SIXFOLD

FICTION WINTER 2022

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Kristina Cecka

Matsukaze

Five years had passed since Hide last walked the backstreets to his aunt's house, but they were still familiar: giggling schoolchildren in their round yellow hats, high schoolers in uniforms passing him on their bikes, narrow sidewalks with vending machines on every other corner. The Lawson he'd gone to every day after work was even still open. Hide smiled at it as he turned the corner, wondering if old Yamamoto still ran it, and stopped hard on the curb as he came face-to-face with a dilapidated wooden two-story house with a stone walkway and window boxes. His aunt's house hadn't changed either in five years.

The lights were out, the windows shuttered. Down the street, children shrieked and played, but otherwise the neighborhood was as quiet and still as he remembered. Hide's legs, still sore after so many hours on the plane, trembled. He clenched his fist around the handle of his suitcase until he could shove down the lump in his chest. Five years. He should be stronger than this.

An old man waited outside of his aunt's house. Hide almost passed him before he recognized the quizzical smile hiding in his grizzled stubble.

"You know me now, huh?" Yukihira's rough, barking laugh was as familiar as his smile. "You go to America for a few years and you forget all the old men who raised you, is that it?"

"Of course not." Hide bowed, grateful to hide his face. "You're looking well, Yukihira."

"At least they didn't ruin your manners over there." A rough hand scraped his hair. Hide batted it away like he had a thousand times before, and he was twelve years old all over again, practicing noh with Yukihira six days a week. He blinked and returned to himself. "Five years, kid. You could've sent a postcard or something."

"Have you been waiting for me all this time?"

"It wasn't so long. I'm an old man now, I have nothing better

to do with my time than bird watch. You're late, you know."

Hide didn't admit he got lost in Shinjuku, that underground labyrinth. Yukihira would only laugh at him. They'd always made fun of the gape-mouthed tourists wandering in there for hours.

"It's a long train ride from Narita," he said. "You didn't have to come greet me."

Yukihira sobered. "I wasn't sure you'd actually come."

"I—" Hide swallowed. "Of course I came. She raised me."

"Your aunt was a hard old woman." Yukihira kissed his teeth, wrinkles deepening at the corner of his mouth. "She had to be, to keep us pigheaded actors in our place. That woman. I'll miss her." He shook his head. "Still, it's good you came. How was your flight?"

"Long." Even direct flights were long, but Hide's two layovers had been several hours each. "I'll need to rest. The wake is this weekend?"

"Yes, it's all been arranged." Arranged? Hide had expected to be buried in last minute preparation. Yukihira put his hands on his hips, shuffling his feet. "Did you get a hotel?"

"Hotel?" Hide blinked. "But—"

He looked at the house behind Yukihira.

Yukihira kissed his teeth again. "I didn't know how to tell you over the phone," he admitted. "It didn't seem right. Your aunt, she left it all to Takehiro."

Black dots rushed to fill Hide's vision and he swayed. He leaned hard on his suitcase and prayed he wouldn't faint. The name was a knife in the darkness, unexpected and damaging. After so many years, he thought his resistance to it would be stronger. How disappointing to find he was as weak as ever.

"What?" he asked through numb lips.

"The house, the bank account, all of her things . . ." Yukihira sighed. "She was lonely after you left. Takehiro visited her often, and they became close. He drove her around, helped with her groceries. She relied on him." He crossed his arms over his chest. "He was with her when she passed."

Had she been lonely? It had been his aunt and Hide for so long—had she felt the empty silence of the house as keenly as Hide felt it in his bland New York apartment? She had never tried to call him, not once. No letters, no postcards. But she'd

had Takehiro. Bitterness gurgled in him, dark and viscous.

Hide shook his head. "What about the wake? The cremation?"

"Takehiro arranged it. She wanted him to."

On the airplane, Hide had prepared himself for the wake; the things he would say, the arrangements that needed to be made. Having it tugged out of his hands unnerved him. Off-balance and unsure, all he could do was stare at Yukihira. Yukihira put his hands on his hips and sighed with his whole chest.

"Come on. You can stay with me while you're in town."

Hide bowed his head. Numbness spread from his face to his whole body.

"Thank you," he said. "I won't be a burden."

"It's the least I can do," Yukihira said. "Your aunt would have wanted you to be here."

Aunt Kaede's mad eyes. The whip of her arm as she threw a glass at his head, the crack as it shattered against the wall. The last time he saw her—five years ago in three weeks—was the final, terrible night before he left Japan for good. Had she ever said anything to Yukihira? They were close, for coworkers, but his aunt had never shared much of her personal life with anyone, not even Hide. She was as self-contained and secretive as an oyster. Hidden and masked from anyone who tried to know her.

Hide looked back up at the house. His aunt's roses wilted in their window boxes. The narrow mailbox overflowed with advertisements and envelopes. A bicycle leaned against the front wall; the back tire was flat and the basket rusted.

"Will he sell it?"

"I doubt he's thought about it," Yukihira said, looking up with Hide at the house. "She loved this old place, you know. She spent hours on those flowers. Had me and the boys over to fix her windows, and exchange out the tatami mats. She could've done it herself, that woman, but she loved having someone to boss around." Yukihira smiled. "I told Takehiro I would buy it from him."

"Really? What would your wife think?"

"I'll tell her it's somewhere to go when she gets upset with me."

Yukihira's wife had never so much as yelled at him, from what Hide remembered. But five years was a long time.

"Aunt Kaede would have liked you to have it."

Yukihira's smile slid away. "It surprised everyone when she gave it to Takehiro. It should've gone to you. You grew up there." Yukihira raised his eyebrows, the old look he had used to ask some silent question of a teenage Hide. He wasn't any better at puzzling out the question now. "You don't want to buy it? You could find a nice wife, settle down back home."

Hide clenched his fist around his suitcase handle. "No," he said. "That's not for me."

Yukihira's wife Saeko was as friendly as Hide remembered. She made him eat three helpings of her homemade udon, criticizing how skinny he'd become. ("Don't you eat plenty of hamburgers in America? Why are you just skin and bones?") Yukihira only laughed as she fussed over him. After dinner, they quizzed him on what famous foreign places he'd visited ("You never went to that big green lady? What's her name?") and drank lukewarm tea as their plump tabby cat wandered from warm lap to warm lap. Hide pleaded a headache to go to bed early, but when he laid down on the fluffy futon it was impossible to sleep.

It was dark and quiet downstairs when he finally gave up and got back up. He collected a glass of water and wandered to the open door at the end of the first-floor hallway.

Yukihira's study overflowed with paper, discarded tea mugs, and books. Smoke hung heavy in the air—Saeko didn't let him smoke anywhere else in the house. A heavy book with a cracked spine stood propped up on the wide, secondhand desk. Hide bent to examine the page it was open to.

"*Who is to tell of our unhappiness, dipping brine at Nada?*" he read.

"Do you remember it?"

Hide jumped. Yukihira leaned against the doorframe, wearing pajamas, a steaming cup of tea cupped in his hands. He smiled as Hide straightened, eyes crinkling at the corners.

"*Matsukaze*," Hide said. "I remember. Is this the new performance this month?"

"If we can figure out who's going to play Matsukaze,"

Yukihira said. “She’s a tough role to fill. You know that.”

Half-remembered dreams: the heavy weight of the robes, the cool, wooden mask. Easier days.

“It’s a good play,” he said.

“The classic ghost story.” Yukihira wiggled his fingers, nearly spilling his tea. “It’s been a little tricky to stage. Are you staying after the wake? Maybe you could give the younger actors some tips.”

Hide’s throat closed up. He looked back down at the page of *Matsukaze*. Two ghosts wasting away in their village, lamenting the loss of their lover to the uncaring wind. A sad play. Grief is at the heart of noh, as Yukihira used to say.

“I was going to catch the next flight back,” he squeezed out at last. “My job—“

Yukihira tapped his index finger against the tea cup. It was a heavy clay one, handleless, with intricate loops and patterns in a deep teal.

“They’ll keep for another week, won’t they? Doing that flight back-to-back is brutal. You’re young, but you should take care of your body more or you’ll start falling apart like me.”

Yukihira couldn’t be older than sixty. Hide braced a hip against the desk and smiled.

“Dramatic,” Hide said.

Yukihira smiled back at him, eyes crinkling. “Isn’t that part of my job?”

“Aren’t directors supposed to keep a cool head?”

Yukihira made a deep, disbelieving sound in the back of his throat.

“Directors are the most dramatic ones of all.” He sighed. “If you won’t stay, you’ll just have to visit more. Takehiro’s wedding is next month, you know.”

Hide’s knees buckled. He put his palm flat on the desk so he wouldn’t fall over and nearly knocked down a teetering tower of books. Too many surprises too quickly—his heart was going to give out at this rate. He swallowed around the hard knot in his throat.

“Takehiro’s getting married?”

Yukihira tilted his head, eyes narrowing. “You didn’t know? He sent out the invitations in March. I have it somewhere . . .”

He put down his tea and rifled through his papers, muttering under his breath. Hide watched the warm curl of steam from the tea and tried to breathe evenly. Yukihira emerged triumphant with a slim card that had been buried under one of the many half-full mugs.

Hide took it from him with the tips of his fingers. It was elegant, with heavy card stock and gilded lettering, announcing a date in late October. The picture on the front was perfect: him in a dark suit, her in a pastel dress, heads tipped together and laughing. They looked like a set already, the kind you bought for the top of a wedding cake.

Hide couldn't say anything. His voice would betray him. Clenching his fist only wrinkled the card. Reluctantly, he smoothed it back out. He needed to breathe.

"I see." Inhale, exhale. "I don't think I can make it." Inhale, exhale. "I'll be busy this fall."

Yukihira's brow crinkled. "You two were such good friends," he said. "It's a shame you drifted apart."

Hide couldn't laugh because he was sure it would only lead to crying. He closed *Matsukaze* instead, desperate for something to do with his hands, and stepped lightly around Yukihira's desk, passing him in the doorway.

"I'd better get some rest," he said. "It'll be a long day tomorrow."

"Sleep well," Yukihira called after him.

But Hide didn't sleep. Not for a long, long time.

The wake was subdued and sparse. Hide sat in the back with Yukihira in his uncomfortable black-on-black suit purchased just before he left America—everything was either too large or punishingly tight. He barely recognized most of the people there, and no one stopped to greet him.

"There's Takehiro," Yukihira said. "That's his fiancée next to him. Shall we say hello?"

Hide's stomach shriveled, a dying, crumpled animal. He kept his eyes trained on his folded hands.

"Later," he said. "Let's pay our respects."

Yukihira didn't argue. They presented their offering to the priest, handing over the crimson envelope with bowed heads, and went up to pay their respects at the casket. An

elderly woman ahead of them bowed her head and stepped away as they approached—her eyes drifted over Hide without recognition and her crinkled, dark face was just as unfamiliar to him. He had a bizarre urge to shake her. What had she known about his aunt? What secrets could she tell him?

Yukihira stepped forward first, bowing his head and muttering under his breath. Hide couldn't look at his aunt's frozen, stiff face. His heart thundered in his ears. Yukihira patted his shoulder.

"Take all the time you need," he said.

Hide looked down at his clenched fingers. He had bitten his thumbnail bloody this week. The cuff of his suit was too short, exposing his bony wrist, pale against the dark sleeve.

He couldn't just stand up here forever. In the back of his mind, his aunt, her voice familiar and beloved, scolded him for taking up too much time, making this difficult for everyone else. Hide breathed deep and looked.

Someone had smoothed back his aunt's hair and dressed her in the traditional kyoukatabira. Her features were flat and empty. All of her energy and charisma and verve—gone. Hide's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, thick and useless. He had to swallow a few times before he could force the words out.

"Goodbye."

There was more to say. So much more.

He turned away. Sat back down at Yukihira's elbow. The world buzzed around him, incomprehensible and alien. The sutras blurred in his ears. His aunt's new name was long and complicated—someone had made a good donation to the priests. The smell of incense burned his nose. By the time the whole ordeal was over, his legs were numb and his brain barely clung to the real world, everything hazy and withdrawn. He stood up, walked, and breathed, but all of it was so distant and foreign it didn't feel like it was happening to him at all.

"Come on, kid." Yukihira steered him out of the temple, a gentle hand on his elbow. "You look like death—we'll talk to Takehiro later. Do you want to come with me for dinner?"

"Dinner?"

"A bunch of us old timers wanted to get together and toast Kaede's memory. Join us, okay? They want to see you."

"Oh." He shivered in the cold air, his aunt's still face flashing behind his eyelids as he blinked. "Sure."

"You don't understand!"

Hide laughed with the others at Yamamoto, already deep in his cups and wailing loud enough to get a sharp look from the bartender. The izakaya was smoky and dense with bodies, musky with sweat, fish, and grilled meat. Their table was already cluttered with sake cups and beer pints, platters of their shared food slowly being emptied out after the initial devouring. Faint jazz filled the space between the chatter around them.

"She's not just a character!" Yamamoto insisted. "She's an *icon*. We can't let just any pup try her on!"

"Touya needs a lead role." Yukihira was the only sober one among them, watching the drunkenness with crossed arms and indulgent annoyance as he finished the last of the yakitori. "We need to cast *someone*. He's as good as anyone else. We've already argued about this."

"But now I can get Hideyuki on my side." Yamamoto nudged Hide's shoulder. He reeked of beer and incense. "Come on, kid. We can't give Matsukaze away so easily!"

"It's just a role, Yamamoto," one of the other old men, Tanaka, chimed in with a laugh.

He winked at Hide as he reached across the table for one of the croquettes.

"You can't say that! You know the old saying—Yuya, Matsukaze, and—"

"—a bowl of rice," they all finished together.

"Yes! Such a beloved play, a character with such depth, and we're giving her away to a complete greenhorn? He's not even as good at the dances as our Hideyuki here!"

Hide rubbed the back of his neck, grimacing at the tacky sweat gathering at his hairline.

"I haven't done them in a long time," he said.

Yamamoto made a rude sound in the back of his throat, waving his hand. "That doesn't matter. Once you've played Matsukaze, you don't forget!"

"Well—"

"Look!"

The shout took all the attention off of him. Hide slumped, relieved and annoyed at himself for being relieved. What did he have to fear, speaking up among all these old men who'd watched him grow up?

He turned to see what they'd gotten so excited about. He froze. Across the bar, Takehiro had one hand over his brow, blocking out the hazy electric lights and squinting to find—

Hide swallowed as their eyes met. Takehiro's expression shuttered, his mouth tightening.

"Takehiro!" Yamamoto stood, nearly fell over, caught himself, and waved his arms. "Over here!"

The other old men laughed at Yamamoto's enthusiasm and urged him to sit back down. Takehiro waved back and started across the bar, edging past the cluttered tables and dense crowd.

"It seemed polite to invite him," Yukihira admitted to Hide in an undertone. "Since we couldn't speak to him at the wake. You two should talk."

Hide's skin tightened, too small for his body. Prickles of goosebumps rose on his arms, the back of his neck. He bent his head, trying to focus on his drink and ignore his hyperawareness of Takehiro as he moved closer and closer. Hide shouldn't have had the third beer; his stomach was made of bile, thickening the back of his throat with its vile taste.

"Sorry I'm late," Takehiro said as he slid into the booth. The only open space was across from Hide and he had to duck his head so he wouldn't meet Takehiro's eyes. "I caught the wrong train."

"Aren't you a city boy?" Yukihira asked. "Shouldn't you know the train schedules by heart?"

Hide risked a peek as they teased him. Takehiro wasn't looking at him and Hide, weak as he was, took a moment to guiltily drink in the longer hair and new wrinkles at the corner of his eyes, the immediate realness of his body existing in the same space as Hide's for the first time in five years. His breath came too quickly. A flush built up the back of his neck.

"—Hide here just got in yesterday. Our world traveler!"

Takehiro turned and caught Hide staring. He forced himself not to look away. Takehiro's direct, dark gaze was just as he remembered it; too bold, too consuming.

"It's good to see you again," Takehiro said, and sounded like he actually meant it. "It's been a while."

Hide's tongue—thick, unwieldy, a foreign animal.

"Yes," he said, unwittingly in English. He cleared his throat and started again in Japanese, "You look well."

"Having a beautiful fiancee agrees with him!" Yamamoto cackled.

Hide didn't tense out of long practice. Even Takehiro didn't react aside from a slight narrowing of his eyes.

"It does," he said, and his smile could have lit up the entire bar.

Hide didn't smoke his unlit cigarette, but he wanted to. Across the street people went in and out of the 7-11: the tired salarymen, parents with small children, giggling teenagers in their school uniforms, elderly grandparents. He almost wanted to go in himself, let the bright lights and anonymity wash over him.

"You're going to freeze out here."

Hide reeled back, catching a shoulder on the rough stone of the wall. Warm fingers plucked the cigarette from his mouth, and Hide's face buzzed from the butterfly touch.

"You don't smoke." Takehiro examined the cigarette. "Do you?"

"Not anymore." Hide disliked the revealing roughness of his voice. "You didn't need to come out and get me. I'm going back in a second."

"I see." Takehiro tucked the cigarette behind his ear. "How's America?"

"Big. Loud."

Takehiro's laugh didn't sound like Hide remembered. "Your worst nightmare."

"It's not so bad," he said. "It's home now."

Takehiro's expression spasmed. He folded his arms and braced a shoulder against the wall next to Hide. His tall broadness provided a buffer against the chilly wind, but Hide wished he'd leave.

"I'm sorry I didn't say hello at the wake."

"It's all right. We left quickly."

Takehiro exhaled, letting out a curl of steam into the night

air. “Your aunt’s will . . .”

“You should have the house,” Hide interrupted. Was Takehiro worried Hide would challenge it? “I would have just sold it if she left it to me.”

Takehiro twisted his large, beautiful hands. “You’re going to stay in America?”

“There’s nothing keeping me here.” Hide looked back at the 7-11. A little girl and her father came out, the girl swinging happily from her father’s hand. She tilted her head to look up at him with a bright smile, chattering and carefree. “Now that she’s gone.”

“Nothing?”

Hide didn’t look back at him. “Isn’t that what you said?”

A sharp breath. “America made you bold.”

“It made me honest.”

Silence spread between them, palpable as fog. Hide listened to Takehiro’s breathing, taking in the familiar smell of musk-and-smoke. Once, the silence and intimacy would have been normal, cherished. After five years without it, Hide’s skin was hypersensitive to the space between them. Across the street, a pack of raucous high school boys spilled out of the doors of the 7-11, shouting and laughing. Hide breathed sharply through his nose.

“You were just gone,” Takehiro said at last, his voice strained and soft. “After our fight, I went to talk to you, to—to try to work things out, but Kaede said you left. She’d been crying, I could tell. I didn’t think anything could make her cry.”

Hide closed his eyes, but it didn’t stop the wave of memory from rising over him, inexorable as the tide. Every moment of his last night in Japan was as permanent and brilliant as any woodblock print: the cruel shape of his aunt’s mouth, the accusing stab of her finger, the heartbreak of her deep eyes.

“It was easier for her if I left.”

“Hide. You didn’t even write her.”

“She didn’t want to hear from me.”

Takehiro touched his elbow, brief and gentle. Hide gritted his teeth against the rush of goosebumps marching up his arm, the way he ached to step closer. He’d been weak to this man so many times in the past. Stomach churning, he wondered if these past five years had done nothing to harden

him. Or perhaps he would never learn.

"Don't."

"Hide—"

"I saw your wedding announcement. October, right?" Hide turned at last to look at Takehiro's expression; wide-eyed, gasping. He couldn't have wounded him more if he'd actually used a knife. Hide twisted the knife deeper. "Congratulations."

Takehiro shuddered and took his fingers from Hide's elbow. He stepped back a pace. The space between them ached.

"You knew this was what would happen."

"You told me."

"We weren't ever going to have a future."

How many times had they had this conversation? If Hide blinked, he could wind back time and see Takehiro from five years ago, his hair shorter and face rounder, his mouth making the same shapes, spilling the same truths. It didn't ease the ache, but Hide's grief was old now, a treasured friend. Exhaustion had extinguished the pain.

"You always thought so," he said.

Takehiro's eyes cut back to him. His face softened, eyes deepening. Carefully, he took a step forward and reached to cup Hide's cheek with a tender hand. The touch was so familiar and Hide was so tired. He might have turned into it, embraced him, but he saw the way Takehiro's eyes darted watchfully over Hide's shoulder toward the 7-11. Five years. Did anything ever change?

"Hide," Takehiro's voice trembled. He was still looking at the 7-11. The tips of his fingers were icy and dry against Hide's cheekbone. "You know I still—"

No. Hide couldn't do this. He pulled his cheek away.

"Did you ever tell her?"

Takehiro's breath stuttered. His hand hung in the air between them, still reaching.

"What?"

"Aunt Kaede. Did you ever tell her?"

"Of course not." Comprehension dawned. Takehiro went wan, eyes huge. "You told—That's why you left?"

Behind him, two men stumbled out of the izakaya entrance, laughing together. They didn't notice anything but their own drunken stupor, but Takehiro still jumped away, dropping his

hand. Hide didn't move.

During his first year in America, he'd dreamed about this reunion every night. He'd practiced his speeches—everything from the cutting to the tender. He'd imagined Takehiro on his knees, begging forgiveness, begging Hide to come back to him, making promises to never part again, to always be together. Hide knew they were just fantasies, in the end. But he felt that now, the way he hadn't ever been able to half a world away.

"I told her," he said. "I wanted—well. I thought—" He shook his head. He'd been bitter, heartbroken, out of his mind. Looking back at that self, Hide couldn't begin to reconcile what he'd thought. It was like remembering the actions of a complete stranger. "She didn't believe me, at first. She yelled. Cried." Her dark, accusing eyes, the angry slash of her mouth. "In the end, she couldn't look at me. I didn't want to trouble her, so I left."

"You shouldn't have told her." Takehiro dragged a hand down his face, scrubbing his chin. "I can't believe it."

"You never said anything?"

"Me? Of course not. What good would it have done, breaking her heart like that?"

Hide opened his mouth, closed it again. He almost laughed. What good had it done, in the end? Maybe Takehiro was right. Hide took one last, long look at him; the dark sweep of his hair, those serious eyebrows, the fullness of his lower lip. All tiny bits and pieces he'd treasured, once. His heart ballooned, pressing against his ribs until he could barely breathe.

"Please leave," he said.

"Hide—"

"Please," he repeated and hated how his voice caught. "Just leave me be."

Takehiro's hand twitched like he might try to reach for him again, touch him again. But he didn't. He only shook his head and turned back to go inside.

Takehiro left early with awkward excuses, not meeting Hide's eye. The rest of the old men drifted away as the night went on, drunk and cheerful, but Hide stayed well past midnight, nursing his sake.

When it was just the two of them left, Yukihira sighed.

"Did you have a good talk with Takehiro?"

Hide flinched and sipped his sake to try and cover it. Dryness built behind his eyes. He wanted to go back to Yukihira's guest futon and sleep for days, for years. Until they wrapped him up in the kyoukatabira like his aunt.

"We talked," he confirmed.

Yukihira hummed and didn't push, to Hide's relief.

"Yamamoto's right, you know."

Hide blinked, taken aback. "About?"

"You were excellent with us. You'd be a good Matsukaze." Yukihira grimaced. "Touya needs the experience, but he's painful to watch."

Hide's heart ratcheted to his throat. "I'm not coming back."

"Sure. But if you did—"

"Yukihira."

Yukihira ignored the warning in his voice, propping his arm on the table, chin in his palm. "She needs a gentle touch, Matsukaze. A lady like that, desperate in her grief. Not everyone can get her."

"I don't act anymore."

"Kaede would weep to hear it. She was proud of your talent." Yukihira smiled. "She told everyone you would be the next Shinsaku Hosho."

Hide's eyes prickled. He breathed in sharply through his nose, trying to swallow back the hot feeling in the back of his throat.

"She washed her hands of me, Yukihira."

"Kaede would never. Just because you went to America—"

"She said I was dead to her. She warned me not to come back." Hide could still hear the echo of every word. Five years and he hadn't forgotten a single one. "I stopped being her adopted son and became a stranger to her."

Yukihira snorted. "She loved you."

"Yeah. But it wasn't enough."

Yukihira considered him, brows crinkling. Hide sipped the sake again. Someone had turned up the radio and a mournful sax solo filled the smoky bar.

"Not enough? How could it not be enough?"

Hide shook his head. "I can't stay here, Yukihira," he said.

"With these ghosts everywhere? I can't."

Yukihira's mouth pursed. His soft, dark eyes fixed on Hide's face but he didn't push. Yukihira never pushed, not like Aunt Kaede had. Hide's throat thickened and he swallowed hard.

"I just want you to be happy, Hideyuki," Yukihira said. "Are you? In America?"

Hide swallowed the last of his sake. It burned on the way down. The porcelain cup was cool against his fingertips.

"I am," Hide lied.

Hide let himself into the quiet, dark theatre through one of the maintenance entrances in the back with Yukihira's keys, following the zigzagging hallways from memory. How often had he run through these halls as a child, delighted to follow his aunt around? The actors had laughed at her for bringing him, but they'd given him treats and ruffled his hair. When had he stopped coming? Middle school, maybe. It had only been after he graduated he'd renewed his interest in acting.

Everything was still so familiar.

They kept costumes near the main stage, overflowing with heavy silk in every color. The masks lined the wall, their delicate, painted faces ranging from grotesque to mournful. In the half-light, without a face to hold them, they seemed empty, somehow. Waiting and expectant.

The mask Hide wanted was near the end of the bottom row; a young woman's mournful howl. He took it carefully down, turning it this way and that in his hands. The cypress was cool under his fingers, heavy and smooth. How many people had worn it? Hundreds, thousands? It didn't matter. Once they wore the mask, they became something different. Everyone had worn it and no one had.

He held the mask up to his eye level. It stared back at him, empty and hungry. The painted red mouth so real it breathed.

Hide turned it over. Put it on.

There was only the faint weight of the mask, the odd smell of it. His vision narrowed through the eyeholes, stripping away the peripherals. In the full-body mirror, he checked the fit. His own dark eyes were a shock. Hairs stood up on the back of his neck, his arms. His heart thrummed.

"Matsukaze," he whispered. He searched his memory. "*I found, even there, an abyss of wildest love.*"

The words didn't sound right, not yet. He picked up her wig, heavy and dark. He didn't bother with the normal precautions to keep it secure, only placing it lightly on his head. His clothes didn't look right either. Frowning, he hunted down the matching kimono and shoes. It was sloppy work putting them on himself, but the final picture in the mirror finally eased him.

There she was. Her moon-pale face and grieving mouth, the golden kimono, the long, dark hair.

"Matsukaze," he whispered again. It echoed in the empty room.

The stage hall was dark. He fumbled for the lights, blinking rapidly against the brightness as they illuminated the plain wooden stage and painted pine tree.

He breathed in, out. So familiar. His body remembered this. His heart picked up in his chest.

The slow, ritualized walk down the bridge to the stage released his lingering tension. The last week sloughed off him with each step—the call about his aunt, the frantic airplane ride back, the wake, Takehiro's beckoning eyes. He let them float away, casting them off. He left Hide behind and took up Matsukaze instead.

When he finally reached the main stage, he paused, looking out into the sea of empty seats.

"Ah," he whispered, voice thin and cracked, "*the sting of regret!*"

He took out the ceremonial fan and reached deep back into the history of his own body, the body that still remembered practicing for this role, remembered how to move like a woman lost to heartache. He turned, elbows tipping and fan floating, and turned again, a whisper of breath releasing as his body struggled to keep each pose.

Something eased in him. He turned faster, moved more smoothly. His mind, untethered by the familiar movement of his body, returned to his aunt. Her shouting anger—her pride when he graduated—the point of her finger as she ordered him to leave—the warmth of her arms when he'd lost his parents.

He missed a step and slipped down to his knees.

Hide gritted his teeth and forced himself back up, trying to move like he knew he needed to move, but it was no use. His mind returned to Takehiro's dark eyes, the careful press of his palm on Hide's cheek. He breathed out harshly and shoved the memories away. He could do this. He needed to do this. He turned again, faster, faster, faster—

Leaving everything behind but the dance and Matsukaze.

He held the dance's final pose, panting from effort. His knees trembled, arms shaky and loose. How did it end? The words rose up in him.

"*Last night you heard the autumn rain; this morning all that is left*," he said, "*is the wind in the pines*." He fell to his knees, hands pressed in supplication, head bowed. "*The wind in the pines*."

Jeremy Glazer

Kintsugi

My older sister Becky called me out of nowhere to tell me that Ruth, my niece, was working at a law firm downtown. Becky asked if I'd meet up with Ruth for lunch sometime since her building was just a few blocks from mine.

"She's a lawyer already? Jesus, Beck," I said, even though I wasn't really surprised. This had been the plan the last time I'd seen Ruth, when she was 16, and it was clear even then that the girl was headed for big things. She had confidence and poise leaking out of her tiny pores.

"Nah," Becky said, and then paused. Even though we were on the phone, even though it had been almost ten years since we talked, I could tell she was doing that quick double head shake of hers. Our dad would do that when he was trying to chase an idea out of his head. "Ruth hasn't even finished college yet. She hit a few bumps in the road, so for now she's just working. But we're hoping she goes back soon."

I chewed on that "hasn't even finished college" for a second because I haven't even finished college either. Not that anyone expects me to at 41, but still. Becky heard my silence.

"I didn't mean . . ."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I'll call her."

I'll admit, at first, there was a little bit of schadenfreude when Becky told me that Ruth wasn't some big success already. I was happy to know that everything hadn't gone swimmingly for Becky and her family without us in their life.

I love that word, schadenfreude. Dr. Koretz, my history professor at community college, used to say it over and over. He had a few special foreign words like that, which he'd always say in what sounded like the right accent. He would drop them in the middle of one of his droning lectures about the Ottoman Empire or whatever, and it was always like hitting a sugar pocket in a muffin—a little explosion of flavor that would perk me up for a minute in class.

What I loved most was that Dr. Koretz would actually

take the time to explain the words to us. My other asshole professors didn't seem to care whether we understood anything at all. Koretz told us these were words we didn't have in English, so he was gifting those words to us for the rest of our lives.

I use schadenfreude as much as I can. Kintsugi is the only other one I really remember. It's the Japanese word for the idea that things are actually better broken and repaired than when they are new. Dr. Koretz explained it by telling us about some special Japanese pottery that can actually get stronger if it cracks and you re-glaze it. He cupped his hand like he was actually holding a bowl when he was telling us about it, and I swear I could see it, like he conjured it up. Like magic. Those two crazy words are about all I got out of my year of college. The rest was just way beyond me.

Anyway, my schadenfreude disappeared as soon as I first saw Ruth in the lobby of her building, where we'd agreed to meet when I called her. She was swimming in the shoulder pads of her dress, and she looked bird-fragile, like a little girl dressed up for career day. She still had those big brown eyes I used to know. I may have been vindictive enough to enjoy my sister's misery, but I didn't want anything bad to happen to my niece.

"Aunt Marie?" she said.

"Just Marie," I said. "Look at you, you're an adult."

That made her look down and blush.

We chit-chatted on the way to a sandwich place. Or, at least, I did. Ruth didn't say much, and I thought she was just being shy because it had been so long. Then, we got to the restaurant and I was waiting behind her to order. This is Philly so you have to use your elbows a little to do anything, but Ruth just stood a few feet back from the register, biting her nails while other customers streamed in front of her. I finally asked her what she wanted and shouted our orders to the woman behind the counter. After we got our food and sat down, I spent the next hour drawing Ruth out, little by little, as she looked around the place with jumpy, squirrel energy. I'd ask a question, get a two-word response, then she'd twitch a little. Another question, then a three-word response, another twitch. Next question, back to two words. This was not the

Ruth I remembered at all.

The whole thing was bad enough that I figured it would be a one-and-done deal, but when I was dropping her off at the building, she asked if we could meet again the next Friday. So, every week for the last two months, Ruth and I have had lunch. We go on Fridays because it's summer and that's when most of the partners in my office are gone down the shore anyway so no one cares if I'm there or not. I'll walk over to Ruth's building, a few blocks away, and we'll sample one of the restaurants around the square. Each week, her shell is opened just a crack wider. She's told me more and more about her job, a little about college. Nothing earth-shattering, just a few descriptions about ladies in her office and a story about a fire in the dorm she lived in her freshman year. Three weeks ago she even ordered for the two of us, which seemed like real progress. I started to feel like a proud big sister. I didn't say anything to mom about it all, though. Becky is one of the things mom never talks about, and so I figured the prohibition extended to Ruth as well.

Last Wednesday, Ruth emailed me to make sure we were on for Friday. I knew that meant something was going on, and she was a little weird when we met up—quiet, like she was at the beginning of the summer. She was doing a whole medley of her tics, looking down, twisting her hair around one finger, biting her lips. I could tell some fight was going on in her head, and she must have vowed to herself that she'd say something before we started eating because as soon as our food came and I forked some salad, she spoke.

"Can you come to a hearing with me next week?"

"Sure," I said. "Of course, honey. When?"

"It's next Tuesday at 12:30. It's downtown. Close by. These things usually take a few hours so you may have to take time off."

"This coming Tuesday? Not a problem," I said. And then she let a long, slow breath out through her nose.

We ate silently for a while. I've learned to just let this girl just swim out with the line and not try to jerk her back in too fast.

"Do you want to know what it's for?" she asked

"Sure," I said.

And then she spit it all out. All of it. She wanted me to come with her to the parole hearing for her *rapist*. She told me that some guy had raped her, some guy from the shitty video store here in the city she worked in the summer after her freshman year. He actually went to her ritzy college too, but they didn't know each other up at school. Ruth tells me she and everyone else at the video place thought he was nice enough. Quiet, but nice. And he was so thin and wispy that he looked like you could blow him over, she said. One night, one of the other clerks scooted out a little early, so it was just Kyle and Ruth at closing. That was his name. Kyle. She locked the front door and went to the bathroom, and that's where it happened. Kyle trapped her in there. I didn't say anything, but I don't care how thin and wispy a guy is, I'd never let my guard down like that.

Anyway, Ruth didn't offer many details about the whole thing, but she mentioned a knife. She'd been staring at the wall behind me the whole time she was talking, telling the story like it was some speech she had rehearsed, but then she looked right at me.

"It felt like sandpaper, you know," she said. "I mean, when he . . ."

And I winced and nodded because I could feel it inside.

It turned out the owner was in the back office while the whole thing was going on. He heard the commotion and busted in while it was happening. He pulled Kyle off and knocked the knife out of his hand and beat him up a little. Then he locked him in his office and called the police. Ruth said the owner was nice, said he'd pay her salary for the next six months, free and clear, no work or anything. But then he kept calling Ruth, asking her if she'd go to lunch with him or get a beer so he could make sure she was OK. She said it felt like he was imagining her half-naked when he asked, the way he saw her that night, so she stopped answering his calls. The paychecks kept coming, though.

There was no trial. Kyle pleaded guilty because the owner had agreed to testify and it was open and shut anyway. He got sentenced to three to seven. Ruth tells me he's been in jail for six years now. After the first three years, she got a call from

the prosecutor's office. They told her that her rapist was up for parole and that Ruth needed to come to the hearing so he wouldn't get released. It worked. She spoke at the hearing and he got denied, and Ruth says she went to another hearing the next year and another the year after. She says she usually gets a call from the prosecutors about a month before. They like having her there. They say it helps a lot.

"Mom used to go with me, but I can't keep taking her. You know how protective and unforgiving she is . . ."

And here Ruth trailed off like I was supposed to know what she's talking about, and I thought "protective"? That's not a Becky I know. Unforgiving for sure, but definitely not protective

The next week, I meet Ruth in the lobby of her building. I don't hug her—we aren't huggers in my family—but I put my hand on Ruth's arm, like I'm claiming her. It's sturdier than I thought it would be. She's got guns, as my dad would say. "Show us your guns," he'd tell me and Becky when we were little, and we'd puff out our chests and flex, and then pop our hips sideways. Combination body-builder and cheerleader pose. I'm not sure who started it, probably Becky, but then she stopped when she actually got hips and a chest. That was right around her twelfth birthday. I know that because I remember Dad joking that those were her birthday presents. After that, she'd just get quiet when my dad would ask for the guns. I'd still do it, though. Anything to get him to smile at me, to get him to like me more than he liked Becky.

Ruth twitches a little when I touch her arm, like maybe she wants to shake me off, and I realize this is the first time I've touched her in years.

She's wearing this pretty black dress, a little form-fitting, even, and when I see it, I wonder for a second what it's like to have to decide what to wear to face your rapist. I figure that thinking about what to wear for these hearings must make her remember the sandpaper and everything else. I wonder how many other things make her think back on all of it, how many times a day she remembers, whether she thinks about it every time she walks in a store bathroom alone, every time she walks by a place that's closing up for the night. I wonder

what it's like to walk around with a memory bag of horrors like Ruth has.

We go out the revolving door onto the sidewalk. The courthouse is only like a half mile, an easy walk. I take my hand off of Ruth when we go through the door and then I want to put it back because she looks a little unsteady when she walks, her ankles wobble a little because she isn't used to high heels, maybe. She's walking fast, though, and I can't figure out how to get my arm back on her casually.

When we're outside, I realize it's one of those in-between days, a fight between the sun and the clouds, so the street is bright for a minute and then goes dark. Just like the sky, the crowd hasn't decided whether it's summer or fall yet. Some people are in shorts and others are in jackets, almost like they're in different cities even though they're on the same street, so everything seem a little more chaotic than usual. I keep looking around, combing the street with my eyes, for what I don't know. I feel like Ruth's body guard, which I know is dumb because we walk down this street all the time together. But today feels different.

I have a lot of questions about how the hearing is supposed to go, but I don't say anything, just speed up to match Ruth's pace. She's walking with purpose, like one of those diviners heading straight for the underground spring no one else knows about. We get to the courthouse, go up the steps, and wait in line for the metal detector. I follow her through, putting my purse on the conveyer belt. She looks back to see that I'm still with her, and then we get on the elevator and get off on the third floor and we pass by the arrows along the wall that say courtroom. We go in the big wood door marked 3-104. Ruth still hasn't said a word to me.

The courtroom isn't fancy, no columns or high beautiful ceilings like on *Law and Order*. It feels more like my middle school cafetorium. When Ruth and I walk in, there's a hearing in progress, so I realize they probably do a bunch back-to-back. The judge is listening to one of the lawyers. She's in a black robe, like on TV, but she looks frumpy and in a bad mood. She's scowling at the lawyer while he talks and then she turns and scowls at his client, who's in an orange prison jumpsuit, his hair in braids.

We sit down, and I look back and see a handful of cops in dark blue uniforms standing against the back wall. One group of three is having a pantomime conversation. The short cop in the middle is wagging his index finger, doing that no-no-no sign, and the two cops he's with are chuckling silently. Next to that group, a tall cop has his beefy oven mitt of a hand on another cop's shoulder and he's leaning in, whispering. Collectively, they look like the bad kids in the back of the class, messing around.

I can feel Ruth facing forward, so I stop looking at the cops and start paying attention to the audience sitting around us. Audience doesn't feel like quite the right word. It's not like we're going to break into applause or laughter or anything.

"These are the victims and families," Ruth whispers, waving her arms towards our side of the room where there are a couple dozen people in dark clothes, looking like a crowd at a funeral. "And those are the criminals."

On the other side of the room, separated from us by an aisle, the first two rows of seats are filled with guys in orange jumpsuits and there are guards stationed on each side. I try to figure out which one might be Ruth's rapist, but they all look the same from behind. Maybe that's the point. A few rows back are some guys in civilian clothes, and I see a few neck tattoos and scars, which makes me think they were in jail and now they're out on parole. I wonder if someone makes them sit on that side, behind the jumpsuits, or if they just feel like they have to.

Then, the lawyer at the front starts packing up his things, and the guy in the orange jumpsuit with the braids walks back to a seat with the others. I'm not sure what happened. I look at Ruth, confused.

"It's a continuance. They're going to have to come back next month," Ruth says. And she starts to do that through the next few rounds, giving me the color commentary so I understand what's going on. This is the Ruth I remember from way back. She's talking freely, explaining. No tics.

During each of the next three hearings, a different cop gets called up from the back wall.

"We're usually just the appetizers for the cops," Ruth tells me. "We go first. The prosecutors tell us to play it up a little.

Not that we have to fake anything, but they want us to make sure that what we're showing on the outside matches what we're feeling on the inside. That's how they say it. Make the outside match the inside. Then they bring in the cop for the kill."

I see why right away. Outside, in the real world, I don't like cops. They always have a little bit of menace for me, like all men with too much power, particularly the ones who are supposed to protect—cops, priests, doctors. I remember one day realizing the word menace starts with men. I told one of my girlfriends this and she said I should make a T-shirt.

But in the courtroom, something comes over me. Those cops at the back wall are completely transformed when they get on the witness stand. They're all business. Square jaws and crisp nods and "your honor" this and "your honor" that. They say things like "two five street" instead of "twenty-fifth street" and it makes them seem like scientific dispatchers of information. The whole package is powerful—the uniform, the fact that three years or six years or ten years after a crime a cop comes back to court to make sure justice is done. I find myself totally on their side when they get on the stand no matter what else has been said. I'm like a chameleon, and I change to whatever color they are.

It reminds me of watching TV with dad on the couch when my mom was working nights. Just him, Becky, and me. Always in that order. If he laughed at something, we'd know the show was funny and that we were having a good time. If he didn't, if he was sullen or angry or drunk, like he was most of that last year before she left, then neither of us would laugh either. My sister would tense up on nights like that right before bedtime, and when I felt that, my own stomach would start to hurt.

The next hearing is a guy in for armed robbery. The defense lawyer calls up a character witness, a woman who had taught him in prison.

"Lester has shown a real interest in literature. He finished his bachelor's degree this past semester and now says he wants to do graduate study when he gets out. He really has turned his life around," the woman says.

I actually start to hope for mercy for Lester, especially because no victim appears. But then, the prosecutor calls up

one of the cops, and after he goes through the details of the crime—assault—I change sides. The judge does not. Lester gets paroled.

There's a five-minute recess called after that round. The judge gets up and goes out a door I hadn't noticed right behind where she was sitting. No one in the audience moves.

"Do you have to think about what you are going to say beforehand or, like, rehearse?" I ask Ruth.

She's looking straight ahead, which is where she's been staring most of the time. I thought she was watching the judge, but the judge isn't there anymore, just an empty chair. Ruth is sitting up straight and I realize that we're almost the same size.

"I don't care what happens to him anymore," Ruth says to me. "That's what I'm going to say. I'm done. This is my last time. It's over."

"Oh," I say. I'm not sure how to respond. I know I'm not supposed to argue with her. I know it's what Ruth wants that matters, but it feels strange. I mean, to have *that* happen to you. To come all the way to court, too—that's not easy. I know it wasn't far, but we had to take time off and everything and she had to pick out her black dress and put herself in the same room with him. It feels weird to me that she'd go through all those steps just to say it doesn't matter to her. I'm not sure if that's the outside matching the inside.

I realize her mom must not know she's going to do this and that's why Ruth asked me to come. It makes me uncomfortable all of a sudden because I flash back to the last time I knew something that Becky didn't. Dad had taken me to McDonald's by myself for a treat. Our little secret, he had told me. Don't tell Becky. But I did, because I wanted her to know he liked me more. She got really jealous when I told her, just like I thought she would. It was the night of their big fight. The night she left.

I'm startled by the gavel. Recess is over and the judge is back and she calls the next name and I can't really hear it, but I feel Ruth stiffen so I know it's him.

A mousy guy comes from the second row of jumpsuits and stands at the defense table. He looks like a weak little asshole,

the kind of kid everyone picks on in high school. Prison must have been something for him. He looks shaky, defeated. I see him steal a look around the courtroom searching for Ruth. When he sees her, his eyes fall.

The judge asks the prosecutor to speak, and he goes through the information—convicted rapist, sentenced to three to seven, has served five so far. They still believe he's a threat to the community. He ruined a promising woman's life. She has only recently been able to work full-time again, though the prosecutor implies that the job she got is pretty dead-end, which doesn't make me feel too great because she basically has the same job I do. The prosecutor says the victim is in the courtroom and willing to speak.

The rapist's defense attorney goes next and says the rapist has had a rough time in the Albion facility and that, as the judge well knows, Albion is notoriously hard on sex offenders. The judge gives a little nod, and it's hard to tell whether or not she's bothered by this fact. The other lawyer objects, says that the prison conditions are not what's at issue, that the issue is whether or not the convicted man has paid his debt to society. The judge shakes her head, allows the defense attorney to go on. He says the rapist want to begin a new life, says the rapist has expressed remorse, has expressed interest in a newly-established restitution commission that works with victims and their abusers so that the victims can restore their own feelings of power, that the rapist understands the victim does not want to engage in this process but he is willing to do so if she ever changes her mind.

The judge asks how many speakers, and the prosecutor says he has two. The defense attorney says none.

The prosecutor calls Ruth up and she goes to sit in the chair.

"Ms. Randolph, what would you like to say about the convict's petition for parole?"

"I don't care what happens to him. He's taken enough of my life," Ruth says, just like she told me she would. The prosecutor's head pops up. He had been looking down at his notepad.

"You have no feelings about him being released?" the judge asks.

"I don't care what happens to him."

You can see the prosecutor is pissed. The rapist's lawyer is pleased, though. His face gets a little softer, his brow unclenches, and he looks down so we almost can't see him smile.

It makes more sense to me, what Ruth is doing, now that I see the guy. He doesn't look scary or like a rapist, which is strange to say because that's for sure what he is. He just looks like a guy who's gone through a rough road, has that hangdog look my dad had towards the end after Becky was gone and after Mom kicked him out. And the rapist must look double like that to Ruth, because she knew him before. And I think how maybe she feels guilty about it, about what's happening to him.

The judge says thank you and Ruth comes back and sits next to me and I put my hand on her arm again. She doesn't twitch or shiver this time, just leaves it there. I thought what she said would mean the hearing was over, but then the prosecutor calls the cop up next. Ruth is looking away, but I see the cop walking past us, giving her a stare. She doesn't see it, but I do. I glare back at him.

"Officer," the prosecutor says, once he's seated. "What can you tell us about this case?"

"This man is a danger to the community," the cop says. "After we apprehended him, we searched his apartment and found an alarming amount of violent pornography. This is a potentially serious sex offender we're talking about here. We cannot definitively link him to any other cases, but it would not surprise me if there were other victims who never came forward. And if he's let out, there may be more. He's a badguy, your honor"—badguy is said as one word—"and my job is to lock up badguys. I know what they look like, what they act like. And I can tell you, this one is a badguy."

The defense attorney is objecting through this whole last part, but the cop finishes his sentence and then just smirks at him. The judge thanks the cop and dismisses him and he walks back towards the wall with the other cops. I hear Ruth sigh next to me, like a tire letting out air. I want to be on her side, but I think she's doing the wrong thing.

"I'm going to refuse the request for parole at this time," the judge says. "You may try again in another year."

Ruth gets up and I follow her out.

"I'm sorry," I say when we're in the elevator.

"You don't have to be sorry. I really meant it. I don't care one way or another. He's in, he's out. Whatever. No more thoughts for him," she says.

I want to ask her why she came if she didn't care, if it really didn't mean anything at all to her, but this isn't a game. I'm not trying to catch her out. People do things that don't make sense sometimes. I know that.

"Do you want to go somewhere? Do something? Or I can take you home?" I say, as we get out of the elevator into the lobby.

"No," she says. "Work is probably best. Maybe we can just get something to eat real quick and then go back to the office. If I do something meaningless for a few hours, I'll feel better. I won't think."

It's the second time today I'm reminded that my job is worthless. We leave the courthouse and go left instead of right. I'm following her, wondering if we're ever going to talk more about the whole thing, and then we're in the middle of all the fast food places downtown and Ruth steps into a McDonald's. I haven't been in one since that time with my dad when I was twelve. I'm standing next to Ruth in line and watching the people and looking at the menu. All those pictures, the meals, the combinations. I'm trying to figure out what to order, and I look down at the floor, at those tiles that are trying to look like wood. I remember standing, staring at those the last time we were there while he was holding my hand in line. I start to tremble a little and Ruth puts her hand on my shoulder. That was the night Becky got so mad. In my head, she was jealous, yelling at him outside my bedroom. I had heard my doorknob squeak, like someone was opening it, then I heard "Stay away, you disgusting sonofabitch." And they fought. A physical fight. I heard it. She got thrown against the wall. And then she was gone. Maybe she wasn't jealous. Maybe she was protective, like Ruth said.

"Are you OK?" Ruth asks, and I know I have to hold it in because it's her day, so I tense up. But then I'm crying silently, no tears, no sound, and it takes all my focus. It's like being drunk and pretending you aren't.

I'm clenched and trying to stop shaking and trying to stay quiet. And I'm thinking about how I have to talk to Becky. And then I realize Ruth's hugging me, patting my back, and maybe she knows what I don't.

"It'll be OK, Aunt Marie," she says. "It'll be OK."

Richard M. Lange

Night Walk

I rise quietly to keep from waking Carmen and find my pants and shoes in the dark. On the landing, the air is cold and dewy. A truck out on the freeway growls through the night. I creak down the metal steps to the lane, not sure which way to go.

The sky is full of stars and a layer of thin cloud, making it brighter out here than in the trailer. Dust from the adjacent fields is sprinkled over the asphalt like brown sugar. My neighbor's Tercel, which hasn't moved in months, is coated with it. Down the way, there's light in a window, another insomniac. I turn right, at random, and the motion sensor on the back wall of the rec room flickers alive. Further along, under the child molester's blue Acura, a tan cat is sitting like a Sphinx, watching me.

In five hours I have a job interview for a warehouse spot at the Amazon fulfillment center in Tracy and my mind is spinning.

When I was thirteen I came home from school and found my father's truck in the carport. He was a driver for a linen supply company and wasn't supposed to be home until six. When I entered the apartment he was standing in the living room, still in his work uniform. The television and stereo were off and the curtains were closed. He was an intimidating dude with a droopy mustache like Jesse Ventura. When my older brother Anthony or I messed up, he slapped our faces. Sometimes, he knocked us down and dared us to get back up. When our mother screamed at him to stop, he smirked. The smirk meant the stuff he was doing was nothing, the minimum needed to keep two boys in line. He liked to remind us that his own father had whipped him with a stick, had opened wounds. The documentation was all over his back and shoulders.

When I took a step toward the hall, trying to get around him, he said, "Your mother's real sick." I was so relieved, I almost laughed. This wasn't even news. My mother had been

sick for weeks. She had a nasty cough and needed to sleep in the afternoon. She couldn't eat and was losing weight. I assumed he was just telling me to keep it quiet, to go play outside and leave her alone. But their bedroom door was open and I could see the bed. "Where is she?"

"Hospital."

"Just for an appointment or to stay?"

"Stay."

I went to my room and lay down, stared at the ceiling. After ten minutes, I heard my father go outside and start his truck. He had more deliveries to make.

When Anthony got home—he should have been in high school but he had a full-time job grinding paint at Boulevard Auto Body—he told me our mother had lung cancer.

She'd smoked a pack a day, sometimes more, from the time she was a teenager, and we knew it would eventually catch up with her. But she was barely forty.

"Is she going to die?"

Anthony shrugged.

That Saturday, my father took us to see her. She'd only had one radiation treatment and was just starting chemo but she already looked older, more frail. The skin around her mouth was wrinkled. She kept closing her eyes. We told her we were okay. We couldn't wait for her to get better and come home. We were going to bake her a cake.

She tried to smile.

Nobody was crying so I didn't cry either.

At home, my father didn't talk about her. My brother followed his lead. Everyone made their own meals, did their own laundry. My mother's absence was like a hole in the middle of the living room that we stepped around to keep from falling in.

On our visits, we pretended not to notice her bare scalp, her sunken cheeks, and said the things we'd already said. "We miss you. We can't wait for you to come home."

A month after she'd been admitted, the doctors walked us into the hall. The cancer was all through her body now. She had maybe another day or two, possibly just hours. Even then my father stayed quiet. He nodded, scratched the back of his head. I knew better than to start bawling in front of him.

The next day, walking home after school, the tears came. I lifted my collar over my face, trying to hide, but that just made them come harder. I ran down a drainage ditch, followed it to a gravelly wash with old shopping carts. I cried until I heard some boys in the distance, laughing and breaking bottles with rocks.

It's so quiet out, my footsteps sound loud enough to wake people up. They make a faint echo off cars and walls. The park is a jumble of older pull-alongs and newer mobile homes, faded turquoise aluminum siding and cream-colored cement board. The spaces are small, so things are crammed in at angles, cars tight against porches and nosed onto patches of gravel. I want it to be bigger, more open, but it's my best option. If I were out on the city streets, scowling around at three in the morning, I'd get stopped and questioned. I wouldn't blame anybody. I'd stop me too.

It's good to work my legs, to let the heat in my body escape into the air. With every lap around our row, I feel less anxious. The motion sensor seems tired of me. Every time it clicks on, it's like, *Oh, you again*. The cat wants to know how I keep leaving in one direction and returning from another.

Not long after my mother died, I got into my first fight. A kid was making fun of me for a stain on my shirt. My father hadn't figured out that I needed new clothes, and I didn't know how to remove taco juice. But in my mind the kid was laughing because my mother was dead. When I got him on the ground, I bounced his head against the concrete until some other kids pulled me off.

The vice-principal called my father in to tell him I'd been suspended. She sensed that my father didn't care. "I hope you understand how serious this is."

My father smirked. "Right. Got it."

A few weeks later, I punched a kid for hitting me with a rubber band—he wasn't even aiming at me; he was aiming at his friend and missed.

My father smirked his way through another meeting. On the drive home, he interrupted the silence. "I don't care what that lady says. Somebody hits you, you hit 'em back."

I kept fighting. When I got somebody on the ground, I kicked their ribs, their head. If nobody pulled me off, I kicked

until I got tired. Eventually, I was expelled.

By the time I got my first job, at Burger King, I'd been in maybe ten fights. For some people, that's not that many, but I'd convinced myself that I was hardcore. I kept my hair buzzed like the dudes in MMA. I bragged about my temper, how I could go off over nothing. Nobody doubted me. I had scars on my knuckles and one across the bridge of my nose. One of my ears was bigger than the other.

If some homeless guy was acting up, yelling for food he didn't pay for, or some high-school kids were squirting ketchup in the dining room, or somebody was getting nasty at the register, my co-workers called for me. I came out glaring, rolling my shoulders, pushing my chin from side to side to stretch my neck. I walked up close like a psycho. My eyes did the talking. *I love fighting. I love it like money.*

Dudes collected their things and left. Who wants to lose a tooth over French fries?

I lasted for almost a year, until I got called up to deal with a guy yelling at Tiburcia, one of the older ladies who worked the register. He was saying she fucked up his order. He'd already eaten most of his food, but he wanted his money back. He was throwing ice from the soda machine.

To me, he looked like a punk frat boy showing off for his girlfriend. I jumped the counter and pushed him. Up close, I saw I was wrong. I'd seen his eyes before. They stared back at me when I looked in the mirror.

He giggled.

"What are you laughing at, fool?"

I didn't even see him swing. He clocked me so hard everything sounded as though I'd gone under water. He caught me again on the way down.

I knew before I touched my face that I was gushing. People screamed.

The dude and his girlfriend ran out the door. A customer chased him and took pictures of his car but didn't get the plate. It took half an hour for the cops to show up.

When I got home, my father saw me and whistled. "Ooooh. Got you good."

I waited until he was done with his inspection and walked past him to the bathroom.

He called after me. “Stop pouting. You’re all right.”

I couldn’t move my mouth. In the mirror, half my nose was normal and the other half looked like purple cauliflower. I texted the manager that I quit.

I lay in bed for three days, my face covered in aloe vera. My father never even checked in on me. I saw that he was more than just strict or shut off. There was something wrong with him. The stuff that had happened to him when he was a kid had fucked him up. I told myself I would be different.

I got a job at Manfred’s Steakhouse, bussing tables. I met Carmen the first night I worked. She was two years out of high school, still living at home with her parents and her little brother. For the first few shifts, we kept it professional. I called her “ma’am.”

One night she smiled. “You need to stop calling me that. I’m not the boss.”

“Oh, I thought you were in charge here.”

She laughed. “You’re crazy.”

Later, when it got slow, I caught her looking at me. She asked about my nose.

I knew better than to talk about fighting, that she was a different kind of person. “This? I tripped.”

“Uh huh. I got a cousin like you. He’s in jail.”

“You’re hurting my feelings.”

“Oh, you have feelings?”

“Yes. But only for certain people.”

She blushed. “You need to get back to work before you get me in trouble.”

We went to dinner and watched *Deadpool 2*. I took her to see Snoop Dogg at the Stockton Arena. The first time I kissed her, I almost cried.

When I told her the truth about my nose, she asked, “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you fight?”

I shrugged. To try to answer for real felt dangerous.

She pulled my head down against her chest. “Okay. But it needs to stop.”

She was finishing the dental hygienist program at Delta. When she quit Manfred’s to work for Dr. Vasquez, the place got boring. I was barely clearing ten an hour. I asked the

manager if I could start waiting tables. He said he didn't think I was ready for customer service.

After Carmen and I moved into the park, we learned about the child molester. Theodore Percival Milman. He's on the predator website. *Sexual contact with a minor under fourteen*. The website doesn't say boy or girl, or how many times.

He works graveyards, no one knows where. Once or twice, in the evening, walking the trash to the dumpster, I've seen a light on in his trailer, heard him moving around. But I've never seen him in person. I like to think he's hiding because he's sorry, or afraid. Most people think he's playing a waiting game. In this part of the park, there's only two families with kids, and the kids stay close. When they're outside, somebody's with them.

Once I got Carmen pregnant, I started to think about him more. I knew it was too soon to worry, that it would be a while before our son was old enough to be...I don't know how to say it...*attractive*. But I also knew it wasn't a good idea to stick around here for too long.

Hoping to start saving for a better place, I got a job in the warehouse at Fresh Harvest. I liked most of the guys I worked with, but I couldn't handle this dude, Ray. He was on the same level as me, another loader, and slow as hell. Late from lunch, late from breaks, always running his mouth. He could take an hour to off-load one truck. If a driver complained, he went slower. Even when it was a hundred out and the refrigeration was working overtime, he stood around, yakking about some trip he took with his motorcycle buddies. Steve, the warehouse manager, came out of his office. Steve couldn't yell at Ray the way he yelled at the rest of us because Ray's wife is the owner's niece. "How we doing, Ray?"

"We're good. About ten more minutes." Ray went back to yakking.

Steve got this pained look, fought back what he really wanted to say, and returned to his office. When the temperature alarm went off and triggered the back-up system, Steve came out again and clapped a couple times. "All right. Let's see if we can't finish this one." He waved for the rest of us to drop what we were doing and come help.

I told Ray to hurry the fuck up.

Ray looked shocked, confused. "What's your fucking problem?"

"Dude, move! The flats have *juice* running down the sides."

"Hey, Steve, you want to get this little bitch away from me before he gets hurt?"

When we moved in together, Carmen made me promise I wouldn't fight anymore. But I couldn't help myself. I punched Ray in the jaw. When he swung back, I hit him again and he dropped. The other guys broke it up and walked me out to my truck.

At home that afternoon, I got texts:

Nice swing, bro. LOL. About fucking time.

Just making sure you're all right. BTW, I fucking LOVED seeing dude get popped.

The Mexicans and Salvadorians stayed quiet. They had wives and kids, mouths to feed.

I left messages for Steve, apologizing.

He called back to tell me I was fired. "I hate to do it," he said. "You worked hard. It wasn't my decision."

"Dude is lazy," I said. "He costs the place money."

There was a long pause. "I've got no comment on that. I'm going to wish you good luck."

When I told Carmen, she wouldn't talk to me, wouldn't let me in the bedroom. We have a couch from Goodwill but it's small, so I slept on the floor. In the morning, I went to the door and put my head against it. "I'm sorry, baby."

"Is that how you're going to punish our child?"

"No, baby. Never." I wanted so badly to convince her, but I couldn't even convince myself. When the pressure built, the only way I knew how to release it was to punch someone.

"If you hit my child, I'll leave. You need to understand that."

"I do, baby. I won't."

"Stop calling me *baby*."

Two weeks later, I got a notice in the mail. Ray was pressing charges. When I called the public defender, the lady gave me two options. Plead guilty to misdemeanor simple battery and take probation or go to trial for assault. If I was convicted at trial, I'd serve time.

As part of my probation, I had to take anger management.

My counselor, Larry, is a recovering alcoholic and a former Golden Gloves boxer. When he was younger, his friend accidentally spilled a beer on him and he snapped. He broke his friend's orbital bone with a right cross, made him legally blind in that eye.

These days Larry is all about stepping away. *Breathe now, talk later. Walk it until you drop it.*

"I'll try."

When he thought I was starting to buy in, he told me he'd call his connection at the fulfillment center. "But there's going to be bullshit there too. They're going to work your ass to the bone. Make no mistake, your supervisor will be a little Napoleon motherfucker with your name on a clipboard. What are you going to do when he starts barking?"

I shrugged.

"Come on, man. You've got to find the serenity."

I'm starting to sweat. Dusty Tercel, blue Acura, cat, lighted window, dumpster. Dusty Tercel, blue Acura.... I can see my breath. My eyes water and snot is running. But my mind is still spinning.

Off in the distance, the morning commute is picking up. Some people drive hours—Oakland, San Jose, Mountain View. Day after day, bumper to bumper. I'd be lucky to last a week. I only have to drive for thirty minutes and I'm worried.

I remind myself of the things Larry told me to say. *I have good transportation. I can work any shift, any time. I'm in a committed relationship and have a child on the way.*

"If they ask about the battery conviction, don't lie. Tell them you're embarrassed about it, ashamed. It's okay to be honest."

Dusty Tercel, blue Acura....

Out in the fields, some coyotes start up. The cat hunches low and turns tail. Far to the east, a stretch of ridge is touched with silver. The hum of traffic is louder, steadier. Through trailer windows, I hear talk radio, the whistle of a kettle. A neighbor on the back side of our row is sitting in his car, idling the engine. I nod.

He keeps his eyes on me.

At the dusty Tercel, I cut right and climb the steps. The trailer is warm and quiet. In the bedroom, Carmen is snoring softy.

She wakes up, sees me standing there, already dressed, and checks the time on her phone. “Is everything all right?”

Her voice in the morning, husky from sleep, sounds like my mother’s.

I sit on the edge of the bed and find her hand. “Can I tell you something?”

She looks nervous. “Okay.”

“I’m scared.”

She pulls me down on the bed and wraps her arms around me. Normally, she has answers, knows the solution. Her silence tells me this is something she can’t fix. All she can do is hold me. In five weeks the baby will be here. I need to figure things out on my own.

I remember a night when I was very young, lying with my mother on the couch while she watched one of her cop shows. Tucked under her arm, I felt safe. It was past my bedtime but I sensed that if I kept still and didn’t fuss, she would let me stay.

I start crying.

Carmen holds me tighter, puts a hand on my cheek.

The tears come harder.

“It’s okay. You’re okay.”

I make crazy pitiful sounds like an animal. I cry until my eyes hurt and my throat is dry. My hands are shaking.

Carmen whispers that she loves me and cradles my head.

I take some tissue from the nightstand and wipe my face. I’ve never cried like that in front of anyone. A little embarassed, I make a small sound, a laugh.

As much as she can, Carmen understands. She gives me a sad little smile.

I lay for a while with my eyes closed, trying to calm down. When I open them, there is sunlight on the curtain. I have to be in Tracy in forty-five minutes.

My mind is still spinning and my life is still my life. There will be more bad days and nights. But for now the smile is enough.

I give Carmen a kiss, climb from the bed and find my keys.

Eleanor Talbot

The Calamitous Consequence of a Small Thing That Gets Big

When I was younger, I never thought parents could be responsible for terrible things. Now that I'm nearly thirteen I know that it's true. Sam told me Mom and Dad don't always mean for stuff to go wrong, but adults should be better at being adults.

"It's the butterfly effect," he said. "Something small and seemingly inconsequential can have huge, calamitous effects at another time or place. That's what happens when our parents do stuff; a drop in the ocean here means a tidal wave over there."

He'd won an international spelling competition, which wasn't a surprise because all sorts of academic trophies sat on a shelf in the lounge. Top of his class, he was the world's know-it-allest brother; he knew so many facts, I can't say how he had space in his brain for them—though that's not saying much, as most of the kids at Hillbrow High are cooked on zol and beer. Anyway, he'd spelled faster and better than thousands of other spellers but was disqualified when the judges realized he was South African. Half the world had put something called "sanctions" on us because we treat black people like shit. Which was a pity, said Dad, because the award money would have come in handy. Dad had been laid off at the time, so money, as usual, was a problem. It made him ratty and difficult, which made Mom ratty and difficult. And before you knew it, just like Sam said, something small turned into something big.

One night we were eating dinner and people were shouting in the alley below our third-floor apartment building window. This wasn't strange for downtown Johannesburg—someone was always shouting or crying or fighting—our alley seemed to be the place for this. Mom said when I grow up, I will live in a nice, quiet house with a garden just like the one Moira Hopkins from my class lives in and I can't wait.

Anyway, a woman shouted, “Don’t! Don’t!” while a man screamed, “Slut! Whore!” We all looked at each other, knives and forks midair, like in a movie. When the bins fell over, Dad jumped up, knocking over his chair on the way to the window.

“Graham, no,” said Mom.

Dad’s got a bad temper and he’ll get into a fight at the drop of a hat. Sometimes he gets into arguments with Sam and I get so scared. Once they fought about an alarm clock. Dad chucked it at Sam’s head, so Sam hit him back and Dad got angrier. They started fighting and I stood in the doorway screaming at them to stop. Eventually, Mom filled a bucket of water and poured it on them.

“Like dogs,” she said. “That’s what you do to dogs.”

The woman’s screams faded to groans and lots of people in our building, including Dad, had their heads out the window, yelling. Suddenly Dad said, “This is ridiculous! I’m not having this!” and marched off to the front door.

I ran after him. “Please, please don’t, Dad,” I said. “Rather drop a bomb.”

In the past, when people gathered in the alley to drink and shout, keeping us up all hours of the night, Dad would fill plastic bags with water and drop them out the window. It’s not right to drench people in the middle of the night, but it’s the last resort when they won’t stop. We don’t like them, but Dad’s bombs do work.

I held him as tight as I could and after a while, he ruffled my hair. “All right, Ronnie, don’t get your knickers in a knot.”

He went off to make a bomb and Mom got on the phone with the police. “You need to come . . . what? Why’re you asking if she’s black? It makes no difference, for God’s sake. He’s going to murder her!”

“Let’s go check it out,” said Sam and ran to the bathroom. I went after him feeling shaky and lightheaded—it was crazy that somebody might die. He jumped onto the bath’s side, I climbed on the basin and together we looked out the window. It was dark but there was enough light from the street that you could see the woman lying on her side, her leg at a funny angle.

“Jesus,” said Sam. “Who even does something like that?”

The man walked away from her and straightened his shirt.

Then, with a splat, Dad's bomb hit the ground.

There was silence for a moment before the man started howling, "My eyes, my eyes!"

He rushed around in circles, palms pressed into his face and after a while, he bent over and vomited. Then he fell on his knees into the vomit and put his forehead in it. Can you imagine falling into your own sick, getting your hair in it and when you sit back up, it drips into your eyes and your mouth? It's so disgusting, just writing it down makes *me* want to puke. But let's face it: he deserved it.

While this was all happening, it sounded like Mom and Dad were having a fight about the fight and I thought, oh no, not another one. Mom told him he better hope the police don't catch him throwing those bombs because one day he would get into deep trouble for it.

Eventually, the man staggered off to who knows where and some domestic workers from the servants' quarters on the roof of our building went down to the alley to help. Mom called Oom Kris in the flat below ours and convinced him to drive the woman to the hospital. He said he would only do it if she paid him the petrol money because he didn't transport blacks for nothing.

"Fucking racist," she muttered, giving me the money to take to him.

Mom hardly ever swore. The surprise must have shown on my face because she gave me a don't-say-another-word look and shooed me out the door.

A few weeks later, at dinner (again), the buzzer rang. We were having Mom's revolting tuna-fish pie and I was telling her why I couldn't eat it. Sam had read me parts of a study that found tuna was not good for pregnant women because of something called mercury. Mercury, Sam said, basically turned babies' brains to mush. Mom told me that since I was not pregnant, I would be fine to eat the pie.

"Yes, but you do realize," I said, pointing my fork like Dad does when he's on an important point, "that my babies will absolutely be retarded because of all the years of tuna-fish mercury stored in my body. You'll only have yourself to blame for the legless, deranged grandchildren that will be *put upon*

this family."

"Ronnie, don't use that kind of language about people. It's disrespectful. I don't know where you learn to talk like that."

"Everyone else does," I said, pushing the beige bits of tuna around my plate.

"It's the 1980s, not 1552. Let's progress for God's sake."

"Have you forgotten which country we're in?" asked Sam.

Mom ignored him and asked Dad about a story in the newspaper. He said he couldn't tell her because it'd been blanked out.

"Stupid government," he said, fork in the air, "keeping us in the dark. Unless that wanker, P.W. gets a grip on the country, the sanctions will bring us to our knees."

I was going to say something but sometimes I get tired of Dad's political talk. According to him, wankers are everyone, everywhere and it's always got to do with people being either black or white—it never ends. What about people who are black *and* white at the same time? Nobody ever talks about them. If everybody was like that then we wouldn't have all these complicated problems. At school, I once suggested we should aim for this mixture and got sent out of the class. There's no pleasing people, as Mom always says.

I began clearing away the dishes and Dad answered the door. It was a cop. He announced himself as Warrant Officer Visagie and Dad led him to the lounge. His black lace-up boots stopped in the middle of his calves making his trousers puff and he had a very straight blonde mustache like the end of a thatch roof.

"I'm here, Mr Taylor," he said in a strong Afrikaans accent, "to investigate a complaint someone lodged about a homemade chemical bomb thrown into the alley a few weeks ago."

My heart sped up. What if Dad went to jail? He'd get fired from the new job he'd just got and then who would pay the rent? I'd also never get a Walkman or the Madonna shoes I'd been asking for. I gasped and Dad turned around with scrunched-up eyebrows—now I was in proper trouble. It was time to get out of there as fast as I could.

"Sammy, there's a policeman here!" I hissed and jumped on his bed.

"Huh," said Sam, looking up from his book. "Get off my bed

with your shoes. Jesus, man."

He pushed me off the bed and I hit the floor with a thump. Normally I would've screamed and run to Mom, but there was no time for all that.

"Dad threw that thing into the alley that time with the poor woman and now a policeman's come about it."

"Oh fuck. Does he know I'm here? Flip, I better hide."

He leaped off the bed and tried to squeeze into the bottom of the cupboard. It was so silly—in other circumstances, I would've pointed and laughed my head off.

"Don't be an actual idiot, man, you're far too big for that." I grabbed his hand and pulled him into the middle of the room. "You've got to act natural. Anyhow, he isn't here for you."

Sam had been called up to the army like all the boys in their last year of school. You only get out of it if you are blind or one-legged said Dad, and Sam's limbs and eyes were in tip-top condition. He hadn't sent his papers in and it was past the deadline, so Mom and Dad were trying to work out a way to get him out of it, but the stupid government seemed to have all the loopholes covered. That's why he was shitting for the police—it's a criminal offense to dodge conscription and they go looking for the people who haven't sent their forms in. That's what happened to Darren downstairs and now he's been shipped off to the border.

Sam sat down on the bed and looked at me. "Dad's been chucking those things for years. Why's now suddenly a problem?"

"The policeman said that one had chemicals in it."

"What?" said Sam. "Not water? Since when's he done that?"

"Dunno. Probably wanted to teach the guy a lesson. Shall we go listen?"

We crept along the hallway and crouched behind the bookshelf.

"The man's eyes are very badly damaged, Mr Taylor," said the policeman.

We couldn't see Dad's face but we could see Warrant Officer Visagie's large round one.

"I don't know anything about it," said Dad almost laughing. "Besides, these dirty hobos get so crazy down there, you don't know if it's made-up nonsense."

"That's the thing, Mr Taylor, it wasn't a crazy hobo."

Dad stepped back and now we could see his face.

"He's a white man with a job in the defense force. He's not happy for this to go uninvestigated."

"Well," Dad said. "Do you know it could have been him attacking a woman down there? My wife saw it. She called the police."

"We are aware of that incident and it's being handled."

"He should be thrown in jail. The sooner the better before he does it again."

The policeman sucked his lips. "There are different laws for these people."

"Which people? Assaulting a woman is still fucking illegal, you know."

Sam and I looked at each other and we both mouthed, "Oh shit!" Dad was beginning to lose his rag with the cop. This was not good.

We scrambled back to our room like rats. As we shut the door, we heard Mom trying to smooth things over with the policeman.

"Flip, Dad's in crap," said Sam. "He could get into real trouble for this, Ronnie. This isn't some darkie who can be ignored."

"I didn't know he was white!" I whispered. "Everybody was shouting, the guy vomited *and* put his head in it!"

I didn't know what my point was and nor did Sam—he gave me a what-the-hell? look. I was unable to let go of the puke aspect of that night and I'd retold the story several times. Mom said I've hung on to that part because of my trauma about the battered woman. It's my brain's way of coping. And it's true—whenever I start thinking about her, my thoughts switch to the horror of the vomit, quick as can be.

We heard footsteps coming down the passage so both of us rushed to our beds and picked up our books. Mom came in with her hands on her hips.

"I know you two were listening in to Dad's talk with the policeman and you should know that you are making him look very poor indeed."

Mom has a posh way of talking and when she says *indeed*, it's a bad business. Mom went to snobby English schools that

Dad teases her about and when she's angry, she talks extra fancy. She walked out, her skirt swooshing behind her.

"And if you want to appear normal, Veronica Taylor, you should try to read your book the right way up," she said from the hallway.

I ended up at court with Mom because Sam had something on and she didn't want to leave me at home on my own. It was *the* most boring day of my whole life. We sat on hard benches forever, waiting for Dad's turn with the Judge. This was the third time he'd come—twice there'd been a postponement. Mom said she was beyond sick of the whole mess.

People came in, one after the other, hour after hour, while lawyers argued and the Judge grumbled. There was a lot of talk about Pass Laws and Disturbing the Peace. I'd heard about Pass Laws many times and when I asked Mom about them, she said they were rules for black people. When I asked her what kind of rules, she said, "Not now, Ronnie."

Dad had applied for bail with money we didn't have, so he borrowed it from Nanna. It made Mom and Dad fight even more than usual. Night after night they argued about bills, Sam going to the army, and almost everything else. It was terrible. Dad had gotten us into a lot of trouble according to Mom, and we were all paying the price.

Finally, it was Dad's turn with the judge. His charge was attempted murder and how did he plead? Even saying the word "murder" gives me the jeebies, same as "switchblade" or "slaughter." Dad said he wasn't guilty and his lawyer went on for a long time about the woman in the alley. The other lawyer went on even longer about the man's eyes and something else I couldn't grasp. It was not like television at all. In fact, if this was ever on TV, everyone would go straight to sleep and never wake up.

After a while, I leaned against Mom's arm and as I started a dream, the Judge banged his hammer.

"What happened?" I asked Mom, yawning.

"The Judge let Daddy off but he has to behave and follow some rules."

"What kind of rules?"

"Not now," she said, standing up to leave.

What was wrong with everyone? There were so many rules I wasn't allowed to know about when, *God knows*, I had to follow enough of them.

Outside, Dad smoked a cigarette while Mom fluffed around in her handbag. It was getting dark and I wanted to go home. I was hungry and cold from spending all day in that dumb wooden cave and Mom said she was sick of my whining.

Then, a black woman on crutches stopped in front of us. The bandage on her leg went from her toes up and under her dress—I'd never seen such a long one.

"Mr and Mrs Taylor," she said. "I'm Doris Shabangu. I wasn't allowed in court but I'm the person . . . that man . . ." Tears welled up and she brushed them away. "I wanted to say thank you for . . ."

Oh shit! It was the woman who was beaten up in the alley!

Dad looked at her and carried on smoking his cigarette. Mom's jaw was almost on the floor. I wanted to say something but couldn't think of one thing.

"You should be careful who you hang around with," Dad said to her and walked off. Mom grabbed my arm and followed.

"Mom, let's invite her over or something," I said, tugging back my arm.

Her grip tightened. "Rons, we've had enough for one day. Another time."

When would another time be? We didn't even know how to contact her. About to argue, I caught a glimpse of Mom's face. Bags rested like heavy sacks under her eyes and her neck was tight and ropey. I don't think I'd ever seen Mom look so tired.

I let my arm relax and allowed her to pull me along.

A few months later I was sitting on our little balcony when Sam came out and sat down next to me.

"Rons, I'm going away next week. The army."

I dropped my bag of crisps. The thing is, you can love someone and also not like them sometimes—that's how it was with Sam. He could be a sicko—he used to break the legs off my dolls and laugh, and I'd break the wings off his model airplanes to get him back. But he also played football with me in the hallway, which drove Mom mad—and he'd always take the blame. On the nights when the fights were bad, he'd let

me crawl into bed with him even though there was no space, and I knew about the boy he'd told off for being mean to me.

I started to cry. "But Mom and Dad said they wouldn't let that happen. How could they?"

He put his arm across the back of my chair. "That guy Dad dropped a bomb on a few months ago? He's a big shot in the department of defense."

"But I thought you'd got off because of your diabetes!"

Dad paid off someone to fake a medical report for a sickness where if you eat sugar, you die.

"Ja, well, they worked out I'm not diabetic one bit."

"But you are! You have to be! You can't leave me here on my own."

Some people got killed in the army. Darren from downstairs hadn't, but when he came back, he was so weird that his parents sent him somewhere so he could "cope."

"It's how it is, Ronnie. I'm being stationed close to the border. At least I'll see some action, I guess."

He smiled. It was thin and fake—I may young but I'm not a moron.

I didn't know much about the border, but I knew it had something to do with guys having to fight for apartheid. Sam said apartheid was stupid and would be the end of all of us.

"But what if you don't come back?" I yelled, feeling squirmy and strange.

"Well," he said, "let's hope I do."

Later that night, I sobbed on my pillow. Mom came in and stroked my hair.

"What if something happens to Sam? Or he comes back like Darren?" I said, writhing around.

"Shush, darling. Don't say that."

"But Dad shouts about it all the time."

"He doesn't mean it. Sometimes his temper makes him say and do silly things."

"Like when he drops the bombs."

"He doesn't always think straight," sighed Mom.

"I wish that night hadn't happened, then Sam wouldn't have to go to the army. It's all Dad's fault."

"That's not the way to think about things."

"Well, it is, actually. It's called the butterfly effect. It's the calamitous consequence of a small thing . . . that . . . gets big . . . Damn, I can never say anything like Sam does."

"All right, love, calm yourself. I know what you mean," she said.

Dad hasn't dropped a bomb since all the trouble. Now, when people shout and drink in the alley, he goes out and doesn't come back till the early hours of the morning.

"Ronnie," says Mom as she sits down on my bed and pushes a wisp of hair behind my ear. "Are you ready?"

I close my diary and make sure the letter from Sam is safely stored in the back. It's dog-eared and stained from the number of times I've read it and I hope the plastic I've covered it with will save it for years to come. I know each word by heart and when I'm feeling off, I can recall it instantly in my mind, like a magic trick. Maybe I'm getting some of Sam's brains after all.

Howzit Rons,

It's hot here and the food is utterly diabolical—that means seriously crap. Our sergeant is a real clutch plate but the guys in my battalion are pretty cool. A few things have gone down, but I'm ok.

Mostly, we spend long periods moving from one place to the next. Slow. Slow. Slow. We wait around a lot and do drills in the heat.

How's Mom and Dad? Hope you're surviving.

I miss you big time, you little snot head. Kick a soccer ball down the hallway and piss Mom off for me.

Love your big boet,

Sam.

xx

He looks handsome in his army uniform in the photograph on my bedside table—strong and kinda cool. I miss him so much. If I was as clever as he was, I would be able to explain it better, but I'm not. All I can say is that if there is a competition of who could miss someone the most, I would win and I'm not even lying.

I get up and smooth down my dress—Mom wants me to look my best. I follow her to the lounge. Dad is sitting on the couch watching television. He's wearing an itchy-looking suit I've never seen before and his eyes are bloodshot.

"Come on, Graham, let's go."

He gets up, switches off the TV, and goes to the front door. They stand and look at each other a while, him in his too-small suit, her, thin and pale in a black dress she hasn't worn in years. When they hug, it's long and slow. I get a funny feeling seeing them pressed together like that—they seem so delicate.

"It'll be OK," says Dad.

I wonder if a butterfly effect ever goes in the opposite direction. Could the biggest, most horrendous thing happen and something tiny and good come of it? And then grow and grow into something huge enough to change all the bad? I haven't read about such a thing and wouldn't know what it would be called. But I have to believe that it exists; it feels like everyone's life depends on it.

Christopher Mohar

Champagne

The sinkhole in Lee's backyard started small, as a divot of sand that could've been written off as some anomaly of erosion or the handiwork of a disgruntled gopher, if only it hadn't expanded with such hunger, minute-by-minute, day by day, until it encroached upon the dwarf dogwoods and the wrought-wire credenza at the edge of the patio. The walls fell in hyperbolically, a study in mathematical derivatives, accelerating toward the vanishing point where the center became full dark—no bottom, no light. No nothing. Lee stood above the hole, his head reeling from the champagne he'd drunk for breakfast. He probed the precipice with the toe of his sneaker and imagined the stomach-flip he'd feel on tumbling headlong in. If he did, this would be over, all of it. Instead, he sank back into a wire patio chair.

On the far side the sinkhole, rust nodes were forming on the lawnmower, blades of grass grown up around it, half-hiding the wheels. Lee didn't have the energy to drag the mower into the garage. He'd hardly had the energy to pop the cork on a bottle of champagne—which he had been drinking daily for breakfast—much less the energy to sweep up the scattered fragments of the dozen or so formerly-identical bottles of champagne he'd shattered against his garage wall. Rings of white sugary efflorescence were dried atop the concrete where the champagne evaporated.

The progression of the sinkhole went like this: day 3, salad plate; day 4, dinner plate; day 5, pizza pan; day 6, failure of cookware analogies; day 9, kiddie pool; day 11; swimming pool; day 14, all-consuming void.

Lee poured out the dregs of his morning's second bottle of champagne. An eerie magnetism repelled the liquid from the walls of the chasm and drew it straight down the center in a perfect golden stream. The darkness in the bottom of the hole had substance. It was not a regular darkness, which is the absence of light, but a sort of inverse light, a black shroud. Lee opened a third bottle and poured it out, and again the

weird gravity took hold. He followed it with a fourth, because fuck it, there were five and a half more cases of the stuff in the garage. Every single bottle had an identical custom label with his name on it, plus Greg's. A couple days ago, he'd sat for an hour trying to peel off the labels, but the adhesive was persistent.

Lee was passed out by noon, hung over by one, drinking off his hangover by three. He'd fallen asleep in the lawn chair again, and his peeling nose had worsened. He awoke to find the wrought-wire credenza teetering precipitously at the threshold of the drop. He nudged it with his toe. Watched it fall. He drained the sun-hot dregs from a bottle lying sideways in the lawn, then tossed the bottle down the sinkhole.

Inside, he thumbed through unheard voicemail notifications, and pressed *delete, delete, delete*. In the garage he tugged on Greg's old gardening gloves, a size too large for his own hands, and brought out a wheelbarrow and a shovel.

Lee dug up the flowerbed: the coneflowers, the tulips, those yellow daisy-looking things. When he had the barrow full, he wheeled it to the edge of the sinkhole—now the size of a modest pile of minivans—and tipped in his load of flowers and earth. The dirt disappeared. The hole did not lessen; nothing seemed to have filled in.

Lee worked until the dehydration gave him a headache, and then a bit longer. He decimated the raised-bed veggie plot. He uprooted the roses, ripped out the petunias, deracinated the chrysanthemums. When the perennials and edibles had all been destroyed, he tossed in the shovel, wheeled the barrow to its death, plucked off the gloves finger by finger and threw them, dusting his hands together as they fell. In great overhand heaves, he chucked the patio furniture piece by piece into the sinkhole.

Lee made trip after trip: comforters, afghans, trash cans, desk lamps, wireless phone headsets, instruction manuals for wireless phone headsets, needlessly saved boxes and shrink-wrap for wireless phone headsets, coriander, cumin, cayenne, pink and white pepper, *War and Remembrance*, tubes of burnt umber, ultramarine and gamboge, an ottoman, a queen-sized mattress, queen-sized box spring, queen-sized mahogany bedframe. By dusk, the flagstones of the patio

were being swallowed.

Lee climbed on the coffee table and hung from the ceiling fan until the fixture ripped free from the drywall. After the fan, he wheeled out the fridge. The photo albums that used to sit on the coffee table had long since been tossed, as had the anise-flavored toothpaste that only Greg brushed with and the decaf beans that only Greg brewed. Lee even tossed the crates of champagne, though he immediately regretted it, and then un-regretted it when he thought of how it was the last thing with Greg's name on it, but in the end regretted it even more when he awoke the next morning with his tongue as swollen as a broken toe and a murder of a headache, and there was no booze to be found except a half-bottle of anisette, also formerly Greg's, for baking, which Lee had missed in his drunken cleansing of the kitchen cabinets.

He drank the anisette standing at the kitchen sink and watched the sinkhole expand. The back bedroom and the sunroom listed upon the margins of the hole, teetering on shaky foundations. Lee busted out the kitchen window with the butt of the anisette bottle and tossed the bottle through the hole.

He searched the knife drawers but found no remaining knives, since they'd already followed the butcher's block and the silverware. There was no rope in the garage, no belt in his closet. The prescriptions had all been emptied from the medicine cabinet. The stove was electric, and Greg had taken the car when he'd left.

Lee lay on the empty living room carpet, his body framed by a sun-faded inverse rectangle around where the sofa had sat for years. After a while, a car pulled into the driveway and killed its engine. The doorbell rang. Lee didn't move.

"Lee?" Greg's voice. The sound of the key working the lock, the swath of light from the opened door cutting across Lee's eyes, brightening the blood red of his closed lids.

"Close the door. I have a headache."

"You're hungover?"

"Close the door."

"I won't bother you. I just came for a few things."

"There aren't any things."

"Don't worry, none of your things. None of *our* things, even.

Just a few of my things."

"There aren't any things."

"What do you mean there aren't any things?"

"There aren't any things at all." Lee pointed to the backyard. He rose and followed Greg, wrapped his arms around Greg, held Greg tight from behind as they stood together before the sliding glass doors.

"It's good to see you."

"You're drunk."

"It's so good to see you." Lee nuzzled his nose into Greg's neck, breathed him in. But Greg slipped the knot of Lee's arms.

"I'll just go get my things."

"I told you—"

But Greg was already disappearing down the hallway. Only there was no hallway to disappear down. The floorboards had splintered and the carpet hung like a loose tongue into the gaping maw of the pit.

"What've you done with my stuff?"

"I told you."

"What've you done with the bedroom? Where did the sunroom go?"

"I told you."

Greg fell back as the kitchen wall collapsed in a shriek of snapping timbers. A section of the roof followed, and a breeze entered from the back lawn, which was no longer a lawn but just a big expanse of nothing. He stood, dusting off his jeans.

"You're pathetic."

"Don't go."

"I'm going."

The sound of Greg's car faded into the distance. In an explosion of concrete and burst pipes, the bathroom crumbled and fell. The roof beams splintered and slipped and did not crush Lee to death as he hoped they might, but slid past, down into darkness. Somehow, everything had fallen around him. Lee was trapped atop a spire, a hunk of living room suspended above the black. He lay back on the carpet, waiting to feel the floor go out from under him.

Nicholas Darmody

All Those Not Seen

"You're late, *amigo*." Donnie told Dick as he walked in. Donnie looked funny sitting on a rotting stool in his luxurious suede suit. Most people wouldn't show up to the Terminal bar with a $50 watch for fear of getting it stolen, but he was perched on his stool with his ankle on top of his knee as if he was smoking at the country club. Of course, the pair had been coming here for years, before Donnie took up a suit, but the scummy bar had never changed. Maybe everyone knew him by now. Maybe he sat there with such confidence that the surlier patrons assumed he was deranged and would rather steer clear. Even if Dick could afford the suit, he would never dare to come to this part of New York dressed like Warren Buffet.

Whatever the case, Dick pulled the stool out next to him, letting it screech across the floor, and sat down. The bar was slim and long inside like most Manhattan bars. The bar stretched along a wall of rowed liquor and beer signs with stiff stools to match its patrons. The mirror behind the rows of bottles was so dirty it could hardly catch the light. "Late my ass. It's seven like always."

Donnie brandished his watch, holding a cigarette in his other hand. "Well, it's 7:02."

"I got distracted. This city is getting soft, man."

"Oh, dear Lord, not the milkshakes!"

Dick looked at him.

He laughed and punched his shoulder. "Aw, c'mon. Don't be square. I'm only kidding, man. I hate it, too."

Dick ignored him and flagged down the bartender. "Give me a beer."

"Light or dark?" His voice was so scruffy Dick almost missed the words.

"Light." Dick looked at Donnie. "You're gonna get yourself killed walking around here with that on, you know that?"

"Aw, they know me. Besides," Donnie opened his jacket to unveil a revolver holstered right into his jacket. "This is

custom made. I can still handle myself. The city is 'getting soft' anyways, right?"

Dick shifted in his seat. "Well, it might not be 1970s New York anymore, but 1980s New York isn't exactly the Hamptons."

"I survived Vietnam. I can survive a few bottom-feeding New Yorkers. No offense." He said, not really caring to offend or not.

"None taken." Dick said.

Donnie took another draw as the bartender poured his glass. He blew the smoke out to the side and eyed him. "So what do you have for me?"

The bartender set down a frothy glass, and Dick placed a couple quarters down in return. He took them up without a word and left to tend to the other end of the bar.

"A few different shots. I got one of some Harlem guys playing dominoes, one of kids swinging around a fire hydrant in the Bronx, a few more of street graffiti." Dick tried to list off his photos without expression to hide that he had exactly nothing, but the roses failed to hide the garbage he knew he had in his suitcase.

"So jack?"

Dick laughed. "Yeah. Jack."

Donnie let out some air and took a long sip from his whiskey.

"How long have we known each other, Dick?"

"Twelve years since basic, right?"

He brought his fist down on the bar hard, rattling our glasses. The old black man on the stool next to us glared, but Donnie didn't care.

"Twelve years! Of those that have occupied our professional relationship, you've always been his most consistent stringer. So why are you drying up now? You holding out? You sucking off some other editor behind his back?"

Dick dismissed him with his hand and took a drink. "You know you're the only editor who'll take me."

"Bullshit! I'm just the only editor that *you'll* take."

"Well, you're the only one who isn't some puffy college elitist," Dick said, rolling his glass. "I can't stand being looked down on by those cunts."

Donnie sighed and relaxed back onto his stool. "I know the

feeling."

"Ah," Dick said. He pointed two fingers and squinted at him. "At least you can hide your service behind a degree. I'm sure they love seeing *New York University* all scribbled out on that resume."

Donnie shrugged. "It helps. It can't be all bad for you though. Combat photographer is still just a photographer, not a grunt."

"They don't see no difference."

Donnie nodded slowly. "Well, at least you're not cheating on me." He paused. "You holding up okay?"

"Yeah."

"I've said it before, and I'll say it again. You need a girl in your life. It steadies you. Look." He held his still hand over the table. "No shakes. Nothing since me and Mary got married."

"Wow. Great party trick."

"I'm serious. Ugly as you may be, every man needs a woman. There's bound to be a blind girl poking around the subway somewhere just waiting for Dick Wilson."

Dick cracked a smile. "Fuck off. I'm good, really."

"Don't you have family? Mother, brother?"

"Yeah, we talk." It had been a couple years.

"Good. That's healthy. A man shouldn't be alone."

Dick drank the fill of his glass and waved for another. "You know what day it is, right?"

Donnie looked off to nothing. "Don't I know it."

"Ten years to the day." Dick said. Dick took the fresh amber glass from the bartender and drank that one too. "I still dream about it, you know."

"I know. Me too."

"You think it's fate me and you were the ones who made it out?"

"I don't think much about fate at all," he said. "Besides, there were more. Dave. Jack moved out to Ohio. Hernandez."

"Hernandez shot himself a couple years back."

"That so?"

"It is."

Donne thumbed the bar, staring down into the wood. Finally, he said: "Look, man. Don't take this the wrong way, but you gotta move on. Hernandez couldn't either and look

where that got him. No sense in being guilty. You just need to duck your head, forget, and start a new life. You get me?"

"I don't know how anyone can go about their cushioned lives here with all the shit in the world." Dick said. "It's not just Vietnam. It's everything, man. People have no concept of what's real and what's not anymore. So much pain in the world, and they just step on it like it was never there." His voice rose before he knew it.

"Just watch yourself, alright?'

Dick turned to his glass. "Alright."

They slouched over the bar for an hour longer and turned to lighter things. They talked about Reggie Jackson's home run against the A's, the Pope being shot that morning, and how good it had been since that "sonofabitch" Carter left the Oval office. After an hour or so Donnie looked at his watch. "Ah, it's about that time. Mary starts getting worried if I'm out too late." He grabbed his hat off the counter and stood up. "You get me something good for next week now, you hear?" He shifted a bit. "The *New York* magazine is trending more and more towards shopping and fashion and all the glitzy crap. You need to fight for your place by bringing me the good stuff. You need to bring me pictures this city can't ignore. Bring me the raw, unfiltered evidence of everything that goes ignored, or we're going to keep getting washed out by all this consumerism. You've got talent, but your pictures need more edge. We need more talent and less of these doe-eyed college kids. Understand?"

Dick nodded. He wasn't sure if he meant what he was saying or if he just pitied him.

"Good." He slapped his back and left through the doors, letting in the city behind him.

After most of these meetings, Dick paid his tab after the weekly wife excuse and left for his apartment to watch late night game shows, but tonight he stayed at the bar. He stayed at the bar drinking whiskey until the stools began to empty, their patrons staggering out the doors to God knows where. A thought occurred to him, and he ordered another whiskey to drink it down.

When Dick stood up his legs had lightened, and he had to catch the bar with his hand. He looked up. The bartender was

counting the cash in the register, and the only other customer left looked like he was going to be blown off his perch if the AC kicked on. *No one knows anyone this time of night*. Dick shouldered his bag and walked out the door as soberly as he could.

The familiar smells hit him all at once. Secondhand smoke, sweat, ash from unseen fires. This was New York City. It was probably the only place in the world he belonged. He passed by familiar old bars and strikingly unfamiliar "handcrafted" milkshake joints that stained the blocks with their clean blushing fronts. He remembered the gone relics that had been in those same spaces not one year prior. Though the streets still lingered with degeneracy, Dick knew the prostitutes that he could no longer see, and he knew the scourge that were being swept away and forgotten at the city's frontier. Dick knew the real city, and he knew the plastic face that would soon be rewritten as the face that had always been.

Walking down the empty sidewalks drunk and alone at night made him feel like he was floating. He found himself straying closer to the dark alleys, daring something to make a move. He started tracking down the few other midnight walkers with his eyes as they passed, drawing angry gazes and curses that floated by him. His shoulder caught one of these vagrant ramblers as they passed. The man shoved him, and Dick's heels tipped over backwards with his "motherfuckers" until his back caught the wall.

"Watch *yourself*, motherfucker." Dick slurred. The man said something else before his fist wrapped Dick's jaw and left him in a gray puddle.

The world spun around him as he walked away.

The scum soiled his jeans as Dick finally felt that pain. His jaw throbbed, and a sudden wave of guilt flooded his mind and swam with those friends Dick knew a decade ago. A person walked by him without looking down. Two more passed without a glance before Dick stood up and continued on.

Dick trotted down the subway stairs, pushed through the turnstile, and got on the 3 train to Utica Avenue in Brooklyn. Somewhere between Chambers and Fulton Streets Dick thought of Donnie and the nothing in his briefcase and

decided Dick was not going back to his apartment after all. Dick soon found myself on the 4 train to Woodlawn because that was the only train waiting at the station where Dick switched. Before long Dick was on the R train to Astoria then the 7 train to 42nd street then a few others after Dick stopped paying attention. Dick held his camera in hand the entire time, looking for a miracle shot. Although he usually worked during the early hours of the morning, Dick never worked this drunk. Photography was one of the few things left in life that he approached with true discipline. Despite his drunkenness, he was sobered with every new picture.

The world looked different through a camera lens. It was much easier to understand. A man sat on the opposite end of the car with his hands clasped as he looked forward. At a glimpse he was painfully regular. Very easy to miss. Dick raised his camera and clicked to take a picture. The man probably knew he was painfully regular. The more Dick looked the more he could see the weariness at the edges of the man's eyes, the kind that doesn't wash away with a good night's rest. If he ever even had those these days. The man looked over curiously at him then at the camera then back before staring forward once again.

Dick switched trains at the next station and left the man to continue on to Cortlandt street. Graffiti had almost completely overtaken the mustard paint on the walls, scribbled happlessly in its own language. Dick read what he could discern. "Stompy" here, "Satan" something there. Dick raised and lowered his camera. He slid down a few feet to the left and found this angle was better. Click.

The more trains and stations he visited, the better he felt. This was when the city felt most alive, when all the well-off were fast asleep, and the scourge could be free. They thought they were saving the city by washing the streets and raising the prices. The true New Yorkers knew they were just stealing the city one block at a time. He could see the city's salvation in every photograph. No matter how many blocks they stole away, he knew they would carry on. The homeless, the broken, the destitute. They are ignored their entire lives until he can capture their soul in a photograph. *It's the only hope I have left in this world. The only thing worth fighting for.*

As Dick bumped along with the next train, Vietnam started to swim back to his head. It nagged at me daily, but he always drank it down. He reached for his flask. Whether it was the cool touch of the metal or the mood he was in, he pulled back and let the memories come. He remembered the rain, that god awful rain, and trading socks twice a day to keep his feet dry. He only had two pairs on the patrols so he would keep the wet pair wrapped around his neck to dry it before rotating. He remembered the infantry platoon he had been attached to well. Dave, Fitz, Donnie, "Lee Harvey", Smith, and the others. During one ambush Dick was pinned with them at a small cropping of trees. After several hours they had completely run through their ammo, and they could see the enehis circling around them. Dick yelled "Grenade!" and threw his Bell and Howell 16mm camera as far into the trees as he could as they hauled ass backwards away into the trees. The ploy must have worked because the gunfire stopped, and they escaped back to the rest of the platoon unscathed. He could remember their uncontrollable grins, and how they talked so fast they couldn't separate the words. Later when the Marines required that Dick pay back the money for the camera, none of the bastards would chip in. "That's yo' problem, Dick." Smith had told him as he was scrubbing down the bolt on his M16. "I din't go beggin' you to save his ass."

Dick was smiling, but the longer he thought the more it faded. Those men could only be thoughts now. What he would give to have those pictures on that camera. He took a drink from his flask.

As 4 o'clock came and went, he began to get tired. He knew he had some good pictures, but he couldn't help but feel disappointed. It all felt so pointless. Best case scenario he would get a picture on the front page, but then what? All those people, the well-off Americans who hated him so, would stop at the newsstand and see his picture. They would study the faces of the underground with some morbid curiosity, pretending to be shocked at the degradation to feel moral. Maybe they would feign interest to feel intellectual. All from a safe distance though, of course. All while sipping their cappuccino. His flask was empty. He needed to find a drink.

Dick stepped off the train somewhere in Brooklyn and looked around. The train pulled off and the station was quiet, except for a couple men huddled together across the tracks. Dick turned towards the stairs and started thinking about how far the nearest open convenience store would be. If any were open this time of night at all.

A shout from behind nearly made me jump. Across the tracks the taller man was tugging hard at the other man's bag, but the second man refused to let go. Dick immediately pulled up his camera and knelt against a metal column to steady himself. The shot was perfect. The two men were pulling opposite one another, positioned perfectly between two columns. Dick snapped pictures as quickly as he could.

As they shifted around, locked in their criminal tug-of-war, the second man reached into his jacket. *Pop. Pop. Pop.* The bullets chimed throughout the station as they ricocheted around the metal and concrete. Dick felt a punch in his gut and crumpled forward. Without a thought he propped up on his elbows to keep snapping pictures. The taller man was on his back now, cradling his chest in an awkward position as he rolled. The second man got to his feet, having fallen backwards with the bag, and stood over the other. *Pop. Pop. Pop. Click.* Red mists puffed with every shot. Through the lens Dick saw him look up at him. "Shit." Dick lowered the camera and froze. The man stared at him for an eternity. Dick froze like a deer caught in the sights of a hunter. Without a word the man pulled his hood tighter against his head and ran down the platform, disappearing up the stairs.

Dick's first thought was what he was going to do if the man came back down the stairs on this side to kill the only witness. Dick tried to stand, but a pinching in his gut held him down. He rummaged through his pockets for his knife and pulled it out, but it only had a four inch blade. *I heard a click. He's out of ammo.* His second thought, which was far more concerning to him, was that the man might destroy his camera and the pictures if he did come down to finish the job. "Come and try it." Dick grunted as he rolled onto his back. He waited for the tapping of footsteps to start back down the stairs, but they never came. All was quiet.

Once Dick was sure the man had left he untucked his

shirt and wiped around his stomach. He held his breath when he felt the wetness near his belly button and released the air when he looked at his blood-coated palm. One of the ricocheting bullets had hit him, likely severing an intestine based on the burning pinch he felt. Dick took his knife and began cutting into his jeans. The blade nicked at his thigh, but he knew he had to be quick. He took the slab of denim and folded it over the oozing hole. Next he whipped off his belt and fastened it around his waist to hold the denim in place, poking a new hole in the leather to accommodate the tight fit. Dick could hardly breathe, but the denim stayed firmly over the wound. He rolled on to his stomach and pulled myself to his feet using the metal pillar. The adrenaline had left and the sting in his stomach began to burn hotter and hotter. Dick shouldered his bag, camera inside. *Get help. Move.*

As soon as his hand left the pillar Dick buckled back to his knees. He crawled to the stairs and then up them, holding onto the wound the whole way. Every move made me grimace. This was hell. He continued on under the turnstile and started up the last set of stairs when he really began to feel lightheaded. He collapsed to the stairs and used his one free hand to drag myself up each step. The pain was subsiding which terrified him. He began to feel delirious. At the top of the stairs the sweaty city air hit him. *Am I losing too much blood?* Dick looked back down the stairs and felt his soul sink back into the underground. A shimmering crimson trail had been left in his wake. He felt his denim patch, which was only moderately soaked through. It was holding up fine.

Then, his heart sank at his realization. Dick reached around to feel his back and found his jacket soaked. He had been shot clean though and didn't realize it. He had completely forgotten to check for an exit wound. The blood was pouring around his back and onto the ground.

Dick pulled himself to a wall outside and hauled himself to a sitting position. Whatever small morning hour it was, the street was empty. Three-storied apartment buildings surrounded him, with crude commercial awnings and signs at their feet. Across the street was a nail salon, pharmacy, some outreach church, and a liquor store, all with graffiti-clad garages clasped down. *Maybe I can get a drink after all.*

Dick laughed. He would be dead long before those garages opened for the morning. As humid and miserable as the air was, he enjoyed it. His only regret was that his camera would be picked off by some junkie, and he would lose these pictures forever. Around here bodies were picked clean before the police could ever reach them. Dick would lose more people. This had really been his best work yet, too. Donnie would have been proud. Dick closed his eyes.

A babbling down the sidewalk let them open. Dick turned his head to see a scrawny man staggering about. It sounded like he was murmuring to himself. Dick realized this was his only shot. "Hey." Dick said and felt the pain in his stomach. "Hey!" Dick yelled and buckled forward at the burning sensation.

This the man heard. He stopped with great surprise and saw Dick laying a few steps in front of him. He walked up, muttering quietly, and stared with great bewildered eyes. Dick could see the veins in the whites of his eyes even in the dark.

"I need your help."

He kept looking.

"Can you please help me?" Dick closed his eyes, trying to not think about how futile this was. "There's money in it for you." The man nodded slowly. By God, he had a response. Dick pulled the camera out from his bag. "This is an Olympus 35 SP. You can sell it for maybe $70, $80. It's yours. You could sell it tomorrow if you want."

Somehow his eyes got bigger. Dick's throat had gotten very dry, and he tried to clear it to no avail. His head kept getting lighter, and he was losing track of himself. Dick continued anyway. "It's worth $70 or $80. I don't know. But the pictures on it are worth even more than that. If you can take it to his friend tomorrow, you can get money for the pictures and the camera. You understand?"

Again Dick got a slow nod. This was going splendidly. "Perfect. I'll write down the address." Dick opened his notepad. He tried to think of something clever, but after a few moments he scribbled into his notebook.

220 East 42nd Street
Ask for Don Russo

*****

Caught a bullet on the subway. Nostrand Avenue.
One other dead. Shooter got away. Pictures in camera.
Give the money to the junkie.
Thanks for your support.

Signed,
D.W.

"You can read, right?" Dick choked. He nodded. "Good." Dick handed the note and camera to the junkie. It took all the strength left in him not to rip the camera back from his reach. Dick knew this deal was his only chance at saving his pictures. Saving more people. He stood there gawking at him. "You can go now, thanks. Remember, more money for the pictures." With shaking hands, Dick lit his last cigarette and had an idea.

"Wait. Take a picture of me."

The man looked at him. "Picture?"

"Yes, picture. Just hold the camera up and click."

As he fumbled with the camera, Dick opened up his jacket to show the belt and the blood, though there was blood everywhere at this point. He left the cigarette in his mouth and looked into the lens. Dick couldn't remember the last time he had been on this end of a photo. *Click*.

"Thanks." Dick whispered. He lingered for a few seconds. Dick wondered if he was considering whether to get help for him, but Dick could see in his eyes that even this man knew he was done for. After a time he finally turned and ran down the street, camera swinging wildly. When he was a hundred yards off Dick heard the babbling start up again.

The street was lonely. Dick sat there watching a traffic light switch from red to green for no one. His cigarette burned until he couldn't pick it up from his lips anymore, and he turned and let the butt fall to his side. He remembered when he first came to the city, straight after his deployment was

over. His family had kept asking me why he had to leave. Why he wanted to live in such a slum of a city. They kept asking the same questions until they gave up talking to him at all. The truth was Dick never knew the answer himself until now as he laid under these ghostly lights. He saw so many friends die in a void. They died ahead of a world that would never know them or even like them. It only felt right that Dick should be forgotten as well.

Dick started to breathe fast, but he couldn't find the air. The faces of his friends flashed through his mind, but when they ran out, he began to see other faces. Faces that a scarce soul would recognize, faces that the eyes glazed over in crowds without a second thought. Yet every one of these faces held rich lives and struggles and wants that were never acknowledged, and Dick saw them there all at once in the night. They were the faces Dick photographed, the single mothers, the men at the dead end of their lives, the alcoholics, the refugees, and all the others who were never seen. Dick smiled. He hoped the pictures would get to Donnie for him and every other person struggling in this city, but he felt right knowing he had fought the good fight regardless. *Maybe someday people will start to look after each other better.*

The sky turned a pale blue as sunrise neared. A deli shop owner came to open the shop and cursed the hobos when he found a man fallen over to his side face-down against the garage door to his shop. When he shook him to wake him up, he felt the blood and cursed again when he realized he was dead. He called the police and urged them to get rid of the body before customers began to show up. Someone had stolen the man's wallet and picked his pockets clean before his body could be reported. By eight o'clock, the sun washed the street with light, and the body was gone. He was booked as John Doe, aged mid-thirties, found on Nostrand Avenue. Time of death around 4:45 AM.

Darcy Casey

A Hard No

Whenever Kitty ran out of dope and money she counted upon Annie to give her a place to stay. Annie was a better person than she was, so when Annie showed her not to the guest room but to the apartment above the garage, explaining it was more private, Kitty took it to be another display of her friend's endless kindness. Only later, when Kitty was alone and feeling miserable, did she open the plastic bag Annie gave her to find the note, written on the back of a receipt tucked between a packet of beef-flavored Ramen and a bottle of Ibuprofen: *Lock the door when you leave*. The finality of the word *when* made Kitty's legs cold and her forehead burn. She didn't have a key to the apartment and felt it must be a mistake. Rallying against the anxiety, Kitty went to the main house and tried the door. It was locked. Peering inside she could see the heads of Annie and her son, Sam, in the living room. Sam's head turned slightly at the sound of the door's handle, but Annie touched his arm and leaned toward him. Annie looked straight ahead even when Kitty gave a small wave and Kitty, reeling from loss, returned to the apartment without knocking.

The space above the garage was, if anything, private. It had a bathroom and kitchenette and although it was drafty with spring-time air, Kitty had blankets and a thick black sweater. If she pulled the shades she could die in there and no one would find her for weeks. Annie certainly wasn't coming to check. To keep her mind off things, Kitty arranged boxes of old magazines and dish sets into a maze and walked it endlessly, trying but failing to sleep, staring at walls that were neither salmon nor red but the ruddy blush of a drunk white man. After four days the worst was over. Not wanting to be seen, she waited until midnight before she put on her sweatshirt, took the last of the Ibuprofen, and locked the door.

At the bottom of the stairs came voices from inside the garage and Kitty was afraid if she went any further, she would come face-to-face with Annie. But the voices were of

two men, one very young and the other with the timbre of someone twice her age. Relieved, Kitty hurried forward but could not help glancing inside as she passed. What she saw made her freeze.

A stranger was bent at the waist, rifling through a box in the far corner, speaking all the while in a soft voice to Sam, who stood by the door pulling off a T-shirt, a flush in his cheeks and a nervous look about his eyes.

"Sam!" she said, moving in front of him. "What are you doing?"

The old man turned to look at her with sad eyes and a tart smile. "You must be Kitty," he said. "Sam did say you were here."

"I told you we had to be quiet," said Sam. "Now it's ruined."

"Sam," said Kitty, "where's your mother? Who is this?"

"Nothing's ruined," said the man, waving a flashlight. "It's all right. But you need to hustle."

"You don't have to do anything," said Kitty to Sam, but from behind her came the telltale shuffle of clothing as Sam peeled off another layer.

"I think we're off on the wrong foot," said the man, stepping toward her. "I'm Earl. I live next door. Annie left on business and I'm watching Sam. I told him to change his clothes because he's wearing white. He could have done it in his room, but he didn't."

Earl held out a hand but Kitty didn't take it. Behind her, Sam had pulled on a pair of forest green long johns. The flushed look had crept back on his face.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"We're gonna steal some dogs," said Sam. "Earl knows how."

"One dog," said Earl. "We can only do one."

"The one that's sick," said Sam. "I remember."

"Very good. Now, get in the truck."

Sam left. Kitty felt as though she were moving too slowly for the world and sat on an overturned bucket, one hand on her stomach. Earl gave her an appraising look.

"Did you lock the door?"

Kitty stared at him blankly.

"The door upstairs. Did you lock it?"

She nodded.

"So you were leaving, then?"

She nodded again.

"Alright. Don't let us stop you." He went to the door and paused with his hand on the frame, and when he turned back to her his eyes were rheumy with mischief or maybe glee. "But you could come along, if you want. Your clothes are good."

Kitty ran a hand over her sweatshirt. "It's the middle of the night."

"It is," said Earl. "And dark." He winked and was gone. Kitty sat alone in the garage, watching until he rounded out of sight. Her palms grew moist with anxiety.

Sam was her son's age, or at least the age he was when Kitty last saw him, a boy of eight, all awkward bones and stretching muscle. They were on the courthouse steps just after the divorce and her newly-minted ex said *Give your mother a hug* and he did, his arms a trap waiting to spring. It was over before she had a chance to feel the warmth in his grip and when he looked at her it was with the face of a much older boy. There was no sadness in his eyes, only relief. A relief that Sam would never have cause to feel, for Annie was also a better mother than Kitty.

Outside a door slammed and an engine started. She knew leaving was the right thing to do, but to where? Kitty wiped her palms on her dark-enough jeans and thought of jail. She had been lucky all those years, shooting up in parking lots, coming close enough to feel death's eyelashes on her cheek. Part of it, she knew, was the town itself. Drugs ran like oil through her fishing community. Drugs hauled the nets, tossed the traps, kept men on their feet through long hours at sea. Tourists refused to see what pulled the boats back at the end of each day and they came in droves each summer, money in fists, thrusting it into the hands of locals who swallowed hard and put a little extra in the tithe on Sunday. Lincoln green prayers for all the lost lives but no one would say the words out loud.

Kitty rose from the bucket and went to stand beside Earl. Sam was in the truck, a restored Chevy that might have been as old as Earl. The sheen on its two-door cab was crisp enough in the flood light to show a scar above Kitty's left eye she had no memory of getting. Earl opened the door. It was spotless

inside and Kitty thought maybe that was his job, fixing things that people were about to quit on. He smelled like motor oil, anyway, and something else, flowers or potpourri, but it was spicy and discordant. A man who smelled like that could be capable of anything.

"Are you a mechanic?" she asked, taking in his ropey arms and calloused fingers, the tips stained dark.

"Isn't everyone in Maine?" he said with a shrug. But he softened when he saw her face. "I own the shop. But don't worry about it. I'm just like you."

He gestured to the seat and said they could all fit if Sam took the middle, but the thought of them thigh-to-thigh was too much. "It's okay," she said. "I'm not even a hugger."

Earl nodded. "If I didn't need to drive, I'd be back there, too. A night sky like this will drown you. You'll see."

He put a blanket in the bed of the truck and gave her his hand, which she ignored. The tailgate slammed behind her and soon they were on the road, hitting hard against potholes, sending Kitty's shoulders against the bed's coated edges. There was no rain but the air was ripe with its promise and little beads of water formed at Kitty's hairline, ran down her face and into her hood. She was cold but at barely five days sober, she didn't expect to be warm maybe ever again and so she let the droplets run down her face.

The back window slid open and Sam's head poked through.

"Earl says are you fine or do you want another blanket?"

"It's okay," said Kitty, shivering. "I'm all right." The window closed and the latch clicked. Kitty leaned her head against the bed of the truck, felt the tremors of motor and earth vibrating the bones of her skull, and closed her eyes. But her new sobriety colluded with the twisting road to summon in her a deep, thick nausea and she leaned over the edge of the truck. In the throes of withdrawals she was ants and skin, wired exhaustion, tanned hide over the wrong carcass but that had ebbed into chills and throbbing joints, headaches and an acid stomach. Worse was the cloud of desire, the shifting fear, but of what? Perhaps life itself, of waking up on the other side of sobriety and feeling something terrible the way it is when one walks into the light from the dark, blinking, rendered immobile from the rush. Fear also that nothing would ever be

good again, that her only choices were to spend the rest of her days ignoring the pain of a phantom need or succumb to it.

Kitty wiped her mouth and thought enviously of alcoholics. They had immunity, wrote memoirs, held speeches at schools to warn children of the dangers lurking in their rich fathers' liquor cabinets. Alcoholics could get sober again and again and each time regain their status. It was easy to see why; drinking was something everyone did, it was only a matter of timing and quantity. Livers died quietly inside a body but needles were feared, their marks visible. Heroin was a dirty word, and if spoken at all, passed from mouth to mouth in whispers and hush.

The truck's headlights winked off and they stopped so slowly Kitty was only aware of their stillness when the engine cut. They were against a deep, living woods, the outline of a dirt road cleaving its stomach. Trees the barest memory of green pulsed in the wind beneath a galaxied night sky. Earl came around to let her out, night erasing the lines on his face.

"Where are we?" asked Kitty.

"You'll see."

Earl extended a hand and she took it. Gravel chirped under her sneakers, blending with the sound of summer crickets. From the cab Earl pulled a toolbox so rusted it could have been the color of blood or carrots or dirt. Its opening lid gave a piercing squeal that shivered down Kitty's neck.

"Jesus," she said.

"Don't get cold feet," said Earl and Kitty knew what he meant but she thought of bodies behind dumpsters, needles still in their chilled arms. She knew three people found that way, their lifeless faces frozen not in pain but in ecstacy, and she knew that would be her way, too, only she did not know when.

Sam's face, angled toward the shifting trees, was a twitching, shining nerve. Kitty thought dimly of the marching regularity of Sam's life in a predictable, safe world—a life like her son would have now that she was gone from it—and instead of wrapping an arm around Sam to comfort him threaded her fingers through the belt loops of her jeans.

Earl pulled from his toolbox a pair of wire cutters, two wrenches, and a crowbar. From a long way off echoed the

barking of dogs, dozens or more, and something inside Kitty clicked into place.

"Earl," she said.

"Zip these into your pockets," he said, handing the wrenches to Sam. "Don't let them fall out."

"Earl, we shouldn't be here."

"Don't turn this on unless I say," said Earl. He handed Kitty a flashlight. She took it and held it like something alive.

"We should go," she said.

At last he looked at her. "No," he said. "We're doing this."

There was a silence in which even the crickets seemed to still.

"I—I don't want to," she said.

"Then stay in the truck."

"What if someone sees me?"

"Lie."

He turned and Sam followed him up the dirt road until they were swallowed by the trees. Kitty got into the truck and stroked the seams of the seat, which was brown and leather and smooth. The distant barking of dogs was the murmur of voices and it seemed that if she focused enough she might understand something that had, until that point, been lost to her. Her fingers tapped out a rhythm as she strained and strained, but nothing came, and she could no longer hear Sam or Earl. It was that easy. They had gone on without her.

She got out of the truck and it was like slipping into cool water. For those first few steps Kitty held her breath and then, lungs burning with the effort of walking, exhaled. At last she saw the flash of Earl's hand, the back of Sam's neck, their skin rendered mushroom white by the dark. When she reached Earl's side he said to her, "Remember, don't turn the flashlight on unless I say. The house is there."

Rising at the top of the hill was an ill-used trailer thrown onto a foundation of unmortered cinder blocks, a sagging panopticon guarding rows of wire cages. In them were dogs, some with muscles Tyson-chicken plump, others mere slivers. The chain link fences, hardly able to contain them, rattled as the dogs lunged and dipped, their bodies a heaving mass of feet and rigid tails. Some had swollen bellies sagging low, tits worn hard from litters of puppies surely born right there,

on four by six patches of thirsty yellow earth that absorbed their afterbirth and blood and urine alike. Kitty felt she could taste it, not just the defecation but the fear rolling off them in waves, and it was familiar and primal and raw. Kitty knew this place for the twisted crevice it was. So much of her life had been formed or wasted in places like this, the ones other people pretended didn't exist.

"Okay," said Earl. "Which one?"

The boy faltered.

"Sam," said Kitty.

"I think—this way." He went slowly at first, looking back over his shoulder every few feet. Soon he stopped looking, and after a time he darted forward, his body a minnow between the cages. "I remember!" he called. "I remember!"

Earl disappeared after him but Kitty lagged behind. The din of the dogs was savage; their barking muted her steps, drowned the beating of her heart. This was a place for disappearing, the night a smothering blanket of stars shielding her from the rest of the world. The guilt of things she had done, of choices she had made and would make again, couldn't touch her here, were rendered suddenly harmless. Although the place was familiar in its stench and despair she wasn't a part of it any more than Earl or Sam and, freed of a weight she didn't know she carried, Kitty jogged, slow at first and then faster. Her body had forgotten what this felt like; she had always slipped from one periphery to another but now she was right there in the middle of it, a moving part of something, impossible to miss if only someone chanced a look.

She came upon Earl and slowed, her body bursting with life and the struggle to breathe. Sam crouched in front of a kennel, hand extended through the chainlink fence. A dog lay on its side, moonlight highlighting canyons of ribs.

"Oh!" she said, grabbing Earl's wrist before releasing it and rubbing her palm where her skin touched his.

"I see him, Kitty. I see."

"He doesn't remember me," said Sam. "I was here, but he doesn't remember."

Earl had the wire cutters but the kennel's latch lifted easily; there were no locks, no chains or bolts, nothing at all stopping them. The dog regarded them with slow, unfocused eyes.

Earl took Sam's shoulder. "Let him come to us," he said. From a pocket he took a bag of cheese crackers and when he shook it, the dog rolled to his side and stood, his massive head too large for his emaciated body. He came forward with tail and ears tucked.

"He's sick," said Sam. "He needs saltines."

Earl extended a cupped hand and the dog ate, watching them with white-rimmed eyes.

"Give him more," Kitty said. On the third handful, the dog's tail gave the smallest wag and he shoved his nose into Earl's hand, eating greedily, when a sudden light illuminated the ground behind them. The windows of the trailer were lamp yellow, and behind the curtains moved a person. Dogs went wild with barking as a face appeared, squinting beyond the reach of light.

"What do we do?" said Kitty. "What do we do?"

"The woods! Go!" Earl gave Sam a shove and Sam ran past the kennels and beyond, through a vegetable garden, and into the bushes. Kitty followed. She stumbled over a cabbage but didn't slow until she was deep in a hug of pine boughs and bramble. Then she turned, thinking not of the person in the trailer but of Earl, who was in the garden, cracker by cracker coaxing the dog between rows of corn. The dog crouched low, scarfing crackers and periodically glancing back. A shout carried from beyond the pens.

"Deer in the garden again!"

A door slammed and the dogs grew quiet. Two chugging clicks echoed off the trees. Kitty saw Earl through the eyes of these people: a moving mass in the corn, little flashes of white skin like the underside of a bounding deer's tail. A shot rang through the forest and Earl's head dropped out of sight.

"Earl!" cried Sam.

Kitty turned Sam's shoulders around, told him to run and he listened, he actually listened. Stunned by the effect of her words, she hesitated—and that was all it took. The bushes beside her shook to life and through a shimmy of leaves and light came Earl, crawling, the dog behind him.

Kitty dropped to the ground but Earl shook her off.

"Are you numb? Put your head down! Go!"

They ran, hunched, thorns and branches tearing and

slashing at panicked limbs. Time fuzed into open-mouthed breathing, the movement of body against the resistance of forest, and the world was nothing else until in front of them was Sam and then, mercifully, Earl's truck. When they reached it they stood, panting and blinking, listening for sounds of chase. There were none. They were alone, gasping in the wake of what they had done.

"I thought—I thought you—" but Kitty couldn't say it, and bent forward, waiting for the nausea to spill over. When it didn't, she straightened and patted her torso and legs, tenderly touched her face. Earl rubbed his knees and she searched him for signs of injury, heart leaping at every scratch and scrape. The dog pawed at Earl's hand for more crackers and Sam made a sound that was part sob, part laugh, and said, "We did it."

"Let's go home," said Earl. He dropped the tailgate and hoisted the dog inside.

"I'll sit in back," said Sam.

"You won't," said Earl.

"Mom lets me."

"I'm the sitter, so my rules."

"But Mom—"

"I won't have you falling out of a truck on my watch."

Their bickering was so utterly normal that the fear which gripped Kitty dissipated, and she smiled, and then laughed, hard and reckless until her sides ached and her stomach threatened to burst. When at last she wiped her eyes and blinked, Sam was in the cab. Earl raised his eyebrows.

"Because you won't let him in the back of the truck," said Kitty, "but you're okay with a great, grand dog heist."

Earl sighed and looked troubled but Kitty felt no shame. Hours ago Earl was a stranger, but now they had done this thing together, and the result was her standing with him at the bottom of a long dirt road, skin and clothes torn and dirty, a strange dog in the back of a pristine antique truck. It occurred to her they were friends—they had to be after doing a thing like this—and even if they never met again they would always have this between them and if she ever needed to, she could summon the memory of this night and it would mean something.

Earl cleared his throat. “Let me tell you something, Kitty. Kitty—that’s your real name, yeah? Never mind it, never mind. When I was Sam’s age I had a cat. A one-eyed, earless tabby king. Flea-ridden, shabby, you name it. Scars. But every night like clockwork he would come into my bed and stay ’til morning. He was my cat, you see? He knew his name and came when I called. But one night he wasn’t there. Lord, did I search for him. Called him. Made flyers. Left out food. Christ, I set clumps of tuna fish from my own sandwiches by the front door. And it worked. One day I looked and there he was. I’ll never forget it. I was out the door so fast I bet I flew. Yeah, I flew. But that cat . . . well. My pop said he must’ve crawled into the neighbor’s tractor and got stuck. Ma said owls. But there I was, Sam’s age, looking at this cat who somehow made it back to me and was looking up like here I am, see? Here I am.

“A low like that stays with you. All these years and I still close my eyes sometimes and see him laying in the dirt, and I get a good dose of the feels like it just happened. Probably always will; I’m pushing seventy, anyway. So there’s a difference. Truck beds are a hard no. And I could’ve said no when Sam told me about the dog. But the thing I asked myself was, if I said no, could I look at that boy again, knowing he’d see that dog until he’s my age?”

Earl shook his head. “That’s a hard no, too. It’s not a question of right or wrong. It’s whether you can live with yourself when you could have done the hard thing but chose the other.”

Earl looked off into the woods and there were the sounds of dogs, of Maine. Crickets and the hum of plants. The gentle snapping of twigs beneath unseen, midnight paws.

“It’s Katherine,” said Kitty. “My name, it’s . . . .”

“Yeah?”

“Kitty is short for Katherine. From when I was a girl.”

“Katherine. All right.” A pause. “Are you coming back with us?”

Kitty nodded and climbed in beside the dog, feeling the healthy ache of muscles well-used, a certain tenderness in her lungs. Earl handed her the crackers and she saw he was limping, just a little. After he closed the tailgate Kitty said his

name, softly, and he didn't hear and maybe it was better that way. When the truck started moving the dog settled down, pressing into her side. His bones were hard and warm and he smelled of bog and shit and she fed him crackers and they were peaceful. Down the road Sam opened the back window, summoning a cyclone of crumbs, of dog hair and saliva. Sam's face was glowing and eager, and in the truck's lights it bloomed a happy pink. Kitty gave him the crackers and he contorted his arm so the dog could eat.

"Look at you," whispered Kitty. "Just look at you." She peered around the side of the cab, squinting against the wind and night bugs. The bottom of Earl's face hovered above his folded arm, reflected in the side mirror. His lips were moving in conversation with himself or maybe prayer. He was taking them back to the house, but Kitty felt it didn't matter, that he could take her anywhere. She stretched onto her back to watch the stars zip by and it wasn't at all like drowning. It was like flying, or something better. There was a time long ago, when she was still good, and she'd been swimming in the ocean at night and all around her was this electric blue shine lighting up the droplets and waves and she felt like she could dive into it and swim on forever, right to the center of the earth, and that nothing could ever hurt her while she did. But she had to leave the ocean and that night and in doing so had forgotten all about it. But there in the truck, looking up at the stars, it all came back to her, that feeling of a great big world curled around her own smallness. And there was a safeness in it she knew would fade like a dream, and she was afraid of forgetting, and wanted Earl to stop the truck and climb in back with her, and Sam too, so they could sit there looking up at the sky while she still had the words to tell them.

Weston Miller

Dystopian Lit

Trying to minimize a yawn, especially one that sneaks up with urgency and without warning, was a challenge. He looked around the room as if checking the alertness of the class and brought a fist up to shield his mouth from view, glad the student up front had her eyes down rather than looking out at the audience.

If pressed, Professor Strake would say he chose to sit in the back left corner of the classroom during student presentations because he didn't want to be the audience—he wanted students to present to their classmates while he took his copious notes for the grading he'd do during the weekend. But who was he kidding? The real reason to sit back there was to provide cover for his boredom and the occasional drooping of his eyes. As for the grading? He told them he waited until he'd seen all thirty of their presentations before assigning grades, that it was a comparative exercise. The truth was that he hastily wrote down an approximate grade range as soon as the presentation was done, and 98% of the time, that was the grade being entered on his Excel spreadsheet.

It wasn't laziness or sloth. Closer to emptiness—a feeling like there wasn't any more to accomplish. And it wasn't just professionally. He'd been divorced for almost twelve years now and middle-aged dating seemed inappropriate, almost gauche. There'd been no children (she saw his indifference to fatherhood as one of the many reasons to file), so his social existence mainly consisted of take-out dinners or leftovers in front of Netflix or Jeopardy at his one-bedroom apartment.

The sun shining in from the side windows didn't help with drowsiness, for him or the students. They were almost there, the light at the end of the semester-long tunnel beginning to get brighter—only one more class meeting of presentations after this one. While he would never admit it to his students, it was just as tough for their professor to push through the last few weeks. Whether looking forward to the winter month off or, like now, the almost four months of summer, being so

close to the end was more distraction than accomplishment.

Even the summer, a massive benefit of his profession, had become mundane. For the last five years, he promised he'd get to work on his novel, the one he'd been researching and outlining since the divorce. But if the past served as a guide, he'd get to mid-August with ten pages of mediocre, over-edited prose, having spent the vast majority of his time at the laptop playing gin rummy or going off on research tangents he justified as essential to creating authenticity in his work. He'd visit friends on the Cape for a long weekend and take a couple trips down to Pennsylvania to see his father in the nursing home. But for most of his summer break, his most creative production would be coming up with reasons not to sit in the chair in front of his computer like "the first two weeks after the semester were for decompression" or "it was always better to start fresh on a Monday" or "his ideas needed more time to percolate in his head." Instead of looking forward to the upcoming months, he loathed the succession of humid days without real purpose or deadline along with the guilt he felt for wasting the time. And those days only led to the dull routine of classes resuming in September with the papers to grade, the two-hour faculty meetings, and the constant email stream in his inbox. An endless cycle of dread.

It had gotten to the point that, whenever he got an email from Human Resources, he hoped there'd be some mention of early retirement. Fifty-eight was a little young to qualify, but stranger things had happened in these days of higher education belt-tightening and thrift. What would he do as a retiree? If he was given the chance, right this moment, to do over his professional life, would he take it? Maybe practice law or get into diplomacy? Wouldn't it have to be better than this? Wasn't he supposed to be at the peak of his profession by this point? Friends from college and high school were negotiating multi-million-dollar mergers and performing artery bypass surgery while he graded hastily written three-page essays written by nineteen-year-olds who thought reading the assigned texts meant skimming the SparkNotes. Strake returned his blank stare to the young woman up front, checking in to see if his poor first impression of her presentation had been a mistake.

". . . and so the princess walked to the top of the hill and looked toward her favorite mountain. But she couldn't see it. The smog and clouds blocked her view, giving her a world that was smaller and fuzzier and reduced."

She had decided to read a story for her presentation. Just read it. Without any visuals. About pollution. With her head down the entire time. Her voice a constant monotone. The prompt was clear and straightforward: taking into account what you've learned in the class, present an aspect of your personal dystopia in six minutes. It emphasized that thoughtfulness of the presentation was the most important aspect of the assignment, but come on. The class was expected to pay attention and remain engaged for this? When she'd come to talk to him about her ideas a few weeks ago, it seemed like she had more energy and enthusiasm for the project. And now here she was, reading to them. She was one of those students who came by his office at least once a week.

Office hours. What had once been three hours to look forward to, a chance to interact with students in a less formal environment, had become the bleakest blocks of his academic week. He remembered when students used to come in and chat, sometimes offering a pretext from a class discussion to get in the door, but then talking to him about their lives, their challenges, their dreams. Now, they all just wanted him to edit their papers, telling them what needed fixing so they could receive their well-deserved A.

Had he changed that much from his first days on the job, a freshly-minted Ph.D. in his late twenties, excited about a career in front of the classroom? Strake used to give students the option of calling him by his first name, thinking it made him seem more relatable, like an older cousin instead of a parent. He'd go through his spiel on the first day of class—going over the class roster, handing out the syllabus, telling them about the required texts—and then slide that piece of information in there, that they could call him "Pete" if they wanted to. Some took him up on the offer in the first fifteen years of his career, before the gray invasion above his ears and at his temple. But at some point, it became unseemly—he wasn't sure if that judgment was more from his perspective or that of his students. When asked, he still gave students

the option of using his first name, but the couple who took him up on it seemed more interested in the mischief of it, like children calling their parents by a first name, than the informality.

He knew how they viewed this class. "Dystopian Literature" might sound like an intriguing topic, but students took it because they had to—the college had a mandatory humanities requirement at the intermediate level. And they expected it to be a "gut" class—one where minimal effort would produce an A or, at worst, an A-. The fact that he pushed back against these grade expectations, keeping his average GPA for the class around the 3.2 range, was reflected both in his section being among the last of the intermediate electives to fill up and in the harsh comments he read when the semester was over in his student evaluation form summaries.

But if midlife dating was gauche, what was the midlife crisis? Wasn't it the ultimate in terms of being a two-dimensional character, a cliché? The privileged, sad, little white man who went on living his life, bored and disappointed with where his choices had led him, but unwilling (or unable?) to make any kind of substantive change? The ambivalence. The resigned passivity. Boo hoo for him.

When the woman presenting finished, she looked back to his corner expectantly, like a pet seeking verbal approval along with a scratch behind the ears. "Thank you, Amanda," Professor Strake said, beginning the applause that would half-heartedly spread through the room. "Nice job." He made a notation in the margin of his notebook, marking it as a "B-/C+," and then referred to the sheet of paper to his left for the presentation order before saying, "Next up is Warner."

A young man from the back stood and strode to the computer station in the front right corner, clacking at the keyboard like he'd used it for years. He was wearing one of those bulky flannel shirts that had come back in style, some kind of green and black plaid. It seemed all the skinny men wore extra-large clothes, providing a shapeless tent around their physiques, while the more muscular wore shirts and pants one size too small. Professor Strake wondered if Warner was one of those students who travelled northeast for college, never tiring of complaining about the cold and snow. "It'll take me a couple

minutes to set up," Warner said.

Strake checked his watch, noting they were ahead of schedule. "Whenever you're ready."

The divorce. It probably should have felt like a bigger deal at the time, recognizing how much it was going to affect his patterns and change his existence. It had been a surprise, sure, when she plopped the manilla envelope on the table in their breakfast nook. But looking back, it made sense: they'd become more roommates than partners, each with their own office space in the house, often eating breakfast and dinner at different times because of their schedules. Or because of their preferences.

At least they'd kept the lawyers out of it, dividing up the assets with a few emails back and forth. He'd given in more than he'd stood firm, believing he didn't need much and hoping they'd retain some form of friendship. She kept the house, the new SUV, and half of their savings. Their interactions dwindled to a Christmas card and a random email exchange once or twice a year when a news article or internet meme tweaked her memory of some instance from their shared past.

"Almost ready?" Strake asked the student at the front. Warner put up a finger, asking for another moment. It struck Strake as rude.

What did Professor Strake know about this presenter? Warner enjoyed participating and would come up with a truly insightful observation or point every once in a while. But for the most part, he was content to slouch in his chair during their discussions of *Brave New World* and *Never Let Me Go*, paying attention at a superficial level but never fully engaging. Strake wondered if it was the same when he'd been a student, that the bare minimum was acceptable instead of below average—as with most nostalgia, he wondered if his memories were tinged with what he wanted the past to be instead of what it actually was. Warner's performances on the analytical paper and mid-term showed promise, but he seemed to pull them off without really trying, like he'd rather coast to a B+ than work for the A. The young man looked up and gave a curt nod to Strake before turning his attention to the class.

"When you buy milk or eggs or orange juice, isn't it nice to be able to check the label to see how long the product is good for? If you're like me, you use the expiration date as a guideline instead of a mandate." An image appeared on the screen behind him, a close-up of the printed expiration date on a gallon of milk. "But what if it was perfectly accurate? What if the company could provide you with the exact date the milk would go bad? Wouldn't that be preferable? Wouldn't that be more valuable information than what's currently available?"

Already, Strake recognized the potential. He wasn't sure where Warner was going, but the student had grabbed his interest. Young men and women who had been trying to sneak glances at their phones under their desks now sat up straighter and had their eyes focused on their classmate at the front. Maybe it would be as good as the woman who lived in a world without touch. Or maybe it would rival the world of the Bino.

The Bino presentation was that one glimmer of excellence, holding a mythic place in his memory. A video imagining a world where the race most discriminated against was the whites. And while the production values weren't high (the student filmed using her iPhone) and the idea wasn't, in itself, revolutionary, it was the little details and ramifications of the created world that set the presentation apart. The slur for whites was "Binos" and it was a term delivered with such bile and hatred that it was clear they lived at the bottom rung of society's hierarchy. Their white skin was viewed as "soft," unable to effectively deal with the sun's rays, and the society viewed their paleness as an analogy for emptiness and simplicity. Some Binos tried to "pass" by tanning their skin while others projected "white pride" by keeping themselves covered and protected at all times, trying to preserve the creaminess of their skin tone. The presentation closed with a black character agonizing over the decision to have a child with her white husband, concerned about the lightness of their future baby's skin and how much more difficult the child's life would be.

It had been given by one of his better students (but not one of the best) the third year he'd taught the course. For

a couple semesters after that, he showed the presentation to other classes to give an idea of what an "A" presentation looked like. But then, no surprise, about one third of the subsequent presentations focused on different racial groups being discriminated against, poor imitations of the original. Some even concluded with interviews of citizens thinking about having interracial children. It confirmed one of Strake's theories about his students: they didn't think creatively and critically. They searched for the proven template to get the best grade without having to struggle or wrestle or fight. The pursuit was of a formula and a right answer. And, of course, it wasn't all their fault—it was the way their elementary and high schools had trained them to deal with intellectual challenges.

"Ever wondered what the future holds? Maybe not wanting to know exactly what's going to happen, but having some areas of certainty? Like knowing exactly when that milk is going to turn? If so, this is the app for you." A mock-up of a home page appeared on the screen, text written over a skull and crossbones. "I give you . . . Expiration Date."

Warner pushed another button on the keyboard, animating a stick figure walking across the screen. It got almost to the center, bent over, collapsed, and died. But once prone, the figure lifted an arm and gave a thumbs up. If there was one area where students still occasionally impressed Strake, it was their comfort with the tech.

"Through our predictive algorithms and with the use of our quantum computing capabilities, our system can tell you the exact date . . . yes, you guessed it . . . of your death."

This is what Strake had in mind when he crafted the prompt for the presentation eight years earlier. Not the dozens of videos on global warming or the PowerPoints talking about overcrowding. This. Something that showed the student had taken what they'd read about and watched and talked about all semester and synthesized it into a unique, harsh, frightening potential future. Even though Warner was barely a minute into his presentation, Strake wrote an "A" in his notes next to the student's name.

"Of course, it's comforting to believe in those concepts of free will and personal choice, but we've found that when enough predictive data is accumulated, Expiration Date is

99.996% accurate in predicting your DOD (or Date of Death). It's not about telling the future. It's about organizing trillions of pieces of data effectively."

As Warner continued, explaining the mechanics of his fictional app, Strake looked around the classroom. Almost all of the students' faces were engaged and attentive, a few mouths open, like when he checked their attention during a particularly jolting scene in a Black Mirror episode.

"It's true that, for some, the news will be less rosy. But we encourage you to examine that cup as if it were half full. If you only have fifteen months to live, wouldn't you rather know that fact? Wouldn't knowing your DOD change the way you live your life? Would you really spend those months working toward your degree knowing you'd die four months before graduation? Or would you drop out and travel more, spend time with your family and loved ones, make sure you filled those last days with as much of the positive as possible?"

Of course, there was no way an app like the one described could actually work. But Warner understood realism wasn't the purpose of the exercise. It was about extrapolating the wants and desires of human beings to the nth degree and realizing a portion of the ugliness and selfishness and baseness.

"And for those who get good news . . . those who learn they have fifty or sixty years left . . . well, forget about skydiving or rock climbing," Warner waved a hand to the side dismissively, batting away those inadequate suggestions. "That's entry level thinking. Want to see if that sports car can actually hit one thirty on the Mass Pike? Give it a try! And while you're at it, don't worry about the discomfort of those pesky seat belts. Some one else might get hurt while you hurtle down the highway, but Expiration Date has already guaranteed your safety." A few appreciative chuckles meandered through the classroom. "Hell, take it even further. Want to jump off the south rim of the Grand Canyon? Before Expiration Date, an idea like that might sound like certain death. But now, the app virtually guarantees it won't happen for years. So, whether it means an inflatable cushion will miraculously catch you at the bottom or you'll sustain serious, but not fatal injuries, you can rest assured the fall won't kill you."

It energized Strake, a jolt of adrenaline. The experience forced him to consider how long it had been since he'd felt it before. To have a student so effectively grab hold of the exercise, using the texts and conversations from the semester to create something unique and powerful and thought-provoking—maybe he had made the right choice professionally. Maybe he was making a difference. Maybe his classes weren't just required intermediate liberal arts electives that students rolled their eyes over and expected to be easy. Or maybe this was the apex, the pinnacle. And it would be all downhill from here.

"In fact," Warner continued, "I decided to give a live representation of what Expiration Date could do. I began inputting information for members of this class. And a funny thing happened. The more names I input, the more it continued."

Warner clicked on the keyboard again and white numbers appeared in the middle of a black screen. It took Strake a moment to recognize the configuration of the date. There were several chuckles in the classroom, and a couple students turned to see their professor's reaction, wondering how they should respond.

"As you can see, when I put all of your names into the app, the same date came up. Today." Warner began to slowly unbutton the flannel shirt, working from the bottom up. "At first, I wondered if there was a glitch. But then I realized, as usual, the system was 99.996% reliable. I just couldn't see how it made sense at first."

The right hand went up. To Strake, it looked like one of the clickers the contestants held on his beloved Jeopardy, the instrument they used to buzz in. But then Warner pulled back one side of his unbuttoned shirt and stepped out from behind the computer podium. They looked like triple-sized sticks of butter, the wrapped blocks going around his midsection. The vest could be fake, Strake first thought. Or it could be real. It didn't take long for the uproar to begin.

Time slowed. A scream. Male. A commotion at the back of the room. Turning, Strake could see six or seven students straining at the door. Somehow, Warner must have locked or jammed it. Students were looking back toward Strake's corner,

tears in their eyes, seeking guidance or protection. As if he had any control over the whole thing. A couple pairs stood up and hugged each other, eyes squinched shut. Others were flat on the ground or under their desks. There was a communal wail—Strake was sure it could be heard outside. And the smell—the body odor of primal terror, sour and pungent. The woman who had given the prior presentation was running around in circles by the side whiteboard, sobbing. I guess she's not so concerned about pollution now, Strake thought.

The front of the class had receded from Warner, students distancing themselves by slinking toward the back of the room. Strake continued to take it all in. He thought it was of interest. No one was confronting Warner or charging. He wondered how Professor Giroux over in Psychology would explain the phenomenon. If one attacked, would others follow? What was going through the group's communal hive mind? Was it self-preservation? Or some form of bystander effect? Granted, they likely wouldn't get there in time to stop him. But the gut reaction of the entire class was to retreat instead of attack. Fascinating.

Had Warner crossed a line? Would there be disciplinary action if it was all fake? Of course. But the presentation would still earn an A. If he ever got to enter the grade. What a waste it would be for this performance to not get the benefit of its judgment. But was the presentation about more than a grade? Had Strake crossed a line, too? Did he have a preference as to whether or not the device was real?

A student two seats in front of Strake raised a desk and tried to throw it through the window. It produced a crack in the glass, but bounced back into the young man's chest, knocking him down onto his rear end, the surprise clearly evident in his expression. Warner remained standing at the front of the room, detonator (or whatever prop it was) still raised high in the air like a lighter at a rock concert. He looked Strake straight in the eye, the smile wide across his face. And he winked.

For the first time in years, maybe since the Bino, Strake was eager to see how the presentation would finally end. Either way.

Chelsea Dodds

Float

Paul leads me to a clearing in the woods, what I think will be a sweeping vista revealing the first brassy hues of autumn foliage in the distance. Instead we walk onto a giant slab of trap rock, a platform on the edge of a cliff overlooking the municipal reservoir, splash rings visible below from recent jumpers.

The boys in my math class talk about this place all the time. It's illegal to jump into the reservoir, so they just tell their parents they're going hiking or dirt biking. The woods out here are so expansive, the up-and-down trail so demanding on the knees, that no one's parents would dare follow them all the way to the cliff.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Paul turns to me and asks. His green eyes beg me to be impressed.

"We're very . . . high," I say, cringing at the word choice. To my relief, Paul just laughs.

"I can't believe you've never been here. You live so close."

There are a lot of things Paul probably wouldn't believe about me. Like how I can't have a social life because my mom won't let me get in a car with anyone who's had their license for less than a year, but she also won't let me hang out with anyone who is more than a year older than me. I've spent most of my free time in high school sitting in my room, playing guitar and trying not to be bored while Mom works three jobs to pay the rent.

Paul's only had his license for five months, but he picked me up for our hike since my house is on the way. I texted Mom and said I was walking to the library to meet up with a partner for a group project. When I was in middle school, I watched as my older brother got in trouble for going skateboarding with a friend after dark. Mom accused him of buying drugs and took away his phone for a month. If that's the punishment for telling the truth, I'm afraid of what might happen if I tell a small lie, so this is the first one I've made.

But Paul doesn't know any of this. He especially doesn't

know he's the first boy I've liked enough to break my mom's rules for. All he knows is I get straight 100s on my Spanish quizzes and I don't try to be noticed by boys. No make up, no fancy hair products or highlights. Mom probably couldn't afford any of that anyway if I asked.

"Paul!" another voice shouts from below. We both turn and look to see Jeremy, one of the boys from math, and his girlfriend Julia, climbing up a series of boulders rising out of the reservoir. Water drips from their hair and faces. Jeremy's shirtless and Julia is in a bra and track shorts. I can see goosebumps covering their arms and stomachs by the time they reach us, even though the late afternoon sun is hot through my black T-shirt.

"Hi Sierra," they each say when they see me. I've never seen either of them outside of school before and the way they avert their eyes when I say hi back tells me they are also aware of this fact.

Paul and Jeremy talk while Julia grabs a towel hanging off a nearby tree branch and dries herself, then lays the towel out and sits down. She looks at the boys and then at her phone.

"Do you want to jump?" Paul asks me.

"I—um," I stammer, feeling a hole form in the pit of my stomach and widen, growing arms and legs to rip the rest of me open and pull me under. "I didn't bring a bathing suit."

I mean, it's not a lie. I'm still wearing what I wore to school today: Screaming Females T-shirt, jeans, old dusty black Vans.

"None of us will care if you jump in your underwear," Julia offers.

I shake my head.

"You sure?" Paul asks.

"Yeah. Maybe next time." I try to sound optimistic, but who knows if there will be a next time, if he'll want to go anywhere with me again if he discovers the real reason I won't jump.

"Okay," Paul says. He glances at Jeremy and then back at me. "I'm just gonna jump once, okay? Then we can go if you want."

I nod and sit down a little ways from Julia, try not to stare as Paul sets his backpack down, then takes off his shoes and shirt, his back muscles pronounced from years of competitive

swimming. When he asked if I wanted to go for a hike after school, I didn't know we'd be coming *here*, that his friends would also be here. I thought he wanted to just hang out with me, talk more than we ever have time to at school or on Snapchat, not jump off a stupid rock into water that will eventually wind up in my kitchen faucet. Plenty of people don't know what's in their drinking water. Apparently in this town, it's the sweat and tears of daredevil teenagers.

I scoot up to the edge of the cliff with nervous anticipation to watch Jeremy jump, then Paul, their bodies shrinking as they fall farther and then disappear under the blue surface. I try to count the rings around the spot where Paul goes under, thinking that like the rings of a tree tell us how old it is, maybe the rings around the spot where a body goes underwater can tell how deep they've gone. Except there's too many rings to count, and from up on the cliff, they kind of all blur together.

"Don't get too close to the edge," Julia warns, looking up from her phone. "That's a good fifty-foot drop. Maybe sixty."

As she talks, I hear a splash, and look down to see Paul resurface. He waves to me before he starts swimming back to land, and I wave back, trying to think of anything comparable fifty or sixty feet tall, wondering what it must feel like to fall through the air and trust the water to catch you.

I've known Paul since sixth grade, when the three elementary schools in our town merged into one middle school, but we didn't talk much until this year when we wound up in three classes together. We mostly chat about music and compare grades, him never able to match my grade in Spanish and me never able to match him in science. In English, we're pretty even. The other friends I talk to at school say we would make a cute couple, but I'm too shy to try initiating anything and I don't quite know if he reciprocates my feelings. And then there's the whole not being allowed to ever go places.

Paul stops to say hi at my locker on the way from lunch to science. It's the day after the hike and I've ignored him all morning, worried he probably thinks I'm super lame for not jumping.

Instead he says, "Sorry if that wasn't really your thing yesterday. I'm never really sure where else to suggest hang

outs besides, like, the bowling alley."

I shut my locker and readjust my backpack straps, look him straight in the eyes. "It's fine. Hiking is totally my thing."

"Well I already got the hint that jumping off a cliff is not." We walk side-by-side down the hall. "It's okay if you're afraid of heights."

"Oh. It's not the heights."

Paul stops outside the classroom door. "What is it, then?"

"I can't tell you." I feel a hole forming in my stomach again.

"Why not?"

"It's embarrassing," I hiss, not wanting anyone else in the crowded hallway to hear me.

"I doubt it's embarrassing, Sierra."

I like the way my name sounds when he says it, each syllable given equal emphasis, but it's still not enough for me to acquiesce. The bell rings and we walk inside the classroom, sit down at our respective seats a couple rows away from each other. Our teacher begins by reviewing yesterday's lesson, but neither of us really pays attention, stealing glances at each other whenever she turns to write something on the board. He mouths "tell me," and I just shrug, watching his forehead crease in concern.

In the second half of class, we do a lab. Paul and I are partners, and once we've moved into the lab room I figure there's enough noise going on with the clanking of beakers and chatter of classmates that no one is going to eavesdrop.

"If I tell you," I say as I lay out our materials, "you have to promise not to tell anyone."

"My lips are sealed," he says. He even mimes zipping his lips and throwing away the key.

I look around the room and then lean closer to the table. "I can't swim," I whisper.

Paul is quiet for a moment. "Like, you never learned, or you're just bad at it?"

"I never learned."

He starts adding ingredients to one of the beakers. "Why were you afraid to tell me?"

"Because you're on the swim team!" I blurt out, and immediately feel my face go red in fear of other people hearing me. "That's like, your thing."

Paul continues to set up the experiment. We're supposed to add different ingredients to beakers of water and test each one's density. I usually write down the observations and let Paul do the actual experimenting.

"I could teach you," he says.

I look up from the notes and envision a parks and rec style class, where it's me and half a dozen five-year-olds who all pick up treading water way faster than I do. "No one else can see us. Or know."

Paul laughs. "Yeah, you've made that pretty clear. I know a couple places where we won't be seen. Just bring a bathing suit this time."

"Okay," I agree, unsure whether to be excited to hang out with him alone or terrified of making an absolute fool of myself.

Paul adds the last ingredient to the last of the three beakers and hands me the rubber stoppers. We have to record whether the stopper floats or sinks in each substance. I roll them over in my hands and then drop one in the first beaker, wincing as it makes contact with the liquid, as if I'm the one on trial.

Paul picks me up the following evening at 7:00, when it's starting to get dark and we'll have less of a chance of being seen anywhere. Mom won't be home for three more hours. This time I don't text her with a fake alibi at all, since after the hike she questioned why my sneakers were so dirty, so I decide not to risk it tonight. We ride for a while in silence, while I alternate between staring at my fingernails and admiring the purple and orange sky out the window.

"So what's the story behind you never learning to swim? If there is one?" He fiddles with the radio, even though it's turned so low I can't really hear it.

I shrug. "My mom doesn't know how to swim, either."

"Does your dad?"

"Yeah, but I haven't lived with him since I was little. My mom was going to pay for lessons at the Y when they were still married, but he said not to waste her money and that he would just teach me."

"And that never happened?"

"Nope. My mom's friend told me once that I almost drowned

when I was little, but I don't remember it."

Paul's eyes go wide. "What? How? Were your parents there?"

"I don't know the whole story. Just that I apparently fell into my grandma's pool and my mom's friend saved me. I was like two or three."

"And your parents never mentioned that to you?"

"No," I say, though I hadn't really thought about how odd that was until now.

"Jesus," Paul says.

I say nothing and keep my eyes glued to the window. Vines suffocate a fading sign from a long-abandoned dairy farm, the grass underneath overgrown and morose, almost blue in the fading light.

We pull into the parking lot of the elementary school Paul attended, and he parks in the spot farthest from the road. On our left, tall street lamps illuminate a newer but empty handicap-accessible playground. In the summer, teenagers take over the playground at night, some high, others just holding onto a false sense of childhood nostalgia. I came here once at midnight while on a sleepover at a friend's house who lives nearby. We sat cross-legged underneath the wobbly bridge and played Never Have I Ever. Turns out, I've never done much of anything.

"Is this one of those scenarios where the pool on the roof rumor is actually true?" I ask as we get out of the car and I hug my towel to my chest.

Paul laughs. "I wish. We are actually going out there." He points to the tree line on our right, away from the school and playground.

I follow him a few feet into the woods and stop when we reach a shallow brook, snaking through the trees and out towards the direction of the road. It doesn't look like it could be more than a couple feet deep.

"We're going to swim in this?"

"Not quite." He sits down and takes off his shoes, rolls up his khaki cargo pant legs. "Before you can learn to swim, you have to learn to float."

I look at the water with apprehension as I place my towel on the ground and strip down to my bikini, the only bathing

suit I own. I'm fine wearing it around my girl friends, but I'm suddenly feeling extra self conscious, as if Paul can see too much of me, inside and out. I can't look him in the eyes.

"Um, you can just sit in the water to start," he says. His voice cracks a little while I step into the creek and sit, pull my knees up to my chest, instantly shivering when my body touches the water.

Paul sits on the grass so his legs are still in the water, but he is closer to me. "Okay. You'll want to sit with your legs straight out. Relax. Pretend you're in your bathtub."

I follow his directions, try to focus on my breathing, but it's hard when I'm distracted by the buzzing of insects I cannot see. Every time a car passes in the distance, I worry it's the police who will bust us for trespassing, or worse, someone from school who might expose my secret.

"Lean your head back," he continues. "Like, not so your face is underwater, but your hair should touch at least."

The water feels coldest when I lean back and it laps onto my cheeks.

"Do your legs feel like they want to come up?"

"Sort of?" I say. I take a deep breath and let them go limp, let them float closer to the surface.

"Okay, so now the hard part: you have to do the same thing with your butt."

"How?" I ask, looking directly at him for the first time since before I got into the water. My legs pull themselves back to the bottom of the creek, frustration overcoming embarrassment.

"The same way you did with your legs. Just relax and concentrate."

"What if I lose my concentration and sink under the water?"

"It's not deep enough for you to actually drown. And I'll catch you if you do start to sink."

His face looks serious when he says this, so I nod and then turn my attention to my legs, try to get my toes to pierce through the water's surface. I close my eyes, let my arms rest on top of the water, and focus on my breathing. As soon as I feel my bottom begin to lift, some type of panic button goes off in my brain and I start to roll over on my side, my right arm and leg grasping for solid ground. When I'm back in a sitting position, I look at Paul who looks at me with his

brow furrowed. It takes me a moment to realize I am nearly hyperventilating.

"What happened?" he asks.

"I thought I was drowning," I say, and then look down at the water and realize how stupid I sound.

He moves a little closer, and if I was braver, I could reach out and touch his face. "I won't let you drown. I'll catch you, okay?"

I nod, trying to memorize the freckles on the bridge of his nose I had never noticed against his tan skin. I take another deep breath and relax my arms and legs, but my eyes are open this time, focusing on Paul as well. He reaches his arms out towards the water, ready to spot me, as if I were climbing a mountain and actually in real danger. As I will the rest of my body to relax and become light, he leans forward, not unlike the way he leaned into his cliff jump a couple days ago. I am aware of his closeness, how we are almost close enough to kiss, but all I can think is that I want to be suspended in this water and in this moment, forever on the brink of everything that could be.

Michael Sadoff

The Day I Saw Janis

This might be my last chance to see her, I was thinking that day when the gear shifter on my old Beetle broke off. I was in the far-left lane on the Bay Bridge, the broken shifter in my hand, my foot on the clutch, the car in neutral and starting to decelerate. My friend Vic was in the passenger seat singing along to The Byrds on the radio, crooning "A time to laugh, a time to weep." He didn't notice what was happening and just kept singing, so I held the metal bar out to him.

He stopped midline and said, "Far out man." He was my old fraternity brother from Brooklyn College and part of the reason I had moved to California. Someone I couldn't help but follow. He rolled down his window, leaned his head out and waved at the other drivers, his hair gyrating in the wind. "Get back! We gotta pull over!" He turned to me. "You got it now. Quick."

I cut across three lanes and rolled to a stop, horns blasting behind us. San Francisco perched above the water in a halo of overcast sky, beckoning.

I pulled up the parking brake, climbed across the front seats and squeezed out of the passenger side. A tailpipe somewhere backfired. Light flashed across steel beams. Traffic merged from four lanes to three, and I thought, where the hell did the time go? It felt like I'd only moved here yesterday. Except that was 1967, and this was 1969, and the times they had a-changed.

Not for the better. Still the war raged. Utopia had failed to materialize.

Outside the car, the stench of exhaust and gasoline started to make me dizzy, like I was levitating, and my eyes watered from the glare off the bay. People swore at us through their windows. "These people are out of their freaking minds," said Vic. He had chestnut brown hair and a beard, which grew shaggier as the war dragged on. It had been years since I'd last seen the divot of his pointy chin.

He was still clean cut when my wife and I moved out

here. We would go on double dates or to parties. Back then, we thought street marches and folk songs would make a difference. You could feel the energy in the air. Then, Leslie got pregnant with our daughter, and Nixon got elected. The party was over, for me anyway. Wouldn't you know I'd get one night out and have car trouble.

Vic leaned into the road waving for help. You would never try this in New York City. In California, a light blue Ford Fairlane coupe stopped, and a woman with long, straight hair and a plaid button-down called through the window in a sing-song voice, "You guys can ride with us."

Inside the car smelled of menthol cigarettes. A raspberry blond, Robert Redford looking dude in a gray suit was driving. He pulled into the next lane and with patience broke loose from the traffic snarl. He made eye contact with me through the rearview and asked where to drop us off.

"Can we go back to 1967?" I asked.

"I never heard of 1967," he said. "Sounds quaint."

"Dennis here remains steadfast in the 50s," said the woman. "He even kept the suit." She ran her hand down his jacketed arm. "Show them your elbow patches, Denny." A dimple appeared on her cheek as she grinned at me and batted her blue eyes.

As far as I could remember, no woman had ever batted eyes at me, not even my wife. I thought it only happened in movies.

Most of my life, I had done basically what I ought to have done and what people expected. I had fallen for Leslie in college and had married, a little earlier than intended, but there was the deferment. I taught elementary school and worked on my graduate degree and every Sunday morning would put little Cynthia into her carrier and stroll to the park.

"Give me your hand," said the woman in the car. She was a rosy-cheeked California doll. No make-up required. Chiseled nose, girlish grin, perfect teeth. A picture of innocence.

Before moving to California, I hadn't known that women like this existed. I had never even seen a woman get her hair wet in the swimming pool.

"Come on," she sang.

"I'll give you my hand," said Vic.

"Not you, silly. Not that you aren't cute."

Her hand felt cool when I took it. She said to call her Kat and asked my name. “It’s okay to want things for yourself, Henry. You know that, right?”

“He doesn’t know that,” said Vic. “You need to tell him what he wants. It won’t occur to him otherwise.”

Dennis cleared his throat. “Sounds like a grave responsibility.”

The tires rumbled on the ramp to Fifth Street. Kat rolled up her window against the cool, damp air of downtown San Francisco, and we rode past Rincon Hill’s abandoned factories and warehouses.

Twenty-seven years of my life had gone by already. Still young, I know, but it all happened too fast, and no one had ever asked me what I wanted. One day I was a kid collecting stamps, the next I was someone’s dad.

“I take it very seriously,” said Kat. “I only want what Henry wants.”

“You may be waiting awhile to find out,” said Vic.

She studied my face. “He wants love.”

“He wants to watch baseball,” said Dennis.

It was a good guess. I had been a Giants fan since they were the New York Giants, and they were playing the Padres that day at Candlestick. Anyway, the Braves had already clinched it, and what I wanted that night was to hear Janis sing the blues. I had always loved the blues, and she was the real deal. She could sing away all that longing and regret.

We were stuck in traffic again. I didn’t know what to do. The plan had been Chinese food and the show at Fillmore West. My car was back there on the bridge, and the concert was at eight. I needed to call a tow truck. On Market Street, women in flared pants crowded the crosswalks.

“I can drop you gents off at the next payphone if that works.”

Vic was watching the girls. “Sure, anywhere.”

Kat pressed in the cigarette lighter and fished a pack of Newports from her handbag. “I think we should invite them along.”

After a moment, Dennis said, “I don’t think they would satisfy the dress requirements.” She smiled and swatted him on the shoulder. When the lighter popped out, she lit her cigarette and cracked her window as she exhaled. Menthol

billowed through the car.

"Where you two heading?" asked Vic.

Dennis and Kat glanced at each other, a secret in the air. Her cheeks colored, and he began to hum "Ode to Joy."

She took another drag from her cigarette and peeked back at me, fully blushing now. I was craving a smoke too, even if they were menthols. I thought maybe the two of them were going to a love-in and that Kat wanted me to join her. I felt like I was on a carnival ride.

"Do you mind if I have one of those?" I asked. I had quit smoking the year before when Cynthia was born.

Kat lit another cigarette off the end of hers and handed it to me. The menthol cooled my throat. The clouds opened, and sunlight splashed across the street scene. Truth be told, I had never made it with a total stranger. Not that I hadn't thought about it before.

"I have grass," said Vic.

Dennis hung a right and started up a side street. "Always good to bring a party favor."

"We don't want to crash your party," I said.

"Nonsense," said Kat.

We stopped at a traffic light, where a mustachioed man in a skintight leather vest crossed the street singing in a falsetto.

The city got weirder every time I went there. It felt like I was missing all the excitement. I spent most of my time at home or in the classroom.

"Let's check out the party," said Vic.

There were warmup acts playing that night. I wondered if maybe we could stop by the party, leave in time to catch Janis and worry about the car later. But how would I get to work in the morning? And what would I tell Leslie about the car? "I don't think so," I said.

Kat pouted her lips.

"Come on, stop in for a drink," said Dennis. "We'll pretend it's 1967."

We arrived at an enormous brick home in Pacific Heights with views of downtown and the bay, its pastel blue water dotted with sails. Kat smiled, bittersweet it seemed, like she was remembering something great that would never

happen again or maybe imagining something that would never happen in the first place. “At least come inside and use the telephone.”

“I definitely want to use the phone in this place,” said Vic admiring the facade. “Get you unstuck, right?”

Inside, The Mamas & the Papas sang from a record player. Men wore dark suits or checkered blazers, and the ladies bell bottom pants and crop tops. A woman in a black cocktail dress and tiara greeted us, kissing Dennis and Kat on the cheeks. “Where did you get these two young men?” she asked, spilling drops from a martini glass. “They’re so authentic.”

“Yes, very authentic,” said Dennis. “We found them on the Bay Bridge.”

“How serendipitous. I’m Bianca. Would either of you like a drink?”

“I’d love some red wine,” said Vic. He held his hand up before I could answer. “My friend drinks whiskey on the rocks.”

“Oh, a real man’s drink,” said Bianca gazing up at me.

“Should I have worn a jacket?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about that. That’s what the men wore when I started throwing these parties. Times changed, but they kept wearing the suits.” She pinched a lock of Vic’s hair. “Until you two rebels showed up.” She smiled and turned to get our drinks. Dennis and Kat had already started mingling.

“We’re only staying for one,” I said to Vic.

“I know.”

“We shouldn’t be here.”

“It’s like the song. There’s a season for everything, a time for every purpose under heaven.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not what they meant.”

“I know what they meant, and you know I want peace more than anyone, but there’s also a time to love, and this is that time.”

In the living room by the picture window, we drank and smoked grass. “You should have been at Monterey,” Vic was saying for what felt like the fiftieth time. “Holy smokes. Hendrix. It was like a UFO came and flew us to outer space.”

Dennis crinkled his nose. “Hendrix is a great showman,

but we're not talking about real musicality. These hacks can't even read music."

"Dennis listens to classical," said Kat, "so when Hendrix learns to make UFO sounds from an oboe or clarinet, it may pique his interest."

People were slipping upstairs or down the hallway in pairs or in threesomes.

I drifted off to find a bathroom. No one answered the knock, so I pushed it open. A man was on the commode with his sleeve rolled up and a band around his arm. Sweat dotted his face and stained his armpits. "It's occupied," he said. I closed the door and hung out there in the hallway, waiting for my turn to use the john. The counterculture was rotting from the inside.

Kat appeared in the hallway. "Oh, dear. You seem a bit stressed."

"I have to pee and this guy's taking a while."

The toilet flushed, and he came out looking pale. Blond hair stuck to his forehead. "The lock is broken." He rounded the banister and trudged zombie-like upstairs.

When I came out, she was still standing there, a little sheepish. She leaned against the wall with her fingers in her jean pockets. Turned her face to the side and grinned, narrowing her eyes. "Would you like to fool around?" She came closer until our lips almost touched.

If I could just undo the top button of her shirt, maybe it would be enough. "My lady and me. We're a steady thing."

She spoke softly in my ear. "You shouldn't limit yourself. So many great friends and beautiful people. Love is everywhere." My heart raced when she took my hand. She kissed my cheek and whispered. "Such a sweet man. I only want to give you something to remember me by." She led me to the stairway.

Letting myself get pulled along. "I think maybe this is wrong."

"But here you are and here I am and what a wonderful accident. It's really the right sort of wrong, don't you think?" She led me upstairs and down the hall, opening a door that was ajar. Inside, a couple was balling on a four-poster bed. "Oops, sorry," she said casually and closed it. At the next door, a girl in a cherry red tunic dress and ripped white stockings

slipped out, her Mary Jane shoes in hand. She wasn't more than eighteen.

"Hey, baby, where you heading?" asked a shirtless man from inside.

"I told you I wasn't into this," she slurred.

"What's the matter, you don't like me?" His voice set me on edge.

Kat glanced over her shoulder at me looking unsure.

Patchouli overtook the dim hallway, and a woman in a paisley dress and headband appeared from inside the room, nudging the guy out of the way. A motherly expression on a sun-weathered face. "What's the matter, honey?"

"I want to go home," said the girl.

"Let's talk about it inside and let these nice people go by."

The girl sniveled and looked at her feet.

"She said she wants to go home," I said.

The shirtless guy popped his mophead into the hallway. He had a red bandana around his neck. "Hey, you Big Brother or something?"

"Just a concerned citizen."

"You look like a square to me." His big brown belt was the only thing holding up his pants.

"Let her go home."

The girl turned to me wide-eyed, her pupils dilated. "Big Brother?" she said.

I was a vessel drifting without instruments. "Just trying to help," I said.

"Yeah? Well, get lost," said the woman in the paisley dress.

"Come on, Henry, let's go," said Kat.

"Henry," said the shirtless guy. "Look at you, cool cat. What's the matter? Think your shit doesn't stink? We're all trying to get our rocks off here, right?"

Growing up in Canarsie, Brooklyn, I'd defended myself against some tough guys, and this twerp didn't scare me. I inched closer. "Say another word to me."

Heads poked out of doors to see what was happening. I had marched for peace seven times and now I wanted to rearrange this guy's face.

And there it was. *I wanted*. Wanted to bang a foxy blonde. Wanted to hang loose at the party. Wanted to smoke

cigarettes and drink whiskey. Wanted to hear Janis Joplin sing the blues. Wanted to punch this loser in the nose. The anger tasted metallic. Kat tried to take my hand again, but I pulled away.

The shirtless guy's crooked mouth formed a smirk, and he squinted, one eye smaller than the other. He had a faded scar on his cheek like the threads on a baseball. "Hey, man, don't flip your wig," he said. "Come on, babe," he said to the girl. "Let's hang out." He took her by the elbow and started to lead her back into the room.

I aimed for the scar when I threw the punch. The pain shot to my elbow. The woman in the paisley dress shrieked. The girl ran out of there. He hadn't seen the punch coming and wobbled sideways to the opposite wall twisting like a rubber band. He steadied himself, straightening to face me, no longer smirking. Lowered his shoulder and lunged, slamming us both against the wall. I heard my head thud against plaster. He spun away before I could hit back.

When he came at me again, I grabbed the stupid bandana from around his neck and yanked it. He went bug-eyed and gagged, his hands going to my wrist. How easily I could snap his neck. What was I doing? I let go. That's when they pulled us apart.

Half-dressed people were in the hallway. Most had only seen when I nearly choked the guy. A welt formed on his cheek. People came to his aid. He panted but looked satisfied. Tears ran down Kat's rosy cheeks. Bianca's face, which earlier had been flushed with booze and giddiness, was colorless. She looked at me in astonishment. "I have to ask you to leave," she said apologetically.

"Ah, Hank," said Vic. "What did you do?"

I beelined for the front door. Kat tried to follow, but I shook her off. I was a married man and a father and shouldn't have been there in the first place.

The sun was setting, its orange fingers stroking the bay's water. I crossed the street and sat at the curb. At least I had gotten out of there without cheating on my wife, however ungracefully. My hand was starting to throb, my left shoulder too from where he threw me against the wall. A knot was

rising on the back of my head. That dirtbag was still inside milking it for sympathy.

I barely noticed when the signal red Triumph TR turned onto Divisadero and started speeding down the hill. The sound of its engine drew my attention. Gorgeous car. Its top was down, the driver in a plaid golf hat and wrap-around sunglasses, gaining speed.

And that's when the girl in the ripped stockings stumbled from between two parked cars down the street. The Triumph careened toward her, me jumping up and waving my hands, shouting for him to stop. Tires screeched. The car skidded a few feet from where she stood oblivious. Burnt rubber filled the air.

"What are you doing?" the driver yelled at her. "Are you crazy?"

She looked at me like maybe she knew me from somewhere. Then she realized what had almost happened and the color drained from her face.

"Come on, let's get you off the road," I said and started to lead her away.

"What in god's name?" said the guy in the sports car. He had a clean shave and a buttoned-up polo shirt with stripes down the front. His tailpipe made little puttering sounds. Seemed like he cared more about his car than he did about people.

I shook my head and went back to helping the girl, who shuffled to the sidewalk, her stockings threadbare, her shoes nowhere to be seen. The last few rays of sunshine poked at us from between two houses.

"This is why I don't like hippies," said the guy in the car.

This, from a man who wears leather driving gloves. "I'm not a hippie. I'm a teacher. And you're a pretentious asshole."

He shook his head and grabbed his perfectly intact gear shifter. "To hell with you." He sped away, sticking in first gear too long so the engine revved. He rolled through a stop and cruised toward the bay, shrinking to a tiny red speck and dipping below a ridge.

The girl gazed into the sky. "The light's so beautiful," she said. She had paper flowers in her hair. She turned to me with wonder, her pupils like two dark caves. "I almost died." She

started to sob.

Vic was outside now too, standing across the street. I had no idea how long he'd been there. "I see you're still winning friends and influencing people," he said. He crossed the road. "I called a garage in Oakland. They'll tow your car if it's still there."

"I'm glad you got to use the telephone. I heard it was nice."

He squinted at me with bloodshot eyes. He had been a good friend for almost a decade, but I'd relied on him too much, believing that life for him was somehow easier. It wasn't true. He wanted to live in a world where all that mattered was your soul. Wanted to find bliss. Wanted to love lots of women and for them to all love him back. Wanted to end the war. Wanted the will of the righteous and the power of good to overcome greed and evil. He'd be disappointed. The false promise of drugs, the bad habits that eventually caught up with him. "What happened to you in there?" he asked.

"Figured out what I wanted."

"Yeah? Did you get it?"

"Some things were mutually exclusive." I didn't explain.

It had been my choice to get married and have a kid. I needed to stand by that decision and couldn't go through life wondering how it happened or letting other people lead me around. Every minute of every day, I had to decide for myself what kind of man I wanted to be.

The girl was slumped now on the sidewalk. I squatted down and talked to her. Her name was Sandy. She lived just north of the Fillmore District and couldn't remember how she'd gotten to the party. We rode the bus with her and eventually found the three-story apartment on Pierce Street where she lived with her parents. At least one good thing would come out of the day. "Tell your mom you have a headache and go crash," Vic advised.

She wrapped her boney arms around me. "Thank you," she whispered and turned toward the gracious Victorian with its yellow spire, walking up the front steps and through the wooden door to whatever life she would end up living.

When we arrived at Fillmore West, a crowd was waiting to get through the door. They had moved the venue the

previous year to Van Ness in what used to be the Carousel Ballroom. I remember a bored looking copper, his hand on his nightstick, his mind elsewhere. I can still picture the auditorium with its glass chandeliers, wooden balconies and velvet curtains.

Janis was late taking the stage that night, and everyone got restless. They started stomping and shouting her name. I thought maybe she was too high to perform. Finally, the lights dimmed, and she strutted out and broke into an Eddie Floyd song, a horn section blowing behind her. Her eyes were rolling back in her head, and she stumbled when she tried to dance. I wasn't sure if she would make it through the set, but she kept going like nothing else mattered.

Vic drank more booze and smoked grass during the show and after a while didn't look so good himself. His eyes were red slits. He was slurring and not making sense, and I had to steady him from falling at one point. He had that same look on his face like the girl at the party. Lost. At the mercy of others.

I guess everyone just wants to feel better in the moment no matter the cost.

When the show ended, the cool fresh air was a relief. Steam rose from our sweaty clothes, and billows of smoke escaped the front doors, catching in the intersection of Van Ness and Market and swirling in the cross breeze, while all of us stumbled bleary-eyed into the night. I had to lead the way for Vic and figure out our way home. I had never seen him this far gone. Finally, we pushed onto a crowded bus and rode back to Oakland together in silence.

They said Janis was past her prime. A junkie. A shadow of who she was in 1967. It was still the best show I ever saw. Even on a bad night, the woman could sing the blues like no other. Sure, maybe she was strung out. Maybe the whole thing seemed unreal to her like the day had seemed to me. One day she was a girl singing in the shower, the next she was a rock star. Still young, but everything had happened too fast, and no one had ever asked her what she wanted.

Jeannie Morgenstern

Francine

If I saw her again, this is what I'd tell her:

You had it coming.

I swear to God. That's what I'd say.

Sunk: That's what we all are.

Deep down I thought it was going to be the kitchen's crab legs that took me out. Maybe the water herself. I considered it could happen off stage, after the show—I'd bump into one of the creeps that lingered after our set, or maybe trip over the heels one of the gals left discarded in the hall—maybe even die on stage. It's not like it hadn't happened before. But it turned out not to be any of those.

I had survived a lot. That stupid conversation with Theo, which I'll get to. Storms, men, the rocking back and forth and back and forth, that one time the food spoiled because one of the guys left the main fridge open and everyone ate rot—that was a nightmare. But I was strong. I can tread water real good. But I guess it all caught up to me, made me weak like ocean foam. Francine caught me just as I was beginning to get tired, that's what happened. And now we're sunk, each and every one of us.

Sometimes people recognize me before the show and offer to buy me a drink—but when she walked up to me, she didn't offer to buy me a marg. She didn't give me those sad pitying eyes neither. She tapped me on the shoulder. Theo had gotten me so on edge with his stupid talk, she's lucky I didn't bop her right then and there.

Before I could do anything, she said, "You remember me—don't you?"

She had looked so eager. A smile splitting her face, and those deep, dark eyes. Made me wonder what toothy ocean creatures swam beneath.

"Don't you?" She tried again. She was brave, that Francine.

"I do," I lied.

I didn't know her at all. But perhaps she had been on this

circuit before, years ago. I thought I would remember seeing a beautiful woman like her, but—hey. Some people only get better with time. May we all be so lucky. Then she said she liked my top—a green, off the shoulder number. She said it reminded her of ice cream.

What else could I do? I cackled. Right in her face, you bet your ass I did. I didn't know why on this big blue earth she saw me with my typewriter teeth and decided she wanted more. Why she looked at me and thought, *that* is someone worth loving. I wanted to take her breath away, I could have drowned her—but no beautiful woman comes to the *Turquoise Escape* alone. Their problems usually follow them here.

After I collected myself, made sure my tatas were in their homes and my teeth in their gums, I turned around and walked off over to the dining corridor.

"Consider this conversation resolved," Theo called after me.

Consider this ass! But that would have been rude to call out—maybe not out on the deck, but I was already in the dining hall, which always felt a little like temple to me. The air tinkled with the sound of forks and knives. I've always loved that sound. Honestly, the thing I hate most about my job is that once me and Pinky and Goldy step onto that stage, people stop eating. Like they can't watch us and eat at the same time. I'd rather they just keep eating their food. It's not good cold. It's barely good warm—they do offer you a lot, though, I'll give them that.

It's a shit cruise. No other way to say it. We don't even go nowhere. That's the truth: people just come out here to float. I always thought it would be nice if we went from New York to Boston to Canada. See some bears or glaciers or some shit. Or we could go down south, go tropical, but I doubt the water is really that blue. Even if it was, it's probably ruined by now.

I always do the same plate. I've been here long enough to know my favorites. First, potatoes. A small mountain does it. Then a coral reef of buffalo wings, a yellow scoop of mac and cheese, a lake of ranch. Some broccolis planted around the edge. The girls always tell me to eat better, but I can't be bothered. I tell them fishes come in all different sizes, don't they? And besides, I saw what the spinach did to Goldy. Won't

forget that anytime soon.

I sat alone at a table in the back like always. I liked to scope out the audience before the show while the other girls did shots and made themselves throw up. It was a shame, but nothing I could do.

This crowd had looked pretty good; nothing out of the ordinary. Just a bunch of old people trying to squeeze something out of the time they had left, a few colorfully dressed families determined to make their children like them, a few sad, single dudes who shelled out money for this shit because they know the girls here can't run away. Why do they always wear the ugliest shit?

After I got settled, Francine came out from where she was peeking and sat at a table a few feet from me. I heard her order the oysters—she didn't strike me as an oyster gal, but what did I know? She thanked the waitress. I liked that—good character. She patted her hair—short, cropped close to her head, and real dark, like she had just dyed it. I did not wonder what color it originally was, but rather, why she had chosen such a somber color for a place such as this. Francine, dark, holding something close, a clam—that was how I came to know her. I didn't want to take from her. What I wanted to know was what she was thinking, planning, and perhaps even share with her my own story and maybe given her a kiss in the spot between her ear and neck where there was no hair, just soft skin and hard bone.

She hurried to the buffet once the waiter was out of sight. She smoothed her skirt while waiting in line like she was anxious. A seam along the side had split, like there was an actual body in there. She patted her hair again. Then, finally, she was able to grab a plate. It looked like the bottom of the ocean floor; I'm telling you I could see from my seat the amount of gravy she poured over her potatoes. Fried shrimps stuck out like bits of broken driftwood—but I'm not one to judge. My first year here, all I ate were stuffed mushrooms and crab legs. Couldn't get a word out of me until I was done.

She ate quickly. When her plate was clean, she hurried back to the buffet and refilled it. I wanted to point out that they have a fresh stack of dishes ready on the side for this very reason, but she was determined. This time her dish

exploded with lobster tails and creamed spinach and what looked like the chicken franchise. The waitress arrived with a huge platter of oysters. Francine picked one up and beamed, looking like a giant spotlight until a man sat down at her table. She knew him: her shoulders slumped inwards, glow dimmed. She pushed the plates—oysters and all—towards him, and handed over the oyster she had been bringing to her own lips. They did not speak. From over his shoulder, her eyes wandered around the room until landing on me.

I sauntered over to her table. She had a spot of gravy on her chin and I told her so.

"And you can stop staring."

"Oh." She wiped the splatter away from her skin and fiddled with her wrinkly fingers, not looking at me. "Sorry. I didn't mean to. I don't know what's gotten into me—"

"Everyone gets a little awestruck on their vacation," I smiled in a way I hoped was reassuring. "Did you have enough to eat?"

She turned to the man across from her. "Ted?"

"Oh, yes," Ted nodded and smiled. He was almost handsome. "Thank you."

"I'm not your waiter," I snapped. I smoothed my face. "I just wanted to make sure you were comfortable."

"Ted loves his oysters," Francine smiled back at me, though her eyes remained dark. Me and her, smiling, converted into this secret code. Her wrinkled fingers gripped at the tablecloth—she had strong arms. I imagined she came from a farm or owned a shop where she did all the heavy lifting. Maybe, I thought to myself, she brought him here to kill him.

"We're having a lovely time. I'm a little scared of the water, that's all," Francine said apologetically.

"I'm sure you'll forget about it soon enough. Most people are dazzled by the show."

Her fingers retracted from the table to her stomach. That dress was too tight on her.

"The show?"

"The gig. With the mermaids. *Moi*. That's French. It's part of the *Turquoise Escape* entertainment package. Didn't you get a brochure?"

"Oh, I don't know if—" Ted hesitated. "We're not interested—

Francine, you don't want to go to that."

"You're supposed to get a pamphlet upon entry. Whatever. You can come here in an hour and watch me. Might as well enjoy yourself, right? Relax a little. The sea won't get ya."

I winked, though not before casting a look around for Theo. A few weeks ago, he made us promise not to talk about shit like that with the passengers anymore.

"Act like we're in a giant floaty in a big pool. Or a bathtub," he said at our last group meeting. He really did say that. I swear, it's always the idiots that move up the rank. One of the chefs belched. Another asked if we should all take our clothes off.

"For Christ's sake!"

"Where are my bubbles, boss?"

"Hey!" I called to one of the waitresses. "You wanna go swimming? Take off your—"

"Shut up!" Theo cried. "Just don't scare our guests. No storms. No monsters. No *lore*. We are on vacation, *capiche*?" He shot me a look. "Back to work!" And that was that.

Francine looked up at me as Ted devoured what had been Francine's plate. "Are you—who do you play?"

"Who do I play? I'm one of the mermaids. Didn't I say that? The green one."

Ted slurped another oyster. I wanted to smack him.

"What's your name?" Francine asked.

"I don't have a name."

"Your name in real life."

"This is real life," I replied. "Come by at 8."

Her lips twitched. "Okay. I'm Francine."

"Okay, Francine. See you in a few."

I didn't really expect her to come. Ted didn't seem the type to want to watch a bunch of mermaids sing about love and pearls. Maybe he would have been interested in our last number—we were sponsored by some boring-ass company to do a circuit on extra-absorbency towels. We had to wear them during the whole act—what a shitshow, I tell you. What mermaid needs towels underwater? And they didn't even let us keep none at the end.

The music started. When we climbed out of our clamshell

and onto the stage, I wanted to turn right back around. The hot lights caught the green sequins of my top, plunging everyone's faces into nausea, and then they went to Pinky, dousing everyone in sunset, leaving me cold and dimmed. I did not see Francine—just strange eyes in stranger faces, staring. Boy, are men ugly. But then there she was, hovering in the doorway holding a new plate by her chin, shoulders up by her ears.

I sang with my mouth wide open and hurt my ears with how loud I was. Francine did not smile, holler, or clap. She went back and forth between chewing her food and staring.

Pinky shot me a look afterwards. "What's gotten into you? Can you even hear yourself? You just about blew out my eardrums," she spat. The lipstick on her teeth made her look like she had just taken a bite out of someone's cheek.

"Leave her alone," said Goldy. She turned to me. Gold eyeshadow flaked all over her face. "You're about close to retire, aren't you?"

"You'll find out when your daddy tells you," I retorted.

Pinky didn't laugh. Goldy's chuckling followed me from the dim hall out to the fresh air.

Francine stood on the deck, a damn chimney. She flicked the ash from her cigarette away with a thick finger. It splattered into falling stars that hissed upon hitting the water.

"Did you enjoy the show?"

She nodded and threw her cigarette overboard. "Can I tell you something?" She asked, still facing the water like she was in a movie. She probably didn't get around a lot. I pitied her. "Your voice is lovely."

Too many stories for this body. Loosen my strings, and we'd have more time. When I was young—believe it or not—we were hosting a get-together.

My daddy was sitting in his green chair, listening to my aunt tell some story. He looked so old, hunched over like that, barely even nodding. Everyone else was standing, holding their plates of cheese and crackers and laughing. All of a sudden, he sneezed real loud. His legs shot out before thudding back onto the floor and a big drop of silver spit hung out of his mouth. The cracker he had just been chewing spewed from his mouth. My aunt jumped and dropped her

olives. Seeing my daddy lower his head and try to suck his explosion back inside of himself made me feel the same way I felt as a young thing looking out at the sea, at its comings and goings that don't actually go nowhere.

My mama jumped into action.

"Go on and sing something for everyone," she had said. "I hear you in your room. She sings all the time," she explained, turning to our guests.

I was sure they could hear the tears in my voice. But afterwards, my aunt came up to me and asked me, same as Francine, like my time meant something to her: "Can I tell you something?"

I hung my head. I looked at my shoes, at my daddy's shoes.

"You have a beautiful voice." She really did say that.

"She'll be a siren when she's older," she said to the other adults. My mama let out that tight laugh of hers that meant the conversation needed to end. But I didn't mind. I was so happy, I decided right then and there that I'd become a singer. And I would always hold onto that blue feeling I got from that memory of my daddy hunched over, the shape of a shrimp, so every time I opened my mouth it would be with that beautiful voice my aunt so loved.

I made sure to look into Francine's eyes when I next spoke. They were dark as secret. "Come day after tomorrow. If you liked tonight, this next one will blow you away. There's always a special show on Wednesdays."

"Special?"

"Helps people get over the hump. Even on vacation. They start to think about returning to land."

She turned her eyes to the sky, as if contemplating what I said. "I'll be there. I love your outfit, by the way. Green is my favorite color. Like sea foam."

"Seafoam is shit white. Unless there's some kind of seafoam I don't know about."

She laughed.

"You've only been sweet to my clothes. Sweet talk me. Or something mean—call me out," I pouted.

"I can't," she stammered, mortified.

"Can't say I'm surprised." I took hold of her hand and pulled her towards the empty dining hall.

All they had left at that time of night was warm honeydew and the little tower of chocolates they put out to be fancy, though I knew they were just regular chocolates spray painted with a little airbrush full of blue paint.

I watched her pick up a chocolate. She didn't use the silver tongs they left next to the plate, and I didn't correct her.

"Tell me about yourself," I said.

"I'm just a lady on a ship. On vacation," she corrected herself.

"Why this one though?"

She laughed. "Do you really want me to start from the beginning?"

She placed her hand over mine. The chocolate on my tongue grew heavy. I had dreamt that it would be warm, but her palm was cold, dry. She pinched into me, softly, then harder, digging into the tender webbing between my thumb and pointer finger. When she stopped, there was a small blue moon there, almost like a bite mark.

That's how I'd like to remember her: black and blue chocolate in her teeth. Neither of us knowing nothing that would come. Honestly, it must have been love because I could have sat in that creaky chair all night and into dawn while the night crew vacuumed crumbs from the floorboards and listened to her tell me the story over and over again.

I wanted to know how she ended up with those deep eyes, that little furrow she had seared into her forehead. I wanted to know how she could stand to wear those bras that gave you gills on your sides, and why she had been carrying around some book by Chopin since the day we shoved off. Never knew he wrote.

"It was my reward." She must have seen the look on my face, because she continued: "I had been on a diet, see. And I hit our goal. Ted said, once I reached my goal weight, we could go on a cruise—"

"You picked this one?"

"I didn't care which one. I just wanted to get out."

I had to give Ted credit. He saw the fractures in his life and instead of doing the work, decided the best thing to do would be to tap into what his father and his father's father gave him—the audacity.

“Is this it, then? You’re done? You’ll spend the rest of your life celebrating?” I was angry because this beautiful woman across from me was married to a coward. Because that was how it always goes. People come here, expecting to be rewarded—but this isn’t paradise. Wherever you go, your shit follows. And then they take it out on us.

And Ted! Afraid of his own wife’s hunger. He thought the proper solution would be to hold something over her head: threaten her with the ocean, because everyone wants to be skinny for the ocean. It’s not really a good idea, of course—have you ever been collecting on the shore and looked for a skinny rock? Good luck. Yeah, some seaweed is horizon-thin, but then you pull and pull and it’s like you got the world’s biggest root in your hands. And the most exciting waves are the big ones that could kill you. Bigness is the ocean, and that’s that.

Francine hadn’t been to the beach since she was a child, didn’t remember that the best stones are the ones that fill your whole palm, that even skinny lines of melting vanilla ice cream end in fat, heavy drops. She didn’t have to explain to me. I knew her, and I told her so.

“I see you,” I said. “If you don’t go hog wild on this vacation, I’m going to call in a favor and have Theo bop you and Ted both. Make the most of it.”

She giggled. Said they met through mutuals. On their second date, they were walking through the park. All Francine could do was look at the flowers and feel queasy. But that was nothing new; she said she been nauseous her whole life.

I thought she was saying she had a bad stomach, but then she blamed it on the green woman.

“The green woman?” She said it like she was someone I should know: Madonna, the moon, my mother.

“Yes,” Francine looked off into the distance dreamily. The green woman was some unsmiling lady she saw in the park once when her mother took her on a walk as a child. She was wearing a mint-colored dress with lace all around the edges.

“It could have been real silk,” Francine sighed. “Moved like water but was the same color as the leaves all around us.”

“Who wears silk to a park?”

Francine shrugged. “She had style. Taste.”

They had been sitting on a bench, sharing a cup of vanilla ice cream. Her mother was impatient and wanted to help her husband close up the store, but Francine threw such a fit that they finished their ice cream there on the bench.

"It didn't look like she was working," Francine said. "Just sitting leisurely."

When her mother finally dragged her away, the green lady was just beginning to open a book. Francine cried in the car and moaned for as long as she could until her mother threatened to leave her on the side of the road. She moaned because she was sad; she moaned because it felt good.

When they got to the store, she wiped dust off the tchotchkes like she was told.

"Tell me," I interrupted. "You're the expert. Why does dust always gather in those little bitty windows of Christmas houses?"

She grabbed my hand. "Take me serious."

She said she imagined what her life would be like if she and the green lady lived together in one of the little Christmas box scenes they sold for $9.99, sharing hot chocolate and eating mint ice cream by the fire. The lady would suck on the little chocolate chips until all the ice cream was gone, and then she would spit them into a little dish for Francine to eat.

"I thought about her since then. The green lady saved me, time and time again," Francine whispered. "Whenever I was sad or lonely or just bored, I thought of her. At night, when I couldn't sleep—I dreamt of her. We'd wear matching dresses that flowed between our legs. We'd garden together, and grow peppers, parsley. Big green tomatoes, chives, cilantro—ivy pouring over all the shady spots. We'd move from our little town in New York, live somewhere warm. We'd lay in bed together—she brought me comfort," she shook her head, almost mournful. "And then Ted and I met through our friend—and he bought me a mint ice cream.

"It was a sign!" She rolled her eyes. "I never should have believed that anything was ever given to me. I thought—"

"What happened to her?"

She shrugged. "I only saw her that one time. But I never forgot."

It grew quiet after that. We realized we had picked our

treasure clean, so all that was left were a stack of dishes with smudges where the chocolate had melted and a light coating of green glitter. I was shedding.

I reminded her to come back tomorrow. She said she didn't need to be reminded. Well, that really did me in. I went to sleep that night thinking about her in that dingy room with Ted, laying on the bed, and imagined that each time the boat rocked it was from them, from Ted, trying to capsize everyone with their celebration. It shouldn't have bothered me—Francine was obsessive. She must have seen this green lady over 30 years ago.

But weren't we all like Francine, in some way? How can we get anywhere without clinging to things? Who doesn't love that hard? Each and every night I can hear Pinky working away at herself like her life depended on it. Goldy swiped passenger's pearls (usually fake, but she didn't care), and the only reason why she wasn't fired the first or second time she was caught was because Theo was in love with her. Some guy had to sit down and think of the word for *rainbow*. Hell, I had just met Francine, and I had gone to bed every night that week dreaming of her: Ted and Francine, in a room sprayed with air freshener so the smell of the ocean didn't get in, flopping on the duvet. Her hair sticking up in a million directions, sharp, wicked. Him reaching out for her like she was an anchor.

For the first time in years, I drank with Pinky and Goldy before the show. I still went to the buffet, but it felt like I had swallowed a bunch of sea urchins and after one plate I had to go into that dark room to drink. Shots, shots, shots—boring, only the repetition made it seem like worship. When we emerged, I was dazed by the light pointing at us. Goldy had cracks around her lips she had forgotten to cover. Pinky threw her pearls at the crowd and didn't seem to care. We lamented over our love for humans. I thought I saw a tear on Pinky's cheek.

The lights dimmed. I was not used to drinking so much; my stomach sloshed and I pressed myself together as we finished the first number, trying to hold it all in.

"Do you hear that?" Pinky cried. All the eyes in the audience shot up. It was Wednesday. We had to give them something.

Pinky repeated herself, louder. "I think—it's Poseidon, calling us home!"

"Poseidon!" We cried. I lifted my arms up to the ceiling, still sucking my stomach up near my heart. The lights looked like two giant eyes, light green. Goldy told me to never look straight at them, but I couldn't help myself that night.

"Poseidon!"

I always thought this gig was stupid. Maybe not as bad as the towels but still. Crying out like we weren't real until someone heard us!

I got on my knees and the girl's smiles froze in place. I stared at those green lights. My eyes were burning but I was afraid if I blinked, she'd go away. Sea urchins swam in my belly, and now my bladder felt completely full, close to bursting.

"Who is he calling?" Pinky continued with her dialogue and held a hand to her ear. She pointed at a sap in the crowd. All eyes moved from me to him. "Can you hear him? Who needs to return to the sea?"

Lately, the audience had been picking Pinky to go outside. But that night a man in the back stood up. The other fellow Pinky had chosen closed his mouth with relief.

"The green lady!" The figure cried. I didn't realize it was Ted was until I saw Francine next to him, looking mortified.

The girls looked at each other and then at me. Normally everyone liked to watch the young pretty girl die. Whatever gets your heart going, I supposed.

When the lights dimmed, I swam through the crowd, not looking no one in the eye. I made it out the door and the air felt good. Cold.

This was what made the *Turquoise Escape* so spectacular. We advertised a show of surprises and that's what they got. Only the bravest and warmest dressed followed me out to where Theo, minutes before, had set up a nice board for us to sashay out on. The rest stayed inside and watched Pinky and Goldy sing half-heartedly about missing *moi*.

There were no stars out that night. I thought of Francine's cigarette and shivered with the air all around me. Finally, I reached the edge and looked back at the crowd. Francine was watching and now had one foot on the plank. I wondered if she had pushed through the crowd to get there.

Go back, I mouthed.

I turned and faced the empty sky. The cold wind howled her tune.

Honest: I thought, briefly, you were trying to kill me. When I hit the water, I let everything go. The world around me turned warm. And then you were all over me, pushing me deeper, wanting more. Body landing in the water: sounded like the wind had found its way beneath the surface, following me. A rush of bubbles, hands grabbing at us. Theo shouting.

"That didn't go as planned," Francine later sighed.

"No. It didn't."

We looked up from our plates at each other. She was grinning maniacally, invigorated by her stunt. Her hair, so short, already drying, forgetting the sea. When she placed her moist palm on my hand, she did not pinch, but let herself rest, lightly, so that I knew we were both thinking the same thing:

Kissing. No puke taste, just salt and brine. Unpeeling. I'd pick the seaweed from her skin. I imagined her nipples like big barnacles. Maybe we'd knock teeth like we was kids. When I'd open my mouth to laugh, she'd let herself in. Then we'd celebrate the new show, and our love, at the buffet. We would hold hands under the table. I'd feed her baked salmon with a spoon and convince her to try something other than the damn gravy and wings.

"You're lucky I got my wits about me," I said. "Jumping in after me—such a stupid idea, I thought Ted had put you up to it."

She grinned over her plate. "Something got into me. *Inspiration*—is that the word you artists use?"

"I don't use no words," I scowled. My chest hurt. My lungs ached from the water. My knee ached from where I had banged it up, scrambling with her in my arms, trying to suck in some air. "Always been a singer. But if I had to choose, I'd prefer *stupid*. You're lucky Theo didn't save you just to throw you back out himself. And that's the last time we're doing this gig, that's for sure—"

"You didn't even *like* this show—"

"It was better than the towels!"

She pulled her hands away from me. "You're just trying to

scare me."

"Your days are numbered, honey."

I always thought I had the theatrics fit for a prophet.

It was quiet after that. Mia, a waitress I've always been fond of, came over and asked if we would like anything. I turned to Francine, whose face was pinched into an expression of resignation.

"Oysters, please. We're celebrating you not drowning to your death," I hit the table, jarring Francine from her glum disposition. "So you better start acting like you're alive."

"What kind would you like?" asked Mia. She cast a glance at our hands, intertwined. She had heard about Francine's shenanigans—the only secrets that exist in this place are those we are too afraid to look upon.

Francine and I looked down at the laminated menus. Unfamiliar words swam up into our faces. I looked back up and Francine was staring right at me, her lips about to burst.

We exploded into sweet laughter.

I gathered myself and collected my teeth and wits and said, "Whatever you think, Mia. Then come sit down and join us. Get off your feet."

She did not. When she brought the oysters out on a large silver dish with lemon and a small pot of red sauce, she disappeared before I could say I had hoped we ourselves were going to shuck them.

"I had been looking forward to that part," I said to Francine.

Francine ate like she had swallowed some parasite when she jumped in the water after me, or like she only just now realized she was starving. She lifted one oyster, then another, and another, up to her beautiful mouth.

"We're not going nowhere," I chuckled. Francine paid me no mind. I reached for an oyster, uneasy, feeling like I should catch up to her. The cold bottom of the dish peeked through as more and more shells disappeared.

"You think Theo will seek revenge? Push us into some fog? Or no—" I reached for her hand, and she blinked, throat moving up and down in a swallow. "What about Ted? You think he knows about us?"

The oyster was salty. When I squeezed lemon onto it, it moved, as if still alive.

"You think these guys are still alive? Is there a brain in there?" I squinted at it.

"He's always known," said Francine between gulps. This surprised me.

"He knows—"

"You don't care," she sneered. "Soon I'll be gone, and you'll find someone new."

"Hey." I put my oyster down. I felt like I could choke. "I care about you, Francine. I was thinking—I could come visit you."

"You'll never leave," she sneered again.

"Hey." I wanted to put my hand on her cheek, cup it, feel the soft bit of stubble that poked from her chin. "Don't you drift away. Look at me, Francine. I will." I stood up. "I'm ready to get off this damn boat. Find my legs again. I'll go with you—how's that?"

"No, you won't." She shook her head feverishly, eyes now on something in the distance behind me. "You won't. Theo needs you."

"That's true," I laughed now, imagining the man's face when I left. "He does need me. So if I leave—he'll come get you," I teased, switching tactics, desperately trying to get her to look at me, stop slurping those damn oysters, saving me none. "We'd have to hide away together—"

"Stop!" She cried. She threw her head back and lifted another shell to her mouth, opening herself in the only way she knew how.

If only I could have gotten her to look at me. Just for one damn second. If I could have stopped her, if I could have made her believe that all of this would remain, well—maybe she never would have. It's not like it's easy to believe this is all here, for us. I still sneak chocolates and wine into my room at night. Theo has been talking about chopping jobs in half. Every night, passengers take pictures of the moon with their shitty phones, and though it never comes out right, they won't stop. Deep down, we know the moon will fly away one day. And the stars—they hide from us now.

When the sound from her throat stopped, I thought at first she was having one of those deep belly laughs. I tend to have that effect on people.

"Don't!" Theo cried, having been retrieved by another

passenger. I froze from where I was standing, leaning above her, ready to thrust my fist into her soft stomach. Francine's eyes rolled around her head as the oyster choked her. "Wait for the medic!"

A liability. That's what he had said, as if the medic off giggling with a guest in the freezer wasn't.

The only indication of a new week was Goldy's grumbling. They were late with our checks. This wasn't new, but still, Goldy complained.

Theo came up to me and said I was on thin ice. I could have been smart and said something like, *Actually, we're all on fire and the ice is gone*, but I didn't because he knew and I knew he knew and I also knew he could not afford to care.

He demoted me to a side role on the stage. No more singing. No more walking the plank. No more dinner with guests: remember my place. And I said: I don't care. I'm done.

It's time. I was going to retire before Francine came, but something stopped me—don't ask me what, because I won't say. I should have quit. I should have known, the second I spoke to Theo—I told him I don't like my name no more. Is that such a crime? It's my name, ain't it?

"Fine," he said. "If you have to be so dramatic. At least you're not one of those."

"Those what?"

"Those. You know." He waved his hand in the air. Didn't know what he was saying.

"I don't know what you're talking about. All I do know is that I don't like my name no more, and I don't like 'she.' It fits weird on me now." I crossed my arms over my chest.

"Have you been eavesdropping?" He sneered. "We've had an influx of young passengers—young people with these ideas—"

"40 ain't young, Theo! We're surrounded by old hags, just like you and me. Young people don't want to be on this ship. They can't. It freaks them out. They got anxieties, and the water—"

"Slow down." He put his hand on my shoulder and softened. "They're valuable patrons of ours. But the show is the show. I can't do nothing about that—"

"But you can talk to the crew, can't you? Or at our staff

meeting, I'll just mention it real fast—lots of people have nicknames—"

"No." His hand squeezed my shoulder. The ship rocked underneath us. "Let's talk about this another time. Go get your food. The rest of the girls have already eaten."

Those girls don't eat no more, I wanted to say. *It's just me.*

But I didn't. Not because I was afraid, but because something stopped me—Francine's hand, tapping on my skin, like I was going to drift away if she didn't grab on fast enough.

If I could tell you one thing, Francine—actually, two things. Just two things. First of all—why did you have to go and do that? Didn't I say, didn't I say not to act like you was going to die? Because then shit like this happens—you go and die.

That should have been me. It always was meant to be me. Or not just me, but all of us stinky people working this shit ship. We all smell like sweat and seaweed. We could have disappeared and it would have been easy. We could have been sucked in by some fog, gone missing, and no one would know because none of us on this ship had anyone on land to worry about us. It should have been us. But now—it's you who is dead.

Ted wasn't crying when they wheeled you out. I could have slapped him for that, but I realized I wasn't crying either. My mouth was hanging open for so long that when I shut it, my tongue was cold and dry against the roof of my mouth.

The second thing I'd tell you would be that I stay awake at night thinking about the ocean. It's rising. Some guy told me that over a drink last night. I told him he was horrible at flirting and he said he wasn't flirting. He bought me another drink. I didn't tell him Marco behind the counter would have given me one for free anyway.

When I took off my clothes, he stared at my knee, where it was cut from the little stunt you pulled. I was really scrambling to get out of that water, I tell you. My bandage had been turning gold, and the cut underneath oozed neon green. I was infected.

I got down on my knees.

"Open your mouth," he said, but he was so slanted it came out sounding like *myth*.

"That's good," he muttered to my gaping face.

I went back to the bar after the whole thing was done. I can't go back into my room, there's something wrong with the lighting and the fake ass silk cover itches my skin and I never should have peed in the water, I feel sick. Still sitting here. My ass hurts on the chair but I like listening to the boat's moans.

I'd like to get away for a while. And then when I come back, the water will be up past my eyeballs, risen so fast everyone could lie and say they never saw it coming.

But that's just a dream. I won't speak it aloud. I'll always be here, thinking of you and that stupid green lady, until the water covers my feet and legs and eyes and I see you again.

Contributor Notes

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