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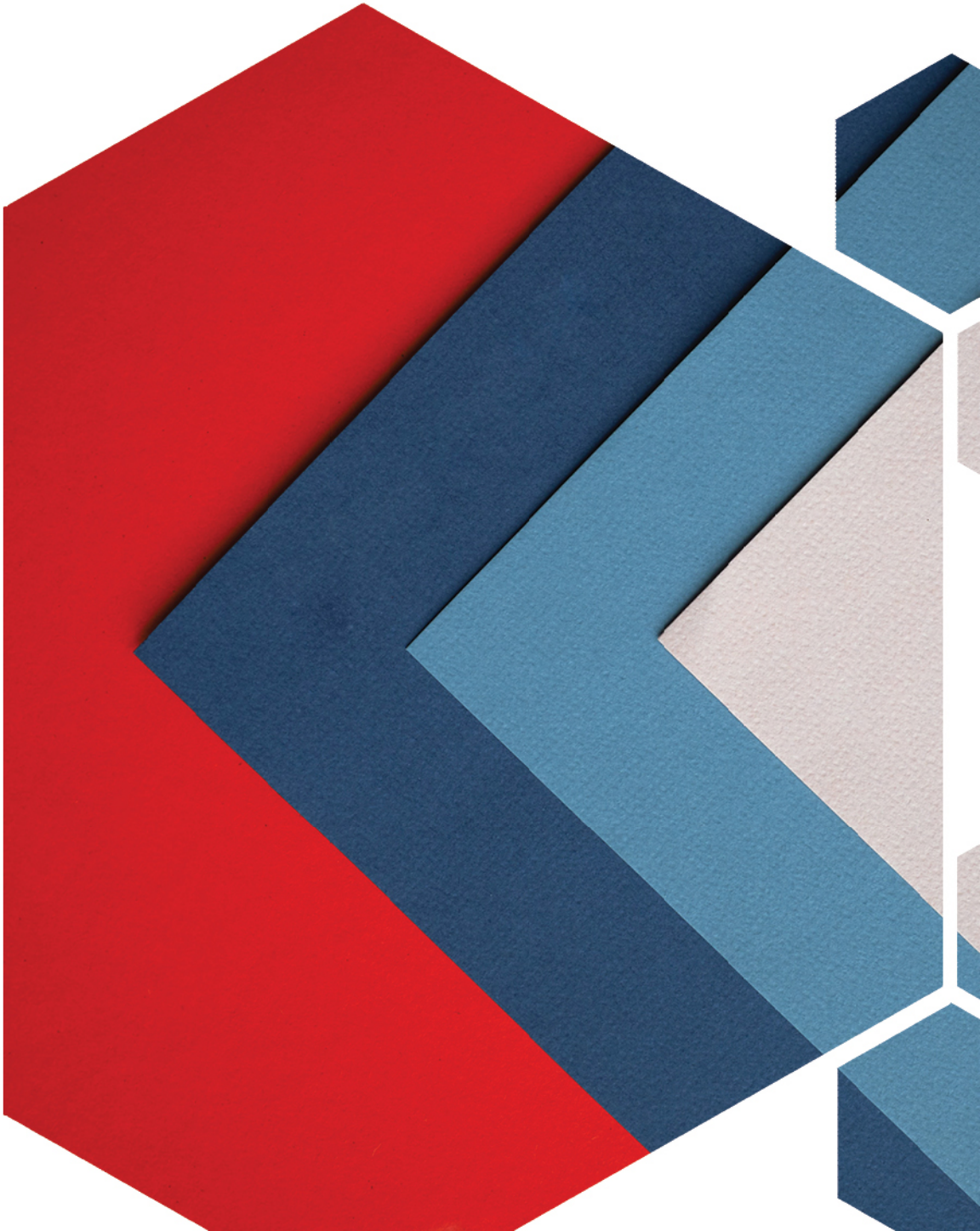
FICTION WINTER 2021



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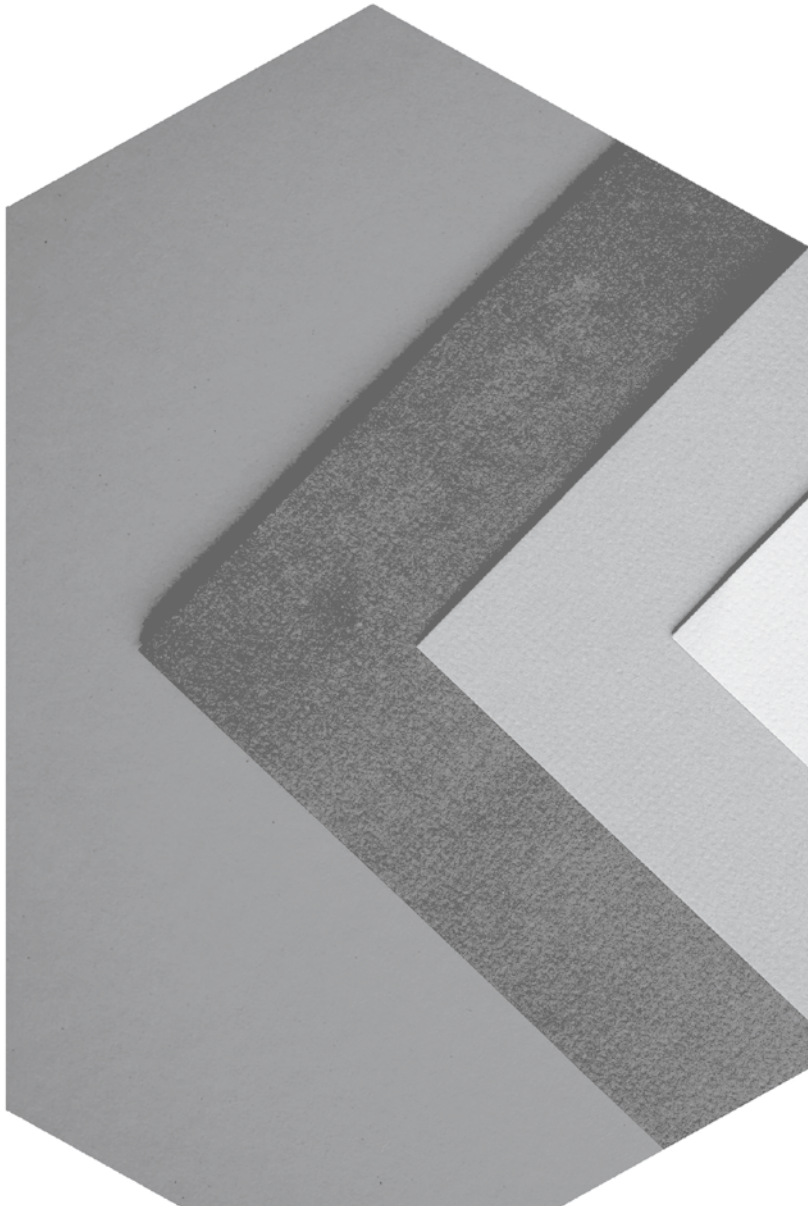

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SIXFOLD

FICTION WINTER 2021
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Kati Iso

Mamochka

March, 1945, Budapest

Zoya fills my cup with hot water from the samovar. I watch her dunk the tea, her head resting on the palm of her hand, countenance hungry for solace. She longs to be told that everything will be all right, and that her husband, Pista will return home from the war soon. But I can't do it. I can't give my daughter false hope and I can't say what I don't believe. She is not a child anymore; she is a wife. A mother. I was her age when I left Russia with two kids many years ago. Alone, seeking refuge in Budapest, no husband, no property, other than my Singer, I ran from another war. Nobody told me then, that everything was going to be all right.

My silence bothers Zoya. "Poor Mr. Pinter," she says, in an attempt to feel less sorry for herself. Mr. Pinter lives below us. He and other residents bunkered with us for weeks in the building's basement during the siege of the city. Zoya pops open the slender cigarette box with her thumb and slides one of the white cylinders between her lips. She doesn't smoke often, but the cigarettes remind her of Pista, who always kept cartons in the apartment. Smoke billows from her mouth as she exhales, drifting towards the ajar window. Even after two children and weeks of starvation, my daughter's beauty strikes me with a mix of pride and fear. During war, beauty is conspicuous; beauty is the unintentional inviter of peril. Zoya's hair embraces her face with softness against the sharp angles of her jaw. The warmth of her eyes matches her waves—dimensional, like chestnuts in the fall. Delicate fingers lift the cigarette to full lips. "The old man has become a ghost since he had to watch his wife die down there in such . . . awful circumstances," she says.

I slide a jar of apricot preserves in front of her. "Haven't we all become ghosts? At least his wife wasn't alone when she went." After Mrs. Pinter died in the dreary dampness of the underground shelter amid the sound of bombs, tanks,

and gunfire, Zoya and I helped wrap her body in sheets and carried her outside, where we hoped the frigid air would keep her frozen. As soon as the weather warmed and temperatures no longer dove consistently below zero, we buried her in the common yard. Zoya ignores the preserves, while I scoop a spoonful of it into my tea and watch the dark, golden syrup unify with the black tea as I stir. The silver spoon's hitting against the wall of the china reminds me of the distant sound of an alarm. "There are worse things, Zoya."

My apathy for Mrs. Pinter shocks my daughter. She shoots me a disapproving glance. "That's horrible to say."

I rise from my seat and step closer to the window. "Mrs. Pinter died in the arms of a loved one. That's a luxury these days."

"She was sick for so long—" Zoya says, but I'm no longer paying attention.

"Shhh!" I jerk my hand through the air, and she immediately freezes, eyes widening.

Our second-floor kitchen window faces the front, allowing me a view of Pasareti Road. To the right, in the direction of the intersection, I see them. A group of uniformed men, walking in ragged fashion, split into several smaller cliques. Their voices offend the silence of the night, carrying down the street, flooding in through the crack of the window.

One cluster of men disappears into a two-story building on the corner. There must be no more than two flats in there for them to loot and who knows how many people left to harass. When another group—four noisy men—breaks off this sinister parade, moving close to our street front, my heart quickens. Their talk is elevated and bounces between the buildings in a chilling echo. I notice their saunter is not wobbly; they aren't drunk yet. They must have just gotten off duty, eager for whatever they might deem as fun.

"Mamochka, what is it?" Zoya asks, trying to peek from behind me.

"Soviet soldiers. Looking for trouble."

"Trouble only for us."

I move the lace curtain so that only a narrow strip of the window is clear, from behind which I can keep peering down. One of the soldiers yells, "Which one should we try?" The

sound of my native language from his mouth strikes me almost as something unfamiliar. A bottle glints in his hand when he raises it to his mouth, tilting his head up to take a swig. He is turned in my direction, and when the bottle lowers, his face remains open toward me. I could swear I lock eyes with him before he looks away, pivots, and heads straight for the entrance of our building, his laughing comrades following.

"*Blyat*!" My curse and the expression on my face scare Zoya, but I ignore her questions as my mind races through our limited options in the little time we may have. I grab her arm and begin pulling her to the living room. "Quick, you need to hide!"

This is what I feared ever since the siege ended and the Red Army took over the city. I knew this all too well. I've seen it. I left my country because of it. One power leaves, another takes over, with no sense of liberation. Common folk bowing their heads in shame under the scourge of a new power, blamed for the old one's mistakes—an entire nation put firmly back in its place. And the fear and danger always doubles for women. I used to fear for myself when I left Russia decades ago. This is new fear. Stronger, fiercer: the fear of a mother.

Zoya obeys in silence, hastening as I drag her into the living room.

A single floor lamp's light dresses the room in amorphous shadows, casting elongated black shapes behind the family photos on the mantel. The pine-green drapes had been drawn, their fabric blends into the thickness of the air, as they block the glow of the streetlights below.

I rip the oversized cushions from the sofa, shoving my daughter into the depth of its frame. The four seat cushions, with the swell of the pillows on top should be sufficient to conceal her, even if she bulges up slightly from underneath. My survival instinct—sharpened by two wars—have long recognized the enormous furniture as a hiding place for someone petite.

Zoya lowers inside the belly of our sofa, shrinking herself into a horizontal position. She balances on her elbows and stares up at me, and I can't bear the look in her eyes. No mother ever wants to see pure, gripping fear on their child's face, no matter how old they are. "And the kids?" she whispers.

“These men aren’t looking for children, Zoya.” I hold onto her face with both hands, as if my grasp could somehow steady her mind. “You have to stay absolutely silent, no matter what you hear, do you understand me?”

She nods and submerges.

I bury Zoya with the seat cushions and throw a blanket with a couple of decorative pillows on top to add more fluff.

Back in the kitchen, I clear away Zoya’s teacup and hide the samovar in the lower cabinet, remembering that a typical Hungarian would not own a samovar. And that a Russian refugee from a tsarist era may not be seen very positively by them. I sink into the same chair I sat in before, sipping my now cold tea. I light a cigarette, unsure if it is to keep myself calm, or to appear calm. My hand trembles, I wipe the sweat off my palms on my skirt one after the other.

I wait. The silence swells around me, heavy and suffocating.

Maybe they chose a different apartment. Maybe they turned around and went back to the street.

My fingers squeeze into fists when I hear their laughter and shouting as they ascend the main staircase from the foyer. Harsh banging on our door jars my shoulders.

“Inspection! Open door!” a man yells in broken Hungarian. Another one chortles.

I have no plan, only a straight spine when I open the door and set my eyes on the first soldier at the doorstep.

He’s barely in his twenties. He leans one elbow against the door frame high above his head—a pathetic attempt to conceal the deficiency of his height. My hand slides off the door handle when he shoves past me into the flat. He considers himself at liberty to say or do anything in a country that was his enemy only a few weeks ago. The rest of them file in behind and I take in each of their appearances and their ages. I feel a pang at the realization that they could all be my sons. Their uniforms suggest only one may be a higher-ranking officer, and not higher by much.

They stroll through the front hall and begin peeking into rooms, speaking Russian, unaware that I understand every word. Their speech is common class, although I haven’t been home in a while to know if everyone sounds different since the Bolshevik revolution.

I follow in silence, stiffening my face to erase all expression. Two of them enter the living room. I hold my breath. The tall one hesitates, throws tentative glances at his comrade, then around himself, before making a move to sit down on the sofa. Just then the other points to the silver ashtray on the coffee table, instructing his friend to check it out.

I'm afraid to blink.

The tentative soldier-boy looks for the silver stamp on the bottom of the ashtray and nods, before his buddy rips it out of his hand and slides it into his own pants pocket.

My heart drums against my chest, sending echoes into my ears. *Please don't sit down. Please just don't. . . sit. . .down.*

A call rings out from the kitchen, and the two soldiers rush past me out of the living room, leaving an acidic stench in my nostrils. My chest deflates as I let out a long-held breath.

I follow them into the kitchen, pulling the living room door closed behind me.

They still don't address me. Swallowing the knot in my throat, I focus on their banter. They call the young, short one, with the wine bottle in his hand, Dimitri, while the higher ranking one's name is Ilya. They begin opening cabinet doors, slamming each one closed when they don't see anything to their liking. Dimitri whirls around to look at me.

"Where do you keep your liquor, you Hungarian whore?" he asks in Russian. He shakes the wine bottle in his hand and points at it with exaggerated gestures.

I think of that bottle of *palinka* we've been saving to use only in case of injury, in lieu of rubbing alcohol and pills. If I give it to them, maybe they'll leave. I move to the sink and pull out the bottle from the cabinet underneath.

They all shout in rude joy, and Dimitri rushes toward me from the other side of the kitchen table. I hold out the *palinka* to him, but his superior, Ilya, steps in front of me and removes the bottle with an unhurried smile that sends chills up my spine. His face, up close, strikes me with the jolt of uncanny familiarity. His resemblance to my late husband, Nikolay, disturbs buried images from Russia, feelings of happiness, loss, and guilt. Nikolay was a little older than this Ilya when he left to fight with the Russian army in The Great War. Or is it now called the *first* world war? Nikolay never returned and

I had to leave, fleeing from the Bolsheviks. It has all felt so long ago, neglected by my mind, that I've forgotten Nikolay's face. Until now.

Ilya laughs at my facial expression, but I can't help my stare. His eyes are Nikolay's eyes, his laugh is Nikolay's laugh splitting the previous silence of this home. I can almost see Nikolay question me—not with love, but with judgment: *'What have you done? Have you no loyalty?'* I'm fixed on the features of this young man in my kitchen, the image of a young Nikolay materializing like a ghost of my guilt, a raven tapping at the window of my conscience. I think about how I looked for him after I left Russia, hoping to find him alive somewhere, traversing half of Europe, only to betray him in the end. He had left me alone with two daughters, and by the time I gave up my search and landed in Hungary, I had three daughters. During my travels I naively accepted a man's help and affection, only to be cheated, pregnant, and alone again. Of course, I had wanted to be faithful to Nikolay, but there was no Nikolay anymore. There was no one. At the time I eased my conscience by telling myself Nikolay was gone. I even hoped he was. Because I did not want to face him, and I did not want to imagine the things he may have done during that war. While I struggled to survive, young and naïve, easily enchanted by the first helping hand to break my fading vows, did Nikolay invade people's homes in foreign nations, looking for silver to pocket and women to rape like the men sitting in my kitchen right now? I refused to think that. But isn't that what keeps happening? Soldiers, who come apart by their seams from the numbing emptiness of their wars, becoming something they'd never imagined they would. Why should I feel bad for having been lonely, abandoned and trusting? All I have known is that the war either killed Nikolay, or it made him forget who he was. Just like the man I betrayed him with. Just like these men in my kitchen.

I start when Ilya passes the bottle of *palinka* back to me. I shake my head, but he insists and pushes the bottle into my face. I take it and drink as they cheer. The liquor's burn feels oddly pleasant on my throat, but the soldiers' sudden silence sends a chill into my chest, sucking the air out of my lungs. Following their gaze, I jerk my head towards the door. In the

hallway, standing behind the kitchen's doorstep, barely half a meter tall in his blue pajamas, little Istvan squints into the light.

For a moment, nobody moves. I put the palinka on the table and stride over to my grandson, whispering to him that he needs to go back to bed. But before I can lead him away, Ilya calls out, "Little boy, come here." He motions the universal sign to make sure Istvan understands.

I pray that my grandson doesn't say anything in Russian, in a silly effort to try to show off. Zoya speaks to him in Hungarian, and he rarely uses anything else—but he can still understand Russian.

Istvan walks over to Ilya, who bends at the hips to be at the boy's eye level.

"Where did you come from, you little devil?" Ilya asks, then glances at the other three men. I can't tell if he's upset or simply wondering about how they could have possibly overlooked a child while waltzing through the apartment.

None of them found the children sleeping in the far back room. The men never made it to the end of the hall in their search, too busy looking for alcohol and valuables.

"Show me your room," Dimitri says, coming to his feet and pointing down the hall.

Istvan complies and dutifully marches back toward his room, where his baby sister is sound asleep.

I push ahead of them, grabbing Istvan's tiny hand, my pulse throbbing in my ears.

"Do *not* say anything in Russian," I whisper to him as we turn into the kids' room.

The soldiers allow me to put my grandson back to bed, while they argue about missing not one, but two children during their vague search.

After tucking the boy in, I turn to them, reprimanding them with a shushing sound. The four men pause for a moment, and then break into a laugh, like scolded teens. My fear transforms into impatience and frustration, a fury forming in my stomach, but I force myself to calm down and I point toward the kitchen. "More *palinka*?" I pray that they can't hear the shakiness of my voice.

They stroll back out, but Ilya keeps a suspicious gaze on my

face.

In the kitchen, I start washing my teacup just to avoid looking at them, but I'm fully aware of Ilya leaning against the door frame, ignoring his comrades' chatter and careless drinking. His glare burns holes in my back.

I remind myself that children are supposed to be protected by official Soviet order. That means hurting children is punishable by their own laws. These soldiers will surely decide to go somewhere else now that they found the children.

And then . . .

"Where's the mother?" Ilya asks, and the teacup slips out of my hand, clanking at the bottom of the sink. Every fiber in my body stiffens. He used the word *matushka* for mother, but when I ignore him, he asks again, louder this time, and using the universal word: *mama*.

I turn around, the water behind me rushing in sync with the blood in my veins.

Ilya's question booms over the others' voices and they stop their jabber. The room falls still, and I feel the space around me shrink. Ilya looks at his comrades and speaks to them while pointing at me. "She's way too old to be the mother of those kids," he says, prompting them to put together the pieces.

I shake my head a little too forcefully and answer in Hungarian. "No mama, no papa."

Now Dimitri jumps to his feet, his suspicion aroused. "Tricky little *suka*," he says, determined to call me a whore every time he addresses me. He bolts out of the kitchen, two of the other men following him. Ilya makes no move. He watches me and his resemblance to Nikolay nearly makes me burst into pleading with him.

A profound form of apprehension rises into my throat. It takes immense effort to inhale and keep my face as flat as possible to Ilya, whose glare is fixed on me. We both listen to the rumbling as the others search all the rooms again. I imagine them looking under every bed, the sofa, and inside every wardrobe, and wish to God they don't think to look *inside* the sofa.

The thought barely crosses my mind when I hear their voices shouting in a wicked glee. Every nerve falls apart, collapsing

the tension in me into a sense of utter hopelessness.

Ilya smirks at me, pivots, and leaves the kitchen.

In a daze, I rush after him to find the three lower rank soldiers next to the sofa, cushions scattered on the floor. Dimitri and the other man who pocketed my silver ashtray earlier drag Zoya out of her hiding spot, with a rough jerk of her arm. The tall, shy boy steps back into the shadow of the drapes.

"Look what we found," Dimitri says. "Another lying bitch, but this one's much more to my taste."

I shove past Ilya, but he just laughs at me as I push myself in front of Zoya.

Dimitri brings his face close to mine. I can smell the apricot *palinka* on his breath. "Nice try, bitch. You thought you could keep this hot little *devochka* hidden?" He grabs Zoya's chin, holding her face up for the rest of them to ogle at. "I don't even care that she's older than me. I haven't seen anything this pretty in a long fucking time."

A burning sensation kindles in my belly, slowly growing into a ball of fire.

Zoya starts crying and I just want to ask them why they act like this? It cannot be possible that these men were *taught* to act this way—not by women they weren't. Is this what happens to men who spend years away from home, away from their mothers and wives? Does fighting slowly envelope their souls in shadow, forcing them into dark caves that birth demons of vice and malice? Their chests puffed, their eyes hazy, they are filled with a false sense of power bestowed upon them by pretend gods of war. Is this what my Nikolay did, when he'd been sent to fight in foreign lands, while I cared for our children and waited for his return? Is this how Zoya's husband acted when his hussar regimen entered France?

Ilya walks up and pushes Dimitri aside, so he can take a better look at Zoya. His eyes travel up and down her body, watching her chest shake as she quietly sobs. "I think we hit the jackpot, comrades."

The fire in me turns liquid, rage finally spills out like lava through the cracks. The words roll from my mouth, inches from Ilya's face—in Russian this time. "How dare you?" I ask him. His eyes widen, expression frozen in a shocked grimace.

I shift my stare to the rest of them. “How dare *all* of you?”

The surprise of hearing their mother-tongue momentarily paralyzes them.

“Don’t you have mothers?” I am spitting with anger. I don’t shout but my tone is deep and clear. “When was the last time you saw their worrying faces, heard their voices, ate the foods their hands made for you? When was the last time you *thought* of them? Of the lessons they taught you?” I shake my head, words coming in a pant. “They didn’t teach you *this*! And what would they think if they saw you right now, right here—akin to animals, to *beasts*—ready to violate someone else’s daughter, someone else’s mother . . . ? Shame on you all!” I run out of air but keep my stance as they all stand still around me.

Zoya’s sobs cease. Ilya steps back. He blinks several times, his mouth open, his arms dropping awkwardly by his sides. Dimitri and the other two men shift their gazes toward the floor.

“You . . . you speak Russian?” Ilya asks, his ice-blue eyes captured by my scowl.

“I *am* Russian, you imbecile. And so is she,” I say, tipping my head toward Zoya. “But that’s not what matters. We’re wives and mothers, who’ve suffered through wars we didn’t choose to start.” I pause and wait for him to say something, a glimmer of hope crawling back out from deep within me.

Nobody speaks. The room around us feels solid, stiffened into a colorless background mass. I soften my voice: “What did you call your mother, Ilya? Did you call her Mama? Matushka? Mamochka?” I look to the other three. “And you? What about you, Dimitri? Or do you prefer Dima? Is that what your mother called you, as she gave you tea with honey whenever you felt ill?”

Calling them by name puts the four soldiers in an even more profound state. Suddenly, they remind me of two Hungarian soldiers who showed me kindness during the siege, despite their orders. The difference is that these Russian boys have less to fear. They survived the fighting, they won, and now they are fed lies about victory and dominance away from their home. But they are still lost, carrying with them an empty purpose and a lifetime of terrifying memories. I now

watch, as the soldiers' collective arrogance deflates within the silence.

"Mamochka," says the tentative boy by the drapes, whose name I never caught. "I call mine . . . Mamochka." He seems painfully juvenile now, standing behind Dimitri, the dull light of the lamp illuminating the glaze over his eyes.

"What's your name, son?" I ask him, as his wordless comrades all stare at him.

"Nikolay," the boy says, his hand nervously rubbing the back of his neck. The collar of his uniform curls up and hides the red tag that displays the Soviet emblem: a star encircled by two ears of grain.

I nod, the pressure in my chest returning from the sound of that name. "That's the name of my late husband. I lost him in the war. Not this one; the first one." Nikolay's expression opens with wonder. "When I was alone and scared for him at home, it never occurred to me how he might be acting towards civilians, towards young women in some faraway land. Now I wonder, was that naïve of me?"

Their shame is palpable. Even Ilya won't meet my eye anymore.

But I need to find a final blow that will ensure they will leave and not do anything stupid. Not tonight, not another night. They all have superiors and now I know their names and faces. "Your mama would be ashamed of you, although she may never know how you behaved today. But I don't think you want your commanding officer to find out, do you?"

Ilya shakes his head and shoots uneasy glances at his comrades.

I feel as if my veins have suddenly opened, sending a cool flow through my entire body, the tenseness in my limbs releasing. "Take the rest of that *palinka* if you want. I have some cigarettes, too."

They file out of the room, following me into the kitchen. I give them our last pack of smokes and hand Ilya the bottle of liquor.

Before they leave, Ilya pauses in the doorway. "What is your name, ma'am? And where are you from?"

"I grew up in Kiev. My name is Yefrosinia." I point toward the back room, in the doorway of which Zoya watches us

warily. “And that’s my daughter, Zoya.”

He smiles at her and I notice the creases around his eyes crinkle in playful curves. Something flashes across his face—maybe a memory or an image of a pretty girl he knows back home.

Dimitri—whose favorite name for me until recently was whore—is last to leave, and before he does, he pauses in front of me. “I—I’m sorry, Mamochka,” he mumbles.

For a moment I wonder if he meant to call me ‘mom’ or his subconscious did.

I find peace in the fact that I will never need to know.

Devon Bohm

Grief

It's been three hours since they told me you were dead and when they did, I didn't feel anything, so I went to the library where my mother keeps her self-help books and found one about Grief so I could know what I was supposed to be feeling. And then I knew it was okay because it told me I was supposed to be feeling Denial and it defined it and gave an example. Essentially it means that I'm not letting myself believe the truth of the situation. So it makes sense that I'm not sad. The Book assures me that people handle Grief in different ways, which makes sense too, since I'm sitting in my dad's study, drinking one of his nicer single malts and smoking a cigar in your favorite lingerie. I'm kidding. Well, I'm kidding about the cigar and I'm still wearing all my clothes. For now.

See, I must be in Denial, proper noun kind of Denial, because that's the kind of joke I made when you were alive. I'm talking in past tense, which makes no sense, because you're not dead. See, look at how good I am at Denial. No, no, this can't be happening, this isn't happening! As if telling myself that will mean you weren't in a car accident on the I-9 on the way home to meet me for our last Fall Break.

But I'm not feeling Grief, of course. I'm not feeling anything, not even this scotch. No matter how much I drink, I'm still stone sober. What good is alcohol if Grief is going to deny me the blissful black-out sleep of the truly good and drunk?

When I got here I ran around and turned every light in the house on. My dad's in the study now, I can hear his wheezy breath from twenty-five years of smoking and he's saying my name real softly now. Now he's prying the empty glass from my left hand. He wants to hold me. I'm going to put my head on the desk now and just go to sleep.

Elle, there's been an accident. Ellethere'sbeenanaccident. Elle there's been. Elle. Accident. Like going to sleep. Just like going to sleep.

I slept for two days, but they woke me up for your wake. What is a wake, really? Besides the worst possible misnomer for those of us in Denial. A wake, a-wake, awake. There's something in the sound of it that's too optimistic, that secret hope under every tongue that the dead will sit up in their casket. Not you. I may be in Denial, but I also know that it was a closed casket wake because all that was left of you was in pieces. I know because I passed the crash site on the way to your house and was rubbernecking like every other driver on the road and I didn't recognize your car and your arm. I thought, *It looks like him*. I thought, *It's the same car*. I looked right at it and I didn't see you. I stared. The world loves a car crash. The world loves a sad story.

Your sister held my hand the entire wake. We didn't say anything to each other. She cried. I wore my sunglasses indoors so people would assume my eyes were puffy and raw from sobbing, but the fact is I forgot to put on mascara. And underwear. But that's probably some part of the normal grieving process. I'm so deep in Denial, I'm denying the fact that I should have worn underwear. I mean, Father Gilbert was there and everything. I did remember to wear black, though. I wore the dress you took me to prom in and it's too short and too fancy and I'm not wearing underwear, but goddamnit you love this dress.

Loved?

Annie held my hand the whole time, and in a completely detached way. I'm starting to realize it's not just because she's your sister. She's my best friend. But at the same time I'm aware of how weird it is we've stayed best friends even though we had all been best friends since we were little, because our parents are best friends, except now I'm the girl fucking her brother, or was, and not only that, her twin. There's something really warped psychological shit there, really, there must be. It's all too Southern Gothic Romance for me, but maybe we were all in Denial long before this. That's more Connecticut.

You would have hated your wake. The entire world turned up, our whole town, people from your and Annie's school, even some professors, and then a bunch of girls from my school and extended family from your side and mine. These people were clearly not in Denial. They were blubbering and

sniffling and making all sorts of terrible noises. I seem to be the only one who's doing this correctly.

Annie clung to me today, as if because your body had touched my body, I could be you for her, and now she won't stop calling the house. I haven't picked up. It might be because she's my best friend and I know how she is, but I'm partially worried I've somehow inherited your freaky twin psychic connection thing. You said it got weaker as we got older and you both developed deep relationships with other people, but that sounded too clinical to me for it to be real. When we were fucking I always kind of worried she would know.

People try to talk to me and I don't say anything because all I can talk about is the weather, which isn't appropriate. They'll bury you in the churchyard tomorrow and it's one of those wet, bright autumns you always loved where the rain makes the colors seem super-saturated, all reds and yellows standing out like paint against the black of the pavement and the still unnaturally green of the grass. So all I really want to talk about is the weather. It's all I can think about. How beautiful the world still is without you in it. Denial.

I've decided to move on to Anger. It's a word I've always liked because to me it sounds like what it is, not in the way an onomatopoeia does, but more subtly. I think Anger and I think barred teeth growling in a vicious snarl. It's like squishy, cuticle, bomb, obtuse. You always disagreed with me about this, saying words can't have a feeling. Well, fuck you. That's why I ended up an English major and you ended up dead. And by that, I mean you were going to go to business school after we graduated. See, even my jokes are spiteful. A perfect example of Anger.

Today was your funeral and there were even more people than at the wake. Our little town church was standing room only. Our families bunched together in the first pew, all on one side, not like it would have been if we had gotten married here like you wanted to, one day. That's when I realized I must have moved on to Anger without realizing it. Because all these people that are supposed to matter to me are hurting, and I just don't care. I don't want to share my Grief with them.

Anger flared again during the eulogies. Your dad did

this really terrible one about how even though as a father he was supposed to be your hero, you were his, and Annie totally overworked the whole twin thing. Neither of them talked about you the way we really knew you or in a way that seemed at all real. I thought about reading to them from the Anger section of the book, which gives an example, a person screaming, *No, no it isn't fair!* Except I would mean the way they were talking about you, the way they were all pretending, and not about your death. All I know is that I was supposed to say something and that I couldn't say anything. I got up there when it was my turn and all that came out was this long, terrible screeching noise somewhere between a wail and a laugh. A sound so high pitched I wasn't sure I could actually hear it, wasn't sure it was real at all.

Everyone patted me on the back too much when I sat down. Annie hugged me and said, "Me too, Elle." My mom leaned over and touched my hair and your parents were beside themselves, even your dad in his power suit. You mom's tears looked weird on her loose face, like she had taken more than her normal amount of Valium. I wonder what stage that is. I am definitely in the Anger stage, I know it, because you're dead and everyone around me is crying because they think I loved you so much I couldn't even speak. I loved you so much and it's so, so sad.

Fuck. Them. And Fuck you too. It's your fault I have to put up with this bullshit at all.

Our mothers tricked me today. It's four days after they put you in the ground, instead of cremating you like you would have wanted. I have withdrawn in protest. I haven't showered and smell like sweat and alcohol and I'm still wearing my prom dress. But even if I shower I'm just going to have to shower again, so I mean, really, why would I do that? What's the point to it? This makes me feel Anger, appropriately.

They drove me to your house and I didn't want to be there but it had been a week since I had said a single word and I didn't know how to say anything to them. Not *no*, not *fuck off*, not *please, please, not here*. They led me up the stairs and past your room, the room where you taught me to play video games, where I threw up in the fifth grade and again

after freshman homecoming, where we kissed for the first time, where we had sex for the last time. I thought I could smell your cologne and body wash, the particular way they mix together on your skin, and I wanted to scream. I wanted to scream, but I don't remember how.

But we didn't stop there, they dragged me into Annie's room, which was dark and I was all about the Anger because they had tricked me. But they threw me into the chair near her bed and I decided to make the best of it, so I stretched out my legs and even took off my sunglasses for the first time that week because I really couldn't tell if Annie was a-wake or asleep or even dead.

After about ten minutes, Annie's voice that wasn't really Annie's voice croaked, "Elle?"

I didn't say anything, so she peeled back the covers and blinked, trying to see me in the dark. I was as there as I could be. She didn't seem to believe it. She got up and opened the curtains to let the grey light of the storm spill into the room. She was all rumpled up which is so terribly un-Annie that there was Anger again, I think.

She just burst out, "Oh, Elle!" and threw herself across my lap and started sobbing and shaking and I put my hand on her hair which wasn't as blonde as it usually was, but dull and greasy. I wasn't sure what else to do. Annie lay there for a couple of minutes before she looked up at me and all her crying suddenly stopped, cut off as if she had been speaking and she goes, "Elle, have you not cried at all?"

I realized I had taken off my sunglasses and she could see how I was (and am) dry-eyed and not even puffy and red like I had already cried myself out. She was looking at me in this way that reminded me so much of you, her eyes the same greenish-glass, that I couldn't look away. It was Annie that broke, Annie that lifted herself off my lap and turned and reached and pulled something out from under her pillow. It was a little velvet box. Then she was on the ground in front of my feet, in between the chair and the bed and she opened the box and inside was a diamond ring. For half a second I thought *Annie's proposing*, and a beat later, *I didn't know she was a lesbian*. But then she started talking. Her words tumbled out in one, long, breathless stream.

"He asked Mom and Dad for it near the end of the summer so he could propose to you at Thanksgiving in front of the families so you could plan the wedding for spring, just after graduation. He had already booked the church like you two always talked about. It's an heirloom, my great-great-grandmother's, remember? It's family tradition that the first born son gives it to his bride and even though you'll never marry him now, Elle, my parents and me too, we all want you to have it because it should have been yours and it's just not fair."

This was the moment I must have known Anger the best, because I slapped Annie so hard the box flew out of her hand.

I thought seriously about digging up your body this weekend, which makes me think I may have entered the Bargaining stage of grief. You have been dead for a month and I seem to be flying along here. Clearly, I'll be fine in no time.

I'm not sure exactly what kind of thing I would be Bargaining for. It's not like I'm planning to hold your body hostage or anything. The Bargaining stage makes the least sense to me. The example in the book doesn't even make any sense. The example is saying something like, *I would give my life for so-and-so to still be alive*. How does that even make any sense? As much as I love you, I'm pretty aware that trading my life for yours is 1) impossible and 2) actually pretty fucked up because I would be bringing you back into a world where I was dead and I'm pretty sure you wouldn't enjoy that. I know you being dead hasn't made my life all that spectacular.

My version of Bargaining is that I shower and change my clothes every day and talk to my parents when they talk to me and in exchange they'll decide I've recovered enough to go back to school. I've even seen a shrink a few times per my parents' request; though they seemed pissed I have nothing to say about the sessions. What can you say about sitting in a chair and trying your best to make conversation for an hour three times a week? It's about as stimulating as a colonoscopy in there. Maybe it's needed, but the best you can hope for is feeling vaguely uncomfortable and sleepy.

That's the kind of joke that you would of smiled half sideways at, rolling your eyes. The therapist calls deflecting.

I insist to her that I'm actually just very witty, but this just causes her to shake her head and write in her notebook. I'm trying to put a serious face on and talk about my feelings but honestly, this Bargaining makes no sense to me. Because I don't know what she wants me to say.

Her name is Dr. Dixon and she likes it when I call her Melissa, even though that makes me feel like she's in high school and not really a doctor at all. She reminds me of that guy, Frank, who used to come to high school parties even though he had graduated a while ago. In retrospect, he really wasn't all that old. He was probably our age now. My age now. But there was something desperate in him, in all that striving to connect with us, that Melissa has whenever I'm in her office. Though she always wants me to talk and she never seems to really have anything to say. It's kind of wildly unfair and not really helping with that whole connection aspect.

I spent the first couple of sessions telling her about our families and our lives. How our fathers met at an Ivy, how your mother went to the women's college that eventually got absorbed by that Ivy, and how my mother went to my school. How everybody met at some dance or social or game or some other tradition not really in practice anymore and how everyone fell in love and moved to Connecticut a couple of miles away from each other so their pasts were never that far past. And then how our mothers were pregnant together and how you and Annie were born only a month before me and how we all grew up together in the same bathtub. How when we were old enough you and I got together and were together from then on always. How we kept growing up together and went through CCD together and drank and learned how to roll a joint together. How we graduated high school at the top of our class together and went to our parents' alma maters and visited on weekends and for the few remaining traditional events.

I even tell her about you dying and the ring and slapping Annie because I was running out of material. I regret that, because now all she wants to talk about is Annie and how I should call her. It's just been Annie blah blah Annie blah blah blah for the last two weeks straight. Blah blah blah.

This week she started things out by saying, "Elle, would

you consider Annie a sister?" And I had no real way to answer this question besides a literal, "We would have been if her brother and I have gotten married. But, you know, he's dead now." I know she won't like that, so instead I burst out: "I can't stop thinking about digging him up."

No room has ever been so silent.

So I said something like: "I don't understand why no one asked me what he would have wanted. I was the closest person to him, closer than Annie even, his twin for chrissake, and they just buried him. Forget all that Christianity crap, he didn't want this. Now he's trapped here and all we ever wanted was to go somewhere else. We would have had the nice, big wedding for the parents and then disappeared into the world. It's what we wanted. He was so much, he could have done anything he wanted, anywhere he wanted. But now where is he? He's in the ground. They should have cremated him and thrown his ashes to the wind. Not fucking made sure he was stuck here forever. Because I get the whole Christianity thing, but if there's some sort of revelation or whatever, his body is in pieces anyway, I saw it. Besides the fact he was an atheist."

This is the most I've spoken in a month.

"If you dig him up, what would you do?" Her interest had been piqued, even though I have no desire or need to pique anybody.

"Nothing. I'm not going to. I just wish I could. I can't change anything, I just want to."

When I got home today, Dr. Dixon had already called my parents and they're letting me go back to school to finish my senior year. Without you.

The thing about winter is that there's two kinds of winter. Happy, excited, anticipating Christmas winter and after New Years oh-fuck-it's-cold winter. The latter is pretty charmless, bleak and desolate and empty. That's where we are now. Which is how I know I've moved on to Depression. There's no other way to feel when the world feels like this.

I didn't go home for Christmas. I stayed here. I take walks in the woods, knee deep in snow, and most of the time I think about you and how we used to walk in these same woods,

making the same plans over and over again. Get married. Move to Morocco, London, Prague, a new place every week. You picking up jobs and I would have written or painted or maybe taught whenever we went. Now I stand in snow and wretch up everything inside me and cry. The tears are hot on my cheeks and there's no one around to lick them off.

I walk and I think of echolocation and about the tree falling in the forest. There's no one for me to echo off of, no one around to hear me fall. I do not exist. I am no longer real. How am I supposed to prove my existence except through another person?

I'm reading the Depression section of the book again. It's telling me I'm feeling despondent, anxious, empty, hopeless, irritable, restless, and even guilty. Guilty. That's a funny one. Cute even. I have all the other symptoms: insomnia, loss of interest in activities I once enjoyed, like sex, loss of appetite, aches and pains, problems concentrating, but guilt? Why should I feel guilty? I'm not the one that purposely drove my car into oncoming traffic. Not that I know it's how it happened, I never read the reports, I don't really know anything about how any of it happened. But I could imagine.

This is what I've kind of pieced together from what I know about everything. This is how I see it: You were rushing, rushing, rushing home because I missed you. I imagine you feeling that anticipatory excitement the same as I did, but then you didn't. Because then you saw our whole life before us as one long and endless string of the same, the same as it had always been and no way out. No Morocco or London or Prague, just Connecticut. Getting caught, getting locked in, not being able to do everything we wanted. It would just turn into children and white picket fences and everything all over again, just like our parents had done it. No way out because you loved me and could never leave me or disappoint me or our families. So you pulled the steering wheel, hard. Because there was no other way out.

Does that sound familiar?

I ran into Annie today. Your sister, your twin. She was here, in my little college town, and I was walking and I saw her and she was smiling. Apparently she's going through

the stages even more quickly than I am, skipped right over Depression and got out of the cycle entirely. There's no one around and then Annie walks on in, looking the same as ever, except maybe thinner. Sometimes my life doesn't feel real.

Her face cringed when she saw me, walking toward her on Main, very distinctly cringed in a way I couldn't distinguish; something between horror and pity and disgust. A halfway house of feelings I can't even begin to conceptualize right now. Her friends recognized me too, their faces looked more shocked than anything, but really, what the hell? They all know I go to school here. They smiled and greeted me politely after their initial responses and the friends kind of faded away until it was just Annie and me, standing in the snow near that goddamn giant Christmas tree they still haven't taken down even though it's half way through January and most of the lights are burnt out.

Annie hugged me but she felt like you and smelled like you in a way that made me want to vomit, and I released her quickly. She looked hurt but I didn't know how to fix it. How do you fix this? But she was always the kind of person Emily Post would admire and she tried to, anyway.

"Elle, how have you been?" her brow furrowed. "Are you okay? You don't look…like yourself. You…well, I haven't talked to you in forever. I didn't even know you were at school right now."

"Where else would I be?" My voice cracked. It had been so long since I had spoken to anyone.

"Oh, my parents figured you would have gone home by now, since you weren't home for Christmas. We missed you, Elle. I still have, well, we're keeping the ring for you. Whenever you're ready." Her smile wasn't patronizing even though I was feeling patronized. She looked so normal. It made me want to hug her, break down in tears on the street so she could lick them off for me because she was the closest I had to you, to anyone. I didn't say anything. I was silent, staring at her and the way Annie and you had the same nose and eyebrows and chin and how looking at her was like looking at you in drag, so beautiful.

"Elle," she said again, "Elle, are you okay, seriously? You don't look okay and you still haven't been home and I miss

you and I mean…"

And she just looked so much like you, and so alive and real and now that I kissed her. On the lips. And she responded, kissing me back, her tongue sliding into my mouth for a second. She broke it off quickly and I looked for her reaction and there it was—she was flustered, upset. She felt something. Annie walked away from me without a word.

And I kept watching after her as she walked away, thinking: I'm going to be like that someday. Fixed, whole again. Done with all this Grief. How perfect. How lovely. How not.

Maybe I'm supposed to feel guilty in all this Depression, and I can think of plenty of things to feel guilty about, but instead I just feel nothing at all. I must be doing this right.

You are dead. See. Acceptance. It must have come in with the spring flowers and now everything is warm and sticky all around me including the fact you are dead. It is so simple and true it rings outward over the pond. I am not sad. I exult. Sometimes I wonder if I was supposed to feel sad at some point in all of this, this nine months of grief, ending in a beautiful firestar firework firebird celebration, right here, right now. I am in the same woods I cried and wretched in. But now I am free. I release you the way you released me.

I am walking, right now, to our favorite spot on the river. We called it Ophelia's Bend and sang about his green grass bed and being tumbled into bed. It is just after sunrise and no one is here, on the path. I don't need to look up at all, I can feel the world around me, swallowing itself. But I am here, all of a sudden, strange as that, strange as you not being here, but I am here.

Today is graduation day and because people don't actually know what the word irony means, I could call this ironic. Because you are dead and not here to correct me I can be colloquial instead of proper.

Right here, right now, you are dead, but I can't do this alone, so I imagine, I dream of you and we are walking. We are always walking, but in the dream it is different somehow. The way we walk is not fumbling and separate. I do not bump into you, weave in and out. My feet are as sure as yours. Our feet move in a rhythmic falling like the light is shining

through the trees is not from the sky, but from us, singing outward. We are walking on our trail near the river.

It is spring and I can smell and taste the world as I breathe in honey and freesia and grass and clean air so new after months of nothing but the smell of snow empty in my cold head. I am melting and I can feel you melting beside me and I know you taste it too, all mixed up in the spring you can taste me on the air the way I can taste you. You, all heavy, dark sugar of black cherries and something almost like leather, deep and earthy, but also the salt of the ocean even so far from the coast, the baked heat of the beach rising in invisible spirals from your skin. We reach our bend in the river where the trail goes on but also lets you choose to keep walking or descend into the river, shimmering clear and copper in the new light that is waking up and stretching itself all over these woods like the belly of a snake, cool and thick skin even in the heat, like pennies, like my hair in sunlight by summer's end. I don't know what I look like, but when we look at each other, I can see myself reflected in your eyes and I catch myself glancing out beautiful, but only in your eyes. Only in your eyes can I catch that.

And now I am dreaming of you and you look at me. Staring at you is like staring at the sun, it blinding. You are golden. You are the ocean rising up to swallow me, so far from the coast. You are the sun and the light and the heat. Your eyes flash the sky back and forth back and forth to me and I am lost. I am a little doll in your eyes, staring out with something I couldn't see before—with sadness. Both of us are so profoundly sad, but it's all so beautiful and I can feel the light in my hair and see your muscles rippling under your brown skin and summer has come and gone and come again so fast as you reach for my face, like it's a flower, and you hold it and look at me for the smallest second before you kiss me.

This is Acceptance.

Am I doing it right, Caleb?

Sarah P. Blanchard

Playing Chess with Bulls

Two months ago on Darcy's nineteenth birthday I asked her why she rode bulls.

Part of it I get—the grit-and-rhinestone glamor of rodeos, the macho kick-ass allure of cowboy culture.

But what flirt-with-death wish compelled my sister to take up a sport like bull-riding? And how is it a *sport* to climb onto a pissed-off, three-quarter-ton beast—with horns—that wants to stomp you into the dirt?

Those china-blue eyes gleamed whenever she talked about the bulls. "It's like an eight-second game of chess. You have to out-think the moves your opponent's gonna make. The bull," she added. Like I couldn't figure it out. "He's your opponent."

"Right. Exactly like chess."

She didn't hear the sarcasm and she was just spouting bullshit—*real* bullshit, right?—from the rodeo producer's PR campaign. Their latest attempt at lipsticking a brutal gladiator event.

Darcy was all earnest, pleading for me to understand. "Bull-riders are real religious, you know. There's a prayer we all say while we're gettin' our glove and rope all rosined up. 'Lord ride with me.' Then you climb in the chute and ease down onto ol' Mister Bull and just keep sayin' it, 'Lord ride with me Lord ride with me Lord ride with me.' Set your spurs and lean in. Finish it with 'By your grace I am saved.' Then *everything* explodes and it's awesome, the best adrenalin rush *ever*. Like a religious thing. Ecstasy, but not the drug."

"You joined a church?"

"No, it's just what you say."

"So riding bulls is like taking drugs?"

"*Way* better. Come watch me ride, Bets. Support your kid sister."

"I can't watch. So no."

But I do support her. I've been feeding her and her horse for the past two years. And after each smash-up with a bull—first a cracked collarbone and busted ribs, then a wired-up

jaw and a ruptured spleen—I convinced my husband Ryan to move his weights from the guest room to the garage so Darcy could recuperate at our house.

After a brindle Brahma named Bruisemaker broke her leg last spring, she stayed with me for three weeks. At end of week one, Ryan let me know what he thought about that by slamming the back door off its hinges. He moved in with his cousin in Marshall and stayed there until I helped Darcy get good on crutches. I set her up in a Motel 6, the only place I could afford.

No one's heard from Darcy now for three days.

They found her truck at the post office yesterday, Monday morning. A mail carrier arriving early for work saw Darcy's rusted-out F-150 sitting at the far side of the parking lot, apparently abandoned. The doors were unlocked and a key sat in plain sight on the dash. The left rear tire was flat. No spare.

The truck wouldn't start, a sheriff's deputy informed me over the phone.

"The mailman recognized the truck. Told us you're her sister."

I waited for him to ask a question. He waited for me to say something.

"Yeah," I offered.

"But she didn't call you."

"No."

He had lots more questions I couldn't answer. No, I didn't know where Darcy was supposed to be. Did she have a job? Maybe. I wasn't sure. Where did she usually stay? In her truck. Sometimes with a friend. No, I didn't know who.

He sighed. "Do you have a photo of her?"

We were both relieved when I said yes. I texted him a picture of Darcy on her eighteenth birthday, a little more than a year ago. I'd taken her to dinner at a barbecue shack, just the two of us. She wore a lacy white low-cut blouse and her shortest miniskirt, and a walking cast on her right foot. The photo was a good one. She wasn't posing or mugging, just smiling a little. It was easy to see her lean face and the thick rope of straw-yellow hair hanging over her shoulder. Her head was

turned a little so the scar on her jaw wasn't visible.

The deputy said he'd send the photo around. If she didn't turn up in twenty-four hours, they'd put a search together. He thought the truck may have been there a day already, maybe two.

The post office sits at the end of town where the road changes from county pavement to one-lane gravel and disappears into the Pisgah National Forest, half a million acres of wilderness. There's not really a town there, more like a couple of buildings on a flood-prone riverbank between two mountains. Next to the post office is a gas-and-sandwiches store, and beyond that, a campground entrance with a trailhead into the forest.

On a busy summer weekend, hundreds of day-hikers and campers swarm into the Pisgah. Then the post office yard becomes an overflow parking lot. With all that traffic, no one gave Darcy's broken-down truck a second glance until the campground crowd cleared out early Monday.

I figured Darcy would turn up on her own in a day or two with an elaborate story about spending the weekend with someone she met in a bar. But this morning—Tuesday—I got a call from the sheriff's office. They were organizing a search, headquartered at the campground, and I needed to show up.

School was starting in a week and I should've been finalizing orientation for my third-graders. But I set that aside and drove out, stopping briefly to drop off a bag of grain for Darcy's horse, Wiley, who lived at an old farm on the way to the campground.

By the time I arrived, the county's search-and-rescue team had rounded up a couple dozen volunteers. The camp's parking lot was crowded with ATVs and big-wheel pickups, pre-coated with mud. Farmers and hunters wearing Carhartt denim and dirty camo formed small groups. They looked busy and important as they checked radios, shrugged into blaze-orange vests, and squinted at photocopied maps.

A deputy I'd never met, a restless, bulked-up cop named Jeffries in a tight khaki shirt and aviator shades, pulled me aside. Someone had seen a blond girl hitchhiking out on the county road, he told me, two days earlier.

"We're thinking it was Darcy. She must've set out on foot."

"I don't think she was on foot—"

"Yeah, she thumbed a ride with the wrong person."

"That's not what I meant. Her horse—"

"She's a pretty girl, right? We're not assuming foul play, not yet, but yeah." Jeffries nodded a lot, agreeing with himself.

"That's not what I meant—"

Someone called "Deputy!" and he pivoted away. I leaned against my Jeep, wondering what I was supposed to do next.

Was Darcy pretty? I never thought so. All those scars, and way too skinny. But our mother always said I was the smart one, the responsible one, so where did that leave Darcy?

Jeffries came back and resumed his spiel. He talked about BOLOs and mapping apps, tracking dogs and tri-state coordination. They were setting up a phone-in tipline. They'd find her and the bastard that took her.

When he stopped for breath, I told him I'd found Darcy's horse that morning, wandering outside his pasture. Not more than half a mile from here, back along the county road.

He shrugged it off. A loose horse, no big deal, happened all the time around here. Someone left the gate open, or the horse jumped out.

"Yeah, but—" My jaw was starting to clench up. "Wiley, that's her horse—he was real sweaty. Like someone was riding him this morning. Maybe Darcy rode up one of the trails, into the Pisgah."

His eyebrows climbed over the aviators. "You think your sister went for a ride on her horse? Instead of looking for help after her truck broke down?" He aimed his gaze at the mountain behind me. "Was the horse wearing a saddle?"

"No, just a halter. With a piece of rope."

"Well, there you are. A halter's what you use to lead a horse, not to ride one. Best thing is, you go home and wait. Where you'll have a reliable phone signal."

He added a chin-jerk, indicating my Jeep.

I really wanted to grab Deputy Jeffries by his shirt but that would be a bad idea, so instead I raised my schoolteacher voice. "A really *good* rider, like my sister Darcy, doesn't need a saddle. She rides bulls in *rodeos*, for chrissake."

But he was talking into his radio, and I don't think he heard.

"So now what, Wiley? I know you've been here before. So, which way?"

A horse can feel if you're nervous, so I tried to fake a confidence I didn't have. I hadn't been on a horse in years.

But Wiley was pretty chill. He stood patiently, shaking his head occasionally at gnats and deerflies. We paused in the mid-afternoon shade on the bank of Watson's Creek at the edge of the Pisgah Forest. Waiting for me to decide where to go.

We'd ridden along a wide, well-marked path from the gravel access road to an empty picnic site where the trail forked. Turn left, and you'd have a pleasant, shady stroll along the creek back to the main entrance. Go right, and you'd be scrambling up an overgrown game trail that doesn't appear on any Forest Service map. It winds through a jumble of boulders the size of bucket loaders, then climbs almost straight up into deep wilderness.

I'd ridden that unmarked trail once, a decade ago when Darcy was nine and I was fourteen. Some older kids told her about a clearing with a waterfall at the top of the mountain, so of course she had to see it.

That had been a tough ride. She'd had Wiley for only about a month then, and his steering—or hers—was still kind of sketchy. On the way down the mountain, my little old pinto mare Dixie tripped over a rock and came up lame, so I'd had to get off and walk her home, stumbling downhill through loose rocks and mudslides. We didn't get back until after dark and of course Mom blamed me.

So no, I didn't *want* to follow that game trail today. But I could see hoofprints, same size as Wiley's, in the mud by the streambank. One set of tracks pointed straight up that unblazed trail, and a second set showed where the same horse came back down.

Wiley snorted, blowing the gnats from his nose and startling me. Then he shook his whole body like an oversized hound slinging off bathwater, telling me that it was decision-time.

I lifted the reins and nudged his belly with my heels. We ducked under low hemlock branches and began climbing.

The trail was steep, with lots of switchbacks, and I quickly

came to admire Wiley's mountain-climbing skills. He was nineteen, not a young horse, but still surefooted and clever, a tough old hill pony apparently born with all-wheel-drive.

It was hard work, though. An hour in, Wiley and I were both dripping with sweat. My thighs burned and my lower back ached and I was cursing Darcy's saddle, a dried-out chunk of leather designed for barrel racing, not backcountry riding. The saddle needed treating with neatsfoot oil to soften it up. Darcy loved that old trophy saddle but she'd let the care of it slide, too, along with everything else.

That saddle was the biggest award she ever won at a rodeo. The lettering stamped on its scuffed skirts proclaimed their victory, hers and Wiley's: Champion Barrels, Girls 12-14, Yancey County 2009. From when she was still in school and still crazy about horses, not chasing broke cowboys and bone-crushing bulls.

When we reached a mostly level section of trail, I stepped off so Wiley could catch his breath. I leaned against his steaming, oak-brown shoulder and inhaled his hot-earth horse smell. It's a special aroma, way more than just horse. It's fresh-baled hay and livestock shows, picking apples and planting corn. Watching a newborn calf stand on shaky legs and find its mama for the first time. All that rural-kid, farm-life stuff that's supposed to make up for having parents who earned too little and fought too much.

Two months ago, Darcy told me she needed a new horse, something younger than Wiley. Better trained for ranch work, roping calves and chasing strays. What she claimed her real job was now, or would be soon, while she got better at bull-riding.

"What about Wiley?" I asked her.

"I'll retire him to a good family. He can have an easy life, teaching little kids to ride."

That sounded nice, but she never got the money together to buy a new horse and she never found Wiley a retirement home.

Truth? She's never earned enough to feed herself, let alone a horse. For the past two years, I'd been buying Wiley's hay and horseshoes with money from my summertime tutoring. It paid better than Ryan knew; he was under the impression

that my side-gig money paid for yoga classes. I hate yoga.

Since I was footing the bills for Wiley's keep, I could've ridden him anytime I wanted. But I never asked, and Darcy never offered. We'd both learned to ride as kids but horses were Darcy's thing, not mine. I never thought a horse would get me what I wanted, so I quit riding after eighth grade.

For me, it's always been eyes on the prize. Grades and graduation, a steady job, a steady husband. Check, check, check. Ryan says I was born grown up. I'm so responsible, he says, I'm boring. Except I was buying Wiley's oats on the sly.

Good old Wiley. When his breathing steadied, I hauled myself back into the saddle and we resumed climbing. Where a fallen pine tree blocked the way, I hung onto the saddle horn and gave Wiley his head so he could lurch and leap over. By then, I was giving equal time to prayers and curses, and worrying about how we were going to get down off this mountain before dark without falling off a cliff and breaking a leg.

If Darcy were here, she'd say breaking a leg isn't the worst thing that can happen.

"I came off my bull the wrong way," she'd explained at the discharge desk.

"There's a *right* way?" I'd swallowed three ibuprofens on the way to the hospital because when I get that angry, my jaw clenches shut, and I get horrible headaches. I was able to speak so the ibuprofen must've been working.

"Any way's the right way, as long as you stay on for the buzzer."

"And did you? Stay on for eight seconds and the buzzer?"

"Two and half. He was a real twisty bastard. They named him Killdevil Hill."

She said it with reverence, like being a twisty bastard was a good thing.

Worse than the broken leg, she reminded me, was what happened four years ago when our fed-up mother kicked Daddy out of the house. Two days later, Mom put our sorry little farm on the market and told Darcy to pack, they were getting an apartment in town. Moving in with Mom's boyfriend Herb.

Daddy wasn't exactly a catch—he hung onto his truck-

driving jobs just long enough to qualify for unemployment, then spent his cash on booze and hunting gear—but he was good to us girls. I never knew what our mother saw in Herb, a sullen, obese plumber with bad breath and bad teeth. He inhaled two packs of cigarettes a day and communicated mostly by grunting.

"What are you going to *do*?" Darcy wailed over the phone the night after they moved into Herb's apartment. I knew *exactly* what I was going to do: finish college, marry Ryan, teach little kids. Avoid going home.

But Darcy was only fifteen, so she was stuck. She said she had three good things left in her life, Wiley and her saddle and an old hunting knife that Dad gave her. She left her big sister—me—off her good-things list, she said, because I'd abandoned her.

Years later, Darcy told me she kept the knife stashed under her pillow at night because Herb always stood a little too close and gave her the creeps. My sister was silent about some things and a total drama queen about others so the knife and Herb's creepiness may not have been true.

Mom declared it was a relief to have a man who didn't get drunk every night and smash things. By "things," maybe she meant herself as well as the furniture. I never asked.

Darcy was a marginal student at best, but her grades really went down the toilet after they moved. She quit school the day she turned sixteen. She was probably a little dyslexic but no one talked about it, and maybe social services should've gotten involved but no one called them.

Darcy's first cowboy was a calf-roper, a soft-spoken Texan who taught her to roll a joint and drive a stick shift. He had a mattress in his Silverado and a spare slot in his horse trailer, so she and Wiley joined him on his tour of a bush-league rodeo circuit.

Then the Texas roper got a job on a ranch in Montana so Darcy moved in with a bronc rider who convinced her to quit the relatively safe sport of girls' barrel-racing and learn to chase the "real money" in riding roughstock. That's rodeo-speak for broncs and bulls, those violent, rider-hating animals that are bred and trained to explode into a bucking frenzy that pitches riders into the dirt.

Broncs, Darcy explained, bucked higher than bulls and came down harder but the bulls were more challenging because they could spin and corkscrew in mid-air. When a rider comes off, a bronc usually gallops away. But a bull often turns and tries to kill the rider. She liked the bulls.

After her first broken rib during a practice ride, I bought her a padded body protector off eBay. After she caught a horn in the face that broke her jaw, I bought her a helmet, too, with a chin guard and face cage.

Our conversation from a month ago followed the usual pattern.

"You're wearing the helmet *and* the vest, right? Every ride?"

"Yeah."

She was lying. I couldn't watch her ride, but I searched for new photos every Monday morning, and I'd seen the Instagram pics from her Friday night practice rides: head bare, yellow braids flying, skinny body whipped sideways.

"Come *on*, Bets!" She'd perfected her snarky eyeroll years ago. "Can you show a little family pride here? I'm *achieving*. I'm not a buckle bunny, an arm-candy idiot who'll sleep with any asshole. Any buckles, I win myself."

"You haven't *won* any buckles. You're hooked on painkillers. And the prize money's shit. Especially for girls."

"Women. We got a league. I need the Oxies so I can keep riding."

"You'll be crippled before you're good enough to earn back your entry fees."

"There's a guy from Australia making a movie about it. Us. Women riding roughstock."

"Yeah, right. What's his name? How much is he paying you?"

"I don't care about the money."

"So he's not paying you."

"You don't understand. It's all about the *bulls*. That rush I get from a ride? That's how I know I'm *real*."

I've never questioned being *real*. It's like we weren't from the same planet, much less the same family.

Five years' difference in age is fine if you're in a family where the adults do some reliable parenting. Then later, when you and your little sister are both grown up, you can laugh about

how she tagged along everywhere and tattled on you and stole your makeup. Then she'd apologize for that time when she was seven, when she threw her mittens in the creek and hid for *hours* in the attic and Mom came home and blamed you for the lost mittens *and* your lost sister. You have to keep looking for her, Mom said. No matter how long it takes.

If that was the two of you in a normal family, you'd be laughing together now and poking each other and shouting, "Sisters forever!"

Ryan was no help. He disapproved of Darcy and everything about her. Her sparkly rodeo shirts and her boots caked with cowshit. Her habit of showing up for dinner unannounced and leaving with all the leftovers plus a little cash for groceries. What with dropping out of school and spending money she didn't have and getting herself busted up, he told me, my sister had pretty much trashed her whole life at nineteen. Ryan didn't mention drugs so maybe he didn't know about the opioids.

He said I enabled Darcy. I said I was talking to her, trying to guide her. He didn't care about guidance, he cared about our money that somehow got wasted on her rodeos. How could we save for a down payment on a house if I kept saving Darcy? Cut her off, he said.

A week ago, I made that call. It's over, I told her.

"Sorry, Darcy. I can't do this anymore. Get clean, get a job, find Wiley a home. Like you said."

"It's Ryan, isn't it?" She whispered over the phone like we were all in the same room and he might hear. "You can't cut me off just because Ryan hates me."

"You're still riding bulls? What the hell, Darcy. You have a death wish, go chase it."

"You make it sound like I'm totally fucked up."

"Get a job."

"I have a job! At Beekman's."

"Part-time laborer, minimum wage if you get lucky. Shoveling cowshit and stacking hay bales. Half the time you can't even do that because you're on crutches. Grow up."

Silence, then a sniffle.

I sighed. "Have you talked to Mom?"

"She hangs up. Doesn't answer my texts." Her voice caught.

"Look, if you can't help me pay for Wiley, then that's it. He's yours."

"I don't want your horse! Quit the bulls and get yourself off the Oxies. Call me when you get it together."

By the time Wiley carried me onto the last high ridge, it was late afternoon. We'd climbed a thousand feet up to a small clearing near the top of the mountain, all gravel and boulders and scrubby bushes. A spring trickled out of a ledge and formed a narrow stream that cascaded over rocks and filled a shallow pool. Darcy's waterfall. The air was cool and I had an awesome view of the mountains. For a moment, I watched a pair of hawks riding a thermal at eye-level. Far below, Watson's Creek wound along the valley floor to the campground. Beyond was the post office parking lot where Darcy's truck sat.

I climbed down from the saddle, loosened Wiley's cinch, and let him drink. I tied his reins tight to a small oak tree so he couldn't wander away without me.

Had I ridden all that way for nothing? I walked along the stream and around the ridgetop, looking for some sign that Darcy had been there recently.

At one side of the clearing, a mattress-sized ledge of granite overhung a sharp drop-off. I walked toward the far edge, but I've never liked heights so when I got close to the rim I dropped down on hands and knees and eased forward between two big rocks, peering over.

Then I scrambled back, fast, because there was nothing out there except air and dizziness. Step off that cliff and you'd drop a hundred feet or more, straight down onto treetops and rocks.

I crawled back from the overhang. When I could breathe again, I stood and looked back to check on Wiley, dozing by the oak tree.

On top of a mossy boulder, less than a yard from where I stood, was a cellphone. The case was filthy black and the screen was cracked and I knew it was my sister's latest pay-as-you-go.

"Darcy?" First I whimpered it. Then I cried it. Then I planted my feet on the gravel and screamed her name over

and over until every forest sound paused in shock and I had no voice left.

Nothing changed. The small stream flowed, Wiley stood by his tree, and Darcy's phone sat on the boulder.

I pulled my own phone from my jeans pocket and found Deputy Jeffries's number. I walked to one side of the clearing, then the other. There was no signal.

A thought surfaced. What had I said to Darcy, the last time we spoke? "Call me when you get it together."

And yes, she *had* called me—that very morning, shortly after four a.m. It woke Ryan. He swore. "Do *not* pick up. She'll leave a message."

I was only half-awake anyway, so I went back to sleep. When I woke for real at seven, I'd forgotten all about the call. She hadn't left a message and she never called back.

Damn.

Some part of me was aware that the sun was getting low. In the deepest mountain coves, shadows had already crept in. Wiley and I needed to get off this mountain and find help.

An eerie, flute-like whistle broke the silence. It was Darcy's ringtone—the theme from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,* her favorite movie. Wiley's ears pricked and he turned his head.

Her phone had a different carrier than mine but still how could there be a signal up here?

The caller was someone named Jake. My hand hovered and the screen faded. I'd missed it.

The screen flickered alive again. A new voicemail. I knew her password because I've always known Darcy's passwords, and then I heard a man's voice fading and rising. Accented, something from another time zone.

They needed more footage, he said, for the roughstock project. Schedules and script approvals. Somebody liked the back-story. "Back on Thursday, Darce, with my mate for photos."

The voice of Jake paused. Waiting, like me, for Darcy to pick up. Then, "Hey Darcy, you there?"

Silence.

The person who was me sat there for too many minutes, eventually remembering that we—she, I, Wiley—needed to get

off the mountain before dark. That person tightened Wiley's cinch and swung into the saddle. Darcy's horse—my horse—carefully slid and skidded and stumbled his way down to the valley just after sundown, with zero guidance from his rider.

At the farm, the not-me unsaddled Wiley. Hosed him off, fed him, and hugged him.

At the campground I found a different deputy, a warm-faced older woman who listened and asked good questions. I described the trail and showed her the photos I'd remembered to take with my phone. The clearing, the waterfall, Darcy's cellphone on the moss-covered boulder. By then it was full-on dark and clouding in. The search would re-group at dawn, bringing in a tactical team with climbing gear and drones. They'd find her, she assured me.

I went home, said something forgettable to Ryan, and waited.

It's been a week now with no news until the sheriff's office called this morning. They found a body on the mountain, about a half mile away from the rocky clearing and the waterfall. It will take a few days to collect everything, bring it down, get an ID. Something about the remains being scattered.

I don't believe it's Darcy. Lots of people hike the backcountry in late summer.

Until I know different, I'll stick with my routine. Each evening, I drive to the farm and spend an hour with Wiley. Sometimes I sit on a hay bale and work on my third-grade lesson plans, but usually I just brush my horse and pick the burrs out of his mane. I tell him things he might not know about my sister, from when she was little. How she loved to climb trees and fish in the lake at the quarry. How fearless she always was. How once she wanted to learn chess but she never opened the book I bought her.

I believe I've worked it out, what happened to my sister. She abandoned her broken-down truck at the post office soon after four a.m., right after she called me. She walked to the farm by moonlight, climbed over the gate, and went looking for Wiley. She called to him softly and moved quietly so he wasn't startled from where he loved to sleep, in the lower

pasture by the river. She wrapped her legs around his ribs, tangled her fingers in his mane, and rode bareback to the trailhead just as dawn broke, while the mist in the fields rose and swirled around them like a living thing.

What else was there for her to do then, but gallop along the creek and follow the ancient game trails, climbing the mountain to find that waterfall again?

I tell myself that even if I'd remembered to call her back that morning, it wouldn't have changed things. By the time I was making coffee, she'd already set her cellphone on that mossy boulder by the little waterfall.

Maybe she put her phone down and forgot where she left it. Or she tripped and hit her head. Maybe Wiley wandered off and she tried to follow him but lost the trail.

It's all a terrible mistake. I think she'll just show up one day, maybe with a limp or more bruises. She'll laugh and say she'd like her phone back, please. And her horse, and me.

Brandi Sperry

Benny

My room at the summer house has a built-in radio, sunk right into the wall. Mama says this was very fancy back in the days the house was built. All the radio's finishes are brass, and the speakers are the size of my palms. I've seen its twisty kind of dial before in Grandpa's old pick-up truck, from when I was really little, the truck that didn't even have seatbelts.

Mama needs to write this summer. Her friend Carol who's loaning us the house said that over and over as they drank wine in our little kitchen at the new apartment: "Judy, you need to take the summer and get back to writing. Just get it out. Process everything."

I guess that means she'll write about me. Since I'm the cause of *everything*.

I fold my clothes into the dresser and tuck my suitcase into the wood-paneled closet. It's better when I'm tidy, at least. My hairbrush and barrettes and toothbrush and toothpaste and my pills all fit in the cabinet with the mirror in the bathroom. You could look in these rooms and not know I was here.

When everything is put away, I go out the sliding glass door and walk down to the dock, where the sun is shining on the lake water, making patterns that slip away before I can get hold of them in my mind.

"Casey!" Mama calls from the house, that stressed edge in her voice. I'm not even doing anything, just looking. I turn and wave back at her, hoping she'll leave me with the sunlight for a minute. I'm listening, I'm listening. I won't argue if she tells me to come in. I don't want to go but I won't argue. I am not going to have any fits this summer.

I make myself smile big, and finally Mama goes back inside.

That night, it's hard for me to sleep. It's quiet in a weird way in this house, with no neighbors sharing our walls. I look around the room, memorizing the shadows, so nothing will surprise me out of the corner of my eye. Moonlight glints

on the brass of the radio in the wall, right above the bed.

I sit up and run my fingers over the buttons and the dial. I flip the power switch, jumping a little when the static sound spills out of the speakers, fumbling to turn the volume down, quiet, quiet. I twist the dial like Grandpa used to do, waiting for a clear sound to rise up out of the gray.

When I hear a snatch of a song, I try hard to put the dial in just the right place to make the static fully fade. It's a really old song, but famous, one that everybody knows. The Beatles, I think. "*Images of broken light which dance before me like a million eyes . . .*" I sing along for a minute, but barely, under my breath.

And then there's another voice. Not the song, and not me. It sounds like it's also coming through the radio. "*Nothing's gonna change my world . . .*"

It sounds like a boy. About my age, eleven or twelve.

I lean in, listen hard. He doesn't know all the words, or doesn't care, singing "bum bum bum" instead of the right thing half the time. I wonder if someone at the radio station is messing up, not realizing they left a microphone on. But when the song ends, no new one starts. There's a shuffling and a record scratch, then the sound of someone picking up a guitar.

"Enough of the Beatles, let's give the crowd what they're really here for!" And then the boy's voice makes cheering sounds. "Here he is, folks—it's Benny! Benny the Jet!" He strums the guitar and sings some nonsense—he's terrible, but you can tell he's having fun.

I get up and go to the sliding glass door, looking out over the lake at the few other houses we can see from here. Maybe we're getting a crossed signal from somewhere close, someone with some recording equipment, or a CB radio in a boat. But everything is just dark.

My reflection in the glass of the door looks weird and pale, and a chill runs down my back.

Benny could be a ghost.

I try to tell myself it's a dumb thought, but it keeps feeling possible. He could be the ghost of a kid who died here, a long time ago, when the music he's listening to was new, maybe.

Kids do die. I know that as well as anybody.

I slowly step back to the bed. Benny is mostly just humming now, practicing some chords, I think. I put my mouth close to the radio speaker.

"Hello? Benny, can you hear me?"

He keeps on messing with his guitar. And after a few minutes, the static starts up again. I twist the dial back and forth, but I can't get Benny back.

The first time I got a really bad headache my teacher said I was probably just dehydrated. She sent me to the school nurse, who gave me a cold juice box out of a little fridge, with a wink, like it was our secret. I did feel special, sitting in the front office watching other kids go by, seeing in their faces that they wanted to know why I didn't have to be in class. I pretended that the juice box helped. I didn't want the nurse to be annoyed with me, after she'd been so nice.

It was a few more headaches before Mama and Daddy started to worry that something might be wrong. Really it was when I started throwing up a lot. That's always when adults finally believe kids aren't faking it.

There were a lot of doctors. A lot of scans of my brain and the tumor in the very inconvenient spot. They were not optimistic. This is what you have to say: "not optimistic." You can't say you're pessimistic; that's going too far, even if it's the truth. Mama and Daddy cried a lot, and they told me to hold on, and they sold our house to pay for everything, and they fought a lot about money, but they found a doctor who would go to the inconvenient spot in my brain. She dug in, and she fixed it.

Except I came out sort of broken after that.

I shake the cereal box at Mama and slam it down onto the counter. "What is this?"

She looks at me over her coffee cup. "What do you mean?"

"Why aren't there pancakes?"

"We have cereal."

"But it's vacation. We always used to have pancakes the first day of vacation!"

"Casey, this is not vacation. This is just life in a different place for a little bit."

"No! Goddammit!"

Later I will know I shouldn't yell like this, and I will wonder why I was so mad, even though they've explained it to me again and again. There's damage now, that causes mood swings. Extreme reactions. Aggression.

I throw the open cereal box on the floor, and it scatters everywhere. I scream at the top of my lungs: "Fuck you! I won't eat it!" And I run back to my room.

I lay on the bed and cry, because I yelled at Mama again, because this isn't vacation, and because I couldn't even go one day without having a fit.

I'm not ready to go back out there and face Mama. She will leave the cereal for me to clean up and she won't say anything about the fit, but she'll seem sad and tired in a way she never did before I was sick. I decide to try the radio again, because it's lonely in here and I don't think it's true that ghosts only come out at night.

I twist the dial back and forth, getting nothing but static for a few minutes, but I don't give up. And then it happens—Benny's voice! I suck my breath in and try to stay calm.

"We were gonna go fishing, but Dad said a storm is forecast, so we can't go today." He pauses for a moment. "I know, it sucks. I'm missing soccer for nothing."

It sounds like he's on the phone. Do ghosts talk on the phone?

"But he also said we can go to the bait shop so we can try live worms. It's so gross, I can't wait."

A rumble fills my room. Outside, gray clouds are gathering.

"Oh crap, thunder! Okay yeah, talk to you later. Bye."

Benny hangs up. I stare at the sky as drops of rain start to hit the sliding glass door. And Benny, settling in for his own stormy morning, starts playing music again. A weird country guy with a low, crumbly voice.

At that moment, I notice a cabinet in the corner of the room, the one I stacked my books on top of, and I remember what it actually is. It's a special kind of cabinet—when you open up the top, there's a record player inside.

I open the bottom door on the cabinet and pull out about a dozen records that are tucked inside. I've only really seen

these in movies. The paper covers smell like the old library at school before they built the new one.

"The Man in Black, really? Do you even know who that is?"

I stare at the radio. It's a second voice coming through, a man's voice.

"Whatever, Dad. I can read the cover, right?"

I look down at the record album in my hands, read along as the man says the title out loud:

"Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison. A classic choice, beansprout."

And this whole time, my heart keeps feeling smaller and smaller in my chest.

Because I know that voice. That's Daddy's voice.

In a book I read once, it talked about infinite other versions of our reality. Other dimensions. I read a lot of books when I was sick and sometimes it's hard to remember what was real stuff and what was just part of a story, but I look this up and it turns out to be true—lots of scientists believe in other dimensions. Math that is way too hard for me to understand tells them that they must exist.

In this dimension, I haven't seen my dad in person in almost a year. He took me to lunch on my last birthday, when I turned eleven, and when we got home he told me he wasn't coming in and would be going away for a while. I knew that meant they were getting a divorce. I'd been waiting for that, but I still cried a lot. "I'm sorry, beansprout," he said, looking straight ahead through the windshield, not at me. "Life doesn't always go the way you hope it will."

The Daddy-voice that comes through the radio is so happy. Even in the summer heat, his voice makes me picture him in a Christmas sweater. He and Benny sit and listen to music together, talking, Daddy telling stories, laughing. I listen to them for almost an hour before they get up and leave the room to go get something to eat. And then I don't know what to do and I start to feel a little crazy. I find my cell phone that I'm only supposed to use for emergencies and I call Daddy's number.

"Casey, what's wrong?" He sounds annoyed.

"Nothing. Nothing really, I just—"

"If nothing's wrong, I can't talk right now."

"Well I wanted to tell you about the lake house we're—"

"Your mom told me. Make some friends or something while you're there, okay? And try to be good."

He hangs up before I can say anything else.

I sit out on the dock and watch the sunlight patterns on the water.

I wonder if Benny goes to my school. If he's had the same teachers as me. Except he'll be in the right grade, not a year behind like me, from missing so much school. I wonder if he has my room at our old house, the one we had to sell. I wonder if he plays with my old cul-de-sac friends, who don't invite me to their sleepovers anymore.

I wonder if he's ever been sick.

A little boat cuts across the water, with a boy who looks maybe fourteen at its outboard motor, and another boy and a girl who look a little younger with him. Their life jackets are unbuckled and hanging open. They probably think it looks cooler that way.

The younger boy points at me, saying something to the one at the motor. They slow the boat and turn, coming toward me. "Hey!" the girl yells as they get close. I wave, because I don't know what else I'm supposed to do. The older boy cuts the motor and they drift up close to the dock.

"You a vacation kid?" he asks. We're not on vacation, but I know what he means.

"I'm here for the summer."

"All summer?"

"Yeah."

"Well that's okay I guess."

The younger boy smiles slyly. "It's okay—if you take the jump."

I look around at their faces, confused. The girl rolls her eyes.

"It's this dumb initiation thing they made up. Vacation kids have to do it if they want to hang out with us."

"Do I want to hang out with you?"

She laughs, but the boys look annoyed. I learn their names are Hunter, Tanner, and Grace. Their parents run the only cafe

nearby. And it seems like they're the leaders of the few kids who live around the lake year round. On Sunday afternoons after church they all meet up at what they call the Pine Cliffs, at the north end of the lake.

"If you jump from the highest cliff, then you're in," Tanner explains, though I pretty much already figured that out. I don't agree to anything, but Grace taps my number into her phone before they leave. She says she'll text me on Sunday.

As they speed away, Mama walks down the dock behind me.

"Are you making some friends?"

"I guess, maybe. The girl seemed nice."

She gets a look on her face that's part hope and part worry. The last time I saw that exact look was right before I had my surgery.

The next day is clear weather, and I guess Benny and other-Daddy left early for their fishing trip, because I can't hear anything but silence over the radio.

Okay, I do know I could be crazy. Hallucinations, right? That's a thing people with broken brains sometimes get.

I'm about to switch the radio off when I hear humming. It gets louder as whoever it is walks fully into Benny's bedroom.

"What a mess."

Mama's voice. That confirms it—she's there, she's with them. In Benny's world, Mama and Daddy are still together.

She starts singing quietly. *"Que sera, sera . . . whatever will be, will be . . ."* I sink onto the bed and listen as she walks around, I think picking up Benny's clothes that are scattered around the room. Boys can get away with being so messy. I look around at my room, perfectly neat, and my cheeks start to feel hot with anger.

It's just my broken brain. It's just my broken brain.

I run out of the room and down to the den, where Mama sits at her laptop.

"What would you have named me, if I'd been a boy?"

Mama looks at me for a second, and I think she's going to tell me to get out and let her focus, but then she leans back in her chair, almost smiling.

"We didn't really think about names until after we already

knew you were a girl."

"You must have had some ideas! What do you think you would have picked?"

She considers. "I probably would have named a boy after my grandfather. His name was Benjamin."

Hunter and Tanner and Grace and their friends splash in the water around the Pine Cliffs like they've never had a problem in their life. I lean my bike on a tree and walk slowly down to the shoreline.

Okay. I can be normal, I can make new friends.

Grace waves to me, and Tanner swims closer, giving me his smug smile.

"Gonna jump or not, new girl?"

A couple of kids are doing flips off of a rocky ledge that's maybe fifteen feet above the water. But that's not what he means. There's a little path that leads up to a much higher ledge, more like 40 feet, and not jutting out as far. You'd have to really throw yourself off the end to make sure you had a safe distance from the rock wall.

"No problem."

Tanner grins. I take a deep breath and slip out of my sneakers and the jean shorts I'm wearing over my swimsuit, throwing them into my bike basket, then head for the jump.

When I reach the top of the path, I can hear them all below in the water, but I can't see them, and they can't see me. I wonder if it's better not to look down first. I could just run and fling myself over the edge. My muscles feel stiff. I realize I don't even know how deep the water is. I haven't actually gone in the lake yet at all. I think the last time I went swimming was two years ago, at Sophie's birthday party, the last one before I was in the hospital.

"Getting scared?"

I look behind me to see that Tanner has followed me up the path.

"No."

"Come on," he says. "We'll do it together."

He strolls to the edge, and I follow. Looking down, the water seems far away. I feel a little dizzy.

"It's best with a bit of a running start."

He takes a few steps behind me. I hesitate, eyes still on the water, inching back a little—when suddenly I feel his hands on my shoulders.

"Hey! Stop!"

He's laughing, trying to push me over the edge! I throw my body weight back instinctively, and we both hit the ground.

"Ow! Geez, I wasn't really going to—"

I don't even hear him. I flip around and just start punching and slapping, landing blows on his face and chest. His yelling sounds further and further away.

Then I'm riding home. It feels like an instant later. I reach our yard and throw my bike down, lay down in the grass, take deep breaths. As I calm, I notice my knees are skinned and my hands are dirty. There's a flash in my head—Hunter pulling me off of his younger brother. Another—me running down the path, away from them.

And the kids' voices screaming behind me, calling me crazy.

A kid has to be taught everything they ever need to know. I remember when I was little, it would take me a long time to learn some things. I didn't know how to let my body take over, to feel the balance of the bike wheels, memorize the pattern of shoe strings, let myself float. I'd get there eventually, though. Because Mama and Daddy would patiently show me, again and again, until I trusted myself. And they'd tell me they were proud, even before I got it right.

They fight on the phone that night. It didn't take long for Mama to find out what happened at the Pine Cliffs. Tanner's mother showed up at our door, irate. I tried to apologize, but Mama sent me to my room. I don't know what she said after that, but I guess she didn't defend me, because now she wants Daddy to fly back to the city and drive up here to get me. He doesn't want to do it. I think they'll never stop arguing about who has to take me.

Benny and his parents are having spaghetti. They laugh so loud around the dinner table that the sound drifts down their hallway, into his room, through the radio, to me.

Mama and I are quiet around each other for the next couple of days. Daddy will be here at the end of the

week.

I walk into the kitchen while she's washing dishes, her back to me. I don't think I can say what I want to say if she's looking.

"Mama. I'm sorry you're sad because of me."

She shuts off the water and turns, staring at me for a long moment. "Oh, Casey. It's not your fault. You know that, right?"

I know that if they'd had a different kid, they'd still be happy.

Benny didn't take the jump. I hear him, talking to his best friend at home on the phone, telling him that he did. That it was awesome, and that all the lake kids were so impressed with him. But that was a lie. He tells the truth to other-Mama, and he's upset, mad at himself for being scared, and worried the kids won't hang out with him again. She comforts him, tells him he was right not to do something dangerous, right to listen to his instincts. She says she's proud of him.

I wonder if I would have done it, if Tanner hadn't interfered.

Daddy will be here in an hour. My bag is packed. Mama is tense; she keeps pacing around the rooms of the house instead of settling in at her laptop like she normally would at this time of day.

This morning, Benny seemed cheerful again. He and other-Daddy and other-Mama talked about whether they wanted to go fishing again or drive out to a hiking spot they heard about. I don't know what they chose, because they walked outside before deciding.

Daddy will be here in an hour, and I'll never hear that happy version of their voices again.

My stomach feels tight and I'm clenching my jaw so hard my teeth hurt. I want to smash everything in this room but I can't, I can't. Please, let me control myself, this one time.

I finally hear Mama go into her office, and I dash out of the bedroom, to her purse where it sits by the front door. I take her keys and run to the shed where she locked up my bike. In a minute I'm rushing down the road, knowing where I'm heading before the actual plan has formed in my mind.

It's early. No one else is here yet.

When I walk to the edge of the cliff jump, this time I don't feel dizzy. My body is calm. Benny has them now. But he has no idea how fast it can all go away. He's scared of a jump like this. Well, I've cheated death. This is nothing to me.

I back up a few steps, take a running start, and leap.

Nothing's gonna change my world
Nothing's gonna change my world

Worlds change whether you want them to or not.

The shock of cold—stinging pain all over my body—sinking, sinking.

Then kicking toward the light.

I gasp, swallow the air. Was that ten seconds or ten minutes? I don't know. All I know is that I did what he couldn't.

He has them, but I have one thing he doesn't have.

Every part of me bursts, but I'm breathing.

Parker Fendler

Mittens and Things

The fire didn't burn everything, it spared the junk. I step over the cast iron sink that hasn't seen a kitchen since Mama installed one of them undermount ones. This one's in the side yard. Just two days ago a pokeweed tall as me was sticking up through its drain. The flames took the weed and left the sink. If the fire had been greedy, really itching to take something worth taking, it would've torched the Oxbow place or Carson's Ranch. I suppose fire ain't too finicky though; maybe it's just downright lazy. Everything this side of the creek was like kindling, especially the Pine Glen Mobile Home Park where I live—I mean *lived*.

It wasn't the first fire to hit Marwick Valley. The last one scarred half the mountain. After the rains came, the runoff brewed the ash into a thick sludge that choked the creek. Cissy and I were spearing half-dead carp till we couldn't take the smell. After that, Mama prepared an emergency bag in case we ever got chased away again. It lasted a few months, but then we started borrowing from it. Aspirin when we caught the flu, candy bars when we were sick of eating healthy stuff, and cash when the septic tank got clogged. When the fire struck this time, the bag was empty.

The firefighters told us to stay away. When a fire burns a home, things like bleach and batteries get toxic, they said. The older mobiles might have asbestos in the debris. The men are too busy with other parts of the fire to stop anyone, though. Besides, the folks here are as stubborn as stubborn gets. The trees are like telephone poles now, so I see our neighbors clearer than ever. Most everyone's doing the same as us. Walking with their heads down and kicking stuff over. Thinking.

"Watch out for nails, Jed," Cissy says as she sidesteps a section of fallen roof. "Mama says if you step on one, you'll get lockjaw."

"Oh yeah?" I say.

Cissy leaps onto what remains of our oven, and she spins

like the little ballerina in her old jewelry box. “Yep, she don’t care none though. Says if we get lockjaw, she’ll save some soap on account of us not being able to sass her.”

“That woman hasn’t soaped my mouth since I was younger than you,” I say. “Besides, there’s no soap left. Ain’t nothing left.”

“There’s this,” she says plucking the naked blade of a shovel from the ash.

I search her face for sassiness and find none. Cissy seems to be handling things well for an eight-year-old. Her glass is always half full as the saying goes. Mine? It ain’t even half empty. Thing’s bone-dry.

“Handle’s gone,” I say.

“So.”

“So? What good’s a shovel blade without a handle? Or a shaft for that matter?”

She stoops down and scoops ash like she was scooping ice cream. Sure as shit, she uncovers a pair of cinder blocks. Not exactly gold, but worth a few bucks anyway. She stacks one on the other and sets the shovel blade on top. Then she puts her hands on her hips all ladylike and gives me the stink-eye. If not for them blackened knees, she’s the spittin’ image of Mama.

“Go on, Cissy. Put ‘em in the pile.” Our job is to find anything worth finding while Mama helps at Mrs. Spencer’s. Mrs. Spencer is still at the gymnasium. If her home looks like ours, her wheelchair won’t much help her find anything worth finding.

“You think Mittens is okay?” Cissy says motioning toward the spot where Ruthie’s home used to be.

Mittens is tough like an alley cat even though there ain’t no alleys in Pine Glen. He once killed a rattler and left it on the porch like some trophy. Only thing is, he’d disappear into them woods a couple days at a time. I hope he wasn’t too deep when the fire struck. I don’t want to discourage Cissy, though. “Mittens is fine. That cat’s smarter than Ruthie. He’ll turn up.”

“I hope so,” she says. “Except for Mittens, it’s just *things* that’re gone. They can be replaced.”

That’s what everyone’s been saying at the gymnasium.

Each time someone starts to cry, someone comes over and hugs 'em and says that. Cissy's just repeating it like a parrot.

"How's everyone gonna replace all their things with no money, smart one?"

"I don't know, *Jed*," she says. "Insurance?"

We're in the outline of the family room now; the entire ceiling's one big skylight. A sofa that was already a dinosaur when we bought it secondhand is now a fossil, all springs and charred frame. Man, I remember that sofa. When we were little, Cissy would lay on it longways like she owned it. She wouldn't budge when I'd try to push her aside, so I'd just sit on top of her. Then I'd act like I was just sitting on the cushion, and I'd yell for Mama and ask if she knew where Cissy was. Cissy would giggle until all the air was squeezed out of her. Eventually, she'd pinch me, I'd scoot over, and we'd sit side by side watching cartoons.

Sweat's stinging my eyes so I dab at them with my sleeve. "What do you know about insurance?" I say.

"Just what people been saying."

I roll my eyes. "Ain't no one in Pine Glen able to afford insurance. Not enough anyway. What else they been saying?"

"That God'll take care of us."

I'm not sure of that either, but Mama says to have faith and I'm trying.

Cissy and I are inspecting pots and pans when Mama returns carrying a duffel bag. She enters from where the front door used to be maybe out of habit. Her pantleg's torn below the knee. Dirt cakes most of her face except her cheeks where the tears have turned it to mud. We ask if she's okay and she says she is. The tears are for us and Mrs. Spencer and everyone else.

"Lord knows I've had nothing before," she says. "Besides, this ain't nothing. We've got each other." She pulls us into a tight hug and says God'll take care of us.

I carry the bag containing everything Mama salvaged from Mrs. Spencer's home. It's light enough to carry with a finger. We drive toward the school. The street sign says Pineview Road. I wonder if the folks in charge of naming streets will give it a new one. We leave our section of the neighborhood where the homes were destroyed and pass a section where the

homes were saved. It's like when two blocks in a domino chain are spaced too far apart and they stop knocking each other down. One home is gone, the next is fine. We know most of the neighbors here. They were huddled in the gymnasium same as us waiting to hear. Now, many are away helping others. Some are even boarding folks on account of the gymnasium being full.

I get to thinking again. If I take a break from school, I can get a job. Mama already said no way, but I'm thinking there *is* no other way. Last summer, Mr. Carson said he needed help mucking the barn and cleaning the chicken coop. If the creek's not flooding, I can walk—walk from where? I don't even know where we'll be living. We'll probably be leaving the valley altogether and moving to town where Mama works. I worry for Mama and Cissy. Here in Pine Glen, we poor folks are just poor. In town, poor folks are—well, I'm not sure they're safe.

We arrive at Marwick Valley Junior High. My school. My new home. Red Cross trucks are parked where the school buses unload. We accept water bottles and supply bags from volunteers at the doorway. Inside, it smells like sweat. Strangers are carrying huge strips of cardboard that look like flattened boxes. There are fewer cots now and they're spaced further apart. It makes sense since the lucky ones have returned to their homes. Still, people are starting to pour in. We find our spot that Cissy nicknamed *the Fort*. Mama goes to see Mrs. Spencer, and Cissy runs off to visit with some classmates near the food tables.

I get to people watching. Two girls younger than Cissy are playing tag. A little boy is petting a dog wearing a vest. A preacher is leading a small group in prayer. Mama is whispering something to Mrs. Spencer. The woman slumps in her wheelchair, and mama wraps her arms around her. I later learn that the fire had engulfed her box spring and mattress along with the envelope in between. Payback for her not trusting banks.

Volunteers are unfolding the cardboard box-like things and attaching them to bases so that they stand upright. Partitions to give folks some privacy. I offer to help. We arrange them end to end to make rectangular "rooms" around clusters of

cots. By the time I'm done, a line is forming at the food tables. When I get to the front, I'm greeted by an apron-wearing Cissy and her friend Ruthie whose eyes are red and puffy.

"Can I help you sir?" my sister says.

"Sure. I'll have the daily special," I say.

She nods to Ruthie who hands me a plate.

"What do I owe you?"

Cissy pretends to think and then says, "that'll be *all* your money."

I dig into my pocket and pretend to hand her a wad of cash. "Here you go, ma'am. That's everything I have." That part's true.

Cissy pretends to count it. "Thank you, sir. Enjoy your dinner." She straightens her apron. "Next!"

As I walk back to our area, I realize I'm grinning. Good 'ole Cissy . . . serving up food *and* smiles. I hope the smiles rub off on Ruthie. She seems to be having a tough time.

After dinner, we help folks who need it. I carry boxes of diapers and other stuff from the trucks. My friend Mike is here too, and he grabs the other end of the heavier boxes. He says we're returning to class the day after tomorrow. I don't like school more than any other kid, but it'll be good to go back. I joke that the walk *home* will be short.

After rinsing off in the mobile shower unit, a semi-truck with a bunch of doors on the side, I return to the Fort. Mama, Cissy, and Ruthie are there sitting on our cots. The overhead lights in the gymnasium are now off, and a small lamp plugged into an extension cord lights the space.

"Ruthie wants to pray with us," Cissy says.

Nightly prayers have been a routine for our family since I was little. Ruthie's folks aren't the praying type. We all hold hands and Mama leads. We pray for Mrs. Spencer. We pray for the victims and volunteers. We pray for strength. Cissy and I take our turns. We pray for the sick and the hungry. We pray for peace. We pretty much pray for everything 'cept things. It ain't proper to ask God for things.

"Ruthie, would you like to take a turn?" Mama says. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

"Yes, please."

It's the first thing I've heard her say all day. She clears her

throat and looks at Mama who nods. “God, please protect Mittens.”

It’s quiet for several seconds as we wait to see if she’s going to say more. Finally, Mama says amen and then we all say it. Ruthie too.

Mama walks Ruthie back to her family’s fort. When Mama returns, she flops onto her cot and falls asleep without kissing us on our foreheads. I’m sure she didn’t forget on purpose. She’s had a long day. Maybe she thinks we don’t know any differently. We usually pretend we’re snoring—sawing logs, as Cissy says—when Mama comes in. I’m getting too old for that anyway. I suppose other family traditions might be over too. At least we got to praying.

I say goodnight to Cissy and turn out the light. Sleeping in the gymnasium is hard, mostly due to crying babies. None are crying now, though. Yesterday, Mike’s sister Maggie was sitting right there on the bleachers nursing her baby. I meant to look the other way, but somehow, I found my eyes locked with Maggie’s. I tried so hard to keep my eyes on her eyes rather than on the boob, it just made things worse—like I was staring at her. I was worried she’d be angry, but she shrugged and smiled. I suppose all the babies are asleep now or have boobs in their mouths.

“Jed, you awake?”

I roll my eyes. Cissy’s version of a whisper is more like a hiss that’s louder than normal talking. “Yeah.”

Her cot creaks as she shifts. “What are we doing tomorrow?”

“Same as today, I suppose. Looking for stuff we can save from the house and then helping folks who need it.”

“Think we’ll find anything else worth finding?” she says.

“Sure,” I say. “Fires are funny. Sometimes stuff you think will burn doesn’t. Mr. Cheshire said he found a box of cereal today.”

“Really?”

“Yep. He was telling folks that his Rice Krispies were crisped but the Cheerios were cheery. Meaning the Cheerios didn’t burn.”

She was quiet for a moment probably trying to decide if I was telling the truth. I was. That is what he *said*. Was *Mr. Cheshire* being truthful? Folks say that man lies like a

politician. I didn't tell Cissy that part since I didn't want to squash her hope.

"If you could find one thing that wasn't burned," she says, "what would it be?"

"I don't know. Maybe my baseball glove. What about you?"

"You know that box of photos Mama keeps in her closet?"

"Yeah," I say.

"Remember that one where I'm riding piggyback on Mama, and she has her arms around you? We're all smiling, and I look like a bunny rabbit with my teeth? I want to find that."

I feel guilty since I was wishing for *things*. I mean a photo's a thing too, but it's got no value. It's more like a memory. I know the photo, the only square one in the box. It used to be rectangular, but Mama scissor-cropped everything above the front door on account of the bird poop splattered across the gable. I hold the image in my mind. Mama's hair was so long. Cissy had it tangled in her tiny fists reining her like a horse. My pants were too short like a flood was coming. I was wiggling out of Mama's grasp while she tried to tickle a smile out of me. Behind us, red and yellow potted flowers sat on the porch, wood-colored back then. Now it's white—I mean it *was* white. Now it's gone.

Everything's gone. My brain already knew this, but all at once it feels like the rest of my body just caught up. Suddenly I'm shaking, and my teeth are chattering something fierce. My heartbeat is thumping in my ears. Cissy asks if I'm okay. I try to answer but my breath is stuck, and the words are trapped behind it. What would I tell her anyway? I've been pretending to be brave for her and mama—being the man of the house and all—but dammit, there ain't no house! I'm just as scared as they are, maybe more so. Cissy asks if I'm crying. It's the one thing I promised myself I wouldn't do, but I'm blabbering like a baby off the boob. One cot squeaks then another, and next thing I know, my eight-year-old sister's got her arms around me. She's crying too. I wonder if she's doing it to save me the embarrassment of being the only one crying. That girl's tough as a cut of rawhide. Either way, it makes me feel better, like we're a team. Eventually, she returns to her cot. Soon she's snoring.

I'm still thinking about that photo. When we go to the house

tomorrow, that's what I'll look for. Just like Mama cropped it, I'll take a pair of scissors and cut around the outline of our bodies. Then I'll stick the three of us on a new background like a beach or a mountain or Disneyland. On second thought, maybe I'll just keep the house there to remember it by. I kiss mama and Cissy on their foreheads, and then I fall asleep. In my dream, I don't find my baseball glove or the photo, but I'll be darned if that cat doesn't strut right out from between them spindly trees and purr for Ruthie.

L. Michael Bohigian

Delivered

He needed to get a job that summer. Something. Anything. His father wasn't going to let him goof off with his high school friends, playing backyard Wiffle ball by day and drinking light beer in the woods by night.

"Perry, we're not paying thirty grand a year for you to study liberal arts at some fancy institution so you can screw around all summer," his father admonished. Larry Guck was a house painter who toiled long hours and came home looking like a dappled cow.

"Dad, isn't that a speech you make after someone graduates college, not before they start?"

Perry Guck was short and unmuscular and if he had gone through puberty, it wasn't apparent in his high-pitched voice and cherubic face.

"This isn't a discussion, Perry." And it wasn't. His father had a menacing stare and a stout frame and when he raised his voice, Perry knew it was best to obey. Or at least feign obeying.

Perry handed in a few applications that week—the Stop & Shop, Applebee's, the local ice cream parlor. Under job history, he listed "NOTHING" and under the job for which he was applying he wrote, "ANYTHING (preferably easy)." He delivered his applications to the most accessible front-line service worker and then dashed out as if the place were contagious.

"Any news?" his father asked him at the dinner table a few days later.

"Nothing." Perry shrugged and moved his piles of peas and corn with his fork, creating a vegetable world of hillocks and trails.

"Did you follow up?"

"Follow up? Like how?"

"Yeah, follow up. Give them a call. Walk back in there, say hello, ask to talk to a manager. Act like you want the friggin' job." His father's voice was loud and the wrinkles in his

forehead converged as he stared across the table at Perry.

"I did nothing of the sort."

His father shook his head back and forth. "I don't know about this kid, Gayle."

Perry's mother was his co-conspirator. An elementary school teacher, she wasn't unhappy with the idea of Perry being around more that summer to spend more time with him. In the fall, he'd be two hundred miles away in college and lost to them, a veritable adult.

"Oh Larry, would you let the poor kid alone. He applied for several jobs. What else do you expect?"

"He *applied*," he said with another shake of his head. "This isn't about just applying, Gayle. We're not giving out participation trophies here. You can't expect everything to be just given to you. You have to show some initiative. Act like you want it."

Perry didn't have to test himself against his father's maxims. A couple days later his mother ran into a friend from the PTO who volunteered for Meals on Wheels. The organization needed delivery drivers.

"It'll be perfect," his mother pitched it to him. "You'll be out and about, meeting interesting people."

"Interesting people?" Perry scoffed. "Isn't it, like, all shut-ins? I mean, who gets these meals?"

"You're going to have to find out. Interesting people. I'm just sure of it." She was eating baby carrots out of the bag and stretching her quads, the back of her heel up against her butt. She had just finished her daily five mile run.

His mother's enthusiasm wasn't what bothered Perry—it was her constant need to spin everything into a positive. A bout of the flu wasn't a week of misery but a welcome wake-up call for the immune system. Losing wasn't a sign of inadequacy but an opportunity to show grace and sportsmanship to the winner. The shouting matches between his parents weren't indications of a crumbling marriage but healthy and productive conversations toward real compromise. "A bunch of new-age nonsense" was his father's description. It was the one thing on which Perry and his father agreed.

"What, are they going to give me a car?" Perry rubbed his

hand through his mop of brown hair, sweeping it up and letting it fall back down on his forehead. “How am I going to get around?”

“You can borrow my car, kiddo,” she said with a smile.

On his first delivery, Perry found out exactly the kind of interesting people he’d encounter. An elderly man with overgrown eyebrows waited for him on the front sidewalk with a newspaper tucked under his arm and a large coffee stain—or what Perry hoped was just a large coffee stain—on the front of his white undershirt.

“You the new happy meal driver?” the man asked with a toothless smile.

“Happy meal coming up,” Perry said and handed him the plastic tray covered in cellophane. A peek through the plastic revealed a lump that looked suspiciously like horsemeat nestled next to a few wilted leaves of iceberg lettuce.

“Meatloaf again?” the man groaned, Frisbeed the tray into the shrubbery, and waddled back to his house. Before he walked back to his car, Perry noticed several other trays on the ground under the rhododendron.

“Don’t blame you!” Perry called out.

The old man wasn’t the only strange encounter that morning. At one home, a female voice bellowed from behind a closed door, “Just leave it on the step, please.” Another man opened the door naked except for a pair of loose-fitting boxer shorts that drooped below his hips. “Oh goody” was all he said when Perry handed him the tray.

With just a few deliveries left on his route, eager to get home and relax, Perry met Elaine. She opened the door with alertness in her eyes and a head of creamy white hair combed over her ears. She was a tiny woman, about four foot eight, and made Perry look like a basketball center in comparison.

“What is your name, young man?” she asked.

“Perry,” he said, surprised to be asked a personal question. Nobody on his route had asked him anything yet.

“Perry? Like Perry Como?” she said with a chuckle.

“I guess. Who’s Perry Como?”

“Oh, a legendary singer way before your time. He sang ‘It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas.’ Have you heard

that song?"

"I think so," he said, pretty certain he hadn't.

"You look a little like a young Perry Como," she said.

"Oh really?" he said, suppressing an urge to pull out his phone and search Google Images.

"My name's Elaine," she said. "Very nice to meet you, Perry. And where do you live? Are you nearby?"

"I'm in the neighborhood. Just about a mile from here over on Calumet Drive."

"Oh sure, I know Calumet. And are you going to school, or graduated perhaps?"

He didn't like these kinds of personal questions, but the woman had such grandmotherly cheer in her voice, he didn't mind.

"I just graduated high school. Off to college in the fall."

"Congratulations, that's wonderful. And you're off to where?"

"Allegheny College," he said. "About two hours from here."

"Of course, I know Allegheny. My late husband was from Meadville. That's a lovely town. Oh you're going to love it," she rubbed her hands together. "That's so exciting. So this is a summer job then for you?"

He nodded.

"We get lots of delivery people rotating in and out. It seems all the good ones leave quickly," she said with a sigh.

Perry shrugged, unsure what to say and whether he was being deemed "a good one" on his first day. Not prone to easy flattery, he felt a sense of pride in the compliment. He extended his hand and presented the tray to her. "Well, here's your meal, Elaine."

"What do we have here?" she asked, taking it from him.

He resisted an impulse to make a joke.

"Meatloaf," she answered for him with a smile. "That'll certainly do. Thanks very much, Perry. See you tomorrow I hope?"

"Yes, I'll be here," Perry responded and for the first time that morning, he found himself happy in the job. He had survived the first day and had a nice chat with a friendly woman to end the shift. Perhaps his mother was correct—the job might be pretty decent after all.

At home that evening his mother delighted in Perry's anecdotes about the characters he met that day, especially the ones featuring the wasteful curmudgeon and his antitheses: the man who came to the door with a fork in his hand, ready to devour the meal on the spot.

"It takes all types," she said with a laugh. "You're doing good *and* making some money. That's great, Perry. Not a bad job at all, huh?"

His father meanwhile was drinking a bottle of Yuengling and leaning up against the counter. "You call that a job, driving around a few hours, dropping off meals to people? That's volunteer work, Perry. You can't live off a few hours a day."

"Who said anything about that? Perry said. "Who said I was going to get a job to live off?"

"C'mon Larry, don't be so hard on the kid," his mother said, raising her voice. "He got a job. It was his first day and he did well."

"Stop awarding participation trophies, Gayle," his father barked back.

"Would you stop it with the damn participation trophies? At least come up with something new for the love of God. It's like I'm married to a Fox News host!"

When his parents began to argue, especially when the argument centered on him, Perry retreated upstairs to his bedroom. These silent retreats happened more this summer than in the past. Perhaps it was his parents about to lose him, their only child, that coming fall that caused the final strain on the marriage. Perry didn't know it then of course, but it would be the last summer any of the three of them lived together.

The next morning, Elaine was ready for him. She stood supported by a cane behind the screen door. He was surprised to see the cane because he hadn't noticed it the day before. When Perry walked up, she popped open the door with a smile. "You came back for a second day!"

"I did," he said, happy to see a friendly face. The driving around all morning, the incessant starts and stops, was tiresome.

"How many homes are on your route, Perry?"

"About forty."

"Wow, forty. That's a lot. Very impressive. Getting the hang of it?"

"I think so," he said feeling himself swell again with pride. Here was an objective person, not his fawning mother, paying him a compliment. Never mind his browbeating father whose sparse praise was usually backhanded anyway. "Beautiful day today," he offered.

"It certainly is. I'm going to work on my garden today." She said this with such gusto, it belied how brittle she appeared with her cane and the tiny dowager's hump that jutted from her back.

"Garden?" he said looking around with his hands out, palms up. "I don't see a garden."

"Oh it's out back, silly," she said and chuckled. "I'm growing rhubarb, radishes, beets, collard greens—and fennel."

They all sounded like vegetables that Perry wouldn't touch. "Fennel?"

"You don't know fennel?" she said.

"Never heard of it."

"Oh it's delicious. Such an underrated vegetable."

"Vegetables are rated?" Perry said with a smirk.

Elaine chuckled. "I like your sense of humor, Perry. That's a gift. That's going to take you places."

"I'd be more excited if you were growing pizza back there," he added.

She laughed again, her entire little body shaking.

A week later, Elaine opened the door with a smile. Cupped in her hand was a white bulb with green leaf spears that sprung out of it. To Perry, it resembled a plant that belonged at the bottom of the ocean. Squid food.

"This is fennel, Perry."

"This is from your garden?" His voice broke in surprise.

"No, the grocery store," she replied, smiling. "Mine aren't ripe yet. A friend of mine picks me up a few things on occasion at the store. I don't drive anymore." She paused and then said with a tinge of sadness, "It's just something I decided on my own. I didn't feel confident in my ability anymore."

Perry had assumed most of his customers didn't drive

anymore, but he never gave it any consideration. Now that he had a car at his disposal and had experienced that freedom, he couldn't imagine not being able to drive, stuck at home, dependent on others for everything, including basic sustenance.

"Take it Perry. Try it at home," she offered.

"No thanks," he said with a shake of his head. "Maybe I'll wait for yours to be ripe to try," he added with no intention of following through on it.

July 4th fell on a Tuesday, which meant no meals that day and a double delivery on Monday. Along with the normal hot meal, Perry distributed a box of goodies—mac and cheese, bottled waters, granola bars, apples, cans of beef stew: apocalypse food and enough of it to last a few days. He tucked the box under his left armpit and held the tray in his right hand. He humored himself wondering whether his father would appreciate the dexterity the job now required. Sure, it wasn't standing on the top rung of a ladder dabbing at impossible crevices with a paint brush teetering on his fingertips, but it was something.

Elaine wasn't sitting in her front porch as usual, so he pressed his knuckle up against the bell, heard the loud ding, and then waited. Five seconds became ten. When ten became thirty, a sense of panic crept in. And just when he was about to make a phone call to the office, the inside door opened and Elaine hobbled to the front door.

"Oh dear, Perry, I'm sorry. I overslept this morning. I still haven't even dressed." She was rattled, her cheeks flushed. She stood before him in her nightgown.

"I was starting to get worried," Perry said. "Is everything ok?"

"Yes, thank you. Everything is fine. I just slept late. It happens some mornings. Don't ask me why." And then she forced a smile and pointed at him. "Don't ever get old, young man."

"I'll try not to," he said and tossed up his hands. "Do Flintstones vitamins help with that?"

"I think they probably do, Perry," she laughed and then gestured at what he was holding. "The box must be for

tomorrow? July 4th, right? I almost lost track of it."

"Yes, two for one special."

Elaine extended her right hand to grab the box but Perry realized at once that it was a bad idea.

"Let me help," he said. "Can I drop these inside for you?"

"Aren't you kind," she said, turning around and leading him into the screened porch. Perry took in the room in a sweeping glance. A little checkerboard table off to the left was covered with a few pieces of mail, and several potted plants lined the back wall. She gestured to the table. "You can lay those down right there, Perry. Brush those envelopes aside. It's just junk mail."

He laid down the box, tucking the tray next to it, and then turned around to see a three by three canvas on an easel, featuring a stand of Black-Eyed Susans illuminated in sunlight.

"That's amazing," Perry said, astonished at the preciseness of the painting, the sheer artistry in display. "You painted that?"

"I did. Those flowers are right outside the window here."

"How long have you been painting? Are you like a professional?"

"Ha no!" she waved off the idea. "I picked it up when I was in rehab last year. There wasn't anything to do but sit around watching TV or playing Bingo. I took advantage of the art room."

"What were you doing in—" Perry caught himself, realizing the question was too forward. "Sorry."

"Oh don't be. I had a bad fall. That's how most old folks like me end up there."

"Are you better now?" He found himself fumbling. "I mean, recovered from that fall?"

"Well enough to get out of there, which was the important part—but I have to say, it wasn't all that bad to be there. I had a couple roommates and one of them was a real hoot. They served us three hot meals a day. Family style. It was just nice to be around people."

"That sounds nice. And you had the art room."

"Yes, and I had the art room. Where I turned into Monet," she chuckled and again waved, this time toward herself. "As if!"

A month in, Perry had settled into the job. He knew it, mastered it. The most efficient routes, shortcuts that avoided traffic lights, the discreet patch of woods to pee. His mother no longer asked him for any stories and updates and his father had accepted with a muted resignation that the job would be the extent of Perry's summer employment. A couples times the office sent Perry updates to incorporate new homes into his delivery schedule, but otherwise things thrummed along in the slow ease of summer.

Elaine's house came near the end of his deliveries and he preferred it that way. It allowed for conversation without holding up everyone else waiting for their meals. One morning, she invited him to walk around to the backyard to see her garden.

As he walked along the side of the house to meet her in the back, Perry marveled at the beautiful landscaping—the grove of hostas, the bushes of white roses, the row of Black-eyed Susans. He had shared the driveway with a landscaping truck on more than one occasion. Her yard contrasted with his home where his father practiced minimalist lawn management—frequently mowed grass and no adornments to keep away any critters.

Elaine stood at the end of the deck like a conductor, pointing out vegetables and announcing when they would be ready to pick. Nothing was quite ripe just yet, but getting close. Any day now, she said.

"This is incredibly arranged," Perry enthused about the raised beds of wood that housed the vegetables. "When did you set all this up?"

"Years ago, Perry, when I was young and spry."

A vegetable garden. He certainly didn't like eating vegetables, but the idea of a garden had immediate appeal to Perry. The opportunity to grow something from seed, from the earth. Nature unleashed. Later that day, he introduced the idea of setting up a garden behind his house to his parents. His father dismissed it as a breeding ground for rabbits and raccoons. "We can't have that Perry." Even his mother didn't support the idea, claiming a garden was a lot of work, too much work, and since the planting would have to be done while he'd be away at college, she wasn't invested enough to do it for him.

A few days before Elaine's promised harvest, he received a phone call in the morning from Meals on Wheels. An administrator named Jessica, someone he had never met before, was on the other end. "Perry, I have some sad news to pass on," she said in a tone of professional distance. "Elaine Bascomb passed away last night. I wanted to let you know. So obviously no meal delivery there anymore."

Perry was in shock and couldn't reply.

"Perry, you there?" she asked.

"Yup, got it," he said. "Thanks."

He sleepwalked through his shift that day, absently delivering meals, forcing smiles and false cheer. Toward the end of his route, when he was just a block away from Elaine's street, the pain hit him. He pulled over and felt his throat tighten. And then before he could take control of himself, he was crying, softly at first, and then deep muffled sobs, his whole torso shaking. His reaction was a surprise to himself. He hadn't lost any relatives or friends before, or knew anyone on a personal level who had died. Death was a new enemy and a painful one.

At home that afternoon he told his mother the news, stifling tears, and she wrapped him in a bear hug. His father knocked on his bedroom door later and said, "Bud, sorry to hear about that woman. Sounds like a great lady." He nodded a couple times and then left the room. His father's sympathies were almost more jarring than Elaine's death.

In the funeral parlor, Perry sat in the back corner in a short-sleeve white dress shirt, and billowy black dress pants, looking more like a caterer than a mourner. He found the clothes at the back of his father's closet.

He was one of only six people in attendance and the youngest by at least forty years. Only six people, he kept asking himself? How could that be for someone as warm and genial as Elaine?

After the service, he headed to the door, not knowing what to say or do. He was about to push the door open and leave when someone addressed him, "Excuse me, young man." He turned around to see a woman of about sixty with cinnamon red hair smiling at him.

"Yes," he said.

She walked over. "I'm Elaine's niece, Beatrice. You must be Perry?"

"Yes," he said again.

"Oh Perry. I'm so glad you came. Elaine talked a lot about you these last several weeks. She was very fond of you."

He felt himself blush. "I enjoyed talking to her too."

"She said you're going to Allegheny in the fall. I live outside Meadville. I kept inviting Elaine to move back to the area—I have a spare bedroom—but she was wedded to her home."

"She took really good care of it."

"She did, she really did. I was just over there this morning sorting through some things. There are a couple of things she'd like you have, Perry."

Beatrice greeted him at Elaine's front door. It felt odd and sad for someone other than Elaine to be there waiting for him. Beatrice led him into the porch, which led into a den. The room was orderly but undistinguished. A couple recliners, a beige sofa, a coffee table strewn with magazines, a bookcase against the wall with old, likely out-of-print, books. No television set.

Beatrice walked over to the corner of the room and picked up a painting leaning against the wall and spun it around to show him. He didn't immediately recognize the tidy square lawn bisected by the cobblestone walkway, or the dogwood tree on the strip of lawn between the curb and sidewalk. But there in the painting was his mother's blue Buick parked right behind the tree, and in the foreground a diminutive figure approaching with a miniature tray in his hand.

"Wait, that's—"

"The front yard. And you! Walking up to deliver the meal," she chuckled. "Elaine told me she was painting this scene. She was going to give it to you as a parting gift when you went off to college."

"This is amazing," he said looking the painting over, unable not to smile. "Just amazing." He looked up at her and smiled and then took a step toward the front door. "Well, thank you for giving this to me. Nice to meet you."

"Wait, one more thing, Perry," she interrupted. "Something

is finally ready for you." Beatrice left and then came back with a fennel bulb in her outstretched hand. "I know she'd want you to have this."

Perry took it in his hands and brought it up close to his face. It smelled okay. Beatrice laughed. "Try it," she said. "It's right from the garden."

"What part of it?" he fumbled. "I mean, where do I start?"

"It's all edible," she said.

He brought the white bulb to his mouth as he would an apple and took a large bite, his teeth crunching into the heart of it all. There was a pungency to it but also a sweetness. Like licorice. And it was good.

Elizabeth Lyvers

The House and the Sea

She'd come home a thousand times in her mind, but each visit ended the same. It didn't matter when or how. She could arrive on a sun-filled morning with a baseball glove or a rainy afternoon with two cups of coffee and a stack of novels. The initial effort made no difference. The ending would come all the same—silence wrapped around them like seaweed. Anger in an airless room.

Elina stepped out of the rental car and gulped at sea air. Gulls shrieked overhead.

The cottage faced the ocean with the weary countenance of an old friend. The two had spent the last 100 years together, weathering storms and batty tenants and protracted periods of abandonment. The memories stretched deep on this patch of sand with secrets caught between them like driftwood.

"Just come for an evening," her stepmother had pleaded with her. "He wants to see you."

Elina slammed the car door shut and tucked short, blonde hair behind her ears. Straightening her cotton shirt and denim shorts, she moved up the stone walkway, taking in the stained clapboard, the navy-blue storm shutters, the dormer window at the tip top of the house. She wondered if her bedroom still existed behind that bit of glass. If he'd left her piano books and school uniforms and paintings of seascapes, or if they had been carted away to resale shops.

An untidy garden filled the yard, comprised mostly of inkberry holly and orange butterfly weed. Coral honeysuckle clung to the white fence separating yard from beach. A Sweetbay Magnolia tree sat at the edge of the side porch, its creamy blooms leaving a lemony perfume in the air.

Out on the water, a single sailboat cut through the expanse of darkening blue, a lonely and lovely sight. The front door opened, and Elina pulled her eyes away from the view. Margie hovered on the threshold wearing an apron. She held up a smile and a bottle of Sauvignon blanc, the picture of domesticity. Between the two of them, she was the better

actress.

"You're just in time," she said brightly, as if Elina had been gone for a week and not six years. "Risotto is done."

Elina kissed the air close to her stepmother's cheek. "Smells delectable."

"New car?"

"Just a rental."

She'd sold her car the same day she'd purchased the plane ticket. If only memories could be shed as easily as physical things.

Elina stepped inside, stomach churning. The cottage was impervious to change, as if through proximity to the sea it had captured some of the water's timelessness. Visitors seemed to find the shabbiness charming—moody lamp light, shiplap walls, oil paintings of lighthouses.

But under the low-hanging ceilings, Elina could hear echoes of every argument screamed, every accusation hurled. She could still see a seventeen-year-old version of herself curled up on the couch like a ghost.

Her father stood in the glow of the kitchen, facing the ocean through the window, his shoulders more stooped than she remembered. He turned to greet her, but his storm gray eyes skidded across her face and to the table where Margie had already set places for three.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Sure," she lied.

Margie did most of the talking. "I've had the worst luck finding a reliable dry cleaner around here since Smiley's closed. Ed's shirts came home last week smelling like barfy bananas. Can you imagine?"

Elina couldn't, actually, but she nodded.

Margie refilled her wine glass for a second time, her only display of nervousness. "Do you like the risotto, Lina? Enough salt? Those scallops are from a quaint little market I discovered in Marigold."

Elina scooped dinner into a dry mouth and listened to her stepmother prattle. Futile as it might have been, she should've brought something—a book, a cigar, flowers. Her empty hands spoke volumes.

Ed finished his plate and picked up his untouched wine

glass. “I’m going to sit,” he said, pushing back from the table. He nodded in the direction of the porch. “Beautiful evening.”

Margie smiled hopefully in Elina’s direction. “I’ll bring ice cream in a bit,” she said.

Elina followed her father. The screened-in porch had been an addition in the last twenty years, built sideways from the house to expand the view of the ocean. It smelled faintly of damp rug and sea salt. When Elina sank into a padded rocking chair, she caught a whiff of cigar smoke. Something in its familiarity unwound the knot in her stomach and brought tears to her eyes.

Night was drawing close. The sun was a crack of orange fire against the horizon. Rolling water gathered itself into a cloak of purple. The house and the water were a beautiful pair—coexisting long before Elina’s father had moved to the coast. Long before she had run away.

“You liked India?” Ed asked.

“I was in Nepal. And yes.”

“You were . . . uh . . . helping kids.” His voice was subdued. He seemed so different, so careful.

“Teaching English mostly.” She took an unsteady breath, hands twisting in her lap like she was at a job interview and failing. “My visa lapsed so I had to come back, but I’m reapplying for permanency. It’s home now.”

He nodded, nothing in his body language demonstrating surprise. Margie had implied that he wanted to talk. Elina waited, expecting something predictable like a bad diagnosis—*only six weeks to live, you see*. Anything that would give them a reason not to argue.

But Ed merely patted his shirt pocket. “Mind if I smoke?”

“Please do.”

He pulled out a cigar and used a cutter to clip off the end before flicking the lighter. He coaxed forth a puff of smoke, and Elina breathed in its fragrance of chocolate and cedar. She found herself wishing, as she often had before, that she’d been a son instead of a daughter. Perhaps then she would be less perturbed by silence and content simply to belong. Less consumed by the need to be understood.

Ed’s eyes narrowed. “Is that . . . ?”

Elina followed his gaze over the ocean and at first saw

nothing but swells and white-capped edges. Then—*there*—a curve of white in a sea of shadows. The belly of the sailboat. She sat up hard.

"It capsized."

The swells shifted again, revealing two smaller shapes, a flailing arm.

"Two overboard," Ed said sharply, dropping the cigar against the rim of the ash tray. "They're struggling."

He and Elina both stood, stunned at first. Besides the occasional rip tide tugging at over-confident swimmers, it had been years since any real incident in the water.

"Marge!" Ed hollered. "Call the Coast Guard!"

"What?" Marge yelled from the kitchen sink.

"It'll be nearly impossible to get the dinghy past the surf," Ed told his daughter. They shoved through the side porch door. As if by tacit agreement, they were both running to the garden shed.

"I can swim to them," Elina said.

"It's too far. Daylight's nearly over." Even as he said it he handed her two life vests. He knew she was a strong swimmer. She'd done it before. "If you can reach them, strap on the jackets, tell them to float on their backs 'til help can arrive."

She looped the life jackets through her jean shorts.

Ed held out a neon green body board. "Don't try to pull them in."

"I won't."

"Steady on." His eyes fully met hers for the first time. "You can reach them."

Elina left her shoes in the garden. She sprinted across the sand, blood pumping in her ears, and broke into cold seawater for the first time in more than six years. She struggled on her feet past the crash of smaller waves, nearly knocked off balance as water crested just above her knees. She charged forward until it was deep enough to swim, then dropping onto the body board, she kicked.

As if in conscious betrayal, the sun slipped lower. In daylight, the ocean was a formidable expanse of sparkling, rippling power. But in darkness, it was terrifying. Fathomless, depthless, concealing predators beneath its inky surface.

Fear tightened her breathing as she imagined sharks

beneath her feet. A rip current opening in front of her. It would be an easy thing to lose sight of the shore. A simple thing to panic and inhale water. She swam harder and gulped for air, suddenly awash with dizziness.

Steady on.

She couldn't lose focus. *Maintain a manageable pace. Calm your breathing. Take breaks.* Her mind raced backwards to the lifeguard training class she'd attended in high school. It had been held in a gymnasium on a rainy afternoon when beaches were deserted and the likelihood of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation seemed as distant as college graduation.

She paused, allowing the body board to bear her weight, and blinked salt water out of her eyes. She'd been certified for two weeks before she'd pulled the boy out of a rip current. The local newspaper did a feature on her, even running an oversized headshot of her suntanned face squinting into the camera. The picture of innocence.

Elina's view rose and fell with the waves, and the boat loomed closer. It bobbed like an overturned bathtub, bewildered to find itself on the wrong side of water. Another dip and she heard a weakened cry for help. Adrenaline humming through her, she swam forward.

The woman was perhaps mid-forties. It was difficult to tell—the color had gone out of her skin. Wet hair ran down her face like cracks in a marble statue.

"My son!" she cried, voice hoarse, breath ragged from long minutes treading water. She reached for Elina, arms thrashing. "My son!"

Maintaining distance, Elina unclipped a life vest and tossed it to the woman. "Put this on!"

The woman dipped beneath the surface and returned, sputtering water. She pulled the life vest over her head. "I can't see him anymore." Her eyes were pink and terrified. Teeth chattered behind purple lips.

"Are you hurt?"

"Please, he's only ten. I can't see him."

"Here, on your back. You need to conserve energy. Help is coming."

"My baby."

"I'll find him. I swear I'll find him."

It was foolish of her to promise. No one made promises when up against the ocean. The water did what it wanted. Took who it wanted. But Elina found the words of assurance coming out of her mouth regardless. She *had* to find him, and she would. How she knew defied explanation. Instead, the knowledge sat in her chest as real and as mysterious as the moon's effect on the tides. Intangible and undeniable.

Pushing upwards on the board, Elina craned her neck for a wider view. Empty, rolling, darkening water. The boy had either been pulled out of sight or he was on the other side of the boat. How long had she been swimming? She feared it had been longer than she realized. The sun barely hung above the horizon. Whatever light remained was trapped in the surface of the water, glowing with an eerie green iridescence.

She charted a path around the vessel, lips moving in silent prayer. It seemed to take hours, the current pulling her away from the boat like a capricious hand. When she finally reached the other side, there was nothing but empty, silent water. Elina spun, panicking. He was going to be here. She *knew* he was going to be here.

"No!" she screamed and her voice was swallowed whole by the gargantuan expanse. "No!" She started to sob, limbs weak and trembling. "Hello? Can you hear me?" She secured the life vest over her own head. "God, please!"

"Ho!" a man' s voice shouted. A light pierced through the waves and Ed's fishing dinghy crested and descended a wave. "Hold on, Lina! I've got him!"

A small boy crouched in the bow of the dinghy, pale and wet and trembling, but alive. Found.

Elina wept. The rest was a dizzy, darkening blur—Ed pulling her and the mother into the boat. Rowing to shore. The arrival of the Coast Guard and an ambulance, flashes of blue and red lights on the sand.

Elina leaned against the garden gate wrapped in a blanket, feeling seventeen again—the reluctant and terrified hero. Ed came and held out a mug of Margie's French roast. "You could stay the night," he said.

"Okay," she replied.

Dawn came in the form of periwinkle clouds and pink light and tranquil water. Elina found her father on the side porch, a book in his lap and a plate of eggs beside him.

"Mind if I sit?" she asked.

He made room on the glider. They rocked and watched the sea.

"So, you're going back to Nepal," he said at length.

"Yes."

"When I heard you were back . . . " He busied himself with the plate of eggs. "Well, I . . . I just wanted to see you. Not getting any younger." He scratched at his neck. "So, thanks. Thanks for coming by."

"I'd nearly forgotten how much I missed this place. The house and the sea. Not to mention Margie's risotto."

Ed merely nodded. Elina figured he had his reasons for reaching out to her, and like so many of his thoughts, they would remain his own. She settled back in the glider.

"It was impressive yesterday," Ed said. "The way you swam after that family. Not sure the mother would've made it if you hadn't reached her when you did. You treated them like . . . like they belonged to you."

Elina didn't respond. It would be impossible to describe *why* she so desperately needed to save them. It was a choice that came to her on its own, as obvious and simple as breathing.

"Sometimes the parents send me a picture," she blurted out, the change in subject a shock even to her. She clicked into her phone and pulled up an image of a little girl with blonde hair and almond-shaped eyes and a smile as familiar as a sunrise. "She'll be seven in the fall. First grade."

"Seven, my goodness. She looks like . . . " He took the phone, a noticeable tremor in his fingers.

"Mom."

"God rest her soul." He didn't hand the phone back, just stared, lost time shimmering in his eyes. "I would've loved her, you know."

Here they were, still pretending as if this were his fault. Elina had to look away. She could see the grief she felt written on his face, and she understood, as she hadn't before, that they shared this. Sorrow. The ache of loss. The forever missing of someone else.

"I'm sorry I didn't give you the chance," she whispered. "You wanted to adopt her, and I was . . ."

"Young. Seventeen. I was too hard on you. I should've known you weren't ready to . . . to be . . ." He shoved the phone back into her hand as if it were hot and wiped a hand over his mouth.

Elina stared at the picture of her daughter, overcome by love and hope and regret. "She looks like you, too."

Ed gave a wry smile. "Too beautiful to look anything like me." He cleared his throat. "I'm going to make coffee. Do you want to stay for pancakes?"

Elina put the phone away. The pink light was turning to gold now, the sun rising, the night fading.

"I would love to."

K. Ralph Bray

Rocket Girl

Until I got to college, no one knew that I could put my entire fist in my mouth. Small towns and small schools are no place for revealing that kind of talent, but in college I found kids who also came from small places. At parties they'd shout and cheer while I disabused them of their skepticism.

"There's no way a normal human can do that."

"You'd have to unlock your jaw, like a shark or something."

"Your mouth is freakishly big."

"Your fist is weirdly small."

I have a wide face, a "Slavic" face my mother would say; the edges of my mouth extend a half inch beyond either side of my nostrils. "I don't know what side of the family you got that from," she said. "Maybe you got your maw from your dad's aunt. She had opinions bigger than her brain."

My mother said that I was found at the front door by my seven-year-old sister, who answered a knock. My sister had asked where children came from and my mother, who believed certain topics being taught in school were too prurient for a seven-year-old child, placed me in a basket and set me outside the house.

"You were in a wicker basket. Very biblical," my mother said.

My mother thought this was one of the greatest jokes running in our family and told it every Christmas.

I'm funny too, also in a practical way. In grade twelve my friends and I rolled the English teacher's VW Bug onto its roof in the school parking lot. She came out at 3:30, saw the Beetle on its back, called us "fuckerbums", and demanded immediate repair to the roof. We told her it was part of our group's class presentation on Kafka's short story "The Metamorphosis." In woodworking class, I made a gun rack for my father, who was an avowed pacifist, and told him that I might join the army after graduation. I bought surplus army clothing and wore it around the house for a week.

In my second year of college I went on a blind date, arranged

by a couple of joking friends. I was supposed to look for a woman in the bar wearing a red blouse. For ten minutes I sat on a stool looking at women, trying to avoid eye contact or lechery, until I felt tapping on my shoulder and turned around to confront a woman who asked "are you looking for a girl in red?," as if I were a small boy who'd lost his mother in a store.

"You said you'd wear a red blouse."

"A diversion. I had to see what you looked like before I committed."

We ordered some bar food and beer and chatted. She misused common expressions and words. I thought she was having a mini stroke or had cheated her way into school.

"I saw *Jaws* last weekend," she announced. "Talk about nerve raking!"

"Yeah. Not sure I saw that ending coming," I said. "What a practical joke that'd be, right? Putting an oxygen tank in a shark's mouth."

"Yes. Good one. Maybe you can dress up as a shark for Halloween and I'll be the oxygen tank."

We both studied mathematics. She planned to become an actuary and I had no career plans and after dating for a week I switched into her classes and declared the same major.

"God, what a platitude of problems I'm having with differential calculus," she said at lunch on our third-week anniversary.

"OK, can I tell you something?" I asked.

She nodded.

"I think you should take an English class. You're struggling with words."

She laughed, ejecting grilled cheese sandwich from her mouth.

"I was waiting for you to notice. It's a joke, dummy. I wanted to see if you'd tolerate my 'language difficulties,' or think I was just a math nerd who didn't read."

"Ah. Good one." We clearly shared a proclivity for foolishness.

"Do you read *Mad Magazine*?'" I asked her.

"Of course. I used to watch Laugh-In when I was a kid, too. And I loved the *Carol Burnett Show*."

"Yeah, I'm a fan."

"Best prank ever is *War of The Worlds*," she said.

"Orson Welles?" I asked.

"Yes. I'd love to pull the cotton over peoples' eyes."

In our last year of college, we got together with friends of hers who studied art and constructed statues of Lenin, Mussolini, and Genghis Khan, and placed them around the building holding the history and political science departments. It took three weeks for students to figure out who the statues represented and then another week for a petition to circulate demanding the figures be removed.

We married, moved to New Mexico, and got jobs as actuaries at competing insurance companies. I updated risk tables for 80-plus-years men who tried to delay their imminent deaths with newly acquired and desperate habits, like swimming and lawn bowling. We bought a house, started acquiring possessions, and calmed the pace of our practical jokes, practically eliminating them from our social and professional circles that overlapped in a Venn diagram. We remained frivolous and fun with one another, though. She bought a lawn mower for my birthday (our yard is xeriscaped), and I got her cross-country skis for her thirtieth birthday, giving them to her in January in a small ceremony beside our bubbling backyard pool. We shopped together for a fifth-anniversary gift and purchased matching Birkenstocks that we wore to a Summer of Love-themed party.

We excelled at work and made decent money, but we were bored at being adults.

"We need to do something big," my wife said.

"Quit and move out east?" I asked.

"No, let's have a kid." She smiled, the way she did when she mangled language.

"Ha ha. Not funny. And not clever." Actuarial work was destroying her funny bone.

"No, really. We'd make great parents and we might as well do it before the chance passes. You know the math as well as I do."

A friend of ours got a dog and it cramped his style. I feared that a kid would do the same to us.

Our daughter Annie was born in a heat wave. The scalding river rock on our front yard and sizzling red gravel on the driveway shook the air above our cars and around the front door; the house looked like it sat on a Martian plain. I imagined us living on the red planet, our Martian garage filled with mowers and skis and golf clubs, as useless to us there as they were here on Earth. And then I had an idea for what I figured might be the greatest prank ever. I explained it to my wife.

"This is awesome. You are the best husband ever. Annie will love it."

I made solo trips to the hardware store to buy plywood, sheet metal, metal duct tape, a blow torch and small propane tank, and six rolls of aluminium foil. My wife did the sewing (we had a sewing machine in the garage from Christmas a few years ago), learning from books she got out of the library.

After a week the stage was ready. We put the uniform and wool cap on Annie and drove to the mountains an hour away. I'd marked the route into the crash site with small strips of red plastic tied to tree branches. My wife carried Annie in a basket and couldn't stop talking about how young and happy she felt. "This might be better than Orson," she said.

"Let's see how it plays out. We won't know for years," I cautioned her. I took photos of us walking through the woods, careful to keep the red plastic ties out of the shot, until we got to the crash site.

On the top of a small rise, in a clearing not much bigger than our backyard pool, I'd assembled a twenty-foot-long model of a crushed rocket ship. The nose of the ship crumpled into the forest floor. I scarred the underbelly of the ship with a low flame from the blow torch. I bent the four fins attached to the circumference of the ship and tore the top corner away from each one to show the desperate strain of the ship's entry into Earth's atmosphere. At the rear of the rocket I painted a circular insignia that looked a lot like the Nike swoosh, and my wife sewed the same insignia onto a patch on Annie's cap.

"Put her on the ground and I'll take photos," I said.

Our daughter slept through the script: alien offspring stunned by a forced landing on a strange planet, her alien parents perishing in the crash. I took shots of my wife walking

towards the ship, my wife looking into the wreckage and finding a blanket under the tail section, my wife unwrapping the blanket to reveal what looked like a human baby, me pointing a finger at the wool cap and then at the rocket ship, us burying the rocket under pine boughs.

When we got home we printed the photos and placed them in a hope chest, along with the uniform and the wool cap. We waited thirteen years for the prank to unravel.

Annie was an easy child. Until she demanded a little democracy in the family (she insisted that we vote on assigning chores) our biggest issue with her was finding outfits to coordinate with her orange-red hair. My wife thought the colour green made Annie look like a leprechaun. At six years of age Annie asked us why her hair didn't match ours and we gave her a lecture about recessive genes and how one of us carried it and we had a one-in-four chance of our kid getting red hair.

"So if you had four kids, one of them would get it?" Annie asked. "But I'm an only child. That doesn't make sense."

I assured her that it would when she was older and knew more math.

"I want to wear pants like Randi's," Annie demanded. "And a red sweatshirt."

Annie and Randi. They'd been friends since grade one. Annie and Randi really bonded, polymer-strength bonding, as if they'd gone through some traumatic event only they understood, a trauma requiring 24/7 commiseration, weekly sleepovers at Randi's, and trips with Randi's family to their cottage. Randi's dad was a psychiatrist and her mother volunteered at an outreach facility for mental health, predisposing them to magnifying pre-teen angst into some sort of DSM malady.

"Randi's dad says that human fear is not from this planet," Annie said at dinner a few weeks ago. Annie had stopped eating meat, arguing that killing and eating animals was exactly the same as if aliens invaded Earth and consumed humans and she was thirteen so she could make up her mind about "stuff."

"Aliens will be much smarter than us, like we are to cows,

but we wouldn't want aliens eating us, right?'"

"Aren't plants alive?" I asked. "And dumber than us?" I picked up a spear of broccoli and made it dance around my plate begging for mercy, a small green man with one thick leg and a broccoli brain.

"There are people who think you can survive just on air. And dirt," she said.

"Well you wouldn't want to be invited to their dinner party," I said, chomping the head off the broccoli.

"Randi only eats yellow vegetables. They're better for her advanced digestive system."

When Randi's family came by the following weekend to pick up Annie for a cottage trip, I decided talk up Nick, her dad. Over the years we'd said hello when we dropped off or picked up kids, talked about weather reports and school events. Randi always came to the door with her father and pushed past me like a dog eager to get out of the rain.

"Good morning Nick," I said. "Nice day for a drive to the cottage."

I waved at his car, a solid Volvo.

"Nothing to fear when you drive that," I said. "Safest car on the road made by aliens."

"What?" Nick looked over my shoulder into the house, waiting for the kids to return.

"Swedes. Foreigners, right. Their culture is so different than ours it's like they're aliens."

Annie and Randi squeezed between me and the doorframe and shared the weight of Annie's oversized bag, hopping together in a three-legged race to the car.

"Do you think aliens are real Nick?"

"Swedes are real."

"I guess that answers it then."

Nick smiled and said they'd be back in three days and I could call the cottage if I needed anything.

"No I should be good. I'm not worried. Nothing to fear with you guys looking after her."

Annie didn't look back as the Volvo drove away, not even when my wife ran out to wave at the departing family.

"I'm going to live with Randi's family."

Annie had been home from the weekend cottage trip for all of fifteen minutes when she announced this.

My wife replied first.

"Ha ha. OK, you can eat whatever you want and do one less chore. I'm guessing this is brinksmanship."

My turn for parental wisdom.

"Good one. I should have used that joke on my parents too. Especially when they made me eat vegetables."

Annie unzipped her duffel and dumped its contents onto the kitchen floor.

"I want to live with a family that understands me."

Annie kicked a wool cap, smaller than a tea cozy, at her mother's feet, and fanned a dozen photos on the tile floor, like she was a blackjack dealer.

"What? How did you get those?" My wife snatched the hat from the floor and held it to her face. The insignia that she'd sewn onto it thirteen years ago was still perfect—even the small burn mark I'd applied with a lighter had held its colour and shape. And the photos looked fresh; we'd used a top-notch shop to print them.

"I know that I'm from another planet. You stole me. Randi's dad thinks I should live with them. He says I can't trust you."

I loved being a father. When she was three years old I'd balance Annie on my right hand and hold her in the air, like a waiter carrying a silver tray, and fly her through the living room. In the playground Annie flew down the biggest slide and into my arms. She trusted me. And I loved the socially acceptable pranks—the tooth fairy, Santa Clause, the Easter Bunny—that opened mine and my wife's heart.

"Nick is a bit kooky, you know," I said. "People who studied psychology are messed up."

"He's probably a fan of Orson Welles," my wife added.

"I know the *War of the Worlds* story," Annie said. "Randi's dad says that Orson Welles was really an alien who tried to warn humans by writing that story."

My wife looked at me and silently mouthed WTF.

"Honey," she said to Annie. "Randi's dad is just fooling around. He's a joker, like your dad and me." My wife confessed, explaining that we were caught up in the moment

of being young parents who still wanted to have fun, that we'd forgotten about the rocket ship and never meant to actually go through with the prank.

"You guys are stupid and useless parents!" Annie kicked the photos under the fridge and grabbed her duffel. "I'm leaving."

We grounded Annie for two weeks. She sulked and kept mostly to her room. I researched cults and how to deprogram their victims and my wife destroyed the photos and costume.

"I can't find the hat," she said. "Did you pick it up?"

"Don't worry about the hat. It's probably mixed in with her laundry and the other space junk from her trip."

My wife chuckled.

On the tenth day of Annie's captivity I decided to visit Nick and have a word. I parked behind his Volvo, patting its solid and unblemished metal doors as I passed. The front porch had a mat with the NASA emblem. Nick came to the door before I'd even rung the bell or knocked.

"Hey Nick. Just a friendly visit to clear up a few things with Annie."

Nick pushed between me and the door frame, closing it behind him and standing off to my left.

"Annie's a great kid," he said. "She deserves to know her origin."

I smiled and dried my palms along my pants.

"It was joke, you know. My wife and I are pretty funny people."

"Nothing funny about human ignorance," Nick said. "Annie would be better with us. We're the same."

Was this guy putting me on? Did Annie put him up to this?

"I know about the crash," he said. "The photos. The insignia is the one we used a thousand years ago when we arrived."

"That's good Nick. OK, you guys win, I admit your prank is better than ours."

Nick placed his hand on my shoulder.

"You can finally admit the truth," he said.

On the drive home I saw the Big Dipper and thought about the Drake Equation, a simple mathematical expression concerning the likelihood of alien life. The result depends on the values chosen for the variables in the equation, and

you could bend the math to make you believe in UFOs and other crazy stuff, but I was pretty sure that the famous Fermi question "where is everybody?" summed up my belief that no other intelligent, technologically advanced life existed in the observable universe.

My wife got me at the end of our driveway just as I pulled in with the car.

"Nick called. He said that you were violent?"

"Nick grabbed me."

"How? Did he threaten you?"

Annie was looking down at us from her bedroom window. She'd used a green window marker to draw the Nike swoosh on her glass.

"Look, she's sending a signal to the mother ship."

I pointed to Annie's window.

"What happened?" my wife asked.

"I threw my fist into his mouth. I might have knocked out a few teeth."

My wife teared up a little.

"It's not fun anymore, is it?" she said.

I didn't know what to tell her.

"It's a platitude of problems. We'll get through it." I waited for her smile but she turned and walked into the house.

I leaned against the car and looked up at the stars.

Annie held her wool cap against the window and pointed to the sky. I waved. She put the cap on and waved back. That kid was definitely ours.

Brittany Meador

Darkside Knocking

"The greatest cruelty is our casual blindness to the despair of others."
—J. Michael Straczynski

A'pral liked streets paved in calcite because they were smoother against her tentacles. She slithered over the slippery stone, radiant with heat from the sun, and drank in the familiar bustle of luncheon time along the boulevard. The scent of the rush-water river blew in from behind the trees.

She purred with contentedness, following the thoroughfare's curve past a contemplation area replete with florentina flowers. The world glowed with lilac sunlight, and A'pral ran the tip of her hook idly over the center of her carapace. It was so peaceful here she was tempted to slither over to one of the large stone bowls for a rest, but it wouldn't do to dawdle. J'ral was easy going, but even he might grow annoyed if her tardiness was excessive.

In no time, she was traversing the path leading to his long-time dwelling. It was larger than most homes in the province, round as an overturned cup, and made of good, black clay scooped from the nearby river. Trees like jagged spikes lined the path on either side, and A'pral enjoyed how they shivered in the breeze as she galumphed past them. The auto-gate recognized her and swung open at once, just in time for J'ral's thoughts to drift up to greet her.

"In the solarium, Beloved."

Smiling at the sheer audacity of such laziness, she made the familiar journey through his sloping halls.

"What's this?" she thought to him. "Too tired to meet one's guests at the entry? What would your mother say?"

"Pish. We've been friends far too long for that. You're practically family. Please, help yourself to some refreshment, and while you're at it, be a dear, and bring me a sapati, won't you? I've a powerful thirst."

A'pral flicked her tail in indignation, but swung the hook of her claw in counter measure so he would know her reprimand

was only a tease.

"Incorrigible. Worse every time I see you."

"Wouldn't you be bored if I wasn't?"

Once she'd settled down in the bowl next to his, sapati gently smoking in one of her tentacles, she brought up the real reason for her visit. "Have you given any more thought to my proposal?" she thought.

"Yes, and I still fail to see what your students would want with a washed up old dauber like me."

"Stop it," she chided him. "You're the artist in residence for the Office of the Progenitor. And you've been commissioned by the chancellor of three separate provinces. *And*—"

He tried to protest and she rolled over him, as she'd known she would have to.

"*And* you're a singularly engaging and interesting individual, whom they'd be lucky to learn from."

"Dearest . . ."

He stopped immediately and she knew she had him.

He reclined in his bowl, brushing his hook through the sleek, waxed tips of his drooping moustaches. "They're anthropology students, not artists," he thought. "I know pigments and glaze. Nothing of science or catalogy or any of that orderly nonsense which is anathema to an unfettered soul like me."

"Anathema, my thoraxular vent. You can give them perspectives on art and culture that I never could. You're perfect. And besides, they're higher learning students, they're used to engaging the broader applications of their field."

"You're so annoying when you're undeterred." He blew out a thin stream of air, looking askance at her from the quivering tips of his eye stalks. "Though, where I'll find the time now that I've added to my collection, I don't know."

"Oh?" she thought, generous now that she'd won. "A curio?"

Despite his protestations to the contrary, it was anthropology that had brought them together. They had met in their first year of higher learning, at an illicit auction in a space port wares-room. They'd bid to the death over a phosphorescent carving of a multi tentacled female deity. J'ral because the glow tantalized his burgeoning artistic sensibilities and A'pral because it reminded her of the Ras Mag'rit, the first fetish

ever discovered on her planet. Rancorous as that meeting had been, it opened a door to a lifelong friendship.

"I should be so lucky. This is something rather more work intensive. And more interesting."

He heaved himself up from his sprawl, setting his sapati on the low table beside his resting bowl, and disappeared down the sloping hallway. He was gone for a long time.

A'pral was just about to go in search of him, when she heard him ascending the hallway. He quivered in excitement, tentacles rolled together to protect the item within. He set it on the table before them.

Revealed was a creature of great peculiarity, fishbelly pale, its head covered in a mop of microfilaments like a furfly. She could see it was quadrupedal, each limb ending in a fleshy splash that looked to A'pral like the buds of stunted tentacles. It was small enough to fit into a drinking glass, but its exact dimensions were hard to determine because of how it crouched. A strip of medical tape wound around it's center.

"Is it hurt?" A'pral asked.

"The covering is completely superfluous. I leave it alone because it pouts when I take it off. See?"

His hook came down and gently tugged the strip away and indeed the creature began protesting at once, reaching its malformed limbs upwards and opening wide its seed sized mouth. The creature elongated its tiny body, reaching to the fullest of its miniscule height, before hunkering down once again paltry eyeballs staring at nothing. Its teeth glinted wet like specks of crystal.

"How can you stand to look at it? It's so . . . bald and squishy. It looks like an external testicle."

J'ral laughed, deep rumbling barks from the meat under his carapace. The creature stopped reaching and hunkered to the floor. A reek came up from it.

"Phew!" A'pral waved hook and tentacle to clear the air. "Does it do that often?"

"Sometimes," thought J'ral. "It has very pungent hormones." He laughed again. He'd always taken abnormal delight in shocking others.

"I'm almost afraid to ask. Wherever did you find such a thing?" she thought.

One of his eyestalks turned toward her, sly. He ran his tongue along his jagged incisors and thought with a most haughty and condescending air, “Best not to know when the knowing would vex one.”

It was obvious that J’ral was desperate to be asked, so A’pral, being mildly perverse herself, thought, “Best not to know, then.” And settled into her seat with definite finality. That stumped him alright.

While he sputtered, the little thing began crawling, scooting along the table. J’ral put a tentacle along the edge to prevent it from tumbling over. It touched the tentacle with its foreleg then rose on its hind parts, following along the tentacle’s length.

“I swear this thing is suicidal. Always getting stuck behind furniture and falling off seats.”

“Maybe you should return it.”

“Not an option. My contact’s sales only move one way, I’m afraid, ” he thought.

A’pral blew a blast of air from her mouth, fluttering the ends of her moustache. “The company you keep.”

His eye stalks danced. He loved transgressing, but loved being chided for it even more. She suspected it was the main reason he continued to make rash and outlandish decisions like purchasing an unpapered, non-native animal as a trophy.

“Aren’t you a little old to be doing irresponsible things like buying illegal items in a back alley import market?”

“Poppycock.” he thought, settling back into his scooped stone seat with supreme satisfaction. “I’m entirely responsible. The marketeer promised it had been given the full complement of tests prior to auction. Everything from cognition to virology.”

“And?”

“It’s warm blooded, mostly male, consciousless, and one of a kind.”

“Well don’t come crying to me if the administrators fine you for purchasing untaxed goods,” she thought, taking a slurping sip of her sapati.

He clicked his hook against his carapace, delighted by her admonishments. The creature had given up trying to find the boundaries of the table. It curled up like a burning piece of paper and didn’t move again.

The symposium had been a success. As she'd known he would, J'ral had inflamed the students desire to learn. He'd preened about the small stage, barely sitting in his bowl in favor of clumping here and there on the tip tops of his tentacles. Between his anecdotes and the Q and A, his didaction had fathered a hundred new student projects. It was nearly three weeks later, and A'pral was finally seeing him again to celebrate their triumph.

She let herself in and found him in the kitchen slurping the midday meal off a dark, stone dish.

"Hungry?" he thought. "I have enough for two."

"Thank you," she thought, retrieving a dish and portioning out some of the thick, green noodles boiling merrily in their pot.

"How's your new pet?" It wasn't necessarily the first thing she wanted to communicate, but the small square of gauze on the counter had pushed the question tumbling out.

"Oh, it's fine. Really settling in now. Wanna hold it?"

J'ral returned a few moments later with the creature and deposited it on the flat of A'pral's most mobile tentacle. The animal looked diminished.

"What do you feed it?" she asked, stroking the very tip of a tentacle down the infinitesimal bumps of its spine.

"It's the most unimaginable nightmare. Right now, I'm trying grubs. A healer friend of mine has a myna," he thought, sending along a picture of the healer and her pet. "They're quadrupedal too, and have just the two eyes, so I hoped their diets would be similar." He paused momentarily to suck up a long string of noodles. "But my little lovie ran from them when they started moving and of course, they're poisonous almost immediately after death, so." He sighed. "It eats Jah'halal fruit well enough, but then it shits everywhere."

A'pral turned the body gently over. The creature's head swayed, back and forth, seeking without comprehension.

"And it gets lost all the time," he continued. "It wanders away and then I'll find it digging in some corner like a burrowing cricket."

"Poor thing," she thought.

"Poor me," thought J'ral. "Taking care of it has turned out to be a real hardship."

“If only someone could have advised you against taking on the care and feeding of an alien wild animal,” A’pral thought, laughing at him. She picked up the square of medical tape and placed it over the creature.

It responded at once, grabbing the ends of the fabric and pulling them around itself. The oscillation of its head increased in speed and rotation.

Intrigued, A’pral placed it on the counter ignoring J’ral’s chatter until he slithered away, disgusted by her inattention.

The creature seemed to breathe in great sucks of air, its little mouth puckering open and flopping shut repeatedly. She bent an eye stalk level with the table and watched it up close. Its forelegs stretched out. Its mouth flapped. Finally, it fell shuddering to all fours.

She tried to telegraph her movement, but the trembling thing still jumped when she touched it. She stroked it gently, with her smallest and softest tentacle and its little back bent to her ministrations, head buried in its forelegs. Slowly, deliberately it brought the limb closest to her down twice, then laid there in silence for a while. There were three tiny taps. A pause. Then five. Then seven.

As if in a dream, A’pral repeated the sequence, hook knocking against the counter top. Two, three, five, seven.

The creature’s head jerked towards her. It swayed with the totality of its entire body and touched out the sequence again, adding eleven.

She answered. Two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen.

It shambled upright, top legs outstretched as it stumbled toward her, shuddering, mouth agape. It flinched as it reached her curved, bone hook, but when she touched it with a tentacle, it clung to her.

“J’ral!” Her summons flew to his mind, more urgent need than polished thought.

“Goodness, Beloved. What is it?” he thought, flowing through the entry fast as his tentacles could carry him.

“J’ral.” Her mind spun. “I think this creature is sentient.” She held the little thing cradled in her tentacles.

He laughed. “Impossible. It was screened before I purchased it, remember?”

“But did you see the dealer do it?”

"No, but I'm confident he did," J'ral thought.

"It knows the sequence of prime numbers. It must have an understanding of mathematics," she thought.

All twelve of his eyes boggled at her. "How? Without consciousness, how could it possibly understand concepts that complicated?"

"But it—just look." She sent him what had just transpired, the escalating sequence of primes.

To her horror, he laughed. "My Dear! Oh, how you frightened me! That's what has you all in a twist? It jerks all the time with no rhyme or reason. Who knows what causes it."

He looked sure of himself. She'd never persuade him. The only course was to meet him in kind with bullish assurance. "I want to check it for sentience. Now."

"A'pral!" he thought appalled. "How inconvenient you are! It would take me ages to find my translator. For the love of the sun, I haven't used it since higher learning."

"Find it." She turned her back on him. "I'm serious J'ral. I sacrificed a dig at the ruins at Quem'M Atem to support you when Jel stopped taking your messages. Get searching."

He stumped away, sending her epithets and curses and he slithered away, but A'pral had no capacity to worry over him. With more care than she ever had before, she sent forth a mental message.

"Greetings," she thought.

There was no response. No quickening in the creature, no gentle waves of thought, and certainly no return message.

She thought to it again. "My name is A'pral."

It made no reaction; thought nothing in return.

She was still at it, when J'ral returned with the UT. They hooked it to the power stream, and A'pral carefully scanned the creature. Nothing. Even so, she placed the cranial node on her head, between her forwardmost eyestalks and thought again, "Greetings."

Nothing.

"There. You see?" J'ral thought.

"Wait," Turning her attention once more to the creature she thought, "My name is A'pral. Do you have a name?"

Nothing.

She adjusted the frequency and tried again. Again. Again.

But always, there was nothing. The creature was demonstrably unaware that anyone was thinking to it. And there was no evidence it could communicate back.

"I want to take him to a healer for testing."

"Whyever for? If it doesn't register on the UT, it can't think. The youngest child knows this."

"Maybe it thinks on a frequency we can't interpret."

"For love of the virtues, A'pral the universal translator is *universal*. It computes trillions of brain wave frequencies. You're acting insane."

Rage built behind A'pral's carapace. "I know what I saw! Has it ever done something like this before?"

"How should I know? I told you it never stops wiggling around and getting into trouble. I can't pay attention to it every second of every day."

A'pral barrelled on. "And it's skinny. Why haven't you taken it to a healer?"

"Surely you mean a veterinarian? What will I say when they ask for its license?" he thought with poisonous sweetness.

"Do you play with it? Do you take it out? Did it ever cross your self-centered little mind that maybe it was trying to communicate?"

He swelled like a wave. "Not that this is remotely your business, but the damn thing used to have full run of the house until it started getting stuck. I have no choice but to keep it in the waste room for its own safety. I've been turning myself inside out trying to make it happy!"

"But do you interact with it or leave it alone all day?"

"How dare you come here and interrogate me. You're always clicking your hook about my life and how I do things. Always pushing me to do what you want, like mentoring your plodding students. I paid for it, it's mine, and if I want to grind the damn thing to paste in the waste disposal it's no business of yours!"

"Fine! I'm leaving. And I'm taking it with me, since *you* obviously don't care."

"Absolutely not!" He exploded to his full height in front of her, tentacles arching over his back. "It's mine. Give it here."

Who knew what damage any significant jostling could do to the tiny slip of skin cradled in her tentacle. Besides was she

really going to confront her oldest friend with physical force? Eyestalks trembling, she tried to deposit the creature into his outstretched tentacles. It clung and had to be peeled away. She told herself its sightless eyes were not looking for her.

The next day she sat at the computer terminal with purpose, but immediately found herself at a loss. Where should she start? There were quadrillions of animals and beings in the database. What did she have to go off of? Mostly bald, possibly bipedal, single penis.

"I don't often see you in the zoology lab," Kal, the adjunct zoology professor, thought as he slithered through the entry.

"Hello," A'pral thought back, distracted.

He sidled up to her, nervously stroking his moustache into place. "Anything I can help with?"

"Not unless you can find the origins of an animal no one's ever seen before."

"As a matter of fact, I'd be delighted." He clipped his hook on one of the mobile bowls and dragged it closer. "What are we looking for?"

She told him everything, except what might implicate J'ral. Fight or not, he was still her friend.

"It has big eyes?" he asked.

"Yes, at least in proportion to its face."

"But it's blind?"

"I think so. It stares but doesn't see. And doesn't react to movement unless it's touched."

"Maybe this animal has adapted to see a spectrum of light different from what's created by the sun? Visible light occupies only one end of the spectrum but it extends far beyond what we can perceive with our naked eyes. Perhaps this animal is functionally blind here."

"Yes!" A'pral enthused, instantly certain he was right. "I think you're onto something."

Encouraged, he continued. "And, it could explain why the animal prefers certain stimuli like the fabric bandages. Perhaps the ambient temperature of its native environment is much warmer or the bandages resemble its species' nesting materials."

"But where does it belong?" She pushed back violently

from the terminal. “I need to find if it’s sentient, and I can’t reasonably do that without more information about its home.”

“I assume you tried the universal translator?”

She sighed. “No response. But it knew the sequence of primes. That has to mean something.”

His hook tapped on the desk as he thought. “I wonder if my associate at the Omni Institute of Higher Learning could help you.” He straightened from where he’d been slouching. “I’ll reach out to her and ask that she contact you. Her institute has the best exobiology department on the continent. For now, let me set you up with some equipment.”

“Thank you, Kal!” she thought, throwing her tentacles around him so forcefully their carapaces clicked together.

His tail lashed the air, tentacles wavering like trees in a high wind. “It’s nothing really.”

The auto-gate did not open like usual, forcing her to demand entry with the ingress request signal. J’ral opened the entry a fraction, draping himself across the chasm with a snide air.

“Something you want? Come to insult my ancestors instead of my virtues this time? Perhaps you’re here to confess you never liked my art?”

“Don’t be petty, J’ral.” At his wounded expression, she relented. Even if he would never admit it, their argument must have cut deep for him to act this way. “I love you.” She thought at last. “You know I do.”

He turned his head away but all of his eyestalks stayed on her.

“I was worried about him. You know how I get. Had to bring every injured myna in the neighborhood back home when I was a child.” She moved up the path until she finally stood at the lowest level of the entry ramp. She held up a basket. “I brought some sapati from that bottlery you like.”

He slid inside with barely a backward glance. “I suppose you better come in, then.”

He retrieved the creature and placed it in the glass terrarium A’pral had brought. The container had one corner for water and food and one for waste, and the floor was lined with soft cloth for resting and sleeping and wrapping in.

It was skinnier than ever, limp and cold. A'pral covered it with a piece of cloth and it tugged to find its boundaries, cocooning itself in the fabric.

J'ral touched it gently with his hook but the thing crawled deeper into its nest to escape the petting.

"I don't think it likes that very much," A'pral thought sadly.

She placed a tippi berry on its feeding plate.

It seemed to smell the food, crawling over to sweep its arms over the berry's entire circumference. It tried to push an appendage in and pry out a morsel, but was too weak.

A'pral bisected the berry with the tip of her hook and tapped the plate.

The creature pitched forward onto a slippery, red surface and ate a few bites before laying down, seemingly exhausted.

"I brought something else from the institute," she thought as she set a box of bulbs on the table.

A'pral carefully screwed in a lightbulb into the aperture near the feeding plate and turned on the power stream. The creature did not react, although it twisted one side of its head toward her tentacle as it worked.

It didn't have a reaction to infrared light, nor the next frequency nor the next. She was fast losing hope as she changed out bulbs. Suddenly the creature jolted as if electrified and clapped its front appendages over its face.

"What's happening?!" J'ral thought urgently.

She turned off the bulb, but that seemed to distress the creature further. It crawled under the device clawing at the glass wall with its head thrown back, sightless eyes staring up towards the empty bulb. Its mouth stretched wider than she'd ever seen it. Taking a chance she turned the light on again. The creature hid its face, but its tortured movements finally stopped.

They waited for a long time.

At last it moved off its belly, scanning as it often had before, only slower. It stood on its back legs, walked a few steps towards the water dish, but sat down almost immediately. It crawled the rest of the way.

A'pral moved an eye stalk level with the glass. For the first time, their eyes connected. He reared back far as his prone position would allow, covering his face with dead-white

forearms. Slowly, he lowered them.

Something belligerent and focused burned out of his eyes like a conflagration. "Ancestors forgive me," she thought. How terrible the isolation of a sentient mind.

Softly, so softly, she tapped three times on the enclosure wall. He tapped back, three miniscule slams of his fist where he lay fragile and hollow as a slip of shed skin. Weak as he was he managed to glare at her and bare his sand grain teeth.

"J'ral," she turned an eyestalk to face him. "I'm going to take this creature home with me. I'm going to investigate his natural environment and recreate it as best I can. When I find his home, I'm returning him there. Alright?"

"Alright."

A message waited at her work station the next day. A'pral played it tentacles trembling. He'd seemed pleased with his new enclosure and even more pleased to look around as she'd carried him back to her dwelling one careful slip at a time. Hopefully this missive was good news.

Greetings from Instructor Lel'alal from the Omni institute.

Your little friend sounds intriguing, I'd be happy to evaluate him. As I'm sure Kal's told you, we have many avenues to explore: kinetic forms, pheromones, vibration patterns . . . The list goes on. I can meet you as early as tomorrow if that is amenable.

"Yes!" she thought to no one, rattling a hook against the terminal in triumph.

A'pral sped through the work day, dropping her bags at the door and racing to the kitchen to cut up some fruit for her guest. How she wished they could communicate. How she wished she could tell him not to fear, that one day he would find himself once again under the warmth of his own stars.

He sat wrapped in fabric, motionless under the bald light and completely unreactive to her presence.

She touched him gently to wake him and found him stiff as a figurine, his last lonely moment preserved in the rigid angles of a tortured body given out at last. A sob forced its

way out of her as she sank to the floor.

Spirit never truly died. Consciousness was the only eternal. Even consciousness too rare to be translated by machine. She hoped the spark that had animated him was even now flying onward to the life beyond this one. She hoped that whatever he had been, he was finally home.

Nick Gallup

My Son's Grandmother

The hospital was noisy but orderly chaos. It took the doctor a while to find a quiet place where they could talk. The doctor was young for a surgical oncologist, still in his thirties, who made no attempt to nuance it. "She's dying, Mr. Hayes. Her kidneys are shutting down. She has only a few more days to live."

Ford wasn't surprised.

"Can I keep her here?"

"Afraid not. The insurance wouldn't pay for it anymore. They'll pay for a hospice, though." He handed Ford a brochure. "Here's some info on one. Only a few miles from here. A beautiful place."

Ford shook the young doctor's hand. "You guys have done a fantastic job."

"We do our best, Mr. Hayes. Even if it's only life extension. Your mom's a tough lady. Just wouldn't give up. Every time I saw her she was asking when could I reverse her colostomy."

Ford walked back into the hospital room, forgetting he still had the hospice brochure in his hand. His mother was 88 and, although she suffered from a number of maladies, none had to do with dementia. She noted the brochure.

"What's that?"

"Something the doc gave me."

"Let me see it."

He passed it to her and silently watched as she leafed through it.

"A goddamned hospice. I've had it now."

She was too savvy for him to argue otherwise. They didn't send patients who had even a remote chance of getting well to a hospice. There may have been patients who defied the odds and walked out of a hospice, but he guessed they would all fit into a very small phone booth.

They chased him out of her room at ten, but not before she could ask him once again if Jake, his son and her only grandson, had called. Her disappointment was evident when

Ford told her no. She doted on Jake. Always had. Birds of a feather.

She had said little when Ford attended UM and graduated Summa cum Laude. Jake attended the same university, attaining only gentleman C's and an occasional B. Still, she hung on Jake's every word as he recounted his wild adventures at his playboy fraternity house that was invariably on, or skating very near, probation by the university.

Jake was her knight in not-so-shining armor, and she did a good deal of vicarious living through him. Henry V had died years before, and she was lonely in the big house he had left her, even though Ford had moved back in after Gwen was killed in the car crash. She relished her grandson's visits and made it worth his while to spend his spare moments with the queen of Oxford Manor.

A nurse advised Ford they would transfer his mother to the hospice the next morning. Visiting hours began at one p.m., and the directions to the hospice were on the brochure.

Of course the place was beautiful. It was a hospice.

His mother was in the last bedroom in the lakeside section of the hospice. It had large windows on its southern and western sides. The southern windows showcased a vivid blue lake. A small lake, Ford deduced, as trees on the other side were very near. The western windows looked out on large oak trees thoughtfully spaced and carefully policed of brush or fallen debris to avoid any suggestion of the intrusion of woodland. It was midday, and the sun was shining softly through the oaks and creating a mellow glow in the bedroom. The blinds had been raised to the top of the window and the heavy curtains, covered in a soothing light gray fabric, had been drawn to the sides of four tall windows.

There were no boats on the lake, and Ford doubted there ever were. The lake was a prop, meant to soothe and nurture. There was not a sound of activity from outside. Inside the room, he could hear an occasional muffled voice, and sometimes a phone rang, but someone would quickly pick it up and speak softly into it. Never a prolonged conversation. Almost absolute serenity and solitude, totally unlike the hospital he and his mother had been in the night before.

She was napping when he arrived at the hospice, so he had pulled a chair close to the windows overlooking the lake to enjoy the view. He wondered why they would bother to have blinds and heavy curtains available to block such a beautiful view.

Maybe some patients preferred to spend their final days and hours closeted from the outside world, he mused, and didn't care to be reminded they would soon be taking leave of such things as inviting lakes and shady oak trees. So, please, nurse, they might ask, would you lower the blinds and close the curtains? The view's a little depressing.

Others, perhaps, might want to enjoy the world they're departing as long as possible. Open the windows wide, please, nurse. Let in all of the light. There, isn't that a magnificent view?

His musing upon this great mystery at end of life was interrupted when he heard his mother rousing from her nap. He pulled his chair close to her bed, which was covered with the same gray material as the drapes. She was frail from cancer and radiation and chemo and had looked small even in her body-sized hospital bed. Her hospice bed was queen-sized, and in its expanse she looked almost child-like.

She wasn't fully awake yet, and the unfamiliar surroundings had momentarily confused her. Even with her advanced age and terminal illness, she still somehow managed to look younger than she actually was. She had been a beautiful woman in her youth, a Miss Dayton who just missed becoming Miss Ohio. The girl who had edged her out had gone on to win Miss America. "Who knows," she often speculated, "If I had shook my ass a few more times at the judges, I might have been Miss America."

Possibly, Ford conceded, but his mother was a notorious flirt, and although he had not been around at the time, he was confident she had flirted to the maximum extent with any male judges who might have been admiring her anatomy.

In any event, the Miss Dayton title came with benefits, even though it was 1934 and the height of the Great Depression. The benefits were not pecuniary, as in prize money, but rather attention from men who had money. The definition of "having money" in those days had been obscured by the

depression and went so far in some cases as to include almost anyone having a steady job.

His mother's name was Vickie, and every man she met wanted to sleep with her. But she understood market value and brusquely rejected the heavy breathing of would-be seducers. And so she was until she met Ford's father, who had a steady job and was willing to proffer up a wedding ring. Little did he suspect he would be the first rung up her extensive divorce ladder.

Her talent in the beauty competitions was dancing, and she had a dancer's slim. athletic body. Her teeth, and this was in an era when the last thing on a person's mind was dental care, were perfect. Her hair was on the dark side of blonde, but she helped it along chemically until it possessed the hue of polished gold. She was blessed with large blue eyes and lashes so long an admirer might think them fake unless he were fortunate enough to get close and inspect them for himself. Bottom line, she was an extraordinarily attractive woman, even into her elder years. As she got older, though, her maintenance time grew.

No matter, she happily put the time in.

Ford had inherited the mundane looks of his father, Augustus, tall and brown-haired with wide, deep-set brown eyes beneath a furrowed brow. He had his mother's long lashes, but his eyes were weak and he had to wear glasses early on. And his thick brown hair had not lasted long. He was experimenting with comb-overs by his thirties, and, by his forties, had given up and capitulated to sporting more skin than hair.

Still, he had married well, a lovely girl named Gwen, whom he had met while still in undergrad. Given his plain looks, for that was the way he perceived himself, he marveled how someone as beautiful as she would pay even passing interest in him. Still, at every home match he played on the university golf team, he would look at the small retinue following his play and see a tall, slender girl with long auburn-colored hair and Carolina-blue eyes masked behind large sunglasses.

Given his shyness, it was doubtful they would have ever formally met had she not taken the initiative. His shyness was not due to lack of confidence, just a feeling he was a

person of little interest, notwithstanding his prowess on the golf course, where he rarely lost a match. One day, after he had defeated a particularly strong Clemson player, she approached him and extended a hand to congratulate him. She had a firm handshake, and she held his hand for a long time, not that he minded. She removed her sunglasses and smiled her approval of him and his play. Her eyes seemed to sparkle.

"Inasmuch as I'm one of your groupies, I thought it was time we met."

"I'm Ford."

"That much I know." Another gracious smile. "I'm Gwen."

"Pleasure to meet you, Gwen."

Without asking, she reached up and removed his glasses. After studying his eyes for a full minute, she remarked that he had kind eyes. She gently returned the glasses to his forehead.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No, just surprising. Not the killer eyes of a competitive golfer."

"The competition is with myself. Why obsess over my opponent?"

"Point taken," she admitted. "I do have some advice for you, though."

"Such as?"

"You need to practice more on courses other than UM. It's too easy."

"It's rated as a hard Par 72."

She raised a doubting eyebrow. "I never shoot above 80 on it."

"Anyone can say that. Care to prove it?"

She later admitted to him he had fallen into her carefully-laid plan. She knew he would challenge her to back up her braggadocio. They made a date to play the following weekend, where she skillfully shot a 78. She also knew he was a pre-law major, as was she. She had also looked deep into his eyes and perceived a soulmate. It was inevitable that they would marry.

They had a son, Jake, who for reasons Ford could never fathom, had the blonde hair and blue eyes and striking good

looks and the impulsive ways of Vickie. Ford attributed it to a skipped-generation syndrome. Having been trained as a lawyer to verify facts, he even went so far as to see if such a syndrome actually existed.

It purportedly did not. Genes cannot, per se, skip a generation, The manifestation of genes, or their traits, can, however, skip generations under certain circumstances, the circumstances being that in his case, his father evidently passed on genes to him that negated some genes passed on to him by his mother. If not the genes themselves, then at least the manifestations or traits of the genes.

Semantics, he decided. Sounded like skipped-generation syndrome to him. The bottom line was that Ford and his mother were nothing alike. His son and his mother were virtual clones, excepting gender, of course. Identical twins in every respect. Just born two generations apart.

His mother was fully awake now.

"How long you been here?"

He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "Fifteen minutes or so, Vickie."

"How'd I get here?"

"They brought you in an ambulance last night."

"I don't remember."

"Like your view?"

"Help me sit up, so I can inspect it."

He slid her up, which was easy, given her slightness, and placed an extra pillow behind her. She fussed with the pillow a bit until she was in a good position to consider the expansive view afforded by the four tall windows.

"Norman Rockwell."

"Don't like it?"

"Looks staged. "

"Should I close the drapes?"

"No," she quickly said.

He now knew which side she came down on with respect to opening or closing the curtains. She was a "I want to see all the lakes and trees and light I can before I go" kind of person, even if they did look staged.

Ford was only 20 years younger, and it wouldn't be much longer, he speculated, before he might be making a decision

as to whether he wanted to close the curtains or not. Blindfold or no blindfold in a manner of speaking.

"Has Jake called?"

Jake again. "No."

"Does he know I'm . . ."

"Yes, I called him last night."

"And?"

"Left a voice mail you were in hospice."

"He's probably busy on a new project."

"He is."

"What project?"

"More like a who project."

"Kimberly and the kids?"

"No, his girlfriend and the kid he's having with *her*."

"You don't know that."

"I do."

"How?"

"He let it drop when he was putting the touch on me a few weeks ago."

"You part with any money?"

"No."

"You're so penurious, Ford. He's your son."

"Which gives me special insight into him."

"You're annoyed because I signed Oxford Manor over to him."

"I do live there."

"You can still live there."

Ford nodded as if that were true. Jake had already put the Manor up for sale.

"He'd get the house eventually anyway. What's the difference?"

And so it went, a conversation they'd had dozens of times. He, the prosecutor of his son and she, a Johnny Cochran scrambling to his defense. No matter what Jake did, the glove never fit. So, Ford invariably caved and chose to acquit by changing the subject.

"Can I bring you anything from home, Vickie?"

Vickie had been only 20 when Ford was born, and she didn't relish the world knowing such a beautiful and desirable

young woman already had a child. So, when he was older and coherent enough to follow orders, she instructed him to address her as Vickie. By then she had divorced Augustus and moved in with her mother and father, whom he could call Mom and Dad if he so desired. But the inviolate rule was he was to call her Vickie.

World War Two was on the horizon. An Army Air Corps Base was nearby and many young officers came calling. The last thing Vickie wanted was a rug-rat running around calling her "Mommy" and cramping her style. She'd break the mommy news to a suitor later if the courtship flourished. By then she would have her suitor panting so hard her having multiple rug-rats would have been of little consequence.

That was the modus operandi thereafter.

Ford had never called her Mom. Always Vickie.

He was her only child, and he heard many times from her how his coming upon the scene had ruined her trim figure. So, no more kids for her. The many officers attending her didn't agree about birthing having diminishing her figure. She was as desirable as ever to them, but her bedroom door was always shut tight unless a suitor had a wedding ring with which to unlock it. Given her appeal and the uncertainties of the war, marriage offers flooded in. Young pilots didn't exactly have their futures guaranteed. They could well be dead in a matter of months. So, they were of a mind to marry sooner than later, and especially so with someone as delectable as Vickie. People didn't have affairs in those days. If they wanted a change of partner, they were more likely to do so through the divorce route.

Ford later characterized it as the Liz Taylor malaise.

Vickie began a series of war-time marriages, each lasting about 18 months. The scenario was the same each time. A six-month courtship, then a marriage of six months until the new husband had completed his flight training and sent overseas. Six more months more would elapse, during which letters of eternal love would be exchanged. But Vickie would soon grow restless. A new and even more handsome young officer would appear, and she would permit herself to be swept off her feet. But first there would have to be a divorce, which the eager new suitor gladly paid for.

Ford had no memory of Augustus, or at least no memory of him while he was married to his mother. He saw him occasionally in the years following the divorce. Augustus knew he had been lured onto the rocks by a siren named Vickie, and, for some reason, held his failure to better navigate against Ford. Ford was puzzled by this.

Until Augustus explained, that is. Ford was 10 or so at the time.

"You're the reason she left me."

"What did I do?"

"She never wanted a kid. Blamed me for you coming along."

After Augustus, there was Karl, Dale, Harlon, and finally, the best of the group, Henry, whom Ford had dubbed Henry V. Harlon, unhappily, did not need to be divorced. In addition to the bad luck he'd already incurred in marrying Vickie, the B-29 he was piloting over Tokyo was shot down in the last few days of the war. The distraught widow received a check for $10,000 and a pension, which she happily accepted until Henry V, who was a prominent attorney with lots of old money, appeared on the scene.

Henry, unlike his predecessors, knew well what he was getting into. In fact, he, or one of the underlings at his firm, had handled her three divorces. Henry was 20 years older than Vickie and was wise to her ways. He had been married several times before himself, so he knew well the pratfalls of marriage. He understood especially the needs and whims of Vickie, and he acquiesced to them. He allowed her to stray off the range once in a while, but gently tugged on the reins when she strayed too far or too often.

Vickie clearly understood her job description. Occasional sex with a 55 year old man and posing as the beautiful and charming wife of a prominent attorney. Henry especially loved dinner parties at his large house, which he had grandly named Oxford Manor. Vickie was expected to throw these parties together, sometimes with only a few days' notice, and then preside gracefully over them. Vickie was to Oxford Manor born.

Henry worked hard and played hard. He was both a perfectionist and a hedonist. Still, he weathered these afflictions well and presented an enviable countenance. Yes,

he looked prosperous, with a slight paunch and a slump caused by either bending too much to read law books or leaning forward too often to sip Martinis or perhaps keeping his eyes on too many golf balls. He was tall and lean, nonetheless, with a tanned face and a visibly intelligent look in always amused brown eyes.

He was a man of unfailingly good humor and disposition, a pleasure to be around. He laughed heartily when he learned Ford had dubbed him Henry V and promptly donned his Shakespearian cloak and recited verbatim his predecessor Henry V's Battle of St. Crispin's Day speech. "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers . . ."

Ford was 15 when Henry came into his life. By remarkable coincidence, Ford had developed an affinity for golf and was on the high school golf team. Henry bought a new set of golf clubs each year and immediately earned Ford's undying allegiance by gifting him a $300 set of last years' golf clubs in a hand-tooled leather bag worth twice that.

Ford put the clubs to good use. By the time he was 18, he had zero handicap and had won the club championship twice. He and Henry won the annual father/son trophy three consecutive years. It was no surprise when UM offered Ford a golfing scholarship.

Henry funded law school for Ford and brought him into his firm when he graduated number three in his class, two spots beneath Gwen, his soon-to-be wife. Henry served as Ford's best man when he and Gwen married. He gifted Ford a sizeable trust fund and treated him as his own son. He had only one condition which he laid out to Ford at the beginning of their special relationship.

"What is it?" Ford asked.

"I'd like for you to call me Dad."

Henry died 10 years later. He suffered a heart attack just after he had hit an awesome approach shot on the par five 12th hole of the country club golf course. It was one of the toughest par fives in the state. The caddy raced for help.

Ford was holding Henry as they waited for the ambulance. Although he was in severe pain, Henry looked up at him and smiled. "Did I reach the green, old Sport?"

"You're ten feet from the cup, Dad," Ford responded. "It's

going to be a tricky putt, but I think you've got a decent chance at an eagle."

Ford told the EMS crew he would meet them at the hospital.

First, though, and acting on compulsion that even he did not quite understand, he walked to the 12th hole green and studied Henry's approach shot. Henry's ball was indeed 10 feet from the cup and, as Ford had foreseen, a tricky putt awaited. Ford studied the putt for several minutes, as if he were putting for the club championship. The putt was slightly uphill and would break to the left. He took Henry's putter and struck the ball. He had read the putt correctly. The ball coasted into the cup as if it were on rails.

He penciled in a 3 for his dad on the score card. An eagle.

He rushed to his car to join Henry. Henry died several hours later, Ford and Gwen at his bedside. Ford showed him the score card and told him he had scored an eagle on the toughest hole at the country club. Ford realized it was myth that a man could truly die happy, but the look on Henry's face convinced Ford it was possible for an avid golfer to come close if he had hit a fantastic golf shot just prior to his demise.

Vickie had been too stressed to join them at the hospital. She was captivating, though, at the funeral. The grieving widow role was high drama for her.

A hospice nurse stopped Ford in the hall when he took a restroom break. She was an older woman, a little on the pretty-plus size, with gray hair and comforting eyes well-trained to comfort all parties during end of life proceedings. Central casting could not have sent over a more perfect actress for a hospice nurse. She spoke to him in a soft voice.

"It doesn't do any good, you know."

"What doesn't?"

"Arguing with them."

"Arguing?" He repeated.

"Voices carry in here. I could tell you were upset with her. It happens."

"What does?"

"Loved ones arguing with patients because they won't eat or drink. It's just nature's way. The body is shutting down. Eating and drinking is repulsive to a dying patient. You have

to understand that," she said compassionately. "In a day or two she'll be comatose, and it will be up to you then to take her hands and tell her it's okay for her to die. She'll want to stay so you won't have to grieve."

He had leafed through the brochure the oncologist had given him and had read that. The nurse had apparently overheard their discussion about Jake. and, unable to discern the specifics, had concluded from the tone of their conversation Ford had been pushing his mother to eat and drink so she could stay around longer. The brochure hinted it was grief denial on the part of loved ones. They must release the person and accept the grief.

"It's easier for them if you just let them go."

Interesting theory, Ford thought. But theory, nonetheless. He could not help but feel he would be suspicious of someone encouraging him to hurry up and die.

"I understand. I'll try to do that."

"I'm Pam."

"I'm Ford, her son."

"I know. You just let me know if there's anything you or your mother need."

"Thank you, Pam."

He was annoyed, not at Pam, but at himself. It was always hard for him to accept Vickie's unwavering defense of Jake. Ford had indeed been petulant in that conversation.

His mother was alert the next day, but her voice had deepened into a hoarse whisper. Her beautiful blue eyes which had always been so bright and clear had dulled into a pale and barely discernible gray.

He tried several times to get Jake on the phone for her. Voicemail.

Ford tried to make conversation. Not much to talk about. She had long since settled her estate, which he didn't care to talk about anyway. Almost everything was bequeathed to Jake. She began to speak aimlessly, and then, as if a button had been pushed, she drifted off,

Her eyes became blank and vacant. She was settling into coma.

She was comatose when he arrived the next day. He sat by her bed and watched silently as she breathed long, deep

breaths. Although he still had his doubts about the "letting go" theory, he took her hands in his and began to speak to her. He told her he loved her and that it was okay with him if she decided to leave. Still, she clung on.

Her eyes were clamped shut. She had not moved or spoken since he had arrived.

He took out his cell and called Jake. It began to ring. And ring.

"Goddamn it, Jake, answer the phone!"

To his surprise Jake answered.

"Hey, Dad. What's up? How's Grandma doing?"

"If you ever checked your voicemail, you might know."

"Yeah," he acknowledged. "Got to start doing that."

"Vickie's dying, Jake."

"Jesus, Dad, I'm sorry to hear that. If I had known she was that bad off, I'd have driven up to see her. Or maybe you could've sent me an airline ticket. I knew she had cancer and it was just a matter of time. I figured tough as she was she'd outlive us all, you know?"

No, he didn't know. He'd made it clear weeks ago her situation was tenuous.

He decided to let Jake say goodbye to her. She was comatose and wouldn't hear him, but at least Jake couldn't complain later he'd been denied the opportunity to say goodbye.

"Listen, Jake, Vickie's awake, but she can't talk. I'm going to put the phone by her ear, and I want you to talk to her."

"Jesus, Dad. What the hell do I say to her?'

Ford begged the gods for patience. "Tell her you love her, Jake, that she's been a great grandmother, and that you'll miss her very much. Tell her that it's okay for her to go."

"Go? Go where?"

"That it's okay for her to die."

"Why would I want to tell her that? You sure you're okay, Dad?'

He patiently explained the hypothesis of how dying people tried to hang on longer than they needed to because they didn't want their loved ones to be grief-stricken when they died. Ford now so doubted the science behind it he had downgraded it from theory to hypothesis.

"That's weird, Dad."

Ford agreed but nonetheless put heat in his request. “I’d appreciate it if you did as I asked, Jake.”

There was a pause as he mulled over Ford’s request. Jake, as usual, was looking for the road less traveled, but he sensed Ford was about to lose it, so he reluctantly gave in.

“Okay, Dad. Whatever you want.” He expelled his breath drama-queen style.

“I’m putting the phone to her ear now, Jake. Tell her what I told you.”

Jake mumbled okay. Ford placed the phone next to Vickie’s ear.

He couldn’t decipher what his son was saying, but he could faintly hear the sound of him speaking. He was being fairly loquacious, which surprised Ford. Who knew what he was saying or would say? Jake was 35 going on 15. Ford could only hope he was following script.

He was watching Vickie carefully as Jake spoke. Suddenly her eyes popped open. To Ford’s absolute amazement, they were a bright blue, so clear, so alert, virtually aglow with happiness. Her lips parted, and she silently mouthed, “I love you, Jake.”

That was what she was saying. He had no doubt.

He took his cell away and told his son goodbye.

Vickie closed her eyes when he withdrew the phone. Her breathing quickly grew troubled, and the time between breaths increased. This went on for a few minutes, and then she took a deep, almost gasping breath. A heavy expulsion of air followed. He waited for her to inhale again. And waited and waited. No more breaths.

He began to cry, the first time he had cried since the sudden and tragic death of Gwen ten years before. He had been crying then for Gwen, whom he had loved and who had loved him in return. Before that he had cried for Henry V, who had asked to be called “Dad” and loved him for doing so.

He felt Pam’s deft touch on his shoulder.

“Is she gone?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Mom’s gone.”

“I heard you talking so lovingly to her, Ford. I told you it makes it so much easier for them to pass when someone they really love tells them it’s okay to go.”

He nodded as they walked from the room with the four tall windows.

"I didn't agree with you at first, Pam, but now I think you're right."

Rodney Stephens

Half-Thumbs (The Myth of *Vespidae*)

My grandpa was a big, bald man with nine and a half fingers. He lost the tip of his thumb when a hive of wasps ambushed him at his ranch on the outskirts of Dallas. His thumb ballooned, hives wiggled up the arm, and his very own throat tried to strangle him. They rushed him to a hospital and managed to save his life, but it cost him half a thumb, finger prints and all.

It didn't take long for thumbs to become a unit of measurement in my family.

"I missed my sales quota 'by the tiniest of margins,'" Mom said, pinching her thumb to her middle finger and holding it in the air. "Half a thumb shy." Hamilton and I also put thumb to middle finger to rationalize bad grades and failed try-outs; all kinds of rejections and coming up short were transcribed into the code of thumbs.

Swarms of wasps also bedeviled my boyhood mind. I saw them hiding beneath eaves and ledges, or tucked inside thorny bushes and horse apple trees. My thumbs ached at the sight of them. My skin shivered at the thought of their sting. But I was also drawn to them and their papery nest, crafted from gobbled up wood and gooey saliva. So in science class, while my friends presented projects about scorpions and spiders, I created The Myth of *Vespidae*.

I put the title in the center of the board, using big, bold letters. The rows of yellow-jackets, wasps, and hornets dangled from one end to the other. I fixed them to a thick square of Styrofoam, using color-coordinated pins for each type: an abacus of reds, yellows, and oranges with a blank space between them. I studied the board, made sure the pins were even, and angled their bodies so that they were all paying homage to the titled queen. But something was missing and I knew what it was. I grabbed Mom's Polaroid and went out back.

The rickety storage shed had always been their favorite spot

and this nest was a doozy, nearly as big as a horse apple. The sun was in my eyes, but I swear there must have been twenty eggs nestled in those honeycomb cradles. A pair of wasps crawled over the nursery, so I approached slowly, crouching down a little to make myself extra-small, then I took a picture and paused to see the colored image take shape.

Closer.

I had to get closer to the nest.

One wasp flew off. The other one patrolled.

I glanced around, hoping for another way. My hands were sweaty paws, but I took two more steps, aimed the camera and took a photo. I sat it on the ground, breathed in deeply, and then I took another one, before retreating to my room. I pinned the polaroids of the nest on either side of the title and nodded.

The photos had that Cracker Jack tattoo look. The colors weird, not quite right, not quite true. Not that I was an expert on tattoos. I had only seen the ones on the top side of Grandpa's feet. Old wartime jobs, a pig on one foot and a rooster on the other. They're all faded and blurry, but grandpa pointed out which was which, and said he got them for dropping incendiaries on Tokyo during World War II. A present from his buddies.

I didn't talk about my grandfather or World War II in third period. Family day and social studies had come and gone, so I kept it mostly scientific. I sat the display on the chalk tray and started talking.

"These are the antennae," I said, pointing them out with a shaky pencil. "And this is called the thorax." I paused for a heartbeat, checking my notes, "and right here, at the tail-end of the *add-boman* is the stinger." Everyone laughed, and Miss Kendrick corrected me. "Abdomen," she said, clearing her throat. I was always messing up my bs and ds.

It was hours later, walking home from school, when I stopped feeling sorry for myself, and it dawned on me, this thing that I had done. Those strange, lifeless wasps were almost golden in death, so my heart sank into itself. I had stuck pins into their dead bodies. Jabbed it right through.

I slunk down an alleyway, sat my project on the dirt, and removed the pins. A breeze fluttered the wasps, but they

didn't crawl or wiggle. They didn't wake up. I knew they wouldn't. I squatted down and brushed a tiny, auburn one from head to stinger with my index finger. I was trying to be gentle. I meant it in a good way, but it didn't matter. The body parts flaked off. The wings drifted off the thorax, and then the wind picked up and kited them away. I left the myth where it was, scrambled to my boot legs, and sprinted all the way home.

My grandfather's ranch was no Southfork, and he was no J.R. He was famous, but only in a small way. Other vets from the war, also with roosters and pigs on their feet, knew him. They had all dropped incendiaries during the war. Some fell on German factories. Others on Japanese gardens. Most of them continued working in the incendiary hustle. But Grandpa's focus was on meat.

His small fame was not limited to the war. Parts of his cows landed in grocery stores and restaurants all over the metroplex, from little mom and pop joints to wide-aisled mega-stores with humongous meat freezers. After the cattle were slaughtered, they weren't called cows anymore. Now, they were steaks and hamburgers, T-bones and rib-eyes. They were cradled in a Styrofoam tray and wrapped in see through plastic. Each one had a little white label that listed the net weight, the unit price, and the total price. Nothing hidden. Decimal points and pennies printed in clear, black numbers for everyone to see. My grandfather liked to pick the package up and sniff it. Right there in the grocery store. Made a big scene out of it, too. Everyone looking.

"Go on, Enki. Give it a smell," he shouted.

I squirmed a little, but did as I was told.

"I don't smell a thing," I mumbled, handing the meat back to him.

My grandfather laughed. "That's because your nose," he said, flicking it with his good thumb, "your nose needs more schooling, that's all." He pushed the shopping cart away, chuckling, and I followed. Chunks of his cows must have ended up in all those bellies, most every night. He could barely keep up with demand, and with the population booming, he must have believed that his hands would always finger clean, crisp dollar bills. How could he think otherwise?

But one day, not long after the Styrofoam wasps, my grandfather's cattle started dying off. Every morning, he discovered a single skeleton next to the creek, and each day he'd wonder about the missing meat and the vanished hide. "They leave the bones there to mock me," he said. He couldn't figure out who or what was doing this to him. He didn't have any enemies, "at least, none that would do something like that," but he wasn't so sure about those bearing a grudge from what he called "the checkered career" of our ancestors.

"History may not repeat itself," he told my brother and me, "but that doesn't keep the past from changing its clothes and making a guest appearance."

It didn't take long for him to decide that we needed to help him put a stop to it. "No sleeping in the house," he announced. "We'll sleep right down by the creek. Each man will have his own gun, and I'll give a $20 bill to the man who first spots the poacher" he said, poking me in the ribs with that half-thumb of his.

After we pitched our tents, Hamilton and I went down to the creek for a swim. When we got down to the water, we undressed and slipped right in. It was crystal paradise with a honeysuckle breeze. Goose pimples tingled up and down my arms and legs. I stood there for a minute, thigh deep, petting the water with my fingers and letting the creek move in and around me. Then I waded in deeper, until the water was almost up to my neck. I shivered for a moment before squatting down, putting my head under water, and holding my breath for as long as I could. I never once shut my eyes: the water was that clear, that clean. Hamilton was a few feet from me. He kept diving down to the bottom of the creek looking for arrowheads. I thought about doing the same, but for now, I let my legs rise to the surface and floated on my back, listening to the concert of the creek: a symphony of chirps, chatters, and croaks.

I was studying the sky, watching shape-shifter clouds morph from wolves into eagles, when Hamilton shouted: "Enki! I found one." He stood there belly button deep in the water looking like he'd just been baptized. His whole face smiled, and his blue eyes glowed as he showed me the most wonderful arrowhead I had ever seen. An absolute gem,

tinged so red that you could see the history of blood gushing everywhere.

"There are tons of them," he said.

I dove down, and sure enough found a few resting on the creek bed. I picked out two of them and came to the surface. Hamilton did the same.

"Arrowhead River," I said, wishing it were true.

"Just imagine what it must have been like," Hamilton said, "scouting around on a horse with a weapon in your hand."

"I don't know," I said, looking at our row arrowheads, "looks like an awful lot of dying to me."

As we sat around the campfire that evening, my grandfather told us about the different tribes that used to roam around these parts and figured that this must have been the site of a mighty fierce battle.

"This was a kind of no man's land, a buffer zone, a goulash of shifting cultures. Everyone borrowing, and sometimes stealing, from everyone else. In a way, it has always been contested land. Guess it always will be," he said.

"Mom says we've got Comanche blood coursing through our veins," I said.

He nodded. "On her side of the family," he said, "way back when." His eyes darkened a bit and his half-thumb twitched.

"The Comanche were known as wasps because they swarmed in and stung their enemy to the quick," he said, poking me with the point of an arrowhead.

"You been stung by a wasp, haven't you, Enki?"

I shook my head, but he ignored me and plowed on.

"Well, it feels kind of like that to get killed by an arrow, only a whole lot worse." He pushed the point of the arrow into the rind of a melon and held it up for our eyes to see.

"You see, when the arrow pierces your flesh, it feels just like the stinger of a wasp. Only with the arrow, it's like the whole wasp flies right inside of you, stinging you all the way through, from one side of the body to the other. From here," he said, indicating his chest, "to here," he finished, pointing over his shoulder at his back.

My brother and I shivered with delight. "A full moon night like this was their favorite time to raid an enemy encampment," he said, "so keep a sharp look out."

When we turned in for the night, Grandpa held up a brand new bill with President Andrew Jackson's face right in the middle and reminded us why we were here. "Anything suspicious and you wake me," he ordered.

But who could sleep on such a night? An owl kept hooting about something or the other. Every sort of leaf, twig, and branch creaked and crinkled like a wadded-up old deed. And every once in a while, one of the cows would make its solitary sound. Eventually, I must have drifted off. I don't know how long I slept, but I woke slowly, not to a loud noise, but to a misplaced sound that vibrated the air. Hamilton snored lightly, murmuring gibberish from time to time. I tried to go back to sleep, but the humming grew a notch louder.

I reached over for my BB gun and pointed it at the front flap for a long while.

"Hamilton," I finally whispered. "Hamilton." He didn't budge, so I pulled on my boots and crept outside on my own.

Curly brown hair, scrawny, baby blue overalls, and cowhide boots. I fashioned a tough look on my face, but inside I was trembling all over.

The moon was so bright that I didn't even need a flashlight, and there it was on the side of the creek, the nude skeleton of a cow. Its meat and skin picked clean. That humming, that buzzing grew louder and louder. It ramped up a bit. I had intended to go get my grandfather. Instead, I found myself following that song. I don't so much remember thinking that I'd head down to the creek as finding that I was drifting down there.

The tug was irresistible. My flesh tingled and crawled from the haunting symphonic chants: "O fortune, changeable as the moon." I felt alive and I felt bewitched. The sound seemed to be coming from the creek itself. "Come, come, my love. I implore you. I implore you."

I didn't see our arrowheads. They were just up and gone. The cow's skull was stained with splotches of blood. Drops on the ground, too.

Something landed on me and I swatted it away. I edged closer to the creek, pointing my BB gun at the churning water. Then another landed on me and another and another. They'd touch down and fly off before I could hit them.

When I got to the bank, I squatted down like a catcher and tried to look beneath the surface. The daytime creek had become a smokey silhouette. It was bubbling and rumbling. The liquid harmonics rose from the water—misting in the air: "Vain, monstrous Fate, you turning wheel." The waters swirled to a pitter-pat of feverish, drumming chants. The beat took on an edge. Then the creek belched once, sputtering smoke rings. I inched back and eyed the ripples. A minute later, it burped a second time and a cloud of wasps shot at me with a blast of steam.

The swarm swirled into a ring of fire. Their black eyes locked on to my green ones for a scalding second, before they whirled around me, brushing me with their wings and whooshing me with their song. I sank backwards, dropped my gun, and tried to scoot away, but they kept gushing towards me, tumbling all over me. I sat there by the river, wide-eyed, paralyzed with fear. My legs pulled tight into my chest. My voice wouldn't scream. It couldn't make a sound. The blur of bodies. Seductive, longing chants. A few wasps bounced into me, but they didn't sting. They ricochetted off. I kept expecting them to arrow right through my chest, but they didn't. Instead, they brushed against me. The briefest, little sprinkling and the lightest dew. Then the funnel cloud dissipated and faded into the foggy banks of the creek, and my fear transformed into wonder.

I must have passed out, because next thing I knew I was back in the tent, with Grandpa and Hamilton squatted over me. Faces real close to mine.

I told them everything. Everything I could remember. Why wouldn't I?

"No more spooky stories for you," Grandpa said.

"I tried to come for you, but I couldn't."

"Sounds like a scaredy cat dream," my brother said, rolling his eyes.

But I wouldn't let it go. I kept after them. Kept piling on the details, exaggerating here and there, but sticking close to the truth. It took a while, but I could see they were getting won over.

"Why didn't they sting you?" Hamilton asked.

"Beats me."

"I've known some bee charmers in my time," said Grandpa, "so I suppose it's possible."

Enki, the *Vespidae* Charmer, I smiled. My brother and grandfather studied me up and down. Human lie detectors. They studied the skeleton baking in the morning light. Bony shadows. Weird gleams. Finally, when I saw my grandfather massaging his thumb, I knew he was persuaded.

"Stranger things have floated down the creek," he said, handing me the $20 bill.

I doodled my way through school next week and checked out all the books on entomology. My fingers traced anatomical sketches of V*espidae* until I could flawlessly reproduce them. I created a colored flip book that spanned from their emergence out of the creek to their swirling loops around my body. Lovely pages of gossamer wings with pinstripe veins. They still had stingers, but they also had ocelli and compound eyes. I seesawed from elation to doubt, and then the sky cracked open with a rumbling.

I was walking home Friday afternoon, daydreaming, when thick rain drops plopped down from above. I picked up my pace, but so did the storm. The rain morphed into pea size hail. With the backpack over my head, I took refuge beneath a horse apple tree. Zigzag lightning bolts flung from the wrath of Enlil. Thunder booms that rattled the bones. I dashed from tree to tree until I finally made it to safety.

"I'm home," I shouted, as I opened the door. No one answered, but I heard Mom and Grandpa talking. "I told him to drop every pesticide known to man on the sons of bitches. And he told me that he had some 'military grade stuff' that would do the trick. Hell, I didn't think he was going to poison the whole goddamn ranch."

"That's got to be illegal."

"Damn right, but no one can find him. He disappeared. Fell off the face of the earth with all my money."

"But why would he do such a thing?"

I stepped into the living room and they turned to me

"What happened at the ranch?" I asked. "What were you saying about pesticides?" My whole body started shaking and my teeth chattered.

"Enki, what's wrong with you?" my mother asked.

"Pesticides? I tell you about the most incredible experience in my life and you slaughter it."

"What the hell are you talking about, Enki? They were goddamn wasps, not floating fairies."

I stared at him, boiling. "You have murdered something you don't understand." Their faces were baffled and terrified. "You have killed something beautiful and bizarre."

Hot tears skidded down my cheeks. I turned my back on them and stormed down the hall to my bedroom. I crawled underneath the bed. The cambric was ripped and drooping, so I found myself staring up at the innards of the boxsprings: wood slabs, cobwebs, and old pieces of chewing gum. At last, my eyes lighted on a crumpled sack of *Bottle Caps* candy. I must have hid it there a month ago. I pulled it loose from the spring and emptied the candies into my mouth. I chewed on it a little, tasted the soda, but it didn't taste right. Everything was kind of off. Enlil's hailstorm still battered the roof and chipped away at the windowsill.

Rage flickered and flared. Plots of revenge. Lots of stabbing. Knives spread out into lethal fans. A thousand and one stingers. The wasp nest as torture chamber. It was getting out of hand. I started to scare myself. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, whispered the alphabet backwards from z to a, and finally managed to shelve the worst of such thoughts.

The poison must have killed them while I was playing with the fluttering pages of the flip book. I must have felt something when they died, only I couldn't be sure. There were so many other emotions swarming in my head. Enki, the *Vespidae* Charmer? A lot of good that did 'em. If I had kept my mouth shut none of this would have happened. I was to blame as much as him. I was the one who squealed. I was the one who ratted them out. I was the traitor. I guess I just didn't think, but even so, I can't dodge responsibility, not for this crime. All those papered-over-loyalties to species, property, race and family shattered beneath my bed.

"Enki?" Mom said, flinging up the bedsheet. "What has gotten into you? You don't talk to your grandfather that way." I crawled out.

"I'm sorry."

"You don't understand," she said.

"I said I'm sorry."

"That's not going to cut it, mister. He's ruined," she said. "Ruined."

Tears rolled down her cheeks, as I looked at her stupefied.

"Don't you get it. Him being ruined means us being ruined. And here you are crying about wasps. His cattle are dead. The crop duster poisoned the ranch. The whole lot of them up and died. It's desolation."

We drove out to the ranch when my grandfather deemed it safe. Mom parked the station wagon on the side of the gravel road, and we stepped into light of Shamash's fiery sun. Heat radiated from the ground. No wind. No whispered breezes; an old Western silence. Rattled stillness twisted around denuded branches. Bonfires blazed here and there.

"We have to cremate every last one of them," my grandfather said.

We stood before the funeral pyres watching the last of the dead cows burn. Charred patches. Flame licks here and there. Horned skulls and skeleton bones scattered among the embers. The incendiary stench commingled with the rotten horse apples.

Not a wasp in sight. Not even a nest.

I drifted down to the creek. The water slogged before me in a thick, oily sheen. More syrupy than gooey. Shafts of blurriness slid along the bottom. I spotted an arrowhead above the waterline, so I bent down and pulled it from the mud. I squeezed it in my hand. The chiseled stone felt good.

"Someone must have swapped our creek for another," Grandpa said, walking up behind me and putting his hand on my shoulder. "I've been up and down this godforsaken thing and it's the same everywhere," he said. "Look at it. You'd think the poison would be diluted by now, but the level keeps dropping. At this rate, it'll be history before the new moon rises."

"I guess this is what happens when myths collide," I said.

I felt his bewildered eyes on me. My grandfather. The one who had such a way with words. The one who helped us make it to the end of the month. He was always giving me lemon drops and buffalo nickels. He may not have flown the mission, but he gave the orders.

I fingered the arrowhead, rolling it around in my palm, pressing my fingers and thumb against the sharp edges. Grandpa's hand felt heavy on my shoulder. I gave it a quick glance, then turned back to the stream. The webspace where his thumb greets the rest of his hand. I clinched my teeth and sent my right arm swinging fast and hard, stabbing the arrowhead into his webbing. Screaming, cursing, "Enki!" I took off. I slid down the creek bank and stumbled into the shallows. I found my feet, stuffed the arrowhead in my pocket, and then tripped and splashed my way to the other side. I paused for a moment and turned back to see Mom and Hamilton rushing to my grandfather's side.

Salena Casha

When you find yourself at the bottom of the stair, think of Diderot

She doesn't want to but she ends up stopping at a Walmart outside of Pelham. It's the kind of place where she doesn't need to check if they sell guns or not because she already knows. The asphalt is slick from the mid-November storm but, fifteen minutes ago, the wipers started squeaking and she flicked them off. Just in time to see a confederate flag, big and bold and utterly lost here in the North flying off the side of a barn and she wonders who went through the trouble of making one so big. How many hands it took.

Early in the summer, her aunt told her that after a friend of a friend put a Black Lives Matter sign in the dirt of an Exeter front yard, an Amazon package with their name on it arrived with combs inside for braiding hair.

Nothing sinister but made you look around and wonder who.

"Everyone has their thing," a bad first date told her years ago and there was a part missing from that sentence she didn't think of until days later in the shower, namely that sentiments like that only applied to Dungeon & Dragons and weird Starbucks coffee orders. Not hateful ideas that festered in the picked-at aftermath of a mosquito bite.

It takes less than five seconds to loop her mask around her ears, cotton pressing to chapped lips though, now that she's looking at the building, she's wishing she brought an N95 instead. Certain places just feel more catching. Blue and yellow reflect on the shining black pitch.

Wallet, keys. In and out, just water, flowers, and a four-pack for the night. Her throat is cracked from singing on the road. The car lock clicks under her finger and she heads in. Even though she's just a few hours from home, she feels timid, foreign.

She doesn't know what made her aunt move up here after

all these years but something must have changed. The air. The traffic. The study that showed bad air from traffic caused premature death in cities. Lungs black with ash. Or maybe it was so she could sit out on her porch in an approaching thunderstorm with a lit cigarette and no one would have an opinion about it.

The last time she'd seen her aunt like that was the Fall before lockdowns started.

"What's one of your biggest regrets," she'd asked.

Her aunt tugged at the rhubarb braid wrapped around her shoulder and pinched her forehead together. "Susan Cates in college. Should have kissed her because maybe I would have just known right then and there. Avoided a lot of wasted time."

A bottle of wine had surfaced, thumping on the table. Ruby liquid lit up the ceiling.

She thinks about that visit a lot recently.

"How're you?" Two old white ladies have set up camp in the sliding glass foyer at a plastic table next to hand sanitizers and surgical disposables and a big chalk board saying *masks required*.

She's gotten used to smiling with her eyes and they crinkle as she nods. The mirror in her bathroom tells her it's causing cracks in her skin but it's the price she has to pay to connect with other people so she shells out.

It's eight and she sees a few late nighters milling through the aisles. The enormity of the warehouse floors her. All white lights and speckled tiles, people as pale as her shifting in and out of the multicolored shelves in camouflage. She briefly mistakens a mannequin in a sweater dress for a shopper.

A place this big god knows where they keep the alcohol.

She decides to grab the flowers last and the beer first. Water on the way to the register.

It takes about six minutes thirty to locate the beer aisle and another twenty seconds to find the craft section. Normally, she sits there staring for minutes but the orange cans blink at her like a traffic cone and her fingers hook into the ringing. Refrigerator air blows through her clothes.

She knows she doesn't really have a plan and so she heads to the chip aisle for a bag of Cape Cods. Maybe worth buying

a red bull for the drive back. She hasn't decided how long to stay.

It takes a moment to realize she's not alone in the aisle and she half-turns to see a white lady about ten paces down, staring at her and her first thought is how much better everyone looks when they wear a mask, which this woman is not. The white elastics pull down at her ears, tugging at the material looped below the woman's chin, hiding another and she can't help but think of the early pandemic memes of ways to not wear face coverings. The woman's mouth is fully lipsticked, tart cherry. Enough shorter than her that she has to tilt her head slightly down to get a full view of the woman.

From here, she can see roots, grim chunks of white and red and gray sprouting from a center part.

She's careful to shift her gaze above the woman, beyond her. For a second, she wants the woman to say something she'll regret. Or maybe thinks about saying something she'll regret but, at best, it'd be muffled, and for that she's thankful.

Regardless, she wonders why the woman is staring at her so hard, what made her put on lipstick this morning and walk into a store and think yes, today I'm going to breathe my unwanted air into another human's face.

A light above them buzzes, flickers.

The chip bag crinkles in her hand, the beer's chill radiating up her wrist. She wonders if this woman thinks about everyone in the US who has died. All 600,000 of them.

She swallows hard and makes her way around the woman, yielding her a large berth, almost flush with the Doritos. The woman's eyes follow her enough to turn her head.

As they pass, just feet between, the woman whispers.

"Dumb bitch."

Simple, like a quick *jesus christ*. It was like she watched the woman's lips move but didn't hear it, almost like it was said in a different language and she waited for the subtitles to kick in.

She keeps walking even though her hand shakes. For a second, she wonders if she imagined it; she's been alone for so long she's started hearing things. Incessant electronic beeps that have no origin, clicking through the wall. The low rumble of the homeless fighting in the post office parking lot.

The water and bouquet of purples and yellows take no time and she's back into the parking lot, water hanging in the air and smelling like wet wood.

There's a word for the feeling, likely something French, and she stares at the store. She waits for the woman to exit the Walmart, electric light bleeding on glass.

Can't wait to tell you about this. She feels the emptiness of the thought as it hits her.

It's funny how strip malls like this are all the same up here. She can mark her life in even increments with their help. The place she got her ears pierced was in the same building as the place she bought her prom dress a decade later and, five years after that, the place she bought mace the summer after she was raped. Her aunt had driven her to a Dick's Sporting Goods in Rockingham because it was something you couldn't buy legally without a permit on the other side of the border.

They hadn't said a word the whole ride but she remembered at one point her aunt reaching across to hold her hand. Cracked skin warming knuckles.

She can't remember the last time she held someone's hand.

Maybe she missed the woman leave with her shopping cart. Maybe she hadn't recognized her in the dark. The lights of the store stay on but either way, it's getting late when she puts the car back in drive, heat subsiding from her cheeks.

The rest of the trip is so short she's still catching her breath when she puts the car in park. Dark trees, wrought gate, unrushed. She takes some time there. No one is around, not even houses, just a patch of land, though it's not like she's expecting. She checks the address twice and grabs just the beer and flowers and, after a short debate, jumps the fence, careful of her jeans. The ground is damp but doesn't give way. She already knows where to find it.

Even in the night, the stones shine white and gray. Clean and pure, no geese around to desecrate the rest, not like in Boston and when she finds the one, she sits down. She doesn't smoke, though she had a friend once who liked dragging on joints in graveyards because *it was fucking poetic, that's why* and she wishes for a second she was that kind of person.

She sets the flowers down at the base, the lettering so new she could cut herself on it if she wanted. The beer is cold

against her hand and she cracks the can. Thinks about leaning into the stone, like she used to lean into her aunt when she was a child but thinks better of it and settles across from her like they're at the dinner table.

Light shining on ruby hair.

You don't look anything like your mom, her aunt had said once. *You look like me.*

"I know," she says out loud. The air is mild for this time and she takes a long bitter swig.

The night she died, her aunt hadn't called her. The woman had known it was the end and she hadn't picked up her phone. If it'd been her, she also wouldn't have called anyone, not wanting anyone to see her like that. Keep alive for longer just the memory of her walking still, breathing still. Being still.

If she had called, she knows it wouldn't have been about good-bye, but more about asking her aunt one last time for forgiveness, for reassurances that she wasn't so bad after all, that people made mistakes. That she was so much better than that woman in the Walmart even though, deep down, she knew they were the same, just on different sides.

Dumb bitch.

There's a sycamore on the periphery of graves and she watches it instead, thinking sometimes she sees it move. Damp seeps into her jeans, taking root. She remembers reading somewhere that people who died of natural causes in an unnatural time left a different sort of hole but she isn't sure because this is the first loss she's felt that she has memory for.

A fox appears, eyes like torches. Disappears. Just passing through. She thinks, briefly, about a homeless man she saw sleeping on a bench in the city once, a wedding band glinting in the street lights.

The blue-black shifts into muddy dawn. She touches the stone as she leaves with numb fingers.

What she should have said only hits her on the way back, sun blinking on glass.

John Maki

Max, They

The dog jumps into the video call, grey and scruffy, saliva flying from his mouth. My daughter Nina yanks him into her lap and hugs him. He is a stray that never left, a Toto. It's late afternoon and she wants to talk about her seventh grade students and yesterday's school lockdown in Las Vegas. She still feels uneasy, jittery. I'm jittery too especially about how Nina's anxiety could affect Max, my only child's first child, a baby, an unborn. I should be listening, calming her, but all I can think about is Max, Max not Maxwell or Maximilien, one-syllable Max, long-awaited Max, just Max. Toto wiggles and licks Nina's face and jumps out of the iPad's frame and I finally see my daughter's round bulging tummy ensconced in a gray tee shirt. I'm filled with envy.

Later at dinner, my husband Jim and I eat from small black dinner trays balanced on our laps; our Seattle kitchen is under remodel. I tell him *Nina is okay, although I don't know how anyone could be okay after that*. I've seen her portable classroom but not been inside. It's a white box with no windows. She loves her kids and I imagine it full of life. The lockdown signal was a series of horn blasts. Her kids had practiced. She secured the door while they circled up on the floor. A girl, Shaniqua, fainted and Nina revived her. Everyone scoured their phones for information but found none. Someone played "Uptown Funk," loudly. When the all-clear came, more blasts, Nina opened the door onto to an unchanged world. Later, it was reported that a twelve year old boy had been seen in the neighborhood with a handgun. Why boys? Jim and I wonder. Why do boys, guns, and shooting go together?

The next morning, still in my bathrobe, I step behind a temporary plastic barrier to inspect my dusty in-progress kitchen. The contractor has inserted small wood shims underneath and between the new cabinets. The poky-outy effect looks silly, unnatural. Those shims have a big job to do,

keeping everything level.

Lunchtime. I'm knitting outside at the patio table, listening to the contractors work, when Harter joins me. He's my new best friend, eighteen, just out of high school, one of the crew's little buddies. The boss is his uncle and Harter thinks everything is stupid because he isn't allowed to touch power tools. He opens his sack lunch and plows down a hot dog rolled into a slice of American cheese. We listen to the warm spring buzz.

"What do you want to do with your life, Harter?" I ask.

He thinks. "You know, get good at something."

"Like what?"

"Like computers or games or something."

"How about carpentry?"

"Too dirty. Besides, I have asthma." He coughs to prove it.

"You can get help for asthma."

He points at my knitting. "What's that?"

"A Christmas stocking for my grandson." I hold it up. It is red. White block letters encircle the green neck. MAX.

"That's cool. How old is he?"

"He's not here yet. Soon, though."

"Cool. I want a mini-me someday."

"You have other things to take care of. Parenting is a lot of work."

"I know," he says, nodding. "Cool. Cool."

I'm trying to understand boys' lives. Their default shape is maddening. So much willful desire. Will Max survive? I wonder. Will he thrive? Will he be a they or she or them or her instead of a him or he? Nina was always unquestionably feminine. Now, thirty-two years later, things are different and I need to change. Sitting and staring at Harter, something claws at me, a busy beast. I try to understand it, examine it, rename it. After Nina's birth, I couldn't get pregnant again. Artificial insemination didn't work, so I turned to In Vitro fertilization. Five attempts and as many years later, I gave up. Jim memorialized the medical code and I began to use words other than fallow to describe myself. If only. The mind wants but the body claims, seldom an equitable exchange. Five losses, all of them mysteries.

For years, my family's mission has been to make sure I'm

okay, keep me on track. Therapy and physical activity help, I promise, but my most constant symptom, a stubborn inability to appreciate Nina's vitality, persists. Last September, when she announced her pregnancy, I discontinued my depression medication, so I could be more present for her and Max. It has worked. I feel more focused and attentive, more alive.

My next conversation with Nina is tense. It is a week after the lockdown. We're on the iPad again. Her voice rises and falls with fatigue. Her freckled face is swollen and her brown hair is wispy and limp. Before the pregnancy she worked hard to maintain her appearance. She knows I'm envious of her marvelous fecundity. I need to be strong for her. "You'll snap back," I say. Toto's unfortunate black nose appears and fills the frame. "What happens to Toto when Max arrives?" I ask. Nina is silent. Her husband Brad is installing a dog door, an opening to the outside. I think about my openings and how each In Vitro deposit felt like a breath and every exit a sneeze. Toto licks Nina's camera, his large tongue a gray smear. She pushes him away and my openings throb with misapprehension.

The next morning Nina goes into labor and I schedule a last-minute flight to Las Vegas. The contractor is laying hardwood floors, four-inch boards, finely grained with lovely brown streaks. They're beautiful in their solidity. As I step out the door to catch my Uber, Harter bids me goodbye. He looks eager, hopeful.

After my uneventful flight arrives, I see a text while waiting at baggage claim. My contractor wants me to phone him. He needs decisions about drawer pulls. Background noises creep into the call. He's in the emergency room. An hour ago, Harter sawed off his pinky finger.

I'm still thinking about Harter's pinky when I get to the rental car center. I've seen injuries before, my own and others, but severed digits really get me going. He's on my mind when I pick out a black Dodge Charger and take off to the hospital. On the freeway I accelerate toward the desert's vast horizon. Looming lawyer billboards reassuringly promise help if I get drunk and screw up. Behind them, outcroppings of new housing developments stretch into the filmy horizon

and disappear. I like the desert's blandness, its sweeping anonymity, and lack of blame. People come here every day to start over.

At the hospital, I greet Nina's in-laws who are waiting in the birthing center. We chat and I head for Nina's room. She is awkwardly pretzeled beneath tented blankets, seven hours into labor, four centimeters dilated. Her epidural has kicked in and she is wanly cheerful. She jerks and Brad jumps to attention. It's nothing and we all laugh. I leave for the cafeteria to get Brad a hamburger and when I return, nurses are probing Nina's midsection. Max is out of position and Nina's blood pressure is rising. They need to adjust the baby so he can get out. I beat back a surge of worry and tears and put my faith in Nina. I'm here for her.

In the waiting room, my co-grandmother clutches my hand, sniffles, and takes large bites out of Brad's hamburger. Hours pass. None of us are allowed in. At 8 PM, Brad comes out. Nina has been pushing and is spent. Max will arrive sometime, probably in the middle of the night. We should all go home. He will text us.

I check into a nearby motel. It is cheap and uncomfortable and I'm lying awake at midnight remembering Nina's birth, a high forceps delivery that followed a 30-hour labor. It took all my strength and that of three nurses to push her out. Her scrapes and bruises healed quickly but I memorized the feeling of the forceps' undertow. The thinnest of membranes separate joy from sorrow. My depression medication withdrawal ended a while ago but some effects remain. My head hurts and the imaginary space beneath my skin and muscle burns. I try to focus but my thoughts race. I kneel on the floor and pray for joy.

Morning. Sunlight streams into my room and I groggily grope for my phone. Max is here, a bright photo of a small face. I dress quickly and rush to the hospital. Nina is nursing a wee person in a blue stocking cap. I'm happy and breathless and relieved. I touch his cheek and take in his measurements, the baseline numbers of an uncertain future. He stares at me through shrouded unsullied eyes. My newest best friend has entered the world. "Pretty great," I whisper and Nina replies, "Yeah," nonplussed and exhausted. Behind Nina, a

white board reads *Thomas Maxwell Cranston*. I blink and reread the words. Changes have been made and the Christmas stocking is wrong, all wrong. My mind chugs. I squint again at the words. I want to scream bloody murder but head to the bathroom instead, where I weep into my shirt sleeve. After a while, I pull myself together and call Jim and when I utter "Thomas," I break down all over again.

"Are you okay," he asks. *Okay, okay, okay.*

"Yes. I am okay."

When I finally return to Nina's room, Brad asks if I wouldn't mind straightening up their house for tomorrow's homecoming. I accept his offer and kiss Max and Nina goodbye. In the parking lot, I can't locate the Charger. I click the key fob's panic button and hear a wail. When I finally find the car it looks huge and I am overwhelmed by its extravagant masculinity, its ripe bulges, oversized tires, Hemi engine, and mean grill. I climb in and run my hands over the steering wheel like it is a round gun barrel. I imagine Harter in the back seat, crowing about torque and horsepower, urging me on, holding up his maimed hand, yelling, "Fuck yeah!" I turn onto the freeway and punch the accelerator and shoot past a Prius, a panel van, and a red Cadillac, biting down on my adrenaline. The car is flying, almost out of control, taking me somewhere new.

"Fuck yeah!" I scream. "Fuck yeah! Fuck yeah! Fuck yeah!"

Finally, a grandson and a legacy.

Finally, a baby.

Finally, a life.

I was a teacher once, like Nina, high school English, but I quit a few years ago. I don't miss it. I wasn't very good at it. Jim is a librarian and will retire soon. We met in college, fell in love, and settled down. No wild streaks, just us and our fates and later the petri dishes. My therapist likes to talk about the movies trapped in our heads—the ones that loop over and over again. We each have private collections. Watched up close, they can dominate your emotions, but from a distance they're manageable. I have a new movie to watch.

I drive the Charger to Nina's school instead of her home and pull into the parking lot. I get out and stretch to gather

strength. The surrounding neighborhood of cracker box houses and rusty cyclone fences feels foreign, yet I'm calm. I've been summoned. The school's main building looks like a World War II bunker and the portables are in the rear. Endless boxes. I want to get inside Nina's box and absorb its impenetrability. I walk across a grassy play field. It's hot outside and I'm sweating. I wonder why I ever wanted a second child. I wonder why Nina never felt like enough. My movie reel slaps loudly as I parse each celluloid grain. There is no way out, no small openings. "Stop," someone yells and a school security guard, a woman pointing a handgun, motions at me. I smile and wave. I'm just a sixty year old woman in jeans with a gray ponytail, for crying out loud. The security guard advances. "Hello, I'm a mother," I yell. "My daughter teaches here. She just had a baby." I lift my hands and someone tackles me from behind and drives my face into the grassy field. Horns blast and I am cuffed.

The next day, Nina, Brad, and Max arrive to a well provisioned ready-to-nurture home. Nina places the baby in a bassinet and Brad helps get her comfortable on the couch. She is pale and bloated and still shaky. It's the blood loss. They are grateful for my help. They know I have a kitchen to finish. I'm bursting to tell Nina about yesterday's school debacle and how security detained me and how a nurse put me down for a nap and how I have resumed my depression meds. But I don't. I'm too afraid, too ashamed of my uncertain mental state. I stare at Max in his bassinet, at his acne-dotted skin and bland expression. After a while, he begins to fuss and I pick him up and change his diaper. His dotted meconium is a perfect yellow. I dab ointment on his raw belly button and whisper, "There, there." I pull him close and he wriggles his face into my dry breasts and I flinch with phantom pain.

Nina wakes up. "What happened?"

"Max is hungry. Very hungry."

Nina takes the baby and unbuttons her top. Max struggles to latch onto her breast but finally connects and calms down. Nina strokes his head.

"Mom, you've got to start calling him Tom."

I stay a week. I cook and freeze meals and tidy up and run errands, while Nina and Brad tend to Tom. The mood is tense and vigilant. Nobody wants the baby to die. I check in at home with Jim and the contractor. The floors are waxed and the backsplash is being tiled. Harter can't work yet. The contractor laughs. The injury messed up the boy's video shooting hand.

I have to leave tomorrow. I try to act sad, but the medication is beginning to numb me. Brad's parents bring Toto over. He slowly advances toward Nina, bewildered. She coaxes the dog, "That's a good boy," and he jumps into her lap pushing Tom aside. She hands me the baby and he begins to cry a loud hoarse cry and I try to imagine him as they. He's bewildered too. He will have too many choices to make too.

After dinner, my phone's news feed turns red, a middle school shooting in Texas. Lockdown memories flood back. Nina says that she would have killed her school's shooter, would have ripped his throat out to save her kids. Her mama-bear intensity excites me. I mention a voicemail she left as the lockdown was occurring. She was in control, her usual self. Fortunately, we talked before I listened to it. I sometimes replay it, taking in every inflection, every pause and strain, and wonder what I would have said, how I would have sounded in the moment, how I would have comforted her, she my only survivor.

"What would you have said if I had picked up when you called?" I ask.

"I don't know. I won't call next time," Nina says, amused, attuned to my lack of confidence.

"Dear Lord. No next time. Please."

In the morning, I kiss Tom goodbye. He is growing up already. His eyes are wider and his eyebrows more visible. I give Nina the stocking and offer to make a new one. She laughs and hugs me and apologizes for forgetting to tell me about the name change. It happened after Tom was born. He's still the same little person. It is our best moment since my arrival.

The sixteen-year-old gunboy from Texas is dead, killed by police. His girlfriend had just broken up with him. I remind Nina that the leading cause of death amongst teenage boys

and young men is suicide, information gathered since Harter's accident.

"I know," she says. "Thanks, Mom."

I wonder if such statistics will be gathered about they and them?

The day after I get home, my therapist squeezes me in. We talk about the inexplicable feelings grandmothers can have. We discuss the Charger, Harter, his stump, the shooters, my remodel, and how much I already miss Nina. I tell my therapist how much I love Max, so very, very much. I can't say Tom.

As I speak and listen to my words, I take in the office's neutrality, its half-shut blinds, the oak bookcase, the stiff medical tomes, and shiny magazines. My therapist smiles and types, fingers flicking over a small laptop on a rolling desk. She is always a little too alert. She nods and asks questions and I fill in the spaces, careful to sound reflective in a meaningful way, careful not to incriminate myself. I want her to know that I will be okay. We discuss my latest movie and go over my medications. I admit to having watched some old movies recently and finally mention Nina's school and how I was mistaken for a killer.

The kitchen is finished. It is spotless and shim free. It's exactly what I wanted and for the next few weeks we get acquainted. I line the cupboards with white mesh and buy new pans, my first copper. I try out new cooking techniques, oven-dried fruit, sous vide chicken breast. I wipe down the stainless steel three times a day. I stare at the granite. I video chat with Nina on the iPad. Each time Tom is dressed differently, a polka dot onesie, a turquoise kerchief, teensy knitted socks. I *ooh* and *ahh*. Her leave of absence from school will end soon. I hang up and stare at my granite. Then I take my therapist's advice and call Nina back to explain why I tried to crash her classroom.

One day Harter stops by, ostensibly to see the finished kitchen, but I know he wants to show off his stump and talk. I want to talk too. I've missed him. He holds up his

prosthetic pinky, a science-fictiony thing made of hard rubber and metal. Now he can shoot his video gun again. *Bang, bang*. He picks up a strawberry and pops it into his mouth. He tells me he has met someone and could I tell him about restaurants and wine. I remind him he is not old enough to order wine. He asks about Max.

"He's great. His name is Tom actually. My mistake. Getting big." I hold up a picture on my phone.

"Well, he looks awesome."

"Yes. You'll know someday."

He stares, pensive, thinking about it.

"Why didn't you have more kids?" he asks. "You're a great mom."

"I couldn't."

"You could have adopted."

"I couldn't," I say more firmly.

"Want to be my mom?"

"Don't you have a mom?"

"She died when I was ten."

I'm surprised I don't know this essential bit of information, given our many chats.

"What does it mean? Be your mom?"

"Nothing really. You can just think of me that way. No strings attached."

I peer into Harter's goofy face. He's serious. It's such an easy solution to a difficult problem. A gift. I grab his hand and pull it to my cheek. We hug and he whispers, "Cool, cool."

Nina calls on the iPad again a few days later. She has returned to school and is wearing make-up and a necklace. She holds up Tom, so I can see him, before handing the baby off to Brad. Her strength has returned along with her stern teacher look. Toto has been moved to Brad's parents. I don't miss the big black nose and out-of-control tongue interrupting our calls. She holds the camera closer and the border frames her face. Something she says reminds me of my last In Vitro fertilization attempt. We've been talking more openly and in more detail recently. She has context now, flickers of understanding.

"What happened?" she asks.

"I'm not exactly sure. I was combing your hair and felt a twinge inside. I pulled your hair a bit and you cried out and I knew the last one was gone. I'm sorry I hurt you."

For a split second the video freezes. Then Nina's face returns, her freckles singing, her eyes full, her voice knowing.

"It's okay, Mom. I don't remember."

Contributor Notes

Sarah P. Blanchard is an award-winning writer whose lived many years in New England, on farms large and small. A former teacher at the University of Hawaii-Hilo, she now lives and writes in western North Carolina. Her poems, nonfiction and short stories have appeared in several publications including three previous issues of *Sixfold.* “Playing Chess with Bulls” was a finalist for the 2021 Doris Betts fiction prize.

L. Michael Bohigian lives in Concord, MA. He’s working on a collection of contemporary short stories.

Devon Bohm’s work has been featured in publications such as *Labrys*, *Spry*, *Necessary Fiction, Hole in the Head Review*, *Horse Egg Literary, The Graveyard Zine*, and Sunday Mornings at the River’s *365 Days of Covid* anthology. Her first book, *Careful Cartography*, was released in 2021 by Cornerstone Press. Follow her on Instagram @devonpoem or @devonbohm, or visit her website www.devonbohm.com to learn more.

K. Ralph Bray is a former teacher and lapsed economist living in Toronto. His work is found online and in print. He studied at the Humber School for Writers. He’s writing a novel that owes much to Bel Kaufman’s “Up The Down Staircase” (“the book that got teaching right” according to the New York Times).

Salena Casha’s work has appeared in over 50 publications during the last decade. Her most recent work can be found in *Bath Flash Fiction Anthology Number 6* & *trampset* and is forthcoming in *FlashBack Fiction*. She survives New England winters on good beer and black coffee. Follow her on Twitter @salaylay_c.

Parker Fendler has been conjuring up stories ever since he could dream. He recently began transcribing them after waking. He was previously published in *Sixfold*'s Summer 2021 issue. He lives in Phoenix Arizona where he gravitates toward indoor hobbies (like writing) that pose a low risk of dehydration in the desert heat.

Nick Gallup is a has-been/would-be novelist who now wards off dementia by writing short stories, a number of which have been published in such online literary journals as "The Write Launch" and "New Pol Lit". He is a pilot, an Army vet, and retired DoD contracting official. He lives and concocts his complicated story lines, which he characterizes as "Holden Caulfield does Walter Mitty", in Cape Coral, FL.

Kati Iso grew up in Budapest, Hungary. She has a Master's degree in English, but over the years she's been an HR assistant, a bookkeeper, a social worker, and primarily a mother. She is also a bit of a snob about coffee and dessert. Kati finds mornings dreadful, but she keeps busy during the day with her two Irish Wolfhounds. Then she likes to write into the nights in the company of the moon.

Elizabeth Lyvers grew up in the hills of West Virginia, molded by books, trees, and basketball. She recently published a novel called The Honest Lies and writes for her blog, Dear Life. She lives happily in Texas with her husband and infant son, writing during nap times.

John Maki lives in Seattle and studies with Hugo House and One Story. He very much appreciates *Sixfold*'s caring editors and readers. Other publications in which his stories have appeared include *Jam Tarts, Desi Writers Lounge, Eastern Iowa Review, River River, and Across the Margin*. Check out www.makihome.us and a forthcoming audio book of his work to be published Spring, 2022.

Brittany Meador is a spoken word poet currently pursuing a degree in English. She is a certified logophile who loves words as much as pastries and who is incapable of restraining her inner fangirl when she meets an author she really admires. You can find her work at brittanymeador.com and in the *Hash Journal*, the *Hip Circle Empowerment Anthology* and other publications.

Primarily a screenwriter, Brandi Sperry's scripts have received placement on industry best-of lists including the 2020 GLAAD List, which showcases promising LGBTQ+-inclusive feature scripts, and the 2020 WriteHer list, highlighting the best TV pilot scripts by female writers. She hails from Seattle, studied creative writing at Macalester College in St. Paul, MN, and is currently based in Los Angeles, CA.

Rodney Stephens is chair of the English department at Howard Payne University. He teaches creative writing, U.S. literature, and science fiction. His work has appeared in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, *Jelly Bucket*, and *Amarillo-Bay*.