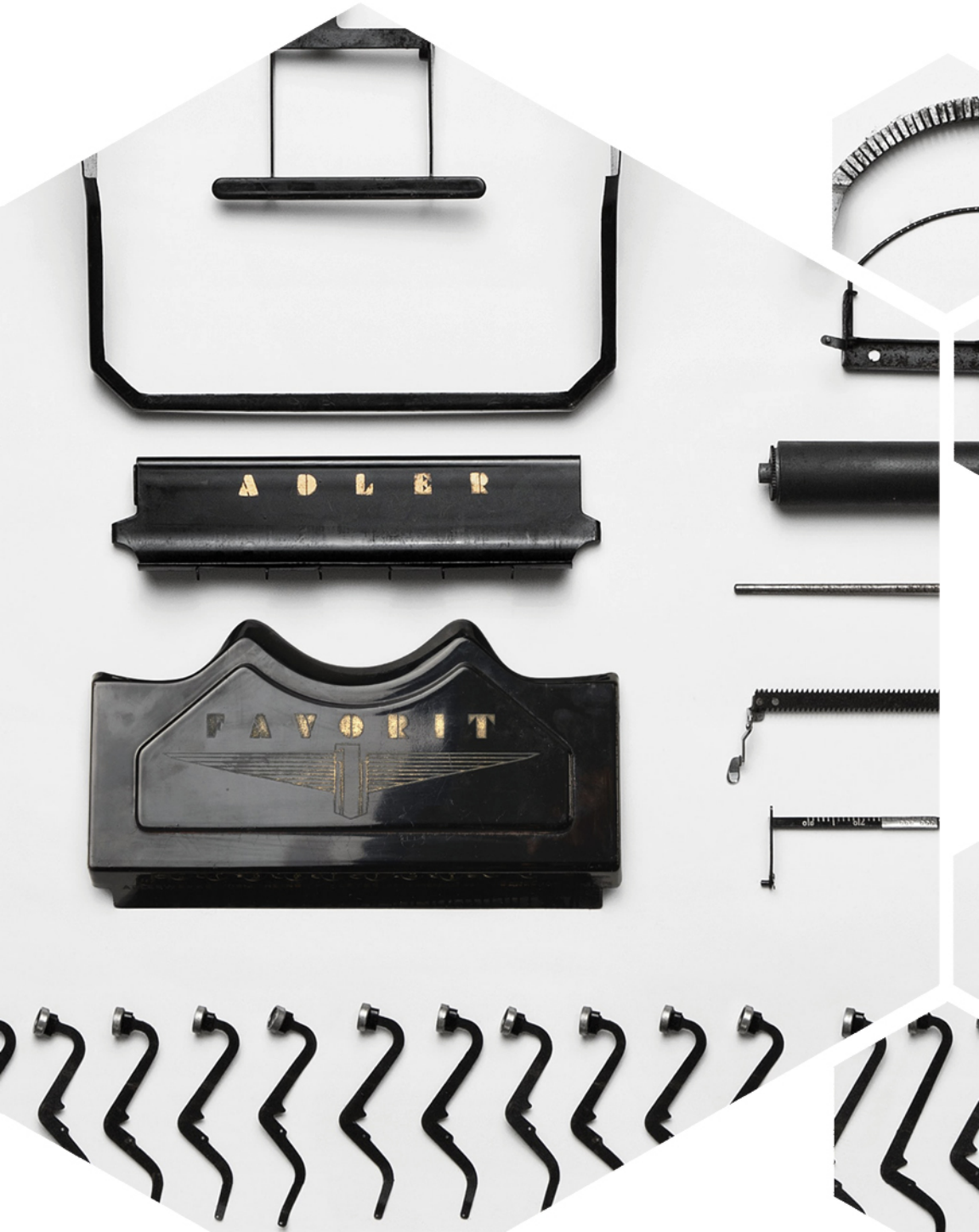
SIXFOLD

FICTION WINTER 2019



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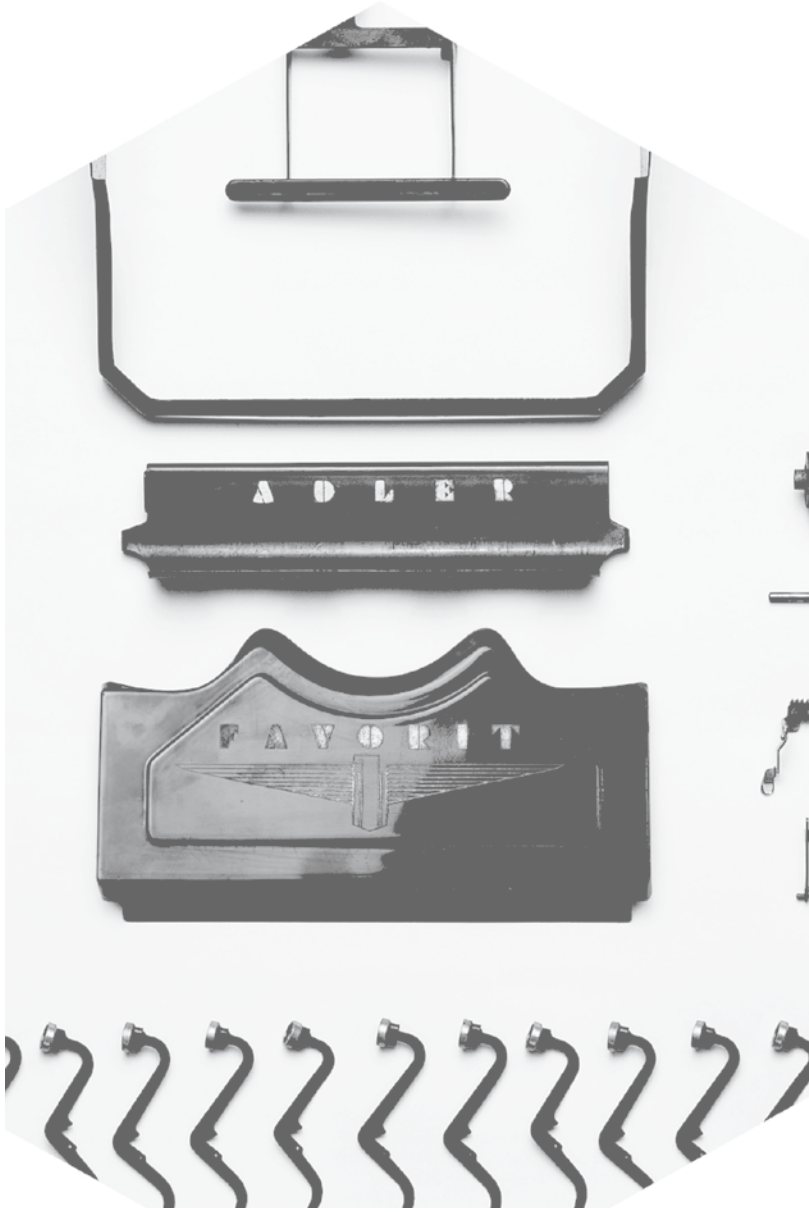

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SIXFOLD
WWW.SIXFOLD.ORG SIXFOLD@SIXFOLD.ORG
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SIXFOLD

FICTION WINTER 2019
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Jan Allen

Eight States

About a year ago my wife, Katie, convinced herself she had early Alzheimer's. It's not out of the question since her mother died relatively young from complications of it. Katie's always been quirky, though, so it's hard for me to sort out what's Alzheimer's and what's just, well, her.

The issue at this particular time is that she wants the two of us to drive the back roads across the country, ending up in Oregon where she can get a doctor to help her kill herself. This makes me think dementia is playing a role, since you'd think she'd be able to figure out why this idea does not appeal to me.

"Until the very, very end," she says, "it'll be a blast, just like your favorite movie, *Lost in America*." We're sitting on the couch, and I'm eating what's left of a Reese's Peanut Butter cup after Katie's nibbled the chocolate from around the edges. I flip off the TV she'd previously muted at a commercial and walk into the kitchen.

Besides the assisted-suicide thing, it's also unsettling that she doesn't recall my favorite movie is *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*.

I wonder if she remembers that in *Lost in America* Albert Brooks' idea of dropping out of society and RV'ing across the United States morphed immediately into a disaster. It was hilarious, but still.

She follows me into the kitchen.

"We can take your van and sleep in it," she says, like she's trying to coax an old dog outside in the rain. "We won't even spend money on hotels."

Our Ford Transit Connect works better as a cargo van than a sleeper. "I'd have to sleep with my knees in my chest." Katie's 5 feet 2; I'm 6, 1.

"Oh, come on, Joe." She stands on her tiptoes and combs the hair above my ear with her fingers. This is one of the things she does when she wants me to do what she wants to do. Maybe she's never noticed that I do what she wants even

when she doesn't flirt. "We'll take the tent for the nights when you want to stretch out."

Our tent. It's supposed to take five minutes to assemble but always takes us an hour.

Back in the day we used to camp all the time, but now the idea doesn't appeal to me anymore. I'd wake up every morning with a rock stabbing me in a kidney, no matter how persuasive the message on the box of the blow-up mattress was, promising me that this would be the one that wouldn't leak air overnight. I'm 44 and Katie's 11 years older than I am, so I'm not sure why she's so enamored with the idea of tent-camping, except that since I weigh almost double what she does, she'll wake up suspended on air, my princess without the hint of a pea in her mattress.

I audibly exhale, and I guess Katie interprets hesitation or exasperation in it, even though it's really a sigh of resignation. Her reasoning lumbers on. "I'm the one who's up like a jack-in-the-box at the slightest sound, Joe. I'm the one who'll have trouble sleeping. Every night you're snoring as soon as your head hits the pillow."

She's right. And as luck would have it, I'm not working right now. I'm a professor at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, and I don't have any responsibilities this summer.

Katie quit her job as a librarian last month, in May. She claimed she had become so disorganized that she had to leave before they fired her. I certainly don't believe that, but I chose not to pursue it with her. We've always lived frugally, we're both ardent thrifters, so barring some unforeseen disaster, we're set for retirement already.

Would there be a physician in the world who would help her end her life at this point in time? Physically she's in perfect health. Mentally there might be a few problems, but surely she'd pass the count-by-sevens-backward-from-one-hundred test as well as I would. (I'd get to 93). I don't believe there's a physician in Oregon or anyplace else who would help her end her life, so maybe a trip across the country is what some doctor somewhere would order.

Oregon, here we come!

Kentucky

"What does disgruntled mean?" Katie asks me.

She's reading a book while I drive, and I want to tell her it's exactly what I'm feeling now. I'd assumed she'd wanted to take the back roads to look at the scenery, but she's had her head buried in a novel ever since we left home this morning. I'm thinking about getting on I-64. She wouldn't know the difference. She hasn't looked up once. I've seen the directional arrows for it about 20 times now, and I've started to think these signs are meant for me specifically: Joe Warren, be smart, take the interstate.

"What does disquiet mean?"

Disquieting that she's asking me this. Katie is the librarian. I'm the economics professor. What's happened to her hitherto vast vocabulary?

"I'm starving," I say, when I see a mom-and-pop restaurant.

"I can't stop now. I have to get to the end of the chapter because I can't find my bookmark."

It's the only restaurant I've seen in the past hour and a half that isn't boarded up.

"What's a maelstrom?" she asks me.

As with the other words, I give her a brief definition. My stomach grumbles its discontent, as I wonder if this trip is on its way to turning into one.

Illinois

It's 2:09 a.m. when Katie asks me what I'll do after she's dead. She uses that word, not "moved on" or "gone." We're in the Transit because we've been tenting on nice nights and sleeping in here when bad weather is forecasted. It's impossible to sleep though. Hail relentlessly thwacks our metal roof. I can hardly hear her, so I pretend I don't.

I'm lying on my side, turned away from her. She throws her arm around my chest and positions her mouth close to my ear. She still has to yell. "Marry somebody who makes you laugh, and make sure she understands your sense of humor."

I used to say and do things that would make Katie double over, but lately she doesn't get it. Similarly, I used to laugh when Katie said something silly, but I don't anymore. I'm never quite sure if she's being absurd on purpose, and I don't

want to hurt her feelings if she's not.

I don't much like this distressing game of hers, but I decide to play it. Even if she dies 20 years from now, she's likely to go before I do because of the difference in our ages.

"I'm not going to find anybody else," I yell. "You're the only one I could've ever suckered into marrying me."

"Joe, that's crazy talk. All the casserole ladies will be falling at your feet."

"What's a casserole lady?"

"The women who will bring food to the house in supposed sympathy that I'm dead, but really they'll be hitting on you."

"Well, I'll take their food but pass on any other offerings." I roll over as gently as I can. I don't want the blow-up mattress springing a leak. "None of them will measure up to you."

She sighs.

I kiss her neck.

She giggles.

Sex on this trip hasn't been an easy thing to accomplish. At campgrounds your next-door neighbors are 25 feet away at most. Tonight we discover there's a definite benefit to the deafening pelting rain that's kept us awake all night.

"Remember what I said about laughing, Joe," Katie says as we drift off to sleep. "Beauty doesn't matter."

Tomorrow we'll have to stop somewhere to buy a new mattress.

Missouri

We spend three days in the Ozark Mountains. The first night we arrive there's a band playing bluegrass at our campground, easily within walking distance, so we have a few beers and dance. We haven't done either of these things in at least a decade, and I don't know why.

I make a mental list of other things we love but haven't done for a while—watching old movies, bicycling rails-to-trails routes, marveling at the art in Berea, Kentucky. Berea's less than an hour's drive south of us. When we get back to Lexington, I'll suggest to Katie we spend the day there again.

Katie befriends our fellow campers while we're dancing, asking a few of them to take our picture with my iPhone. For the rest of our stay at the campground, I'll be accosted by friendly

people every time I try to walk unnoticed to the bathroom.

The next day we take a long hike in a wooded area. Katie can't stroll more than 50 feet without darting toward a butterfly or a flower. She's always been like that in the woods, Helen Keller dashing from object to object after Anne Sullivan helped her solve the language mystery. I stroll leisurely, listening to the scurrying rodents, smelling the pine-scented breeze. Once in a while I grab her hand and point to a bird of prey watching us from above or an odd-looking insect sitting on a leaf, because that's the only way I can stop my human pinball for a minute.

On the third day we rent a two-person kayak. I let Katie sit in back and steer because she says she wants to. I know it means we'll zigzag back and forth, not making any progress unless there are rapids to push us downstream. I know we'll eventually change places, but whether this takes 25 minutes or three hours depends on Katie.

About two hours into it, I suggest exploring a small creek that's flowing into the river we're on. She surprisingly steers us to its mouth like an expert, but then, as I paddle with all my might against what I thought wasn't that bad of a current, I don't get anywhere.

"Are you helping at all back there?" I ask finally, and I turn my head so she can hear me.

That's when I see her paddle isn't in the water. Not only that, she's actually hindering our progress by holding onto a low-hanging tree branch.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"I don't want to go up that creek," she says. "It looks spooky."

"Why didn't you just tell me that?" I ask.

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"So you thought you'd let me paddle for 20 minutes instead?"

"I thought you'd give up a long time ago," she says.

I start laughing. Katie joins in.

That's the thing about the two of us. In small ways, after all these years, we can still surprise each other.

Kansas

Katie is charmed by Kansas; me, not so much. We're on an infinitely flat and boring road with endless brown prairie

grass dotted with rusty water towers and banal grain silos. Driving, I have a hard time staying awake. Katie says she'll do it. I tell her we need to get gas in the next town, and I don't think I'm in the passenger seat more than a minute before I fall asleep.

I'm not sure what wakes me up, but it's probably the intense heat.

"Gosh, Katie," I say groggily, "it feels like it's 110 degrees in this car."

"I think the air conditioner is broken," she says. For some odd reason, she doesn't look like she's sweating, but I'm sopped head to toe.

I look at the console. It's about 90 outside, and she's got the heat on full-blast. I turn the knob to choose the blue color for the air conditioner, and Katie glances down while I'm doing it.

"I thought red was cold," she says.

"Nope," I say, "red for hot, like red-hot."

"But red is the color your fingers turn before frostbite sets in, and blue is the hottest flame on a Bunsen burner."

I don't know how to respond to logic like that. And I don't have to because I lean further over in my seat and notice the low-fuel indicator.

"We need gas," I tell Katie. I don't want to scare her, but it seems rude not to inform her since my next words are to Siri: "Take me to the nearest gas station."

"Oh, Joe, I'm so sorry. I forgot you said we needed gas, and I forgot to look at the gauge."

"Don't worry about it, Katie. Running out of gas has happened to everyone at least once." I tell her this even though it has never happened to me.

Siri says there's a town not far down the road. We might make it.

"I forget everything," she says sadly. "My brain's like that payphone we passed a few miles back—useless."

"Waterbeds," I say. She looks puzzled. I want to get her mind off our gas situation. Mine too. "Things people don't use anymore."

She grins. "Tinkertoys." She's got the idea.

"Cigarette vending machines," I say.

"Wooly Willy."

"Metal ice trays with levers."

"View-Masters."

When I don't come up with something in five seconds, Katie continues, "Lite Brite, Bernie Bernard, Romper Stompers, Spirograph, Etch-A-Sketch—"

"Stop," I say, laughing. She's naming every toy she played with as a kid, whether it's in use anymore or not, and for that her brain is impeccable. "It's my turn."

But that's when we roll into the gas station with at least a few drops of fuel to spare.

Colorado

We're sitting atop a rock at Hoosier Pass. We had to scrape ice off our windshield this morning, but now the sun is hot on our skin. This is the highest point on the trip Katie mapped out for us, 11,542 feet above sea level. She tells me we'll head north and stay in the Rockies until we get to Idaho, then head west again. In the process, we'll cross the continental divide nine times.

"Why did I hate taking care of her so much, Joe?" Katie whispers this, breaking our half hour of silent splendor-watching.

She's talking about the eight years she cared for her mom, after her dad's sudden fatal heart attack. I met Katie a few weeks after her mother died and have been hearing her side of the story in bits and pieces ever since.

"Sometimes, God forgive me, I couldn't tell the difference between hating the circumstances and hating her."

She's confided to me she prayed to die, because she didn't feel it was ethical to pray that her mother die instead.

What started with Katie's kind actions being countered by her mother's hostile and aggressive reactions, ended with Katie feeding her mom baby food with a spoon, changing her diapers, and setting an alarm every two to three hours through the night to turn her in bed so she wouldn't get skin ulcers. Katie never prayed for her mom to die, but when she could no longer swallow, Katie refused to have a tube put straight into her stomach, which was the immediate cause of her mother's death.

She told me once she felt like we were closer to the same age than we were because her life had been suspended for those eight years. So even though she was 36 when we met, she felt like she was 28; emotionally she was only three years older than I was.

"Mom was so out of it, she didn't even know who I was," Katie says now, "but there had to be a time, even if it was just a sliver in the very beginning, when she knew what was happening to her, when she could've made decisions that would've changed the way things played out."

Katie and I met at a grief recovery group in 1999. I'd just lost my twin brother at 24. Someone had told me about a support group held on the third floor of a community college on the west side of town. I was desperate for some kind of help, but from the doorway I knew right away it wasn't for me. I knew I wouldn't be able to talk about my brother in a group setting.

"Sorry," I said, "wrong meeting."

Unbeknownst to me, it was the only meeting at the school that night. Katie ran after me. She listened while I talked to her for hours.

"It seems like there's always guilt and regrets involved with the death of a loved one," I say now. I focus on a pale blue mountain the farthest away from us, the one that blurs with the horizon. Is it fifty miles from here? One-hundred? "Why isn't our misery torture enough? I think often how I wish I'd asked Jeff if he was taking his medication."

"Joe, do you think if you'd nagged Jeff about taking his meds, he'd be alive today? I think he would've died anyway."

"See what I mean?" I ask.

Still, even after all these years, I wish I'd endlessly badgered him about it.

"You're so right, Joe. Guilt is stupid, and don't you forget it."

I jump off the rock with more force than necessary, intending to stomp out the gloom. I take Katie's hands in mine. "Let's explore Breckinridge."

Wyoming

We love antiquing. We started about five years ago. We go our separate ways and then show each other the items we

liked best at the end. When I'm finished rummaging around in a store in Lander, I text Katie to find out where she is. I call. She doesn't answer. It's a big place, three floors, lots of nooks and crannies. I do a sweep through the whole place and I can't find her.

It crosses my mind she's wandered off, into danger perhaps, but I shake it off. She wouldn't do that. She's definitely not that far gone. I know this in my bones.

Yet, what pops into my head is the variable-message sign I saw on the interstate a few months ago—a license plate number, a make, a model, the message "Missing Adult." I'm sure that family didn't think their loved one was "that far gone" either. My heart starts to beat faster.

I'm trying to decide what to do. Do I call the police? Do I go outside and start walking down the sidewalk? If so, do I walk north or south? I decide to do one more sweep through the antique store.

I find her sitting cross-legged on the floor in a tucked-away corner of a room that wasn't much more than a cubbyhole to start with. Her back is to the entrance, and I'm glad because it gives me a second to change the expression of too-much-relief on my face. I push some crap out of the way and sit down on the floor next to her.

"What treasure have you found?" I ask, as calmly as I can muster.

"Oh, Joe," she says, "I found letters in this Maeve Binchy book. They're from a woman in Maine to her friend here in Wyoming. I feel like I know both of them now." She removes purple pages from one of the envelopes, gently unfolds them, and reads aloud.

"Dear Grace,

Suddenly, it's awkward with my husband and daughter. My friends don't call anymore. Even Evie! Remember how she used to tell us minute, intimate details about her sexual encounters? It was embarrassing, but we listened. Now, when I try to talk to her about my cancer, she changes the subject. Every last one of us is going to die, so why is the subject taboo? Maybe it's easier to listen to words on paper. Can you do that, Grace?

Love, Ginny"

Katie folds that one and replaces it with gentle precision in its envelope, then begins her search for another one. "Here it is." She mumbles, "I haven't put them in chronological order yet."

"Dear Grace,

It was so good to see you. You've been gone only a few hours, but already I miss you. Watching old black and white movies alone isn't the same. No one else brings me wildflowers. Was being with me hard for you? I hope not. It meant the world to me.

Love, Ginny"

Katie picks up the entire pile of letters and stacks them so their edges are aligned, then holds them out to me.

"That's nice, Katie," I say. I'm afraid she'll be disappointed in my adjective selection, disheartened that I don't reach out, take the pack-full and devour every word Ginny has written, but Katie pulls the letters back to her nose, closes her eyes and smiles.

Three people walk by the doorway at a leisurely stroll while she inhales. I'm sure all she smells is mildew. When she opens her eyes, there are tears in them. "These letters are here because Grace has died now too. They're together again."

I put my arm around her shoulder and hug her close. I wait for what I hope is an appropriate amount of time to pass before I ask to see her iPhone so I can turn the ringer back on.

Idaho

We've been to Boise close to a dozen times, but we've always flown before. Katie's college roommate, Charlotte, moved here when she was 28, and for all these years their friendship has endured. It probably helps that Charlotte's husband and I—although he's twenty years older than me—get along terrifically. Doug's an artist type, and every time we come here, or they come to Kentucky, he's got a new hobby, or even three or four new hobbies, and I've picked up a few of them from him.

This time he's playing guitar at a coffee shop, and at his insistence, I join him to strum on one of his ukuleles. He got me interested in playing almost a decade ago. Katie and Charlotte sit at a table and pull their heads away from each

other at the end of every song to clap ferociously. I'm not sure if we're good or they've drunk too much caffeine.

On a morning toward the end of our stay, Charlotte and I sit alone at their kitchen table. Charlotte sips tea. Katie and Doug are in the back yard. Katie's playing fetch with their collie, Apollo, and Doug is watering their garden.

"I'm glad she finally did this," Charlotte says. When I furrow my brows, she adds, "You know, drive the roads we were supposed to bicycle together after Katie finished her master's degree."

I've heard this story before, how Katie had to cancel on Charlotte last minute, after the two of them had researched bike touring, gotten in shape and quit their jobs. A few weeks before they were supposed to leave is when Katie's dad died suddenly, and the multitude of things her mother had been relying on him to accomplish for her became alarmingly apparent.

I don't know why I didn't piece it together before—why Katie chose the route she did.

Valiantly, Charlotte flew to Virginia and started the cross-country bicycle trip on her own, meeting Doug on the second day. The trip, I'd heard long ago, went through Berea, Kentucky, and it occurs to me why Katie read a book that first day—we weren't on the trail yet.

I listen to the coffeemaker's final puff of air and push my chair back to pour a cup of coffee. Charlotte and Doug don't drink it, but they've kept the coffeemaker on hand for when Katie and I visit. I no longer drink it either, but I don't want to hurt Charlotte's feelings by telling her this, so I sit back down, take a sip and manage, I think, not to grimace.

Charlotte clears her throat. "Katie told me she thinks she has Alzheimer's." She whispers this, even though Katie's outside howling and growling at Apollo and can't hear what Charlotte's saying. "She says she's going to quote unquote end it all down the road."

I put the coffee cup down, and sigh.

"So she's confided this to you, too?" she asks me.

I nod. I suppose she hasn't told Charlotte that down the road to Katie means down *this* road.

Charlotte says, "I told her I'll always love her, no matter

what, even if she's not herself."

Here's my take on that. How can I love her if she not Katie anymore? I'll handle having to dress her or feed her when she no longer remembers how, and I'll cope when she forgets to use the toilet. Those are "worse" scenarios in "for better or worse." But what if she no longer sees all the wonder in the world?

What if she no longer loves me?

I nod again, not in agreement, but as in "I'm hearing you." Charlotte, of course, doesn't know the difference.

Still whispering, she continues. "I told her she's not allowed to do it without telling me first, and she said 'I'm telling you now,' and then she said 'you'll try to stop me.' It was hard, really hard, but I promised her I wouldn't."

I try to speak but my voice comes out gravelly, and I realize these will be the first words I've spoken all morning. "Do you think she has Alzheimer's, Char?"

Charlotte looks down at her tea as if there is a bug floating on it. "I've noticed some things," she says. She keeps studying the invisible bug.

Oregon

Astoria is where Katie's bicycle trip, had she taken it, would've ended. She wants to splurge on a hotel. "You know," she says, "like they did in *Lost in America*." She wants us to be able to see the water from our room. Since Astoria is a port city, this is a request that's easy to fulfill.

She waits until we've watched TV in bed for a few hours, she waits until we've turned it off and made love, she waits until I've almost fallen asleep, to say, "I made an appointment with a doctor tomorrow."

The next morning I wake up to an alarm clock the previous guests must have set. Trancelike, I stumble into the shower. The shampoo lather in my hair is about to run into my eyes, I'm about to duck my shoulder to position my head under the shower nozzle, when I realize Katie, who one-hundred percent of the time jumps up to the sound of an alarm like a jack-in-the-box, hadn't moved when I turned it off.

In a nanosecond, all the pieces fall together, every last one.

Shampoo bubbles flying, I sprint to Katie's side. I grab her

shoulders, I scream her name, but her body only moves to the rhythm of my shaking her.

I call 9-1-1. I open our hotel room door naked and soapy to find the number of our room. I manage to get my jeans and T-shirt on before the paramedics get there, but just barely because by this point I'm shaking uncontrollably.

It's not until early afternoon that I find myself alone in the hotel room.

I don't look on her phone to find a doctor to cancel an appointment with, because I know she'd never set up a consultation and never planned to.

I don't look for a suicide note, because the police would've found one when they rummaged through her luggage and found her note which exonerated me. Besides, I know now that's what this trip across the country has been—her farewell.

I will breathe guilt like carbon monoxide on my return interstate drive to Kentucky as I convince myself that at some point I knew what Katie was going to do in Oregon, and I let her, because I didn't want to change the diapers of a stranger. Anger will be my partner in the driver's seat at times as well.

But now I'm numb. I sit on an uncomfortable chair at a small round table and stare, unseeing, at our awesome view and fixate on her well-thought-out attempt to ready me for her death without straight-out telling me what she was up to. And I wonder how Katie tricked me into walking that fine line where I would be braced for the worst, yet not stop her. How could someone with Alzheimer's fool me completely?

Gwen Mullins

Our Way in This World

Before the robbery, the people in town thought of Celeste as a compliant, modest young woman, if they thought of her at all. They assumed the shock of the bank robbery must have unsettled her and sent her down a new, errant path.

They were wrong.

Celeste had worked as a teller at Heritage Bank & Trust since the summer after she finished her associate's degree, and, over the course of her five years at the bank, she became a favorite among the old ladies who came in to cash their pension and Social Security checks. Celeste wrote their balances for them in large, clear numbers on bank stationery, and she never rushed them as they completed their deposit slips with shaky scrawls. Her manager, Bob the balding, nodded with approval when cardiganed matrons informed him that Celeste was the best teller the bank had ever employed. Celeste wore her relaxed hair in a bob, blouses that revealed no cleavage, and lined skirts that grazed the midpoint of her knee.

When her boyfriend Martin proposed to Celeste before he went to Ohio to attend seminary, she accepted. She was 25 and he was 26, and everyone agreed it was an appropriate time to settle down. Celeste got the feeling that Martin proposed because she was the sort of girl his father thought he should marry, rather than the kind of girl he could not live without. Her mother assured her that true love was not marked by passion and fervor. Her mother and stepfather approved of Martin, with his bland good manners and his call to serve just like his father, the pastor of the large brick Rivermont A.M.E. Church near downtown.

Celeste first befriended Martin, who was Pastor Hodges' youngest son, at a church youth event when they were teenagers. He had just ended a tumultuous relationship with a white cheerleader, a relationship both sets of parents frowned upon for reasons no one was comfortable articulating. Members of the congregation nodded to each other whenever they saw Celeste and Martin sitting together at church, even

though the two did not date in earnest until Martin graduated from the state university and began working in the business offices of Rivermont.

Celeste's closest friend, Naomi—twice-divorced at age 28—had vowed she would allow no man other than Jake, her toddler son, to infiltrate her heart again. After she finished cosmetology school, Naomi left the bank to work at the salon down the street. When Naomi worked late, Celeste would pick Jake up from pre-school and take him to Naomi's duplex for his afternoon snack. Jake ate peanut butter spread on saltines and sipped from an apple juice box while Celeste tidied Naomi's kitchen and asked Jake questions about his day. Jake tried to call her Aunt Cellie, but in his small boy's mouth her name sounded like Aunt Silly. This moniker amused Naomi, Celeste, and Jake so much that even when Jake learned to say her name with clarity, he continued to refer to Celeste as Aunt Silly. No one considered Celeste a silly person. This truth made her relish the boy's name for her even more, although Celeste was not generally fond of nicknames.

Neither Celeste's fiancé Martin nor Celeste's mother approved of Naomi. In a rare display of doughtiness, Celeste chose to ignore their comments of, "Now where exactly is Jake's father?" or "You're going to that Naomi woman's house again?"

Naomi was the only one of Celeste's friends whom her mother and Martin referred to as a woman rather than as a girl, and this distinction was not lost on Celeste.

During the first fall that Martin was away at seminary, Celeste began to spend occasional nights at Naomi's place rather than making the long, lonely drive across town to the garage apartment she rented from her mother and stepfather. Some nights Celeste simply fell asleep watching a late movie, other times she planned to stay over so that she could drive Jake to pre-school while Naomi ran errands for the salon before work. The women, their heads wrapped in patterned silk scarves, slept in the same bed companionably, like childhood friends, like cousins.

On occasional Fridays, Naomi stopped for cocktails with the other hairstylists, and sometimes she would break her

vow to herself and invite a man over. On these nights, Celeste took Jake back to her own apartment. As a cheap indulgence for both of them, Celeste sliced hot dogs into macaroni and cheese made from a box or picked up a sack of Burger King Whopper Juniors. She and Jake ate their makeshift dinners while they watched old episodes of "The Muppet Show." If Jake were still awake when the show ended, they mixed the ingredients for coffee mug brownies to cook in the microwave. Jake liked to stand on a chair to watch the batter puff into a cup of brownie-cake.

Naomi's men never lingered.

Naomi confessed she selected her occasional lovers based on the breadth of their hands and the likelihood that they would leave shortly after having sex with her. After the man of the night left, Celeste dropped a sleeping, pajama-clad Jake off and drove back across town to her own bed, with its clean, pressed sheets and firm, lavender-scented pillows. She called Martin to remind herself that they would soon be married, that they would build a life together with him as pastor and her as his helpmate, that their destinies were entwined and expected and perhaps even preordained.

Celeste had long been accustomed to doing what others expected of her. She attended with equal care to the expectations of Bob at the bank, her mother, Martin, and, when she was younger, her teachers. At Celeste's middle school just across the river in Arkansas, the other kids called her a goody-goody, a teacher's pet, a snitch. While young Celeste knew in her heart that the first two insults rang true, she chafed at being called a snitch.

Celeste excelled at keeping secrets, even from herself.

Just as she sought approval from the adults in her life, she longed for the same from Evie, a skinny tomboy with a silky afro who presided over the eighth-grade popular girls' table in the cafeteria, and from Evie's on-again-off-again boyfriend Connell, a lupine-faced 14-year-old who, despite his ripped jeans and disorderly folders, managed to make teachers, even the tough ones like Mrs. Hendricks, suppress a smile when he concocted improbable excuses for not completing his homework yet again. Connell's willful, grinning disobedience

thrilled Celeste with a delicious shiver that was as seductive as the feeling that washed through her the day Mrs. Hendricks read Celeste's sonnet aloud. Mrs. Hendricks remarked on Celeste's close attention to the rhyme scheme and the syllabic count for each line. When Mrs. Hendricks read Celeste's ending couplet, "And so it goes, the river flows, away, / Away from me, back to the sea, to play," Evie smirked and stage-whispered to Lanie, a freckled ginger girl who agreed with Evie's every utterance, "Looks like Shakespeare ain't dead after all." Several girls in the class giggled. Lanie whispered back, "Bor-ing."

But later, when Celeste went to the girls' locker room to get her gym clothes so that her mother could wash them over the weekend (even though most girls just wore their sweat-stained shorts week after week), and she rounded the corner to find Evie and Lanie kissing each other, did she snitch? Of course not. She backed away, her Pumas soft against the hard floor, almost disappearing around a row of lockers before her sneakers betrayed her with the sharp squeak of rubber against polished concrete. Evie pushed Lanie away. Evie's pupils were liquid with a darkness and warmth that filled Celeste with an unfamiliar sort of longing.

"Look, it's Shakespeare," Evie said.

"Oh, shit," Lanie said. She wiped her pale mouth against her sleeve.

"I didn't see anything," Celeste said. A lie, but all that she could think to say as Evie's eyes faded from their dreamy openness back to their natural state of practiced insouciance. "I swear, I didn't see anything," she added.

Lanie picked up her backpack, a monogrammed purple monstrosity from Lands' End, and muttered under her breath.

A thought occurred to Celeste. She cocked her head to one side and asked, "Did you and Connell break up?"

Lanie snorted.

Evie said, "Get the fuck out of here, Celeste."

Celeste ran all the way to chemistry class. She left her gym clothes to grow stale and stiff in her locker. When Mr. Barrett called on Celeste to draw the chemical symbol for sodium chloride, Celeste faced the blank white expanse of the board. She uncapped a green dry erase marker and tried

to remember why Mr. Barrett had called her to the front. The teacher shook his head, more in surprise at his most eager pupil's distraction than actual disapproval. He directed his request to another student while Celeste returned to her seat. A salt twinge of guilt at disappointing a teacher wavered in Celeste's throat.

But had she snitched?

No.

And that night, when her dreams were hijacked by images of Evie, her hair grown long and trailing curls across her naked chest, Evie reaching for Celeste in the showers of the girl's locker room, had Celeste told her mother about what she saw, what she dreamed?

No.

The following Monday, Mrs. Hendricks wrote *e e cummings* on the board before reading one of the poet's tamer poems to the class. "This is a sharp contrast from what we've been studying," she said. Mrs. Hendricks told the students that they would write a poem in free verse for their homework assignment, which they could begin working on during class. She slid into her big wooden teacher's chair and read from a volume of Cummings' collected works with her chin in her hand and a softness in her expression that never surfaced when the class studied sonnets.

Celeste wrote the assignment in her planner as *free-verse poem, due Wednesday*. She ignored the snickers from Evie and Lanie as Evie they looked up some of the poet's more explicit poems on the outdated classroom computers. At Celeste's elbow, Connell drew pictures of souped-up cars on the cover of a torn blue folder. Celeste looked for examples of free verse in her textbook, and she frowned at the lack of rules, the disdain for consistent rhyme schemes, the words strewn in irregular patterns across the pages.

"Celeste, psst, Shakespeare," Connell whispered.

He tossed a folded piece of notebook paper onto her desk. Celeste raised her eyebrows. "Who do I pass it too?" she said. In her experience, folded notes were never meant for her, but rather for girls who made plans with each other for the weekends, who laughed together at lunch, who had sleepovers and pool parties and beach vacations.

"It's for you," he said. "From Evie."

Celeste felt Evie's stare, heard Lanie's indiscreet cough. Mrs. Hendricks was still reading, her lips moving over the words while she twirled a section of frosted hair around her forefinger. Celeste unfolded the paper and smoothed it on her desk. In block letters, it read, MEET ME IN THE LOCKER ROOM BEFORE CHEM. The O's in the words *locker* and *room* were sloppy, full hearts, and a bright pink lipstick mark underscored the message. Heat flamed from Celeste's heart to her scalp. She fixated on the paper until the embarrassment melted and transformed into a warm glow of acceptance, followed by another feeling—something forbidden, delicious. Celeste dipped her chin toward Evie in acknowledgement. Lanie held a textbook in front of her face, and Connell resumed drawing cars.

When the bell rang, Celeste positioned her books, pencils, and laptop into their assigned compartments in her backpack. She refolded the lipsticked note and slipped it into her bra the way her mother tucked folded cash away after stopping at the ATM. Celeste sat at her usual table for lunch, working her way through the turkey sandwich on whole wheat and carrot sticks that she packed for herself. When her lunch friend Laura asked to borrow her math homework, Celeste handed it over without the stern look she usually adopted when Laura wanted to copy her answers. The folded paper in Celeste's bra crinkled, and Celeste imagined the lipstick bleeding through the paper and streaking her breast with pink.

Chemistry was the last class of the day, so Celeste had study hall and geometry to trudge through before meeting Evie in the locker room. She tried not to think of what Evie wanted from her even as bits of her dream tickled the edge of her consciousness. Celeste had never kissed anyone, neither boy nor girl, and she was not sure whom she would prefer to kiss more—Evie or Connell.

By the time Martin returned to Memphis for Christmas break, Naomi had styled Celeste's hair so that her bangs swooped across her forehead and came to a point on the left side of her face. Her hair in the back was cut razor-short, almost like the big chop some women did before going fully

natural. Celeste wore her new hairstyle pulled back on one side with a rose-gold bobby pin. The haircut emphasized Celeste's cheekbones and pointed chin; she looked almost feline.

Upon seeing her, Martin chuckled. "Was that hairstyle Naomi's idea?"

Celeste nodded as she removed the bobby pin. She combed her hair forward with her fingers until it obscured her field of vision.

"It looks a little butch. You'll probably want to grow it out so you can fix it like usual for the wedding pictures." They had not discussed a date for the wedding other than agreeing it would be next summer, after Martin finished seminary.

Celeste twisted her engagement ring around and around on her finger while Martin flipped through channels on her tiny TV. He settled on a show where young vocalists endured critiques from a panel of washed-up performers. Celeste hated the forced schadenfreude of reality shows, but she said nothing.

The more Celeste tried to do what people expected from her, the more paralyzed she became. Young Celeste could not figure out how to begin a poem with no defined rules, without the parameters of meter and rhyme. Study hall stretched on while Celeste read poems that made her neck burn with their suggested meanings. Math class slipped away in geometric theorems. When the bell rang, Celeste stuffed her book and papers into her backpack any which way in her rush to get out of the classroom and to the locker room before the break ended. At the door to the girl's locker room, she paused, her hand trembling on the big metal bar. The thought of pressing her mouth to Evie's produced a churning, murky feeling in Celeste's midsection. She blinked, took a deep breath, and walked in, proud of herself for doing what she wanted to do rather than what her mother or her teachers expected her to do.

The girls from the popular girls' table stared back at her, their hands clapped over their pretty pink mouths, their eyes sparkling with restrained laughter.

"See, I told you she was a lezzie!" Evie's voice rang out.

Lanie said, "Jesus, what a dyke. You were right, Evie."

The door clanged shut. All those pretty girls laughed and laughed while Celeste stood apart, her stomach swallowing her dropped heart. Evie was sarcastic with other kids, flippant to teachers, lazy at schoolwork. This was the only time Celeste witnessed her in an act of cruelty.

"I'm not, I just thought," Celeste's voice cracked. Her eyes pleaded with Evie as panic rose in her belly. What would everyone say? Was she a lezzie for coming to the locker room with hope in her heart and the lipsticked note pressed against her breast?

Evie glared back, her eyes big and dark, her jaw set in a sad, hard line.

"Evie, I'm not, I mean I just thought," Celeste tried again.

One of the girls from the basketball team said, "Celeste, the Ce-lezzie." One by one each of the girls except Evie began to chant, "Ce-lezzie, Ce-lezzie."

Evie's voice cut through the chanting. "Get the fuck out of here, Celeste," she said. Evie sounded almost gentle, her eyes wide with, what? Fear? Affection? Celeste thought of a line from one of the poems she read in study hall, *eyes big love-crumbs.*

Once again, Celeste turned and ran, past chem lab and Mr. Barrett's startled face, out into the parking lot where the cold November air took her breath and released her brimming tears.

For a long, long while, that was the last time Celeste could remember doing what she wanted to do rather than what other people told her she was supposed to do.

One night after a glass of sweet red wine, Celeste told Naomi about Evie and the other middle school girls, of the terrible months where girls whispered "Ce-lezzie" whenever she answered a question in class or walked into the locker room. Celeste and Naomi chatted, their legs tucked under a shared afghan on Naomi's sofa, while Jake whirred Hot Wheels across a weathered coffee table. Celeste, cheeks aflame, recounted the whole experience. Naomi listened, her hands cupping the mug as if it held tea rather than wine. Celeste left nothing out, including the occasional dreams

she still had of a naked Evie, her eyes like big love-crumbs, and her simultaneous crush on both Evie and Connell. At the conclusion of Celeste's tale, Naomi took their cups to the kitchen so that Jake would not knock them over with his Hot Wheels. She returned to the sofa, took Celeste's face in her hands, and kissed her. Celeste tried not to wonder if she had exposed her deepest secret, that long-buried story, to win the feeling of Naomi's mouth on hers.

Naomi's nights with men went from occasional to almost nonexistent, and Celeste began to spend more time in Naomi's bed than her own. The night they moved beyond cuddling and kissing, the night they wriggled out of the baggy T-shirts that served as pajamas while Jake dreamed his little boy dreams in the next room, Celeste thought her beating heart would tear through her skin. Afterwards, Celeste apologized for the wetness she left on Naomi's bed.

"That's never happened before. I mean Martin and I have done it, but I've never, you know, not like that," she said.

Naomi laughed and spread a thick blanket over the damp spot on the sheet before crawling back into bed and cupping Celeste's body with her own.

The next day, a denim-clad boy delivered a big bouquet of blue and pink-tipped hydrangeas to Celeste at the bank. She let the other tellers assume they were from Martin, although she knew even before she opened the card that he would never send a bouquet so impractical and full and beautiful. Celeste's stomach fluttered when she read the card, "For Celeste, my Silly Ce-lezzie, XOXO." In her lover's mouth, the middle school nickname lost the power to wound. She did not want to leave the card for anyone else to read, so she tucked it into her bra, next to her heart.

That night, when she undressed in Naomi's bedroom, the skin-warmed note fluttered to the floor. Naomi picked it up and held it to her face, her eyes warm and liquid.

Not long after the Ce-lezzie incident became known all over school, after even Laura declined to sit with Celeste at lunch, Connell called out to Celeste in the hallway.

"I didn't know Evie could be such a bitch," Connell said. Before she could respond, Connell hugged her. He smelled

like soap and cigarettes, a combination Celeste associated with her own father before he moved away. “You know Evie’s really the one who, well, I think she and Lanie . . . ”

Celeste nodded, the only acknowledgement she would give that she had seen Evie and Lanie together in that way.

“You should tell the principal what they did to you, or maybe Mrs. Hendricks. She really likes you,” Connell said.

“I’m no snitch.”

Connell tipped his chin up and pulled his shoulders back, a gesture Celeste recognized from the times he failed to amuse a teacher with his excuses and was preparing to be given detention or sent to the principal’s office. “You’re better than they are,” he said.

Celeste remembered Evie’s eyes, big love-crumbs, and her sad, hard jawline. She shrugged. She repeated a phrase her mother used when she was on the phone with her best friend, a divorced woman who was sleeping with a man who swore he was leaving his wife, “We’re all just trying to find our way in this world.”

Celeste wanted Connell to kiss her, wanted to prove to him that she did, in fact, like boys, him in particular. He grinned, his pointed incisors gleaming, and chucked her on the shoulder. “Hah, you should be a poet. Or a, what are they called? A philosopher.” Connell’s eyes, green and sharp and laughing, radiated a kind of broken quality, a persistent sadness that lurked beneath the veneer of jokes and defiance.

“Well, I’m no snitch, no matter what.”

Celeste transferred to private high school in east Memphis the following summer. She left the locker room nickname on the other side of Mississippi River as she vowed to do the right things, to be the girl she the imagined she should be.

After a few days in the corner of Celeste’s workstation, the hydrangea bouquet grew limp and faded. Celeste was contemplating hanging the stems upside down to dry when the men came into the bank, their faces smushed flat by pantyhose, their gloved hands carrying green canvas bags. One man carried an AR-15, a rifle Celeste recognized from video footage of school shootings. Bob the bank manager sunk to the ground behind the teller wall. Celeste felt him

shivering next her calves. She longed to sink there next to him, to hide beneath the ledge. Instead, she straightened her shoulders and stepped forward. One of her favorite old ladies, a shrunken, white-haired widow the tellers called Miss Martha, was signing the back of a check with a pen stamped with the bank's logo.

The man with the rifle stood in the center of the lobby and shouted, "Nobody move!"

Miss Martha wrote her new balance in her checkbook, unaware of the scene taking place behind her since she had once again left her hearing aid at home.

Celeste reached for Miss Martha's hand through the gap in the glass partition. She lifted her chin toward the man with the gun as she squeezed the old woman's hand. Celeste's fingers stretched long and smooth over Miss Martha's papery skin.

"It's going to be okay, Miss Martha," she said.

Bob shuddered in the floor next to Celeste's legs and she thought of little Jake, scared from a dream, crawling into bed between her and Naomi, wrapping his chubby toddler arms around whichever woman was closest to him.

One of the men stared at her, his face long and distorted under the pantyhose, his eyes sharp and green, his flattened features wolf-like and menacing. A slow buzzing filled Celeste's head, and her joints and bowels loosened. She felt Bob inch closer to the wall under the counter, and out of the corner of her eye she saw one of the other tellers push the emergency button.

Connell's features had grown harder, but time and the crude pantyhose mask emphasized rather than obscured their lupine quality. The haunting sadness in his eyes had been replaced by a fierce coarseness. She blinked in acknowledgement, confident of their mutual recognition. She resisted the urge to call out to him. Celeste tilted her head to one side and mouthed, "I'm no snitch." She hoped he understood, that whatever led him here, to her bank and her little old ladies, that the tumble of years between then and now, that his very identity, were safe with her.

Miss Martha stood to one side, the bank pen still clutched in her hand. Celeste stacked the cash from her drawer in neat

rows on the counter, ignoring her stuttering heart and the whimpers of Bob the balding at her feet.

Connell rapped on the glass partition. "Push the money out through the hole."

She recognized his voice, roughed by cigarettes and bravado. Celeste slid the money through the scooped-out space below the partition. When Connell raked the bills into a bag, his gloved hand grazed Celeste's trembling one. He zipped the bag and winked at her.

"A philosopher, for sure," he said.

After the men left, their bags bulging with hauls from the cash drawers, and the first police sirens began to wail in the distance, Bob stood, his shirt stained with perspiration that arced in big circles beneath his armpits. He said, "Everything's okay now, folks. Just stay calm. The police will be here any minute now."

Miss Martha frowned at Bob and turned to Celeste. "You're a brave woman, a good person," Miss Martha said.

That night, curled next to Naomi on her old sofa while Jake assembled Lego towers and watched *My Pretty Pony* cartoons, Celeste talked about Connell, his sadness and kindness, his laconic good humor, and together she and Naomi speculated about what led men and women to be who they were. In a different life, would Connell have gone to seminary like Martin? Or taken a job in Alaska just to get away from his responsibilities like little Jake's father? Naomi did not suggest Celeste go to the police with her knowledge of the identity of one of the armed men.

Like Connell all those years ago, perhaps Naomi admired Celeste's subdued yet resilient flintiness, and like young Connell, perhaps part of that admiration was seeded in doubt that she herself would have behaved with the same consistency of character.

When Martin learned of the robbery, from the news and from Celeste's mother rather than from Celeste herself, he called. Celeste murmured reassurances that she was fine, that the men had not harmed her or anyone else. She told him about Bob's cowering and the fear for herself and Miss Martha that clutched at her heart as the men shouted and gathered cash from the tellers.

"Why didn't you call?" he said. "A girl should call her fiancé when something like this happens." He sounded more annoyed than concerned.

"I guess I'm in shock," Celeste said. Naomi grinned, filled the electric kettle to brew water for tea. "Maybe you should pray for me," she added. Martin assured her that he would pray for her, that he could come down for the weekend to be there for her.

"I'm okay, really. I'll see you at Easter," Celeste said.

After Celeste ended her call, Naomi handed her a mug of mint tea. Without her salon make-up and with her hair pulled away from her face by a terrycloth headband, Naomi looked like the younger of the two.

"I want to stay here, with you and Jake," Celeste said.

Naomi smiled, sipped her tea. "For more than the night?"

Celeste slipped Martin's ring onto Naomi's manicured finger. It caught the light from the lamp and refracted little prisms across the coffee table. Naomi rested her newly bejeweled hand on Celeste's thigh.

"I'll have to give that ring back to Martin," Celeste said.

"I may still want to be with a man, sometimes," Naomi whispered.

Celeste shrugged. "We're all just trying to find our way in this world."

Jake looked up from his cartoons and Lego towers. "Amen," he said.

The women laughed, and, at least for that night, they were happy enough to pretend they were the only people in the world.

Erin M. Chavis

Lemon Lemon Lemon

I watch the girl as she repeatedly fiddles with the tiny box she has cupped in her hand. "Shit," she whispers for the sixth time before fiddling with it again. "Shit."

"Are you okay?" I ask.

I know that I have startled her because I've just spent the past hour pretending to be asleep. She doesn't answer, simply turns out the reading light over her bed and faces the wall, fully clothed and on top of the covers . A few minutes later, she is snoring, but her back and shoulders are too rigid for her to actually be asleep.

So we're both liars.

But so is everyone else in this place.

It's my fourth time here. In four months I'll be too old, so I have to come up with some kind of plan. It's not that we're expected to wake up on our eighteenth birthdays with the skills necessary to survive on our own, it's just that Alan and Paul don't have the resources to house so many people. They operate on the honor system—they don't check birth certificates or anything like that—but the last thing I want is to screw them over.

I want to do *something* right.

When I wake up, the new girl is gone. I get dressed in the bathroom after my shower. I know that The House is a safe place, but I can never forget how my stepfather reacted when he learned I was binding my breasts. I don't know my roommate well enough to be comfortable doing that in front of her. I don't want any questions or strange looks.

I've had enough of those, thank you very much.

All of the other kids are quiet at breakfast. There are eleven of us right now. The new girl is there but as far away from everyone as she can get, hanging halfway off the edge of the bench at the reclaimed picnic table where we eat. Alan is at work, so Paul is doing his best to strike up conversations as

he dishes out pancakes and eggs. I sneak peeks at the new girl and recognize the way she carefully slices her pancakes and pours her syrup just so. She's pretending that she's not starving.

I corner her after breakfast. "We're roommates," I announce.

"So?"

"I'm Kate."

Her eyes are hazel, much more interesting that my boring, everyday brown. Last night's mascara has flaked onto her cheeks. "So?"

"Just wanted you to know, since we're sharing a room."

"That doesn't mean we have to talk to each other."

Paul pulls me aside while she's in the bathroom. "Give her some time," he says. "She's been through a lot."

I don't have to remind him that we've *all* been through a lot—it's the very reason he and Alan run an underground sanctuary for homeless teens. They know what we're going through.

That night, it's the same thing: the new girl is messing with that little box again. I know her name is Vicky, but only because Paul told me. I lay with my back to her and listen to her mutter "shit" until I fall asleep.

Vicky is pretending that she wasn't staring at me when I open my eyes. I had been having that nightmare again, the one where I'm back at home, except Mom is gone and it's just me and my stepfather and he throws away all of my clothes. He leaves me with nothing but "proper clothes," all frilly dresses and high heels and pink blouses. When I wake up, my mouth is dry and I instinctively reach for my Ace bandage. It's still there, in the corner of the bed.

"What's your story?" Vicky asks.

"What's yours?" I counter, waiting for my heart to slow down.

She shrugs and picks at her cuticles. "Folks kicked me out."

I sit cross-legged on the mattress and pull the blanket up to my chin. "We hear that a lot around here."

"How long have you been here?" Her face says that she's kicking herself for showing interest.

"Only three weeks this time around. But it's my fourth time."

At this, her hazel eyes widen. "What's up with that? Your parents keep kicking you out?"

I don't tell her that I haven't been home since I tried to go back after my first time here. I don't tell her about the places I've slept, the things I've done to survive. "They're not my parents," I explain. "It's my mom and my stepfather."

"Did he . . . ?"

"No, nothing like that. They just . . . they didn't tell me to leave, they just made it impossible for me to stay."

She looks at a corner of the ceiling. "I got a stepfather, too."

I don't have to ask her what that means; she probably doesn't even realize how she crosses her arms over herself when she mentions him.

There are so many things I want to ask her, but I don't want to scare her off. It seems wrong to assume that she's queer because she's here, but it also seems wrong to assume she's straight because she doesn't look like me. I have only had one relationship and no one would've ever suspected she liked girls; people take one look at me and they know right away.

"How old are you?" I say, because it seems like the safest question to ask.

"I'll be seventeen next week. What about you?"

"I'll be eighteen in August."

"So that means you gotta be outta here by September, right?"

"That's right."

"What are you gonna do?"

I shrug. "Go someplace warm, I guess." In case I have to sleep outside again.

She nods and slides off of her bed. "You coming to breakfast?"

"In a minute."

Vicky's eyes dart to my Ace bandage and away again. Had I blinked, I would've missed it.

"I'm going to stay with my sister once I turn eighteen," Vicky says in the dark.

I try not to be jealous that she has someone that cares about

her, jealous that she has a plan. “Where’s that?”

“In Chicago. She has her own condo.” Her voice is overflowing with pride and awe.

“That’s cool.”

“I’m going to take the GED and find a job and get a place of my own.”

I lie in bed and toy with my bandage, which is crumpled into a ball. I don’t want Vicky to hear me crying. I had gone to a job interview that day and been rejected. The manager said that it was because they required a high school diploma but I’m certain it was more that they required someone not like me. I hate that I’m thinking of changing myself to be the way other people think I should be. I hate that I’m angered by Vicky’s hopefulness.

My roommate is gone when I awaken. I try not to panic, but Alan tells me that she is in the basement, taking inventory of supplies. We all have to pull our own weight around here; I usually handle the floors. Paul rests his head briefly on his partner’s shoulder while Alan is slicing fruit. I try to will myself to be happy for them instead of resentful.

“What is that?” I ask when Vicky is messing with that little box again.

She automatically hunches herself over it, as if she expects me to try to take it from her. “Nothing.”

“Doesn’t sound like nothing.” I’m too excited to sleep. We have been sharing a room for five weeks now, and tomorrow, I start my new job. It’s only stocking shelves at the ninety-nine cent store, but it’s something.

“You’ll think it’s stupid.”

“No I won’t.”

“You will.”

“Okay, fine.” I open the book that I keep next to the bed. I pretend I don’t feel her eyes on me.

“It’s just something someone gave to me,” she finally says.

“Someone? Like a boyfriend? A girlfriend?”

“Just . . . someone.”

“Someone important?”

“Yeah.” She is still fiddling with it and frowning, but at

least she isn't saying "shit" over and over again.

"What is it?" I press.

She holds it up but doesn't move any closer to me. I lean over the edge of my bed and peer at the object dangling from her hand. It's a keychain made to look like a slot machine, complete with a tiny moving handle. The one-armed bandit. My mom said that my grandmother had issues with the one-armed bandit.

"It's good luck to get three cherries," Vicky explains. "But all I get are lemons."

"You believe in that stuff?"

"Not really," she says defensively, but her eyes drop to the floor. "But the person who gave it to me told me that, so I keep trying."

I'm dying to ask her who this important person is. If it was her sister, she would've said it. Instead, I ask, "What makes this person so important?"

"I dunno." She turns out her light. Discussion over.

We have been lying silent in the dark for over an hour when she says, "They were the only person to ever make me feel beautiful."

I THINK YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL!

But I just mouth the words.

My birthday is two weeks away and I'm scared. The good news is that I am working full-time at the ninety-nine cent store. I'm going to learn to cashier for when Patsy goes on maternity leave, and I have a lead on a room for rent when it's time to leave The House. I may not have to find a new city to live in, after all. Still, I'm terrified at the thought of truly being on my own forever.

I get back to the shelter after a double shift to find a small crowd in the hall. Paul and Alan are in a corner, conferring privately. "What's going on?" I ask.

"Vicky's having a breakdown," one kid tells me.

"Alan thinks they should call 911," another says.

I hear my roommate crying hysterically inside our room. "Let me talk to her." I first poke my head in the room and then

slip inside, shutting the door behind me. Vicky is on her bed in a ball and sobbing, rocking back and forth. I tentatively touch her hair. "What happened?" I ask, praying I can calm her down. The last thing we want is to get the authorities involved—Paul and Alan could get into serious trouble and the shelter will be shut down.

To my surprise, Vicky grabs me. She has never touched me before, and my heart skips a beat. She clings to me and I just hold her while she cries. Alan pokes his head in and I wave him away. Soon, she's down to whimpers and sniffles. My uniform shirt is soaked when she finally pulls away.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I say when she seems more composed.

She doesn't speak, just points a shaky finger at some debris on the floor. I have to stare at it for a while before I realize it's the pieces of her keychain. At first I think she's upset because it's broken, but as I stoop to retrieve the pieces, I see what has gotten her so worked up: there's nothing but lemons on the tiny reels that spin when you pull the lever.

"It's all a lie," she wails and begins to cry again.

"It's okay," I tell her. "It doesn't mean anything. You'll still do everything you planned and you'll be fine."

She stretches out in bed and turns to face the wall. "She lied to me," I hear her say. "She lied."

Two nights later, in the dark, Vicky confesses: "I don't really have a sister, Kate. I made it up."

I take a moment to process this information, my eyes wide and pointed straight ahead as I lie in my bed. "It's okay," I whisper. "I understand."

"What am I gonna do?"

I don't have an answer.

I get the materials I need from the ninety-nine cent store. I go to the library to work on my project because I don't want to be caught in the act. The next morning, I pretend I'm asleep at breakfast time so I can leave the gift on Vicky's pillow. When I get home that night, she's crying again, cradling my offering in her hands. My heart sinks.

"You don't like it."

Her eyes are still beautiful even though they're bloodshot.

"This is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me."

I can't speak around the lump in my throat, so I just shrug like it's no big deal. I sit on my bed and watch as she pulls the lever on the tiny slot machine, her face lighting up when three cherries appear in the display window. I had spent hours drawing them and then carefully cutting them out with sewing scissors so I could glue them over the lemons. I would do it every day to make her happy.

It's my last night at the shelter and sleep is the furthest thing from my mind. I have already taken my few belongings to my new place, and all I have with me is a change of clothes. I hear Vicky breathing in the next bed, and I fight back tears as I think of how much I'll miss that sound. The sun is coming up when she finally says my name.

"Will you wait for me?" she asks.

The emotion in me is so overwhelming that I actually feel faint even though I'm lying down. Speech is impossible, so I simply reach across our narrow room. She extends her arm and laces her fingers with mine. For the first time in my life, I know where I belong.

Dayla Haynes

That Thing for What's in Between All the Stuff

Poppy Duveen's the one who brought condoms to Hermit Crab Healthfoods. Oh sure, the coolers were still full of quark, bulk bins brimming with bulgur, supplement shelves lined with Bach Flower Essences—but, less than two weeks after Poppy took over, one end-cap display was all condoms. Seven racks full of them, all brands and varieties, right alongside the yohimbe and homeopathic calendula.

"There's not too much vitamins and healthfoods can do to prevent STDs," she'd tell customers as she sold them their oat groats and esterified vitamin C. "Think of it this way: condoms as sexual supplement."

One sunny June morning, after ringing up two quarts of kefir and a case of special-order non-prescription Danish female condoms for a yoga teacher who'd driven all the way from Tallahassee, Poppy glanced through the open front window of the store, right onto the shallow reaches of Hermit Crab Bay. Barely twenty feet out stood a skinny blond fellow, knee-deep in baywater, his khaki pants soaked to the seat. Poppy groaned. The skinny guy was her younger brother Sam, just flunked out of his third try at college and back home in Hermit Crab for the summer. Poppy worried about Sam for reasons far beyond his flunking out of college and swimming in his clothes. "Look at him out there," she muttered. "Alone. He's *always* alone." As far as five years of therapy had enabled her to see it, the erratic parenting of their country-clubbing parents had produced in Sam a nearly pathological state of social withdrawal. She remembered him, barely three, whirling around and around their candle-lit dining room until he passed out from dizziness and second-hand smoke.

"Lil' dancin' babe's in a worl' all his own," their mother had slurred, sipping her fifth double vodka gimlet and dragging hard on her Kent, while down on the carpet eight-year-old Poppy frantically slapped his cheeks to bring him to.

Over the years, ever-mindful of the powers of suggestion,

Poppy had hinted, cajoled, even wished right out loud for Sam to find someone he'd let into his world, someone he could truly love. On his birthdays, she'd given him huge variety-packs of healthfood store condoms wrapped in red velvet with gold satin ribbons, silver sequins, and quartz crystals to concentrate the love current, but he'd never seemed even the slightest bit interested.

"I've got other things on my mind," he said.

Evidently, Poppy thought, her face against the window screen, what he's got on his mind right now is breathing. She watched him as he stood in the bay, tossed his head back, and inhaled. He splashed through the shallows, breathing deeper and deeper. "I inhale and leave the world spinning in a vacuum," she heard him shout. "I exhale typhoons and tornadoes, with an arctic howl and a sand-filled desert hiss!" He threw his arms out, panting like an overheated greyhound. "*This wind brings the breath of Aphrodite straight from Olympus*!" he yelled, then he flopped, face first, into the foamy green bay.

Poppy sighed. The store fell quiet. She opened a bottle of Bach Red Chestnut Essence. On the wall behind the counter, the clock measured out the minutes as her wish ticked on and on: "A love for Sam, a love for Sam, a love for Sam."

He was a gangling young man with a long straight nose, lank white-blond hair, and eyes the color of dry beach sand. Poppy looked just like him, but colored in—hennaed and tattooed and suntanned. Sam was pale beige all over.

While Poppy squeezed juice from organic blood oranges, Sam floated in the bay, breathing the breath of the universe. She wished in rhythm to the squeezing of the juicer: "A love for Sam, a love for Sam, a love for Sam . . ."

The next morning—exhaling in puffs, a final small whirlwind—Sam once again waded into Hermit Crab Bay. The sun shone, the breeze blew, the water sparkled with whitecaps. Sam crouched in the shallows, sea grass thick around him, and scooped a small, brown-striped scallop from the muddy bottom. "While it *is* true," he conceded, "that all scallops have scores of neon blue eyes inside their shells, I've found the eyes of our homegrown Hermit variety to be

especially fine." He held the scallop close, just inches from his face. Gazing into the multiple brilliant blue eyes right inside her slow-opening shell, he crooned, "Your eyes, my lovely, upset my senses. They fill me right up with awe!"

Beige-eyed Sam was a sucker for that blue. He pulled a 100x magnifying glass from his pocket and held it over the scallop, focusing the enlarged images upon her many eyes. "Behold," he whispered, "the hundred-fold magnified vision of sandpipers the size of elephants and clumps of sea oats towering four stories tall!" He jiggled the lens over the scallop. "I'm certain this moment of increased perception will change you," he murmured. "These heightened images streaming through your scallop nerve and sinew will bring you enlightenment and make you a princess among scallops—or, at the very least, some sort of mystic priestess."

Now, even though none of them could possibly have known it—not Sam, not Poppy, and definitely not the third party—on that shining bright morning, Sam was about to fall in love. And it wasn't with the iridescent eyes of a shellfish or the nebulous breath of Aphrodite on the wind. It was with a real, live girl.

The girl Sam was about to fall for wouldn't believe she'd been wished for by Poppy or anyone else. If she'd known it, she'd have snorted a bad-tempered laugh. "Bullshit!" she'd have said. "I'm not worth wishing for." And it's not that she had particularly low self-esteem. She didn't think anything was worth wishing for. She didn't think anything was much of anything—just aimless electrons and empty space.

Her name was Claudia Moon, and she was a plump, doughy girl with blue eyes, brown hair, and a revolving wardrobe of six poly-cotton thriftstore muumuus. After an unsuccessful six months at an all-girls' college in Atlanta, and another five as a back-office medical transcriptionist for Hermit County Gastroenterology, she'd flung herself headlong into a swamp of existential dejection. At the end of a long day transcribing, she'd slouch at her keyboard, chain-smoking Camels, muttering a mantra of dissatisfaction: "*Life is all a bunch of crap.*" Perfectly reasonable requests, such as "Hey, Claudia, would you hand me that pen?" assaulted her senses

like chainsaws on steel. "You may think it's a pen," she'd yell, "but to ME it's a meaningless heap of subatomic CRAP." Then, to make matters worse, she'd usually flat-out refuse to hand it over: "Pen? What pen? Jam all the solid matter in that thing together, it'd fit on the head of a *pin*."

Relations around the office deteriorated. Finally, in June, the senior gastroenterologist took her aside. "Sweetheart, what's the problem? I'd like to help."

"You're full of crap," she told him. "That's the problem."

The next day, the office manager fired her.

"Oh, who cares?" Claudia said.

For three days after that, she stayed in bed in her efficiency apartment, tossing and turning and swatting mosquitoes.

"What a bunch of crap," she muttered. "Shitty apartment with shitty broken window screens."

The morning of that fourth day dawned breezy and bright, weather so brilliant, so gleaming, so glitteringly cheerful even Claudia could only drum up bad attitude through anticipation of sunburn and glare headache. She rolled out of bed, squirted Bactine over her mosquito bites, threw on a wrinkled orange and purple muumuu, and set off to find something to eat.

Taco Bell, she thought. Or maybe Bojangles.

Her car wouldn't start. "Piece of '97 Honda lousy crap!" she yelled.

Hermit Crab Healthfoods was only a block from Claudia's apartment. Being mostly a fast food/frozen dinner type of girl, she'd never been there. But that day, she stalked up and went inside.

". . . there's cracked wheat in it, and sunflower seeds," Poppy was saying to Sam as he stood, sopping wet, dripping baywater onto the baked goods counter. She looked up at Claudia. "Can I help you?"

Claudia said, "I don't suppose you have breakfast burritos, do you?" She scrutinized the shelves behind Poppy, upon which were displayed an array of freshly baked organic fruit pies. "Or maybe a pie," she said. "Yeah, a peach pie."

Poppy picked up a pie and stuck it into a waxed paper bag.

"Hand me that pen, would you, hon?" she asked, pointing to the felt-tipped marker she used to price bakery items.

Claudia grabbed the pen from the counter. Her dejection flying on autopilot, she muttered, "To *you* it may be a pen, but to me it's a meaningless pile of subatomic crap careening through empty space."

Sam exhaled with a huge rushing whoosh. "And to *me*," he cried, "to me, the pen's the WHOLE BOOK."

And maybe it really was because of all Poppy's wishing, or maybe it was just random luck—a chance limbic system misfire or a dopamine surge—but, when Claudia turned to look at Sam, her blue eyes sent shock waves straight through his head. They ricocheted off the inside of his skull, shot through his heart, tingled his toes, and left him reeling. For Sam, it was definitely love at first sight.

Dumbstruck and dizzy, he trailed Claudia home. The next day, he showed up on her stoop with a second peach pie and three organic avocados from Poppy's produce section. When Claudia opened the door, he cleared his throat, squared his shoulders, and made the pronouncement he been silently rehearsing for almost twenty-four hours. "Hello," he said. "I'm Sam Duveen and I'd like to declare my intentions."

"Your intentions to do what?" she snapped. "Sell me a bunch of crap? Vacuums or saucepans or World Book Encyclopedias?"

"No!" he cried. "You don't understand. I'm not a salesman. What my intentions are—well, what I *want* is, I want to be your boyfriend."

"Riiiiight," she drawled. "That busybody gastroenterologist put you up to this, didn't he? Or was it the transcriptionists? '*I want to be your boyfriend*,'" she mimicked in a mincing falsetto that had nothing in common with Sam's low-pitched delivery.

"What gastroenterologist?" Sam asked.

Claudia stared at him. "Hey," she said finally. "You're the guy from the healthfood store."

Sam nodded.

"You got excited about the pen. '*The whole book*,' you said."

He nodded again. "I tend to see possibilities everywhere." He thrust the pie and the avocados into her hands and gave

her a jaunty wave. “Well, see you tomorrow.”

He came back the next day with cherry pie and green beans. The day after that, he had apple pie and eggplant. On the fourth day, he brought strawberry pie and a bouquet of sunflowers, each stem over three feet tall.

“Those sure are some big-ass flowers,” Claudia said, her voice soft, carefully wending its way past the huge, boisterous giggle she felt bubbling up in her chest.

On the fifth day he arrived, bramble-scratched, with brownies and wild blackberries.

On the sixth day, he had zinnias and jalapeno peppers.

“Hey, thanks,” she said. “I really like hot stuff. Maybe I’ll make pepper jelly. You ever had it? My mom makes it. You eat it with cream cheese and crackers.”

(“*Jelly*?” she wondered. “What’s the matter with me?”)

On the seventh day, as he stood at her door with zucchini bread and shelled pecans, a caterwauling *meeeeow* broke through the undergrowth beside her driveway.

Sam spun around. “Buster, I told you to stay home!”

A scrawny orange cat slunk out from behind a clump of oleander. He deposited two dead moles at Sam’s feet and retreated into the bushes. Within seconds, he’d returned with three mice.

“Yikes,” said Claudia.

“I know,” Sam groaned. “The cat’s a hunting machine.” He pulled a folded Ziploc bag from his pocket and bagged the rodents. “But he doesn’t much like the taste of them raw.”

“So you *cook* them for him?”

“Of course not!” Sam said. “I give them to my neighbor. He’s got snakes . . .”

Unfortunately, the existence of Doug Bateman’s five albino pythons didn’t deter local gossips any. Poppy had heard them, eyewitnesses to her brother’s painstaking retrieval of Buster’s kill, trading stories at the post office, the drugstore, and the library: “Sure he cooks ’em! In cream sauce. ‘Creamed Mouse on Croissants’—that’s what’s for dinner at Screwball Sam’s. On Sundays, it’s ‘Cream of Mole Stew.’”

The librarian, an elderly woman with an open mind and a tender heart, defended him: “You know, he’s really not quite

as odd as everyone thinks—"

"Oh, yes he is!" library patrons said. "That boy's pure-tee wacko. Get this—he goes out looking for starfish to *amputate*. He cuts a leg off each one he finds and says . . . uh, what's that he says again, Miz Sophie?"

The librarian examined her ink-stained fingernails. "He says, 'If I do it enough, regeneration may be postponed and, with the final destruction of radial symmetry, manlike, they may rise and walk.'"

The patrons groaned. "See what we mean? What a bozo!"

But Sam didn't really expect an army of starfish to come marching towards him, upright and mobile. And, no matter what library patrons said, he never envisioned starfish in Bermuda shorts and sneakers pushing baskets of starfish-food in suburban starfish grocery stores. Sam simply liked starfish, and, because he liked them, he wanted to give them a leg *up* the evolutionary ladder by taking a leg *from* their bodies. He said, "The bilateral symmetry of four appendages is, after all, far more advanced than the radial symmetry of five."

On the seventh day, he brought lemon pie and basil. On the eighth, blueberry cobbler and yellow squash.

With strict, single-minded intent—augmented by Poppy's baked goods and organic produce—Sam snuck his affections right up on Claudia. Before she'd even noticed, he'd become a habit. And, as habits go, he was infinitely more comforting than existential dejection ever had been. She started to fret: "He looks tired, he's so pale, he never eats right." Sam was precisely the cure Claudia's disgruntled spirit had needed. How could she think everything was crap when she worried so much that his feet might be cold?

She bought him bedroom slippers and galoshes, wool socks and fishing boots. "Oh, what a beautiful morning!" she'd bellow, wading barefoot through the shallows beside him.

At precisely three-thirty-three on the night of the twenty-first day, Sam crawled through Claudia's torn window screen, over the sill, into her bedroom. She looked up to see

him standing, pale blue in the moonlight, a 100x magnifying glass in his hand.

"I knew you'd be awake," he said, lying down beside her.

Then he aimed his magnifying glass out the window, straight into the sky, and focused the images of infinite space—moons, planets, and stars—all over her body.

"I'm convinced certain sensory experiences can effect evolution of the spirit on a subatomic level," he explained.

"Oh, yeah?" she said. "Well, jam all the subatomic stuff in me together and it'd fit—"

"Sssshhh," he whispered. "This is for what's in *between* all the stuff."

She leaned back and closed her eyes.

"Feel it?" he whispered. "That shimmer? That tiny jolt? That's your spirit expanding."

Maybe it was a weird kind of lovemaking, but really, who's to judge? One thing's certain: if Sam made the scallop a princess with that magnifying glass of his, he made Claudia a flat-out queen.

The next morning, Poppy was stocking the shelves with damiana, black cohosh, and Okamoto condoms when she looked out the window and saw Sam and Claudia knee-deep in bay water. Claudia glowed in a hot pink muumuu. Pale skinny Sam was positively rosy in her reflection.

Poppy knew what was on their minds as they stood in the bay. They were breathing. Together, they threw their heads back and inhaled.

"I'm breathing saffron from the plains of India!" Sam cried.

"And gardenias on the heavy, warm wind of Savannah!" yelled Claudia.

Then they stood, arm in arm, soaking wet, their spirits expanding so white-hot and explosive Poppy could practically see them, like fireworks, over the bay.

Isabelle Ness

Celestial Body

Maybe what's wrong with me is exactly what Momma says: a mind too busy and a mouth too often kept shut. "You could've made him stay, you know," she says, "if you'd have made him feel guilty." Other days it's "Smart girls say no." I am not a smart girl. If I were, I would've moved out of Momma's place already, found somewhere cheap and quiet where everyone keeps their mouth shut because everyone is me.

Momma and I sit in the living room folding laundry. There are five piles for the five of us, but she keeps holding things up and looking to me, unsure of which pile it belongs to. She lifts a black and yellow *Steelers* shirt and scans it up and down, front and back, like it might have a name.

"Lisa's," I tell her, and she nods like she knew.

"When did y'all get so many damn clothes?" she asks. I don't point out the holes in the armpits. "The baby will need clothes," she says, "and I suppose we need to figure out where to put her." Eight months in and Momma is finally thinking about these things. Behind her the TV sells us wonderfoam that can soak up a mess in less than five seconds.

"You don't want her in your room?" I ask. Momma glances toward the kitchen where Pete is smoking a cigarette and playing solitaire.

"Pete thinks he can build a third room, you and the girls won't have to share."

I've heard Pete talking about this, the third room, talking and measuring the walls but we both know he won't get around to it because Pete doesn't get around to anything. Instead he gets what Momma calls "sad," and sometimes we don't see him for a week. All we hear is Momma cooing to him through the walls, trying to get him up.

"Well, there sure isn't room for a crib," I say.

"You know," Momma says, "I was your age when I got pregnant, too. And I didn't have no damn family to build me rooms and buy me clothes." She shakes her head. "Besides,

we don't need a crib. Baby sleeps in the bed, with you."

Around Momma's neck is a moon pendant with a name engraved on it—Celeste—and this is what she's decided will be my daughter's name.

"Cribs are a tiny prison," Momma continues, "babies need contact, skin, human bodies," and she smacks her forearm. I am about to ask what happens when she's too big to share a bed, but Mickey comes traipsing out of our room, and I let it go. At nine years old Mickey is the youngest of the house, and she hoists herself onto the couch between me and Momma. She holds up a book she got from school and points to pictures of giant red orbs.

"You know these stars blow up after, like, a billion years," she starts, and Momma goes back to folding, popping her gum against her thin yellowed teeth.

On Saturday I head to the park to get out of the house for a while. The kids are always shouting, slapping each other and crying, and then Momma is shouting for them to stop, and then Pete is shouting for everyone to shut up, and I get tired.

Denise is at the park today. An old schoolteacher of mine, she is forty-two and raising her third child. *We missed having a baby around*, is what she told us, but everyone called it a stroke of bad luck.

"Well hello!" she shouts from a bench away. "You're looking just great today. I can tell the baby's healthy, plenty of color in your cheeks." Her kid walks in front of me and stares a while at the lady with the fat stomach. "Benny's getting so talkative. Say hi, Benny!" Benny looks from me to his mom, chewing on his fingers.

"Didn't your Momma used to come here?" Denise asks. "She's got the big curls, right? Lovely dark hair."

"Did she?"

"Don't you remember playing here?"

I remember the playground, swings that squeak and the slide with a hold burned into it, but never Mom's dark curly hair on the sidelines.

"Did you ever talk to her?" I ask.

"Oh, no," Denise says, "your Momma was never the talkative type."

I imagine my own baby playing on the monkey bars, chunky arms reaching for the next rung, while I stand on the side watching. Will she forget my shadow there like I have forgotten Momma's?

The park is not so different from home; children yell and they scream and they cry and I rub my hands over my belly. I suddenly feel, sitting on that old faded bench, as though it could be 1987 or 2009 or 2031, and I could be Momma or myself or my daughter and I wouldn't even know it, wouldn't be able to tell the bulging stomachs apart. The familiarity gets me hot and sweaty and short of breath.

Denise sees me rubbing at my stomach and says, "If I can give you one piece of advice: when the time comes, just take the epidural."

At four in the morning I get up to pee and water falls out of me, all over the carpet. By five the nurse and midwife are here filling the tub, old friends of Momma's from her nursing days, before she started showing up late to work with eyes red and voice wobbly. When Momma called them months ago begging for help with her pregnant daughter, they said they would come only if Momma got clean. And now here we are.

Momma runs laps around the apartment, waking everyone up and amassing a collection of items she has decided are necessary: towels, ice, sage and amber. She places them around our centerpiece, the bath, rented on Amazon for the low price of two-hundred and fifty dollars after three months of hiding bills where Pete couldn't find them. We had to start over once when he shook out an old Phillies cap and a hundred crumpled dollars fell out that he promptly spent on booze. After that, we hid them behind the laundry detergent.

The bath was Momma's idea, of course. *Baby comes slipping out like a fish*, she'd said, *pretty soon everyone will do it this way*.

She's dragged Lisa and Mickey to the couch where they've curled up like cats and gone back to sleep, but Momma doesn't worry.

"We'll wake them when the moment comes."

"But Momma," I say, "What if it's traumatizing for them?"

"Even better," she says.

The girls know all about Momma's unplanned pregnancy, the big story of how her life was thrown off track. I suppose she can't miss the opportunity to show it to them in real-life, this spectacle of the sin for which we are all in constant repentance.

Everyone but the sleeping girls helps me into the bath. Even Pete, rings cool against my skin, holds onto my left elbow. He looks stricken. All these women, doing these womanly things, and he doesn't know what to do with himself.

The bath is similar to the kind of thing people put in their front yards for their kids to play in—blue plastic blown up with a little motor—only it's smaller, with thicker walls and handles to hang on to. I lower myself into the warm water. Sometimes the nurse empties a bucket and adds a new one, measuring the temperature with two fingers that slosh the water back and forth in three quick swipes.

The labor is slow in progressing. After three hours of what I think is pain, measuring my breathing and sipping the water Momma gives me, I am swept away by the tectonic plates of my body and I lose all sense of restraint.

"I want the shot," I beg between contractions, "the one in the back." But it's like I've become a ghost from the neck up, because the women study everything except my face, clucking amongst themselves.

More hours pass and I am forced to trust the midwife. She tells me I am almost there, almost there, and Momma rubs an amber stone while she reads from her spiritual books, and the girls argue over who will cut the cord, and I wish to slip underwater if only to have a second of silence. Pete has returned to watch, timidly, arms crossed over his belly. When the baby finally comes we are all leaning in for a better look, jostling the bath walls. We cannot see her clearly through the splashing water. For a moment she is only dancing shades of beige, features slowly solidifying as she breaks into the air's dreadful hardness.

A month later I am at the park again. Denise and I have gotten into something of a routine.

"Looking better every day," she tells me, winking. Denise has asked mercifully little of the delivery.

"How's Benny?" I say as we watch him chase a boy around a slide.

"Tireless, as usual."

The other boy knocks his head against a protruding metal foothold. He falls to his knees, face scrunched in surprised pain, mouth open but no sounds coming out. "Oh, goodness," Denise mutters, as Benny tugs on the kid's shirt. "Where's that boy's mother?"

This must be what people will think of my daughter. *Goodness, where is her mother?*

The boy's mom jogs over from the other side of the playground. She kneels by her son and Benny takes a few startled steps back at the appearance of an adult. He watches the woman rub her son's chest and examine his head. Benny sees the fun has ended, and wanders back to Denise.

"Aren't those your sisters?" Denise asks, nodding to Lisa and Mickey at the swing set behind the playground. They're swinging higher and higher, looking over the basketball court where men play pick-up and smoke cigarettes.

"And my mother," I say. Momma is there behind them, a shadow, looking at me with her lips pursed.

"That's your mother?" Denise says. "My, I didn't recognize her."

"No more dark curly hair." I say, and an uncomfortable silence opens up. Momma's aged twenty years in ten, and is as skinny as my pre-teen sisters. She waves and calls to the girls, pointing to me.

Momma has been bringing my sisters to the park while I'm there, trying in her way to help, as Momma is always trying to help. She thinks she can trick them into talking to me again. As if, *Oh, look, your sister!* will be enough for them to give me a hug and forget about what I've done.

Everyone hates me a little bit, even Pete, who said a new face might just lighten the mood in the house. *I want the mood to already be light*, I'd told him, *and then shine even brighter for her. Like a supernova. Right, Mickey?* But Mickey had already forgotten her books about stars and ran sobbing to our bedroom.

Only Momma came around. After everyone had stormed off and slammed doors, Momma took her moon pendant off—

the one engraved Celeste—and placed it in my hands. “Now Pete won’t have to build a wall,” she’d said.

I had known, of course, that Pete wouldn’t have to build the wall, and not just because he‘d never get around to it. It was because of the smiling couple I’d met in month five, their story of an infertile uterus, the papers I’d signed and the deal I’d sealed. And now Celeste would be raised where my problems—which had once been my mother’s—would not trickle through the cracks between us and onto her shoulders. Where a room had already been built for her, where she had clothes without holes in the armpits and where her name wasn’t Celeste but Claudia.

Denise clears her throat. “Well, I can see the resemblance, now that you’ve told me.”

I look at my weather-worn mother. “Is that a good thing?” I say, and I laugh, and so Denise laughs with me.

“Hey, there’s no way around it,” she says, “we can’t help who our mothers are.” And she pats little Benny on his perfectly round head.

Diana Bauza

Lani's New Moon

Mommy had a special black skirt that was shiny like a snake. I knew when she put on that skirt, it would be a bad night. And if Angie in the apartment next door couldn't come over to babysit me, she would have to bring me with her to run errands. Those nights I would sit in the backseat of the car with the windows cracked open while she picked some things up at the Crocodile Lounge. I'd watch the sky go from pink to purple to blue and black. She never came back with any bags.

I hated it when she brought a man with her to the car, and she'd make me wait outside while he helped her with important grown-up stuff. "Bank things . . . like your math homework but much harder," she'd giggle, opening the door for me to leave. I'd find a spot in the trees near the parking lot, where I could sit and throw pebbles into the street without anyone seeing me. I'd listen to the wind in the branches like they were whispering and try to figure out what they were always saying to each other. Most times I didn't have to wait long, but when I did, I'd get scared in the dark. The trees' whispers would sound angry then, and I would hear sticks breaking like footsteps coming for me. My heart beat so fast I had to remind myself to breathe.

Once I fell asleep in the grass, lying there in the moonlight so bright it was almost like day. I curled up under a big tree with my ear pressed to the ground, trying to hear what was happening inside the earth. I closed my eyes too long and woke up to Mommy shouting my name. "Lani!" she cried, "Lani!" I ran to her voice and hugged my arms tight around her waist when I found her. She smelled like smoke and men's cologne, and her skirt was on backwards. The smell made me feel sick. She bent over me and kissed my head a hundred times until my hair was wet with her tears.

I never told anyone this, but at nighttime when I'd ride in the back of the car, I'd look out the window and see the

moon following. No matter how fast we went or how many turns we took, she was there above me like I was her special friend. When I was really little and the trees or a house or cloud would cover her, I thought she had left me for good. I even cried once. I didn't know then that she was always there and that I just I had to wait for her to appear again. That I had to trust her.

In school when we drew pictures for art hour, I would draw a picture of the moon in the night sky with stars dotted behind her. Sometimes I drew her as a yellow sliver, and sometimes I'd draw her full and white in a black sky. On the day we were supposed to make a family portrait, I did like everyone else and drew my family standing on some grass in front of a house. Since it was only Mommy and me, I thought my picture looked empty, so I colored the white behind us midnight blue and drew the moon big and beautiful above us, almost touching the roof of the house. When my teacher asked me why I drew it at nighttime, I lied and told her that I accidentally used the wrong color of blue. I knew lying was bad, but I couldn't tell her the truth. She wouldn't believe me if I said the moon was part of my family.

Mommy always said she liked showing a little leg even if people thought it was wrong. She said they should mind their own business. She told me, "Lani, if somebody asks you about me, something you don't want to answer, you keep your trap shut. You don't have to say anything you don't feel like." That was because once I told Angie about the men from the Crocodile Lounge. When Mommy found out, she spanked me hard and sent me to bed without dinner. But later she came to my room crying and said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, sorry, sorry!" She curled up in my bed and fell asleep with her mouth open and her arms wrapped around me. She smelled like she always did after coming home late. I wiggled free and looked out the window trying to count the fireflies blinking outside until I fell asleep on the floor. In the morning she was back to normal, smoking at the kitchen table with a bowl of Cheerios waiting for me.

Some days I couldn't keep my eyes open in school. I'd try so hard to stay awake, to make it until recess when I could sleep under a tree by the playground, but my teacher Mrs. Lazlo got mad at me for not paying attention too many times when she called on me. I had to clean erasers at recess for being a bad listener, and she called home. When no one answered, she asked where my mom was at this time of day. I looked down at my feet and whispered, "I don't know." Mrs. Lazlo didn't like that answer and repeated it, only louder, "You don't know?" I shook my head. Maybe Mommy was home asleep on the couch still with her shoes and everything on from last night because that's where I'd seen her when I left for school that morning. Mrs. Lazlo said, "I'm waiting for a real answer, missy." So I told her, "My Mommy said I don't have to say anything people ask about her if I don't feel like it." I didn't think it would come like that, but I yelled it so loud my face was hot. I looked up to see what Mrs. Lazlo would do, if she would spank me or yell back, but she just looked at me funny. It was like I turned into a frog or something right in front of her eyes. Then, she told me to go see Miss Mona, the guidance counselor.

On my way down the hall I stopped in the bathroom to try to see what made Mrs. Lazlo make that funny face, but I looked the same. I had Mommy's hair: light blonde and fluffy like a golden retriever puppy's fur. Her eyes were brown, but mine were dark blue-gray. "Like the color of the sky right before it storms," she always told me. I had freckles on my nose and my other front tooth was starting to grow in crooked after I lost the baby one a couple weeks before, but I didn't look any different.

I'd never been inside Miss Mona's room. The walls were painted yellow with pictures hanging everywhere instead of a chalkboard, and it didn't have a big wooden teacher's desk in the corner either. There were beanbag chairs all over the floor, and on the back wall there was a huge pile of toys and games stacked up higher than my head next to a tall bookshelf. I ran my fingers over the smooth book spines until I touched one about outer space. I slid it off the shelf. On the front cover was the most beautiful picture of the moon I had ever seen. It was full, the color of snow with a blue ring shining around it, and

the sky looked like the deepest blue of the ocean dotted with silver stars.

"Do you like outer space?" I heard a voice say from behind me. I turned around to see a woman with braids piled on top of her head and a gold cloth wrapped around them. Her long, flowy skirt was blue like the sky on the book cover, and her dark brown cheeks glowed when she smiled with the whitest, straightest teeth I'd ever seen.

"Yes, I like the moon," I said quieter than I meant to. She smiled again, sitting on a beanbag chair and patting a green one across from her. I sat down still holding the book in my hands.

"I have a big telescope at my house where I can look at the moon and the stars very closely at nighttime," she said. Her voice made me think of the cellos I heard at an assembly once. "My name is Miss Mona. What is your name?"

"Lani," I said quiet as a whisper. I thought it was funny for a grown-up to sit on the floor with her legs crossed like a kid, but I didn't say so.

"What a pretty name. It's nice to meet you, Lani. Mrs. Lazlo said you might like to talk about something?"

I kept my mouth shut. I didn't know what Mrs. Lazlo had said, but I was afraid it was about Mommy. I knew I shouldn't say anything about her to other grown-ups. I was afraid I'd say something wrong and get her in trouble, so I just looked down at my feet.

"That's okay, Lani. Tell me, what do you like about the moon?" she asked. I looked at the book cover again and flipped through the pages.

"I think she's beautiful," I told her over the soft whooshing of the pages as each one slipped through my fingers.

"You think the moon is a girl?" Miss Mona asked. I'd never thought about it before. I shook my head yes.

"I guess I think so, too." She asked me some other questions like how old I was, what my favorite subject was, and if I had any brothers or sisters. When we were done, she walked me back to Mrs. Lazlo's room. Before I went inside, she bent down in front of me to be near my face. Except for Mommy and Angie, I couldn't remember ever being so close to any other grown-up. She didn't smell like smoke at all, and her

skin looked soft not bumpy like Mommy's. I wanted to touch her cheek, just to feel it, but I kept my hands at my sides.

"Lani, what if we meet every day in my room? I think we have more to talk about. How does that sound?" I smiled and nodded.

While the other kids in my class did silent reading time or recess, I would go see Miss Mona. At first, she would ask about Mommy, like if she's nice to me and what her name is and what her job is. I'd hug my arms around myself and stay real quiet until she asked me something new. Now, she asks me about what I had for breakfast, what I do after school and on the weekends, and how I get along with the other kids in my classes. And every day she asks me to point to the face that matches my mood and holds a picture of yellow smileys that look sad and happy and mad and scared. Most days with Miss Mona I feel happy.

One day after a bad night, I fell asleep on the bus to school, so the bus driver had to wake me up. When I went to my classroom, Mrs. Lazlo said that I should go see Miss Mona in the morning, giving me that funny look again with her eyebrows all scrunched and her frowny mouth. She'd been looking at me like that more and more since I went to Miss Mona the first time. That look made me feel like I wanted to cry but shouldn't. Like I was bad on the inside and couldn't hide it from her.

Miss Mona was putting books on the shelf when I went into her room, so I sat in my green beanbag and closed my eyes, listening while she hummed. I wondered what it would sound like if Mommy ever hummed. I was thinking about when Mommy was driving us to the Crocodile Lounge, and I told her about Miss Mona. She didn't say anything for a while, so I said it again in case she didn't hear me. Without even looking at me she said, "I wouldn't trust her. Everyone knows guidance counselors are full of baloney." Then she turned up the radio loud, but I saw her wiping tears from her eyes. I wanted to ask why she was crying and what it means to be full of baloney, but I was afraid to say anything else.

"Oh, good morning, Lani," Miss Mona said when she saw I was there. My breaths were slow, like I was falling asleep.

I thought about how the night before the sky was hiding the moon, so the stars had to keep the dark away by themselves. I used to feel scared when that happened, but this time I wasn't. I remembered the story Miss Mona told me about a little bird with a broken wing who lost her family when they flew south for winter. I tried to think of all the words, but when I couldn't, I came up with my own. It made the time go faster until Mommy called for me.

Miss Mona kneeled down in front of me. I played with the ripped end of my shoelace.

"Mrs. Lazlo told me you drew a lovely picture for her during art yesterday of a colorful bird. You like drawing, yes?" I nodded and wondered if all grown ups always knew everything that happened.

"Do you want to draw a picture with me today?" I nodded again and smiled, so she stood up and pulled out a pile of drawing paper and a box of crayons and put them on the floor. I picked out navy blue first and colored the sky, leaving a space in the middle for the moon. I mixed violet and black into it, too. Miss Mona drew a picture next to me. It was quiet except for the sound of the crayons pressing on the paper. I tried to move to get a better position to outline the moon. It would be full like the cover of the book, but I hit my arm with my knee and drew a crooked black line through the space I'd left for it.

I stared at the line. My chest felt like strings tied around it were being pulled tight, and tears squeezed out. I tried to stop them before Miss Mona would see, but a big teardrop plopped onto the paper and then another and another. Miss Mona stopped drawing and looked at my paper. I blinked and tried to make the tears go away, wiping them with my hands.

"Lani, it's okay. You can make a new picture. Does that sound good? We can fix it, don't worry," she told me as she handed me a tissue. I tried to say okay but instead I cried harder. Miss Mona took my hands and pulled me up to my feet then, and I wrapped my arms around her, pushing my face into her belly. I was afraid Mommy would be right and she'd smell like baloney, but she didn't at all. Her smell made me think of those sunny mornings after a night of rain when the trees shake their leaves dry in the wind and the birds sing

and splash in the puddles.

I felt bad for getting her nice dress all wet with my tears, but she didn't seem to mind.

Sarah Blanchard

Two Out of Three

"Book. Lamp. Table."

The homecare assessment nurse enunciates carefully, her easy Carolina drawl opening the vowels and turning *lamp* into *lay-ump*. Her large dark eyes narrow slightly with the effort to be precise and professional.

"Book. Lamp. Table," she repeats. Her name is Charmaine, accent on the first syllable. Charmaine is tall, angular, and dark-skinned with tight black hair woven into intricate cornrows. She's sitting at the small kitchen table in Edith Mullen's cluttered apartment, surrounded by nice antiques and stacks of junk mail.

Across the table, Edith settles her considerable 91-year-old backside firmly into the seat of her red-cushioned wheelchair. She hunches forward, resting pale, blotchy forearms on the table's stained burlwood. Her thin lips, startlingly pink and a little crooked, silently mouth the same three words as she regards Charmaine.

They lock eyes and lean toward each other over the small table: the slender young black woman in crisp blue nurse's scrubs and the wizened old white woman in her pink polyester pantsuit.

Behind them, Edith's younger sister Jenna is propped against the kitchen counter. She's dressed in baggy jeans, sandals, and a worn T-shirt. A single plume of silver ponytail, wrenched back and bound with a rubber band, hangs limply on her neck. Jenna crosses her bare ankles and keeps an eye on the old table, ready to leap to the rescue if its fold-up leaves give way.

A shaft of thin sunlight slants from the narrow window across the room. Charmaine squints a little in the dusty light, then smiles encouragingly. "You can remember those three words, right, Miz Edith? I'll ask you to say them again in a few minutes. It's a little memory game, helps me figure out how you're doing, all right? Book, lamp, table."

Edith's wispy, over-permed white hair flutters a little in

the ceiling fan's sluggish breeze. She forms the words again, practicing, then repeats slowly, "Book. Lamp. Table," pausing after each word and attempting to copy Charmaine's southern inflection.

Then Edith abandons the fake drawl. "Book! Lamp! Table!" Delighted, she slaps the tabletop sharply with both palms, making it vibrate. "Got it! Like a BLT! Book, lamp, table!"

Startled, Charmaine jerks back a little. "Very good, Miz Edith." She lifts her slim manicured hands, palms outward, as if to calm a manic puppy.

Jenna shifts herself off the counter and crouches to inspect the underside of the old table. It's a family heirloom, not designed for rough handling. She checks the leaf braces, then repositions a wobble-correcting napkin wedged under one foot of the table.

The nurse ignores the woman under the table and continues. "Just a few more questions, Miz Edith. Can you tell me a little about your parents? When and where was your momma born?"

Edith pats her flown-away hair and launches into a story. "Oh, our mother's name was Villa, rhymes with Willa but starts with a V. I bet you've never heard that one before. Isn't that so pretty? It means a grand house in Spanish, because her grandfather was a sea captain and he sailed all over, so to speak, down to places like South America, and his ship was named—"

Jenna crawls out from beneath the table, stretches a kink out of her back, and returns to her place by the sink. "Edie," she says gently, "can you please just answer the questions? Charmaine asked you when Mother was born. And where."

"I was getting there," Edith snaps. "And she asked *me*, not you. There's nothing wrong with my hearing. The ship was named the *Villa Maria*. April 23, 1909, she was born, but I don't know where. They all traveled a lot. And there were so many of them. All over."

"Mother was one of twelve children," Jenna says. "We actually aren't sure where Mom was born. The family bible had her birth date but not the location. Somewhere in Vermont or Massachusetts, I'd guess, or maybe Nova Scotia where Grandpa was from."

Charmaine looks from Edith to Jenna. “Thank you, Miz Jenna, but I need Miz Edith to tell me what she can recall.” Jenna shrugs in apology. Okay, she thinks, you can sort out the next storm of pronouns on your own.

Edith shoots a dark look at her sister. “It was somewhere they speak French, I know that. She spoke French. Though she had that Spanish name. But she learned that in school, the French. She was very smart, so to speak.”

Charmaine is confused but she presses on. “Miz Edith, was your mother Hispanic?”

“No, good heavens, of course not,” Edith shakes her head emphatically. “I have blue eyes, see? We all do. She was Vermont. Or maybe Canada, that’s where Nova Scotia is, isn’t it?”

“Okay. And when did your momma pass?”

“Oh, yes!” Edith smiles broadly, showing a mouth of yellow dentures. “Mother was so smart, she was brilliant. She passed all her classes early and then she skipped two grades, went right into high school. That’s why he thought she was so much older. But then she met him and got married, and never graduated high school. So to speak.”

Charmaine looks lost, so Jenna offers to translate again. “Edie, Miz Charmaine asked about when Mother *passed on*, not when she passed her classes or why Dad thought she was older. The question is, when she died.” She hefts a jumbled stack of magazines and catalogs from a second kitchen chair and sits beside her sister’s wheelchair.

“Oh, well, then,” Edith frowns. “She should’ve said so. Still she was that smart, like I said. But she died in 1964.”

Jenna suppresses a sigh. “No, Edie, Dad died in 1964, Mother in 1984.”

Charmaine tries to recover control. “Miz Jenna, please, I need Miz Edith to say it.”

Edith scowls at Jenna, then says, “It was a long time ago. Daddy died so young, when he was only 64. We kids were all in our late thirties when Daddy died.”

Jenna shakes her head. ”Edie, I was in eighth grade. You were 36 when Dad died, but I was only 13.”

Edith and Charmaine both stare at Jenna.

“No,” Edith said, “That can’t be right. Jenna, you were in

college, I know that. And pregnant." She scowls and thumps the table with a closed fist for emphasis.

"No," Jenna repeats. "I was 13. And not pregnant."

Charmaine abandons her script and turns to Jenna. "You're *how* many years younger than Miz Edith?"

"Twenty-three years. Mom got married at 15, Dad was 24." Jenna speaks rapidly, hoping to get through this detour quickly so they can wrap it up. They're already a half-hour late for lunch. "Mom had four kids by the time she was 20. Twenty-one years later, they had me. Same parents, same farmhouse, same high school, even the same art teacher. I had two brothers and two sisters, but they were all grown and gone by then. Edith was third of those four, I'm number five. Now everyone else is gone. Edith and I are the only ones left."

Not the whole story, Jenna thinks, but it's all you need. And why does it matter?

The longer version would include more details, like the part about Mom getting pregnant a month after her fifteenth birthday by a man almost ten years older. There was always the question of who had seduced whom, back in 1924 when respectable young women absolutely did not have sex before marriage.

"So . . . if Miz Edith is ninety-one, you're . . . sixty-eight?" Charmaine stares at Jenna.

Edith looks blank. Jenna nods. "Yeah. I'm the age Dad would have been when his youngest daughter—that's me—graduated high school. If he'd lived."

"But she's talking to *me,"* Edith interjects sharply. "This is *my* story. And the best part is this! Now my baby sister has moved near me, and now we are getting to know each other. And I'm just *tickled to death*." She flashes her open-mouthed smile, lifts her head and begins trilling in a tremulous off-key soprano, "Getting to know you, getting to know all about you . . ." She breaks off singing and adds triumphantly, "See, now I get to learn all about my little baby sister. *All* about her, everything I missed before. And she's learning everything about *me*!"

Oh, Edith, Jenna thinks, you can't know. You simply weren't there. Not that time after Dad died, when I was fourteen and I ran away from home. You missed my high school and

college graduations, never met my first fiancé. Missed all three weddings, one abortion, the divorces, my son's birth, and all the rest of the first sixty-five years of my life. So no, you can't know me. And whatever you *do* know about me, you don't approve of.

Instead, Jenna says pleasantly, "I always thought that song was creepy. No one can know *all* about anyone."

Edith's winning smile flattens. She glares angrily at her younger sister. Abruptly, she leans over the table, reaching for Jenna's ponytail with one gnarled hand. Jenna tilts her chair back, staying just out of reach.

"Jenna," Edith scolds, "you mustn't ever pull your hair back behind your ears like that. Ears are ugly, they detract from your face. Where are your earrings? Ladies wear earrings, and they hide their ears with their hair, so the ugly parts are covered. You need a proper haircut. Comb your hair forward to cover your ears and spray it in place. A permanent would help. Or you could just wear one of my wigs, that would look nice. While we're on the topic, so to speak, your pants are baggy—"

"No, thank you," Jenna looks away, tamping down the instinct to lash back. "I'm happy with how I look. I like my jeans and my hair is fine. *So to speak*." She glances pointedly at the clock over the kitchen sink.

"Sorry," she says softly to Charmaine. "We don't want to miss our lunch."

The nurse's eyebrows have risen almost into her neatly braided hair, and she's ready to flee. Caught in the middle of a battle she can't possibly understand, she chooses strategic retreat. She pats Edith's hand reassuringly and gathers her paperwork, then pushes back her chair and looks for the door.

"You have such interesting stories, Miz Edith," Charmaine says briskly, "and you must be so happy to have your baby sister here, now, where she can visit and help you like she does. Thank you, I do believe I'm about done."

Edith slips her sociable face back into place, preparing to be gracious with her goodbyes.

Charmaine closes her notebook, zips up the case that holds the blood pressure cuff, and stands. "Tomorrow I'll write up my report," she says, "and the office will get back to you real

soon on your homecare claim, Miz Edith. Then we can set up that extra help you're needing. For bathing and dressing, housework and such. I know Miz Jenna helps you a couple days a week, but she can't do everything. You need more help, every day.

"One last question, Miz Edith. Do you remember those three words I asked you to memorize?"

Edith stares up at Charmaine, mouth open and trembling. "What words? I know the Lord's Prayer. Those words? 'Our Father who art—'"

"Those three words we worked on memorizing, earlier."

Edith looks to her sister, hoping for help but finding none. She closes her eyes tightly and twists her gnarled hands together on the table. "Chair," she says. Desperation creeps in. "No, no, not chair. Lamp. Lamp and paper, book? Yes, book! BLP? No, no, can't eat that, not paper."

The old woman sits in frustrated silence, angry and defeated, unable to dredge the third word from her chaotic memory.

"That's okay, Miz Edith," Charmaine pats her shoulder reassuringly. "You did real good. You got two out of three, that's good."

The caseworker gathers her jacket and case, gives Jenna a sympathetic nod, and leaves, closing the apartment door gently behind her.

Furious, Edith spins her wheelchair back from the table and glares at Jenna. "That woman tricked me!" she shouts. "I remembered everything just fine until she distracted me, we were having a nice chat, I thought we were done, and then she did that to me when I thought we were all finished! That's what she did, she tricked me, so I failed! And you were *no help whatsoever!*"

Jenna sighs and stands. "She was just doing her job, Edie, not trying to trick you. I wasn't supposed to help at all. Here, I'm putting together a sandwich. You want ham and cheese or chicken salad with lettuce-tomato?"

The question of food catches Edith's attention, as Jenna knows it will. "Chicken! I love chicken salad." Just like that, the anger is gone, swamped beneath a new confetti storm of memory fragments. "Mom made the best chicken salad, and

roast chicken, too, didn't she? I remember all the chickens we had on the farm when we were kids. We traded eggs to other people, even traded a dozen chickens for a goat, once. I liked gathering eggs, but I don't like chickens. Stupid, smelly things. Especially in the summer when it rains because the chicken coop gets so stinky, and Daddy made the boys clean it out. They hated that. Remember?"

Jenna is poking through the refrigerator. She finds mayonnaise, days-old white bread, a cooked chicken breast, limp lettuce, no tomatoes. She makes a mental note to give the fridge a good cleaning, then locates a dull knife and small cutting board. She begins shredding chicken.

"Remember? About the chickens?" Edith insists.

"No, Edie." Jenna suppresses a sigh. "Not really. You were gone, the boys were gone. The chickens got sold off when I was four. But, speaking of chickens, I do remember the story that Mother always told me about the chicken coop and your wedding."

"What story? Was it a funny story?" Edith tips her head to one side.

She looks, Jenna thinks, rather like a bright-eyed broody hen. Age had pulled the skin on Edith's face back against the skull, sharpening the bones, and her hairline had retreated, showing pink scalp. Below, gravity had pulled the bulk of her torso downward into a large middle mass of belly and bottom, with skinny legs beneath.

Yes, a broody hen settled on her nest, ready to protect a flock of chicks. Her face is alert, slightly suspicious. Ready for anything, to be attacked or entertained or flattered, or distracted with food or stories. Bread and circuses. That's where I'll be too, I guess, in twenty years.

Jenna says, "Really? You don't remember, from your own wedding? Mom told me over and over, not because it was funny but because she held that grudge against Dad for the rest of his life. It was your wedding day, Edie, in June, right? 1954? When you married Walt? And they hosted the reception at the farmhouse. I was the flower girl, I was only three, so I don't remember anything. Mom said that Dad decided to clean out the big henhouse the day before the wedding. He shoveled all the smelly chicken shit into the manure spreader

and hauled it out to the fields, but the manure spreader leaked all over the driveway. It was June, it was hot, and the whole place stank to high heaven, she said. There was no way to clean it up, the wedding guests arrived, and everyone tried to ignore the smell. It was a farm, after all."

Edith is shaking her head harder and harder as Jenna talks. Then she snaps, "No! I know nothing about that. And *do not use* that filthy language around me, young lady."

Jenna slaps chicken salad onto stale bread and blithely continues, "Mom said she was mortified. She was so mad at Dad that she didn't talk to him for *a week*. Of all the times to clean the chicken coop, he had to do it *then?* And Walt's mother, your mother-in-law, what was her name, Dorothy? She was very high-society, an old-money Mayflower descendant, a DAR lady, granddaughter of a Massachusetts governor. She didn't approve of her son marrying the farmer's daughter anyway—"

"*No! It did not happen that way!*" Edith's voice rises in fury, and tears glaze her eyes. "Our wedding was perfect, Walt and I were so happy, it was a beautiful day in June! Everyone should have a June wedding! Look at the pictures. I was so pretty, that day."

"Yes, you were pretty. But every time Mom looked at your wedding picture, on the mantle over the fireplace, it reminded her of the smell, and she told me that story. And," Jenna adds, "I'm sixty-eight. I can say 'shit' if I want to."

Edith twists her face away. "Why are you here? I don't want you here if you're going to tell lies and use filthy language."

"Because you need someone to help you. I'm your sister, all the family you've got left."

Edith sets her mouth in a furious narrow line. In silence, Jenna serves their sandwiches and pours two glasses of milk.

With the food in front of her, Edith shakes herself like a hen fluffing off dust. She smiles her sweet-child smile, and picks up her sandwich. "That is the prettiest amaryllis, isn't it? I do love a spot of red in the room." Mouth full of chicken salad, she points a finger at the windowsill where a glass tumbler holds a stalk of bright green with four brilliant scarlet blooms, a flowering bulb that Jenna had brought a few weeks earlier.

Jenna sighs and sits next to her sister. We share blood and not much else, she thinks.

They had never lived together or even spent more than a few hours in each other's company until a year earlier, when Edith's husband had died. Childless, Edith had invited Jenna to move nearby and offered her a stipend to help around the house, a couple of days a week. Jenna—divorced, living alone, with her one grown son working abroad—figured it was an opportunity to strengthen family ties, maybe find some hidden truths about her little-known siblings and long-gone parents. Here was a chance to locate a few richer threads in the tapestry that she was bound into but had never felt a part of. And she needed the money.

What Jenna had gained in that year, along with several shifting versions of maybe-real family stories, was the suspicion that her older sister had probably always skated on the far edge of truth. Every visit with Edith included some sort of verbal barrage, a slew of distracting non sequiturs, casual criticisms, and unverifiable reminiscences. The random chatter and rapidly shifting moods, fueled by age and untethered impulses, created a cognitive whiplash that left Jenna feeling manipulated and exhausted. To comb through all that clutter, in search of small truths about herself, her family, or anything else? Not worth it.

So now the topic is flowers, which Jenna figures is safe enough. Edith natters on through lunch, speaking of vases and past floral arrangements and how much she loves sunflowers. She falls silent, briefly, while Jenna gathers the plates and fills the sink with soapy dishwater. Then, disliking a conversational vacuum, Edith launches into her favorite topic, the rhetorical tale of Our Perfect Childhood.

"We had the best parents ever, didn't we? And the best life on the farm. What a wonderful place to grow up, out there in God's green country. It was perfect, wasn't it?" She looks to Jenna for agreement. Jenna knows she's supposed to chime in, to say oh yes, absolutely, the best childhood, the best parents, we were so fortunate. Yes, it was God's country. Remember the wild blueberries we picked, the strawberries that Daddy planted, the corn that grew so tall, the kittens born in the haymow.

She isn't sure where Edie is going with it this time, but Jenna is tired of being spoken to as if she were a simple child, or an echo chamber, or whatever Edie needs her to be. Not today. She just doesn't have the energy to produce or consume that much sugar.

Jenna drains the sink. "Edie, maybe you remember how it was lovely and perfect, but you all had a hard life during the Depression. The boys fought in the Second World War. Dad had a thing for Mom's younger sister."

Jenna is worn out and her own filters are starting to fail. "After he lost the farm, Dad spent the family savings on grand ideas that didn't work. He tried selling insurance but failed, and that's when Mom had to go to work as a lunch lady at the high school. Finally, Dad got a job as a school janitor so at least he had health insurance when he got cancer."

"I don't remember any of that!"

"Of course not. That last part, after the farm got sold, that was during *my* childhood, not yours. I had a good childhood, and I believe Mom and Dad loved all of us and probably loved each other the best they could. We learned the value of hard work and a good education and how to tell right from wrong, mostly. But it wasn't ever *perfect*. And gods don't have countries, as far as I know, so I really don't get that part."

Edith looks away, her mouth set in a stubborn line.

Then, as Jenna sponges crumbs off the table, Edith catches her wrist in one arthritic hand and grips fiercely.

"Jenna, you always were a contrary child. That's why I moved away when you were two. Why are you always so disagreeable? Why can't you *just agree with me?* I don't *want* to remember anything bad or hurtful. I only want to talk about nice things, pretty things!"

Jenna ignores the sharp fingernails digging into her skin and lets her wrist go limp. "I guess," she sighs, "what I want to hear is something true. Life isn't pretty, most of the time. We learn from the tough parts. The way you tell it, everything was always so perfect and sweet and lovely. But I know it wasn't."

Edith is silent for several seconds. She lets go of Jenna and folds her hands on the table in front of her. "Well, then," she says with a secretive smile. "You do know why Mom got

pregnant, right?"

Whiplashed again. Damn, it's hard to keep up.

Since Edith might now offer information on something more substantial than flowers, Jenna searches her memory for something to contribute.

"Well," Jenna begins, "Mom told me she got pregnant that first time when she was barely fifteen, with Martha, because she wanted to get away from caring for all those babies at home, her little sisters and brothers. If she was going to take care of babies, she said, they should be her own. She wanted to marry a farmer, Dad was a handsome young farmer, and I guess she figured that was a good way to catch him. At the time Dad had another girlfriend, Lucille, right? That his family thought he would marry. Mom was pretty proud that he married *her* instead of Lucille."

Jenna rattles on. "Then Mom had the next three, Allen and you and Charlie. She told me she didn't know anything about birth control, which was of course illegal then. But an aunt finally told her to get a diaphragm, so she did. But two decades later, at age 41, she got pregnant one more time—surprise!—and there I was, one more to raise, after the family was already complete."

Jenna stacks the dried plates on a shelf over the sink and wonders fleetingly why they're discussing Mom's pregnancies. Is this a lead-in to a discussion about sex? Would Edith want to know more about Jenna's wild party-girl life during the sixties? As part of "getting to know all about you?" Surely not.

"She got pregnant with you," Edith intones dramatically, "to save her marriage."

"What?"

"It was Daddy's old girlfriend, Lucille. He and Mother had been married twenty-five years, working on the farm, raising us—but Daddy never forgot Lucille. He always wrote to her, she wrote back. She got married and moved to Virginia. Then her husband died, maybe 1948 or '49. Dad told Mom he wanted a divorce so he could go marry Lucille. We four were grown up. Martha was married, Allen was in college, Charlie and I had jobs. Dad figured he'd done his duty and twenty-five years was enough."

Jenna chucks the dish towel onto the counter, returns to

the table and sits with a thump. “Wait,” she says, “Dad wanted a divorce?”

“Yes, exactly,” Edith continues. “So Mother got pregnant one more time. With you. Then he couldn’t leave. You got born and saved the family! Although Lucille wouldn’t have him anyway. She turned him down, said she wouldn’t be a homewrecker.”

“How do you know this? Who told you?”

“Mother did, right after you were born. So you see, Jenna,” Edith says with an air of triumph, “I *do* know a few things about you, that you don’t even know. See, everything happens for a purpose! You were the miracle baby! What do you think about *that*?”

“I’m not sure what to think.” She shrugs. “It’s pretty sad. I feel bad for Dad, living all those years in one family but always wishing he’d married Lucille instead. He must have felt trapped. And I’m sad for Mom, too, that she thought she had to use pregnancy to keep him tied down. I guess she felt she had no other options. Yeah, that’s a sad story, if it’s true.”

“What do you mean ‘if it’s true’? You’re *missing the point*.” Edith shouts, frustrated. “It’s not a *story,* it’s the truth and it’s not sad, it’s wonderful. It’s about how Mom was so clever, she was able to hang on to the man she loved, she found a way to keep the family together. Babies are supposed to be wanted and you were *wanted*. It was a miracle, God caused you to be born to save the family. That’s why we all were so happy when you were born, why we all loved you.”

Jenna gazes at the stranger in the wheelchair, this angry old woman that everyone says is her sister. Was *this* her origin story, being born into a family of schemers, people living small lives of regret and quiet desperation?

“Let’s leave gods and miracles out of it,” Jenna finally says. “If that’s the way it happened, it was Mother’s plan, not God’s or anyone else’s. But you’re saying I accomplished this grand purpose in life just *by getting born?* And that’s why my family loved me? And, if Lucille turned him down, was I even necessary?”

“I don’t know that! But you were loved! And Mother was happy, and Dad stayed, so the rest of us didn’t have to worry about them getting divorced. Like I said, *that’s what mattered*

most. But," she adds more quietly, "I'm sorry, you must have been so lonely!"

Jenna stares at her sister for a long moment, then sighs and slumps back in her chair. "Dad must have found some way to make peace with Mom and everything else, because I always felt loved, and yes, I had a good childhood. I liked being the only child, but of course I didn't know any different. I was so spoiled, wasn't I? They made the best of it, they sacrificed for me when they could. I got toys and attention, dogs and cats and a pony, swimming and music lessons, trips to the museums. I'm sure you four older ones were jealous. I didn't have to share anything! But I was never lonely. Alone, yes, I was often alone. I preferred to be alone, most of the time. I still do. But lonely? No, never."

Jenna pauses. "Edie, I'm sorry you didn't share that part of my life. There's really no way to do that, is there? No way to catch up."

Edith's eyes fill with tears. "Of course, you were spoiled. You were the *special one*. And we *are* catching up."

She wipes the back of one hand over her eyes and sits up straighter. "You know, the reason my wedding reception was so memorable, the reason Mother was so very angry with Daddy, was because my mother-in-law, Dorothy, that high-society lady as you call her, she *stepped in it*. In the *chicken shit*. Yes, Mother spoke of that *every time* she looked at my wedding pictures. I do remember, of course I do. But I choose not to."

"I know," Jenna nods. Her voice softens. "And Edie, it's book, lamp, table." She places an arm awkwardly around her sister's thin, bony shoulder and gives her a small hug. "It's book, lamp, table. Next time, you'll remember."

L. L. Babb

The Point

It was a Friday night like any other, this time in a bar called The Drop Zone. Katarina sat at a table in the center of the room, alone. A man and a woman sat with their chairs pushed together at a table nearby. A trio of men in baseball caps silently lapped the pool table in the back. The bartender rubbed a yellow rag against a mug while he gazed as if pondering something profound at the flickering bulb in a beer sign. A lone man sat at the bar. He had his back to Katarina but she thought that he had noticed her when she had sat down a half hour earlier; there was something about the tilt of his head and the way he turned his face toward her as he lifted his beer to his lips. He could be the type who would need extra encouragement to approach her. She sat up and flipped her hair back, straightened her shoulders, and arranged her shellacked, scarlet lips into a pout. The band, three shaggy men who sounded like they were playing together for the first time, announced that they were taking a fifteen-minute break.

Katarina directed a penetrating stare into the back of the man's head. After a moment, he turned and looked at her. Their eyes met for an instant. He gave his head an awkward flick to clear a swath of brown hair from his face then swiveled back around to the bar. It was clear to Katarina, in retrospect, that she could have given him more than just eye contact, that if she stood up with her drink, and slipped onto the empty stool next to him, maybe even put a hand on his arm, ("You mean blatantly come on to him," Richard, her husband said), that she might have had more time with him.

"That isn't the point," Richard said. They were lying in bed. Katarina stopped her story and waited patiently, staring at the ceiling.

Richard was always explaining the point to Katarina. There were a lot of things she needed explained. Richard was hard to understand. There was the language problem and the age difference problem and what Katarina told her mother

on the phone, was the "American" problem or perhaps more specifically, the "Richard" problem. Katarina wasn't sure if these were all separate problems or maybe one big problem jumbled all together.

The point, Richard always said, was to let them come to her. The point was that it was their idea, not hers.

"I know. I love you," Katarina said. She felt confident saying I love you, more than any other words in English. She said it a lot. It was the least she could do. Her husband had given her this new life, brought her to America, paid for pedicures and shiny cocktail dresses, let her order anything she wanted at restaurants. Katarina stroked the patch of curly gray hair on Richard's chest. "Like old poodle," she had remarked the first time she saw it and Richard had made the very displeased face—the one where he flattened his lips into a straight line and wouldn't look at her. Richard didn't often think she was funny.

Katarina continued watching the man at the bar. After a few minutes, he turned to look at her again. This time Katarina was the first to look away, as if caught doing something she shouldn't. She took a tiny sip of beer. There were strict rules for these evenings, one of them being not to drink too much. Keeping her eyes downcast, she crossed her legs and hooked a finger under the strap of her dress to adjust her bra. When she glanced up again, the man was still looking at her. This time neither of them looked away.

"He really liked you," Richard said, stroking the valley between her breasts, "I could tell."

The man stood and walked over to Katarina. Up close, she could see that he was young, probably close to her own age. He had the kind of eyes she liked, warm and brown and heavy-lidded, as if he were trying hard not to fall asleep. She had been disappointed in Richard's eyes the first time she saw them. His were a cold metallic blue and as alert as a squirrel's.

"What was the first thing he said to you?" Richard asked.

"Hi."

Katarina tilted her head up. The young man was tall and lanky. A beanpole but not unattractive. Not at all. His hand clutched a sweating beer bottle, a somewhat anxious

expression on his face. She thought perhaps he was not in the habit of approaching women. She liked him immediately.

"Hi," Katarina said.

He turned and studied the stage the band had vacated. Katarina waited. Without looking, he put a hand on the back of an empty chair at the table and took a sip from his bottle.

"And then he asked do I come here often," Katarina told Richard.

"He didn't," Richard hooted. "You're kidding." Richard found other men's corny pickup lines uproariously funny. The first thing Richard had said when he met her was, "Well, at least you look a little like your picture."

In reality what the man said was, "I don't want to alarm you but there's a really creepy guy over there who's watching you." He jerked his chin towards the back of the bar.

Katarina glanced over to where Richard sat under the EXIT sign. The light turned the top of Richard's silver hair a Martian green but his face was lost in the shadows.

Another rule—never look at Richard. Katarina glanced back down at her hands wrapped around her glass. This was the first time since Richard had started needing this that someone noticed him. Usually the men saw only her. A few had mistaken her for a prostitute and she knew she must look like one, in her short, shiny dresses, offered up, glistening, silky, and fresh—like something good to eat. Dessert. She might as well have a price tag on the top of her head and a spotlight shining down.

This bar was a horrible place, dark and musty smelling. She was, as usual in America, way overdressed. But Richard said he couldn't take her to nice places all the time. He wouldn't even take her to the same place twice. He didn't want her to look like a regular or some kind of barfly, whatever that was. He didn't want to take a chance that some guy might recognize her and approach her a second time. That wasn't the point, he said. Katarina imagined that someday they would run out of places to go on Friday nights, that there couldn't be that many clubs in Albuquerque and the surrounding area, and they would have to move to another city, to someplace new. Maybe they would end up in a motor home, like some of Richard's old friends from the Navy, chasing the sun and

good fishing, though in Katarina and Richard's case they'd be chasing singles' bars

"I'm sure you're used to men staring at you," the young man said then quickly continued, "I don't mean that in a weird way. Geez, I'm sounding like an idiot."

"No, no," Katarina said. "Is okay."

"Did you think he was attractive?" Richard asked.

"Oh," she said, "he was just kid, you know?" That part was true. He was a kid compared to Richard.

"Not even a little attractive?" Richard burrowed his head into the hollow of her neck. "Come on," he mumbled into her skin. "You thought he was hot."

"My name's Seth," the young man said, offering Katarina a hand that felt damp and cold from the beer bottle. "I would ask you to dance, but my dancing . . . well, that's not the first impression I like to make on a girl. But I can dance if you want to, I mean, if you don't mind dancing with a dork." He smiled. "Or slow, I can dance slow." He gestured to the stage. "I mean, when the band comes back. Then. We could dance. Or something."

Richard would like it if they danced. Once, Katarina had danced with a tall, muscular black man wearing a white T-shirt that stretched tight around his chest. They hadn't danced so much as simply swayed on the dance floor, never lifting their feet, the top of her head nestled under his chin. For that moment, they became one melded being, fitting as if they belonged together. Then Richard had appeared to claim her, like a child who wanted his toy back. That night he fucked her in the back of the Bronco right in there in the parking lot of the club. Katarina could still smell the other man's aftershave in her hair as she and Richard drove home.

Now she felt Richard watching her from across the room, waiting to see what she'd do next. She gave the young man her dazzling smile, the one that she perfected in the mirror, the one in the first picture Richard had ever seen of her. "I'm Katarina," she said. "For now, we can talk?"

"All right," Seth said, pulling out the chair. "Where are you from? I like your accent." He put his elbows on the table, leaned forward and let the beer bottle dangle from his fingers like a bell. He was more than attractive; he was beautiful.

She could see that now. His long hair made him look almost feminine.

"Like Beatle," Katarina said to Richard, "very pretty."

"Not your type at all, right, baby?" Richard said. "Poor sap, he never stood a chance."

"Yes," Katarina said, "no chance."

"Tell me, Katarina," Seth said, taking a sip of beer, "tell me something about yourself. What do you do for fun?"

Katarina thought for a moment. There was nothing to tell about her life back home. There she was the same as everyone else, with the same flat future as her mother and father and her aunts, uncles, and cousins. She didn't miss much about it. She had written on her profile that she wanted to be an actress, the kind who made audiences laugh because she was clumsy and always messed everything up. Like *I Love Lucy*. Funny and loud. She hoped a movie director from Hollywood would discover her but instead it was Richard from New Mexico. He picked her out from a hundred beautiful faces on a website, they met, she married him. She was so lucky. She didn't have anything to offer but herself, her youth, her pretty smile. And he didn't ask for any more in return than any husband would ask. Except for these Fridays nights.

Richard was retired. Weekday evenings they sat in matching recliners and watched *Judge Judy* after dinner. They went shopping together for groceries and clothes for Katarina. A woman came twice a week to vacuum and scrub the toilets. There was little for Katarina to do. She never went anywhere or did anything without Richard.

"I like shopping," Katarina said.

"Who doesn't?" Seth said. "What else do you like?"

"I like dishwasher," she said.

Seth laughed. He had a hearty guffaw, throaty and appreciative. When he laughed, he seemed kind, like someone she could become friends with, maybe fall in love with. Such straight white teeth. Such clear and flawless skin.

"Tell me something surprising," he said. "Tell me something you've never told anyone else."

"Okay," Katarina said. She wanted to tell him something that would make him laugh again. Maybe she would tell him about the first time she had gone to an American supermarket, how

she had been overwhelmed by the entire wall of cereal. Boxes and boxes nearly six feet high, flakes and loops and squares, charms and nuggets in every color. She stood staring, frozen in the aisle for so long that Richard had to tug at her to get her to keep walking. This was America. This was how Americans lived. Richard should have been practiced at choosing one from so many.

"Okay," Katarina said again. She wasn't that smart; Richard had to explain everything over and over. She was pretty, but Richard said she was ordinary pretty. He said her hips were big, she crossed her arms over her breasts, she slumped her shoulders when she walked, and she was too loud. He thought sometimes he might have done better. She knew Richard was afraid he'd made a mistake.

"The creepy man is husband," she said, surprising herself.

"What?" Seth said. He didn't laugh. He paused with his beer halfway up to his mouth. "He's a husband? Whose husband?"

"Me. Mine husband." Seth turned in his chair. "No, you must not look."

Seth put his beer down on the table and frowned. "So what's . . . is this . . . is this a joke or something?"

"Is okay," Katarina said, though she was pretty sure it wasn't okay. Richard didn't precisely tell her not to tell anyone about him. It was more implied by his actions, his lurking in the shadows.

"Ah, no, it's not okay," Seth said. "Is he, like, stalking you? Are you separated or something?"

"Yes," Katarina said, "separated. I am here, he is there."

Seth contemplated this for a few moments. "Look," he said, "I don't know what's going on here but I don't want any trouble." He put both hands on the table and started to stand.

She reached over and grabbed at his fingers. "No trouble," Katarina said. "Please. Just talk?"

Richard said, "You seemed to be having a pretty intense conversation."

"I told him I was gypsy. I told him I would read palm."

"Oh my god, that's perfect," Richard said, delighted.

Seth sat back down and took a sip of beer. "I'm going to regret this. I know I am."

"No, no, nothing bad." She turned his hand over and

uncurled his fingers one by one. The pillows on the palm of his hand were soft. Richard's hands were scaly and covered with hardened calluses. They caught on her skin when he touched her. "Is perfectly normal. You stay and we talk and we dance and Richard take me home."

"Who's . . . wait, he watches you with other men?" Seth said, his voice rising. "That's just crazy. You're joking, right?" The bartender glanced over at them.

She thought of the night when Richard interrupted her dancing with the handsome black man, how Richard had tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Okay, buddy, that's enough." The man stepped back as Richard slipped his arm around Katarina's waist, pulling her to his side. His arm was a steel shackle, his bony hip pushed into her side. The man could tell immediately that she and Richard were all wrong together.

"She's my wife," Richard had said.

"Shit," the man said, "you with her?" He laughed like it was a practical joke she and Richard were playing on him. When Katarina laughed too, Richard took a step towards the man, pushing Katarina behind him.

"Is this old dude really your husband?" the man said, looking past Richard to Katarina. "Really?"

She realized afterward that she might have said anything at that moment and changed her life. She wondered if she would ever get an opening like that again.

"No joke," she said to Seth.

One of the band members stepped back onto the little platform in the corner of the club. He rifled through a pile of papers on top of the piano then turned and scanned the room. When he saw Seth, he gave him a quick nod.

Seth nodded back. "My brother," he told Katarina. "I guess we both have family members here." He paused as he thought about it. "Only I'm watching him, not vice versa."

Katarina tipped her head back and laughed up at the ceiling. She let go of Seth's hand and it escaped back to his beer bottle. He stood. "I just came to watch my brother play. I don't want to get in the middle of anything between you and your husband over there."

"You were laughing," Richard said. "What were you talking

about?"

"I don't remember," Katarina said. She put her arms around Richard's neck and pulled his face to hers. "It's not important. He's not important."

"But didn't he want to dance with you or anything?" Richard asked. "I mean, why did he come over to talk to you in the first place? What was the point?"

Katarina felt the tendons in Richard's neck stiffen. The air between them, which had been as thick as syrup, seemed to thin. Richard peered into her face, judging, evaluating, searching for those flaws that hadn't been apparent in her photos on the internet, looking to see what everybody, anybody, else saw.

Katarina thought of other nights—the time a young man talked to her for over an hour about God and the sorry state of her soul, the guy who tried to sign her up to sell Amway, the middle-aged man who cried quietly when he mentioned his dead wife. She had listened and waited for whatever came next.

"This one wanted to go to back room," she said, "the bathroom, where we could fuck. He wanted to leave and I go home with him right now. Run away. Go, go."

Richard's head dropped down next to hers on the pillow, his arms tightened around her, his body against hers tense and urgent. "He wanted me so bad. But I laugh at him and say no. No. Only talk. Only dance."

"Everybody wants my baby," Richard said without lifting his head, his mouth flush against her ear.

And like every other Friday night, Katarina closed her eyes and opened her legs beneath him. It was funny. He wasn't a big man but the weight of him nearly crushed the life out of her.

R. C. Kogut

Best Man

At first, the flight status says only: DELAYED. When the new arrival time posts, it's fifteen minutes late, and Jake thinks, okay. But the arrival keeps getting bumped later and later, five or ten minutes every time the board updates. Now, the flight is almost forty-five minutes late. Jake, always fifteen minutes early for everything, has waited for over an hour. And isn't it just like Kevin O'Connor to make him hurry up and stand here with his thumb up his ass.

Waitin' on you, Connie. Waitin' on you.

It's an Army thought, a CO thought. They've been thinning out, those catchphrases, in the year since he got out. He wouldn't say something like that out loud anymore, just like he's mostly lost the impulse to sir his boss. But the lexicon still comes back, in the company of other soldiers or in moments of head-banging frustration. The Army has more words for fucked up than the Eskimos have for snow.

Lafayette, he thinks, and shoves the thought away.

He should have refused this rendezvous. He could have claimed work. He could have claimed anything. Connie's call last night caught him off guard.

He has nothing to say to Connie. Nothing about their glory days at West Point. Nothing about his aborted Army career. And not one fucking thing about Jamie or the ugly rumors around his death. Jake has pins in his spine, courtesy of his own tour in New Iraq. Some days, he can hardly stand up straight. But if Connie plans to interrogate him about his brother, Jake knows he still has it in him to kick his ass.

Fucker, he thinks.

Jamie isn't here to defend the bastard, to spin it around, to turn it funny.

Jamie isn't here.

Suddenly, the anger's gone, and he's eyeing the rows of empty terminal seats, sick and limpdick tired. He wants to sit, but his back can't take it. He had to stop three times on the two hour drive here. He considers lying down on the floor.

The arrival time for Connie's flight is fifteen minutes later. Beneath it on the status board, there's a new flight, also delayed, coming in from Lafayette.

Lafayette. And that is weird. Weird enough to make the hair on his arms stand to. He took that flight himself, fifteen years ago, after Connie and Gwen's wedding. Lafayette to Denver. *Lafayette to Montgomery, by way of Denver.* (He can just hear Jamie say it.) *Ain't that just the Army way?*

Lafayette. All through his sleepless night, his workday, his long, rain slick drive through the mountains, his thoughts have been blinking back there. To that last summer night. Before New Iraq and the crap on the Moon. When he and Connie were new minted 2nd lieutenants. Friends, more or less. And Jamie . . . his kid brother Jamie was nothing but a hotshot firstie, his great fuck-up of a life yet to come.

Jake shuts his eyes and he's there again, fifteen years lifting off him like a curse.

Kevin & Gwen O'Connor—Happily Ever After. Jake read the banner over the bandstand for what might have been the thousandth time and struggled not to roll his eyes. He shifted his numb ass on the satin-wrapped folding chair; swatted a mosquito on his neck. His sharp new Class A uniform had long since wilted in the humidity. It clung to every part of him, damp and itchy. Miserable as he was, waiting, he had to admit it was a pretty evening. Strands of white lights adorned the estate hedges and the tree limbs overhead. The warm evening breeze swam with the scent of fresh mown grass and sweet magnolia blossoms. The last guests standing bumped and sweated their way around the dance floor. Jake swirled the punch in his cup and dreamed of the cool, fresh queen-sized bed waiting for him back at the hotel.

His brother emerged from the darkness behind him and flopped in the nearest chair at the table.

"How's the view?" Jamie asked, looking from the dance floor back to Jake.

Jake glanced meaningfully at his watch.

"Come party with us," Jamie said, his grin a lighting flash under sky blue eyes.

Jake snorted. "I'm good."

"You haven't had enough to drink," Jamie said. He dumped one of the glowing neon drinks he had been carrying into Jake's plastic cup. "Here."

"I'm driving." Jake held up the rental car keys as evidence, and Jamie snatched them out of his hand.

"I'll drive. Drink."

Jake frowned at his brother, not sure whether Jamie was already too drunk to drive.

"Drink, boy, it's good for you," Jamie barked and Jake struggled to hold on to his frown. Jamie leaned toward him and pointed to the crowd on the dance floor. "That girl over there, the brunette in the blue dress . . ."

"They're *all* in blue," Jake grumbled, even though he knew.

Jamie raised his eyebrows. *Please.* "She's been checking you out all evening. I'm telling you, bro, easy as pie. Tell her you're on your way to flight school next week and she's all yours. Come on." Jamie got up and offered him a hand.

Jake shook his head. He had been watching the girl in question all night, and he was sure she hadn't shot one look in his direction. In fact, she had spent the whole evening, like all the single girls at their table, watching Jamie. Jake had been watching him, too, to tell the truth. He shone.

For the last few hours, Jake had sat back the way he always did, watching his little brother work the crowd, trying to figure out his trick. He studied the way Jamie's mobile face could be goofy, delighted, serious, all in the space of a five-minute conversation. His best man's toast had Gwen's grandma weeping with laughter. No one could resist him. One minute, he was sipping whisky with Connie's father and grandfather; the next he was soaked and dishing out retribution in a short-lived water fight with Gwen's little cousins. He must have danced with a hundred girls. Skinny, fat, young, old, not a soul escaped him. He spent a couple songs twisting it up with a six-year-old flower girl, and Jake gave up. The boy was a mystery to him.

"There! See?" Jamie said, elbowing him, as the girl peeked at them and blushed. And she might, she just might have looked at him. "Come o-o-n, Jake."

"Naw." Jake said, his resolve beginning to slip. "She's looking at you. You go."

Gwen swept by, barefoot now, holding the hem of her slim white dress off the lawn. As much as Jake disliked her, he couldn't deny she made a stunning bride. Her auburn hair floated loose about her face, falling in heavy curls over bare shoulders pale as magnolia petals. Jamie's head snapped around, and Gwen glanced back at him as she passed.

"Gwen!" Jamie said, twirling the rental car keys around his finger. "Come over here."

She slipped away with a sad little smile over her shoulder, exchanging a private look with Jamie that Jake didn't like one bit.

Jake frowned. *That bitch.* Here she was, on her wedding day, eyeing her husband's best friend. *Women,* he thought bitterly.

Jamie glanced at his brother's scowl and shrugged. "Good looking bride," he said, then distantly, "They're already fighting."

"There's a fucking newsflash."

"Yeah," Jamie said, but he didn't quite smile. "Kind of sad for her, though."

"Even sadder for Connie."

"Amen," Jamie laughed. He looked at the sky, then grinned at his brother. "Bridesmaids, Jake. Bridesmaids."

Jake sighed. He heaved himself upright. "One hour. And give me the keys. You're drunk."

Jamie pulled the key fob from his pocket, and bounced it thoughtfully in the palm of his hand. His eyes flashed.

Jake leapt, but he was too late.

Jamie stepped back and pitched the keys onto the three-story gabled roof of the big white manor house. As they rattled into a rain gutter, Jake's vision of sleep in clean hotel sheets and air conditioning winked out like a lightning bug. He grabbed his head like he was trying to hold it on.

"Fuck! Jame! I'm flying out at 0700 tomorrow."

"I'll get you there, bro." Jamie said, shaking him by the shoulders. "Come on. Party with us. This is the last time we're all going to be together like this."

"Fuck," Jake groaned. He downed the drink in his hand. It tasted like rubbing alcohol mixed with half a pack of KoolAid. He coughed.

Jamie swatted him on the back. “That’s more like it.”

Jake scowled. He was going to wind up crashing on the floor. Again. He just knew it. “Why did I even bother getting us a hotel room?”

Jamie leaned back on his heels and laughed. “Man, I have *no* idea.”

Jake smiled. He couldn’t help it. “I’m going to need more than that if you expect me to dance.”

Jamie pushed the other drink at him and dragged him out onto the dance floor.

Jake snapped awake in the no-man’s-light of early dawn, unsure what had wakened him. He stretched his legs between cool cotton sheets, savoring the feel of the girl’s bare body, hot against his. He slid his hand up the silkiness of her side and hugged her drowsily, pleased. He wanted to stay there just one minute more, before he had to wake all the way up and face the full magnitude of his hangover. He started to drift off again, wondering how much time they had, and she shook him.

“Hey!” she hissed, and her drawl was not the least bit sweet. “Wake up!”

He rolled onto his back.

“Wake up!” she said again, and pinched him, hard.

“I’m up,” he said, catching her wrist. “Stop. I’m up.”

“Someone’s on the roof.”

Plaster dust and grit fell in his eyes as the beams above groaned under footsteps.

An avalanche of matted leaves and twigs clattered on the third story balcony outside and one long, swim-trunk-clad leg eased over the eaves. *Jamie.*

The girl shrieked. The noise sent a lightning bolt of pain through the center of Jake’s head. He sat up and the room spun. Jamie’s leg disappeared and the girl screamed again.

“STOP that,” Jake growled. The girl narrowed her eyes at him, like she didn’t much care for his tone. “It’s my brother,” he muttered. He put his arm around her and they blinked at each other for a few seconds. He recognized her as the brunette, now liberated from her blue dress. *Winnie, Windi, Vici?* Jake couldn’t remember her name. His eyes went over

her, taking in the perfection of her dainty shoulders, the little morsels of her breasts. She huffed and yanked the sheet up under her arms as if she hadn't ridden him like a polo pony a few hours earlier. She ducked when he tried to kiss her, and his teeth connected with the top of her head.

Jake got up and yanked on his briefs. The used condom slumped sticky and dejected on the nightstand. He knew he ought to be glad to see it, but somehow he wasn't. He bundled the mess and the wrapper in a tissue, and dumped it in a flower-painted wastebasket.

A key fob jangled on the leaf-strewn porch and Jamie swung his hips down. Beyond him, the thin light revealed the wide lawns and gardens of Gwen's family estate, swaddled in fog and surrounded by a vista of mossy treetops that might have gone on forever. Jake's watch read 0500. If they hurried, he might still make his flight.

The gutter creaked ominously as Jamie dropped onto the balcony in front of the open French doors, grinning like a madman. Jake knew he should be pissed at him; all he could do was shake his head. Jamie'd spent his final summer at West Point training with the Rangers. He was planning to go for Infantry, Rangers, then Delta, and he'd been pulling crazy stunts all weekend as if to prove he had the mettle. Even if Jake found some of Jamie's daredevil antics unnerving, he was pleased, at last, his brother was interested in something other than getting laid.

"Veronica," Jamie said, easy as if he had joined their conversation at a garden party instead of infiltrating their locked bedroom, commando-style.

"James," the girl said coyly, and Jake, with his back to her, rolled his eyes.

Jamie smirked and threw the rescued car keys at Jake, who caught them as he struggled into his pants. "Ready?"

"Knocking," Jake said. "A useful skill."

"Door was open."

Jake shut his eyes, speechless. When he opened them, Jamie was still there, half-naked and barefoot, apparently not the least bit hung over. He had a long scratch from his navel to his collarbone which Jake suspected came from sliding over the gutter.

"You need to knock that crazy shit off," Jake said, dragging on his T-shirt. "What the hell happened to you last night anyway?" He'd lost track of his brother somewhere between the tequila shots and Connie's pukefest in the koi pond. Jamie hadn't been anywhere in sight when the party finally broke up well after 0200. "Well?"

Jamie's eyes flickered from Jake to the girl in the bed and back again.

"Not too much," Jamie said.

"Mm," Jake replied, knowing this was a lie. He frowned at Jamie, but didn't push. If Jamie didn't want to say where he'd spent the night, then it was probably an unfit topic for the present company. "Alright, let's go. You drive." Jake threw the keys back at Jamie, who seemed more sober than he felt. He stared at his brother until Jamie took the hint.

"I'll go grab my stuff. See you later, V." Jamie winked at her and padded out the door.

Jake sat on the edge of the bed and slid his arm around the girl. "Sorry about that." She let his hand rove over the soft skin of her belly and hip. When he moved to kiss her, she stopped him.

"Look," she said. "Just . . . Just go."

He went. He respected her honesty. He appreciated the exemption from the usual phone number farce. Still, it stung. Jamie was waiting for him in the hall, now wearing shiny black low quarters unlaced with his trunks, his uniform jacket and slacks draped over one arm.

They walked down the long hall of closed doors in silence.

"So, was she as good as she looked?" Jamie asked at the top of the stairs.

"Yeah," Jake said. He didn't remember much of the sex beyond the polo pony evolution. Good enough, he guessed. "Easy." For some reason, the whole thing made him depressed.

"What'd I tell you?" Jamie laughed. "Did you get her number?"

"No."

"Aw, Jake . . . She's going to law school at FSU with Gwen. She'll be right down the road from you at Rucker."

"I'm not going to have time for that crap."

Jamie was quiet, then, "Maybe you ought to . . . you know . . .

get a girlfriend."

"What, like you?" Jake snorted.

Jamie shrugged.

"That's the last thing I'm gonna need at flight school, Jame."

After a careful pause, Jamie said, "You seem down lately, that's all."

"I'm not down!" Jake took a breath then let it out, too tired to argue. "I'm hung over. Do you have any more of those pills?"

Jamie produced a small bottle of D-TOX from a pocket, and Jake shook out two of the small blue pills, chewed them and swallowed. The bitterness made him shiver.

"Ugh. Thanks."

Jamie chuckled in his good-natured, easy way.

"Te-kill-ya."

"No, I'm pretty sure it was the beer."

"Beer and tequila?"

"Beer and so-co."

"Oh, man. Yuck." Jamie laughed. "No wonder Connie was puking."

Usually, when Jamie laughed, he looked about fifteen years old, but not this time. Not anymore. His kid brother was a man now, and so was he. Today they would start their own, separate lives. Jake shoved him affectionately.

"I'm gonna miss my flight."

Without another word, they slipped past the quiet kitchen and crept through the great room, stepping over sleeping forms huddled under blankets on the floor. When Jamie opened the tall door into the marble entryway, Jake dropped his shoes in a startled clatter.

Gwen O'Connor stood in a green silk robe, staring out the wide windows flanking the front door, her small feet bare on the white stone. Even half a mess, she was beautiful. She glanced at them, and her eyes stopped on Jamie before she turned back to the window, her arms crossed tightly over her chest.

Jamie cleared his throat.

"Connie's in the bathroom by the stairs on the first floor if you're looking for him," Jake said, meaning to be funny. Gwen fixed him with a look so full of cold hate that he grabbed his shoes and fumbled to unlock the front door.

"Gwen . . ." Jamie said softly.

She reached out to snap the lock open, and Jake saw her pretty green eyes lined with smudged make-up and pink sleeplessness. Before he could help himself, he felt sorry for her, and ashamed for getting Connie puking drunk on his wedding night. Then Jamie nudged him onto the porch and shut him out, closing the heavy door between them.

"Hey. Hey now," he heard him say as the latch clicked home.

Jake crossed the wide veranda to sit by himself on the cold stone steps. Unseeing, he watched the pale morning fog curl through the trees along the drive. She still had it in her power to reduce him to a fumbling idiot, even after all this time. He groaned and squeezed his aching head.

Keeping movement to a minimum, he put on his socks and shoes; checked his watch. They would be cutting it close with the flight. Jake looked back over his shoulder at the front of the house. Through the window, he saw Gwen crying, her face buried against Jamie's neck, her hands balled at the base of her throat. Jamie was talking to her, his mouth moving above her ear as he rubbed her back. He looked up and met Jake's eyes.

Jake turned around and squinted at the dust between his feet in confused worry, the image of the two of them still in his mind. The way they were standing, something about the way Jamie had his other arm wrapped around her, low, across the small of her back, seemed too familiar. When he tried to evaluate what this meant, he found he wasn't sure what he had seen. He wanted to turn around and look again and he didn't. He stared at his own hands. His eyes hurt when he moved his head. He was still drunk. He laced his fingers together and rested his chin, then his upper lip against them. Under the ghost of the girl, he could smell alcohol fuming off his skin. He didn't know what he'd seen. Jamie wouldn't do anything against Connie. He knew this. Jamie and Gwen were friends. That was all.

If they didn't leave in the next five minutes, he could forget his flight. He really wasn't looking forward to camping at the airport all day, nursing a hangover. He hazarded another look at the front windows. Gwen was wiping her eyes on her sleeve. Jamie had his back to him, apparently talking to her,

not touching. Jake turned to the driveway and closed his eyes. It was clear what was happening here: he'd made a mess of things and Jamie was picking up the pieces. The shots hadn't been his idea, but he had known how they would end. Deep down, he suspected he had fucked up Gwen and Connie's wedding night on purpose. He flicked a stray pebble off the steps. He never should have let Jamie talk him into staying. He should have called himself a cab.

The great door clicked behind him. Jake saw the scuffed toes of his brother's black dress shoes, and looked up.

"Is she alright?" Jake asked him.

"Yeah," Jamie said and cleared his throat, "yeah, she's fine." He stood with his arms folded, staring down the misty driveway. "Jake . . ."

"I know. I know. I swear it was Connie's idea."

Jamie looked down at him, clearly puzzled. "What?"

"The tequila . . . "

"Oh. Yeah. I figured." Jamie said, and smiled at him absently, as if Connie's tequila debacle was the farthest thing from his mind.

Fifteen years later, Jake is once again waiting on a flight. This time he's not going anywhere. He stands with his hands at his back, waiting, just the same. The flight is over ninety minutes late.

He can't see much out the window in front of him, the terminal is too bright and the night too dark. Instead, he watches his own face reflected in the glass—his brother's face, one shade darker. This is more or less how Jamie would have looked, had he lived. Jake's imagination isn't up to the task of conjuring him. He can't see Jamie with those deep set lines in his forehead. He can't see him with brown eyes instead of blue.

But he remembers his brother, even four years gone.

Connie's flight status is flashing again. DELAYED, DELAYED, DELAYED. The flight from Lafayette has arrived.

Lafayette, he thinks, and rubs the ghost of stubble along his jaw. *Lafayette*. That night, fifteen years ago, wasn't the last time he saw his brother alive. It wasn't even the last time he saw Jamie happy, but something about it has always bothered

him. The memory of Gwen, barefoot on the cold stone floor, nags him like one of those stupid number puzzles he's never had any patience for. He can't solve it, plus it's pointless, but he can't put it down, either.

So, maybe Jamie *had* fucked his best friend's wife on her wedding night. Maybe he *had* kept at it all those years Connie spent posted to the Moon. Maybe he *had* been running drugs all through his last deployment in New Iraq. And maybe he *had* crashed that chopper on purpose, killing himself and taking his copilot with him. Jake doesn't want to believe it. He's always denied it. And now, four years later, he has to admit he only knows one thing for certain. He will never know the truth about his brother. And maybe that's why the probability of Jamie screwing Connie's wife bugs him so much. It's not the fucking around. It's the not knowing. He thought he knew his brother, better than anyone in the world. And maybe that's the lie.

Jake drops his head back against the sharp corner of the window frame, then does it again, just to feel the sting. He misses Jamie, whatever the truth. He wishes Connie's plane would hurry the fuck up and get here. He wishes it would get diverted or turned back or maybe even crash, so he can go home. If he was any less a soldier, he would have cut and run by now.

Even though he's no longer a drinking man, Jake suddenly wants a drink. He's contemplating the sports bar across the terminal, when travelers start filing down the stairs from security. He scans them out of habit, his face half turned away. His eye catches on a tall, willowy figure in a smart green dress and heels. He doesn't even have to see her face to know it's Gwen. She's older now, still good-looking, her hair short and sleek along her jaw. Now Jake's really wishing he had that drink. He wasn't expecting her. Connie hadn't mentioned her. Last he heard, they were separated.

Just when Jake is calculating his odds for a stealthy retreat, Gwen makes him. She looks him right in the eye and Jake feels a stab of true fear. Then, she smiles. She raises her hand in tentative greeting. It looks like a little white flag.

Connie is two paces behind her, and the principal thing Jake can see of him is the scalp showing through his grizzled

crew cut. He's got his arm around a boy, about 10 years old, near as Jake can tell, a boy with golden hair and blue eyes, and a smile Jake recognizes, a smile that shines like a light in the dark.

Elisabeth Chaves

Drummer Grrrl

College students milled about in Becker's driveway. Some sat in groups on the curb. It was obvious they knew each other, the crowd a mix of hipsters, wannabe hipsters, geeks, and drama whores. Stephanie had watched them, or versions of them, while pushing her six-month old daughter in her stroller across the campus quad: undergraduates who played Quidditch ironically, others who played for real; tightrope walkers whose older siblings, or parents maybe, had hacky sacked; proud and ashamed members of the university marching band; and, even a few who donned plastic and cardboard medieval armor and unabashedly jousted on foot next to the guys kicking a soccer ball.

What they all shared was the yellow pallor and glassy eyes of the medicated. Not the fun stuff anymore but the anti-anxiety meds and anti-depressants that had become this generation's multivitamins. Her husband Brian was always complaining about the latest tale of woe e-mailed him in lieu of an assignment. Only these couldn't be dismissed as in days of yore but were shared with the full raft of support services childproofing the sharp edges of higher education. That was her analogy. Like her newfound proficiency at the cryptic crossword, her brain's excess capacity, formerly used to study medieval literature, now produced party tricks.

Everyone in the driveway seemed at least ten years younger than her, full of unrealized prospects. Some were good-looking in the promising way that the youth are. She spotted one kid who might easily model. Stephanie turned to leave, but a suburban street filled her field of vision with anodyne house after anodyne house, sterile green lawn after sterile green lawn, each planted with the requisite shrubs in soldier-formation, standing at attention, warding off all threats of interest, a landscape so barren as to make a rock outcropping appear biologically diverse. People hidden away. The occasional car the only sign of life. No sounds but the birds.

Her own street was no different, and so she turned back around, clutching at the drumsticks in her bag. Passing a parked car, she admired her flexed arm reflected in its window. She'd hung from her arms while giving birth to her daughter Eleanor, a thirteen-hour feat she'd endured without drugs.

The undergrads had now organized themselves in the driveway, waiting for a show. She wasn't sure what the band's sound would be. The ad described it as psych rock meets acid jazz. More like confused, but there weren't any other bands in the area looking for drummers. There weren't many bands period, which was surprising in a college town. But other than the frats, there weren't many places to play.

The band tuned up in the garage, and the garage door kept sliding down inches at a time. Someone from the drive stood and jammed a ratty sneaker into the top corner of the mechanism to hold it in place. A guy wearing tight pants and a sweater that could have belonged to Stephanie's middle school wardrobe gave a nod, and they began to play. She assumed the guy was Becker, the person ostensibly in charge who'd placed the ad for a drummer. He wasn't thin, and his butt was too feminine. Still, put a guy behind a bass guitar, and a squishy ass mostly disappears. The timing was off, and Becker turned to the guy on drums, jerking his thumb. Someone else from the driveway jumped up and took his place. The substitutions repeated. There was no order, but it was orchestrated, like they'd all done this before.

After a few more auditionees had a go, some of the gathered students began to jabber on their phones, or tap them noiselessly, some left, some went indoors, some returned with bags of chips and oversized cups. Some of them had given her a few looks when she arrived. The obvious one who did not belong there. But she had occupied a space near the bottom of the drive, close to two guys who looked like bystanders. She'd been surprised when one—a clean cut male in a button-down blue shirt and khakis—had leapt up to have a go, half stumbling then righting himself into a handstand, an impressive feat on an uphill drive. He wasn't bad, on the drum kit, even if he'd fallen off beat and pulled Becker out of rhythm too. But he knew the song. They all did. There were

only three songs in rotation, but everyone except her seemed to know each one.

The last would-be new band member was ejected, and no one rose to replace them. The model had already taken a turn. He wasn't just looks, but he wasn't much more. Stephanie wavered; an energy urging her to get up started from her deltoids traveled through her rotator cuffs and bisected, sending currents down her triceps and biceps, before rejoining in her forearms and exiting at the wrist, firing shocks down each finger and thumb. But her sore backside had other plans and remained planted. She rocked, and the guy in the khaki pants who'd resumed his seat grunted, "Just do it." She gave him a look and pulled herself up as gracefully as she could. Having given birth six months ago, her body still wasn't entirely her own.

She stepped between the remaining clumps of students pebbling the drive. Her sticks were in her hands, extending from them like her own fingers did. Becker looked at her impassively and waited for her to sit behind the kit, but only just. He launched into a new song, a fourth, with a fast and unpredictable beat, more messy than measured. She felt for the rhythm, trying to predict its next move, but the song darted around like it had ADHD, like it spent all its time on screens. She thought maybe they were messing with her, because her concentration was consumed with groping after the beat, and she hadn't bothered to notice whether the song itself was intelligible. It may not have been a song at all, but them just riffing, improv, discordance. Maybe this was them trying to be punk, and like all attempts, it was wannabes playing instruments badly but sort of together. When the song finished, or when Becker decided it was done, he flashed a grin and gave her the finger.

She spent a second trying to work out what it all meant, and then in the next second she chucked one of her sticks at Becker's head, shouting "Pecker!" He ducked, and the stick shot out onto the drive striking the model in the chest who stood next to a guy Stephanie thought she recognized. The model yelled "Bitch!" and everyone in the driveway jumped to their feet. The glazed-over looks of the checked-out or too-cool-to-care transformed to bloodthirstiness. A different

kind of zombie. The kid in the khakis shouted "fuck yeah!"

Stephanie wasn't sure what to do, so she stayed behind the kit. Becker flicked an eye to the guy on guitar who started to play. The keyboardist joined in, and so did the other guitarist, and then Becker, and then the dude standing next to the model tossed the stick back to Stephanie. She caught it confidently, like a triumphant moment in an 80's teen flick. This go-round she could not only follow but also lead, and as the song built, she pushed the beat faster. Everyone in the drive pogo'ed or body slammed, and the sweat marks on her armpits extended down toward her waist. Her ass hovered imperceptibly over the drum throne, as she reached for the ride, and her quads burned. She could feel her womb quivering, threatening to slide out, and she squeezed her pelvic floor tighter. "Kegel, damn it, kegel," she whispered while her hands danced and her sticks flew. Becker turned toward her, and she savored the look of concentration on his face.

When she got home, still high, Brian met her at the door, their daughter Eleanor in his arms. She pulled her out of his and into hers, twirling the baby around, blowing raspberries into her exaggerated cheeks.

"PT that good?" Brian asked.

"Just good to get out of the house," she smiled.

Her midwife had prescribed physical therapy for the almost fourth-degree tearing. The surgeon who'd sewn her back up after delivery described the damage as a starburst. Stephanie imagined her baby shooting out like a divergent beam of light, searing the edges of her vagina as she exited. Even after the stitches healed, things felt a bit . . . wobbly. And then there were the hemorrhoids. But PT for her punani was beyond the pale. That though was the excuse she gave Brian—that he had to watch Eleanor while she finally made it to her first appointment. She hoped there would be need for a second.

During the night while she nursed the baby for the third time, the text came. Outside it was dark. "See you at 5" was all the text said. She'd given Becker her number before she left. There had been a few more songs with her on the drums. Then the handful of remaining undergrads congregated in the garage, shuffling among the knots of extension cords

and tangled leads that she herself had almost tripped over. "You should come back," Becker told her, his bass leaning against an amp, his ass out in the open. Not, you're in the band, or anything committed. Just, come back. When, he left undetermined. It shouldn't have made her feel so good to be accepted by some twenty-somethings who shared her passion for music though little else. But she was excited again, like when she was pregnant.

The baby woke at seven, giving Stephanie maybe five interrupted hours of sleep. She contemplated rolling over to tell Brian, "I'm in a band." But she wasn't exactly, and he would get up soon to go to work, dress in a suit, sit in an office, read difficult material and relay it to a lecture hall full of open and shut minds. She remembered where she saw that guy before, coming out of Brian's office when she'd stopped by with Eleanor to bring him his forgotten lunch.

Brian couldn't watch the baby that evening, and babysitters were too expensive for their budget. So she texted Becker after breakfast, "Can't. Tmrw?" She tensed and waited, watching Eleanor push a chunk of banana around her high chair tray. The baby squeezed it hard in her fist and shrieked. Stephanie checked the phone. No reply. Eleanor was smiling at her, looking for a response. She beamed back and said "Silly Billy," then threw the phone onto the table.

That afternoon she met another mom, Angela, for coffee. They'd been in a birthing class together. Angela worked in HR at the university. Most people in the town worked at the university. Most people in the surrounding towns did too.

"Working part-time is exhausting," Angela half-joked. She was the same age as Stephanie, and also a transplant from the West Coast. But she'd adopted the look of their new mountainous home and dressed like she could as easily go for a hike as input salary data into a computer.

Stephanie smiled. Eleanor and Angela's son Dylan looked peaceful, slumbering in their respective strollers.

"It takes so much to get Dylan to daycare and then myself to work. Once I'm there I have to pump. By the time I'm actually working it's time to go home. It's not fair to Dylan either, because I can't really be the mom I want to be. I mean,

how can I be engaged when I'm so tired? He must sense it, my lack of enthusiasm when I'm reading *Little Blue Truck*. I can barely 'beep.' Why do you keep checking your phone?"

Stephanie was tempted to say, because you're making me insane. Instead, she said, "Sorry, I'm waiting to hear from someone. It's rude."

"That's fine. I try not to let Dylan see me on my phone too much. Do you know they've done studies and infants whose moms are always on their smartphones have developmental disabilities?"

Stephanie struggled to pay attention. "Where were they published?"

"Oh, I read about them somewhere. Facebook maybe. Anyway, how are *you*?"

"Not bad. Just trying to keep a six-month old entertained," Stephanie said as she shifted on the hard chair.

"I know what you mean. Dylan is so active already. I can see his mind whizzing away, and I'm afraid our activities aren't stimulating enough. I've been watching some YouTube videos. At work actually!" Angela laughed. "I hope my boss doesn't have one of those programs tracking my Internet history."

"How do you have time to surf the net? I thought you barely had time to work."

Angela paused and looked at Stephanie carefully. "I guess you don't have to worry about that. A boss, or sneaking videos at work. You must have lots of time to do what you want as a stay-at-home mom."

"Yeah, I've become a day trader and am already earning a six-figure salary."

Angela's eyes widened and she shook her head. "You're such a bullshitter!" She laughed loudly. "That's why I like hanging out with you. Too funny!" She laughed again.

Eleanor and Dylan both startled and began to cry.

"I think that's our cue," Stephanie said standing, her bottom thankful for the relief.

"Oh, don't go. I don't have to be home for another hour. Dylan's having trouble with solids. We're doing baby-led weaning. And I want him to take the right approach to food. His dad is a little overweight . . ." Stephanie's phone vibrated

but Angela ignored the interruption. ". . . We should do this again. Maybe next week?"

"I'm busy. You know, the day trading."

"You are too funny. I'll call you."

Stephanie read Becker's text. She may have said to Angela, "Great, looking forward to it."

Outside the coffee shop Stephanie told Eleanor, "Your mommy is going to do things differently. No more wasting her time with boring people. No more watching her life go by. You're cute, and mommy loves you. But this motherhood shit is not getting the better of me." The text read: "Good thing you can shred. Tomorrow then."

Becker was tightening a nut on the Hi-hat when she arrived the next day, his ass jutting out like the bow of a ship. "I can do that," she said, moving to take over.

"Go for it."

"Sorry about yesterday."

"It is what it is."

"I hate that phrase." She wasn't being rude on purpose. She was just sleep deprived, and it was her experience that it didn't pay to be too nice. Most guys didn't want a female on the drums to begin with.

Becker eyed her warily. "Yeah well, nice to have you back. We'll get started when Josh gets here."

Stephanie eased herself onto the throne and began to do some stick warm ups and arm stretches. Becker tuned his bass.

"I've never seen you play before," he said.

"I haven't. Not here."

"Why not?"

"Just busy. I haven't played in a while, okay?"

"Couldn't tell."

"Guess I'm a natural."

"Me too." He played the bass line from a Katy Perry song. Stephanie laughed. He turned to her again. "Why with us?"

She was caught off guard, not having expected to play twenty-one questions. She hadn't expected a guy like Becker to give a shit. "Why what?"

"Why do you want to play with us? You're like ten years

older. At least. And you're good."

"There's not exactly much going on in this town."

"Well, I like that you're kind of an asshole, and mysterious too. If only you were hot, then maybe we'd get fans."

"Don't make me throw my stick again."

Josh arrived with some excuse about having to study for a midterm. They began to practice, and Stephanie felt herself uncoil. She locked into the beat and forgot about everything else. Even Becker started to look cute. The band wasn't good. The music mostly sucked. But even out of dross, she could spin some gold. Her muscle memory took over, and she played complex grooves and difficult fills. Suddenly Becker stopped playing. She pulled herself up and waited.

"Jesus, stop making us look so shit," he said.

Connor, the guy on keyboard, said, "I thought we were sounding good. I've never heard us sound good." Josh nodded in agreement. So did the other guitarist, Kevin.

Becker continued, "But it's obvious she's carrying us."

"Sorry I didn't realize you guys were a bunch of posers," Stephanie said. "Your ad said you played gigs."

"We do. We have," Becker said.

"Really?"

"Yeah, at a frat," Kevin said.

"Great."

"I'm talking to people." Becker took a few sips from a flask. "There will be others."

"What happened to your last drummer anyway? Whose are these?" She hit the pedal on the bass drum.

"He committed suicide," Becker said.

"What?"

"Shitting you. He moved."

"Well, if you don't want me to play with you, that's cool. I don't have to." Stephanie held her breath.

"You can stay," Becker said. "Just don't be so . . ." He stared at her. "Don't be such a rock star."

That evening after dinner, once Eleanor was in her crib for her first stretch of sleep, Brian reached for Stephanie's waist while they stood in the kitchen. He let his hand drift downward.

"Not now," Stephanie said.

"Then when?"

She pushed him away. "I'm not in the mood."

"But you look hot."

She looked down at her shirt stained with spit up. "Really?"

"Yeah, you're like a taut string, and I want to pluck you." He put a hand between her breasts and grabbed at her bra.

"You've got to be kidding me."

"What?"

"I need to sleep. PT wore me out."

"Ok, as long as that's all it is."

"What else would it be?"

"Nothing, I guess."

In bed, she waited for Becker's text. "You down tomorrow?" it read. What was with these guys? Didn't they have anything else to do? "Have plans," she texted back. "Monday?"

"Whatever," he replied.

She wanted to tell Brian, but he would laugh, find it hilarious she was in a band with guys that could be his students. Or he'd be pissed she was playing drums instead of taking care of her infant daughter or pelvic floor. Instead of finishing her dissertation comparing the use of scatology in Swift and Rabelais. Instead of finding a job that could take them someplace better. He'd always said she was the one with the career potential, and here she was wasting it. But she could remind Brian that he met her at a gig, when her band opened for the band that opened for Sleater-Kinney. That he'd fallen hard for the badass behind the drums. That if he ever wanted sex again, he'd have to let her find that person who'd dropped out of sight sometime last year. But she wasn't sure it was so straightforward. Everything made sense to her when she was playing, but she couldn't translate a rhythm into words.

"What's that noise?" Brian mumbled, reaching out a hand for her, feeling around on her side of the bed.

"Go back to sleep," she said.

He found her butt and gave it a gentle pat. She quickly squeezed his hand and moved it aside.

A week later Stephanie sat on the examining table, the thin sheet of tissue paper below her, a thinner cotton sheet on

top. The nurse had handed it to her, the sheet, folded up into an untidy rectangle. “Everything off below the waist. Underwear too. You can use this.” As usual, Stephanie didn’t know what to do with the sheet; it could cover a double bed. She could wrap herself in it three times. Should she drape it around herself like a cape and when the doctor walked in she could whip it open, flasher style? Today she settled on spreading it around her like skirting, like she was a Christmas tree and the sheet covered the mechanics keeping her upright. She bunched it around the back of her ass and considered tying it. But she didn’t want the doctor to have to unwrap her. It was a long wait between nurse and doctor. So she stared at the model uterus, at the small resin baby that fit in it upside down. Eleanor was passed out in her stroller, oblivious to the gynecological world. There was a pelvis too that looked like the jaw of a shark. Stephanie studied the cervical dilation gauge and wondered again how any woman’s undercarriage stayed intact. A soft rap on the door preceded the doctor’s entrance, a woman in her fifties, she guessed, who’d sewn her up.

“So, you’ve been having issues with incontinence?”

“No.”

The doctor sat in front of the computer monitor presumably reviewing Stephanie’s chart.

“Oh right, I see,” she said, her back to Stephanie. “You’re having problems with bowel movements. The hemorrhoids?”

“That’s what I thought, at first. But it’s getting worse.”

“How so?”

“More painful.”

“More blood?”

“No, not really.”

“Just more painful?”

“I feel like I have to shift things around, to get it out.”

“Manually?”

“No, I have to sort of squat and lean from side to side. Shift around. And breathe. Honestly, it feels like giving birth all over again.”

“Did you treat the hemorrhoids with the steroids when I first told you to?”

“No.”

"Why not?"

"I could handle them."

The doctor stared. Stephanie could tell she wanted to say something.

"What?" she asked.

"You don't have to prove anything," the doctor said.

"I'm not."

"Then fill this."

Stephanie reached forward for the slip of paper. "You don't want to check?"

"You have a monster hemorrhoid, and you're in denial."

"Seems common enough."

"Most people seek treatment."

"Is there some sort of meeting I can attend, for other deniers like me?"

"Go to PT, like I told you to."

Stephanie didn't have time for PT, now that she was playing again. She could handle the pain. Physical pain was her thing, an opportunity she seized. How else could she demonstrate to herself that she was strong enough? Most mornings, after breakfast, she deposited Eleanor in the contraption that kept her standing while she swatted at things that bobbled. Then Stephanie ran to the bathroom. The urge to unload was as overwhelming as the impossibility of getting anything out. She practiced the breathing exercises the midwife had taught her for labor. It was like she relived it every morning, the horror and triumph of Eleanor's birth. The act of turning herself inside out and showing everyone what she was made of. Each morning it took longer, too. Minutes ticking by, as she tried not to strain, Eleanor getting fussier, and Stephanie trying to ignore both demands. She focused on the drumming then, that other thing that made her invincible. In the afternoons at Becker's, she forgot about the mornings, and in the mornings, she tried not to think.

After practicing together about a month, her daughter Eleanor got sick, and Brian got busy with work. She thought about telling Becker she was away, but she knew that would guarantee running into him somewhere in their

pokey town. So she kept it cryptic, texting him to say she had a thing. Each day she sent a variation of the same. At first Becker replied with jokes about the important lives of adults. The following week, with Eleanor still under the weather and Brian being a jerk—staying late at work just because, Becker's responses became more abrupt, then stopped. Stephanie was jonesing for band practice. Withdrawal made her an asshole. She felt shimmers of embarrassment that she needed the drumming to stay sane, especially when it was so pathetic, her and some college kids who sounded no better than the day she first joined them, who would never play anywhere else than that garage. It didn't help that she'd even started to fall for Becker's marshmallow butt.

She figured they'd all be in the garage, just like every other afternoon, and she needed her hit. So after she'd made the handoff, quickly giving Brian the details of her continued need for the PT appointments, the details painted in very broad strokes, she squeezed Eleanor goodbye and headed over. She was right; they were all there, even Josh was on time. Becker acknowledged her arrival with an eye roll.

"Sorry about last week," she said.

"Last two weeks."

"I couldn't help it."

"Whatever" he said, before taking a gulp from a tall plastic cup.

Some other undergrads started to arrive, ones not in the band. Stephanie ignored them and warmed up. When Becker was finally ready, he began to play one of their old standards. Stephanie was already bored, but she drummed along, keeping a somewhat wobbly Becker on beat. More students showed, Becker kept chugging whatever was in the cup, and, after the third song, a skinny boy who looked maybe thirteen, a child prodigy she imagined, walked over to the drum kit and waited, like he was expecting her to get up.

She stared back at the kid, her sticks tightly gripped together in her right hand.

"Yeah?" she asked.

"I called next," the boy replied.

"What the hell?" she said, scanning the faces of the other

guys who stared down at their instruments.

"We didn't know if you could commit," Becker answered.

"Commit to what?"

"To the band."

"What band?" she said. "This isn't a band; this is an assemblage of jerk-offs who hang out together in your garage every afternoon. It's like I'm back in high school, and I'm waiting for your parents to come out and tell us to keep it down."

"Only my dad lives here."

"Seriously?" Stephanie asked. She looked Becker up and down, scrutinizing his flabby figure. Then she looked around the walls of the garage and noted for the first time the careful order of lawn care instruments and power tools. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"You're a freshman?"

"Senior."

"In college?"

Becker laughed.

"We're in high school," Kevin answered. "All of us."

"I thought you were in college. I've seen some of you," and she waved her stick in the direction of the driveway, "on campus." Stephanie scanned the crowd for the guy's face she'd recognized. The guy she knew she saw come out of Brian's office. He was down by the bottom of the drive, intently staring at his phone.

"You!" she shouted, pointing her stick.

The guy looked up, but the face was different, rounder, the eyes less in the know.

"Seriously?" she said to Becker. "You guys are all in high school?"

"Yeah," he said and took a step toward her, looking like he was going to vomit, but snagged his bare foot on a cord. She thought about the rugs sitting in the rear of her hatchback—impulse purchases she'd bought when she was shopping for nursery furniture for Eleanor's room, now that she was old enough to have her own. The rugs that would prevent accidents like this one from happening. That would sit on top of the snaking cords more experienced bands knew to cover.

Then she realized she knew all along they were just kids, and like an experienced mom, she caught Becker mid-trip before his head hit the floor.

The next afternoon Stephanie stood at the pharmacy counter. Eleanor was strapped to her chest in one of those wrap things that took her a couple days to figure out. The stunned expression worn into the pharmacist's face suggested he found life as disorderly as the curls sprouting from his ears.

"These work, huh?" she asked, while she waited for his assistant to package her prescription-strength suppositories.

He turned his ear toward her. "Say again?"

"The butt supps," she shouted. "They really do the trick, huh?"

"Oh yes, they're quite effective." She knew he'd be speaking from experience.

"Can I pay for this here?" a guy behind her said.

Becker put a gallon of cheap orange juice on the counter. He glanced at the baby but hadn't noticed Stephanie.

"Hey, hey," she said.

"Oh shit, I didn't see you. You have a kid?"

"Yes, I'm a procreator. Guilty as charged."

"Are you teaching her to drum?"

"We're still working on picking up Cheerios. Beats are a ways off."

"Sorry about yesterday."

"What, it's not every day I get puked on. Oh wait, it is." And she waved a burp cloth at him.

"I guess the volume was a bit different though."

"That it was."

"It's the cheap liquor. My stomach can't handle it."

The pharmacist held up a clear plastic bag with the suppositories and placed it in a paper pharmacy bag. He handed the package to her.

"For my husband," Stephanie said to Becker.

"Married, too. That sucks."

Stephanie admired the profile of Becker's pincushion bottom and thought about giving it a slap, to see what it would sound like. She imagined it would make a noise like

footfall on waterlogged turf. Or maybe it would produce a more muffled sound, like the thud from her stick striking a rubber practice pad. Instead, she said, "I'm thirty-three."

"Shit."

"Yeah, that's practically middle aged."

"It's not easy being a loser."

"I know."

Becker twisted around to pick up his orange juice. His glutes twitched almost invisibly in his tight jeans, his pillowy eighteen-year old unmarred butt having barely flexed.

"Tomorrow then?" he asked.

Eleanor began to fuss, and Stephanie jiggled her up and down. As she bounced, she listened to the suppositories shake in the paper sack.

Some things were maybe better put behind her.

Paul Attmere

Muriel

How can she do this to me, my daughter? She moves into my flat last year—against my wishes by the way. Puts her damp cheek to mine and tells me her father will not suffer the indignity of a home for the old, will not pass on surrounded by strangers. Now she's got in a carer, while she's cavorting in some Paris hotel with some up-start from work.

The care worker bends over sighs and tucks the bed sheets in. I put it to him, this jumped-up pair of trousers: "Why do you have holes in your jeans?"

"That's a good question, Mr O'Grady."

He's Irish and sounds like my old man. I'm a London boy born and bred.

"I guess the holes are fashionable. Can I call you Frank, Frank?"

"You're old enough to be wearing grown-up clothes, aren't you? And no, you can't call me Frank."

"All right then, we'll keep it formal . . . Frank."

Cheeky fledgeling. "You've tucked in these sheets too tight. You think it's funny torturing a man with no legs?

He loosens the sheet on one side of the bed.

"What you doing, wasting your time on cripples like me?"

"Cripples, is it?" he says, lip out, shaking his head. "Can you not find another word for a man in your unfortunate situation, Frank?"

The only way the fireman could separate me from the dashboard was to amputate just above the knee. They left the rest of my legs in the crumpled remains of my beloved Triumph Dolomite. I was knocked out and they kept me like that—sedated—for two weeks. When I came round my first word was, 'shit.' I haven't changed my opinion. "Do you have children?"

"Not yet." He sucks in his lips and rolls his eyes to the carpet. "I was sorry to hear you lost your wife."

"Lost? She's not down the back of the sofa. She's dead, you gibbon."

"But you're alive, Frank." He drops to his knees and starts picking up used tissues I've thrown on the floor.

It's a moment I've lived over and over. My wife managed to free herself from her seatbelt so that when we hit a tree—her pulling at the steering wheel, screaming for me to stop—the impact catapulted her clean through the windscreen. I succeeded in ending her pain—cancer had already spread to her bones—but for me, the pain was just burrowing into the marrow.

"And just to clarify, your daughter hired me through an agency to look after you while she's away. You do know she's in Paris, right?"

"Just because I'm a cripple it doesn't make me senile. My body's knackered but I'm as *compos mentis* now as I was when I killed my wife."

On all fours, scrabbling around on the carpet, he stops and turns, like a dog that's discovered it has a tail. "You did what?"

"Didn't Rachel tell you?"

He shakes his head, such a small movement from right to left—more like a nervous twitch.

"Rachel's my daughter."

"I know who Rachel is," he says.

"If I hadn't looked at her," I add. "I would have driven us off the cliff edge together, as planned." I could toss a doggy treat into that gawping gob of his. Truth is, making a beeline for the cliff edge, I glanced at her—I could never resist those grass green eyes—before losing control of the car. We slammed into the tree at sixty miles an hour.

"Now pass my teeth," I say. "I can't speak proper without them."

He silently passes a glass with my false teeth in, the previous lightness to his actions replaced by slow, heavy movements. It's a relief. He was beginning to annoy me with his perpetual let's-look-on-the-bright-side tone.

"You tried to kill the both of you?" he says.

"Tried and failed. So if you happen to leave a box of paracetamol on my bedside table, expect me to tip the contents down my throat and join my wife in the never after."

"Right," he says and ambles out with his hands full of used tissue.

Before Rachel left last night, she'd tried to introduce us, but I pretended to be asleep. She told him I was sulking because she was going away for the weekend. Of course, I'm missing her but that's just a nagging inconvenience compared to the void my wife's left. Don't tell me the universe is indifferent to suffering. It's lapping it up—the fact he's here, rubbing salt into my wounds, proves that. I take the teeth from the glass. It's not a full set, just six front ones on the top row from where I rode my bike into the back of a milk float when I was sixteen. My wife insisted I soak them every night; they taste cold and minty from the toothpaste in the water.

When the care worker returns, he puts a mug of tea down on the bedside table and walks towards the curtains. "Your daughter tells me you haven't been out for a year."

"The curtains stay shut."

He pulls the curtains open with a flourish. "My feeling is the light's good for you, Frank. My name's Kyle, by the way."

When he holds out his hand for me to shake, I take the mug of tea he's placed on my bedside table and fling it against the wall. "Keep them shut, Paddy."

He crouches down then stands up, hands holding three shards of broken mug. "Paddy?" he says. "I haven't heard that one since holidaying in Bangor as a kid." Then he disappears and returns with a portrait of my wife. "This room needs something, Frank. I found it behind the piano in the hall. It might cheer you up.

My sister in law painted it just after we moved into this flat in 1969. It's a portrait of my twenty-three-year-old wife sitting in a tatty old chair, passed down to her by my mother, wearing a red dress I bought for her from Marks and Spencer's. We were fresh from London—newlyweds starting a new life next to the sea. I started up a picture framing business, while she kept home. That was one of the first pictures I framed. At the end of that first year, she was pregnant with Rachel and I spent my first year's profits on the same Triumph Dolomite wiped out by that blasted tree. The chair is still in the corner, a bowl of potpourri arranged on the seat by my house-proud daughter. She says she's going to restore it—it's a Chippendale or something—but I told her to get rid of it along with everything else that reminds me of her mother.

"Your wife?" Kyle asks, positioning the painting on the wall opposite the bed. "Here all right?"

I remember her standing there, pouting full lips as she put on lipstick, adjusting her skirt on hips that, even when she was a pile of bones under white sheets, still made me want to pull her to me. The tip of my tongue nudges the roof of my mouth but won't commit to snapping "no." I grunt and turn to look out of the window. Black clouds have rolled in across the English Channel. A tear trickles down my cheek. I grab a tissue and pretend to blow my nose—dabbing the tear before squishing it into a ball and tossing it at Kyle. It hits him on the back but he doesn't notice. He steps back from the painting, folds his arms and cocks his head to one side.

"You know how much that hurts, having her here?" I say.

Still admiring the painting. "You can't just shut yourself away like this, Frank. I've worked with old people before and . . ."

"And what, you find digging up painful memories gives them something to smile about?"

"She's pretty," he says then turns to me. "I've got to ask though, why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You said you killed your—"

"You got yourself a girlfriend?"

"Yes . . . I mean, no, she's . . ."

"She know you go sniffing around men's dead wives?"

"My girlfriend's . . ."

I pitch my voice high, mimicking his Irish accent: "My girlfriend's . . ."

He drops onto the end of the bed and rubs his eyes. "She's gone, all right?"

"Gone?"

"My fiancée needs a break—time to think. We were supposed to be married next month but . . ." A thud against the window interrupts him. He springs up from the bed to the window and presses his face over a greasy smudge on the other side of the glass. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

"Something hit the glass." He opens up the window and leans out. "Could've been a bird. Do you think it's dead?"

Although I've never seen a seagull crash into a window,

Rachel claims it happens a lot. “We’re eight floors up. Of course, it’s bloody dead.”

He turns and looks at me with eyebrows raised. “Let’s see, shall we?”

“You’ve left the window open,” I call after his departing footsteps, clapping down the parqueted hall. The front door slams shut leaving me with the persistent ticking of the old drop-dial clock in the hallway. I’ve asked Rachel to stop winding that clock. She says it reminds her of her mum—exactly the reason I want rid of it. My wife was always buzzing around the antique shop next to the train station. She’d come back all excited with bric-a-brac or larger pieces like that clock. Even after the diagnosis, before chemo started, she would disappear every Friday and return, more often than not, with something old and useless. I put my fingers in my ears to mute the ticking clock. A few minutes later the muted slam of the front door to our flat followed by Kyle’s footsteps clip-clopping down the hall. “My daughter finds you’ve been wearing shoes in the flat she’ll string you up,” I call.

“Alive,” Kyle stands in the doorway, a little out of breath, clutching a seagull in both hands. He slips off his shoes, pulling the heel against the other shoe’s toe, and enters my bedroom in his white socks.

I take my fingers from my ears. “Throw that thing out the window. And then shut it. Are you trying to finish me off by freezing me to death?”

He stands for a moment smiling, tilting his head as he did in front of the painting. “I thought you said, what was it now Frank, you wanted to join your wife in the never after?” Then he relaxes his grin, widens his big blue eyes and holds the bird towards me as if presenting a prize. “I don’t think there are any bones broken. Maybe she’s stunned . . . even concussed.”

“Flush it down the toilet,” I say.

He cradles the seagull close to him and puts his mouth close to its twitching head. “Are you concussed?” He looks at me. “I’d given up finding her when I saw her in a hedge. It must have broken her fall.”

“Her? How do you know it’s a her?”

“Just get a sense of it being a girl bird.”

“When Rachel comes back she’s gonna flush you down the

bog when she finds a seagull living in the flat."

He grabs a pillow from the side my wife used to sleep and places the gull in the centre. It raises a wing but nothing more; one eye remains open and unblinking, the other half shut.

"That's my wife's pillow, not a place for dead birds."

"You don't mind do you, Frank? It's just for a bit."

I can see my wife looking up at me from that pillow. The pain from cancer that started in her breast, before spreading to every part of her body, contorted her face into a permanent expression of pain. If I've done one good thing in my life, it's ending her agony. "You're here to look after me not play Doctor bloody Doolittle," I say. "Now do something useful and make lunch."

"That's a point," says Kyle. He shivers and pulls the window shut. "I'll feed her some of that liver your daughter left you. How you can eat that stuff I don't know."

"Just get me something to eat and while you're making it think how you'll get rid of that bird, not keep it alive."

"Her names Muriel, what do you think?"

Hearing my wife's name spoken loud is like having hot needles jabbed into my ears. Is he doing this on purpose?

"It was Gran's name," says Kyle and winks at me. "She was a funny old bird too."

"Just get my lunch on."

Kyle leaves the seagull on the pillow with me. It's not big. It must be young. There's an even split of grey and white feathers and an orange beak that occasionally opens up as if expecting fish. When she stops moving, I call him in. "She's dead," I say but he checks her and soon enough she's lifting that wing like an invitation to come under it. After that, it's all about the bird. I keep calling it the bird and each time he corrects me.

"Her name's Muriel, Frank," he says. "You can feed her if you like."

"I'm not feeding that bloody bird when I haven't eaten myself. The sweet smell of liver and onions wafts in from the kitchen. "Where's my lunch?"

He puts one finger up and returns with a dish of liver and onions. "I almost heaved cooking that muck," he says, and

lifts the bird—with the pillow—and they disappear into the kitchen. Bloody lovely, the liver and onions, but when he returns to take my dish, I keep the compliments to myself.

"Our Muriel ate a little raw liver," he says.

"She's not my Muriel. Stop saying that. Muriel was my wife's name as you no doubt know."

"Really?" he hesitates. "I'm sorry, Frank, I didn't know that."

"You knew all right, my daughter must have told you."

"Honest to god, Frank, my gran's name was Muriel." He hesitates. "She'll pull through, you'll see." He takes the plate and starts banging pots in the kitchen.

"I don't give a damn if she pulls through," I yell after him.

Towards evening, the newlyweds in the flat above start making their bedsprings moan—it's a sluggish rhythm that never seems to get much beyond the can-we-just-get-this-over-and-watch-telly tempo. Muriel and I were always at it when we were first married. We would do it everywhere, even the kitchen on occasion. Memories of making love to my Muriel send my cock into an erection. It hasn't done that for a while. I do nothing with it and allow it to wither in my hand. I remember, after we made love, Muriel would always tuck herself under my arm. I'd apologise for the smell. She'd giggle.

I wake with a start. Kyle appears in the doorway to the bedroom with the seagull on the pillow. "You're awake at last," he says. "I let you sleep—a lot of moaning going on there, Frank."

"What moaning?"

"There's a problem," he says and sucks his lips in like a child choking back tears. I think Muriel's wing's broken." He places the bird next to me. Muriel's head stays still, one eye-rolling left and right. "I'm gonna put her out of her misery."

"How?"

"Don't know."

"Break her neck?"

"Is that the only way?" His phone beeps. He slips it from his pocket and rolls his eyes to mine.

"Fianceé?" I say.

Kyle steps away from the bed, staring at his phone and

chewing his upper lip. Apart from her twitching eyes, Muriel doesn't move. When I look up, Kyle's gone.

Summers, as a child, we would leave London and visit my grandparents in the country. My grandfather would get me chasing Sunday lunch around their backyard, so I've snapped the necks of countless chickens. Perhaps I should help the poor lad out. He doesn't look capable of snapping a bird's neck. When I reach my hand towards the robust neck of the bird, I know I can't do it—I can't be responsible for another Muriel's death.

Kyle walks back in and hovers over the bed; his cheeks are damp and shoulders tensed unevenly so the right shoulder is higher than his left.

"Everything all right?" I say.

"My girlfriend says it's over."

He reaches for the pillow but I grab Muriel and hug her to my chest.

"Leave her alone."

"Frank, she's suffering."

"My Muriel had cancer," I say.

He opens his mouth, lips tense around unformed words.

"The accident was my attempt to end her pain."

Kyle puts out his hands. "And putting our Muriel out her misery—it's the same as your wife. Give her over, Frank."

"No!" Muriel's wings spasm in my hands, her head rolls back and she thrusts her beak forward, opening it wide. More of a gull-whimper rather than a cry leaves her mouth, followed by another louder attempt as her beak opens wide. After the third or fourth attempt, she's making ear-piercing screeches.

"She's in pain, Frank," says Kyle. "We need to do this."

I drop Muriel onto the bed where she begins thrashing around on the same pillow my Muriel would rest her head after long bouts of chemotherapy. "Look, lad, this bird—it's worth a shot—she might just fly." One of Muriel's wings stretch wider than the pillow but the other stays pulled to her.

He raises his voice. "Can't you see, that wing's hurting her?"

Muriel withdraws the outstretched wing into her body before spreading both wings in a violent impulse to fly, to wriggle free of death's clutches.

"Will you look at that?" says Kyle.

"Open the window."

He dashes to the window and flings it wide. "What now?"

"Throw her out."

"But she'll . . ."

"Do it. I can't."

He shakes his head. "But I can't."

I roll to the edge of the bed and push myself up to sitting. "Then I'll find a way." Before I can lower myself onto the floor and begin the impossible task of transporting bird and pillow to the window, Kyle grabs the pillow. Muriel snaps her wings into her body, then out again.

"Think she'll be fine, Frank?"

"I don't know," I say.

Kyle rests the pillow on the windowsill and slips his hand under her body. I see my Muriel propped up by that pillow, reading one of those romance novels she was so fond of. Sometimes she'd laugh at the ridiculous plot or overblown characters, but it wasn't unusual for her green eyes to let a tear loose down her cheek. "Throw her out," I say. "And the pillow with her."

Kyle remains statue-still, arms folded, peering out the window where he's just dropped, Muriel. She must have followed the pillow to the ground. It's over. Poor thing. He turns to me, teeth clenched, fists balled like a defeated boxer as Muriel swoops upwards—framed by the window behind him—drawn by thermal currents, spiralling high into the blue cloud-free sky.

AJ Powell

Gone Days

There shouldn't be any light this late. It's Friday near midnight, no street lights for a mile, barely a handful of homes, and trees outnumber the people a hundred to one. I expect darkness like a blanket, but the night shimmers with a low glow along the northwest near horizon. Looks like someone lit candles on a giant birthday cake. Warm light like birthday candles, but the smell in my nose—like burnt rubber and wood and what else?

Something sits wrong. Jeanette turns toward Javi and I; our necks are stretched forward.

The three of us trade our walk for a slow run, then faster as we close the final few yards to my block. Rounding the corner, we see it—piss-poor, pea-green mobile home. On fire! It's there and half gone, in the clearing, lit up like a bonfire, and I'm tearing across the weedy yard.

In a heartbeat, I pound the wall hard on the half still standing. I shout: "Dad. DAD! Are you out? Get-up-get-up-get-OUT!" Did he slip into sleep on the couch, one of his menthols dangling from his fingers? I'm half-forming a prayer, but it's crowded out by panic as the windows glow orange like a predator's eyes in the night.

"Rosa, wait!" Javi's words reach me but I disregard them.

I fly up the four steps to the door and wrench it nearly off the hinges. "Dad!" My cry disappears into a hacking cough. Heat sears the air. I stumble backward into the railing, gripping my wrist as if to stop the nerves from registering with my brain the sting in my hand.

Smoke billows out of the wide-open front door. I can see my father framed by the doorway, lit by licking flames. He is rummaging. In the upper cabinet, above the microwave. As though he has time and inclination to grab the Tupperware on his way out the door.

"Dad. Leave it!" He turns at my voice, sees me step toward the entrance. He lunges at me and shoves me away. I topple backward and the momentum sends me over the railing.

Sprawled in the dirt I look up and see him, digging again. The cabinets are burning now. There is no time. Flames consume the roof inches above his head. Still he rummages. Five seconds longer. Then he seizes something and screams like a screech owl.

My father runs backward, staring at the object in his hands, then spins a one-eighty and runs forward. Out the door and over the railing I've just flipped over. He's in the dirt beside me, screaming and looking at his hands. They are empty now, and bubbling, the skin on his palms and fingers puckering and peeling and red and gone. A small metal box, a cash box, is in the dirt beside him, nearly glowing with the heat of the fire. I know: don't touch it, as I hear my father's screams turn to weeping and echo in my ears.

Javi sits dumbly beside the chaos; Jeanette is furiously fumbling with her phone to call for help.

•

It's two in the afternoon and I'm oozing self-satisfaction. The day's drudgery is done. They can't cage my ass in a desk again for a long weekend I'm making longer, sneaking out early. I slouch out of the short afternoon shadows of Gambel oak hemming the high school's farthest field, certain I'm out of any teachers' sightline. I want to stay up and stay out—late—tilt time toward freedom.

I stash my backpack in a familiar, hollow-knotted tree and lope toward a ditch with just enough momentum to clear it, entering *my* prairie. Hardly mine by rights but claimed by my romping childhood. If knowing is a kind of owning, this patch of Missouri land is mine, sealed by mutual fondness I like to think. The trees bend in the breeze to greet me; bunnies aren't afraid to cross my path. Sun, rain, and stars have shed blessings on me here for years.

The greenbelt stretches in front of me only a handful of acres but with enough hidden nooks, trees, and wading pools to lose myself and loose myself. I make a circuit I've been traveling since I was ten. I remember when this was an impassable jungle to me, eyes barely clearing the height of the prairie grass. Now my canvas tennis shoes grip the

slick rocks across the creek to a meadow of grasses grown tall enough this wet Spring to tickle and switch my thighs as I run. I find the old downed oak and scamper up its trunk to the one remaining branch, grown akimbo long ago and perfect for straddling. For old times' sake, I arch my back on an imaginary horseback ride, the rough tree-bark the only saddle I've ever sat on.

I take a moment to admire my stealth—the swift escape I managed while the cafeteria monitor harangued some hapless sophomore whose platter slipped, spilling milk and mashed potatoes across half a dozen sneakered feet. "When opportunity presents itself . . ." I say with a happy shrug. I savor a granola bar stowed in my back pocket, brush the crumbs from my hand, and lick the remnant sweetness from my lips.

Then I'm off again, ready for a foot-soak under the cover of Cottonwood. This is the perfect way to pass an easy hour, waiting for the distant shrill of the final bell to release my classmates to the weekend I've already made friends with.

Before the sun has inched across a slice of the day, I sense company coming. My friends know where to look for me, and soon their voices carry across the quiet like gunshots, scattering birds from branches. I hear them holler through cupped hands. I holler back, ready to release my solitude. They find me ankle deep in the trickling creek, mud between my toes, crawdad wriggling between my fingers. I lower the creature into the water before the boys start feeling experimental.

Roy approaches me like an alpha wolf, eyes low but fixed on mine, feet treading softly to the creek's edge. He lets me lean into his lips, kissing me with a nonchalance that suggests he'll find affection elsewhere if I don't deliver it. "Don't sweep me off my feet or anything, babe," I chastise him for his indifference, catching an edge of cold in his typical passivity. He's my third boyfriend experiment of high school and shaping up to be the least successful.

Dylan and Jeanette are listening to Javi finish his gripe about a livid teacher slinging a pop quiz in our last period class. "And you," Javi now turns to me with gleeful accusation,

splashing his still-shod feet into the water beside me, "are gonna have to beg her to let you make it up!" He yanks a fly-away strand of my hair right out of my head, so I wince and give him side-eye. "That's for leaving me alone with that ghoul. Whose answers am I supposed to copy when you're not there?"

Jeanette slugs Javi in my defense. "Don't pull her hair; that's so immature. Maybe try studying for once? I pulled off a B in that class last semester; I could tutor you."

Jeanette and Javi are as familiar to me as these acres of escape; we entered each other's lives when we were six. Living within about a half-mile of each other, it was inevitable that our orbits of childhood mayhem would align. We ran rampant under lackluster parental supervision—found sprinklers to run through, mud pies to make, and spare change from couches to pool for shared licks of cheap popsicles from the 7-11. We are better and worse than siblings to each other. Except that poor Jeanette has nursed a semi-secret crush on Javi for the past two years now, and he is happy to have her adoration without any real interest in sidelining his flirtatious and wayward ways. He comes out better in the deal for sure, with her there to nurse his ego after his latest flings fizzle out.

Dylan—who made our trio four when we were in 4th grade—opens his backpack, pulling out a big bag of half-gone Doritos to share.

Our huddle of five settles onto a dry patch of grass flattened over time by our periodic visits. Fingers slowly turn orange as snacking and gossip wile away the scraps of the afternoon. Plans are made to meet up in Dylan's basement after dark for a horror movie and root beer floats.

Roy declines. He won't make it. Feels like being home. Feels like being alone. In fact, he's going to scram and "catch you guys later." He is gone with no goodbye, no kiss or hug or nod in my direction. I surmise his interest in me has fully faded.

Enthusiastic was never a word I would've used to describe him, and what few conversations we shared were neither deep nor sparkling. Roy let me lean into our relationship like he let me lean into our kiss this afternoon. He let me join him in his car on Friday nights when he pulled up honking. He

never quite asked me out, never quite held me close, and now I think he's not quite breaking up.

It could be worse, I determine. He might have given me reason to surrender my heart.

I could be like Jeanette, jumping in with unreturned devotion to Javi. Or I could settle for easy openness like Dylan who is always glad just to be along for the ride and providing the snacks, glad to share with us the only single-family home among our crew for basement movie-nights and backyard hang-outs. Or I could fall into some tired side-by-side like Dylan's parents, no longer liking each other but hardly finding any alternatives likely to change them. Or I could fall in lust like my parents, leaving a kid as a dream-killing burden for someone to shoulder.

All my observations suggest love is the most dangerous thing to dare and rarely worth the bother. So hang you, Roy, and good riddance; you're more like a millstone, and I'm looking for wings.

On the half-mile walk home, Jeanette tries to sidle up to Javi as he bounds ahead intermittently. Dylan fingers the crumbs out of the bottom corners of the Doritos bag.

When Jeanette peels off to walk up the driveway of her family's duplex, I watch Dylan accompany her halfway, releasing her with an eager, "See you later?" to which she nods. Her nod shifts her bag down her arm, and he grabs it just as she does. They simultaneously lift it back up her shoulder, Dylan's fingers leaving orange Doritos dust on the strap she doesn't notice or doesn't mind. I take it all in with a sly grin and a sliver of hope. Some things never change, but sometimes they do.

"What's with Roy today?" Javi digs at me for info. "Is he on the rag? Did you slap his hand away last night?" he asks cheekily.

"It's no big thing; I think we're just," I falter in response, the unfinished sentence hanging in the air for a second. "Whatever. Bored, I guess."

Dylan pushes on my back with his shoulder, rejoining us, a friendly nudge as we saunter up the road. "Interesting people are never bored. You're not boring, Rosa. Roy's definitely on the rag, or just plain stupid."

"Thanks, Dylan," I say with a wrinkled nose and a thankful smile.

Javi, not missing his chance to capture a smile, begs, "You want excitement, I'll show you excitement!" And he grabs my wrist and twirls me twice before I can disentangle.

"Okay, Romeos. I'll see you later. Please no cheap gore tonight. Pick something classy: The Shining or The Ring or something. Or else I *will* be bored." I give the most serious glare I can manage, and the boys depart with promises, trotting up the road to their respective homes, each happy in his own way. Dylan lumbers toward whatever might fall in his lap, while Javi trips toward his next impulse. "Happiness is strange," I say out loud to only myself, "and it's a tease." The sting of Roy's rejection returns as I step up the planks to my front door. "Screw him!" I command to the universe as I yank on the door handle.

I slam the pressboard door against the feeble wall and lurch into the living room/kitchen combo of our home, fury in my face. I bash my backpack against the wall for emphasis, letting it fall to a heap on the floor. I work to expel my anger with deep exhales.

My father is already settled on the couch, the dim light of evening cut by the flickering tv. His work boots are dropping mud on the floor beside the door. His socked feet are crossed, toes curling and uncurling, on the coffee/kitchen/dining room table at the center of the carpet and linoleum space.

"Looks like Dylan and Javi are vying for your friendly attention," he compliments on the scene half-observed through the window. "Two boys yankin' on your arms and fighting for your favor sounds none-too-tiresome to me. You've got your pick, darlin'."

I throw daggers with my eyes and huff, "In tug of war, the rope never wins." I feel a verbal tango coming on; my dad and I can't seem to resist sparring with our words, playing our hearts for each other like jazz instruments riffing. More fun than a shouting match and easier than hugs, with an emotional payoff somewhere in between.

"Beggars can't be choosers, Rosa. Fought over is better than dropped in the dirt."

"I'm not a beggar for boys, and I won't be anybody's rope." Then under my breath but loud enough to be heard: "Ugh. I gotta get out of this place."

"Then why don't you?" he calls my bluff and bluster. "You don't do any better than grouse at me all the live-long."

"No place better to go. Yet."

"Hell, every place is better than this place."

"Well, I'm not riding a boy out of town. They don't get good mileage," I sneer. "I'd end up stranded in a smaller town on a worse road in a shit-hole uglier than this one. With boys, you don't get gone; you just take the trap with you. Trust me, I'm leaving, but I'll do it smart. When I go, I'm gone for good."

"Gone for good—that's a curious thought. Whose good? Yours? mine? Damn, babygirl! Nothing but hateful disappointment in that plan."

With that pronouncement, he soothes the socks from his feet, tosses them near enough to his boots for one more wear before washing, then massages the arches of his feet. "You just try and go then. You'll see what it's really like out there. You'll come back hat-in-hand, and maybe then you won't be so quick to disrespect my sacrifices—everything I've done for no one else but you."

"You mean, all this," I sing, taking in the room with a grandiose sweep of my arm, "is mine?" Venom drips from my gaze onto every surface: the television's rabbit-ear antenna, the shoe-scuffed and sun-faded coffee table, the cigarette-and-ash-dusted couch just waiting for one warm cinder to catch and burn.

From where I'm standing in the kitchen I can see the back of his sunburnt, balding scalp tilt left as he eases a pack of cigarettes from his back-right pocket. With a flick of his finger he lights a match head against the corner of the coffee table. He inhales his first smoke of the evening, scorching his taste buds to nothing—the pre-dinner ritual of a man who works on other people's cars in other people's garages for other people's profits. Decades of grease under his nails and nothing prouder to show for it than his still-running Ford, the very one I was conceived in when his head still had hair, and his heart still held dreams alive and bubbling like a volcano in his chest.

Gone days.

"Shee-it," he jaws at me, straining his head around so I can see his eyes soften. "We're both sour, sad sacks at the end of a hard, dull week. Settle in and have a slice of pizza."

I glance down and see a frozen pizza pulled from the freezer to the counter, waiting my arrival. I turn the knob to start the oven pre-heating, then turn my attention to the morning's cereal bowls still in the sink, loading them into the dishwasher while I wait.

"You'll turn that attitude into a paycheck yet, girl," my dad muses. "Someone's gonna pay you just to shut-up one of these days. But it won't be me. You're outta my league," he smirks at me, offering a reconciling smoke from the pack in his hand.

He gets another day with me in it—tangle-haired tornado igniting his life with worry and work. I ignore the offered cigarette as I always do. He births a sigh in his belly and delivers it into the world, fatigue curling toward the ceiling with the menthol smoke of his cigarette. Love and need aren't so far apart for some.

"Oh that is so wrong!" Javi watches the horror flick with animated interest, leaning closer to the screen from his spot on the floor. A big bowl of mostly ignored popcorn sits in the center of the couch. On either side of it, Dylan and I half follow his commentary. "Too dark. Slow, but in a good way. I love how they shift the time frame here. Whoah!" And in unison all three of us lift off our butts at a jump-scare.

Jeanette hides in an old recliner in the back corner of Dylan's basement, concentrating on a cross-stitch project under a dim lamp, no fan of horror movies. Her root beer float is still half full beside her.

By the end of the movie it's nearly midnight, my blood sugar has plunged, and my eyes are heavy. We all have the stunned look of roller coaster fanatics who rode one too many times. Ride's over and we are over the ride. Javi clicks off the television. Jeanette gathers her threads as Dylan sucks the last of her float through her straw, clearing cups away. A mostly empty two-liter of root beer tucked under his arm, Dylan walks us to the door and says, "G'night," quickly resting an awkward hand on Jeanette's shoulder, which she doesn't

brush away.

"Homeward," I heave myself into the lead, Jeanette and Javi closely in tow. I haven't missed Roy a bit tonight, I muse inwardly.

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On Sunday afternoon, they finally let me see my dad.

Thirty-six hours in a bleak waiting room, friends in and out with ineffective comfort, trying to occupy me with tabloid magazines and vending machine snacks I can't even pick at. Jeanette thinks to bring me clean clothes to borrow. Dylan has been helpful in giving his parents things to do—they're so anxious to help—so they aren't hovering. Javi has never been so quiet, twitchy in his discomfort with hospitals, but he stays.

The updates are clinical. First degree burns on his palms and second degree on the top of his head. Surgery yesterday to graft healthy skin from his thigh onto his hands. His scalp will heal with time. They clean his burned skin twice a day; "debridement" they call it. Bags of antibiotics will flow into his veins for days to fight a likelihood of infection.

I haven't slept. When I close my eyes, I see him sitting in the dirt screaming and staring at his hands; then his head grows a wick which lights like a Roman candle, showering sparks down like a thousand golden tears.

Only seeing him will help to quiet the worst-case scenarios spiraling in my brain.

Finally, I follow a nurse into my father's hospital room. My dad is half-reclining in a hospital bed clothed only in an assortment of tubes and a white and blue paper gown. His hands, wrapped in gauze, are resting across his belly; his eyebrows are singed away to nothing, and he wears a gauze crown on the top of his head. He is awake and looking sheepish. When he sees me, he shrugs his shoulders and tries to joke, "Can't even manage the remote for myself, but it's a great excuse to keep callin' on the pretty nurses for help."

I open my mouth to laugh and tears come instead. I blubber til my nose is dripping. Uncertain if I can touch him, I stand by his feet and look around for what to do next. I spy a box of

Kleenexes and lurch toward them, forcing my throat to close on my crying. With ferocity, I turn back to my dad and scold: "No more cigarettes. No more fucking cigarettes!"

"Sorry, babygirl. I know. You're right. No more."

"It's not gonna be that easy; you never get to scare me like that again! I'll think about forgiving you when it's been a month with no smoking." Then, to let him off the hook a little: "At least we're getting a new couch."

"Hah! There is that. Oh my. You tie me down, Rosa, you know that? Tie me right down."

A swift red curtain falls over my eyes. I feel myself the hard-born burden for the millionth time in my life. "Don't blame me! I didn't ask to be born!"

"Babygirl, you misunderstand." He moves a mittened hand over a large square of gauze on his thigh, looking confused as to how to scratch an itch. He is hopeless and in need of mercy. He lifts his gaze to me, daring to look me in the eye. I am flushed and vibrating, shifting between anger and deep-rooted love like a cuttlefish shifts its colors, and my eyes are brimming oceans. "You tether me to the world, darlin'. Without you I'da found some reckless way to leave it. Long time ago." I can tell he hopes it's enough, hopes I feel the truth of it, like a word spoken in church.

He tilts his head toward the hospital side-table. The cash box sits on it, closed.

"I can't find the courage to look inside. I need you to do it, Rosa. See if. See if it burned up inside."

Until Friday night, I never knew the box existed, let alone what could be inside worth risking his life for. I stretch out my hand slowly as if expecting it still to be hot. "What the hell could be so important," and I cut myself off, seizing it. The lock holds when I try to lift the lid.

My father glances down toward his chest as if looking for something. "Um. Check that big ol' plastic bag on the chair. Maybe it's there."

I pull at the bag's opening, smelling his smoke-saturated clothes. I plunge my hand in and feel around, finding a chain with a small key attached. I raise it in his sight and he nods.

Slipping the tiny key into the cold metal lock, I turn the tumblers and lift the lid. Inside are stacked many dirty bills,

rubber-banded in several packets. I tip the small box into view for my dad, who releases his mitted, IV-tubed arms to the ceiling and rasps out a hearty, "Woohoo!"

"Dad. Holy shit."

"I wanted it to be more; I meant to save more. It's only about, I think, $9,000. But that's community college for two years. Almost. By the end of that you'll have talked somebody into paying for what comes next. I'm sure of it! You're gonna be leaving soon. Christ what'll I do with myself?" he winces with more than the pain of the burns.

"Oh my god. Dad! You'll be getting ready for my visits. I'm very hard to please, you know. I want a new couch to sit on, and you have to cook me a decent meal. And I'm not coming home just to use the laundromat. Find a second-hand washer and dryer and fix it up." I try to find a project for him to latch on to—try to show him he is still home to me.

"Leave that for later, babygirl. I'm tired; I need a nap. Just lock that up and drive it over to the bank in the morning. The nurse and I just need five minutes alone, and then I'm Rip Van Winkle. Go find some food, and I bet Dylan's parents will find a spot for you for a couple weeks while I get it sorted. Do me a favor and off you go, Rosa. I love ya, girl!"

"You too, Dad. I'll come back tonight?" My exasperation with him is matched by my surprise. Love and relief are bubbling fountains in my empty belly. I don't know how to find where the bandages and burns end and he begins, so I kiss his knee under the blanket and leave the room. "Love you, Dad."

I carry myself back to the waiting room to find Jeanette, Dylan, and Javi looking up at me, a feast of sub sandwiches and sodas spread out for us like a picnic.

Lurking in the corner, Roy lifts a Snickers from the vending machine. He winks at me as he tears the wrapper open, raises the chocolate bar in his hand and, before my hand can stretch out to receive it, takes an enormous bite.

With the finality of a verdict, I announce to him, "You can go," turn my back, and settle in with my friends for my first meal of the weekend. The cash box is locked and resting in my lap, a treasure chest holding my dad's past and my future.

Kimberly Sailor

Knots

Due to its sympathetic nature, the water mourns. Though no one alive and aware wants this for young Drew either, especially after Drew's mental health was making remarkable progress.

During particularly rainy summers, the kind that make frugal corn farmers sing God's praises and scientists worry about climate change, deep water stays in the ditch well after school resumes. A few frogs or even an exotic Wisconsin salamander pop up around the edges where the tree branches bow low, forming a temporary pond laboratory. The kids know it's useless to make a pet out of the new amphibian arrivals, but poking a frog's spots or daring one another to lick a salamander is an acceptable pastime when humidity makes their house walls bubble. Their parents, often in town enjoying a craft pour or a few streets back hustling cards with each other, don't care too much about the specific enrichment activities of the ditch environment; the good mothers simply tell their sons and daughters to leave animal carcasses alone, because a wisp of decency must prevail somewhere in town and it's not always happening from ma and pa.

Drew says it feels like an itch, a persistent tickle, at first camouflaged by his trademark silky hair. He went to bed the night before without any fuss, then reported the new sensation over breakfast. His mother, Susan, suggested allergies. His father lives in Vermont and hasn't suggested anything in years. His younger brother, Dean, noted a "weird thing" poking straight out from Drew's ear, a little white bit with a frayed end. "Maybe a rope," he guessed between peanut butter crackers. "Let's swing!"

Susan then revised her diagnosis to acne, or perhaps a temporary pore-clogging event "like a boil growing." But the rope-zit-boil stayed put, never draining or changing. This caused Susan to frown and fret more than usual, and Drew's mother already did a lot of both.

While Drew's medical mystery carried on inside, much was

unfolding outside. A group of middle school kids, ages eleven to fourteen, played in the neighborhood ditch every tolerable evening. In the early spring, the ditch is a long crooked stream filled with papery leaves and lightweight trash that blows away from gutter garbage over the winter. Drew's house sits in the lowest part of town, so a lot of runoff slides down into the drainage ditch from higher points, especially after a bad storm or quick thaw. The kids prefer to play in the ditch in the summer when there's just spongy moss and clean water to poke around in, after some church or service organization comes through with orange vests, black bags, and a sense of something bigger than itself.

Drew is the de facto leader of the ditch kids due to his yard having the closest proximity to the water. Dusk comes quickly in early March, sometimes before dinner is on the table. Their growing middle school bodies crouch low in the moving water when headlights crest the hill, used to hiding just in case someone's older sibling is sent to collect his or her respective ditch kid. They call that soaring crest in the road "Dead Cat Hill"—cars come over the other side so fast that wandering felines who nap on the warm asphalt don't stand a chance. Drew has only seen fatal damage once, but that was enough, and he was careful to make sure young Dean didn't wander over to inspect the floppy, too-still body.

When it's the right combination of conditions both outside and in, Drew's hair is at its early GQ best. He has the distinctive hair of a kid who is both retro-cool and ahead of his time; longer locks in back with a burst of curly bangs in the front, all impeccably styled via the atmosphere of his midwest town and his troubled mind. It's the kind of hair that sweeps over big ears beautifully, hiding a bit of twisted trouble quite well. There really aren't cool kids in Benton until high school, but Drew will be a hipster when his time arrives. He'll be on prom court with blue sneakers and will probably hook the lead in the school play, too—hopefully a moody David Rabe or August Wilson exposition to frame his future complexities. For now, Drew is a suburban, middle class, oldest child who delights every teacher he meets with his soft, polite manners and intellectual promise; he's certainly crafty enough to hide his mental health quirks.

Over a Saturday lunch of chicken wings and asparagus, Susan sees the thing in Drew's head loop out and dangle like an earring. Drew sits straight up and twists his back to her, stuffing the accessory back into his head.

After this, mother and son mutually agree that Drew would be best served by the health clinic on the east side of town.

"Have you tried pulling it? Maybe it's just a loose bit from *a shirt*," the nurse cuts while taking Drew's vitals, stressing the last words hard enough to convey her disenchantment. She holds a pen beam of light against the side of his cheek. "Yeah, I'm pulling it," she concludes. Drew's mother agrees, exchanging an embarrassed look with the nurse. Since his father's Vermont move, Drew is a well-documented patient here.

Largely stunned into an inactive state over his latest life trial, Drew simply shrugs. The nurse snaps on her blue gloves while Drew's little brother Dean grips the sides of his chair. Susan stays still, biting her lower lip and wondering about the copay for lint removal.

The nurse gives the white thing a swift yank. Drew's well-heeled mother lets out an unusual "holy shit!" while an arm's length of thread whirs out of Drew's head like cheap drugstore floss. Drew's eyes flutter and he pleads for the nurse to stop, slapping his hands against his skull.

Picking up her surgical scissors, the nurse is taken aback but also irritated by her frequent flier. She gives the string a snip before dropping the collected contents of Drew's head into a specimen jar. "I think there's a lot more in there," she says, signing off on a lab order. "We'll get this tested."

"Tested for what?" Drew asks.

"For bacteria. For an infection. Foreign objects don't belong in your ears, Drew."

As they buckle back into the car, young Dean leans over to look inside Drew's ear again. To him, it looks like just enough string to fly a kite.

The ditch kids are nearly done tying together a milk jug raft, lovingly crafted from rescued plastic. No one's older brother or sister wanted to drive the kids around to the town's

dumpsters, so the seven ditch kids pulled a convoy of wagons over Dead Cat Hill, around the elementary school lot, and to the loading dock where the sanitation trucks park. The kids stacked and fashioned the freshly collected trash with stolen neck ties and garage jump ropes before parading their ship back to the ditch. "I think this milk jug came from my house," one of the kids decides, rubbing his thumb over the 2% label. "How funny."

The kids know the raft isn't sturdy enough to transport anyone anywhere, but it's cool to load it up with pop tops and dandelions and pebbles and watch it float down the slow moving stream for a while, catching up to their curious boat just before it tips over in a current.

"Do you think the lab called your house yet?" Sam asks Drew. Sam is a ginger with a six-pack, cut and lithe from his many days of roaming back and forth between Benton's boundaries like a stray Irish Setter.

Maisy perks up at this question, squinting at the cotton ball shoved inside Drew's ear. "Did it hurt when the nurse pulled?"

Drew tickles the water's surface. At the clinic, he could *hear* the string moving inside his head. He is sure yards remain. He is probably growing more string somehow, the way toenails and hair grow.

He answers, "They're looking for an infection. I don't know how long that takes." As the water caresses his fingertips, he suddenly recoils, splashing out of the ditch and back to the grassy bank.

His friends stand motionless, worrying for their friend and his strange episodes.

"It's from the water," Drew says. "The ditch is making me sick."

The water shifts uncomfortably.

Susan rinses spaghetti noodles for dinner. They eat a lot of pasta; she can afford spiral ham or baked turkey each night, but she likes using the pretty teal colander Drew bought her for Christmas. Drew pops out of the craft room next to the kitchen to cozy up beside her, twirling steamy noodles right out of the colander. Growing boys can smell noodles. He finishes half of his supper before he even sits down, washing

it away with a large glass of ice water from the tap.

Susan is thinking about Drew's clinic appointment when her son offers, "I got this way from the ditch."

"What way?" Susan asks quietly, being careful to speak in a relaxed tone. Drew is getting better at sensing anxiety, and accusations.

Her son crunches an ice cube between molars before continuing. "My *sick* way. The water gets really gross. Everyone is always trying to clean it up. I bet all kinds of stuff is growing in me. Probably cancer. I probably have all sorts of sick junk in my body. I'm polluted now."

Susan listens to her son's word choices carefully, trying to determine if his hypochondriac tendencies are getting more dramatic.

Her son throws down his glass onto the tile kitchen floor, tap water and shards spraying between their feet. "This water," he says. "Our water."

Divorced. Susan feels the most responsible for the illness in Drew's head.

Eleven P.M. Susan listens outside of Dean's door. She can hear his electric sound machine making soft machine-waves, but she can not hear her youngest son breathing, or snoring, or stirring. She can not hear anything, which means he may not even be alive, but the stillness is satisfactory enough for her to move to Drew's door. Here, she grips the knob tightly and turns fast, avoiding that known *click* if you move the silver too slowly.

Inside, Drew is just a silhouette, the hallway light catching his flannel pajamas just enough to make him glow like the radioactive chemicals he thinks are everywhere: in his house, in his body, at his school, in his food, in his oxygen.

This is the time of night for her secret routine. Susan slips on her gray athletic shoes, zips up her jacket, and slides out the patio door. Only porch lights are awake in her neighborhood of long driveways, red brick houses and daisy gardens. Her streets are a perfect blend of family living with enough elbow room for privacy. She fought hard to keep her house in the settlement; it took three snappily-dressed lawyers from Madison to stay tucked into her cul-de-sac.

The boys never saw their father again.

At the top of the hill, Susan has to make her nightly decision. Here she stretches a while, the last place to lunge and bend with the house still in view, the last point where she still feels like a decent, watchful mother. The top of the hill is also her last position until freedom; once she crosses over, she is technically abandoning her sleeping children.

With one last look at her house before sought-after empty streets, she goes. The night air pops open her community and she takes note of everything, the only time she doesn't have to focus on keeping two kids safely in front of everything else. Now she can see the exact height of each taupe, cinnamon, and navy blue mailbox; the particular way—sometimes graceful, other times sharply—front yards slope toward the curb for rain and grass fertilizer to dump into the sewer grates; the thickness of bumpy tree trunks; and the way no two nights smell the same. Soon she has run all the way to the school buildings, two miles past the neighborhood bus stop, her breathing more jagged now but her senses ever-sharpening. Here there are yellow parking lines, evenly spaced metal windows, a faint buzz from something large behind a utility fence, and the smell of oily tortillas. It was taco day at school, she remembers, as she hairpins back toward home to add another $100 to Drew's lunch account.

Familiar guilt returns as she ascends the back side of her street's hill, realizing that young Dean will basically need to raise himself with all the attention that Drew requires. She read picture books to Drew, always, every day. Practiced addition with Drew. Took him to museums. Took him to the theater. Took him to interesting places, special places, with the mission of making fresh mother-son memories, *only* mother-son memories. There was hot fudge sundae outings, splash pad romps, and carousel rides at the zoo. If Drew is already this damaged when she tried so hard, what will become of Dean?

Seeing her house again from the top of the hill always provides relief. Nothing to feel guilty about, just out for some air. Everything is normal. Nothing happened. No flames or tornadoes took the house and her sleeping sons away.

But instead of jogging down the incline and back up her

driveway, Susan makes a hard left to visit the drainage ditch the neighborhood kids are always poking around in. To her, this little watering hole always seemed like a harmless way for Drew to get in some social time—heck, even better without screens and with the full disposal of nature, right? How very traditional, how creative and quaint, how circa 1950s, Susan used to think, craning her head out a window to watch the big kids throw rocks and mud into the current.

The ditch is pretty wide this time of year; lots of extra water from the spring rains and the last of the melting snow piles further north. She fishes her cell phone from her pocket, tapping on the digital flashlight. The water is dark but alive under the glow, moving faster than she realized. Swirling water patterns skim the surface with tiny gnat-clouds dancing on top. It won't be long until the mosquitoes hatch and Drew comes home with red dots he'll insist are burst capillaries or the start of dengue fever. She crouches low, wondering how deep the middle is, wondering what the kids really do out here in those distinct two hours after school before parents are home, when America's youth population is largely unsupervised and feral.

She wonders if she should call the other mothers and fathers to ask if any of their children seem sick. But no, she decides, it's just her weirdo kid.

Susan lets her fingers fall into the water. The current moves around her slender hand, making a soft little gurgle when it hits her just right. The water is colder than she expected, like a real stream instead of the town's nasty overflow. Like a lake, like an ocean. Maybe there are fish in here. Maybe there are eels, and crocodiles, and manta rays. She cups her hand and brings it to her mouth, taking a small sip. She pauses, waiting to turn green, waiting to self-diagnose the freshly arriving cancer like Drew would. Nothing happens. She smirks and takes another sip. Then another, and another, before she wades right into the water, running pants and jacket and all, to splash up big scoopfuls of water, now drinking so much water she is choking and coughing, then laughing at her foolishness. She noisily flops onto her back in a star-shape, floating away like one of the child's twigs, squinting her eyes until she sees reassuring Mars in the night sky.

She is still here.

Inside the house, Drew slips into the silent craft room. There are machines here that could make noise—an embroidery machine, a sewing machine—but nothing has been plugged in and running for years. There is a particularly loud laminating machine that his younger brother Dean, who is still developing his language skills, named "the lamenter."

The house was built in the early '90s and sold as an "executive home," but this designated office space was earmarked for domestic affairs at the start of escrow. Drew's mother talks about a "grand garage sale" as often as she speaks of returning to her former hobbies, but only Drew's hands work this room now.

He sits at the laminator, holding up smooth clear sheets of fall leaves that he carefully pressed, arranged, and preserved for Dean. He picks up scissors to cut around the edges of a yellow aspen leaf, speckled with brown decay marks that Dean calls "freckles." Trapped, flawed, and flattened in its sticky condition, the small heart-shaped leaf cannot die further. Stopping the dying process was relieving to Drew, who thinks the cutout would make a fine Christmas ornament if hung using green, healthy yarn. The red maple leaf is still brilliant and perfect, too nice to see for but one season. This leaf will be a bookmark for Dean, who is starting to page through early readers with pictures of barn animals and house cats. The orange oak leaf is probably the flashiest, having absorbed extra water from skimming the drainage ditch on its droopy branch. It was an easy one for Dean to pluck, who leaned over to grab "the nicest leaf on the whole tree." This one will be a sun catcher, thinks Drew, taking a seat at a cutting mat.

But this is enough science for one day.

Drew pulls open a metal desk drawer filled with spools of thread, all arranged by color in a pleasing ombre effect. It's time to refill the tiny spool in his head. Looking down at the preserved leaves for inspiration, he wants to choose orange, but is always drawn to the purity of white, deciding it's a cleaner choice to go inside his body.

He snips off a long piece and delicately practices his old Boy Scout knots first, not that he can really see the knots on

such thin material. Stretched leather is the preferred choice for making knots, but that'd be far too bulky to shove inside his head. Although, leather could really block sounds—never hearing others talk, never having to respond at all. The final memories Drew made with his father were going to Boy Scout meetings together around town, making knots just like this.

Drew makes the tiniest knot he can with the thinnest white thread he can find, and winds it onto the tiniest bobbin his mother owns, the one made for ornate machine work. This bobbin will sit at the entrance to his brain. He loves keeping his hands busy: winding, winding, winding. The spool fills up, nice and snug, with just a bit of string hanging out. He should probably learn to crochet or knit, something productive, something valued. He could be the cool boy who makes rainbow scarves with tassels, or in Harry Potter house colors, for the long winters of Benton that pull down the soul.

He often wonders if his dad really left, or if that's been fabricated, too.

Drew yanks his sore earlobe and shoves the bobbin inside, wincing at the resistance.

Come morning, Susan is smiles and cereal, packing her briefcase and Dean's little backpack. She asks Drew about everything familiar and fine while the sun rises: homework, sports tryouts, weekend plans, chore lists. She is unaware that while she is out running in the dark, he is inside sewing his head.

After Susan arrives at work, the nurse finally calls with the lab report. "It's just string. It's not infected. It's not anything, it's just string. His ear is probably full of string."

It's not anything. There's a bit of back and forth before she thanks the nurse and immediately opens her tracking spreadsheet to add this incident for the therapist's records. A tear falls onto her desk while she stands to look out an office window, her usual remedy after disturbing news about Drew.

Mark from the company's IT department approaches a few minutes later. "Can I refill your coffee?" he asks. Susan has been candid about her life over the years here, her work being the only comforting constant in the last decade. Everyone responds warmly and surprisingly authentically, but midwest

values are still a thing in small Wisconsin towns.

She politely declines the coffee, so Mark takes to staring out the window with her. There are still a lot of things going right, she faithfully reminds herself. Money isn't a problem. Both kids have friends. They are curious, and kind. The house is in good shape. Haven't needed any major repairs yet.

"Is it self-harm?" Mark asks quietly. "Sorry, couldn't help but hear a bit of that phone call. My nephew cuts himself. If you want, I could put you in touch with my sister."

Susan leaves work early.

As she drives across town, crisscrossing over her running path, she knows the ditch kids are out. The sun is warm. The clouds are few. The yellow daffodils and purple tulips have returned. Who wouldn't be outside? It's like the most perfect Easter day. It's like the most perfect setting for a suburban childhood, which Drew can't enjoy because of his affliction. Because of her choices.

She toys with the idea of picking up Dean from daycare an hour early, but instead merely lingers in the facility's parking lot, watching him out at recess like a distant voyeur. She stands on a concrete square, her light spring pea coat flapping at the ends while he bounces in and out of sight. The children's voices and laughter carry to her, hitting her cheeks and ears and skin with happiness, real happiness, as their sounds soar back from the big metal slides. The chirps from her own son find her first, a little beacon blinking back to her. He is content. She is sure.

A moment later, the car is in reverse and she is gone, the seats around her empty.

Just driving up the backside of her street's "freedom hill" provokes the same feelings of guilt and excitement as running down it when the kids are asleep. Drew and his friends immediately pop into view as she crests, their little bodies crouched low along the ditch, growing bigger and more defined as she pulls off to the side.

The sound of her car door shutting snaps seven small heads up in unison like the start of a choreographed dance routine. All of the kids stay low except Drew, who grows tall, the lead in this new stage production.

"You're home early," he says. "Is Dean sick?"

Susan steps closer, close enough to hear the little splashes from the stream's current. She looks down at the water, remembering how easily she floated, glad that little Dean hasn't been attracted to the ditch yet. Her eyes go from Drew's wet shoes to his face.

"Can you hear me alright?"

Drew's face scrunches up. The other kids are still squatting, perhaps scared of Susan, perhaps just weirded out and trying to stay invisible, hoping she'll leave soon and they can get back to their stories and plans.

"I said, can you hear me alright?" Susan yells, leaning forward across the ditch with her fists curled.

"Yeah, stop it. What do you want?" Drew says, reacting to his mother's tension with more edge.

Susan splashes across their boundary in her good work heels, stockings soaked. "Just making sure you can hear me," she screams, "With all that goddamn sewing thread shoved inside your head. Do I need to start locking all the doors? Do I need to hide the scissors and needles, too?"

The ditch kids run home.

It's the right time of night again. She knows by the way the light changes inside the house, a smoky navy now, like the sky is suffocating. The space around her was always this shade of navy as he arrived home from work—much too late for arriving anywhere, the light gripping around her throat.

This time, Susan doesn't stop in front of bedroom doors to listen for breaths, to hope the faint sounds of a pleasant in-progress dream reassuringly part the air. She has rearranged all of her justifications for leaving the kids lately, settling on the positive "self-care" women's awakening movement, but really, it's because she wants to be alone. Solitude is healing.

Is it possible for a new season to arrive in a day? It's nearly midnight, but rabbits are out chewing iris stems, and a rogue peeper frog is working on his tenor line. Susan decides to run up the hill, to feel her chest ache immediately, at the forefront. She accelerates so fast down the other side that her calves shake. Only minutes into her run, she is already limping, injured and frustrated but thrilled to be loose. She arm-

pumps right past a stop sign, right through an intersection, never looking left or right, not caring about cars or people or the new pain.

She stops when her own son walks out from behind a utility pole. Her acceleration halts so abruptly that her sneakers squeak like the asphalt of Main Street has become a basketball court.

Mom is playing defense. They are inches apart, son only a bit shorter than mother. He'll probably surpass her before high school, a new teenager, lanky and lean. Despite the navy sky, despite muted features, their hearts recognize one another's. Drew's heart is more like her ex-husband's, tender at its core but hard for outsiders, and especially hard for insiders, to read and to live beside.

"You left Dean alone?" they say in unison, even on the same pitches with the same swell in dynamics at the end, their genetics finally finding some common ground. *Alone?*

Drew is frustrated, but his mother is enraged. "You get back to the house *now*," she seethes, winded and pissed.

Her son's eyebrows have a particular way of furrowing that resembles only one other person in their lineage, now only comparable through photographs of early birthdays and preschool graduation. "Did Dad leave us, or did you leave him?" Drew asks.

Susan has always wondered how much of Drew's mind is still occupied with his father. Is he a man Drew only knows through annual traditions—through popsicle Christmas ornaments and a trip to see a live nativity on Main Street—or does Drew walk beside his father each day, each hour, opaque but still touchable, just off to the left side of his brain? Is Drew different now because of his father, or because he has no father? Does the navy night suffocate him, too?

On the other side of all of this, of this fleeting season, of this unfolding night, the last clump of snow will melt into the creek and the steadfast sun will burn through and sterilize the ache. Susan realizes that this could be the closure Drew needs to move forward, to grow. Maybe even to sterilize his sickness, his sadness, too. Her fists uncurl, her lungs fall inward.

"He left us, Drew. He didn't want a family, but I do."

Drew also has his father's crooked chin, now softening, and his father's forehead, now relaxing its crimp. "He's not coming back?" he wants to know, the first time he's asked aloud.

Susan moves her ringless finger to touch Drew's hair, tucking back his trademark waves to find the end of the white thread. Her fingernail slides just far enough into Drew's ear to snap out the plastic spool, which releases with a satisfying pop before softly clinking to the street.

"No, Drew. He's not coming back. But I'm staying."

As they turn to walk up the hill toward home, Susan finally senses something fresh from her son, a boy so knotted up with anxiety and dread, so messy and tangled.

Relief.

Contributor Notes

Jan Allen loves the Sixfold feedback process. This is her second story to be in it. An essay she wrote about her bicycle trip across the contiguous United States was published in the book *Bicycle Love: Stories of Passion, Joy and Sweat* in 2004. She met her husband, who volunteers by playing his ukulele in nursing homes, on that trek back in 1992.

Paul Attmere is an actor and writer. Originally from the UK, he now lives with his family in Krakes, a small town in Lithuania. He's been published in *Spread the Word—Flight Journal*, Running Wild Press Short Story Anthology 2019, and due to be published in Vol. 7 Anthology of *The Writer's Games* in 2020.

L. L. Babb has been writing since the moment she realized that there might be something useful to do with an overactive imagination. Her fiction and personal essays have appeared or are forthcoming in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Rosebud*, *MacGuffin*, *West Marin Review*, and elsewhere. She won first prize in the 2018 Winter issue of Sixfold. She's been a teacher at the Writers Studio San Francisco since 2008 and lives the good life in Forestville, CA, with her husband, her puppy, Punky, and two disgruntled cats.

Diana Bauza writes copy and marketing content to support a travel habit. She grew up outside of Philadelphia, PA, and has lived in many cities and countries since, on a journey to find a place that feels like home. Her writing has appeared in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Minetta Review*.

Now retired, Sarah Blanchard previously taught at the University of Hawaii-Hilo. Her fiction has appeared in *Sixfold*, *Dreamers*, and *Red Fox Review*. Awards include: 2019 *Dreamers* flash fiction award; 2019 Writers' Workshop of Asheville fiction award, second place; 1993 NLAPW, Simi Branch, fiction award; 1994 *Short Story Digest* honorable mention, fiction. Poems have appeared in several publications including *Calyx, Welter,* and *Sixfold*. Her non-fiction pieces have appeared in many publications including *Yankee*, *Equus*, *HI Luxury* and *Hana Hou*. She lives in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Elisabeth Chaves lives in southwest Virginia with her husband and young son. She has a JD and a PhD in planning and governance. Her story, "Maggie," placed third in *Bethesda Magazine*'s Fiction Contest, and another story, "Lady's Slippers' Reward," will appear in the Frankfurt anthology *Open Bookcase 2*. She is currently a student of the Humber School for Writers and is working on a novel.

Erin M. Chavis is a Chicago native. Her work has appeared in *Sixfold*, and she has received three honorable mentions in the *Writer's Digest* Popular Fiction Awards — for Romance in 2015 and Horror in 2018 and 2019.

Dayla Haynes lives in Asheville, North Carolina.

R. C. Kogut lives in San Diego, California, with her husband and three cats. She loves mamas and babies, and moonlights as an obstetric nurse. "Best Man" is an aside to her novel-length manuscript, *The City of Lost Wars*, for which she is currently seeking representation. Need to know what *really* happened to Jamie in New Iraq? Fly by www.rckogut.com for announcements and sneak peeks.

Gwen Mullins is essayist, novelist, and short story writer. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Bitter Southerner, African American Review, PANK, The New Guard, descant* (Frank O'Connor Award)*, Green Mountains Review, Numéro Cinq*, and *Social Justice Anthologies*, among others. Gwen is currently working on her second novel as well as a short story collection, and she holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Originally from rural Wisconsin, Isabelle Ness now lives in western Massachusetts where she writes fiction and poetry. She has a degree in Anthropology from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and currently works as a bilingual interpreter. Her studies and lifelong love of stories has taught her that words can breach even the most polar of differences.

AJ Powell is a once and future teacher who raises her children, served on a school board, and attempts to write in the wee hours of the morning with varied success.

Kimberly Sailor, from Mount Horeb, WI, is the editor-in-chief of the Recorded A Cappella Review Board, with more than 300 music publication credits. Sailor was a 2019 Hal Prize poetry finalist, with poetry appearing in the *Peninsula Pulse*, *Sixfold*, and the *Eunoia Review*. She is the author of the fiction novel, *The Clarinet Whale*, and serves as an elected official on her local Board of Education.