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HURRICANE SHOES AND OTHER STORIES

by

KRISTIE SMELTZER
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2000

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

Hurricane Shoes and Other Stories is a collection of short stories that center on evolving and devolving relationships. The characters in these stories form tentative bonds with people in their lives while other relationships slip away. In “Hurricane Shoes,” Katrina attempts to reinvent herself by ending an affair. Katrina’s pregnancy and her mother’s cancer pull the two women closer. “Da’s Violets” is about Cheryl’s changing relationship with her father. Just as he moves on from the wife who left him for her podiatrist, the wife returns with hopes to reconcile.

These stories catch characters in moments when they must make difficult choices and endure the uncertainties and ambiguities of relationships. In “Lady Luck,” Laurel is a cocaine addict and alcoholic on the verge of finalizing a divorce. She propositions a young man named River to exchange sex for money. River turns the table, and offers Laurel a deal where she’ll have all the money and drugs she wants, as long as she helps him transport cocaine. “Bridges” is a coming of age story in which Linda and Kristin have a close call with a train, and Linda matures as she realizes love has limits.

The catalyst for changing relationships is sometimes an exchange between characters. In “Special Son,” Mark’s father is dying of cancer. The father asks his son to take special care of his mother, and Mark needs his father to finally acknowledge Mark’s sexuality. In “Swim or Sink,” Doreen befriends her campground neighbor, Michael McBride. McBride has been living at the campground since he left his cheating wife, and he offers Doreen insight when she discovers her husband’s infidelity. Together the stories function as a mosaic—each very different, but a complement to the others in forming a larger portrayal of relationships.

This story collection is dedicated to my parents, Russell and MaryAnne Smeltzer.

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HURRICANE SHOES

It is the first day of spring, the date Mother and I schedule our annual bonding a la spring-cleaning. We started this three springs ago, after my father died. That first year we collected his clothes and donated them to Goodwill, except for a pair of worn leather bedroom slippers Mother kept in her walk-in closet.

“Dear,” Mother says as she adjusts her silk-scarf anti-dust turban, “your hair has to be that short?” Mother’s shoulder-length hair defies what *they* say older women should do with their hair, but she keeps the color light blond, almost white, to go along with *their* guidelines.

“What is this?” I ask Mother. I tug a brown cardboard box from the closet’s corner next to Dad’s slippers. All of Mother’s shoes sit in beds of tissue in shoeboxes she’s covered with fabric and frills. The closet floor looks like a Hallmark gift-wrap display and stimulates my gag reflex.

“Hurricane shoes.” She tugs the hair at the nape of my neck.

I can’t believe she’s allowed an unadorned brown shipping box to share space with her shoe collection. Mother prides herself on being one of those southern ladies with a pair of shoes for every occasion. And a purse to match. And often a hat.

A pair of manly, rubber galoshes and a wild pair of olive green and tangerine pumps with three-inch heels inhabit the box. Neither is typical of mother’s style.

“Those are if I’m going to survive,” she says, indicating the galoshes. “And those are if I need to go out with style.”

I pick up the green and tangerine monstrosities. “But with whose style, Mother? Liberace’s?”

“Don’t be fresh, Katrina.” Mother puts the hurricane shoes back in the box and shoves it back into the corner. She wipes the dust from Dad’s slippers. “What ever happened with the last one? Joseph was it?”

“Nothing’s happened to him. He’s still married is all.” I open a box covered in black satin and fastened with a black tulle ribbon. A pair of gray pumps with tiny pink rosettes at the toe and one inch heels.

“Funeral shoes,” Mother says. “Remind me to show you where I’ve put the dress you’re to bury me in.”

With a wave of the hand I dismiss as if she were a waitress offering another free refill. This dress will be the fourth in two years she’s wanted to be buried in.

“You’re an adulteress now, in your spare time? Put those away before you muss them.” Mother grabs a brown paper bag from a shelf and drops it on the hurricane shoebox in the corner.

“I’m trying to make a living at it, but it’s harder than they make it out to be on television.”

She gently slaps the back of my head.

“What’s in the bag?”

“The hurricane purses.”

I rub the fog from the bathroom mirror. Hotel mirrors always reveal the circles left by the last occupants, which often leads me to ponder the cleanliness of the toilet seats. I wrap a towel around me and use another to rub dry my hair. I asked the hairstylist to give me pixie, and I ended up with dykie instead. Dyke isn’t a word I use, but Donna, my lesbian friend who’s allowed to use it, did when she saw my new cut. So I’ve appropriated. Donna was ecstatic about

the cut because she thought I'd switched teams. Alas, I have not. But the chestnut brown of the new me I adore.

Joseph comes into the bathroom and stands behind me, resting his chin atop my head, which makes me feel like his little sister.

"It's fine, babe," Joseph says.

This unsolicited comment is his seventh, which leads me to believe that he does not like my new hairstyle.

"It's dykie." I duck out from under his chin. "I'm trying to pick up women. As part of becoming the new me."

Joseph tries to snatch my towel. "That's hot."

"So I wouldn't need you anymore, not so you could watch." I turn the light out and leave the bathroom.

Joseph follows me out, scratching his dark patch of chest hair. He is my type: muscular arms, hairy chest, brown eyes, and minimal brain cells—the sort of man who calls all women after legumes and gets away with it: sweet potato, sugar beet. "What's wrong?" he says.

"I'm reinventing myself."

"How so?"

"New hair. New choices." I flop on the hotel bed careful to hold my towel in place. I feel more naked in the towel than I did a half-hour ago when we fucked—perhaps because the nudity isn't functional now.

Joseph sighs and sits next to me. "I can't leave Rachel right now. Hell, we shouldn't even be here."

Regret usually kicks in when the condom comes off. “Funny, I thought we were talking about me.”

“You were hinting.”

“I wasn’t.”

Joseph stands up. “Then you’re about to give me an ultimatum or some shit.”

“I’m really not.” I get up, grab my clothes, and go back into the bathroom, locking the door behind me. I pull my short, naughty-secretary skirt on and yank my white button-down blouse over my head: the costume of the mistress. Two of the buttons flew off during foreplay, but I’ve got to wear a shirt home. I chuck my black satin and lace panties and patent leather come-fuck-me pumps into the garbage. The poor maid.

I know I am pregnant, even before I pee on the test stick, before the blue line materializes. I wept about three commercials this week, and I threw up the coffee I’ve had for breakfast twice. Crying isn’t something I do, or vomiting. The unsurprising blue line serves only to confirm my fears. Or my joy. I haven’t committed yet.

I arrive at work a half-hour late at 9:30 after brushing my teeth repeatedly, unable to make the acidic taste go away. Slinking to my cubicle, I avoid eye contact with anyone. As soon as my ass hits the chair, Donna pokes her head over the partition between our desks.

“You look like shit. Late night?” Donna’s bleached hair’s been dyed green since I last saw her.

I stand up and pat Donna’s alarmingly stiff and erect green spikes. “Long morning. Your hair looks like I feel.”

“Hung-over?”

“Pregnant.”

Donna stares at me a minute, perhaps waiting for me to laugh if I’m joking. “You’re shitting me?”

“No.” I grab some papers and shuffle them. Revealing this news wasn’t my plan for today.

“Lesbians don’t knock anybody up.” Donna ducks down on her side, and more quietly, through the sad, flimsy wall of our cubicles she says, “What’re you gonna do about it?”

“I’ll tell you when I know.”

After an hour or so of shuffling the same papers and watching the pipes of my screensaver fill my monitor, I call Joseph and tell him we need to meet for lunch. He asks what hotel we’re meeting at, but I tell him Gino’s, our restaurant, which is a hint that I have news.

Later at Gino’s, I wait ten minutes after I’m seated before I plow into the bread and order an apple crisp dessert with two scoops of vanilla ice cream. Twenty minutes after Joseph and I were supposed to meet, my dessert arrives with two spoons. I feel like chucking the second spoon across the restaurant but fear I’ll clock some poor patron in the head. Instead I stick the spoon in my armpit for a second, and then place it on the opposite side of the table. The warm apples and pastry mingle in my mouth with the freezing ice cream. The conflicting textures and temperatures turn my stomach. Joseph strolls up, and I set my spoon down. I force myself to swallow.

“Already through with lunch?” Joseph kisses my cheek and sits.

“You’re late.”

Joseph unfolds his napkin and sets it in his lap.

“Have some apple crisp.” I motion toward the armpit spoon.

Joseph picks it up and takes a heaping spoonful of apples and ice cream. “Sure. Yeah. You’ve got the face on. Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

I smile as he puts the armpit spoon in his mouth. “I have to get back to work. I only have a half-hour for lunch today because I got in late this morning.”

“So you’re pissed I was late, and now you aren’t going to tell me?” He dips the spoon into the ice cream again.

“We can’t see each other anymore.” I stand.

Joseph stands. “You’ve said that before.”

“I haven’t meant it.” I turn to go, but Joseph grabs my hand. He rubs his thumb over the back of my hand and the bones creak under the pressure. I turn, lean toward him, and kiss his cheek. It’s barely past noon, but he’s already grown stubble. I let my lips drag across the rough little hairs. “I have to go.”

Since it is the weekend, I call Mother and ask her to go shoe shopping with me. A new hairstyle alone doesn’t constitute reinvention. I’m going to need accessories, too, which means I’m going to need help. Mother is waiting in front of the house when I pull up. She wears a clear-plastic rain cap and as she slides into the passenger seat, the cap catches on a handle above the door.

Mother yanks the cap free, tearing it at the seam. “Oh fudgebricks,” she says.

“Could you cuss like an adult just once, for me?” I tuck a displaced lock of her hair behind her ear.

“Ladies don’t swear, dear.” Mother pulls the visor down and checks her hair in the mirror. Then she wipes some lipstick from her teeth. “Sailors do.”

“You’re in a fine mood. Should I veer into oncoming traffic?”

“You called me,” she says, dramatically snapping the visor up.

At the department store, the shoe section eases mother’s mood a bit. She greets the sales clerk Darleen by name. Mother caresses a pair of sequin and satin pumps. She grabs a pair of peds from her purse. Mother is in her element. I, on the other hand, feel like a car is parked on my chest.

“I think I’m having a heart attack.” I collapse into the nearest chair.

“You’re hyperventilating or having one of those panic attacks they talk about on TV. It’s all the leather and stylishness.” She sits next to me and pats my shoulder. “It’ll pass. Deep breaths.”

This advice is the most helpful she’s ever given me. I breathe more slowly and the pressure eases. “Thanks, Ma.”

She squeezes my shoulder. “Now about the new you.”

First we pore over the sale rack, Mother picking out shoes in one-for-you, one-for-me fashion. She asks Darleen to bring her selections in our sizes. Then we commence the trying-on phase, which is serious business and involves standing, walking, leaning, sitting, and leg crossing in each pair. Mother and I finally agree on a pair of tea-rose pink pumps with gray and black rosettes near the toe and a fun baby blue pair. She decides on a pair of sensible tan heels for church and a frivolous pair of lavender pumps with a “smart-looking black stripe.” With Mother, shoe shopping is all pumps, all the time. Exhausted, we slump into the stained, uncomfortable shoe department chairs.

“The tea-rose pumps are fabulous. They make your feet look so petite.”

A size nine, my feet are anything but petite, which is dad's fault because I inherited his gargantuan feet but not his height. Mother has tiny size six feet that seem to defy physics by holding her up. She's amply bosomed and bottomed in an Italian grandmother sort of way. Oh, how many times I've heard she'd love to be a grandmother.

"Dear, you have to be so thin?" Mother pinches the back of my ankle where my Achilles tendon bulges.

I'm a vegetarian and ultimately find food boring. This point is a bone of contention between us. Raised in the deep South, she believes anything worth eating should at some point involve bacon fat in its preparation. Pregnancy, however, seems to already be wreaking havoc upon my feelings about food. I'm starved.

Mother says, "Couldn't the new you eat a cheeseburger and a shake sometimes?"

"Only if *you* swear like a sailor."

I get up and carry our shoes to the register where I treat because the trip was my idea, and at Mother's suggestion I tip Doreen.

"Lunch?" I link arms with Mother, and her body stiffens. Usually I'm not inclined to public displays of affection.

Mother relaxes her arm and hands me the bag she carries. "Cocktails, dear."

We find the only actual sit-down restaurant in the mall, and the waiter tells us house wine is two-for-one. I propose we split two pinot grigios, but Mother insists we get two-for-one each. Though I haven't decided whether or not to keep the baby, I have no intention of drinking two glasses of wine in one sitting while pregnant. I scheme to give Mother my second wine, which will get her schmasted.

“So, dear, does the new you need an outfit to go with the shoes? How about a bag to match?”

“Easy, Mother. I’ll hyperventilate again.”

We laugh. I enjoy the moment—it’s rare that we ever find the same thing funny. Dad and I were always laughing. Mother was usually the butt of the joke. The waiter comes with our wines.

“A toast,” I say. “To mother-daughter bonding and reinvention. It’s always worked for Madonna.”

“Which, dear?” Mother chuckles, amusing herself at least, and we drink. “So why the new you?”

“I haven’t been the person I want to be, and I guess I can’t find the person I want to be with if I’m not the me I want to be.” I am tempted to blurt out: *By the way, I’m pregnant.*

“Seeing a therapist?” Mother finishes her first wine and picks up the second.

“Are you?” I chug the last of my wine. We hold our glasses up to toast again.

“To your father, who didn’t bullshit, God rest his soul.” Mother clanks her glass against mine and takes a huge swig.

“I was kidding about the cheeseburger.” I suppress a smile and take one sip from my glass before setting it down in front of Mother.

“Dear, let’s cut to the chase. You don’t really want to change yourself, you want to change the men you’re with.” She finishes her second wine. “And you can’t change men. And love isn’t being with one that’s perfect. Love is 20 percent unhappiness, 10 percent struggle, 50 percent compromise, 20 percent comfort, and maybe 5 percent bliss if you’re lucky.” Mother signals the waiter over and orders another round.

“That’s 105 percent, Ma.”

“I know.”

We stare at each other across the table for a minute. Ma’s crow’s feet have deepened and her lipstick seeps into the wrinkles around her lips. She’s always looked timeless, like she’d aged to a graceful fifty and decided to stop. Now she looks old.

Mother stands up. “Excuse me, dear. I have to powder my nose.” She reaches for her purse and knocks it off the back of the chair, the contents spilling onto the floor. A prescription bottle falls out with her packet of tissues and a glasses case. Mother’s always been perfectly healthy—frighteningly so. She sits on the floor and shoves things back into her purse. I kneel to help her pick up, but she swats my hands away.

“I didn’t want you to find out this way.” She picks up the tissues and pulls one from the pack.

“Find out?” I try to read the name of the medicine.

She says, “I’ve got,” and then she leans in closer to me—close enough for me to feel her breath on my cheek—and whispers, “cancer.”

I laugh. I am sure this is some sick joke. Mother’s face looks pulled too tight as she stares at me in silence. She’s not kidding. I try to read the prescription bottle again, but tears blur my vision. I refuse to blink because Mother can’t see me cry. I don’t cry—haven’t cried in front of her since childhood, not even when Dad died. I don’t know why I can’t stop the tears. It’s probably hormones or something, but Mother doesn’t know that. I shove her things back into her purse and help her up.

“I’m gonna go blow my nose,” I say. I mean I’m going to go throw up.

“Here, dear,” Mother says, handing me the tissue. “This one’s for you.”

Joseph snores next to me in bed. I called him in a moment of weakness, after Mother and I suffered through an awkward lunch and affectedly cheery ride home. I wanted a clean break from Joseph, to never call him again. But here we were.

When he arrived at the hotel, I told him about Mother's ovarian cancer, the prognosis bad but better than it could have been because the doctor said it had been detected early. Joseph nodded like a bobble-head, not sure what to say. He pulled me to him, forcing my face into his shoulder. Maybe he hoped I'd cry. He was useless, his presence making me feel even more alone about the whole thing than before I'd called him.

I couldn't explain how I felt, even if I had been speaking to someone who might have been able to understand. Mother being sick made me feel like I already lost her, and that I was losing Dad all over again. They'd been inseparable, as long as I could remember. I hadn't expected her to bounce back well from Dad's death, but her strength surprised me. And when I could get her to talk about their life together, it felt like Dad was still part of our lives. Theirs was the love story I was raised on—I always thought they were effortlessly, deliriously happy. Now she tells me it took work?

Joseph mutters in his sleep. I get up and dress. Joseph always looks so peaceful when he's sleeping, like a stretched-tall five year-old.

After our lackluster conversation, we'd had sex, and he was more gentle and slow and gracious than usual. Sex seems like the only way we can communicate at all. I contemplate percentages. Is this affair more than 50 percent compromise? Does great sex constitute 5 percent bliss? Does love like my parents had even exist anymore?

Joseph chokes on his own spit then coughs. The hotel room is silent, save for the usual hum of the mini-fridge, the purr of the air conditioning, and the buzz of the neon sign outside our window. I kiss Joseph's forehead and leave.

I knock on Mother's door. I've brought her a bouquet of Fuji mums, the flowers she had at her wedding—her favorites. She answers the door in her bathrobe, a sure sign she's resigned herself to death. The woman usually vacuums in a dress while wearing earrings.

"They're lovely," she says.

I follow her inside and into the kitchen.

Mother turns on the tap and fumbles in a cupboard. "They say you should trim flowers' stems at an angle while they're submerged in a bowl of water."

"Who are *they*, Mother, and why do we care what *they* say?"

"Just making conversation, dear."

In her bathrobe, fumbling for a bowl to trim her mums in, she looks much smaller than I remember her.

"Let me, Ma." I reach over her head, grab a bowl, and try to take the bouquet from her.

"For Pete's sake, Trina, I'm not an invalid. Sit down. Have you eaten breakfast yet?"

I can't sit, so I lean against the counter and watch her trim and arrange the flowers. "I don't eat breakfast."

"Oh," she says. "Did you just come over to give me these?"

I want to tell her I just wanted to see her, but it sounds fake coming from me, even just in my head. I want to tell her I'm pregnant, so she'll finally get the grandchildren she's been pining

for. “I thought we could do some more shopping, you know, for the rest of the new me. Feet alone don’t make for a transformation.”

Mother shifts the stems around and gently fluffs the blossoms. “Just because love isn’t all rockets and sunshine doesn’t mean you have to settle either. Just don’t expect perfection. On Earth perfection doesn’t exist. Especially not in men.”

“I know, Ma.” The belt of her robe hangs unevenly. I grab the longer end and pick at its frayed edges.

“Do you? You shouldn’t settle. I didn’t. Settling never makes anyone happy.”

“Is that why you have two pairs of hurricane shoes? Couldn’t settle for just one?”

“I just like being prepared for anything.” Mother sets the vase of mums she’s arranged in the center of the kitchen table. From the counter, she picks up a framed photo of her and dad, looks at it a moment, and sets it down. “I’m up for more shopping.” She loosens the belt of her robe and evens it out. “I need a pair of sensible chemotherapy shoes.”

I should laugh. It’s what she wants. But I can’t. “Ma, I’m pregnant.”

Mother leans against the counter, lets the air thicken with silence. She wraps a hand up in the robe’s belt. After staring at me for a minute that feels like ten, she says, “Is that so.” Not a question.

“No. I’m making it up to top your cancer press release.” Sarcasm: the humor of my father and me. The kind of humor that left Mother the butt of our jokes.

Mother pulls the belt tighter around her hand until her fingers go purple. “I just need to know if you’re telling me so I can get excited, or if you’re telling me because you’re going to get one of those things.” Mother whispers the word cancer and can’t even say abortion.

I haven't decided what to do yet. But Ma's eyes glimmer with hope while her hands tremble with fear. I should have the baby. Maybe she'll live to see a grandchild. "Of course I'm keeping the baby, Ma, or I wouldn't have brought it up."

Mother relaxes the belt, and her fingers slowly return to a normal shade. She smiles, though it seems she's trying hard to keep her face set in the taut expression of disapproval at me, her unwed, pregnant, adulterous daughter.

I rise and go to her. I take her shoulders in my hands and squeeze, a gesture that's as close as I've come to hugging her since seventh grade. "The new me is a mother, Ma."

She should laugh. "I'll go change," she says.

I sit at the table to wait. My cell phone rings and the caller ID shows that it's Joseph. I push the button to send him to voicemail. The photo of Ma and Dad is from their honeymoon. They went to Niagara Falls. Dad had wanted to go to Hawaii. Mother wanted to go the Grand Canyon. Niagara Falls was the compromise. In the photo, they stare at each other like there's no one else in the world—like the camera and the person behind it don't exist. Five percent bliss. My phone rings again, and I know it's Joseph without checking. I answer it, saying, "I just can't settle, Joseph. So don't ask me to, not now or ever again."

But it's a woman's voice that replies. "So you're the whore my husband's been fucking."

For a minute or more, we are silent. I imagine her in her bathrobe, smoking a cigarette and clutching Joseph's phone so hard her knuckles go white. I've seen pictures of her in Joseph's wallet. She's lovely in an Audrey Hepburn sort of way, always put together, manicured, a little gaunt. The sort of woman who looks like she needs to be taken care of. The sort of woman who likes being called after legumes.

"Don't settle," I say. I can't think of anything else.

“Bitch,” she says.

“By the way,” I say, “tell him I’m pregnant.”

Joseph’s wife hangs up. He told me that for a while they tried to have kids, but when they got the plumbing tested to see what the problem was, the doctors told them she was sterile. I feel cruel and small for having just told the sterile woman whose husband I’m having an affair with that I’m pregnant. Was having an affair with.

Mother comes into the kitchen. I still press the phone to my ear though the line is dead. Ma’s got her purple pumps with the smart black stripe on. She smiles at me and pinches my cheek. “You’re pale, dear. Who’s on the phone?”

“No one. I’m fine.” I get up and throw my phone into the sink full of water and dishes. “Our purchases await. Let’s away.”

Ma retrieves the phone from the sink and throws it on the floor. She looks at me, and something about my expression tells her not to ask. Instead, Ma drives a heel of her purple pump into the phone, cracking it into large pieces.

“Now you, dear,” she says. Ma smiles what Dad used to call her full moon smile. “It’s liberating.”

I smash the chunks of phone under my sensible sandal. Then with the other foot. Only small pieces of dashed plastic and metal circuitry remain.

Ma links arms with me and gives my hand a squeeze. “You’ll have to start eating more with a little one on the way. We’ll have to pay attention to your protein.” Ma pats my stomach with her free hand. “Your hair really has to be that short,” she says. And the new me doesn’t seem to mind.

FATHER PETER'S CONFESSIONAL

Father Peter collected the sins of his parishioners in a journal. Doing so violated the “Seal of the Confessional” he swore to honor as a Catholic priest, but it seemed such a terrible waste that his flock should hoard their secret sins only to have them spent and absolved. He waited in the dark confessional of St. Stephen’s, wondering who his next penitent would be. Some sinners proved more interesting than others, the most interesting often being those who hadn’t visited a confessional in a good long while.

The Saturday evening confession hours tended to be slow, but the confessions varied. Some Saturdays proved quite interesting, with congregation members confessing to behaving badly on Friday night. The door to the confessional opened then closed, and his first penitent kneeled. Through the intricately carved wooden screen that separated them, Father Peter saw the young boy’s silhouette, head bowed and hands clasped. Father Peter sighed, expecting a boring, predictable confession of masturbation and foul language.

Father Peter said, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

The boy crossed himself. “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It’s been two weeks since my last confession.” The boy’s high voice told Father Peter he still hadn’t reached puberty. Father Peter ran through the boys of the parish around eleven or twelve years old. The boy hesitated, and Father Peter shifted closer to the grate, wondering if perhaps this boy would surprise him and have an interesting sin to reveal.

“Do you need help, my son?” Father Peter helped penitents that struggled to reveal their sins to him by listing the Ten Commandments or referring to Christ’s teachings. The Church’s

guideline was to wait until the penitent asked, but Father Peter often deviated—in varying degrees—from his prescribed responses.

“No, thank you, Father. Here are my sins: I skipped Mass last weekend to go fishing with my father, I took the Lord’s name in vain a *few* times, and I,” the boy paused.

Father Peter leaned back from the grate and clamped a hand over his mouth to conceal a smile. Boys always stalled when it came to admitting their impure thoughts, especially the first few times. Father Peter’s congregation consisted of around 150 parishioners who attended Mass regularly, and his holiday crowd only included about 50 extra Billy Holidays—Father Peter’s name for Catholics who only showed up at Christmas, Easter, and maybe Ash Wednesday. It was a small enough group, made up of mostly extended families, so that he knew each parishioner’s name and face. If he had to guess, Father Peter thought this boy was Warren McDonald, a twelve year-old middle child amidst four sisters. Warren had been looking at the young girls in the choir longingly for some time; Father Peter had been expecting this confession.

“Father, I’ve had dirty thoughts. About girls.”

Father Peter removed his hand from his mouth. “Have you entertained these thoughts or acted on them?”

The boy’s head flinched, and Father Peter imagined him wincing at the question. “No, sir,” he said, and Father Peter knew for sure it was Warren. It seemed the boys who lived with sisters clung to the idea of girls being gross longer than those who didn’t.

“Try to fish with your father on days other than Sunday, as it should be a day of worship and rest. Be true to God in your speech, thought, and action as best you can. Your penance is to say two ‘Hail Mary’s and two ‘Our Father’s. Make your Act of Contrition.”

Warren said his act of contrition, and Father Peter absolved Warren's sins, blessed him, and dismissed him to go say his penance in the sanctuary. As the door to the confessional closed behind Warren, Father Peter chuckled softly. Though many of congregation seemed to forget, he'd been a boy. As a teenager he'd kissed girls, touched breasts, considered more. Every time he touched a girl it felt like love. Or at least he thought it was love. Father Peter knew the urgency the young men who confessed to him felt, and he knew the strength necessary to deny those urges. For them, he hoped that their future held happiness in a marriage to a special woman who made the sacrifice worth the struggle. According to the calculations from his journals, though, about thirty percent of the sins he heard from married men involved them disrespecting their wives, and over fifty percent of his married male parishioners from the forty years he'd been a priest had admitted impure thoughts about women other than their wives. The rest just didn't admit them. Marriage, like faith it seemed, didn't maintain itself without frequent, bitter struggle.

Though he hadn't intended it as research, Father Peter's diligent record keeping of sins over the years had resulted in a study of human weakness. Years with particularly harsh winters showed an increase in the number of confessed impure thoughts and recreational sex. When the town's paper factory closed, the number of people confessing substance abuse and theft increased. Sometimes as Father Peter watched television in the rectory, he calculated percentages. Individually, confessions became routine and uninteresting, but collecting them into his journal and analyzing the trends made Father Peter feel important, as if by better understanding the scope of sin he were better equipped to absolve the individual sinner.

Over the years he'd filled hundreds of notebooks with every confession and penance. Keeping a physical record of his flock's sins made him feel like the parishioners' struggles

meant something and were part of a larger human endeavor; noting his reactions and the penances kept him steady and true to his duty. Though it was Warren's first confession of impure thoughts, Father Peter's journal held thousands of other boys' similar sins and Father Peter's standard penance, always the same: two "Hail Mary"s and two "Our Father"s.

The confessional door's handle creaked. Father Peter smoothed his cassock. He wondered if the day's confessions would be another long string of venial and petty mortal sins. Most people thought mortal sins were only serious crimes like murder or rape, but something as commonplace as blasphemy could land a person in hell if not confessed and absolved. The door opened and the penitent stepped in quickly, yanked the door shut with a thump, and sat forcefully on the bench. Most able-bodied parishioners used the kneeler. Father Peter edged close to the lip of his bench and tried to peer inconspicuously through the grate. He hoped it was her.

"Father, am I in it now," the woman said. Her familiar melodic voice, a bit gravelly as if she used to have a sweet singing voice before smoking caught up to her, confirmed Father Peter's recognition. The woman, not a member of his congregation, showed up every few years. He knew her by her voice, the floral scent of her perfume, and her complete disregard for Confession protocol.

Father Peter cast a careless sign of the cross in the woman's direction, knowing she wouldn't wait for it to begin. Her visits were like solar eclipses—rare, exciting, and a little dangerous.

"Last time I came it was just fooling around—fondling and petting. Now it's worse."

Father Peter deviated from his routine responses more often with adults. With this woman, he abandoned his script altogether.

"How much worse?"

The woman's perfume wafted through the small openings of the grate. The scent reminded him of the white lilac bush outside his boyhood home.

Since Father Peter had entered his sixties, his memory wasn't as sharp as it had been. Sometimes he brought a tape recorder, hidden in the folds of his cassock, into the confessional. The recorder needed fresh batteries, and Father Peter regretted not having it now. The confessional's bench creaked, and Father Peter imagined the woman resting back against the wall, re-crossing her legs, fidgeting with her fingers and wanting a cigarette. He'd never smelled smoke on the woman, but he imagined her as a smoker. He waited. Was she pregnant? Had she and her lover murdered her husband? Father Peter knew his imagined scenarios seemed melodramatic, but part of him wanted to believe this woman capable of anything.

"Me and my lover have been bumping like bunnies." She paused.

Father Peter nodded in encouragement, knowing that she could see him moving if she looked through the grate at a certain angle and probably felt him willing her to continue even if she weren't looking.

In the cavernous vestibule of the church, a male parishioner coughed. Father Peter imagined the man was this woman's lover, and her confession the product of post-coital guilt. He envisioned the lover as younger than she, in his late twenties, standing in the atrium near the holy water bath, shifting his weight and looking like an uncomfortable teenager at a funeral, his hair still tousled from their lovemaking.

The air in the confessional moved as the woman shifted from the bench to sit on the kneeler. Her face came within inches of the screen, and Father Peter could see a pale-complected silhouette. He saw her clearly in his mind—hair slightly mussed and wearing a fitted linen suit with a thin silk blouse underneath. She'd been coming to confess on and off for over

ten years, which meant she would be in her mid-thirties at least, Father Peter thought, and a slave to her nearing sexual peak.

“Father?”

The way the woman breathed the word would have aroused him in younger years, but now he just felt a tug at his heart, an attraction to the urgency in her voice.

“Yes?” Father Peter found his brow moist with sweat and wiped it with his handkerchief.

“Thing is, I don’t love my husband. Never did. I never thought that mattered. He’s a good man, steady and thoughtful. Sent my mother flowers on Mother’s Day.” The woman paused, stood. Father Peter realized she’d said more than she’d intended to. Their previous visits had lasted only a few minutes. The first time she entered, she said, “Father, I’ve been thinking some pretty slutty things. I don’t think God’s hearing me, so could you pray for me to have strength?” and left. Now that she stood, Father Peter feared he would lose her.

Usually, when people brought up romantic love or sexual relationships to him, what they said came out in code or euphemisms. “Father, I pleased my girlfriend,” or “I asked my husband to do things to me with his you-know.” This woman’s candor impressed him—made him want to be more forthcoming in return. Leaving with an assigned handful of prayers wasn’t what she wanted. In fact, she’d never waited to receive a penance at all. Father Peter’s entries for her in his journal were the only striking deviations. After her first few visits, he’d written the penance he would have assigned her, but as the years passed he transitioned from that to question marks and finally blanks where her penance should be.

Fabric rustled as if she tried to pace within the tight space of the confessional. Father Peter imagined her fidgeting again, and he had a sudden and overwhelming urge to force his handkerchief, a token from his mother, through the tiny openings in the confessional’s wooden

grate. Most of the comfort he offered the penitents who came to him for absolution was abstract, intangible. He visualized his hanky in the woman's hands, her toying with the embroidered edges with the tips of her long, pristinely manicured fingers.

“But Michael, the other man. I think I actually love him.”

Father Peter spent the better part of his time in the confessional denying his urges to ask his parishioners the questions in his heart—the hard questions definitely not found in what the Church dictated he should say. He wouldn't do that with her.

He said, “Are you sure it's love and not something else?”

The woman cackled. Laughter wasn't something heard often in the confessional, which struck Father Peter funny, and he laughed too.

“I've been in lust plenty, but this feels different. I'd try to explain, but I couldn't do the feeling justice.”

He felt thankful she didn't say she wouldn't describe it because he couldn't understand. Father Peter realized that part of her allure was she treated him like a person, their time in the confessional more like a conversation than a transaction. His parishioners, through no fault of their own, treated confession like an automated service: insert sin here, collect penance there, repeat as necessary. The conversation between Father Peter and this woman had been generally one-sided, until this visit.

“Are you here alone?” Father Peter said, and she said she was. Father Peter stood. “Meet me outside the confessional.” He had made a point of never peeking at those leaving the confessional, more because it ruined the images of them he'd conjured as they spoke than out of respect for the penitents' privacy. Most of his regulars who also attended services consistently he recognized, and he savored the few penitents who remained a mystery.

He stepped out of the booth, blinking at the bright, multicolored light streaming in the stained glass. The door to the penitent's side opened slowly, and the woman who emerged looked nothing like his vision. She ran a hand over her dark hair, though it was already pulled up taut in a bun. She was heavier than he imagined, though not chubby, and wore a rather frumpy denim dress. She looked like a third grade schoolteacher, and for all he knew she was.

She squinted at him. "You gonna excommunicate me?"

Father Peter shook his head. He wasn't sure what he meant to do with her.

The woman reached out her hand to shake and said her name was Marguerite. Father Peter asked her to follow him back into the rectory, which was attached to the church, made up of only a kitchen, a sitting room, and his bedroom. He'd had visitors back into the rectory before—visiting priests, prominent parishioners, couples he advised before marriage—but those interactions typically took place at planned times in the sitting room and wouldn't merit a raised eyebrow from Jean, the woman who cleaned the rectory and cooked for him. Father Peter led Marguerite through the kitchen and down the hall to his bedroom.

The bedroom had few furnishings, hand-me-downs from congregation members over the years. The diocese would have bought him new furniture, but he felt the money would be better spent elsewhere, and he could always rely on his parishioners' generosity. The walls bore a few reproductions of great religious works of art, and his favorite hung above his desk—a large print from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel of God and Adam with their fingers extended to touch.

Father Peter asked Marguerite to sit in a leather recliner he sat in to read. He moved the ashtray filled with cigar ends from the end table. Cigar smoking was one of the vices he allowed himself. He pulled a simple wooden chair with a cane seat from his desk and sat facing her.

"Wondering why I asked you here?"

Marguerite nodded, her mouth set in a tight line. “Are you hitting on me?”

Father Peter laughed. “Can you keep a secret?” As someone who’d spent his life a keeper of secrets, he knew the weight of the burden.

“I don’t get what’s going on.” Marguerite tugged a string from the pocket of her dress. She plucked another.

“I’d like to show you something, but you can’t tell anyone about it.”

Marguerite said nothing and squinted at him again. He got up and opened the drawer of his nightstand, its surface scarred with coffee mug rings and the carving of “John” which he hid beneath the lamp. He shifted the worn Bible, a confirmation gift from his mother, and from underneath he pulled the leather-bound journal of sins. After he completed each journal, he brought it to a storage unit he rented so he needn’t worry about Jean finding them.

Father Peter turned and handed the journal to Marguerite. He sat.

“What is it?” Her face relaxed.

“Open it.”

Marguerite opened the book and flipped the pages. She looked at the leaves covered in Father Peter’s careful, nun-trained cursive and smoothed the pages with her hand, as though touching the words would help her understand. He began his life as a lefty, but the nuns had changed him.

“What *is* this?” Marguerite stared at him hard, her eyes blue-gray, shadowy like smoke.

“I’ve recorded every sin confessed to me in the forty-one years I’ve been a priest in this church and every penance I’ve dispensed.” He felt a wave of relief wash over him. God had known all along. Still, the secret seemed more real to him now that it had been shared.

“Isn’t that against the rules?”

“Of course.”

“Why are you showing me?” Marguerite closed the book and stared at him.

“Open it,” he said. “Look at the penance I’ve dispensed to those who’ve come to me for guidance.”

Marguerite shook her head. “No. I’m not doing that. It’s not right.”

“Neither is adultery.” He expected her to understand his need to get this secret off his chest.

“You’re judging me?” Marguerite stood and the journal banged to the floor.

“I’m making a comparison. You never seemed so concerned with rules before.”

Marguerite looked to the floor and the fallen book. “Can’t argue with that.” She picked up the book and sat in the recliner with the journal unopened in her lap.

“Look at it,” he said.

Marguerite ran her hand over the leather binding. She looked up at him and their eyes met.

Father Peter said, “Please.”

Marguerite nodded slightly and took a deep breath.

“I never thought anyone else would see my journal, but now you’re here.”

Marguerite opened the journal and thumbed through to the middle. She ran her finger down the page, stopped on an entry, and read, her finger tracing her progress across the page.

“This one’s good. A guy addicted to cocaine who stole his wife’s engagement ring to hock. He only had to say decades of the Rosary?”

“He had to say a lot.” Father Peter pointed to another column in the book. “And I advised him, see?”

“Yeah—to get off the coke and to apologize.” Marguerite smiled. “He couldn’t have come up with that on his own.” She turned to another page.

“I wanted you to see the history of my absolutions—that I’ve always been consistent. For each entry you’ll find the date and time, sins confessed, penance given, and any advice I offered—that is, except for your entries.”

Marguerite stared at him and clenched her jaw.

“Yes,” he said, “of course your visits are listed among the others. But they’re marked by lacking penance and advice. Your visits have stood out from forty years’ worth of confessions.”

Marguerite closed the book and tossed it to the floor. “Well, I’m sorry I ruined your record keeping.” She stood.

Father Peter stood and placed a hand on her shoulder. “You’re misunderstanding me.” He gestured for her to sit, and after a moment she did. “I’ve looked forward to your visits. I’ve enjoyed your candor.”

“I still don’t get all this.”

“If you looked closely in that journal, you’d find people with confessions similar to yours. And I told them all the same thing—to reconcile with their spouses, ask God’s forgiveness, end their affairs.”

She stared at her hands clasped in her lap.

“I’m not going to say those things to you. I don’t have the answer to your dilemma, but you seem to. If you believed you were damned already, why would you come to see me? If you could stop your relationship with Michael, whether it’s love or lust, you would have already.”

“Are you saying I should leave my husband?”

“I’m saying you know what you want to do and what’s most fair to him. You’ve stormed into my confessional every time, no nonsense and no excuses.”

“Knowing what I want isn’t the same as knowing what’s right.”

“I live by faith, and it’s an inexact science.” Father Peter rose. He took the journal from Marguerite and put it back in the drawer.

She thanked him and stood, and he led her back out into the church. She walked to the atrium, dipped her fingers into the holy water and crossed herself. She opened the door and stepped out into the bright afternoon sun. Outside Father Peter’s confessional stood Jack Phillips, a decent fellow who swore a lot. He looked at Father Peter, his brow wrinkled, probably confused that the priest wasn’t already in the booth.

Father Peter knew he wouldn’t write his encounter with Marguerite in the journal. He went to the confessional and resumed his place. Jack entered the other side and knelt.

Father Peter said, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Jack crossed himself. Even though Father Peter knew who this penitent was, he prepared himself to remember the details of Jack’s confession, so he could later record his sins as another nameless sinner in the journal.

BRIDGES

“Watch me,” Kristin said. She strutted onto the railroad bridge. Spring had overgrown into summer, hotter and greener every day. The tracks smelled of tar brought up by the heat. A steep embankment stuck out under a few feet of the bridge, but Kristin kept going until all beneath her was water. She turned to face me and thrust her arms up in the air—tadah, like a magician’s assistant. “No big deal, baby.”

We were both eleven, then, and in Ms. Robinson’s sixth grade homeroom together. We had lived right next door to each other forever—our mothers even shared a hospital room after they had us. My heroes ranked Wonder Woman, Kristin, then Sally Ride. Kristin and I had always been best friends, and that year she spent a lot of time with our family, sleeping over and staying for dinner, after her mom died in a car crash when we were in Ms. French’s fifth grade.

Beneath my feet, the ground vibrated. I listened hard, imagining my ears perking like a dog’s. In the distance, I swore I heard the faint chugging of an approaching train.

“Kristin, come back. Come fast.”

She shook her head and walked farther onto the bridge. She jumped between the wood beams like hopscotch squares and whistled, showing off even more than usual because she knew how afraid I was. Part of the reason I wanted to be her was she never seemed scared of things like trains or the hobos they said lived out by the tracks. Back then I thought being fearless was the same as being brave.

“Quit it,” I yelled. “I think a train’s coming.” I put my ear to the ground like I’d seen Indians do on TV. I didn’t hear anything, and yet I’d been so sure just a moment before.

“I’m gonna cross. You coming or what?” Kristin shimmied her butt at me from halfway across the bridge.

I put my hand on the metal part of the tracks because my father had told me you could feel the tracks move before you could see a train. The metal hummed beneath my hand.

“Come back. There’s a train. I’m positive. Come back.” I jumped up and down and waved my arms. Though I yelled, I could barely hear myself. I sounded like my mother did when I had dived down in the town’s pool and she tried to call me from the surface.

“Linda is a baby. Waaa, waaa.” Kristin put her hands to her head like antlers and wagged them at me. She stuck out her tongue.

I started to cry. “Please, please, come back.”

Kristin turned her back to me to keep walking. She turned back around right away and ran toward my side of the bridge. She jumped more than one wooden slat at a time, and I imagined her falling between them or getting stuck, a train popping her head off like we did bright yellow tops of dandelions. Then I saw the train coming, moving fast.

“Hurry!” I ran back from the tracks, the most frightened I ever remembered feeling. Even though it hadn’t reached the bridge yet, the train looked gigantic to me, like it stood five stories tall.

Kristin looked over her shoulder and tripped. She hit the metal part of the bridge hard.

“Get up. Get up.” She didn’t move. From the waist down I went numb and tingly and thought I had wet my pants. Kristin fell a few feet from the end closest to me. She was almost safe. The train reached the other side of the bridge. “Get up!” I yelled so hard it felt like my throat tore loose from something inside me, like it could never re-attach. I must have thought if I

yelled as loud as I could, she would have to hear me and get up, even if she had knocked herself out.

Kristin put her hands down and tried to stand, moving underwater slow. My body vibrated, and my heartbeat nearly drowned out the loud train whistle. There was no way the train could stop before it hit her. I ran to where Kristin lay, still struggling to get her legs underneath her. I grabbed her by the arm and pulled. She yelled, stumbled, and I dragged her over the last bit of bridge and the white gravel next to the tracks. The big oak and maple trees of the woods that lined the track surrounded us before I made myself stop. My knees gave, and I dropped to the ground, breathing hard. Kristin managed to sit up, and she opened her mouth. I couldn't hear her because the train exploded by us, its whistle screaming mad and the wheels banging against the metal tracks. The noise made my throbbing head hurt worse, so I shoved it between my knees and clamped my hands over my ears. The wind off the train blew hot and fierce through the trees.

On the ground in front of me, pebbles and stray pieces of the white gravel skipped on the ground from the wind and train's vibrations, like the jumping beans my dad had brought me back from a trucking trip to the South of the Border in South Carolina. After what seemed like ten minutes, the pebbles settled. I had held my breath, so I gulped air and took my hands away from my ears.

Kristin sat picking gravel from her shins and laughed. I looked down at the crotch of my pants because I thought maybe I had wet myself and that was why she laughed. My shorts were dry, but I felt like if I didn't pee right then they wouldn't stay dry long.

"I gotta pee." I looked around and wondered what to do. I couldn't make it back to my house in time, and I'd only ever peed in a toilet or the ocean.

Kristin pointed to a big oak trunk next to us. “Drop your pants and lean against the tree. Bend your legs like you’re sitting on the toilet or else you’ll pee on your feet.”

I did what she said, but I couldn’t start going. I held my breath and tried as hard as I could. Finally the pee started, and I felt so much better. I peed and peed. When I finished, I looked at Kristin. She stared at her hands, splashed with blood and shaking.

“How do I wipe?”

Kristin had just stopped laughing but started again. “You can use a leaf but you might get poison ivy on your majigi. Dad always tells me to drip dry when we go fishing.”

So I stood there, my shorts and underpants bunched at my knees, a trail of my pee flowing away from my feet. Kristin kept laughing, and I grabbed a nearby rock and threw it at her. She ducked, and the rock smacked into a tree trunk behind her. Somewhere above us a bird rustled in the leaves.

“What’s so funny?”

“Your face.”

I heaved another rock, whacking Kristin in the shoulder. She rubbed where it hit, and for a second her face contorted and looked like she might cry. But she laughed again. I pulled up my pants and walked away, back toward the tracks.

“Wait.” Kristin limped after me. Both her knees had busted open in big gashes, and her shins were crisscrossed with scrapes and cuts from being dragged. The white gravel near the bridge had red speckles of her blood. “Don’t be mad.”

I wheeled around and shoved her. She fell to a knee, and I winced.

She said, “It was totally far away. We were safe.”

“We could be dead.”

Kristin got to her feet. She stepped close and put a hand on my head. Even though we were the same age, she had about six inches on me. She scratched my scalp with her nails, and her touch made me feel sad, and I started to cry. Kristin's mom used to scratch her head like Kristin did to me. I wanted my mother.

"It was a joke. I coulda got up, but I wanted to see if you'd save me."

I stopped crying. I couldn't tell if Kristin was lying because sometimes she did. She was good at it. I shoved my hands into my pockets, and they tensed into fists so tight it felt like my nails cut my palms.

"We could be dead like your mom."

Kristin's hand dropped from my head, and she looked down at her scraped palms. She reached out and pinched me hard.

"Don't ever." Kristin clenched her teeth and stared at me, her eyes unmoving, set and frighteningly intense. At the time, the expression on her face made me afraid of her, though I didn't know why. Kristin turned her back to me, wrapped her arms around her body like she was hugging herself.

I didn't complain about her pinching me because I didn't mean to say what I did about her mother. I wanted to go home then, to see my mom. I felt like it was my knees that were raw. I walked back toward our houses.

"Linda," Kristin yelled. I looked at her, and she motioned for me to come back. "I think I dropped my mom's locket on the bridge somewhere."

"So."

"Will you come out there with me to look?"

I shook my head and kicked at the bloody gravel. Kristin knew how afraid I was of heights, of the bridge, of trains. I didn't want to go back there ever again.

"Please?" Kristin grabbed my hand. The locket was the only thing her dad let her keep of her mom's. All the rest of her mom's stuff he gave to the Salvation Army. It was Kristin's favorite thing in the world. She usually didn't wear it when we played outside.

"What if it fell in the water?" I said. We walked to where she fell and looked on the tracks, in the dirt, over the side of the bridge to the brush on the embankment.

"It can't have." Kristin looked to the other side of the bridge. "Maybe it's out there where I hopped."

My stomach clenched like fingers into a fist. I didn't want to go any farther onto the bridge, though I wanted to help Kristin find the locket. Kristin's mom kept a picture of Kristin in the locket, and Kristin covered the picture of herself with a photo of her mom. Her mom had been tall, with almost black hair and light blue eyes. She seemed to me then to be magazine-beautiful. Linda Carter beautiful. Even as a kid, I noticed her looking off past whomever she talked to, like she waited for someone else to show up. Kristin would grow up lovely like her mother.

"A train just came. We'll be safe."

"Not from falling."

"We won't."

Kristin took my hand again and pulled, gently—not so hard that I'd resist. The water beneath the bridge rippled in the breeze. The brook was only a few feet deep. If we fell, we'd break bones. That's what my mom said when she told us not to play by the tracks. She said

we'd be lucky to break all our bones in the brook if we weren't dead from being run over by a train or kidnapped by a hobo.

"Don't look down," Kristin said. She held my hands tightly, the raw skin of her palms making mine itch.

The gaping holes between the planks frightened me the most. "If I don't look down, how will I see the locket?"

"Just keep me company." Kristin looked from the tracks to the water below. "Step wider right here."

We made it to the place near the middle of the bridge where Kristin had stopped. She let go of my hand. I squatted down and grabbed the rail. Kristin squatted too and looked over every inch. She didn't find the locket.

"Wanna?" Kristin pointed to the other side of the bridge. She took my hands, and I let go of the bridge to grab onto her. I held my breath. She led me all the way across to the other side. We found a patch of clover next to the tracks that felt soft as a tumbling matt. We sat down and listened to the wind rustling the tree branches, and the sound reminded me of summer cricket songs. Kristin picked at the rocks embedded in her shins again. It must have hurt a lot.

"Sorry about the locket." I wanted to apologize for what I'd said, about us ending up dead like her mom, but I couldn't. I couldn't risk her getting mad again.

Kristin didn't look up at me. "Not your fault," she said.

We sat silently for a while. Kristin plucked handfuls of clover and picked through one stem at a time in search of a four-leafed clover. The sky turned deep pink and purple as the sun set.

I said, "It's almost time for dinner."

“Unless you’re going to be faster going back, we better start now.”

Going back turned out to be much easier because I knew I could do it. I even chanced a look or two down at the brook rumbling over the rocks below. The little falls made bubbling and burping noises I hadn’t noticed before. We followed the train tracks out of the woods and then meandered to our backyards. I felt like I should say something important, about how I never wanted her to scare me like that again. But I couldn’t break the silence between us, maybe because I didn’t want to hear what Kristin would say back. We stood in her backyard, facing each other and toeing the dirt.

Kristin’s dad walked onto their back deck with a plateful of hamburgers to grill.

“I found that damn locket in the bathroom again. Told you you can’t keep it if you’re not responsible.” He opened the barbecue’s lid and tossed the burgers on with his fingers. He didn’t say anything about Kristin’s bloodied legs.

“Sorry. Forgot to put it away after I took it off to go play.” Kristin climbed the stairs up to their deck. “See ya.” Her father told her to go wash up, and she waved to me before disappearing inside.

I walked into my backyard. I hadn’t thought Kristin had lied about the locket, but it didn’t surprise me. What I didn’t know was why. Maybe she needed to cross the bridge because she hadn’t the first time, and she couldn’t do it alone. Or maybe she knew I’d never get across the bridge unless I thought she needed me.

Over at my house, I went into the kitchen, which smelled of onions, celery, and Worcestershire sauce—the scents of mom’s meatloaf. She put the last of the quartered potatoes into the pot, turned, and wrapped her arms around me. She smelled like Ivory Soap and onions.

“Did you cut yourself?” Mom pointed to some blood on my shorts. She looked me over for injuries.

“Kristin fell.”

“Well, I’m sure her dad’ll fix her up.” Mom went back to the stove, stirring the potatoes. “Go wash up for dinner.”

I wanted mom to hug me again. I wanted to tell her everything—about the train, peeing in the woods, Kristin lying about her mom’s locket, and me crossing the bridge even though I was afraid. Mostly I wanted to tell her that Kristin’s dad wouldn’t fix her up. Kristin needed help, and I was frightened of her. I knew Kristin would come knocking the next day, looking to go back to the tracks. To take another chance. And if it wasn’t the train tracks, she’d find another risk to take. And I wouldn’t tag along again.

At the stove, Mom hummed. She looked over her shoulder and winked. “Go on, wash up.”

I wanted to tell her everything, but I couldn’t. Not only because we’d get in trouble for playing by the tracks, but because it felt too hard to say I didn’t love Kristin the way I thought I did. Love wasn’t like I imagined—there were limits, places you wouldn’t go. Up in my bathroom, I turned on the cold water and let it run over my hands until they numbed. I knew what being older felt like, then, because I had secrets.

ICE CREAM FOR ASTRONAUTS

I've been time traveling with my son, Mavery. We are walking the Rocket Garden at Kennedy Space Center in Florida, attempting to re-create—with minimal success—a trip I took with my parents as a girl.

“Mavery Andrew MacInerny,” I yell. “The sign says *not* to climb on the rockets.”

Mavery's father Derrick, my former husband, named our son, and in retrospect Mavery seems a cruel name, destined to be mocked.

Mavery jumps the rocket's fence and rejoins me. “Mom. Mav. I mean, like, people heard you.” Since Mavery turned twelve, his friends call him Mav like Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*. He feels cool—aviator glasses and leather jacket cool. Fortunately for him, America is recycling the 80s. “Plus,” he says, “it's probably just a fake they made for this place.”

In the days I came with Mom and Dad, before Dad left us, we walked around some buildings—end of tour. Back then it was The Cape. It was my Christmas break from school, 1968. We saw Apollo 8 launch, and I cried as the trail of fire reached into the sky. I imagined that Jim Lovell was my Dad, strapped to the front of a burning rocket. Part of me wanted to be strapped in right next to him.

I didn't know at the time it would be our last family trip. Mom cried, too, as the rocket shot off. Dad put his arm around me and drew me close to him, but he only put a hand on Mom's shoulder.

Kennedy Space Center is home of “The World's Largest Space Shop.” Trying to tell Mavery that The Cape used to be different is like telling him a story about walking uphill both ways. In the snow. But it felt different, less theme park, more space race.

We walk toward the exit of the Rocket Garden and look at the map to decide where to go next.

Mavery says, “Can we find a skate-park tomorrow?”

“Haven’t you broken enough bones yet?”

He tells me no, reluctant to let me have the last word. I fear only one of us will make it through his teenage years alive. I got so angry last time he broke his arm, I set it myself. At the hospital, I told the doctor I pulled Mavery’s arm straight on instinct, and he said I did a fine job, just next time leave it to the trained professionals. I wanted to tell the doctor to blow me, but Mavery was there.

Mavery was an accident, coming years after Derrick and I had given up trying because we’d both become tired of the sex-for-procreation routine. And I felt too old, even though every over-forty actress in Hollywood was popping out a kid, then instantaneously reclaiming her waifish figure.

“What about Imax?” Mavery reads times off the guidemap.

I close my eyes and visualize what Apollo astronauts saw from the moon: Earth, like in the pictures, a distant ball of blue, green, brown, and white, its rough edges smoothed by the distance to a perfect circle. The dark eternity of space punctuated by bright stars and distant planets. A funnel of darker black sucking in debris, planets for all I can tell from the distance. I feel it then, the pull toward the black hole, the intense gravity.

“Mom. Mom? What *are* you doing?” Mavery waves the guidemap in my face. “Are you even listening to me?”

“Imax movies nauseate me.”

I tell him he can go and that I'll be waiting outside after the movie ends. After I leave him at the theater, I unfold the guidemap on a picnic table to see what exhibits are close by. My cell phone rings: Derrick.

"Still roaming the country?" he says. "What state are you in now?"

Mavery and I have been traveling since summer began. I took an extended vacation from work. The divorce happened five years ago, and all I've done since then was *talk* about traveling. When Mavery barely passed the sixth grade, I knew this was our last free summer.

I say, "Still in Florida."

"It would be nice if I knew where my son was without having to call you every other day."

"I'll send post cards."

"I graciously gave up my weekends with Mav all summer, and you can't be pleasant?" A quarter of his weekends, Derrick didn't even take Mavery. "He's going to turn out strange without male role models. He's nearly thirteen."

"Just turned twelve. That's hardly almost thirteen."

"Fine." Derrick sighs. "Listen. I have to tell you something—they want to move me for work. Seattle."

We all live in upstate New York.

"So?"

"Can we not fight long enough to talk about Mav?"

"Who's fighting?"

"I want Mav to come to Seattle with me."

The guidemap blurs. “Derrick, I will not have this conversation now.” I hang up, silence my phone, and smooth the creases of the guidemap. At the tables around me, families sit and eat five-dollar hamburgers. In the distance, the peak of a rocket pierces the horizon. Derrick’s no deadbeat, but he’s never been all that eager to see Mavery for longer than his weekends and the odd holiday week.

At a different eating area, a few feet away, an astronaut who has to be sixty approaches a podium. The ticket booth listed “Lunch with an Astronaut” as one of the extras visitors could purchase with admission. The idea seems like bad dinner theatre, an embarrassing endeavor for all involved. This man who thought he’d see space, experience weightlessness, now dons his jumpsuit and dances for the people. I’ve never heard of the guy—probably a back-up pilot from some long-ago scrapped mission.

After I collect Mavery at Imax, we take the bus tour. We get off at the observation tower and climb the stairs to the top deck. In the distance on one of the launch pads, Shuttle Discovery waits. From the observation tower, we see only the dome of the orange main engine jutting above the launch pad’s scaffolding.

“This sucks,” Mavery says.

I ask him to come sit with me on a bench. The wind rushes into our faces in hot gusts.

“Your father called. He’s moving to Seattle.”

“He said he might.” Mavery picks a scab on his knee.

“He wants you to go with him.”

“What’d you say?”

“Do you wanna go?” I rest my hand on Mavery’s shoulder.

Mavery keeps picking, doesn't look up. I know for sure he asked to go with Derrick—that's the source of my ex's sudden new interest.

“Answer me.”

“You're not going to let me go.” Mavery stands and walks over to one of the observation viewers that work off quarters. He peers through the blocked lenses, then yanks on the machine.

I go stand next to him. I had hoped this trip would bring Mavery and me closer together—instead we're talking about him moving thousands of miles away. His long bangs blow into his eyes, so I smooth them back, tuck the hair behind his ear. “Look.” I point to Discovery. “Can you believe that's where the shuttle's going to launch from in just a few days?”

He looks at me. “Maybe it'll explode like that other one. That'd be cool.”

I slap Mavery. Tourists stare at us a moment before politely looking off at the shuttle, the Assembly Building.

Mavery says, “Bitch.” It's a half-hearted insult, muttered under his breath. He turns and descends the stairs.

I have surprised myself by hitting Mavery. Derrick was always the disciplinarian, and neither of us hit much—the swatting of a hand when Mavery was a toddler, the odd spanking when he did something dangerous. In the distance, a flock of birds soars over the shuttle. I wonder if they have the sense to avoid the area on launch days or if NASA ends up with seagull casualties. Can birds down a shuttle like they can a plane?

On the bus, Mavery sits in the very back, sulking. I leave him his space and sit in the middle of the bus. The bus driver points out alligators, a bald eagle's nest. We arrive at the next building, an exhibit of the Saturn rockets that propelled the Apollo missions into space. After

disembarking, the visitors enter a theater with three movie screens on our right and a fairly cheesy mural of the Apollo 8 rocket with a sunset for the backdrop on the wall opposite the door. Mavery walks to the farthest back corner of the room, and I follow and stand a few feet away. The movie comes on and various NASA fellows talk about the Apollo missions, the unfortunate deaths of the Apollo 1 astronauts, and the pressures everyone felt—to beat the Russians, to reach the moon, to keep all the astronauts alive.

The movie presentation ends, and the tourists shuffle into the next room, which holds a display of NASA consoles. There's a movie screen in the middle of the room, and a bank of windows behind the rows where people stand. Mavery and I go to the last row. He stares down at the equipment and leans on the bars. I should say something to him, but I don't know how to start.

Jim Lovell comes on the movie screen, but he is not the youthful astronaut I remember. He is old, probably late sixties or seventies. He explains that the consoles in the room are the ones really used during the Apollo 8 launch, and what we will experience is a re-creation of the final three minutes of countdown before Apollo 8 lifted off. The video begins. A spotlight focuses on one unmanned console after another, and we hear a recording of the controllers who sat there during the Apollo 8 launch go through the final systems check. The video cuts back and forth between images from the launch control center and the launch pad.

The faces of the men are drawn, serious. Labels of the various checks illuminate on a display as they are completed. The tension is palpable. My chest aches with anticipation, even though I know the outcome. I feel ten years old again, a bundle of nerves and excitement. The countdown reaches zero and the rocket launches, the brilliant fire and smoke filling the screen. Behind us, the windows rattle and bright light shines in. I grab Mavery's hand, and he lets me

hold it. On screen, a man watches the rocket lift off, the glow reflecting in his glasses. I wonder if the men at launch control felt sad when they turned Apollo 8 over to mission control in Houston. The special effects stop as the rocket climbs out of view. Jim Lovell comes back on the screen, mentions seeing the moon twice but never setting foot on it. He jokes about the exciting journey that was Apollo 13. Lovell tells us to go into the next room to see a real Saturn V rocket.

“Mom.” Mavery squeezes my hand and lets go.

I was staring at the screen, though it had gone dark. The people descend the stairs out of the room. We exit, following the herd into the huge hanger where the Saturn V is displayed, suspended over a variety of displays about the Apollo missions. Mavery runs his hand over a miniature display of the rocket while looking off in another direction.

“I saw that launch, you know.”

“Cool.” Mavery shoves his hands down deep into his pockets, and the long shorts he’s wearing slip down on his hips. If he weren’t wearing a huge T-shirt too, his boxers would certainly be showing. I refused to buy him shorts like he’s wearing, but he came back from a weekend with Derrick with ten pairs, which I have to let him wear because I get tired of being the enemy.

Mavery withdraws a hand and taps the astronauts’ return capsule on the model.

“So, like, the shuttles now land like planes. This thing doesn’t have any wheels or anything. How’d it land?”

“It had a parachute and crashed in the ocean where a boat came to pick up the astronauts.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“It was.”

“In the Imax movie it showed that Russian astronauts still land like that.”

“Is that so.”

There’s a large gift shop to the side at about the middle of the Saturn V. Mavery heads toward a display of the vehicle astronauts drove on the moon. Patches from all the Apollo missions, shot glasses, refrigerator magnets, and T-shirts fill the shop. Near the register I find freeze-dried ice cream, something they’d had at The Cape when I was kid. My parents had refused to buy some for me. I pick up two packages.

After paying for the ice cream, I find Mavery at a bench in a food court area.

“Bought you something.”

Mavery laughs and takes his. “This stuff’s going to taste nasty like chalk.”

“Don’t know.”

We tear into the foil packages. Inside, the Neapolitan ice cream block is wrapped in paper. The block has broken into pieces, so I pick up a small chunk and nibble. To my fingers it feels like chalk, but when I bite it the consistency is more like a rice cake. It tastes surprisingly ice cream-like, minus the icy and creamy attributes. Mavery picks up a big chunk, shoves it in his mouth, and chews.

“This is okay. No brain freeze.”

When I had asked my parents to buy me freeze-dried ice cream, my father said, “Why pay money for ruined ice cream?” I’m glad that Mavery and I chanced it. We eat all of our astronaut ice cream, and I shake the crumbs from my empty package and put it in my purse.

“Mavery,” I say, “I’m sorry I slapped you.”

“S’okay. What I said was pretty stupid.”

“It was.” I sigh.

Mavery wraps his wallet chain around his fingers and they purple.

“Do you want to go live in Seattle with your father?”

“I don’t know,” he says. He unwraps the fingers on his left hand and wraps up the right.

“Think so, but I’m not sure.”

“You’re old enough to know what you want. Think it over, and let me know.”

Mavery nods. My gut says I should say something more, offer some guidance. I want to tell him to stay with me—I feel like I should tell him I want him to. But I keep silent. No matter what he decides, I am grateful that we’ve had this trip together, that we shared freeze-dried ice cream.

“It’s not because of you, Mom,” Mavery says, tugging his earlobe the way he does when he’s lying.

“I know.”

Mavery and I sit and watch tourists stroll by, many staring at the rocket above and barely missing collisions with each other. Mavery gets up and walks over to a display where he can touch a moon rock. I wonder if Jim Lovell hoped, as he watched the moon fading in the distance for the second time, that he’d have another chance to touch its surface. Or did he know he’d only see the moon again like the rest of us—a distant white mirror in the sky.

SOUVENIRS

I slapped my Jeep in park and threw on the hazards. A dead deer lay at the bottom of my driveway. A car had hit him, but he looked intact—fur the soft brown of honey, black eyes wide open, with unmarred five-point antlers atop his head. The sort of deer a hunter would be proud of, but the sort a motorist would feel ashamed of.

Being a fairly big guy, I figured I could move the deer out of the way by myself. I had just driven to my country bungalow from New York City, and after the hour-and-a-half drive, I felt eager to be out of the car a bit. I grabbed his front legs and pulled—tried to do it fast, as though I could spare the buck hurt or the corpse damage. A bloodstain trailed behind as the body dragged, so the deer's other side had gotten the brunt of the damage. I kneeled next to the animal, laid my hand on him—the thick muscles of his hind leg were still warm.

“I’m sorry,” I said. My eyes welled. I laughed at myself. As a war correspondent, I’d seen Marines, barely twenty, bleed to death from gunshots. I’d seen a kid step on a mine and blow up into pieces. I’d made a living staring at death straight-faced and dry-eyed for years. Hell, I did more than that. I peddled death for a price. And now I was crying over the corpse of a deer.

I moved the deer out of my way, but someone from the county would have to come and take away the body. I drove up to the house, and inside the chilled air smelled stale—like dusty wool blankets and aging logs. I hadn’t been to the bungalow in about a year. To keep the pipes from freezing, the electricity stayed on year round, but I kept it low. My ex-wife Cheryl had decorated the house like a log cabin. Ansel Adams’ landscapes and paintings of ducks cluttered the walls. At a garage sale in town, she’d bought this strange blanket inspired by Native

American art—all black diamonds and red triangles. Together the aesthetic embodied yuppie rendering of small-town. I felt like I'd walked into someone else's house, someone else's life.

I'd just returned from spending six months in Iraq covering the war and traveling with Marines. When I closed my eyes, the red-brown desert still stretched out before me. Even when it seemed nothing was out there, not for the miles we could see, we looked for insurgent groups, IEDs—anything unexpected. In a city, an old lady watching from her doorway might mean an attack. We always watched, even with our eyes closed.

The return to normal life in the States had felt surreal, and I wasn't doing a good job readjusting. I'd done an interview as soon as I got stateside, and I'd said something stupid—the kind of stupid thing journalists say often.

For the interview, I wore a clean version of the clothes I'd worn with the Marines, minus the Kevlar—khaki pocketed shirt, fatigue cargo pants. Sandy Richardson and Cole Bryant, the morning show hosts, sat opposite me.

“It's quiet here,” I'd said. “Clean.”

Sandy laughed. “New York quiet and clean? Who knew?”

“Over there, sand gets everywhere, and there's not much clean running water. The Marines are partial to wetnaps. Send wetnaps.”

Sandy changed faces, wrinkling her brow, clenching her jaw. Nodding.

In the desert, bullshit was a luxury, and when things got rough, it was first to go. Now I'd lost my tolerance for it. My boss Kevin forced me to do the interview as a condition for leaving Iraq when I'd wanted. I thought the idea of journalists interviewing journalists was pretty damn pretentious.

“What are the Iraqi people like? Happy to be free of Saddam?” Sandy re-crossed her legs.

“Yes,” Cole said, “How are the Iraqi people coping?”

“How the hell do I know? They look past the rubble of their homes. They look past their dead. They have to, I guess. The dead are all over the place in some areas.”

Cole had spun my answer into some positive statement about the resilience of the Iraqi people. Nobody else probably thought twice about what I’d said, but it bothered me because it wasn’t true. I’d always comforted myself with the thought that at least I told the truth. So after the taping, what I’d said kept bugging me, and I escaped more interviews by driving to the bungalow.

Other than the old coffee in the freezer, there wasn’t any food at the country house, so I dropped my suitcase in the bedroom and headed to the General Store. In the divorce two years ago, Cheryl had gotten our prime real estate in the city, and I took the country home—a bungalow in a town about an hour-and-a-half northwest of the city called Warwick.

I called the county about the deer and left for the General Store. The deer looked so out of place still, lying on the pavement. I hoped they would come remove the body soon, before it really started to stink.

Cheryl had always called the General Store “Little Bits” because it had a little bit of everything. Old-fashioned coolers lined the back wall, and the post office took up about one quarter of the store’s interior. Shelves filled the open center of the room, and a little bit of everything shared the space: one brand of toilet paper, one brand of toothpaste, one brand of coffee. All overpriced.

Dale Tanner, the latest in a long line of Tanners to own the store, rang me up.

“Mr. MacFarlane, welcome back.” Dale insisted on calling me by last name, which made me feel like an old son-of-a-bitch. He looked young, like a coin that hadn’t been in circulation long enough to be dirty, though he had to be in his thirties and was hardly a kid.

“Please. Paul.”

“You see any of them Taliban assholes get theirs?” He carefully bagged up my eggs and coffee.

“What?” I said. “No.” The General Store’s fluorescent lights, ice cream coolers, and refrigerated cases buzzed. The mechanized hum was driving me crazy.

“Shame.” Dale placed my half-gallon of milk in a sandwich-sized paper bag, then put it with the other things in a larger paper grocery sack.

In a way, Dale’s ignorance was what people had died to protect. Ask a GI about his hometown and he’ll start describing the details with church reverence. It doesn’t matter if he’s from Podunk, Iowa or Chicago; home in their minds is always perfect. The little Italian place he and his first love went on their first date, the drive-in where all the guys got drunk, the diner everyone in high school went to after everything else closed down. And that was what made them follow through when they were pissing-down-their-leg scared. Truth was, half of them joined up because their hometowns bored them or didn’t have a job opportunity to spit at. But who wants to die for that? With people shooting at you, every hometown becomes a utopia.

When I neared my driveway, the deer had disappeared, but the blood smear extended all the way to the runoff ditch next to the driveway. I got out of my car and saw the deer sprawled in the ditch. Was that someone’s idea of a joke? Grabbing the buck’s legs, I tried to pull him back onto the driveway, but it proved easier to drag across flat ground than out of a ditch. I guessed I’d call the county back to say the deer had relocated.

A beat-up, 80s sedan was parked in front of my house. I turned the front door knob, expecting it to be open, but I had to use my key. From the bedroom soft music seeped. I ruled out burglars. From the living room, I snatched a poker from the fireplace tools. A woman giggled in the bedroom. The door stood ajar; the girl giggled again, and a young man said something. I threw the door all the way open, slamming the knob into the paneling on the wall hard enough to leave a dent.

“Shit,” the guy said, and then he bolted out from under the bedcovers. The kid couldn’t have been older than seventeen. The teenaged girl he’d been pleasuring jumped off the bed, clutching the sheet to her lower half. She had her sweatshirt on top still, but her panties and jeans lay in a heap on the floor. The guy wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. I struggled not to laugh.

“Shit,” the guy said. “Thought it was warmer in here.”

I considered a moment how to play the situation. I could have feigned bad cop and brandished the poker at the kid like I intended to brain him and his little sweetheart. That might have been funny for a minute, at least to me. But to do such a thing wasn’t really my style. I thought back, tried to remember what it felt like to be young and eager and constantly looking for a place to score with girls. I grinned and set the poker’s tip down in front of me so I could lean on it like a cane.

“My, my,” I said.

The girl burst into tears, and I laughed before I could stop myself. The boy looked at me, his eyes blazing with the kind of anger only fear can kindle.

“It’s gonna be okay, Tanya,” the boy said, his eyes never leaving me.

“It is. Tanya, me and—” I paused and stared at the kid, hoping he’d tell me his name without my having to ask. He didn’t offer anything. “Me and him are gonna talk in the living room. Get dressed and take a minute to get it together.”

She sniffled, and the boy squeezed her shoulder.

“Come on.” I led the boy into the living room, and he closed the bedroom door behind us. “How’d you get in?”

“I’m not saying.”

“Listen, kid. I’m not going to do anything to you or your girlfriend. No cops either. Just tell me your fucking name.” I put the poker back by the fireplace and sat in the recliner.

The kid crossed his arms over his chest, skeptical. “Who are you?”

“Paul MacFarlane, owner of this house. You?” He said his name was Jeremy Lee. He kept himself between the bedroom and me. He hadn’t forgotten his job of protecting Tanya, and it made me like the kid. I motioned to the couch and asked him to sit again. He did. He explained that his friend worked with his dad—a locksmith—during the summer. So that kid made a key, and then Jeremy and a bunch of his friends came to hang out at my bungalow, always careful to put things back just as they’d found them. They’d done a good job of it, too, because I hadn’t noticed anything out of place.

“Okay. And your girlfriend’s name is Tanya, right?” I managed to suppress a smile that I knew would look condescending.

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“But Tanya’s the name of the girl you were giving head to in my bed, right?” I said, growing impatient with the argument over semantics.

Jeremy’s eyes opened wide. “What are you going to do to us?”

“I told you I’m not going to do anything. Relax.”

Jeremy drummed his hands on his knees. “That’s her name.”

“I propose, to avoid embarrassing encounters like this one from ever, ever happening again, I’ll call you before I come to use the cabin. When I’m not here, you and your friends use it as you like, as long as you keep taking care of the house like you have been.”

Jeremy’s face looked blank, without wrinkles, hair, or even pimples to lend him some character. He was only a few years younger than the Marines I’d seen shoulder guns and great responsibility. And I could see the weight of those things in their faces. But Jeremy’s was still a clean slate, yet to be challenged. Tanya emerged from the bedroom, eyes downcast. I assured her everything was fine and told her to sit with Jeremy.

“If you get caught doing anything stupid here, you don’t mention you have my permission to be here. In exchange, if I get the call that some stupid kids broke in, I won’t press charges. Second condition is that you personally make sure there are always clean sheets on that bed before I get here. Understood?”

Jeremy nodded, and Tanya looked at him, confused. He patted her knee and kept staring at me. After a few seconds, Jeremy relaxed back into the couch’s cushions.

I stood. “All right. Tanya, if you’d be kind enough to yank the dirty sheets off the bed in there. You two’ll take them with you, wash them, and bring them back here when you two use the cabin. Jeremy, you’re going to help me get a fucking deer out of my ditch, and then you two can go.”

Jeremy and I walked down the driveway.

He said, “You’re that reporter guy, huh?”

“One of them.” I jumped into the ditch, and Jeremy grabbed the deer’s legs and heaved. The kid was stronger than he looked because I barely had to push.

“Shame somebody nailed this guy with a car,” Jeremy said, wiping his hands on his jeans. “Got a nice rack on him.”

A joke about Tanya’s rack came to mind, but I kept it to myself. The deer’s blood covered my hands, and for a second I thought my breakfast was coming up. Jeremy pulled a towel from his car and handed it to me to wipe my hands and then we shook.

“Thanks for being so cool about all this, Mr. MacFarlane.”

“Please. Paul.”

Tanya came out of the house with the sheets bundled. They said goodbye, and Jeremy opened the passenger side door for her. I grabbed my groceries and went inside before they left. After I put the groceries away, tiredness hit me—the weariness of too many days awake compounded by jetlag. In the bedroom I found fresh sheets on the bed and felt grateful.

I had no idea what time it was—or where I was—when my cell phone rang. Grace, my old friend Jeff’s daughter, had run into Dale and knew I was in town. When Jeff died, she’d abandoned a promising career as a photojournalist to replace him as the local paper’s photographer. She called to ask me to meet her in town at noon for a ceremony she was shooting at a firehouse.

I’d met Jeff when he worked for *The Daily News*, and he retired to Warwick and worked at the local paper to keep from going nuts. Cheryl and I met Grace at a July 4th barbecue at Jeff’s. Grace was working for a couple of women’s magazines in the city, so we kept in touch.

It was already 11 o'clock, so I washed up quickly, changed clothes, chugged some coffee, and headed out to meet her. I pulled the Jeep down the driveway, and the deer still lay at the end where Jeremy and I had moved him. I'd have to call the county again.

Grace was already at the firehouse when I got there. Her house was only two blocks over, so she'd walked. The last time I saw her was five years before, at Jeff's funeral. When we were apart I forgot how painfully lovely she was. I had a decade on her at least, but I'd always found her very attractive. She wore a long gray skirt that clung in all the right places and a green fleece pullover. Her long red hair was clasped loosely back in a clip. She carried an old manual camera with a huge zoom lens.

"Thank God you're here," Grace said. "I almost looked up that fat guy's skirt from boredom." She pointed to a rotund man carrying bagpipes and wearing a kilt.

We hadn't seen each other in over five years, but Grace always started talking like she was continuing a conversation already in progress. Like no time had passed at all. I eased the strap over her head so I could get a better look at her camera. It reminded me of one I'd used in college in the 70s. I stepped away from her, so I could see her through the zoom. Her eyes were the deep brown of freshly tilled soil. Grace looked away, off toward the volunteer firemen in dress uniforms, awkward in white gloves and freshly shined shoes. I put the strap over her head again and handed her the camera.

The firefighters—two or three women in the lot—milled about restlessly until someone took charge, splitting them into rows and dictating the rhythm they'd march.

"How's your family?"

"Mom's great—off in Rome with her Purple Shoe club or whatever it's called. Gran keeps wetting herself. When Dad was alive, they had her in a home for a while. The nurses put

her in diapers there. Now she can't remember to get up to pee. I keep telling Mom I'm gonna put her back in diapers, but Mom says it robs Gran of her dignity. Like peeing yourself is dignified."

She aimed the camera at the firefighters as they practiced marching, many tragically out of step. She snapped some shots.

"How old's Gran?"

"Late seventies."

Gran was only thirty years older than me. In thirty years, I could find myself incontinent, impotent, and left in the care of strangers, since I didn't have kids, let alone grandkids, to do the wet work.

The wind caught Grace's hair and fanned it out behind her for a moment. She smelled faintly of vanilla.

I said, "You look great."

"Mr. MacFarlane, are you flirting?" Grace let the camera drop to her chest and turned her brown eyes on me.

"Why does everybody keep fucking calling me that?" Why didn't she just say, "What are you trying, Old Man?"

Grace stepped toward me. A man, some department chief, called for the people's attention. Since I'd arrived, a crowd had gathered, most people just from the houses that lined the street. The old firehouse was in a residential neighborhood, and other than the enlarged garage, it looked like all the other houses on the block. The chief thanked the community, the neighbors present, and extolled the virtues of their new home. At noon, some firefighters

lowered the flag, took it in their hands with reverence, folded it, and fell into lines behind their trucks, which they had polished to a blinding shine for the occasion.

I said, “The flag from Fort Henry that inspired the ‘Star Spangled Banner’ stayed in the family of one of the fort’s commanders, and they gave swatches of the flag to friends as souvenirs—someone even took a star right out of the middle.”

Grace cocked her head. “Really?”

“Isn’t that American?” I said.

The trucks eased off, progressing down the street at a crawl. It felt like a funeral procession for the old station because its expanded garage was no longer sufficient to keep the number and size of trucks the town’s growing population required. Grace took her fill of pictures and fell back to walk with me behind the trucks.

She asked what we would do after the ceremony, and I said I had no plans. She had to check on Gran, and then, she said, “Who knows,” and waved her hand in the air. Endless possibilities. She was still young enough she could afford to believe in such things.

In Iraq, the exuberance of youth, especially girlish youth, was something I sorely missed. It seemed difficult to believe that such a thing could exist under all the dark shrouds the women wore, but on rare occasions I’d see the glimmer of an eye, a crinkle of the skin near the eye that hinted the woman smiled underneath her veils, and it made me believe that in private those women could be as intoxicatingly girlish and coquettish as any others. With Grace the volume of the girlishness was almost overwhelming after months of muted femininity, and I enjoyed growing accustomed to the ways of American women again.

The new firehouse looked as if the paint hadn’t had time to dry. Various men made speeches. They talked about dedication and sacrifice of their kindred firefighters, of the souls

lost in the Towers in New York City and local heroes whose sacrifices were just as great. They raised the flag on its new pole, and ceremoniously backed the fire trucks into their new bays. Grace moved closer to the garage to get a better shot. The pipers played, and when Grace came back her cheeks were damp.

“What?” Tears didn’t become her, and the sight of her crying unnerved me.

“They always make me cry.” She wiped her eyes and nose on the sleeve of her green fleece.

“Who?” I squeezed her shoulder, too uncomfortable not to touch her.

“Bagpipes.”

I’d had Grace figured as a woman who’d laugh at a Podunk parade like this. After stopping at her house to check on Gran and pick up her coat, she agreed to come back to my place. I had expectations, though I was unsure what they were, and I certainly wasn’t ready to admit anything. Grace had been quiet since the ceremony, which unnerved me. I craved her good-natured prattle.

I said, “Tell me a story.”

She turned to face me. The camera clicked as she shot my profile. “What kind?”

“Something simple—a day in the life of you and Gran.”

“A day in the life—let me think,” Grace said. I stole a look at her, and her deep brown eyes hinted that she brimmed with stories.

When we had almost reached the house, I warned her about the deer and told her I hoped it was gone. She asked if I’d hit it, and before I told her no, we reached the driveway. The deer’s body still lay there, but the head had been cut off and taken. I jumped out of the Jeep and

kneeled next to the body. Grace got out and came to my side, but went back to the truck to leave her camera behind.

Grace shook her head. She put a hand on my shoulder, gently, like she thought I'd shatter. "It was a buck, right?"

I told her it was, and she said somebody had probably taken the head as a trophy. My body went numb. I knew why I'd lost my taste for my job. One man's tragedy is another man's trophy. After watching two wars in Iraq, after growing up watching Vietnam on TV, I couldn't tell anyone a thing about war. I'd drawn no conclusions; I had no answers. Is a man's freedom worth a man's life? No matter how many times I tried to answer that, I couldn't draw the same conclusion twice. And what did I know anyway? I had just tagged along. I dropped the corpse on the people's doorsteps for them to decide what it meant.

I stood. Grace stared at me, and I looked into her eyes. I hoped she could try to understand. "I said something really fucking stupid the other day."

"What?" she said.

A puddle of blood congealed on the ground near where the buck's head had been. The rough white bone of the deer's neck showed where some fucking asshole had sawed right through. "I said the Iraqi people looked past the rubble of their homes—that they didn't see their dead. That was how they managed to keep going."

Grace listened, hands shoved into her pockets.

"What I tried to say was that to keep going they had to look beyond the dead bodies to the live ones. I saw a mother poking through the rubble of her house looking for her children. She found an infant's leg. Just a leg. She picked it up and carried it around while she kept searching. Then she found a small boy, couldn't have been older than three, unconscious and

bleeding from his head. She dropped the leg and picked up the boy.” I looked at the deer’s body, then off at the nearly barren trees. The exposed branches chattered against each other in the wind. “Truth is those people see the dead everywhere, even after the bodies are gone. They never forget. It was me who had to look away to keep going.”

“You’re looking now.” Grace pointed at the beheaded deer.

We got back into the car and drove up to the house.

I said, “You’ll never believe it. Yesterday, I walked in on a pair of young lovers using the cabin.”

“Really? What’d you do?”

“I told them to use the place whenever.” I paused. “The sheets are clean, though.”

Grace laughed. “You’re assuming a lot.” Her tone wasn’t discouraging, and I felt grateful. I wanted to be with someone who looked at me the way Grace did, with hope just tilled under in her brown eyes. As we walked in the door, I helped her out of her coat. She snapped another picture of me.

I smiled and hung her coat in the closet. I offered her coffee and went to the kitchen to put the pot on.

“Was decorating this place your job or Cheryl’s?” she said. I imagined her grimacing at the Ansel Adams prints, poking a dream catcher on the wall.

“The ex-wife’s handiwork,” I said. I filled the pot with water.

Outside the window, autumn had turned the maple tree brilliant yellow. Some of the leaves had browned and fallen. I pushed up the window and listened to the dead leaves rustling against each other, whispering in the breeze.

SWIM OR SINK

The dust blew up off the dirt road in front of our campsite, and my daughter Danielle blinked and rubbed her eyes. On Saturday, two days away, she was turning eight. I hadn't mustered the heart to tell her daddy wasn't coming to the campground to celebrate her birthday with us. Franklin, my husband, told me he needed to work over the weekend and couldn't make time. I figured the weekend is when he'd *have* time for his family and *make* time for work, but he informed me I was wrong. Before this summer, he never used to work weekends. Franklin was an estate lawyer, and I stayed home to care for Danielle. In summer, Danielle and I spent all of our time at the KOA campground.

I sat on the camper's awning-shaded porch, and Danielle moistened the dry dirt lawn with water from my Tupperware iced tea pitcher. After she wet the ground, she shoved the feet of her Beachin' It Barbie into the mud.

On the neighboring campsite, Michael McBride hammered nail after nail into a permanent shed he was constructing at the site's back end. The KOA's board strictly forbade any permanent structures on the sites, even though people owned their lots. Most people followed the rules to avoid the hostile attitudes of board members who lived at the campground, and the fees they charged for violations, but neither of those things kept us from building our porch.

"How many nails does one little shed require?" I yelled, knowing McBride wouldn't hear.

"Want I go tell him, Mama?"

“Tell Mr. McBride to come have some cold iced tea.” Every street had a few people who stayed at the KOA all summer, but most folks just came up on the weekends. Danielle’s friends Tara and Bethany went to weekend day camp with her. Their moms sucked up to the board members to learn all the gossip, and Bethany’s mom said McBride bought the site next to us and moved to the campground indefinitely after leaving his cheating wife in the early spring. He’d been a permanent resident ever since. During the week, McBride, Danielle, and I were the sole inhabitants of our street, so we’d been having the brief, over-the-fence sort of neighborly conversations.

Danielle stood and dusted off her bottom. The butt of her bright fuchsia shorts had a ring of mud from sitting in one of her puddles, and her Strawberry Shortcake tank top hung too short, exposing her tummy. She had grown like a cornstalk—tall and all ears, like her father. Her bare feet slapped the dry ground sending up plumes of dust. One of our favorite summer luxuries was not wearing shoes much, sandals when we had to.

I smoothed the skirt of my sundress. Danielle came around the corner with McBride in tow. He finished pulling a shirt over his boiled lobster, sun burnt chest.

“Thanks,” McBride said.

“What?” I spoke loudly. “Can’t hear ya—deaf from some idiot banging all day.”

Danielle giggled. “Mama, you ain’t deaf.”

“Danielle Anne. Aren’t.”

“Aren’t deaf.” Danielle looked at her feet and toed the mud.

“Pipsqueak, how ‘bout you get me some of that iced tea you promised?”

“Can I, Mama?”

I told her she could, and she sprinted inside the trailer. She was playing with the Tupperware iced tea pitcher because I'd bought a large sun-tea container with a pour spout. Danielle would have to work at it to make a big mess with that dispenser.

I said, "So what's next, Mr. McBride? A deck?"

"For the love of Pete, call me Michael." McBride sat in an aluminum and mesh lawn chair. "Yup. Big deck; I'll be hammering all summer."

I rolled my eyes and said, "Men." Always preoccupied with the size of their decks.

Danielle came out of the trailer with a tray bearing three iced teas. She tripped, spilling an entire glassful in McBride's lap though he caught the other two before they emptied. Danielle burst into tears.

"I'm cooler now." McBride handed me a half-full iced tea.

Danielle giggled, then kept crying. I poured iced tea in my lap. "Well, we don't have to go to the pool."

McBride threw the last glassful on Danielle, who hunched over and laughed hard. Franklin would have yelled at her. He would have made her go get another tray of drinks and try again. Children—our child in particular—brought out the worst in Franklin.

"Penny," McBride said.

"Doreen, actually. Confusing me with one of your other lady friends?" I meant to sound funny, cavalier, but it came out sharp.

"I meant penny for your thoughts."

"You and your wife have any kids?"

McBride shifted in his lawn chair, the flimsy thing creaking from his weight though he was tall and lean. He shook his head. I wonder if he saw the situation with his wife coming—if he knew she was cheating before he *knew*.

I got up and a delicious breeze came, pressing the moist, cold fabric of my dress against my legs. “I’ll get us some more iced tea.”

When I returned with our drinks, Danielle and McBride sat next to each other digging in the dirt. I handed them the cups.

“Mama, Mr. McBride builds stuff for real. That’s why he’s so good at hammerin’.” Danielle took a huge gulp from her cup and slopped iced tea on her shirt. “Can I go look at his shed?”

I said, “Any rusty nails sticking out or hacksaws laying around?”

“Nope. Everything’s put up.” McBride stood. He poked Danielle in the chest and when she looked, he tweaked her nose.

“Go ahead, but sing. And don’t touch anything.”

Danielle started “If You’re Happy and You Know It” atop her lungs and ran off.

McBride and I resumed our seats on the porch.

“Nice porch.”

“Thanks. Franklin built it over a few weekends last summer.”

Danielle still sang, occasionally clapping her hands.

McBride said, “What’s he do?”

“Franklin’s a lawyer.”

“Regular Renaissance guy.” McBride finished his iced tea. “Well, I better get back.”

I took his empty cup. “Come over any time.”

“Thanks.” McBride went down the stairs.

“Send Danielle back.”

“Can I put her to work if she wants to help?” McBride winked. He must have been lonely at the campground all spring when no one was around.

“Sure, as long as she’s not in the way.”

Danielle worked all afternoon as McBride’s assistant, handing him nails and bringing him boards. He made a friend for life.

After dinner that evening, Danielle and I took our nightly walk. First we walked to the end of our street past the camper with a yard full of garden gnomes with purple faces and green hands painted by grandchildren. Then we walked back past our camper and McBride’s, classic jazz from his radio seeping out open windows. We followed the main road down the hill toward the campground’s entrance. Some nights we turned down the road that went to the lake, and Danielle would catch fireflies as we walked part of the lake’s edge and listened to the rubber-band songs of the bullfrogs. That night, we kept on the main road and walked past the laundry shed to the A-frame, which held the KOA office, a basic grocery store, and the game room. We went to the row of pay phones on the side of the building and called Franklin.

After a few rings, Franklin picked up. “Hello, dear.”

“Here’s our girl,” I said.

Danielle got on and said her hellos, told Franklin about all the fun we’d been having and how excited she was to be seeing him soon.

I sent her off to play on the old fire wagon they kept in front of the A-frame for the kids.

“Danielle Anne, sing loud enough so I can hear you while I talk to Daddy.”

Danielle ran off, singing “You Are My Sunshine.” I sighed into the phone.

Franklin said, “You haven’t told her yet?”

“Hoped maybe I wouldn’t have to.” A mosquito buzzed by my head, and I worried that Danielle was getting eaten alive. I hadn’t remembered to rub her down with Skin-So-Soft before we left.

Franklin said, “We’ve talked this to death. I’m trying here. But I have to work on the Kraus estate. If I keep the whole family happy, I might get a promotion.”

“You haven’t made the past two weekends, and this is her birthday.” The connection crackled, and I thought I might’ve lost him. “Franklin? Hello?”

“What?” He sounded like he spoke through clenched teeth.

“She only turns eight once.”

“I know. I’d be there if I could. I’ll make it up to her.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “I’ll tell her tonight. Talk to you in a few.”

Franklin said, “Tell her happy birthday and—”

I hung up. The breeze carried the smell of barbecue—charcoal and hamburgers. Danielle switched songs to “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.” The pay phone rang and startled me because my hand still rested on the receiver. I walked to the front of the building where Danielle sat on the fire wagon’s bench and turned the steering wheel dramatically left, then right.

She sang, “Land where my father hides, land of the pilgrim side. From every mountain high, let freedom ring.”

I swung myself up onto the bench next to her, and she stopped singing.

“How ‘bout we head back and roast some marshmallows?” I said. Even though Danielle didn’t know Franklin wasn’t coming, I was already trying to make it up to her.

“I’ll drive us,” she said. She looked over her shoulder as though checking for traffic and spun the steering wheel fast.

McBride ushered in the next day with incessant hammering. I still hadn’t decided how to break the bad news to Danielle. I packed a picnic lunch for us, and Danielle and I abandoned the camper for the quiet solace of the lake. Most other campers didn’t arrive until Friday night or Saturday morning, so we still had the lake to ourselves. The brown-green water, the color of moss, broke in tiny waves from the breeze. After we set our lunch and Danielle’s sand toys down on our wide beach towels, I ran off toward the water.

“Bet I can beat you to the float.”

Danielle had just mastered the breaststroke at her weekend swim lessons.

“Nuh-uh,” she yelled and took off running, all knees and elbows.

I slowed to an exaggerated jog and let her catch up, so we reached the water together. We walked into the water, and once the bottom dropped from underneath us, Danielle breaststroked and I backstroked. I swam a few feet ahead.

“Come on, slowpoke. First to the float gets a fudgicle.”

Danielle stuck her tongue out, probably to give me a raspberry, but instead she got a taste of lake water and spat. She hovered, head bobbing as her legs worked underwater to keep her afloat.

“Don’t stop,” I said. “A fudgicle’s on the line.” I swam, leaving a greater distance between us. She followed.

“Mommy. I can’t.”

The float waited about ten feet away. Danielle stopped, arms resting and feet kicking double-time to keep her above water. I treaded water and stroked my arms in arcs, moving the water between us as though my waves could urge her along. At the beginning of the summer, she had only been able to make it halfway to the float on her own, but here she was, just ten feet away. Danielle panted, at the brink of tears. I smiled and swam toward her. Danielle relaxed when I got near and dunked under, but I pulled her up by the straps of her suit. She sputtered and barked up the brown lake water.

“Mommy?”

“Paddle.” I let go and nudged her forward. “Kick.”

“I can’t.” Danielle stopped swimming and sank beneath the water’s surface again.

I pulled her up. She came up this time without coughing, so I knew she’d held her breath. That dunk was purely for theatrical effect.

“Danielle Anne, I am right here.”

Danielle clenched her jaw in an expression of childish determination, but the facial gesture reminded me of the way Franklin clenched his jaw when we fought. Danielle arrived at the float, climbed the ladder, and stepped onto the float. As we both stood on the float, she crossed her arms across her chest and fixed her face in a pout.

“Look at what you just did.” I pointed to the beach, which looked farther away than ever before. “All by yourself.”

Arms still crossed, Danielle smiled. “Yup, I did.”

She crossed the float and hugged me, and for a moment I felt like I knew what I was doing as a parent. Danielle released me from the hug then shoved me with all her weight. I stepped back, lost my balance on a scummy piece of the green outdoor carpeting that covered the

float, and toppled into the water. I came up sputtering surprisingly foul tasting lake water—so thick I felt I should chew it. On the float Danielle jumped up and down and clapped her hands.

That night, I decided to make tacos, Danielle’s second favorite, for dinner. Breaking the news that Franklin wasn’t coming the next day for her birthday had been put off too long. At the counter, I chopped onions, tomatoes, and lettuce. She sat at the table, eating her victory fudgicle as a dessert-appetizer and coloring a picture. In the drawing, she stood atop the lake float in a tiara and pink dress with wings. I sputtered in the water below, my hair algae green and my red tongue sticking out. Halfway down, my body turned into a fish’s. At least I had been upgraded to a mermaid. A chunk of Danielle’s fudgicle fell on the drawing and she licked it off.

“The water was kinda brown anyways.”

I smiled, despite the nausea welling in the pit of my stomach. Danielle was going to be so disappointed that Franklin would miss her birthday, and I was so disappointed in him I was afraid I wouldn’t be any good at consoling her.

Someone knocked on the trailer door. Danielle looked at me, eyes wide. I could see a picture show of thoughts projected onto her smooth, sunburnt brow. She imagined Franklin on the other side of the door carrying a present so large he couldn’t open the door, maybe a new bike or the Easy Bake Oven she wanted so badly even though he told her it was too dangerous.

I wiped my hands and opened the door. McBride stood on the porch, looking too tall to fit in our trailer. He held a paper grocery sack.

“Had to get some more nails for the shed, stopped by the farm stand on the way back. Butter-n-sugar corn by the dozen.” McBride pushed the bag into my hands. “Figured you ladies might like some.” He turned to go.

I grabbed his shoulder, and he turned back. “That bit about the nails was a joke, right?”

He winked. “Enjoy the corn.”

I asked if he’d eaten. He hadn’t, so I asked him to stay for tacos and corn with us.

McBride slid onto the bench seat opposite Danielle at the fold-down table. He and Danielle talked about her picture, the day’s swimming adventure, plans for her birthday. Danielle asked for the Uno cards, and I looked to McBride’s face to see if he wanted to play or felt obliged. He smirked at me, smile lines appearing around his eyes. He looked more excited to play than Danielle. I found Uno in the junk drawer and handed the cards to McBride.

“Don’t beat him too bad, kiddo. ‘Specially not if you’re taking him for cash next game.”

“Right, Mom.” Danielle rolled her eyes. She’d started doing that sometimes, in front of her older friends. How flattering for McBride.

I excused myself to husk the corn and propped the trailer door open to keep an ear on things. The air outside looked gray with twilight, lightning bugs appearing in the trees the campsite’s edge. A gentle breeze blew, thick with humidity and electricity from an approaching storm. I sat in the dirt and set down the bag of corn and the pot I’d brought for the husked ears. Husking corn felt like a hunter-gatherer thing to do. Danielle’s laughter echoed out of the trailer, sweet and soft. Franklin didn’t know what he was missing. The trouble was, she wouldn’t have laughed like that if Franklin had been playing with her. Ever since Danielle was born, it felt like Franklin had been slowly slipping away. Missing campground weekends here and there was one thing, but missing Danielle’s birthday went beyond careless to cruel. I wondered what better offer Franklin could have gotten.

I pulled the husk from the corn with a squeak, the smooth corn silk—soft as infant hair—glowing in the amber light escaping the trailer door. I piled the cornhusk and silk and planned to dry it to make cornhusk dolls tomorrow at the party with Danielle and her weekend camp

friends. I'd tell her tomorrow that Franklin wasn't coming. She'd be disappointed, but at least her friends would be there to distract her. I could handle Franklin neglecting me, but Danielle already got so little of his attention that I didn't know if I could forgive him for putting work or whatever was keeping him before Danielle. Lightning jumped from cloud-to-cloud, a web of dancing sparks, and a few seconds later the thunder rumbled.

We ate dinner and afterwards McBride and Danielle played Connect Four. I sat next to her and coached, though she didn't need my help. McBride let her win but didn't make it obvious, and I was grateful. Danielle nodded on my shoulder between turns and after her second victory, I scooped her up and carried her off to her bunk deep in the belly of the trailer. When I came back to the kitchen, McBride plucked the last of the pronged, corn-shaped corn holders from the gnawed clean ears and dropped them in the sink.

He ran water over his buttery hands. "You've been quiet."

"You sayin' I talk too much?"

"Yes."

I sighed and sank onto a kitchen bench. I picked up Connect Four pieces, one red, one black, and fit their grooved edges together. McBride turned on the tap to wash the melmac plates from dinner.

I said, "Don't. I'll do them."

"Least I can do."

Danielle and McBride had played through the time we usually took our walk and called Franklin. I felt hesitant to leave McBride alone with Danielle, but I wanted to give Franklin one last chance to change his mind—I wanted one more chance to make him hear how badly we both wanted him to come.

“Would you stay here a few minutes with Danielle while I go to the office to call my husband? Five minutes tops.”

“Sure. It’ll give me time to finish these.” McBride gestured to the plates.

“You really don’t have to.”

“I know.”

I left the camper without bothering to put on shoes. Thunder rumbled. The sporadic streetlights cast occasional pools of light, but most of the road was covered in deep blue darkness. The road was rockier than I realized, and my feet ached from the sharp stones. Thunder sounded again, and I expected to get drenched if I didn’t hurry. I jogged the last quarter-mile to the A-frame.

The phone took my change, and I dialed. Franklin picked up on the first ring, which was strange. We called every few days, and it was well past our usual time.

“Hey, babe,” he said. I heard him smiling. “Was about to give up on you.”

He didn’t realize it was me calling. He’d been waiting for someone else to call, someone he called babe. I held my breath and wondered what he’d say next.

“Doreen?” He stammered. “That you? You there?”

“Who else would it be?”

“I had a call out to someone from work.”

“Babe?” I wondered if he’d actually keep trying to lie his way out. On the other end of the line, Franklin was quiet.

Finally he said, “Dammit, Doreen.”

I hung up and was jogging back up the street when the phone rang back. At the trailer, McBride sat on one of the benches with his feet up on the other. He'd folded the table up out of the way.

McBride said, "Everything okay?"

"No," I said. I sat opposite him, and he pulled his feet down.

"How 'bout I buy you a drink?" McBride said. "Got cold beers over at the McBride Ranch."

"If we can drink 'em on my front forty, sure."

McBride went to get beers, and I shoved the Connect Four box into the storage space underneath the kitchen bench's seat. At the rear of the camper, Danielle lay sprawled on her bunk. She'd already kicked her sheets off and dropped her baby doll on the floor. I covered her, smoothed her hair, and tucked her baby underneath an arm. She shifted onto her side and snored. I kissed each of her eyelids and wished her sweeter dreams.

Outside on the porch, the floodlight cast a triangle of light over the campsite. At its edge, the trees offered the undersides of their leaves to the coming rain, and the first drops smacked the parched dirt. McBride came and sat next to me, two cold beers in hand and another two packed in ice in a work bucket.

McBride handed me a beer. "Penny."

"You don't actually want to hear about it, do you?"

McBride clinked the neck of his beer against mine and drank. "Rhetorical questions aren't my style."

I couldn't decide if McBride was trying to get into my pants or just enjoying a borrowed, ready-made family, wife and child included, that he could walk away from at the summer's end.

“What the hell are you after?” I took a long pull off my beer.

McBride shrugged. He drank his beer and looked off at the trees, the lightning bugs. The steady falling rain silenced the crickets. “Maybe I should go.”

I apologized.

McBride said, “She’s a great kid.” He gestured to the trailer, and I imagined Danielle’s little heart-shaped face, smooth with sleep. I hoped she wasn’t dreaming of gifts Franklin would bring her.

“Franklin isn’t coming to celebrate Danielle’s birthday.”

“Something important must be keeping him.”

I shook my head, killed the last of my beer. “It’s someone.”

Thick raindrops fell harder, beating on the trailer’s roof. From outside, they sounded alarming—a dreadful clanging like the roof was being beaten in. Inside the trailer, enclosed in the nook that held my bunk with Danielle breathing rhythmically in the bed below, rain sounded comforting, like a distant echo of our heartbeats. I felt McBride watching me.

He took my empty beer bottle and handed me a fresh one.

“I haven’t told Danielle yet that he isn’t coming.”

“You’ll have to, tomorrow.”

“I know.”

“She’ll bounce back.”

“I know.”

The sky sounded with a low rumble of thunder from distant lightning.

I said, “Can I ask you something personal?” McBride nodded. “Did you know about your wife before the end? I mean, how’d you know?”

McBride rubbed the condensation off the neck of his beer with his thumb. He watched the sky where lightning flickered between clouds. “I didn’t know.” He paused, took a long drink. “I confronted her when I stopped being sure infidelity was a ridiculous thing to worry about.”

“Guilty before proven innocent?”

McBride shook his head, finished his beer. “I confronted her when the evidence became too great to deny. But I didn’t know. Sometimes I still don’t believe it.”

“I feel so stupid. I should have seen this coming. I didn’t.”

“Don’t beat yourself up for loving someone who turned out to be untrustworthy.”

The rain tapered off to a light, slow drizzle. Near the floodlight, the raindrops seemed to stall a moment as the light caught them. The drops just hovered in space not falling, defying gravity.

I said, “What next?”

“The hard part.”

I looked at McBride. “Everything will change.”

“You’ll get through it.” McBride leaned closer. “At some point you’ll wonder if marrying him was worth it. If it was a mistake. But you have Danielle.”

The rain fell harder, and water rushed down our sloped dirt yard into the road because the parched ground couldn’t absorb it fast enough.

“Michael, would you come celebrate Danielle’s birthday with us tomorrow?”

“I’d love to. I mean, I can’t bang on the shed all day if you’re having a party.”

I clinked my half-empty beer against his fresh one. “To good neighbors.”

Lightning jumped from cloud to cloud, intricately branched and lace-like. I'd heard the night sky reveals what the next day's weather will be, so I watched the storm, as the rain eased, and tried to see tomorrow.

AIOLOS

It was like going blind all over again. Aiolos limped sometimes while guiding me down Boston's shady Otis Street to Siobhan's Bakery, where I bought my favorite croissants and he got his daily hard roll. But one day he couldn't get up for our morning walk. He's a yellow lab; I love the irony that yellow labs and golden retrievers, the most common guide dogs, have color names. I haven't always been blind, so in my mind I see Aiolos's coat, the pale yellow of summer corn silk and corn-silk soft, too, on his ears where he likes me to rub.

I crouched near Aiolos's bed and found he'd wet it. I rested my hand on his head, the strong brow muscles contracting into his old man face. A whine escaped him, high-pitched and long. Eighty-five percent shame and fifteen percent pain. He was hurting bad if he couldn't get up, but he was telling me about the shame of it all just then—the wetting, the feebleness, the aging. I named him Aiolos when I'd gotten him ten years before, just months after a thorough pounding had turned out my lights. I was a real asshole in those days. As a young dog, he did everything quickly, like the Greek god of winds. Only later did someone tell me that Aiolos also meant Earth-Destroyer, a name that never seemed to fit my dog until I realized that if Aiolos's condition was serious, I might lose him.

My sister Aurora arrived within a half-hour of my call. She let herself in and found Aiolos and me on the floor by his bed. As Aurora rushed over, the sweet smell of her hair, something like Ivory Soap and lavender, preceded her. And a faint hint of nail polish remover, a tag along scent from her work at the salon. She bent over Aiolos, the swing of her long, orange hair creating a breeze. A secret anger rose in me when people called it red because that description is plain wrong. Orange is closer, though umber or pumpkin or setting-sun suit better

depending on a person's shade. In my mind, whenever I'm told someone has red hair, it's the shade of Aurora's hair I see. If my old drinking buddies knew how much time I'd spent in the past ten years thinking about colors, they would probably suspect the blow to the head affected more than my sight.

"Oh, boy," Aurora said. Aiolos sniffed her, his breath puffed out and sucked in quickly because he adored her and visits always riled him up.

I grabbed a strand of Aurora's hair, rubbed my thumb over it—smooth as river rocks—and tugged. "Thanks for getting here fast."

She squeezed my hand then rubbed the patch of hair at my temple she insisted was graying. "You look more and more like this old Aiolos boy every day, Jerasimos." She patted Aiolos on the head—her fingers thudding softly against the thick muscles there—and he panted in approval. Our ongoing joke was that my hair as it lightened to lighter blonde on its way to gray cinched the resemblance between Aiolos and me. But I had a hard time envisioning the comparison, beyond the species difference, because I often forgot my own face. And Aurora's 29 year-old self was the image of her burnt into my mind forever, regardless of how many times she asked me to feel for crow's feet near her eyes.

Aurora stood. "I'll grab his leash."

"Don't think we need it." I crouched in front of Aiolos and caressed his head in the long, smooth strokes that calmed him. "Easy." I scooped him up in my arms as if he didn't weigh almost a hundred pounds and turned toward the front door. "Grab a few towels."

Aiolos loved the car. We laid him in the backseat of Aurora's Jimmy and opened the window. As we drove to the vet he sniffed the air, the scent of fallen leaves, carved pumpkins, and wood fires mingled in the breeze. I figured he liked being in a car so much because they

were all joyrides to him, all of his primary duties of no concern while he and I were both safe in a car.

Looking back, the ten years Aiolos had been with me seemed a lifetime. A different life from the one I'd lived before. When I was thirty-four, I was prone to drinking so much that I forgot the bar fights I'd started the night before. My father had been a dick for as long as I could remember, so I disregarded most of the advice he gave me, which wasn't much. But I should have listened when he told me not to get too cocky because there was always a tougher man out there, and if I started enough trouble and ran my mouth too often, the only thing I could be sure of was that the tougher man would find me.

When he did, I didn't recognize him. So I insulted his girlfriend and grabbed her ass, and then I called him something like a cock-sucking pansy. I woke up a month later in the hospital, not sure I had woken up because the room remained dark. Everyone told me how lucky I was to be alive, and I felt lucky for a little while, until I realized how humbled and blind I had become.

At the vet's, Dr. Ferguson, a kindly, soft-spoken man with rough but sure hands, told me Labradors as a breed are inclined toward hip problems, particularly arthritis. The room smelled of some pine-scented cleaning product, but the smell of dog and cat lingered faintly. Aiolos's nails clattered on the metal exam table, and he whined pure pain. The doctor's touch caused that pain; it made me want to bust Ferguson in the nose. "We'll keep him overnight. It'll probably be easier than you trying to manage him right now. And we'll have to run some tests to see how bad this arthritis is."

Aiolos's tail smacked onto the metal table in a regular rhythm, so the doctor must have been petting him. Even if Aiolos couldn't hold a grudge worth a damn, I could for him.

I said, "How the hell would you know what I can handle?"

Ferguson muttered apologies.

Aurora said, "It's fine. We're just upset." She gave me her elbow and led me out of the exam room.

Aurora kept me company for dinner, so I made mom's Shepherd's Pie from scratch. Cooking always distracted me. Half the time the guys and me would go out drinking, we'd end up back at my place with me cooking corn beef hash. Bruno even sent mom a thank you note for teaching me how to cook. Aurora ate like she hadn't had a meal in weeks, which she might not have. Aurora was usually broke, and the grocery budget often went to liquor instead. But I couldn't eat much. Aiolos would love the leftovers when he came home.

"Have I told you Aiolos doesn't like peas?"

Aurora's fork hit the bottom of her second plate. "Peas?"

"He eats around them and spits them out. I like to think he enjoys watching me crawl around on the floor near his bowl, fumbling for peas and trying to pick them up without crushing them all over."

Aurora scraped her fork across the bottom of her plate, a habit left over from our childhood, which always made my teeth ache. It was a sign she was nervous. She kicked me under the table.

"You haven't touched your food, and you're talking about Aiolos like he's dead. Enough melodrama, big bro. He'll be fine." Her voice had a subtle edge, like grapes just beginning to sour.

"Red or white?" We needed wine.

"Yes."

I grabbed a bottle from the red side of my wine rack and held it out. "Cab okay?"

“That’s Merlot, which is fine.” Mona, the cleaning lady I had come once a month, insisted on moving things.

“Everything okay, baby sis?”

“Bout time you asked. Everything’s wrong, as usual.”

“What happened with Mr. Good Enough—Chester, right?” I grabbed the wine key from the drawer. The foil wrapper came off easily enough, but I must have got the corkscrew in crooked, because the cork broke in half as I yanked. Aurora knew better than to offer help—I’d only get more pissed.

“Chester? Charles. The bastard stole forty dollars from my purse for pot. You’re dropping cork shavings into the wine.”

I gave up on trying to get the screw in again and pushed the cork into the bottle with the handle of a wooden spoon.

“Pot, Jerry. Who steals money from a girlfriend for pot? Maybe teenage stoners lift ten bucks mom won’t miss, but a forty-year-old man?”

I poured our wine. “Did he share at least?”

“Not with me. And, I have a black eye.”

“You joking?” I could’ve called guys from the old group and had the bastard beaten within a half-hour. Bruno always had a soft spot for Aurora, and he’d have been first in line to issue a beating on her behalf. “Seems out of character for a stoner to be abusive.”

“The police decided it was self-defense. They were kind enough not to throw me in jail, mostly because they couldn’t stop laughing at Charles.”

Tempers like Aurora’s and mine were the product of a fiery Irishman father and a Greek import mother. Aurora moved to anger more slowly than I did, but once she was there—trouble.

I raised my glass. “To a sister who beats men.”

Aurora clinked glasses with me. “To a brother who cooks better than Mom.”

After a bottle of Merlot, we felt relaxed enough to get to work on the tough subject.

Aurora said, “So what about the Aiolos situation?”

We ran through the possible scenarios: Aiolos would be treated and cured, back to guide dog life as normal. Aiolos would be guide dog no more but could retire. Or Aiolos would have to be put down. Retired dogs often could be placed with families through the service that provided them, and people paid hundreds of dollars for them because of their excellent behavior.

I said, “Can you imagine Aiolos getting his tail pulled by some screaming halfling with a runny nose and a inclination for decorating walls with its own feces? He’d be miserable.”

Aurora and I had made it to a bottle of Pinot Grigio, and we sat on the floor, to have shorter distance if falling became necessary.

“But if he can’t be your guide anymore, keeping him means handling two dogs, which would be tough.” Aurora hiccupped, and I imagined cartoon drunks and their bubble exhalations.

“Lots of people have two dogs.” I wasn’t convincing myself, though, let alone Aurora. We both knew Aiolos spent more time taking care of me than I did taking care of him.

Aurora spent the night and in the morning we went to the vet’s. An assistant brought Aiolos into the exam room on a leash, an encouraging sign. The assistant left, saying the doctor would be right with us. Aurora told me Aiolos was still limping, though I already knew from the sounds of his walk. I leant my face down, and Aiolos slathered my face in dog juice.

Dr. Ferguson came in and shook my hand again. It was the gesture of someone who

either wanted to be formal, or who was weird around blind people and wanted to let me know he was there. Either way, I wanted Ferguson to cut the bullshit and tell me straight.

“We gave him some injections that, as you can tell, made him more mobile. He’s got some pretty serious arthritis, but the girls out front’ll give you his prescriptions for anti-inflammatory medicine and some pain pills.” Ferguson leaned closer to me to pet Aiolos, who sat on my feet and rested his head on my thigh. Ferguson smelled of cat piss and Old Spice.

“So Aiolos is fine to continue being my companion, then?” Next to me I felt Aurora slip forward to the edge of her chair. Something was wrong.

“Not exactly. He’s going to have good days and bad, but his condition will keep getting worse.” The doctor paused. He sighed. He cracked his knuckles. “Between the medicine he’ll be on and the deterioration of his joints, he’s not going to be able to guide you much longer.”

I rubbed Aiolos’s head from the crown down to the tips of his ear—a technique I’d heard of to calm a dog, though I did it to calm myself.

Ferguson said, “We can post a flyer to find him a new home once you’ve replaced him. If you’d like.” He meant well.

“You don’t understand the first fucking thing about this dog or me.” I eased Aiolos’s chin off my leg and stood. Aurora stood, too. I felt for the doorknob, pulled the door open, and walked out. Behind me I heard Aurora mutter embarrassed apologies.

The first half of the car ride was silent. Aurora knew me well enough to let me stew. She was one of the few people who knew how to handle me well in the days I was at my worst, which was most of the time for a while.

“We’re not going home.” Aurora held her breath. “I had a bad feeling, so I called the Helping Hounds service yesterday, and they actually have another dog you can have right away.”

I shook my head. Everything was changing too fast.

“You did what?”

“I didn’t think they’d have a dog for a while, but they did. So I figured bandaid off-fast instead of slow.”

I punched the dashboard of Aurora’s car. I was lucky the airbag didn’t deploy in my face.

“Christ, Jerry.”

I took a moment to breathe, to remember she was helping me and Aiolos because she loved us both. “Sorry.”

“Forget about it. Just meet this other dog, okay.”

I nodded and reached back to pet Aiolos, secretly pledging to hate this new dog on principle.

At the Helping Hounds, Kim, the trainer, introduced us to Flax. His name would have to go. We brought Aiolos in with us, figuring how he reacted to the dog might decide whether I could take this one.

“What are they doing?” I said.

“Doggy handshake,” Aurora said, meaning they were sniffing each other’s asses.

I reached out my hand and Flax sniffed and licked. He seemed kind. The experience reminded me of meeting Aiolos.

After spending another week in the hospital once I woke up, I’d moved to Carter’s School for the Adult Blind to learn how to take care of myself and be blind at the same time. Especially in the beginning, it was no easy trick. Friends came to visit, but they treated me like I

was fragile. Bruno, who used to punch me in the face if I got mouthy and then buy me another round, patted me on the shoulder and asked how I felt.

I couldn't go back to my job at the auto shop. I had to sit to piss. Someone had to help fold the corners of my cash differently so I knew a single from a twenty. Aurora sorted my darks from lights on laundry days. I broke three toes trying to take a walk by myself in the garden behind Carter's. My occupational therapist told me I was getting a guide dog, but I didn't figure that would make much of a difference. And then I met Aiolos, and he was young and crazy. When I'd take his harness off, he'd run around in my room, over the bed, under the coffee table—around in tight circles until he exhausted himself. We had a lot in common. Asking people to help drove me nuts, but I didn't mind letting Aiolos help, and he seemed to love it.

Flax's tail thumped the floor as he licked my hand.

"What's Aiolos doing?" I said.

"Knitting a sweater," Aurora said. "He's looking at Flax."

Kim said, "His posture doesn't suggest he's threatened, though he looks a bit jealous. Are you keeping both?"

"Yes," I said.

Aurora said, "Maybe."

Aurora dropped us at my place, and after cleaning up at her apartment she came over for dinner and to help me rename Flax. She let herself in and both dogs went wild. Aiolos trotted over and panted and the dog formerly known as Flax barked and sniffed.

"What'd ya bring them?" Dogs loved her, but she got an even more raucous welcome than usual. I hadn't managed to get Aiolos up since she'd dropped us off, so I knew she had a trump.

“Nothing.” The dogs’ crunching on bones gave her away. “What’s cooking?”

“Lamb stew with red wine.”

Aurora pulled a stool up to the counter. “Yum. Need backup?”

“Got the stew wrapped around my finger. At my beck and call. This stew is my bitch.”

“At the cooking wine again?”

I smiled my wry, slightly crooked, tipsy smile. I spoke to the lamb and potatoes doing my best Swedish Chef impression. Aurora laughed.

“So,” she said, “what’s the damage with the newbie?”

“He’s fine, except for the name. *Flax*: It sounds like stool softener. I can’t bear it.

Neither can he.” I poured a little more wine into the stew.

“It’s not that bad a name.”

“Not if the dog is a stripper.”

Aurora drummed her fingers on the countertop. I gestured at Aurora with the spoon I stirred the stew with, accidentally showering her in wine gravy. She accepted my apology and a beer.

We ate the majority of the stew in one sitting and gave the boys the leftovers. They hovered in the polite but apprehensive stage, still sniffing asses occasionally and each eating from his own bowl, separated for safety’s sake.

“Isn’t it going to confuse him if we change his name?” Aurora sat on the floor and scratched the part of the-dog-formerly-known-as-Flax’s back where it met his tail. He thumped his tail on the floor rapidly in approval. “He and Aiolos have something in common.” That spot turned Aiolos to a tail-wagging lump of mush too.

Aiolos sat at my feet, resting his chin on my lap. “Look, Aurora. I think somebody’s jealous.” I stroked down Aiolos’s ear and pinched the tip between my fingers. He panted, and I felt his face ease into a smile. “*Flax* wants a new name. And he’s smart. He’ll adjust.”

“Let’s try a few out, then.” I eased myself onto the floor, and Aiolos lay half in my lap. “I hope Aiolos doesn’t piss on me to claim me.”

Aurora laughed, more out of filial duty than amusement. Her fake laugh sounded like a wounded bird, but her true laugh sounded like a little tinkling bell or one of those triangles we played in kindergarten. “He looks like a Lance.”

“Lance?”

“Shut up. I’ll call him Lance and see what he does.” She got his attention and tried the name out.

“What’s the verdict?”

Aurora sighed. “Nothing conclusive. Let’s take turns suggesting names, and I’ll tell you how he responds.”

We went through at least twenty names, some of the high points being Jerome, Brooklyn, Dodger, Felix, Maurice, Laquan, Frank, Harry, George, and Elvis. We settled on Max, though, because it rhymed with Flax yet was not lame. It confused him less than other options.

“Max it is,” Aurora said. She groaned and stood up. “I’m spent, brother. Can I crash in the guest room again?”

We got Aurora situated, and the boys and me went to our room. Before we made it into the room, Max bee-lined for Aiolos’s bed. He plopped onto the cushion and sighed. Aiolos and I stood in the doorway at a loss. I rested my hand on his head and felt him turn his face up to me. The rule for guide dogs was they had to sleep on the floor in their own bed. But Aiolos,

officially stashed as a pet now, could sleep in the bed with me. After I put on pajamas, I crawled under the covers and patted the space beside me to call Aiolos up. This motion, this invitation was foreign to everything he knew. He whined. I called him up, used my soothing voice. He wouldn't jump up. Finally I got out of bed, picked him up, and set him at the foot of the bed. He jumped down. I put him back up and climbed into the bed. I commanded him to stay, which he did though his muscles felt hard as rocks. I lay atop the covers with my head next to his. I petted him and talked at him until he relaxed a bit. On the dog bed on the floor, Max snored. A close-mouthed half-bark escaped him as he slept, and his nails clattered softly against the floorboards. He dreamt. Finally I fell asleep, my arm resting against Aiolos's body, our heads touching. In the middle of the night I awoke to Aiolos standing over me growling—a deep, guttural growl from the depths of his chest. Next to us Max barked.

Aurora came running. “What?”

“Don't know.” I tried to get up around Aiolos.

“Aiolos's teeth are bared. He ever do that before?” She crossed the room to the dog bed. “I've got Max by the collar.”

“I'll get Aiolos.” I eased my hand into Aiolos's collar, and he relaxed a little. I got up, led him off the bed, and headed out the door. “We'll be downstairs.”

Aiolos lay in his bed in the kitchen corner. I started a pot of coffee, and then pulled a chair up next to him. He seemed calm. Aurora and Max came down the stairs, and she grabbed a leash from the rack near the front door and took him out. The coffee was ready by the time Aurora walked into the kitchen, and she closed Max up alone in the study. The pads of her feet thudded softly against the floor. “That was intense.”

I handed her the steaming mug of coffee as she sat at the breakfast bar.

“What set Aiolos off?”

“Don’t know. I woke up to him growling about ten seconds before you came in.” I took a sip of the too-hot coffee.

“Well, Max took a wicked piss outside. Either he really had to go, or Aiolos scared it out of him.” Aurora laughed the wounded bird sound.

“Maybe Max tried to wake me up to go out, and Aiolos felt like he was protecting me.”

“Maybe,” Aurora said. She reached across the counter and took my hand. “Jerry, this may not work.”

I sighed. How do you explain the idea of retirement to a dog? Aiolos’d spent the last ten years of his life loving me by being my companion, my guide, and my protector. Seventy dog years. It was too long a time getting used to a routine to change it.

Aurora said, “You can’t do this to him. You can’t keep him around just to torture him by changing everything he knows.”

I knew what that felt like, and it was in my power now to spare Aiolos the same pain. I’d lost my sight, and then I learned to trust Aiolos enough for him to be my eyes. Could it ever be the same with Max? Ten years of my life had been spent with a dog I trusted more than most people I knew. Suddenly I had to give Aiolos up—had to be brave enough to try to have another relationship like ours. But I had to do right by Aiolos—it was only fair.

Aurora cupped my cheek in her hand and stroked the stubble with her thumb. “You’re the old dog, Jerry. Aiolos will be fine if he doesn’t have to watch himself be replaced.”

Aiolos got up and bumped his head into my hand, begging for a pet. I stroked his ears, his corn-silk soft ears. “Hear that, Aiolos. You’re benched. We’re putting in the rookie.” I rubbed the top of his head hard—doggy noogies. “It’s not so bad, old man. Trust me.”

LADY LUCK

I danced out of the bathroom, still rubbing the blow residue from my cutting mirror onto my gums. The bar's front door opened and another frigid gust of winter air moved through The Caboose. Every time someone came in, I hoped it was Gary and again I was left disappointed. The feeling didn't stick, though, because when I reclaimed my seat at the bar, a fresh drink waited.

"From the colonel, Laurel," Danny Boy said. He pointed at Old Jim, one of the hardcore boozers who started when The Caboose opened at noon. Old Jim, farmer turned full-time alcoholic, felt just fine by night when the little bar grew crowded. I loved the atmosphere of the old, trailer-size train station turned dive-bar, with its dim lighting and the toy train that zipped around a shelf near the ceiling. Plus the jukebox worked, which made The Caboose our small town's most popular drinking establishment.

I lifted my bourbon to Old Jim and smiled. He grinned, showing his sporadic teeth, and raised his glass.

"To a thing of beauty," Old Jim said. He spoke loudly, over the Springsteen song on the juke and the murmuring of the regulars. We drank and set down our glasses, and Old Jim went back to muttering to himself.

Danny Boy handed me a clean bar towel. "Your nose is bleeding."

"Winter and all the dry heat screws up my sinuses."

Danny Boy nodded. He knew too well what winter could do to a person. He set a glass of water in front of me. Danny Boy was in the army during Desert Storm and returned from Saudi Arabia with an intense appreciation for wet-naps and the desire to never, ever again leave

our hometown. He'd been tending bar at The Caboose ever since. He wore his uniform of a semi-clean flannel, band T-shirt, and well-worn jeans.

My nose stopped bleeding, and I handed Danny Boy the towel.

"Any change in the Gary situation?" Danny Boy doubled as half the town's shrink while tending bar.

"Called and left messages, then yesterday divorce papers showed up at Mom's." Gary had kicked me out of our house a month before when he found some of my coke. Now the drink and the coke seemed to kick in at the same time, and the blood pounded in my veins. I drummed my fingers on the bar. "Left a message for Gary to meet me here tonight to talk, so he'll probably be in sometime."

Danny Boy wiped the bar in front of me, though it was clean. "Next one's on me, Laurel. What'll ya have?"

I ordered a Wild Turkey, to keep the burn going in my throat and chest. It would have been heartening to believe the male attention I received was because—between the coke and mom's cooking—I'd been able to fit in my size 4, stone washed jeans from high school again, with some negotiating. But everyone knew how broke I was. How alone.

The smell of snow rushed in with the opening of the door. A group of college-age guys came in decked out in ski jackets and knit caps. Very Abercrombie-Fitch—not any of our own returned home. In the other room, the guys shed their coats, scarves, and hats and claimed a table that some regulars had their drinks on while they shot pool. A fight seemed imminent, but one of the younguns, a kid with tousled brown hair and frozen-lake blue eyes, picked up the beers and asked the regulars if they wouldn't mind them on the shelf nearer the pool table. We didn't get diplomacy much, and the natives seemed appeased.

The blue-eyed boy came to order drinks, and he leaned over the only empty stool at the bar, which happened to be next to me—the seat I’d saved for Gary. The kid held a worn leather wallet and stared at Danny Boy. At the other end of the bar, which was only five feet away in The Caboose, Danny Boy rearranged the rum bottles and talked sports with Two-armed Chuck. Chuck, who only had one arm, was shooting pool. The kid thumped his wallet on the bar in time with “Werewolf in London.” The song ended and started again.

He said, “Didn’t we just hear this?”

I said, “It’s Two-armed Chuck’s favorite—always plays it twice.”

I saw snow lights as the coke really hit me. The kid kept tapping his wallet. I squirmed a bit on my stool and downed my drink in one gulp so the drink would settle me a bit. I clanked my glass on the bar in time with the kid’s thumping. Little flashes of light swam around me. Danny Boy and Two-armed Chuck moved on to politics, which I knew meant we might be waiting forever, so I cleared my throat and sang “Danny Boy.”

Danny Boy stomped over. “Christ, Laurel. Don’t sing. What?”

“We need drinks. I’ll have a whiskey sour.”

The kid said, “Can I start a tab?”

Danny Boy said, “No. What’ll you have?”

“I can leave a card.” The kid pulled a platinum card from his wallet.

Danny Boy shook his head. He turned away to make my drink.

“Any specials?”

Danny Boy groaned.

I said, “Catch up, kid. You’re not at the college pub. Order something or go away.”

“Right.” He paused and looked at the taps. “Four draft Buds, please—biggest you have. I got the next round for the guys at the pool table. And that whiskey sour.” He pointed at my drink without looking at me.

I could afford free drinks, so I figured I’d be nicer to the kid.

Danny Boy poured the four beers and set them on a tray. “The beers are sixteen, twenty-five for their round, and six for her whiskey sour. That’s forty-seven total.”

I said, “Add three more bucks, and he’d own this whole shithole.”

Danny Boy shot me a hot look that meant shut the hell up—him skimming money from this kid would let Danny Boy keep giving me call whiskey and bourbon at well prices. He’d always been good to me, so I checked myself.

“No biggie,” the kid said. “Can I use plastic for that or is only my cash good here?” He pulled a wad of bills from his pocket and fanned it to show off a couple hundreds.

“I’ll run your card.” Danny Boy took the platinum.

“Add a shot for you, man.” The kid picked up the tray and delivered the drinks to his friends.

He came back, beer in hand. “Mind?” He pulled out the stool I’d been saving for Gary.

“Okay, sure.” I picked up my purse and put it on the bar. “My date’s late anyways.”

Danny Boy unplugged all the cords attached to the credit card machine and plugged them back in. He swiped the kid’s card. He pounded the machine with a fist. Still nothing. He tossed the kid’s card onto the bar and got the Bacardi 151 from the rum shelf.

“What kind of name’s River, anyway?” Danny Boy poured himself a double shot and joined us, glass raised. “I’ll fix the machine before you leave. Try to run off, and you’ll have to

deal with Ant-ny.” Danny Boy gestured to Anthony at the pool table. He was about five feet tall and nearly the same measurement in width. “Call the toast, since you’re buying.”

River raised his beer and said, “May the best days of your past be the worst of your future.” We drank.

Danny Boy turned and dropped his shot glass in the sink. “Come up with that all by yourself?” He returned to Two-armed Chuck and resumed their talk of Bush’s war in Iraq.

I picked up the platinum card. “Your name is actually River. River Throughtit?”

“My middle name’s Runs,” River said.

“What tribe are your parents from?” I paused to sip my drink. “Or were they high?”

“I changed my name. When high school graduation rolled around, I’d just finished *A River Runs Through It*. They asked what I wanted on my diploma, and I thought it’d be neat to have the title. The asshole principal said the name on my diploma had to be my legal name or the name I went by.” River paused and killed his beer. It seemed like he was trying to build suspense—like a pause had worked there for him when he’d told the story before. “So I legally changed my name.”

“Wasn’t it expensive—a lot of bullshit paperwork to change your name as a fuck-you to some principal?”

“In high school I had plenty of time and money. And I was high.”

“Shouldn’t your new name be Ariver?”

“That’d sound stupid.”

We sat in silence a moment. Everything around me pulsed to the beat of “The Joker,” which boomed out of the jukebox and filled the tiny bar with sound. I tapped my foot to the

music and next I knew my whole body swayed on the barstool. River watched me in the mirror behind the bar.

One of his friends came over, interrupting our silence. “We need to move along—find someplace with other people born in the same decade as us.”

I smiled at him. He looked even younger than River. The friend’s big brown eyes eased down from my face and over my body. I had ten years on the guys, minimum, so the jeans definitely still worked.

River introduced me to Russ, his roommate.

I said, “Good luck finding a younger crowd.” On a winter Wednesday, there was more of a chance of hell freezing. “High school kids with fake IDs go the Barn Cider up the street.”

Russ said, “Thanks. We’ll check it out. You coming, man?”

River put a hand on my knee. He slid the bottom of his empty beer mug in circles on the bar and smeared the ring of condensation. The room swam for a moment, my drinks kicking in as the coke wore off.

River said, “Your date gonna kick my ass if he finds me sitting here?”

I shook my head. “He’s not coming.” I knew all along Gary wouldn’t show, but saying it to River made it more official somehow. My hands went cold, and my stomach seemed to grow heavy and sink deep inside me.

River squeezed my knee. “You guys go ahead. Maybe I’ll catch you later.”

“You’re sure?” Russ slugged River in the shoulder and turned to go before River could answer.

Cold air blew through the bar as they left, but I couldn’t watch them go. Instead I studied the thin white line on my ring finger. I’d taken my wedding ring off because I thought I’d see

Gary. I thought maybe without it on, we could act like two normal people, meeting for drinks and talking. Maybe we could forget about being married people who'd changed so much we had trouble recognizing each other. Now I felt foolish and naked without it.

River said, "Do we have to sing every time we want drinks?"

"You try it and Danny Boy'll sick Ant-ny on you." I wanted to smile, but the skin of my face felt too heavy. I needed the last of my coke. "Why don't you order us some shots while I go freshen up." My fingers fluttered like moth wings when I tried to grab my purse strap, and I felt like everyone could see right through me.

After double-double checking that I'd locked the bathroom door behind me, I set out my coke stuff—little mirror, rusty razor blade, dollar-bill tube, and the sad, half-empty coke baggy with a shamrock on it. My hands shook as I poured the last of my coke onto the mirror. The world spun too fast for me to keep balance, so I sat on the toilet and cut lines. Gary wasn't coming—wouldn't take me back. Couldn't keep sponging off my mom. I had wanted to get out of town when I left for college and had come back for Gary. I was stuck. I did the lines, then snorted some water to make sure I got it all. I smeared the last dregs of coke from the mirror on my gums.

My blood rushed, my heart thundered against my ribs. The bathroom's dirty, dimly lit mirror was never flattering—an ate-up, thirty-something woman with crow's feet and gray roots stared back at me. I wondered what the kid was doing with me. He had to want something. I threw my stuff back in my kit and left the bathroom.

At the bar, Danny Boy and River laughed over empty shot glasses. I worried they had been talking about me.

"Whaddya say to Car Bombs?" River said.

Danny Boy chuckled. “Looked it up. We’ve got the stuff.”

“How could you not?” I slid onto my stool. “It’s a glorified Boilermaker.”

“I’ll get right on top of it then, captain,” Danny Boy said.

River stared at me. I rubbed my nose, feeling self-conscious. Small talk, I needed to make small talk.

I said, “In college?”

River nodded. “In Boston. Double majoring—pre-med and business. Haven’t committed to a future yet.”

Danny Boy brought our Car Bombs, and we raised our shot glasses above our beers.

“Your toast,” River said.

“Better to be a has-been than forever a never-was. Danny Bonaduce said that.”

“Danny who?”

I said, “Shut the hell up and drink.” We dropped our shots in and chugged. Between the curdling Bailey’s and the stout, I felt like chewing even after I swallowed. “Let’s get out of here.” I was coming down way too hard and fast.

“Yes, ma’am.” River saluted me. “Danny Boy, what’s the final damage?”

“Sixty sounds fair.” Danny Boy unplugged the credit card machine’s wires again.

“Forget that. Here, man—change’s all you.” River dropped a hundred on the bar. “I’ll go warm up the car.” He headed for the door and stopped to get his jacket and scarf from the chair he’d left them on near the pool table. He nodded at Chuck and Anthony and the other guys playing pool, and then went out. The wind had stilled so cold air seeped in as the door swung slowly shut after him. Outside, snow fell softly in graceful, fat flakes.

“Laurel, you leaving with this guy?” Danny Boy refilled my water glass, and I drank it down to wash away the taste of the Car Bomb.

I shrugged. Danny Boy asking me about it made me realize I wasn't sure what I was doing or why. As kids at the park in town, we would throw sticks off the bridge into the creek and watch them race. I felt like one of those sticks—letting the coke and drinks and this kid carry me along.

“He seems nice enough, but something's off. Wait here until close, and either me or one of the guys'll get you home.”

“I can handle myself.” I stood and got my balance. My jacket got twisted as I pulled it on, and Danny Boy reached over the bar to help me get my arm in. I squeezed his hand and walked out the door. For a moment, I hoped I wouldn't find River waiting—that he would have already left having reconsidered whatever it was he intended to do with me. But there he sat, in a pricey-looking S.U.V., right outside the door.

He pushed open the door and offered me a hand up. “Thought you'd snuck out the back or something.”

I shivered. “Just had to give Danny Boy a long kiss goodnight.” The goddamn seat had some sort of heater in it. “Nice ride.” The sudden cold outside, the harsh warmth of his car, I felt I might pass out.

River reached across me and pulled the door closed. He smelt good, like fresh air and a slight hint of expensive cologne. He stared at me a moment. “Okay?”

I took a deep breath and put my hands in my lap. I wanted to feel put together and in control, but the high faded, and the drunkenness took over. I nodded. If I didn't get more coke soon, I knew I'd crash completely.

“What now?” River gripped the steering wheel.

“Let’s stop playing games.”

“What games are we playing?”

“You want something. If it’s sex, gimme a hundred dollars.”

River laughed. He let go of the wheel and cracked his knuckles, one finger at a time.

“You a cop?”

“What?” I inched toward the door. Everything moved too fast. The full moon shone through the trees, and eerie blue shadows prowled across the fresh snow.

“I know you’re an addict—didn’t have you pegged as a whore. A hundred dollars? Either you haven’t done this before or you’re particularly ambitious.” He reached toward me, and I flinched. He opened the glove box and pointed to a black film canister. “Have a pick-me-up. It’ll clear your head so we can talk.”

The canister held white powder. It looked like blow, but so did sugar to a drunk in dim light. River reached over and dipped his pinky in the powder, then rubbed the finger over his gums. He stared at me a moment, then put the car in reverse and backed out of the spot. He pulled out of the parking lot. I tried some on my gums, and the coke seemed fine. Better than fine, it felt like the best I’d had in a long time. I got the kit out of my purse and used the tiny metal dipper to snort some.

River pulled onto the highway and set cruise control. It felt like we flew over the road dusted with fresh snow, but the speedometer showed we were going exactly fifty-five, the speed limit.

“Better?” River looked over at me quickly, then back at the road.

“Thanks.” I capped the canister, put it back in the glove compartment, and closed it.

“I’m an entrepreneur. You’d be amazed how many medical students wouldn’t make it through school without coke.” He paused, looked at me to see if I followed. “I need a business partner in this area. Someone to help with deliveries from here to Boston.”

“How’d you know about me?”

“The jeans, the way you move, the dilated pupils.”

“Fuck you.” I felt naked. Cheap. For a few drinks he’d figured out my secrets.

“We’ve covered I’m not interested in that.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. I wanted to tell him to stop the car and let me out, but I’d be stuck in the middle of nowhere.

“Obviously you have a price. Earlier it was a hundred bucks. I’m offering you a better deal than that.”

“Take me back to The Caboose.”

River nodded. “Sure.” He made a three-point turn on the deserted two-lane highway and headed back in the direction we’d just come from.

We sat in thick silence all the way back to the parking lot. Only two cars were left, one of them Danny Boy’s beat-up Pontiac. River parked.

“Think it through. You don’t have cash. You need more coke. Take my offer, and you’ll have all the money and coke you want.”

I thought about it. I couldn’t stop using blow, I knew. But getting high didn’t seem worth the guilt I’d feel contributing to the downfall of others. What if I read about some med student O.D.ing in Boston? Worse yet, what if I read about some Boston doctor cutting off a kid’s left leg instead of right because he’d gotten wasted that day?

“Thanks—not interested.” I opened the car door.

“I think you are.” River grabbed my shoulder, rubbed his thumb over my collarbone.

The little taste of his coke wore off. I felt the need for more start somewhere in my spine and pulse farther into my body with every heartbeat. I slipped from underneath his hand and stepped out of the S.U.V. before I could reconsider. Before I begged for more.

“Here’s my number, for when you change your mind.” River handed me a gray business card with only a telephone number printed on it. It wouldn’t matter if I told anyone about him, because he’d disappear like a mist of hot breath in a winter breeze. He was smart, untraceable.

I walked to the front porch of The Caboose and sat near the steps. River waved and pulled away, and I wanted to believe I would never see him again. The still air felt colder than if there had been wind. Flurries fell, sad and slow. On a distant street I heard the first of the plows, scraping the asphalt as it pushed away the thin layer of accumulated snow. I tore River’s card into pieces and tossed them in the air—watched them flutter down, looking heavy and clumsy amid the snowflakes.

SLEEPKILLER

In the sink, I find a mutilated cockroach—split in half, legs plucked off. I stand, holding my toothbrush, and stare. A few legs are arranged around the body like a child’s drawing of rays around the sun, and the other legs are missing, probably down the drain. I have been killing in my sleep again.

“Sweet-teat, know where my extra razor heads are?” Steve brushes past my shoulder to reach into the medicine cabinet. When I don’t answer, he looks at me and then at the sink.

“Yuck. Don’t freak. I’ll get it.”

Steve steps away to get toilet paper. He’s used to me shrieking and fleeing from roaches or standing atop the couch and squealing like in a cartoon. In my waking life, that’s what I do.

“Doesn’t look like Pourquoi’s work,” Steve says. Pourquoi Pas is our cat. Steve pokes a leg, disturbing their arrangement. The roach’s corpse ceases to be beautiful to me then, after my composition is ruined.

“It’s mine.” I turn on the cold water full blast and wash my kill down the sink before Steve gets it.

“Aren’t you afraid of roaches?” Steve holds the dampened, futile wad of toilet paper.

His body hovers within inches of mine, and I want to squirm, push him away or leave. My nocturnal predatory nature has been a secret of omission during our four years of married life because why the hell would such a topic come up? Until now.

Steve says, “Really?”

“I used to do it as a kid.” I rifle through the medicine cabinet, unable to maintain eye contact with my husband. “In my sleep, I’d kill household pests. Don’t worry, the cat’s safe.”

“Sod the cat,” Steve says. “I’m worried about me.”

I laugh before I see his face, before I note the wrinkled brow and too-wide-open eyes that seem to say, *Who the hell is this woman I woke up next to?*

“So don’t be a fucking pest.” I hand Steve the razor heads he’d been looking for and walk away.

The skills section of Steve’s resume should say, “Effectively makes mountains from molehills.” It’s practically his calling. At breakfast I tell him so, over too-runny eggs and overcooked bacon. Steve and I alternate days cooking breakfast, and he invariably botches the job. He won’t let the roach discussion go, and I refuse to tell him more about my childhood habit—it’s a strange, disturbing thing I do, why belabor the topic? In my sleep, I only kill pests, which most people kill when they’re awake. We complete the rest of our morning routine—from breakfast dishes to helping each other dress for work—silent movie style, each refusing to speak and, therefore, saturating every gesture with meaning. By the time Steve hands me my to-go mug of coffee, the way his hand pauses as I take the cup tells me he’s sorry. I withdraw my hand quickly.

At my pottery studio, little KeSasha DeVries already waits, sitting on the rough-hewn log steps. Her pottery class starts at 10 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but her mother drops her off early, usually right when I open at 9 a.m. KeSasha tells me her Mommy drops her off so early because she nags her Mommy because she’s so excited because she likes pottery so much. KeSasha is five, too young for school. I am an unpaid babysitter for an hour before and usually about an hour after KeSasha’s class ends until her Gamma comes to collect her. And most days I don’t mind because she’s cute, well behaved, and could chat the ears off corn. I get to the studio

earlier on KeSasha's days, so she won't be stuck locked outside alone like I find her this morning, but with Steve and me moving in silence, I lingered too long at home.

"Morning, Miss Cloud." KeSasha hugs me around the waist, buries her face in my stomach.

As I usher her inside, KeSasha tells me she has a surprise for me. She pulls a kid-wrapped parcel complete with mashed bow from her pocket. I tell her to wait, to give it to me in a few minutes, and I make her sit on the kick-wheel, gift in her lap, while I turn on lights, ready the kiln, and set out clay for the day. When I was a kid, I remember the excitement of having a present for someone and how the joy of having a surprise diminished after the person opened the gift, no matter how much they liked it. So I let KeSasha stew a bit, ride her anticipation buzz.

"You look too pretty, Miss Cloud. I like your long hair down. Like a real pony tail. Shiny. My hair is bunchy." KeSasha takes a breath and points to her freshly braided hair clasped with pink, purple, and orange barrettes. "Gamma played up my hair for me. So I slept real still. I want nice hair for pottery and not a darn mess."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Mommy."

I hand KeSasha a cookie to curb her mouth for a while. She smells of Johnson's Baby Shampoo and maple syrup.

"Betcha I can read your mind," I say.

KeSasha says, "Nuh-uh." She showers the kick-wheel with oatmeal raisin cookie crumbs.

"Yes-huh." I dampen my hands at the sink and get the clay. "Think about what you had for breakfast."

KeSasha clamps her green eyes closed tight and stops chewing. She's told me before her Mommy only makes her two things for breakfast, Eggos or cream of wheat.

"HMMMMM." I knead the clay some before I cut it. "Oh, I hear you now."

KeSasha kicks her legs back and forth, the anticipation and sugar whipping her into a five-year-old frenzy.

"Frogs' legs." I spin around. KeSasha giggles and shakes her head. "That's not it. You had Eggos!"

KeSasha claps. The clay slicks up my hands, turning them brown-red. Its smell, somewhere between dust and river, permeates the room. Behind me, KeSasha exaggerates her sniffs. After six blocks of clay are cut for my first class, I wash my hands at the sink and turn to her.

"Wanna do the surprise?" she says.

I nod, and she seems to fly from her perch and be at my side without ever hitting the ground.

"Made it all by myself."

Gingerly, I tear off the wrapping paper to find a small pinch pot of straight-from-the-ground clay. It has been dried light gray in the sun. Little oval impressions of KeSasha's fingertips adorn its edges. Into the clay, so they protrude inside and outside of the pot, she's pressed bright beads—eggplant purple, autumn-leaf red, pumpkin orange.

"Gamma helped." KeSasha's lips press together into a straight line, ready to smile or frown depending on my reaction.

My eyes fill with tears. I've received handmade gifts from children I've taught and from my nieces, but all those were ugly. This gift is both thoughtful and beautiful. For a moment, I

regret my vehement stance that I do not want children. I regret the abortion I had when I told Steve I needed a break and stayed with my sister Nilda for three weeks. He never even knew I was pregnant. He would have been so pleased.

I fear the regrets will keep flooding until they sink me, but then I look at KeSasha. She cries, too. She thinks I don't like her gift. The look on her face, the wilted mouth and streaming tears, remind me why I don't want children: it is so easy to hurt them, without even meaning to.

“KeSasha, it is so beautiful.”

She squints up at me, wipes her eyes and nose with her sleeve.

I put the pot on the windowsill, and the beads become translucent in the sun, making little rays of stained-glass light. My breath catches in my throat, and I grab tissues.

“Sweetie, I love it. Really good art can make us feel different things, remember.”

“I made you sad?”

“Your pinch-pot is so lovely, it moved me to tears.”

KeSasha blinks at me. I'm trying to explain aesthetics and the meaning of art and beauty to a five year-old. I wipe her face with a tissue and feed her some more cookies before the rest of my 10 a.m. class arrives. As the other girls trickle in, I show them all KeSasha's pinch-pot and dote on her. And children—wonderful, generous people they are before puberty—admire upon request.

The rest of class is unremarkable. Near its end, I set the children's creations into the kiln: a crooked candleholder destined to start a fire, two ashtrays for mothers I know do not smoke, a puppy statuette that looks like a camel, and a flat slab of clay with dents in it that Trina says is the bottom half of a butter dish she'll finish next time. All ugly. I smile and praise as necessary.

KeSasha brings me her project last. It is a little pot she threw on the electric wheel, which is amazingly symmetrical for such a young, tiny-handed student. Half my adults couldn't manage this pot. One edge tilts some, so to compensate KeSasha pinched the edge, thinning it and making it look like a blooming flower petal.

“For Mommy’s sparkly earrings. I want earrings. I want a baby sister, but Mommy says no.”

I smile. KeSasha loves her mother with such determination. When I met KeSasha’s mother, her dull eyes looked like part of her had died, like the eyes of an old, old woman who’d seen too much of the world and couldn’t look at it head-on anymore. She stared at my chin and asked me about class times and prices. She looked at KeSasha like the kid was a walking, talking-up-a-storm regret. KeSasha’s a smart kid. She sees it in her Mommy’s eyes too.

After class ends, I ask KeSasha how she wants her pot glazed and show her a couple of examples. We narrow the colors she likes to two, and I tell her I’ll use both. KeSasha tells me how hard her Mommy works and all she does to try to make her Mommy smile. I’m relieved when her Gamma shows up only fifteen minutes late.

Steve’s car is already in the driveway when I pull up. Usually I beat him home, even on Tuesdays and Thursdays when I have my 6 p.m. adult class. My stomach plummets to my toes, and I wonder what’s happened. Steve, a workaholic accountant, doesn’t call in sick, and I have to beat him at arm wrestling to get him to use his vacation time.

Inside the smell of cooking onions and peppers greets me. I’m unnerved. The wonderful sweet, acidic smell cannot possibly be Steve’s work, which means when I enter the kitchen I’ll find his mother hovering over our stove, readying herself to tell me some awful news. I sit on the couch and let my bag clunk onto the floor.

“Cloud?” Steve says from the kitchen.

I exhale a deep, cleansing breath and relax my hands, which had clenched themselves, completely devoid of my knowledge, into knuckle-white fists.

“Cloud?” Steve emerges from the kitchen. “Babe. You didn’t answer.”

“Why are you here?”

“Name was on the mailbox. Figured I’d stay a while.” Steve keeps wiping his hand on the kitchen towel.

Pourquoi Pas comes and sticks his head in my purse.

“I mean, so early?” I pat Pourquoi Pas on the head and eject him from my bag.

“Date night. Figured we could have a nice dinner.”

I stand up. He’s bullshitting me.

“Spill it.” I yank the towel from his hands and walk past him into the kitchen.

“Took off early to go talk with Mom.”

In a pan, Steve reheats his mother’s famed chicken Marsala.

“Cut to the peach pit fast. You’re pissing me off.”

“I made an appointment for us. For a marriage counselor.” He pauses. “Tomorrow.”

At the sink, I turn the hot water on until it steams and wash my hands—the water so hot it gives me a chill. The window over the sink fogs, and I use the dishtowel to dry my hands and wipe the window clear. In the backyard, a doe and two spotted fawns nibble crab apples from our tree. I imagine baking up a nice apple pie, with enough sugar to pass crab apples off as normal, and feeding it to Steve. It wouldn’t kill him, I’m sure, but he’d be expelling enough from both ends to regret his own stupidity. Steve puts his hand on my shoulder, but I shrug it off.

“Hasty.”

“Sweet-teat, I have something to tell you.”

I stare at him, no idea what to expect. No matter what it is, I know I don’t want to hear it.

“How’d you get an appointment that quick?”

“I told the counselor’s secretary it might be a matter of life and death.”

“Nice melodrama.” I throw the towel at his head and turn my back to him. Outside something spooks the deer, and they bolt.

“I woke up the other night to you choking me.”

He’s joking. He has to be. When I turn, the look on Steve’s face is tax audit-serious. I want to take him in my arms and bury my face in his chest. I want to listen to his heartbeat and feel his breath on top of my head. But I only want those things to comfort myself. I do not know what to say to my husband. I cross the few feet between us, feeling the need to step carefully like the floor is a freshly frozen lake, and the ice may not be sure of itself yet. Taking Steve’s hand in mine, I look into his eyes hoping they’ll tell me what to say. They look murky, more confused than angry.

“I didn’t mean to,” I say.

The skin near the corner of his eyes crinkles a bit, the edges of his mouth curl into the slightest of smiles. This hopeful inclination is what I love most about him.

“I know,” Steve says.

That night, after the delicious dinner and superficial conversation, we turn in early. Steve, optimist he is, snores before my head hits the pillow. Pourquoi Pas paws at my chest and turns circles, finally settling with his head in the crook of my arm. He purrs. I insist on calling

him by his full name, or else it morphs from the name of a carefree little cat to a constant question.

Steve snores beside me. His jugular pulses. I imagine what it felt like to have my hands over his neck, feeling that pulse falter and his breathing slow. In a self-defense class I took, the instructor said the most effective methods of choking cut off both air and blood supply to the brain. Was I doing it correctly, I wonder, when I tried to kill my husband in our sleep?

After my pregnancy, I got paranoid that Steve had plotted against me. The conspiracy involved sneaking around and replacing my birth control pills with Infant Aspirin or something. I sat up at night waiting to catch him in the act. The sleeplessness went on for months, but lately I've been back to my old self, asleep in an instant and all through the night. The killings always happen when I'm well rested.

Now, I do not close my eyes for fear of sleeping. A soft rain taps against the window. Pourquoi Pas purrs, like a heating pad that vibrates. Steve snores rhythmically. Still sleeping, he rolls over and wraps an arm around my middle. I vow I'll just rest my eyes for a second and let them close.

I am first awake, starting bolt upright in bed around 4 a.m., surprised to find myself sleeping. A wave of relief hits me when I see both of my bedfellows still breathing. It's my turn to make breakfast, and even though I have hours until Steve awakens, I head downstairs.

In the pantry, the body of a mouse who has been troubling us lies splayed unnaturally on a shelf. Each of his legs points in a different direction, like a furry compass. A small puddle of blood surrounds his head, which has been crushed. Otherwise, there is no blood or scratches. No missing fur. No signs Pourquoi Pas did this.

I want to find some chalk to trace around the poor thing's body, to commemorate the mouse's passing and serve as a reminder that I am a killer. Every time I go in the pantry for coffee, I'll see that chalk outline and remember what I'm capable of.

Upstairs, Steve's footsteps tread to the bathroom. I don't want him to come looking for me and see my latest kill. With a hand-broom and dustpan, I collect the corpse and take him to the backyard. I say a silent "Our Father" and cast the body into the woods. The hand-broom has blood in its bristles, so I heave it far in between the trees as well.

After perfectly cooked eggs and overly lighthearted conversation, we head to the marriage counselor's office. The waiting room has purple and blue striped wallpaper and an orange floral couch. The coffee table looks like the Salvation Army rejected it because of the scuffmarks, coffee rings burnt into the veneer, and names carved into the wood. No wonder this guy could take us so soon; no other clients wait in this hideous room. A woman's sobs erupt from the closed door of Donovan's small office, and the receptionist looks at the silent phone as if it just rang. She blushes as if embarrassed by the sobbing woman. I grab a *Cosmopolitan* from the magazine pile. *Parents*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *The Smithsonian* also clutter the pile. Bile rises in my throat. Now that we're sitting in the waiting room, I can't believe this is what we've been reduced to—that our relationship has come to depend on a person who decorates with purple stripes and orange flowers.

"Peter and Taylor forever." Steve points at the coffee table, the carving about Peter and Taylor accompanied by an intricately carved blooming rose.

"Is this really necessary?" I stare at the *Cosmo* in my lap. The front bears the title: "76 ways to please your man."

Steve picks up the *Parents* magazine. He tears the top edge of the cover about every half-inch, creating a fringe he rubs his palm against. I look from the wallpaper to the couch. From Steve's magazine to his face.

"Really?" I'm still hoping to avoid hashing our lives out in front of Donovan. The woman's sobs grow louder. It will be bad enough to tell truths without having some stranger as an audience.

"It's not just about the new things. We've needed help for a while." Steve tears the cover off *Parents*, crumples it, and chucks it into the trash. It rests on a bed of used Kleenex.

I stand, pick Steve's creation from the trash, and smooth it flat. Then I fold it neatly and put it in my purse. For the divorce scrapbook, maybe.

The door to Donovan's office crashes open, and a man so red in the face he looks boiled rushes through the waiting room and out the door. The sobbing woman, still clutching tissues to her face, apologizes to the receptionist and slowly follows the man out the door. Another woman walks out of the office and approaches us.

"Jo Donovan. You must be the Keenans."

I expected Jo Donovan to be a man, and from the surprise-party look on Steve's face, he did too. She's got a short-cropped pixie haircut and thick-rimmed glasses. Her eyes, a light hazel, shimmer behind the glasses, and I feel immediately vulnerable. Steve shakes her hand, lingering too long. I catch him looking at Donovan's breasts, which are proportional to her frame but a bit too perky. Probably enhanced.

"Cloud." I thrust my hand at her. "And you've met my husband, Steve."

Her office suffers from the same design malady as the waiting area. The pea-soup green, crushed velvet couch inspires a grimace before I can control myself.

“I just moved into this office,” Donovan says. “Haven’t redecorated yet.”

Steve and I sit on the horrid couch. I grasp his hand and squeeze, a final plea to end this torment. He returns with slow, reassuring pressure.

“Please, call me Jo.”

“We thought from your name that you were a man.”

Jo explains that she gets that all the time. Steve ogles. With my free hand I scratch my arm where it touched the couch. I imagine it hopping with fleas. I imagine the sensation of fleas popping between my fingers, the dark contrast of their crushed bodies against my pale skin.

“What’s going on in your relationship?” Jo adjusts a pad on the desk next to her and holds a pen ready.

Steve leans toward Donovan. “Well, Jo, we’re—“

“I’ve been killing pests in our house in my sleep. Steve says I choked him the other night.”

Steve looks from me to Jo. He seems torn between relief and shame.

Donovan says, “Have you done anything like this before?”

She seems too calm about the whole thing, which unnerves me more. I feel like now that we’ve told a professional, she should be frantically Roladexing for a colleague’s card to refer me to. Or something. After keeping the secret so long, Donovan’s low-key response is anticlimactic.

“Have you, Cloud?” Jo holds her pen ready.

“She says she has.” Steve stares at the floor.

“When I was around ten we lived in the city, and my mother found me exterminating a rat with a hammer. She yelled at me to stop, but I didn’t. After the thing stopped twitching, she

said I arranged its tail around it and snapped each of its legs to make them point opposite their natural direction. Mom flipped out and slapped my face, and then I woke up, saw the rat, and burst into tears. She took to tying me to my bed frame after that. It's only happened a few times as an adult."

"Christ," Steve says. He leans back into the couch cushions. He doesn't look at me.

"You only mutilated the body after the rat was dead?" Jo maintains her therapist too-calm voice. Steve looks sideways at me, like I've sprouted a beard and landed in a sideshow all of a sudden. I tell her that's how it went the only time someone caught me in the act.

Steve says, "Isn't killing animals a warning sign that someone's going to be a serial killer or something?"

"Not necessarily," Jo says. "Let's not jump to conclusions."

This woman is exasperatingly calm. Steve is too easily alarmed, and he doesn't know the half of it yet. Something about this situation inclines me to be liberal with ugly truth.

"I was pregnant and had an abortion without telling you, Steve." I stand up.

"What?" Steve shakes his head like he's clearing water from his ears. "What?"

Jo adjusts her glasses and reaches for a bottled water on her desk. I decide she's nonplussed, and I feel I've won.

Jo swallows some water. "Let's take a minute to slow down."

"Shut the hell up," I say.

Steve rests his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. I go to him. I crouch in front of him and look up into his face. He looks beautiful, his brown eyes mud-puddle murky like they get when he's confused.

"How do you tell a kid monsters exist?"

Steve stares at me, his chin and lips quivering.

“How do you tell a kid mothers can be the worst monsters?” My body goes cold, like storybook vampires. I am a vampire, in a way, feeding off my dead. My mother thought I cried over that hammered-to-death rat because I was sad, but really I had never seen anything so beautiful. Its tail arranged just so, limbs placed in unnatural angles. I never felt so alive as after I rid my body of that accidental child. I asked the doctor to see the aborted fetus, though he refused.

I stand up and walk to the door. Steve looks after me, just another casualty, this time from my waking life. Jo Donovan, marriage counselor, seems at a loss for words.

“Where are you going?” Jo says.

I haven’t decided yet. I walk past the secretary, and from the astonished look on her face, she’s overheard part of our session. At the car, I realize Steve has the keys, so I start walking.

Steve calls out from behind me and runs to catch up. I stop.

Steve says, “Was it a boy or a girl?”

There’s a few feet between us, but it might as well be a galaxy.

“I didn’t ask.”

And that’s when it really happens, when the last of the store of hope he had for his life, for our life together, slips out of his eyes with the tears. I’ve kept too much from him, and now I’ve shared too much—I can’t ask to be forgiven.

I turn away and head toward my studio. I want to dig my hands into clay and create something beautiful from nearly nothing. Maybe I’ll throw a pot for KeSasha.

At the roadside, a raccoon lays sprawled belly up, a road-kill casualty. With my foot I flip him over, and the fur of his back is surprisingly clean and without injury. I pet him for a

moment, then snap his limbs at the wrists, arranging his paws ziz-zag to his legs. His tail got flattened, so I try to fluff it. It doesn't work, so I arrange the smooshed tail under the check mark I've created from his broken hind leg. A trail of blood leads from where his corpse rests now to where it had puddled underneath his body. It looks like he exclaimed in a cartoon dialogue bubble of blood. I step back and admire him. I see brown fur against gray pavement and red-black blood, the curve of the flattened tail juxtaposed to the abrupt angle of the broken hind leg. Now he is mine.

DAVID'S THINGS

I keep still in the morning, lying naked next to my husband David, so he doesn't know I'm awake. He feels he's entitled to sex whenever he wants it, even though I'm eight months pregnant, but he'll leave me alone if he thinks I'm asleep. The sheets feel soft against my skin; the sun creeps in through the gap between the thick curtains and the windowsill. I feel and watch and keep quiet. David's mother calls our master bedroom's décor eclectic. Boyhood toys of David's clutter the shelves near the bed—G.I. Joe hunches down, combat-ready; a red Corvette Matchbox is poised at the brink of a big jump. David's dented Batman lunch-box holds a place of honor, prominently displayed on his nightstand. Most of my contributions to the room are antiques passed down through my family. A pink glass vase with scalloped edges, one of my favorites, is on the nightstand. Grandma's grandmother bought the vase from a woman in Italy for a chicken. When the sunlight hits it, it projects pink icicles onto the floor.

The alarm erupts with radio voices. David rolls over, reaching across my body to slap the clock silent. He stares. I mustn't stir, not even a twitch of an eye. I hope he hasn't awoken aroused because sex is so uncomfortable now that I'm bigger.

"Are you up, Ginny?" he says. He whispers, leaning within inches of my face. "Hon?"

I am silent and still. I never say anything, but sometimes I flinch at the sensation of David breathing in my exhalations like a mischievous cat. Today I do not move.

David gets up and puts on his pants. A quirk of his is to leave his pants from the day before, with his white cotton briefs still in them, next to his side of the bed, in case of emergency. In the morning, he gets up, steps back into his soiled things, and heads to the

bathroom—where he brushes his teeth and strips again, leaving the pants with undies in them on the floor near the hamper. If only I'd known.

The sound of the running shower signals that it's safe to get up. I rise, balancing my beach-ball tummy on spindly legs. Dr. Callahan keeps telling me to gain some weight. David buys me popsicles at the supermarket—the kind with vanilla ice cream in a hard chocolate coating. Both the baby and I favor the Haagan Das ones, but he buys the Publix brand. Still, I cannot resist.

I have morning rituals, too. I stare into the antique oval mirror near the dresser. It is mounted on a stand, so it can spin. Grandma Nonny, who received it at her wedding fifty-some-odd years ago, could never give a good reason why a mirror should spin. Sometimes, when I am home alone, I pull the mirror away from the bureau to spin it fast, like people spin the big wheel on *The Price is Right*. My reflection spins and contorts.

When David is in the shower, I investigate the changes in my body. Stomach a little lower, skin a little clearer, bruised arm turning green now. A haircut would make washing my hair easier, but David doesn't like the idea. I am beautiful this way, he says, with long brown hair. He likes something to hold onto.

In the shower, David sings an old song, indistinguishable because of the drumming water. Probably Elvis. Time to start breakfast. My soft, terrycloth robe awaits in the closet, and I pull it on and tie the belt snugly over top of my stomach. The shower stops.

“Ginny! Bacon!” David yells from the bathroom.

For the first three or four months of our marriage, I used to ask if David wanted bacon or sausage with his eggs. His response never varied, so I stopped asking, though he has yet to stop answering.

We sit at the kitchen table. David reads the paper and dips his bacon in the egg yolks, and my breakfast is a popsicle. David looks up from the business section as a hunk of the chocolate shell breaks off and falls on my green robe's lapel. He laughs.

"You could boil that robe and make soup soon." He stares as I lick the chocolate off the cloth, getting green lint on my tongue. His face relaxes into a warm smile; his brown eyes shine with boyish glee.

My God, I love him.

"Eat that chocolate off anything, ay, baby?" he says, snapping his paper forcefully in half.

I stick my linty tongue out at him. He drops his paper, reaches over, and slaps me. The popsicle falls to the floor.

"Don't be disrespectful. I hate that."

I stand, remaining silent, and cast my eyes to the floor. David picks up his plate, holds it out at arms length, and opens his hand, letting it crash to the floor. The plate fractures, splattering egg yolk over the cabinets, my robe and feet.

"Turned my stomach. Ruined my goddamn breakfast. Clean this mess up!"

David snarls like a mean dog sometimes. He stands and grabs his briefcase and keys from the table by the door.

"I'll be home at six tonight. Have dinner ready." David shakes his head, glowering at me and the mess he's made. "Do you need me to pick up anything on the way home?"

He's back to friendly now. I get up, running my hands over the yolky places on the green cloth. David waits at the door for a kiss goodbye.

"Have a good day at work." I caress my stomach. "I don't need anything at the store."

David slides an arm around my waist. “You sure, doll? You still have popsicles? Can’t have you too thin.” He stares intently into my face, pulling my chin up to make me look at him. He kisses my forehead.

Gilligan’s Island is my favorite show. The baby likes it too, moving around in my stomach a lot, probably because Gilligan makes me laugh so hard. Nothing happens in the show that can’t be resolved in a half-hour, and most things are constants: Skipper and Gilligan have their love hate relationship, Ginger and Maryanne battle for the men’s attention, Mr. and Mrs. Howell act snooty and naive, and the Professor experiments with coconuts and sand.

Three dirty glasses and a bowl with a lone Fruit Loop in it clutter the end table by the couch. A half-inch of dust clings to the top of the television. It’s lucky I’ve had trouble gaining weight because Dr. Callahan warns me against “overdoing it.” Now, David can’t punish me if things are untidy. He says he’ll hire a maid. He’s said that since this final trimester began, two months ago. David says I’m in a “delicate condition.”

The phone rings—either Mother or David.

Gilligan and the group are being held captive by cannibals who paddled over from a neighboring island. The tension on the island is tangible for me in here in the living room; I don’t want to look away. Usually I keep the portable phone near during morning TV, but today’s breakfast episode muddled my routine.

The phone rings again. I struggle to my feet and amble to the kitchen.

“Hello?” I wonder which one it is.

“How’re you feeling, dear?” Mother calls once a day to check-in. She can’t wait for her first grandchild.

“Well,” I say, meaning to begin a sentence.

“Due in a month now, right?” Mother says.

“Yes.” I head back to the couch. Gilligan, the Skipper, and the Professor attempt to formulate a plan, some way to communicate and negotiate with the cannibals. I can’t help but laugh.

“What’s funny, dear?” Mother asks. She’s been talking, but I’ve been watching TV.

“Sorry, Mother. What’d you say?” I turn down the volume.

“I was saying that you can’t be too careful at this point. Be sure not to do anything too strenuous or have any of your clumsy accidents.” She chuckles, sounds like a small bird.

“Yes, Mother. I’ll be sure not to have any of those.”

“Well, I’ve gotta go. I’m overdue for a permanent at the salon. Give my love to my David, and give that tummy of yours a pat for me. Call me after your doctor’s appointment on Monday.”

The Skipper and Gilligan confuse the cannibals, and it seems they are going to get away.

“Yes. Goodbye.”

“Are you sure you’re alright, de. . . .”

I hang up. She’ll call tomorrow, Saturday, and Sunday, reminding me to call after the appointment. How can I forget?

The Price Is Right comes on next. Halfway through the show, it’s time to make some lunch. It’s easy to get lost watching television and forget, so during a commercial break I fix food quickly and get back at the TV for the Showcase Showdown, my favorite part.

The first game is Plinko. I love watching the game piece slip down the board, bouncing off the sticks on its path to the money slots at the bottom. As Bob Barker explains the game, the

contestant, a man in his twenties whose nametag says Jim, looks out into the audience. A woman waves at him, Jim's wife I guess. Jim releases his piece down the board; he wrings his hands as it bounces toward the money slots. The piece stops in the thousand-dollar slot. Jim jumps up and down and kisses Bob on the cheek. His wife leaps to her feet and cheers. I hope Jim makes it to the Showcase Showdown.

The phone rings, David this time.

"Hey, sweetie. Just calling to check in."

Check up, he means.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"*The Price Is Right* is on." A woman gets ready to play the putting game. Bob shows off, sinking two putts in a row.

"Ginny, did you eat lunch yet?"

"No, not yet. It's not even halfway through the show." The woman, obviously not a golfer, misses the hole by a foot.

"Remember what I told you: If you don't make your lunch before it comes to the Showcase Showdown, you can't watch it. Remember?"

David knows my weaknesses, all the right buttons to push.

"Yes. Lunch before the showdown."

"That's a good girl. Do me a favor and go upstairs to my office, please."

"Why?"

David sighs. "Because I need to see if I've left a file there, and I'm in a hurry, Ginny."

A commercial flashes on the TV anyway. It's an effort to get up off the couch, but I have to be careful not to moan or else David might misunderstand and think I'm grumbling at him.

“It would be by the phone,” he says.

I climb the stairs and walk down the hall to David’s office. The file is right where he said it would be.

“Yes. It’s on your desk, the file.”

“Good. I didn’t lose it then. Well. I gotta go. Remember what I said about lunch, and see you at six.”

“Okay.”

“Bye, sweetie.” David hangs up.

File folders and binders cover David’s desktop. In an Incredible Hulk cup his pens are grouped by color. Red with red, blue with blue, and black with black—nothing out of place. It’s against the rules for me to be in David’s office when he’s not, so I leave. But I snatch a red pen out of his Hulk cup on the way out and slip it into my robe’s pocket.

The nursery is right next to David’s office. I’m missing *The Price Is Right* and not making lunch right now when I should be, but since I’m right near the nursery I have to go in. This room is my favorite in the house. David let me pick out the yellow ducky wallpaper, the white eyelet bedding for the bassinet, and the dark wood rocking chair with the pink and white gingham seat cushion. I should like the things for taking care of the baby, he said. He chose all the toys.

The roast is in the oven and potatoes boil. David doesn’t really like vegetables, but I make carrots because they are a favorite of the baby’s and mine. We can’t get enough of them. He encourages me to eat things we like; he encourages us to eat anything.

A few months ago in May, David came home to find me passed out on the floor. I'd had an accident the night before. David was upset that I burned the steak—he likes it bloody—and shoved me, and I fell, knocking my head on the kitchen counter. I didn't eat much dinner, even though we like steak well done. The next morning I ate breakfast, but threw it up. I watched TV all day and forgot to eat. Around four p.m. I got up to pee but felt funny. My head spun and a hum rang in our ears like the noise a neon light makes. I didn't know what to think and sat on the floor and wept. What if it was a concussion? As I wept, my head hurt worse and the buzzing got louder and louder until everything went dark.

“Ginny. Ginny!”

I woke up to David calling at the top of his lungs and shaking me so hard my teeth clacked together. Finally he noticed my eyes were open and stopped shaking.

“Baby. Are you all right? What happened?”

Tears streamed down David's face, and his hands trembled against the flesh of my arms. He wrapped his arms around me and cried. I wrapped my arms around him, too, patting his back and running my fingers through his hair.

“There, there,” I told him. He was so concerned and afraid—I saw it in his eyes. It reminded me how much I love him.

David collected his wits after a few minutes, scooped us up into his arms, and carried us to the car. At the hospital, he told them that I had fainted and must've hit my head.

After that scare, I didn't have any accidents for almost a month. While dinner cooks, I scrub the now hardened, orange remains of egg and sticky, melted ice cream from the floor and cabinets. Letting the yolk dry was a mistake. I have to get down on hands and knees and scrub with a brush, but sweating feels good. I am still naked underneath the robe. The sweat forms

droplets and evaporates, leaving my skin cool. David treats me alternately like a china doll that can't do anything and a punching bag—his punching bag. He's confused.

David's due home in about a half-hour, so I should go upstairs and change into some clothes so he doesn't realize I've worn my robe all day. I stick a fork into one of the boiling potatoes to check if it is tender. The smell of the roast permeates the kitchen; it smells lovely and makes us hungry. At least with a roast I can eat the ends, which are more done, and David can enjoy the rare middle. Our tastes complement each other perfectly on this occasion. Finally, I sample a carrot from the pot. It is so sweet, the texture so pleasing that we have another and another. I pick up the pot and shovel several more carrots into my mouth, spilling some orange water on the front of our robe. I have to change.

Upstairs, light filters in through most of the windows, but the bedroom, with its thick draperies, is almost dark. I go to the bureau and turn on our favorite lamp, the antique with the frosted glass dome with bead skirt dangling down. It lends a softer, kinder light to the room than the garish florescent ceiling fixture. I squint at the initial brightness, but my eyes adjust quickly.

I pass the mirror and remember my morning disciplining. I stop to examine the changes now. My face is bruised at the cheekbone with a red welt on most of the cheek; it aches dully. Unfastening the belt, I let the robe fall to the floor. Standing there, naked, I appraise our body. It's almost time. We will not be this way much longer. One more month. We can't have any more accidents—today's was minor, thank goodness. We have our health, our lives, to think of. Even though David loves us, he doesn't know his own strength. He hurts us though he doesn't mean to.

A door slams downstairs.

"I'm home, baby. Where are you?"

We left the bucket and scrub brush on the kitchen floor and didn't finish cleaning up. David will be angry.

“Hon? Where are you?”

Usually we are waiting for David in the kitchen when he gets home, but today is different. We stay silent. Maybe he won't find the mess. Maybe he'll forget we exist; he'll eat his dinner, fall asleep in the recliner in front of the TV, and leave us alone.

“Sonofabitch! I thought I told you to clean up this fucking mess.”

We sink to the floor and pull our robe around us.

David mounts the stairs, his footsteps ringing out through the house like thunderclaps. We crawl over to the door, pulling free the piggy bank filled with pennies—a boyhood treasure of David's—that we use as a doorstop. The door swings closed.

We can't let him hurt us again. We're so close to really having each other.

David reaches the landing. He pauses a moment, taps his foot. No doubt his hands are on his hips, and he's gazing up into the darkness with his face full of reproach. We get to our feet, slowly, and move toward the door to lock it. David is too quick, barreling through the door as we reach it. We reel back, knocking into the mirror and sending it crashing to the floor. The shards of glass slide over the wood floor in every direction, each piece reflecting a part of us. We clutch the piggy to our chest and cower against the wall.

“Christ! Ginny, what are you doing?”

Always our fault. We shove the door back at David, whacking him solidly with it. He stumbles forward and falls to the floor amidst the bits of mirror.

“What in the name of God do you think you are doing?”

It's a rhetorical question, one we've been asked before. We try to run out the door, but David grabs our ankle. As we fall, the piggy flies across the room, crashing into the wall and showering the floor in pennies. Oh God, please God, don't let him hurt us. We are so close, so close being together.

David pulls himself toward us by our ankle, but we kick him in the head with our other foot. His face is contorted, eyes wide. It must be surprise or shock even, but it's not an expression we are familiar with. We kick him in the face, and blood erupts from his lip. He lets go, and we manage to get on our feet and run out, pulling the door shut behind us.

We pause outside the door for a moment. What do we do now? He'll kill us. He will kill us.

We run down the hall, pulling paintings and pictures down from the walls and overturning a chest of drawers, a family heirloom. If we can just get out of the house before he catches us, we might have a chance.

The door to the bedroom opens. David stands there, staring out at us. The astonishment is gone from his face, replaced by the squinty-eyed, wide-grinning face of rage we know too well. He wipes the blood away from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You stupid bitch. You made me bleed. And look at the mess you're making of the house."

His voice is raised to just short of shouting.

We turn to start down the stairs but trip over our feet. David easily steps over the chest, pausing a moment to look at its drawers splayed out onto the floor with their contents spread out like entrails. He scoops up one of the drawers and throws it at us. It hits us in the head and shoulder. Warm blood trickles down our cheek.

David stands over us, grabs the lapel of our robe. “Had enough?” He raises his fist.

We kick at David’s legs and knock his feet out from under him. He crashes down, but we protect our stomach with our arms. After kneeing him in the groin, we squirm out from under him and crawl down the stairs. We almost make it out of his reach when he clamps onto our leg. He pulls. He’s too strong. One of the photos we tore down slid down the stairs, and we take it up and heave it at David. The frame smashes into his head, and his grip loosens.

We scramble down to the landing and struggle to our feet. Behind us there’s a loud crash. The house shakes. David has slipped on shards of glass from photos we pulled down as we ran past.

Will he get up?

“Baby, please,” he says. He looks at us, his face softening. He reaches out toward us, his hands blood-smearred. “What are you doing? It’s okay that you didn’t finish cleaning up the mess in the kitchen. I can forgive you. Let’s stop this nonsense before things get out of hand.”

David gets to his feet and starts toward the staircase. Stepping backward down the stairs, we cannot take our eyes off of him.

For a moment, the briefest second, we stop where we are, nearly at the bottom of the steps. But David’s hands tense into fists. The appealing softness leaves his face. It isn’t over.

We turn and run down the last of the stairs. David comes faster but smashes into a shelf mounted on the wall near the top of the stairs, sending his jar of marbles, a dirty tractor, and framed photograph of his first bike cascading down the steps. The jar explodes against the banister and the marbles scatter. The tractor bounces down a few steps, and then slips through a gap between banister rungs, falling with a clank to the floor below. David doesn’t stop coming at us. We reach the door just as he hits the first step with marbles and loses his balance, stepping

to the next step—maybe trying to catch himself. He doesn't. His feet fly out from under him, and he flips midair. Then he tumbles down the rest of the stairs, tumbling alternately into the railing and the wall. We watch him fall, hand on the doorknob.

David ends in a heap at the base of the stairs, breathing heavy and bleeding from a large gash at his temple. We can't move, our hand frozen on the knob. We are so close.

David shifts his body, trying to get up. He yelps, like a car-crushed dog.

"Baby, help," he says. He reaches out to us again, his voice as soft as a church whisper. "I'm hurt. Look what you did." He touches his fingers to his temple and looks at the blood. "Baby?"

We weep, collecting our robe tighter around our body. The house feels so cold. The smoke detector sounds, and we notice the smoky scent of burning meat. We've forgotten the roast. Well, at least it is well done, how we like it. We go to the kitchen and turn off the stove and the oven. We eat a few more carrots.

We peek around the wall, looking toward the stairs. David has pulled himself nearer to the door but lies there moaning and bleeding. He gasps; he reaches for something we can't see.

But we know what to do. We have our future to think of. We pick up the phone and dial 911. "There's been an accident," we say. "Come quick, he's hurt bad." Even though we're supposed to stay on the phone, we hang up. David calls from the other room, "I think my ribs are broken. I can't breathe. Help me. Please."

We peep around the wall again, to see if David has moved any closer to the door. He hasn't, so we walk toward the door, careful not to slip on any of the stray marbles. David clutches the dirty tractor to his chest.

Pulling the door open, we look back at him.

“Where are you going?” he says, his voice as soft as satin.

Outside the stars twinkle down through the leaves of the oak tree in our yard. The air has turned cold with the first hint of the approaching autumn. Somewhere close by, a siren sounds.

“Baby?” David says.

We do not turn. Next to our head, the tractor crashes into the doorframe. We take a deep breath and step over the threshold. Tightening our robe against the breeze, we look left and then right. The siren grows louder, coming from the right. We go left, walking slowly at first and then letting our bare feet fall faster and faster—the damp pavement beneath comforts us. Our head swims, soars. Our heart sounds in our ears loud, then louder. Our heart.

SPECIAL SON

When my father asked that I go hunting with him, I feared he really meant to kill a deer. I'm his special son—the one he knows is gay, though we can't talk about it. I'd just recently gone vegetarian, which also rendered food a taboo topic. As he packed up supplies for our trip—two rifles, two neon orange vests, a lunch prepared by Mom—he coughed an ahem to get my attention, then he dumped the bullets into the bottom of his gun cabinet and threw the empty box into his hunting sack. He winked. Apparently we were keeping appearances up for Mom, James, and Henry; we were not really off to hunt.

My brothers and I were all home because it was Thanksgiving—the one holiday we all still spent with Mom and Dad. James had a wife and two daughters who came with him to our parents' for Thanksgiving, and then the whole lot of them spent Christmas with the wife's family. Henry brought his fiancée home this Thanksgiving, and he usually worked Christmas at the theatre to give the light techs with families a break. David, my partner, received an invitation every year, but he wasn't truly welcome, so he tactfully declined. As Dad packed up and Mom flitted about shoving additional turkey and gravy sandwiches and cucumber sandwiches for me into our bag, James and Henry hovered, fishing for an invitation. Both loved to hunt and were Dad's usual companions.

“Got your license, Dad?” James said. As the eldest son at forty-two, he fancied himself responsible for us all, even for Dad.

“No,” Dad said, “Mark doesn't have one, so he and I'll risk it together.”

James shook his head. “I won't bail you out.”

Dad said, “Of course not—that’s why we’ll call your mother or Henry. I always loved him best anyway.” Dad slapped Henry hard on the back. The middle child, he suffered from the syndrome, and often admitted feeling least noticed. Dad laughed until he coughed.

Mom walked us out back, to the edge of the deck we’d all helped Dad build.

She said, “Dear, should you really be going hunting with your cold?”

Dad had been a smoker since his days in the Navy and had only just quit. He had been sick, making his usual smoker’s cough far worse.

Dad kissed Mom’s forehead. “It’ll be fine.”

She said, “Don’t get shot.” She hugged Dad, kissed me on the cheek, and rubbed away her lipstick.

Dad handed me a rifle. I shouldered it, trying not to smile. We entered the woods, down the path to the empty creek bed. In summer, the water chatted and churned over the bed of rocks we walked in, and in autumn the creek was alternately muddy or dry depending on when it last rained. In silence except for occasional bouts of coughing from Dad, we followed the emptied waterway, up and back into the deeper woods behind our home. I wondered what Dad had in mind, leading me out into the woods in chilly autumn weather with no ammunition. I hoped we would not happen across a bear. We left the creek bed, and Dad let a branch he’d pushed aside snap back at me, to see if I paid attention. I didn’t, and the branch whacked me square in the eye. Dad laughed, and once I confirmed I could still see, I did too so he’d be laughing with me instead of at me.

“Make sure you step on top of the logs we’re walking over. Rattlesnakes should be hibernating now, but I’d rather be alive than wrong.”

I followed Dad, footstep for footstep. He'd been exploring and hunting these woods my whole life. The path we walked could barely be discerned, but Dad knew the way. He looked at each rock and tree with purpose, the way I looked at the mile markers and exit signs on my way back into the city. Each landmark one closer to home. Dad stepped on a log and flushed a pheasant who beat its wings and flew away. As we moved deeper into the woods, the trees changed from deciduous—maples, oaks, and birches—to pines. The sweet, sappy aroma of pines, mostly spruces and firs, reminded me Christmas was coming soon. I thought of David and me on one of our first dates, skating at Rockefeller Center with the giant tree casting its scent on the wind.

I was tempted to ask Dad what all this was about, but he wouldn't be rushed once he'd decided on a way to do something, so I resolved to wait it out while enjoying the view. Dad pointed out a hawk circling overhead, the bird tightening its circles as it descended on a thermal, poised to catch some unwitting prey.

Dad led me to the tree stand he and my brothers had built years before. He stepped up onto the first two-by-four nailed into the heart of the tree and grabbed the next rung of the built-in ladder above his head. He pulled himself up one step and faltered, jumping down and taken by a fit of coughing. He coughed hard, and I laid my hand on his back, my ribs aching in sympathy. I took the hunting pack from his shoulders and grabbed his arm, but he waved me off.

Dad gestured for me to follow him, still not having caught his breath from the coughing fit. He led me to a perfect circle of pine trees that seemed to be waiting for fairies or witches. He sat on a rock near the circle's edge, and I sat next to him.

“Curious?” he said.

“Always.”

“I haven’t told anyone what I’m about to say to you.” Dad looked off across the circle, up to the gray autumn sky barren of clouds.

I took a deep breath, sure I didn’t want the surprise he was about to give me.

“I’ve got cancer,” he said, without looking at me. “Started as lung cancer. You get the star for telling me to quit smoking.”

The flesh around my eyes numbed, but I inhaled deeply to keep my eyes dry. Dad turned to me, took my hand and squeezed.

He said, “Do what feels natural, kiddo. The spruces won’t judge.”

I lost any desire to cry then, even if it felt right. Now that I had permission, crying seemed phony somehow.

“Why haven’t you told everybody?” I said, feeling the information was both privilege and burden.

“I have something to ask you to do. If you say no, well, I guess I have to undergo treatment and refuse to die.” Dad laughed. He was a man who often appreciated his sick sense of humor alone.

I stood and paced, treading the browning grass flat. Why Dad told me before everyone else seemed mysterious.

“Mark, you are the most sensitive of my sons. And closest to your mother.” Dad took sandwiches from our pack, setting a cucumber sandwich on the rock next to him, partially unwrapped, and taking a turkey and gravy sandwich for himself.

“Sensitive?” I spoke louder than I intended and the sound of my voice seemed out of place in the calm, quiet forest. So this was how he was finally going to acknowledge I was gay. I picked up the sandwich he’d set out for me, and held it as I paced.

Dad continued, undeterred. “I need you to take care of your mother when I die. The doc tells me it’s three months if I don’t get radiation, and six months, maybe more, if I do.” Dad took a bite. He was one of the few people I knew who ate when upset. “You know your brothers. James’ll balance her books, and Henry’ll invite her to the theatre to keep her busy.”

Dad crumpled the tinfoil Mom had used to wrap his sandwich, and birds in the spruces took flight, startled by the noise. In the distance, the hawk cried, and I imagined him diving to scoop up an unsuspecting mouse.

“I need you to take care of *her*.”

I knew he meant this to be another secret between us—another truth we both knew but never spoke about.

“So you’ve got it all figured out.” I crushed the foil and sandwich into a tight ball. “I’ll take care of her because I’m *sensitive*.”

Dad exhaled slowly. He bit down repeatedly on his tongue, a habit that had always seemed odd and slightly disgusting to me. “I mean you’ll listen to her and help her deal with things when the other two’ll just try to distract her. And your mother’ll tell you things that she’d keep from the other boys.”

I turned and stared off into the thick green branches of the spruce ring. I threw the balled up sandwich and tin foil at the ground. Dad climbed off the rock and crossed the circle to pick up my sandwich. He chucked it into the hunting bag and laid a hand on my shoulder.

“If you left that here, you’d have trouble falling asleep tonight.”

I shrugged off his hand. He was right, and I hated it. It wasn’t like he’d been a bad father. He hadn’t ignored, hated, or abused me. Perhaps if he had, our relationship would have been simpler. I would have known how to feel about him. He knew me just as well as he did his

other sons, and he loved me just as much as he loved them. But we had this aspect of my life we spoke around while James showed photos of the girls from the shore and Henry called everyone's attention to his fiancée's engagement ring.

We stood in the middle the spruce ring. I turned to Dad. "I'm gay."

He nodded.

"I need you to say it—say the words. Now my being *sensitive* is convenient for you. Now it's okay that I'm gay because I'll comfort mom and help her find the perfect pair of pumps for your funeral. Is that your plan?"

Dad stepped away from me, resumed his seat on the rock and watched me. I had always been the peacemaker between my brothers when they fought, and I always took criticism and punishments from my parents silently. Dad had never seen me openly angry.

"And what about me, Dad? I get to smile when we get back and kiss Mom, secretly knowing you'll be dead in three months. How am I supposed to deal with this?" I paused. Dad sat, still watching, like I was a swift spring thunderstorm. "You haven't even met my partner and don't intend to."

Dad sat on the rock and looked up at me. "Son, you're gay. I love you now as I always have, same as I've loved your brothers. Man to man, I'm asking you to do me this favor of looking after your mother because of my sons, you'll be best at it."

He seemed at a loss as to what else to say or do. He looked off at the trees and chewed his tongue. I sat next to him and let it sink in. I thought I would feel different, that something in me would click into place when Dad finally acknowledged I was gay, and I'd feel like a different man. But I didn't. Dad patted my leg as he stared off across the circle, and we took in the

forest's quiet punctuated by the whispers of falling spruce needles and the rustling of autumn leaves.

At the other end of the circle, a buck trotted in and paused, looking surprised to find us there. He stood, nostrils flaring. Dad reached for his gun then stopped. I admired the deer a moment, his glittering black eyes never leaving us, then ran at him to spare my father the regret of not having brought the deer home. The deer leapt through the spruce branches.

I wanted to ask my father why he didn't want treatment and where the cancer had spread. But I knew he'd made up his mind, and if I knew him at all, the decision was made after long, careful deliberation.

"When will you tell her?"

"When I can't hide it any longer."

I sat next to Dad on the rock, our shoulders touching. "I'll take care of Mom."

Dad cupped my cheek in his hand and kissed the other. He stood. We headed back the way we came, through the woods to our house. We found the dried up creek, and Dad paused. He picked up a stone, smoothed by the water. Its oblong shape seemed the most perfect thing I'd ever seen.

Dad handed me the stone. "Paperweight," he said. "I hope you and David are half as happy as me and your Mom. You should bring him at Christmas. Really. Do it."

I worried my palms over the stone's cold surface. I hadn't been sure Dad knew David's name before that moment. Dad stepped away and sat on a felled tree. I walked up the streambed, looking at smoothed rocks. Next to the bed, a misshapen rock caught my eye. The rock's surface had an imprint of a scallop-edged seashell and a snail's spiral. In prehistoric times, the valley we lived in had been an ocean. I wanted to give my father the fossil, but the gesture

seemed too sentimental, so I held the rock, clicking my fingernail in the shell's ridges—afraid I'd ruin the easy silence between us. I slipped the fossil into Dad's hunting pack. Mom would find it there when she cleaned out our lunch things, or maybe Dad would find it after I'd gone back to the city, there in the bottom next to the empty bullet box.

I walked back to the fallen tree and sat next to Dad. "When will you tell James and Henry?"

"Same as Mom, once it's obvious."

We walked the remainder of the way back to the house in silence. I rubbed the creek rock in my pocket. I tried to fix my face, which I felt must be showing the weight of my father's news. He had passed the baton to me to care for the only woman we'd both ever loved. His steps seemed more casual and less calculated on the return, and for a moment I envied him, a man of clear purpose who knew his fate and knew he'd been loved.

At home, Mom kissed Dad's chilled, Rudolph-red nose. "That was quick," she said.

"The deer got away," Dad said.

I said, "And I was cold." Mom took my hands and blew on them to warm me. She smiled at us, the skin near her eyes crinkled mischievously like an accomplice to men she knew were lying to her.

I went into the den where James and Henry had built a fire. Tossing another log onto the flame, I sighed and watched the sap crack in bright green sparks. In the kitchen, Mom and Dad sang lines from "You Don't Know Me," their song, to each other. Upstairs, James chastised his girls for being too loud. Henry played Bach, probably to drown out James' brood and to remind himself who he was—a man of the theatre. I put my feet up on the coffee table, and imagined David there with me, watching the embers.

LOVE BUGS

I'm waiting in the car while my husband Bob runs into the supermarket. We've just come from the ob/gyn where I had a D&C, which Bob keeps calling The Procedure. I had a miscarriage, our third. Autumn in Florida brings love bugs and hurricanes, and we seem just a few plagues short of something Biblical. A pair of mated love bugs flew in the car when Bob got out. With my hand, I gently urge them near the windshield and pull my sun visor down—even horny bugs deserve a little privacy. Bob says their life seems like a perfect existence, but I'm not so sure. Love bugs are attached and copulating most of their brief lives. I think of them like conjoined twins—it must be difficult to define yourself if you're never really alone. But love bugs aren't trying to define themselves, I am.

Bob opens the passenger door. “Was it Chocolate Therapy or Chunky Monkey?” He's taking care of me, which involves a lot of ice cream. “I mean, I wasn't sure. So I bought both in case.” He closes the door, puts the groceries in the trunk, and gets into the car. “Did you want me to get you some movies to watch?” He cups my cheek in his palm, then gives my cheek a pinch. “You look pale. I can take you home first and then come back for movies—if you want movies, that is.” He's been talking without pause since I called him to say we needed to go to the doctor. He doesn't crisis well.

“Babe, I'm fine. Let's go home.”

Bob shifts the car into reverse, and I give his forearm a squeeze. He pulls my hand to his lips and kisses the back, then pecks a row of kisses to the end of my middle finger. He places my hand in my lap instead of just letting go. I want to tell him I'm not fragile, but I don't want to hurt his feelings. I sigh instead and lay a hand over my eyes.

Giant, old oak trees line our street. Bob speeds through our neighborhood, probably eager for us to be out of the car. After parking in our driveway, Bob rushes around and opens my door. He gives me the keys and collects the grocery bags. From the looks of the packed trunk, Bob bought at least two of everything I wanted.

I say, "Give me some."

"I'll get it. Go inside and rest." His arms have plastic bag handles draped from elbow to wrist.

"Bob, let me help."

He shakes his head. His arms sag from the weight.

"Dammit, it already happened. Let me carry a goddamn grocery bag."

We stand watching each other to see what we'll do next. I take two bags from the more burdened arm and walk toward the house. Bob loads up with the last of the bags and tries to close the trunk with his head. It's a funny sight, but I haven't the heart to laugh. I go inside, drop the bags in the kitchen, and head to our bed.

I awaken and find it nighttime. The door to our bedroom is open, and downstairs I hear Bob talking on the phone. Careful not to make a sound, I pick up the portable phone from the nightstand.

"How many weeks was it this time?" Bob's mother Frances says.

"Fifteen."

Frances sighs. "You're sure she wasn't doing anything stupid—drinking Chardonnay on lunch breaks? Sneaking cigarettes when you weren't around?"

Before Bob defends me, which I know he will, I turn the phone off and throw it across the room. It crashes into the dresser, and Bob comes running.

He flips on the lights and pants in the doorway. “Bekah, you okay? What was that?” He sees the phone on the floor. “You were listening?”

I nod and pull the covers up to my nose—more ashamed of letting Frances get to me than of eavesdropping.

“Two minutes.” Bob thumps back downstairs to make excuses.

I groan and duck my head completely under the covers. I hear Bob come back, kneel next to the bed. He lifts a corner of the bedspread and sticks his head under.

I say, “It’s hard enough without *her* two cents.”

“You wouldn’t have heard her two cents if you hadn’t listened in.” Bob slides a hand under the covers and gropes a moment before he finds my hipbone and cups it in his palm.

“She’s just disappointed, like us.”

“I told you we shouldn’t say anything till I showed. I’ve learned by now not to get my hopes up until the third trimester.” We both know I’m lying. This pregnancy lasted the longest, and I’d already squirreled away baby things I’d secretly purchased.

“Each time you miscarried, I felt like I might lose you.” He squeezes my hipbone.

“We don’t have to keep doing this.” I poke Bob’s cleft chin. “You didn’t even want kids.”

“You were very persuasive.” He lets go of my hip and withdraws his head. I thought he was joking, but he sighs and plods out of the room.

In the kitchen, the news is on the countertop TV. Bob sits at the table with the newspaper opened to the crossword. He looks at neither distraction. Instead, he stares into his Jack and Coke as if he can read our future in the ice cubes.

I don't know what I mean to say to him yet, so I do a fly by and head into the living room. While I slept, Bob cleaned. The pile of bills from the corner finally made it into our filing cabinet. The couch's pillows have been fluffed and arranged, the fireplace swept, the glass coffee table Windexed, and the coffee-table books stacked into a pyramid. The room looks too neat, un-lived in—as though a real estate agent will stop by momentarily to show the place. I need a little clutter to avoid panic, so I deconstruct the book pyramid and arrange the volumes into fans. The way I like the books arranged, I can see the covers and pick one up without causing an engineering nightmare.

When I walk into the kitchen, Bob looks up. I get the bottle of Jack from the liquor cabinet and refresh his drink. Sitting in a chair pulled up to the table would feel claustrophobic, so I sit on the counter and prop my feet on the chair. I take a swig from the bottle.

I say, "Talk to me."

"Bek." He checks himself before he says something about why I shouldn't be drinking. "What do you want me to say?"

"Something." I pull the chair back with my feet, its front legs suspended. "Anything."

Bob shrugs, picks dead skin off a callus on the mount of his palm. He has something to say, I know, because he doesn't look up at me. I let the chair's front legs fall back to the linoleum.

"Those cigars that say, 'It's A Boy' or 'It's A Girl'—I ordered a set of each last week." We had decided to let the baby's sex be a surprise.

"I bought onesies and teething rings and diaper cream—hid them in the attic."

Bob looks at me. "Did we jinx ourselves?" He's not a superstitious man, but he stares into my eyes, his face frozen in anticipation.

Maybe we did, both secretly buying tokens for a baby we didn't have yet. I don't really believe it's our fault, though. The doctor said miscarriages are nature's way of preventing a flawed pregnancy from continuing. Something had to have already been wrong—we were spared heartache later.

I pull my legs up and cross them underneath me. “We didn't jinx anything.”

Bob leans back in his chair, puts his hands palm down on the table. “What next?”

“We don't have to decide our future this instant.”

“Let's start.”

I take another drink of Jack. God-awful tasting stuff, but it does get the job done. Already my limbs feel a little numb. “The doctor said we'd have to get some tests if we wanted to try again.”

“What kind?”

“Shit, Bob. I don't know. I felt pretty sure, after *The Procedure*, that I didn't want any action down there for a while, so I didn't ask.”

Bob stands, pushes his chair in, and leans on the back a moment before he crosses the kitchen to me. I pull my knees up into my chest and wrap my arms around. He rests his hands on my knees and touches his forehead to mine. I'm trying to stay mad, but his touch is a comfort.

I say, “You're disappointed along with me, I know. But you can't really know what this feels like.”

“Tell me.”

“What's the point? I don't want to be feeling like this in the first place, so what good would it do to inflict it on you too.”

“Tell me.”

“I just know I can’t do this again. Can’t be disappointed again. And if we have a baby—something could still happen.” I drop my feet down and stand—nudge past Bob to pace. I realize I am as afraid of having a child as of losing another one. There is so much uncertainty in the world, so much danger. Mothers must have an endless supply of hope and an endless willingness to worry. “I thought I wanted to be a mother.”

Bob faces the cabinets. “And now?”

“I see I’m not mother material.”

“What if I think I’m father material?”

“Unless you figure out a way to conceive by yourself, we’ve got problems.”

Bob glowers over his shoulder at me, his lips slightly parted. Exasperated. “I’m taking a walk.” He brushes past me, and I turn to watch him go. At the door he stops, turns to me and says, “We need to talk about this, we’re just not ready.” He steps out into the dark and lets the door slap shut.

In the kitchen, I chug a little more Jack before putting the bottle back in the liquor cabinet. If we had a baby, we’d have to get those hideous white childproof latches to secure all our cabinets. The glass coffee table I love would have to go, its sharp corners too dangerous around a toddler. The fireplace tools would end up elevated or in a closet because Frances keeps talking about her neighbor’s cousin’s baby popping a lung with a bellows. Every time she tells the story I ask where the child’s mother was, but I could be her. If Brad Pitt were on TV bare-chested, I could get distracted long enough for little Benjamin or Brianna to taste-test the sooty fireplace tools.

Outside, half-hearted thunder rumbles and rain patters against the windows. Bob will return soon, soggy and perturbed. I tromp upstairs and yank the pull cord for the attic ladder. In the balmy attic, I open my hope box of baby stuff. I take out the package of onesies and tear into the plastic, pulling out a soft cotton onesy. I hold it to my nose and wish it smelled like baby.

After a while, Bob pokes his head through the illuminated square ladder-hole into the attic. His moistened hair clings to his head. “Y’okay?”

“No.” I drop the onesy into the box.

“Me either.” Bob climbs all the way into the attic. He looks through the hope box, then sits behind me, resting his head upon mine.

I say, “I don’t want to give up, but I’m already tired of trying.”

“I know.” He wraps his arms around me, his wet T-shirt soaking my top.

“Let’s not do anything heroic. I don’t want to be a guinea pig.” I lean back and rest my head on Bob’s shoulder.

“Okay.” He pulls me close, and his heart beats against my spine. “Okay.”

Rain patters on the roof. As my eyes adjust to the dark attic, the shapes of items stored within remain indistinct in pools of shadow. With our bodies intertwined, it's hard to tell where my silhouette ends and Bob's begins. No matter what happens tomorrow or the next, we are bound for now in this small shared space, where we wait to see who will be first to move.

DA'S VIOLETS

My father came to visit baby Grant and me one day, and he brought a houseplant with him. An African violet. I had busted him before—he'd been chatting up a spider plant in his bathroom. He misted the spider plant with a spray bottle and whispered to it softly. He'd been lonely in the year since my mother ran off with her podiatrist, so I hadn't made a big deal of it. I'd been pleased he was making friends and hoped he'd move up to people next.

“Da, can I make you some coffee?” I asked. Grant had newly acquired the skill of making sounds that resembled words. We decided Da meant my father, so now the baby, my husband Kipling, and I all called him that.

“That would be swell, Cheryl darlin’. Could you bring some water, too?” Da rubbed his fingers over the violet's fuzzy leaves.

Grant toddled to Da and chanted his name until finally my father left the violet alone and pulled the baby into his lap.

In the kitchen, I ground coffee beans and put the pot on. Da bringing a houseplant over seemed so surreal I feared I couldn't ask him about it without laughing. He'd always been quite level-headed, the more practical and less romantic of my parents, and that common sense was one of the few characteristics he and I shared. From my wide, knobby feet to my flirtatious personality, I was virtually my mother's clone.

When I returned to the living room with Da's coffee and the plant's water, Grant rocked back and forth in his motorized swing, and Da held the violet again. Asking him about it without cracking up seemed impossible, so I decided to discuss the situation with Kipling first.

Grant and I were in the kitchen when Kipling got home from work. I peeled and quartered the last of the potatoes while Grant whizzed around the kitchen in his old walker. He got a running start, and then picked up his feet and yelled, “Eeeeeeee!” until he crashed into the cabinets.

“He’s outgrown this. Why do you insist on putting him in it still?” Kipling dropped his briefcase on the kitchen table, plucked Grant out of the walker, and set the baby on the floor next to his feet. Grant immediately chewed on the toe of Kipling’s oxford. The shoes shined everywhere but at the toe, where they’d been worn dull from previous gnawings.

“Stop him.”

“It helps build his immunity.”

I chucked a damp potato at Kipling before setting the pot on the stove. I told Kipling Da had visited. Grant sat at Kipling’s feet and said, “Ad-dy, ad-dy.”

“Da brought a plant with him today.”

“For you? You’ll kill it in a week.”

Grant tugged on Kipling’s pant leg. “Ad-dy? Ad-dy!” His volume rose.

“He just brought it with him. For company, I think.”

“Are you joking?”

The ad-dy chant continued from the floor, and Grant pulled himself up by Kipling’s pants and thumped him on the thigh with little fists.

“Pick him up, please.”

“You coddle him too much.”

Kipling often tried to pass off his laziness as parental responsibility. At a canter, Grant headed toward the cabinets. Sometimes he forgot he no longer had the buffer of his walker and

ran into things. He smacked his head into the table's leg, and his face contorted into a grimace for a moment as he considered crying. Instead, he said, "Da. Da. Da-da."

"Maybe," Kipling said, "he's not our baby at all. Perhaps he's a Russian operative switched with our child at birth. How would we know? He came out covered in muck, so it'd be impossible to tell for sure if the nurses made a switch." Kipling opened the refrigerator and stared.

"I'd recognize Grant's head anywhere."

I stirred the potatoes, urging them to boil. Grant rubbed a snotty nose on the back of my pants, and Kipling stared into the fridge for another minute before closing it and heading to the den to watch the news. Grant followed Kipling, and the kitchen grew quiet. I felt for the first time that day I had a chance to really think Da's visit through. He and I hadn't spent much time together since Mom left, but we never had in the past. Grant was only two months old when Mom and Dr. Beltser left town, and I'd been too angry with her myself to comfort anybody else about it. She'd called on Grant's first birthday, but I told her she had the wrong number. She tried twice more, hoping I'd change my mind, but I assured her no daughter of hers lived at this number.

What Da needed was more human companionship. Sure he said he had plans sometimes when I invited him to dinner or asked if we could come over, but this traveling African violet conjured visions of him having romantic dinners with his spider plants or taking the violet for long walks in the park. So I resolved that Grant and I would have to visit more, maybe even coax Da to take outings with us.

The next day, we showed up at Da's unannounced. Normally, I'd call before we went over, but I'd hoped to surprise him into agreeing to come to the mall. I also wanted a chance to catch him whispering sweet nothings to his plants again.

In Da's kitchen, several sprouts trimmed from the spider plant hovered in little jars of water on his windowsill. From somewhere deep in the house, Da hummed. A fear mounted in me then that if a grown man could start bringing a houseplant on visits, he could develop odder, more disturbing habits without warning, so I called out his name to let him know we were there.

"Here," Da called from his bedroom.

I carried Grant down the hall because Da's house still hadn't been childproofed and letting my son loose could result in breakage or poisoning.

"Everything okay?" Da met us in the doorway and kissed me on the cheek, Grant on the head.

"We were in the neighborhood and wanted to kidnap you."

Grant squirmed, so I let him down and he bolted into Da's room. We followed.

Da said, "I'm cleaning up. Have a friend coming over tonight for supper."

A bright pink feather duster lay on Da's crisply made bed, which looked like it had been done by a military man. The knickknacks Mom left on her dresser had been cleared, and in their place stood bottles of cologne, a fancy shaving kit, and a wooden cigar box in which Da had collected his cuff links and watches. Next to the cigar box stood a prescription bottle.

Grant ran head first into the dresser, creating a tremor that knocked over Da's neatly arranged cologne bottles and the prescription, which fell onto the floor. Before I got to him, Grant already had the prescription bottle in his mouth. I grabbed it, smoothing my thumb over the ridges he'd already bit into the plastic.

“Sorry, Da.” The prescription was Viagra. I quickly dropped it back on the dresser and scooped up Grant. I wanted to wash his mouth out.

Da sighed. He came to the dresser and organized his things again. “I’ve met someone.”

“Oh?” I said.

“Nice lady. Her name’s Noreen. You’ll like her, darlin’.” He stuck the pill bottle in the cigar box and closed the lid.

“Great.”

“She gave me that plant I brought over your house yesterday. Said it’s real temperamental, so I didn’t want to leave it alone.”

I laughed. And Grant laughed because I did, and his giggles echoed off the walls in Da’s room and felt out of place.

“I didn’t say anything about the plant being your new best friend because I thought it was a sign of dementia.”

“I’m not that old.”

Da and I stared at each other. I wanted to hear more about this woman, but I didn’t want to ask. Da looked from my face to Grant’s.

After a long, silent pause, I told Da we’d let him get back to his cleaning and that he should come by for dinner later in the week. He said he’d have to double-check his plans. He meant he’d have to ask Noreen.

We left, but headed toward home instead of the mall. Spring had eased in without me noticing, and tulip shoots emerged in short green tufts. The brown world leftover from winter greened at its edges. Many people thought spring a hopeful season of rebirth. But the trees and

fields blanketed with a clean, new coat of snow smoothed rough angles and reduced things of the world to their most basic, simplest shapes. With spring, the unexpected bloomed.

“Undy!” Grant said from his car-seat in the back. Next to the road a rabbit hopped from under low spruce branches and chewed a tuft of grass.

“Bunny,” I said. Grant put Ds in every word-like sound he made. “Bun-ny. Rab-bit.” Whenever I repeated words at Grant, I broke the pronunciation in syllables. Sometimes I feared he would learn to speak that way, since Kipling did the same thing to him. What if some arbitrary choice we made hurt him his whole life? I was grown, and my parents’ choices still affected me.

We arrived home, and in the foyer Grant and I struggled to free him of the heavy coat he’d already outgrown. The phone rang, and I left Grant, one arm in, one out, writhing on the floor.

“Yes.” I expected the caller to be Kipling.

“Cheryl?” Mom said.

“You have the—”

“Am I never going to see my grandbaby again?”

Mom’s expertise at guilt was legend in our family and the town alike, but running off with Beltser had diminished her leverage some.

“Grandson. Goes by Grant. Ringing any bells?”

“Don’t hang up. Please.” At the ends of her words, Mom’s tone became nasal, half-whined. She didn’t sound herself.

“What do you want?”

“I’m not perfect, Cheryl Anne. I know I’ve made mistakes, but I—”

“I’m not having this discussion. Our address hasn’t changed.” I hung up.

In the foyer, Grant had managed to get his arm halfway out of the sleeve before falling asleep. He lay on his coat amidst a pile of shoes next to the door. I knew I should move him to his crib, away from the drafty threshold, but I couldn’t muster the energy. Instead, I went to the den and assumed my spot in the recliner to watch my soaps. The day’s events merited some TV indulgence.

I awoke, apparently having dozed off during *One Life to Live*, to loud, insistent knocking at the door. Before I could get out of the recliner, from the foyer came a loud thud followed by Grant wailing.

When I got to the door, Mom had let herself in and was holding Grant, who kicked and screamed. To him, she was a stranger. I took him from her. A golf ball sized lump formed on Grant’s head where I assumed the door had thumped him.

“Why the hell was the baby sleeping right in front of the door?”

“You disappear for a year and just come traipsing in?”

I rubbed the knot on Grant’s head and rhythmically bounced him up and down. He settled from sobbing to occasional sniffs, and wove fingers into my hair.

“How are you?” Mom’s hair blazed the pink-purple of rhubarb. Foundation had been spread heavy on her cheeks and settled into her wrinkles; her cheeks bore bright check marks of blush that made her look flushed and flustered.

“He’s so big. Looks just like Kipling.” Mom grabbed the toe of Grant’s boot, and he retreated by burying his face in the crook of my neck. “How’s Kipling?” She paused. “How’s your father?”

Up until Mom asked that question, I wasn't sure what I thought of Da meeting a woman. Now I felt happy to have ammunition. That decided the matter. I was pleased Da had found companionship.

"Da's great. He's got a date tonight."

Mom smiled, all teeth. She nodded. Perhaps she waited for a punch line.

I turned and brought Grant into the kitchen. Kipling would be home soon, so I had to start dinner.

"You mean your father's actually seeing someone? A woman?"

Grant crashed his walker into Mom's foot, but she didn't seem to notice.

"So he says."

"Ha." Mom tossed her head back. "So you haven't met this alleged woman."

"I'm sure she's a woman."

Mom laughed like the canned laughs for TV shows.

"Staying for dinner?" I had a hard time being as assertive about my anger in person. I knew she'd stay and that eventually through the course of a meal I'd start to forgive her, but I'd treat her badly for a good long while to come. I held on to grudges, another quality I inherited from Mom.

She nodded. "Love to. I need to get to know this big boy." She smiled at Grant, who ran, picked up his feet, yelled "Eeeeeee," and rammed her again.

Kipling arrived home at the usual time and found a strange car blocking his entrance to our driveway. Following his normal M.O. he opted not to say much about the situation. Once he found out the car was Mom's, he treated her as if he knew all along she'd be visiting that day.

We all chit-chatted over a mediocre meal of leftovers I threw together, and it was after dark by the time Mom helped me bathe and put Grant down for the night.

At the door, I helped Mom into her coat. By then, I had grown eager to be rid of her. I still wanted to be mad, but the rhubarb hair, her nasal tone, the affection she showered on Grant all urged me to forgive her.

“He left me, you know.” Mom’s mascara strayed beneath her lashes from Grant’s bath time splashing.

“The podiatrist?” I said. Mom’s collar caught in the neckline of the coat, distracting me.

“No, the milkman. Of course the podiatrist.”

I reached over and righted her collar.

“I’m staying at the motel in town.”

“Does it have cable?”

Even if I’d had the desire to let Mom stay, we didn’t have the space. She said goodnight and left, and I stood in the doorway and watched the red taillights of her car grow small and distant. The air smelled damp, like dew or rain instead of snow.

In the morning after we’d had breakfast and Kipling had gone off to work, I called Da to tell him Grant and I were coming over. I didn’t tell Kipling I planned to tell Da about Mom because I knew he’d try to talk me out of interfering, and I knew he’d be right. Da said to give him an hour or so and then to come on over, which led me to assume he still had company. The thought of my father courting and bedding someone other than my mother made me slightly nauseated and fuzzy in the head.

When we arrived, a strange sedan still sat in Da’s garage, and we found the door locked. Da never locked his door. I let Grant knock. Inside, Da and Noreen laughed. I pounded on the

door. Moments later it opened, and Da stood there with a tall blond woman with a sharp nose and too perky a ponytail for her age, which disturbingly seemed to be her forties. Her breasts also seemed unnaturally high and firm. She extended her hand.

“I’m Noreen. I’ve heard so much about you. And this must be Grant, bless his little heart.” Noreen poked Grant in the tummy, and he recoiled.

She was thin and attractive and looked at least fifteen years Da’s junior. I wondered if he had money squirreled away we didn’t know about.

“Noreen’s just leaving. I’m gonna walk her out. You and Grant make yourselves comfortable.”

They moved past us out into the garage, and Grant and I crept in. No lights were on in Da’s house, and the day was overcast, so the little sunlight coming through the windows left the interior shadowy. We sat at the dining room table. The African violet held a place of honor as the table’s centerpiece. Dishes from the couple’s dinner last night cluttered the sink. I set Grant down and hoped he wouldn’t stray near the bedroom. I feared the sight of Da’s unmade bed.

“What’s the morning edition, darlin’?” Da came up behind me and scratched the span of back between my shoulder blades. The gesture made me feel twelve years old again, uncomfortable with the affection but comforted by his touch. Grant crawled under the table and played peek-a-boo from under the tablecloth’s edge.

“Mom’s in town.”

“I know.”

Da sat next to me. He rubbed a thumb over the callused mounts of his palm, the rough skin making a shushing sound from the friction. “She called late last night. I would have rather told her about Noreen myself.”

“I just said you had a date.”

“It’s more than that. Your mother thought she could come back here.”

Grant pulled the tablecloth and the African violet slid with it closer to the end of the table. Da placed his hands on the table to stop the cloth’s progress.

“I told your mother I want a divorce.”

I put my hands on the tablecloth too, to steady myself. Grant brushed past my leg under the table and pulled himself up by Da’s pants. He crashed the top of his head into the underside of the table as he stood. Da tugged him out from underneath the table and into his arms. Da looked at me, and for a brief moment our eyes met. I shifted my gaze to his chin.

“Da. Da!” Grant said and clapped.

“Let’s me and you go fill up Da’s birdfeeder, big guy.” Da squeezed the base of my neck and went outside with Grant.

Alone inside, the nearly absolute silence of Da’s house felt heavy, like the gravity had increased and pressed me down hard into the chair. It seemed a miracle the lonely hush hadn’t driven him mad before he’d found a companion. Noreen’s African violet sat on the table. I reached out and grasped the stem to break the blooms off—to behead the plant. My hand brushed the leaves’ fuzz, like Grant’s hair when it was new. I let go of the stem, leaving the blooms intact. I broke off a small leaf and tucked it into my pocket.

I went outside. Da and Grant crouched a few feet away from the newly refilled birdfeeder. A bird landed on the perch and picked at the seeds. At a signal from Da, Grant charged toward the feeder, startling the poor bird off, which made Grant fall to the ground to wriggle and laugh.

“Get up. You’ll be covered in mud,” I said to Grant.

“Let him be. He’s washable.” Da put his arm around my shoulder.

Grant got up and ran deeper into Da’s backyard, startling birds that had settled in the dried remnants of last year’s long grass. We looked after him, and I noted the buds on the trees.