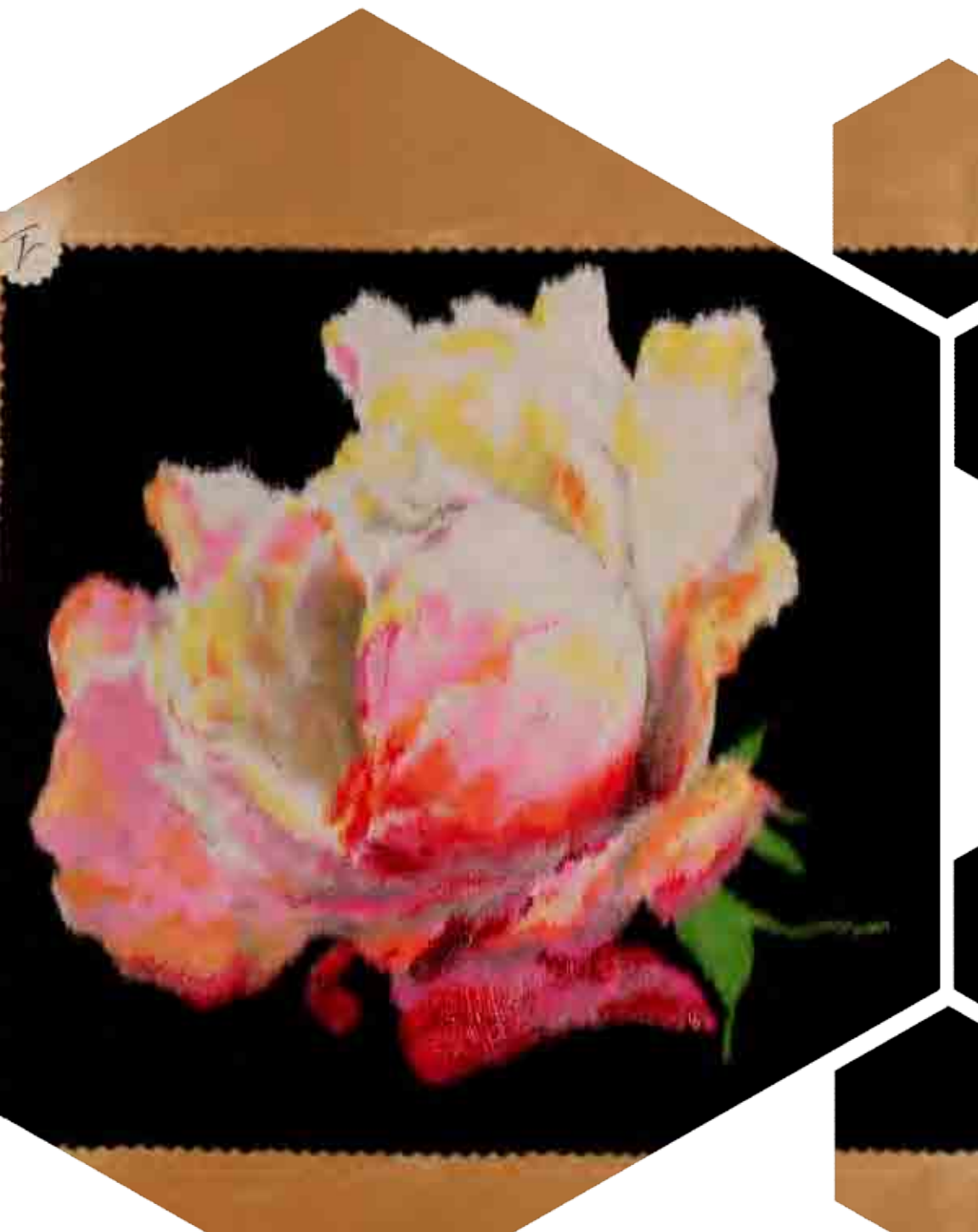


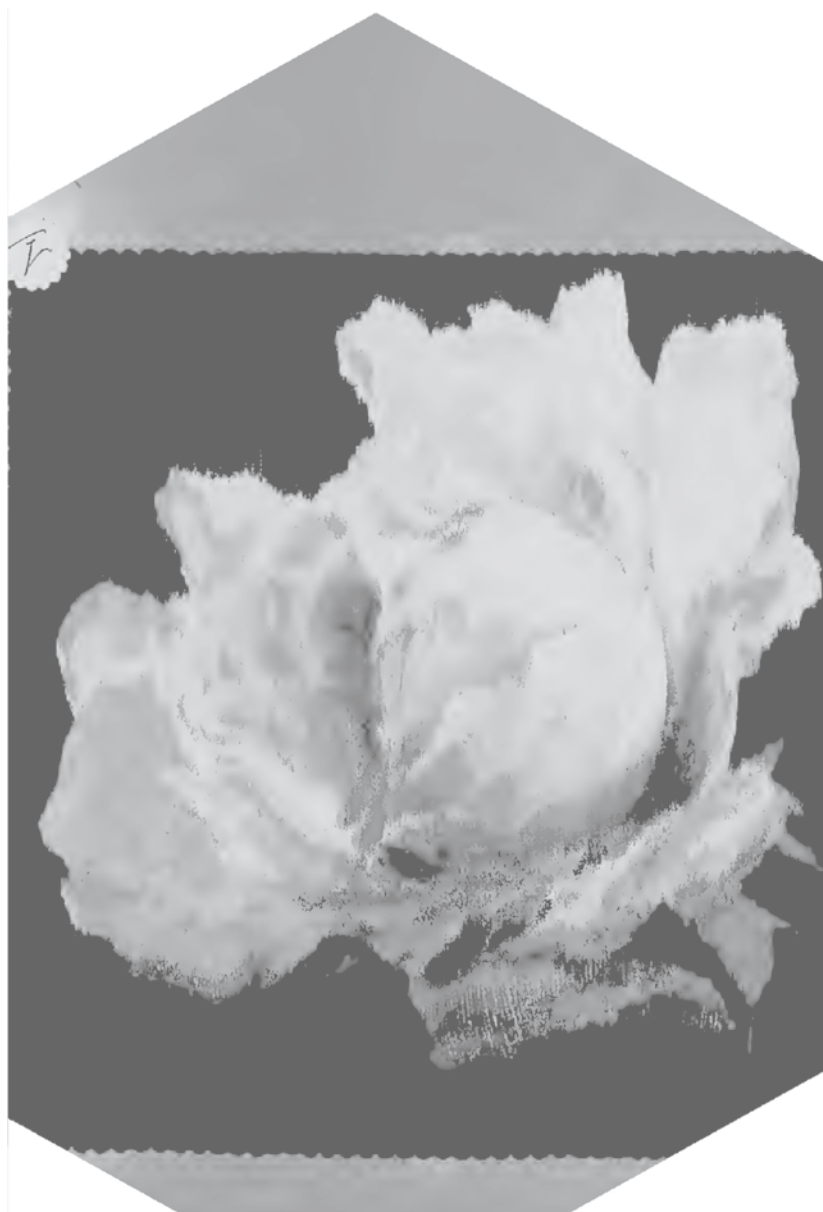
SIXFOLD

FICTION WINTER 2020



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

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Cover Art: French silk sample book. 1895. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute Library

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Elisabeth Chaves

The Skin of Things

I watch fellow volunteers scour the ground to my left. Their orange vests and bright pinnies stand out among the bare trees. When we started an hour ago, the line was in tight formation, its members spaced no more than ten feet apart. Already the line wobbles and sways. Melanie Houseman has been missing more than a month. I have never joined a search party before. I don't expect to find anything.

These woods have been combed. As has every other inch of town. People have looked for the missing teenager in their own basements, the trunks of their cars, behind sheds and woodpiles. As if Melanie has simply been misplaced.

They printed her photograph in the paper and showed it on the news. The town is small but not so small that you know everyone in it. Some days I go to the grocery store and don't see a single familiar face.

I first met Melanie in the woods. I'd enrolled in a nature photography class offered through the community center. There were maybe ten of us. Melanie, the youngest, was a junior in high school. The oldest, a man who hummed when he walked, must have been eighty. The instructor showed us photographs on his iPad from an artist's gallery show. Two-dimensional slices of forest. The edges removed. Nothing to see but trees.

We had an hour to wander. The woods were bounded on one side by a parking lot, on the other side by a creek. Past the creek was a small meadow. On the other side of that was a subdivision. You could hear traffic. But it wasn't loud enough to drown out the man's humming.

We all wandered our separate ways, our paths crisscrossing. You were never really alone. I took photos of trees that looked interesting, ones that leaned, ones with unusual bark. I took a whole series pointing my camera at the sky, trying to capture the pattern of the branches against it.

A white oak dwarfed the other trees. My fingers fit inside the furrows of its bark. I tried to snap off a chunk, but it

wouldn't budge. The bark adhered to the wood underneath, like a secret it wouldn't release.

I backed into Melanie while I stared up at the tree, at its branches reaching higher. Her head came to my shoulder blades. I stared down on her, a girl destined to look forever young. I left her there and continued to wander. My pictures began to seem all the same.

When the class hour was over, the instructor blew a whistle. We wandered back along the deer trails to the parking lot's edge. He admired the photos on Melanie's camera and transferred them to his iPad so he could share them with us. In hers, I saw something other than forest, than limbs and trunks and dead leaves. In hers, I saw something alive.

It was a one-session class. Twenty-five dollars for an hour and a half. Twenty dollars if you lived in town. I complimented Melanie on her photos. She knew they were good. "Thanks," she said, "I want to be a photojournalist." I offered her a ride home, because her friend had texted to say she was running late. I was a middle-aged woman. I drove a Subaru. She said yes.

Itremble in my parka on this January morning. An Eastern Towhee trills two short notes. Until today, the parka occupied a space in the back of a hall closet. An unwanted present from my husband; the coat is neon pink with lime piping. They told us to wear something easy to spot, something not the color of deer.

Armed with walking sticks, we work deliberately through the woods. We poke at tangles of underbrush or clumps of leaves. We aren't to lose sight of one another, because the authorities don't want to look for anyone else. Also, keeping an eye on the person to your left and right ensures all the ground is being covered, systematically. Some people brought their own vests, people who jog or hunt. For the rest of us, there were scrimmage vests, pinnies the colors of ketchup and mustard that belong to the high school football team.

Melanie was last seen at a football game, the news said. Her parents believed she'd come home that night, but they hadn't bothered to check. They weren't in the parking lot this morning. But it has been more than four weeks, and we are

using sticks to poke at piles of dead debris. No parent would want to poke and hit something.

That Saturday after the photography class Melanie hadn't wanted to go home. She was buzzed from the praise. I was hungry and suggested stopping at a frozen yogurt place.

She asked for tart yogurt with fruit. My order was brownies and caramel sauce. We took them outside to a metal table with an umbrella that hadn't been raised. It was almost lunchtime. The sun was high, giving off late September heat. I popped open the shade. We ate our yogurt and talked about photography, about the other people in the class, speculating. We ran out of things to say. She kept checking her phone, sending messages. She had a nervous smile. She was bored with my company. I wasn't surprised.

"I'm in love," she blurted out.

It was embarrassing, hearing that from someone you hardly knew, even if she was only a kid.

"That's exciting," I said.

Melanie wasn't especially attractive, too snub-nosed and freckly. You didn't have to be beautiful to be in love. But her love didn't seem like the type inspired by a pimply classmate or a high school geek, which I'd pegged as her cohort. They had been mine after all.

"He's incredible," she said.

The taste of the yogurt went flat in my mouth.

"We're meeting the week of Thanksgiving, when he's on his break from school."

"You haven't met?" I asked, hoping I wasn't bursting her bubble.

"No, but we talk all the time. It's like we already know each other."

"How did you find him?"

She said she'd stumbled across some of his photography online and messaged him as a fan. Then he'd blown her mind by saying his parents had moved to our town last year. He'd been away on study abroad and had started the fall semester without a visit. That's how she knew it was meant to be.

"Those kind of coincidences," she said, tapping her white plastic spoon now shiny with saliva on the table, "don't just

happen.” Then she put the wet spoon back inside her mouth.

I’d been surprised to see the old man from the class join the search party this morning. We’d exchanged pleasantries, even if they felt out of place. He took up a position to my right, at the end of the line. It seemed like he’d done this before. And he gave me an inquiring look, as if wanting to know why I hadn’t.

As we walk, he shuffles along, scanning the ground in front of him with his stick, making rainbows. He wears a broad-brimmed hat that seems excessive for the shade of the woods. Its drawstring dangles down past his concave chest toward his convex stomach. Every so often the back of the stick catches in the string, and he stumbles forward.

As we press on, the vegetation grows denser. The trees stand farther apart. The low canopy of the understory begins to envelop us. Tendrils of plants seeking sunlight wind around me. Brambles claw at my legs. I could hang myself on the vines that meet my neck, some thicker than any rope I have encountered. They dangle in great loops, weighting down trees and branches, choking things.

A large maple interrupts the arc of the old man’s stick. He steadies himself against a round burl bulging from the tree like a tumor. The wood is blackened and bumpy, covered in scales. Still leaning, the man uses his other hand to reach around and pat the maroon-colored bag he wears on his back. The connection reassures him somehow, and he pushes off the burl. I slow to keep pace.

Melanie reminded me of myself when I was young. Something in the eyes. Eyes like invitations. Mine seem to have gone unanswered.

“I guess you’ll send him the photos you took this morning,” I said, wiping a smudge of caramel from my chin.

“Already did,” she said and put her hand on her phone.

“What do your parents think?”

She frowned. “They wouldn’t understand.”

“They might worry,” I said.

She stared at me for a moment, maybe thinking she had told the wrong person.

“Only because they wouldn’t get it,” Melanie said.

My yogurt cup was empty. Hers remained half full. She wasn’t in a hurry to leave. It was as if she’d been waiting a long time to tell someone. Someone safe, who wouldn’t diminish what she had to say.

“And your friends?”

She wrinkled her nose.

I tapped my spoon on the edge of her cup. “You want him all to yourself.”

Her face brightened.

“I promised my husband I’d be home by lunch,” I said with a frown. “I have to help him build a fence.” A tall privacy fence I wasn’t sure I wanted. “Anyway, I should get you home.”

Her house sat atop a hill in an expensive neighborhood. A woman outside gardened in a floppy hat.

“Thanks for the yogurt,” she said from outside the passenger side window. Her mother stopped pulling weeds to look at my car.

“No problem.”

“Do you have SnapChat?” she turned back to ask.

“What?” I said. But Melanie was already up the path.

I waved at her mom and did a U-turn in the street. Then I made sure to wave again as I drove past.

Since Thanksgiving, I have followed the story of Melanie’s disappearance on the news. The false leads. The ups and downs. I studied the mother’s face during the press conferences, how the skin under the eyes darkened, the skin covering the cheeks tightened. The mother’s face changed shades with each report the sheriff gave, from pink to green to ash gray.

The effort put into the search dwindled after a few weeks. The professional search and rescue team was sent home. Some stayed on, dedicated volunteers. They helped organize people from the town and the surrounding area, anyone who wanted to help. For the past two weeks I’ve been on the verge of joining them. The Housemans started a GoFundMe page and use the proceeds to support those willing to continue. Their intermediaries hand out maps and fliers, pack lunches, make sure everyone has whistles and water bottles, fresh

batteries for headlamps in case they are caught out late. I took my whistle from the person who handed it to me. I put on my red pinnie. I tried to make small talk with the others as we waited to begin.

After spending the weekend digging fence postholes with my husband, it had hurt to type at work that first Monday after the class. I wouldn't be able to pick up my camera for a while. Still, the physicality of the digging awoke something in me.

My hands, covered in Band-Aids, hunted and pecked while I inputted billing information for Dr. Patti Nolan. She was a dermatologist, which was fortunate, because abnormal moles appeared out of nowhere on my husband's back. I'd bring in digital photographs on my phone for Dr. Nolan to examine between patients.

It was snooping and illegal, but I searched for Melanie's name in Dr. Nolan's records. She'd been in to see her a few years before for a rash. Something fungal. There was just the one appointment. I had hoped for more.

Dr. Nolan poked her head into my windowless office, asked if I wanted to get lunch. Melanie's patient record still filled my screen.

I liked lunch with Patti, because we usually ate somewhere expensive and she paid. It was like a vacation from the day. But I had brought my lunch and was feeling guilty enough.

My husband Tom met me in a downtown park equidistant from our offices. He worked for the planning department. That's why we'd moved to Chilton three years ago. I'd found the medical billing job without much trouble soon after.

Tom waved at me with his brown bag from across the square. I waved back with mine. We met at a weathered bench, our bench.

The park was an afterthought. There was no shade, no trees. Paved sidewalks sliced through a field of grass. A few benches ringed a round brick structure that may have hosted a fountain once or was meant to. Its bottom was littered with cigarette butts and candy wrappers.

As we ate, I picked at the Band-Aids whose corners already curled upwards. Beneath them my palms were rubbed raw.

My skin unable to withstand the friction of the same repetitive motion, succumbing to stress between its surface and the rest of my body. A pocket of liquid filling in as protection until it burst. And now the old skin hanging there by a thread.

Tom told me the hearing he had to attend that night would go late. The zoning permit was controversial.

We kissed goodbye, a flat kiss on the lips, two pieces of cardboard coming together. He walked back the way he came. I stayed on the bench. He must have been staring at his phone, because his foot caught on an uneven bit of sidewalk and he was thrown forward.

For a second I thought I would have to help, pick him up, check to see if anything was bloody or broken. But he steadied himself without falling and turned around to stare down the offending spot. “Almost lost it there,” he shouted. Then he turned back around and left.

The old man blows past me, his stick ticking back and forth like a metronome. A tree covered in pale green lichens captures my attention. I pick at the edges where the lichens curl. When I was a girl, I liked picking or pulling at the skin of things, like bark, or dried scabs, or the matte surface of butterscotch pudding, my favorite. A small amount of lichen flakes off and falls down onto my shoe. I learned about lichens in biology. They are symbionts, organisms that require a host, but not the way a parasite does. A parasite feeds.

I look up and watch the man pushing forward in his steady rhythm. His humming grows faint before it disappears. To my left, shuffling leaves replace the humming. A bough breaking in the distance makes a hollow crack. Snatches of bright color appear. The others aren’t so far. The old man, however, I can no longer see.

That week after the photography class I searched for Melanie on the web. Her high school announced she’d made honor roll. An old photo of her softball team printed in the local paper celebrated a tournament win. Her Instagram page was set to private, and I lingered for a while, my finger hovering over the mouse to make my request. I got up and poured myself a glass of milk. The cold glass felt good in my hands.

I googled “SnapChat.” It was for kids, and I felt silly installing it on my phone. Melanie, though, was easy to find. Within minutes, she sent me a Snap, an exaggerated picture of herself in cat-eye glasses and kitten ears blowing a kiss. I kept the photo open until it vanished.

She’d saved Snaps in her Stories. There were photos from around town, although it looked less familiar. Photos from beach vacations—reeds on top of dunes flattened by the wind, the shadow of a bird on the water. I remembered a breeze moving the leaves on the trees during our class so that the leaves resembled tickling fingers. In my photo they are just leaves. A chipmunk like an inverted comma sitting on a stump is nothing more than a brown knob. She had a photo of a man in a bucket hat standing next to his anchored fishing pole in the sand. Maybe it is her father. It is dawn or dusk, and it looks like he has spent the night or day fishing. His pail remains empty. I became overcome with emotion. I swiped up to start a chat. “Beautiful,” I typed. She replied with a heart.

I glance up from time to time to check for the other volunteers. There are hints of movement, intimations of presence. There is no use trying to resume the line’s formation. The sloppiness of the search seems to belong to it.

After a time, I stop checking. My other senses take over. I hear every twig snap, every wing flutter. The forest groans as the wind moves through stiff branches. I touch everything, the bark of every tree, some smooth and cold, some thick and rough and temperate. A few brittle leaves remain stuck to otherwise naked branches. One droops in front of me, and I almost take it in my mouth. I imagine its bitter taste. How it would crunch before dissolving into dust.

Melanie and I agreed that those class woods hadn’t been nature. They were too tidy, as if someone had taken a broom and swept away anything interesting. Melanie knew of a different forest, in another part of town. Dark woods, the kind you could get lost in.

We left my car on the shoulder of a gravel road. A neglected trailhead pointed the way in. The forest wasn’t as dense as

I expected. Leaf litter piled feet deep in places. The trail sloped downward, and we slid along it. Melanie giggled every time she lost her footing. Her arms flailed out, looking for something to grab hold of, and her camera swung wildly from her neck.

Maybe it was the brisk October air or the majesty of the woods, the towering trees that enveloped us. Maybe it was the air and the forest that aroused me, stinging my spine. I smelled life, in the decay of the forest floor, the humus, more life than I ever smelled behind the fiberboard desk at the dermatologist's office or beneath the polyester comforter that covered our bed. I lunged out to grab Melanie's hand as she began to slip, but she snatched it away before I could take hold.

At the bottom we crossed a creek and began to trudge upward through thick rhododendron. I let Melanie get ahead of me. Truth is I couldn't keep up. I stepped off the trail to photograph a rotten stump that had taken the form of a hollowed triangle. I crouched low to capture it from different angles. I heard Melanie calling. She retraced her steps down the trail. Her voice growing more eager, almost frantic, as she approached. After she passed, I emerged from my hiding spot.

Melanie smiled, her eyes shiny, relieved.

"Sorry, I had to go," I said.

She looked like a child who'd lost her mother in a grocery store. A small bundle of raw need.

"Why didn't you answer?"

"I didn't want you to see me pee."

We posted the photographs we wanted to show off to our Instagram accounts. I had started one, too. Her photos attracted comments. Mine were ignored. I edited the photo of the triangular stump. Made the stump darker, increased the contrast with its surroundings. Brightened the background. Until the stump sat like a malevolent force, an energy-hungry black hole.

Mid-search, my stomach growls. I was so busy accepting whistles, maps, and thanks that I had forgotten to take a bagged lunch. I don't know how far out into the forest I

am, but too far to turn back. I chug from my water bottle, reflexively pausing to poke with my stick. When I pull the bottle from my mouth, my elbow grazes a snake sunning itself along the top of a bristly bush. I stumble to the side, tripping over a pile of brambles, and snare my stick on some tangle of flora. A sapling breaks my fall. My head makes a dull thud when it strikes against it.

I force myself up from the forest floor. The snake is nearby. Only now I see that it isn't a snake, but a snakeskin. The molted remains of a creature moved on.

In college, I begged my parents to let me go to Mexico for spring break. I returned the color of a vine-ripened tomato. After a while, my skin began to peel. I stood naked before the floor-length mirror in the bathroom of my dorm room. Starting from the shoulder, I peeled away long strips of translucent dermis. Not able to reach my back, I left the better part of the job to my roommate. Once we finished, a fluttery cloud of both soft and crunchy skin lay on the bathroom tile.

I rub my hand along the snakeskin, and its scaliness makes my stomach turn. Ahead is a small clearing. Running pine fills it with a thick green carpet. A fairy garden tucked back into the woods. I am no longer hungry or thirsty, only drowsy, and I let the sun wrap around me.

Always we went to the woods. My laptop filled with images of trees, bark, and branches. A palette of browns and grays as fall marched on. Pale fungi and sinewy vines. Mounds of scat and lost feathers.

Melanie showed me how to create a Story together on SnapChat. When we were apart, we shared details from our day. I snapped photos of my husband's back. Under a filter, it looked like the surface of the moon. She snapped photos at school. Rows of lockers that she made tunnel on forever, windows that she covered with bars.

One Saturday, with Thanksgiving only a couple weeks away, she thrummed in the woods, and I could sense her vibrations. I reached out my hand to steady her as we slipped down another trail. It had rained all week. She gave me a grateful smile and reached out her hand to squeeze my elbow. She left it there, and I left my hand on her side just below her armpit.

We walked like that for a few more yards until we were past the worst of the mud. Then she dropped her hand, and I let mine fall, my fingertips dusting the length of her spine.

“He’s not coming,” she shouted when I met her the last Saturday. Her face was splotchy, the freckles fused together into large dark clouds. I gave her a hug.

“He can’t get away from school over Thanksgiving. Because of his job.” Her voice grew noisier, discordant. “And his car has been sounding funny. He doesn’t have the money to fix it. He doesn’t trust it to make the long trip.”

“I’m sorry. I know you were looking forward to it.”

This made her cry. She began to pace until her walking sent her in circles. Her breathing became shallower as she choked on her sobs.

“You’re hyperventilating.”

Now she began to panic. Her hands flapped, willing air toward her. I dumped the contents of my packed lunch onto the ground and held the empty paper bag to her mouth. She shoved it away, her eyes bright with fear. I tried again, but her hands kept coming between us.

“Stop,” I said and slapped her face.

Stunned, she forgot to resist me.

Now I could bring the bag to her mouth. She still struggled, so I hugged her close.

Her breaths began to slow, deepen.

The crying hadn’t subsided.

I took the bag away and said, “Maybe you should go to him.”

Melanie waited in a booth for me at a McDonald’s. A duffle bag sat upright beside her.

I expected her to be all smiles, giddy with anticipation.

She said nothing when I sat down across from her. An uneaten apple pie in its paperboard sleeve rested on the table between us.

She pushed it toward me. “I can’t,” she said.

“They serve these this early?” I asked.

Melanie’s face was drawn, her eyes bloodshot.

“What is it?” I wanted to know.

“Maybe I shouldn’t go,” she whispered.

My stomach rumbled. There hadn't been time for breakfast. I opened the sleeve and slipped the pie out. Filling burned the roof of my mouth.

I recognized the look on her face. Second-guessing what you want because you are afraid.

"Will you regret not going?"

"Yes," she cried. But her hands gripped the table like she dared someone to remove her.

There was a parking lot. Maybe a mechanic's shop. Some building dingy and gray. Melanie took her bag from the rear of my car.

"I'll wait with you," I said through my window. "I don't mind."

"He'll be here," she said. "He's just running late."

We were in a small town about an hour from his university. He'd offered to meet us there because he felt bad about making me drive all that way. It was the least he could do. He thought his car could handle it.

She'd shown me his photo. Dark hair and blue eyes, striking. A dimple on his right cheek where he smiled.

"I can wait, really. I don't feel comfortable leaving you here."

Her phone lit up with a text.

"He's just ten minutes away," she said, now unable to stop the smile.

"Good, then I can wait."

Light snow began to fall, dusting her head.

I got out of the car and pulled my beanie over Melanie's dampening hair. It was two in the afternoon. Other cars passed on the street.

"You should go," she said.

"No."

"Please leave."

A car with its turn signal flashing slowed in front of the parking lot.

Anticipation rose in my chest.

But the car increased its speed and drove on.

We waited thirty minutes more; no one showed. Melanie sent messages. She tried to call. There was no response.

“This is your fault, you know,” she said, pointing her phone toward my heart.

“Let’s go, Melanie,” I said, motioning to the car.

“No.”

I wish I could say I left her there because I was angry or hurt. In truth, I wanted her to have her chance.

As I left her behind I found it hard to breathe. I got back into my car and turned the ignition as my hands shook. Reversing out of the space, I watched Melanie typing furiously on her phone. Snow fell harder as I drove out of the parking lot; I could feel its chill inside my car. Waiting to turn, I looked back once. Melanie waited patiently, but I knew her heart raced, too.

A few cars driven by young men passed me as I made my way out of the town. I stared hard at each. Is it you? Is it you?

My hands began to grow numb, and I feared the car would slip on the snow. That I wouldn’t be able to control it. And then I thought, maybe my car will drift and slide right into him.

I pulled over when I could. I sat in the still car while the wipers winked back and forth. I tried to slow my heart to their steady rhythm. The snow was erasing things, wiping them clean.

I managed to turn without spinning the wheels. When I arrived back at the parking lot, I found it empty. Everything asleep beneath a white blanket, except for the quickly filling tracks where the tires had been.

The forest is growing warmer. The sun makes columns of light in the gaps between the trees. I remove the pinny and let it drop to the ground while I unzip my parka.

I come to a wide creek. Algae-covered stones make the shallow water green. A dead tree lies across it. I step up and balance myself on the narrow trunk. I am not high up but high enough that I don’t want to lose my footing. As I inch along the makeshift bridge, I can only think about falling.

My head has begun to throb, and once safe on the other side, I slump down against the base of a tree. An insistent hum occupies my ears. I look around for the old man, but if he is there, he looks just like a tree. I reach out my hand, and

my fingers become his branches.

Then a series of sharp blasts on a whistle pierce through the hum. I grope around in my sweatpants' pocket for my own whistle, thinking I should answer. As soon as my hand closes around the metal object, the other whistle stops. The forest lapses back into its still quiet.

Ever since I heard Melanie was missing, I expected the police. When they come, I will tell them everything. They will stand in my living room, ask questions about the class, our trips to the woods. They will make notes about the phantom boyfriend, but what they will really want is to see my photographs. I will fan them across the coffee table, printed up as eight by tens. One officer will point to a close-up of white lichen. Magnified, it resembles an aerial photograph of snow-covered trees. "Where is that?" he will want to know. I will tell him it's not a place, but a thing. Or two things that now exist together. He will rub at the surface with the rough pad of his finger trying to reveal the secret underneath.

Daniel Gorman

The Last Lion in Mosul

The zoo I was in before was a paradise, I see that now. I had space to run and a tree for shade, and if the other lions were not monopolizing it, a small pool I could bathe in. I was a prisoner of course, but at least the prison had comforts. Then the men put me in a truck and brought me here, to this squalor. My new cage is filthy, littered with trash the humans throw for amusement. The floor of my enclosure is nothing but hot, lifeless dirt—who would have guessed there would come a time when I would long for the simple pleasure of grass between my paw pads? The only shade from the relentless sun is an artificial den at the back of the cage. Its walls are a gray stone that traps the heat. The zoo is made of these gray stones. I can hear the chimpanzees shrieking for relief.

My thoughts dwell on escape, but this zookeeper respects the strength and power of his new lion and has not allowed me to kill him and flee this place. I will have to be clever and trick him. In the meantime, the best I can do is press my nose to the hot dirt, close my eyes and imagine I am back on the plains of my infancy, watching the antelope graze in the distance, unaware of the danger looming nearby. But in the savannah, there are few sounds: the wind hissing in the tall grass; the squeaking cubs tumbling in the dust; the alpha roaring his dominance in the challenge of another. Here? There is constant noise, and the worst of it comes from the bear.

I hate the bear.

Her name is Lula. She lives in the cage across from me with her two cubs. Her fur is the dull brown of hippo dung, a substance I suspect she carries around inside of her head. When I arrived, she immediately began babbling and didn't stop until the sun dropped out of sight. I was startled by her lack of deference toward an alpha predator; did she not recognize the danger I might pose to her and her offspring? The bars of these cages cheat me of my proper respect.

“I was in the circus, before I came to this place. That's where

I met my handsome Misha. We were practically famous.” Always she is talking about the circus. “Oh, Marlon, you would be so wonderful in the circus! You have natural charisma. What a star they would make of you! The ringmaster would shout, ‘Here he is, Marlon the Lion, the fierce king of the jungle!’ And then you would jump through a fire hoop!”

What self-respecting lion would perform tricks for human masters? When I learned there were lions trained to follow human commands, I could not believe it. So shameful. Were I enlisted in the circus, the first moment a human turned his back on me, I would kill him. But I wouldn’t stop there. I would slaughter them all in their big top, as the elephants and giraffes watched with gratitude it wasn’t them. I would not perform tricks.

Always this bear is doing tricks. She has a filthy ball which she balances upon. Her two cubs—I refuse to learn their names—they cackle and chirp and tumble over each other in excitement, as though this is the most impressive thing they have ever seen. She does it every day! And of course, it is an excuse for her to tell me *more* about the circus. But what is most egregious about this bear are her performances.

All day we sit in our cages as soft, dull-eyed humans gawk at us. They must get a thrill staring at superior creatures imprisoned against their will. And Lula, she *dances* for them! Whenever a human passes between our cages, she stands and shuffles like the great clumsy oaf she is, with her foolish cubs mimicking her, and the humans throw to her scraps of food as a reward. If I cared at all I would teach these cubs not to debase themselves for the promise of a thrown apple, but I do *not* care. Let them grow up thinking bears are supposed to dance like humans for scraps. I will never be anything but a lion, and these people will never be anything but prey.

Also, there is a lioness here. She was here when I arrived. Her name is Stella. She is okay, I suppose.

Today the zoo is quiet. The early morning crowds were frightened away by a tremendous boom outside of our walls. It was like the thunderclap of some ominous storm on the horizon, only so close it shook the ground and made my ears ring. The screaming humans scattered, like zebras when the lioness breaks from the long grass, as though the quaking

earth signified the arrival of some terrible predator.

When the zoo emptied, a silence fell over the park, which Lula has been only too happy to fill with endless blathering about Misha. Misha is her mate, another fool bear from the circus. I am not entirely convinced he is real.

“Misha is the most handsome bear in the whole world,” she says. “He was the star of the circus—he could ride a unicycle and play the accordion! Now he lives across the river in a wealthy man’s home and he gets fed fresh salmon every day, which makes his coat shiny. Except for on his head of course, because he is completely bald. An unfortunate incident with a flame juggler. When he performed he had to wear a beret and he was so dashing.”

I do not know what a unicycle and an accordion and a beret are, but I assume they are human contrivances, and as such I hate them, and I hate this Misha for his mastery of them and Lula for her incessant fawning. Stella tells me to hush when I start to complain. It is quite bold of a lioness to tell an alpha male to bite his tongue, but that is how this lioness has been since I arrived—*bold*. I offered to explain to her what her place was. She was raised in captivity and not born on the wild savannahs as I was, so she never knew the hierarchy of the pride.

“Do not be ashamed of your poor behavior,” I said. “It is not your fault. I only tell you so in the future, you may act properly when addressing an alpha male.”

“When I see an alpha male, I’ll be sure to remember your advice,” she said to me. Like I said—*bold*.

“When you were being fed from a human’s bottle, my mane was red with the blood of dead gazelles.”

“You were a cub when you were taken by the men!”

I regret having shared my history with her.

“I will have you know my mane was full and impressive, the envy of all the males in my pride.” This was an embellishment on my part, but I did not want to give to her the satisfaction of thinking otherwise. The next time the zookeeper comes by, I will make obvious my displeasure with my cell mate, and in such a way he will be forced to move her, or me, lest he be down one lion.

I pass the time daydreaming of escaping, and eating

humans. I try to pay as little attention to them as possible. To acknowledge them is to encourage them. I do not care if they think I am the most boring creature they have ever seen. Let them think that—maybe the zookeeper will send me back. He will think I am a faulty lion and request a replacement. Then I will be free of this place.

Except, sometimes I cannot help myself. The hunter in me will not be made a fool. There is a barrier between the humans and my bars. The span of a human arm separates the barrier from my cage; I know this because the adolescents dare each other to lean over it and touch the bars. They have invented a game of sitting at this barrier with their back to me, throwing into my face that they are prey and I can do nothing about it. I try to ignore it, but my pride as an alpha demands I display my dominance. I roar and lunge at the bars and remind them it is this prison that keeps them safe. They skitter off, making their hyena noises. Stella says I am foolish for allowing myself to participate in their pranks, but I also see the twinkle in her eye after I have shaken the bars of our enclosure with my bellows. I would never tell her I do this for that twinkle.

Stella is a fine lioness, if one is able to look past the fact she was raised in captivity. She is fond of stretching her body across the front of the cage, where she sleeps while the humans stretch their arms and tickle her fur. Lula's cubs are a constant delight to her, something I do not understand. A lioness of the savannah would see those cubs and know instinctively the best way of separating them from their mother so they may be killed for the pride. I think she would make a fine mother and a terrible hunter. I tell her this sometimes, to which she responds by irritatingly calling me "Baby Marlon" and grooming me until I must retreat to the stifling shadows of our den.

Lately, Stella and Lula have been talking about the men who have begun patrolling the zoo. They are easy to spot with their stink of grease and metal and a subtle but constant anxiety, like lesser males in a pride who must always be concerned with their status, always snarling, quick to fight until the alpha reminds them where they stand. They carry the men's weapons of war. It is odd that men would be armed

for war in a zoo. Stella says they make her uneasy. I pay them no mind; they are prey, like the rest.

“There are so many of them! And yet none of them ever gives me apples when I dance,” Lula says. “Why do you think they are here, Marlon? Do you think it has to do with the chimpanzees?”

The chimps have a reputation for flinging their feces at the humans, a distasteful practice I nevertheless respect for the spirit of the act. But I doubt the transgressions of the apes would anger the humans such they would dissuade them with threats of war. I suggest to Stella perhaps word has spread of my ferocity, and the men are here to ensure no more silly games are played in front of my cage, lest I break free and slaughter every human in this zoo. She does not agree. Regardless, there are fewer humans walking past my cage, and that suits me fine.

Not all of the humans are worthless. There is a man who passes through the zoo daily. He walks around with colorful birds all over him, as though within him lives the spirit of a comfortable tree. Lula explained to me he is a bird-seller. In his circuit of the park he pauses at our cages, where his routine is to stop and bow to Stella and me. Also, he never gives to the bear any apples, no matter how much she dances. Among the humans, he is worthy of a modicum of respect. When I break free, I will make his death as quick and painless as possible.

It wasn't long after the arrival of the armed men that the sounds of war followed. At first it was a curiosity, but then the fearsome noises of their fighting became a constant refrain in our lives. For many days, a cacophony of popping and ripping and rumbling has persisted outside our walls. There is no opportunity to relax, no relief. We are under constant duress. I cannot stop pacing. Stella jumps at every blast, every rattle, every human shout. She thinks the sounds are getting closer. I say nothing, but I think this as well.

Today, war entered the zoo. Stella and I huddled in our den as the air outside thundered, as though the men had pulled the storm clouds down from the sky. Lula sat in the opening of her den, blocking her cubs within. The air grew heavy with the acrid stink of smoke, the crisp smell of fresh blood, the shrill screams of men and animals dying. Stella pressed close

to me, tucking her head beneath my foreleg.

“Why is this happening?” she asked, but I had no answer. I was terribly frightened, but for her I would not cower.

When the thunder of war passed, we crept from our cave. Smoke hung in the walkways as though the storm had left its clouds behind. Through the haze I could see men lying on the ground in pools of blood. I could see innocent animals in the same condition—the stately giraffe, whose slender neck was a constant feature of my daydreams, lay crumpled in his enclosure, his long neck curled unnaturally beneath him. I could hear the rattling breaths of a rhinoceros as he bled from holes that had been punched in his hide. Death is a way of life; a lion knows this. But it should be on the terms dictated by nature, not left to the whims of careless human captors. I mourned their wasteful deaths.

There are no more visitors to the zoo, only men of war. This morning there was no meat in our cage, no visit from the keeper who removes our scat, nor even the bird man peddling his colorful pets. Only men who are too preoccupied with fighting to care for the prisoners.

Tonight a mighty crash shook the earth beneath me as I slept. I awoke in a panic, for Stella was not in the den. Then I heard her call to me from outside.

“Marlon, come look!”

Stella and Lula with her cubs were all gazing out over the zoo. The sky was ablaze with fire and smoke. A building had collapsed, and the wall at the back of the chimpanzee cage was a smoldering pile of rubble. Men ran all over the place, shouting at each other and dying.

“I think they used a cannon,” said Lula. Her tiny eyes bulged in the half-light. “The cannon in the circus made a sound like that. Only that cannon fired a man into a net. I don’t suppose a man fired from a cannon could do that.”

I was too distracted by the sight of the chimps to rain insults upon her. Those who survived were running, deaf and screaming, across the tops of buildings and into the crimson night. I wondered if the air outside their bars tasted as good as I imagined.

The men are gone. The last of them passed our cages yesterday. Lula stood at her bars and danced, but they paid her no attention. Her cubs stayed in their den; they do not come out much anymore. It has been many days since we were last fed and watered. I can still hear war outside our walls, but it has used up the zoo and moved on.

The air is befouled with the scent of death. The men took their dead with them, but they left the animals to fester in the sun. The smell chokes me, and yet I find myself longing for the carcasses. It is shameful, to find the sweet stench of rot appealing like some kind of scavenger, but I would do anything to quiet the howling in my stomach. And I worry for Stella. She is weakening, though she does not like to show it.

“I am stronger than you, Marlon. When you die, I’ll just eat you,” she said, with a twinkle in her eye. “Or maybe I won’t wait for you to starve to death.”

I can feel on the air the seasons changing. I can count the passage of time in the ribs visible in Stella’s flank. We have only been able to survive through the generosity of humans who sneak into the zoo. The visits are infrequent, as the war is not yet over. The humans move like antelope at the water’s edge, always watching for danger lurking in the tall grass. Yesterday a man gave to us a slaughtered goat. It was a pitifully small meal, but a feast compared to what we have had. To Stella I gave the choicest parts of the animal. It hurts my pride to accept handouts; I am no better than Lula and her dancing. But now is not the time for pride. You cannot fill a stomach with pride.

“Sometimes I think Misha will climb over that wall with a great big salmon in his jaws, and he will drop it at our feet. Do you dream of food too, Marlon?”

Lula stands and watches the hole in the wall of the chimpanzee cage. I think she believes her dreams, and like a fool I find myself watching for this imagined bear with his bald head and his gift of salmon. The lack of food has not slowed Lula’s storytelling. I have begun to wonder if she does this for the benefit of her cubs and Stella, as a distraction from their suffering. When Stella sits, she leans her weight against me; I can barely feel her, she is so thin.

“I worry about the cubs,” she says. The cubs are but bags of

bones, their baby fat melted away, leaving only bright eyes in dark caves.

“Do not worry for them, my queen. They are young and strong. Lula may not have gifted them with brains, but their strength is admirable.” I hope I have allayed her fears, even as I know in my heart what Lula will have to do. I fear for Stella’s innocence.

At dawn I left Stella sleeping in the filthy hay of our den. The light was the greyish blue before the sun has crested the horizon, and the air was cool and calm. It was so peaceful, for a moment I was able to forget our hardships. I focused only on the sky and was able to pluck a memory from when I was a cub, of watching the sun rise above the mountains, setting ablaze the only world I knew, a boundless freedom that stretched to the horizon. I remembered the beauty of my home, and my mother’s face, and if only for a moment, I was transported there.

Lula was awake, watching the zoo with unseeing eyes. She said nothing to me when I emerged, and I knew then what she had done.

When Stella awoke, she found me sitting vigil with Lula.

“Where are the cubs?” she asked, though she already knew the answer. I guided her back to our straw bed. The instincts of a lioness are not erased by a life in captivity; they sleep beneath the surface. Though she has never known the ruthlessness of the wild and the hard decisions a mother must occasionally make, the cruel mercies they must invoke, she understood and she never had to ask why. She pressed her body to mine and mourned in silence.

“You will make a fine mother someday,” I said.

Today the bird man returned. He had his birds with him, as though it were just another day, and for a moment, in my hunger deliriums, I thought I had dreamed all of this misery. His birds wore little hoods over their heads, the purpose of which mystified me until I watched him push one of the unnaturally placid creatures between the bars of my cage. Lula and Stella eventually overcame their grief to accept these gifts, but with Stella, it took a great deal of coaxing on my part, and she only ate the one bird. When the birds were gone, the man bowed to each of us and departed. I have

amended my opinion of the bird man: when I escape, I will not eat him, but allow him free passage in the domain of the lion and welcome him as a friend.

I wonder what my companions endure, if our experiences are equal, or if we suffer differently. I know how I suffer: my joints ache and I have hardly the energy to move. The emptiness in me is profound. There was a great chasm near where I grew up, where the lions could sometimes corner young elephants frightened from the herd. It was deep and the wind howled through it on summer nights. That chasm now resides within me. I wonder if Stella and Lula can hear the wind howling in their own chasms.

Stella has not been the same since she learned of the cubs. She does not move. She lays beside the bars, where she would when she let the humans play with her fur. Yesterday a man and his daughter brought us two chickens. Stella did not move to eat, and I had to push the small carcass to her nose.

“You eat it,” she said. “I am not hungry.”

“You must eat, Stella.”

“Not now. Lay down with me.”

The sun nestled into the hills, washing the walls of the zoo in purples and oranges. Lula watched the sunset with us.

“What will you do when you are free?” she asked. She is made of much stronger stuff than I could have imagined. I think perhaps she can feel Stella’s spirit weakening, and the maternal instinct to nurture has found a new focus. “I think I will find Misha, and we will climb off into the hills where there are fish in a bubbling spring and maybe a quiet cave, and we can listen to the bees and smell the flowers. But first I will bathe in a river. I would never want for Misha to see me in such a condition. I’m filthy. And the stink! I know how you two smell. I can’t imagine what I must smell like. No, I must be clean for my handsome Misha. I will bathe, then I will find him, and then we will find our cave.”

Lula’s eternal optimism may not nourish our bodies, but perhaps it will nourish Stella’s wounded soul. In my heart I am thankful for Lula at this time.

“When I die, I give you permission to eat me,” Stella said.

“Do you not remember? You are the strong one. You will eat me.” I tell her.

She chuffs at me and nestles into my side. I fall asleep thinking about the chimpanzees, and what they might be doing with their boundless freedom.

The morning's dawn brought to us a rainstorm and the realization that in the night, my lioness's suffering had come to an end. I lay next to her the entire day, as the skies opened up and washed the filth from our cages and from our bodies. I did not think the emptiness within me could expand any further. How wrong I was.

“**T**he man who came yesterday, he has been here before, I recognize his scent. I think he is going to rescue us.”

Lula has taken up the notion that every person who comes to the zoo to sneak us food or water is going to rescue us. Meanwhile we continue to lie in our own waste as frail, skeletal versions of our old selves.

“If that was true, would they not have taken us from here yesterday?” The day before, three men visited us. They took Stella and dug a hole in the ground outside my cage and placed her in it. Had I the strength I would have torn them to pieces the moment they tried to touch her, but I can barely get to my feet. They left food and water, but I refused to eat until they left; I would not give to them the satisfaction of seeing me eat after they dared touch my Stella. Now I lay in her customary spot by the bars. I imagine I can still feel the warmth she left behind.

“Maybe they need to figure out how to move us. If you think about it, they probably don't want to move us together in the same cage. They probably think we'd kill each other. That must be it. Isn't that exciting? I don't even hear cannons anymore, do you? I haven't heard them for the longest time. The war is probably gone. Now they have to figure out how to get us out. I wonder if they will have Misha with them—”

“We are not getting rescued.” In my despair my words have malice and claws, and they seek the hope that still draws breath in Lula's heart. “You stupid bear. We are going to die in these cages. Just like Stella. Just like your cubs, and your Misha too. Everyone is dead, and nobody is coming to get us. These humans who come to throw us their scraps will soon find two more dead animals to drag into holes in the ground.”

The days come and go. People come to feed us enough to keep us alive, but nobody has rescued us. Lula and I have not spoken for days. I am filled with great shame in remembering my moment of despair.

When Lula got sick, I swallowed my pride and apologized for what I had said. In her grace she forgave me, though I fear the damage is already done. She coughs and wheezes all day now. In the night I can hear her struggling, and I barely sleep out of fear I will wake to find Lula has left me alone in this awful place. Sometimes, when it seems she has stopped breathing, I call to her until I hear her weak voice and know she has not left me. Worst of all, she no longer tells her stories. She hardly talks at all. She just lies there, her chin on the ground, waiting as I do, to see who will die first.

“Lula, tell me a story,” I say to her. There are people around us now. Where did they come from? Lula has somehow found the strength to stand up at her bars. She is so strong, even now. I remember her dances, from before, and I think I see apples raining from the sky. “Tell me of Misha and the juggler. You never told me what happened to Misha to make him bald.”

“Misha is dead, Marlon. Besides, I think we are going somewhere.”

I think this is such a foolish thing to say, even for Lula. Then I feel a sting in my side, and I see bird feathers sticking out of my haunch, and then I sleep.

I dream of being lifted and carried, and long journeys in the backs of trucks; of men arguing and water being poured into my mouth through narrow bars; of Lula in her own box next to me, sleeping or dead, I cannot tell. I dream I call out to her, but she does not answer.

The events of my rescue I shall never fully comprehend. I have been in the new compound long enough to regain the strength to go on walks. My legs do not ache like they used to, but I tire easily. There is room to run here and trees to shade myself in, but I do not let these conveniences obscure the fact I remain a prisoner. I am grateful for my rescue and rehabilitation, but when my strength is fully returned, I intend to break free and make the long trek back to the savannahs of

my ancestral home. But for now, I rest and reflect. I am alone in my enclosure, and I am happy it is this way. Though it is big here, there is not enough room for another lion; Stella's memory takes up too much space.

Lula's compound is next to mine. On my walks I stop at our shared fence and I watch her. We have not talked. In fact, she has not moved at all. Her new home has a den like we had in the zoo, and she never leaves its shade. I fear she used up all of her hope keeping me alive in that place, leaving none for herself. Every day I expect the men to put her in the back of a truck and drive her to some hole in the ground.

Today the sound of a truck carried across my enclosure. As it backed up to Lula's pen, the hair on my neck stood up, and dread filled my heart. Suddenly I was back in that zoo, terrified my friend had finally left me to be alone. I stood at our shared fence and I could see the outline of her great head, shaded beneath her cinnabar tree. Then the men opened the back of the truck, and an emaciated bear trundled out. His fur was the dull brown of hippo's dung, except on his head, where he was completely bald.

For the first time since our rescue, Lula lifted her head.

Esem Junior

The Dueling Plumbers of Harvard

Jim knows it's silly, but all he's thought about the past few days is holding a baby panda. A fifty-five-year-old man shouldn't obsess over such a thing, that's what he tells himself. But certain things can't be helped. He's watched videos online, has seen the newborn pandas squeak and topple down hillsides. Has imagined scratching them behind the ears, gathering soft, white down between his fingers. That's what has taken him to the panda center outside Chengdu. Two minutes of panda time cost two thousand yuan, but so be it. He needs this.

Jim's been in China for two weeks and has hated every minute of it. The Chinese strike him as pushy, rude, prone to spitting. Being in China reminds him of days past when he fought with Asian grandmothers in Costco, who conspired to box him out at the rotisserie chicken counter with the hard edges of their carts. But these mid-sized industrial cities in Western China will be his home for the foreseeable future. He's paid by corporations to be an authentic white man, to sit in corporate meetings, packaged in a dark wool suit, and nod when a critical mass of black eyes look to him for assent. It's prearranged that every question will have a "yes" answer.

An attendant at the panda center holds out plastic gloves and shakes them in Jim's face. Powder sifts from the gloves, chased by the scent of latex.

"You've already got me in this get-up," Jim says, and nods down at the mandatory, blue scrubs that billow over his torso and upper thighs.

The attendant, a man Jim's age with acne scars across his forehead, shakes the gloves again.

"Jesus, fine." Jim snatches the jumble of rubber. Once gloved, he holds up his hands and wiggles his fingers. The man directs him to sit on a bench.

The baby panda appears. A different attendant waddles out with the bear, holding the creature under its arms. There's no ceremony to it. The attendant stutters forward, as if lugging

a bag of cement, the panda's belly and appendages swinging between the man's knees. Another handler materializes and they lift and dump the animal into Jim's lap. He groans—the creature is heavier than he's imagined.

More staff appear. They swarm. A stalk of bamboo is produced, then shoved into the panda's mouth. A woman with a surgical mask tells Jim to smile. Flashes detonate from his periphery.

The panda isn't at all interested in Jim. It doesn't squeak, it doesn't even look at him. It jaws the bamboo, its singular mission, and Jim can't even see its face—not its round, glassy eyes, ringed in plush, midnight fur. He glances around, expecting someone to acknowledge this travesty. The panda is his totem. The keeper of serenity in the cool, wet bamboo forests of the Shaanxi province, and Jim needs to draw its same breath, take what it can impart for the long solitude to follow.

He fixates on the panda's hair, so close. The strands move in waves as the bear squirms, and that's when Jim does it—he ungloves one hand and pets the creature. The fur is coarse, wiry, and he imagines the bristles of a shop broom.

The attendants are on him. Two move to extricate the bear. A woman slaps his hand and a man shouts at him through surgical gauze. Jim is assisted to his feet, then stripped of his blue scrubs and steered toward the exit. The panda center employees are tiny compared to him but they're sinewy, tough like beef jerky, and Jim's upper arms sting from where they're pinching him, maneuvering him through small explosions of pain. Still, he's pleased with himself. He considers this a victory.

Then they mention police, in English.

Jim goes numb as his attention goes inward. He wonders, do Chinese prisoners get phone calls? Can he reach the consulate? Does he even know how many digits make a Chinese phone number?

They sweep Jim through manicured bamboo habitat where they pass a crowd of Americans. The group is from Ohio—their sweatshirts and caps advertise this fact. Just a blur of Buckeye gear and white faces. “Oh my god, oh my god,” the largest female says. “It's really him.” Her hand cups her open

mouth. She points at Jim. The adult men become present, their eyes engaged, and scramble for cameras.

The Chinese attendants are perplexed. They scrutinize the man in their custody.

This delay is their undoing.

The Ohioans rush Jim. They tell him they *love* his movies. That they've had contests to see who could watch *The Four Amigos* more times.

You see, Jim is no ordinary dumpy middle-aged man. He's got a special face. Through lucky twists of the double helix, he bears not a striking resemblance—but an identical twinness—to Burl Holiday. Yes, that Burl Holiday. The aging comedian with roots in SCTV, who blew up the Nielsen ratings in the 1980s, anchoring the end of a sitcom bar. The one who later smashed box office records with Reagan-era satires about the Cold War and corporate culture. Also, of course, there's his role as the fourth amigo in the Mexico-based, culturally insensitive romp, *The Four Amigos*.

The Chinese attendants confer in a makeshift circle. Both Holiday and Jim have an everyman's face—there's nothing outwardly telling here. The handlers trade barks and gesticulate, glancing at the Rolex on Jim's wrist, until one breaks from their order and tells Jim to take his time, but that he must leave. The attendant mentions he's a fan of *Bigger Trouble in Little China*, which paired Holiday with Jackie Chan in a reboot of the 1986 comedy.

Jim sits on the ground. The Ohioans keep their distance and, for the moment, he's alone. He thinks about the panda. He feels stupid, mostly for what he expected of the little bear. After all, what show of affection could one expect from the most solitary creature on earth?

The female Ohioan sidles up and takes a selfie, the camera held high. Jim glimpses himself in the lower background of the frame, his shoulders slumped, his stomach hanging over his belt. She says nothing, no hello, no hey, and stands idly with crossed legs, editing her picture and sharing it on social media, her fanny pack and buttocks just feet from his face.

Jim fishes out his wallet and withdraws the two-by-one-inch picture of Burl Holiday he keeps there. The eyes have been scratched out with the tine of a fork. Were paparazzi present,

they would have found this delicious. Reporters across the globe have waited three decades for these doppelgängers to meet in person, and keep looking for that one final straw—the one that’ll catapult one of the two men into a head-on collision course.

The origin of Jim’s vendetta is ancient.

Thirty-five years earlier, Jim heads into a stand-up comedy show in Buffalo, New York. He and the gang are back from college for their final summer vacation. Jim’s waist has thickened, so have his jowls. It’s happened to them all. They’ve completed youth, and are approaching who they’ll become. Hardworking but shallow, aspiring to keep the status quo.

They take their seats in a ramshackle building warped by decades of lake-effect snow. Jim’s high-school sweetheart, Kimberly, sits next to him. They’ve dated since they were fourteen, and next year he plans to propose.

He knows everything about Kimberly. She’s scared of snails but not spiders. The scar on her thumb is from a childhood fishhook incident. Fresh from an adult-league softball game, she wears a trim-fit uniform with white piping, accentuating the cambers of her waist and hips. Jim becomes very conscious of his own features—the jowls, the puffs under his eyes, a small thinning of the hair.

The host steps into the spotlight. He’s thin but his gut protrudes, a snake digesting a rodent. The host pulls at his collar.

“We have a special treat tonight,” he tells the audience. “We have, um, Burl Holiday in the house.”

The audience is stunned. Holiday has a home in Toronto, just across the lake, but he’s well past doing sets at fourth-tier comedy clubs in forgotten cities. He’s normally seen on Thursday-night television, in a sitcom about a Boston pub where he plays “the plumber of Harvard”—a pile of flesh with the labored breath of someone with sleep apnea.

Holiday doesn’t wait for the host to finish. He stumbles up to the microphone, clearly obliterated, his pants spotted with beer or urine. He squints into the spotlight, and seems to have lost his train of thought.

His eyes settle on Jim.

“My god,” he says, rubbing his jowls. “You look like me, only fatter.” His eyes travel Jim’s belly. “One too many jelly donuts?”

For the next twenty minutes, Jim is subject to Holiday’s public humiliations. Jim is this, he’s that, he’s got all the detriments of the comedy star and none of his superpowers, so the audience is told. And it’s true—Jim has the comedian’s saggy, ho-hum looks, and though Jim may have some strengths, none are extraordinary, and he certainly isn’t funny. At the end of the show his friends start calling him Baby Holiday and Kimberly is looking at him. The skin around her eyes gathers, her pupils constrict. She tries to compose herself, to refreshen a smile, but it’s done.

What’s been said cannot be erased.

The next day, she breaks up with Jim in the neighborhood pizza parlor. A pizza pie sits between them and he stares at the orange cheese and the wells of oils in the curled pepperoni, pizza he loved as a child. Kimberly talks but he never remembers her explanation—the real reason is clear—and every time Jim looks in the mirror from then on, he remembers how she looked at him in the pizzeria and he thinks of Burl Holiday.

Jim sees Kimberly once more in his life, walking on the other side of Niagara Square in downtown Buffalo, holding hands with an out-of-towner. At that moment, a station wagon full of SUNY Buffalo students grinds by. “Burl!” they yell, in a gust of spittle and beer. “All the way from Hahvahd Yahd!” Jim squats down behind a U.S. mailbox while a stranger points and smiles. In various permutations, this keeps happening.

And his love life?

In America, it dies.

A few years later, Jim has fled the U.S. and is teaching English in Tokyo. Looks-wise, things are *no bueno*. Whereas Holiday has the benefit of Hollywood-grade skin serums, Jim has bars of Irish Spring. So while Holiday is ten years older than Jim, their visual age has synced.

But nobody seems to know this in Japan. Nobody points and laughs. To the Japanese, he and Holiday and all white mankind look the same. From time to time he’ll cross paths

with an American tourist—in the subway, in the leafy inner gardens of Meiji Jingū—but Westerners ignore each other, he notices, pretending they are the sole adventurers in this quiet, alien land.

Jim sits in a Shinjuku bar and sips Japanese bourbon. He tastes butterscotch, a hint of cinnamon. The finish is smooth, smoother than anything from the American South.

“Imitate, improve, then dominate,” Jim says. He notices this happens a lot in his new country.

A television murmurs behind the bar. It’s September, when the Ryōgoku Sumo Hall hosts its tournament. Jim checks the time. Each night after teaching class, he stops here to meet a woman, a former student. Tonight she’s late. Jim contemplates that she’s been acting strange the past few weeks.

The sumo coverage takes a break, and that’s when Jim sees it. A commercial blinks on for Boss coffee, the canned variety one finds in the country’s gazillion vending machines. Burl Holiday appears, stepping from a shadow. He’s wearing dark aviator glasses and a black suit, echoing a film he’s done in America, lampooning the U.S. Secret Service. “Wake up,” Holiday barks, “and show them who’s Boss.” Japanese characters smack against the screen with exclamation points.

The bartender is also watching.

“What’s that?” Jim says. All warmth is sucked from him.

“Burl Holiday,” the bartender says. He’s looking down, drying a cup that’s already dry. “You know Burl Holiday?”

They both know Jim knows who Burl Holiday is. What Jim doesn’t know, because his teaching schedule coincides with Japanese primetime, is that the plumber of Harvard has been introduced into nine million Japanese homes. It’s the first successful U.S. television import.

Jim steps in the thought that everything will change for him, just as in Buffalo. He’ll have to run again, to an even farther corner of the world.

“Excuse me?” This, from a man at the end the bar.

His skin is the color of snow, his hair is a shiny sable. He even wears a jinbei, a crossing robe fixed with a sash. But freckles dust his nose and cheeks, and his eyes are an arctic blue.

The stranger stands, tumbler in hand. He wipes a watery

ring from the bar's surface with a handkerchief and walks down to Jim.

"Edwin Smart, talent agent," he says, extending a hand. "I specialize in placing westerners with local opportunities."

Jim shakes Edwin Smart's hand, introduces himself. He can't take his eyes off this strange white man in Japanese costume.

"You, Jim, are a rare find. Something very special." For his part, Edwin can't take his eyes off Jim. "Let's state the obvious. You look just like him—just . . . incredible, wow. So let me tell you what I'm thinking, sir. John Candy—you know John?—he starred in a commercial for Crunky last year. A thirty-second spot, and he made enough to buy *thirty* Cadillacs." Edwin splays fingers on both hands, then flashes them twice more. "Now, John just came for a short visit. But what would've happened, Jim, if we plucked John Candy from Chicago, brought him here, and suited him to Japanese tastes?"

He explains to Jim that, while Holiday's coffee ads have crossed the Pacific Ocean, the actor himself will not. For the past two years Holiday has refused to leave North America.

Holiday is known for his quirks. On film he's darkly comedic, known for a sharp tongue, but away from the limelight he's different. There's the surprise appearances at McDonald's, where he tips cashiers two thousand dollars, and his antics at Toronto Blue Jays games, where he kisses babies and grandmothers. Little is known about his personal life, just that he's a life-long bachelor. The Japanese, Edwin has said, relate to him—his mania, his privacy—though there's considerable affront at his refusal to visit.

Jim isn't sure about any of this, but then Edwin says: "Asia is a larger market. Now Jim, what if I could make you bigger, more famous, than Burl Holiday?"

For twenty-five years, Jim is a fixture on Tokyo television. It begins with him spoofing Burl Holiday on celebrity gossip shows, reprising Burl's characters on SCTV, including an off-pitch lounge singer. Each time Jim does this, he exhales away a sad note from his past. To be oneself is a burden—Jim's never thought about things this way, but it is so. In the actor's

shadow, he can do whatever he pleases.

These cameos lead to a regular spot on a Japanese version of Hollywood Squares. Surrounded by the nation's wittiest stars, Jim becomes fluent in their language—and well-connected. Before long, he's an actor in his own right, appearing not only in comedies but serious films too, including a supporting role in *Watashitoisshoni Dansu?*, which wins Best Picture at the Japanese Oscars. The film's about a group of Tokyo workaholics who find presence, meaning, and love in ballroom dance competition. Jim plays the irreverent Western teacher. With this performance, the Japanese claim him—they consider Holiday nothing more than a slapstick comedian. And their faith in Jim is well placed. Unhinged from any allegiance to any one self, Jim has abandoned the burdens of his past, and has discovered that he's more faceted than Holiday. Having experienced a broader spectrum of pain, he has a deeper emotional well from which to draw, and his acting reflects this.

Jim is sure Holiday knows about him. *The New York Times Magazine* has published a ten-page feature on the pair, entitled “The Dueling Plumbers of Harvard.” The article follows, in part, Jim's parallel career through the cartoonish world of Japanese entertainment, ending with his trip to the Japanese Oscars. “Holiday gave me my start,” Jim's quoted as saying, “but I'll give him his finish.”

Holiday is contacted, but doesn't comment.

But Holiday is no slouch. He evolves too. Over the course of a decade, he develops into a Grammy-nominated mandolin player, a feat of physics given his kielbasa-sized fingers. For Jim, this is good news. For every reinvention, Jim has an opportunity to recapture the public's interest. Though he, too, has sausage-like fingers, Jim's got the same genetic lineup as Holiday, and becomes a respectable mandolin player in his own right. Tonight he's playing the New York Grill and Bar on the 52nd floor of the Park Hyatt Tokyo. The lights smolder at minimal wattage, their filaments dim and golden, and those in the bar have the sense they're suspended among the galaxy of stars that laze over Tokyo. The neon explosion of Shinjuku is far below, a smiling reminder of that small, bustling world. The customers talk in murmurs; Hanashyo glassware clinks,

daintily. Edwin sits across the room at the bar and toasts his most profitable client.

Jim sets up near the window, hundreds of feet above the street. He keeps his back to the cityscape; he's dizzied by heights. His mandolin lifts softly from its velvet encasement and he holds its red belly against his own. He'll play a set of five pieces, finishing with a crowd favorite, Led Zeppelin's "Going to California."

From the first pluck, he knows this performance is special. His fingers hold the double strings true against the frets and the notes soar in perfect waves, resounding through the hollow of the instrument. Jim was nervous but now he is not. He's tapped into something greater than himself, something which directs his fingers through the metallic runs of each song, revealing perfect harmonies already existing, awaiting release. Jim closes his eyes. The universe is confirming that this is where he's meant to be. That he's the rightful player of the mandolin. That it's a matter of time before he overtakes his more famous counterpart, and that the next story in *The New York Times Magazine* will be a rumination on authenticity, questioning what happens when a copy is better than the original. Jim has come so far, he knows this. If he could draw a straight line through the globe, he believes it would emerge in a Buffalo pizzeria.

He plays for forty minutes and on the last note of the last bar of "California," his string breaks. The twang reverberates and dies, and for a few moments only the muffled clanks from the kitchen waft into the bar.

The applause comes at once, a rainstorm of approval.

Jim packs away his instrument and joins Edwin at the bar. Edwin is frail and walks with two canes. He's had stomach cancer for six months, weighs one hundred pounds.

Jim is hugging his friend when he feels two taps on his shoulder. A man with a museum-quality jaw stands in a thousand-dollar suit. "Mr. Jim Nowak?" The man's voice is strident, his consonants crisp. Jim nods, and papers are flicked against his chest.

Jim unfolds the documents and turns them around. It's a cease and desist order, and a wild-eyed skim reveals it's a missive sent by Burl Holiday.

The man turns to leave.

“Hold on,” Jim says. He takes a linen napkin from the bar and a pen from the man’s breast pocket and writes a message back to Holiday. “Burl,” he scrawls. “You should know some turd is going around Tokyo, making you look like an asshole. Game on, jelly donut, and may the best man win (me).”

A year goes by.

Jim watches the American Academy Awards, a rebroadcast on Tokyo’s Wowow channel. Burl Holiday has starred in his own drama, portraying a cantankerous shut-in who falls in love with a neighbor in his apartment building. It’s her weeping violin, which drifts across the courtyard in the hours before dawn, that draws him to her, and out of himself. Though Holiday’s performance garners an Oscar nomination, critics complain he’s only played himself.

On the TV, a starlet announces the nominees. Holiday sits in the cavernous Dolby Theater on Hollywood Boulevard, his face sallow, the skin around his eyes dark. He looks around, his glances darting, acknowledging the room. When they announce his nomination, he blinks three or four times, as if struggling to maintain control of his face.

“And the winner is . . .” The starlet opens an envelope and reads a different name. Matthew McConaughey appears on screen and kisses his wife. While he sidesteps toward the aisle—the equivalent of dead air—the camera cuts to Holiday. His eyes are rimmed with water. He claps, but it takes him a moment.

Jim shuts off the television. There’s just the sound of ice settling in his boulevardier. Through the wall, he can hear the broadcast continue from a neighbor’s television. He knows it’s wrong, but he’s happy with the results. Elated.

After that, Holiday stops making movies. Jim isn’t sure it’s the Oscars loss—not entirely. He thinks instead that comedy is changing, that audiences no longer want blustery wise guys who joke about body fat and jelly donuts.

They want sensitive heroes.

They want Jim Nowak.

Three years pass. Edwin has survived cancer and maintains an office in the skyscraper forest of Nishi Shinjuku, and invites Jim to visit.

The day is bright, and he's backlit against the windows. The wrinkles bunched in families around his eyes.

"Old friend," he says. Since cancer, he's mellowed, certain that anger is the ingredient of disease. "I've tried to book you everywhere, but I have nothing, unfortunately."

Jim hasn't been working much. He still appears on Japanese Hollywood Squares, but it's been relegated to a midday time slot, and won't be renewed another season.

If Edwin has learned to move with the universe's tides, Jim has not. He's furious with Holiday. He blames him for not reinventing himself, for not making more movies. Instead, Holiday has been squandering his time at celebrity golf tournaments. He shows up in the news, but for non-momentous events. He crashes weddings, even gives toasts. He attends flash mob dances in malls, and when people ask him for autographs, he instead offers hugs. He buys a house for a Northern Californian fireman who loses his home to a wildfire, but stays clear of Hollywood. His fifteen minutes are gone and so, it seems, are Jim's. He realizes that, maybe, he's never been famous in his own right.

Edwin reaches across the desk for Jim's hand. He offers a smile. They've done their best work together, but Jim knows this is goodbye.

He leans forward and puts his head between his knees. The world's axis is shifting, the room's floor canting. Tokyo is expensive and he's saved little. He has no home to which he can return. "What," he says, "am I supposed to do?"

He feels Edwin's hand on the back of his head.

"Teach English?" he says.

Jim could do that, he thinks. Or he could ground himself in an American retirement community. Take advantage of Medicaid and AARP benefits. Get a job at Costco. And maybe the older he gets—the older both he and Holiday get—the less distinguished their features will be. They'll begin to look like any other senior, with spotted skin, shapeless cheeks, unruly white hair. Maybe as Jim devolves into anonymity, he can take simple pleasure in a normal life.

“No,” he says. America won’t work for him. Working at Costco, flirting with widows—this is a consolation prize, a second-rate version of what he’d wanted back in Buffalo. He won’t have it.

“There’s also China,” Edwin says.

He looks at Edwin.

He thinks this is a joke.

Fog settles over Chengdu.

The BBC anchorwoman delivers the news she gave ten minutes earlier. A tsunami, Russian hacking, the collapse of another Antarctic ice shelf. The air conditioner hisses against the sealed glass and Jim, back from the panda center, drinks a Chinese beer while thumbing through a summary of Costco’s employment benefits on his mobile.

The A/C stops, leaving Jim alone with the sizzle of carbonation and the reportage on Singapore’s financial market. He decides it’s too early to sleep, so he finishes his beer and leaves the room.

The hotel in Chengdu has the architectural appeal of an abortion clinic. The hallways are mauve and beige, the metal doors to each room accessible by metal handles. Jim is heading to the fifth floor, where he understands there’s a KTV bar.

Wikipedia has informed Jim there are various kinds of KTV bars. Some are plain-vanilla karaoke bars, some are brothels. The internet says he must beware of those venues where girls line up for him at the entrance. Jim has paid for sex in Japan, but he reminds himself that he’s different from other ex-pats. He’s not inventing new perversions outside the watch of Western society, but making sure years don’t pass without him touching anyone.

Someone opens the door of the KTV bar ahead of him, at the end of the hall. It’s a beige metal door like the others, only with red Chinese characters above the frame. Before the door shuts he sees chips of light from a disco globe, swirling around a dark room.

He enters.

In a mirror behind the bar, Jim watches himself sit down. Near his elbow, various curiosities reflect back. A platter of

fruit, a bowl of congealed dipping chocolate, an open tin of cigarettes. He lifts his gaze and studies himself, and wonders how he got so old. He wonders whether America will accept him, whether he's ruined himself. It's possible he's become a pretentious twat, the sort they all hated back in Buffalo.

A hand falls on his shoulder. The comb-over lives strong in Chengdu and the Chinese owner of the KTV bar has fixed his strands in place with lacquer. He turns Jim around and vigorously shakes his hand. Girls are lining up, and the man beckons to them. They are uniformly short, Asian, and scantily clad.

He picks the oldest-looking one. Her hair is short and spiky and she fidgets less than the others, doesn't giggle. She comes up, unafraid, and takes his hand and tries to lead him to a karaoke room. "Actually, no," he says, and gives her arm a slight tug, then motions to the barstool alongside him. She glances at the owner but Jim is fast; he places two thousand yuan on the bar. The balding owner gives him an American thumbs up.

Jim's decided he just wants to talk, but he doesn't know what to say, and isn't certain the girl speaks English. Will he have to pantomime? Build kindergarten-level sentences? She watches him.

"I'm not interested in prostitution," he says.

The girl smirks. She flicks a hand at the bartender, who starts mixing drinks.

"No?" she says, "Too bad, I pay well."

He looks at her closely. She is alert, engaged. Her chin is strong, her chest is flat, and he might've thought she were a boy if not for her eyelashes and full lips. From her ears, a pair of fuzzy panda earrings dangle, and another panda sits embroidered on her sleeve.

She is studying him also, mostly his face, and he wonders if 1980s sitcoms are syndicated in China.

"Do you know who I am?" he says.

"Let me look." Her eyes narrow.

They travel his face, the smattering of acne scars below his cheekbones, visible only in certain light. Then his nose—a common nose, neither too fat nor skinny, slightly bulbous at the tip, the capillaries ruptured. Her gaze lingers on his

eyes. *The New York Times Magazine*, in profiling Jim and Holiday, remarked that their appeal rested in their eyes, which were large and hazel, watery and honest, “brimming with humanity.”

“You have a kind face,” she says, “but why so sad?”

“Sad?” he says. He checks himself in the mirror. “What should I be sad? I’m George Clooney’s father.”

She smiles. “Yes, I see the resemblance.” Her words are accented, Chinese flavored with something else, and he imagines she’s gone to a British finishing school. “You and your son,” she says, “are both very geriatric.”

Her skin is so smooth, he thinks. She has countless choices, while he’s left with so few. “I’m at a crossroads,” he says. “I don’t know whether I should stay here”—he motions at the world beyond the walls—“or move back to the States. Phoenix seems affordable.”

“Tell me about these places.”

The bartender sets tall drinks before them. They’re the color of guava, and bright, crepepaper umbrellas loll against the rims of the glasses.

“Here I have no one. No friends, no family. But I don’t know the language, and don’t know anyone who speaks English. There’s so much traffic, so many people spitting . . .” He stops, aware that saying what he thinks will offend her. “In Arizona, I don’t know anyone there either, but the people are my age, and they speak English. I’ve lived abroad so long, who knows, they might find me interesting.” He imagines the boring lives of Phoenix retirees, exhausted by ungrateful children, spoiled grandchildren, deteriorated discs, and the rising cost of prescriptions. Their days absorbed by Facebook and Candy Crush.

Jim looks at himself in the mirror again. He’ll be a novelty, a favored guest at parties and events at the clubhouse. A star attraction. But only, he thinks, if he keeps things superficial. The more they get to know him, the more they’ll notice it was not adventure, but fear and vanity, that placed him on the road less-traveled. They have seen less, but loved more. Jim looks to the girl.

She sips her drink through the straw. She swallows. “So Arizona then?”

“No,” he says.

“Then stay here in Chengdu?”

“No.”

She shakes her head. Her eyes slide toward the ceiling. “I just am hearing ‘no.’ No this, no that. Life is easier, mister, if one says yes. You,” she says, and wags a finger, “must say ‘yes’ to the very next thing someone asks you.”

Jim wonders if she’s being provocative. He reminds himself she might be a prostitute. He glances at the unrefrigerated platter of fruit near his elbow. The strawberries are sweaty. Oil sits atop the chocolate dipping sauce.

She parts her lips. She smiles.

“Go home,” she says.

Jim meets her eyes. “What?”

“Go home.”

He exhales. “That,” he says, “was not in the form of a question.”

But before she responds, before she has a chance to, Jim’s phone starts buzzing. “Hold on,” he says, and pulls the device from his pocket. It’s a number from the United States, one he doesn’t recognize.

The girl looks over his shoulder. “You must say ‘yes,’” she says.

Jim holds the phone tight against his ear, and stoppers his other ear with a finger. “Hello?” he says.

“Jim Nowak? Do you know who this is?”

He knows. Every particle of this voice he knows, all its timbre and gravel. The man on the other end of the line is Burl Holiday.

Jim doesn’t know what to say. He thinks of the cease and desist letter, and his napkin response. He understands Holiday has indicated a desire to take a rolled-up copy of *The New York Times Magazine* and administer him a proctology exam.

“I’m not angry with you,” Holiday says. “I feel sorry for you—no, that’s not right. It’s just . . . I understand what you’ve gone through. I understand you’ve been angry with me, which is very valid—very, very valid. You see, I’ve spoken with your friends in Tokyo. I’ve visited your hometown.”

Jim isn’t feeling well. Flecks of light off the disco ball,

constellations of them, sweep across the walls. He closes his eyes. “I’m confused,” he says.

“Yes, yes, I get it. Look, if I were in your spot, I’d be confused too.” Holiday’s voice is calm, and Jim has the idea he’s sitting by a pool with an Old Fashioned, swirling a giant ice cube around a glass. “But look,” Holiday says, “Please don’t say ‘no’ right away. I want you to think about it.”

“Yes,” Jim says. “Whatever it is, yes.”

The girl bunches her shoulders and pantomimes a clap.

“You’re a funny one,” Holiday says. “Look, I saw you in *Rising Sun Pizza*.” This is a Japanese movie where Jim’s character opens a pizzeria in Tokyo and falls in love with a married patron. Her marriage is passionless, but her sense of duty is strong. In the end, she leaves Jim behind.

“Did you really cry during the final scene?”

“Yes,” Jim says. He did cry. He remembers the on-screen kiss he shared with the actress. Their lips touched over the warmth of a pizza, the air scented with marinara. He closed his eyes and, for those moments, he was thirty years younger and on the other side of the world, when life was still beautiful.

Jim knows instantly what Holiday is after. An Academy Award. And that it’s something within their reach. But Jim knows, too, that this is about more than Holiday’s legacy. It’s about him tipping McDonald’s cashiers two thousand dollars. It’s about wedding toasts and gifting homes to strangers.

“I’m an asshole,” Holiday says, “but I try to right my wrongs. Here and there.”

Before Jim gets off the phone, he learns that FedEx will deliver plane tickets to his hotel, with directions to Holiday’s house outside Toronto. There they will switch driver’s licenses and passports. There, Jim will play the greatest role of his life.

Jim takes all of the money from his wallet and presses it into the girl’s hand. The Rolex watch too. Everything he has. He says goodbye, kisses her on the cheek in a grandfatherly way, and exits the bar.

Edward Mack

Cottonwood

It was bigger in those days, of course, with branches that sailed overhead like ship's rigging and roots that plunged through waves of earth like the tentacles of a kraken.

As with most boys of that age, climbing was a subconscious thing, a lingering Miocene urge. A wire fence tacked to the tree's trunk provided a ratline into its lower limbs, a siren's song I could not resist. After hauling myself over the thick first branch, I scrambled upward, skipping from yardarm to yardarm until they grew too thin to support my weight. From that crow's nest, I surveyed the map laid out before me: a tidy neighborhood dotted by tidy houses, dead-ending at the untidy backwater of my parents' farmhouse. In our rear lot, a half-charted pasture slowly consumed the wreck of a tumble-down barn. Several cars in various states of repair and disrepair cluttered the driveway. Our dog sprawled in the dirt below me. On the other side of the fence, however, the neighbors' grass was meticulously watered and clipped, a smooth sea unbroken by such flotsam of dog turds and jetsam of old toys. The true draw of the neighbors' yard, however, was an in-ground swimming pool that sparkled under the summer sun.

An oasis.

From my crow's nest, I spied on the pool and the neighbors. Though my parents brought over cookies at Christmastime and invited them to walk in our back fields, I hardly knew the girl and her father who lived there. The father I mostly only ever saw skimming the pool or mowing the lawn. Nearly every afternoon that summer he cranked up a shiny red ride-on and drove back and forth across the grass for hours, staring into the distance, chewing on the tips of his salt-and-pepper mustache. Only after he had shaken out the clippings and pulled the mower into the shed would she appear, slinking out of a slider on the back of the house to lounge in the sun or slip into the pool. I wondered how that grass felt under her bare feet, so clean and soft and trim. Or how the cool

water felt slipping over her skin. When she swam, her long blond hair streamed out behind her, swirling in her wake like golden phosphorescence.

That summer the heat was nearly intolerable. My parents denied me sanctuary in the air-conditioned kitchen, banishing me to the smothering day outside. My only relief was to lie in the shade of the cottonwood with Jake and pant. The tree rippled overhead, an enormous green wave that never broke. As I stared up into its hypnotizing shivering, I imagined myself submerged, fallen from the rigging. The entire world grew muted, filtered through thick water. From that depth, I heard splashing. Surfacing, I looked across the neighbor's yard to where the girl pulled herself from the pool and prepared for another dive.

The first time Jake tunneled into their yard, my mother sent me to fetch him. The girl's father had called and complained while we were eating lunch. I came around their yard from the front so I didn't have to climb the fence, like my mother had told me, and caught Jake rolling, tongue lolling from his mouth in a stupid grin. Leaving him to enjoy his roll, I wriggled my toes in the soft grass. Nearby, the pool sparkled. Time might have slipped away, but the slider screeched open and the girl's father, all chest and churlish, yelled out, chiding me about responsibility and respect and my family's lack of it with our filthy backyard and trespassing dog. Grabbing Jake's collar, I slunk around the house and retreated into our yard and it was back to shade and panting and dirt for us. With longing looks at the pool, I filled in Jake's tunnel with rocks.

Days stretched into doldrums. Afternoons were interminable, the shuddering stillness broken only by the crank of the mower engine, the drone of Japanese beetles, and the splash of the girl diving into the pool.

One afternoon, she didn't dive. The slider opened and she sidled out. She lay in the sun for half an hour, she brushed her hair with her fingers, she laughed at something she was reading. It wasn't until she had nearly reached the tree that I realized she was slowly, coincidentally, approaching.

I sat up from the dirt where I was sprawled.

She frowned at the fence where it was stapled to the trunk of the tree, bent and sagged, permanently disfigured by the

innumerable times I had climbed it. “My father says you shouldn’t be allowed to have pets if you don’t know how to take care of them.”

“Jake’s a good dog.” He lifted his head and panted at me.

“I wasn’t talking about the dog.” She cocked her head and narrowed her eyes. “My father says I shouldn’t talk to you.”

“Why are you then?”

She shrugged and tongued her gums.

I scratched Jake behind the ears, making his leg thump in the dirt.

“So are you coming or not?”

“Coming where?”

“Swimming.” Turning, she said over her shoulder, “Meet me back here in five minutes.”

It only took me three to change into my bathing suit, scoop up a towel, and yell to my mother that I’d be next door. I beat the girl back to the fence. As I waited for her, I pulled my toes through the dirt, drawing indiscriminate patterns, and wrung my towel. Jake watched me from the top of his eyes.

When she finally appeared again, she had changed into a white tank top, loose around the shoulders with deep cutouts, the kind my older sister used to wear to the beach. It hung to her naked thighs.

“Well, come on,” she said and catwalked towards the pool.

I scrambled up the bent fence, finding familiar footholds. This time, instead of pulling myself into the tree branches, I looped my leg back down the other side. The motion felt unfamiliar and awkward, though only for a moment. Then I was down and sprinting across the grass.

“Stop,” she commanded as I reached a scorching concrete patio surrounding the pool. The pool had a ladder, I noted, but no steps. The better to throw myself in. She wouldn’t let me yet, however, and I hopped from foot to foot as she slowly stripped off her top. “Do you like my bikini?” she asked. “It’s the first time I’ve worn it.”

I didn’t care about her stupid bikini. Chlorine filled my nostrils. My feet were burning. The waters beckoned.

“You’re being rude. I asked you something. Do you like my bikini?”

I begrudgingly studied her bikini. It was small, tied with

strings around her neck and back, and off-white—the color only adults wore, the color they liked to paint their walls. A color much lighter than her skin. Her chest, I noticed, was already quite large.

“Yea, it’s a great bikini. Now can we go swimming?”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“First you have to watch me dive. I’m the best diver in my class.”

She strutted to the diving board and bounced a few times. Her already-quite-large chest bounced with her. Finally, she leapt, twisted in the air, and entered the water.

Plopping myself at the end of a deck chair, I pulled my scorched feet under me and waited.

She swam underwater to where she had left me then hauled herself from the pool. Smoothing her hair back, she stood dripping water onto my thighs.

“So?”

I didn’t swim that day. I watched her dive, the intoxicating smell of chlorine taunting me, until twilight fell and her father called her in and she sent me away.

The following day, Jake and I waited at the fence hoping she’d appear. When she did, it was to inform me of her latest mandate: “Today you can watch my underwater handstands.”

“What about your father?” He peered out at us from behind the slider.

“What about him?”

Leaping the fence, I trotted after her to the pool. Just like the day before, she dove and swam to the chair where she had bidden me to wait. “Here,” she said, patting the side of the pool, “dip your feet in.” But upon seeing my feet, she frowned. “Wash them first. There’s a hose off the shed.”

I scrubbed the dirt off, but before I had gone a dozen steps, grass clippings had already gathered on my wet feet. I gazed from my feet to the pool, where several limbs pinwheeled through the water with a splash. Running back to the hose, I washed again before tiptoeing across the lawn. Even then, clippings coated my toes, but I thrust them into the water before she could notice. Green slivers bobbed out around me

incriminatingly. I splashed them away. The water licked at my calves and the heat of the day, of the summer, siphoned away through my feet.

“Now,” she said, brushing wet hair from her face, “watch this.”

At twilight, when her father called her in and she sent me away, I resolved that the next opportunity I had, I would jump in the pool, no matter what.

So the following day I waited in the cool of the tree until the slider squealed. With a quickness that was becoming habit, I was over the fence and halfway across the yard before I realized that she was leading me beyond the pool.

“Aren’t we going swimming?” I asked.

“Shut up.”

She wore the same white tank top and—I can’t say if I noticed it then or it is merely a suggestion of the memory of what was to happen—an azure bikini bottom, so it seemed as she walked that the sky and clouds had been inverted. She led me to the very edge of the yard and pushed through a hedge of pines to a narrow alley hidden between the trees and the fence bordering the next yard. We sat on the pine-sticky ground. Though we could see her house and the pool through the branches, no one could see us.

“This would be a great place for a fort,” I said.

Reaching out, she plucked at the strings of my bathing suit.

“What are you doing?” I asked, brushing her hand away.

“Don’t act like you don’t know. Here.” She took my hand and placed it on her thigh, just where her white tank top ran out of hem. She held it there and I couldn’t pull it away. Her heartbeat pulsed in her thigh. She pulled my hand along her leg and at some point released it, though my hand kept sliding of its own accord over the soft hair, almost imperceptibly clear, and under the hem of her top. I didn’t know what I was doing, but what I was doing didn’t require knowing.

In as long as it took for a hand to tighten, my innocence flapped away, flushed out from behind the pines. I knew what I wanted. Not exactly, but I knew very clearly that it had to do with her, with suffocating myself in her, drowning in the scent of her hair, the warmth of her skin, the pressure of her body.

“You like it?” she asked.

“Yes.” Yes. “What do I do now?”

She had laid her hand on my leg and now she drew it away. Mine she pushed off her thigh.

I reached out again.

“Nothing.” Again she threw it off. “I didn’t like it much.”

But I did, I liked it, much. In a way that I couldn’t describe, didn’t know that I even realized at the time. Some urge took me, some primality. If I had conscious thought, it had abandoned me. Once more I tried to fit my hand over her thigh, fingertips brushing that fine fur. But she pushed me away and disappeared between the pine palisade.

Several days of torturous expectancy passed before I saw her again. Every afternoon I waited for her as her father trimmed the grass, staring at me like he meant to drive the mower through the fence and over me. I waited for her until I heard the buzz of the mower in my dreams. I learned many things in those days: about biology, love, disillusionment. It was as though I had peeked behind the curtain and seen the chaos. The curtain of the spectacular. The curtain of the trees. The curtain of her shirt’s hem. I did nothing but pine for a return to that neverland, that no man’s land, between her yard and the next.

Jake would get there before me. It was another smothering day and my mother and I had been out shopping. When we got home, I went directly to the fence to wait, but Jake wasn’t in his normal spot below the tree. I didn’t need to search for him in the bushes or the garden though; the pile of fresh dirt thrown up behind a new hole under the fence told me Jake wouldn’t be in our yard at all.

Calling out for him, I heard a weak bark from the swimming pool. I leapt the fence and sprinted across the emerald grass, ignored the scorching concrete patio, and threw myself into the shallow end. Jake’s eyes were wild as he paddled to me, his tongue lolling in the water. I swept him up in my arms.

“You’re ok, boy. You’re ok.”

But even as I carried him to the ladder, he kept swimming, his paws pumping furiously. His nails caught the flesh of my thigh and scraped down my chest. Blood bloomed in the water

but I did not cry out, only pushed his rump as he scabbled up the ladder.

“Come on,” I said, pulling myself out after him, “we’ve got to get out of here before they see us.” He panted at me happily, gave a half-hearted shake, and lay down. “No, come on, get up.” I tugged at his collar and tried to scoop him up, but he was too heavy.

“What are you doing?” I hadn’t heard the slider, hadn’t seen her approach. I looked around but there was no place to hide, only sparkling water and emerald grass. I felt like a mouse in a fresh-cut field.

“Did I say you could go swimming without me?”

“I wasn’t swimming,” I said, trying to cover up the gashes in my leg. Red-tinged water dripped between my fingers and down my knee. My thigh had started to burn.

“You need to train your dog better.”

“It’s not his fault.”

“My father will have to clean the pool now. I won’t be able to swim for days.”

For a moment, I forgot about my bleeding leg. “What were you doing all this time? Why didn’t you help him?” Squatting down, I pulled hard on Jake’s collar and he wobbled to his feet. “Come on, boy,” I said, shooting her a sour look, “let’s go.”

It wouldn’t be until days later, days after what was still to happen at the tree, days after that even, when Jake got out a third time and they fished his body from the pool, that I would realize that I hadn’t filled in his tunnel under the fence. Sometimes now I wonder if I actually did forget or if some part of me rooted for him to get out, to roll in the grass and jump in the pool.

Sometimes, now, when I watch my own daughter playing, I wonder how a child weighs the life of a dog. How does an adult? I wonder how many tragedies are written off as accident because we are manipulative enough to hide our true nature.

Then I see the thin, clear hair growing on my daughter’s legs and wish I had never become a father. Those days, I know it should have been me at the bottom of that pool.

I didn't feel like waiting for the girl at the tree after taking Jake home from his illicit swim. Instead, I moped around the kitchen, lying under the table in the air conditioning and reading comics. My mother even let Jake inside with us, and I used him as my pillow, my head rising and falling with his breathing. He was never far from me those days.

After three mornings, my mother must have decided that my wounds were healing well because she booted us from the kitchen and told me to go play outside. Even then I had no intention of returning to the tree until I saw her standing at the fence.

She wore cut-offs, red and fringy and very short, gold earrings, and a white blouse. Mulberry bruises, I remember now, ringed her arm and pinched her neck, though I didn't note them at the time, absorbed as I was in the armholes of her blouse that hinted at a peach bra.

Something quickened in my chest.

"Do you want to go behind the trees?" I asked.

"No."

The untrimmed fringe of her shorts scrambled her legs hairs, bending them in all the wrong directions. I wanted to reach out, rip the strands away, and smooth the hair.

"Do you want to go swimming?" I asked.

"No."

"What do you want to do then?"

She leaned against the fence and twisted her neck to look up into the branches. "I've never climbed a tree before." Her neckline dropped, exposing her bruise and her peach bra and the top of her chest. "Show me."

I don't know what made me do it, if I had been thinking about it for days or if I hadn't thought about it at all. I found myself leaning forward, like I had seen a million others do, and reaching out for her lips.

She pulled away and I stumbled into the fence.

"What are you doing?" she snarled before her face opened in mockery. "Don't be stupid." Blood surged to my hands. "Now," she said, placing a foot in the fence, "if you're done playing games, show me."

The fence wobbled but held when she pulled herself up, grabbed the lowest branch, and hoisted herself into the tree.

With fingers still clumsy from embarrassment and anger, I followed.

“You’ve never climbed a tree before?”

“My father thinks they’re dangerous.”

“Your father thinks everything is dangerous.”

“He’s probably watching us now. I don’t care. I hope he’s watching.” When I joined her on the fat lower limb, she placed a hand against my chest to check her balance, forcing me to sit to keep from falling. Still, the lick of her fingers sent shivers from the crown of my head down my spine and through my ankles, as if drawing all the hours of watching her and waiting for her out through my skin.

“You should sit,” I said.

“I’m not a child.”

My fingers clenched. “The first thing you need to know about climbing trees is—”

“I didn’t actually mean I needed your help.”

“Fine then,” I said, heat rising to my cheeks. “If you don’t need help, why don’t we bet who can climb higher?”

I just wanted to beat her at *something*. Did I understand what I was doing? What was I but a kid who didn’t know any better? If I never lied when they asked me what happened, is it still deceit?

“Fine,” she said.

“It’s ok if you don’t want to, you’ve never climbed a tree before.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll still beat you.” She was already up and away, scrambling over the next limb.

I knew the tree. I knew its gnarled trunk, which branches were living and strong and which were rotten and weak. Which were within reach and which were not. I easily caught up to her and passed her.

Faster she climbed, pressing me from below. Faster I climbed, up into where the branches grew thin and springy and unknown. I passed my crow’s nest. The ground became distant and inconsequential. A face appeared in the window at her house; so he was watching, after all.

The red fringe of her shorts flashed by my face as she climbed past me. “Slowpoke!” she shouted from several branches above. “I told you I’d beat you.”

“You haven’t beaten me,” I said. “Not yet.”

She scowled and scampered higher. “Admit it, you lose.” As she climbed, her voice took on a lightness, a freedom.

I paused as she passed into branches that I knew were too thin. “Never.”

She went higher and then higher still.

I can still see her there laughing amidst the leaves, still hear an untamed joy in her voice. On good days, I know I told her to stop. That she was climbing too high. That she had already won the stupid game and she should come back down.

On the bad days, I can still feel a summer of frustrated desire humming through my fingers.

She called out from above, but not to me. “I win,” she said, then laughed. I recognized the pain behind that laugh, the unburdening. It was a laugh that had nothing to do with trees, or races, or me.

She smiled down at me, the first time I’d seen her smile since we met. In that moment, I felt like we might be friends. “Come on up,” she said, “the water’s fine.”

She laughed again, throwing her head back and howling. The branch beneath her foot snapped. Her leg jerked downward. She might have held on even then, but the broken spar sliced into her thigh and she twisted out and away from the tree’s trunk.

The branch in one of her hands broke, followed by the other. She screamed, high and young.

Thin branches whipped at her body before springing back into place. Others broke and fell with her.

When she passed where I clung to the tree, I saw her face, twisted with confusion and betrayal. Not as though she didn’t understand what was happening, but as though she didn’t understand why. A laugh escaped me then. A laugh that had nothing to do with terror or consequence. Horror stifled a second, but that first laugh continues to haunt me.

The screaming stopped when she crashed into the thick limbs below. Her body twisted, one final glorious dive, and she hit the ground, landing on one of the tree’s largest roots.

Jake got to her first. Licking her face and whining. Then her father, before I had even climbed out of the tree. He burst

out the slider like something eternal, something unstoppable, something more than human and less.

I don't know how he got over the fence. Maybe he simply crashed through it.

"Move," he said, aiming a white-socked foot at Jake's belly. Jake yipped, a high-pitched screech more terrible than hers ever was.

"Is she ok?" I asked, but her arms flopped limp as her father scooped her up and lifted her away. Her shirt slid up her abdomen and gathered under her chest. The sun lit the near transparent hairs below her belly button. Blood dripped from her leg.

I sat in the dirt and let Jake clean my face.

Bill Pippin

Texas Swing

As Leonard entered the Super Walmart, he glanced up a side aisle and saw Mama. For a moment he could hardly breathe. It wasn't her, of course; just yesterday they'd buried Mama. But the resemblance—at least from a distance—was uncanny. This woman looked younger than Leonard, late thirties maybe, around Mama's age when Leonard was in kindergarten. Thick brown hair, sharp nose, perfect posture. She wore a smart gray suit, not the sort of attire you'd expect on a Walmart shopper. Mama had worn a suit like that—the only suit she owned—to the Baptist Church every Sunday.

Sensing Leonard's stare, the woman's head bobbed up from reading the label on a cereal box and her gaze met his. She looked away, then back again. When she found him still staring, her expression turned steely and Leonard hurried on.

Being back in Texas after so many years had him spooked by shadowy watchers from the past. He was here mainly because of Ellen. When his sister called to say Mama had died, she was adamant: "No matter how you felt about her, Lenny, you still need to be here for the funeral. You owe the rest of us that much."

With Mama in the ground, that morning he'd joined his four sisters and their husbands around the oversized coffee table in Ellen's living room. Leonard held his tongue as platitudes about Mama were bandied about: principled, strait-laced, devout, tenderhearted, loving—and some he considered accurate: naive, self righteous, God-fearing, tough old bird. The most telling observation came from Ellen, who, being the oldest, knew Mama best.

"She could surely be a bewildering tangle of contradictions."

Familiar stories followed: how Mama had grown up poor on an East Texas sharecropper's farm; how, as an eighteen-year-old drugstore soda jerk, Mama had met their dad, an oilfield roughneck, when he ordered a ham sandwich and cherry Coke, and a month later they were married. How they

loved to go dancing in honky-tonks. How Mama got a ticket in downtown Houston for making an illegal left turn, then wet her pants in fear of going to jail. Everyone laughed at that one, but the laughter quickly faded as the word *jail* sank in and they all looked at Leonard.

After Ellen served brunch they began leaving, some by car, some by taxi. Ellen's husband Deke drove off to his barbershop. Ellen persuaded Leonard to stay over a few days, they had so much to catch up on. Her grandkids Mark and Susan—overjoyed to be staying at Grandma's an extra week—took their homemade ice-cream and chocolate cake out to the screened-in back porch where they could watch the hummingbirds feed. Leonard asked Ellen if she cared to drive over and see the old neighborhood.

"I'd love to," Ellen said. "But it's way too hot for those kids. Can you pick up my blood pressure prescription at Walmart?"

It was Saturday and the young Hispanic woman at the pharmacy counter said Ellen's prescription wouldn't be ready for at least another hour. Leonard was curious to see the changes after thirty years and decided to look around outside. Ellen had warned him he wouldn't recognize much. What had once been woods and fields, rural mailboxes and gravel driveways along a winding country road, were now fast food restaurants, housing developments, apartment and office buildings along a heavily-traveled four-lane.

A glimpse through the trees at a rotting foot-bridge drew him to the edge of the parking lot. The bridge spanned a sluggish creek bisecting an overgrown park. The concrete picnic tables, rusting swings, and scabby softball field brought back memories. As a boy, Leonard had spent hours playing here. Getting his bearings, he decided the shopping center must sit on the former site of Morgan's Trailer Park, which didn't make him feel at all nostalgic—the "trailer trash" label pinned on them by kids living in houses and apartments still stung.

Leonard crossed the bridge and meandered through the park, emerging onto the tree-lined streets on the other side. As a paper boy he'd trudged these same streets. He located the old community building, now a used car lot, as well as the grocery store that cashed Mama's Social Security checks,

now a Chinese restaurant. James Bowie Elementary School had been replaced by a building supply center. His best friend Randy Helzer's former home was a beauty shop. Old Randy—Randy—what would he be up to these days? Still hooked on *Dungeons and Dragons*? Still hiding in his bathroom with the latest copy of *Playboy*?

Leonard recalled meeting Ellen in the park one evening not long after he turned thirteen. By then his sister was a nurse. She came to talk him out of running away from home.

"I've had enough of her, Ellie," Leonard said, as they walked along a wooded path. "She won't care if I leave. She'll probably be glad to be rid of me."

"Of course she cares, Lenny. Mama loves you. You're just feeling sorry for yourself."

"She loves y'all, but not me."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well . . . she never strapped y'all like she does me."

"Because we didn't need strapping. We did what Mama said."

"I don't always like with what she says or how she says it."

"She's your mama, Lenny. You don't contradict her. I wish Daddy were here to talk to you."

Lenny had been three when his daddy dropped dead shooting eight-ball with some oilfield buddies. A defective heart according to the autopsy. But from what he'd heard about his daddy, they were a lot alike. Ellen was quick to agree.

"He was a troublemaker too."

"I bet Mama never took a belt to him."

Ellen laughed and slapped a mosquito. She looked like Mama when she brought up that scowl, though with an underlying softness that Mama lacked. "No, that's for sure."

"Was he mean?"

She took a moment to consider. "No, not mean. He didn't tolerate nonsense. He had a temper. He wore his feelings on his sleeve, just like you."

"Would he've used his belt on me?"

"Probably not. When he told you to do something you knew from his tone you'd better do it. We were all scared of him. Mama too."

“Was he mean to her?”

“To Mama? I wouldn’t say mean. She knew not to give him any guff. He never hit her or anything. Mama wouldn’t stand for that. Hard-nosed is what he was.”

Ellen stopped to look at him. “The thing is you do stuff the rest of us never did—smoke cigarettes and Lord knows what else, skip school to sneak off to those rock concerts, talk back, shun God. You disrespect Mama.” She walked on and Leonard hurried to catch up. “The rest of us, we were easy. You’re not easy, Lenny. Mama’s trying to straighten you out. She only knows one way.”

“She strapped me right in front of Randy,” Leonard said. “My best friend saw me shamed.”

Ellen grunted. “I heard about it. You smarted off to her in front of Randy. You embarrassed Mama.”

“I could’ve yanked that belt away and used it on her. I’m big enough.”

“Then you’d have me to reckon with.”

“I can’t ever forgive her.”

“Well, Lenny, that’s just downright silly. You need to stop being childish and grow up.”

Leonard made his way back to the store and went looking for the computer department. Standing before a blank computer screen, he imagined a schematic of Morgan’s Trailer Park overlaying a map of the shopping center. The very spot he stood on could be 370 Fourth Avenue.

He pictured Mama standing on the cement patio in front of their trailer, hands on hips, gossiping with Iris Hernandez, while their fox terrier Bingo rolled in the grass. He could see Mama ironing and listening to her old 78s from the thirties and forties. Leonard liked to poke fun at *Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys*, because he knew Mama loved the group. She’d been to see a live performance once and liked telling Leonard about the stubby bandleader strutting like a baton twirler in his flashy boots and big Stetson, prattling above the guitars, fiddles and brass, crowing that ridiculous *Ahhh-Haaa!*

“Put on some Stones or Three Dog Night!” he’d wail.

Without looking up from her ironing, Mama would snap, “You go jump in the lake, boy.”

Her favorite Bob Wills' song was "San Antonio Rose," to which she always felt compelled to sing along. Leonard judged her voice to be as strong and true as any voice in the Wills aggregation, though he never confessed this to Mama. Once, as she was singing full bore, he clownishly joined in. Instead of protesting his mockery, Mama exulted in their impromptu duet. Leonard took pity on her and finished the song straight, even erupting at the end with a passable yodel. After that, Mama tried coaxing him to do a repeat performance, but Leonard only recoiled in mortification.

He went over to the CDs and worked his way down to the Ws, not expecting to find anything by Bob Wills, surprised when he did. Evidently somebody still liked Texas Swing—at least in Texas. He was actually tempted to buy a CD. But why should he want a memento of a life he hated? Living in a cramped trailer, Mama scraping by on her meager monthly checks, fretting over every bill, strapping the hell out of him if he stepped out of line?

He put the CD back and dawdled in men's clothing before wandering over to the toy section. With Mark and Susan in mind, he was looking over the vast array when the three boys appeared. The oldest boy was ten or eleven, the other two seven or eight. From their similarity in build and features, their stylish haircuts and brand-name sneakers, Leonard pegged them as brothers. Lanky, bright-eyed, clean-cut, they exuded mischievous energy. Led by the oldest, they stormed past Leonard, ignoring him as they manhandled every other toy in the aisle, tossing some aside with contemptuous giggles. If a toy missed the shelf and landed on the floor they ignored it.

An elderly woman pushing a cart rounded the corner and shuffled up the aisle. Tall, with a dignified bearing and a smooth, brown, skull-like face, she wore a long flowered dress that came to her ankles and hung loose on her gaunt shoulders. Large red earrings dangled from equally large ears. The matching red silk scarf wrapped around her head was meant, Leonard suspected, to conceal a bald pate.

Arriving at her cart, the oldest boy pulled up in mock annoyance as if she'd purposely impeded his progress. The other two boys plowed into him in the manner of Keystone

Cops.

“Watch yoself, children,” the woman said, almost under her breath.

The older boy gave the cart an indignant shove and staggered backward in comic recoil.

“Y’all be careful now,” the woman said, a little louder.

The boy’s impish eyes grew large. His hands fluttered to sham terror, drawing shrill tee-hees from the other two.

“Move on out my road, you hear?”

The two younger boys started to go around. But the older boy stood firm, feet spread as he stretched out both arms to restrain his brothers and block the old woman’s path.

She shook her head in weary disapproval. “Y’all move on now.”

Leonard came abreast of them and the old woman waited for him to pass. Seeing she was about to yield territory that was rightfully hers, Leonard’s ire rose. On top of her groceries lay several cheap plastic toys. A malevolent look darkened the oldest boy’s face as he reached into the cart and grabbed a red, white, and blue rocket ship the size of a cucumber. He made a zooming sound and sent the rocket sailing down the aisle. In dismay the old woman watched the toy crash and clatter along the floor. The boy reached into the cart again. Leonard grabbed his throwing arm—something Mama might’ve done—and jerked it back. With a startled yelp the boy gawped at the large man towering over him.

“Go pick that up,” Leonard said. “Put it back in the cart. Then apologize to this lady.”

Massaging his arm where Leonard’s fingers had sunk into his flesh, the boy pooched out his lower lip and minced over to the rocket. He bent down as if to get it, then took off like a sprinter, yelling over his shoulder:

“Fuck face!”

The other two boys darted past Leonard in hot pursuit.

Leonard retrieved the toy.

“Thank you, suh,” the old woman said.

He showed her a crack in the plastic. “You’ll need to replace it, ma’am.”

“I do thank you kindly.”

Still fuming, Leonard made another tour of the store,

searching for the three boys, hoping to see them in the company of a parent and report their bad behavior. But as he cooled off he had a troubling thought: what would their parents be like? If someone reported any child of Mama's behaving that way, they'd get a thank you and the child would get the belt. But as acceptable as a good licking might've been in Mama's day, these days it was viewed as harsh, even criminal. How would that boy's parents react to Leonard's complaint? What if the boy countered with his own complaint about the big man grabbing him? Talking mean? Scaring him? Hurting him? It sounded like child brutality and Leonard would have to admit to it. As an ex-con he didn't need that.

After talking to Ellen that night in the park, he hadn't run away from home. But it didn't change the way he felt about Mama. The day after he graduated from high school he'd joined the Air Force. Following basic training at San Antonio, he was sent to a base near LA. Being part of the California scene changed him. Mama would've said he got too big for his britches. To earn a few extra bucks, he sold a small amount of meth procured from a sergeant to a buddy who turned out to be an informant. Leonard confessed to what the baby-faced lieutenant handling his defense assured him was a minor infraction.

"You'll probably get busted and fined. Then you can get on with your life."

Leonard was court-martialed, along with the sergeant and several other enlisted men. He was eighteen, new to the base, with no real friends to vouch for him. The prosecuting officer was a chinless, cat-eyed man named Harper, who kept jabbing his finger at Leonard as he labeled him a key participant in a major Air Force drug ring. The crime was made more reprehensible because the base was part of the Strategic Air Command.

Leonard was tall and solid, sharp-featured with heavy-lidded eyes and a bent nose from playing football. He drew little sympathy from the panel of officers gathered to judge him. When they gave him three years he turned to his lawyer in shock. His lawyer could only look back helplessly.

After the worst year and a half of his life, Leonard was released from prison for good behavior. A bad conduct

discharge crushed his dream of attending college on the G.I. Bill. Crushed his self esteem as well. The letter Mama sent him didn't help. "Your daddy was awarded a Bronze Star at Inchon, a Purple Heart at Pusan," she wrote. "Now you got him sobbing in his grave."

Leonard never wrote back.

He hitchhiked around California, washing dishes, bagging burgers, sweating in dusty, heat-drenched fields, thankful to be free. In time he lucked into a job in the shipping department of a small manufacturing company near Sacramento. The company happened to be in the process of computerizing its operation. Computers fascinated Leonard. The big-hearted divorcee who ran the department took him under her wing and into her bed. Displaying an inborn knack for troubleshooting the often recalcitrant machines, Leonard soon earned a reputation as a technical guru.

He told himself that Mama had written him off, along with the rest of his family, and he shouldn't care. But deep in his heart he harbored the dream that one day he'd return to Texas and move her out of that trailer and into a home of her own, a dandy little cottage paid for in full, with a nice spot for a garden. That would be his revenge.

When the big day came he called Ellen in a fever of magnanimity. She was delighted to hear from her wayward brother, but informed him regretfully that Morgan's Trailer Park had been sold to developers.

"Mama moved out of her trailer a while back, Lenny. She's living with me now."

"All the more reason," he said, "to want a real home of her own."

"I-I don't think so."

"Is Mama there?"

"Yes . . . she's here."

"Can I talk to her?"

"Well . . . she don't talk much these days. She has Alzheimer's, Lenny. If I'd known where to reach you . . ."

"Alzheimer's!"

"Mama don't even know us. Even if you did buy her a house, she couldn't go live in it. Not on her own. But it's still a lovely thought, dear."

Leonard checked his watch and decided Ellen's prescription should be ready. On his way to the pharmacy he ducked into the men's room. He was washing his hands when the boy emerged from one of the toilets. Leonard glimpsed him in the mirror at the same time the boy spotted Leonard, then slipped out the door.

He took his time drying his hands. He picked up Ellen's pills and was on his way out of the store when he noticed the boy standing near the exit. Crowded around him were his two brothers and a woman—Mama's lookalike. Brimming with purchases in cloth bags, her cart had been shoved to one side. She spoke animatedly to a man in a white shirt and black bowtie, wearing a name tag. The oldest boy, who'd seemed composed in the men's room, pointed tearfully in Leonard's direction. The woman looked at Leonard and her face clouded with recognition. Grabbing her cell phone, she tapped out a number.

Leonard's legs turned sluggish. Veering off in a different direction would look like an admission of guilt, but it took immense self control to keep moving toward the woman. She put her cell phone in her purse and again spoke to the man wearing the name tag. He hurried over to Leonard.

"Sir," he said, "my name is Rankin. I'm the store manager. I'll have to ask you to wait here until the police arrive."

"The police?"

"The lady called them. That lady over there. Her son . . . apparently her son made an accusation."

"About me?"

Short and bald with a fringe of blond hair over his ears, the manager pursed his lips. "Were you just in the men's room . . . with that boy?"

Leonard looked past Rankin at the woman. He felt sick. This wasn't about what happened in the toy aisle. This was worse—much worse.

"I was just in the men's room," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "I did see the boy, though briefly. I certainly wasn't *with* him, whatever that means."

The manager had trouble meeting Leonard's eyes. "Well, he claims you were . . . with him. His mother's quite upset."

Leonard's instincts, fine tuned in prison, were now on

full alert. He told himself he needed to do something before the police arrived. He needed to say his piece before this monstrous lie gained momentum and he got sucked into something that was beyond his control. He went over to the woman. Behind the oldest boy's tears Leonard detected a sly smile.

"He's lying," he said, without raising his voice.

The woman blinked. "*What?*"

"Whatever your son said about me is a lie."

"How dare you!"

"Your son is lying, ma'am." The conviction in Leonard's tone appeared to rattle her.

"Do you think for one minute . . . listen, sir . . . you listen to me—my son does not lie."

"I'm afraid he does."

The boy shoved his hands in his pockets and turned away. Customers in the checkout line watched them with interest.

"Why would he make up something so disgusting?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Leonard said. "I really don't care to know, since nothing in fact happened. Not a word, not a glance passed between your son and me in that men's room. Nothing happened. Period. Nothing at all."

Her cheeks flushed pink. "Then please explain why he'd accuse a perfect stranger—"

"I'm not a stranger. Not to your son. And I believe I *can* explain why he's lying."

Now she looked confused. "Oh? Well please do."

Leonard nodded at the boy. "It would be better if you asked him."

"The police are on their way," the woman said. Her mouth was set, nostrils dilated. "Would you rather explain it to them?"

Leonard hesitated.

"I'm waiting, sir."

"Fine, fine, fine. Let's do it then. Your son was rude to an elderly woman. Extremely rude. He was clowning around but he was very rude. I reprimanded him. I might've been a little rough . . . I admit that. He's getting back at me—"

"And where is this person? I'd like to hear it from her."

Leonard looked all around. He didn't see the old woman.

He checked his watch. “This happened a while ago. In the toy department. She may have left the store.”

“I see. And how do we know you’re not the one lying?”

“Ask *him*. You’re his mother. You’ll know if he’s telling the truth. Any mother who knows her children would.”

Her gaze shifted from Leonard to her oldest son.

“Your other two boys witnessed everything,” Leonard said. “Ask them too.”

The two younger boys stared at the floor. Leonard turned to the oldest boy. “Young man, this is serious stuff. Try to understand—your lie could ruin my life. Is that what you really want?”

The boy rubbed his nose and shifted his weight from one leg to the other. The woman kept glancing at the glass doors.

“Please!” Leonard begged.

“Wait here,” she said to him, making it sound like an order.

She took the oldest boy by the hand and nodded at the other two boys to follow. They hurried to the tunnel behind the lines of linked shopping carts, away from eavesdroppers. Leonard watched her questioning the oldest boy, then the two younger boys. His heart thudded against his chest.

He remembered the first time a teacher marched him to Mr. Burnside’s office to be paddled. He couldn’t recall what grade he was in—second or third—nor the offense. Only that he’d rushed home after school, sobbing crocodile tears, swearing the teacher had made the whole thing up. Mama waited, jaw clenched, for him to finish his elaborate lie, before ushering him into the back bedroom. Without a word she took his daddy’s leather belt—kept hanging in the closet for just this purpose—and gave him a harder whipping than he’d got from Mr. Burnside.

When the two cops arrived, the woman went to meet them in the vestibule between the sliding glass doors. Commanding their attention, she gestured nervously, smoothing her hair, smiling, shaking her head. The cops treated her with deference. Not once did they look Leonard’s way.

At last the oldest cop turned to the oldest boy. Seeing the boy’s shoulders slump as they conferred, Leonard’s hopes rose. Until the cop put his hand on the boy’s arm in a fatherly fashion. Then they all turned and came toward Leonard: the

cops, the mother, her three sons.

Leonard tried to swallow and couldn't.

The woman avoided Leonard's eyes as she nodded to Rankin and retrieved her cart. Walking stiff and straight, chin up, making her oldest son push the cart, she hurried out of the store.

The oldest cop approached Leonard. Tired blue eyes in a ruddy face offered him a bland smile. "Sir, you're free to go. Sorry for your trouble."

"Good Lord," Rankin said. "She didn't even apologize."

The cop shrugged and walked away.

"That was awful," Rankin said to Leonard. "That kid should be horsewhipped."

Leonard left the air-conditioned store and the muggy heat enveloped him like a wet dishrag. He put Ellen's medicine in the rental car and locked the door. He felt too shaky to drive. He crossed the foot-bridge into the park. The trees closed in overhead and it felt cooler in the shade. More people were enjoying the park now. A large, boisterous family readied a table for a picnic; a group of teens tossed a Frisbee; several people walked dogs. The swings were empty and Leonard sat in one he recalled as his childhood favorite. Probably it wasn't the same swing, but as beat-up as it looked it could've been.

A soothing calm settled over him as he glided back and forth. The scent of fresh-cut grass hung in the air. He felt safe here. Safe and thankful—thankful to be free. Mama's trailer was only a short walk, just over there. Just beyond those trees. She'd be fixing lunch. Playing her records. Bingo would be curled up on that old brown sofa.

He caught himself humming a nameless tune.

No . . . not nameless.

He began to sing and he could almost hear Mama join in.

"Deep within my heart lies a melody, a song of old San Antone . . ."

Ryan Byrnes

One Last Lemon Soda in Tunis

Antonio is already a man at thirteen, from the moment the Bishop of the Diocese of Monreale thumbs a cross, traced with the sappy aroma of balsam and olive oil, on his forehead.

“*Pax tibi, Augustini,*” the bishop’s voice echoes off the marble floor.

In the pews, his father nods. His mother clutches her veil.

“*Et cum spiritu t-tuo,*” Antonio recites the secret words just as Sister Saint Stanislaus had instructed.

After mass concludes, they take the cart back to Partinico, where his mother and aunts prepare the meal. Sleeves girded, they slap dough with wheat flour and sprinkle sesame seeds. They unfold brown butcher’s paper and drop veal spleen and veal lung into a pot of steaming fat. When the bread is crisp, they draw it from the oven and spoon veal into the slits, topping them each with a paste of spicy, straw-yellow cheese spun from the *Cinisara* cows. They platter everything with sliced lemon. Antonio is the first to eat. His whole family crowds around him—his father Giuseppe, a barber, his brother Pietro, a barber, his father’s father Salvatore, a barber, his father’s brother Pietro, a barber, and his brother Saverio, a wood-carver who details the interiors of luxury train cars.

“So, now that you are a man, have you decided your profession will be?” his brother Saverio laughs from behind a cigarette.

“You already know what I will say,” Antonio crosses his arms.

“You never doubt? You’ve never seen yourself doing anything else?”

Antonio smiles.

“Pietro, look at this *mimmo,*” he pulls his brother in, “only thirteen and has written the book of his life.”

“Bah,” Pietro swats his hand and returns to the rest of the family, who swarm about platters of veal.

The sun is falling behind the hills by the time an automobile

grumbles down the gravel onto their street. The hood shines, and Antonio can see on it streaks of recently applied wax. Vincenzo and Camillo Minore step out, each with one hand on their pistol holsters. They have the most immaculately cared-for pencil mustaches Antonio has ever seen. Most of the guests disappear by the time Vincenzo swallows his first cannoli.

“Where is the big man, eh?” Vincenzo announces. “Is it true Antonio saw the bishop today? I could see the light from your halo all the way in Castelmarre del Golfo.”

Antonio’s brothers all stand in front of him; his mother lays her hands on his shoulders.

“Now that you’re a big man, Antonio, perhaps you can join us,” Vincenzo projects his voice across the street because Antonio is hidden behind his brothers. “Ever since Diego left us, bless his soul, we have had a spare gun for any man with the courage to accept the Duke’s call.”

Vincenzo touches a middle finger to his forehead, then his chest, then each of his shoulders. He pulls a second pistol from his coat, flashing it against the burning red sunbeams of the Mediterranean sunset, showcasing the pistol’s walnut grip. Antonio knows from his brother that walnut coffins are for dukes and duchesses, though he does not know who walnut guns are for. Perhaps his belt is big enough to fasten a holster; the pistol would certainly look suave on his hip. Vincenzo snaps his fingers, and Antonio’s father drops twenty lire into his hand. Then they are off, and the dust settles where the automobile once grumbled.

“Clouds are rolling in from the sea,” his mother says. “My sons, help me stow the tables back indoors.”

That night, he hears hushed discussion between his mother and father.

“The Black Hand have their eye on Antonio,” his mother says. “He cannot stay.”

The next morning, his father flips the store sign to *closed*, which Antonio has only ever seen him do on Sundays, and pays a horse-drawn cab to take them to Palermo harbor, where he lays down five lire for a ticket to Tunis.

At age thirteen, the day after becoming a man, Antonio sits for six hours on the deck of a steamer. His legs are just long

enough to scrape the deck, and his suitcase outsizes his lap. He tells the woman next to him that not even one year has passed since the *Titanic's* sinking, and only six months from the day where he nearly drowned trying to swim off the beach at Castelletmarre del Golfo. The steamer chugs, hugging the coastline of Sicily, green hills at their left, the shimmering Mediterranean on their right. The sea might be glass; it sends shards of sunlight his way. Soon, the hills of Sicily disappear, and he is alone.

Uncle Pietro meets him at the Tunis harbor. He is the first person Antonio sees after stepping onto the hot stones of the quay.

“*Mimmo!*” Uncle Pietro pulls him close, but Antonio does not hug him. He is not a *mimmo*.

Uncle Pietro has not a single hair below his nose. His sideburns are pressed close, and a perfectly straight part outlines his scalp. Even when the sea-breeze blows hard enough to flap the French flags, his hair is so thick with shining pomade that the wind cannot tussle it. Antonio nods his approval. Uncle Pietro presses a cold bottle into his hand—a lemon soda—takes Antonio’s suitcase, and carts him away. They pass a crowd of soldiers in khaki and rolled sleeves searching a man in a robe, perhaps speaking in French, perhaps speaking in Arabic; he does not understand either way but cranes his head to follow them as they pass. The sun shines more intently here than in Sicily, so he must squint.

“The day is almost over, *Mimmo*. Let me take you back to the shop, and when we are done, we will have our introductions. Yes?”

They walk to Rue Pierre de Coubertin, number four, through the gridded blocks with the five-story buildings resembling photographs he has seen of Paris. Uncle Pietro opens a door.

“Here we are.”

His barber shop is an art gallery. Four mirrors and four chairs are exhibited along each wall, where employees clip away at a spectrum of sideburns and mutton chops and walrus mustaches and pencil mustaches and pompadours and undercuts. One of the barbers pulls a lever, and his chair

reclines for shaving. Antonio gasps. The washbasins are porcelain, and the water runs clear for the tap's turning.

"You sit here, Antonio. I won't be long," Uncle Pietro points out an empty barber's chair.

The leather cushion sinks a thumb deep when Antonio sits on it. He stares at himself in the mirror and sips his lemon soda, and afterwards his hand is wet from the cold beads on the bottle. Uncle Pietro's two sons, Vince and Pete, sweep away the hair every time a customer leaves. White and yellow tiles checkerboard the floor, and the walls are painted the color of the sea.

They close up shop at five past noon. By then, Antonio's head aches, and he is sleepy with hunger since he has not consumed anything save lemon soda and the pastry his father gave him that morning in Sicily. He says nothing to Uncle Pietro, who locks the door and takes them upstairs to the apartment. His daughter Giuseppa, younger even than her brothers, cooks for the five of them. She fills a pot with lamb and carrots; she reaches for what Antonio thinks is a jar of sand and pours it in; they swallow it with goat milk.

"What is it?" Antonio pokes his fork at the sandy, yellow grains. They taste of rice.

He eats only a small bowlful and goes to bed faint-headed. He does not ask for more.

For the next week, Antonio sweeps the floors with Vince and Pete. He learns the names of all the employees and asks them questions like "How much pomade do you think Giolitti uses?" to show them he knows what pomade is and who the Prime Minister is. He is a man, after all.

Each morning, he goes with Uncle Pietro to buy milk at the goat market on Rue de Protestant, in the square outside Sacre Couer church where the piss smell of fly-swarmed goats marries the smell of incense from the church. Sacre Couer casts its shadow over a busy intersection between two Muslim cemeteries, one Catholic cemetery, and one Jewish cemetery overgrown with eucalyptus trees. Workers are paving over the Muslim and Jewish cemeteries to plant a garden for the colonists, though the Catholic cemetery goes untouched.

"We should visit your mother," Uncle Pietro says to Giuseppa.

They purchase a bouquet of white jasmine flowers in the souk market from a girl with coins tied in her hair. They follow the quay to the beaches north of the city, where they set the flowers at a mausoleum chiseled under the name “Palazzolo.” Uncle Pietro and Giuseppa each trace a cross on their forehead, chest, and shoulders; they stand and listen to the waves and the rustling palm leaves.

When the Arabic calls to afternoon prayer echo from the various square towers comprising the skyline, Uncle Pietro closes the shop and climbs the stairs to the apartment, where they eat couscous and lamb and carrots until they cannot eat anymore.

“Serve your cousin, Giuseppa,” Uncle Pietro ushers his daughter over and has her ladle out a plate of food for Antonio, who smiles weakly. She is only nine.

By the summer of 1914, fighting breaks out in Europe, and soldiers march with bayonets down Rue de Paris. His uncle tells him not to stare at people, but it is difficult, for the hair styles are myriad. Men walk past in swishing robes, their heads wrapped, sporting the most delicate grey beards which they showcase beneath the shades of the outdoor cafes, chatting while smoking shisha and playing backgammon. Uncle Pietro says a few words to them in French, and he introduces Antonio, who finds himself speechless.

One day, Antonio squints at himself in the mirror to see a shadow on his upper lip that won’t go away. He touches the ridge of skin between his nose and mouth, finding it feather-soft.

“Shaggy nephews are not good for business,” Uncle Pietro says. “You should shave that.”

“When I have time,” Antonio says.

Uncle Pietro slides open a drawer and pulls out a razor that glints under the lightbulb.

“Here, *Mimmo*,” and he reaches for Antonio’s face.

“Oye!” he throws a hand over his lip and jumps from his chair. “I said I will do it when I have time. I am busy now.” His voice is muffled behind his hand. He grabs a broom and starts sweeping.

“Did your father not teach you to shave, Antonio?”

“He was going to. Before I left. Just like he taught my brothers to shave when they were old enough.”

“But I can teach you.”

“No, no, no. I will shave myself when I am ready.”

“But you do not know how. You will cut yourself.”

“I have watched it enough times.”

His uncle does not ask again after that.

Uncle Pietro’s customers are all Sicilian men; the Sicilian women of Tunis have their hair styled at a French salon on the other end of Rue Pierre de Coubertin, but Uncle Pietro never allows his daughter near the premises.

“The French do not have a monopoly on style,” he complains, glaring at the salon from his window. “Pretentious. It’s not just good enough for him to be an honest barber. He has to be a *coiffeur*. I can cut a woman’s hair just as well.”

One day, while Giuseppa is boiling the couscous, Antonio notices her hair is done up in a pompadour; it shines with a mysterious product smelling of lavender.

“You went to the *coiffeur*!” Uncle Pietro slams his fist on the table, making the dishes shake.

“He does a far better job than you,” she whispers.

He doesn’t speak to her for an entire day, after which Antonio takes care to sit on Giuseppa’s side of the table. She is right; a woman’s hair was as foreign to Uncle Pietro as the streets of Paris. He brushes her hair rough as a horse’s mane, like something to be reined in, and she winces as the brush scrapes and pulls. By the time they finish, the brush is tangled with dark tufts.

“Anna Maria Orlando wore perfect Marcel waves to church today. Her mother taught her to use a curling iron, you know.”

“Anna Maria’s mother isn’t a professional barber,” Uncle Pietro huffs.

“But some things only a mother can teach.”

“What Cinderella fairy tales are you peddling now? Hold your head straight,” and he tugs the brush, which is knotted to the nape of her neck.

Antonio imagines himself cutting her hair and failing, condemning Giuseppa to walk to the market and purchase milk with a single bald spot on her scalp, like a wheat field partway through the harvest. Poor girl.

Around Christmas, Antonio is riffling through the linen closet for a hat box, and he finds a book titled *Counsels on the Hygiene of the Feminine Function*. He does not know if they belong to Giuseppa or Uncle Pietro, though he does not dare ask. Antonio keeps the hat box under his bed, only drawing it out for a weekly deposit of one franc to fund his eventual return to Sicily. He does not know when the return will happen, but eventually it must. He was born to work in his father's shop just like he was born to walk the beaches of Sicily; it was not his place to challenge what his family needed of him.

“**H**ave I ever told you the story of my wife?” Uncle Pietro asks him one day after lunch, when they are strolling along the quay and looking on the Mediterranean and wondering if they are seeing the green hills of Sicily or just clouds.

“Her parents lived in a fortress at Castelmarre del Golfo. The Minores. Generations back, they were royalty—dukes and duchesses—but now they run the Black Hand and demand people pay them for protection. Soon you are wondering who the real protectors are. In 1904, I married Maria Minore, the daughter of Vincenzo Minore. They left a ring finger outside our door to frighten us, so we moved here, to Tunis. She died shortly after Giuseppa's third birthday.”

They pass a column of French soldiers searching the pockets of an Arab man.

“Change and obligation are the engines of life, dear *Mimmo*. We have an obligation to take care of our families, and we show our love by doing what is best for them. Just like how your brothers moved to America, how they returned to marry their cousins, how they brought both their families to live in the States. Like them, you must be brave, *Mimmo*.”

He rests a hand on Antonio's neck.

That night, Antonio rises from his bed and wakes his uncle, who sleeps on the floor beside an empty bed near a portrait of his wife.

“I am ready to shave, Uncle Pietro.”

In the wash closet, Uncle Pietro has a special straight razor that folds out of a walnut sheath. Raindrops *taptap* the window pane. Uncle Pietro shows him to run the tap water on

the shaving soap, to scrub it with the brush until it lathers. He presses the brush into Antonio's hand and has him lather his upper lip. Holding the razor with the perfect amount of firmness, they scrape the fuzz off Antonio's lip, wiping the razor on each side with a cloth. The rain pours outside and down gutters; his lip-hair pours down the drain of the wash basin. That night, Antonio checks the hat box under his bed to find the coins accumulating steadily for the day when he will step foot on the gold shores of Sicily and work in his father's shop once more.

Over the course of a spring, the hair on his lip grows back thicker, and soon he sports a consistent dark fuzz, thick enough for him to carefully etch out the thinnest sliver of a pencil mustache. On Good Friday, 1915, before mass, he parts his hair, molds it solid with two squirts of pomade, and squints at himself in the mirror. His younger cousins Vince and Pete watch him, jealous. Their hair is too faint for any sort of mustache. With only a few hours to go until church starts, Uncle Pietro calls Giuseppa down to style her hair, and she drops into the barber's chair, arms crossed, pouting. Uncle Pietro observes his scissors. He pauses, knits his brow, and sighs.

"Antonio, why don't you style Giuseppa's hair today. You know the Marcel style, yes?"

His cousins are hard at work sweeping, but when Uncle Pietro hands Antonio the scissors, they freeze.

"Me?" Antonio asks.

He sees his reflection in the scissors—he looks like a lamb at the slaughter. Pinching the scissors, Antonio holds them to Giuseppa's head. His hand quakes. Uncle Pietro looks on, arms crossed, judging his technique. *Snip*. The first curl feather-floats to the floor. *Snip. Snip. Snip*. Taking the spray bottle, he presses the rubber bladder and spritzes her dark hair until damp. A sheen settles on it. He cuts her hair shoulder-length, ties it at the nape of the neck, and pins it above her ear with a crystal hair pin. Uncle Pietro grumbles. When Antonio finishes with the scissors, he draws the curling iron from its holster; its heat rolls sweat beads down his arm. He curls the waves tight, clipping and unclipping the iron on the thick hair. After the right half of Giuseppa's head is

styled, Antonio takes a step back. He hasn't done a terrible job. Giuseppa curls the smallest grin, either entertained with Antonio's terror or happy with his results. He cracks his knuckles and dives back into his work, his hands stronger and steadier with each turn of the iron. After thirty minutes, he concludes with the final touch—the single curl that is left to bounce against her right temple.

“Mia Madonna,” Pete whispers from the corner and sets down his broom.

Giuseppa studies herself in the mirror from various angles. His uncle exhales roughly out his nostrils. For a second, Antonio fears his uncle will slam his fist on the counter, but then he gives a single nod and croaks, “You will cut her hair from now on,” walking out the front door of the shop, still wearing his apron, not returning for an hour.

“Loyalty is at the root of our profession,” Uncle Pietro decides to preach one day from behind the head of a customer.

Antonio dusts stubble off a customer's neck in the neighboring chair. He has graduated from floor-sweeping.

“Once a man chooses a barber, he must invest in them. The one who cuts hair is family. When you first came to Tunis, you would not trust me to hold a razor to your neck, and I did not learn how you like your hair groomed until the third attempt—a thumb's length on the sides and parted at the left. Who among these men would ever think of seeing a different barber after investing all this time?” He gestures to the full shop and the three customers-in-waiting who leaf through Italian newspapers along the window. They swear at him and call him names, and he laughs. “Once, a French priest came in for a haircut, Francois Miquet, you know him? I do a good job, he pays well, we are friendly. And the next month? Nothing. I don't see him again for four whole months,” he holds up four fingers. “I talk with the barber on Rue de Paris, and he says the same thing, that a certain Father Francois Miquet left him cold for six months. The Frenchman had been going to a different barber every month, in a rotation. The philanderer!”

To win and keep customers, Antonio learns, a barber must

add a little extra to the experience. When Uncle Pietro cuts hair, he breaks out into Italian opera. His favorite is Enrico Caruso, a tenor of course. On Saturdays, when business peaks, he pays the goat herder Leonardo Ribaudò to play the accordion on the stool by the window. He also imports lemon soda from a cousin in Partinico who grows the lemons himself. He keeps the bottles in an electrified ice box that attracts sweating customers in the summers and winters. Every night, Antonio checks the hat box under his bed to find the coins accumulating steadily for the day when he will step foot on the gold shores of Sicily and work in his father's shop once more.

Giuseppa's haircuts become more regular, and Uncle Pietro often leaves them alone together after-hours with the empty shop, and they know what to do. Antonio unfurls the cape about her. *Snip, snip*. Curls of hair float to the floor one by one until a pile accumulates on the tiles. One night he is cutting her hair, and the streets outside burn scarlet as the sun slump, slump, slumps over the Mediterranean, dipping under the sea until the coiled filaments of the lightbulbs are their sole light source, tinting the shop bronze. The windows are open, and a hot wind flaps the corners of the newspapers.

"Look at me," Antonio touches his face in the mirror. "Look how shaggy I am; my hair covers my ears. Perhaps I am the one in need of a haircut."

"I can arrange that," Giuseppa says.

His stomach churns. He sits on the chair, and she throws the cape about him, fastening it at his neck.

"I have never actually cut hair before, you know. My father never let me. But now that I try it, I find it is far easier than you make it out to be, cousin Antonio."

While she snips, his hair falls away. For the first time in a month, he feels air on the back of his neck. He feels lighter, cooler.

Giuseppa walks to the electrified ice box in the corner and pulls out a lemon soda for herself.

"Do you want one?" she asks.

He nods.

She brings just the one bottle. She pops open the cap and sips, then hands it to Antonio. He presses his lips to it. The

glass is beaded with frost, and the sour lemon makes his mouth pucker. The bubbles rush straight to his stomach. The drink is a relief from the hot wind blowing in from the empty boulevard.

“Was this your mother’s?” he points to the crystal pin in her hair.

“Maria Minore,” she nods. “Daughter of a duke. Her family runs the Black Hand in Sicily. You know her father, Vincenzo Minore, yes?”

“The name is familiar,” he passes her the bottle. “Your mother is certainly with the angels now.”

“Amen.”

She snips some more, a bottle in one hand.

“I wonder if I would have the courage to do what my mother did, to betray a family of mobsters, to abandon wealth for love, to flee Sicily for *this* place. My father teaches me that everything we do must be for the family, yet my mother so clearly spat in the face of her own family.”

“Do you believe that?” Antonio asks.

“What?”

“That everything we do must be for the family? Do you believe that, cousin Giuseppa?”

“I know what you are thinking,” she takes a swig.

Soon the bottle is empty, and they clean up after themselves.

While Antonio is wiping off a razor one morning, an envelope slides through the mail slot on the shop door. He snatches the letter, finding his own name written on it—and what’s more—written in his brother’s handwriting, pasted with stamps from America. Antonio leaves his half-shaven customer sitting on the chair and reads the letter, frowning at the final paragraph.

One by one, we are saving up our money, taking boats to America, and working a few years until attaining citizenship. With our new citizenship, we travel back to Sicily and marry a cousin so that their family can cross the ocean as well. In this way, our family has transplanted itself. Our home in Partinico is boarded up, and there is nothing for you to return to.

He is quiet during his next appointment with Giuseppa.

“If you follow your brothers to America,” Giuseppa says, “you will never see Sicily again.”

If he follows his brothers, he will have to sit on a boat for three weeks. He will have to learn English and prepare a home for himself and Giuseppa.

“Perhaps I could go back to Sicily and reopen my father’s shop. I do not have to cross the ocean.”

“No one will stop you.”

They close the shop for three hours at lunch time, so Antonio takes the time to be alone. He walks along the quay by the seashore, thinking that he has always lived near the sea and that he always must return to it. The day is August 28th, a Tuesday, the feast day of Saint Augustine. While the Muslims are kneeling on their prayer rugs, he walks to the empty Sacre Couer Church, takes off his hat, crosses himself with holy water, drops two francs in the collection box, and lights a candle for the aunt he has never met—Maria Minore. While Antonio prays, he thinks that the line separating duty from selfishness is as thin as the wrinkles circling Uncle Pietro’s mouth that show the places he used to laugh. Somewhere in heaven, he reasons, Maria Minore knows this, bless her soul. Antonio is kneeling in the pews when Father Francois Miquet walks into the empty church carrying a bouquet of roses on some errand and notices him.

“What are you doing here, Antonio? It is Tuesday.”

“Today is the Feast Day of Saint Augustine.”

“I am aware.”

“Augustine is my confirmation name.”

“Oh, I see. You pray for his intercession?”

“Only when I have a lot on my mind.”

Antonio is holding the photograph his brothers sent him, in which they are standing outside their new house in America.

“Saint Augustine was from Tunisia, you know,” Father Francois says. “He probably walked these same streets. Of course, that was before he moved to Italy. Did you know that Saint Augustine sailed away from Tunisia when he was a young man? He said goodbye to it.”

Antonio pictures his house in Partinico as he knew it, before they boarded up the windows, before the thistles sprang up in the rose garden. He will hoard this memory; he foresees

himself becoming drunk off it in the coming weeks when the peals of the transatlantic ship-whistles wear thin and the towers of New York City break over the water. And long after he follows his brothers, long after he takes Giuseppa as his bride and cuts the hair of trigger-happy American cowboys, he will pray to Saint Augustine and know it to be true, that change and obligation are the engines of life as Uncle Pietro decreed. And what of it if he cuts hair on this side of the ocean or some other side, if he is a citizen of this country of some other country—he is the son of a barber just the same, snipping, shaving, styling to the same end. He sees it coming.

Antonio empties the coins from his hat-box-savings-account, walks to the post office on Avenue de France, and tells the clerk behind the bronze grating that he would like to register for a passport.

“What is your nationality?”

“I am a proud Italian! What do you think?”

Antonio fills out some forms and returns them to the clerk, who studies them. For his payment, he hands over the fistful of francs, the collective tips from a dozen haircuts.

“It says here you are eighteen,” the clerk reads.

“You’re never too young to move to America.”

The clerk sighs and crumples the papers into a ball.

“This is the correct form for you,” and he hands Antonio a new paper down from the heights of his desk.

Order of Induction into Military Service of the Kingdom of Italy.

“I am to fight in the war?” he looks up at the clerk.

“You are a proud Italian, are you not? They will be expecting you on the frontline.”

Antonio rushes back to the barber shop on Rue Pierre de Coubertin, piecing together a story to tell his family.

Brittany Meador

The Eating of Apples

There was a man hanging out of the window. Although the sidewalk was lousy with pedestrians, no one gave him more than a passing glance, save for a couple of austere executives who observed the scene as if it were a mildly entertaining street performance. A woman in a felt hat was on the phone with the police.

Evelyn drifted over in spite of herself, bleached hair whipping in the rising wind like tentacles. She checked the charge on her ThoughtBlock, the battery indicator a comforting black line, the only thing between her and the howling intrusion of other people's thoughts.

This far down she couldn't see the jumper's face, only the pristine white of his sneakers. The woman in the hat put the phone down, turning to Evelyn.

"They want Insight," she said.

"Okay . . ." Evelyn trailed off. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Would you mind?" the woman asked, giving Evelyn an encouraging smile.

Evelyn touched her ThoughtBlock, unconsciously protective. She didn't want to know why the man in the window was trying to die, refused to hold his pain in her mind. "I'm really not the appropriate person."

The woman's cajoling manner dropped at once. "Well someone has to!"

"Why don't you, then?" Evelyn interjected her tone with as much attitude as she could. It was the obvious choice, after all. Why translate the jumper's psychological quagmire through a third party when the person actually speaking to the police could hear him just as well?

The woman's face pinched, and it was with extremely poor grace she used her thumbprint to unlock and unhinge the tiny face of her ThoughtBlock. She pressed the single button inside, turning it off, eyes darting immediately to a man a few feet ahead, broad back covered in a thick brocade coat.

Whatever he was thinking must have been vile, because the woman swallowed like her mouth was filled with blood as she looked away.

“I can’t tell which thoughts are his,” she said into her phone, turning her eyes aloft as if sight alone was enough to focus one’s Insight. There was a pause before she snapped, “There’s like, twenty people walking past, and hundreds in the buildings around me. It’s not so easy.”

Evelyn was dying to hear what the dispatcher was saying, but nothing was worth disabling her only protection against the viral degeneracy of the human mind.

The woman on the phone shrieked seconds before her scream spread to the two lookie-loos with their noses to the sky. The sound was sudden, quicker than should be possible. Limbs and skin spread out like an empty suit, letting the viscera and pulp, the churning stuff of life, spill out in a red slurry. Evelyn saw, by accident, the jumper’s head had fragmented like a shattered jar of marinara.

The woman in the hat was still yelling, incomprehensible, perhaps only to Evelyn who could hear nothing but the sound of the body obliterating itself on the pavement. She shook hair into her eyes and stumbled away, thinking with laser focus on the miniscule details around her: the oak leaves tossed in the strafing wind, the gum flattened into black discs on the sidewalk, the graffiti on a blue BMW.

The faces around her portrayed no distress. Such incidents were unpleasant, but these things happened. They were why there was a euth clinic in the first place, so people could handle Insights in a safe and controlled manner that didn’t inconvenience hapless bystanders. Evelyn shook off the sticky-sick feeling attempting to hook into her belly and joined the stream of commuters. There was no time to dwell, she had to go home and prep for Patterson.

Her apartment hunkered in Camden, part of a drab building which remained relentlessly industrial despite her attempts at cheer. A twist of plastic tinsel clung to the rain lashed window like a rock climber, precarious over the dollar store Santas below. The light switch did nothing but click.

Groaning, she called the super, getting his voicemail message twice in a row. She twisted her ThoughtBlock around

and around the bony protuberance of her wrist. Any other night, and it wouldn't be worth it, but tonight she was going to see Patterson.

She wiped the ThoughtBlock's face with the corner of her cardigan, and opened it with her thumb. The button inside was a tiny nub encased in silicone. It amazed her that such a little thing was the arbiter of Insight, the difference between Knowing and not. At this hour only a few people were home, so there wouldn't be many minds to sift through. Her fingertip brushed the off switch's slippery surface, but she couldn't do it. She snapped the face closed.

Before the Universal Flu Vaccine had accidentally incited Sudden Onset Telepathy in millions of people, Evelyn had thought it would be so cool to read minds. It was always what she said when someone asked her to pick a superpower. She had imagined never studying for another test, always knowing if the cute barista was actually flirting, but the reality was a constant barrage of unfiltered opinion and unbearable truths. It had been excruciating.

Evelyn lived every day knowing her sister stopped inviting her for dinner because her brother-in-law didn't like her, that she wasn't her mother's *or* father's favorite daughter. Her brain had been the repository for the filth of thousand's of minds, everyone's sad and angry and sickening thoughts slicking the floor of her head until her own mind filled like a cesspit. Maybe some people revelled in their new Insight, maybe some could brush it off, but not Evelyn. She'd thought she'd go mad with it, or have to live in the mountains far away from the city she loved before the ThoughtBlock had been released to the public. She wore it constantly, for hours longer than recommended, sometimes not even removing it to sleep. Whatever migraines she suffered were a cheap recompense for her blessed, mental silence.

Evelyn's head was pounding now, not least because of the stress of the afternoon. She swallowed down a brace of Advil and set off to locate her missing super. He wasn't in his office, nor outside by the dumpster rolling a fluff of Top. She found him in the basement, one knee on a ratty bath towel as he swore before the fuse box. He spoke before she could announce herself.

“My towel ain’t ratty, it’s well used.”

With someone else she might have felt awkward, but he had surely heard the thoughts zipping across her mind repudiating that any offense had been meant. Besides, those who chose to listen had no cause to be angry at what they heard.

“Damn straight,” he said. “And to answer your other question, a rat chewed through our wiring.”

Evelyn inched forward to peer over his shoulder. The fuses were antique, squat glass rounds with threaded lightbulb bottoms. None were blown, but caught in the bald, copper innards of a shredded wire, a rodent carcass pointed forward like a mummified arrow.

“I think the electricity smells like iron or blood to ‘em,” he said. “The buzzing tickles their teeth and they’ll chew until they hit the current, never knowing what’s about to fry ‘em.”

She opened her mouth, but having heard the question be born in her mind, he answered before she could give it breath.

“Probably three or four hours. I have some backstock material but it’ll still take me that long to replace it.”

“I hate it when you do that,” Evelyn said, but she was smiling.

“Yeah, yeah. You and your little doodad are just jealous you’ve met your mental match.” He winked as if she couldn’t tell he was only teasing.

“How can you stand not to have a ThoughtBlock?” For once she blurted exactly what she was thinking. “Doesn’t it make you crazy, hearing horrible things all day?”

He heaved himself to his feet. “Those horrible things have always been around. I guess I figure it doesn’t do any good pretending something’s gone just because you can’t see it.”

Upstairs Evelyn completed her usual pre-Patterson rounds: dishes, sheets, sweep, mop. Flame to wick so the apartment smelled like cinnamon. Dinner with Patterson always flustered her. He smiled at her like he was selling watches in GQ, but she was never sure what was happening behind his eyes. She’d get ridiculous if she let herself, frenetic and clumsy with nerves. Instead she clung to a monk-like null, setting the table and dropping frozen fillets into water to soften with as few thoughts as she could manage.

At four she lolled in the bath, shaving herself dolphin sleek and pumicing the puckered half moons of her heels. The ritual always made her feel like a bride before her wedding night. It was a silly thought—they hadn't even discussed exclusivity—but she couldn't help feeling he was right at the threshold of becoming her actual boyfriend. She told herself she'd be embarrassed for him to know how much she liked him, but truthfully she hoped he'd sought Insight so she'd never have to say anything. He always wore his ThoughtBlock, but most people pretended it was on, especially when they were actually eavesdropping. She thought about what a good girlfriend she would be when he was over, just in case he was listening.

Water down the drain, lotion, then robe. Her room was draped in dusk, a small square of light intruding from the window as she dried her hair. Later, she would slink into a dress that tried without admitting to it, but not until dinner was done and the threat of grease splatter had abated. The lightswitch once again failed to produce illumination, so she set every candle she owned at the table's center until it glowed, candles of all shapes and sizes burning like a skyline on fire.

Patterson turned up later than expected so the fish was a little overdone, weeping albumin. Still, he cleaned his plate so Evelyn surmised her salmon de citron couldn't have been that bad. He looked like a king in the candlelight, regal and reposed with shadows dancing in the dip of his throat, and surely that was worth a late arrival and his phone joining them at the dinner table. Evelyn was seized with curiosity, sorely tempted as she so rarely was, to listen to his thoughts every time he answered a text message.

They spoke about his day and the new project for his division and the weekend he'd spent with his brothers in the city. He didn't ask her questions, but Evelyn made sure to pepper her own likes and dislikes, her day, her work, throughout their discussion like sea salt over a good meal. She was certain he was interested because he always listened quietly, he must just be bad at thinking up lines of inquiry. As usual, their conversation turned philosophical over dessert.

"Nobody can avoid Insight forever," he said, teeth piercing the fondant skin of a chocolate petite.

“Maybe one day we can again,” she said, shepherding a fat, three-wick beeswax into the kitchen to pour the coffee. “A neurologist on 60 Seconds of Science thought we could reverse SOT if they severed certain connections in the brain.”

He laughed. “Who’s going to test that? Animals don’t have Insight. It’s not like they can mince a bunch of mice brains until they get it right.”

“But there’s still a chance,” she insisted, setting his usual cup with half and half and a single spoon of turbinado sugar in front of him. “And I read about a blogger who couldn’t hear her boyfriend while they were spelunking in Crete.”

“Wooooow,” sarcasm stretched the word like toffee. “A peer-reviewed blogger?” He poured a hot draught of dark roast into his twitching mouth.

“Just because someone’s—sometimes regular people notice things,” Evelyn said, taking her seat.

“Sure. But if somebody cracks Insight, it’s not going to be some airhead professional tourist.”

“Maybe not,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Why does avoiding Insight matter so much to you?” he asked.

“I just miss the old days. I miss not knowing every fucking thing my mother ever thought about me, or hearing people’s sad sackery all day.” She laced their fingers together. “You know how hard it is for me. I couldn’t stand to be around any of my old friends, and now I have to have a headache all the time.”

Patterson nodded, letting her hand go to reach for his coffee. “You kind of choose to have a headache, but I get what you mean. I just hate to see you waste so much time obsessing over something you can’t change. They’ve been trying to find out what the vaccine did to turn us all into Professor X, and they’re no closer now than they were when it first happened six months ago.”

“So you wouldn’t want to go back if you could?” She asked, playing coy over the rim of her coffee cup.

“Hell no. Insight is an incredible tool. I’d be an idiot not to leverage it, especially in my business.”

Evelyn smiled, leaning across the table. “So you’d be willing to spy to get what you want?” she asked, pretending

to admonish him.

“Sometimes,” he said. “When I need the advantage.”

“Do you ever listen in on me?”

He snorted. “It’s not really necessary to spy on a sure thing.”

“‘Sure thing’ meaning what?” It sounded so rude, but being sure could be a good thing. You had to be sure of someone to love them.

“Just that, you know, we kind of have a pattern going by now. I come over, we have dinner, we hang out.”

“Do you ever see the pattern changing? Like, seeing each other more often?”

“Maybe. I really like what we have now,” he said, taking her hand again. “I like seeing you every Thursday, but I’m busy the rest of the week.” His eyes glimmered, beautiful, black shale in the candlelight.

“It doesn’t have to be a big thing. I could bring lunch to your work.”

“Are you gonna offer to do my laundry to see where I live? Nice try, Sherlock Holmes, but you’re not that subtle.” He nudged her with the point of his elbow, but Evelyn wasn’t laughing.

She stood, stung, and retreated into the darkness of the kitchen, sans candle and her previously buoyant mood. She washed her hands to make it seem like she was actually doing something and not just hiding. Already she regretted her outburst. Patterson was a good guy. He was just taking his time. There was no harm in being sure of someone before you committed to them. And besides, a few months wasn’t such a horribly long time in the grand scheme of things. She dried her hands, still in darkness.

The pattern continued as it usually did, though this time they washed the dishes by candlelight before moving to the living room. It was Patterson’s turn to pick, so the evening’s entertainment was his car show. It wasn’t Evelyn’s favorite, but it gave them something to talk about and it was so rewarding for her to see Patterson light up during the program. She could imagine them like this, together, a couple in a new, bigger apartment. Evelyn could almost sense the invisible border between casual date and girlfriend that was drawing nearer with every hour they spent together.

“Is this the dream car you were telling me about? The Hemi?”

He knocked his hand gently against her head, knuckles sliding to caress her cheek on the way down. “It’s so adorable how you try to keep up with Top Gear. Hemi’s are trash. The car I was telling you about is a LaFerrari Aperta. You have to be invited to even buy it. So epic.”

His eyes returned to her laptop and shortly after, hers did too. Eventually, she couldn’t take it anymore and pressed kisses into the bristly shelf of his jaw, until he pulled her to the bedroom, springs creaking as they wrestled with their clothes. The condom looked like a greasy icing bag in the lone candle’s feeble light.

She sat astride, hair a curtain cordoning her face, as the bed squealed and his breath bellowed up, smelling of fish.

His hands were warm and welcome, skimming up her arms. They groped her chest, thrilling, and meandered around to discover the dip of her back. She was enjoying herself as usual, eyes closed, but couldn’t stop thinking about the pattern even as she raced to complete it, moving with increasing ardor until the mattress springs complained.

For once she looked down, seeking connection instead of oblivion.

His face was all wrong. He didn’t look bored, or displeased. There wasn’t a word that described the thoughts flashing like fish scales in the depths of his eyes, but she could see them, formless things, only hinted at.

Even as she moved, she unlocked the key to knowledge at her wrist. It seemed a thousand, thousand voices crashed down on her in a crushing wave. Many minds—ruminating, shouting, grieving, thinking, dreaming—pressed against her as closely as the body below. She let them flow through her and away, becoming one with the only mind that mattered in this moment: the mind that held her in its regard as she hurtled toward the apex of thunder and light.

Patterson didn’t like her tits. He thought they were saggy and her nipples were too long.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

She climbed off, shaky legged, and disappeared into the bathroom, flipping the switch by habit only to be blinded by

a sudden stab of illumination. He was in his underwear, still hard, when she returned armored in her robe.

“You turned off your ThoughtBlock.” He didn’t have to ask.

“You don’t even think I’m pretty.” Her throat could barely disgorge the words. “What have you been doing here all this time?”

It came to her in fits and flashes. Their meeting, her eagerness, his indifference. Last week, before their meetup he’d told his brother he was on his way to pick up some Fast Ass. It was like Fast Food, only cheaper.

“That was just a joke,” he said. “Just guy stuff. I didn’t mean it how it sounded.”

Their minds were two mirrors.

She said, “Get the fuck out of my apartment.”

She wandered to the window to air out the goathouse stink of her and Patterson. Like everything else, the window was old. She pried it open by inches, turning a small crank while paint flaked onto her hand. There was no screen, so she rarely dared to leave it agape for fear of flies, but now she needed the blast of icy-fresh air more than a sanitary apartment.

It wasn’t so much that Patterson would never be her boyfriend, it wasn’t even the months she wasted making dinners and watching awful television, it was her own cowardice and foolishness that ate at her; her own pathetic, puppy dog desperation that made it hard to breathe under the pricking light of the stars.

“Fast Ass,” she said to no one, dry eyed and wishing she could just cry and get it out.

The street looked abyssal, dark and far away even though she wasn’t that high up. She stared down at nothing until a wedge of light split the velvet black directly below: her super stepping out for a smoke. He threw a sagging bag into the dumpster one handed, then moved into the light to roll a cigarette, sliding the glue strip over his tongue like a harmonica to seal it.

Seeing him reminded her of the electrocuted rodent in the basement, blindly nibbling fizzy-good feelings until he burned away to bones. Reminded her of the jumper, destroyed

by truth as surely as others were saved by it.

The man below seemed to sense her, jerking up to meet her eyes. A surge of recognition expanded within her with the force of a breaching star, suffusing her, face to foot, with a giddy flush of certainty.

She unclasped the shackle from her wrist.

It dropped into his waiting hand.

João M. Serro

The Lesson

“Hugo, I think it’s time to read the poem.” Ms. T spoke kindly to the selective mute.

But her voice startled the boy. His large brown eyes remained fixed on his teacher, as if her words were beams of light emerged from some dark wood to expose him. All the other children had recited “Faun’s Head” earlier in the week. But Hugo remained silent.

Every two weeks each kid had to recite a poem, from memory, in front of the class. This was not an easy task for the students or the teacher. Ms. T often reflected these things out loud to her husband, who always listened attentively to her daily stories about the children and school policies.

Untrained little minds meet new words with a wicked resistance, she would go on. A doggy-park frenzy. So the obligatory recital first required they handwrite the poem—daily. Through tedious repetition, the ink would eventually soak every word into their brains. By the end of the week this rote exercise gave them a gangly confidence. They could then stand before their fellow students and deliver, orally, the inspired verse. As every parent understands, she continued to voice her thoughts to her husband as they made dinner, no transaction between child and adult can proceed without a deal. In this case, the ‘deal’ was simple: once they had recited the mandatory poem, they would no longer need to scrawl a tedium of crooked letters—meaningless scratches on a page they couldn’t relate to. “Now children, I understand a drawing of killer robots blowing each other up makes more sense. And is more fun. But since you kids have told me repeatedly that you hate the act of writing and want to avoid it at all cost, the sooner you get it over with, the better.” This single motivation made it quick and painless for all—except one boy. Hugo.

Her long Polish name was much too hard to pronounce, so the children called her Ms. T. She explained to them that people who live in hot places around the world—the Hawaiians, for instance—have lots of soothing vowels in their

language, because a tropical sun warms their lips. “*Aloha nui loa e noho mai, e `ai a e, wala`au,*” she would say softly, shaping her mouth into exaggerated ovals and mock kisses, as the children listened, open-eyed and smiling. Whereas, in cold places like Poland, where she is from, the winters are sluggish and brutal, so the people who live there suffer purple lips and a cacophony of consonants. And here, Miss T, her teeth chattering uncontrollably, would cough up a succession of K’s and Z’s and B’s and T’s, trying to construct her name from this sonic clatter, while the children howled in their glee.

Her art degree from the Warsaw Academy did not allow her to make a living in Los Angeles. But it did allow her to view the world through a precise lens and she now shared that expertise with her students. She taught them the art of seeing, but they taught her the art of feeling—drawing her into their feral emotion as they painted guns and bleeding hearts on the costly paper she brought from home.

She loved living in America, especially southern California, where the year round sunny days melted those bleak Polish winters from her memory. And she loved her husband, Raúl, an amorous Mediterranean man who was always chasing after her. He never stopped touching every part of her body. He warmed the chill out of her bones. When they cooked dinner together, he would often stop what he was doing to slide his arms around her waist and kiss her neck, while she diced cabbage and chopped beets for the borscht. When they went for an evening stroll, he would take a gentle hold of her upper arms, simultaneously, in both his mitten-sized palms.

“I wish I had extra hands,” he often said to her. “So I could hold you in more places at the same time.”

She would laugh and melt into him. “It wouldn’t do any good. You would just keep wishing for more hands.”

“You’re right. My greed for you exceeds a simple hand count.”

He always pleased her first, before he ravaged her for himself; followed by long, luxurious nights of spooning.

Their combined incomes were not enough to live on. It’s true he didn’t work as hard as she did, but maybe he worked

smarter. She embraced steady employment, he chased sporadic freelance; she was the industrious worker ant from northern Europe and he was the pleasure-loving grasshopper from the Mediterranean. Somehow they scraped by. They did bump heads occasionally, like most couples, over idiosyncratic differences. She mobilized every pair of socks and marshaled every surface to reflect her face; he didn't mind a little mess—his socks never matched—and he preferred to smooch.

Earlier in their relationship they had suffered some conflict as they adjusted to each other's habits and personalities. But they wanted to stay together, so they pressed hard to iron out the hideous ruffles. She had a greater advantage working with kids, which taught her patience. Although Raúl was a sensitive guy, as attached to her as a tail on a horse, he was no saint. If he had limited resources from lack of sleep he might get grumpy or grow distant or stay mad an entire day. Gradually, he learned to reduce that disrupting interval to half a day and then an hour and then maybe a minute before he autocorrected his mood and apologized for his behavior. They always learned something from each episode and from each other. Primarily, they lived in harmony. In fact, over time, he taught her a different kind of art—how to steal pleasure from every moment.

When acquiring a second language after the age of 12 or 13, it is next to impossible to lose your accent. Ms. T had learned English in her native Poland as an adult. Although her accent was thick, her command of English syntax and grammar was excellent. But like most immigrants, she occasionally used a turn of phrase in such an amusing way the kids would be delighted for hours. Whenever she would say, “What a week. *Thanks* God it's Friday,” they would take the phrase home and repeat it all weekend to squeals of laughter. At other times she would assure them with, “Don't worry about the quiz, it will be a *pieces* of cake.” That one really poked their humor buttons. But for a foreign mind, it makes perfect sense to think in this way. After all, one cuts things into ‘pieces’. And one gives ‘thanks’ to God. In particular, she often repeated two American colloquialisms—her favorites—perhaps because they were the first ones she learned when

she was studying English. At every opportunity, and there were plenty with these unruly kids, she would say, “Who’s minding the store?” or “What’s up with that?”

Ms. T’s enthusiasm for America never waned. But over the years her disappointment with the American school system greatly disillusioned her hopes for the future of this great country. She was always telling her husband that in Europe, teachers are highly praised, well respected, well paid, and well pensioned when they retire. After all, they are the caretakers who insure a healthy garden—the ones who plant the seeds, who nurture the sprouts that will become the fruit-bearing trees of the nation—the next generation of builders, thinkers, inventors and innovators. How is it possible that the most powerful country in the world, America, would throw its teachers to the bottom of the barrel? “What’s up with that?”

And especially in the wealthiest state in the union, California, with its vast, fertile farmlands (the breadbasket of the world); with its aerospace and computer industries (Silicon Valley); and with its Lotto (which is supposed to provide huge revenue for schools); why does California have a broken education, and its children on the school grounds have no nurses, no paper, and no hope of higher learning? “Who’s minding the store?”

Raúl would smile every time she used that phrase in her cute Polish accent. He held her thigh in both his hands as they lay in bed snuggling. The fingertips of one large hand almost touching the tips of his other hand as they circled the circumference of her thigh. “I love how adorable you always look in your passionate embrace of what’s wrong with America. You can’t solve these problems overnight. But maybe if you keep repeating your justified rants, someone important, besides me, heh, might listen and do something about it.”

“Oh!” she said. “Am I repeating myself?”

“Don’t we all repeat ourselves?”

“I don’t mean to bore you.”

“Do I look bored?” He smiled back at her, still holding her thigh. “I’m never bored with you. In fact, that’s the very definition of love. Listening to your friends and family tell you a story. The *same* story . . . over and over again. And

every time you listen to that story, it's as if you're hearing it for the first time. That's love."

Ms. T rolled over on top of him and kissed him everywhere.

Yes, she loved her job and she loved working with the kids. The only drawback (besides the unpaid extra hours, and the administrative bumbling) was that the children made her sick. They were little germ factories, coughing as if tuberculosis was back in fashion, and her health wasn't what it used to be. This school year in particular, she was sick seven months out of ten. Six years earlier, she had caught whooping cough from one of her boys (poor fellow), who sneezed phlegm in her face while she was leaning in close to help him with a run-on sentence. Whooping cough is rare these days and vaccines have all but stamped it out, which meant her doctors didn't diagnose it properly. For six months her hacking and wheezing was so severe, she got no rest and Raúl had to sleep in the other room. But she would never take a day off. She had that Polish workhorse ethic.

She explained to her husband that Hugo was a *selective mute* and what that term meant. He blabbered endlessly, at home; but at school, not a squeak. He chatted with his best friend, but not with the other children. Before public education had run out of funding, Hugo had been assigned a counselor, a speech therapist, and a psychologist. Every teacher and resource person in the school had also tried to help the boy, unsuccessfully. No one knew how to break his voluntary silence or what trauma had triggered his wordless retreat. But she wasn't interested in a psychological analysis of the root cause. She was a problem solver more focused on the cure. By the time Miss T arrived at the school, they had considered the boy to be a waste of valuable resources. "Leave him with me," she told them. "I know what to do. I will not throw *out* the towel."

Ms. T had a theory. She believed it was the whooping cough that had indirectly caused her cancer—by compromising her immune system and wearing her down. Her doctors didn't agree that whooping cough could possibly cause cancer, directly or indirectly, but she held her ground.

Although she had been aware for a few weeks that something odd was happening on her lower abdomen, just above her pubis, it was Raúl, through his affectionate touches, who had first discovered the lump.

Ms. T noticed Hugo hunched over his desk, his head covered by his signature blue hood. Concerned, she walked over and tapped gently on the desk, so as not to startle him. “Are you okay?” He slowly sat up and resumed playing with his keychain. Along with two keys, a little man hung from a silver ring. Its hands and feet were shaped into wrenches. “Wow,” Ms. T said, her tone amplified with enthusiasm. “That man is a hard worker, like your parents. Look at all the wrenches. That means he knows how to turn things around. When something isn’t working he knows how to tighten things up and make them better. And look at his smile. He wants you to be happy too. He wants you to pick up your pencil and work on your paragraph.” She pointed to the writing assignment he was supposed to have finished. He had barely begun. “See? You can move these words around, freely, in this part here; and oh, add a period there; and look, remove this phrase because you have already used it above.” She took her red pen and, letting it dance in swirls around the page, showed Hugo all the magical possibilities—how elastic and playful writing can be. Delighted, he opened his mouth slightly, as if to speak, but no words came out.

Then, she darted across the room to resolve a conflict between two girls fighting over a wet paintbrush, gobs of green watercolor spattered onto their faces. Ms. T took the paintbrush away from them. “You both know we’re short on supplies, so you need to learn to share.” The girls acquiesced, but continued to stare each other down like a couple of boxers geared up for the second round. “I have a suggestion. When one of you is using the brush, I want the other one to observe *what* she paints and *how* she paints it. You might just learn something.” When the girls settled down and took turns sharing, Ms. T looked over at Hugo, now happily immersed in a busy writing frenzy.

Her gynecologist was a tall, dark, man, who always made her feel comfortable with his warm and earnest bedside manner. From his towering overview, as she lay on the examining table, he gave her the bad news. She had a malignant tumor on her ovaries. He explained that ovarian cancer was a deadly, silent killer that targeted a demographic primarily of northern European women who, like her, have never had children. But the good news was that they had discovered it in the early stages, so her chances of survival were excellent. “*Thanks God Raúl found it so quickly.*”

She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. But her husband knew what to do immediately. Weep. He navigated his ship of tears, south, through a Mediterranean storm. Nothing would console him. Understanding how profoundly important she was to him, she decided to tough it out in true Polish style, and accept her fate—dry eyed. She was more concerned about her husband. How would he handle it if she didn’t survive? He loved her more than any man had ever loved her. She felt his joyful presence brush up against her days.

One morning, Hugo trotted over with a sad look on his face. She could tell he needed a good hug. But she wasn’t allowed to touch any child. Sometimes the kids would spontaneously run over and throw their arms around her, happy to have her in their lives. She was comfortable with that. And pleased. But she couldn’t do the same in return. Moving here from Europe, where people do not own guns but often give each other hugs, it was hard for Ms. T to wrap her mind around the fact that in America, guns are legal but hugs are outlawed. “What’s up with that?” A good hug would have established rapport and gained Hugo’s trust sooner. But she was resourceful. She had other approaches, which might take longer, but were equally as effective.

This week’s verse was “Faun’s Head” by Arthur Rimbaud, a poem about astonishment in a magical forest. Although it was unusually difficult for kids this age, she specifically chose this verse because she liked challenging them and because the mythical creature, wild in the woods, reminded her of the children. “Among the leaves . . . a startled faun widens his two eyes and bites the red flowers with his white teeth . . .

his mouth explodes in laughter beneath the branches.” This passage definitely reminded Ms. T of the kids on their lunch break. And finally, when the faun has “scampered—like a squirrel—his laughter still trembles on every leaf, and you can see, awakened by a bullfinch, the Golden Kiss of the Wood, pulling itself together again.”

Every day Hugo would turn in his handwritten copy of the poem. She could tell by the softer, sweeter expression on his face that he was warming up to her, little by little, and beginning to trust her. But no matter how gently she spoke or how cheerful her questions, she couldn't muster a peep out of him.

Every other week all the children had stood before the class and recited their poem. But Hugo still refused. A few times, when Ms. T would sit after school preparing lessons, Hugo would hang out under her care waiting for his parents to finish their long day's labor and pick him up. He knew he would have to keep writing out the poem until he was able to say it aloud before the class, but he remained silent. “I want you to do me a favor, Hugo,” Ms. T asked him. “I want you, today, before you go home, to say only the title of the poem, that's all. Then you won't have to copy the verses everyday. You don't even have to recite the entire poem before the class, only the title, right now, during this hour, for my ears alone. I will even turn around. I need to prepare the lessons for tomorrow, on the blackboard. So when you are ready, say the title so I can hear it and you can stop writing and go play.” His best friend had decided to stay with Hugo to keep him company. “Now that is a great friend,” Ms. T said. “I would love to have a friend who cared about me that much.”

His friend sat close to Hugo, whispering in his ear. “Say the title, Hugo. It's only two words—Faun's Head. Say it. Come on—say it. Then we can go play. You won't have to write anymore. Just say it.” His friend kept offering these suggestions relentlessly, single-mindedly, for almost an hour. “Look, Hugo,” his friend persisted, “Miss T turned her back. She can't see you. Go on, say it.”

Finally, before the hour was up, in a low, squeaky, trembling tone, Hugo spoke. “Faun's Head, by Arthur Rimbaud.”

Miss T turned around, a huge smile on her face. “That was

excellent, Hugo.”

His friend smiled too. “See, I told you it was easy.”

By the time her limited insurance kicked in, three months had passed before they could schedule her surgery. No one knew exactly how the small tumor had leaked; maybe because so much time had lapsed since the diagnosis; maybe because the scalpel had accidentally sliced the tumor going in. Her oncology surgeon did a great job of cleaning everything up afterwards, making sure no cancer cells were left behind, but just to be sure he insisted she go through a double round of chemotherapy. The first round would be the standard twelve sessions. The second round would be a concentrated dose injected into the peritoneal cavity.

But she wasn't going along with this plan passively. As usual, Ms. T required other opinions before drawing a conclusion. She needed to cross-reference her options through exhaustive research. She performed her due diligence by making phone calls and scouring the Internet for all available information. Her gynecologist corroborated her findings. The second round of chemo would be unnecessary. The percentage of improvement between those who received this supplementary treatment and those who didn't was so minuscule it wasn't worth suffering the extra horror and its aftermath.

Her husband, who had initially broken down in sorrow, turned out to be an angel through the entire nightmare, drawing on reserves of superhuman fortitude. The post-surgery hospital stay would have been grueling had he not sat by her side holding her hand and reassuring her with smiles and kisses. He sweet-talked the nurses into letting him sleep over—a request they never allowed. They even provided a mat for him to rest on overnight. He brought in his freelance jobs and designed on his laptop while she hallucinated on the morphine. All night long Ms. T couldn't sleep because the opiate dripping into her arm kept whispering: America. America. America.

Ms. T was a vegetarian. She tried to interest the children in eating more vegetables—the missing component in their sugar, starch, and animal diet. To their astonishment,

she explained how she grew a variety of edible foods on her balcony and windowsill. She would bring soil and seeds and earthenware from home and teach them how to pot and water and nurture the plants. It did no good. They loved sprouting the seeds, but not eating the yield. The children groaned that they hated tomatoes. She spent a lengthy amount of time convincing them that tomatoes are not only nutritious and energizing but they are as sweet and delicious as candy.

At lunchtime, Hugo came running over excitedly to where Ms. T was standing in the shadows (after chemo, the southern California sun was too aggressive on her delicate skin). He grabbed her hand, opened it, and placed three cherry tomatoes in her palm, two yellow and one red. He could see she was delighted. But having second thoughts, before she could eat one, like a baby bird snagging a worm, his five small fingers pecked at her hand and snatched the red tomato right back out of her palm. He popped it swiftly into his mouth and chewed it up wholeheartedly right in front of her, the seeds and red pulp stuck between his teeth. This cracked her up. “I’ll bet you’ve never eaten a cherry tomato before, have you Hugo? This is your first one?” He nodded in agreement and ran off toward the parallel bars, his blue hood flapping. “I just knew it,” she said, smiling after him.

Raúl attended every chemo session. Painfully disheartened, he couldn’t design, so he would sit, round-shouldered and vigilant, on the chair next to his wife as she suffered the ordeal while reading a vegetarian magazine. Observing her calm exterior with curiosity, he appeared to suffer more than she. For she seemed relaxed and unaffected by the poison draining from the ominous bag above her head down the tube into the portacath implant burrowed in her chest. All previous attempts to mainline had badly bruised the fragile veins in her arms.

On the way home, after her first experience with the slow dripping toxin, she bragged to him that it was *a piece of cake*. “What is the big deal? Why does everybody make such a fuss about it?” But by the third session, it hit her that chemotherapy is progressive. The poison builds up, killing you by degrees, until it overwhelms your mental and physical

resistance. Then, out of nowhere, the neuropathy would kick in. The pins and needles in her hands and feet drove her crazy. Suddenly, she would rub her hands furiously. Or she would stomp her feet and dance around in a circle on the kitchen's polished linoleum.

Her husband would ask her, "Do you want a hat, honey?" She would look over at him puzzled. "You know," he added, playfully, "for your Mexican Hat Dance." She would burst out laughing and the laughter helped relieve the pain.

Once, she started sobbing. She rarely cried, so on this occasion, Raúl was troubled. "Are you in terrible pain, sweetie?"

"No," she responded, in a state of hysterics, "It's just that if I stand too long in one place, a pile of hair appears at my feet. Look at this?" She bent down and picked up a wad of hair strewn around her Doc Martens.

He tried to console her. "Well then, try not to stand too long in any *one* place."

This time her laughter reverted to more tears. "Look at my head? My hair is so thin you can see my scalp."

He addressed her tenderly, "It doesn't diminish your beauty in the least. It's always a pleasure to look at you. I'm surprised, I've never known you to be vain."

She was quiet for a moment. "It isn't about vanity. Much of a woman's identity is tied up in her hair. I feel so ugly." She continued her sobbing.

He threw his arms around her gently. "Ooh, you lovely thing, please don't feel that way, don't you understand? You're always beautiful to me. Always. It's just that now you happen to be my post-apocalyptic-punk-art babe." And he kissed her on the head.

She recoiled squeamishly. "Don't do that, you'll cause more hair to fall out . . . I'm starting to look like the Golem in the Lord of the Rings." She twisted her body into a ghoulish shape.

So he kissed her once on the forehead and twice on each cheek. "Yes, my *precious*."

She stopped crying and smiled, enlivened by her husband's devotion.

Hugo often waited for his overworked parents under Ms. T's supervision. His best friend couldn't always accompany him, so one time, when it was just Hugo and Ms. T, she opened a large black bag she had brought from home and, flipping it upside down, dumped out an endless stream of art tools and supplies onto his desk—brushes, tubes of paint, colored pencils, pens, markers, and blank canvases. His eyes popped seeing this magical invocation before him as if he had rubbed a lamp and every one of his wishes had come true.

“Hugo, I know I said you were no longer obligated to write or recite the poem. But I was struck by a strange idea. What if I leave the room while you recite into my recorder?” She activated the memo app on her phone. “If you can recite the entire poem, you can have everything in this art bag.” Hugo stared at her, astonished. “Would you like that? I know how much you love to paint. And you are so good at it. Do you think you could put these tools to good use?”

Re-opening the empty black bag, she reclaimed her harvest and walked away with the booty. Hugo was suddenly dispirited. “Whenever you are ready to recite, just go ahead, I will be outside the door working on lessons. Or you can do it tomorrow; or the day after; or the day after that. But just remember. You won't receive your prize until you recite the entire poem.”

The next day Ms. T played the recording of Hugo reciting the verses. The class listened open-mouthed, surprised and impressed. When everyone looked over to acknowledge Hugo for his daring accomplishment, they noticed his seat was empty. Hugo was hiding under his desk.

However, the following morning, after recess, Hugo was the first to burst into the room and run up to her, filled with energy and purpose. He proclaimed in a loud, but still wavering voice, “Ms. T, Ms. T, can I recite “Faun's Head” myself, in front of the class, not the recording, but just me?”

At first she was shocked. To hear his voice for the first time after all these months just about made her cry with joy. But she held back the tears. Instead, the corners of her mouth slowly lifted into a satisfied smile. “I would be delighted, Hugo.” For a moment she wondered if maybe his best friend had some

influence on him? Perhaps it was all those art supplies? Or maybe his voice on the recorder didn't sound so bad after all? But none of that mattered.

Hugo stood proudly at the front of the class. His blue hood usually covered most of his face. But now he pulled it back onto his shoulders. Outside, the weather had shifted over the last few days from the usual L.A. sunny skies. Clouds gathered and a few drops of chilly rain fell here and there on the playground as the wind shook the trees. Ms. T tried to suppress a cough—this residual daily hack had begun months ago and seemed to persist, much to her annoyance and discomfort. Her doctors couldn't find anything wrong and thought it might just be allergies.

Hugo recited the first line timidly, but soon pronounced every long and difficult word with accuracy and confidence: “Among the leaves of the grove, green nook sprinkled with gold, in the uncertain forest that blossoms with spectacular flowers . . . a startled faun opens his two eyes wide and bites the red flowers with his white teeth.” As Hugo continued, his shaky, squeaky voice found solid ground and deepened its resonance. When he reached the poem's finale, Hugo slowed down and took a deep breath: “. . . his mouth explodes in laughter beneath the branches. And when he has scampered—like a squirrel—his laughter still trembles on every leaf, and one can see, awakened by a bullfinch, the Golden Kiss of the Wood, pulling itself together again.”

Hugo himself couldn't stop trembling with laughter. Silence filled the room as Ms. T and the class were left speechless. His own white teeth in contrast to his dark brown skin seemed to take a bite out of that moment and store it in everyone's memory. From this day forward, no one could shut Hugo up.

And no one ever discovered the reason for his selective silence and why, out of the blue, he would suddenly become so gregarious. There were faint rumors that Hugo had encountered an older neighborhood boy playing with a loaded firearm. But lacking witnesses or Hugo's own corroboration, the rumors were as fanciful as a poem. All Ms. T cared about was that Hugo had climbed his way out of a handicap. And on his own time. She was only there to assist the process. Encouraging kids was her job. She was, after all, the one

minding the store.

That evening, she lay in bed thinking about her day. Outside the window, leaves rustled as the wind ripped through the branches of the trees. A confident drizzle tapped at the glass letting her know she was vulnerable, yet safe. The long effort and determination she had taken with Hugo had paid off. She thought of the look on his face as he read out loud to the class for the first time the last line of the poem, pulling himself together again.

These reflections made her happy—her life in America, her school children, her marriage. Snuggled up and intimate, Raúl held her contentedly while he purred in his sleep. Not wishing to wake him, she tried to suppress a cough. But in this instance, her effort and determination were futile. For all along her chest, over each of her ribs, she could feel a tickle roll upward, slowly, toward her mouth—where it exploded into a consonant. Maybe a K or maybe a T. Under the soft, even rain, the branches quivered and sighed, gradually lulling her to sleep. And as she drifted off, she could hear Hugo’s laughter still tremble on every leaf.

Faun’s Head

Among the dense leaves of the grove
green nook sprinkled with gold
in the uncertain forest that blossoms
with spectacular flowers where the kiss sleeps
wild and rushing through the splendid embroidery
a startled faun widens his two eyes
and bites the red flowers with his white teeth

Stained and crimson like old wine
his mouth explodes in laughter beneath the branches
And when he has scampered—like a squirrel—
his laughter still trembles on every leaf
and you can see—awakened by a bullfinch—
the Golden Kiss of the Wood
pulling itself together again.
—Arthur Rimbaud

(This poem is public domain and translated here by this story’s author)

J. Williams

False Truth

I pulled the plastic tray with a half-steaming, half-still-cold Salisbury steak dinner from the microwave, ready to sit in front of CNN for an evening of palavering pundits and pols. Of course, the phone rang. It was my client, Bart Munson, candidate for governor.

“Tommy, meet me at the pub immediately,” he said.

“Maybe later? I just—”

“*Now.*” He clicked off.

An interrupted evening is an example of what makes me a worse-for-wear middle-aged schlub. I’m ground down from years on the road, eighteen-hour days ‘nourished’ by missed breakfasts, grab-and-gobble lunches, and rubber-chicken dinners, topped off by boozy late nights with reporters. Political campaigning is a lifestyle incompatible with marriage, as I proved twice. Folks tell me I look like Humphrey Bogart, only heavier and four-eyed.

I sighed, shoved the dinner into the fridge, and made my way to our usual joint, Off the Record. That’s a pub situated in the shadow of the state capitol, and a watering hole for seekers and sellers of political access. I pushed through the door and spotted Bart.

Jerry the bartender greeted me, “Hey, Mr. Keller. Scotch and splash, right up.”

On the bar in front of Bart, Jerry placed a cocktail napkin printed with the slogan, “I approve this beverage.” He set a drink on it, a Mojave martini—a gin drink with no vermouth, no olives, no shaking, no stirring.

My humor aspires to be as dry.

Bart picked up his drink and his suit coat from the adjacent barstool and walked towards the back where it would be more private. His shirt was soaked with sweat. Had he jogged from campaign headquarters?

We slid into a booth for our tête-à-tête. Bart’s campaign ads showed him with a newscaster-handsome face, graying temples, and gleaming smile. The man sitting across from

me was not smiling. His eyes scanned the room, checking for nearby ears. He leaned in, hunching over the table. “A reporter called. She claims to have a source on that old rumor saying I went AWOL from the National Guard.”

“Who is it?” I asked.

“She’s surely not from the *Henderson Herald*.”

“I meant who’s the source, but okay, *where* is the reporter from if not the *Herald*?”

“That’s the reporter’s name!” he hissed. “Shirley K-n-o-t-t.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish.” He took a deep breath. “I was reviewing today’s polls when a call came in. The front desk sent it to me because senior staffers were out for dinner.”

“Senior staffers” included me as communications director for the campaign, and “out for dinner” seriously oversold my miserable microwave meal.

He continued, “So I pick up and give the caller a hearty ‘Hyello, this is Bart Munson and I’m working hard to be your next governor!’ She says she’s from the *Herald* and spells her name. She starts right in claiming to have a source that I didn’t complete my Guard training or other duties, and asked me for confirmation.

“I froze. I managed to sound calm and asked who was saying that? She said she was—quote—not at liberty to say, and asked again for a response.

“I ducked by saying I hadn’t met her and didn’t know she reported politics, was she new at the *Herald*? She said she had other reporting duties but had a source about the Guard.”

Bart’s a good guy, but I’ve seen him under pressure. I imagined his hands sweating, making the phone slippery, and him passing the receiver from hand to hand so he could wipe them on his pants.

It’s 2006. His Guard stint was decades ago. There had been vague mutterings, questions in prior campaigns that got no traction. But this was somebody not asking about his service but outright stating he was AWOL. Bart’s opponent, Buster Shaw, could make something of that even without proof.

Treacherous questions can surprise during campaigns. Fortunately, this was on the phone and not live TV. What’s a candidate to do? Lie? They said after Watergate it’s not the

crime, it's the cover up. Saying "no comment" sounds guilty. And since the question was about himself, Bart could hardly say, "Let me check on that and get back to you."

Bart should have referred the call to me. It's my job to know how to defer, deflect, distract, defuse—whatever is necessary. As it was, we didn't know the story's source. Maybe there was no source. What if this was simply a hack reporter fishing for a damaging response? I asked Bart what he said.

"I said I didn't know what her 'source' was smoking, but I stand by my record. I said, 'I've served faithfully as a state legislator, and intend to serve as governor.'"

Standard political practice: sidestep an annoying question with a Non-answer Answer.

"She said the National Guard acknowledges I was inducted but has no records of my service. I said they lost the records and it's up to them to find them. Then I asked if she was familiar with my tax reform plan? She interrupted and asked if I had a copy of my service records.

"I was exasperated, so I went with the 'Hello? Hello? Are you still—?' routine and disconnected."

The Non-hang-up Hang-up. Rare, but effective in a pinch.

Bart called me immediately after ending that call and high-tailed it to the pub where we now sat.

I said, "The *Herald* is like a small-town weekly shopper that happens to print daily. It proves Jefferson County is replete with birds in cages and puppies being house trained, otherwise there'd be no reason to subscribe."

Bart picked up his martini and knocked back the remaining third in one gulp. "Haaaah."

Yikes. Even across the table I could feel the burn trailing down his throat.

He sat back. "Sheesh, she had me sweating. So, there's nothing to worry about?"

"Hell yea-uh! If they print you were AWOL, papers, TV, press across the state will report that a story was published, even if they don't themselves investigate it. It's the meta-story: if you can't report the story, report others' reporting. Shaw won't even have to claim it's true to keep it in the news." I switched to my rather good impression of Buster Shaw's drawl, "I know folks's sayin' Bart Munson was Aaay-WAWL,

but I'm jes' stickin' to the issues.”

That's the Non-mention Mention. Talk about something by repeating frequently that you are not talking about it.

“Okay, Bart, I'll check out this Shirley Knott—jeez, comedian parents?—and find out what she's got. But I've got to know: what is the story?”

Bart had not practiced law in years, but as an attorney he would have advised a client to tell him the whole truth. Nothing is worse for a defense than being surprised, either in court or on the campaign trail.

He sighed. “It was Vietnam; I didn't want to go; I graduated college; I signed up for National Guard to avoid the draft; then I went to law school. That's it.”

Bullet points. I liked that Bart could speak very concisely for a politician. But I didn't like what he said. If it was so simple, why did the reporter's question have Bart literally sweating?

I probed. “Did you make friends in the Guard, anybody who'd remember you and could verify your story?”

“The *Capital City Courier* four years ago found guys who remembered me. They printed that, and haven't mentioned it since.”

“But if somebody has proof?”

“The Guard confirmed I showed up, but my training records were lost or destroyed.”

“But if they're not sure?”

“Hey, whose side are you on? Why would something from thirty-five years ago matter to voters?”

My lips scrunched in dissatisfaction. I thought, If hearing about it made you sweat, then you know why it matters. I tried another tack. “If the rumor gets attention, maybe we can do something else like demonstrate things you would have learned. You were trained on an M1 rifle? You can still clean, load, and shoot an M1, right?”

“I haven't touched a gun in years. I mean, I wasn't the best soldier, this was a long time ago, and my mind has since filled up with stuff other than guns.” A politician, he automatically added, “Of course, I fully support the Second Amendment and citizens' rights to bear arms.”

This was bad. The military had switched to the M16 by the

time the Vietnam War started escalating, and training would have drilled out of a recruit the indiscriminate use of the word “gun” for rifle.

Bart’s a solid technocrat, not a slick politician. As a state rep and senator he was known for workmanlike legislating and good constituent services. He didn’t make outlandish promises and so wasn’t a typical ‘lying politician.’

But Bart was lying about his Guard service, and that would make my job doubly hard. I not only would have to keep the press away from the story, but with Bart not confiding, I wouldn’t know where the landmines might be. If it’s denied and proof comes out, the mud splatter would embarrass me and bury the campaign .

It would be a major setback for my career. With a few good wins I could be a first-tier operator able to expand Thomas Keller Communications with hired foot soldiers in the field. Politicians would come to me. I could stay put, restoring a non-nomadic life, perhaps one worth sharing.

I didn’t have a choice. If I quit Munson at that point in the campaign season, I couldn’t get another gig for two years.

As for the campaign? I wasn’t a true believer—just a salesman. But I felt Bart Munson would be a better governor than Buster Shaw, a radio talk show host who’d never run anything but his mouth.

I would rather put out the story, the true story, but under my control, releasing it some Friday night when few pay attention. Bart would quietly mention “a youthful indiscretion” followed by, “If I’ve offended anyone, I apologize”—the Non-admission Admission, and the classic Non-apology Apology.

The next day I did a computer search and called my down-state contacts. Turned out, Shirley Knott reported society and styles for the *Henderson Herald*. I met Bart again at the Off the Record and told what I’d found.

He said, “You’re kidding, right? Why’d a society reporter call with allegations about my Guard service? Does Henderson even have ‘society?’”

“Dunno. Maybe she met somebody at a begonia club luncheon whose husband was in the Guard. Could be anything.”

“Okay, where are they on this?”

I unfolded a newspaper clipping. “The only mention they’ve printed was in a front page story, but deep, after the jump. Shirley shared the byline with their hard news reporter. It was after she talked to you. It’s a summary of statewide political events that says, ‘The *Herald* spoke directly to Sen. Munson and asked about rumors he had shirked his National Guard duty. The senator replied that he “stands by his record.” Since they didn’t dispute anything, no other press picked it up. They don’t have enough evidence, so they’re sitting on it.”

“Then it’s over?” the candidate asked.

“Not until November 7th,” I sighed.

The receptionist buzzed my intercom. “Tommy? I have a reporter on line four. Says her name is Shirley Knott. Can you believe it?”

I picked up.

Shirley identified herself and said, “I’m calling about Senator Munson’s claim to have served in the 799th National Guard Brigade.”

Time for me to punch the SPIN CYCLE button—deny, defy, charm, disarm. “That was a long time ago. Bart doesn’t have much to say about it, doesn’t remember very much. And anyway, the state faces a number of issues now that deserve the next governor’s attention far more than irrelevant ancient history. I’ll send you a copy of Bart’s position paper on agriculture. You’ve got farms there in Jeff County, right? Maybe—”

“Excuse me, Mr. Keller. Almost every family in this state has someone who is or was in the service, or they have friends who are or were. And they may be deployed now in Afghanistan or Iraq, in harm’s way. Those folks will be interested to know what Senator Munson’s experience was, and why such an ordinary step in his career should be shrouded in such mystery.”

Oh, hell, I thought, she might be a yokel working for a rag, but she’s righteous. She knew she was onto something and was biting hard. Part of my stomach tightened, another part turned. I said, “Do you have a source? Who is it? What makes you think they’re credible? And what are they alleging?”

“I won’t say at this time. We only want the truth.”

I suppressed my Jack Nicholson impression—*you can’t handle the truth!*—and settled for, “You’ve printed that Bart stands by his record. Why don’t we leave it at that and go on to—”

“Why would a bigtime political pro such as yourself be reading the teensy-weensy *Herald*?”

“It’s my job to stay on top of all distractions”—including the ones we manufacture—“and possible untruths that might be promulgated by our opposition”—or by us against them.

Some things you don’t say. I’m not cynical, just experienced. Politics ain’t patty cake.

We were alone in the campaign conference room. Bart wedged a chair under the door knob to make sure no one could barge in.

I opened the dossier on his new nemesis compiled by a private investigator. I read aloud, “Shirley Mae Knott—”

“No way!”

“—forty-eight, never married, lives alone, owns a two-bedroom in Henderson, debt free—”

“Sheesh.”

“—has reported for the *Herald* for, uh, twenty years—”

“What kinda car does she drive?”

“What? What the hell difference does that make?”

“You’re telling me everything else.”

“Let me finish. An English degree from Steadman College. No professional awards. Two cats. I half-expected a brother named Gordy N., but nope.”

“So how the hell does such a do-nothing nobody from nowhere get a source claiming I skipped out on the Guard?”

“It’s not only Woodward and Bernstein who can crack a story.” In my reporting days, I’d bylined a few scoops.

“Come on, Tommy, what do we do?”

“My best guess is the *Herald* is holding off because they have one witness—but only one—who was in the Guard who says they remember you were, too, but you went AWOL. Without the records, it’s a he said, he said. What do we do? We wait.”

Bart scowled. “I’m raising and spending two million bucks

a month on this campaign, and working a hundred hours a week, every week. The closer to Election Day this thing drops, the less we can do about it. If they are purposely waiting just to screw me and support Shaw, we can claim it was an October Surprise.”

“If voters even half-way believe it, they won’t care if it is dirty pool,” I said. “Shirley is right. With the connection voters in this state have to the military, this campaign will be in the toilet if they think you went AWOL.”

The candidate twisted in his chair. His cheeks bulged as he exhaled through tight lips. “Can we lean on the editor of the *Herald*? The publisher?”

“And confirm for them they’ve got the scoop of the year?”

“We can’t buy her off . . . or can we? Maybe she’d like a spot in my administration?”

“Keep your enemies closer? Get real.”

“Maybe she’d like a new car? You didn’t tell me what she drives.”

I fought but couldn’t stop it: my eyes rolled.

He barked, “Come on, there’s gotta be something.”

“Yeah, she’s got the two cats. We’ll spread a rumor that she’s a crazy cat lady.” I was frustrated. By not facing up to the threat, Bart was increasing the danger.

Time to take it up a notch. I fixed my gaze. “Bart, tell me. Where are your records?”

“I told you, they’re lost. The Guard said publicly they don’t know what happened. They did say the colonel that ran things—whatzisname, Nickerson? Dickerson?—had fouled up lots of things, including the office stuff. He was drummed out back in the seventies. A drunk. I bet he’s dead by now.”

“Okay, the Guard doesn’t have your files. Do you?”

“Why would I have them? They’re gone, I told you.”

I looked up at a light fixture in the grid of the suspended ceiling. I hated how the cheap fluorescent bulbs put out a grayish blue light that sucked the life out of everything in the room. As in movie interrogations, I wanted a bright light to shine in Bart’s eyes, a light to suck the truth out of him.

I suggested, “Come clean. It was a youthful mistake. Throw yourself on the mercy of the voters. I’ll have cover, a distraction ready so we can bury this when it comes out.”

“No.”

“Bart,—”

“I said, no.”

“Come on!”

“No, dammit!”

“Why the hell not!”

He glared at me in the sudden silence. I glowered in return. I waited him out. It could have been a full minute.

Bart sighed. Quietly, with eyes moist and throat tight, he said, “It’s my mom. She’s still alive. She was so proud It would—kill her—to find out.”

“Find out that you . . . ?”

Bart exploded. “I skipped out! Alright?!” His face went crimson. “Fuck! I hated the nonsense, the total fucking nonsense of the drill training.” He took a deep breath then said, almost a whisper, “So I—I just took off.”

Looking at the ceiling, he spat the details. “I called a friend; he picked me up; I stayed at his place; we partied. I spent days watching TV; we smoked so much weed you wouldn’t believe. After the ten weeks that I would have been training, I slunk home, expecting the Guard would’ve called my parents and they would disown me. Hell, I figured I’d be arrested.” He heaved a sigh of relief. “But, the damndest thing: no call, no arrest. Like I said, administratively, at that time, at that base, they were totally screwed up.

“I would have forgotten the whole thing, but in ’78, when I first ran for state rep, everybody knew you had to have volunteered, been drafted, done the Guard thing, had a 4F, or skipped to Canada. My parents told everybody I was in the Guard, so I was stuck with it.”

Getting this story out of Bart had been like pulling teeth, extracting tooth by tooth, truth by truth. I asked, “And that’s it? That’s everything?”

Bart looked around and found a trash can in the corner to stare at, avoiding my eyes. “My first job after law school was being a flunky in the state attorney general’s district office in Greenville. I assisted on a land transfer from the state to the Army to expand Camp Bullard. That’s where my training was.

“We had meetings on the base. I concocted a reason to stay

late in their office. When I was alone I rummaged through every damn file cabinet. Finally, about four in the morning, I found my folder. It had fallen off the hangers and was flat on the bottom of a drawer.”

“And you took it?”

“It disappeared,” Bart said silkily. But then, holding his hands out, he said, “Look, why do you think I’ve worked this hard to be an effective, to be an *honest* public servant? I screwed up, but a second chance appeared. I took it, and I’ve done my best to make it worthwhile.”

I put my feet up on the conference table, and clasped my hands on my stomach, mulling options. Even with no file, there was still risk. If Bart destroyed the only file—and it seemed likely there were no copies, otherwise one would have surfaced—the *Herald* could still print the story. Even if their source was not fully credible, attention could surface sources that were. That would be fatal for the campaign.

Having the file out of circulation did not solve the problem.

I said, “Bring me the file.”

“It’s gone. Disappeared, I told you.”

“Bring it tomorrow.” I rose heavily from my seat and removed the propped chair from the door. I needed a drink and a think. I headed to the pub.

The next morning, Bart walked through the big room at campaign headquarters dodging youthful volunteers as they skittered about trying to look busy. He made eye contact with me and tossed his head toward the conference room. I joined him. Bart again did the wedged chair thing, making sure the chair legs were digging into the carpet.

I considered the purple and white “MUNSON06” banner on the wall of the conference room. I thought it was stupid to mash the 06 against the name making it hard to read.

I’d been informed it looked ‘hi-tech.’

Bart spoke first. “Supposing you had my Guard file, what would you do with it?”

“What I *am* going to do is give that information to Shirley Knott.”

Bart’s jaw dropped. “Shirley Knott! And kill my campaign? You don’t look good, either, Tommy, if this tanks.”

“Listen. We don’t know *who* her source is. It sounds like a person with a plausible story, but we can’t do anything about it because we don’t know who or what. But why is the *Herald* sitting on the story? They need more evidence, some corroboration before publishing.” I plopped my feet on the conference table. “But we can neutralize Shirley and the *Herald*, discredit them, thus their current evidence is discredited, too.”

“The cat lady thing? What!”

“Give me the file. I need to know what I’ve got to work with.”

Bart stared at me. I stared back.

He said, “Listen, Tommy, you better know what the fuckin’ fuck you’re doing.” With that, he opened his briefcase and produced a tired manila folder with smudgy handprints and the crescent of a coffee stain on it. He slid it across the table.

I sat up and opened the file. I looked at it for ten minutes while Bart sat, then paced, then sat, then paced again.

I read carefully, examining each page front and back, holding some pages up to the light as if I were a Florida chad checker.

“151 pounds? You were thin back then,” I said.

“Who wasn’t?” Bart snorted. He hugged himself like he was cold.

After another minute, I closed the folder. “I can make this work.”

“I still don’t see how giving my file to that, that woman gets me off the hook.”

“Not the file. I said I’d give her the *information* from the file.” I put my feet back on the table, hands behind my head. I tried to keep a poker face but the glimmer of a grin played across my face. “What your Colonel Dickerson did was write a letter to the Pentagon, with a copy for you and a copy for the files, stating you left base without permission and were in breach of your obligation, et cetera. However, all three copies went into the file folder. None was sent. But you know all that.

“The plan? I’ll anonymously send that information to Shirley, and—”

“It’s the smoking gun!”

“Yes, it will confirm what she suspects. And I hope she prints it. Ideally, they’ll print photos of the pages.”

“But how does—”

I put an edge in my voice to quell the interruptions. “I’ll send a copy of this letter. That is, I’ll send the *contents* of this letter. It will look very much like this original”—I waved the Colonel’s letter—“and it will be the same, word for word, but it will not *be* the original. I’m hoping the *Herald* will be so ecstatic to have the smoking gun they’ll rush the story to print and everybody else picks it up.”

Bart cringed, no doubt imagining a press feeding frenzy, his career circling the drain.

“See, the *Herald* is a two-bit rag, and they won’t have the resources to notice what I send is a forgery,” I said. “But the city papers and TV will. Or, no-lifers on the internet will. *That’s* what discredits Ms. Shirley Knott and the *Herald*—their big story will be based on a fraud. Any other evidence they have becomes tainted. They’ll have a true fact wrapped in a false package. A false truth.”

I, Tommy Keller, had invented the Non-truth Truth.

Bart admired the elegance of the plan for a minute, then jumped on an apparent flaw. “But—what if the *Herald* commits journalism and has the document checked out? Like at the state police lab? Or a university?”

“A journalist’s kryptonite is not the story that’s too good to be true, it’s the story that’s too good to check. And if they do check it? They already have something, but something not solid, not corroborated. Then, they get something spectacular that seems to prove their case but find it’s a forgery. Their first guess will be that it’s from Buster Shaw’s campaign and conclude whatever they have already is also some sham from Shaw. They either go after Shaw or drop it altogether.”

“This sounds good. It sounds brilliant, in fact. But it’s not foolproof—is it?” The grayish blue light on the candidate’s face accentuated the lines of late middle age, highlighting his hunger for reassurance.

Foolproof? I reckoned that to run for governor without resolving this AWOL secret made Bart a 40-proof fool.

“No,” I said, “not foolproof. But it’s what we got.”

I took the perilous papers home and got to work on my computer. I scanned the Colonel’s letter to get the letterhead

and signature. I downloaded a font that was a good match for the other documents. It looked like a typewriter with ink stuck in the crannies of certain letters and had other imperfections characteristic of mechanical typewriters.

There was a sheet in the file with handwritten notes about some issue completely unrelated to Bart Munson. But the back of that sheet was blank and could be used for the letter—it was the same paper with the same yellowness of age as the other documents. I figured it would support the story by looking like someone had mistakenly written notes on the back of the Colonel's letter, but filed the letter anyway.

I prepared a package containing some innocuous forms from the file—Bart's indicative data, such as name, birthdate, address, height and weight, and a form he signed when he showed up the first day—along with the transcribed copy of the Colonel's letter documenting recruit Munson had left the base without notice or permission. The first items would bolster authenticity, the latter plainly stated Bart's infraction.

But upon careful examination of the letter, it would be noted that the date when Munson was discovered missing—June 14th—had the ordinal indicator in superscript, something simply not possible with typewriters common in the seventies. That would prove the letter to be fraudulent.

In the clipping from the *Herald*, I highlighted the reference to the rumor about Bart being AWOL. I stapled the clipping to a cover note where I wrote in block letters with a red marker, "THIS IS WHAT YOU'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR. THE TRUTH MUST GET OUT!"

The spycraft didn't have to be perfect, just good enough to get the *Herald* people excited, yet imperfect enough that credibility would collapse under scrutiny. Oh, and it must not be tied back to the Munson campaign. Nothing I was doing seemed illegal—I was, after all, revealing the truth about Bart—but the scheme would blow up if someone figured out the Munson campaign fake-snitched on its own candidate.

I wore cotton gloves when handling the papers, and used a cloth and then a slice of stale bread to remove earlier fingerprints from the papers. I'd learned the bread trick from an artist who used it to clean drawings. There could be residual oils in the paper, but I had not heard of those being specific enough for forensic identification. To mail the

large envelope and get a postmark from within the *Herald's* coverage area, I drove to a suburb of Henderson. I paid cash at the post office which used a computer-printed sticker for the postage. I didn't handle the sticker, and didn't lick the envelope, so I left no DNA.

And what to do with the original letter? The true truth? I returned it to the candidate: it was Bart Munson's to come to terms with.

Back home that evening, I poured a glass of my best Scotch, put my feet up, and pondered.

Is this any way to run a democracy? Is it okay for the voters to not know something important about Bart Munson? Or to know it but not believe it? Politics, and especially campaigns, are maelstroms of assertion and spin, beliefs prevailing over facts, yet the nation depends on voters to sort it out. Still, partisanship is a powerful filter which can make even smart voters impervious to facts.

What do voters want? Voters say they want sensible policies, but the taller, better financed, better looking candidate has the edge. They say they want to hear the issues, but savor scandals and irrelevancies. They say they want better schools, a stronger military, more services, but vote for lower taxes. They say they want positive campaigns, but will vote for negative campaigners.

Sure, politicians lie. So do voters.

Must leaders be perfect? There was the long-time politician, revered by his party and respected by his opposition—a lion of the legislature, but also a lush and a letch.

What's the role of a campaign functionary like me? My job is to make the best case for my candidate, and, sometimes, the worst case for the opponent. The voters are the ultimate judges of what is fair or not, what is important or not. But how often does it come down to which candidate the voter would rather have a beer with?

And lastly, the press: the public depends on reporters and their outlets to convey truth and expose falsehoods, all on deadline and with diminishing resources.

So, what would Shirley Knott and the *Herald* do with the truth of Bart Munson's very brief military career?

The next morning's weather was clear and pleasant. On my walk to headquarters, I was feeling good about our chances. The campaign was moving ahead, much like the city bus I watched pull away bearing a MUNSON06 ad.

An elderly lady, also watching the bus, gave a palsied tug to my jacket sleeve and asked, "Tell me, please, what is a Munsonog?"

Perhaps the campaign still faced some self-created headwinds.

I did my regular work of scheduling events and press conferences, chatting up reporters, and checking out the young female volunteers.

Our pollster collared Bart and me. She told us, "We're up four points since last week. If we keep it, it's the margin we need. Is there anything on the horizon, any October Surprise to worry about?"

I caught Bart's eye and answered, "Surely not."

He grimaced and shambled away, a bundle of twitches and tics. He stopped in his tracks when shouts and whoops erupted from staffers gathered around a TV.

Bart and I joined the crowd to see breaking news. Live video showed police cars with flashing lights. Officers and detectives milled around a crime scene. Firefighters struggled to free a shirtless blubbery bald middle-aged man stuck in a bathroom window behind a local motel. It was Buster Shaw. The TV reporter said police were questioning "a woman not Mrs. Shaw" in the motel room.

Campaign workers laughed and danced, but my stomach sank. The second rule of campaign communications: when your opponent steps on a landmine, don't distract from their disaster. Weeks of campaign coverage repeating images of Buster flailing in the window would be pure gold, but reports of Bart's AWOL, even if subsequently neutralized, could push Buster's brouhaha off the news.

Could I intercept my smoking gun package before it got to Shirley? I grabbed my jacket and ran for my car. I hoped to figure a finagle on the way. The first rule of campaigning: when you think it's over, it's not over. Call it the Non-ending Ending.

Janet Barrow

The Crossroads

I first heard a tourist refer to my city as *audacious* on a street corner outside of a travel agency three years ago. “It certainly is an audacious little city.” The second time, I was at the market watching a group of vultures squabble over a bag of chicken bones. “The audacity of this place.” After that, a month or two might go by, but I’d always hear the word again.

In my little English thesaurus, ‘bold,’ ‘impertinent,’ and ‘defiant’ are listed beside *audacious*. How strange, I have always thought, that so many of our visitors fix upon that same word, as though their minds are sieves, filtering through its synonyms before catching against its hard acid sound—*audacious*.

On the day Chaupi first appeared, I had taken the canoe upriver from our house, zagging into the narrow channels of Iquitos district so that I could tie up at Qori’s dock. I was heading to Belén Market to buy *ají*, oil, and *uvachado*, and though there were plenty of docks closer to the market, I had learned to tie the canoe only where friendly eyes could keep it safe.

“Qori Sonqo,” I yelled up the ladder to his house, too lazy to climb up.

“Oye, Rumi,” he said, running out the door like a dog, “I’ve got news. New developments with *Señorita Camila*.”

Señorita Camila was the girl that Qori had been in love with as far back as the wind blows. She helped her mother run a fruit stand about two kilometers north of Qori’s house, and every Saturday morning, he walked all the way to her stand to buy *plátanos* and *camu camu*, although there were six *tiendas* before hers that sold all the same things for the same prices. Qori’s ‘developments’ with the *Señorita* tended to fall into the category of ‘she smiled at me,’ or ‘our hands touched when I handed her the money.’

“This one’s big,” he said, slipping his shoes on and sliding down the ladder.

“Sure it is.”

We took our normal route, north a couple of blocks and then west, so that we could cross through the Plaza de Armas. By the time we passed the Casa de Fierro, an anomalous two-story building designed by the French architect Gustave Eiffel, Qori had only just finished going over the details leading up to his ‘big development,’ somehow managing to stretch what must’ve been a thirty second interaction into a ten-minute discourse.

“And then she gave me a mango, Rumi! A mango—for free! And all she said was, ‘It should be ready by tonight. Don’t eat the whole thing yourself.’”

Qori had gotten himself so worked up that the people on the balcony bowed their heads down to look at us. He didn’t seem to notice.

“A mango, Rumi! What do you think it means?”

“Probably that she’s happy to have made so much money off of you over the years, and since she’s not planning on putting out anytime soon, she figured she’d throw you a piece of fruit to keep you swimming at the end of her line.”

“Don’t talk like that, Rumi,” he mumbled, “It’s bad luck.”

In the Plaza de Armas, the Igelsa Matriz, a neo-gothic Cathedral painted eggy yellow and trimmed in the rich dark red of dried blood, stood like an apparition, strangely firm in its sense of being.

“What are the characteristics of a mango,” Qori was asking, as much to himself as to me.

“They’re native to South Asia,” I said, “so maybe she’s trying to tell you that you’re as foreign to her as the Chinese New Year.”

“A foreign fruit,” Qori echoed, mulling it over in his head, “But we’ve got tons of mango trees here as well. So maybe it’s that there’s something different about me, some kind of unknown essence. I’m mysterious, but not impenetrable,” he concluded, nodding to himself.

I laughed. “Mysterious in scent, maybe. When was the last time you washed yourself?”

On the clock below the belltower, the long hand pointed to the four, which was written in old Roman Numerals, four single I’s instead of the traditional IV. It was nine twenty in

the morning, and as Rumi rambled on about his mango, I was suddenly struck by my first theory. La Iglesia Matriz, La Casa de Fierro, El Ex Hotel Palace, it was really quite simple. What were Baroque and Rococo, let alone any metal fixture ever even touched by Gustave Eiffel, doing here, a thousand miles outside of the world, where hollow spaces filled with snakes and psychedelic cumbias collided, each night, with the wave of insects that precipitated out of the steaming air? What did that other world have anything to do with thatched-roof houses that were made of dried reeds and soft wood? What did it have to do with the tannin that flowed into the water and gave it the same color that sun and history has given us, or with floating universes, where you could fall asleep in a canoe, looking up a meter into the cool underbelly of your stilted home, and wake up after the rain with your nose brushing against its sagging wood?

A child would know that history had made the collision of the two worlds, ours and the one outside, inevitable. Money might not grow on trees, but rubber grows inside of them. So was the audacity that of the outside world, of cuacheros who came to steal our resources, and brought us—a civilization bent on survival in the heart of the Amazon River Basin—the frivolities of whimsical architecture? Were *they* the audacious ones, for treating us to the same fate as all who have ever been colonized?

“Or perhaps I should be asking what sets a mango apart from other fruits?” Qori dragged on, “They ripen to red, instead of brown. Green to orange to red. Leaf to fire. That’s it,” he cried, “Sunset! She wants me to meet her at sunset.”

But I don’t think that’s it, after all. Those who have never been colonized wouldn’t use a word like audacious to describe an act of colonization. They’d use rounder and softer words—a pity, they might say, or a shame.

By the time we finished our shopping, Qori was so convinced that the mango was an invitation to a sunset walk along the malecón that I was almost starting to believe him.

“What should I wear,” he asked.

“If she shows, and that’s a big if,” I told him, “she won’t care about your clothes. Just be sure to wash and pull a comb through your hair.”

Qori walked me to the end of his dock. It was still hours before sunset, and usually we would have sat and told stories or gone fishing together, but I could see how anxious he was.

“Good luck, then. Try not to say anything too stupid.”

I had nearly finished untying my canoe when I heard a heavy sigh behind me.

“Qué pasa?” I asked, but when I turned around, there was nobody there. *Strange*, I thought, *the dancing heat must be playing tricks on me*. Then I looked down into the canoe.

“Oye, Qori!” I yelled, “Come look at this!”

Qori came thundering down the dock, and the sigher in my boat, startled by the commotion, jerked awake. She was a Peruvian Inca Orchid—a hairless dog. She had wrinkly grey skin and a single poof of orange fur between her ears that made her look like the dog of a punk musician.

“You know they’ll never let me keep her,” I said.

But she was determined. After a prolonged struggle, Qori and I succeeded in hauling her onto the dock, but as soon as I pushed off, she jumped into the water and started swimming after the canoe. I figured she’d tire herself out after a few minutes and swim back, but by the time I was wading through the water foliage of Punchana district, where the piranhas gathered in swarms, she was still following me.

“Fine,” I said, slowing down pull her inside, “But they’re still not going to let you stay.”

I was right about that.

“You forget the eggs and come back with an overgrown rat,” my father yelled, “Ay carajo, Rumiñawi! We don’t need any more mouths to feed.”

I put her out on the dock and told her she had to go. But that night, when I went outside to piss into the water, she was still there. And again the next morning. In the evening, I snuck out and brought her a few scraps of chicken. By the third day, there was nothing my father could do.

“Fine,” he said, “But if she shits on my floor even one time, she’s gone.”

As persistent as she had been from the beginning, she was very self-conscious. She couldn’t eat if anybody was watching her, and it took her five nights of sleeping on the floor before I was finally able to coax her onto the end of my mattress for

a belly rub. When at last she rolled over, relaxing along the length of her sturdy spine with her legs flopped open like a frog, I noticed a strange mark at the base of her rib cage. At first I thought it was a birthmark. But when I touched it, I could feel that it was raised slightly above the wrinkle of her grey skin. It was a tattoo, I suddenly realized. Some kind of symbol resembling a P turned on its side, whose hump, instead of forming a half moon against the hard line of its back, pulled out into a spiral.

I decided then to name her Chaupi, a Quechua word which means ‘between,’ because I figured I had met her at the crossroads between her life that had been and her life that would be.

The following weekend, she went with me to pick up Qori on the way to the market. While I tied the canoe to Qori’s dock, she barked her way to the base of his house ladder.

“Oye, get lost,” Qori shouted, stumbling out onto the platform. “No way,” he laughed then, recognizing her at once by the poof of orange hair between her ears, “I can’t believe they let you keep her.”

“Didn’t have much choice—” I started, but he’d already dipped back inside. He emerged a moment later with a lucuma fruit cupped in his left palm.

“You’re not the only one who got lucky,” he grinned, “What’s your best bet for the time and place of my next meeting with Señorita Camila based on this?”

He tossed the soft green fruit down to me.

“No way,” I exclaimed, and Chaupi barked twice, imitating my surprise.

That day was the first in what became our Saturday ritual. Qori would spend the first half of the morning filling me in on the details of their last date, and then we’d use the second half to try to guess the meaning of the newest gift. Chaupi joined in the conversations as well, barking whenever one of us exclaimed, and panting heavily along when we broke into fits of laughter. In the weeks that we guessed wrong, Señorita Camila would give nothing to Qori, and he’d have to wait until the following week to test a second hypothesis. Slowly, through the stories that Qori told, through the time that we spent trying to divine the meanings that she had threaded

into the flesh of gifted symbols—one day a baggie full of aguaymanto, another a browning pear or a dusty avocado—I began to feel that I knew Señorita Camila just as well as Qori did, and maybe even better.

I was the one, after all, who figured out the solitary green grape, after he'd gone nearly a month without seeing her. I knew what the plátano meant right away, recalling the story she'd told Qori months ago about the time her little sister had bitten into one not a moment after a wasp had alighted on its peak, and how they'd taken her to the neighborhood shaman when her throat swelled closed, unable to pay what it would have cost to bring her to the city hospital.

Qori was often careless in the way that he listened to her. She'd give him a deep purple plum, and I would remind him that that was the color she'd worn to her brother's wedding, but when I pressed him for where her brother had been married, he wouldn't remember.

"Have you ever mentioned me to her?" I asked timidly as we wandered in the market one afternoon between rows of hand-rolled cigarettes and dead chickens, plucked and hung by the neck on iron hooks.

"Couple of times, yeah," he shrugged.

When I realized that Señorita Camila knew about me, something changed. For a long time, I'd been harboring a dark thought, something I'd been using Qori's newfound brightness to cover over. If Señorita Camila was half as insightful as she'd long compelled Qori and me to be, it would be obvious to her that Qori was no longer the one solving her riddles. She lived in symbols—in colors that carried the weight of her ancestors, in smells that told you the rain was coming and just how hard it would come. For her, the history of the world could be contained in a single piece of fruit. These were things that Qori did not understand, as much as he may have loved her. *He doesn't deserve her*, I suddenly thought, the sentence floating up from the darkness and alighting on the surface of my mind, as clear as if I had said it out loud. *He doesn't deserve her*, I repeated to myself. But maybe, just maybe, I did.

In May, Señorita Camila gave Qori a cherimoya—a soft green jungle fruit with a faceted surface that makes it look

like a grenade. Cherimoya tastes like a cross between an apple and a pineapple, with some kind of flower crushed into it, and though it's stringy and sinewy, it's white interior, punctuated by large black seeds, is as creamy as a papaya.

Qori went for the most obvious reference—the grenade. He took his canoe to the curve in the Naynay River where the Spanish Jesuits are said to have first arrived, more than two-hundred and fifty years ago. He waited for her in the fading light, captivated by the ability of trees and plants to grow over history, as if nobody had ever landed right there, bursting into the jungle and forcing religion upon its people, whom they called savages even as they raped the women and beat the children.

But Señorita Camila would never have treated such a mysterious fruit so literally. A fruit already steeped in resemblances, to other objects and other tastes, could not allude to anything so incontestable as the violence of the Spaniards. It had to be in reference to another kind of mystery or symbol. A myth or a piece of folklore, perhaps.

The young fisherman's daughter, I suddenly remembered. She had disappeared the year before and was rumored to have been eaten by Pirarucu, the son of an ancient Amazonian chief who was banished to the river for his cruelty and forced to live as a great red monster—a fish the weight of three grown men, with a flat head and thick bony scales that are sold in local markets to daring women who use them as nail files. For Camila, the facets of the cherimoya were nothing like the grooves of a hand grenade. Instead, they were the scales of a great fish.

She *was* waiting on the riverbank, I realized. Just not the one where Qori had gone to look for her. Without pausing to think, I began to make my way there, Chaupi trailing behind me. It wasn't until after I arrived that I remembered the cherimoya had not been given to *me*, and that if Señorita Camila did show up, she wouldn't know me from a stranger at the Saturday market.

"Oye, you brought Chaupi," I heard a voice exclaim from behind the thicket Chaupi had chased a frog into, "And she really does look like a punk rocker!"

I froze. She was there, and I hadn't done anything to

prepare. I hadn't washed or put on deodorant or thought of anything to say.

"Qori?" She laughed and stumbled into the clearing where I was standing.

"Oh, sorry," she said when she saw me, and she quickly averted her eyes toward Chaupi, who she reached down to scratch between the ears. After a few moments, she looked up again.

"This is Chaupi, though, isn't it?"

I nodded.

She had two beautiful black braids, as thick as mooring ropes. Her eyes were shaped like almonds, but each was as wide as a yawn, and her nose curved so gracefully into her cheeks that I almost overlooked her black nostrils, which punctuated her face like commas, reminding one to pause at every interval, to stop and breathe. They were a necessary detail, for something about her thin, ripe skin, or perhaps it was the impossibility that such a tiny body could carry the weight of those braids—something made you want to take her in all at once, as though she were a hallucination, liable to disappear at any moment. But then, every time she moved her mouth or let a new expression take hold of her, it was obvious that you'd misunderstood entirely. She was not something that could be taken in at all.

"So then you must be Rumiñawi," she concluded.

"How'd you know?"

"Qori talks about you all the time. I'm surprised he didn't introduce us months ago."

"Right," I said, nervously digging my toe around in the dirt.

"Where is he, anyway?"

"Oh, um . . . actually I sort of had my own last-minute guess on this one. Qori had already gone to look for you somewhere else and I just—I was just curious to see if I'd figured it out. Besides," I added, "I'm not superstitious, but if there's any truth to those stories about the fisherman's daughter, you shouldn't be out here alone."

"Hmmm," she hummed pensively, scratching Chaupi between the ears again, "so do you want to take a look around?"

"Okay," I said, my voice as flat and scratchy as sandpaper.

And then, trying to redeem myself, “Qori’s told me a lot about you, too.”

“I know he has,” she said, her eyes meeting mine in a fiery flash, “You’ve been helping him unravel my symbols.”

I smiled. “Yes.”

That evening, I told Camila my first theory about why the tourists call us *audacious*.

“No,” she laughed when I’d finished, “It’s got nothing to do with the Spanish. It’s us they’re talking about. Not the architecture, and certainly not the Spaniards.”

We’d gone walking into the shipping yard, and now she pointed up at a huge ocean vessel.

“Look at that ship, Rumiñawi,” she said, “That ship will be filled with timber, oil, aguaje, camu camu, rum—all the riches of our world—and then it will travel three-thousand six hundred kilometers down the Amazon, until it falls out of our world and into the Atlantic Ocean.”

She looked at me for a moment before continuing.

“This is the largest city on earth that can’t be reached by car, did you know that?”

I shook my head and watched her wisp of a body as she climbed up the side of the large ship, beckoning me behind her. I began to climb as she spoke, her words as spellbinding as the thick braids that hung down her back.

“They call us audacious, Rumiñawi, because we are a world hidden within the world, something that most people have forgotten is possible. They think the world is modern and knowable. But we are none of those things. We are audacious because not only do we exist, but here, where the plants grow taller than men and can swallow you whole, we flourish. They can’t dismiss us as they do the small jungle tribes, which they presume live as they do only out of ignorance, only because they don’t know anything else. Having known the outside world, we remain here, with no roads leading out and no desire to escape. And so, in the outside world, where the desire to escape is all that exists, they call *us* audacious, for daring to live as we do.”

I did not think of Qori when I leaned in to kiss her. If I had, the shame alone would have burnt through my cheeks. They would have been left swollen and red.

The following Saturday, before I met Qori to go to the market, I found a bright yellow maracuyá on the mat outside my door. The week after that, it was a guanábana. It took me three weeks to tell Qori what had happened, three weeks that he went looking for her when I had already found her. When at last he told me he was going to the riverbank where the fisherman's daughter had disappeared, I couldn't take it anymore.

"You won't find her there, Qori," I burst.

That was the moment I learned that love is as capable of destruction as it is of creation.

For a long time afterwards, I tied my canoe to Qori's dock every Saturday morning on my way to the market, but when I called up to him, he was never home. Then, one day, Chaupi and I returned to find a note crumpled up inside of the canoe.

"If you leave your boat here again, I'll float it into the channel and wait on the dock for it to be stolen."

After that, I took a mototaxi to Belén on Saturday mornings.

Six years passed in the audacious city. Camila and I got engaged, and I started teaching English at an elementary school in Belén. From time to time, I saw Qori walking through the Plaza de Armas, or I passed him in my canoe, fishing on the riverbank with his father, and we both nodded cordially, never saying a word. Chaupi continued to follow me everywhere, though with age, her front right leg grew stiff, and she developed a growth underneath the skin of her back, and one just behind her left ear.

On a Saturday in March, Chaupi and I took the canoe out fishing. She lay in the quiet sun while I waited, looking into the hazy tannin-infused water and thinking of ancient river myths. We floated past a group of villagers hauling the carcass of a cow toward the riverbank. It was an old practice. Throw in a carcass, and a swarm of piranhas will flock to it, clearing the water upstream for bathing or washing clothes until they grow hungry again.

I took the opportunity to guide us downstream, where all manner of fish would soon congregate, drawn by the scent of blood. Within a few minutes, I had caught two catfish, and Chaupi busied herself pawing at them while I waited for a

third catch. I was trying to remember if we had any banana leaves left at home to grill the fish inside of when Chaupi sat up with a jerk. She began to bark and strained out over the back of the boat, her reflection shifting in the water like a blooming ayahuasca vision.

“Quiet,” I hissed, “You’re scaring them all away.”

But she wouldn’t stop. She stretched so far over the canoe’s edge that I imagined her falling in, her body transformed into a piece of fresh meat the moment it hit the water.

“Alright, alright,” I conceded, rowing us in the direction that she was indicating.

A few meters downstream, I saw what she was fussing over. There was a struggle in the water. Something large was thrashing just below the surface. With all manner of river-monster legends flickering through my mind, I pulled Chaupi firmly under my left arm and began paddling awkwardly with my right. But she wasn’t having it. She bared her teeth and struggled against me, and in a single fluid movement, she broke free and leapt into the water in pursuit of the thrashing creature. I cried out after her and tried to pull her out of the water, but again and again, she defied capture, her hairless skin as slick and slippery as the scales of a fish. The boat rocked violently and threatened to swamp. And then I saw it. It broke the surface for a split second before disappearing again beneath the commotion. A hand.

Piranhas can strip the flesh off a cow in under ten minutes. That puts a seventy-kilo adult at around five. There was no time to lose.

Chaupi had made her decision, and I didn’t have time anymore to try to get her back in the boat. I paddled as hard as I could into the thrashing water, my eye pinned to the place where I’d seen the hand emerge, strain upwards towards nothing, and slap back beneath the water. I thrust my arm beneath the surface in search of a body, but the moment I touched the water, a white-hot pain shot up my arm as though I’d forced it through a tangle of barbed wire. I screamed and recoiled. I then spent an illogical moment trying to breach the water with my gaze, but it was opaque as mud, a whirlpool of tannin and kicked-up sediment. Just as I began to entertain the idea that the whole thing had been a trick of the light, that

what I had seen was a flipping fin rather than a desperate contortion of human fingers, I spotted Chaupi to the left of the canoe. She squealed in pain, but as I reached out to grab her, she dove beneath the surface.

“Chaupi!” I screamed. But just where she had gone under, a head bobbed up above the surface. She was pushing the body up, I realized. I grabbed an arm and pulled, almost falling out the other side of the canoe. It was a young man, and the water was as red as a ripened mango.

As he lay in the belly of the canoe, I turned back to the river and thrust my arms in again. I caught Chaupi by the nape of her neck, the firmness of my grip hooking the teeth of a piranha deeper into her skin, so that as I hoisted her aboard, it stuck to her, flopping back and forth against her hairless back. I reached for my fishing knife and rolled Chaupi onto her side so that I could isolate the fish against the wood. I stabbed straight through it, waited for it to stop squirming, then pried its jaws open and flung it back into the water to be devoured by its own.

Only then did I return to the young man, who was unconscious and so covered in pulsing blood that I couldn't see his face. I rolled him onto his belly and hit his back until he let out a few weak coughs. Then I took off my shirt, tore it open, and wrapped it around his abdomen to stop the bleeding. At last I returned to Chaupi, but there was so much blood that I couldn't figure out where to apply pressure. I cut open the canvas bag I had brought our lunches in and pulled it tight around the length of her body.

I paddled then until the lactic acid in my arms was so palpable that I imagined my sweat would burn through the hand of anybody who dared to touch me. I watched from a hazy distance as I dripped blood into the water and schools of fish bumped against the canoe in pursuit of fresh meat, trailing us until we were picked up by a motorboat.

I didn't hear my own voice when they asked me what had happened, nor did I feel the tears begin to stream when I realized that Chaupi had stopped breathing. I didn't even have it left in me to be surprised when somebody wiped a wet cloth over the young man's face and I saw, through the bruising and swelling, that it was Qori. As I climbed onto

the docks, I just kept pressing Chaupi's wrapped body into my chest, and together we boarded the ambulance that was waiting to take Qori.

A week later, my mother was serving ají de gallina when a knock came at the door. It was Qori. His arms and face were covered in newly formed scabs, and he stood stiff and unsure, poking his shoe around in a small inconsistency in the wood.

"Qori," I said softly, allowing my gaze to fall to the circular inconsistency as well, as though it, rather than my old friend, was the most interesting thing on my doorstep.

"I wanted to say thank you," he whispered, still without looking up.

Just then, my mother burst through the door.

"Dios mio," she exclaimed, "Qori Sonqo? I haven't seen you in years! Come quick," she yelled over her shoulder to my father, "Look who it is."

Unmoved by Qori's half-hearted protests, she insisted on pulling him inside to eat with us. At first it was uncomfortable, but soon I was grateful for her chattiness. She asked him all of the questions that would have felt forced coming out of my mouth, that would have only sharpened the distance between us, shining a light on everything we no longer knew about one another. When she told him that I'd gotten a job as an English teacher, he laughed.

"Of course you did," he said, "You're the only person outside of the tourist industry who speaks a lick of it. The administration will never figure out what nonsense you're stuffing in the kids' heads."

And when my mother worked it out of him that he was dating a graduate of the National Amazonic Peruvian University, a Limenean who'd come to Iquitos to study marine biology, I couldn't help myself.

"She chose well, eh? A fish magnet to show her around the river."

Soon enough, we didn't need my mother. Just as easily as the psychedelic cumbias and insect songs fill the night-time air along the malecón, we'd begun to fill in the distance between us.

Qori and I went to the market to buy dragon's blood ointment a few weeks later. Afterwards, we sat down in the Plaza de Armas, and Qori took off his shirt so that he could apply the ointment to his scars. At the base of his ribcage, I noticed one scar in particular. It looked like a P turned on its side, and its hump, instead of forming a half moon against the hard line of its back, pulled out into a spiral.

Kathryn Li

Kingdom of Bees

You haven't spoken to anyone besides your mom since the beginning of summer break. The friends you would normally see outside of school have moved away. So every day while your mom is at work, you bike aimlessly through the streets near the apartment complex where the two of you live. She works a lot, sometimes even at night—last year she told you that she had become a custodian, and to this day the best definition you have of that word is the way she avoided your eyes when she said it, the hesitation in her voice. Anyway, it has been a long two weeks, and at this point you are willing to investigate almost anything. You find yourself squeezing the worn handbrake on your bicycle while passing through the park when you notice movement in a grove of trees.

The local park is a regular stop on your daily route despite being outside your neighborhood; during hot summer days, water fountains and public restrooms have a special importance in your mental map of the world. You leave your bike against a fence circling the park's playground, make a quick detour for water, and approach the grove cautiously.

Once, it was a sandy clearing surrounded by a ring of trees, with pristine wooden picnic tables in dappled shade. Inevitably, teenagers happened. Traces of their activities remain: crushed cans and miniature bottles kicked under prickly bushes, phrases carved into the table legs with a variety of tools. A large oak tree towers over its neighbors at the head of the grove. Several faded kites flap uselessly in its branches, their mangled frames sticking out at odd angles, their line weaving chaotic webs among the leaves. Below, a man and a girl surrounded by balloons are hanging a banner which reads, "NEIGHBORHOOD BBQ TONIGHT! ALL ARE WELCOME!" The picnic tables are covered in a plastic imitation of red gingham held in place by coolers of different sizes. Most of the trash has been swept into a neat pile in a corner of the grove, and two backpacks lie at the foot of a portable grill.

By the time you finish taking everything in, the banner has been hung, and both the man and the girl have noticed you. Before you can back away, the girl runs up to greet you, her dark pigtails bouncing behind her. The two of you are the same height. “Are you here for the barbeque?” she asks. “We’re organizing it for our whole neighborhood! But we’re not ready yet—Dad, when are we starting?”

The man checks his phone, running a hand through the graying stubble on his chin. “Uhh . . . I bet most people won’t show up until six or so.” He strolls over and crouches down next to the girl. “Hey there. What’s your name?”

You clear your throat and straighten up so you can look him in the eye. “Eddie.”

“I’m Hana!” the girl replies. “And this is my dad.”

Hana’s dad chuckles. “Nice to meet you. Do you live around here?”

Your view is obscured by trees, but you know that the edge of the park is lined by neat rows of wide roofs. You ride there when you’re in the mood for smooth roads. “Umm, sorta?” you say with a shrug.

“Well, you’re welcome to join us tonight. Bring your family and friends too—we can’t eat all this food by ourselves.” He gestures at the setup, looking almost apologetic.

Hana grins at you. Her smile is brilliant; it makes you feel like you’ve been friends for years. You swallow and nod, hoping she can’t tell how light your insides are. Then, you’re racing home on your bike at a speed you didn’t know you were capable of.

You wait outside your front door on a flight of steps overlooking your apartment complex’s parking lot. You can recognize the sputtering of your mom’s car before you see it, and when she arrives at her numbered spot, you are there to meet her. You knock at the driver’s window and hop around in anticipation until she rolls it down, and then you smother her with a hug and a flood of words. Your description of the interaction at the grove comes out jumbled even though you’ve rehearsed it over and over in your head—how could you possibly describe that smile? Still, she can sense your excitement, and when you tell her about the barbeque, she relents. “But only for a little while,” she says. “I have a night shift to get to.”

The grove is filled with chatter. The adults stand in small groups, eating delicately from paper plates while the younger children play tag at their feet. When you spot Hana's dad, you break away from your mom and weave through the small crowd towards the grill. Hana is helping him serve hot dogs, her face illuminated by fairy lights. "Oh, it's you!" she says when you reach her. "Here, how many do you want?"

"Where are you sitting?" you blurt out as you hold up two fingers.

She gives you two hot dogs on a plate and leads you to a nearby picnic table. A girl and a boy kneel on one of its benches, poring over a large notebook and eating in silence. They look strikingly similar in their matching uniforms, and the right sides of their collared shirts are marked with an unfamiliar logo. As Hana waves to them, the girl narrows her eyes at you and asks, "Who's *that*?"

"Don't be mean! We're friends. Eddie, this is Claire and Connor. They're twins! We go to the same elementary school."

"Middle school," Claire says.

"We just finished fifth grade," Hana explains.

"Me too," you say.

Connor acknowledges you with a sharp nod but is clearly more interested in the notebook. Claire continues to stare at you.

You point at the notebook and ask, "What's that for?"

"It's a secret," she snaps, hovering over it protectively.

Hana rolls her eyes. "Let him see it, Claire. It's not even your game."

Claire frowns but moves aside to make space for you at the table. Hana flips through the notebook to a map drawn in colored pencil. In large letters at the bottom of the page are the words, "THE KINGDOM OF ETHER."

"This is a story I created," Hana says. "It takes place in space! See, this is our floating castle." She places her finger on a familiar blue-and-yellow structure in the middle of the map.

"That's the playground," you say.

"Yeah, but *imagine* it's a castle in space. And we all live here and play different characters—"

"I lead the space patrol and fight the Quasare dragons!"

Connor says. At the edge of the map is a clump of trees labeled “DRAGON TERRITORY.” You look up at the branches hanging over the grove. Silhouetted against a darkening sky, the broken kites start to resemble pairs of outstretched wings.

“And I’m the queen.” Claire tosses her light curls.

Hana turns to you. “You should join! It’s better with more people, and I’m only partly playing because I have to keep track of everything that happens in the game. Dad, can Eddie play with us?”

“Sure . . . as long as his parents are okay with it.”

You realize that you’re still holding the food you meant to share with your mom. “Wait, let me go find her.”

She is standing right where you left her, watching the barbeque from the entrance of the grove. She turns to leave as you give her the plate with the remaining hot dog, but you tug at her hand and drag her over to the grill. Hana continues explaining the game once you return to the picnic table, but you keep glancing at your mom as she talks to Hana’s dad and an elegant woman who must be the twins’ mother. Your mom carries herself with dignity, but she looks small and stiff in her work clothes next to the elegant woman, who seems determined to outshine her. The woman is wearing all white, and the perfect waves in her hair cascade across her shoulders every time she laughs. When a bee circles your mom, trying to get to her food, the woman exclaims, “Oh, it likes you!” Your mom shrinks away from the bee with a nervous laugh. But when she notices you watching her, she flashes you an encouraging smile, and you can tell that she is providing you safe passage into the Kingdom of Ether.

Every Monday and Thursday after lunch, you meet Hana, Claire, and Connor at the playground with the supervision of Hana’s dad. In the first half of the afternoon, everyone goes about their normal routines. Claire, the queen, takes her place at the top of the castle and surveys her vast kingdom. Hana, the seer, performs scrying rituals in a shady chamber and reports her visions to Claire. Claire instructs Connor, the patrol leader, to keep the peace among the masses, or to investigate a disturbance at the border, depending on what Hana sees. Connor brings you scrap metal and debris from

his expeditions, and you, the tinkerer, fashion weapons and armor in your workshop for him to use. You wish your role didn't involve taking orders from Connor all the time. It's hard to argue with Claire, though, so you take comfort in the possibility of proving yourself in other ways during the second half of the afternoon.

Today, while Connor is carrying out his patrol, Hana signals to him from the top of the castle. He marches over dramatically and says, "Queen Claire! We discovered a crashed spaceship at the border."

"Take me there," Claire says. "I want to question the captain."

"Can I come with?" you ask.

"This has nothing to do with you. You stay here."

Hana rushes to your defense. "But Eddie's the tinkerer. I bet he would know a lot about the ship."

Claire makes a face. "Okay, fine. Let's go."

You gather at the edge of dragon territory. "The captain of the ship says that she and her passengers came from a kingdom with a very cruel leader," Hana reads from her notebook. "They stole a ship and ran away. But the Quasare dragons attacked them when they passed through here. They almost didn't make it."

"How do we know they're not lying? They might still be dangerous," Claire retorts. "We should just leave them here."

"Does anyone on the ship understand how it works?" you ask, sensing an opportunity to contribute to the conversation.

Hana shakes her head. "Just the captain. And she only knows how to fly it."

You turn to Connor. "What if I fix the ship, and you make sure they leave our kingdom afterwards? Then we don't have to take them in, and they might help us in the future."

"Oh, that's smart," he says. "What do you think, Claire?"

You hold your breath while Claire considers her options.

"Hmm . . . alright," she says, putting on an authoritative tone. "Connor will guard the ship while Eddie makes his repairs." Hana sees the triumph in your face and gives you a discreet thumbs-up before opening her notebook to record these changes under your character descriptions.

At 4:15, a white SUV pulls into the parking lot near the playground. The car's shiny exterior is blinding in the afternoon sun. Through the windshield, you can see the elegant woman's sunglasses against her pale face. Claire and Connor dash off together after saying a quick goodbye.

"Why are they in such a hurry?" you ask Hana.

"They have swim practice, or art class, or something like that. Their mom signs them up for stuff and doesn't want them to be late," she says. "She's really strict."

The two of you walk to the bench near the water fountain, where Hana's dad has been reading and watching over your bike. "Do you need a ride home?" he asks, peering over his book as you reach for your helmet.

"No, I can bike," you say, shaking your head vigorously.

"I know I've said this before but . . . if you ever do, just ask. It's no problem at all."

You and Hana wave at each other as they drive away, and then you head home.

On a humid day late in June, you find Hana and her dad alone at the park. "Claire and Connor's mom told my dad weeks ago that they have a swim meet today, but he totally forgot until just now," Hana says, opening her notebook as the two of you sit down at a picnic table in the grove. "I was running out of story anyway, though, so I was going to come up with some new things that might happen. Do you have any ideas?"

You both tap your fingernails against the table for a few minutes, trying to think. "What if the people living in the kingdom were unhappy and wanted a new leader?" you say.

"Ooh, because the dragons get too close and start destroying some of the towns?" Hana scribbles notes onto a blank page as she speaks.

"The commoners that survive come to the castle and ask Claire for help."

"She sends Connor and his men to fight off the dragons, but it's not enough. The commoners want a stronger leader and start planning a revolution."

"Can I do it?"

"Do what?"

“The revolution.”

She stops writing and looks at you in surprise. “You mean, you want to replace Claire?”

“Yeah.”

“Well . . . it is more fair that way. Claire shouldn’t be telling us what to do *all* summer. But we have to plan it carefully. She won’t go along with it if you just bring it up.”

While you and Hana are writing out your revolution speech, there is a low rumble in the air. The branches above you begin to sway in the wind, and before Hana can close her notebook, the pages are covered in dark spots of rain. Hana’s dad appears at the entrance of the grove. “Come on!” he calls, gesturing towards the parking lot.

You scramble back to the playground to fetch your bike. Hana and her dad have almost reached his car when he realizes that you aren’t following them. “Eddie, I can’t let you bike home in a storm. Just come with us this time.”

He’s right. Your clothes are soaked through, and you’re shivering so much that you can’t hold the handlebars of your bike still. You climb into the back of his car with Hana. He loads your bike into the trunk before getting into the driver’s seat, and the three of you sit in silence, listening to the downpour outside.

“Alright, then,” he says to you after a minute, still cheerful despite the rain dripping from his chin. “Where are we going?”

“So if you go out this side of the parking lot and turn right . . .”

Your apartment complex is a five-minute drive from the park, but each pause between the directions you give to Hana’s dad feels unbearably long. Hana is staring out her window with a dazed expression, as if she didn’t expect a neighborhood like yours to exist so close to her own. When you make eye contact, she quickly looks down, twisting her hands together in her lap while her face turns red.

Over the next two weeks, Hana introduces the threat of the Quasare dragons and the growing unrest among the citizens of Ether. Claire and Connor are oblivious to your plan. Hana distracts them with visions of the dragons’ terrifying powers, and you practice your revolution speech while pretending to tinker away in your workshop. One day,

she returns from a meeting in the grove with the twins and whispers, “It’s time!”

She leads you to the grove. “What’s happening?” Claire asks.

You take a deep breath. “For too long, the Qua—Quasare dragons have been allowed to destroy the homes of our citizens. Many are dead, and the others have nowhere to go. This cannot continue! The rev—revolutionaries have surrounded the castle and ap—appointed me as their leader. I demand an election to decide which one of us should rule this kingdom.”

“You?” she scoffs. “No way. That wasn’t even your own speech.”

She wouldn’t be allowed to treat you like this if you were king. You feel yourself tensing up, and Hana grabs your wrist to hold you back.

“Besides,” Claire continues, “there’s only four of us, and I bet it’ll be a tie.” She shoots a meaningful glare at Hana’s hand.

Hana lets go of you abruptly. “I—I can flip a coin.”

“No. If you think you’re a better leader, Eddie, then prove it. Let’s have a contest. Whoever slays a dragon”—Claire points at the kites in the oak tree—“and brings it back first will rule the kingdom.”

This was not part of Hana’s plan. She turns to you and says quietly, “I don’t know what she’s doing, but it might be your best chance. If you want to do this, go before my dad sees us.”

You try to picture what your world would look like from the top of the oak tree. More certainty, more freedom, perhaps. No more tiptoeing around everyone else the way your mom did when she was here for the barbeque. Your heart rises in your chest, straining towards the kites fluttering high above you. “Okay,” you say. “I’ll do it.”

Connor goes to the base of the tree and uses a stick to draw a line in the sand. You and Claire take your positions behind it, and he says, “On your marks . . . get set . . . go!”

Claire is up over the first branch by the time you get a good foothold. The bark scrapes at your leg when you pull yourself up, but adrenaline reduces the pain to a warm pulse. As you climb towards a kite hanging on your side of the tree, you see

that Claire is having trouble with hers; the line is so tangled that it can barely move. When she tugs at it, the frame flails in all directions, and she has to lean back to avoid getting scratched. You clamber onto a branch within arm's reach of your kite, but as you try to pull it loose, there is a sharp, burning sensation near your wrist. An angry welt begins to form on your skin, and suddenly, over the rustling of all the foliage that Claire has displaced, you hear a buzzing sound. "Claire, look out!" you yell.

She whirls around, her face contorted with rage. "What? What do you want now?"

Connor also notices the swarm of bees above her. "Get out of the tree!" he shouts. "Bees!"

Claire screams and thrashes about, swatting at them with her arms, but as the buzzing intensifies, she gives up on the kite and starts lowering herself through the branches. Realizing that you are at an advantage, you seize the frame of your kite and try to free it from the branches so you can take it with you. But the bees sense your movements and surround you, stinging your arms and hands until you can no longer grip the kite. Refusing to leave it behind, you hug your swollen arms to your chest, curl up until your forehead rests against the branch you are sitting on, and squeeze your eyes shut.

"Eddie! Come down!"

You shake your head. There is some shuffling in the sand below you as Claire reaches the ground.

"Eddie, listen to me!" Hana is pleading with you. "This isn't about the game anymore. We'll say you won—you can be king—right?"

You open your eyes. Connor is nodding in agreement. Claire seems to be resisting the idea, but Hana elbows her hard, and reluctantly she nods at you as well. In that moment, you find yourself gazing down into the faces of three children, desperate and powerless after all.

". . . Claaaaire, Connnnor, where are you?" a shrill voice calls from a distance.

The others spin around to face the entrance of the grove. You freeze and press yourself flat against the branch.

"There, under the big tree," Hana's dad answers. "Do you

see them?”

The elegant woman walks into the clearing, removing her sunglasses and blinking to adjust her eyes to the shade. “What’s taking so long? We’re going to be late for—” she gasps when she sees Claire’s bee stings. “Baby, what happened to you?”

Claire points at your hiding spot in the tree as she tearfully recounts how you tricked her into disturbing the bees’ nest, her wails growing more and more incoherent.

“Connor, is that true?” the woman asks.

Connor gazes at Claire, then at Hana, and finally up at you. Slowly, he turns to his mother and nods.

“Unbelievable,” she says, the word dripping with disgust. To Hana’s dad, she continues, “I didn’t bring my children here so you could let them run around with any random kid off the street . . .”

You want to scream at her, but your voice is choked with tears. You scramble out of the tree, run to your bike, and ride away before they can hear you cry.

“Looks like you’ve had a long day too,” your mom says when you arrive home later than usual. “Oh, did you get stung by something?”

“Yeah, I was at the park . . .”

“Come to the bathroom. Can I take a look?”

You sit on the sink counter and tell her what happened while she washes your face and cleans the stings with a towel. “You didn’t know the bees’ nest was there, right?” she says, handing you a pack of frozen peas for the swelling. “So it wasn’t your fault. Claire and Connor shouldn’t have lied about that. I bet they were scared of getting in trouble themselves. Press that where it hurts . . . I’ll grab another pack.” She smiles at you on her way out, but not before you notice the exhaustion in her eyes. You hold the frozen peas against your left arm and swing your legs in the air while thinking over her words.

The doorbell rings, and you hear your mom going to answer it. You stop fidgeting and listen to the muffled voices as they clash and recede, one slowly overpowering the other, but you can’t make out any of the words. Finally, the front door closes. When your mom doesn’t return, you jump off the counter and

run to the window just in time to see the white SUV drive away down the street.

Your mom is leaning against the front door, her face pale. “How did she know we lived here?” she asks.

“I’m sorry—Hana’s dad drove me home once—it was raining—”

“No, it’s fine, I—I was just surprised. But . . . promise me you won’t go near them again?”

You nod. She pulls you in for a hug. “I wish there was more I could do, Eddie. You don’t deserve any of this.”

You hold each other for a while. Eventually, she sighs and says, “I’m going to be late for work. Dinner’s in the kitchen. Can you help me with the dishes after you eat?”

“Okay.”

That night, you lie awake in bed for so long that you hear the front door unlock as she comes home from her night shift.

Lunchtime comes and goes. You should be at the playground by now. You watch the minutes tick by on the kitchen clock, feeling increasingly restless. This game had been the highlight of your summer, and now—

You bike to the edge of the park. When you see that the playground is empty except for Hana and her dad, you relax and approach. Hana sees you first and hurries over. “Eddie! I was scared you wouldn’t come. Are you okay?”

You tell her about the elegant woman showing up at your apartment.

She clutches at her head. “Oh no . . . my dad can be so clueless. I’m really sorry—I don’t think he would’ve told her your address if he knew she would do that.”

“So . . . what happens now?”

Hana glances towards the grove. A cloud of static still twists itself through the trees, buzzing faintly. “Well, Claire and Connor’s mom isn’t letting them play with us anymore. The game doesn’t really work with two people, but . . . we can still hang out if you want! You can come over, or—” she falters, “or something. I don’t know.”

This is not the kingdom you wanted to inherit. Hana seems to recognize this too. You both stare at the ground helplessly until Hana’s dad joins and says, “Hey, Eddie . . . uh . . . we have

to go pretty soon. Hana has a dentist appointment today.”

“Oh. Um . . . bye, Hana.”

She gives you a weak wave as they leave but doesn't look you in the eye. You watch their car until it disappears behind the neat rows of wide roofs.

In the grove, the bees are waiting for their king.

Jan Allen

Outsourced

Outsourced. It was the only word I heard when our department head called the unplanned meeting. That was two years ago.

I can't say I was passionate about my job after 37 years, but when I was told it was gone, I felt like a toddler who'd had her blankie stolen by a Big Corporate Bully.

Our Corporate Bully offered us free classes through a career transition company on resume writing, networking, LinkedIn, and interviewing. One of my previous coworkers, Brenda, talked me into attending them with her. She thought going back to school might be fun.

A career coach perfected my resume, which consisted of no college degree and one job. Then I found myself sitting at an oval table in the networking class, with William—as written on his cardboard nameplate—to my right, Samuel to my left, then two gentlemen who shall remain nameless (because I've forgotten their names), and finally Brenda.

The instructor, Zoey, asked us to introduce ourselves. She looked at William, going clockwise, and he began.

"Hi, my name is William Dunn. It's nice to meet everyone today. I'm a certified public accountant specializing in financial auditing and . . . I'd like to put my expertise to work doing . . . Along with my 40 years of professional experience, I recently was awarded the . . ."

What the heck! I tuned out most of it, but I know an elevator pitch when I hear one. How anal retentive can you get? It's not like anybody in this room of hangdogs was going to offer him a job.

I was next in line. I sat up straight and smiled. "I'm Regina Reynolds," I said. I planned on adding something, not a 40-second pitch, but something.

I couldn't think of anything. "Hi!" I added.

Samuel and the two nameless guys sold themselves with their own presentations, of which I cannot remember a word except "Samuel."

Then it was Brenda's turn. "Hi, my name is Brenda Sawyer. It's great to meet you all. I was a contract analyst for corporate accounts in a medical device company for 34 years. I'd love the opportunity to put my skills to work in the medical device industry again or perhaps a medical research organization."

Et tu, Brenda? At least she'd written my elevator speech for me.

Turned out William, who blinked like there were errant fleas he was trying to dislodge from his eyeballs and licked his lips like they were salt-water taffy, was not anal retentive. Turned out I was unprepared and unprofessional.

For the next three hours, Zoey talked about Everything Networking. I wrote down that seventy-five percent of people find their next job by networking, only five percent by applying for posted jobs. Otherwise, my note-taking skills weren't as advanced as my aptitude for doodling daisies.

The next class was LinkedIn for Beginners. Samuel and the other two gentlemen were replaced by three young women with impeccably prepared speeches and attire. Their hair was professionally styled, highlighted or extended, they spoke in four-syllable words, and collectively they smelled like how I hoped heaven would. Where were the young women with nose rings that could easily be mistaken for boogers? That's who I wanted to compete against for jobs.

I sat next to Brenda this time, and across from William. The last time, when he sat next to me, my eyes had been drawn to his hands, which were constantly moving, kneading dough or keyboard typing or who knew what. This time William executed a table-top performance, using his forearms as windshield wipers, polishing the table with his shirt sleeves.

Naively, since the class had the word "beginners" in its title, I'd thought I was going to learn how to set up a LinkedIn account. Instead, Zoey talked about Headlines and Posts and Groups and Connections. This is what I can tell you about LinkedIn: No matter how proud you are of your 1971 VW van or that 35-pound brown trout you caught in Lake Michigan, don't pose in front of it or behind it respectively for your Profile Photo. What I can't tell you about LinkedIn to this day is how to set up an account.

Lastly was the Interviewing course. There were no familiar

faces in this class. Either the others had found jobs or tired of the process. I followed up with Brenda, and she told me the classes hadn't been quite as much fun as she'd imagined. Her husband was the CFO of a software company, so she opted for early retirement.

This is what I learned in class: Take the glass of water they offer you at an interview. If you can't think of an answer to one of their questions, taking a sip will buy you time. I learned that body language is more important than the words you say. I learned to always get their email so you can send a letter of thanks.

This is what I learned in real-life interviewing: I was never offered a glass of water. No matter how firm my handshake was, no matter how straight I sat, no matter how big my smile, I nonverbally communicated my age—or at least something close to it—57, much too old. As for thank-you letters, even the best detective in a Sue Grafton mystery wouldn't be able to uncover an email address for anyone.

For every twenty customized resumes and cover letters I sent out, I landed one interview. Whenever I did, I was composed, I was confident, I spouted correct answers. It was a sham, and they all knew it.

The interviewers were usually nice, but ten minutes in, they were no longer making eye contact with me, and twenty minutes in, they were no longer making eye contact with each other.

What I'd done for the past 37 years was highly specialized, and I'd dropped out of college to do it. I quickly realized I wasn't going to find a job with a salary anything close to what I'd been making. I cut back on spending, started interviewing for jobs that paid a lot less, and remained hopeful. At first.

It was interview number 13 or 14, probably unlucky 13, when one of the two interviewers asked me this asinine question: "If you were a superhero, what would your superpower be?"

I picked up the portfolio that I'd leaned against my chair, got up and walked out. I was four office doors down the corridor, about to turn the corner to the elevator, when I realized I could actually go back—they'd still be in shock, wouldn't they?—and say, "my superpower would be disappearing."

But the interview had already gone badly. I knew the

thanks-but-no-thanks signs by now. The elevator door opened, inviting me in, and I hadn't pushed the button. I still remember how I felt that day when I stepped outside. The sun sifted some rays on my face, and I felt euphoric, because I didn't have to send any stupid thank-you notes. But then a thick cloud blocked the sun. I remembered my dwindling bank balance, and I was scared out of my mind.

Soon I was applying for jobs that paid close to minimum wage while I worked nights as a waitress. I learned something: People who get hungry in the middle of the night don't tip. All my credit cards were maxed out.

The only good thing that had come from my job loss was my friendship with Brenda. One day we sat on her designer sofa. "It's a shame you don't have a rich husband like I do," she said. "Simon's happy I'm not working. He was jealous of that design engineer who flirted with everybody at our Christmas parties. I wish you could forget about job hunting, too."

It was 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and the two of us had drunk quite a few Black Russians. I liked White Russians better but felt I should forego the cream since I had no health insurance. "I know," I said, "bummer." I was concentrating on painting Brenda's toenails.

"Gina!" Brenda pulled her feet out of my lap and grabbed the nail polish from my hand. "We're onto something."

"We are?"

"Look at you," she commanded, "you could be gorgeous if you tried. And let's face it. Loaded old men want skinny women, like you. You're young, too, considering you'll be under 60 looking for some rich old fart who doesn't have much longer to live."

Brenda disappeared, but quickly returned with her laptop. Her fingernails tapped. Her eyes darted back and forth between the keyboard and the screen.

"InTunE dating looks good. So does WeMelodious and Looking-Woopies. We'll have to pay because that's where all the rich old men will be."

"I can't afford it, Brenda," I said.

"I'm paying. I'll get you a makeover. And some decent clothes. No offense."

“None taken.” I was wearing safety-pinned-at-the-waist sweatpants—the elastic at the waistband had forgotten its function months ago—and a frayed-at-the-neckline-and-sleeves T-shirt. I hadn’t combed my hair since Monday, and it wasn’t Tuesday. “But I can’t let you pay for all that.”

“Please let me.” She pressed her hands together in prayer. “Simon wants me to take up photography. This hobby will be much cheaper than a Nikon Coolpix.”

Brenda was a kid at a fireworks show. Maybe it was the Black Russians, but her enthusiasm was contagious. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt even a twinge of pleasure. Certainly not in the last year.

“Okay,” I said, “let’s do it.”

As Brenda studied the websites, a question flitted into my consciousness. I quickly shooed it away, but not quite quickly enough to forget what it had been.

What was the definition of prostitution?

There are two types of rich men. The first drives a Lexus, a BMW, or a Mercedes-Benz. He lives in a multimillion-dollar home and spends his winters far, far away from it. He leaves wads of cash in not-well-hidden places to test you, and you’d better believe he’s counted every last five. Oh, and he plays a lot of golf.

The second type of rich man lives in a modest home and drives a Ford or a Toyota. It’s tricky to tell the difference between a rich man in this group from a have-not-much. Either way, like the ostentatious rich man in the first group, he plays golf and has a housekeeper. But you can tell the rich man from the not-so-rich one by how many mailings from charitable organizations rest on his table. Also, the richer the man, the more his offspring’s expensive smiles resemble the bared teeth of junkyard dogs when they are introduced to you.

I liked Gus for being the second kind of rich man.

I liked that he wore a Timex watch.

I liked his smile.

I liked that he went to the gym most mornings to meet his buddies, walk the indoor track, and drink the free coffee.

I liked that some of the mailings on his table were thank-

yous from those charitable organizations.

I liked that his son and daughter and their spouses visited him often. They kindly close-lipped smiled at me.

Gus wanted to fly us to a place he co-owned in the Bahamas for the weekend but I didn't have a passport. So he drove us instead to the Upper Peninsula, where he rented a cabin on Lake Superior. He was hoping, he said, that the Northern Lights would show off for me.

Brenda didn't buy the lace bra and panty set I wore. I'd bought it online when I cashed in my 401k. The money wasn't going to last me to retirement, especially with the penalty I'd had to pay out, but it was getting me through for now.

Gus lay on the bed in his boxers. He'd watched me undress. I'd done it slowly, and I let myself be flattered that he had an erection, pill or no pill.

I didn't love Gus, but I'd had sex in my life with men I'd liked a lot less, and a few I even disliked in inexplicable ways. Yet, as I walked as sexily as I could toward the bed, I started to cry. My tears shocked me, perhaps more than Gus, and my weeping quickly transformed into gasps for air. I made it to the bed, which I sat on the edge of, and Gus shifted closer and rubbed my back.

"Oh, sweetheart," he said, "what's the matter?"

"I'm so sorry," I managed between sobs, "my father died Wednesday."

Gus sat up. "Gina, why in the world are we here?"

"No, it's not like that." I grabbed some tissues off the nightstand. "We were estranged. I hadn't seen him for 20 years. I didn't think I cared about it."

We sat on the side of the bed together, and Gus held me until I stopped crying. Then he guided me gently to a lying position and combed the hair at my temple with his fingers. I knew he wasn't expecting anything from me at that point.

I kissed him.

He asked me if I was sure. I nodded.

I didn't cry again until I heard Gus's sleep-breathing. My dad and I had been read-poetry-to-each-other close. He'd died 12 years earlier. This made me a prostitute, and also a liar.

“I can’t do this anymore,” I said.

I was sprawled on Brenda’s couch inside her greenery-laden screened-in porch while she clicked away on her laptop.

The problem with online dating is that this, too, is a competition. We’d discovered the idea Brenda had was far from original. Instead of competing for jobs against college grads with superior experience to my own, my competitors were women who were willing to date and marry not only men old enough to be their father but old enough to be their grandfather.

After five months, Gus had recently dumped me for a woman three years older, not than me, but than him. At least I’d seen the aurora borealis.

“OMG, Gina, come here, look at this!”

“I told you, Brenda, I’m done. I’m sorry, but I’m done.”

“No, I heard you, but you have to see this. It’s that guy from our LinkedIn class, the one who kept sweeping invisible crumbs off the table. He’s on InTune.”

Apathetically, I unfolded a chair and pulled it next to her at her desk. Our foreheads conked accidentally.

“No,” I said, squinting at the man’s profile, “that guy’s name was William, this guy’s name is Liam.”

“Liam’s a nickname for William. Like Liam Neeson’s real name is William.”

“Who’s Liam Neeson? Is he the design engineer your husband hated?”

“No. He’s—” But Brenda was busy enlarging the photo. “It’s him, I know it. It’s that doofus from our class.”

Maybe.

“Look,” I said, “that guy might’ve been a little weird, but he wasn’t a doofus. I bet he got another job right away.”

“Ask him,” Brenda said. She nudged her laptop in my direction.

I didn’t move my fingers toward the keys but I bent my head closer to the screen. “He’s sort of cute, isn’t he?”

Brenda shrugged. “I guess. You don’t notice it in person because he’s moving.”

“I don’t know how to send a message, Brenda. Will you ask him how he’s doing for me?”

He answered immediately. Brenda read: “I remember you,

Regina. I found a job I like a lot better than my old one. How about you?"

"Tell him I've gone from thirty-four dollars an hour to four, but that now I get tips."

Brenda typed. Then she read aloud: "You wouldn't want to meet me at Aromas Saturday at 10, would you?"

His negative sentence construction made me smile. "Tell him 'sure.'"

She tapped away on her keyboard for a lot longer than it would take to type four letters.

"It's a go," she said, setting her laptop aside.

I'd parked 30 feet from the entrance to Aromas, but I was drenched by the time I made it inside. It was that kind of rainy day. I was 10 minutes early, but Liam was sitting at a table with two coffee cups. He stood up when he saw me.

In a sweatshirt and jeans, he looked more oddballish than he did in business casual. His arms were proportionately too long; at the end of them were his fidgeting fingers. He shook his left leg, as if it had fallen asleep while he sat waiting. He grinned, and his whipped-cream mustache turned up at the edges.

We sat down. He made sure my butt hit the chair before his did.

"I got you a chai tea latte like you said." Like Brenda said.

"Thank you," I replied.

It took him a second to focus in on my face, as if he had to locate who was talking in a crowd. Magnified by the lenses in his glasses, his dark eyes were huge. The out-of-style frames he wore occupied most of his face.

His lips moved, forming a soundless phrase or two, before he said, "You're welcome."

Somehow, I knew Liam passed many hours searching for plain women on dating sites, then no time pursuing them. Somehow, I knew, even though we'd connected through InTunE, that Liam didn't think of this meeting as a date. I could only imagine how ratcheted up his quirks would be if he thought it was.

I didn't want to complain about my miserable life, so I started our conversation by complaining about general subjects. I

started with TV commercials. I hated when their sole goal was to be funny—which they failed to be, in my opinion—and nobody knew what they were selling. Liam added that he hated ringing or dinging in commercials because he thought it was his phone ringing or dinging. I griped that any sound in a song resembling a siren noise should be banned, in case you're listening while you're driving. Liam added that a song covered by a second artist is never, ever, as good as the original version. No matter the topic, he matched me criticism for criticism, except his comments were funnier. I found myself laughing until my stomach hurt. In the last year and a half I'd forgotten how good that felt.

We monopolized our corner table for a couple hours, but then Aromas started filling up with the lunch crowd, and soon there was only one empty table.

"I guess we should go," I said, "I had fun, Liam." I captured Liam's busy hands and stilled them under mine on the tabletop, and I'm not sure if it was to convey what a nice morning I'd had or to still his hands on the tabletop.

He looked down, and I could tell he thought the latter. I'd spoiled a perfect morning.

His words were curt. "Me, too."

He tried to stand, but I held onto his hands.

"I want to see you again, Liam. I don't care about your idiosyncrasies." What was I saying? "Oh god. I hope you are aware you have idiosyncrasies."

The edges of his mouth turned up. "Yes. I know I'm never going to be the guy who gets the girl. But sometimes my peculiarities are helpful. Employers see Rain Man in me. They know I'll be good with numbers."

"What's a Rain Man?" I asked.

He cocked his head. "Like in the movie. Dustin Hoffman? Tom Cruise?"

I nodded. "Oh." My nod changed to a shake. "I've never liked movies."

"I hope you are aware there's something wrong with you if you don't like movies." I think that's when I fell in love with him, when he tossed my 'I hope you are aware' phrase back at me. "Um, I don't know what your plans are today," he said, "but there's a one-hundred percent chance of rain until this

evening. I've got dozens of DVDs and an 80-inch TV."

I wanted to spend the day with him, but not necessarily watching movies. Maybe I could think of something else for the two of us to do on a rainy day.

Meeting Brenda and Simon for dinner was a terrible idea. I knew this. But I'd met many of Liam's friends in the last six months, and he kept pushing to meet mine. I didn't want him to think I'd been putting it off because I didn't have any friends, but except for Brenda, I didn't. There were women I liked at the restaurant, but none of them had suggested getting together outside of work. I didn't want him to think it was because I was embarrassed by his 'peculiarities,' because I loved that part of Liam, along with everything else.

So here we were, finishing our meal in an adorable establishment with great food. I was thinking if I could get a job at a place like this, the tips would be better, and maybe I could limp through for a few more years to 62, when I could start collecting social security.

After the waitress gathered most of our empty plates and walked away, Simon turned to Liam. "So where do you fit in, in this scheme?" Warning bells started ringing in my head. They were tinkling though, not an air horn.

Liam cocked his head, but he didn't answer.

"Let's get dessert," Brenda said loudly. "They have apple pie, Simon."

Simon ignored her. He was still focused on Liam. "When I picked up Brenda's laptop last week by mistake and saw her InTunE and WeMelodious accounts, I freaked out, let me tell you. I thought she was cheating, you know?"

I wondered how Simon got so far as to look at both of Brenda's dating sites 'by mistake,' but by now I was busy going deaf because of the blaring air horn.

"But then Brenda told me what the two of them were up to."

"Simon," Brenda said, "shut up."

But Simon was mad. Calmly participating in small talk through dinner, with this amount of anger seething, deserved an Oscar. I knew all about the Academy Awards now. Simon and I spent a lot of time watching movies, curled up on his couch, and spent more time critiquing them afterward. Simon

kept talking to Liam. “These two are trying to find somebody with money for Regina to marry because she can’t find a job.”

“I’m sorry, Gina.” Brenda said to me, inadvertently verifying that what her husband was saying was true. “He promised me he wouldn’t say anything.”

Liam stood up. His hands shook as he took some bills out of his wallet. Four twenties fluttered onto the table like autumn leaves, enough for all our meals. “I want to talk to you outside, Gina,” he said.

Simon’s sigh was a growl. How frustrated he was, not being given the opportunity to witness the confrontation he’d arranged.

I followed Liam outside, leaving my purse and jacket behind, and as soon as the door to the restaurant closed, the cold wind slapped at me. Liam turned around so we were facing.

“Liam, it’s not true.” But I looked at Liam’s face, and I knew I had to add, “Well, some of it’s true.” How could I ever explain my relationship with Gus? Even dates that Brenda arranged for me which ended up being platonic had left black marks on my soul.

“I’m confused,” Liam said, “Do you work where you said you did?”

I had no idea what Brenda had typed that day, and I tried to remember if Liam and I had ever talked about our jobs, except to share if our work-day—or in my case, work-night—had been good or bad.

“I work as a waitress at the truck stop down by the highway.”

“Let me get this straight,” Liam said. I cringed as I readied myself for my transgressions to be listed. He looked calmer than I’d ever seen him. I assumed anger wasn’t an emotion his face projected properly. But all he said was, “You want to marry me?”

Even considering my financial struggles, I’d never been happier than since I met Liam that morning at Aromas. “Liam, it’s not—”

He put his index finger on my lips, repeated, “You want to marry me?”

“Yes, but I want to explain—”

“For the past five months, I’ve been asking myself how I

could ever get a confident woman like you to marry a dorky guy like me. Now I find out we've wanted the same thing all along."

"Liam, Brenda and I . . ." I shivered. I had no idea where to begin.

He took his jacket off and draped it around my shoulders. Then he grabbed the lapels of it, pulling me closer to him.

He whispered, "After we're married, how does your scheme work? Do we have sex anymore?"

"Brenda and I never got that far. I guess you and I will have to make up the rules from here."

Liam's grin was competing with his glasses' frames for taking up the most space on his face.

Someday soon I'd explain everything.

Or maybe I wouldn't.

Jens Birk

The Church

The white church immediately caught his attention as the train slowed down. He was surprised to find it located on the top of the distant hill, so isolated from the small town below.

The sight of the church evoked a hazy, distant memory in him—some significant connection that he felt an inexplicable need to explore. He had never been here before, never even heard about the place, but found something instantly soothing about it.

He had left his host family in Copenhagen for the day, needing some time alone. Longing for the sea, he had originally planned to visit a coastal town further west, hoping that the wide stretches of sand and endless ocean would ease his mind.

He was the only passenger to leave the train. For a brief moment he wondered nervously what he was doing there, alone on this deserted platform. Maybe it was a mistake to stop here.

At first glance the station seemed grand, and he expected to discover a charming food stand and a ticket booth inside. Instead he found only a broken ticket machine and an empty waiting area, littered and smelling of stale smoke. The stairs leading up to street level were forbiddingly steep.

He walked up the main street, which looked as if it had possibly thrived in the past. The town seemed abandoned, as if something had happened. The closing of a factory, or a devastating accident involving the majority of its inhabitants? The only visible survivor, a small corner store, exhibited yellowed cabbage and weathered potatoes along with dusty beach toys, their bright colors faded by years of exposure. Outside the store a toddler of unidentifiable gender inspected him. The child was the only sign of life and looked too big to be in its narrow stroller. The scrutinizing eyes followed his every move.

He continued up the hill, aware of the sound of his footsteps

as they broke the disconcerting silence. He began counting his steps, as he sometimes did when he became anxious, and had a subtle sensation of being observed.

He knew that Danish churches were open in the daytime, and it somehow felt important to visit this particular one. It looked so daunting from its elevated position, as if it was breathing life and death into its parishioners below. He thought of his upbringing's mandatory Sunday morning services at the local church. He had gladly taken a break from religion when he arrived in Denmark, but maybe now was the time to go back. An urgent need for the quiet contemplation that had been the only thing he liked about going to church. Places of worship allowed him to be alone with his thoughts, which still felt overwhelmingly shameful.

When he reached the church, slightly out of breath after the ascent, he heard music, unexpectedly sounding like an orchestra performance. He assumed a churchwarden had left a reel-to-reel tape on to lure visitors inside the building. Walking around the structure, which was surrounded by a cemetery, he noticed the neatly kept graves, several adorned with fresh flowers. Inscriptions revealed some recent deaths that year, 1977. Lost in thoughts, he failed to register someone coming toward him. The man noticed him but didn't smile. The sexton, he guessed, as he saw the man continuing toward the farthest corner of the graveyard.

He had a brief flashback to the small town in Wyoming where he'd grown up. It wasn't unlike this place, its misty weather, the permanent chill in the air. He thought about his parents, imagined them looking forward to his return—to things being back to normal. They had not been in favor of him spending his senior year abroad in Denmark. An only child, he felt guilty leaving them behind and now wondered if they had received his letter.

He kept hearing the music from inside the building and finally tried opening the front door but it was locked. He searched for the sexton but in vain, debating whether to give it up. But he felt drawn to this place, this particular church, that music. Something about the effort of making it all the way to this town, to the top of this hill. It was a quest that puzzled him, yet it seemed an important part of this journey

on his own. For the first time since he'd arrived in Denmark, discovering this church made him want intensely to connect with something past.

Maybe it was a way of coming to terms with what he was soon about to lose.

“It’s eighty *kroner* per night,” the woman said. She didn’t seem comfortable asking for money and kept stroking her tidy, gray hair. Her eyes avoided his. She was clearly not used to running a pension—he was maybe her first guest, he thought.

The house, in traditional red brick, looked in a better shape than what he’d seen elsewhere in the town. He was startled to hear loud voices in the background, then realized they originated from a transistor radio.

“May I see the room?” he asked her in the elementary Danish that he’d learned while living with his host family in Copenhagen over the past year.

“Please follow me.” She walked briskly up the stairs, surprising him because she had seemed old and frail.

“So here it is,” the woman said, suddenly appearing reluctant to let him in. It was a tiny room with a small balcony. The antique bed had wood carvings, and although it looked a bit short, it was wide enough to seem comfortable.

“This looks fine,” he said.

“Very well, if you will come back downstairs and sign the registry. I do ask for payment in advance. And there’s no breakfast but I can make you a cup of coffee in the morning.”

“I don’t actually drink coffee, but if you have tea . . .”

“No, we don’t drink tea. Coffee it will have to be.”

He’d wanted to ask her if she was alone, whether she had a husband or a relative living with her. If this room used to belong to someone—a child who moved away?

He had decided to stay overnight, not yet having been able to access the church and feeling a perplexing attachment to this small town. It wasn’t a beautiful place, and there were apparently no notable sights. It was perhaps simply that this was a perfect spot to be alone. He needed some time to digest thoughts that kept him from focusing. All he could do was think about Henrik, the eighteen-year-old son in his Danish host family.

He unpacked his few belongings and took the photo of Henrik out of his wallet and placed it on the bedside table. He looked at it, straightened it out. It was a bit like having him there, creating his presence.

He'd found the photo on a pile on Henrik's desk and often looked at it when he was on his own. It was a portrait, part of Henrik's hairless, naked chest visible. Henrik smiling, on a beach. There was something about that smile that stirred him and warmed him.

A cream-colored powder table with a round mirror made him believe the room had belonged to the woman's mother. A painting depicting Jesus, he thought, and a small, wooden cross hung like a warning over the bedside table. Next to it was a discolored, empty square on the wall, a rusty nail left behind.

His eyes went from the cross to the photo of Henrik, and he briefly thought about hiding the photo.

He went out on the balcony and saw the proprietress now sitting below an apple tree in her garden, knitting, a cup of coffee by her side. He decided to ask her about the church. He had not noticed it earlier, but her left arm was shaking lightly.

"The church is only open during service," she said without looking at him as he joined her in the garden.

"I thought I heard music from the church. As if it was a concert," he said.

"No, that would not be possible. They keep it very simple. Just the organ and the small choir. They wouldn't allow anything else." She put down her knitting. He could see that her arm was shaking even more now.

"If you stay until Sunday, you may attend the service," she said hesitantly, as if weighing in her mind the extra income against having a foreigner attend their church.

"Is there really no way to get in? To borrow a key?"

She shook her head again. "It's not that kind of church."

He was not making any progress and asked for a place to have dinner.

"We have no restaurants but there is a bar. They do serve a *Dagens Ret*, and I guess it would fill you up." He remembered having passed the building on the way from the train station. He thought she was going to say something else, but her eyes

stayed on the knitting.

The barely readable sign announced that the dish of the day was *Bøf med løg*—hamburger with caramelized onions, potatoes, and a gravy that Danes traditionally served with most meat dishes. The bar was part of an old inn that probably used to cater to travelers arriving by train, back in the days when the town must have been an important hub.

The windows were covered in faded, red curtains, closed to the outside world. It reminded him of the inconspicuous gay bar he had secretly visited in Copenhagen. He was astonished to find a small group of elderly men smoking by the counter, drinking beer and *snaps*. He waited in vain for someone to seat him and eventually moved to sit at a table by the window. The men kept staring at him as they continued their non-conversation, and he regretted not having brought a book to read. The air was stuffy with pipe smoke and the smell of fried onions. There was no bartender in sight, and after some minutes he finally found the courage to ask one of the men, who directed him toward the kitchen. Once there he tried to make contact with the man who was cooking. The man finally turned around and faced him. The cook, maybe the owner, was easily in his eighties.

In his best Danish he asked if he could order the dish of the day. The man smiled.

“The dish of the day? That’s the first time in months that somebody has ordered food. I was just cooking for myself. Let me see what I can do. Take a seat.”

He nodded thankfully to the guy who had helped him. The men still stood silently, drinking and smoking, and he pictured them all living alone. He sensed them whispering about him, and occasionally one of them would turn around and observe him lengthily.

He found a local newspaper and read through it slowly. It was mostly ads for shops in the nearby city, and obituaries. There was an announcement for the Sunday church service, an ad for a funeral parlor, but apparently no movie theater. He would have to call it a day after dinner and get a long night’s sleep.

The food finally arrived, along with a bottle of Carlsberg.

When he looked up, one of the men at the bar winked at him. He hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast and hungrily ate the meat and the bowl of steamed potatoes, mealy and bland. The beer helped the food go down more easily. He soon got up to pay, but the owner, standing by the bar, refused to receive money.

"It's rewarding enough to see that you liked my food," the owner said, and he noticed the strain in the man's voice; a sense of regret, and maybe grief, now apparent on his wrinkled face. He thanked the man who sent him the beer and discreetly left five *kroner* on the table as a tip.

The streets were still empty, and as he walked back to the pension, he detected only a few flickering lights from TV screens. Most of the houses were dark; the inhabitants seemed hidden behind thick curtains, as if during a curfew. The town was again inexplicably quiet, only stirred by the passing of a train that rushed through without stopping.

He found a phone booth and called the family in Copenhagen. The mother answered. He had hoped it would be Henrik.

"I just wanted to let you know I've decided to stay away overnight. I'll be back tomorrow afternoon."

"Oh, okay, that's fine." She paused for a second. "Have you found a nice place to stay?"

"Yes, a little pension, run by an old lady. It's very charming."

She sounded worried, even a bit upset. He felt bad for letting her know so late that he wasn't coming home that evening and wondered why she seemed concerned—he had always found her very easygoing. Had Henrik said anything about him? No, he must have imagined something that wasn't there. Being on his own in this little town made him feel sensitive, unprotected, aware of everything around him and of what he had been trying to hide.

In bed that night the loud radio from downstairs prevented him from falling asleep. He got up several times and eventually opened the door to the balcony, hoping the night sounds would block out the radio. It was chilly now but the fresh air calmed him. He tried reading but had a hard time focusing on the Danish novel that Henrik had given him. His mind kept going back to Copenhagen, to Henrik, realizing that he had

needed this trip on his own to explore what it would feel like no longer sharing a room with Henrik. He thought about the nights when they had talked until dawn. Henrik had taught him most of his Danish, and he had slowly become consumed with Henrik. At first he convinced himself it was because he was in a foreign country on his own, far away from his family. His need must account for his feeling so close to Henrik.

He would always make sure to be in bed first, pretending to read but positioning himself so that he could observe Henrik stripping down to his underwear.

Here, alone, in this small, offbeat town, his longing for Henrik was even stronger. Not just the safety of Henrik, but an all-consuming desire to be with him.

He finally fell asleep but woke up early in the morning. He was tired, his mind drowsy after the short night. In a dream he'd conjured Henrik, visiting him in his room at the pension and speaking to him. Now he couldn't recall the words and felt frustrated and lonely.

It was windy, the air heavy with rain. The house was so quiet that his own breathing sounded disturbingly loud, and he tried to restrain it. Opening the door to the corridor, he wondered what the rest of the house contained, what the living room looked like. He examined the doors to the other two rooms but didn't dare open either of them. Although he had the impression that the woman slept downstairs, he wasn't certain. The old, wooden floorboards creaked as he hesitated in front of the bathroom.

He took a quick shower in the old bathtub, trying to avoid spilling water on the floor. There didn't seem to be any hot water, and he shivered as he dried himself in the small, child-size towel. He planned to return to the church in the morning, hoping to meet the sexton and persuade him to unlock the entrance. After packing he observed the room one final time. Once again he noticed the empty space on the wall, next to the cross.

As he quietly descended the staircase, the woman suddenly appeared. He felt like a thief sneaking away.

"Leaving already?" she asked.

"I thought about going for a morning walk before taking the train back to Copenhagen."

“Oh, that’s where you’re from. I see.” The woman had never asked him about his accent. She seemed uncurious, unlike the men in the bar the night before who had kept looking at him. He told her he had enjoyed his stay as he smelled the coffee brewing.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like a cup before you leave?” The thought of something hot was tempting.

“Okay, yes, I would like a small cup,” he said, and he finally caught her smiling.

They sat together in silence in her old kitchen. From the wobbly, wooden chair he observed the kitchen’s gas burners, a dented fridge, the worn-out linoleum floors. The coffee was made in a blue Danish coffeepot like the one he had seen in a folk museum. It simmered on the stove, steaming up the room. The coffee didn’t taste good, but at least it wasn’t strong and it gave him warmth.

“Don’t try the church again,” she finally said, as if reading his mind. “You won’t be able to get in.” There was something in her voice, almost pleading. Then she added, “I never go. I stopped going.” Her eyes briefly met his, and she had a hard time controlling her hand as she led the cup to her mouth.

He quickly reached the top of the hill. The clouds were hanging low but the rain had stopped. Fog was now obscuring the graveyard. When he tried the door, it finally gave in.

He called out but no one answered. It looked like other Danish churches, spare yet elegant: an elaborate model of a ship suspended from the ceiling—a reminder of Denmark’s past as a seafaring nation; rows of plain, wooden benches; an altar covered in white cloth. Three tall, white candles.

He slowly walked toward the altar.

The church was chilly and he suddenly felt uneasy. Maybe he shouldn’t be there. A smell of abandonment, of old psalm books, of long-past services hung in the air. He examined the white, plaster walls, as stern inside the building as they were forbidding outside. Fragments of naïve frescoes were visible, but most of them were covered over or washed out over the centuries.

After some time he thought he heard a door closing in the

distance. Then there was no sound at all, as if he had entered a vacuum. He sat on one of the benches in the back, praying and feeling increasingly desperate. With only one week left in Denmark, he was approaching his last moments with Henrik. So many times he had prepared in his mind what he wanted to say. He fantasized that Henrik had the same feelings. Although maybe Henrik was simply a kind person, caring and loving but not likely to be interested in him in that way. Still, he hoped that Henrik would understand him, not judge him.

Henrik was sporty and outgoing, popular with girls, and had often taken him to discotheques. They'd seen *Saturday Night Fever* together at a cinema in Copenhagen. He preferred the music of Joni Mitchell and felt uncomfortable dancing in front of others, of standing out. Henrik had often invited him out on the dance floor, but he was too embarrassed to accept. He worried he wouldn't be able to conceal his joy, even though he knew that here in Denmark, it was not so unusual for young male friends to dance together.

No one had asked him why he wasn't dating girls, neither back home nor here in Denmark. He had become good at pretending.

It dawned on him that the book Henrik had given him was about a man coming to terms with his homosexuality. Henrik had insisted he read it, telling him he had been very moved by it. Henrik must surely have seen through him, and giving him this book was Henrik's way of showing his acceptance. Or was it more still?

Maybe Henrik could come to America to study, and they would share an apartment. At least they'd be together as friends—it would be better than not having Henrik in his life at all. He did not intend to move back in with his family; he'd applied to study in New York City. Henrik would finish high school in a few weeks and planned to take a gap year. That year could maybe be in the US, he'd said.

He felt conflicted thinking about Henrik in this church. Then again, his adopted country seemed so modern and tolerant. Henrik's parents were very open and would surely accept him, although he still recalled the concern he'd detected in the mother's voice on the phone.

Until now he had convinced himself that it was just a phase. After sharing a room with Henrik for almost a year, he felt certain. For the first time in his life, he was close to another man and felt comfortable.

When he'd finally had the nerve to visit a gay bar in Copenhagen, he'd hungrily observed the men but had not dared meet their eyes. He'd been terrified that someone would approach him, talk to him, and had finished his beer in a few, quick minutes and left, relieved but saddened that his courage had failed him.

As his stay with Henrik's family was coming to an end, he felt increasingly distressed. At night he struggled to fall asleep, knowing that Henrik was only a few feet away, under his own bedcovers. Almost naked. Often he would masturbate quietly to the rhythm of Henrik's breathing when he felt certain that Henrik was asleep. He fantasized about joining Henrik in his bed, caressing him, sleeping in his arms. His longing was nearly unbearable, yet nothing he wanted to shed.

He sat still for a long time, feeling tired and desperate about the situation. About returning to his parents. He almost regretted the letter he'd sent to them about how fond he was of Henrik. It had been subtle but it was all there, between the lines. They wouldn't want to understand.

Still kneeling on the church bench, his eyes closed, his hands folded in prayer and lost in reverie, music suddenly started playing. He was startled—how long had he been sitting there, an hour, maybe more? When he looked up, a woman stood quietly before the altar. The three candles were lit. He recognized the music—his father had often played that LP: Schubert's *8th Symphony*. He didn't understand why he had not heard the woman enter the church and wondered if she'd put the music on. She now kneeled down.

After some minutes she slowly stood up and took something out of her coat pocket. She turned around.

It was the woman from the pension. She held a photo in her right hand.

He couldn't quite see it from this far but suddenly worried it might be the photo of Henrik. Had he forgotten it on the bedside table—had it been there when he came back from the inn last night? He was so tired from the lack of sleep that he

couldn't think straight.

He suddenly started to panic, concerned that she would challenge him when leaving the church. *Don't try the church again.* He tried to hide behind the bench in front of him, pretending to be lost in prayer, to not have noticed her. He struggled to control his breathing as his heart raced.

The woman brought out another photo. This one was framed, in black and white. She looked carefully at it while standing still for minutes. He kept expecting her to look at him directly, to say something, but she remained silent. He wondered how she got here so quickly. She must have read his mind, she must have known that he planned to go here. He now felt certain that it was the photo of Henrik. He was ashamed that he'd left the photo on his bedside table and also upset that she'd entered his room while he was out the night before, or this morning while he was in the bathroom. She knew his secret.

Unexpectedly, though, there was a gentle expression on her face.

He was now able to look at the other photo. It was an old image, the young man dressed in formal, dark clothes that looked like something Henrik's grandfather would have worn when he was younger. Maybe it was not her son, maybe it was a relative. He was absorbed in thoughts as the woman left the altar.

He finally heard footsteps walking by, slowly, quietly. It felt like his life went by. He realized that the music had stopped. He looked around—the church was empty. The candles were no longer burning.

It was just another early morning, in a church, in a small town in Denmark.

He quickly left the building. The scent of the now extinct candles accompanied him outside. He closed the heavy door carefully.

As he walked through the cemetery, he saw the woman again. She was kneeling by a gravestone and had placed the two photos on top of it. He approached her, wanting to ask questions he had formulated in his mind inside the church.

"My brother," she said. She didn't look up. She knew he was there.

“The church discouraged me from burying him here. He refused to lie about who he was. I pretend he’s resting here, next to my parents. They cannot prevent me from doing that, can they?” Then she got up, and as she left she added, “It was his favorite piece of music. The unfinished symphony.” She’d taken the photo of her brother but left the one of Henrik on the gravestone.

He hesitated for a moment, then quickly picked it up.

He followed her at a distance and considered trying to catch up with her. He wanted to know more about her brother, who he had been and why the church didn’t want him there. When he had died, how he had died. But she walked so fast that he would have to accelerate to follow her, and she clearly didn’t urge him to accompany her.

When exiting the cemetery, he noticed the sexton by the church entrance, locking the door. He worried that the man would confront him about having entered the church but the sexton quickly disappeared. Maybe the woman knew him, and he had left the door unlocked for her, for *them*, on this quiet morning when nobody would ask questions. Maybe the sexton had known her brother.

As he went down the hill, a subtle sense of transformation slowly took place in his mind. He now felt prepared to face Henrik, ready to move on. Even if it had to be on his own. If a woman this age could accept him, then other people would too. Maybe even his parents, eventually.

His feet headed for the station at a fast pace—he was hoping he wouldn’t have to wait long for a train, eager to be back in Copenhagen, to tell Henrik about his visit. He observed the small town one last time, wondering again if he had imagined it all.

He recalled moments of praying in church back home in Wyoming when he would sometimes end up in a meditative state, almost similar to sleep. Maybe he had been dreaming and simply awakened rejuvenated. But he knew for certain that he’d met the woman by the gravestone. That she’d spoken to him and left the photo of Henrik there for him. The brief moment with her, her words about her brother, had made him feel understood.

As he walked by the inn, he saw the old man by the window,

the curtains now half-open. He waved hesitantly, at first unsure if the innkeeper recognized his customer from the night before, but the man eventually nodded at him. The familiar smell of fried onion accompanied him as he moved on.

Reaching the station, he hurried down the stairs to the waiting area. He briefly thought about returning to the pension, a sudden urge to find out more. But he also sensed that all had been said.

When he opened the door to the platform, he was heartened to find her there. She looked him in the eyes and held out the photo of her brother.

“Keep it,” she said. “It’ll help you. It would have meant a lot to him to know that somebody was thinking about him. He never had anyone.”

Then, without saying good-bye, she opened the door to the station and climbed the stairs. He knew he would never see her again.

He wondered again what had brought him here, to this small town, and then to her house. What had made him decide to stop here.

He then felt the vibrations from the approaching train and searched for signs of it in the distance.

When the train began slowing down, he took a final look around him. It was as if he saw the town anew. The church was again visible, the fog beginning to clear. It had not been a dream.

He never had anyone.

He entered the train and, pushing open the door to a compartment, a young man sitting by the window smiled at him. He decided to sit next to him even though all the other seats were vacant. He liked the smell of the train, of the young man, as he settled into his seat.

Comfortable, at last, as the train started moving forward, he pulled out the photo of Henrik from his backpack and placed it on an empty seat.

A shimmer of a thought emerged, barely conscious, barely there. That he would maybe leave the photo on the train when he reached his destination. He would maybe allow himself to forget it.

Contributor Notes

Jan Allen would like to thank the Sixfold creator, also her friends in the Clifton Fiction Writing Workshop. After revising a story as suggested by her fellow Sixfold fiction writers, it received honorable mention in the 2020 Saturday Evening Post's Great American Fiction contest. Her short stories have appeared in *Sixfold* and *The MacGuffin*.



Janet Barrow's work has appeared in *The Lascaux Review* and *Adelaide Magazine*. She was a finalist for *Easy Street's* 2018 Portal Prize for Speculative Fiction and has received honorable mentions in *Glimmer Train* and *Tulip Tree Publishing*. In 2019, she attended the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference as a wait-scholar. She currently resides in Sydney, Australia.



Jens Birk Originally from Denmark, I lived in Paris until I moved to New York City in 2004. I've attended many writing courses, including fiction writing at NYU. My work has appeared in *The Alembic*, *Crate Literary Magazine*, *The Lindenwood Review*, *The Oklahoma Review*, *Prick Of The Spindle*, *Rio Grande Review*, *The Sand Hill Review*, and *Sanskrit*. My story "Life on Mars?" received the North Carolina College Media Association's 2013 Statewide College Media Award for Fiction.



Ryan Byrnes' first historical fiction novel, *Royal Beauty Bright*, won a gold medal in the 2020 Independent Publisher Book Awards and was a finalist for a Foreword Reviews 2019 INDIE Book of the Year Award. His short stories have been published in magazines and journals such as *Pembroke Magazine*, *Italian America*, and *Sketch*. Ryan's favorite books include *Our Souls at Night*, *Swamplandia!*, *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *The God of Small Things*.



Elisabeth Chaves lives in southwest Virginia with her family. Her story "Drummer Grrr!" appeared in *Sixfold's* Winter 2019 issue, and another story "Maggie" placed third in *Bethesda Magazine's* Fiction Contest. She received a graduate certificate in creative writing from the Humber School for Writers and recently completed a novel.



Daniel Gorman lives in Albany, NY. His stories and poetry have previously appeared in *Sixfold* (Summer 2020) and in the *Trolley* journal. He has participated in the NYS Writers Institute workshops for fiction and poetry and hopes to one day become a full-time writer. He also loves talking shop, so if anyone is interested, feel free to reach out at dgor88@gmail.com



Esem Junior is a former police reporter, and his nonfiction has appeared in national newspapers, including *The Wall Street Journal*. His fiction has appeared in literary journals in the United States and the United Kingdom. In his spare time during the pandemic, he visits the same websites every day, drinks a lot of coffee, and wonders why people live in Florida.



Kathryn Li is making sense of the world and looking for new ways to tell stories about it. She is also currently a student at Rhode Island School of Design, pursuing a BFA in Illustration with a concentration in Literary Arts and Studies.



Edward Mack is the fifth **Mack** by that name and the first not to make brick for a living. He feels conflicted about this, but generally content. He earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Complutense University of Madrid. His most recent publications include fiction in the latest editions of *Adelaide*, *Short Edition*, and *The Bosphorus Review*.



Brittany Meador is a spoken word poet and amateur lexicographer from the red rocks of Arizona. She is constantly inspired by common place occurrences like snatches of grocery store chatter and the way a stranger holds their pen. In an effort to promote writers and poets who enjoy words as much as she does, she launched her own literary magazine, theonyxpouncepot.com, at the end of 2020. Her favorite word

is trenchant.



Bill Pippin was nominated for a 2019 Pushcart Prize. His short story, "Century," won first prize in the Summer 2014 edition of *Sixfold*. His stories have appeared in several anthologies as well as *The MacGuffin*, *Black Fox*, *Sixfold*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, and elsewhere. His nonfiction has been published in *Newsweek*, *Field & Stream*, *Writer's Digest*, *Philadelphia Magazine*, and many other publications. He lives in New Mexico with his wife, Zona.



João M. Serro studied English and French literature and art at Paul Valery University, Montpellier, France; at UCLA; at Otis; and at San Francisco State University. He returned to school to study web design and ended up working for major dot-coms, including the Disney Channel as lead designer. He has written stories and poems along the way and two novels, one published, another in progress. He currently lives with his wife in Los Angeles.



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J. Williams grew up in Mississippi and Texas, and had a career in IT in New England. J. is active in adult fiction critique groups at The Writers' Loft near Boston and has participated in fiction workshops at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown.

