THE MFA PROGRAM FOR WRITERS

FICTION WORKSHEETS
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Ave Bisesi
Juliet McShannon Bornia
Jason Bowman
Matt Bucknor
Elyse Durham Buffenbarger
Chas Carey
Jennifer Christman
Drew Coles
Madison Cyr
Joy Deng
Eliza Eddy
Anne Elliott
Susannah Emerson
Jeff Gabel
Pam Goldman
Courtney Min Han

Christopher Hathaway
Artis Henderson
Sasha Hom
Jared Levy
Kirsten Lind
Yiming Ma
Ami Canaan Mann
Juli Min
Koye Oyedeji
Roseanne G. Pereira
Jeff Peterson
Rose Smith
Kristen Sahaana Surya
Wesley Weissberg
Olivia Zubrowski

WARREN WILSON COLLEGE
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The MFA Program For Writers
Warren Wilson College
GUIDELINES: WORKSHOP PARTICIPATION

The workshop is an opportunity not merely to receive response but also to give it a sustained *practicum* in criticism. At Warren Wilson, too, the eclectic nature of the student body challenges and stretches one's own aesthetic assumptions.

Because of the pace of residency, students and faculty should read carefully and make notes on all of the material for one's workshop IN ADVANCE OF RESIDENCY, as well as reserve some time the evening before in which to review the work of the two students being discussed the next day. For this reason, students are NOT ALLOWED to distribute replacement sheets (revisions or substitutions) at the residency.

When preparing worksheet material, participants should try first to discover the work's intention, setting aside for the moment one’s own tastes and preferences; toward the end of the discussion hour one could raise doubts about the intention—i.e., why would the poet want to make this a sonnet; wouldn’t a third person narrator be more efficacious for the thematic intent; is the convention chosen too great a limitation--but at least initially, the reader should try to describe rather than evaluate, and be open to the premises of the work. Often, a first reading will provoke more questions than comments—one pleasure of workshop is when your questions are answered simply by the perceptions of other readers. A second level of engagement with the task is to locate those passages/devices/choices that seem most effective in pursuit of the work’s intent, or core. Often the most useful response a writer can receive is indication of what is successful. A natural extension of this engagement is identifying passages/devices/choices that seem at cross-purposes with the rest of the work, or not as fully realized, clear, detailed, or graceful as they need to be. Finally, workshop groups can be useful in speculating about change or additions—again, though, not in blind application of the reader's own taste or preference but in light of the work’s deepest purposes.

At all these levels of consideration, comments need to be precise and detailed, offering evidence from the text for their assertions. A workshop should not be a poll; it is insufficient to say “I like the first stanza of this poem,” or “I wanted to know more about the narrator”—comments should be supported by analysis and should be as descriptive as possible, without sliding into jargon.

The faculty members serve not only as active participants but as discussion moderators; they usually wait for students to initiate the conversation but may intervene to focus or redirect it. They also try to maintain a balance among an agenda most helpful to the piece, one most suggestive for future work by the author, and one (perhaps more speculative) most instructive to the group.

It is extremely important, as well, that students monitor themselves in the crucial balance between active participation and domination. Some checkpoints might be:
• Don’t begin the talk with a small editing point or a broad challenge to the basic premises of the piece—rather, with that first level of engagement: description of the poem or story’s intention/plot/central conflict and chosen formal means.

• Don’t ALWAYS be the first one to speak. New students in particular might be well advised to listen at first for the tone of these conversations. At the same time, a student who never speaks denies him/herself the chance to learn through articulation, and shows a lack of generosity to fellow students who speak about his/her work.

• While preparing the manuscript your comments are addressed to the author or to yourself, but the discussion hour is a dialogue. Members of the group should respond to one another as conversation unfolds yet not belabor points already covered thoroughly.

• Comments should be about the work at hand and not about the person who wrote it—writers, above all others, should be most vigilant about the power, privileges and protection of the imagination.

The etiquette of the workshop requires that the author not speak during the discussion, unless called upon to supply some necessary information, not only to avoid “defense” of the piece but also to insure that he/she hears what readers take from the page (or have failed to take). At the end of the hour, he/she may wish to ask questions of the group or request a brief summary of the response. A workshop may be frustrating if there has been wide disagreement or if you feel especially attached to/vulnerable about the piece. The “buddy system” often helps—singing out some other member of the workshop to ask, over lunch or in the dorm, for a summary of what was said—or reviewing the criticism with your new supervisor, during residency or in correspondence. Remember this is not the only “airing” of the poem/story/chapter—the pieces often reappear, reworked and strengthened, at the Student Reading or Graduate Reading or in the Thesis Manuscript. Remember, that is, it goes back, after workshop, appropriately to your desktop. Sometimes a comment recalled later will open a window, suggest a new way of thinking about the piece; sometimes, the group has misnamed but nevertheless located a weakness, and this prompts you to a greater clarity of purpose; most often, what you learn from the discussion will be made manifest less in the piece discussed but in new work, a furthering.

At Warren Wilson, we are particularly proud of the tone of the workshops: supportive but rigorous, analytical but not judgmental, noncompetitive, vigilant against workshop jargon or preferred aesthetic. Participants should always feel free to question what seem weaknesses, poor choices or inadvertent missteps, but should also recall that the piece has been snatched from the desktop, that some of its awkwardness may be the absence of authority that attends most work-in-progress, that it does not seek to represent the author’s best or finished work. Workshop is not an occasion for merely congratulating the author nor “fixing” a flawed piece. As with all other parts of the Program—in the residency classes, during the exchange with your supervisor, undertaking the essay—the importance of workshop is the chance to enlarge one’s capacity for strong work.
Addendum to the Workshop Guidelines

We consider the MFA Program for Writers a work in progress. Similar to the way we ask students and faculty to evaluate the semester’s work and every aspect of the residency, the Academic Board continually re-examines the program’s policies and procedures. In the past, significant changes to the residency have included removing graduating students from workshops (allowing them to focus on thesis interviews) and introducing bookshops. This past July, we experimented, in a few groups, with a different approach to workshops. After considering student comments and soliciting input from representative faculty in both genres, we’ve decided to continue to experiment with our workshop practice more uniformly, informed by these revised guidelines, which are being made available to both faculty and students.

Preparation for workshop remains as described in Guidelines: Workshop Participation in the Program Handbook.

We continue to believe that it is helpful for the author to hear initial responses to the work as it is on the page, without additional commentary or information from the author. Those initial responses should begin by attempting to recognize and articulate the intention of the work, as well as its most significant features—aspects of the work that seem particularly striking, interesting, necessary to its form, etc. (One way to approach this is to imagine what you would focus on if you were to annotate the work, and why.) This initial response should not be supplied by just one member of the workshop, as in nearly every case readings will vary, possibly even contradict one another.

At this or at any other point in the discussion, if readers seem distracted by a particular reference, an apparent inconsistency, or some other matter of content, faculty should invite the author to clarify. The author should also feel free to offer such clarification on their own initiative, while keeping in mind that it can sometimes be helpful to hear where readers are confused or uncertain.

After these initial responses, which are likely to lead to productive conversation, and no later than halfway through the allotted time, the author should have the opportunity to pose questions to the group. This is more than what has, in the past, been informally called “the redirect”; this could be a single question about the work or a series of questions. At this point the author is choosing how to make the most of the assembled readers. While it might be useful to offer some clarification, this should not take the form of a "defense" of the piece, and it shouldn’t direct the group away from a discussion of the specific poetry or fiction at hand. Appropriate questions might be inspired by readers’ initial expression of the work’s intention; they might also concern the effectiveness of particular choices or passages, or potential revisions.

Once the author’s questions are addressed, faculty will encourage further discussion of the work, including passages or elements that seem particularly effective and opportunities for consideration in the drafts ahead. This part of the discussion might also include questions posed to the author; the author has the option, but is not obliged, to respond.

At the end of the discussion, the author should have the opportunity to pose a final question.
Believeland

There is a putrid body in the janitor’s closet. The operator finds it as he is closing up for the night, locking the rooms and the corridors and the machinery with a heavy set of keys that hangs on his belt and drags his trousers well below his hip bones. He has never seen a lifeless body before even though he is old, older even than the creases around his eyes or the tufts of white springing from his ears betray. He is not the type to attend funerals, though so many in his life are dead and gone. He remains calm. He closes the door with a soft click and calls Corporate.

Corporate is not pleased, no they are not. The Boss makes this clear in his office with floor to ceiling windows that overlook the lake. He sits behind a big oak desk whose surface is invisible under a crush of computers, electronics, stacks of paper, while the operator stands near the door with his head dipped. When he told his wife about the dead body, she sobbed for hours for some reason he could not discern. Meanwhile he tucked into the meatloaf she had cooked for dinner and ate every last bite, licking the plate clean.

This is a major oversight, very bad for publicity. How could you be so careless, how could this escape your watchful eye? This is what the Boss wants to know. There is a vein throbbing in his left temple that the operator watches with fascination. He cannot imagine that Corporate will be pleased if the Boss also keels over dead. Two employees in two days, because, that’s right – the putrid body in the janitor’s closet happened to be the janitor. The operator had only seen him a few times in all their years together at Believeland, and so had not been able to identify the face of his puffy, mottled corpse.
As the Boss yells, the operator knows better than to speak. It is not his job to check on the janitor. He sets up the park in the morning and tears it down at night and teaches the new floor hands how to do their jobs and locks all the doors before he goes home. He watches the monitors to make sure that the reenactments are a success. Sometimes he does research, late at night in his office. Almost every day is the same. He only went to the janitor’s closet to search for a mop when he noticed the bathrooms of the waiting room were a little dirty. He says none of this. The Boss has no idea how Believeland works, only that it does. The smoke and mirrors are the job of the operator, and he is very, very good at his job.

This is why, he suspects as the Boss dismisses him, that he has not been fired. Corporate is not pleased, but they will be less pleased if the park closes, and without the operator the park would certainly close. He calls together his employees in the break room after his meeting with the Boss. Many of them are crying. Others look hollow-eyed. The operator knows many of them spoke to the janitor. Perhaps they considered him a friend, although the operator discourages fraternization; friends working together are not productive. It was the floor captain who identified the janitor’s body, who noticed the empty bottle of pills on the shelf a few feet away.

Is it true that it was a suicide, the employees want to know. The operator shrugs. The Boss did not tell him and he did not ask. It does not matter whether or not it was a suicide; this is the story that will be in the papers either way. The operator does his job, and Corporate will do theirs.

We should have a moment of silence, someone says.
No, we should have a celebration of his life, says another.

Has anyone been in touch with his wife? How are his kids?

The operator holds up his hands. Back to work, he tells them. Doors open at 8. Same as always.

The papers report that it is a suicide. The operator reads the story at breakfast while he cuts his pancakes into little pieces. His wife placed his food on the table and disappeared without a word. She has not spoken to him since he told her about the janitor, which irks the operator. Normally she is pleased to hear the stories he brings home from the park; he has a deep and sonorous voice, and he delivers jokes perfectly. She laughs and tells him, Your job is so monstrous I don’t know how you stand it, but he knows that she loves his tales by the way she nods encouragingly. Yet when he tried to describe the janitor’s blotchy face and the Boss’s throbbing vein, she ran from the room in tears and missed the punchline entirely. It was quite unlike her.

Without his paycheck from Believeland, she would still be teaching algebra to snotty adolescents in the miserable, decaying school where they met; the least she can do is maintain an interest in his days. In protest, he does not clear his place as he usually does before he goes to work. She has nothing else going on, he knows.

After he finishes unlocking the park, he drops the paper on the table in the break room. On a Post-it he scrawls, Hope this answers your questions, and he tacks it on top of the fold, under the headline. In it, the janitor’s wife and children are named. They are two boys, twins. Both twelve. The operator remembers when his
daughter was twelve, and he feels less sorry for the janitor. Twelve starts a miserable span of years with no end in sight. Most likely the boys still liked their father when he died. Would they still like him if he died when they were fifteen? The operator spent enough time teaching high school history that he thinks he knows the answer. But his daughter died when she was fourteen, so he cannot say with absolute certainty.

When the doors open for the day, the first visitors to Believeland are a tour group of teenagers from the Jesuit school one district over. Their teachers have selected a scenario from the bus boycott in the 1960s. What would this group of bored teenagers have done if they had been alive during the bus boycotts? Probably nothing at all like what they will do in the park, but that’s none of his business; the operator has bills and a staff to pay. At best a face-off between prep-school adolescents and Klansmen will make a funny story he can offer to his wife; perhaps she will eat breakfast with him to hear it. He shuffles to the floor deck to prep his team.

I would like to put in my two weeks’ notice. This is from the floor captain, who says it with a straight face. She stands stock-still in the operator’s office. He has been preparing to lock up for the night.

The operator is surprised, but he keeps his eyes on the paperwork he is sorting. And why is that, he asks.
I think it is my time to move on, the floor captain says. Her voice does not
tremble, and he cannot place why this irritates him. He reminds himself that she is
an actress. That’s part of the job.

And this would have nothing to do with the janitor, I assume.

I was thinking about leaving long before Alan died.

The operator freezes with a stack of papers in his hands. It is the first time
he has heard anyone speak the janitor’s name aloud. He read it in the paper and
could not believe it was true; he had always thought that the janitor’s name was
Adam.

Where will you go, then.

I don’t know. I haven’t decided.

This job pays very well. Better than most things in the city.

Then I will move away from the city.

Your whole family lives in the city.

If you don’t mind, sir, I think it would be best if I worry about my future on
my own. The floor captain’s gaze is downward, face ablaze and expression
mortified, but she persists. I’d like to live my life thinking about more than the past.

The operator snorts at this. He finishes sorting his paperwork and folds his
Anyway, he wouldn’t want to employ someone who would say something so
juvenile, so meaningless, so stupid. He’s made his living out of the past, and so has
she.
When the floor captain has gone, he tugs open the desk drawer that is full of Almond Joys. His mother used to keep them in a jar; he would get one whenever he expressed his feelings without yelling. This made the operator very good at speaking without affect. Now he pops two candies in his mouth and congratulates himself on his steady tone. Mother would be proud.

His wife has always hated Almond Joys.

She’s the next to leave, his wife. The operator feels that this is an unfair blow after the loss of the floor captain, for whom he refused to allow the other employees to throw a going-away party. He returns to his home after a long day of Katrina scenarios and it is empty. Even the cat – which he barely noticed and did not care for – is gone; the food and water bowl that sat near the kitchen table have disappeared. The fridge is packed with prepared meals that will last him a month, at least.

He finds the note on the nightstand in the bedroom. The bed now has only one pillow. The note reads, Penny would be ashamed it’s taken me so long to go. Thank God she didn’t live to see you now. I won’t keep making the same mistakes.

For dinner the operator eats alfredo that he heats in the microwave, unwilling to take the time to heat it on the stove as his wife used to. While he waits for the timer to ding he tears the note into shreds and lets them fall like snow into the trash can. He has never cared for melodrama or falsehoods, and the note falls solidly in both categories. He should have known better than to marry a
mathematician; as if a life could ever be anything more than reenacting history, a continuous repetition of mistakes. If she’d been a physicist, she would have known.

Good riddance, he thinks. To use their daughter’s name to wound him? The operator is no saint, but he has not mentioned the girl in nearly twenty-five years. His wife never wanted anything more than to be a mother; he tried not to rub her face in the pain of her failure, the failure that came after the years and years of miscarriages before Penny’s birth. Yet here she had weaponized the memory of their child. Often she told him that Penny’s death made him unfeeling, but the operator sees now that it was she who became cold.

The operator is preparing Believeland for a World War II simulation when the janitor’s wife shows up at the gates. He is sorting the money in the cash register to prepare the front desk and she speaks to him through the little microphone in the booth. He does not recognize her, but when she says her name he recognizes it from the papers.

Do you have a ticket, he asks. Admission is $25 per person.

I’m not here for your stupid theme park, says the janitor’s wife. I am here to speak to the owners of this place about my husband’s death. From the mascara tracking down her cheeks the operator suspects that this is not a planned visit.

The Boss is not in, he says, but offers no more. The Boss only comes in when he wants to, which is not often. Usually he will be gone for months at a time, unless there is a problem. Unless the janitor kills himself in the closet.

That’s fine then, the wife says. You’re the operator. You’ll do.
The operator sorts the money in register a bit more quickly. He wishes he sent one of the employees down here to set up the front desk today. He should be inside designing the floor.

I don’t know anything about your husband’s death, he says. I didn’t even know your husband.

Well he knew you, the janitor’s wife says. Her form is warped by the glass of the booth, but the operator can see that she is very beautiful. When she cries, men do not look away. His wife was never that beautiful. He knew you and he hated you. He used to have nightmares about the horrible things you made them do, the things he had to clean up.

This is not a good time, the operator says. There will be a queue of customers soon, and he does not want them to hear. He remembers the last thing the janitor ever cleaned; he remembers how many of his employees left that day in tears, which he could not understand. They had seen much worse. The gates will open in five minutes. I would like for you to leave.

I bet you would like that, the wife agrees. I bet you’d love for me to disappear like my husband did. Like your wife did.

The operator stiffens. He has not told anyone about his wife. This is what he gets for staying in the city for so long. None of his pain has ever been private.

Based on how each of our marriages ended, it would appear both of us were unsatisfactory spouses, he says, turning and walking back from the gates toward the park. When he reaches his office he discovers that his face is wet and he wonders if it started to rain. He does not believe what he said; he was always a loyal
husband. He did what a man should: provide stability, absorb pain. But he wanted
the janitor’s wife to go away, and when he glances out the window toward the front
gates, he sees that she has. He notices that the ground is perfectly dry.

Two of the floor hands walk off the job. It is the middle of a generic
simulation and the operator has taught them exactly how to get through these. He
is explicit about every detail. He reminds them that these reenactments pay the bills.
The school groups come to relive historical moments; Corporate gives them a
discounted rate. Something about taxes. And so, if there were not unhappy people
interested in returning to a better time, the operator says, Believeland would not
survive. It is not our place to judge what a better time means to them, he says. Many
of his employees avoid his gaze when he gives this speech.

The customer is a middle-aged man who charges into the operator’s office
without a knock. His straw hair is thinning, and his face is smudged as if drawn by
a god who got bored halfway through completing the portrait. He has hate lines
around his eyes and a puckered mouth. At his side he is carrying a pellet gun. A
generic day in 1933. Everyone at Believeland understands.

Your employees are gone, he bellows. The operator looks at him
impassively. His hands flicker toward the drawer of Almond Joys. Your employees
shot me and then called me a Nazi and now they are gone.

Behind him another employee has appeared. He is a new hire; the operator
has always thought he looked Jewish. He has run through many scenarios flawlessly
in the past two months. The operator sees fear in the curve of his spine.
Allow me to explain, the new hire begins, but the operator holds up his hands.

Sir, he says to the customer. If you come with me, we will get you sorted with a full refund. And what about a voucher. Two free simulations for you and a friend. Redeemable any time.

As he pushes past the employee headed to the front desk, he adds, You’re fired. He does not linger for a response. He does not want to see the relief in the young man’s face. As for the others, when they return for their effects he will not let them in. He has seen walk offs before. It has never changed Believeland.

But now in a week the operator has lost five employees. As he helps the customer at the front desk he develops a headache. Corporate will not be pleased.

At least, he tells himself, shutting the register with a satisfying click, there will never a shortage of aspiring actors.

The operator is cleaning out the storage room in search of the costumes for the French Revolution when he discovers the note. It is scrawled in an old prop journal; every page is blank except for the janitor’s chicken scratch. The operator accidentally knocks the journal to the floor and it reveals to him the correct page, dated on the day of the janitor’s last clean.

They had to use a lot of fake corpses that day; they did not have enough floor hands to recreate the sick wards completely. Fake bodies on ventilators. Park employees coughing and moaning in hospital beds. Meanwhile the customer paced like a caged animal, pretending to treat them. Then he began to cough so hard he
seized, and, barely able to contain his exasperation, the operator called an ambulance, ordered a swift clean-up. They had an Iwo Jima reenactment the next day to prepare for.

The janitor had written, I used to think the worst evil was in the past. Every day I learn I was wrong.

The operator tears the note out of the journal and stuffs it in his pocket. He is heartened by the knowledge that he was not telling his employees a falsehood when he gave them the paper. It was, indeed, a suicide. And for the best: if he could not bear to return to the pain of the past at a comfortable distance, contained, the operator understands that the janitor could not have stomached all that awaited him in the future.

The operator is surprised one morning to find the Boss in his office. It is an unwelcome surprise.

Even worse: behind the Boss stands the janitor’s wife. She is every bit as beautiful as the operator suspected, but she is not crying this time. She meets his eyes defiantly. She has her arms around the shoulders of two boys. The twins. They look like the picture of their father, the one in the paper. The operator still cannot remember what the janitor looked like in life.

The Boss says a lot of things while the operator keeps his head bowed, seething. He hears the bottom line. The janitor’s wife has made threats, accusations. If he does not show her and the boys around, if he does not try to provide some answers, she will cause trouble. Corporate will not tolerate this trouble, no matter
how good the operator is at his job, even with five employees already gone in a week. He’s getting old, anyway; eventually they will need to replace him.

His ears burn as the Boss talks to him like a child. Perhaps the janitor did know evil, the operator thinks. Nothing is eviler than going to such lengths to humiliate a man of great character.

When the Boss has finally gone, the operator says nothing. He sweeps his arm toward the floor, an invitation. He longs for an Almond Joy; he has hidden the flame in his chest so well.

The boys do not speak the whole visit. They have no questions. They avert their eyes as they pass by the simulation floor; they do not look with any interest at the monitor, where a 9/11 reenactment is playing. The sirens and wails are deafening. One boy covers his ears, and then the operator knows that the janitor has raised these boys to be as weak as he was.

The wife is silent too. For all her trouble, she does not speak during the tour. Her beautiful mouth is drawn and bunched as she considers the waiting room, the front desk, the offices, the storage closets, the operations room, the changing rooms. Her lip does not tremble even as the operator gestures toward the janitor’s closet.

This is where I found him. He looked a mess.

Her eyes are cool. You would enjoy telling me more, wouldn’t you.

Knowledge is power. If we don’t know the past we are doomed to repeat it. That is what we hope to share at Believeland, if your husband had cared to listen.

The janitor’s wife smiles. It is an empty smile. We’ve learned quite as much as we needed to know, haven’t we, boys? The boys are still silent, but they tighten
rank around their mother. She snakes her arms across their shoulders again, three becoming one. Then she looks back at the operator.

You don’t recognize me, do you?

The operator feels the flame in his chest ice over. I don’t have any idea what you mean. Of course I recognize you; you are the janitor’s wife, you are the woman who has accosted me at my place of employment twice now.

I could tell you more about what Penny looked like when she died. As you said, knowledge is power. The operator sees that even saying these words causes the wife physical pain. She flinches away from her own callousness. Now, while she swallows regret, is the time to strike.

If you ever come back here, I will file a restraining order. I’ve told you everything there is to know about this place and your husband’s role in it. Now take your boys. Get out.

The janitor’s wife does not hesitate. In lockstep, she walks with her boys to the entrance and pushes it open. A beam of spring sunshine spills in, staining the waiting room in brilliant light. All that remains of the janitor’s family is the white spot the light burns into the operator’s retinas.

In his desk, there is a picture of his daughter and her friend hidden under the Almond Joys. The friend called the ambulance as the truck driver sped away from Penny, her bike twisted and thrown across the street. The friend sat with them in the hospital waiting room and held the operator’s wife as she cried. The operator does not need to check this picture to know that the friend’s eyes belong to the janitor’s wife.
On the night he eats the last of the meals his wife prepared, the operator pairs it with two heavy pours of whiskey. He does not drink except on holidays and so he feels its effects immediately. In an amber haze the operator goes to the bookshelf and pulls out a yearbook.

He finds the page immediately: the pictures of the teachers in grainy black and white, many of them young and grinning fearlessly into their futures. The operator’s photo comes immediately before his wife’s; her maiden name was only a letter different than his. The photographer or the graphic designer – the operator doesn’t know which – made a mistake and positioned the pictures as if they are mirror images of one another. As if the operator and his future bride were looking intently at one another through a window or across a table.

Underneath, his wife scrolled in permanent marker after their first three dates, What are the odds, followed by a trail of hearts. Rhetorical: his wife the mathematician knew the odds of anything much better than he. But he was a historian. He knew how to assign meaning to the ebb and flow of entropy. This is why she needed him.

The date on the yearbook is from 42 years prior. They had known each other for so many lifetimes. On their first date, he took her to the frozen lake. She was new to the city. She had never seen the ice sculptures before. She could barely fathom their beauty.

The operator slides the janitor’s note in between the pages of the yearbook and replaces it on the shelf. Before the warm haze of the whiskey fades, he calls the
new floor captain to say that he will not be coming into work the next day. The operator has never called in sick, not once in 30 years. He worked the day after Penny’s death. It was the last time his wife asked if he might take some time off.

Now you’re getting what you wanted, he thinks as he drifts off to sleep. And you’re not here to enjoy it.

Sitting on the edge of the lake, the operator tries not to think of his wife, and in his attempts, he thinks instead of everything else about his first year of teaching. He thinks of his first assignment, how assured he felt of its brilliance.

He had just finished his degree when he found himself standing knock-kneed in the front of a history classroom, his face as pockmarked with zits and scars as the adolescent students whose minds he was meant to cultivate, charged with the unenviable task of communicating to twenty-five disaffected teens the reality of the Third Reich. The operator himself was not Jewish, nor a homosexual, nor disabled, nor Romani; he was not a Jehovah’s Witness, a clergyman, an intellectual, a socialist. His hair was blond and eyes were blue and skin a lily-white, and his parents had been terrible bigots, and so he was certain that if he could understand the tyranny of the Nazis, so too could his impressionable pupils.

Thus came the inspiration for the assignment: 2,000 words on who you would have been during the Holocaust. What would you have done? Here would be the proof that you could teach empathy. He sent his students off scurrying when the bell rang, shouting at their backs that this masterpiece of pedagogy would be
worth one-fourth of their grade, that it must be free of all typos and grammatical errors.

When they were gone, he collapsed at his desk and closed his eyes for a nap. Sleep swirled with dreams about awards that would decorate his desk, how, as an old man, awash in the applause of his students, whose futures were forged by his dedication, he would begin his retirement speech with a reminder of where it began.

The operator never won a single award, and now that he is an old man there is no applause. Instead he is alone, staring out over the lake as nostalgia sends shockwaves through his frail, concave chest. He can recall the outcome of every scenario ever run at Believeland, and his face burns for some reason he cannot discern. To cool himself, he dips his hands into the frigid water and splashes it against his neck. The chill drives away the heat, and so he risks one step into the churning wake and then another. Soon he is waist-deep in the surf. Looking back at the skyline of the city, only one memory remains: the operator, standing behind the lectern. He tells his students to close their books and says, in his deep and sonorous voice, “Don’t you see? What we’re learning here today is not the past, but the future.” In the classroom next door, he can hear his wife’s students laughing. Down the hall, their daughter learns the second law of thermodynamics.
“Lost Sailor” is a new chapter in a novel of interconnected, interdependent stories set in South Africa, and The Salton Sea. The reader comes to this story with knowledge of Star Beach and its cast of characters, except for Piper and Matt.

The reader also has knowledge of the fish farm and its cast of characters (including the dog!) and an understanding of the uneasy dynamic between Lucy and her mother-in-law Brunhilde, and of Lucy’s struggle to fall pregnant.

Thank you for reading!
By midday, it seemed as though the whole of Star Beach had turned out. They stood along both sides of the road, slurping from cans, telling jokes, spitting date pits into the sand. A few stumbled out of Star Inn, where Joe offered half-off beer. There was a festive atmosphere, in part because of the fermented hops, but also in anticipation of the main event: the arrival of Larry and Babs’ *Lost Sailor* or “Babs’s Boat” as the locals had nicknamed it. Handwritten fliers had been posted on utility poles, and on the noticeboard inside Star Inn, wedged between the For Sale humidifier (needs repair) and a crockpot (lid not included).

The local rag had sent a photographer, and he took his position at the turnoff to the town on a triangle of scrub shared by an unmarked van. In front of the van, a young Hispanic man had set up a table and was divvying up crates of dates into Ziploc bags.

Jessica, a slight woman in her twenties emerged from Star Beach Inn. She crossed the road to stand with Babs, who was watching a band set up on a makeshift stage. “Everyone loves a festival!” said Jessica, flicking her long blond hair and pointing to the gathering crowd. In the near distance, a calm inland sea glittered like a tray of topaz and diamonds.

Babs nodded, shifting her toes in her tight, new shoes. She eyed Jessica’s blue and white outfit and smiled. She had encouraged nautical colors.

“My son organized this band,” she said, pointing at the stage. “He also lives in New York.”
Jessica gave Bab’s arm a little squeeze. “I fly back tomorrow. It’ll be a shock after this.”

Babs felt a small constriction in her chest. She wasn’t sure what *after this* meant. She had never been to New York and the only image she could conjure up were those fallen towers she had seen on television. Where had a decade gone?

The guitarist caught Babs’ eye and winked. She flushed, her thoughts drifting to her husband. How easily he had told her of his plans to stay on in Santa Cruz a while longer. Two weeks ago, he’d sent her a picture of the boat on the water with its tall masts and white sails, reassuring her that the seller had promised to give it a fresh coat of paint. It would be the star of Star Beach! She has laughed at that but now she felt a twinge of uncertainty. After the success of the “Year Zero” events, she knew the locals had high expectations.

The honk of an air horn, and a roar went through the crowd. Babs and Jessica craned their heads in the direction of the highway. The cab of a trailer appeared as a speck, disappearing and reappearing, as if on an asphalt wave, seemingly larger as it drew near. At the turn off, the driver honked once more and the guitarist gave the signal and struck the opening chord.

At first Bab’s couldn’t see the boat in the swirling dust. She saw the photographer click away and young Santiago at the date table cough violently. She left Jessica’s side and made her way to the back of the slow-moving trailer. A few drunk onlookers tried to join her but were pulled back. This was Babs’s moment and everybody knew it.
She lifted her chin, looking left then right as she walked. She wondered if she should wave? As she walked, she noticed the crowd thinning out and drifting toward the stage. She nervously touched her auburn curls, and some onlookers, mistaking it for a wave, waved back.

The truck braked with a loud exhale. Babs wiped grit from her eyes, and in the clearing dust, took in the boat on its trailer bed. It had been freshly painted as promised, but where was the cockpit? And why had the masts been cut to stumps? She felt murderous toward Larry, as she made her way to the stage.

The band had stopped playing. Babs whispered in the guitarist’s ear, feeling her cheeks redden as he smiled at her, lowering the microphone to her height. She looked beyond the crowd as she spoke, nervous, but slightly exhilarated at the sound of her amplified voice. Now she had a side view of the boat. She noticed its gently curving hull, the portholes smartly rimmed in white, and felt relief. “It will be our town’s newest lodging,” she heard herself say, distracted by a young boy who was standing in front of the truck cab pulling down his shorts. “Soon to be listed on Airbnb. Tell all your friends…” She trailed off, knowing most of the locals didn’t have those kinds of friends.

Joe had stepped outside his bar, curious about the people lining up to get in. Weren’t they watching the parade? He could hear but not see Babs, his view obscured by a large trailer stopped outside the Inn. Was that Hank’s kid in front of it? Peeing? He took a drag from his cigarette and studied the boat, noticing with amusement, that the boat’s waterline matched up with the horizon line of the sea behind it, giving the impression of a weightless vessel floating on top of the
water. Larry had put her up to this, he thought, shaking his head. The boat was big. Maybe 40 feet long? So big it might not even fit his uncle’s cradle. He felt a petty meanness swell inside him thinking about his Uncle Ed’s sailboat. The envy of all in Star Beach until the bank auctioned it off. He exhaled smoke, the rising grey wisps taking him back to that unusually foggy morning on the beach, where from behind his uncle’s legs, he had watched a man with a clipboard, his suit pants flapping, point to the boat and call it a _ketch_. It had stuck in his six-year-old brain: _ketch, ketch, ketch me if you can_. Over and over again, he would repeat those words until that punch to his mouth. No sense of humor his father. Joe slid the tip of his tongue between the gap in his lower front teeth.

Hank’s wife stepped in front of the cab to yank up her son’s shorts. The boy started to cry. Joe looked away.

“Y’know, they have to break a bottle on that boat,” said Freddy coming up beside him, still wearing his kitchen apron. He looked longingly at Joe’s cigarette. “If not, it’s bad luck.”

The band had started up again. _Some days the gales are howling. Some days the sea is still as glass_. In the heat of the day, a belt of haze had formed off the far southern shore, so that the Santa Rosa mountains seemed to rise up from behind it like a ghostly wall.

The truck moved on, revealing Babs on the stage. Joe remembered her squee of delight when Larry won the bid for his Uncle Ed’s boat. Her disappointment when Larry sold it for a profit before they’d even put it in the water. He glanced at the line of customers and tossed his cigarette, motioning for
Freddy to follow. Freddy watched the door swing shut behind Joe, then picked up the discarded Gauloise, and took a final drag.

Piper was on the stairs when she heard the front door open and the soft *ploff* of his backpack in the hallway. She came down and noticed her husband’s car keys on the console table. Above it, on a lean floating shelf, stood her two ebony elephants tail to trunk. She picked one up. It was so beautifully etched, she thought, and she had seen it done with her own eyes. Her friends, Arabella and Margaux, had balked at her staying at a hilltop monastery in India—all that *nothing*—but she had told them it was a cool thing to do. She had *made* it cool. It had certainly made a change from those obligatory summers at Cape Cod making small talk on the porch with her grandmother’s neighbors. Now, of course, “wellness” trips were *di rigor*, but she’d had a finger on the pulse back then. She turned the elephant over in her hand, then put it back with the other, rearranging them so their trunks now touched.

The blunt slam of a fridge door brought her back. She looked toward the kitchen, wondering how Matt’s investor meeting had gone. Start-ups, she thought. Their marriage needed a—she tried to think of the word, feeling the vodka begin to play its tricks—*a jump-start*. Last week’s argument ran across her mind like a ticker. He had stood right here, his face luminescent under the recess lights, his pupils shrunk to pinpoints. He had complained about the expense of transforming their *whole house* to Scandi-chic. She had spat that he was all San Bernadino wrapped in Silicon Valley, feeling instant remorse for the cruelty of it. Her eyes
now followed the smooth line of the elephant trunks, dipping, then curling upwards, the crack barely visible. She hadn’t planned on hurling the elephant at him, but the look on his face. Feeling woozy, she headed to the kitchen, stepping around the nick on the floor.

“The usual?” he said without turning, reaching for a tumbler on the shelf.

“Why not the anniversary bottle? My mother always asks about it.”

She carefully pulled out a “wishbone” stool from under the kitchen island and sat down. She had admittedly fallen for the name and didn’t every Scandinavian kitchen need a Wegner chair? He had said that last part back to her during their fight.

He began to unscrew the musulet. “I think I’m making it tighter,” he said softly, turning the wire the opposite way. The familiarity of his half smile caught in her throat, and she watched him with a sadness she couldn’t articulate. It seemed like a lifetime since she they had lain in bed, her finger lazily tracing his straight nose, his full lips.

Her parents had accepted their engagement with a long silence. Arabella and Margaux had merely nodded at the large pear-shaped diamond on her finger, expecting no less for her. She knew his tech friends were more enthusiastic about the union. She could hear them now. He’d bagged the cool blonde from old money. A bit flighty, and high maintenance no doubt, but hey, she’d settle down once he got his kid in her.

“Give me a break,” he growled, the cork refusing to budge.
“Forget it. Vodka’s good,” she said, sliding between words. She felt herself color.

Hands full, he scraped a stool toward him with his foot. She flinched.

“Thought we’d try something different,” she said.

“Vodka?”

“Our weekend,” she laughed nervously.

He poured two singles into tumblers. “The Salton Sea, huh?”

“I know you don’t like water, but it’s hardly the ocean.”

“I never said I don’t like water.” He tapped the bottle. Raised his eyebrows. “Maybe you should like water a little more.”

She tugged at her bottom lip. “It’s only a three-hour drive from here.”

“But we’re 15 minutes from the sea!”

“At least it’s not fucking India!” She took a gulp of vodka and closed her eyes, letting her words float back down from the vaulted ceiling. “It’s our anniversary.”

“Vegas not good enough?”

“A tech conference with me tagging along? That’s hardly the same.”

She felt his arm brush past her, his trainers squeaking as he left the room. She finished her drink, then reached over and finished his.

Babs’s fold-out chair faced the opposite shore. The sun was a ball of red, all soft edges, sinking fast behind the peaks. A mosquito buzzed around her face and she could hear the flapping of bird wings out on the water. The surface of the water
looked cool and glassy, so inviting in this heat, she thought. She pulled one calloused foot out of a clog, rested it on top of the other. Flexed her painted toes. “Havana Nights” the little bottle had read. Wiggling her toes, she wondered what it would be like to visit Havana. Another place they would never go. They hadn’t even been to the opposite shore! More of the same Larry had told her. That wasn’t strictly true, she knew. Wilma had visited the other side and even seen Bighorn sheep on those mountains. Well, so she said. Come to think of it, only she and Wilma had been born and raised in this town. Larry couldn’t claim that honor. Though going to school out here should count for something. The mosquito landed on her big toe and she swatted at it then wedged her foot back inside the clog. This boat was definitely one of his crazier ideas. She hadn’t heard from him since their argument on the phone. At least they’d kept Ed’s cradle. A miracle the wood hadn’t rotted in all these years. She hadn’t the courage to ask Joe what he thought. Poor Joe. Mad at Larry for buying Ed’s boat. Mad at his dad for not. If only his father had stayed sober, they might have kept the boat in his family. She didn’t want to think about that. Her toe felt itchy and she considered removing her clog but didn’t. In the distance, the Santa Rosas had turned to shadow in the setting sun. She headed back to the town, her mind filled with thoughts of Havana as she crunched over pieces of fish skeletons and bits of glass.

Piper parked her Range Rover in front of Star Inn, on a sandy patch of ground. She switched off the engine. The temperature immediately began to rise.

“We’re here,” she said softly. “Surprise,” she added, clearing her throat.
They unbuckled and got out. There were two other parked cars outside the Inn, both dusty sedans with out of state license plates.

“Let’s go in and have a drink,” she said uncertainly.

Inside, they adjusted their eyes to the dim. “Hello?” she called.

“We’re here to get the key,” she said, on seeing Joe emerge from a set of swing doors. “Thought we might have a drink first.” She felt Matt’s stare.

They looked out the window while Joe prepared their drinks, the silence broken by clinking ice-cubes for her Screwdriver, the hiss of an opened beer bottle for him. Outside the wind had come up, the dust turning the view sepia. A hanging bird feeder swung wildly.

“From out of town?” asked Joe, setting their drinks in front of them.

“LA,” said Matt, taking a sip of beer.

“Your kayak on that roof-rack?”

“Babs said we should park here,” said Piper taking two large gulps.

Joe smiled and handed Piper a key. “From Babs.”

She fingered the keyring with the letters NEW YORK, an apple for the O. Joe watched the couple leave through the window. The surface of the sea was breaking up, small waves now racing across in diagonal lines. A shapeshifter, he thought. A sea that looked like a lake, but acted like an ocean. That current wasn’t one to mess with.

Matt stood in front of the fence and stared at the 19-foot trailer that sat beside the sailboat they had rented. He took in the go-faster stripes and the faded Wilderness
letters with the ‘i’ in the form of a fir tree. Like the trailer from his childhood memories, this one was in bad shape. The tires were flat and the awning was coated in a film of dust. Next to the trailer, a sailboat looked to him as though it were levitating, if not for the cradle bearing its weight. It didn’t look like much. He watched his wife struggle with the key in the gate’s padlock. She looked at him plaintively, screwing up her eyes against the wind-blown sand, and he almost forgave her for everything. A click and the heavy chain fell away, hitting the fence pole with a clang.

“Well, it’s different,” shouted Piper, dragging her roller case behind her. She was swaying and he knew it wasn’t only the wind. *Lost Sailor*, he read out loud, as he followed her up the ladder tethered to port side.

Joe had come in to work earlier to cover for Freddy who, he supposed, was nursing a hangover. He felt under the counter for his hidden packet of cigarettes. Gone. *Freddy*, he muttered. The sun was shining through fast moving clouds and the wind had not let up. Matt was his first customer.

“My wife’s sleeping in,” he said taking a seat at the bar in a wrinkled tee and jeans. Joe poured him coffee and went into the kitchen.

“Smells good in here,” said a young woman, the door closing behind her. He noticed her long, bare legs as she walked toward him, holding a stack of folded towels. Mexican he guessed, but the clipped accent took him by surprise.

She lay a pile of towels on the stool next to him, brushing hair away from her face with long fingers. “Windy out there,” she said.
“Hey Lucy. Guess you bumped into Babs?” Joe slid a plate of bacon and eggs in front of Matt.

“In the carpark. Came to see if you could spare a lemon,” she hesitated, “for Brunhilde’s tea.” They watched him head to the kitchen. She turned to Matt, “I can drop these at the boat if you like?”

He wondered if Piper was up. Sober.

“For your Schwiegermutter,” said Joe walking back with a lemon.

Matt thought he saw her make a face. “Is she from around here?” he asked when she had left. A fly landed on his bacon and he flicked it away.

“Two miles thataway.”

Matt followed his pointed finger. He thought about their drive here. The miles and miles of nothing until the cell tower had come into view with the cluster of dilapidated houses at its base. Yet another of Piper’s getaways to the zoo of other people’s lives. He looked out at their kayak as he chewed, picturing Piper and himself holed up in that boat all day. He’d take his chances on the water.

Then, again, maybe it was her plan to talk out there. The thought horrified him.

Piper heard the words float down to her, as she retched. She flushed the toilet and rinsed her mouth, scraping the back of her hand on the faucet.

A young woman’s face smiled down at her through the open hatch. “I’ve brought you towels,” she repeated.

An English accent? Piper watched the stranger descend, tanned feet in pink flip flops, feeling for the rungs. She wondered if Matt had met her, but the
thought was stopped by the *thwack* of something hitting her hard on the mouth. She let out an *ow*, as a lemon rolled past her feet at speed.

“Oh no! Are you ok?”

Piper pressed her hand against her mouth, then smiled at Lucy with straight, white teeth, her bottom lip beginning to swell. Lucy met her eyes; a blue so light, they seemed to be drained of all color, like daylight. Long, spiky lashes gave her an alert, startled look, so that when she blinked, Lucy thought of an owl.

“You’re bleeding,” said Lucy staring at Piper’s hand.

Piper shrugged and picked up the lemon that had come to a stop at the foot of a V-shaped berth. A smell of varnish came off the wooden fixtures underlain with a human odor. Two thin mattresses peeked from under the sheets. Nearby a metallic roller-suitcase and a duffel bag lay open, clothes spilling out.

Lucy put the towels on the counter, and Piper, the lemon next to them. She turned to Lucy. “I’m Piper,” she said, extending her hand.

Lucy had never seen a diamond that large.

“Care for a drink?”

Lucy hesitated.

A small smile crept over Piper’s face, as she bent down to retrieve a bottle of gin and a can of tonic from the bar fridge. She unzipped a cooler bag with a monogram in the center and took out two tumblers, then poured in a glug of gin and a polite amount of tonic. She held up the lemon. Lucy nodded, and Piper cut two thin slices.

“Cheers” she said, passing the tumbler.
Lucy took a sip. The gin felt fresh and sharp. She took another, feeling Piper’s eyes on her.

“Where are you from?”

What to say? thought Lucy. England? But you sound Australian. That’s because I grew up in South Africa. But then all the questions.

“I live up the road.”

Piper blinked, then her features began to crumple, her face going pale. “Excuse me,” she said, slamming her glass on the counter, the lemon bobbing on a gin wave. She pushed past Lucy. The sound of retching escaped through the pocket door.

Piper came out wiping her mouth. The blood on her hand had caked a dark red. Lucy though it looked like stigmata. She took another sip.

“Sorry,” said Piper, prying a wet strand of hair from across her cheek. “And yes, it is what you think.” She downed the rest of the gin, fishing out the slice of lemon. “I should be showing by now.” She rested her hand on her flat stomach, making a face as she sucked on the slice. “My husband doesn’t know, at least not yet, so if you meet him, I would appreciate—”

“Of course,” said Lucy, forcing herself to make eye contact. “I should go.” She put her drink down with trembling hands. The wind had begun to rattle the latches, the cloudy sky tinting the cabin a blue-grey. Piper rubbed her eyes, smudging mascara. Lucy thought of the raccoon at the farm, loping between the ponds at dusk.
“We’re going to kayak in this!” Piper said suddenly, holding her hands up, her translucent eyes glittering.

Lucy stared at her, unsure of her tone. She saw in her expression that same look of awe and daring in her kindergartners faces when warned of danger. She thought about the fetus. No, she mustn’t. She must not think about that.

“There’s a strong undercurrent,” is all that she could think of to say.

“Wait! Your lemon.”

Piper watched Lucy climb up and disappear, a tunnel of wind flapping the edges of the towels before the hatch slammed shut. What’s that maid’s story, she wondered, smoothing the towels that felt pebbly to the touch. She looked around. The cabin looked nothing like the photos. She absently pulled on a loose thread that easily unraveled. The faint smell of vomit made her stomach lurch. She would have to tell Matt today. She looked out of the porthole. The sea was alive. Pewter waves were racing in from all sides, while rays of sunlight fought through a ceiling of dark cloud, spotlighting individual waves. She checked her watch. What could be keeping Matt? That girl? She re-filled her glass, shoving the near empty bottle to the back of the fridge. The lemon rind lay on the counter. It brought back happy memories of her childhood in Monterey. Her room facing onto the orchard. No matter, she thought, feeling a low headache begin to pulse. No lemons, no oranges, but—she held up her hand—I have a pear. She slipped off her ring, watching it sink to the bottom of her glass, with a clunk.
Lucy saw the curtain move as she parked the truck in front of their home at the farm, wondering how long her mother-in-law had been standing at the window. She hadn’t wanted her to visit at all. She rubbed her cheeks, blotchy from crying, and switched off the diesel engine. The truck shuddered to stillness. *Fetus* she said out loud. *Fetus*. A *fetus* in a jar. An ugly Latin word making it sound unreal. Invented for those like her, she thought. You can’t lose a baby if it isn’t real.

She reached back for the lemon and held it up to her nose. The lemony scent reminded her of the polished floor of the classroom, and the day she had first met her husband. He had leaned casually against the doorframe, hands in his shorts pockets, his sunburnt face and tanned limbs looking out of place in the concrete building. She had noticed the thermometer tucked into his collar, and he had noticed her noticing, telling her playfully that he was a fish doctor as she checked his ID against the name on her list, before releasing his friend’s child into his care. He explained that he also looked after young ones, but in a hatchery. Dr. Karl Teufel from Moreno Farms, Salton Sea, had won her over that day with his ready laugh, inexplicably making her feel safe. She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, worn smooth from his grip.

Peat-colored clouds now rose over the hulk of metamorphic rock that formed a natural border behind the farm. The spirits were waking she thought. She liked to believe, as locals did, that storms in their area were the restless spirits of the Cahuilla dead; the wind their breath, the rain their tears. She pushed the truck door hard against the wind, scanning for snakes before jumping down.
Lucy stood in her kitchen abstractedly watching Brunhilde pour boiling water over a teabag and slice of lemon in a cup. She could not put the morning aside. She thought of Piper’s manicured fingers clutching the tumbler.

The wind was now rattling the floorboards of the front porch. It didn’t take a large storm to short the farm’s electrical boxes, topple utility poles, rip through nets, dislodge paddlewheels, cut off oxygen. Just one sharp inhale of ghost breath, Lucy knew, was enough to suck the life from the ponds.

She stared at Brunhilde’s bony hand resting on her hip, thinking of Piper’s hand casually resting on her stomach. She could not stay inside a moment longer, she decided. She would go to her husband in the hatchery. She would take her chances with the storm. The spirits were calling her.

Splinters of light speared the circular stony path that led from the farmhouse to the ponds, and around to the hatchery. The stones formed mosaic patterns of pink and blue and purple. Lucy pressed forward, the wind whipping around her, almost drowning out the plaintiff calls of Brunhilde. She hadn’t counted on Brunhilde following her, or Bastinada the farm stray, bringing up the rear. A snarling mass of muscle and thick, black fur.

A band of her hair caught in her mouth, forcing her to stop abruptly. She bent her head against the wind, and while looking down, saw a pale blue stone in front of her feet, in the shape of a perfect heart.

She picked it up, feeling its symmetry in her palm, marveling at how a stone so battered, as she now felt, could be shaped into something so beautiful. The quartz stones glittered in a way she had never seen, or perhaps noticed; the
darker, ferrous minerals in-between creating depth, so she felt as though she were walking on the surface of a deep pool. She found a second heart stone, this one pink and larger, and shoved both into her shorts pocket, looking for more. It began to rain.

Rivulets soon turned the sand to mud, the path fast disappearing. Later, Lucy would not be able to explain why she chose to step out of her flip-flops and leave them behind. The mud squelching between her toes, the sharp stones pressing into her soft pads, her soles.

She continued walking, slower now, checking over her shoulder. Brunhilde was still following, her wet shirt clinging to her. Bastinada, nowhere to be seen. Lucy followed her map of sound. She could hear the roar of water coming from behind a cluster of palm trees ahead. The fish ponds.

There were ten in total, 150 feet in diameter, stretching the length of a football field. A turning paddlewheel in each one. Here, the ground was no longer stony, but sandy. A vehicle path ran alongside, now turned to mud. At the far end, stood the hatchery, rain pounding on its corrugated roof. It was further than she thought. Lamenting her forgotten phone, she passed the first pond, thinking of the eleven to go when a flash of brilliant light instantly drained the surroundings of all color. Even the almighty crack that followed could not mask the sound of a woman’s shriek.

Lucy swung around. In the first pond, she saw an arm reach out from beneath the waves, then another, hands flapping wildly. She watched in horror as a red wig floated in the foam toward the blades of a tethered paddlewheel.
“Brunhilde, I’m coming!” She moved as fast as she could. Her feet were now bleeding. Her cries no match for the driving rain, the roar of water. She reached the edge of the pond. Where was Brunhilde?

Lucy felt the splash before she heard it. A jet of water shooting up from the pond and landing on her like a wet slap. Recovering, she saw Bastinada paddling furiously, pushing a gasping Brunhilde toward the edge.

Bastinada’s tongue lolled as the women sat shivering in the mud. Lucy wondered in despair how to get help. She could just see the hatchery, but knew it was too far to walk for either of them. She shouted “Karl!” but it was useless. Her husband could not hear her voice from here.

Then Bastinada stood up. Started to bark.

Toward evening, the air still swollen with moisture, Lucy sat outside on her porch watching a car speed up their driveway. Expecting the doctor, she hurriedly called her husband from inside. He came quickly, a look of confusion on his face as Babs got out of the passenger side and ran to them, breaking down in sobs.

All that could be found, Lucy would find out later, was the yellow kayak floating face down on the water, the surface so calm and milky as to resemble a cataract eye.

In the days that followed, one paddle would eventually find its way to the opposite shore, retrieved by a Mr. A. Simms, who had been out on the water hoping to catch his lunch. At first, he charged reporters to view it, but interest soon waned and he ended up hanging it in his house as a memento.
The first night after the accident passed slowly, the sky clearing, stars reaching back into black depths. Lucy had checked on a sedated Brunhilde, then gone to bed, waking later to feel her husband pull back the sheet and sink onto the mattress with a sigh. She had reached out, feeling his wet hair, his damp skin.

At daybreak, Lucy put on the kettle. The lemon lay next to it, now a thin wedge. She had heard Karl go down to the farm. She checked on a sleeping Brunhilde then grabbed the car keys.

She parked in front of the Inn and found Babs sitting on a bench outside, still wearing yesterday’s outfit. On seeing Lucy, she got up and walked slowly toward her, past the Range Rover with the empty roof rack. Without makeup, her eyes looked like two small pebbles.

“There’s a third death,” she croaked.

Lucy thought of the unborn child.

“Santiago saw him go in after them. *Swim* to them. Can you imagine?” She pointed at the sea, shimmering in the morning light. “All they found were his packet of Gauloises. Right out there,” she waved her arm around, “floating near that damn kayak.”

Oh, poor, poor Freddy, thought Lucy. Joe must be devastated. She reached out and squeezed Bab’s shoulder.

“He’s inside,” said Babs.

Lucy nodded and limped to the entrance.

“What happened to your feet?”
Lucy looked down at her bandaged feet in Brunhilde’s slippers, and waved her hand dismissively. The Sheriff passed her on his way out, blowing his nose.

Inside, faint cooking smells wafted over to her.

“Joe?” she called out. “Joe?”

A shuffling, then Freddy emerged from the kitchen. He looked like he hadn’t slept. I never learnt how to swim is all he could say, over and over again.

Afraid of ghosts, Babs wouldn’t go near the boat, so Lucy offered, promising to remove only the towels. Gingerly, she climbed down. The cabin felt warm and bright in the morning sun streaming through the porthole. The stack of towels lay on the mattress. A dress lay off to the side, inside out. Lucy’s hand brushed against the heart stones in her pocket.

Piper’s tumbler stood on the counter next to the lemon rind. The drink had been left unfinished, the alcohol still and clear. In the shaft of sunlight, the cuts in the crystal shone iridescent, but Lucy noticed something else. Something sparkling. Something, at the bottom of the glass. She looked into it, her mouth opening in amazement. Her thoughts leapt from the ring to the glittering feldspar revealing the heart stones, to Piper’s pale eyes; eyes that glittered at the thought of paddling out on a turbulent sea.

Towels forgotten, Lucy took the heart stones from her pocket, one pink, one blue, and dropped them into the tumbler. Then she ascended the ladder, not looking back.
With his daughters in the backseat it wasn’t so bad, driving. They kept him mentally inside the car in a way he’d always had a hard time managing when alone. As they pestered each other, or made the sounds of sleep, or asked him what the passing signs said outside their windows, their presence kept his attention from the accident that was never far from the rearview, even as a second decade passed between he and it. He didn’t glance back when he told his daughters the sign said Go Cubs. Na uh, Lily protested because that’s what he always said. Then she said Dad, stretching the vowel sound a few adorable seconds long, which made him look at her in the mirror, smiling. Go Cubbies, he said. She gave a precocious sound annoyance and then Tanner did too, imitating her big sister. He said it again, more dramatic now, like how Harry Carey would say it. Go Cubbies!

It was summer and the air was wet and hot and corn filled and the Cubs were probably losing back home. The girls had tablets in hand. There was a pile of empty snack wrappers between them on the backseat. The car was a truck; the truck was new; it was a purchase that feigned at turning over a new leaf. GMC Denali. Conducive to both fatherhood and bachelorhood. It blurred itself into the foreground as the background transformed from plains to hills in the span of a couple hundred miles. The girls chirped away in the backseat. Then they slept. Then they asked to pee. He pulled over at a big American rest stop and they picked out more snacks, ones their mother would never allow.

Beside them in the checkout line was a big man with a bald head, a long mustache, and a sweat-stained shirt, barely tucked in. He was holding a four pack
of Red Bull and a bag of sour cream and onion chips. Lily looked up at him, and then at her dad, who had been watching her watch him. He was flooded for a second with defeat because it dawned on him that she’d never seen a trucker before; the girls had seen so little outside the life he and she had made for them, full as it was of homogeneity. But Lily’s wide eyes also made him proud because it was so clear how awake she was behind them. He remembered then the times after her soccer games when she ran straight up to him and asked if he noticed all the same things she noticed. The best player on the other team, this pass, that throw-in. She’d always collected everything she saw; she’d always needed her dad to confirm that everything she saw was what she thought it was. About herself too. Back at home after the games she asked him to remember how she looked on the field, what the crowd did when she scored a goal. She inhabited a peculiar in-between of seeing clearly and needing validation that she saw clearly.

As they walked out of the rest stop she turned to Tanner and said, that was a truck driver. Then she paused and said, right Dad? You’re right, angel.

He helped them up into their seats and started to fill the gas tank. After a minute Lily tapped at the window. He opened the door and she pointed at the small lettering etched into the bottom corner of the glass. What does this mean, she asked. Go cubbies, he said. She bounced up and down a few times and said Dad, this time adding melisma to the long vowel. He messed up her hair and looked at the corner of the window. It was a brand name, some combination of letters and numbers, and then the words: Tempered Glass, which is what he told Lily. What is tempered glass, she asked. He explained that it’s stronger than
regular glass, and breaks into smaller pieces when it shatters. She looked away from both him and the glass, which he took to mean she was satisfied with his answer. He got back in the truck and drove down the highway, a bit under the speed limit.

It was a ten hour drive south to the little town in which he grew up. He hadn’t been home in fifteen years. His girls had hardly been south of the street they lived on. He’d decided to split the drive between two days and they got a room in a nice little suburban motel halfway there. When they arrived Lily and Tanner thrilled at every little thing: the ability to park right in front of their motel door, the swimming pool in the courtyard, the patterned comforters, the fancy TV with so many movies, the affable old man at the front desk. They arrived at three in the afternoon and the girls were content to entertain each other on one of the beds while he laid on the other, passing his eyes vacantly across sentences of a book. When the girls did grow restless it was for the fact they hadn’t seen the pool area up close. He asked if they wanted to swim and they said no, they just wanted to go outside. They entered through the gate and the girls ran a lap around the pool. He told them not to run, and then kicked off one of his flip flops and felt the water with his foot. It would be nice to get in, he thought. Lily and Tanner had just finished a swimming program at the club their mother had joined. It’s so hot, he said to them, are you sure you don’t want to swim? No Daddy, Tanner said, it’s not the right kind of pool. He had no idea what that meant.

They sat together on lounge chairs in much the same way they had on the beds. Undistracted dolls, vacant sentences. A good-looking young couple walked
out of one of the upstairs rooms, got in the water and drank Miller Lite out of
cans, their elbows up on the concrete ledge next to each other, facing the sun. He
and the girls stayed out there long enough for the couple to split a six pack in the
lengthening light. When it was time to go back inside, father and daughters sat on
his bed in a little circle at whose center was a box of pepperoni pizza. He put on
The Little Mermaid after. Lilly and Tanner stayed awake for the whole thing; on
either side of him their cheeks smushed against his chest, save for times when
they sat up to sing along. When the movie was over they brushed their teeth
without resistance, went to the other bed and fell straight asleep. He didn't bother
to turn his light off because he knew he would lie awake, which he had most
every night since she’d said it.

It wasn’t the worst thing she said to him; it came at the end of the ending when
the fatigue of fighting had given way to an apathy that made it too burdensome to
say much at all.

   How do you even sleep at night?

   She wasn’t angry when she said it, which meant it didn’t create enough
energy in him to respond. He had been sleeping fine. She could tell, and she hated
him for it. Their interactions were by then largely logistical, relating to their
daughters or the house or the lawyers, but in those interactions she sensed an ease
in him that she resented. Every night she laid awake until the dark purple before
dawn finally cooled the fire in her. That evening he was at the house to box up
some final things in the garage. She opened it for him because the code had
changed since he’d moved out, and then she asked him please not to take long. He
turned away and made a comment under his breath about it not taking long for her
to break up the family. She shook her head and smiled an exasperated smile
directed at whomever above could witness, with her, the comedy of another
person’s ignorance. How do you even sleep at night, she said then, in a tone that
didn’t make it sound like a question. She didn’t premeditate the words; the words
came out of her mouth. And as soon as they did she silently congratulated herself
for having injected him with the arch-nemesis of sleep: thought. She wanted to
give him back the things he’d done that kept her awake.

He didn’t say anything in return. He scoffed, hastily packed the box in the
garage, walked out without closing the door behind him, and drove to the condo
he had rented down the road from their marriage. The condo was too new to him
for the act of sitting on the couch to be routine upon entering like it was in a
familiar place, which meant he had to consider for a second whether he should sit.
The labor of that pissed him off as an emblem of everything that was changing
against his will so he went instead to the refrigerator and opened a beer. He leaned
his palms on the counter and his shoulders rose to invade his neck. He stared out
the ridiculously small window above the kitchen sink. Gravel and pinkish condos
and little plastic looking trees alternated with each other around a long arc that
looked like a hall of mirrors. Everything was monochromatic in the evening light.
Hell must be a hall of mirrors, he thought.

After a few beers and some cable TV he got in bed and grabbed one of the
books from the pile on the floor. He looked at a series of pages but it felt
calculated instead of natural; his routine was no longer see-through; he was using it to manufacture tiredness now, hoping that the motions of a normal night would create their normal results. When enough time had passed, he switched the light off and rolled over onto his side, but when he was about to nod off her sentence rustled around in his body and pushed him over to the other side, where he found nothing but vividness in place of the desired dullness.

It was the gaslighting that undid her, that undid them. Not the infidelity, not the drinking, not the long nights of disappearance, but the fact that he let her go on for so long thinking that she was the crazy one. She knew all along what was going on; at least the part of her that could sometimes come up for air beneath the burden of his lies did; the rest of her knew only that she was imagining things. She brought it up to him though, sometimes manically, sometimes in tears, but also sometimes in moments of sobriety and thoughtfulness that she choreographed painstakingly. If I can just put it in the right words, she thought, at the right time, he will open himself again. It was one easy Saturday morning that she tried to reach him like this. She spent the horizontal hours of dawn planning it out—what she would say, how she would hold herself. The girls were in the back yard; he and she sat at the dining room table with the internet and coffee. She said his name sweetly, and rested her elbows on the table, letting her back round. I want you to know I’m here and you can let me in, she said. His eyes lifted halfway from his screen to her. He didn’t say anything. He nodded his head. I know you’ve been lying, she said then, still sweetly. He looked away. It’s okay, she said. We can figure this out, she said, but you have to tell me the truth.
He shook his head and sneered that it was impossible to live with someone who assumed he was always lying. Then he walked out the front door and didn’t come back until Sunday dinner. When he walked in, clearly drunk, he kissed the girls on the cheek and sat down at the table. She got up and made a plate, set it in front of him. He joked with the girls and then the four of them watched a movie together, which they did every Sunday night. Afterwards they tucked in the girls together and went to bed without a word. He fell asleep right away. She lay there staring at the ceiling wondering how he could sleep at night.

It took her another year to say it out loud.

When she finally did it stayed with him in the way language can sometimes stay with a person, inscribing itself into soft tissue so it’s the body that does the remembering—a much more permanent thing than the mind. And it was still there in the motel room.

He had by then devised a new routine at night which involved him lying flat on his back and folding his hands together over his chest, as if in a coffin. He did it like this because if he tried to fall asleep on his side like normal it seemed only to hasten his restlessness; no one side was ever the right one. So he stayed flat on his back, crossed a leg over the other, closed his eyes and willed himself to stay still for as long as possible. Sometimes it actually worked; when he finally rolled over to his side it was out of tiredness instead of restlessness. But before that could happen in the motel his phone buzzed on the table. He found on his screen a short message from her asking if everything was alright. She did mean to include him in the word everything but he assumed she was just making sure the
girls were alive so he took a grainy picture of them sleeping together and sent it over without caption. She put a heart on the photo. That made his heart hurt.

He was good at compartmentalizing though. People who have lost a lot usually are. Guilt could, like grief, be stowed away in the labyrinth we all keep inside for the purpose of hiding the unsightly from ourselves, so we can, among other things, sleep. But he knew also that the labyrinth can eventually become so detailed, so many hidden corners, so much its very own thing, that it’s possible to lose touch of its map. This is what had happened to his aunt, who raised him after the accident. She put so much grief so deep inside of herself and then walked so far in the other direction that she was no longer anywhere to be found behind her eyes. The internal maze she used to hide things eventually hid her from herself. That was his take at least. A bit different than the doctors, who used words like genetic and onset and progressing. They gave his aunt jigsaw puzzles to solve as a diagnostic tool. At first a twenty-piecer. It was too hard. Then a twelve-piecer with the edges color-coded for ease. She got three pieces to fit together, gave a half-smile, folded her hands in her lap, and said she was done. The doctor pulled him aside and said how hard he knew it was for him and how the new medication would probably help her.

Still sleepless in the motel, this replayed in his mind. He knew it wouldn’t. Help her. The medication. Finding a way out of the labyrinth was a formidable puzzle of its own, much more than twelve pieces. With the kind of late-night vigilance that comes in unfamiliar rooms he realized the same thing had happened to his marriage. He and she had gotten lost in their own mazes and no longer had
true maps of each other’s insides they could use to reconvene. At this thought he became momentarily proud of himself in the way you can be proud when connecting two disparate things. His failed marriage and his aunt’s failed brain. He knew then that his survival through the divorce was and would be similar to what his aunt needed to do: retrace steps, unwind knots, lie flat all the things that have stacked up. Regain a sane viewpoint of the world, on the other side of change.

In the morning they packed up and were on the road by eight. The tiredness hit him as soon as the lines on the highway sped up. He was especially quiet, which Lily picked up on. Daddy, she said, will you tell us about your parents? The surprise of that jolted him back awake. He adjusted the mirror so he could see her. Of course, he said, and then described them by talking about how different they were. His mother was a social butterfly, he said, she could make friends with anyone in the world, and was constantly on the move. His father was slow and thoughtful and loved reading and playing chess. Lily said just like you and mom, and that made his brow lift for a second, just before falling again to crowd its home at the bridge of his nose. He told Lily she was right and then distracted her by pointing out the window at an old hot rod zooming past. It was in that moment however that he knew the abstractness of his girls' understanding of what happened would soon become explicit.

The accident took place on the day he turned fifteen. He wasn't with them because his mom relented to an hour of his complaining, which circled around the theme that it was his birthday so he should be allowed to stay at home if he
wanted. He was smug at his victory when he waved goodbye. His parents and little brother were accompanied by their older cousin Kenny. The four of them got in the car and drove to meet his aunt, Kenny’s mom, at the church’s summer barbecue. They never made it though because on the way there they were hit head-on by a drunk driver, who was the only one to survive. Her name was Sylvia Duncan. She didn’t look at him in the courtroom, even though he knew she knew who he was and where he was. He sat next to his aunt and the packets of tissues to which she gave the beginnings of her grief. He stared at Silvia Duncan. He was behind her and to the left so couldn’t see much more than the fact that she cried too, a great deal. He hated that she cried. With the intensity of his stare he tried to will her to shut up. She did not. She got six years. It was after sentencing, as she stood to be ushered out of the courtroom, that she finally turned back towards him. Sobbing, to the whole room, but looking only at him, she said, I’m so, so sorry. He remained unmoving. That was twenty years ago.

His sixteenth birthday was especially horrible because the dawn of his ability to drive carried with it the anniversary of the end of everything. His aunt bought a Geo Prism for him with some of the life insurance money. The first time he got in it without her was that morning of his birthday. He cried, sitting there in the driveway. He didn’t know she was watching from the living room window and when he cried she turned away and went back to her crossword. He sat there for a minute and gathered himself by turning on some loud music, and then picked up his friend Troy. They went to a parking lot and smoked weed. It added a tingly little buffer around his eyes that still stung of tears. They threw a baseball
back and forth for a while and then sat on the hood of the car and talked shit. He drove away an hour later, high, and everything seemed to him like a video game. He learned he could detach himself from the reality of driving, from the reality of everything. He learned to stay inside the tingly buffer.

The road trip with his daughters was a long and complicated desire of his but planned last minute without real forethought, which is the only way it ever would’ve happened. He texted her spontaneously at two in the morning one night from the condo asking if it was okay for him to take the girls the following week. It was the middle of summer. They had nothing to do. Neither did he. He knew she would be happy to have a break, which was the only deterrent to him asking because he'd rather not give her a break. She replied right away, which surprised him because it was so late. Okay, where are you going? I want to show them where I grew up, he replied. This made the phone heavy in her hand. She stared at the screen for five minutes before responding. They’d always talked about going back there someday; she’d wanted to go with him; she’d wanted to see where he grew up; she’d wanted to have more of his reference points connected to her. That sounds like a nice idea, she typed finally. What she didn’t include is that she knew it was his birthday next week and she knew it was a horrible day for him and she knew that he would be happy to spend it with their children. He told her he’d pick the girls up on Friday morning. She put a thumbs up on the message. Neither of them got to sleep that night.

On Friday she came outside with their daughters and made a gentle second of eye contact that was too much for him to handle. She didn’t say have a happy
birthday though because she knew that would make her want to hug him. The girls carried their bags to the back of the truck and then kissed her goodbye. He said he had to run inside to get his swimming suit, which was in a bag in the basement. Her shoulders fell inwards and she gave a heavy blink as she nodded. At the bottom of the stairs he stopped fast because it smelled like their life together. The guilt came back pretty strong for a second but he found a spot for it in his labyrinth so he could just grab what he needed and walk back upstairs. She thought he looked different when he stepped outside.

Drive safe, she said just before they pulled away.

The girls were asleep again in their seats as the morning sun lifted itself from the horizon. His phone buzzed in the cupholder a few times but he let it sit there because he didn’t need to be reminded it was his birthday. He tried a few stations of the satellite radio but then turned it off. After an hour or so of silence Tanner stirred and tugged on Lily’s arm. Within a minute they were bickering about one of the dolls, but only for long enough to realize they had to pee. He pulled off the highway and into a McDonald’s. They lagged behind him in the parking lot but then clutched immediately for his hands as they walked inside. The line was long upon exiting the bathroom. They shuffled through it silently. Lily looked at everyone around them; her eyes darted from person to person in her way that made clear there was an endless narrative streaming through her. He didn’t notice it this morning though; he stood there with a nervous stare that made him unaware of everything around him. Even Tanner, who was leaning sleepily against his leg,
hardly existed to him. He was thinking about where they’d go that afternoon, what he’d show them of his small town. There was nothing really to show. He had checked only to see if one person he knew still lived there. He was thinking about what it’d be like to drive the streets, to stand in front of his old house. He hadn’t checked to see if it was still there; it wouldn’t have surprised him to learn it had simply disappeared.

The girls got hot cakes and hash browns and he got two Egg McMuffins and a coffee. The food and the eye contact and the conversations about nothing helped him to populate the room again. He looked at his phone. A few messages from friends and a missed call from her. No voicemail though, which meant just call back. When they walked outside it was much hotter already. They drove off and the truck seemed to him a travesty of aerodynamics in the thick air. Once he got the cruise control going he asked the girls if they wanted to call their mother. She answered the phone by yelling happy birthday and that made the girls remember it was his birthday and they squealed happy birthday and the three of them sang the whole song all the way through. It lasted way too long but he was smiling and not in spite of himself when it was over. Lily was incredulous that he hadn’t told them it was his birthday this morning. Tanner wanted to know if she got any presents. They answered easy questions from their mother and Lily wanted to make sure she knew that they’d seen truck drivers and a lot of fat people. That made him say her name in the rebuking way but she laughed and so did her mother. Then Lily told her that she was a social butterfly and Dad wasn’t. Is that so, she asked. Yes, Lily said, just like Dad’s parents too. He froze. The
girls kept talking and their mother, with what was her unending grace in knowing when he was frozen, kept them talking. When they hung up the girls watched cartoons and he wished that she was in the front seat next to him because the liveliness in the car wouldn’t have dissipated right away after she’d hung up. Then he hated her for not being there and he hated her for calling at all and he hated her for reasons he had no understanding of.

It took him nearly six months of dating to tell her about the accident. They traveled to her family for Thanksgiving and all she knew by then was to tell her parents not to ask after his parents. Never had he offered any information about them, other than the information that was implicit in the way he omitted them from stories that clearly should contain parents. They were a hole he had to step around, which he did adeptly with everyone but her. She never pointed at the hole though because she knew it would fill in when he was ready. On the Sunday after Thanksgiving they flew back home and she drove them from the airport to his apartment. In the car, after twenty naturally quiet minutes, he reached his left hand out and put it on her right thigh. This startled her for its novelty and she knew then that it was time. She knew also that she would have to start. She did.

What happened to your family, she said. That she’d just read his mind made him know it was going to be okay. He kept his hand on her thigh and he kept his eyes forward and he kept his voice steady and he said they were in a car accident.

It was easier than he thought because he didn’t have to face her when he told the story; he just stared out the windshield at headlights cutting through fog. What he didn’t notice was that it was easy for him also because she kept asking
the right questions every time he stopped talking, which was after every sentence or two. It was a zero sum thing though because his relief when it was over was balanced by her sudden exhaustion. They drove the rest of the way in a silence that was now unnatural for her. After it went unfilled for a few minutes she opened her mouth to say something but was unable to find any words; they all seemed wrong; they were all words she’d used before. He was oblivious to this, and felt in himself only that it was weird how little he felt. They pulled into a parking spot and he made a move to open the door, but just as he did she reached for his hand, looked at him in a way that made him put his weight back into the seat. She said thank you. He turned back to face her and said it was no big deal, and then removed his hand. She deflated a little bit, which he picked up on. He said you’re welcome. He said thank you for listening. He said your parents are amazing. She stayed at his place that night and laid awake, feeling bad for feeling bad. When things started to fall apart years later she thought often of that night and the way it foretold their own unspoken hole, the one that was dug by a long repetition of luring and hiding, the one that was reinforced by her inability to have needs because his came from such a dire place.

He and the girls approached what would be called a small town by everyone but its residents because it was big enough for a Walmart. The girls had been asleep and they woke up with the change in momentum as the truck pulled off the big highway and onto a small highway. They sat up excitedly, asking if they were almost there. It was another half-hour, he said. Lily asked if they could turn on the
cartoons and he said no, he wanted them to look around. She wasn’t happy about that. He slowed down a bit and pointed out the passenger side window. Do you see that baseball field over there, he said, I played a few games there in high school before I moved to where Mommy and I met. That made Lily forget about cartoons. She wanted to know if he played soccer too. When I was your age I did, he said, but when I got older I played only baseball. Do you want to see the house where I grew up, he said. With Grandma? Tanner asked. That’s what they called his aunt. No, he said, the house where I lived with my parents. They understood they’d never know his parents as they did their mother’s, but it was abstract in the sense that it didn’t seem they understood that his parents would have been their grandparents too. Or maybe Lily did, he didn’t know. He had mentioned his little brother to them one time recently in the spirit of mitigating a fight of theirs. He said that he and Uncle Josh were always nice to each other as kids, which definitely wasn’t true. The girls stopped bickering, but only because it was the first time they’d heard of an uncle.

Lily asked if their old house was big or small. He said it was medium. She asked if they were going to stay there tonight. He said no, they had a room in a hotel on the main street. She asked why not. He said he didn’t know the people that lived there now. She asked if there was a swimming pool at the hotel. He said there wasn’t. The questions kept coming which was nice because he wasn’t aware of his heartbeat. When they got to the stop sign for his turnoff though he hesitated and then turned in the wrong direction. He navigated roads on the other side of town for a little while, the poor side that he and Troy had explored often on bikes.
when they were young, or by car after he got the Geo. The houses here looked poorer now than he’d remembered though, and that made him too conscious of his expensive new truck, which made him second guess what he was doing. He came to another stop sign and paused for a minute to grab his phone and double check something. Then after a left hand turn and a hundred yards of bumpy road poked through with steely blades of grass, he pulled the truck in front of a small, old house with heat-beaten shingles. He looked back to the girls, this time without using the mirror. Both seemed a little uneasy to him, which was either his uneasiness projected, or due to the fact they’d never seen a poor neighborhood before. Is this your old house, Lily asked reservedly. No, he said, I’m going to make a quick stop first. He said he’d be right back. They didn’t say anything. He didn’t move though because in an instant there flashed within him an old recurring dream he hadn’t remembered for a very long time.

In it he was riding his bike to school and was nearly hit by a car. The car hadn’t bothered with a stop sign and he noticed it just a split second before impact. He swerved out of its way, missing the back corner by an inch or two. The bike flew out from under him but he was somehow able to get both feet on the ground as it slid down the road. It was a miracle of a maneuver, even for the physics of dreams. He stood still in the middle of the intersection and his body began to recede farther and farther into a circular void. The driver of the car rushed up to him and his mouth was moving and his arms were moving but everything was so far away. He stood there and more people gathered around him; there was a whole crowd now; everyone he knew was there but he was falling
back and back and back, unable to reach or be reached for. He knew only one thing in that void: the terror that comes in the second before an impact. It was within him now. It was all he had, that feeling and the understanding it was the same feeling his little brother must’ve had, hung up in the moment between foreseeing and feeling.

Lily said, Dad, with a bit of sharpness now. He pulled his eyes back into his head and repeated, I’ll be right back. He stepped down from the truck and Lily moved from her seat next to Tanner at the near window. They watched him walk slowly across a wild lawn that was strewn with children's toys.

He climbed four steps to the front door, pulled back the screen, and gave a few knocks before letting the screen again close. Several seconds passed before he heard footsteps approaching, during which time he didn’t breathe. A little girl answered the door. She was in a flower dress and her hair was blonde and thrown in every direction by the humidity. Hello sir, the little girl said. She looked to be about Tanner’s age. He said hello back with a forced smile and then asked if Sylvia Duncan lived there. Yes sir, the little girl said, that’s my grandma. Then she disappeared into a dusty room behind the screen door. A minute later a big woman appeared there. May I help you, she said. He made himself stand straight and look at her. She was hesitant through the screen; she kept it closed. Then he introduced himself using only his first name. She didn’t need more than that. Her eyes doubled in size, her jaw dropped, her right hand lifted to cover her mouth. With her other hand she pushed open, but more fell into, the screen door. Oh my dear lord, she said, and then stood there. The screen door slammed closed behind
her. A few seconds went by. There was nothing but emptiness between them.

Now he knew it was his to fill.

I drove here with my two girls, he said and gestured to the car. They perked up when paid attention to. Sylvia Duncan managed to wave but didn’t say anything and then brought her hand again in front of her mouth. Her eyes filled with water and a network of tiny little muscles around them seemed to wake up in conflicting little twitches. He started a word with his lips but nothing came out. He wished she would ask him why he was there but she just stood there frozen. He took the kind of deep breath in which only the exhale is audible, then he lifted himself up from the fronts of his shoulders. He said we drove two days to come here because I wanted to tell you that I’m okay, that we’re okay. A blink pushed all the building water to stream down her cheeks. She reached for him and wrapped her large body around his. She was shaking but her hug was enveloping; he received her reach. They embraced for a few seconds, then she drew back, held him by the shoulders and looked into him. I remember you, she said, I have remembered you every day of my life. He cried now too and she increased the pressure of her hands on his shoulders as if to say wait. She turned strong and light and motherly. She nodded at him. He didn’t move. She said, the good lord knows I haven’t slept through the night in twenty years, but I’m going to tonight. Thank you, she said.
This submission is an excerpt from the opening pages of a novel.
January 22, 2019

Let me first tell you about something I saw in the sky before dawn. That has been an unexpected gift of my present confinement, the time now afforded me to simply sit still and look up. Your mother would sometimes say there isn’t much to see on this side of the city. Nothing but a kind of gray on gray violence of cloud against fog and surf. I get that, but she’s wrong. How do I convince you? I don’t know if words can do it justice. The horizon turned in brilliant layers, smears of blood orange cast against bands of soft pink. Then the sun inched its way over Sutro forest and all the colors faded into blue white ether. A cirrus cloud or two settled in, holding tight to the afterglow. But then everything was just as it was. That brief, wondrous light, faltered and gone.

Those words feel like half-truth. And even just a few hours later, I feel the memory slipping away. But for a few minutes, I know I could hardly catch my breath. Is that because in the spectacle I saw the world as it ought to be? Did I feel your mother’s thin wrists held tight against my navel or her small sharp chin dug into the hollow of my neck? Was it something more primal? A reflex hard wired across generations I will never know? Or even less than that? Like the way a starving man salivates when offered rotten fruit.

I don’t know. But it scares me to think how easily I can go on here, if only for the promise of a few colors or shapes in the sky.

I haven’t left this apartment in three months. I know the ocean is right there, on the other side of Great Highway, a hundred yards up and down a faint
slope that crests ten feet above my kitchen window. If the winds are calm, and the
tide is high, I can hear waves slipping smoothly into a dull hypnotic roar. Fog
horns bellow out through the cool wet air. But I spend hours fighting for images
in the corners of my mind. Some come easily, like weary cypress trees along the
coastal trail, their flat green sprays all tilted east, each ashen trunk doubled over at
the waist, waiting for offshore winds to turn out to sea. Or a red-tailed hawk
perched on a tall breeze at dusk, wings perfectly still, in the seconds before terror
reigns down on an ill-fated gopher.

The Pacific expanse, though, is harder to come by. Ocean Beach does not
have much flair, which is part of what I miss most. The muted colors shift
depending where your gaze settles. The water is steeped in slate blue at the
horizon and green frosted glass where the waves break.

There’s an old man who lives in a small white stucco house across the
street. Every day around noon, he pokes out from his garage in full body waders,
wide cross straps over his shoulders, with a surf rod and fishing net in tow. I think
he’s Chinese, but I don’t know his name. I never thought to speak a word to him,
when I could, other than the occasional, brief, “hello.” If he looks up and sees me
at my window, he smiles and waves and I wave back. Then he shuffles down the
block until he reaches the start of the trail and begins his short climb to the ocean.

I know it’s strange, but all I can think of is how, if I walked outside, my
legs could still fly, and I would beat him to the end of the block, or across the
street to the trail, or to the top of that dune. How I would turn back to him, with a
large grin like Usain Bolt, victorious, my fists extended into the sky, my lungs
heaving harsh salt air. How he would belly laugh, and then cheer me with mock applause, and we would hobble together across the sand, his hand clutching my shoulder, until we reached the water’s edge.

Better yet, I imagine you there. Your rail thin limbs turning over and over. Your small footsteps pounding violet ice plants into dust. I imagine chasing you, just outside the grasp of my long narrow fingers and somehow well beyond the sound of my voice. You are so consumed by the possibility of this ocean that you cannot see or hear me. Then finally, you’re on top of the dune and you stop, gasping for air. You point to the water and yell frantic words I can’t hear. You flop down at the edge of the beachgrass and flap wildly until little brown angels are etched in sand. Then you jump and smile broadly with the work that you have done, and this place where you have done it, your hands on your hips and your eyes closed against the sun.

The old man always returns a few hours later, but I’ve never seen him bring anything home. I wonder if he ever catches anything. Or if he throws his fish back to sea. Maybe he never even casts his rod. Maybe he just likes the feel of pressed sand underneath his feet. Standing there under the mid-day fog, the wind kicking tiny grains of sand into his face. I’m not one of those people that longs for pain, but I do miss that feeling. A disturbance so small, you can’t even see it coming, would hardly believe it’s there, except for the flurry of sharp pinpricks on your skin and the thin film of grit you wipe off your face.
Before anyone began to die, at least in any remarkable way, in a world I still can’t fully connect to here and now, I would come home from long nights in the emergency room at San Francisco General Hospital, unable to rest. I always felt anxious that I had missed something in my interpretation of the scans, that someone in that exact instant was suffering with an occult stroke or perforated ulcer or broken bone that I had missed, and I’d never be able to drift off before noon. Those imagined consequences visited me with such excruciating clarity, a feeling new to me since I had completed residency the year before. Instead of rest, I’d swap my clogs for worn Nike cross trainers and lightly jog until I got to the beach entrance at Noriega, where the seawall begins.

From there I would just take off in a dead sprint, the cold dry air forcing tears against my will, until I felt my legs slow of their own accord. Breathless, I’d pause to watch a few surfers cross the highway in jet black wetsuits, white longboards tucked under arm, every single one of them in the same maritime uniform, with the same tousled hair. I’d run another sprint, this time not able to carry on quite as far, until again my body begged to stop. A few more surfers would cross, and so on. With every single sprint, I felt this bizarre rage grow in me, to watch these men in their parade, to bear witness to the luxury and ease of their time.

I know that doesn’t make any sense. Even a few minutes later that rage invariably turned to shame. Why am I telling you this? One day in early September, not long after I began seeing your mother, she found me at the beach after one of my shifts. It had been a horrendous night. The scanners never
stopped. Like a plague of evil humors had been unleashed on the city. I couldn’t eat anything or even go to the bathroom for hours. I was so behind. I remember in the middle of the shift I called an ICU attending to tell her a patient had a blood clot in the heart, only to hear he had already died hours earlier.

The morning finally came and I left the hospital, reluctant to ever go back. I found my way over to the ocean and began my sprints. Despite the wind chill, sweat quickly soaked my blue scrubs into black. After a few minutes, I looked up, and Maya, your mother, was just standing there on a little upslope of sand, in a heavy crimson parka, smiling at me, with two coffees in a small tray, her head tilted to the side in careful observation, and a quizzical look on her face. A crescent moon hung straight above her, I hadn’t noticed that earlier, as if she had pulled it here across the sky. I stumbled to my feet and tucked the scrub top into my waist, trying to act smooth. She smirked, as if I had insulted her, and so I asked, “How did you know I was here?” But she didn’t respond, floating evenly toward me on tiptoes, barefoot. Her eyes gleamed in the early orange sun, on the verge of tears. She drew closer on quick short strides as the wind whipped loose brown waves of hair along the edge of her fur-lined hood. Then she dropped the tray suddenly, the hot black coffee running down both our legs, and took my face in her palms. She pressed her nose to my ear and kissed me softly there, with slow and deliberate intent, as if she could carefully consume this one small piece of me. I had to steady my thigh against hers to keep my knees from buckling. I opened my eyes to see if any surfers had taken notice, but I couldn’t see a single human form, only the wide gray blur of sand and sky and sea.
There had been eight new deaths reported in the local news that morning, the highest total in a single day thus far, including a 32 year-old black doctor found dead on Potrero Avenue in the Mission, just steps from the hospital where I work. Later we would learn that he only lived in the area, that he worked as a nephrologist at one of the private hospitals on the north side of the city, and that he resembled me and my life in no other ways, but those details weren’t immediately available. Your mother had sensed that I was in harm’s way. She needed to make sure I was okay. A phone call or text message wouldn’t do. Nothing else mattered to her in that moment.

I don’t fully understand how we ended up so far from that place. How a single lie could undo the weight of that memory. I don’t mean to minimize the impact of what I did, or what she must have felt. Or what she feels even now. I am so sorry that I deceived her in any way, I truly am. But aren’t all of the lives we live on the internet a kind of collective lie? I swear I never misled her about who I really was. Or who she was to me.

How do you judge someone by the worst thing they have ever done?

At the end of one of my last shifts at the hospital, I was covering the ultrasound service, and there was a young boy with suspected appendicitis. One of our new sonographers showed me the images that she had taken, but the resolution was poor, so I went to go take a look myself.

I meet relatively few patients face to face. It wouldn’t be unusual to find a radiologist who loathes this part of the work. But I’ve always loved the small
thrill of that brief physical contact. I entered the room, noted the outline of a four
year-old buried underneath a large pile of linen on the gurney, and introduced
myself to his mother. She reminded me a little of your mother—early 30s, pretty
with no makeup, a splash of freckles across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose.
Most of all, that smile, which was warm and earnest, as if this 4am trip to the
emergency room was something she had been looking forward to for months.

I sat down on a little stool by the edge of the bed. She told me he had
complained of abdominal pain that afternoon and vomited once after dinner.
Apparently, though, in the last hour he had transformed into a friendly dragon
taking cover from an asteroid. “Dinosaur,” the boy retorted from underneath the
sheets. “Ah yes, of course,” I said. “Dinosaurs have every right to fear asteroids.”
I picked up the probe and added some gel, rehearsing each movement in my mind
so that I could go quickly. Before I was ready, he pulled down the sheets himself,
eyeing me suspiciously. “Are you from NASA?” he asked.

Beyond his apparent expertise in space travel, I was awestruck by this
boy’s look. A white blond moptop masked his forehead and eyes, until he sneezed
and the hair flopped to one side of his face. The bridge of his nose spread wide
into his nostrils and his cheekbones were set high and broad. I don’t think I can
totally explain my instinct but it was clear that the father of this small Aryan child
was black. I stared for a moment at his mother, trying not to appear overly
excited, while also communicating my enthusiasm for her interest in black people,
before trying to reclaim some element of professionalism with a few nimble
keystrokes on the machine. Then I gooped up way more ultrasound gel on the
probe than was necessary. Her smile softened, fatigued, as if I was not the first
man to praise her in this way, and I refocused my attention on the task at hand.

I lifted up his shirt and pointed him to the screen, placing the probe in the
middle of his abdomen, near his belly button, then sweeping gently to his right.
The black and white snow coalesced into a clear image. I could make out the
loops of bowel floating through the abdomen, like cords tethered to a spaceship.
But I couldn’t find his appendix. That happens fairly often and normally doesn’t
matter. I did feel a little pressure to impress this mother, so I hunted around for a
few minutes, but I just couldn’t find it. It was okay, though. There is a look that
sick children have. A sort of quiet nervous quiver. This boy did not have it. I think
that’s my favorite part of the job. The part that right now I miss most. That
moment when I knew someone was going to be okay before anyone else. It felt
like catching a firefly that only I could see.

Your hair would not be like his. You would have dark, coarse curls,
constantly tangled in knots, and your mother would spend hour after hour trying
to figure out how to tame them. I think you would have a tall, slender frame, like
me, with far more arm and leg than any reasonable activity might require. Your
skin would be pale under the summer fog and roast to hazelnut for a week or two
in the late fall. I would laugh at her for putting too much sunscreen on you at all
hours of the day.

Comedy and wit float on your mother’s breath and I’m sure those gifts
would be yours. She is fierce and confident, even when her smile leads you to
believe otherwise, even when she is wrong. While I fear you might suffer from her obstinace, it is hard for me to imagine that you wouldn’t be shy. Timidity resonates so profoundly within me that sometimes I wonder if it is a stubborn fitness held over from eight generations of slavery.

You would sleep so soundly through the night, after only a few months, that each night we would creep into your bedroom and place our hands gingerly to your chest, to make sure we could still feel the soft rise of your breath.

So much is made out of nature and nurture as if there was some sort of legitimate equipoise between the two. As if there would be anything there to nurture without your genes.

I lie in bed sometimes thinking about the alternate world where this all worked. I think part of me is convinced that if I can bring enough of these images into focus, with enough clarity and detail, that the world would have no choice but to bend in their general direction.

I try to keep the thoughts honest. I know this would be harder on her than on me. I can picture her hunched over the edge of a toilet at work, straining not to be heard. Her white coat collecting dirt off the floor. Her quiet outrage as the months went by and eyes drifted away from her own, shifting instead to her swollen belly. I imagine her fatigue and anemia and the dry pallor of her skin. Or the persistent sensation of your foot pressed sharply into her diaphragm. I linger on these images and trace out the edges of her terror, worry, and pain.
But there would be tender moments as well, of course. How we would sneak through the radiology department to watch the tiny furious flicker of your heart on an ultrasound. How I would pillage snacks from every free resource in the hospital and secretly slip them into her purse or coat pocket or cubicle. How we would send each other random text messages with ideas for names—most absurd, but a few heartfelt. And late night walks by the ocean in the twilight. My arms casually wrapping her waist to pull her closer. You suspended between us like a faint light strung between the towers of a bridge.

I understand why she may not see a world with you in it. My anger about that has long since passed. Still I hurt for you.

I have never wanted children, but it feels now that all I have ever hoped for the world, is you. That this place would want you. That I could convince the world to want you.

Time has a different feel to me now. In the first few weeks of my quarantine, before the board of supervisors restricted my contact with the outside world, I could mark the rhythm of the days in text messages, video chats, and the delight of unexpected visitors. I knew your mother would not be among them, but I was still grateful for the company. Friends from work and my softball team brought pre-made cocktails in small mason jars, or homemade chocolate cookies in foil wrappers, and I spent much of this time basked in a sort of drunk sugar high. I’m not close with many folks from medical school, but on Thanksgiving, Jack Manning, my first year roommate, showed up outside of my apartment
dressed up as a shark, and danced the electric slide for a half hour, with a sign that said “Happy Birthday” (it wasn’t my birthday), which was met by thunderous applause from all my neighbors.

I think we all thought this was something we would only have to briefly endure. That a cure or prevention would be readily forthcoming and that the memory of this difficult time would soon recede. I can’t hold on to those human moments any longer as the anchor of my existence. I stay up late now watching re-runs of Star Trek, or Netflix stand-up specials, or in my low points, reality dating shows set on Caribbean islands, with unnaturally fit contestants. My sleep is not restful and rarely comes at night. I read more than I once did. Normally, I prefer fiction, but I try to live vicariously through memoir. I am about halfway through the Autobiography of Malcolm X, which is a nice reminder I suppose that I am not actually imprisoned. I’ve listened to so much reggae that the sound of a steel drum brings on waves of nausea.

Sometimes, I close my eyes. I’ll stumble through the kitchen cabinets collecting Cheerios, almond milk, soup spoon, and bowl, trying to prepare and consume a simple meal without the gift of sight. Or I’ll pedal furiously on my vintage exercise bike, trying to picture the way streaks of light fell on a smooth path cut through white oak, in a Maryland suburb called Columbia, when I was a boy. When I can’t sleep, I rise up from bed and hold my eyes shut and pretend that Maya is here in my arms, one hand pressed between my shoulder blades and the other holding the scruff of my neck, like the nights she would teach me to
salsa at Roccapulco, and I stepped all over her toes, until she fell over me, wild with laughter, the weight of her an easy burden I would never let go.

I spend a lot of the day thinking about what I might write to you here. But I realize there are many reasons you should never know these words.

If I am honest with myself, I doubt you will exist to find them. This is not a choice that’s mine to make. It is her choice whether or not to carry you and I don’t wish it to be mine.

I am a relatively young man in good health, but over the last five months, many like me have died. The numbers grow each day, without warning or explanation, and it seems none is coming.

And at the present time, my thoughts are only my own. The radius of my mind has collapsed into this apartment. Four small rooms at the far edge of San Francisco. Bare white walls and a few bay windows, caked in yellow dust.

I think I still need to know that this truth exists somewhere else in the world. Even if only an assortment of ones and zeros flickering behind this screen, in a laptop that may collect dust for years after I die. So if by some small miracle you are born and I am not around to see it, that you can have this piece of me, to know something about me and the life that I have lived, or at least the life I once tried to live, and the one I wished for you, and why those lives could not continue on here, despite my gravest hopes and best intentions.
Having spent most of my time in classrooms as the only black person in the room, I knew to expect more of the same when I moved to San Francisco for medical school ten years ago from Providence. It was the lack of color in the intervening spaces that caught me off guard. I could spend an entire week without encountering a single brown face. Not on the MUNI light rail between my Lower Haight apartment and the hospital. Not among the faculty or staff once I made it to campus. Rarely even in the patients that lent me their bodies and their time so that I could learn how to heal.

I don’t think I predicted how this change, which seemed so small in degree, would affect me. I would be lying to myself if I said it wasn’t hard. Most of the time that’s probably just what I did, denied the burden of that feeling. Your mother, I think, would be quick to agree. On those rare moments I looked up and saw a face that resembled mine, I could feel the world slow, heart pounding, my hopes pinned to the faint possibility of a sharp head nod or knowing smile.

All that is to say that the exodus of black bodies from San Francisco, the steadfast and tireless decline, was not a new thing, it was built into the city’s fabric, a wallpaper you had to strain to see, so it took that much longer to recognize we were dying. Dark skinned bodies snuffed out in place, like flames on a wick. The first deaths made occasional news, but no one connected the dots. I remember the elderly woman in a grocery store near the Panhandle who collapsed into a case of apples. Round green fruit ran out in all directions. Patrons ran frantically for their not-in-any-way-threatened lives, while the woman’s body settled in a heap against the large wooden frame. I know this is the moment I first
felt concerned, watching the morbid video on my phone in the backseat of a rideshare, on my way to a jazz club, while the driver prattled on about seeing Miles Davis downtown when he was young. I can still picture her lavender church suit, the side of her face pressed flat against the wooden crate, as if straining to hear a whispered secret on the opposite side of a wall.

At first no one did much of anything aside from the occasional crude joke. But soon more videos began to circulate. A high school student doubled over at the edge of Spreckels Lake, almost as if in prayer, while mallard ducks and tiny model sailboats drifted into view. Or a city gardener clearing weeds around a fountain in Alamo Square, while tourists waited impatiently for their cliché photo-ops, before he slumped into the thick ring of daffodils. Or an elderly man who had escaped from a nursing home in the Tenderloin, outfitted in mismatched scrubs, only to be found by a jogger at the base of a date palm in Dolores Park, his arms and legs wound tightly around the trunk’s basketweave scars.

Early on, I tried my best not to pay much attention. I tried to ignore as much of it as I could. At the hospital, no one had seen any suspected cases and physicians as a rule tend to dismiss any phenomena they haven’t directly witnessed. It’s as if we are more afraid to show too much concern too early, and be wrong, than suffer whatever consequence there may be in waiting. In a way, I think some part of me preferred to think this was all happening in a different universe that had temporarily flickered into ours and would soon vanish just as quickly.
I have lived a more superstitious life than I prefer to admit and it was also easy for me to believe that if I lived my life in a specific fashion that I would be rewarded with good health, happiness, and prosperity. If I run a few miles every day, I’ll lose weight. If I don’t smoke, I won’t get lung cancer. Despite what anyone may tell you about the uncertainty principle, this holds up most of the time. It’s a good bet. But there’s always room for chaos at the margins.

Last August, most people were agnostic to the steady trickle of unusual deaths but your mother knew better. She recognized as early as anyone that something different was happening. She would send me the links to each article, with a little worried face emoji. I tried not to read them, but would call her to reassure her that I felt completely fine. I knew her father had died in a car accident in Costa Rica when she was 18. He had gone home to visit relatives, to boast about his beautiful Maya who had enrolled at Berkeley for bioengineering, and he was killed on a two lane highway a few miles outside the airport, by a tour bus trying to pass a freight truck. I knew his death still weighed on her and I didn’t want her to worry.

I should have paid more attention to what other people were saying. I should have noticed when the talk shifted from a vague concern for my life and well-being, to the recognition that I might pose some sort of contagious threat to the general welfare. It was subtle, but I should have noticed it sooner. I have lived most of my life being followed by mall cops in department stores, and watching people jaywalk to keep from passing me on the sidewalk, or following me closely in museums of modern art to make sure I’m not stupid enough to rub up against a
priceless canvas. Maybe in some way that made it more difficult for me to see the change that was starting to occur—the new fear and hatred in their eyes.

September in San Francisco is always the hottest month of the year. People complain about how cold the summer months are but ignore the fact that Labor Day is the start of the warmest weather and that the heat can last well into the fall. It’s so different here than Maryland where I grew up. Summer there always began with that first June thunderstorm. The air turned sharply humid, heavy clouds settled into mid-day darkness, and sonic booms hurled through the sky, leaving me cowering in fear on our basement couch, one eye transfixed on a small above ground window. I would wait for the flash and then hold my breath, counting each long second until an ominous rumble or frantic clash, exhaling when I was finally certain the house was still intact.

Once summer had officially begun, its cadence could be monitored by food. Every few weekends a swarm of garrulous Jamaicans would descend on our modest suburban home with mountains of Pyrex in tow. Late afternoon cooks simmered deep into the night. Smells of curry goat, stewed oxtail, and fried snapper filled the air. We ate by the soft glow of mosquito repellant candles.

I often long for tastes from those nights, but rarely the ancestral dishes whose heat I could barely stand. Instead, the flavors of those summers are for me defined by Maryland blue crabs. Savory crustaceans piled high on newspapers and caked in red orange spice like the color of the Golden Gate Bridge. I would rinse the seasoning from thorned edges and break open hidden layers without
thought. My hands had seen the ritual enough times to know exactly which membrane to pierce and which shell to break until the sweet and salty bands of crab meat were at last liberated.

Over Labor Day weekend, I wanted to surprise your mother by ordering an air shipment of a dozen live blue crabs from the Chesapeake Bay. San Franciscans are inexplicably proud of their local flavorless crab. Maya and I had argued regularly over which of the two was superior and it irritated me greatly that she did not yet see things my way.

Your mother didn’t want me to go pick up the package. She didn’t know that dinner was waiting there. She wanted me to stay home and order sushi, as had been our tradition whenever I finished a long run of night shifts. It was also a few minutes before the post office on Irving Street would close and she didn’t think I could make it. These were both good arguments and worked well to conceal what we both knew but neither of us would say out loud. That afternoon, a far right group had marched on Civic Center to demand the internment of anyone of African descent, accusing the city council of hiding an epidemic. A counter-protest had turned violent and a middle-aged black sociology professor from the community college had been murdered. We were both more worried than either of us would admit.

I drove quickly for the package, weaving through traffic in my used Audi sedan, shifting gears and signaling lane changes with ruthless precision. I parked the car, swung open the doors to the post office one minute before five, and
extended my fists into the air like an Olympic medalist. I like to think of this as a ritual that you and I might have done together—your hand in mine as we scurried up the sidewalk incline and rushed through the glass doors of the entrance.

I presented the small beige slip, signed, and waited. Two minutes at most. The postal worker—I’d seen him before—seemed intent on making me smile. The room was otherwise empty and he cracked a joke about how hard I was making him work. Then he disappeared to retrieve my package and quickly returned, his arms barely able to contain it. We laughed as he made the awkward transfer, sliding the large package across the counter until it was safe in my arms.

It was foggy and windy which is rare in September. I had known the trip would not take long so I had parked illegally in a handicapped spot directly across the street, twenty yards or so up from the intersection. I have a hard time seeing how karma could view this as such a terrible transgression. Just before I stepped foot into the street, I gripped the package more tightly against my chest, looked both ways several times, and rested my chin on top of the box. I did everything I thought I was supposed to do.

The road wasn’t wide. Just a typical Sunset avenue with room for two parked cars on either side and two cars passing each other in opposite directions, albeit just barely, and preferably at slow speed. In the corner of my eye, the intersection was occupied at all four corners, which I took as an added layer of security, but still I moved quickly across the road.

It is hard to explain what followed, the peculiar sensation you have when you realize that someone is intentionally trying to run you over. The feeling is so
foreign that you question it instinctively, even when your chest quickens and your pupils grow wide. For a split second, I froze, despite the image of the rust gray pickup truck barreling toward me. For that one second, I couldn’t move, until the unmistakable sound of the exhaust matched the metallic blur and I could see the man’s cool blue eyes intent on mine, his hands steadfast at ten and two, his vehicle increasing in speed, his mouth flapping violent things I couldn’t hear over the terrifying roar of combustion.

I probably held on to that box for a beat longer than I should have but still managed to let it go. My feet were unsure whether to leap or sprint and in the end I managed some awkward combination of the two, my hands pushing the box aside and clawing for the sidewalk, that narrow patch of beige between the two parked cars in front of me having become the only safe place in the world. I fell to the ground, my long arms safely at curb’s edge, but my feet still dragging asphalt. Relief didn’t come until the sound of the soft thud of the truck’s grill digging into styrofoam.

The mangled box leapt in a high graceful arc and tumbled a few yards forward, mostly still intact. But then came the second hit, which it could not sustain, so much more horrific than the first. Still the pickup continued on until it was up and over and onward, finally satisfied that something was dead.

The truck paused halfway up the block, then slowly coasted away. A casual bare arm swung gently beneath the driver’s side window. I gathered myself to a crouch and watched. A small group of elderly pedestrians drew near me.
A few small crabs lingered at the edge of the blast zone. Their small legs flickered bright blue against the backdrop of the road, uncertain of where they had landed and where they might go. Just inside that rim were the maimed, claws torn from carapace and pearl white gills rolling in the breeze like maple seeds. But in the middle, nearly all were crushed, their outer shells pressed flat into a sheet of iridescent olive drab, glinting sharply under the overcast sky.

What if you had been there, alongside me? How would I explain to you what had just happened? Or worse yet—my impotence in its aftermath? I would gather your arms against my chest and wipe away the black dust. I would check carefully for abrasions, bruises, blood. In desperation, my thoughts would turn first to feigned reason: a disappointed patient or a first manic break or an injured love one across town or a recalled gas pedal stuck in the depressed position. Then I would take your head in my hands, your matted curly brown hair filling my palms. And you would grab me by the elbow and stare at the contrast of your light brown hand against my dark brown arm and maybe wonder if this would have even happened if I were not there. If your relative paucity of melanin might have protected you. Whether your goal in life should be to become something separate from me. And then your eyes would well with tears and the terrifying moment would come when I would have to speak, would have to apply some balm to this open wound. But my mouth would only gape and turn inward and I would stand and pull you to your feet, but nothing would be said, and I would try and fail to take some solace in the fact that we had only suffered this one small death.
The Seaweed Man

My mother left me two instructions: to scatter her ashes near the Bay of Fundy, and to find Hank. The first task would be simple, tactically speaking, easily broken down into a series of discrete and readily accomplished tasks. Quit Peace Corps four months early. Fly from Mongolia to Boston. Rent car. Drive up to Maine. Stay overnight in family cabin once belonging to grandparents (also deceased), now mine. Push galvanized rubber rowboat to the shore. Nestle urn carefully in boat, row into the Bay. Dump ashes. Row home.

The second task, on the other hand, was complicated, because I had never heard of Hank. Neither had the lawyer, nor the funeral home, nor the aunts or uncles or any number of neighbors who came out of the woodwork to call and express their condolences. Nobody sounded surprised she had died, though they all said she was too young, only forty-two. The doctors had found the cancer two weeks after I had left for Mongolia, and none of the treatments had taken. She had told me not to come home.

She and I weren’t close. We had fought all the time when I was in high school—I had gotten mixed up with some rough kids, and she didn’t approve of the loitering and the drinking and the revolving door of girls—and she had sent me to college in Colorado as a sort of punishment. She loved nature and wild things, and she thought the fresh air would do me good. It didn’t—much. I skated through my degree in a weed-filled cloud of Ds and C minuses. After graduation, I applied to the Corps in a panic. I told myself—and my mother—I wanted to study international law, and the Corps would help pay for law school. Maybe she had left Hank for
me as some kind of benevolent fairy godfather. My own dad had left when I was five.

As it turned out, I did not have to find Hank. Hank found me. He found me drunk and washed-up in the rubber boat, my mother’s empty urn in the hull.

The discrete set of tasks had proved more difficult than expected. The Peace Corps, name notwithstanding, was not happy about my withdrawal, and processing the paperwork to free me from my teaching post in Mongolia took three weeks. My flight into Boston was delayed. The rental place hadn’t gotten my reservation and gave me a white Corvette convertible with a top that wouldn’t go down. It rained the whole drive north. I missed my exit and got lost in the windy country roads that Maine employs to keep out strangers. By dawn I staggered through the doorway of the cabin, soaked and jetlagged and starving.

All I found in the kitchen cabinets was a box of cornflakes and a miniature bottle of Jack Daniels. I hadn’t tasted alcohol or anything that came from a cardboard box in nearly two years.

I wasn’t missing anything. The cornflakes felt lifeless and dry in my mouth. I went and poured them in the backyard for the birds and the squirrels to enjoy. This made me feel good about myself, like I had accomplished something. I found the rubber boat in the backyard, and went back inside to get the urn and my jacket. The bottle of Jack Daniels asked if it could come along, too, so I tucked it in my shirt pocket.
It was a chilly morning, cloudy and severe. I stopped and looked down at
the urn, at all that was left of my mother. Was this really a good way to go?
Maybe I could keep her ashes in a crystal vase or something. That would seem
inconspicuous in a corner office. In a lawyer’s office.

The wind picked up. I sighed and began pushing the boat down the
pathway.

The sky had clouded over fully by the time I reached the shore. I took a
deep breath and heaved the boat into the water, setting my mother down gently in
the stern. “Here we go, buddy,” I said, like she’d always said while buckling me
into my car seat. I took up an oar and pushed us off into the water.

How far should I row out? I didn’t know. Wasn’t I supposed to be paying
attention to the tides? By the time I considered this, I had rowed out pretty far.
The shoreline was still visible, but it looked more like an idea than a solid thing.
The wind was picking up. It was time to do the deed and row home.

I picked up the urn and uncorked it. I held it over the edge of the boat,
preparing myself to say a few words, but then a gust of wind came by and rocked
the boat and she was gone.

There I sat, fatherless, motherless, jobless, homeless. Sure, she had left me
life insurance and a couple other things, but I didn’t belong to anybody anymore,
not to her, not the Peace Corps, not anyone. I sat there and I watched my mother’s
ashes bobbing in the waves. I didn’t exactly feel anything then, nothing quite
resembling grief, but the starting of a feeling welled up, the feeling I had been
holding off since the lawyer had called me in Mongolia, and I caught the feeling
like a softball and tossed it away. And before I knew it, my hand did something I
did not expect: it reached into my left breast pocket and it pulled out the half-
empty bottle of Jack Daniels and it compelled me to sip.

The first drink, I told myself, was a toast to my mother. The next was to
see if Jack Daniels had really been as good as I remembered, and as I swigged a
swell came and lifted the boat and turned it into a swallow. Then I stopped myself
and thought that I should pour it out now, a liquid blessing, a baptism of fish, but
then I thought about the cornflakes I had poured in the woods behind the house.
Could birds even digest cornflakes, I wondered? Were squirrels allergic to
sprayed-on Vitamin D? I sat back and thought of the grisly scene that was waiting
for me back at the cabin: two hundred chickadees, a dozen squirrels, maybe even
a half-witted moose who had stumbled onto the scene, all dead. “It’s a good thing
my mother is dead,” I said out loud, “because this would have killed her.”

It stunned me to hear those words. My mother is dead. Had they really
come from my lips? About my mother? I put my head in my hands and would
have despaired if the bottle of Daniels hadn’t splashed comfortingly at my feet.
And that’s the last thing I remember.

Hank was a seaweed farmer. He wore a rubber wetsuit that hugged his
bony frame. He was thin, but when he moved, you could see the strength that hid
beneath the rubber. He had lived and farmed up here for thirty years.

Hank told me he’d thought I was dead when he found me in the boat. I
have no idea how the boat had gotten itself back to shore. I certainly hadn’t rowed
it there. Hank, who was ancient, had somehow lifted me over his shoulder and carried me back to the house that he shared with his equally ancient wife, Marigold.

Marigold was a recent addition. They had met on Match.com. They told me the details of their courtship with the eagerness of a much younger couple. “My username was PotteryLover,” Marigold said, “and he was TheSeaweedMan.” She laughed. Marigold had a crown of white hair that spread out from her head like a halo and she served us a mushroom stew that thawed me from the inside out. After a second bowl, I couldn’t recall a time when I’d felt cold.

They asked about my life. I told them about Colorado, about the Peace Corps and the rough kids, about my dead mother, though I didn’t mention the will. Hank said he remembered her. “She came up here with her parents all the time,” he said. “We were good friends.” He said that when she was in college, my mother came out during the summer and helped him harvest the seaweed. “Maybe you’d like to come out sometime, too.”

“Sure,” I said, a little more disinterestedly than I should have. (I was feeling a little disappointed that he wasn’t a benefactor. That there was no wealth in this house, with its chipped cups and bowls and tattered furniture, was obvious.) I agreed in the way that you agree to an invitation someone has made out of obligation and politeness, one that you will never take them up on because you know they weren’t really offering in the first place. I wasn’t the seaweed-harvesting type, something I was sure he could see as plainly as I could.
But the next morning, before dawn, the door to my bedroom creaked open. They had put me up in a spare room for the night, a room they used to store backstock, and it smelled strongly of salt and air and ocean. A great big black bear of a dog nuzzled its way through the door and started licking my hands.

Hank popped his head in the door. He motioned for me to follow.

He gave me a loaner wetsuit, which he said he kept on hand for guests at all times and which was about three quarters of a foot too tall for me. He led me to the greenhouse. Even in the dim dawn light, I could see that there were thousands of strands of seaweed of every variety hanging out to dry. Hank motioned for me to follow him and he lead me to a corner of the room. “This is bullwhip kelp,” he said, picking up a long, thick strand of something and running his hand over it. “See the tips?” He held up a sinewy stem. I nodded.

“Bullwhip kelp attaches itself to the bottom of the sea, to a rock,” he said. “It has to hang tight even in the craziest waves. It grows where the surf is hardest and heaviest.”

“Sucks to be you, kelp,” I said. My head still hurt a little, and I wasn’t in a botany mood.

“Actually, it loves it the rough surf,” Hank said. “It needs the surf to survive.” He leaned in conspiratorially. “That’s where the nutrients are.”

Not knowing what to say, I nodded again, and Hank hung the kelp back up on the drying rack. “Maybe that’s you, too,” he said. “You’ve gotta be in the turbulent waters to survive.” I was too tired to know what he was talking about, but it felt important, and I nodded.
He handed me a headlamp and we walked out of the greenhouse. I tripped at least three times on hidden hoses and tree roots and wires, but Hank hopped swiftly over them as if he could sense them in the dark. He always seemed to know exactly where he was going.

Hank loaded a bucket of tools onto the boat: a pulley and rope, two nets, two hefty pairs of clippers. He held up one of the pairs and shook it at me. “Now, this is the most important thing for our journey,” he said. I waited, ready for a treatise on the things clippers can teach us about love.

Hank furrowed his eyebrows and looked at me dead-on. “Always, always say thank you,” he said. Then he turned and cast the boat into the water. I had to scramble to get on. “Thank you!” I said, as I tumbled into the boat. Was this a test? But he couldn’t hear me over the waves.

The sea was calm and dark. It lapped us gently away from shore while Hank wrestled with the motor. “It sometimes has trouble getting its creaky parts going in the morning,” he said. “Just like me.” As if in response, the motor sputtered to life with a puff of blue smoke, and Hank steered us away from the cove.

Being in that tiny boat felt like a cosmic joke in the bigness of the ocean. Was the ocean laughing at us as we sped along its waves? We crested little white peaks of foam and it flew in our faces. Hank started laughing, and I did too. It was that giddiness halfway between flying and falling, halfway between jubilation and terror. We were surfing on the edge of fear.
We reached our destination, a far-out place where the shore again was an idea. Hank bent over the water. “See that drifting there?” He pointed. I didn’t see. Hank said nothing, just kept his finger pointed over the waves.

I squinted, and then, I saw millions of purple tentacles, waving at me just under the water, beckoning. My eyes grew wide.

Apparently I leaned too close, because Hank had to pull me back into the boat. “Watch,” he said. He pulled a pair of shears from the bucket. He bent down over the water, slowly, slowly, as if about to spear a fish, then he dipped his hands in, very gently. I almost didn’t notice the tangled waves of kelp he was pulling into the skipper, because they seemed to be part of his body. I could barely hear him mumbling something under his breath. An invocation of some kind, I figured, a blessing.

I listened more carefully until my head was bent near his. Then I heard it. Thank you, thank you, thank you. He was thanking the waters, thanking the kelp for surrendering itself to his shears. Later, he would tell me that he was taught this by a French priest-monk who had lived half a century in this village. He would tell me that he hadn’t found a single bed of kelp until he had asked for it. He would tell me that a lot of plants work with you this way: if you want to harvest nettle without being stung, for instance, you have to give it your full attention.

Later, I would stay on the island and help him bury Marigold, who would die of a heart attack the next week. Later, I would learn to love him as I have never loved another person, even myself. Later, he would tell me he was my father, and I wouldn’t be sure what he meant, but it wouldn’t matter. Later, I
would forget all about Boston and Hank and I would be business partners, would
call ourselves the Seaweed Men, plural. Later, I would bury him in the forest
beside Marigold, after the cancer.

But I did not know any of this then. I only watched the water, and I held
my breath.
Nora and the Flood

It was raining when the Russians rang the doorbell. Three of them: one tall, one short, one fat, all in white overalls speckled with heavy drops of rain. They bowed themselves through the doorway with grace and put tarps on all of the carpets.

Only one of them spoke English—the short one, the ringleader, Vladimir—and he acknowledged Nora briefly. “Will only take two or three days,” he said. “Will be little trouble. Will be two hundred and fifty dollars.” He and the other two carried in tools for what felt like an hour and Nora retreated up the well-worn stairs. She went into her bedroom and shut the window to keep the rain from blowing in.

She was embarrassed about it, ashamed of the whole thing. Hers was the bath that had caused the ceiling cave-in that had necessitated their coming in the first place, the first time anyone had been in the house in weeks. Bath day had been a bad day, a lonely one, a wine-ish one. She had been trying to cheer herself up, had put candles around the bathtub like somebody in a body wash commercial or on the cover of a Jazz for Lovers CD—except with no one snuggling her beneath the bubbles. How could she have known that the drain seal was worn out, that the bathwater would flush itself into the kitchen ceiling in protest? Nora shuddered at the thought of that sagging ceiling, hanging low into the kitchen like an ominous cloud.

She had never heard Russian spoken before, at least not in person. She listened to the hacksaws and Shop-Vacs and clusters of obstinate consonants
mingle with the sounds of rain in reverence, as if hearing Bach in a cathedral. Out her window, the river was steadily rising, just as it had the day Evan had left her.

They had rented this house for its closeness to the river. Nora was a freshwater marine biologist, and she couldn’t imagine living far from a body of water. The dock at the edge of the yard made for a handy parking spot for her motorboat, which officially belonged to the Department of Wildlife, Forestry and Fisheries, but she had christened it herself on their dock, with a bottle of champagne. Evan had pasted exotic rainbow letter decals on the side of the boat to celebrate: Nora’s Ark.

Evan had been a surgeon at the hospital. The hospital where he worked was just down the river, less than a five-minute boat ride, but thanks to the windy mountain roads a forty-minute schlep by car. The two of them had talked about commuting into work together. It became a kind of daily joke, part of their morning routine for decades. Evan would put on his jacket and pick up his briefcase and sigh, looking at his Audi in the driveway.

“Just come with me in the boat,” she would say.

Evan would smile and say he didn’t want to show up to the OR with mud on his shoes. In their twenty-two years in that house, she never took him to work in the boat.

They had never had children. Evan had wanted them, and she hadn’t. Listing all the reasons why had been one of her favorite pastimes. Evan was fastidious and clean, and as a joke, she said this was the chief reason. “You’re anti-Cheerio,” she said. She often reminded him that surgeons’ hours were long
and unpredictable, she didn’t want to be left at home with a baby, she wanted to save for their future, etc., etc., and she thought she had convinced him, but this spring he went and spent every extra cent on Audis and direct flights to “conferences” in Panama and two dozen long-stemmed roses intended for some woman named Tamar. They had been sent to Nora’s office by mistake. Evan’s handwriting was terrible, but she had read enough of the note to know that it wasn’t intended for her, that he would never have called her “his little baby mama.”

Now she was left alone in the house by the river. In the first week, friends had called, Evan’s friends, because she’d stopped talking to her own in tenth grade, the moment she started dating Evan, at his insistence. “Come over anytime,” which she knew meant they hoped she never would. In Tennessee, divorce was a known infectious disease.

So she had stayed inside, where she was safe, where nobody expected anything of her. She took a leave of absence from her job in the fisheries department and told them and herself she would be back soon—she just needed a little time to herself, that was all, a week or two to catch her breath, chart a course, recalibrate—but she started having the groceries delivered and told the fisheries department she needed more time and never set foot out her door. No one asked her to return the boat.

Just an hour after Evan had taken their only car and pulled out of the driveway, leaving her stranded, the river had washed out the road. It was chilling to see that the road, once the support of station wagons and semis, succumb to the
steady insistence of the flood, trusty asphalt destroyed by water. Now, as the
waters rose again, Nora pulled her sweater closer around her and felt grateful once
again that no one was expecting her to be anywhere.

She did her crossword. 5-down. 8 letters. Hardy enthusiasts of caviar and vodka. “Russians!” she cried, and then clapped her hand over her mouth. But if the vodka enthusiasts downstairs heard her, they gave no indication, and still she heard the sawing of boards, the closing of doors, heavy footsteps, the rain.

She sat there long enough that the light grew dimmer and she fell asleep on top of her crossword book. When she woke, it was quiet, and she thought she was alone in the house again but she heard someone begin to whistle. She looked at her phone and saw that Vladimir had texted her. We left one man behind, they said. Will finish paint job and walk home. She looked at the window and decided to tell the Russian to leave while he still could. The river had all but crested its banks.

“Hello?” she said from the top of the stairs.

The whistle from the kitchen didn’t stop.

As she descended the stairs, Nora realized this was the first time she had been alone with another man in eight years, except maybe her dentist, and he didn’t count because she never saw his face behind the paper mask. Evan had been the one constant. Through college, through grad school, internships, first apartments—he had always been there, had said he would always be there. And now he wasn’t.

A cry came from the kitchen.
Nora froze. Maybe there hadn’t been a cry; maybe she had imagined it. But a moan came now, low and guttural. She raced down the stairs. She skidded over the tarps and the tools scattered on the living room floor.

The tall Russian was sitting alone in the kitchen in a pool of blood, clutching his fist in a towel, holding what looked like a severed thumb. He saw her and held the thumb out to her in agony, like a little child begging for a kiss on a skinned knee. “Помогите,” he said.

Nora trudged through the marshy yard, getting drenched overhead and underfoot. The water came up to her knees as she walked up to the dock. The Russian followed her in Evan’s heavy rubber galoshes that he had never worn, that she had bought him just in case he had ever decided to make this journey with her. She had draped a blanket over his shoulders as if he was an Olympic athlete and ushered him into the boat, his thumb sealed in a plastic baggie like a tunafish sandwich. “Careful, now,” she said as she guided his huge frame into the white vinyl seat. “The hospital isn’t far away.” The Russian was very pale. “Я не хочу умерю,” he said.

The boat didn’t look any worse for wear, although the rainbow letters on the side were faded and peeling. The boat engine sputtered and Nora felt ice in the pit of her stomach. She hadn’t used the boat in months. Of course the engine wouldn’t start. Of course this poor Russian would be left helpless in her care. Of course—

“О боже пожалуйста помогите,” the Russian groaned.
Lightning flashed overhead. A thunderclap. Later, in recalling this moment, Nora would doubt that the engine had started the moment the thunder had reached them, that it seemed to respond to whatever the Russian had said. But that was how it felt.

They sped through sheets of rain. The river was swollen and treacherous and required every ounce of Nora’s attention to navigate. Though the sky was colorless, it seared into her senses like a hot blade. The river made the whole world an alley of trees and sand and sky. Had the sky been that big the last time she set foot outside? And how long ago had that been, exactly? Thirty days, forty? And what was it about this Russian in the white stained shirt that had made her cross the threshold without even thinking about it?

The Russian groaned when she sped the boat around an eddy. “There, there,” she replied to his whimpers, patting his knee as if he were six. “We’ve almost arrived.” She wondered what had brought him to Tennessee. Maybe his parents had been beet farmers and there had been a terrible blight. Maybe he had been a spy.

This thought alarmed her a little, and she looked at him over her shoulder. The Russian was younger than she’d thought, blonde hair with no trace of gray, unlined eyes and forehead. He looked like a very tall version of a boy she had once seen on a pamphlet for a Russian orphanage. She was old enough to be his mother.
She glanced at his thumb in the baggie. What if it was taking them too long to get to the hospital? What if they couldn’t reattach it? What was a carpenter, after all, without a thumb?

Maybe, if the thumb could not be reattached, the Russian would have to take time off work and would need someplace to stay. Maybe Nora would be open-hearted enough to invite him to stay with her, not long, just a week or two to catch his breath. Maybe he would begin to teach her Russian, and maybe she would teach him English, and maybe one night they would have learned just enough of both to say what they were thinking, and maybe they would both be thinking the same thing: that something deep and wonderful had pushed them both together.

The hospital loomed into view, tall and windowless and white. She looked back at the Russian to point it out to him.

For years later, Nora would look back on this moment with skepticism, with distrust of her own memory’s account. She would tell herself she had been tired and grieving and running on adrenaline, and who knows what that can do to one’s memory? That, and she had never been very good at remembering things to begin with, so maybe everything she had ever remembered was wrong.

But a small part of Nora knew then and would always know that as she turned to the Russian to tell him about the hospital, a great white bird swooped down and snatched the thumb-holding baggie from the Russian’s hand. It had looked, by all accounts, like a dove.
The great white bird sat for a moment between them. Neither of them made a motion to stop it, and when the bird took off, the two of them just stared at it until it became a speck in the sky.

Nora guided the boat to the riverbank. The Russian was open-mouthed.

“Don’t worry,” Nora said, taking his arm and helping him out of the boat. “After a while, you won’t even notice that it’s gone.”
SYNOPSIS: *Uttermost Parts of the Sea* excerpt

This excerpt is twenty pages from a draft of a novella-length piece. It contains all but the last 8 pages of the five segments that focus on one nameless character in the work, called “the wolf.”

In the novella’s current draft, these segments are interspersed with a parallel story involving a modern-day effort to track down the wolf, who has vanished, by political operatives who believe he has information that may assist their underdog progressive candidate in a New York primary election.

In contrast to the wolf’s story, which is told over the course of several years from 2011 to 2017, the political operatives’ story is told over fourteen days as it becomes apparent that the election may coincide with a major hurricane making landfall at New York City.

Content warning: This draft excerpt contains one homophobic slur, spoken by a queer character facetiously gaming out a bigoted way of thinking.
He never quite knew how he honed in on them. She was probably the youngest person at the kickoff reception, apart from himself, but that wasn’t it. Maybe it was something about the modest cut of the neck on her dress, or the reasonable but high-heeled shoes that showed flashes of pale ankle between their straps almost apologetically. It didn’t matter. By the time he was close enough to make out her name tag—Bethany Stirling, Master in Public Policy candidate, George Washington University—he was sure he was right. He brushed a stray piece of a deviled egg hors d’oeuvre off of his new Diesel jeans, pulled his shirt cuffs down along his wrists until they peeked out from under his blazer’s sleeves, and checked his short shock of hair in a mirror along the ballroom wall to ensure it still swept to a point somewhere above its forehead. His freckles from the summer had started to fade, but he imagined he still looked like a guy who spent a healthy amount of time in nature. Another chance to get it all right.

They shook hands and exchanged D.C. origin stories as they ordered drinks. It turned out they were both biding their time. This was his first teaching gig, he told her. She’d been on the Middle East desk at the State Department, she explained, before the change in administrations.

“A lot of what we’re seeing now in terms of the popular uprisings in Egypt, in Libya, gosh, all the way back to Tunisia, we laid the groundwork for that,” she said.
“Cheers,” said the wolf, lifting his rum-and-tonic to her.

“You’d never see Secretary Rice celebrate it,” she went on, taking a stuffed grape leaf from the tray as it passed. “Never her way, tooting her own horn. That trickles down, too, you know? Everyone I worked with’s out getting their masters’ part-time, keeping their heads down, letting things take their course, waiting for the next thing.”

“Including you?” asked the wolf, arching an eyebrow.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “I mean, there’s always a think tank or policy shop that’ll take a State alum while they’re finishing up a degree at Trachtenberg, but I was lucky to get this spot at Aumerle House.”

“Ah, lobbying,” said the wolf. “The big bucks.”

“We’re a full-service firm,” she said, stiffening her back a bit. The wolf checked his distance to her. Respectful. Nothing for her to worry about. Just let her keep talking. “It’s more the variety,” she was saying. “I can be out helping the sweetener choice team one day, back in Midland on the energy choice—”

“Hold up,” said the wolf. “Sweetener choice?”

Bethany blushed. “There’s this huge push to demonize high-fructose corn syrup, right?” she said. “Plenty of sugar beet farmers eager to see that nipped in the bud. I mean, it’s the same as any other darn sugar you’re gonna put into your drink! Carbs are carbs!”

“I’m an aspartame man, myself,” said the wolf.

“Well, there you go,” she said, giving him a big grin. The tension eased out of her stance. “You want to get cancer, that’s your choice.”
“Demonizing my lifestyle instead of demonizing corn syrup, OK, that’s cool.” The wolf put his empty glass down and made a twirling motion with his finger at the bartender, pretending not to notice the slight roll of the other man’s eyes as he poured the wolf another rum-and-tonic.

“I didn’t think disaster recovery guys had much of a lifestyle,” she said.

“Oh no, we do,” said the wolf. “We all kind of hang together out there. There’re plenty of contracts to go around. Bud over there? Big guy, plaid shirt, red Crocs? He’s probably the oldest. Got started after Hurricane Andrew. Most of this crowd is Katrina-adjacent, though.”

Bethany shivered. “Katrina,” she said. “I was finishing up at Hillsdale when that happened.”

“Yeah,” said the wolf, nodding. Hillsdale. Baptist school, wasn’t it? His mouth began to water and he took a long sip of his drink to cover it. She watched him, waiting for his own Katrina story. “School for me, too,” he finally said. “Holy Cross, ’06. Didn’t get into this line of work until Ike, though, down in Galveston. One of the big guys picked me up when I decided I couldn’t take the McKinsey lifestyle.”

“And now you’re out on your own, huh?” she said, glancing at the nametag on his blazer’s lapel. “‘Little Wolf’? Funny name for a consulting shop.”

“I thought Aumerle House loved small businesses,” said the wolf, maintaining eye contact over the lip of his plastic glass.

“That’s why they’re letting me visit y’all here,” she said with a smile. West Texas, guessed the wolf. Between the way she’d said back in Midland and
that very specific choice to not break out y’all until he mentioned Galveston, it seemed like a safe bet. “I get to do some thesis research,” she went on, “and they get to crow about how much better it’d be if FEMA butted out and left it to folks like you.”

“You’re researching us, huh?” asked the wolf. “Private enterprise in every field is a pretty normal function of a market economy.”

“I get that most problems have market solutions,” she said, “I mean, I think they’d fire me if I didn’t get that. But it’s fascinating to hear you talk about a long-term community of disaster specialists hanging around together.”

He cast his line. “Helps if you believe in what you do.”

She took the bait. “Do you?”

“Mmm,” said the wolf. “Am I an interview subject now?”

“No, no!” she said, blushing again. “This is just… conversation.”

“If I gave you my card, could we set up an interview?” He kept his hands by his sides. He had her now. No sense in being presumptuous.

“Oh!” she said. “Well, sure! I mean, I’m just getting started—”

“Dinner, then,” said the wolf. “Low stakes. I keep wanting an excuse to go to Founding Farmers.”

“Sure!” she repeated, slightly louder than she’d probably intended, then glanced around to see if anyone noticed. “I mean—”

“Great,” said the wolf. Now he went for the card, drawing it out of his inner pocket and handing it to her in one continuous motion. “That’s my cell number on there,” he told her. “Text me tomorrow, or whenever you’ve got time.”
“It hit me when I volunteered out in Ludhiana,” said Elissa as she ran her hand through the hair on the wolf’s chest. “It was hard to describe except as an emptiness, you know?”

“Mmm,” said the wolf, gently squeezing her shoulder.

“I was definitely one of those save-the-whales, flower-children type of girls growing up, but also, my parents were philosophy professors.” She stared at her own fingers, as if hypnotizing herself. “They raised us to be empiricists, so there wasn’t any discussion of anything other than what we could rationally prove. That made life hard when I wanted to, say, go to the playground or stay out past curfew.”

“Ha, sure,” said the wolf.

“Their whole philosophy was just like, people believe different things, don’t be a snotty atheist, there’s a good reason for why the rules are the way they are, all that good stuff.”

“Public school in the suburbs, debate classes…”

“I was the student chair of the county recycling program from fifth through eighth grade.”

“Way to go, tiger.” The wolf gave her a congratulatory pat. She pushed off his chest and rolled onto her back, trapping his arm underneath her on the bed.

“Don’t patronize me,” she laughing. “You’re thirty, not fifty.”
“Oh, no,” he groaned, giving her a pitiful look. “How ever am I getting out of this one?”

“Just gonna have to put up with it,” said Elissa.

The wolf looked around for options. Elissa had given away the frame for her box spring and mattress before she’d met him, and so the bed sat on the bare parquet floor at the center of what otherwise might have been a spacious studio in Washington Heights. Between classes and church, she told the wolf, she spent so little time there. It was important to have the most useful thing in the house be the most readily accessible. Before she’d met him, she could go from locking the door to falling asleep in three minutes. He was ruining her average.

With his free hand, the wolf reached slowly for his phone, plugged into a long cord just beyond his reach. Elissa rolled on top of the wolf, nose-to-nose with him.

“Don’t you dare,” she said. “I thought you wanted to hear this story.”

“I do!” said the wolf, wrapping his now-free arms around her back and giving her a quick peck on the lips. “Unless you have other ideas.”

She wriggled loose and settled back into the position where they’d started the conversation, on her side facing him with his arm around her shoulder. “It’s so easy to get distracted when I’m with you,” she said.

“Mmm,” said the wolf. “So: Ludhiana.”

“Ludhiana,” she began again. “It was my junior year at Brown. I didn’t want to lose a semester studying abroad, but I didn’t want to go home over the
summer either, so I signed up for a volunteer gig. I knew nothing about India, definitely nothing about the industrial north. You ever been?”

“No,” said the wolf. “I’d like to.”

“Skip Ludhiana,” said Elissa. “It’s… rough. And again, I’m not some stay-in-palaces, ride-the-elephants girl, right? I was out there every day, living in the staff quarters at the hospital, helping with intake at the women’s clinic, but it was… a lot.”

“What do you mean?” asked the wolf.

“Well, when you’re as pale as I am and have hair so blonde it’s almost white in the summer, you get a lot of attention if you try and go anywhere. Not just catcalls, or guys trying to sell you cell phones that don’t work, but, like, women handing you their children. So I couldn’t really go out much, not on foot. My world got very small. I started seeing the same women coming back, some with bruises, some pregnant for the eighth or ninth time despite the doctors telling them their bodies couldn’t take it. We talked about family planning, about IUDs. The women were always so quiet. Sometimes they’d say they’d do it, but so few did. I started dreading getting up in the morning.”

“Yeah,” said the wolf. “I would, too.”

“Anyhow, one of the other girls who was volunteering there invited me to join her prayer group.”

“That’s an odd invitation.”

“Honestly, I was so desperate to see anyone who wasn’t a patient or a nurse, I said yes.”
“And that’s where it happened?”

“No,” said Elissa. She paused. The wolf nestled closer to her. When she went on, her voice was quieter, like she was shrinking into herself. “It was a couple kids reading psalms and talking about whether they’d get married before college ended. This girl who invited me gave me a spare Bible, told me I should read aloud whatever spoke to me, and… I just sat there.”

“Jeez,” said the wolf.

“It’s dumb to think about now,” she said, “but I remember so vividly sitting in this little room on the other side of the planet with this book I had no interest in reading and being like ‘I don’t have a boyfriend I can call to laugh about this with.’ I was so alone. I felt like a failure.”

“How’d you make it through the rest of the summer?” asked the wolf.

“I didn’t,” said Elissa. “I came home early. My parents said it was ‘a learning experience’ and I picked up temp work in Providence to help cover the change fee for my tickets. School let me move into my dorm at the start of August, when all those rich high school kids are there at their ‘pre-college programs.’ I just sat in my room whenever I wasn’t working, listening to them run up and down the halls. I stopped eating. This one place I was working reception at told me to go home because I fainted coming out of the bathroom.”

“That’s awful,” said the wolf.

“But what was I gonna do, call my parents? Tell the school? They can take away your scholarship money if you go on health leave, did you know that?”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” growled the wolf.
“Anyhow, either that was a Friday or I took the next day off, I forget. But I was lying in bed and all the kids were at an event or something. It was finally quiet. I closed my eyes and begged for something to fill this emptiness in me. I’d finished all the other books I’d brought along and had been kind of absentmindedly flipping through the Bible at night so I didn’t spend all my time online, and when I picked it up in that moment…” She smiled at the wolf, tears running down her face.

“That was it?” asked the wolf.

“That was it,” said Elissa. “I don’t know what to tell you. I certainly didn’t know what it was in that moment. I just felt full, like I’d done a complete one-eighty. I realized later when I started going to the little Peacemakers group up there that I’d experienced the grace of God.” Her voice strengthened. “I was feeling like, OK, I am worthless, everything I’ve done has added up to nothing, and all of a sudden someone’s telling me that’s all right, you’re forgiven. And, like, forgiven! Given permission to go back out into the world, to know that you’re gonna fail and fail over and over again but that someone out there has his arms around you and will not let you down.”

Elissa sank onto his chest, exhausted. It was late, the wolf realized. The dim little overhead light fixture flickered as thunder rolled over the city.

“How do you still feel that way?” asked the wolf. “Forgiven?”

“When I feel close to God,” said Elissa. “Not when I’m cramming for a midwifery exam or something, but when I’m singing in the choir. Or when you asked me if I wanted to get a drink after my intake shift at the hotel.”
“Really?” asked the wolf. “Walking through the Rockaways in the dead of winter, all that ice and sand everywhere? I thought that was a crappy first date.”

“Yeah, well,” murmured Elissa. “In the face of all that destruction it’s good to be reminded that you’re enough, enough to be loved just as you are.”

“Mmm,” said the wolf.

“You are, you know, right?” asked Elissa.

The wolf gently moved Elissa’s head back onto her pillows before getting up to turn off the light. “Maybe this time,” he said. She was already asleep.

_Emergency Breakwater Repair Operations_  
_Long Beach, CA_  
_Sepetember - December 2014_

He heard Karen coming long before he could see her. While the guys at the construction trailer started yelling after her, then at one another, he pretended to be studying the cruise ships in the harbor, occasionally glancing down at his clipboard to see if he could gauge how close she was out of the corner of his eye.

“We’re gonna need to talk,” shouted Karen, as soon as she thought the wolf was within appropriate shouting distance.

“I can’t deal with this right now,” the wolf barked back, his yellow reflective vest flapping in the wind.

“I don’t think you have much of a choice,” Karen said, stopping next to him. Behind her, one of the men who’d tried to slow her down pointed frantically to his own hard hat and then to her long black hair whipping perilously close to the winch mechanism for the scaffold beneath the concrete berm the wolf and Karen were standing on top of. The men working down below laughed as Karen
and the wolf walked back towards the trailer. Que pendejo, the wolf heard one say. Que pendejo el lobo.

“I don’t suppose you know why this showed up,” Karen was saying, waving the opened letter in his face.

“Taking my lunch, boys, punch me out,” said the wolf to the assembled crew, clenching his jaw and escorting Karen out past the construction perimeter. The foreman waved him off with a knowing smirk.

“The letter’s not gonna change because you’re not wearing your goddamn hard hat, man,” said Karen. “This isn’t an offer. It’s a teaching schedule. When were you planning to tell me you were going to North Carolina?”

He rounded the corner, out of view of the entrance to the job site, and turned on his heel to face her. She walked into him.

“Soon,” he hissed, clapping his palms on her shoulders as if to shake sense into her. He had a full six inches on her, and so even when she scrambled away, he felt himself looming. He backed off, shaking his head and raising his hands in apology. “When I had a minute.”

“Is it money? You always said this wasn’t your typical—”

“There are no typical jobs,” the wolf sighed. “And no, I don’t need money. You have no idea how much this job paid me. The West Coast has no clue how to deal with hurricanes. With what I’ve saved, if I get through a full semester teaching at UNC, I’ll have enough to make a down payment next summer.”
“In LA?” asked Karen, her eyes widening. The wolf looked down at her shoes, caked in mud from the site, and said nothing. She shoved him, slamming both of her hands into his chest. He didn’t move. “Answer me, goddamnit.”

“No,” he said.

The envelope fell from her hand. He bent over to pick it up. She shoved him again, and this time he went down, falling to the cracked sidewalk and splaying out onto his back. The cigarette behind his ear fell out and rolled into the empty street. Now she towered over him.

“I can’t believe you,” she said. “I joked with Jiyin at fellowship on the Sunday after the storm that we were gonna get hurricane boyfriends to shake up our lives. Is this God telling me to be careful what I wish for?”

“If you hadn’t gone through my mail—” began the wolf.

“You never open your mail!” shouted Karen. “You leave it on a pile next to the fridge and hope it goes away! Forgive me for taking the liberty of cleaning your shitty apartment! I thought I was being nice!”

The wolf closed his eyes and tried to envision his place in Silver Lake. A curtain separating the bedroom from the kitchen. A tiny TV perched on the windowsill opposite the loveseat that’d been left in the nook of a living room. It would be easy to sell pretty much everything. He wasn’t sure why he’d given Karen a key, except she’d asked and he’d already gotten hers a month after they’d met, when he took her and her roommates out to dinner after church. What a smart guy, one of them said when they thought he was out of earshot. Maybe not.
When he raised his head to look around, Karen was squatting beside him.

“Where’d you go?” she asked. She’d asked him that a lot, recently, when he stared past her ear at brunch or sat silently on the other end of the line when she called to wish him goodnight.

The wolf blinked and changed the subject. “I’m sorry you had to find out like that,” he said. “I keep telling you I’m trying to be a better person. I just couldn’t... you know.”

Karen sighed. “I’ve had are-we-or-aren’t-we shitty non-relationships last longer than this,” she told him. “This was three months of my life. You suck, don’t get me wrong, but you were slightly better at sucking than others.”

The wolf chewed that over. “You’re not going to try and work it out with me, huh?” he asked.

Karen let out a single “ha!” and sat down on the pavement beside him. “I went through all the stages of grief in the car on the way down here,” she said. “Long Beach is far, man.”

“Yeah,” said the wolf.

“Now it just hurts,” Karen said. “What the hell, man. You were, like, bang on, ready for this, go-to-Disneyland-on-a-second-date into me. You learned how to cook bulgogi to convince me to sleep with you. I met guys at church who didn’t come with me to fellowship as often as you did. My mom didn’t believe you weren’t Korean. When we held hands and said the Lord’s Prayer, what were you even praying for?”
The wolf sat up and looked toward the water. “Honestly, by the end there,” he said, “I kept asking if I would ever feel what you were feeling.”

Karen put her hand on his shoulder and hoisted herself up. She brushed the dirt off of the seat of her jeans and let the wolf go. “Get in, get real, get out,” she said as she walked away. “Hurricane boyfriend.”

_Tulane University, Hurricane Katrina Summer Symposium_  
_New Orleans, LA_  
_June - September 2015_

The wolf put out his cigarette and stepped over the worn names chiseled into the bricks of the sidewalk outside the squat concrete structure that housed the Friendly Bar, careful not to wear them down further. Per the Jesuits, it was bad luck to step on a seal or symbol set into the ground. They might be proud the wolf remembered that much from Holy Cross’s orientation, at least.

Alone at the counter, Matt rooted around in a bowl of Chex mix with one hand and sipped his beer with the other, letting the beads of moisture on the bottle drip into his wispy soul patch of a beard. His Pelicans jersey hung off his bony shoulders. The wolf watched him from the doorway for a moment.

“We’re open,” the bartender finally said, as if to break the tension.

“I know,” replied the wolf.

Matt raised his head but didn’t turn around. “Fuck off, wolf,” he said.

“I remembered you always talked about coming here,” said the wolf, walking up to the bar and pulling up a stool one seat away from Matt’s, as if that would be enough distance to get away cleanly if things went south. “It’s nice.
Pretty much my local, now. Friendly, like the sign says. But I kept wondering if I’d ever catch up with you.”

Matt shook his head. “I wish I could say I’m surprised,” he said, “but you were always fond of the chase, wolf.”

“Some things never change,” said the wolf.

The bartender slowly unscrewed the cap on a small glass bottle of tonic water and went into the back to track down more ice.

“Everyone comes to New Orleans looking for something,” the wolf went on, mirroring Matt’s hunch and thousand-yard stare.

“Or maybe to get away from something,” snapped Matt. “Put on a mask for a while and pretend to be somebody they’re not.”

“I don’t think that about you,” said the wolf, keeping his voice low.

“I believe that,” said Matt. “I wasn’t talking about me, wolf.”

The bartender returned, gave the two men a once-over, and shook his head as he poured the bucket of ice into one of the two tubs of his back sink. “Y’all better not scare away the regulars,” he muttered.

“So, what, you think this is some flash-in-the-pan thing—” began the wolf, but Matt turned to face him, wiry tanned arms so tense the veins popped out across his skinny biceps, and let out something between a growl and a scoff.

“No,” said Matt. “No, I know you better than that, wolf: There are thousands of sorry-ass boys who come down to this city looking for people like me, people who they can fuck and still go home saying ‘this don’t make me a faggot cuz the parts still line up,’ but that’s not you, wolf—”
The wolf raised his own voice to cut the other man off. “The hell’re you saying, Matt? Check my driver’s license, I live here. I own a house in the Marigny even if I only stay in it a few weeks a year and goddamnit, yes, wanting you makes me queerer than a three-dollar bill, it did then and it does now, and I don’t know what you want me to do about it. Take out an ad in the paper? Does anyone still read it?”

“No,” said the bartender, setting the wolf’s rum-and-tonic down a safe distance from his gesticulating hands.

“Fuck off,” barked the wolf.

Matt giggled and took another swig of his beer. “Aw, shit,” he said. “At the height of your powers, wolf, you could sweep a boy off his feet real easy.”

The wolf stared at Matt until the other man met his gaze. “I did, once.”

Matt looked away. “Well,” he said, “you ain’t gonna fool me again, wolf.”

The wolf stood up from his stool and slapped the bar. “You think it isn’t real? You think I don’t feel something for you? You think I didn’t clock you the second you walked into my seminar at UNC? I could feel my mouth—”

“Watering, yeah,” said Matt, sighing and putting his head in his hands. “I read your emails. You didn’t clock me for shit, by the way. Do you even know what ‘clocking’ means, old man? You saw a skinny girl with a flat chest in slacks and a button-down shirt and you thought I was Patti Smith or something like that. That’s the kind of music you like, right, wolf? Old music that sounds like it means something? That girl you saw is finally dead, wolf, and you gave me the courage to kill her when you left her in Chapel Hill, North Carolina with a note by her bed
and a check for two thousand dollars so you could feel better about it.” Tears dribbled down his palms and onto the sticky concrete floor. “God, you were the first person I told my name to, wolf.”

“And you mine,” said the wolf, easing himself back down onto the barstool.

“That’s not the same and you know it,” said Matt, giving him a glare. “You don’t have a real name anymore, far as I’m concerned. You told me that story because you’re all wolf now.”

“You were the first one I told it to, Matt,” the wolf said, his tone approaching tenderness. Matt didn’t move.

“And how many more people since me have you told your horseshit Galveston story to when they ask you if you believe in God?” asked Matt.

“Do you still believe?” asked the wolf in return.

Matt slowly swiveled in his seat to face the wolf head-on. The wolf studied his body language: legs splayed open, basketball shorts hitched up enough to show the thick hair on his calves and shins. Their eyes met. The wolf leaned forward across the stool that separated them, putting his elbow down on it and cradling his chin in his palm so that he had to look up at Matt to see him. Matt reached out and cupped the wolf’s cheeks in his hands. For a minute, neither man moved. Then Matt sniffled and gave the wolf a half-smile.

“Boy, you must get a thrill even asking that question,” said Matt. “You know the answer’s still yes. I don’t believe there’s any other way I could be who I
am if there wasn’t some God giving me the grace to see my way right. That’s why you tracked me down. You miss hearing me say it.”

Matt brought his hands down. The wolf shuddered. Matt shook his head.

“You see?” he said. “You don’t want me. You want that.”

**Governor’s Office of Storm Recovery & Resiliency**
**Hamilton, Bermuda**
**November 2016 - June 2017**

“There are times on Twitter when I just mute every word I don’t want to hear,” said Joanne. She was wearing a linen pantsuit, even with the humid weather outside the conference room, but she never seemed to sweat. Maybe the British didn’t sweat, the wolf thought to himself, or at least Joanne didn’t, now that she had to manage a ragtag team of fifteen. “The word ‘Brexit,’” she was saying. “The word ‘Trump,’ the words ‘hurricane,’ ‘cyclone,’ even ‘storm.’”

“How will you catch up on American sports?” asked the wolf, taking a hit from his vape pen. “Those are all great team names. Even ‘Brexit.’”

Joanne shot him a look from across the table. “Really a disgusting habit, you know,” she said.

“Sports?” asked the wolf.

“Vaping,” said Joanne. “Though you do seem to be one for pushing boundaries.”

The wolf blinked. “Hold up, what?” he said. “Oh, Joanne, come on, I didn’t say anything wrong last night.”

“You remember all of last night, do you?”
“I do, yes,” said the wolf, straightening in the cheap office chair and straining to put the vape pen back into his breast pocket. He’d pulled something in his right shoulder on the flight over and it’d been nagging him ever since. He was breaking all three of his rules by being here: never subcontract himself out to any other storm recovery contractor, never do work on an island smaller than Manhattan, and never accept payment in anything other than dollars. Maybe the right shoulder was the universe’s way of telling him he was right.

“It’s that woman’s first job out of university,” said Joanne.

“Cambridge, yes, very nice,” replied the wolf, twirling in his seat to convey his disdain for the conversation. “Good hire, Joanne, full marks. She could have gone to work anywhere but she wants to make a difference. She played the organ for her local parish, did you know that? She’s looking for a good High Anglican service around here. She asked me about my first job and I told her she’d need to put a few more drinks in me if she wanted the full story. We had a delightful and perfectly civil conversation in which we agreed to follow up.”

Joanne sighed. “I know this isn’t your typical kind of contract,” she said, “and I do appreciate you coming in under the River Horse team on such short notice, really, I do, but you must understand that your reputation somewhat precedes you.”

The wolf stopped twirling and narrowed his eyes. “My reputation?”

“Let me put it this way,” Joanne said. “You and I have been to most of the big conferences in the last few years, stood around at the same mixers, answered the same inane questions. Patterns start to emerge.”
“I don’t want to hear about how I only own three shirts,” said the wolf.

“Or how your Diesel tube jeans are no longer age-appropriate?” asked Joanne.

“OK, that hurt,” said the wolf.

“That’s life,” said Joanne, with a shrug. “Talk to me when you hit fifty and even men like Bud start pretending you don’t exist. But honestly, now. I wonder if it’s because most of us in this profession are men, or because I tend to be the only non-American in the room, but when you see someone who interests you, and I mean, interests you, I actually think that you alter the way you walk.”

“Hold up, what?” asked the wolf.

“It’s as if you…” Joanne trailed off, waving her hand in a circle as if conjuring the right word. “Catch a scent. I don’t know, I suppose it’s nothing, and certainly no one’s ever complained to me, but when you walk up to certain people—and it’s always women, by the way—you have that hungry look about you. I can’t be the only one who sees it. It’s getting more pronounced as you age and they don’t. I’d hoped we might not see it out here, with you out of your element, but no, there it was, right in front of me, last night. It’s vulpine, almost.”

“Lupine,” whispered the wolf.

“Pardon?” said Joanne, but the wolf was staring at the conference table. An uncomfortable silence descended on the windowless room. From outside, the faint roar of the diesel generators gave the only indication of a world beyond themselves. It could be any city on the eastern seaboard, the wolf thought. It could be any city on the planet. 

End excerpt.
God’s eye in the form of a raging storm had zeroed in on El Emperador and was beating the sorry trawler to hell and gone. There was no question that my mother had arranged for it to happen. The storm. Even without knowing I was onboard. No way could she have known my whereabouts. I was far from her, far from New York. I never did that again. Not for a long time. That was the kind of power she wielded.

Shhh, baby, quiet, baby, Pilín said.

Pilín my old man. Pilín, determined to read despite the rocking of the boat.

I had not said anything. The living end, one of her favorite proclamations, was resounding in me, an undertone to wind and water, ropes and rigging, sliding helter-skelter against the bulwark. Pilín and I heard these ominous sounds from our casket-sized hold below deck. The wooden hull was creaking, bending, as if it, as if we, might snap. His penlight provided eerie light, fading out, returning to glow, hope, then dread. The muffled, mournful clanging of a brass bell was insistent. The living end. The living end. The living end.

Shhh, baby.

I curled tight and peered through the crook of my arms at the simplicity of our dungeon, the no-frills-ness, his frail bulb. In spirit, it was not unlike our spartan box in New York, where we had a mattress, desk with lamp and chair, two
spindly stools in the kitchen. Pilín’s books provided color and texture. Had the look of a one-room library. Come to think of it, our kitchen was also a passageway, like the galley of the rank wreck.

   It took me a while to realize we were in the bait well. Plastered to the sides were swirls of sinewy dregs – guts, shell fragments, random antennae – calcified and shiny. From an angle, they were an abstract design in relief. I saw eyebrows and a mouth, pursed and severe. My mother, because I saw her everywhere, and a sword handle, like the uncompromising archangel in Masaccio’s *Expulsion*, suspended over the crestfallen couple, pointing, *go, go* – her grief, his shame, stumbling out of the garden. My mother the archangel, *go, go, away, away,* yanking line from her reel. I wanted her to be that powerful. Perverse as that was.

   I curled tighter and rocked to resist the motion of the boat.

   “Baby, I’m trying to translate. You’re hitting my leg.”

   I was too agitated to be outraged. Not at her. Never got angry at her. At Pilín, I mean. That we were on the godforsaken boat.

   We met in the Art History library. He sidled up to ask if I was in the major. I was planning on it, still a sophomore. Outside, we walked for a few blocks, he was attentive and curious. It occurred to me that my mother would think he was someone who supported my goals.

   I am aware of the dissonance. Saying, on the one hand, that she arranged with God to hex our boat and take us to the brink of death, maybe even unto death,
while, on the other hand, saying that she would have wanted something good for me in my first real relationship. I see the dichotomy. How could she be those two people? She was one person. I had one powerful wish.

She and I were still very close when I met Pilín. She did not find the age gap alarming. She was all over the idea of a staid elder, who would keep me away from boys. Erudite fellow reading tomes by a lamp in the window. Who would bring me milk, make my sandwiches, edit my papers. She was already thinking about handing me over. She seemed to think that Pilín was mild mannered, a gentle, fatherly sort.

She was wrong. He was mother mother mother. All the time mother. Forever and always mother.

I would pipe up sometimes just to get a shhh, baby, never tiring of his low rumble.

More dissonance. When we got married – six months or so before the boat trip and not long before I graduated – I wanted the ceremony to go in the way she would have liked. Meaning it should have spiritual substance. That is why, when we ate in a diner downtown, I tied the thin paper from straws into wedding rings. That is why I made Pilín stand outside the door to the County Clerk, and said, “God is smiling on us,” and asked him to say he agreed. “Yes,” he said. It is true that we needed all the help we could get, divine and otherwise, but it made no sense that she would have wanted things to go in a positive direction for me. That was the powerful wish talking. I have to reevaluate everything now.
Shhh baby, quiet baby.

We had a dirty blanket to sit on. Eliseo, our shirtless, barrel-bellied, chain-smoking man at the helm, had thrown it in after he lifted a hatch and pointed down. We obeyed. What else could we do? The sky had darkened and the cradle had begun to rock. Pilín was having a hard time standing. Hips and low back gave him trouble.

We had been wandering the dock at Punta del Este when Eliseo spied us and waved madly in our direction. Before I knew it, Pilín was steering my elbow toward the wreck, asking about a cheap ferry to Buenos Aires.

We could not afford the cushy bus and zippy hydrofoil, the way we had traveled to Uruguay several days earlier, eager for a side trip from our side trip — both of which became briefer, sharper instances of our main trip, which is to say, our lives together at all times, in all places.

Eliseo invited us on board, gestured around the deck, su ferry, he croaked. He poked a thumb at his chest, soy capitán! He bore no signifiers of authority. Hay descuento para jóvenes, eyebrows up, flashing tarry teeth. Truth in jest kind of thing. He was surprised when I pulled out the pesos — all we had left — and pressed them into his palm. He shut one eye tight to count the money. Pilín had already found a barrel to sit on and was reading.

Eliseo may have wondered what he was doing with a girl who paid his way, carried his pack, was young enough to be his daughter. Technically. I was twenty-one to Pilín’s thirty-nine – point nine, he was on the verge of a birthday. People
Jennifer Christman

wondered. I noticed that in the park, on movie lines, and especially on campus, professors, students, hangers-out, hangers-on — Pilín being one himself, approaching outlier status age-wise. We got some stares — not horrified, curious, maybe just bored ones.

The storm was overkill, a rotten way for her to put an end to me and Pilín. To be so real about it. But nothing about the situation was new or different. The effect of it, being tossed and blown. *Lo mismo*, Pilín would have said. But he was busy with his Ancient Greek. Translating with his cube-shaped travel dictionary. Would have been a comfort if he had said it: *nothing has changed.*

Nothing had. I had been living with the same or similar sensations since the Big Split — what I called the thing that happened between me and her. When she said *I have to withdraw from you.* And I said *what does that mean?* And she said *I have to withdraw from you.* And then she hung up the phone. I don’t remember the date or day, except where I was when I called her. This was the dark ages, because I was at a pay phone near the library. I had been calling and calling for days, leaving pathetic messages, and she wasn’t calling back. It felt like months since I had talked to her or seen her, but it had only been a couple of weeks. And I was having this sensation. My mind and body were disconnected, like I was there but not there. I pinched my arms and legs constantly during those weeks leading up to the Big Split.

I called her so many times that I needed to leave the phone booth, get more quarters, come back, keep trying. I wasn’t getting her answering machine — the
Jennifer Christman

phone at her office should have rung eight times before the machine went on. She was picking up after the first ring and hanging up. Finally, she answered, and the above lines were spoken. That was the Big Split. I must have started by saying something, because she said nothing. I heard her breathing. *Mom? I know you can hear me.* Is what I said.

Not long after, Pilín and I got married.

The Big Split gets extreme reactions – *your mother what? you what? she what? when? what did you do? don’t you care? what if she died? how can you live?* I have a low tolerance for extreme reactions. Even now, if I have to mention what happened, I elide, I slide, I skirt, I glide, like the story is under glass or I am under glass. *You’re so calm.*

A mother severing ties with her 21-year old should make a sound. The literalness of her *living end*, the foreverness of her *withdraw*, the expanse of our Big Split should have been thunderous. It wasn’t.

There was no arguing back and forth. No stomping. There was no lying prostrate, no crying uncle. There were no hoarse voices, no dishes broken, no profanities. No shoes hurled, no doors slammed, no breasts beaten to gods, no echo in alleyways, no triggering of car alarms, no triggering of fault lines. There was no weird weather or water main breaks. No police arrived on the scene with guns drawn. No neighbors watched from their windows. No dogs howled. Not a one.

It was dead-float quiet. Only reeling inside.
Unlike she and I, Pilín and I fought constantly.

“Ssshhh. Baby. Stop now.”

“Juana was ogling you.”

Juana, cousin Mario’s wife. Blonde, toothy, and tan. We had dinner with them our first night in BA, and from the second we sat, she stared luridly at Pilín and repeated versions of the line, loosely translated, ‘you’re so much bigger than I thought you’d be’.

The boat shook in a grotesquely wrong way.

“Did you feel that?”

“Shhh. It’s fine.”

I sensed hairline fissures in the rotting hull widening and deepening. There was a sort of groaning beneath us, but I felt it in my ears. I hummed loudly to make a vibration.

“Baby, ssshhh.”

“She was touching your leg.” I had dropped my napkin to look under the tablecloth, and saw Juana’s strong fingers around Pilín’s thigh, squeezing femur-bruising squeezes. Meanwhile, her other hand held a fork and was inserting grilled testicles into her mouth. I was shocked. But it was shock, like, embarrassed shock. Like shame at my inadequacies as a woman shocked. I sat there and chewed meat.

“It was a sign of affection.”

“She wants to sleep with you.”
“So what, baby, she’s horny.”

“But she wants to sleep with you.”

“She would have to get a signal from me, that I was agreeable.”

“But you let her hand stay there. She could take that as an agreeable signal.”

“I didn’t want to embarrass Mario.”

Mario would not have noticed. He was leaning back in his chair, checking out men carrying trays of parrillada.

In the dark, dank well, the storm, the commotion, the fights with Pilín, were distractions from the silence, and the strangeness of estrangement from her.

I came up with Big Split as a way to remind myself what had happened. Because to remember it suddenly — which was how it came to me — was not good.

Big Split, Big Split, Big Split.

It was, it is, an accurate phrase, because what happened struck me dumb, like a tetherball hit with abundant force. Such abundant force that it flew off its pole, and over a fence, and into the atmosphere. Because I was that child who could not leave her mother’s side. From early days, way before my father left, I was that fretful kid, who never wanted to be separate from her.

First day of kindergarten in Oldham, she had dropped me off in the classroom and was walking home. She was already at the far side of the field at the school and heard a siren. She always told it this way, making the noise — woooooo0000000-wereeereeeeee -- with her eyebrows arched, and lips and mouth
contorting, her chin jutting out. It got louder. She didn’t see police or an ambulance, the street was empty, and it got even louder. It dawned on her to turn around and there I was, tearing across the grass, beelining toward her.

The boat lurched, then shook and convulsed. Instead of creaking, we heard cracking, like fracturing. The hatch opened, water cascaded in, chains and barrels rolled overhead. Eliseo’s moon face appeared, slick with rain. Tormenta maldonada, una puta! And something about needing to save fuel because we couldn’t fight the swells. But that we shouldn’t worry. Sí, sí, gracias, Eliseo! Pilín shouted enthusiastically so that Eliseo would shut us back in. His dictionary was getting wet. Carajo! He was pissed, that’s how protective he was of the books.

“What is he going to do?”
“I don’t know. Shhh, baby.”
“He said something about the engine.”
“He’s turning it off, or down. He knows what he’s doing.”
“How do you know he knows what he’s doing?”
“Shhh.”
“That’s a terrible idea. This was a terrible idea.”
“I’m trying to concentrate, baby.”

With that, his bulb stopped flickering and went on permanent dim.

We were on El Emperador because, soon after we got to Punta del Este, he insisted we rent a car to visit a long-lost high school friend, Emilia – though,
technically, Pilín was the long-lost one. Her husband was away and she had young children, so couldn’t meet us. Pilín was especially tragic about it, if he couldn’t see her it would be the greatest loss he would ever know. I couldn’t fight that kind of despair. We got a car and drove northeast for hours, on shitty roads, basically to Brazil.

“You wanted to go.”

“I didn’t want to go. I went. It was the worst night of my life.”

“You said this was the worst night of your life.”

“Did you have sex with her?”

“Stop, baby. She’s like a sister. Her family took me in, they were my refuge.”

He lived with them his last year in Buenos Aires.

When they saw each other, there were tears, their bodies locked in a sustained embrace. I stood there. Emilia was nearly as tall as Pilín, and striking – chiseled features, broad and muscular. Amazon woman, basically. She scooped up her children with long arms. They crawled on Pilín, tiny creatures.

I had felt sick for most of the drive. She had put a futon in the garage. I went in and pulled the blanket over my head and didn’t come out until the morning. They talked late into the night. I couldn’t understand their easy back and forth, the accent. I slept, then woke up, sweaty and shaky. I heard Pilín’s soft laugh as the door to outside opened and closed, more laughter fading from the house, my eyes burning into the hours, dead quiet, except when one of her sons padded into the garage. He was around four, stood there, looking down at me. I said “Hi,” he said “hi.” Then he went back into the house. In the morning – the same morning of the
boat trip – Pilín was sprawled in the makeshift bed. There was a mountain of sand.

“I told you. We walked on the beach for maybe ten minutes.”

“Why was it in your hair?”

“Shhh baby, stop.”

It was in his scalp, white and tan flecks, like a bad case of lice. On his forehead, earlobes, all in the beard, embedded in his cheekbones like he’d fallen hard, and between his brows, hard. On his eyelids. Collarbones. 

*Stop baby, chrisssssake baby.*

I was wondering how Eliseo could see anything off the bow, when there was a sudden cessation of the grinding hum I had come to rely on. The engine — competing for primacy over the storm — had died. The boat rocked more viciously than ever and, then, a tremendous crash overhead.

Pilín, who had been clutching his precious books, dumped them in my lap. “Don’t let them get wet!”

He stood on his bad knees and shoved the hatch upward with the heels of his giant hands. It barely moved. The boom had broken from the mast and was laying on it like a downed tree limb. He got it to open a few inches.

“Qué pasó? Eliseo!” Water blew into his face and nets were falling into the well.

Eliseo hollered back, “*Agua en el motor. Una sudestada!*” — a weather phenomenon unique to the region, high winds and rain, a quasi-cyclone. Not
supposed to happen in the summer in Argentina. That one did. Because my mother. Not really, but it’s what I believed with all my heart.

“Qué mala suerte, che!” Pilin shouted back and slid down, shutting us in, the boat jerking side to side. His massive head and shoulders collided with the walls of the squalid box, and he pressed his tailbone further into the corner and used his legs to brace himself, never losing hold of his work. His body cast the shadow of a huge, strange-limbed dog. He was not a go-to person in the trenches, but I loved his unwillingness to surrender, his back-to-the-wall defiance in the face of odds, tempests, lesser forms of totalitarianism.

Previously he had been majestic. The way I saw him, in the beginning. Haunted and tragic, too, only in a captivating way. And strong, not just physically — though he was rangy, a tree, and when he wrapped his arms around me it was like being swaddled. He was a thinker, a scholar, across disciplines and eras. And, because he was not the most practical person, he was often learning extinct languages. His whole thing was alphabet as art form, which should not be confused with “lettering,” which is the art of drawing letters. Right there in the wee compartment, in the midst of the gale, he was planning his next language. Phoenician. It was between that and Aramaic, but Phoenician came first. These extinct forms were crucial to his research, or so he claimed. He went back and back and back in time.

He was not even ABD, he was NSD: Never Started Dissertation. And his minuscule stipend — hardly covering his rent — was always about to be cut, so
he was always about to be evicted. And he was chronically unemployed, because he only worked at places where he could study a new old language. I made enough with my library job to pay for food, movies, his book fines.

But he still called me baby (the emphasis more on “bee” than “bay”), and instead of saying “don’t worry” when I worried, he said shhh, like a mama. In baritone. That was still the same.

_Shhh, baby. Shhh._

_The living end_ echoed on. Maybe because I imagined him going headlong over the side of the _Emperador_, arms flailing, gasping, sputtering, inaudible in howling water and air — _baby, baby_, but I wouldn’t hear. That was my forlorn thought, as I tossed and turned – as we tossed and turned – with the refrain _Slip out the back, Jack, make a new plan, Stan_, even while those goofy lines played in my mind. Even when we were on the beach in Mar del Plata, a more fun part of the side trip, songs like _Love the one you’re with_, end-times songs.

The storm wore on, its waves no worse than the dreaded finality that had come over me. But he was the deflating life raft I was clinging to at that time. Had I listened carefully — and forgotten, for a moment, _big split, big split, big split_ — I would have detected a diminishment in Pilín’s ferocity. I would have heard a low growl, defensive, exhausted, from a wounded animal.

Eventually, the swells subsided, and just before dawn, _El Emperador_ pulled into the still-sleeping harbor at BA. We waited until sunup, when Pilín called Mario to get us.
Back at mamá’s, Pilín shuffled worse than ever – he blamed the cramped quarters – his limbs and spine operated independently. They, he, seemed loosely assembled. Turns out that if someone leaves home at the age of 19 and does not return for another twenty years, there is a reason.

_Fue un bruto!_ When we first got there, he said it often, maybe to remember it, like _Big Split._

_Fue un bruto!_ Each time, potent, each time, sharp and defiant, a new truth. It was the mantra he adopted the day we stepped inside mamá’s low-ceilinged hallway. Pilín said it whenever she waxed nostalgic about his father.

He had been a judge of some high court. Launched his belt buckle onto Pilín’s lower back on such a regular basis that his lumbar spine was a shiny purple knot of scar tissue. Sometimes I examined it.

_Stop, baby. Stop it, Florence._

Because Florence Nightingale.

_Stop baby. My L3._

Usually when he was trying to sleep.

_Shhh baby, stop, so tired._

He shambled rather than strode, slept poorly even when he was sapped. It was hard to untangle all the ways Pilín was busted. I believed that his sorrow had settled there, right in the core of his being. And that I could fix it.

Now he was muted: _fue un bruto._

I soured on mamá, and ate every alfajor from our stash — we had bought three boxes in Mar del Plata for her. Cookie-cakie confections reminiscent of
Mallomars but vastly better. Each alfajor was a small work of art, enrobed in chocolate and elaborately decorated with many-colored marzipan curlicues, gold leaf and powdered sugars, filled with dulce de leche or membrillo or nougat or wondrous fruit jellies between layers of cake the color of egg yolk. I would grab one at a time from the fridge, pop it in my mouth and clamp my jaws like a vise so all the loveliness melted in my mouth and what remained, compressed silken cake dregs, slid down my throat.

While I was packing, she smiled wide and warm, spoke sweetly, caringly. Gañasteis peso? Did I gain weight? I went overboard with the alfajores. And Pilín. The morning we left, he had a palm pressed to a photo, trying to cover every part of his father’s judicial regalia. And Pilín’s eyes, alert and quick to react, defend, fight — fue un bruto! — they had begun to dim.

But when his light had fizzled out and we sat in darkness, he had a winning way of understating the abjectly awful. He said we were ‘experiencing a bit of a bad time’, which he delivered in his low mellow tone and charming porteño accent, with its light esses, barely-touched tees, his tongue lifting gently over peaks — estamos pasando un momento un poco malo — filling my deepest insides, my cockleshells, with warm euphoria, and tempering all my fears of the living end. And swells that rose like walls and crashed over the bow, winds that caused our boat to tip, only added atmosphere. They were companion elements to Pilín and me, because we were forever sailing over the edge, falling into nothingness, disintegrating.
A Culling

Clint had been watching the cow die for weeks. That’s why, when his dad wordlessly took the rifle from its place on the living room wall, the feeling of responsibility cranked Clint’s gut until it cramped. That’s why he’s holding a flashlight in the middle of a pasture during a rainstorm. Its an autumn storm common enough to southern Indiana, the kind that heralds the change from brisk fall to bitter cold, the kind that pulses all day long from fine mist to downpour. It’s turned the pasture into the beginnings of a swamp. That’s why its better to do it now. She shouldn’t have to sit through this mess overnight.

She doesn’t have an official name – Clint had stopped naming the livestock after his first year in 4-H – but the dirty yellow tag hanging from the cow’s ear brands her as N26. If this were the first night Clint had to walk the pasture he might never have found her. But, it was day sixty-four by his reckoning, and he knew the spot well enough.

Twice a day a bag of sweet feed. Twice a day a five-gallon bucket of water. Twice a day cursing the animal for not laming out closer to the fence.

The results of Clint’s husbandry aren’t much good. The cow’s skin, tenting over pointed shoulder blades, spams in short bursts. The flashlight reveals a protruding ribcage, a non-existent haunch, and then the back hooves, swollen with infection, laying useless in the mud. A thick puss oozes from one and refuses to dilute despite the weather.

He can smell her. An earthy smell like the fresh chopping of silage. The smell of slow decay.
His dad grunts, a command in the monosyllabic communication
developed between a father and teenage son living by themselves for a better part
of a decade, and Clint is reminded that he’s an active participant in this event. He
brings the flashlight to the cow’s head as his dad brings the rifle to bear.

His dad mutters something that might be an apology, but Clint has never
heard the man apologize.

N26 offers nothing in return. Clint looks away, first at the cornfield, now
empty except for the bone-colored detritus left over from harvest, and then at the
sky, where a cluster of stars have found a break in the clouds. The staccato click
of the trigger cuts through the air like the snap of a giant’s finger.

The first time he met Cass was in third period Ag Science and right away
she made sure no one had the wrong idea why she was there. “I got put into Calc
One so I could use the grade padding,” she said during the teacher’s forced
icebreaker. Cass had a racing stripe. A streak of blonde in otherwise chestnut hair
that hung well past her shoulders. “That’s cool you’re all farm kids though. Salt of
the earth and all that. I can dig it.”

Cass was from Pittsburgh. A city Clint knew existed but had never thought
much about until that moment. From her t-shirt, Clint could tell she liked the kind
of music with fast guitar, heavy drums, and frontmen who scream more than they
sing. Music he could get behind if he needed to.

Eventually he asked her, only half-teasing, if the blonde part of her hair
felt any different than the brown. He was told to see for himself. After a light
brush of his fingertips, cautious as if electricity had caused the highlights instead of chemicals, he couldn’t help but be a bit disappointed when the two parts felt the same.

The night of their first date, Cass met Clint at the end of her gravel driveway and they headed towards town in his father’s beat-up F-150. It was the time of year when the town would appear suddenly to those passing through. One moment your car was flanked by corn stalks higher than the roof and then suddenly light poles appeared, a Dollar General, the tamed grass of yards, a trailer park, then a stop light, a gas station, three bars, a church, and then corn again just as sudden.

The days still had some length, so by the time the two had finished their meal of large-cut fries and pulled-pork sandwiches the sun hadn’t yet reached the tops of the trees. From the vinyl booth, they were able to look out the window and watch a Ford – a four door with a set of cab lights, black, and newer than the one they rode in – begin the three-quarter mile cruise of main street.

“So tell me,” Cass said, wrapping the blonde strands of her hair around her ring finger. “What is it that farm kids do for fun around here, when they’re not speeding up global warming just to show off their truck nuts?”

Clint found it odd the way she kept drawing the distinction between farm kids and everyone else. When your class is projected to graduate just under seventy and ninety-five percent of the county is designated farmland there isn’t anyone who isn’t from a farm. Even those who live in town and work at the IKE
electric plant like Cass’s dad, they’re only one degree of separation away, through a cousin or grandparent.

“We do what everyone else does I guess.” Clint picked at a small nick in the Formica table top with a dirty nail.

The black Ford with the cab lights cruised past and laid on the horn before it disappeared in a cloud of black exhaust. Rolling coal. “But that’s probably because farm kids are everyone.”

Clint didn’t bother to check if the truck had a plastic ball sack hanging from its hitch. He knew the driver would be back in about fifteen minutes, about as long as it took to loop around the used car lot on the other end of town just to come back and do it all again. Burning diesel, rolling coal, cruising roads so far out that the county didn’t bother replacing the street signs that were knocked down or stolen. Clint had tried it once.

“We do have fun though,” he said. There had been a part of him that knew this was where the night was headed. That the plan of dinner and a game of bowling in the next town over wouldn’t hold water. There would only be one thing he could show the girl both from Pittsburgh and a with a racing stripe that would keep her interest.

Cass propped her head on her arm. The blonde stripe of hair fell over her face. “Well then,” she said “let’s see it.”

After a couple of miles on one of the back roads without a street sign, Clint spotted what’s he’d been searching for and turned onto a dirt road flanked
by cornfields. From the passenger seat Cass said “Whoa there farm boy. Where we going?”

“It’s not far,” he said, hoping he sounded mysterious. They lumbered down the road, the truck feeling every pothole and dip. Dark green corn on both sides for miles. Cass stifled a yawn with the back of her hand and reached for the crank to lower the window.

Clint could swear the corn had its own sound, a rustling when the stalks rubbed together in the wind. A kind of loud whisper. The way it was in the movies. He knew it had to be in his head because there was no way he should have been able to hear it through Cass’s open window. Just like he shouldn’t have been able to hear it in his room at night.

The road ahead was empty. The town a tiny glow in the distance. The passenger side lit up in an electric blue and Clint knew she’d taken out her phone.

Screw it. It’d be dark soon enough.

He cut the wheel hard, braced himself against the turbulence of the truck barreling across the ditch. Cass screamed. Clint was screaming too. Their sounds layered on each other until they were unrecognizable. As the truck barreled forward, it wasn’t a feeling of being overwhelmed or powerless, but one of belonging that surged through Clint. The feeling that hooked him the night of his first ride.

He cut the wheel a second time, throwing the truck into a tight circle. Cass’s laughter was full of triumph and he suddenly felt her body against him and he was struck by how hot she felt.
The boy marveled at the way the white metal devoured the stalks. The cadence of the cobs as they struck the hood, he felt the thumps in his heart. He held the truck in the doughnut for as long as he dared. Only after it felt like the truck would shake to pieces underneath him did he let the engine idle and die.

The two sat, straining to hear anything beyond the click of the cooling engine block and their own ragged breathing.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” Cass said and laughed. Her face was flush. She slid out of the truck and Clint watched her from the rear-view mirror climb in to the bed. This became their thing.

That first night Clint tried pointing out the constellations.

Cass cut him off. “I know about the stars. My mom named me after one.”

A first, the metal of the truck bed was rough and cold against Clint’s back, but it wasn’t too long before he began to find it comfortable, surrounded by corn, the shrill cry of cicadas, and a clear sky.

Cass pointed to a collection of five stars near the Big Dipper. “That W-shape over there is me, Cassiopeia. Do they teach Greek myths out here?”

Everything Clint knew about Greek mythology had come from playing God of War on his Playstation. He didn’t recall beating down any monster by that name.

A nighttime chill began to settle across the field, and Clint was grateful for Cass’s body heat.
“She was a queen that got thrown into space because she thought her daughter was pretty. If that’s not some grade-A bad prophecy shit, I don’t know what is.”

Clint felt he should say something. Something along the lines of how he didn’t believe in prophecies but then he thought of the farm and he suddenly wasn’t so certain that was true.

“The shittiest thing about it is,” Cass continued, “that’s its not even her myth. People only talk about her when they talk about Perseus.”

“He cut off the gorgon’s head, Medusa,” the boy said, remembering how he button-mashed a pixelated snake woman to death.

“That’s my point. You can bet if I’m going to get in trouble like that, its going to be in my own freaking story.”

“How do you know?”

“How do I know what?”

“If you’re in your story or someone else’s.”

Clint’s farm was a homestead. The state gave them a blue metal sign the year it became official. Clint and his father went to a ceremony at the statehouse to receive it. The governor stood at the podium and talked to a room of thirty other families each a combination of the old and young, about how important they were in their communities and what the family farm meant to the American people. About how at some point, farming became less about the profit and about the land itself and the pride of that tradition. When the Governor finished with
this last bit all the older people in the room, including Clint’s father, started clapping, but to Clint they all seemed tired.

“I don’t know,” Cass said and rubbing her shoulder against his own. “For a start, I’d look at if any of my decisions actually matter.”

Their first kiss wasn’t Clint’s first kiss ever, but it was his best so far.

#

When his dad clears the rifle’s chamber, the unfired bullet springs into the spread of weeds between their feet. N26 snorts, unimpressed, and begins to lick at her flank. Clint squats and thrusts his hands into the clumps of wet johnson grass, not really searching but wondering what will happen if the first shot – the only bullet his dad has brought out into the field and the rain – isn’t a kill shot.

Clint’s dad finds the bullet first. He reloads and raises the rifle for a second time. N26 stops her cleaning and faces him again as if giving permission.

The boy steels himself, determined to watch all the way through. Again the snap.

#

Reports began appearing in the News of Record, Clint’s dad’s favorite page of the paper. Three sentence dispatches at first, and then after a month, the aftermath of their latest ride leads on front page above the fold. A three-by-five showing a breached wall of a cornfield, gaping like the mouth of a newborn calf. Below it a second photo taken from a drone showed their trail snaking through the field like wet noodles drying on the bottom of a cooking pot. In the top right corner, looped like a signature, the trail of his doughnut lay defiant. Cornfield
Vandal Strikes Stalks Again read the headline. His dad made a sound from the back of his throat, as if he was trying to dislodge a glob of fat off his tonsil. It was a small-town paper, but Clint thought they could have done better with the name.

Clint knew every time his dad read about his adventures, he took it personal. It wasn’t meant to be. The first time, the night of his first ride, it was the feeling of suffocation that jerked Clint’s hand on the wheel. It was seeing the tassels of the corn swaying in the wind and knowing that he was gazing at the permanent backdrop of his life. He wasn’t brave, or stupid enough to hit his own fields, but there was no doubt that if the identity of the Cornfield Vandal was ever discovered, Clint’s dad would be leading the mob.

There was group assignment in Ag Science and they’d put it off until the weekend before the due date. The assignment was to create a video that could educate someone from the city about where their food came from. They met at Clint’s farm without a real plan and by the time he’d managed to wrestle a tiny bull calf into a temporary pen, Cass’s phone was creeping near fifteen percent battery.

“What should I do?” Clint said, doing his best to hold the calf steady against his leg.

“Just start talking.” Cass pointed the camera at him.

Clint pointed to various parts of the calf, identifying the cuts. He traced his finger down the forty-five degree line that separated the neck from the chuck.
When he brought his hand across the sirloin area just before the rump, the calf tried to pull loose, forcing him to pin the animal against the gate with this knee.

“Hang on a minute,” Cass said. She stopped recording. She lowered her phone and there was an uneasiness in her face.

“My phone’s about to go,” she looked around the barn, “you got a charger anywhere? I don’t want to do this again.”

Cass stayed behind while Clint ran to the house to grab the phone charger on his nightstand. When he entered the house, the boy could hear the Brownfield Update giving the midday commodity prices from the radio in the kitchen — the lowest they’ve been in five years — and didn’t have to look to know his dad was sitting at the kitchen table with his iPad and oversized calculator bought from the Dollar Store. His dad caught him on the way out.

“You about done out there? That hay out of the loft needs to be moved.”

“Maybe. She’s the one recording it, so I can’t tell you.”

“Don’t leave a mess. There’s no time for cleaning up after you.”

The older man grunted and walked back to the kitchen. The radio returned to its regularly scheduled programing of Garth Brooks.

When Clint arrived back at the barn, Cass was standing outside.

“Plug the charger in and lets walk for a bit. Give it time to juice up.”

Clint looked back over his shoulder at the house.

“What’s that?” she pointed to the dark shape past the electric fence. Had Clint been paying attention, he would have stopped before they’d gone this far.
Before he can say anything she’s already scrambled her way under the low wire of the electric fence and is halfway to the dying cow. N26 didn’t pull away at her approach,

“What happened to her?” Cass scratched the matted hair.

N26 was meant to be a breeder, he told her, the first in a long line of show cattle that was his dad’s latest diversification idea. He’d paid an embarrassing amount for her pedigree, and even more for some cryogenic sperm from a bull in Texas called DoubleLift.

“What happened to her?”

It was a weekend when N26 started calving so he was home to help, which was a clean way of saying both he and his dad each grabbed a protruding leg pulled off and on for the better part of forty-five minutes. They’d been about to grab some chains before the calf slid free. “That’s where it most likely happened,” he told Cass. A hoof scrapping along the wall of the birth canal. “The calf was bred too big.”

He didn’t expect a girl like Cass to understand. Show cattle is a rich man’s game, and if there are those who would pay an embarrassing amount for semen, they’ll pay even for sires.

“There’s still a chance she’ll get better.”

“The calf in the barn?”

He nodded.

“Jesus Christ, that’s kinda messed up.”

Clint shrugged. Messed up or not, that’s the way it was.
“Going to die from giving birth to an animal bred to die.” Cass said, more to herself than to Clint. “I don’t think I’m cut out for this farm stuff.”

Someone’s getting serious,” Cass said when she saw the board in the tall grass. It was thick as a railroad tie and at least six feet long. Black iron nails, quarter-inch in diameter, protruded from the wood. “We didn’t hit those did we?” She almost seemed pleased by the presence of the makeshift security.

They hadn’t. Whether by a stroke of luck or a flaw on the amateur engineer’s part, the truck had bounced off the barrier and into the ditch before the nails could puncture the tires.

An inspection of the truck revealed no fresh damage, but the way it was angled in the ditch – two wheels deep in the trench and the other two on the flattened dirt of the road – the only apparent option was to drive forward and hope for a shallow enough spot to pull back onto the road. That’s if the force of the angle didn’t snap the undercarriage and leave them stranded in a cell phone dead zone, three miles from anyone in any direction, and full night coming.

Clint hopped into the truck in a way he hoped was confident, but when he tapped the accelerator he felt the wheels spin.

“You’re sinking.” Cass said from her position in the grass.

The rain that helped the corn grow taller than the truck’s roof left the ditch a supersaturated mess. Clint’s wheels slid into the mud like a pitchfork into straw.
They only had about ten minutes of light left and Clint was about to tell Cass to start breaking stalks to put under the tires for traction when the red and blue flash of a patrol car stopped him cold.

The sheriff sauntered across the road the same way a barn cat would approach a cornered mouse.

“You kids all right?” the sheriff said. His accent was more appropriate for a place like Alabama or Tennessee than southern half of Indiana. “Who’s truck is this?”

“It’s his truck, but it’s my fault,” Cass said. “I was...distracting him”

The sheriff’s eyebrows raised a fraction. “I’m going to need to see some identification,” he said.

“Let me go get mine.” Cass started walking back to the truck.

The sheriff watched her and smiled at Clint as if offering approval. The smile twisted as he struggled to read Clint’s license in the fading light.

“You’re Sam’s kid?” The cop scrutinized his face, searching for a resemblance. “Still on that Camel Road place, huh? He always said he’d stick with it come Hell, high water, or the Indiana National Guard.” The word guard come out gward.

Cass returned, trying to do her best to convince the sheriff that he only rolled up on a couple of horny teenagers and not the biggest serial vandals in the county.

“Wait here.” The sheriff walked back to his patrol car with their IDs. Clint looked at Cass and saw her face was flush, just like the night of their first ride
together. Clint didn’t share any of that energy. It took everything he had not to imagine his dad seeing his son’s name in the News of Record.

Crunching gravel betrayed the sheriff’s return. “So you think I can pull you out, or am I going to have to call a wrecker?”

The rear lights of the patrol car disappeared in a cloud of dust as the sheriff drove away.

“He said we’re good to go,” Cass leaned in close enough that she was basically sitting in his lap, “but only if I promised to leave the distractions for the driveway.” She started laughing. As they started driving back towards town Cass rolled down the window, stuck her head out and shouted: “We’ll get you next time. You haven’t beaten the Vandals.”

#

His dad’s stance hasn’t changed in response to the dry firing of the gun, but Clint is suddenly hyper aware of his presence, of the way his shoulders, which Clint had always thought of as clean, sharp corners, are rounded like creek rock.

“The hammer’s wore out.” his dad says and without warning begins pulling the trigger over and over again. Clint turns away, head down, bracing for the misfire, preparing for the explosion. He can see the aftermath. Struggling to carry his father’s dead weight, three times as much as the heaviest bale Clint has ever thrown, an impossible distance to the truck. The trigger clicks a frantic string of Morse code. Finally and without fanfare, the gunshot washes over Clint like a waterfall.
The head lays still, but the body tremors as the death twitch scatters across nerve endings. Clint jumps backward to avoid getting kicked. He doesn’t remember getting so close.

Sighing, his dad rests the rifle with the stock in the mud. “She never looked away,” he says. Leaning on the rifle for support, he bends down and places a hand over the cow’s eyes, but they refuse to close.

#

A few days after his run-in with the sheriff, Clint was studying over a star map he borrowed from the science classroom when he saw his dad in the doorway.

“I ran into Rodney Michael at the bank this afternoon,” he said.

His dad talked like that, said names of people like Clint should have an instinctual index of who’s who, although they’ve never been introduced.

“Says he ran into you and that girl out on eleven hundred west and had to pull my truck out of the ditch.” The old man folded his arms across his chest and leaned his shoulder on the doorway. “I told him that the truck pulls left hard sometimes if you let it. Figured it would be easier than saying he was mistaken, since there’s no reason for you to be out in that part of the county.”

Clint grunted. Shorthanded acknowledgment of the unasked favor.

“Gotta get rid of it before it becomes hard to sell. The gas gauge is all over the place every morning.”

Clint stares at his old man, afraid to blink in case he’d miss those arms unfolding.
“I was a little younger than you when your grandad put me in charge of thirty acres. At the time I thought it was because he was a mean bastard. I didn’t figure it out until later that it was because he needed the help. You’re a smart kid, and that makes it hard sometimes. But I’d ask you not to fight the idea of this place.”

Even though it’s late October, the air conditioner sputters to life.

“Once you get to a stopping place with what you’re working on, there’s some gates that need moved. It’s time we did something about that cow out in the pasture.”

Clint didn’t relax until he heard the slam of the porch door. He turned back to the star map. This far in the northern hemisphere Cassiopeia never disappears, only rotates.

Between classes he told Cass that the Vandals should lay low, that it’s only a matter of time before he’d hit a deer, put a corn stalk through the radiator, or miss a leaf during clean up.

“Things finally start getting interesting and you decide to bail? You’ll miss it,” she said

Clint wanted to agree with her. But he can’t shake the image of his dad in the doorway. Cass walked away. Clint expected her to turnaround, to look at him and toss out a stinging remark, but she didn’t and that hurt worse.

After the hallway exchange, Clint avoided Cass however he could. She avoided him too which made it easier. It wasn’t long before other kids in his grade
were coming up to him in the cafeteria, pulling drive-by whispers about seeing Cass hanging around with Tanner McMahon, a senior on the basketball team. Clint did his best not to give them a reaction. He’d finish his lunch quickly and go to the library. He was thinking of taking a vet class or two at the community college once he graduated, maybe part-time if he could handle it.

A couple of days before fall break, around the time Clint and his dad had rolled out the combine in preparation for harvest, Cass stopped showing up to school and eventually the teachers stopped calling her name for attendance. He tried texting her but no response.

Harvest provided distraction. For the first time he and his father switched roles. Clint in combine, his dad driving the grain cart.

“Let’s get all the mistakes out now,” his dad said. Like it had every year during harvest, Clint’s perception of time blurred in a rush of fourteen hour days. It was dark when he woke and dark by the time he and his dad rolled into the driveway and stumbled to their beds.

It was during a rare moment of free time, as Clint was returning home with a spare part for the combine, he realized he still hadn’t heard from Cass.

He didn’t have a plan in mind when he turned off the main highway towards her house. No thoughts of gestures romantic, or vindictive. He was taking the scenic route back home. All but the last fields were harvested and the boy could see farther now than in the past four months.

He approached Cass’s driveway. Maybe she’d be getting the mail, recognize his truck and wave him down. A giant SOLD sign stood in the yard.
Clint drove on, imaging how Cass would have reacted to the news of her family moving again. Did she lock herself in her room and blast her music as loud as it would go, or did she just roll her eyes and accept the news, understanding that she still wasn’t in her own story?

#

Clint’s dad is at the kitchen table glancing over the pile of bills. The mud on his pant legs almost reach his knees.

“I haven’t seen your girl around much.”

“She’s not around anymore, moved away.”

“I heard IKE let a bunch of people go. The paper said they were giving everyone the opportunity to pick up at one of the plants somewhere in Illinois.”

“That’s probably where she’s at then. She didn’t really tell me.”

“Haven’t seen any of those stories of vandalism lately,” Clint’s dad says.

“You think it’s just cause all of the corn is run, or you think they got caught?”

“Oh realized how stupid it was.”

Clint’s dad hesitates. “I wouldn’t worry too much about that girl. Cass, I mean. Not that I knew her, but from what little I did see, I never thought she was enjoying herself much.”

Normally the sound of rain soothes Clint to sleep, but tonight the storm outside is too much. The singular white noise is more frustrating than calming. He flips on the bed side light and the shadows splay across the wall, straight and sharp like horns. The blinds are open and although Clint can’t see past the rain, he
knows out there is one hundred twenty-five acres and the carcass of a cow.

Somewhere above the clouds is the constellation of Cassiopeia.
The Empress

My mother died alone even though she didn’t have to. She was spiteful that way. We'd been at her bedside for two weeks, me and Dan, this dipshit she insisted on marrying. And she waits until Dan is on the can and I’m out walking laps around the block. It was a statement. Like, how dare we attend to our lesser human needs when she was doing the biggest thing a human could do by dying. I was two houses away when Dan called and said she wasn’t breathing. But not in a panicked way, he was neutral, like he’d expected as much or maybe he’d done it—smothered her with one of her many tasseled throw-pillows because he was tired of waiting around and wanted to get on with it already. He didn’t. Kill her I mean. He's okay. I mean he reminds me of a piece of bread, but he’s fine.

When someone dies, it should be like in those old cartoons where their eyeballs turn into big black X’s. But she didn’t look like that. She looked exactly like herself, and before I knew what I was doing I was standing over her and shaking her by the shoulders. And that’s what I mean. It would save a lot of embarrassment because, of course, when I touched her nothing happened.

But the most embarrassing thing is I have no idea what her last words to me were. Dan says the last thing she said to him was, “Wipe good,” which I believe because she always said that before anyone went to take a shit. It was basically “I love you.” Probably, she asked me to adjust her pillows or rub Vaseline into her cracked, red elbows. But even that I should remember.
My mother was a psychic. I don’t mean she saw the future, but she read tarot and palms and all that stuff. She never read mine though. I wouldn’t let her and it drove her crazy. I should have, probably. What would it have hurt? And I always sort of wanted to, the same way I’d wanted to talk to her about my crushes but didn’t because my mother’s brain was a rolodex of my weak spots and she’d pull out a card when you least expected it.

I was thinking about all of this somehow while also thinking, “my mother is dead” and still holding her by the shoulders. Then Dan started making noises; these big loud wet cries like little kids have. And he got on his knees at her bedside and put her cooling hand in his and kissed it. He was wearing gray sweatpants with elasticated ankles and a tight yellow t-shirt that he tucked over his belly and into the waistband of his pants. Seeing him like that kissing her hand in that fucking outfit and the shiny skin on his bald head, well that was just about the saddest thing I’d ever seen.

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My wife, Angelique, is the most sophisticated woman I know. She's French-Canadian and she plays the violin in a string quartet with the very clever name “Going for Baroque.” Her hair is long and straight and blond. In our bathroom, there’s a stained-glass window of purple irises. When the sun shines through it in the morning, the light fills up her hair with color. I had the thought today while she was standing there brushing her teeth with her halo of purple that it was almost like having a vase for a head, the way she could fill it up. A vase of purple irises. I dipped in to nuzzle her neck and smell her hair. It happens
sometimes. I can’t control myself. I'm like a Labrador and she’s a pool of clear
water. She laughed and a stream of minty froth streaked her chin.

“Oh god!” she said as she pushed me back. “Look what you made me do!”
but she was laughing when she said it, so I knew she wasn’t angry. This was an
issue early in our relationship, my tendency to take everything personally.

“You are always shadowboxing,” she used to say to me. “I don’t know
who you’re fighting, but it’s not me.” Then she met my mother. On our drive
home from that Thanksgiving dinner nearly eight years ago, she smiled at me and
said, “So that’s the shadow, eh?” Angelique is great at that, making things feel
light, things that before threatened to crush you. For example, my mother, much
as she liked her, never referred to Angelique as my wife. “Where’s your friend,
Angel?” she’d ask when I showed up alone. Or, “How’s my Angel? You’re so
lucky to have a friend like Angel.” As if she could rewrite everything. But it
didn’t bother Angelique.

“She can’t love you like you want her to,” my wife was fond of reminding
me. “You have to accept that and move on. I pity her. She's missing out on the
love of her life.” She liked to pinch my cheeks when she said corny stuff like that.
And I know she’s right. When I’m around Angelique I'm not even a better version
of myself, I am just better than myself; a changeling Annie possessed by patience
and compassion and a certain stillness I cannot define. Mostly it’s nice, but
sometimes it gets to me and I have to go out for a long run along the Greenway to
the fossil beds where I just stand and scream across the water until I'm empty.
“Are you going to say something?” Angelique was asking about the service again. She likes the idea of me eulogizing my dead mother. Sometimes I think she’s trying to control me in her own sweet way. To make me someone with a sentimental, poetic spirit like her, but I don’t know if I have it in me. “I just think you’ll regret it if you don’t,” she continued as she applied her various creams and serums. “You can put it all to rest. You can say goodbye. You'll feel a hundred pounds lighter.” I put my arms around her soft tummy and slid my fingers under the waistband of her lace underwear.

“Yeah,” I said. “Maybe.”

Everything was pretty much taken care of. My mom always knew what she wanted. The only thing she didn’t plan was the headstone. “Well, I’m not the one who has to visit it!” was her argument, which I had to admit was pretty airtight. She did have a whole Pinterest board devoted to the topic though. She showed it to Dan a few weeks before she died and he kept me up half the night before our appointment at the monument company with screenshots of the ones he liked the best—gaudy ones made carved from pink marble with engravings of roses and fat baby cherubs, which was the kind of thing she was into in her last few years. This morning he seems practically giddy when he picks me up in his little gray Tacoma. Inside it smells like him, like Winter Fresh Speed Stick and Skoal and the buck piss he sprays on his boots during hunting season. Being in Dan’s truck always makes me feel conspicuously female. Especially today since my period came, a ridiculous reminder each month of a part of my biology I'm not
interested in using. Once inside the cab, the cramps really ramp up, like my uterus is pickling in all the salinized toxic masculinity.

“It your time?” he asks. It comes out as “yer,” a colloquialism Angelique trained out of me. I’ve got a protective arm over my abdomen, which I hadn’t realized, but still weird that he knew.

“Yeah.”

“You got that endometriosis like your momma?”

“No, thank god.”

“That’s good,” he said, patting my knee.

My mother’s periods were events. Five days of bed rest and hot water bottles and cold compresses and precisely timed Percocet doses. She’d go through two boxes of super-plus tampons like cigarettes. I said once she chained-smoked tampons, which she thought was really funny. All the doctors said there was no correlation between the endometriosis and the cancer. But maybe it’s not the kind of correlation that scientists can find. Maybe it has something to do with us, with her and me and all the women before and after us waging war on each other and ourselves, or the thousands of tampons we put inside of us with all of their mysterious fibers and whiteness.

I’d been getting my period for five years before my mom knew anything about it. When it happened the first time, I was eleven. She always kept lots of supplies around the house, pads and tampons and a 1982 edition of Our Bodies,
Ourselves that she encouraged me to study if I ever had any questions about sex or any of that stuff. All I really remember about that book is a picture of a pretty girl with a 70’s perm squatting naked over a mirror examining her own vagina.

“It’s important to become familiar with your body,” the caption read. I never squatted over a mirror, but I did look at that picture over and over again to feel the hot little pang it caused in my crotch. What I’m saying is I knew. I wasn’t one of those girls who are so clueless about being a girl that they freak the fuck out and think they are dying when it happens. I knew what to do. It was an inconvenience more than anything. The most important thing was making sure my mom didn’t know and I didn’t even know why. Then, when I was sixteen, she found a condom in my trashcan. That was way before Dan. We were living in the trailer park behind the Wal-Mart in Corydon. My mom was working at the casino then, waiting tables and reading palms every night. I don’t even remember whose condom it was. Back then it could have been anyone’s. There was a new boy every night. I thought if I fucked enough boys I would stop thinking about Mallory Bryson and her curly red hair and scratchy laugh. I thought they could knock her out of me. And maybe I’d gotten cocky and careless, or maybe I wanted her to find it, to shock her into being interested in me. I don’t know, but when I came home from school that day, she threw it at my head as I came through the front door. I didn’t have time to think or duck. It hit me square between the eyes.

“What the fuck?” I shouted.

She’d been chain-smoking. The trailer was hazy with it. She was wearing a short red satin robe from Victoria’s Secret and a pair of my terry-cloth
volleyball shorts. The shorts looked better on her. They showed off her strong little legs. At sixteen I was already a head taller than her and had another four inches to grow.

“Explain yourself.” She was pointing her coffin-shaped acrylic nail at the sad, wormy shape on the carpet. The carpet was thick and matted and brown. I wore socks all the time, even in summer, so I’d never have to touch it.

“Oh my god. I’m sixteen. Did you think I’d be a virgin forever?” I tossed my backpack on the faded blue recliner and walked past her to the fridge. I wanted a beer. I knew if I could drink one fast enough on an empty stomach there would be a short span of time when I didn’t want to die. Since she was there, I settled for a Sunny-D.

“There are things you don’t understand,” she said. She stubbed out her cigarette in one of her dozen ashtrays and crossed her arms tight over her chest. “Things that can happen. Thank God you haven’t started your period yet.”

I laughed at that because I figured by that point it was a secret we were both keeping from each other.

“I got my period when I was like, eleven,” I said as I stepped purposefully over the condom on the way to my room. The come had congealed inside the casing. It looked like a tapeworm and I felt sour bile creeping up my throat.
“And that is not the first time,” I said turning back to look at her. “The neighbors probably think we’re whores with how many guys come in and out of here.”

I could tell I’d caught her off guard, but the shock quickly transformed into rage and then she was on me. That’s how it ended up most of the time we fought. There wasn’t any pride in it. We scratched each other's soft inner thighs and pulled hair and bit the insides of elbows. We fought like sisters or lovers. Hurting each other was the same as hurting ourselves. Sometimes I miss it. Sometimes I say cruel things to Angelique because I want her to hurt me and I want to hurt her. I want to know if she’s capable of it. If she was, I think we could really know each other. Anyway, that night after we’d worn each other out she told me about my dad.

“He was not a good man,” she said. We were both stretched across my bed on our backs blowing smoke at the ceiling. I was trying to remember how we got there, the choreography of our frenzied bodies, but it was a mystery. She exhaled smoke through her nose. It looked effortlessly cool, and I tried to emulate it but just ended up coughing. She patted my head absent-mindedly. “He’s a rapist.”

We were both shredded; coated in sweat and dust, our eyes ringed with smudged mascara.

“What?” I said, still spluttering smoke.

“You’re a rape baby,” she said and blew more smoke out her nose.
“Was he also a fucking giant?” I said. She laughed like I knew she would.

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Dan kept touching everything, which was endlessly embarrassing. Especially because Rachel, the owner of Greystone Monument, was shockingly normal and even sort of hot. Dan had just pulled out his Pinterest board of dream headstones.

“Look,” she said. “I know everyone comes in with a vision, but sometimes it’s an instinct thing. Why don’t you all follow me out back and take a look around.”

It was April and the ground squelched under our feet and the air was full of that rich Earth smell that comes in spring, like the ground is yawning.

“He must have really loved her,” Rachel said.

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. Rachel’s skin was very white and her hair was very dark. A real Morticia Adams vibe, which probably worked in her favor. “So, did you always want to be in the tombstone business?”

She laughed. “I wanted to be a coroner, but turns out I’m very squeamish. I’m also a stone worker. This seemed like a nice compromise.”

In profile, her lips made a perfect red heart. I thought about laying her down right there in the muddy grass between the rows of blank headstones and fucking her. It was suddenly all I wanted. I get this way sometimes, instantly
obsessed with someone. It hits me so fast and so hard I can forget Angelique exists. I can forget everything about myself except the thing I want.

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When I got home, I could hear Angelique practicing with her violin. I found her in the living room standing in a stream of sunlight pouring through the bay window. The living room is full of her books. She was wearing a diaphanous pink slip. She looked like Botticelli's Venus. We fucked on the floor in the sun and I thought about Rachel.

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We had to get the coffin made custom. The only ready-made coffins in the color she wanted were for children. And even those were lined with ivory satin. She wanted the lining to match. Both a pale, dusty pink.

“God Mom. Could you be any tackier?” I said. I was painting her nails. They were thin and brittle.

“Excuse me,” she said from beneath her sheet mask, “When you die you can do it however you want.”

We were having a spa day. One of the day-nurses suggested it when I asked her what I was supposed to do.

“Just treat her like you normally would,” was her advice. “Have a spa day. Eat ice cream and watch movies.” We'd never done any of those things. My mom peeled off her mask and held it up for Dan to throw away, which he did
right away. Her face glistened. I tapped the serum into her skin with my fingertips, the way I'd seen Angelique do it. Her skin was weirdly taut and youthful in the weeks before she died, and it gave me a creepy cold feeling. It was like she was rotting and being born at the same time and what the fuck are you supposed to do with that? She closed her eyes while I touched her face. Her eyelids were blue and nearly transparent.

“How can you stand being in here? It’s like a Barbie hellscape.”

She clicked her tongue softly on the roof of her mouth. “You’re just jealous.”

Once she’d decided to die at home, she was obsessed with redecorating the bedroom. She had the wood floor covered in thick white pile carpet. She bought a massive four-poster bed and fine linens in pink and white, a dozen down throw pillows, a down comforter and piles of chenille blankets. She had the walls papered in a pattern of antique roses. It was hideous. Not to mention it didn’t match the rest of the house, which was also hideous but in a normal, Midwestern, middle-class way; a white leather sofa set, all black appliances, and meaningless hotel art, that sort of thing. In all the places we’d lived, the apartments and the trailers and the rental homes, she’d never done up a room like this. It was like the disease sent her into a kind of regression. Or maybe, it had always been there? This lacy pink girl fever always inside of her, but circumstances had never allowed it to emerge. The cancer made her fearless in her desires. After the room was how she wanted it, she moved on to the coffin. We spent a lot of time in her last few months going over colors and fabric samples. The casket, when all was
said and done, cost over ten-grand. And that’s not even counting whatever she paid them to deliver it to the house so she could try it out. We found her stash after she was gone—thick folds of bills in a shoebox at the top of her closet. She had arranged it herself with her infuriating brand of secret confidence. When the men arrived from Farley’s Funeral Home, we had no warning. Dan and I had to shove couches and chairs out of the way so they could fit it in the living room.

“What the hell, Judy!” Dan yelled once the men left.

Mom dismissed his comment with a wave of her hand and began to shift beneath her pile of blankets. By this time, she was too weak to stand, let alone walk. Any movement caused her pain. “Oh, my bones,” she would cry out when we moved her. There was no flesh to her at all. Her body was tiny and desiccated and bruised-brown.

“I want to try it,” she said.

“I’m not putting you in that thing,” Dan said.

“You’re going to say no to a dying woman?” This was something she loved to say.

“Judy, baby, you can’t ask me to do that,” his voice got low and hard like he was using to hold something back.

“Annie. Come here. Help your momma.” She knew I would do it. I don’t know why she asked Dan in the first place. Her room smelled like baby powder and lilies and the cherry Jergen’s lotion that I warmed under the faucet
before I worked it into her crepey skin. The room smelled that way but she didn’t. Her smell was a secret, but when we peeled the covers away it was there, a combination of piss and mucus and something mustier, like a dog’s coat. It wasn’t as easy as scooping her up. I had to stand there with my arms outstretched while Dan layered them in blankets so that my bones wouldn’t rub against her bones. Then I crouched so I was level with the bed, and Dan would slide her into my arms.

“My little baby,” I cooed once she was safely held, “My little Benjamin Button.” She always cracked up when I said that. I could tell Dan didn’t want to watch, but he wouldn’t leave until she was safely in the casket, because I guess he didn’t totally trust me not to drop her or something, even though she weighed less than a full-grown German Shepherd.

A thousand of the ten-grand was for the memory foam padding. Four-inches of foam on the bottom, one-inch on the sides. It was so soft and pink I felt like I was lowering her into the mouth of some sweet, pink animal. She let out a little sigh once she was inside.

“Want me to close it?” I asked, and she flipped me the bird. “Ohh, I like this. This is nice,” she said, burrowing her little body into the satin folds. I draped blanket after blanket over her, nestled feather pillows under her head.

“Yes, this will do.”

“That’s good,” I said, “cause you’re gonna be there awhile.”
“Jesus, Annie!” Dan said, and left the house out the back, letting the screen door slam behind him.

“You can’t talk like that in front of him, baby. He’s not like us.”

I sat down on the floor beside the casket. “What do you mean?” I asked.

She sighed, fingering the lace-edge of one of her blankets, “He’s nice.”

“I’m nice,” I said. But I knew what she meant.

“Babe?” she asked, “will you get my cards?”

She kept all her tarot decks in a big walnut box on her vanity. As a girl, I loved to go through the decks. The minor arcana always interested me more than the trump cards because their meanings were murkier, harder to interpret, and therefore, I thought, more closely aligned with the subconscious. I liked chalices best. The suit, my mother told me, was associated with feelings and intuition. I hadn’t thought about any of that in a long time. I sat down and shuffled them, softly, like she taught me, trying not to let any thoughts or feelings pass into them through my fingertips.

“Which deck did you pick?” she asked.

“Golden tarot. The art nouveau one.”

“You always loved that one.”

I spread the deck into a horseshoe shape on the floor and began to trace my hand over them. When I reach the right one, she would tell me to stop, and I’d flip the card and tell her the result. I never knew what the readings meant or what
she asked. But sometimes after a reading, she’d get sad and quiet for a few days and I knew she was working something out. But this time she seemed satisfied with the results. She’d drawn The Empress as her signifier and smiled when I told her. Usually, when a client drew The Empress my mom would ask about their kids because it had to do with fertility and feminine power and the mother goddess. But in this context, I wasn’t sure what I she had to be happy about.

When I’d drawn all the cards and she was done, I stacked the deck and slid it back into its soft, worn box.

“What was your question?” I asked.

“I just wanted to know what it would be like.”

“What?”

“What comes after.”

She lay there in her coffin, her blankets pulled up to her chin gazing at the ceiling.

“Did you like the answer?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said with a sigh.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. I had the urge to crawl into the casket with her, to pull her little body against my own. And then she reached a little shriveled hand out to me and said, “I love you, babygirl.” It was the third time she’d ever said it. One “I love you” for each decade of my life.
Angelique wants me to get a total hysterectomy. She wants me to get tested for the breast cancer genes. She wants to cut away any part of my body that might kill me later.

Women my mother’s age are rarely diagnosed with late-stage ovarian cancer. More than half of those diagnosed are over sixty-five years old. My mother was forty-five at the time of her diagnosis and forty-eight when she died. I am almost thirty-one years old. I know that my wife is doing constant arithmetic in her head. She is counting back the years from the diagnosis to the day the cancer was born. How long had it lived quietly inside of her? Five years? More? Less? Was it already inside me? Were our years together already ticking down? I know this is what she’s thinking. I can tell it by the slow, tender way she strokes my breasts and belly, the way she looks into my eyes when we

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We decided on a white marble heart. It was not cheap. It has been sanded so smooth it looks like a pool of milk and is wonderfully cool to the touch. We had the edge of the heart engraved with the same filigree that edged her favorite tarot deck. We decided to keep it simple, to let the marker speak for itself. Just her same, Judy Alma Greer, and the dates, June 1, 1971 – April 9, 2019. Then, in an italicized script, “Empress”—Dan liked that. He looked at me with weepy eyes that I pretended not to notice. Rachel was excited by the filigree, which she said would be a new challenge.

“But you can do it though?” I asked.
“Oh yeah,” she said. “I’m very good.”

I wondered if Dan could pick up on the note of insinuation in her voice. We’d been texting since we first came to look at the stones three days ago. At first, it was just about the headstone, but then she started to ask about my mom and it turned out she’d had her palms read by her a few years prior.

“One of those weird things you do after a break-up,” she said. Obvious bait.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I replied.

“I’m not sorry. I LOVE being single!!!” She followed that text up with a GIF of Mel Gibson from that famous scene in Braveheart, the word “freedom” blinking in big capital letters.

Now was the part in the exchange when I was supposed to bring up Angelique, after which the conversation could fizzle out naturally, only I didn’t. But I didn’t lie either. I just went to the bathroom and lifted my t-shirt up over my boobs and took a picture and sent it to her. The three minutes spent waiting for her response were pure agony. I could hear Angelique puttering around in the kitchen, humming along to an Amanda Palmer song.

“Hot Damn!” she finally replied, “LOVE the tat.” I have a spider web tattooed on my sternum. In the center of the web, it says “Bad Girl.” It was my first tattoo and the ink has spread with age so that the lines are no longer as black and crisp as they used to be. It had been the most rebellious thing I could think of at the time. I got it two days after the condom fight. A few minutes later, Rachel
Madison Cyr

sends her own picture, she’s sitting in bed with her knees up and the phone is propped so that the angle is the same as if my head were between her legs and I was gazing up at her. She's biting her bottom lip and her right hand is half-hidden by her red lace thong. My whole body feels flushed.

“Babe!” Angelique called from the kitchen, “What are you doing? Dinner is ready!” She’d made roast chicken. I could smell the rosemary, the garlic, the crisp, caramelized skin.

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I met Rachel at a bar the night before the funeral. It’s a bar I’ve never been to before, would never go to, am not likely to be seen by anyone I know. There are peanut shells all over the floor. The barstools are red vinyl and slick with grease. People are smoking even though it’s been illegal for years. It's one of those places that exists as a tribute to the past, to a time of greater mystery, before we knew cigarettes caused cancer, or before we pretended to care. Angelique would hate it.

Rachel hugged me and I could smell her perfume; something dark and musky. I bet it was expensive.

“Oh, okay,” she said, sitting down on a barstool and sipping her beer. “Big day tomorrow. How are you feeling?” She rested a hand on my thigh and my skin burned beneath my jeans.

“I don’t know,” I said. The truth was that I didn’t feel anything at all. I hadn’t shed one tear over my dead mother, but that’s not something you say to
someone if you want to fuck them. “I think I’m still in shock, honestly. I think it will really hit me tomorrow.” Rachel nodded slowly. Because we both knew where we want this to go, but don’t want say it, we switched from beer to whiskey and after about an hour were good and wasted. When Rachel went to the restroom I followed. She had her skirt up and her tights pulled down before I could even get the door locked behind me. The first thirty-seconds spent eating her out are heaven; that blank buzzy feeling you get from wanting something so bad, from imagining it over and over again and then, finally, magically, getting it. With Angelique, it was over a year before that feeling went away. Every time with her was a shock to my system. And then I found myself thinking about my wife and her full hips and her iris-vase hair, and then I thought about my mother in her pale pink coffin with its four inches of pointless memory foam and I did start to cry, which is just about the least-sexy thing a person can do. It took Rachel a second to notice at first, but then I was crying so hard it was impossible to keep the tempo right.

“Woah, woah, babe,” she said, as she pulled up her tights. “Is it hitting you now?” She asked, a hand on my shoulder. I wiped my eyes over and over again with the cuff of my jacket.

“Fuck! I’m sorry!” I said. I couldn’t catch my breath. The smell of her on my face was making me feel dizzy, sick. I licked my lips and they were slick with her and my own snot. I watched her pupils shrink, my own face growing smaller in the dying black.
It wasn’t Rachel who delivered the headstone. I don’t know why I thought it would be. It was some twenty-year-old guy wearing a John Deere baseball cap. I watched him from under the breezeway of the funeral home and wondered if he knew who I was, how I was connected to the hunk of marble in the bed of his truck, if he ever thought about things like that.

My mother requested this funeral home specifically because it had its own cemetery and she didn’t like the idea of her casket being driven around. There was no romance to that, she’d said. She’d managed to find a lot near enough to the funeral home that she could be carried like they do in the movies.

The boy waited awkwardly outside his truck for someone to tell him what to do next. The funeral director walked past me at a clip.

“So sorry,” he said as he made his way to the boy. It was all supposed to happen behind a curtain. That’s what we were paying for, the illusion.

Angelique found me outside. I knew it was her without knowing; the sound of her particular footsteps were so embedded in me I didn’t hear them anymore, my body just turned to her by itself, possessed by an animal knowing.
In the cloudless air over the Dadu River was the sound of a churning hum. It was October but snow had fallen in March and the humid summer shifted into fall. The mother and daughter sat against the sun in the courtyard of the longjialuo, a hotel owned by farmers. The tree in the center of the courtyard was too far to lend them any shade. On the other side of the low brick building, a dirt road led uphill to the cemetery where the grandmother’s ashes stood still.

“What is that sound?” asked the daughter.

On the ground a fan turned at the highest setting, rotating until it faced the narrow end of the table where the mother’s hand fluttered above the teapot, then turned to the corner with the blue cushioned bench where the daughter leaned against the table, spooning preserves into her rice. The daughter raised her chin, squinted her eyes, the humming above them was like a helicopter, but if there was anything in the sky, it was an invisible helicopter that witnessed everything.

“What more tea?” The mother peered under the lid of a terracotta pot.

“Like a vent,” said the daughter. “But there’s no air conditioning.”

Next to their table, the large wood-panel doors to the restaurant were closed, but the night before guests had moved in and out over the low threshold, the air in the courtyard lifted by a recorded music that was not unpleasant, a pop orchestral piece with an electric piano and a too-loud clarinet. The daughter had begun to think, with her hands around a warm tea after a meal of dumplings, suizhu yu, that it was really quite wonderful in the countryside. A place to rest.

“It’s the dam,” said the mother.
The driver who brought them to the longjialuo had mentioned a newly constructed dam. Nothing compared to the Zipingpu Dam over the Minjiang River, he had said. That one was over fifty stories tall, held a billion cubic meters of water. When the daughter asked if the dam caused the 2008 earthquake that killed thousands of children, ninety thousand people – every disaster in China seemed on a scale that was hard to fathom – the driver said no and the mother also said no, it was not likely the dam was the primary cause.

“Dam brings electricity,” said the mother. “A lot of water to Chengdu.”

Twenty-two years ago she left Chengdu with her husband, her daughter’s father. He was back now at the hospital that first sent him abroad and they were no longer married. The daughter looked at her mother’s hair, tied at the nape of her neck, which made her posture seem even more unadorned and rigid, as if a metal pole ran up her spine. Not for nothing she had been a runway model – just a few times, she said, just for fun – after the country opened up post-revolution. It was after graduate school, after she was a mother. But what good were beauty, breasts, medical degrees, if after eighteen years your husband will still leave you? The daughter never understood that line, a thing of beauty is a joy forever. Her mother was not a thing, but this certainly did not apply to time, to anything alive.

“Did Waipo run away from an arranged marriage?” asked the daughter in English.

The mother shook her head. “Why do you think that?”

“Aunt Haili told me.”
“I don’t think so,” said the mother in Mandarin. “Your grandma grew up in a home where there was some tiao-jian.”

The word meant conditions, but the mother seemed to imply that conditions were okay. They had some conditions.

“Her mama’s name was Li Yuhua. She was a smoker.”

“Opium?” said the daughter.

“Opium. They had a nanny, a cook. Her mother played cards, went to the theater with the huang bao che. Sometimes she brought Waipo, so Waipo went to a few places.”

The daughter had seen photos of her mother as a toddler, the youngest of four girls, holding a doll, but had never pictured her grandmother as a small child.

“Waipo’s mother left around forty. Passed away. Only forty.”

“Why?” said the daughter.

The mother didn’t know. “Waipo left home because her father took another woman. I met her. They had a daughter who had a son named Cao Jun. You met him once.”

The daughter had no recollection. On her yearly visits, there were often one-time meetings with a second-cousin, a distant aunt. The name was familiar.

“You mean Cao Cao?” Perhaps she knew him by a nickname.

The mother laughed. “That’s a historical person in China.”

In her mother’s laugh the daughter felt a cutting shame. Often, in hotel lobbies or restaurants, she would see a white young man or a black young woman who spoke Mandarin better than she did and she would resolve, then and there, to
return to the U.S. and learn her own language. But in the end she never made
time. It was not a shame that couldn’t be ignored. She had acquired other
languages – English, German, French – through immersion, moving to countries
with her parents. It was never too late, but now she was in grad school and always
just busier, always taking steps to some destination that did not require Chinese.

“If you don’t understand at least some things about Chinese history, then
you’ll never understand,” said the mother. “Not even early history, just recent.
You can come back to China, work here for a year or two. Bring Giac.”

The mother had met the daughter’s boyfriend twice. She knew about the
wedding they had gone to, but did not know about Giacomo’s offer, that in
Theoule, over the Mediterranean, the daughter had said she needed more time and
he had smiled and said, fine, I’ll give you the real ring when you say yes, this is a
placeholder. The daughter had put the placeholder gently into the top drawer of
her dresser in D.C. before returning to China, too late for her Waipo’s funeral but
to spend a week with her grandfather in the apartment on the first floor of the
Thousand Fortunes Circle community. Two of Waipo’s chickens were still in
their cages in the semi-enclosed balcony, tempting the neighbors’ dogs.

“Tell me more about Waipo,” said the daughter in Mandarin.

“What do you want to know?”

Everything. The daughter wanted to know about her grandmother’s love
life, if her Waipo had taught her mother anything about love, intimacy, perhaps
forgiveness. Did Waipo love Waigong, or was he the only man she knew, had five
kids with, and shared a bed with every night with the door to their bedroom wide
open, in the humid summers in Chengdu? The daughter, considering marriage now, wanted a logic to her mother’s mistakes, as she considered her mother’s life to be defined by failures. How else did a model with two medical degrees end up with neither a job nor a partner to see the movies with, now returning to China and staying with her sister? She was being cruel, demanding and cruel. But she could still remember an eternal childhood when there was no question her mother could not answer, torn clothes were mended, bloody knees sewn with sutures at home. If she had to pinpoint a turn, then maybe age twelve was when she became aware of answers that came to her faster, went further, than anything her mother could provide. Perhaps it was not right to ask questions about a person’s intimate life, after they have gone, but the longer one waits, the less appropriate the questions. Her Waigong was ninety-three now. What kind of granddaughter asks whether her Waipo ever loved someone besides her Waigong? Why did it matter?

Well, it would be a story. A truth she wanted to know.

“Waipo was a middle school teacher,” said the daughter. “She taught composition and reading, right?”

Her grandmother, a spitfire of a woman, had been brittle in bones, fiery in temper. In her old age – the only age the granddaughter knew of her, fifty being as old to a five-year-old as seventy is to a twenty-five-year-old – even as her eyesight failed, the old woman could still sing Russian songs from her childhood. Each year the granddaughter visited, her Waipo’s chair seemed pulled an inch or two closer to the television screen until her face was nearly pressed against the moving images of her favorite soap opera. But Waipo could always win at mah-
jong against her neighbors, macular degeneration notwithstanding. She continued

to yell at her husband, who was more than a foot taller than her, and at her grown
children. Maybe it was the yelling that got five kids into college, an unheard-of
feat in their town after the gaokao exams were reinstated in 1977.

But what the granddaughter wanted to know was more personal. She was
twenty-six and thought the most basic features of a woman’s independence had to
do with money and what was known in Chinese as high tide. Gao chao. She
wondered if Waipo ever talked to her daughters about the high tide that sweeps
over a woman, defining the way she is alone and the way she is with another.

So the mother went on. She said Waipo had left home at fourteen, with an
older cousin who was traveling, looking for a place to go to school. This did not
make sense to the daughter, but the mother said it was during the time of the
Japanese, when colleges sent their students west to Sichuan, for the safety of the
mountains that were harder to invade. Waipo left her hometown in Luzhou and
carried with her cousin to Yibin, a town along the Yangtze, which the mother
called Changjiang. Luzhou and Yibin, one upriver, the other downriver. When
Waipo arrived in Chongqing, she met so-called “advanced people,” which the
daughter assumed meant high school or college educated, and at some point,
somebody had to leave, so they left Waipo with Waigong, and said why don’t you
look after her.

“Didn’t they meet at a newspaper?” said the daughter. “I remember Waipo
had gone to a journal to find someone, and found Waigong instead.”

The mother shook her head. “It was by chance.”
Waigong, who was from Guangdong, had walked to Chongqing to escape the invasion. He walked to Nanjing, and then to Zhejiang. He was twenty-three, and walked to Zhejiang, Guangxi, through Guaizhou, and finally to Chongqing, eight hundred miles from Guangdong.

“Why Chongqing?”

“Waigong’s university, Zhongyang, sent the students there. In every place, they stayed a while like refugees, hiding in the forest, farms, factories. Some places they stopped, taught school for a year, looking for a place to hide, to eat.”

The mother paused, scratching her ear. “When Waigong arrived in Chongqing, he participated in some underground party activities. He met Waipo through friends.”

At this the daughter smiled. Her grandfather was a swimmer. She imagined Waipo falling in love with a tall studious man, lulled by his slow Guangdong accent.

“But this is too broad,” said the mother. “If you want details, I can tell you another time, or ask Aunt Xiaoli. She knows the stories.”

“No, it’s good,” said the daughter.

It was not what she had wanted to talk about, but it was not uninteresting. Parts of the story she was sure she had heard before, even if it felt like the first time. Often she forgot the stories the minute she left China and now her mind drifted as her mother spoke and she thought of Giac in D.C., his family in Italy and France, how easy it was to imagine his ancestors in love, like some European novels she had read, like *Princess de Cleves*. It was impossible to imagine a
similar love story for her own mother or grandmother. Her parents had studied in
Brussels and lived two years in Berlin. They went to conferences in Europe, to
countries her grandparents had never seen. But in books she had seen the golden
silk paintings of Chinese couples on swings, in gardens. *Plum in the Golden Vase*
– she should read that one day, just one or two out of the endless volumes. It
could not be the same definition of romance. She doubted her grandmother ever
talked to her daughters about couples on swings, and it was too late for her to
know more about Waipo, the young woman or the old. Waipo had married the
most handsome man she met in Chongqing, but what happened after the first
surge of desire? Where did one’s energy go?

“After the war, they got married and had their first daughter, your Aunt
Xiaohua, which means Little Flower.”

“So there was no story with the newspaper,” said the daughter, still stuck
on the account of the first meeting. “That Waipo went to a paper, to look for
Waigong, with the excuse that she was looking for someone else.”

The mother said she didn’t know that story. “Waipo liked to write. She
liked imagining things. Waigong worked for a journal, the Guoming Paper.”

“Then what happened?”

It was close to noon and under the invisible sun in the courtyard, their
bodies slowly sank into the wicker chairs. The mother spoke until the heat seemed
to restrict their vocal chords and the daughter looked up at the edges of the roof
above their heads, forming a perfect rectangle of blue sky. The sun had to be to
their left, because that half of the sky was a lighter shade of blue.
“In China you have to leave the city to see clear sky.” The mother sipped her tea. “In Europe the sky is always blue.”

“Tell me about when you were little.”

The mother paused. “Well, I’m the youngest. They didn’t plan on having five. They had three daughters, one son, so your Big Aunt was twelve when I was born. In August, Chongqing was so hot. I think Waipo went by herself. She had a huge jar, a jar for rice, soups. It was 1959 so Waipo was – 1930, ‘40 – she was twenty-nine years old, already four kids. In 1950 she was married, and then there was a dead daughter, between Xiaoli and me.”

The daughter nodded. She knew about the stillborn daughter.

“Waipo was young,” said the mother. “She went onto the roof to connect the wires. She wanted to teach the kids about electricity – wu xian diang.”

“Outside?” The details fit with the daughter’s idea of her grandmother, reckless, straddled with kids.

“Yes, connected to roof outside. At the time, buildings were not that high. She stepped through the roof, the glass, her stomach was stuck, and she lost the child. A girl. Waipo said she was so pretty. Waigong said so too.”

One always mourned the lost one. “How old was the fetus?”

“Eight months. Almost born. If that girl had lived, they wouldn’t have had me.”

The daughter imagined the outline of a lost baby, who would have replaced her mother’s line of decent. If she had looked then at her mother’s face,
she might have seen that the older woman’s eyes were now fixed on the ground, on an image of something else.

It was in Grosseto that Rui made up her mind about the child, after the conference that became their last trip together. Afterwards Jin moved out of the house, and she soon forgot the name of the town, only it was in Italy, but she always remembered it was Jin who said she should go, that her lab funds could send her, and it would be a free trip for both of them.

She said no at first, she didn’t like to fly. He said it would be a trip away from home, from the routines of imbecility and madness. Their daughter would be away for three weeks at a cello camp, and anyway Na was sixteen and never talked to her mother. At night, in the hotel by the beach, the distance between her head and her body felt infinite, her body a desert. He was more creative in fact, in a foreign country, with foreign words, food, hills as far as their eyes could see. The lights sprinkling in the distance was how they knew there were others and it was not a lonely country but a golden, inhabited land where one could breathe. For a long time they did not talk about the baby. It was as if it was something happening in another place, to her, yes, but not to her as she was now, in bed after a dinner on the patio, under a black brass chandelier, drinking, eating prosciutto with pears and persimmon, a leek soup, grilled mackerel. To see Jin sitting with the sunset behind him, rolls and rolls of hills and cypress trees, she thought then it was a good idea to come. When all one sees is a beautiful country, it is easy to
feel some small luck, surrounded by the sun, a house, an incomprehensible language, even him.

During the evening session at the conference hotel, a scientist from Georgia presented his bright purple-pink slides of stained islets of Langerhans. Rui felt bored, jetlagged, looking over and imagining the signals lighting in Jin’s cerebellum, his nucleus accumbens, imagining what or who he was thinking of.

Then he asked if she wanted to take a walk, and from the taxi to their hotel on the beach, she put her head on his shoulder, peered at him, and saw on his face an immense grin, tilted and triumphant. The smell of his body seemed intoxicatingly mixed with the sea.

“I need to reply in a week,” said Jin back in their room, in the front of the bathroom mirror.

“Why hesitate? It’s what you always wanted,” said Rui Li.

“I want president, not vice president.”

She wanted to open his skull then, not with a scalpel but her hands, peeling slowly the layers of periosteum, cracking the cranium, through the dura mater, the pia mater. To see what parts of his brain lit up when he looked at himself in the glass. Was he finally proud of himself? After fifteen years abroad, did he finally see the man he knew he had the potential to be, when the People’s Hospital first sent him abroad? He could go back now, have the success and respect in China he couldn’t have in Europe. He had not asked her to go with him, and she wondered if they would become like so many couples they knew who
stayed married while one, usually the man, went back. She too had been a doctor, but not a surgeon. She had never been as decisive as he was.

She turned to face his stocky frame. For twenty years, she never wore heels, not wanting to appear taller than him. Her hand moved from his shoulder down to his arm, tentatively.

“Ye xin,” said Rui.

Wild heart. The two words for ambition. In the mirror he watched as she placed her chin on his shoulder, the angle of her nose a gentle curve in profile. When he turned, her face was radiant and he froze as he looked at her. He did not kiss her, maybe because her eyes seemed filled then with playfulness as well as meanness, something unlike trust, and then she straightened his collar, went back to brushing her hair, and later when they were together, she felt she knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted her and the other. He wanted everything. Ye xin. In the silence it was as if there was a cat in her throat, trying to make the sounds she had heard women make in American films. In China she never made a sound, and tonight she tried again to not make a sound. To stay quiet and tell him nothing. She did not need to speak to feel herself sinking, falling under his touch.

“It's almost my birthday,” she said after from her side of the bed. Forty-three years.

He looked at his phone. “Not yet.”

She kept her eyes open for a long time after he had fallen asleep. The respect she had for herself demanded an apology, for he could not slip back into their marriage as if he had not cut her, injected betrayal under her skin. He did not
seem to care about her humiliation, only his own, and she felt that if no one cared about her pride then she needed to care extra for herself, much more, and if what she felt for him was still love – love does not sublimate after twenty years – then it was a love that eclipsed respect.

“So Waipo quit her job after you were born?” asked the daughter.

“No, with four kids, they had to work. They sent us to daycare, asked our Nainai to come from Guangdong. A lot of time you couldn’t see anyone at home.”

The daughter had always imagined her mother’s childhood filled with noise and activity, plenty of siblings at home. Dancing, singing in courtyards and barren streets. As a child, she had had moments of intense loneliness, but her mother was the youngest, sometimes teased by her siblings, always taken care of.

“We were hungry,” said the mother. “We didn’t know anything about nutrition.” She was laughing now. “Xiaoli found a picture last year. I was sucking my thumb, my whole hand. I was seven and so thin. But we were happy.”

More than once, when the mother paused, the daughter asked, as she did now, “And then? Then what happened?”

“I remember once Waigong, Waipo went to work, and I cried and cried. I was a kid then. Our cousin was there. I was five, she was one. I begged her to stop. Your Uncle Xiaoli, I don’t know where he was. He was quiet as a kid, like you. But I liked to cry. I just sat down next to the baby and started crying too.”

“Just the two of you?”

“Xiaohua was at daycare. Nainai went to get something, food probably.”
“No one would leave a one-year-old at home,” said the daughter.

“Today, they wouldn’t. In China, nobody cared at that time. It was around that time that Waigong was jailed.”

The daughter did not know this. Her grandfather was not political, not like some of his friends. “But why?”

“Revolution,” said the mother. That disembodied word. “Lots of people were jailed, if your birth family had problems.”

What kind of problems, thought the daughter. Her grandfather’s family owned a rice company.

“Waigong’s grandfather opened a Da Tang, making sugar,” said the mother. “Additions to rice. At the time, you used manual additions, sugars. Their recipe was famous, exported to Malaysia, Hong Kong, Macau. Lots of things were exchanged. Oil, for cars, lighting. There was no electricity, but in their house, they had a bicycle. Waigong’s mama was the prettiest in the village. Your Aunt Xiaohua looks like her.”

“I remember. Waigong told me she had skin like white rice.”


“So they were not farmers. They had a bit of wealth.”

“They had some material goods, xiao zhi ben jia, so there were problems at home. Good thing he joined the party early. It didn’t get very bad. But Waipo’s dad was sent to jail and died of disease. I don’t know what. I never met him.”

The daughter was silent for a moment. She knew her grandfather’s friend had spent more than twenty years in jail. The friend had been the mayor of
Chongqing, written a report on the number of deaths due to famine. But her own grandfather – he was just an agricultural engineer.

“Not jail,” said the mother in Mandarin. “Gan xiao. There was no freedom, you had to study all the time, not real jail. There was no court, but if you have problem, they send you to jail. I remember he was there, it was a very hot summer, he had no clothes to change into. A neighbor told me your dad needs clothes. I was thirteen. I went with an ah-yi, gave Waigong a bag of clothes, a T-shirt, no collar, a pair of shorts, a towel. I wrapped it up and brought it to him. Chongqing didn’t have a lot of cars. We walked a long time, went to that big building. And one by one, they opened the clothes. One by one, to see if there is anything hidden inside. I was by myself and they wouldn’t let me see Waigong. There was a big door. They wouldn’t let me see him.”

“You said you went with an ah-yi.”

“I went there with an ah-yi, but I had to come back by myself. I was thirteen, and there was only one bus. If I didn’t get on that bus in the afternoon, I couldn’t come home. There was a crowd and I knew I had to get into that bus, and I met a bad man. A very bad man.”

The daughter winced. Her mother’s word choice made her sound like a child. “He touched me all over the place. I hid from him.” Here, then, seemed like an opportunity to ask. But ask what? *How did you feel?* Her mother felt terrible obviously. Maybe something was lost in translation, *huai ren*, but that was exactly what it meant. Bad people. The daughter thought now of the word ‘security’ which meant ‘freedom from care,’ the fact that we only feel insecure
because we care, and the moment we stop caring, feel safe enough to trust completely, is the moment we let down our guard and become, in fact, un-secure.

Her mother had never seemed free from care. There was a humming in the daughter’s head that drowned out her ability to ask. In the seconds that passed, the knob in her throat subsided, her heart returned to a steady beat, and she waited for whatever it was her mother wanted to say without prompting.

“Shi-chiao-pu, from there I rode all the way to Lian-Wu-Ko, and then I walked. An hour, an hour and a half. If there had been someone with bad intentions then, I was scared. If there had been a bad guy, but it was different, more innocent then. Now there are more bad men.”

The mother looked at her daughter, who was dating another boy, her third or fourth boyfriend, this one not even Chinese-American. What could she tell her? That it was impossible to know who were the bad men and the good men, that the daughter should judge based on the boy’s parents, his family instead of his seeming individual character, because how do you judge a person in the end, not on the scale of humanity where everybody had potential, but as the one person you choose to marry?

In the morning, there was no light through the curtains and Rui saw it was five o’clock but she could not fall back to sleep. Jin was facing her, his eyes closed, lips parted, a line across his cheek from the pillow like a scar. His head was large and heavy, his shoulders broad and he slept on a thick memory foam pillow at home but he claimed that he could fall asleep anywhere. On planes,
other countries, whatever the time zone. She slipped out of bed, into the shower but when she came out he was not in the room. His brown jacket was gone and so was his phone. She could have stayed then, ordered breakfast with his money, his salary, their family depended on him, he said, and her job was symbolic. But she put on her clothes and did not stop in the hallway with the pink carpet or the breakfast nook by the kitchen. Across the unpaved road outside the small hotel, she crossed the wet grass, took off her shoes, and the grainy sand under her heels slid into her toes until she heard the incessant drone of the sea and a higher pitch closer to the rocks, the hush shush of the waves. Above her the still morning clouds were an oppressive gray with only an outline of clarity at the edges.

When she came out between the clearing, she could see a man on the rocks at the edge of the beach. She knew it was Jin by the shape of his coat, a straight cut which he had bought it on his last trip to China. She thought of turning back but he was talking on the phone, and as she climbed the uneven rocks, she saw he was holding a black stone with one hand and his other hand clutched the phone as he glanced at her. He rubbed the glistening stone against his dark blue coat, then hung up the phone and put it in his pocket.

“Who are you talking to,” she said.

“It’s going to rain,” he said.

“Give me the phone.”

He turned away and on the rock, standing next to Jin, she had the feeling that her mind was moving closer to her ear drum, that she had a heightened sense of hearing even though he continued to say nothing. She did not want to move,
say or do anything, and neither did she turn to look at him, but she felt his presence and it became unbearable. It was the wind that battered her senses, not him, and she stood there until there was nothing left to think, until she felt surrounded on all sides by wind, sand, and sea, and a smell that at first she thought was a whiff of sea salt but soon became part of the sharp air, filling her mind to the break of clarity.

“Na is sixteen,” she said. “It’s too late to start again.”

As she spoke he stood still and looked at the sea. She couldn’t understand why he would want a baby. Somewhere, in her ribs like a memory deeper than bone, she remembered the feeling of a small warm body against her breast, the baby’s breath louder than her own, and in those moments you didn’t think – Rui Li never thought – that one day that sweet sweet child with bright eyes would resent you, look down on you, be disappointed by the curve of your life, as if you did not do everything you could to make a life possible, simply possible. When she asked Jin a question, he turned and descended slowly from the rocks toward the hotel. After a while, she followed him, but he never turned, and when he was almost past the wet grass, a few feet from the road, she veered off the path to walk along the sand and did not return to the hotel until she was sure that this was what she wanted.

“Oh Uncle Li was jailed too,” said the mother. “They took him. Do zen, pifo.”

“What does that mean?” Her Uncle Li, the oldest son of the mayor, had married the oldest sister of her mother. He always seemed so jovial, even-keeled.
His favorite phrase was “Bu jie, bu jie” – no anxiety, no anxiety – which he would say to his wife and daughter, like a chant, whenever they seemed too caught up.

“Guai-ni,” said the mother. “You don’t understand because you don’t study Chinese.” Her tone changed suddenly. “It’s our fault. We never taught you. I regret taking you out of China, only six years old.”

Do zen. Pi fo. The daughter would have to find these words later.

When the van was an hour away, the mother went back to the room to lie down, and the daughter walked from the courtyard through the narrow hallway to the lobby. There was no one at the entrance, the humming sound in the air was gone and clouds had appeared in the sky. A calico dog sauntered down the long twisting road with bamboos on either side behind young plantain trees. In the distance were layers of grey hills, their shapes mimicked by the clouds. Then a three-wheeled truck came down the road, followed by two peasants holding baskets, and she felt how little she knew of this country.

“Don’t go too far,” the mother had said. “Don’t cross the road.”

The daughter walked along the dirt path toward the cemetery. The year before she could not have thought less about her parents, could not have ignored them more, and only once did she call her grandmother. But after Giac asked her to marry him, her head had cleared somewhat and she began to think, often, of her own parents.

Inside the stone gates was a row of ferns under a weeping katsura tree, its leaves incessantly falling. The yellow heart-shaped petals fell one heart at a time,
over the ripples of a small pond. Many of the leaves had browned edges like cancer spots, and in the center of the heart were veins extending to all sides from the stem. She made her way from the katsura to the stewartia, sat down beneath the bark that renewed itself as it shed and peeled, and touched the white stone with her grandmother’s name. A dead Chinese woman named Jiang Mei.

She began to dig. She dug with her shoes, then bent down to dig with her hands, clearing the leaves around the stone. The soil was hard but when her fingers pushed, the dirt came apart. She dug until it crossed her mind whether anyone, truly, cared whether a grandmother passes away. Does one mourn while thinking that seventy-five is a decent number of years – not ideal but what is ideal – and in the ethics of life-years-lost it was not so bad. The doctors could have performed brain surgery, but it was high risk and the family decided against it. By then the swelling in her brain had left Waipo in a coma, without even her eyes to see from the inside. But for the granddaughter, it would have been worth the risk, worth any amount. It was selfish to want to know someone at the end of their life. One’s own understanding was a selfish thing to seek. What did her Waipo want?

The daughter thought now of her mother, how in the courtyard their conversation had not been the usual repetition of reprimands, unsolicited advice, warnings. What was wrong with her that she was still not beyond the blaming of others? Her mother was alive, but she was trying so hard not to become her parents when she hardly knew them. She felt scared, sitting in the leaves among the white stones. Sex, pleasures, the hope always of more, but there were other questions to ask. She stopped digging and walked back to her mother.
Synopsis: I have been working on a small manuscript with four main characters: Na Yang, Giacomo Peretti, Rui Li, and Jin Yang. Na Yang and Giac are in their mid/late twenties. Their story starts in Philadelphia and ends in France. Their sections are told in close third POV focusing on Na, a musician, who spends the first half of the book trying to memorize a single piece of music by Chopin, and spends the second half driving up a hill on the coast of Cannes with Giac, a mathematician. (Not a very plot-driven novel, unfortunately.) Rui Li and Jin are Na Yang’s parents, 59 and 58 years old. Scenes from their marriage begin in Chongqing, travel to Brussels, London, and back to China. The two couples’ stories are told in roughly alternating chapters, with one scene in the middle where Na appears with her parents. Although I am unsure whether to add the material in this excerpt into the ms, possibly near the end – in which case, I would edit the sections with unnamed characters, substituting “mother” and “daughter” with their names – I do like the idea of a short novel about a girl who starts out thinking about her boyfriend and ends up thinking about her mother. Thank you so much for your comments.
I decided to call my mother this morning because last week she had called and I didn’t pick up. Well, I did pick up the phone from the base, pressed TALK after the answering machine had beat me to it, but I didn’t say hello. I let her talk into the machine, and then as quietly as I could, I carefully put the handset back in its base, and let her finish with her recording.
I couldn’t tell you why I did that — pick up, press TALK to take the call, but not talk — only that when it was happening, when I held the cordless phone in my hand, I just didn’t open my mouth. It is a strange feeling to hold a voice in your hand as it speaks up to you. Disconnected from a body but connected just the same. It is a haunting, kind of elegiac feeling.

But I could see her sitting at home, my childhood home, on the end of the tartan plaid couch nearest the phone table where she always sat to take a call, or make one. Where the same green, molded plastic, Radio Shack Trimline phone from childhood sat in a neat arc when the handset was clapped to the base. I recall liking to place my hand momentarily on the sleek curve when passing through the small room wedged between the kitchen and the living room, really it was just a passage way, a thorough fare. I remember the pleasure of pressing the puffy, opaque rounded cornered square buttons. Tiny marshmallows. Pushing them felt like when I pushed in my nipples in the shower on my 13-year-old building breasts. Plump. Springy.

I remember always feeling the potential of the telephone as we chased each other, my brothers and me, through the room. It’s for you, it’s for YOUuuuu they sang after me. It’s Daannny. Ooohhh…Danny. I would get on the phone to heavy breathing … whooo haahhh oooohh. Saarraahh… “Gross!” I yelled. And slammed the phone down on the cradle.

The phone was like a genie in a bottle, a Pandora’s Box of sorts. The phone could hold a lot of trouble. Back then there were crank phone calls. Boys called and huffed and puffed and said dirty things. And we often knew who it
was. Sometimes the calls weren’t dirty, but still pranks. One that was a favorite was:

**Caller:** “Is your refrigerator running?”

**Us:** “Yes.”

**Caller:** “Well you better go after it!”

Another good one:

**Caller:** “Is Jerome Wall there?”

**Us:** “Sorry, no one here by that name.”

**Caller:** “Is Mike Wall there?”

**Us:** “No.”

**Caller:** “Are there any Walls there?”

**Us:** “No.” (happy to be going along with it)

**Caller:** “Well, what is holding up the roof?”

We loved those types of calls. The phone would ring and we’d all run to the phone, clambering over one another to be the one to get to the phone first. Whoever didn’t get to it first would plop down on the couch to listen to the exchange. We’d try our hardest not to crack up, holding ourselves tightly in a squeeze, which only made us laugh harder.

The eighties seemed to be the hey-day of prank calls. We didn’t make them ourselves. The worst we did was call the operator repeatedly for the time.
One joke we got once did hit a little close to home:

*Caller:* “Hello is this Smith’s, do you have pop?” (our last name was Smith, and also the name of a gas station convenience store)

*Us:* “No.”

*Caller:* “No, pop? Well if you did, could you send him home?”

Pop. Dad. Father. Ours was not at home, then, or any longer. He did live nearby, in our same town anyway. The phone, it was how our father spoke to us early on, when he left our family for another. Every Sunday evening at 6pm the three of us would line up on the small couch, arranged from oldest to youngest, wedged and squished in the frame of the couch like the cushions themselves.

When he called, our father, at 6pm on the dot, every Sunday evening, my mother would say, It’s your father. Sarah, go answer it. Being the oldest, I did. How she knew it was him I always wondered. I mean, it was an arranged and set phone call every week, but it could have been anyone calling really. Perhaps I wanted it to be anyone but my dad calling — a friend, a boy, even a prankster, anyone but my dad where in the background I could hear the voices of his other family — That’s what I mean about the phone being a vessel, a container, or connection to all sorts of trouble. It could bring joy — those fun prank calls. But it also could shoot pain through the line straight to the heart in those voices of the other family. My mom, she knew things. She was a religious woman. She knew better than to answer the phone Sunday evenings around 6pm.
Last week, when listening to her on the answering machine, I could see my mother twirling the cord in her long fingers as she talked to me. To the answering machine. Kicking her heel out from the top of her crossed legs kept the rhythm, maintained the cadence of her voice. Her legs were just as long as her fingers, proportionately that is. She is an elegant woman. She always has been. And I can see now she has pressed the phone to her shoulder and she has started to clean her nails.

*Did you get the article I sent you, she was saying. I clipped it from the paper.* I could see her long fingers hanging in the ears of the scissors, pumping open and close the blades around the news with the triangular wedge of muscle between the finger and thumb. The same place in the meat of that triangle, on the hand where she told me to press an acupressure point to relieve a headache. The same fingers in the same blunt scissors that would later snip the long hair at the nape of my stepfather’s neck she held in her other hand while he sat perfectly still at the head of the kitchen table. *The news of the missing woman in your town made it all the way out east to our little paper. They will find her. I have added her and her family to the prayer list.*

I am standing in front of the phone in the pantry listening to her, realizing I too, have started to pick my nails. I begin to look through the mail for her letter. I have always done what she has told me to. I don’t have her elegance. I am noticing I have her busy hands.
The last time we truly spoke, a month ago now, we were on the phone, and she was telling me the names of the people on the prayer list at church.

“Should you be telling me this mom? I mean, it seems like kind of private information. Only between people in the congregation that day. No?”

She didn’t hear me, but kept on rattling off names: “Denny, Candace, she has cancer. So sad. Not good, not good. Pray for her Sarah.”

She continued: “Jean, Gretel. Martha, she has pneumonia. Gene Anderson, he broke his hip. His children are visiting, so that’s good. And Linda. The organist Richard’s wife. Remember him, Richard? He left Linda for their children’s 3rd grade teacher. Can you believe that she did that — have an affair with her charges’ father? I mean twins, does she really think she is greater than the sum of those two children?”

Yes mom, I wanted to say but didn’t. Not about remembering those people. I knew all of these people. I remember Richard. Richard, with his salt and pepper hair. Jesus hair, I thought when I saw him at church earlier this spring, on a trip home the week before Easter. His hair, thick, healthy, hitting at the shoulders. He was probably my age, or a bit older, 43 or 44. His hands pumped at the organ, pulling or pushing the stops below the pipes. I watched him do this, not knowing anything of his transgressions then, and thought how plump, how full his hair looked. How suave and robust. I found his wife (still married then) in the first or second pew with the minister’s wife on her right, and their (Richard and the wife’s) toe-headed twins on her left, picking their noses simultaneously, then
eating their catch in unison. She had a look in her eye. Like she knew something, and was not looking at her husband, but through him. Does she I wondered? Through him into the stained-glass window and beyond to outside. The foil wrapped lilies filled the altar, lined the matted, crushed orange velour of the steps up to the altar, like tiny acolytes themselves. A choir of eager bright white faces.

I remember the suave hair, the oil on the air from the lilies that while sweet, was too much. Looking back, it is obvious. I can see it now. There is something lust does to the body in its craving. It gives polish. Gloss. I looked away from the wife back to him. I couldn’t stop looking at him. I saw myself in him. I wanted to see that I looked like him. In his vivacity. His happiness. There was something about him which was virulent that at the same time gave him a vitality. My mother, beside me, was watching the minister dutifully. I ran my hand through my hair.

I had wanted to tell her about David on that call a month ago. That I understood what it could mean to be another woman. But I didn’t.

I had told David that I couldn’t do it anymore just before leaving to visit mom at Easter. In a text. Isn’t that called “Ghosting?” And a no, no?

Me: “Hi David, nice seeing you yesterday 😊. You know, I can’t do this anymore. Until we choose more, I’m not so sure.

David: “I understand. I want more. I simply cannot choose more right now.”
There was more to the text. But yes, I was prodding him to choose. To choose between his wife and me. Why then? Right before Easter? I don’t know. Perhaps because deep down I knew he wouldn’t choose me over his wife and young family. Perhaps because I was going home and I wanted to tell someone about it. To make it real. I hadn’t been able to tell anyone. All I had were my fantasies of a life together. Him and me. Working, coming home, having his kids on the weekend. I love kids, and imagined a good relationship with them.

But, I did know that David wouldn’t choose me and I wasn’t going to be left again. Again (he had come and gone multiple times over the two years of clandestine meetings by the creek, or off the trail in the woods). Arguably, it was the hardest thing I have ever done. To choose complacency, safety over desire. Call it proactive, self-love, self-care, I still cried the entire weekend. Nothing felt safe about it. Safe had never felt so terrible. But I was not going to be left. Again. It also would be a good time for some motherly love. But I didn’t tell her then.

“Well…,” my mother continued, “Richard, he left the church. Can you believe that? I mean, not that he left the church. Of course he did, he didn’t need to be asked. But I mean the teacher? How could she…can you believe?”

I could see her, my mother, with her busy hands trimming the rising shoots of the house plants in her bay window. The phone on her shoulder, cord stretched tight, cutting across the narrow telephone room.

Yes, I can believe that Mom, I wanted to say again, but didn’t. Perhaps that is why I didn’t pick up last week. I thought I might blurt it out. Blurt it out that I
had had an affair. That I was that teacher. Not the teacher. I am not a teacher, but a nurse, 3,000 miles away. I am that woman that was in want of something not mine to have. I still yearn for it. I wait for the text message. The ghostly arrival of a person whose name has been erased because I have deleted his contact. But who might appear again one day and I will recognize his number and add him to my contacts again and POOF he will materialize again. Be real again. Right now, it is nothing, but something. An apparition. Something phantom. A phantom limb. Then it was something, but not anything. Not enough anyway.

Telling her would make it real. Telling her would move it from the fantastical to the literal. Telling her would make the lingering pain of what is the right decision that feels so wrong, dissipate. But in telling her I would be telling her I am that woman. That woman that dad left you for. So I didn’t.

I did tell someone about David and me. My father. Despite the distance in adolescence we were talking now. I thought considering the circumstances he might understand. I thought we shared a comradery. An understanding of love. I wanted to tell him: I get it. I understand. I forgive you. And I wanted him to tell me everything. What to do even though something had been already done. So I called him when I was out at Easter. And what did he say to me?

“Have you told your mother? She wouldn’t understand.”

So I called her today. My mother. She picked up after two rings.

“I knew it was going to be you! I was just thinking about you. I knew you were going to call today!”
CNN was running in the background on loud.

“Stan, it’s Sarah,” she yelled to my stepfather. Who I knew was sitting nearby at his desk in the telephone room.

“Mom, can you turn it down?”

“Stan, turn it down. Can you turn it down Stan? I knew you were going to call today, I just knew it,” she said again.

“Hi mom,” I said again.

“I’m sorry we haven’t spoken in a little while,” I said. “What’s happening out there?”

“Oh, the same. The usual.” And I knew she meant the news, watching the news. I knew she meant church.

I thought about Richard and his hair.

“How’s Gene, is he recovering from the hip surgery?” Gene had once been my math tutor. He used to come over Thursday afternoons and work on algebra and geometry with me in high school.

“Yes, he’s home. He caught pneumonia though. Poor man. Such a good man. I brought him some food the other day. He still asks about you.”

“And Linda?” I asked. I was still thinking about Richard’s hair.

“Oh, that woman — that homewrecker. That slut.”

“Mom!”

“Not Linda! The girl, the teacher.”

“Mom, I’ve never heard you say slut.”

“Of course I know that word.”
“Mom, I know you know that word. I just have never heard you say it.”

“Stan, don’t I know the word slut, or is it whore, that woman?” In the background I didn’t hear him answer. Only the newscaster.

“Mom, can we talk in private? I can call another time.” And I looked down at my hands, they were twirling in my lap.

“Oh sure honey. No, now is ok. I’ll just bring the phone into the pantry. The tv is still up. We’ll be fine.”

“I’ll call back another time Mom. I’ll call you back.”

There was a moment of rattling, muffled ruckus and I could see her passing the phone to herself through the small window in the pantry on the other side of the telephone room, and sliding the window down so it pinched the cord slightly. That is where we all went to take private phone calls. That is how the phone cord got all of its kinks.

“What’s going on? Everything ok?”

I could feel tears beginning. I moved from Richard’s hair to David. I was thinking of David now. And missing him.

“How’s Linda?” I asked again.

“She’s fine. Better. Not fine. She and Richard are talking. He’s still with the teacher. I don’t think he and Linda are going to get back together. But they’re talking. Linda hasn’t been at church. But I’ve heard from others who have talked with her recently. We still have her on the prayer list. The woman from your town too.”

“Oh, oh good,” I say. “I’m glad they’re talking.”
“The boys,” she said. “They’ll be ok.”

“Yes, yes they will,” I agree.

“What’s going on Sarah?”

“Nothing mom. Nothing.” I wasn’t sure I wanted to tell her after all. I was having second thoughts. My hands twirled in the opposite direction now. I could see her spinning the cord in her hands, trying to smooth the kinks we had made over the years.

“You asked me if I could talk in private.”

“Oh, it’s just . . . I don’t know. Nothing. I’m fine. I’m fine.” My eyes were warm with the liquid starting to fill them. I couldn’t see anything. I tried looking out the window to focus them. But it was like looking through a sheet of hazy visqueen. Blurry. A kind of burning feeling.

“I’ll put you on the prayer list.”

Mom, please don’t. Please don’t put me on the prayer list. Just tell me it is going to be ok. That I will be ok. That this too shall pass. If I said any of that out loud I don’t know. But she heard me.

Ok she said.

And I heard Ok. You will be ok.
“Every time I paint a portrait I lose a friend.”

—John Singer Sargent

THE GIRL IN THE SHADOW OF THE URN
/story excerpt/

*Portrait*

The first portrait Jules Johnson saw, really *saw*, was a watercolor she held in her hands in her uncle’s frame shop: a woman seated on a rock at the edge of a river. The subject’s shoes were off, her jeans rolled up, her feet kicking in the water. The woman looked right out at Jules with eyebrows crunched together, her mouth smilelessly closed. Her expression was intimate but not entirely friendly, barely containing something like rage.

The client was the painter. The subject was his wife. “Does she really want this on her wall?” Jules had asked Uncle Walt.

“Not ours to worry about. He pays on time, that’s ours to worry about.”

In the summer before starting high school, Jules was still learning the process: mounting the work with a hinge of archival tape, cutting the beveled mat, hinging the mat to the mounting board, then blowing out the dust with the air compressor. She cleaned the glass, checking for streaks and lint, then dropped the work into the frame and secured the precious layers with staples. They sealed the back of each frame in brown paper, mounting screw-eyes along the edges, twisting in a hanging wire, and affixing a sticker to the paper: WALTER WEIR FRAMES.
Uncle Walt worked through the steps with unconscious precision. He barely looked at the art after the initial conversation with its owner. Jules’s brother Alfie, too, ignored the art when he came to help Walt cut a large piece of glass. Jules hated that they didn’t trust her with the expensive panes.

Everybody trusted Alfie with expensive everything. If only they had seen him Saturday night, vomiting into a ditch after the county fair—and he hadn’t even gone on any rides. In his new job, Alfie drove an expensive tractor. Jules used to dream aloud about owning her own tractor, and her brothers would just laugh. “You’re cute,” Ray would say, which only enraged her.

That summer, another portrait came into the shop, a print of a John Singer Sargent painting, the opposite of the watercolor of the nearly-enraged bluejeaned woman. Tall and slender, the woman depicted wore a tight corset and a loose expression. Her mouth was red with frank sensuality, her auburn hair swept up in a comb, her pale skin rendered in soft strokes of pearly white and pink. After mounting the print, Jules laid it on the worktable to study it under the florescent light.

The woman’s clothes were what made Jules stop and look. The formal dress was pink satin, but if you blurred your eyes, especially from across the room, you could convince yourself that it was her skin, that she was standing there, naked, next to the pink upholstered chair, making that face at the painter like a dare. The woman wasn’t ashamed. She wasn’t worried about what they would say at school the next day.

“Are you working, or are you standing?” Walt said.

“Working,” Jules said quietly.
Quirks

A couple years earlier was when shit got complicated, as Alfie was fond of saying, when their mother married Kirk the Quirk.

Kirk had a son, who Alfie called Son of Quirk. He was Alfie’s age, but never quite a brother. “I don’t like the way he looks at you,” Alfie said, after they had all gone swimming down at Lake Winnebago. Quirks young and old were in town, celebrating the union of families, before Mom moved away to an airbase out west, leaving Jules and her two brothers in Walt’s house, where they had been living for the last nine years. Mom dared not leave them with their father, Nate Johnson, who was not really the fathering type. He was not, technically, Jules’s real father anyway. That little fact made everyone uncomfortable.

In seventh grade, Jules seemed to have a knack for making other people uncomfortable. Like when her pediatrician examined her—then, blushing, handed over her shirt to cover up. He hadn’t been able to take his eyes away from the pink skin of her growing breasts. She could see his heartbeat yammering in his neck as he leaned into her face with a penlight, asking her to say ahhhh.

On that trip to the lake with the Quirk family, Jules had plunged from the dock into the freezing water, relishing the chill in her scalp, blowing bubbles and splashing her long hair back, before running back to the grassy bank, like she had done since she learned to swim. Alfie’s eyes turned stormy as he watched Son of Quirk, whose expression was both faraway and close, gaze rested on Jules’s wet body. Alfie reached for his own flannel shirt and
threw it, hitting her square in the stomach. “Jujubee. Don’t get cold,” Alfie said.

**Burning**

The summer before high school, Jules used to go over to Lainie Frisk’s house to *lay out*, as Lainie called it, in the back yard. Their friendship had been engineered by Uncle Walt, who knew Lainie’s dad from the Chamber of Commerce. “You girls are the same age,” Walt had said. “Maybe you need some female friends.”

Lainie had just moved in from Chicago. She had earrings, poked in by a friend back in the city, running all the way up one of her ears. “I’ll do yours too,” Lainie said one afternoon. “All you need is an ice cube and a needle. And a match, to sterilize the needle. And an earring. I could give you some of mine. I have loads. And a potato.”

They had spread an old quilt on the grass in the center of the yard, where the sun was best. Jules’s legs and arms had turned brown from all her time outside chasing her chickens, riding her bike, going to the swimming hole with Alfie and his friends. In Lainie’s yard, they slathered coconut-scented oil on their skin to magnify the sun, then lay flat on the blanket. The yard had a high fence, making this patch of grass their own private lair.

“I think rhinestones would look good on you.” Lainie pushed her sunglasses to her forehead and squinted to picture the baubles, reaching over the blanket to lift the sun-bleached hair away from Jules’s ear.

“Rhinestones aren’t really my style.”
“You have one of those? A *style*?” Lainie tugged on the sleeve of Jules’s oversized tee shirt, a hand-me-down from her brother Ray. “The kind of style where you sunbathe in your *Christian youth group shirt*?”

Jules had her one-piece bathing suit on under the shirt, but had grown into the habit of covering it up. Conversations went easier this way.

“C’mon. You have tan lines *on your arms*. It’s just the two of us. What, do you have a horrible rash under there?” Lainie made her cute face, cheeks puffed out, then she sat up and started tugging at the shirt. Jules finally relented and twisted her way out of it, then rolled the shirt up to make a pillow for her head. “You see?” Lainie said. “Geez, you’re gifted. Why you hide? I’m a joke. Look, I look like I’m ten. Here, I’ll put some of this on.”

Jules let Lainie rub oil into her bare back, between the crossed straps of her bathing suit, then into her shoulders, pale until the line where the short sleeves ended. She rubbed the oil herself into the skin of her chest, before flopping back onto the quilt and closing her eyes, inhaling deep the smell of coconut, letting the sticky heat cook the newly uncovered skin into a brutal sunburn.

She felt like a giant, lying next to Lainie on that blanket. Lainie was one of those skinny girls who ate ice cream and candy and chips constantly. She wandered around the house in a bikini like it was nothing, like all the eyes could be on her and she didn’t care, as she leaned into the fridge to find her next snack. She didn’t preen like the cheerleader types at school, who would arch their backs if they knew someone was looking. She was truly free.

“Tell me, Jules,” said Lainie, through a Cheeto dangling from her lip like a cigarette, “who all the hot guys are. Who do you like?”
“Nobody. It’s the same old guys since kindergarten.”

“I miss Victor.” Victor was her boyfriend in Chicago. “He’s going to come up and kidnap me. We’re going camping.” Lainie shook the Cheeto bag to find another big one. “I wish I could talk to him.” The telephone was perched just outside the sliding glass door, on the patio, its long cord stretched as far as it would go, waiting for the Victor call. Jules had never seen it ring.

Victor was real, though. Jules had seen a picture of him, shot in a photo booth with Lainie, one of those black and white strips, poses progressing like a love story. In the first photo, he was stern and gaunt, while Lainie, beside him, stuck her tongue out between her kidlike, freckled cheeks. In the last one, he finally had the glimmer of a smile under his spiky black hair. He looked older.

“Or, he said we’ll drive down to Chicago for a punk rock show. Did I show you my new ID? He nearly broke his elbow moshing the other night. At Metro. We have to go to Metro. You been there?”

Moshing had yet to become a thing in the Fox Valley. Jules had never gone down to Chicago, let alone a nightclub.

“C’mon, you must have someone you like, Jules.”

“Maybe Buzz Larson. But everybody likes him.” She felt weird even saying the words aloud. “He’s in hockey. Alfie said he’s the only freshman who might make varsity this year.” She turned over on her stomach, turned her head away, so Lainie could not see her face.

“Buzz? Is he an astronaut?”

“My brother calls him that. He got stung by a yellowjacket last year, and his whole arm swelled up. Beau, that’s his real name.”

That night, Jules soaked in a cold bathtub at home. She didn’t have any lotion for the sunburn, nor anyone to ask to put it on her stinging skin. She didn’t dare ask Walt. Lying around in the sun was asking for pain, according to him.

_Crickets_

On summer nights, Walt would sit in a rusty camp chair next to his Airstream trailer, intermittently smoking a pipe and waving away mosquitoes. In lieu of beer, he nursed a very tall glass of sugary iced tea. In winter, he did the same indoors near the hi-fi, listening to big band records. In summer, he let the animals provide the music, trees alive with chirping insects tuning in swells.

Sometimes, like tonight, Jules came out and sat near Walt on a springy aluminum chair, looking around at his old wood sculptures. Back when he still drank, he carved totems from logs, filling the night with chainsaw music.

“You spent the day with Lainie?” Walt asked, though he knew the answer. He’d seen her lean back into her dinner chair, wincing as the shaker rungs pressed the rough cotton of her shirt into her sunburned skin.

“Mmmmm,” said Jules.

“She all right?”

“Lainie? Of course. We just listened to music and stuff. She has a great record collection.”

“I probably don’t need to tell you, but you should be careful,” Walt said. “She’s been through some trouble, Lainie.”
“Like what?”

He leaned forward and tapped his pipe against the ashtray, then coughed, then leaned back. “You have a brain. Use it.”

“Everybody has a brain.” What kind of trouble? Walt would never say.

“What about me? I’ve been through trouble too.”

“There’s trouble and then there’s trouble,” Walt said.

“Can I go to the Pickmans’ bonfire on Friday? It’s the last one, before school starts.”

“Only if you use your brain,” Walt said, closing his eyes to listen to the bug symphony.

Pop

Friday afternoon, Jules went straight from the frame shop to Lainie’s house. The plan was to ride bikes to the bonfire, then toss them into Alfie’s truck to hitch a ride home.

But first they had to get ready. Jules hadn’t ever spent time before a mirror prepping for a party, especially not a bonfire. Bonfire prep was nothing but packing bug repellent and wearing old clothes that you wouldn’t mind smelling like smoke later.

“Please,” Lainie said, in her room, holding up one of her rhinestone ear studs. “You’ll look so boss. It doesn’t hurt. I swear.”

Jules finally nodded and followed Lainie into the bathroom, where she sat on the pink counter between the twin sinks, her back to theatrical lights surrounding the big pane of mirror. Lainie held a cube of ice against Jules’s earlobe, holding her face close enough that Jules could feel breath on her
cheek. Lainie smelled of coconuts. She must have been out on the blanket all day, while Jules had been measuring matboard. “Hold this,” Lainie ordered, and Jules took over the ear-icing while Lainie arranged her instruments on the counter: a votive candle, a needle, the rhinestone stud, a box of tissue, a potato cut in half. Lainie lit the candle and held a fat sewing needle in the flame. The needle turned black, and Jules felt her heart quicken, thinking that soot would penetrate her skin and leave a dark tattoo.

“Numb enough?” Lainie said.

“I think so.” The ice had begun to melt and drip down Jules’s arm.

“Close your eyes.”

She felt Lainie’s warm breath again, as she held the hard potato behind her earlobe. Jules closed her eyes and inhaled the earthy minerals of the potato skin. Then with a sharp, audible pop, the needle went through.

*Snaps*

Several Christmases ago, before the marriage to Quirks, when Mom was still living at Walt’s, Nate Johnson showed up during pecan pie, bombed as usual. His kind of drunk was the slippery kind: his voice never slurred; his body never went floppy. “Won’t you let a lonesome old man inside on Christmas Day?” he said at the door, leaning against the jamb in his shiny cowboy boots and bolo tie. Walt sighed big and opened the door wider.

Nate insisted on a slice, and Mom cut him one, out of pity for her kids if not for him. He squeezed in between his two boys on the dining room bench, then leaned forward on his elbows and eyeballed Mom, chewing
lasciviously. “Pearl, you always were put together,” he said. “You are one sexy lady.” She nodded but did not look him in the eye.

“Nate, maybe best you eat that pie and go,” Walt said softly but firmly, taking a sip of his evening coffee. Nate kept eating, eyeing Mom. She offered him a napkin to clean the ice cream from his bushy mustache. Jules thought she saw a glimmer of guilt in her mother’s eye.

Nate had presents wrapped in department store boxes for the boys, but not for Jules. Western shirts, the kind with the pearly snaps and scalloped yoke. Alfie loved his, a denim-blue plaid, but seemed to try not to show too much satisfaction as he folded it back into the tissue. Jules knew already he would wear it well; he had that bright light behind his green eyes. Green eyes that looked just like Nate Johnson’s green eyes.

Ray held his up to his shoulders, but only after his father prodded.

Nate Johnson didn’t even look at Jules. Not once.

After he left, Mom cut Jules another piece of pie and topped it with way more ice cream than she usually allowed. Numb, Jules lifted bites to her mouth, hoping the sweet would make her lips feel like smiling.

By New Year’s Jules found Ray’s new shirt in her laundry hamper. He usually bequeathed her clothes that way. A gorgeous shirt, it featured a black and white striped yoke, black long sleeves, striped cuffs with pearl snaps, and a crisp black collar with white topstitching. She washed it, folded it, then stuck it in the bottom of her shirt drawer until it lost its story enough to try wearing.
Choker

After bejeweling Jules, they went into Lainie’s room to get dressed for the bonfire. Lainie’s dirty clothes were heaped in bright-colored mounds on the shag carpet. A twin bed, pushed against a window facing the street, was also heaped with clothing. Lainie whipped off her tee shirt and stood in the middle of the heaps in a green bra, looking around for the shirt she had tried on earlier. “Don’t you shut the curtain?” Jules asked.

“Oh yeah. I forgot. Can you?”

Jules knelt on the bed to flip the blinds shut, then flopped onto the pillows to look at all the everchanging decorations. Taped to the closet door were two glossy photos of a female pop star. Lainie caught her looking.

“Madonna. Have you heard her new EP? Here, you have to.” Lainie lifted a stack of records already on the player, then restarted the turntable and cranked the volume. She bounced across the room to the beat of the song, handing Jules a record sleeve, then resumed her clothing search in time with the music.

As always, the phone had followed them. Lainie was in the habit of carrying it around the house like a purse, yanking the long cord from room to room and setting it down to wait for the call from Chicago that seemed never to come. Jules had not once seen it ring.

Jules looked down at the black and white portrait on the album cover. The singer had bleached, bobbed hair like Lainie’s, teased in a wild halo. She held both hands to her face, one in a fist, the other partially covering one eye, and at the end of pale arms, her wrists were encrusted with adornment: pearls, silver studs, black leather, as if she had poured out a treasure chest and put everything on her body.
Lainie found her top, bright purple knit covered in silver studs and strategic rips, its sleeves stripped into fringe to expose her tanned arms.

“That’s cool,” Jules said. “You did that?”

“Yeah, it’s super easy. I got the idea from Victor’s roommate. You want to do yours? Where’s yours? You’re not wearing that, are you?”

Jules had come from work wearing another of Ray’s Christian tee shirts. “I brought this,” she said, unzipping her backpack and pulling out the striped western shirt she had found in her hamper a few years ago.

“Nice stripes,” Lainie said, flopping onto the bed next to Jules. But the phone rang, and Lainie popped up and out the door, receiver to her ear, long cord trailing behind her.

Jules wasn’t sure what to do. Lainie would talk to Victor for hours, no doubt, locked up in the bathroom. Jules could put on her western shirt and get on her bike and go to the bonfire alone. She had gone to these things without a sidekick before. She knew all the players.


“He’s such a dick.” Lainie picked up a string of sparkly beads from her dresser, draped it around her neck, eyeing herself in the mirror. Then in a burst of energy, she tugged at the string, scattering little pellets of color all through the shag carpet, slamming her hand against the edge of the dresser, then shaking it out. “Fuck,” she said, as her hand turned red from the impact.

“What did he say?”
Lainie eyed Jules’s western shirt. “I think we need to customize that. You look like such a virgin. Make it sexier. Then Buzz Larson will want to rip it off of you.”

“That wasn’t exactly—”

Lainie yanked the shirt from Jules’s hands and stood before the full-length mirror, holding it in front of her own chest, cocking her head. The speakers popped in the silence between songs. The next record dropped, a new song, a crooning melody, Ric Ocasek, Lainie’s favorite, the man with more pictures than anyone in this room, his long, skinny face, his shaggy hair. His voice like black velvet.

Jules hoped the song would calm Lainie, but it only seemed to remind her of what had angered her. She tossed the shirt into Jules’s face, and Jules had no choice but to put it on. Lainie steered her along the valley between hills of clothing to the spot in front of the mirror, then unearthed a pair of shears from the clutter on her desk.

She began cutting lengthwise at the sleeves, just above the wrist, exposing Jules’s entire bare arm. The shirt was practically new. Jules felt the cold blade against the sunburn on her shoulder, not minding the sensation, the coolness of all of it, this sartorial experiment. Lainie was claiming the shirt for her. Its story was being erased for good. Lainie undid the pearl snaps until the white lace of Jules’s bra was visible. Jules didn’t stop her. Lainie tied the tails of the shirt tight around the waist, exposing the pale skin of Jules’s midriff.

“I don’t know,” Jules finally said. “Maybe that’s a bit. . .” but let her voice trail off, because Lainie seemed to be relaxing, nodding her head to the song, as she put finishing touches on: a pearly necklace wrapped around
Jules’s arm to hold in the ribbons of ripped sleeve, a dozen beaded rosaries around her neck, heavy crosses falling to the spot where the pearl snaps began.

Jules’s newly-studded ear throbbed as she surrendered the rest of her look to Lainie’s sudden makeover: matte lipstick, stark eyeliner, ripped footless fishnet stockings beneath her ripped jean shorts. “He would have to be blind not to get the message,” Lainie said, and Jules wasn’t sure what the message was, but at least it would be something the bonfire crowd had not heard from her before. She laughed at the thought of it, making Lainie smile. “You’re Cinderella and I’m the fairy godmother,” Lainie said. “Oh! Here! But you can’t lose it. It’s my favorite.” She had found a black leather choker, studded with pink and white rhinestones, and stretched it around Jules’s neck before snapping it snug into place.

“Are you sure?” Jules said, feeling, with a swell of gratitude, the push of the tight leather against her voicebox.

Smoke

They were sweaty by the time they made it to the Pickman farm, several miles down the flat, straight road from Lainie’s house. Jules smelled the light perfume Lainie had sprayed on her just before hopping on their bikes: Love’s Baby Soft. Maybe this is what Lainie needed. Softness. Love. To be babied.

There would be no babying at a Pickman bonfire. Perhaps she should have warned Lainie. Or, did some part of Jules want to see Lainie’s city reaction to the inevitable—boys on hiatus from hockey whacking each other with fists instead of sticks, throwing whole bushes of dried weeds into the flames to watch the sparks radiate on all of their drunken faces? Beer was in
coolers in the back of pickup trucks circled around the fire like a pioneer caravan, their beds laden with kindling and scrapwood. Girls stood in groups on the sidelines, leaning on tailgates in Packers sweatshirts and drinking from tallboys, waiting to be chosen for a foray off to the creek, or into the cab of a pickup, or into a stall of the barn.

Boys threw things on the fire, then looked for more things to throw on the fire.

Benny Pickman was the supposed host, but he always lost control long before the moon came up. Sometimes he even went inside and let the party go on without him. His parents were the kind who paid no attention. They were there, up in the house, watching television. They didn’t care, unless you had to use the bathroom. Nobody could go inside. If you had to pee, you did it around back of the barn, hopefully with another girl nearby to stand guard.

Jules expected Lainie to be horrified at their hickness, but she wasn’t. Her tanned face filled with the fire’s glow, and she smiled as she rushed to the front to feel it on her sweating skin. Jules followed. Buzz Larson hefted an old Christmas tree he had brought from his own back forty, aiming to toss it in the fire, and Lainie seemed to spot him right away. She had seen his picture in Jules’s junior high annual, but he didn’t quite look like that picture anymore. Summer had broadened his shoulders, sharpened the line of his jaw and Adam’s apple. Jules knew the face well. He came to her house a lot with Alfie and usually beelined to the boys’ room to do whatever they did in there, with a brotherly nod to Jules on his way.

Love’s Baby Soft seemed to be attracting mosquitoes. The choker around Jules’s neck itched. How pretty she must look, slapping and
scratching, as they approached Buzz Larson, as his Christmas tree sizzled and sent greenish smoke up with its sparks. She tried not to cough. Buzz wore a sleeveless shirt and his muscles sparkled with sweat, his too-long golden hair stuck to the sides of his head. “Oh hey, Jujubee. I didn’t recognize you.”

“Buzz. This is my friend Lainie.”

“Hey.” Buzz nodded at her. “Are you guys dressed up for something?”

“Just thought we’d have some fun with it,” Lainie said flirtatiously, “in case you were here.” She giggled, then held her hands out to present Jules, like a model teasing a game show prize.

Jules blushed. She was glad it was smoky out here, smoke-screened, so Buzz couldn’t see her blushing. But he could see her, and he was looking in a way he didn’t usually, at all of her: her arms wrapped in pearls, her pale, sweaty navel, her ripped fishnets and canvas converse, her pearly snaps undone all the way down to the edge of her underthings. His eyes stopped there, noting the peeling skin of her new sunburn. Lainie watched his eyes travel across her project and grinned at her accomplishment without subtlety.

“What do you think?” Lainie said. “Would you be willing to get her a beer?”

“Yeah, sure,” Buzz said, and headed back to a cooler in his dad’s pickup. The girls followed. He wiped the ice from each can with the tail of his shirt before handing it to one of the girls—Jules first, Lainie second. Jules had never been first. This kind of attention was new.

She caught Buzz stealing glances at the choker around her neck, at all her exposed skin, as they sat on the tailgate to watch the fire as a threesome. Jules sat in the middle and nursed her beer. Lainie turned hers upside down and finished it in three gulps, then leaped up and ran toward the fire, tossing in
the empty can with a whoop. Jules was strangely proud of her friend for jumping right into a new world with such abandon.

Some older guys Jules barely knew, guys too old for school, took notice of Lainie and started circling round her, offering beers, which she accepted. Percy Newton, two trucks over, cranked the volume on a boombox and sent Lainie dancing to her beloved Ric Ocasek. Her dance was sorrowful, ecstatic, maybe too close to the fire, and Jules watched with concern as her friend spun and tripped on a ready scrap of firewood, landing in the arms of some guy who should have been home with his kids. He laughed, then Lainie laughed, then everyone did.

Everyone but Jules. She could see the heartbreak in Lainie’s dance, the heartbreak these hometown hicks were blind to. Maybe bringing her here wasn’t such a good idea. Maybe it was time for Jules to start using her brain.

Jules turned to Buzz to express her concerns, but Buzz wasn’t looking at the Lainie show. He reached over and grabbed one of the crosses dangling from Jules’s collection of rosaries, then looked up at her face with a playful squint. “Ray seen this?”

“No, and Ray won’t be coming here.” Ray was a strict teetotaler, virginity-declarer, church-choir-belonger. These were not his people.

“Alfie seen this?”

“No.”

“You look good with makeup.” His gaze traced the line of her painted lips, then finally turned to her eyes. Damn, Lainie. Girl, you were right. Sad, almost, that a boy’s attention was so easy to claim: remove some clothes, put
on some warpaint. These trappings were such a cheap cheat. “Your ear is pierced,” said Buzz, reaching over to touch the throbbing lobe.

Some commotion by the fire, and Jules looked over. Nate Johnson himself was there, arms akimbo, standing right before Lainie in his bolo tie and looking her up and down as she danced by herself in the firelight. Jules felt a sudden protective instinct, or maybe it was a rage that was already there, or maybe she felt the power of the hand-me-down shirt all ripped and knotted to suit her. She found herself bounding over to stand between her new sister and the slippery man whose name was a scar she carried around, visible for the whole world, but not really hers.

“Who’s this?” said Nate Johnson, diverting his attention fully to his not-quite-daughter. “Our little Jujubee. You look just like your mama, painted all up. Putting it all together, just like your mama.” His green eyes had that same burn that he got when he looked at Mom, a love that always seems to end with someone getting hurt. Mom still had arthritis from where he broke her finger that one time. “What’s this?” he said, suddenly noticing Jules’s shirt. He looked down at her skin peeking through the cut sleeves. He looked at the pearly snaps. A circle had formed around Jules and Nate, ready to be entertained. “This is not your shirt,” he said, lunging at her, and he grabbed it by the snaps and pulled. The snaps gave way, and the shirt opened all the way down to the knot over her navel. “Give it back. It’s not yours.” All eyes were on Jules now, on her bare skin, and she backed away from him, nearing the fire as he advanced on her.
“LEAVE HER BE,” Lainie shouted, standing between them, this little thing, arms out to her sides, blocking his lunging arms as Jules scrambled to re-snap the front of her shirt.

“You stay out of our family business, little girl.”

Lainie had no idea. Nate would strike her, or kick with his awful, decorated boots, or push her right into the smoky mess behind her, burning her careful outfit and her halo of hair, her coconut-oiled skin, her tangle of beads.

“Pop.” It was Alfie. “That’s enough.” Alfie was taller than his dad now, easily strong-armed him away from the fire. “Jujubee, go to the truck.”

“She’s a shirt thief,” Nate said. “She’s a thief, just like her mother.”

“That’s my mother too,” Alfie said, quiet but firm, like Walt. “Dad, you need to go on home. Jules, I said get in the truck.”

Jules obeyed. From the bench seat, she saw her brother steer Nate Johnson over to his fancy Cadillac, parked on the edge of the drive, then the entire assembly stood and watched the dust of his whitewall tires as he retreated down the dirt road. Eyes blazing, arms flexing angrily in his dirty tee shirt, Alfie carried Jules’s bike over and threw it with a thunk into the bed of his truck, then got behind the driver’s seat with a slam of the door. “What the hell are you wearing?” he said, looking over her body like he didn’t want the answer. “Wipe your face.” He looked down at the ripped fishnets, then out the window. “You look like a prostitute.”

He started up the truck and put it in gear. Jules wanted to open her door and dive out, but it was too late. They were already speeding to the gate. She looked over her shoulder through the back window. Buzz Larson stood next to Lainie Frisk, offering her a beer.
Poses

Nowadays, in Boston, Jules’s faculty ID gives her free admission to all the museums, so she can bring her art history students to study the paintings in person. Often, she pops by to visit for a few minutes, if she has time to kill, if she’s in the neighborhood, if she just needs to see that painting one more time.

That painting. It’s a portrait, of course. John Singer Sargent, one of his kid paintings. Four white girls wearing black stockings, crisp-colored dresses, and starchy white pinafores stand between two large blue and white urns. The children are heiresses, famous for being in this painting, offspring of Boston elite. In the center foreground is the youngest, a rosy toddler seated on the blue carpet, holding a doll that looks just like her. Off to the side, also in the foreground, stands an older girl with a playful expression, hands behind her back, as if she’s hiding a bonbon the painter has just given her.

But the two girls in the background draw the true attention. They are the oldest, adolescents. They stand together. One looks out of the canvas, her expression brave, rebellious, go on, I dare you to say something, and I’m not in the mood to pose. And the other doesn’t even look. She leans on one of the urns, and her face is in shadow, seems to be talking to her sister. Whispering. Conspiring. Let’s dive into this darkness together.

The girls in the painting all grew up to live sad lives, she read once: none of them ever married. Jules bristles at that characterization. Sad lives. A whole lot to assume about an unmarried girl.

(continued...)
Dear Readers,

First, thank you for reading. Second, this is an excerpt from the end of a novel. It picks up five or six pages into the final chapter. There are about three pages remaining that I couldn’t include here. The primary subject of the novel is the father/daughter relationship, the parallels between her eating disorder and his alcoholism, and how their closeness devolves into estrangement.

Looking forward to hearing your thoughts,

SE.
There were two locked doors and no windows leading into the Intensive Care Unit. I had to buzz and sign in, but after the first day, they gave me a code. A nurse walked me past rows of vacant beds in the full upright position behind partially drawn curtains. Later, I would ask the nurse if it was always this empty, but at that point I hadn’t noticed that it was just my dad and one older man who slept all day in there. The other man was in a corner bed with a window into the deep wet brown earth and the barren tree trunks whose top branches were colored an improbable purple against the heavy skies. It was the same view of May in New England, mud season, that I knew from my college dorm rooms, though in Williamstown the landscape was punctured by Louise Borgeous sculptures, gold weathervanes atop brick, ivied lecture halls and a white steeple cut into the sky. In downtown Pittsfield if you turned your head a few degrees in any direction, you would see a vacant storefront or a home that the most shameless of my quippy college friends would have called a meth lab. It was only a matter of 20 miles.

My dad had an interior bed, a proper room of his own really, with sliding glass doors and a private toilet. It was called Station 10 and typically reserved for patients with infectious diseases, but it was available, and they must have thought Dad was the worst case they were going to get. The doors were open. The nurse, Susan, entered, approached a tray attached to the head of his bed and picked up a juice box, ripping the straw from its adhesive. She tapped on the tray to slide the straw out of its wrapper and punctured the silver circle with the honed, plastic tip.
From a few feet beyond the doorway, she and a bed of undulating sheets were all that I could see.

“Stephen, you have someone here to see you this morning,” she said.

At the sound of her voice, my dad turned towards her, so slow, and the sheets shifted above his body. She brought the white grape juice to his lips, and a pair of hands lifted, enclosing the small carton. The nurse kept hold. Even at a twenty foot distance, it was clear that dad’s fingertips were far from functional. She didn’t correct him by saying that he could relax. She was a professional and knew to let him drink uninterrupted. I studied her every tender move as she withdrew the juice box and wiped his mouth to moisten his lips.

I was at the foot of his bed by then, but he hadn’t noticed, had forgotten his visitor and been fixated on his liquid snack. I looked to the nurse hoping she’d tell me what to do. She smiled and beckoned, encouraging me to come up close.

“I’m not sure he can see you,” she said to me. If he could hear, he wouldn’t like being talked about that way, like he wasn’t in the room, but she spoke confidently, like she knew the exact decibel that clarity tipped into a low mumble for him. She stooped and put her face in his, nudging him to look at me.

“You have a visitor.”

He turned when she urged. I’d never seen him follow orders. She rearranged the sheets to replace a piece of tape holding one of many tubes to his body, and I saw it all at once, all five sense funneled into my eyes and my pupils widened to puddles, proving that in rare instances we are rocked into making use of our faculties and paying proper attention.
At first, I thought it was just his skin, lemon yellow and lit within, that shook me. He burned low beneath a thin coat of wax that smoothed over the sunspots on his forearms. 67 and his skin was pristine like a child’s, not a wrinkle, not a blemish. He was yellow head to toe and almost translucent, like he had recently been glazed. There was no flush in his cheeks or tan line at the collar of his missing shirt, no variation at all except for small pocks of primary blue and red across his torso. The red dots burst into webs at his middle where his skin was stretched like a drum. There were two bruises of roses dipped in indigo on his side. None of them were human colors.

He had shrunken everywhere but his middle, was thinner than I’d ever been, and since he was just an unadorned frame hung round a terrifying growth covering his stomach, for the first time I could see clearly that my narrow shoulders had come from his. There it was: the whole of the clavicle attachment, the hump of the humerus bone, no trace of muscle anywhere. But his belly was bulbous, taught and massive like a pregnant woman’s except that it spilled outward toward the guard rails on both sides of his bed. The proportions were impossible; it made no sense. I could count the ribs along his sternum, and then suddenly the cavity of his chest swelled into a tummy that housed a mass, straining to leave him so desperately that it had popped his bellybutton inside out.

His skin was pulled tight against his forehead, too. Most of his face was hidden by a beard like raw cotton that skipped over a new bend in his nose and picked right back up at eyebrows that obscured two exact replicas of my eyes.
The rest of his hair was neat like it never was, combed like silver thread on its spool. He was beautiful, holy his sheets, like a dead man brought back to save us.

His eyes were blank that first time he looked at me, and I feared he didn’t know me or want me there beside him. He checked back with the nurse, turning to her with what I imagine was my same frightened look on his face.

“Come right up here,” she whispered to me, and then louder for my dad, she said, “It’s your girl.”

My heart thumped hard like it was taking back all its blood. I crouched by his head and dripped tears that I couldn’t feel until they came onto his pillow.

“Hi Daddy,” I tried to control my voice. I didn’t want to scare him.

His soft voice spoke my name.

“Can I touch him?” I asked the nurse, desperate. I didn’t want to hurt him.

She held a pendant on a chain against her heart, raised her eyebrows and nodded her head, moved to pity or compassion by my hesitance. Later, she would tell me that the man who checked Dad in, Frank she meant, had mentioned that our relationship was strained. She thought it was a really beautiful thing that I was there. It was more rare than not, she said. I try to think about that when regret gets big, but usually when I find the memory, I’ve searched so long and hard that the soothing parts are all rubbed off.

When I put my arms lightly around him, he said my name again and asked me what I was doing there. His smell was usually flat and cloudy like dust and shedded snake skin, but now underneath the film there was honey, too.
His feet were hot so he asked me to pull the sheets up to his thighs. His exposed legs looked like wooden baseball bats painted with a rare varnish and wrapped in blue compression packs. When I returned to his head, he was tearing at his skin. The scratch marks he left behind burned deep red. He was so rough with himself, but his skin was immaculate again in no time at all. I watched this marvel of recovery a few times until I saw him reach for a spot on his back and clasped his striving hand in mine and laid it to his chest. I took over with my longer nails and better access, though I was tentative, still convinced that I would tear his tissue thin skin or puncture his belly. He was unbothered and let me do the work while he dozed off.

Sometimes, he jerked, pulling at the tubes and the sheets, doing everything he could to sit up. “I need to get out of here,” he’d say, as I stood over him, pressing down on his shoulders. He’d settle and his stillness would give way to sleep. I brushed back his hair and worked my thumb in circles on his elbow while he rested. When I wrapped my thumb and middle fingers around his upper arm, my fingertips touched.

The first time he woke up to find me there, he said, “Why are you being so nice to me?”

Could he not know that he was root, the sweet and sorry bleat of my heart?

Sometime after the doctor’s lunch break, we met in a conference room with no windows. Charlie called in. I put him on speaker and held the phone in the air while the doctor spoke and took notes in faint, red ink on the dry erase
board. A video call didn’t make any sense because service could be spotty in the hospital, the doctor said, and if even that wasn’t the case, Charlie was on the third day of his hike through Denali National Park, and we imagined reception wouldn’t be optimal there either. The doctor dove right in and wrote DNI and DNR top left and right corners, respectively. I sent Charlie pictures of the board while she confirmed for me that DNI and DNR mean Do Not Intubate and Do Not Resuscitate. We knew Dad wouldn’t want to live on a machine, but we decided I wouldn’t sign the forms for 36 hours until Charlie could get here. Until then, the goal was to keep him alive, in any state.

“Your father has late stage cirrhosis of the liver. Are you familiar with what that means?”

“Yes,” I said at the same time Charlie said, “No.” Though I wasn’t fully because death still felt entirely hypothetical.

“It starts as fibrosis, and at this point we can safely assume that his liver has ceased to function and turned to scar tissue. The extent of his jaundice is a pretty clear indication of where we are.” Charlie hadn’t seen what Dad looked like yet, didn’t know that the yellow went through the whites of his eyes all the way to the blue. It would be a shock at first sight, though I tried to warn him.

Then she wrote Ascites, Hepatorenal Syndrome, Hepatic Encephalopathy, Internal Bleeding, Cirrhotic Cardiomyopathy on the board. Each had its own bullet point because each was fatal; he was dying five ways. Hepatorenal Syndrome, the kidney failure, would likely be the quickest, and she ran us through all of the treatment options and then all of the reasons they wouldn’t work. He’d
need a kidney transplant, but the waitlist was prohibitively long, and he’d need to be at least six months sober before he could secure last place on the list. Until then, we could put him on dialysis as a bridge to a transplant, but it would need to be an incredibly gentle form of the treatment given how fragile he was, and the nephrologist at Berkshire Medical had confirmed just a few minutes ago that they didn’t have the capacity on site. They could transfer him to the hospital in Amherst where they did have the proper equipment, but there were no available beds there, and even if there were, the ambulance ride would probably be too much for him, and even if that didn’t kill him, hooking him up the machine would almost certainly overwhelm his system. Intubation, resuscitation and the other potential causes of death all ended the same way.

There was no use, but she never said so definitively, instead let us put together that there was no path to better. I could do the computation: I was never more alert, running on a current of adrenaline. Still, my sharp mind couldn’t conceive that this was it, and I didn’t want to ask because I didn’t want to make anybody say it. I believed that if there was only one possible outcome, someone would make it plain.

The nurse came in and out of the room all afternoon, usually to fiddle with his catheter. I drew the curtain between the bathroom and the bed when she pulled the pin out of his urethra, and he screamed. Next, she turned him on his side to wipe him with a fresh coat of lotion and check his empty diaper.

“Have you been able to make a poop for me?” she asked.
“Oop. I forgot,” he said in a little boy voice. “Can I try again?”

She agreed to come back in ten minutes, and when I came out of the bathroom he cut me a look and said, “There’s not a lot of privacy in this place.”

Time moved like a big hole, though it started closing as soon as it had opened wide, pushing everything else to the very edges. It took months shut entirely and when it was gone, I wanted to tear out the ground again, get away and get back to all of the space. I try for empty now, and hope to get all the way to the brink of things where I’m there beside him, listening to the flute of his breath.

I know I called my mother. The order of things gets hard after that. She drove straight from Cape Cod even though I’d said she didn’t need to come, that I didn’t really know what was going on yet.

“I don’t even need to be at the hospital. I’ll stay in the hotel the whole time. I just feel like I need to be there for you,” she said. She was there around sun down and took me to sushi that we ate silently. She began to order a glass of wine, and I put my hand over her menu, saying “Could you not.” She reeled the words back into her mouth, and the waiter walked away, confused. That was my only proper meal that week. The rest were hot water and packets of instant oatmeal.

I know, too, that after dinner we went back to the hotel and slept together in the same bed even though there were two of them. When I began to cry, she tried to comfort me, but I ripped the sheets away from her to protect myself from
her touch and started wailing that I messed up, I messed up, messed up. I never thought. I would never have. So sure there would be more time.

I didn’t want her to say it wasn’t my fault, screamed louder when she did. I still catch myself thinking that if anyone was going to get through to him, it was going to me, that I took a break from trying at the wrong time. When was it that he started dying? Which was the last drink that his body could handle?

Later, I grilled a friend, a medical student, who said it was almost certainly a long process, that his kidneys could have taken over for his liver as much as a year before he died, and at that point, there’s very little to do, but I didn’t know that then, and thought that it was a recent turning point, one last solo detox that did him in, so all I could think was if I hadn’t cut our thread, had tuned in and listened hard enough, if I had called him every morning, if I had committed to visiting during the summer, if I had sent an email saying I love you, made sure he knew I was coming back, would stop everything, move in, do anything.

What could he, my wise man, not figure out? Did he give up? Did he want to be done? Did he know and not say? It’s the same line of thinking no matter the timeline; the only difference is that anything that could have mattered is further in the past, a bit harder to grab at. But this death was part sickness, part will, a ratio can only end in questions, even now, long after there’s anything left to pin down.

Mom and I ate a bare bones breakfast in the empty dining room. I wasn’t hungry. It didn’t feel like a blessing then; I didn’t even notice. We returned to the hospital, and I didn’t leave for five days, five nights.
I told mom to stay in the waiting room and went to Dad’s bedside.

“Mama’s here. Do you want to see her?”

“I want to see everyone,” he rasped. Did that mean he knew he was going?

She read their story, Annie Dillard’s “God In The Doorway,” to him before asking if he remembered the holiest moment of her life when they were newly in love and stranded at low tide at Dad’s favorite place, a sandbar out by Monomoy Island. They’d stood together under the sun until the sand turned to shallow water, and they were surrounded by hundreds of horseshoe crabs closing in on all sides.

Mom began to say more. “Another one of the holy moments of my life was —”

“Right now,” Dad interrupted.

I saw my place, and left them alone for twenty or thirty minutes, but I was greedy and couldn’t stay away any longer. I passed the time outside Station 10 slumped against the wall next to the tea and coffee cart that our nurse had wheeled in for us. When the mean nurse passed, she noted my bare feet on the linoleum floor and scolded me. Our nurse was only a few steps behind, and she looked at me like she didn’t condone the mode of delivery, but agreed that the mean one had a point. She didn’t want me to get sick from spending so much time in there. Not long after, she brought me two pairs of hospital socks to wear around, her first big favor. She rubbed my back after handing them to me and then began to walk away.
“Susan?” I stopped her. “I just wanted to know if there’s any chance that he won’t die. I know that’s unlikely, but if there’s a five percent chance, a two percent chance, something smaller, I need to know. Cause if there’s any possibility, I just need to know.” Needed to prepare to take chances, advocate for aggressive treatment, for moving across the world and living by his side and tending to him like this forever.

She saw me spin through possibilities and squinted her eyes, folded both of her lips until they were inside her mouth. Shaking her head, she said, “No, honey.”

Before she came, I had asked my mom to stop by the main house in Chatham and pick up any poetry books she could find. I’d wanted to read his favorites, Merwin mostly, to him. Mom couldn’t find what I’d wanted at the house, and she sounded genuinely sorry. The nurse overheard the conversation, and the next day she came into the room bearing a 500 page anthology of the best modern American poetry, saying it wasn’t a big deal, her mother-in-law was a librarian. In it, there were three poems by W.S. Merwin. I read “Fly” twice to him. He cut me off at the start of the third go.

“I have been cruel to a fat pigeon because he would not fly — ”

“I think I want to sleep some.”

“Okay,” I said, and I stopped reading and started transcribing “Fly” in my notebook because I needed something to keep.
Mom went out to pick us up lunch that I forgot about when it came. When she was gone, he lay stretched out before me cradling his head in his diamond arms. We took turns showering each other with our respective highest praises.

He said he adored me. I said he was my hero.

“You’ve said that before.”

“Still true, though.”

We left space around what we said because he was weak and his brain was working slow, but more so, because this wasn’t just an exercise in reciprocity, especially when we moved on to apology. Not everything he said made sense, but I didn’t ask for explanations, wouldn’t dare when his everyday gravitas was compounded by the way he looked, the pace, the exertion of speech.

It was perfectly clear what he meant when he said, “I feel so stupid, self-absorbed.”

“We’re all self-absorbed. We might have to be, if we’re going to take any kind of care of ourselves, anyway.”

I waited a while before I said my sorry to be sure he knew I meant it more than I’d meant anything before. At some point I told him he was a stunner in his hospital gown. At some point I told him he was my favorite person in the world. “Likewise,” he said, which carbonated my blood some.

That night, Mom left around seven. The ICU shut itself to visitors at eight, but at the end of her shift, our nurse had said that I could stay with him overnight and Charlie could come straight to the hospital around midnight. Even though she’d said no on the first day when I’d asked, our nurse let me climb into his bed
and lay beside him while I waited. Maybe she wouldn’t have been so lenient with me if she hadn’t been the one to confirm to me that he was dying.

Dad woke up when Charlie walked into the room, crusted in stale sweat and Alaskan soil. His hair had definitively tipped from blonde to brown since the last time I’d seen him, and he’d become a copy of our young father. Dad was more lucid than he’d been when I arrived, quicker to place his son. He took one look at Charlie’s ponytail and fledgling facial whiskers and shouted “JC!” for Jesus Christ. “Oh golly. There’s the boy I love. You look wild, incredible.”

Charlie dropped his bag at the foot of his bed. I stood to hug him, and then took his hand in mine and wrapped his arm around my shoulders while I led him to the bed. I was proud of what I’d learned, and showed Charlie how to hold the straws, when to get him water. When I wrapped my fingers around Dad’s and the juice box, his body bounced back a millimeter in a flinch.

“I’m sorry my hands are so cold.”

“We all have our temperatures,” he said, blanketing the smallest statement in solemn, sweeping import. Charlie and I laughed because that was the gist of him. We had our dad back in a perfect sentence, an oddball adage that almost made sense, but not quite.

All night as Dad fell in and out of sleep, and we sat up by his bed with our heads in our arms folded on a table or the bed’s safety railing or each other. It didn’t feel right to leave Charlie stranded in a chair and lay with Dad, but by the time morning came, I asked, and Charlie said it was okay. I stayed there in Dad’s
bed except for when Charlie put the question back to me, apprehensively almost. Could he lay in bed with Dad alone for a bit?

I didn’t want to get up. I wouldn’t have done it for anybody else.

A steady chain of visitors came through. I thought it might be too many people for him, but he had been alone, all alone, for so long, and the list of those who loved him was so long. There would be 1,000 people at his funeral when the time came. We wanted him to meet all of our unmasked reverence.

When he still had the strength, each time someone walked up and said their name to him, just in case, he would yelp and cover his eyes, like he was embarrassed by their presence or sorry that he’d forced them to make the trip to see him. Sometimes he looked like he hated himself, for bringing us all here, together. He couldn’t take it all in at once, and he’d start crying dry tears that seemed spontaneous, except if you tracked his gaze it became clear that he’d realized some person or other was in the room before they’d come up to say goodbye.

Frank had called the day before to ask if it would be okay if he came to say goodbye. Of course, of course, was our answer. We had so much thanking to do.

It was nice having Frank around. He brought a bit of levity, though his good humor couldn’t quite penetrate me, and I snapped at my mom when she started chatting loudly with Frank about how much she liked being retired.

“Mom, if you’re going to talk about yourself can you go outside?”
My mom barked my name and before she could say more or watch me snarl, Charlie was beside her, draping his arm around her shoulder and cooing. It was Charlie who asked Frank how it had happened and what it had been like, finding Dad.

“Well we’d been doing our weekly dinners, but your Dad cancelled twice in a row and wasn’t taking my calls, so last week I just came in one morning with coffee when Valentina was with her mom. Thursday, right?”

I nodded. No one was looking at me.

“The car was parked in the back, and Layla was in there barking and tearing into all these brown McDonald’s bags. She had clearly been in there a while and gone to bathroom a few times, but she had her leash on, like they were about to go out or something, so I figured your dad was home and went up the stairs and knocked and waited. I was going to give up and turn around when I thought I saw a ghost or something — and I’m not one of those spiritual types, but I was sure it was a ghost at first. He was in this white robe that was most of the way undone and moving so slowly, and it wasn’t until he was much closer that I realized it was Stevie. Then I thought he was wearing a bunch of make up, and I almost turned around again, cause I mean, I wanted him to do his thing. I wasn’t gonna judge, but. Yeah, I mean, it wasn’t a costume, so I called 911.”

Frank had taken the dog back with him to Troy. I was embarrassed that I hadn’t thought about that, but I was in Dad’s bed, mostly eavesdropping, so I didn’t say anything. I must have shifted my weight, though, because Dad opened his eyes and looked right at Frank, noticing him for the first time.
“It’s too much and not too much,” Dad said.

Frank stood in the corner chewing on a stick of meat, and he pointed one finger at my dad and said, “I love you, man, but don’t ever do that to me again.”

It was a joke, given the circumstances, and Dad smiled before he shouted, “What you eating?” at Frank. He had to ask twice before anyone understood.

“Slim Jim! Get the man something to eat!” Frank bellowed.

I was about to whisper to Frank that he wasn’t hungry lately, but our nurse spoke first. She had something she thought he’d like in the staff room. She returning bearing popsicles: Rocket Pops, the kind striped red, white and blue.

Frank and Mom and Charlie each took one. I refused for myself and watched Dad’s eyes explode out of their sockets when I held one up to him. He lurched forward to take it into his mouth. His lips were ringed blue around the edges when he looked at me and asked for another. Charlie was standing behind me when our dad exhaustedly, elatedly offered the dregs of his second popsicle to us.

I was smiling through tears, practically clapping for him. I hated those popsicles. I licked once and passed it on to Charlie who held his own half-melted popsicle in his hand. That was our last supper.

Frank was the last guest to leave. Not longer after, our nurse disconnected Dad from the heart monitor; she’d found it only stressed family members out to keep looking up, waiting for the graph to level out. The doctor arranged for a hospice worker to come discuss next steps in case he lasted longer than expected. Now, I know that we had already overstayed our welcome in the ICU. The fact
that they kept him in the ICU that long, for days after they knew it was hopeless, must mean that he kept on longer than anyone thought he could. We loaded our bags around his feet, while the nurse and I wheeled his bed from ICU to a more comfortable room on the fourth floor. The new nurses hooked him up to a morphine drip, increased his dosage of anti-anxiety meds and brought in a cot for us to lay in overnight.

“There’s no need for him to be uncomfortable or afraid.”

“Will he still be present?”

“He’ll start to sleep more soundly and for longer stretches,” they said.

“He’ll drift off. But he shouldn’t be in pain.”

It sounded like a no.

“When?”

“It’s really hard to say.”

That was always the answer.

As soon as he was on morphine it was no more than a word or two at a time. Mostly, he breathed like a metronome through his parched mouth and blinked his eyes, which were still so alive and deliberate in their focus when they were open.

Things were quiet in the new room, except for when Mom spoke over the silence or interrupted when Charlie and I sang our favorite songs to him. At some point my mother began to sing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” and I was angry with her for the painfully obvious song choice, for the accidental syncopation of her rudimentary harmonies, for the bacon she’d spilled on the floor yesterday
without noticing, for intruding upon what could be my last day with my dad, but on the last chorus Dad joined, just for a “somewhere.” Charlie and I each held one of his hands, and he gave mine a squeeze. His whole body strained as he hooted in song. I don’t think any of us had been sure that he could hear anything. He was hardly opening his eyes at that point, and a coherent sound was a miracle. Mom, Charlie and I looked between ourselves. I stood corrected; it was a very fine song choice. Maybe I wasn’t wrong in the very beginning when I was so sure and so proud of my family, and bliss was just the fact that they were in me.

I was tethered to him, even when Mom and Charlie went back to the hotel to shower or outside to get a few minutes of fresh air. His breath got frantic because I cut off his oxygen for an accidental moment. I grounded my weight into my elbow to lift myself off the tube and then reached over him to place it above his head, so the same thing wouldn’t happen again. I returned to fold myself into his side, he lifted the full load of his skull with his feeble neck and tapped my heart twice with his hand. He placed his palm on the back of my head and guided it to his shoulder. He left his hand there on my head, and though he had long lost the ability to put a pucker in his lips, he brought his shriveled mouth right to my temple and held it there like a child just learning to kiss. That was the crest of every feeling, and when I weep it’s because I can’t hold what he gave me then to keep. There’s no good way to share it, though I’d like to; I wish the proof were hidden somewhere other than in me. Maybe I’ve ruined it in the telling, when I put a wave into the water that was meant to run still and deep.
He died in the middle of the night with my mom beside him on the bed doing a crossword puzzle in the back of a gossip magazine. I wore pajamas I knew he would like and rubbed the red paisley silk against his motionless fingertips. “Soft, right? I’m wearing these guys for you. I’m going to try to sleep some, but I’ll be right here. Goodnight. I love you.”

I woke up at two in the morning to a loud beeping noise and an unfamiliar medical professional rushing through the door. She held dad’s feet which had been cold for days, and then she continued up to his head and pronounced him dead. Mom was babbling, barely making sense. She said he’d been breathing slowly, but continuously, and at some point, she’d stopped paying attention, maybe fallen asleep. It was somewhere in that window. She’d been so sure she would notice, would feel a change when he went, but she didn’t; he just stopped.

It was petty; I knew it then, too, but I’d wanted him to wait for me, to be the one beside him at the end of the story.
Sing It Like Jimmy Durante (working title) is the portrait of a young couple whose marriage has unraveled while living abroad.

Abigail is a scrappy, intelligent painter who has been invited to a 9-month apprenticeship at one of Paris’s newer yet most respected studios. She grew up poor in a wealthy Connecticut town, which has taught her how to persevere in the face of privilege and classist sentiment. Paul, her husband, is a film projectionist, archivist, and occasional essayist. He is a confirmed homebody, not suited for the life of a transient. He likes his routines and depends on predictability. While Paul was ready to uproot their life in Brooklyn for Abigail’s career, being abroad has unveiled fundamental differences between them, testing the degree to which Paul is willing to sacrifice his own needs for Abigail’s aspirations.

The novel begins in media res, about 7-8 months into Abigail’s apprenticeship.

My worksheet includes chapter 1, followed by the beginning of chapter 2.
At the Musei Capitolini, Afternoon.

Abigail was not at all surprised that, no more than eighteen hours after stepping off the train, Paul managed to land them in what was quite possibly the least romantic place in Rome. The hall they were in was dim, its artwork tired. The museum nestled behind the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Most of it was on the wrong side of a hill that, from the other side, probably offered nice views of the Forum and Coliseum. Instead, she found herself affronted, hall after hall, by artifacts and paintings that essentially begged visitors to pay heed to their assumed profundity. It was that kind of place. No bells or whistles. Just a lot of cracked canvases, ancient relics, propagating of old ideas, and an expectation that everyone who walked in maintained a prerequisite knowledge of Roman history.

This was not to say Abigail held a blanket aversion to canonical works of art or old museums—quite the opposite. But at the Musei Capitolini there was no pulse, nothing that compelled her mind to create. No one piece or exhibit activating in her that singular feeling which always came before the inception of her own projects. There was no urgency behind anything she and Paul stopped to look at, no inspired compositions, nothing even to get mad about. What was more, the staleness of the collection accentuated, in a very cruel and precise way, the notion that they were standing in a space that probably, once upon a time, did contain something to get excited over, something beautiful and relevant and flourishing. But the wonder in all of that, whatever it was, had long since gone.

This understanding pressed upon Abigail an acute awareness of the creative
doldrums she had stumbled into a few months ago, and which still consumed her. Worse, it shed light on latent fears and recognitions she was beginning to have about her and Paul. In Paris, she was always so exhausted from her work at Gerard’s studio that she lacked the attention to give credence to what now seemed so plain and obvious. But in the wake of a morning that yielded little beyond an ebbing and flowing of Paul’s restlessness and irritability, of diverted glances and self-censored remarks, those recognitions were clear as day: she no longer knew how to access her husband. Living abroad, his person had been rendered into a complete stranger. As for the fears, she wondered if her efforts to rein him in were all but exhausted. It was as if she had slept walked through a whittling away at her ability to be the partner she wanted to be. How terrifying that, in less than two days away from the studio and their flat in the Marais, away from the stresses of her apprenticeship, they were able to take what was supposed to be a much needed vacation, a neutral place to rekindle a bit of what they’d left behind in Brooklyn, and turn it into a means of unveiling this estrangement.

Meanwhile, Paul trotted around each hall, outwardly content in what was either pure aloofness, or, more likely, an insistence on distracting himself from the tumult Abigail understood to be happening between them. She knew the art on display nurtured a splendor for him that he would readily latch on to if needed. That he might use to extend the degree to which he was capable of delaying a difficult conversation. His, in fact, was hungry, defiant. As if daring her or anyone else to question the vague but confirmed feeling of transcendence the museum and its collection were gifting him. His steps echoed as he paced around the room
they were in, his mind clearly suspended in a reverie she hoped he would not try
and relate to her.

Nothing else to do, Abigail stood in place. The balls of her feet were sore.
Before her, the bronze statue of a wolf bared its teeth. Its eyes were all but vacant,
and it looked upon her with an expression she was unable to read. Below its
udders were two baby boys. One kneeled while the other sat. Both of their heads
were tilted back, ready to suckle.

“It’s kind of odd, don’t you think?”

“Hmm.” Paul’s gaze drifted toward the statue before he stepped over to join
her. Despite his downward inflection, she knew the sound he made, if not an
attempt at a question, was certainly an invitation for her to elaborate.

“I don’t know, just—it. Two naked babies suckling on a wolf? A creepy wolf
at that.” Her gaze drifted warily back to the wolf’s teeth, then to the vacancy in its
eyes.

“I don’t know if that quite does justice to it.”

“Oh it doesn’t?”

“This is a really important piece. The She Wolf? It means, it signifies a lot.”

“Okay. Well, sorry. I guess you forgot to remind me everything in the canon
is infallible—or interesting. My bad.”

It seemed ridiculous that he could make it this far into the day without
recognizing the gap between them. Now, in a painstaking extension of that
aloofness or disregard, he was deciding to harp on her lack of appreciation for the
statue of a wolf nursing little baby boys.
Paul’s reaction, the way his gaze almost turned inward as he pursed his lips, did nothing to disguise how much her reply must have irked him. If he felt she was being snarky he was welcome to say so. But he didn’t. Instead, he said with a sigh, “Okay. Sure. I guess I know what you mean.”

“I didn’t mean anything, it’s just weird is all.”

“But you know the myth, right?”

The question was as rhetorical as it was unnecessary—of course she did not know the myth. As if that implied anything.

“Nope,” she replied, packing in as much challenge one might hope to achieve in a monosyllable. “I mean, I guess I recognize the She Wolf. I’ve seen her image before but no I have never committed to memory the fact that she nursed little baby boys.”

“Okay, I mean. I’m not sure how you can be familiar with her at all and not recognize them as well.”

“I didn’t say I was familiar,” she corrected him.

“They’re just a big part of what makes her image so recognizable. That’s all.”

“Oh geez.”

Paul said nothing but shifted his weight from one foot to the other and folded his arms across his chest. Just as he always did when in need of a little emphasis to shed light on the gravity of a moment, an object, a happening, or tidbit of knowledge. If anything remained consistent after nine years together, it was his propensity for employing such quirks as a means of getting her to prompt him. As if he needed an invitation to elucidate.
“Okay,” she said with a sigh of her own. “Okay then, lay it on me.”

“Well, come to think of it, I don’t know which is which but, the two babies—Remus and Romulus, they’re the guys who founded Rome. Twins.”

That was the closest he would come to an apology for how he’d been posturing—admitting there was a small element of the story he didn’t know.

“Fascinating. Why’s their mom the She Wolf?”

“Because their real mother was murdered for—I don’t know why, but the twins were cast into a river afterwards and floated for a while until the She Wolf found them washed up on a bank.”

As he said this last part, he untucked his left arm, which drifted out in front of him. His hand waved as if to conjure some imagery or imply signification. To her, this just came off as an oddly funny, half-hearted accompaniment to his previous remark. An echo of his displayed frustration. Regardless, the gesticulation was one she knew quite well. Having seen him implement it countless times—usually when he was in the middle of expounding on an idea that had taken hold of him—it always, unfailingly, aroused in her some degree of endearment. No matter how irksome or adolescent his behavior, no matter how dire the straits of their life together may be, she adored it when he became so worked up over something like this. Now was no exception. Just like that, the old feeling swelled. Surely the delirium of travel—a broken night of sleep on the train and then another on the foldout bed in the flat of Gerard’s acquaintance—had something to do with this unexpected shift in her temper. Either way, the feeling came to her out of nowhere, and with such potency, that it seemed useless to try and quell it. She bit
her lip and suppressed a smile.

Obviously as it was how agitated he had become, and in spite of the
insufferableness of his behavior all day, in spite of how at times she wanted to
scream and slap this awkward and unbecoming pretentiousness right out of him,
she also knew his attitude stemmed from a deep insecurity. This was Paul being
guarded. This was his vulnerability manifesting in manner and tone when he
couldn’t find it in himself just to be humble and let her understand what was
bothering him. This was Paul masquerading with an outward pride that wasn’t at
all befitting to the Paul she knew and had fallen so deeply in love with. The Paul
she had chosen as her life partner. While he had never explicitly said it, she knew
how much he missed Brooklyn and his jobs in the projection booths littered
across the city. How their life abroad had, in so many ways, unanchored his sense
of self and left him adrift. Historically, when such an understanding came to her,
her instinct would be to make sure he was okay, to place her hand on his back or
lean into him, to not extend his agitation but suppress whatever demons were
taking hold. But his attitude, his coldness and disregard for the estrangement
they’d done such a good job of casting themselves in was far from helpful. The
endearment dispelled. She stood in place, offered no words of compassion, and
kept her hands where they were.

Paul cleared his throat, though he said nothing.

“So—when they washed up, they were still alive? Obviously,” Abigail
offered, only after collecting herself and thinking, ‘Maybe not so obviously.’ After
all, resurrection wasn’t that out of the question when a wolf parenting
alliteratively named twins framed the story he was going on about.

“Mm-hmm. She nursed them back to health,” he went on. “When they were strong again, a bird—a woodpecker, I think—took care of them. Afterwards, they were reared by a shepherd.” He actually said that, actually used the word reared. “Long story short, when they were grown up, they founded the city.”

“Or, as your grandpa would say, ‘to make a long story more boring.’”

“Oh. If you’re going to make fun.”

A laugh, which she did not intend to release, sprung out of her. “I’m not.”

“You are.”

“Oh.” She fell silent until it seemed safe to go on. “Well, props for giving credit where credit is due.”

Rather than offering a reply, he nodded a few times—the motion of his head like that of a few weights being placed on the tray of a balance, tipping the scale on the fulcrum that was his neck, then gently bouncing up and down as gravity registered what implications were to be examined in the new load.

“Geez. Crazy to think all of this—” she went on, trying in her tone to chip away at the irritability or despondency or whatever it was that informed the motion of his head, not to mention the late afternoon enervation so tacitly expressed. And this time it was she who gave a kind of haphazard wave-of-her-hand to indicate the greater city outside. It was a wave that, were someone there who did not know her as well as he did, that someone might have gathered a presumption of her distaste for the city itself—its maze-like center, alleyways, fountains, and cobblestone streets. The caffè they’d stopped in an hour before,
where espresso machines were concealed from public view to maintain secrecy over the method that supposedly made their espresso the best espresso, not only in Rome but all of Italy. The street performer in Piazza Navona dressed as if he had just stepped out of *Roman Holiday*, 8 ½, or the episode of *Mad Men* when Don and Betty Draper vacation there. How he stood, frozen in a tableau to appear as if he had been caught in a gust of wind, slaphappy with a bewildered, cartoonish smile plastered across his face. One hand holding his hat in place while the other carried an attaché briefcase. The security guard at the Coliseum who wore stilettos and somehow managed grace in the way she carried herself as she stepped across the uneven cobblestone. Walkie-talkie clipped to her waistband.

“All of this is all here, thanks to this here wolf.”

“Yep,” Paul said, ready to speak again. “Pretty much. Well—if you believe in the myth.”

She hated that—this penchant of his to presume sincerity in remarks that had no intended depth beyond a passing shot at humor. In this case, an attempt to lift and toss away the weights so readily put to use in his tone.

Out of nowhere, at least from no nameable stimulus, she began to laugh. First, her stomach quivered, then her hand lifted to her mouth in an effort to suppress what noises were coming out.

“What?”

“Oh, I don’t know. They just look funny like that.” Recovering from her fit, she did her best impression of how the baby on its knee—Remus or Romulus, she could not say—was holding up his little hands, as if the *She Wolf*’s nipple was the
spigot on a cask, ready to release a single droplet that contained a crowning secret or divine power—a key to unlocking a remedy for her and Paul’s troubles, perhaps.

“Must’ve been pretty hungry. After getting tossed around in the river and all that.”

Paul nodded a few more times, then frowned. “Now that you’re more familiar with it, you’ll start seeing it—*them*—referenced everywhere.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Mm-hmm.” He paused again, this time collecting his thoughts. “You know that faux, actually-really-expensive diner-looking-place in Fort Greene where I took you? On Dekalb? Romans. That, the *She Wolf* and twins are on their website, for instance.”

“That makes sense.”

“And it’s also the logo of the bakery that always has a long line at the farmers market.”

“Oh,” she replied, nothing in her tone calling for more examples. It was plain to her, however, that his mind was already following this thread, and she knew it would take more than mild disinterest to yank him from it. “They’re what that Mountain Goats song is about, too,” he went on. “Or, at least, the part in the chorus refers to them.”

“Oh yeah? I don’t think I’ve heard that one,” she replied, thinking instead of another Mountain Goats song that reminded her of wintry nights during the months after they met. She did not know the name of it, nor could she recall any
of the lyrics. But the guitar’s gentle chords, its delicate progression were right there, drifting into her ear and draping her in an unsought melancholy. She thought of how, back then, even the most mundane of their conversations cradled a sense of promise. How he always found the right phrasing to convince her that her art was interesting and fresh and necessary. How wonderful and safe it was to be enveloped in his arms, pressed to his naked chest. How easily and completely she would fall asleep, even in the most awkward of positions. How she knew, also, when her touch was settling the demons swirling around in him. How she could feel him calming down through the tips of her fingers, the palm of her hand. Their limbs entangled. The most effortless and pure and exciting form of reciprocity she had ever known. And how no amount of his body against hers could make her feel constrained or claustrophobic or uncomfortable. Snow drifting down to the campus grounds as her bedside window fogged up. That old mattress without a frame or box springs which they slept on most nights because it was infinitely more comfortable than his. The following mornings when lawns and rooftops were draped in seamless, unmarked sheets of snow and, if the sun happened to be out, how his eyes would water from a kind of light sensitivity or allergy he had explained to her, but of which she never encountered another case. How many years had—

“Sure you have,” he replied, curtailing what remembrances were beginning to take hold of her. “I put it on your mix. Remember? It’s the—third to last song.”

To this, Abigail remained silent, squinting her eyes while she directed her gaze toward a small detail in the She Wolf’s neck. She bit her lip while part of her
contemplated how to answer him, the other part sifting through that contemplation to try and find a path back to the snowy mornings. Nothing came to mind, however, no excuse for not knowing off-hand the mix he referred to or the order of the playlist. As for those days past, the images she tried to call on were all but a blur.

All she did to acknowledge his words was sniff, as if that might motivate their moving on to another hall. Another topic. A reason to shift themselves away from the room they were in. Something, anything to derail the sentiment she knew was finding an ally in the weights dragging down on his posture and beginning to swell into something more. Something that would cripple what remained of their afternoon and spill into the evening. The culprit of a dinner table draped in silence.

“Grizzly Bear. Mountain Goats. Modest Mouse. Deerhunter,” he went on. Starting with his thumb, he counted with the fingers on his left hand while listing the name of each band.

If a reply came to her, it went unaired, overshadowed by her thinking how odd and typical it was he found it necessary to reference not only the fourth to last song, but also those two following the one in question.

No other museumgoers disrupting the space of the room, the silence that had come upon them took its opportunity to settle in.

That was, until, “Paul,” she said, cutting through the silence, as if she had been in a different hall this whole time and only just walked up to join him. But she hadn’t, and her utterance only served to stave off the implications resident in
that silence. In voicing his name, she also strained to remember the last time he had said hers. Which was ridiculous because of course he always said her name.

*Abigail, did we already decide what we’re having for dinner?*

*Hey Abigail, have you seen my latest Film Comment lying around?*

*Did you by chance borrow my phone charger? Abigail? Know where it might be?*

*Abigail, I have something to tell you.*

No, she could not for the life of her recall. In each snippet that came to mind, she was unsure if he actually spoke her name.

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“Nothing,” she said. “A thought came to me, but I’ve lost it.”

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7. Rue de Picardie.

MOMENTS AFTER JIŘÍ LEFT CAFÉ LE REFLET, Paul decided to order one more gin. He hardly gestured over the counter when Élysée, the weekday bartender, caught his eye and understood what he was about to ask for.

Before Jiří’s exit, Paul shared with him an hour or so at the café. During that hour they eased their way through one drink—Jiří listening while Paul detailed the whole of an essay he had just pitched to a few film journals.

Ever since arguments with Abigail came to be expected in the flat on Rue de Picardie, ever since misunderstandings and estranged sentiments framed so much of their time together, Jiří emerged as Paul’s most reliable conversation partner. A
true extrovert and generous spirit, his company never grew old. With Jiří there were no latent implications tethered to self-censored remarks, no mutual sadness, no varying regret, no reinterpreting shared history. Conversations with Jiří were not marred by overtones of marital shortcomings. Nor did they begin in exhaustion and end with more questions—questions, which, in their airing, composed an increasingly opaque vision of the year to come. Abigail’s apprenticeship, which she’d applied for on a lark the year before, was nearing an end. Soon after, the term of their lease would expire without chance of renewal. Even with the replicas Abigail was doing on the side, they would never be able to afford to remain in Paris. That was about as concrete as things stood. While Abigail did not wish to return home, she had not indicated to Paul what, for her, staying in Europe would look like. Paul, wanting very much to go home, knew they didn’t have nearly enough money to get by in Brooklyn for those initial months of reestablishing themselves.

No, in the company of Jiří, there was none of this.

A Czech transplant, Jiří had called the Fourteenth Arrondissement his home for going on a decade. For nearly all of that time he also held the title of lead projectionist at La Filmothèque—an art house cinema across the narrow, alley-like Rue Champollion. Since he and Paul met, Paul became somewhat of a fixture in the projection booth. He never ran shows, but he did help Jiří with the occasional projector maintenance, inspection and rewinding of prints, and general housekeeping. In return, Jiří always let Paul in to see films for free. Early on, he also said that he was more than happy to spend what were usually lonely hours in
the booth with a fellow, seasoned projectionist. Likewise, Paul wasted no time establishing Jiří as a point of solace for his distressed mind. He and Abigail had been living in Paris for nearly eight months. The first six now felt like a chasm separating a former life to this new, stranger one where their marriage had all but unraveled. Above the depths of that chasm, Paul’s initial alacrity for leaving their perfectly acceptable life in Brooklyn and moving to Paris for his wife’s career, followed by his outward enthusiasm for their new life abroad were as though suspended in air. In that suspension they remained exposed for what they were: feeble attempts at convincing himself that his heart was ever behind moving in the first place.

On the present side, the side they had been on for about two months, Paul sought refuge on Rue Champollion. When he was with Abigail, he downplayed the extent to which he ventured there—sometimes going so far as to fabricate a day’s worth of happenings in order to keep his experience of Rue Champollion his own, to not spoil what it had gifted him. For, unlike Abigail’s cohort at the studio, who only exacerbated his increasing lack of self-worth and accentuated his sense of alienation, on Rue Champollion he’d unwittingly stumbled upon a surrogate home. At Café le Reflet he embraced a ready audience for his anecdotes of life as a film projectionist in Brooklyn. In the darkened theaters at La Filmothèque, he established a sanctuary. In Jiří he found an unassuming friend and kindred spirit. Within the corridor of Rue Champollion, there materialized a parallel existence his overburdened spirit would gladly imbibe.

So it was, on this autumn afternoon, like on so many others in 20—, Paul
unloaded his troubles and Jiří listened. The essay Paul wrote was a longer piece focused on the 1960 film *Cimarron*, directed by Anthony Mann. La Filmothèque was in the middle of a near-full retrospective of Mann’s films. Paul hadn’t seen any of them and, as with so many of the cinema’s programs, he intended to catch as many as possible. *Cimarron* did not disappoint. As so happened, it kicked off the series on Mann and was allotted a seven-day run. Paul went to see a matinee screening on the first day, then again the day after. He was taken by how the substance of its plot and nuance of its central characters eclipsed that of most efforts in its genre. What was more, it left him feeling completely disarmed. Such a reaction was always the best indicator of an oncoming, fruitful bout of writing. Over the days that followed, he composed what he considered one of his stronger essays to date. Not only did his thesis and the bulk of his arguments come to him more easily than usual, he wrote with an effortlessness and precision that normally took a few weeks to arrive at, if ever. And yet, in the wake of submitting the essay, he could not help but feel there was an essential piece of the film he had glossed over. Something so obvious the editors of those journals would notice on a first reading and irk them to the point of replying with an automated rejection. So, after riding high the satisfaction of submitting, Paul just as quickly succumbed to a formidable dread that he’d been too eager. He read it over no less than five times between sending it off and meeting with Jiří. While their conversation did quiet some of his anxieties, traces of uncertainty remained.

When Jiří looked at his phone and said he needed to be on his way, Paul was struck with panic that the anxieties would flood back. Surely enough, the moment
his friend walked out the door, they did. As if Jiří’s departure unplugged a drain through which the temporary respite Paul had sought and found slid away. True, whenever he offered up a piece of his writing—whether self-published or submitted—lesser degrees of anxiety more often than not came over him. But the readership of his blog, followers of his social media accounts and traffic on his website had all grown and seen more activity since he and Abigail moved to Paris. When Abigail accepted Gerard’s invitation to partake in the apprenticeship, when the notice of Paul’s VISA approval said that he qualified to live in France but not to seek legitimate employment, he knew he would lean on his writing as a more serious vocation. What he didn’t anticipate was how much the successes and failures of his essays and his blog would weigh over him. How much he depended on them as a counterbalance for the present failings of his marriage.

In this way, Paul sat, tapping his fingers on the bar-counter while Élysée prepared his gin. His back to Rue Champollion, he maintained a good view of the café. The main room was welcoming in its cluttered aspect. The aesthetic it summoned easy on his weary eyes. Posters of Beach Boys albums, of Sam Cooke, Judy Collins’ *Wildflowers*, Marvin Gaye, and a young Bob Dylan perched on a stool, of James Dean, Ernest Borgnine, The Ink Spots and Montgomery Clift, of Lee Remick and Paul Robeson covered the walls. Others too. Neither a single portrait, nor any of the poster art was unfamiliar to Paul. They patched together a quilt, which he gladly crawled under nearly every day.

A Wanda Jackson compilation played through the speakers. Lyrics, in English, from a Townes Van Zandt song hung on a plaque above the arched
doorframe that gave access to bathrooms and an ATM.

*The moments do somersaults into eternity,*
*Cling to their coattails and beg them to stay.*

When Élysée placed the gin on rocks in front of him, Paul nodded *thanks* and took a sip. As with Jiří’s soothing countenance, the taste of gin and the calming aspect of the room could only distract his mind for so long. His thoughts reverted to that which ailed him all day. No one to talk to and nothing beyond a chilled glass and coaster to put his hands on, he extracted his phone and tapped the little icon for his email. When his inbox loaded, he scrolled to the bottom and brushed his finger upward against the screen so the page would refresh. He repeated this motion three or four times. Upon each brush, no unread messages appeared.

Paul traced his finger along the rim of his glass before taking another sip. His gaze landed on a polarized self-portrait of Lee Miller mounted to the left of the liquor shelf. In the photograph, Lee’s profile was set against a blank mat. The polarizing technique gave it a quality similar to that of a film’s negative but with more detail, and not quite as haunting—the effect less obvious. Her eye, for instance, expressed something totally singular, as if the photo was snapped at the precise, fleeting moment when an initial pang of sadness eases into a quieter recognition. As if to say, “Of course. How could I not have known?”

Hours spent in Café le Reflet aside, Paul knew the photograph quite well. It was included in a coffee table-sized biography of Lee Miller that Abigail had owned since college. She pulled the book from her shelf every year or so, revisiting various chapters and photographs. Once, sitting together on their couch, Paul opened it up and landed on the page where it was paired with a photograph
of Lee’s longtime lover and collaborator, Man Ray. Unlike Lee, Man Ray was not polarized. And though he was wearing a shirt and tie, in his plainness he seemed naked, exposed and found out—his eyes confirming the source of Lee’s sadness. They were the eyes of stubbornness and pride, of someone refusing to concede the plain and simple facts of their wrongdoing.

All of a sudden, Paul remembered what day it was.

“Shit,” he said, dropping his head to his chest. “Shit, shit, shit.”

“Something wrong?” Élysée stood only a few feet away, wiping down a glass.

“Eh,” Paul replied. Like a usual suspect beckoned to the interrogation room, his tone presented an accustomed resignation. “Nothing. It’s no big deal.” As he spoke, he lifted himself off the barstool and began putting on his coat. “Abigail—my wife—”

Élysée nodded. Paul mentioned her name more than enough times for any idle listener to commit to memory. Paul, however, had a tendency to forget what he’d told to whom and, as one might expect, a resultant habit of repeating himself.

“—asked that I join her and all of her cohort—her co-apprentices I guess—for a drink.”

“Where?”

“L’Éventail.” Élysée didn’t seem to know it. “Off of Place de la République. Near our flat.”

Élysée ticked his head to the left, regrettably. “Your gin will have to wait for tomorrow then, no?”
Paul lifted his eyebrows in what he thought a genial display of self-awareness. Gin on rocks being none too popular in the Latin Quarter, Élysée loved pointing out Paul’s choice of drink whenever opportunity presented itself.

“Well. I’m nearly an hour late already. Better get going.” With that, he placed a five-euro note on the counter, took one last sip of gin and stepped out, onto Rue Champollion.

By then night had fallen with such resolve there was no longer any trace of the sunset. No hues of violet, strands of pink or faded orange in the sky. There was no hint of the usual bend of light dipping down to the horizon. No sign of a transition of any kind having brushed across the sky’s blanket with colors sinking into the west, the sun their anchor. It was rather as if the night sky were a deeply embedded constant, a murky pool, a washed out shroud forged by city lights whose recesses left no indication of the day behind it having passed at all.

Only a handful of stars pierced through from the other side of that murk. Even those, faint as they were, beckoned no upward gazes as the denizens of the Left Bank moved about. Flanked by shops and cafés and the shuttered windows above, they went along in their various ways. Doors of parked cars opened, scooters whizzed through intersections as the yellow lights above turned to red. Cyclists pedaled in the wrong direction on one-ways and lit signs in storefront windows cast the faces of pedestrians in soft tones of pink, yellow, and green. The sidewalks were busy and a chill settled into the air. Nestled in the space of the avenues and boulevards, it began latching itself to any and everything, sparing not even the cheeks and noses of those simply trying to make their way home.
It was within this instance of cheated transition that Paul’s fret over his essay yielded for another concern: which of Abigail’s co-apprentices he would find huddled around the cluster of tables at L’Éventail. An evening lay ahead of him in which his charge was to present himself with the expected—or hoped for—gregariousness Abigail told him was an essential ingredient of his former self. Whether this self she described to him would manifest or cower, was, in large part, dependent on who else was there. Nevertheless, he’d be damned if he reneged on his promise to join them all for drinks—despite the plain and simple truth that he would much rather return to the flat on Rue de Picardie, have another glass of gin and read his book.

Beyond sating Abigail’s wishes, it felt somehow imperative not to let any of his anxieties, yet again, dictate his actions. These particular anxieties being tethered to nothing if not his present condition as an outsider, he was none too enthused about this newfound placement as the subject of some trial of betterment. As though his attitude, his outlook and the funk Abigail said he’d slipped into were to blame for the rut they were in. The reality for Paul was that he found himself, time and again, smothered by feeling hopelessly out of place when faced with this crowd that was not his, sipping on a drink he did not earn, listening to anecdotes for which he had little if any context. When gained, iterations of this feeling crippled his self-esteem and got the best of him. It got so bad that on the more recent occasions Abigail and her adopted cohort went out for drinks after a long day at the studio, he decided to remain within the safe confines of the flat on Rue de Picardie. Each time he was left afflicted with rumination…. 
The Black Market

All the world before us
Is a very narrow bridge,
And the main thing
Is not to fear at all.
--Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav

Somewhere buried in Europe’s rubble lay the secret of his father-in-law’s
tondness for the words of an eighteenth century Hassidic reb. Before the war,
David Auerbach, may his memory be a blessing, endlessly quoted Rabbi
Nachman of Bratzlav.

If memories of the dead are blessings, Zvi is abundantly blessed. He
remembers his parents and his sisters and his brothers-in-law, his nieces and
nephews, his uncles and his aunts and cousins, his wife and her brothers and her
mother, her sisters-in-law and nieces and nephews. All perished. Feh! with the
perished. All were murdered. A man with Zvi’s connections has his ways of
finding out. Even so, it has taken him years to hunt down the fates of relatives,
and only after arriving on the shores of America did he learn of the last, his cousin
Sandor: Sobibor. But of one, of David, his father-in-law, he discovered nothing.
No shred of him could be found anywhere. Nothing of life or of death. Somehow,
David, man of substance, paragon of Warsaw’s Jewish community, evaded the
Nazis’ meticulous record-keeping. If anyone could spin gold into life, it would
have been him. The man would have been a twentieth century alchemist who,
instead of turning base metals into gold turned gold into life. Other rich men tried
wartime alchemy and failed. Perhaps, they had too little practice before the war.
Perhaps, they offered their wealth too openly to so-called protectors. David, old
goniff himself, would know the ways such fellows cheat and betray and he would have planned for their crooked contingencies. Zvi imagines David’s money hidden here and there throughout Europe with promises to his abettors of greater riches in the future. His wealth, shrewdness, and stinginess were well known in Warsaw and beyond. Prospective saviors would have believed him. Zvi’s recurring and galling thought is that, though he would not have deserved it, perhaps the old man fell in with the few honorable men more interested in rescuing innocent Jews than in enriching themselves. Perhaps he fell in with honorable men who risked their own lives for reasons of piety or morality, qualities alien to the father-in-law Zvi knew in Warsaw. Zvi trusts no one who survived the war and, of the survivors he trusts David and himself the least. In his imagination, the mean old man faded into the wallpaper somewhere by quieting his acerbic tongue and by never again emerging as his own self.

Whether the old man is alive or dead, when Zvi tries to make his memory a blessing he must suppress curses for the man for, if the old goat is alive, it means he used money, influence, and luck to save himself only. He devoted nothing for his avowedly favorite child, Zvi’s first wife Lejka.

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On the nights his second wife, the wife he loves, is passionate, Zvi considers himself a lucky man. His first wife appreciated his attentions, yes, but in hindsight, he understands courtship with Lejka and then their marriage were incited by her wiles. She seduced him. Their moments of congress, the logical conclusion of seduction, satisfied her because she achieved his pleasure and thus
the corollary, her own. Back then, when Lejka yielded to his desires, he considered himself a lucky man. How many men, three sons later, were blessed with sultry and seductive wives? The other men envied him, or so he thought. When she was murdered a fourth child was on the way and he hoped for a daughter, not a duplicate of his lovely wife, but of his resourceful sisters. Back then, he was a fertile man. But passion? Did he arouse passion in his first wife? Only now does he understand that it was the seduction, not the act of love, that was her passion. She aroused her own passion.

When his second wife is passionate, she gallops to places unknown and, he is sure, she does not take him with her. She gallops through fields resplendent with golden rye, her hair flying, golden, too. Yes, like the rye. Probably like the hair of her comrade and shagetz lover. After her final gallop, she falls into deep sleep and spares not even a small kiss for him until the next morning.

He? He finds sleep difficult on those nights. He presses his body against her warmth and opens his nostrils to the smells of their copulation. Summer continues with what he has been told is historic intensity. Gladly would he escape history of any kind, even climatic. Instead, he perspires with her. He hopes she dreams of him but fears it is not he who animates her dreams. He fears the presence of the interloper in their bedroom, the redoubtable Rye, a man as much a hero as his wife, the man he should have been. That man is an ocean, a continent, eight years away, and absent from his wife’s lips. Still, Rye complicates Zvi’s marriage so much that he declared to his wife a preference for pumpernickel over rye bread. Now, the word is not mentioned in their home.
He revels in the passion he quickens in his wife even as he fears it grows from outside their marital bed. In the past, with other women, he was propelled by post-coital contentment to deep sleep. Not so with Judith. She tumbles to sleep, and he lays awake smoking and fretting until overtaken by restlessness. In the night hours, he is bothered by the smallness of their house. He resents the house for its structure, for how it uncomfortably favors the name of the town in which it is situated, Warren. Small rooms lead to small rooms in sharp twists and turns that prevent a man from striding or even, as he needs, pacing.

When the sweat of husband and wife cools and he feels a small chill, Zvi covers his wife and abandons their bed for the kitchen. There, he pours vodka and reads from *The New York Times* or the *Jewish Daily Forward* or plays the radio at the volume of a murmur. He listens to detective stories and hears American slang he will never use. If he encounters it, neither will he be confused. Some nights he dozes with head on table. On this night, he reads. He has admired commuters at the train station with *The New York Times* adroitly folded in quarters to be read with one-handed ease. He practices this method though he has plenty of space to spread the paper across the table. Another just-in-case he stores up for unexpected moments of life in this new land.

David arrives stealthily and taps at Zvi’s shoulder. It has been years since Zvi felt his father-in-law’s habitual tap and he has not thought of it in all that time. Now, it as if his shoulder and that finger never parted. The tap is hard enough to be felt, soft enough to seem enigmatic, like David himself. David evinced an appearance of subtlety without its actuality. When the old goniff
wanted attention, his soft touch and soft voice demanded it. If there is a presence
Zvi welcomes less than Rye’s, it is David’s. Zvi resolves to lead him from the
house. He must protect Judith.

Zvi can out-walk his father-in-law. The old man was never much of a
walker. Zvi creeps to the bedroom and gathers his clothing. He dresses in the
kitchen but puts his shoes on at the stoop so as not to waken his wife.

David taps him once more on the street. No more must he please this old
goniff and so Zvi swats the hand on his shoulder. Time and war have passed. That
touch is now escapable. Unlike David’s corporeal Warsaw counterpart before the
war, the man fades. Lamentably, his memory endures.

To survive the war, David would have devoted his fortune. The old man
would have outwitted the wildest of “protectors.” Promises from the larger fortune
secreted and reserved for the future, would have made betrayal for the paltry sum
he carried foolish. The old man would have proceeded from safe place to safe
place with no thought for the wife and children and siblings he left to their own
fates. The Jews who survived in European holes in the ground or narrow wall
passages survived on bare rations. David Auerbach in such circumstances was
unimaginable. He was the man who insisted on strawberries when he wanted
them, even when they were out of season, who insisted on homemade noodles in
his soup every Shabbos eve, who insisted his subordinates—and that included his
own sons—accept his aloofness and treat him with obeisance, who insisted Zvi
marry Lejka after he learned of their intimacy. The girl was not pregnant. Neither
had she been a virgin when they met, that spoiled girl, that prized child of David
Auerbach, prized for the value all could see and envy, her beauty. His sons? Prizes won at school counted not at all. Value to his business? Not much either. Nothing public, since he appropriated their successes. But Lejka, her worth was available for all to see. David made Lejka and Zvi a wedding for all to admire. And then the prized daughter bore Zvi three sons, David three grandsons, more *nachas* for all to see. “Good seed,” was the way his father-in-law referred to him. That was David’s public message about his son-in-law. Deep in his heart, if he possessed such an organ, he prized Zvi for other qualities.

Zvi was a modern enough man to have exercised his passions before marriage. He was not modern enough to expect love in marriage yet modern enough to hope for it. He did not find it. A spoiled beauty does not make a good wife.

He curses the old man and he hates him. He hates him for coming to his shoulder in this new life in this new world. He hates the old man for having known him as a young man better than he knew himself. Only after scrutinizing Zvi over many Shabbos dinners, many bowls of chicken soup with homemade noodles, did David challenge him about Lejka’s honor. All these years later, he realizes David waited for his daughter to bring the right man home before he made his challenge. The Auerbach sons were sober fellows. David waited for someone more like him, someone he could marry to his business, every facet of his business, as much as to his daughter. Zvi hates the old man because David forced the marriage only after he saw his rapacious self reflected in a son-in-law to-be.
Before the marriage, in Lejka’s presence, David promised the couple an apartment of six rooms on Grzybowska Street and a maid. They got four and a girl to come three mornings a week. His excuse: “You made your fate when you fucked my precious daughter.” He advised Zvi to work hard at the Auerbach businesses to earn the maid and the additional two rooms. The day the Nazis marched into Poland, Zvi lived in an eight-room apartment with a maid and a cook.

Zvi’s brothers-in-law with all their soberness failed to present the upright image their father brandished. David wore hand-tailored suits, fashioned by Warsaw’s neediest Jewish tailors and for which he paid what would have been charged by the city’s fanciest ones. He never mentioned this generosity but he made sure the community knew about it, just as he made sure everyone knew of his anonymous contributions to Jewish institutions and charities. Zvi fashioned a forthright, rather than an upright, image while he adopted David’s guileful business practices. Like David, and when necessary, he inflicted cruelty and shame on lesser businessmen. Ruthless business prepared Zvi, as it prepared David, for survival during the war. Zvi’s consolation is that he used his ruthlessness for others.

Alone, in the American suburb, Zvi wanders south past split levels and newly paved roads. The opposite of the confining warren of his house is the vastness of the ocean. The street is still. Vehicles are parked. Pedestrians sleep. Salt air thickens. He arrives at a marsh and its ocean vista far off. He claims the marsh for himself because it is unlike any place he knew in Poland. The tall
grasses are unlike plants he knew in Europe and, surely, unlike anything David, a man who kept to the city, would have known. Here, at the edge of the land, Zvi frees himself completely from the old man, the man who never knew the ocean or America, who had never seen a vista like this. He stops. The old fart. By now he could know one ocean or another. He could have escaped anywhere. East to the Soviet Union? Even among the Communists, he would have figured out how to make money. Or through Russia to Shanghai with its slums of Jewish refugees. And there, too, he would have made money and lived well. Or, across some sea. South Africa? England? Canada? South America? The United States? For all he knew, David could be living in the sea of émigrés on the Upper West Side or, worse, just around the corner here in the suburbs.

The marsh is perfect. In dim new light, he watches small, translucent crabs dig their way to the surface. They are so small he is not entirely sure these creatures are crabs. They could be insects but they seem to come and go with the waters. He watches full-sized crabs with one large and one small claw scuttle and fight, and he wonders why nature would make such lopsided creatures. He knows from a quick dip of his forefinger that the sand is cool. Some morning, he supposes, he will remove his shoes and delight his hot feet.

Thick salt air restricts his breath. It settles at the top of his chest. Here, it is from here that the town’s heavy air emanates. The townspeople call it sea air but Zvi traveled across the ocean without encountering air this still or this heavy. Marsh air, he calls it. Marsh air brings back other times and places where he breathed shallow breaths.
When his parents of blessed memory named him, how could they have known that to survive he would become what they called him—a deer. Like a deer, he held his breath still through days and nights. Holding your breath because of the thickness of marsh air is one thing. It is one thing to shallow out the lungs to alleviate the difficulty of breathing thick air. It is one thing to do this as a choice in a town where every breath is safe. It is another to breathe shallowly to conceal oneself from Nazis and their collaborators. Like a deer, he breathed to avoid consequence. And, when consequence arose, fled quickly and quietly. So? The deer abides here in this American town.

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His wife never questions him. She offers him dignity and he takes it. She’s been doing this since the day Josef came to him in the camp and asked him to travel to Palestine for the Irgun. He knew it was Judith they wanted. Asking him was a way to get her. Probably, she had already refused. If he assented, she would not contradict him, especially not in public, not to Josef, a fellow partisan. They may have wanted Judith, renowned for her talent with munitions, but a quartermaster such as Zvi would aid the war for independence, too. He had his little fame at provisioning the one partisan band that never knew starvation.

When the State of Israel and then its Israel Defense Forces became realities, they rose in the ranks. She always surpassed him. He carried the rank of lieutenant. She carried the rank of major. They called her the liaison to the Mossad. No one believed she was a simple liaison.

He organized supplies for the army with skill and resourcefulness, so
much that he happened upon adjacent opportunities, and he grabbed them as he would have first in Warsaw for Auerbach and then anywhere possible for the partisans. He was on his way to becoming a little bit rich again. He hurt no one. In a new time and a new place of privation, he made the lives of some a bit sweeter. His own, too. She learned of it. She never said that. One night, as she washed and he dried supper dishes, she announced, “I am finished with war. Before we came here, I was finished. Now, the end. America.” She never criticized him.

They live in this little town due to the philanthropy of the Warrentown Jewish Center and through manipulations made by Judith but in his name. Passage to the United States, the little house on the synagogue grounds, and Zvi’s job as shammes are all the fruits of the suburban community’s charity and some secret connections of Judith’s.

Judith snuggles into the small house something like the way he snuggles against her in sleep. He does not allow himself to cringe every time she says the word “cozy.” Of all the English words he has wished she would learn, she instead chose “cozy.”

He returns from the marsh to the little kitchen. As on all mornings the egg sits beside a bowl, waiting to be cracked. The frying pan waits on the stove. He smells the remnants of match and gas. Judith lit the oven. Bread waits, too, ready for toasting. His wife waits in her immaculate kitchen where everything is tucked away except for what is needed at the moment. She turns to him from the refrigerator and says, “Butter.” He wants to kiss her neck.

The fried egg and toast taste delicious as they do every morning. She
pours coffee and heated milk. His wife is perfect.

The happiest days of childhood were those he spent in the big kitchen with
his mother and sisters. They laughed at his baby hands trying to replicate the
movements of their deft ones. Nothing tasted as good as his sloppy imitations of
their tidy products—knädlach, mandelbrot, challah. They talked about everything
in front of him. He learned about the blood of menstruation and its replenishment
from eating liver. When he became a big boy and was sent to cheder, he was not
proud. He licked the honey from the letters on his first day but he knew that a lick
of honey at school was nothing to the days of sweetness in the kitchen. Exile, he
learned, was what it meant to be a man. His mother took pity on him and allowed
him to stay in the kitchen for one year more but on his sixth birthday she swatted
his tushy and sent him from the kitchen. On the dining table, he found a huge
apple cake with candles and a little pile of gifts. “Papa requires and he is right.”

From then on in the kitchen, they ignored him. No longer was he a person
in that room. After the exile, they doted on him. As he studied or ran in from play,
his mother or a sister would pop a treat into his mouth or kiss his head. When he
had been allowed in the kitchen, he snatched treats and was more often swatted
than kissed. He would have sacrificed all the doting for another morning in the
kitchen.

Zvi understands the plight of Adam. He understands bitterness at his
expulsion from Eden. Eve was ordained to suffer with the pain of childbirth but
men suffer more. Women may suffer at childbirth but they have the bliss of their
bodies’ fecundity. Women recreate Eden in every kitchen. Men, once past
boyhood, are left to themselves.

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David has become impatient. He no longer waits for son-in-law’s post-coital kitchen sojourn. He wakes Zvi from deep sleep on any night and Zvi responds with dispatch, to protect Judith. Once he rises from the bed, he never finds the old goat. Another reason to hate the old man: Zvi has come to like the walks. He needs them.

Even when he sleeps, Zvi wakes early and heads for the marsh. He uses a little notebook one of the children left at the Hebrew School, it must have been a girl because the cover depicts cartoon-like flowers. In it, he keeps a list of animals he has seen. Often, he does not know the names of them but he writes the best descriptions he can. He knows foxes and muskrats and herons. He does not know the funny crabs. He knows the rabbits and the turtles but he does not know the dark armored creature with the long projectile from its front body that makes it look too much like a tank and modern firepower. Zvi stills himself to watch the animals of the new world. He writes in English. When he has to revert to Polish, he writes in tiny letters.

Reb Nachman instructed that all the world is a narrow bridge to be crossed without fear. Zvi wonders how many days of his life the old reb was hungry.

Zvi left fear in the forests of Poland but not the bridge. He thought the bridge would widen in America. He expected it to broaden and steady as he placed heel to toe and heel to toe in the new world. Instead, the bridge becomes ever narrower and more difficult to cross. What place is there for a man such as
he to put his feet? It occurs to him that life could be easier if his feet were smaller and narrower, if he took up less room, if he were ephemeral. Like David. If only the little house had wallpaper he could fade into.

A life without comrades is the narrowest. True, Zvi trusts no one who survived the war. Also, Zvi trusts no one who safely sat out the war. He trusts no one who had enough to eat during the war. He trusts no one who wore a good, warm coat through the war. He trusts no one whose body was never infested by lice. Who never got sick from bad water. Who had not coughed through an entire winter. Or two. Who escaped summers without infected insect bites up and down their bodies. He trusts no one spared from watching a loved one die, or a comrade. He trusts no one who had not been helpless through another’s death. He trusts no one who had not frozen through winter, who never lost feeling in the toes. He trusts no one who wore shoes with soles. He trusts no one who never killed. He trusts no one who has killed.

He wants to trust Americans. He wants to trust their smiles and their flawless teeth, their bright cars and velvety, cropped lawns. He wants to believe that the removal of all those trees to build the suburb was for the best, that Jews will not need a place to hide on Long Island or, maybe, that there are places to hide, not too far away, that he does not know about yet. He wants to trust that Americans will know about such places and inform him of them when the time comes. He wants to believe that Americans would know what to do in such places, at least as well as some few Polish Jews knew, or that they will be willing to learn from him about hiding. He wants to believe that McCarthyism will not
grow into universal anti-Semitism. He wants to believe that he can adjust to their bland life. He wants his soul to leave the forest the way his body already has.

Sometimes he envies the DPs who ended up in city neighborhoods full of their own, so like Europe, so respectable. Sometimes, he pities them. On Long Island, near the shore, he has something none of them have—air unlike their childhood air, salty air rather than city air.

In war, he hurtled into a black market far uglier than the places his father-in-law sent him to before. He was on a trip to negotiate food when the swine murdered his wife and children. Another man, coming home to find the bloody bodies, a better man, a more sensitive man, would have taken his own life to join them wherever they were, even if that place was nothingness. But Zvi simply dedicated himself to the black market. To whatever sources might provide Jews in the ghetto with anything that prolonged survival—food, medicine, clothing, fuel. He was too busy to consider his motives but even then he knew his motives had nothing to do with altruism. It rankled when others treated him as an altruistic man. The wisdom of time reveals his motives. One was revenge. One was love. Not love of his family, but love for the hidden and dangerous market.

He loved the honor among thieves. For whatever reason, and this he never tried to understand, the thieves in Warsaw never betrayed him, unlike Polish partisans in the forest who betrayed Jews as often as they helped them. Maybe the old man was right. Money garnered a kind of loyalty that decency rarely seemed to.

The war taught Zvi how David became respectable. Money substitutes for
honor. Money is honor and so any good outcome of its use is assumed the result of good intentions. Zvi did not make money for himself during the war. Nothing was to be done with money but survive. He saved Jews he only sometimes loved to resist Nazis he always hated. Too easily, he attained respect. Produce a potato and be a hero.

When he left the ghetto and fled to the forest, he was welcomed because he filled the partisans’ bellies and restocked their arsenals. No one asked how he did it. He spoke little to anyone but the young boys he chose to accompany him on his “missions.” At night, Zvi silently sipped vodka and listened to the tales of others. Claims of heroism were his least favorite, not because they were inevitably inflated. They were told to pump up courage for the next time. Tales of heroism were too grounded in the present. He preferred tales of the happy past, sugary tales. They transported him. He loved the work of planning missions because planning engaged all his thoughts. He prided himself on bringing everyone back unharmed. He treated the boys in his command as older versions of his sons, not with affection but with care. These boys no longer had mothers but he pretended he was charged with returning them to mothers, a serious task.

One of those tank-like creatures has expired. Zvi finds its motionless shell and turns it over with his toe. On the underside, he discovers soft, crab appendages.

A blue heron with long legs wades into the marsh and fishes. It spreads its wings as it bends. It catches a fish and consumes it whole, head first. Soon, it lifts
its head with a duckling in its beak. The mother duck swims close and protests via quacks to no avail. The duckling goes, too, head first. A relic from the life in the forest is close observation of animals. Neither fish nor duckling appear dead as they are swallowed. Enough carnage, he thinks. The pink sunrises past the tall marsh grasses have nothing to do with Poland. He watches for life in the wet sand. He watches crabs scurry. Where little bubbles emerge from the sand, translucent animals appear, these are the crabs barely larger than beetles.

He tries to always return home before dawn. He should worry about Judith. She will be putting on the coffee and worrying about him. It is not the beauty of the sunrise that keeps him from home. It is the the edge of the world. Marriage before, when he didn’t love his wife, was easier.

On another morning when he returns for egg and toast, he says to Judith, “It is a hot morning. The air is a heavy tentacle the ocean sends to taunt us.” She smiles at his fancy English words. She pours coffee and milk.

She stands at the stove with a hand at the small of her back and he notices how thin she has become. How has he noticed just today? He stands behind her and puts his arms around her. He kisses the top of her head and says, “tatele” as gently as he can. She turns and kisses him on the lips with a smile on hers. All day he will ask himself what that smile means.

“You need to eat more,” he says.

“My appetite left when I lost the baby.”

Judith’s barrenness is the bitter pill he swallows every night. Lately, again, she has broached the idea of war orphans, of those big-eyed children with
yearning looks. A good man would adopt one of those children. He would adopt a whole family of them. Zvi gags. The yearning for a child is a yearning for something untainted in his life. Something that has not been touched and damaged by war and by Europe. War orphans would only be smaller versions of himself.

The babies expelled by Judith’s miscarriages were not lost. They fled. Those unformed lives fled not from Judith’s body but from the man who would be their father. She, this last baby, knew, he thinks, for this time he was sure it was a girl, the tiny girl knew the kind of man she would have as a father. This morning while he watches his diminishing wife crack an egg and fry it, Zvi understands he will not father another child. Already, his wife told him this. Already she said the expert doctor in New York City told her not to try again, but it is this morning watching his skinny wife that he finally understands. He needs to replenish her until, once again, she is as he first saw her, the radiant goddess Diana emerging from the wood.

This second wife is the wife he loves. This is the wife he cherishes in his heart. He wishes he has not thought about where black markets might be found on Long Island. This, he understands, is another of his failures as a man. He wants to tell her to walk to the butcher and buy liver for dinner. It is too far.

“Rest today,” he says. “I will go to the deli after work and buy some supper.” He says this in Polish, a concession. Silently, she puts his plate on the table, perfect as always. For her, a cup of tea and dry toast with a little marmalade.

David Auerbach, paragon of Warsaw Jewry. King of Jewish philanthropy.
Father of six strong sons and a beautiful daughter. None better. Zvi does try to make that man’s memory a blessing, but among the many failures of his life, this effort ends in his most complete failure. The only blessings from this man were the fruits of his forced marriage to Lejka—sons born in close succession so that upon their deaths they were eight, five, and four years old. Yoni, the littlest would accuse him. “Papa, you look at us too much.” When he ran away, Zvi would walk quickly on his long legs to catch the boy with short legs. He’d scoop him up and cover his face with kisses while the boy would laugh and pretend to wipe off all. He’d put his little arms around Zvi’s neck and give him one kiss, sloppy and wet. This he knows: Even if Judith could produce a child, even if it were a boy, an admirable boy, there would never be another Yoni.

From his nights of listening to detective shows on the radio, Zvi knows about police sketch artists. The victim describes a criminal to the artist. The artist sketches and shows his work to the victim. He corrects over and over, guided by the victim, until he renders an accurate portrait of the criminal, something police can use in chasing him down. But, could he persuade such an artist to render victims, Zvi wonders. And where to find one? He contemplates sending a letter of inquiry to one of the shows, “Johnny Dollar,” he thinks. The name reminds him of his former father-in-law, of Yoni’s former grandfather. Dollar would have been the perfect name for him. Or, Zloty. It is unimaginable to think of this man as a victim.
Prenup

They were on the south side of Mount Monadnock, having just finished the roast ham and fig sandwiches that she had made, when Robin brought up the prenup. Victoria couldn’t make out what he was mumbling at first. He got a bad case of biscuit mouth when he was nervous.

She was only half-listening again. The hat she wore blocked her ears and her energy was focused on warming her pink fingers. It had snowed a fresh foot the previous evening, though it was already mid-April, and the sun threw up a white reflection. She had forgotten to bring her sunglasses and the blinding fields gave Victoria a mild headache. “What’s that? Rube?”

She didn’t love his name—Robin—a feminine limp handshake kind of name, nor did she like Rob, the guy down the street you called to play pickup basketball. She called him Rube, since he had been a Rubik’s cube champion as a boy, a checkpoint in his history that she found endearing.

“My father’s legal counsel suggested it.” Robin said, his bottom lip trembling. It was one of his tells. She had only seen it twice, once when a policeman pulled them over for speeding, and the other when he proposed.

“It’s for administrative purposes,” he continued, expressionless, his gaze fixed on a clump of roots. “To keep my father’s lawyer happy, in case something goes wrong. Not that anything would, obviously. I can’t wait to marry you.”

If only he had cracked a joke then, it might have let the air out, but Robin, being Robin, remained grave. “You can get a lawyer. I’ll pay for it.”

He shook his head with great dignity. “This is about our future.”

The trust had been a sore point between them. She wanted to know its contents—after all, they were getting married, weren’t they? Their lives were fusing together till death do them part—it would make far more sense for them to plan it out together. But he remained cagey about the trust, summarizing the amount it contained and its details. At first she had made a joke of it. Did your father make it off a Ponzi scheme? Are you sure it’s clean? Are you sure there’s anything in it at all? He obtained access it to it after he turned thirty, which had happened last year, but he was as dodgy about it as ever.

“I’m just—surprised,” Victoria managed to squeak. She spoke in shorter sentences in moments like this. Her therapist had suggested it. It helped improve their communication.

Victoria looked down the side of the mountain to still the surge of liquid emotion—another therapist suggestion—and it was in this movement that she noticed the manila envelope protruding from his daypack. “What’s that?”

He reached over to zip the bag shut. “It’s nothing.”

“Let me see.” She reached over as he jerked his bag away, causing two apples to tumble out and roll some two meters down the wet rock face into a heap of snow.

They both looked down at the fallen apples. Neither moved.

“You brought your prenup with you? To serve me papers up here?”
“In case you wanted to see it,” he muttered.

“You wanted me to sign a prenup on this mountain?”

“In case you were fine about it and we never had to talk about it again.”

“Well, let me see it.” She reached for his backpack.

He didn’t move. “No.”

“No? Why?”

“Because, just no.”

She let out a sharp breath, exasperated. “Robin.” He was the spoiled child again, blessed with so many toys that he never had to practice at sharing. He could sulk and pout and have his way in the country manor or the crusty old penthouse on the Upper East Side, or any number of the suites his parents rented.

“Come on, Victoria. Don’t be melodramatic,” Robin said. His mouth lingered open and she could see the breath misting out, a ghost of lost words, stunned to submission as she dared him to keep talking with her eyes.

Robin refused to spar. “Once you do your research, we’ll compare notes.”

He slid down the rock to retrieve the fallen apples. That was Robin. He would risk his own safety to abide by the rules. No littering.

Victoria could have easily unzipped the backpack and taken out the prenup that Robin had carried up the mountain. On the drive home, as they listened to podcasts and jazz on Spotify, as he took two work calls on Bluetooth, she wondered why she hadn’t insisted. It seemed like a test that she had passed or failed, she wasn’t sure which, but either way the moment was over.
Five years ago, she might have sobbed on the way back and challenged him about how much he loved her, but not now, not at thirty-three. Robin probably never overreacted, even as a kid. He once told her his father’s three principles about relationships: One, pick your battles. Two, compromise but don’t sacrifice. Three, don’t fight it and don’t force it. She could almost hear the gears of Robin’s head locking into point number one.

She twisted the big clumsy diamond to sit on the inside of her finger and texted her sister, Abbey, who lived an hour away, just outside of Portsmouth. It was her good fortune that both of them had relocated east after spending their childhood on the west coast. *Prince Eric wants a prenup.* Her sister was the only one with whom she used the reference. *The Little Mermaid* had been their favorite childhood movie, though they would both vehemently deny it to strangers now.

She scrolled through her phone mindlessly as Robin’s words echoed in her head. *In case something goes wrong.* Like what? If she gained a hundred pounds, if she joined the Tea Party, if she slipped into a coma after a terrible car accident, if a car accident destroyed her figure, if they had an autistic child, if it turned out that she could not have children. If he lost his memory, if she caught him watching child pornography or a stash of cocaine, if one of them stopped wanting sex or became deeply religious or joined a sect or became one of those cycling addicts or wanted to sacrifice sheep or became a vegan or called the other a materialistic cunt or a Goldwater Republican. What if he turned off his phone to meditate and she really needed him to hold their screaming child or sign along the dotted line in the ER as she hemorrhaged from her scalp or her vagina?
The Victoria five years ago might have spat such questions aloud accusatorily and later regretted it, but the woman in the car said nothing, though she couldn’t stop herself from blurting out one particular question before they reached the car park. “Did you make Angela sign a prenup too?”

Angela, the previous fiancée. The one with the moon-shaped face who raised pet chickens on her father’s estate, who rubbed lemons into her waist-long hair and took Robin to Burning Man where he got sick in a baby carriage full of hard-boiled eggs, painstakingly painted.

“Come on, Angela signed Greenpeace petitions,” Robin said.

Which meant, no, he didn’t ask Angela to sign. He didn’t have to.

Where did one go to procure the best pre-divorce lawyer? None of her friends, it turned out, had signed a prenup before.

“Who cares? You’re not planning to divorce anyway.” That was her friend Sima’s opinion, Sima with a five-year-old daughter and one-year-old boy who met her husband at twenty-two and married at twenty-six. For their anniversary, she was giving Patrick some kind of special watch so he could spend even more time away from his family, plying the New England back roads on his bike.

“But it should be fair to both of us, as an exercise,” she had reasoned.

Clara, her only friend from the one-year masters program in London that Victoria had quit halfway through because her father got sick, agreed. “A friend of mine signed one under duress. Whatever you do, don’t sign until you’re comfortable.”
Victoria went on Yelp and looked at reviews for divorce lawyers.

The first one she called said, “You’re thirty-four and its your first marriage. He’s got a trust fund. Tell me straight, do you want this marriage to last?”

Another asked her to send three photographs of them together.

“What purpose would that serve?” she said.

“I like to see how couples look. I think of myself a kind of amateur body language expert,” he said. She thanked him politely. She couldn’t hire someone who used amateur and expert in the same description.

She finally found one, Jean, a woman who looked like she was about eighty but dressed in fur-lined vests and wore knobby rings on her veined hands.

“Twenty-two years a widow,” Jean said. Promising. Here was someone who had seen a marriage or two go down the drain.

They met in her spare office. “My, what a gorgeous ring,” Jean said, when Victoria sat down.

“Thank you,” Victoria blushed. She hadn’t thought of herself as the kind of woman who cared too much about how she looked, mostly because she didn’t have the patience for vanity. She couldn’t do the hours of facemasks, skin buffers, jade rollers and creams, the nail polish and massagers that ads on Instagram and Youtube fed her. She hadn’t paid much attention to diamonds until she had one on her finger and realized how much other people paid attention to them. She twisted the big clumsy thing around to sit palm side at first, but soon she found her gaze reaching for other womens’ hands, sizing up the stone on the woman in the
yellow wrap dress on the T, Robin’s only female colleague, her boss’s wife.

Victoria’s diamond was better. Bigger, shinier, newer.

Jean interlaced her hands neatly and spoke like a marriage counselor.

“What do you love about him?”

“He’s capable,” Victoria said. “Everything is in good hands with Robin.”

Robin called when he said he would. He showed up. He was a rock of efficiency and strength—financially prudent, physically sound. He moved from item to item on his schedule like navigating an obstacle course he set up each morning. His laundry machine made her clothes cleaner than they had ever been. He brought back chocolates and dish soaps containing pressed wildflowers from day trips down to upstate New York to see his mother. A photograph of him sitting at George Baker’s desk hung over his desk, a reminder of his promise—and hers.

Someone came into his apartment twice a week to drop off groceries, bathroom essentials and lay out his workout clothes. His father had given him a six-month membership to a bespoke concierge service, and he couldn’t figure out how to cancel it. The leather travel bag he lobbed over his shoulder when they went away for the weekend was a gift, this time from his Uncle, who was literally a Swiss watchmaker. I don’t actually buy any of this fancy crap, he insisted.

People give me things, it’s rude to say no.

“How did you meet?” Jean asked.

“How did you meet?” Jean asked.

“Training for a half-Iron Man.” Neither had ever run more than a marathon, but this, they were told independently, was easier, with the swimming and biking to break up the monotony. Neither were athletes, but they were both
driven. He was twenty-eight, finishing his first year at Harvard Business School—
his father had graduated Class of 1973—and he was soaked with the preternatural
confidence that came with the pedigree. She was thirty-one at the time, broke and
alone in a new East Coast city, managing a fabrication lab, a job she mostly chose
because it was close to her sister. That year, their father was hit by the drunk
driver and killed instantly. Two years earlier, Victoria had emptied her IRA
account to pay for his liver surgery. Training was the only thing that helped her
cope. Swim, run. Run, bike. Bike, swim, repeat. She practically gills that summer.
She and Robin finished, respectably. By then, they were a couple. She didn’t
qualify for Kona or anything, but she got really strong.

She was drawn to him, against her will, to his sturdy build and steady
confidence; his narrow hazel eyes, respectable jawline. Following her father’s
illness, she stopped dating people like herself, people who preferred conversations
about nothing and everything, who were easily moved, giddily impulsive, prone
to lapses into existential despair. Robin looked like a person who could be
satisfied by the down-up motion of ticking off boxes in a checklist. They were the
people who ran the world, she now thought. Evolutionarily, they were the
survivors, and she gave in quietly to the genes throbbed with a deep animal need
to find a suitable counterpart to carry the species.

Jean wanted to know if she got along well with his family. “Sure. They’re
great.” She had brought Robin’s parents a magnum of rare vintage Scotch as a gift
the first time she met them. They complimented her taste and put it away,
bringing it out and offering her some every time she visited.
Then she asked if they fought, whether he yelled or ever threw things. Victoria shook her head, no. They didn’t fight the way her parents did, back when they were together, with screaming, smashing, door slamming, sulking and threats. They fought a little more like his parents, with exaggerated politeness and impenetrable silences, Negronis at the home bar to dampen rage.

“Do your friends like him?”

“They love him.” When she announced her engagement, her college friends were stunned. “We really thought that you would never get married. You just have so many convictions.” To them, she was the funny-headed, idealistic brown-skinned girl with Latina Northern California roots on scholarship money. She did volunteer jaunts, social missions, trust circles. How could she marry a man with a trust fund, and – why would that guy want to marry her?

She laughed off their backhanded compliments and jabs. Certain insecurities had mellowed out. She was at ease with her weight—healthy was better than thin—her slightly off-center smile, her oily forehead, the shape of her ears, the passion projects that she had given her twenties to, projects that had seemed to amount to nothing but a vicious moralizing streak that sometimes emerged when she drank too much. Besides, she was triumphant. The prevailing cultural dogma, however quickly things were changing, still believed that a woman her age could not find a suitable mate who was, if not broken, at least irreparably bent by divorce or disaster. By some miracle, she had managed to avoid the murky depths of online dating and plucked Robin from the slime pool of the weird, the earnest, the heartbroken, woman-hating take-whatever-I-can-get
masses of eligible men for a thirty-something woman. She hadn’t settled. She knew because when he got down on one knee on the top deck of the Provincetown ferry in the harbor sunset and slipped the diamond over her disbelieving finger, the sudden, glorious, giddy rush of joy had caught her so off guard that she would have swooned into the white bench if he hadn’t caught her.

*Swooned.*

“Is there anything else you’d like to tell me before we dive in?” Jean asked.

Victoria paused. What was missing? Well, the sex was fine—solid B, B+. She would have liked more of it, more time before and after, but they were busy people, and sex—well, compatibility trumped sex anyway. She shook her head.

So they began to talk about money. She was still financially recovering from her father’s surgery, when she used her IRA to pay his hospital bill. She guessed that Robin’s trust fund had at least ten million but less than fifteen. Not a fortune by today’s standards. He started a private equity outfit with a friend before business school with seed money from his father. The pair stuck with it two years after graduation and they had wrangled some deals, good enough to stay in the business. The bonus payout that year was good, and he would make off with several million, probably grow that in spades in the coming years, or lose it all – that was of course, possible.

“I hate talking about money, but it’s everything. Power. Security. Comfort… I mean, what it represents. And Robin’s money isn’t regular money. It’s history. Robin would never survive on ramen and lentils if we had to—that’s just how his family is,” Victoria said.
Jean looked at her without speaking. It made Victoria nervous.

“What should I ask for? What’s fair?”

“There’s no such thing as fair in this game,” Jean said. “I’d suggest you use the term, ‘reasonable’. Reasonable for you. Tell me, What do you want?”

Victoria paused. “I want him not to want a prenup. I want to stay married with no hard feelings.”

Robin came by her office after work under Auda’s advice to discuss the prenup in a neutral to favorable location for her. At the fabrication lab, Victoria spent her days organizing workshops, occasionally experimenting with biodegradable markers, writing grants with a low return rate and spending her time thinking about how to make 3D printers more accessible to the general public. Robin stood in the doorway of the empty café attached to the lab, nearly twenty minutes late, looking slightly abashed, holding crisp flowers. Everyone was gone save one straggler, a stonemason from Gloucester, using the laser cutter to etch a logo into a rock that a client wanted to display for their goat farm.

Victoria took the flowers and ushered Robin to a corner table at the empty café. “Should we just exchange papers and read them first?”

He pulled his laptop from his backpack. “Can you read it off of my computer,” he said. “I made a spreadsheet.” She nodded and handed him hers, just one sheet, front and back.

She scrolled. No access to the trust, fine—that was his grandfather’s money—but the rest was confusing, using words her eyes typically skipped over
when she skimmed her retirement prospectus—vesting, sliding scale, stock options amid a swirl of legalese. She read it through several times but Robin still didn’t speak, just stared at her sheet with a slight frown on his face, circling a few odd words. It wasn’t that complicated. Jean had pushed her to ask for equal division of income earned during the marriage after one child, and that was what she included. That was most of it.

“This is how much you think I’m worth?” she asked. “Thirty-percent or one million per year of living together? How is that fair?”

“Look, you get four months extra severance for maternity.”

“A million is how much you’d value a year of my life after I have a child?”

“It’s a sliding scale. It increases the longer we’re married, see, and there’s a multiplying factor if there’s more than one kid.”

“I know, I know, the number increases—you already said that.”

They stopped. She felt winded and out of control. How did things turn so quickly? Deep breath Victoria, she thought, but her mouth was opening.

Robin started again. “You’re not making this any easier by acting hurt by everything I say.”

“I hate the tone you use to talk to me,” she said bitterly.

“We don’t have equal assets. We can’t divide it equally.”

“I’m not asking for equal, but fair—you’re giving me absolute numbers when you’re keeping God knows how much more.”

“It could be less, you don’t know. It’s all a hypothetical.”
“All of this is hypothetical,” she said, though Jean had warned her, at all costs, not to think about it as hypothetical. “I hate fighting with you. You always win.”

“This isn’t about winning or losing.”

“You’re saying that because you have all the power,” she said. “It’s not a game because you own the game.” As soon as the words came out, she realized how hard it was going to be. He had the lawyers, the expectations, counsel. And her? What did she have?

For the first time, she hated him.

Their *New York Times* wedding announcement appeared in June, on Victoria’s thirty-fourth birthday. She had imagined sending the link to her mother, but when the paper came out, she changed her mind.

They were now less than three months away from the wedding. Victoria was with Abbey, inside yet another Target. Lily, Abbey’s goddaughter, wanted a doll from a recent Pixar movie, like every other girl in America. Stockouts on Amazon, Wal-mart. They had gone through four stores and none of them carried it, well, they had plenty of the brunette but not the blonde one, which was what Lily wanted. “What I don’t get is why the girls want the blonde one, when it’s really the brunette who saves the kingdom,” Abbey said.

“I think she’s a better singer?”

Victoria remembered how, as girls, she and Abbey had Ursula’s dark, wavy mane and dramatic eyes, but both wanted to be Ariel from *The Little
Mermaid. They used to sing themselves hoarse while collecting scraps thrown up by the ocean outside their parents’ rent-stabilized house in the outer Sunset. That place was seized by the San Francisco Housing Board when Victoria was in the eighth grade, the year their mother left, and their father had moved them to Redwood City, into an apartment complex with a leery handyman and leaky roof.

She and Abbey used to discuss the lives of families in the complex at great length. Why did some people love each other forever, and others stray so thoughtlessly? There are good and bad people, Victoria had said, and Abbey, only seven, had called out from the top bunk, no, Vic, there are strong and weak people.

The Target aisle was full of teddy bears and yoyos. “I guess these are coming back,” Abbey said. She fingered a stuffed unicorn. “How’s Prince Eric?”

“He’s fine as usual,” Victoria said. “But we’re in a stalemate. Haven’t talked about the prenup in weeks.” Every time they tried, Robin would open his computer. “It’s all in the spreadsheet!” he’d say. She was marrying a man who could only communicate through a spreadsheet. She never knew this stubborn side of him. He negotiated with the drive and determination of a ruthless machine, of the President. She shuddered. “Even if I don’t get fifty percent, I should get more than a million a year. He’s got what—sixty million? It’s humiliating what he thinks I’ll agree to.” He’s such a catch, Victoria! How she longed to go back to that time, only months ago, when she believed her friends’ words, when she rejoiced in peonies and the perfection of it all—Robin, their engagement, herself on the on-ramp to happily-ever-after.
Abbey paused in front of a Barbie, dressed in an apron. “I thought they changed their proportions.” She turned and faced Victoria. “Mom called me and I mentioned your wedding. I hope that’s okay.”

“Really?” Victoria said. Her face darkened. She hadn’t spoken to their mother in ages, though when she transferred her phone line, she kept her number.

“Wouldn’t it be nice for you to have at least one parent on your side?”

“It’s not as easy for me to forgive people as it is for you,” she said.

Abbey maintained something of a relationship with their mother. She had even visited her once, and met her new partner Graham, whom from Abbey’s description, resembled a man in workman’s boots and khakis, the sort who looked like he had just stepped off of a construction site and could be relied on to fix your car on a dark and empty road. Their birth father had been a policeman.

Sensing the sensitivity, Abbey changed the subject. “One thing I never understood is why there’s no section about fines in prenups. Like if a marriage breaks up because of cheating, is that worse than alcoholism or abandonment?”

“I’d make abandonment the worst sin with the greatest consequences.”

“Yeah, we all know that,” Abbey said.

When she and Robin didn’t talk about the prenup, Victoria almost forgot about it entirely. But they couldn’t keep ignoring it. They were marrying in less than a month. In the past week, Robin had changed his tactic. “Victoria,” he pleaded.

“My hands are tied. It’s my dad’s lawyer, really. Just sign the damn paper.”

“Really, Robin? Why don't you own it at least?” she had yelled.
He didn’t yell back.

Since then, she began to see flickers of his cowardice everywhere, and his family, people whom she had on first impression considered exceptional among the crusty rich, now became as stuffy and selfish as the rest, treating her as an outsider, an untrustworthy pauper and potential thief—they were emblematic of everything she resented about the class division that she so hated in the country, the well-coiffed men shaking their heads gravely, sighing, nothing to be done, and their silent, sad wives, weighed down by jewelry standing by as their men signed handsome stationery that condemned swaths of the luckless to poverty. She felt like a traitor to the working class roots she grew up in, had fought for in her younger years. She was crossing over now through marriage, like a double agent, sneaking across the border to a greener, happier country.

She watched Robin hunch beneath the bedside lamp, taking apart his Uncle’s gifted watch and wiping down the parts, his fingers nimble and careful, his movements methodical, so unlike her own. If you don’t clean it often, the timing will be off. That was Robin. Fastidious and clean, with a cleanliness next to Godliness. How much steadier he was than she, how well able to anticipate future risks and potential consequences, and adjust his behaviors accordingly. She trusted him to do a decent job at marriage, better than her. If she strayed, it would be her mother’s fault, she would always have to live with the guilt of having wronged a decent man, a golden trophy she had fought so hard to win, and the idea sunk in her heart like a stone in a well.

“Rube? If we don’t sign? What will happen?” she asked.


“I don’t know.”

She curled up and began to cry. He wrapped his arms around her and they lay in silence, watching the tree tips sway outside the window.

“What would make you change your mind?” she sniffled.

“What would make you change yours?” he answered.

She knew then that it was over. She would have to give in, live with her disappointment. It wasn’t about the outcome. His demonstration of might was enough. It doesn’t matter, she reminded herself. Many things in life didn’t matter, though they did, they did on a very deep level, make all the difference.

That night, Victoria dreamt of being encased in a gorgeous clear film. She woke up with dreams of breathing underwater, tears in her eyes. If the little mermaid decided that marriage was awful, where could she go? Back to the sea? No prenup would have ended her parents’ misery. No prenup would have stopped their father from his lies and awful temper. Except, perhaps a lot of therapy, and even that could not have changed the final outcome.

She called Auda, the eighty-year-old therapist whom she once paid to pretend to be her mother. She had gone in and out of dynamic therapy for years because she was convinced that it was the best way to address her mother issues. In their sessions, Auda held up tuning forks that were meant to resonate at certain frequencies to activate the subconscious and unlock childhood memories. Victoria had no idea whether this did anything at all but she liked the novelty of it, how it made her eyes cross, and it was something to talk about with Robin.
Auda was the one who asked her—this was about three months into bi-weekly sessions—why she distrusted women so much, and Auda was the only person in the world whom she told about her two infidelities, neither with Robin, and the gnawing guilt it left in her. She had slept with other men, cheating on two people she had loved, in periods when she felt like she was losing herself.

They had a few phone sessions during covid, but it wasn’t the same, especially not with the tuning forks and what they offered, some kind of spell. Auda was too flummoxed by technology to understand Zoom, so their appointments trailed off and never resurrected.

“It’s me, your—daughter,” Victoria said. Auda had told her to refer to herself this way in their conversations, as a way to universalize their experience, something else that Victoria wanted to work on. She realized that it had been over a year, and perhaps other patients referred to themselves the same way with Auda, so she added, “Me, Victoria Hamlin. I wanted to tell you that I got engaged. The wedding is in September.”

“Congratulations. Thank you for informing me.”

“Well,” she continued. “I know I don’t have an appointment but, can I ask you a quick question? And can you answer as yourself, and not my mother?”

Victoria continued before Auda could answer. “Robin wants a prenup. We’re fighting more than ever and everything’s confused. I just need a second opinion from someone who knows how the old shit affects me. I don’t know what to do. I’m frozen.”
“I’m afraid you’ll have to make an appointment. I don’t have anything open until October. I have a vacation scheduled to Mexico.”

“Even ten minutes of your time? I’d pay full.”

“I’m sorry my dear. I’ll tell you this, take it from your mother and myself. Putting your happiness in someone else’s hands comes with uncertainty. I wish you’d called me sooner.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I said, I wish you’d called me sooner.”

Maybe Auda was a crack after all, like the piano teacher she had as a kid who actually couldn’t play but succeeded in scamming half the neighborhood before skipping town and buying himself a yacht. “Thanks.” She hung up.

The last she heard, Victoria’s mother was living in a small hamlet in southern California, steps from the beach. She knew this because she received cards from her for Christmas and her birthday. Victoria kept them in a box, in their original envelopes. The last one, postmarked some two months into her and Robin’s engagement, was a birthday note and had included something like, enjoy it now, you’re only young once. Trust me, you’ll be old for twice, three times that time.

Victoria thought of it as she arrived at Jean’s office for their last appointment. The wedding was in a week. Robin and his legal counsel were pleased that she was accepting their offer. She tried to be happy for herself, sitting on a bench, the late August sun warm and wet on her skin. She pictured Robin’s floppy lustrous hair from his high school prom picture. That blank look on his
face when he was tired and processing her words more slowly than she was speaking. Robin never made her feel bad about the conditions she came from, never shamed her about her past. His family, still snobs and not forgiven, but forgivable. She pictured Robin cleaning his watch, so fastidious, past and present in synchronicity. The prenup wasn't real. The marriage was. Love was, in history and future days, love tucked into the hidden corners of the world. Unthinkable things too, events unimaginable until they erupted and suddenly defined a life, making waves that crashed into the shores of future decades, future generations. Like her mother’s disappearing act. What prenup could have protected against that calamity, could remove that impossible boulder from her way?

Victoria checked the time. She still had fifteen minutes.

She didn’t realize she was holding her breath until a singsong voice answered the line. She could only hear Auda’s voice in her head: *I wish you called me sooner.*

“It’s me, Victoria.”

She heard breathing on the other line, a pause.

“Oh *hi* sweetheart. It’s so nice to hear your voice.”

It was too late to hang up, so Victoria heard herself continuing to speak.

"Mom, I'm getting married."
Shaun wipes down the drop car and pulls up his jacket hood. The mist-filled orb of a streetlight glows overhead. He thinks of the mobile above Sydney’s crib, the ball he and Kelsey painted to look like the sun, and the baby beneath it buried in quilt up to her double chin. Even without the title, he’s been a good father. Far better than his own father was for him. He would never forgive himself if Sydney ended up in foster care for a few pieces of luggage and a beater he could lift from any lot in the city. But these airport jobs aren’t about the take so much as Kelsey’s desire to feel in control, to escape this world to which she has been relegated, the only world Shaun has ever known. He pops the door of a hatchback and settles into the driver’s seat, checks his watch.

As he waits, Shaun envisions Kelsey approaching the customs agent, running her hands over her hips and breasts, as if searching for luggage tags and plane tickets. She brushes back the blonde lock curling under her chin, and offers the word *husband* with feigned frustration and a breathy suggestiveness. *I can run and get the tickets*, she says. *If you need to see them.* The agent leers, his elbows propped on his stomach. *Can I trust you?* he asks, but it doesn’t matter—a woman with *those* legs sticking out of *that* skirt?—not so long as he gets to play the hero.

The jealousy Shaun feels in this imagined scenario is as absurd as it is palpable, and the image shifts to Kelsey’s cheekbone pressed against the linoleum floor, her wrists zip-tied behind her back. As the stark reality of a prison cell settles around her consciousness, he hopes that she is thinking about Sydney, about him, but he knows that she is only thinking of herself. Still, his resentment
of her selfishness extends only so far as the distance it creates between them.

These airport runs are like a drug for her, temporarily restoring her self-confidence and transporting them both back to high school when everyone—even those whose envy manifest in hatred, and especially those who tried to hold on as she rose above them, a star shooting toward the Hollywood sky—believed she was destined for greatness. In retrospect, he is grateful that she didn’t know he existed back then. He couldn’t have managed the pain of being cut loose. This is why he understands the way people reacted when she returned. But at the time, from a place of distant and undying devotion, he had celebrated the savage manner in which she severed her ties to home. Somehow it made him feel closer to her.

He pulls up to arrivals as Kelsey pushes a luggage cart loaded with six hard-case rolling bags through the sliding doors. She’s playing the role of a mother of three—a part she might have been cast for in Hollywood at this age—returning from a week of beaches and frozen cocktails. A gust of wind blows the straw hat off her head, and she laughs airily, flashing that smile built for stage and screen as she bends at the waist to retrieve it. Shaun often wonders how many men she let inside her as the mud-caked wheels of her career spun to nowhere.

What is it called when love and rage mix in a man’s heart? Lust? Obsession? Shaun jumps out of the car and cups his hands around Kelsey’s ass—a self-indulgent improvisation—and circles her in the air, breathing in the scent of her sandalwood perfume, savoring the public eye that caresses her shapely frame as though it were a statue of the goddess Aphrodite raised on some hirsute
pedestal, more bear than man, more ogre than Atlas. The implicit question, a matter of syntactical perspective, defines Shaun’s hope and agitation. *How did that guy end up with that girl?* This question elevates Shaun, speaks to his entrepreneurship as a garage owner, the heady tomes lining the shelves of his apartment, the size of his cock. But its obverse—*How did that girl end up with that guy?*—is something Shaun tries desperately not to let Kelsey dwell on.

Kelsey throws her hands out and dips a shoulder. “Where are the kids?”

“Lost ‘em,” Shaun says. He remembers her being a better actress.

She slaps him on the shoulder and gets comfortable in the passenger seat as he loads the bags. A heavy rain begins to fall beyond the shelter of the terminal.

Once in the car, Kelsey removes Shaun’s hat and brushes back his hair. She stares at him with doting eyes, not ready to drop the act, and for a moment he feels as though he’s in a lucid dream. Then she throws her hand up to her forehead and dispels the magic.

“Take me back,” she says in anguish. “Away from this foul weather. Away from the obligations of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.”

The truth of her reality sticks out from this melodrama. Shaun’s world is loathsome to her, a reminder of everything she has lost. After high school, Shaun thought he would never see her again. In a movie or something, sure, but not in person. Then she came back, deluded into thinking her friends and father would open their arms to her. But what friends remained fatted themselves on her shame, and her father—before disowning her for a second time—blamed her mother’s
death on the anguish caused by her unceremonious departure nine years earlier. When her car wouldn’t start, she offered Shaun every penny she had to make it run. Perhaps she figured he would fix it up for free. Instead, he offered her a job and a place to crash. Occasionally, he feels remorse for holding her hostage, but then he remembers that if she knew who Sydney’s father was, she would be gone without giving him a second thought.

He merges onto the highway and Kelsey flings her straw hat onto the luggage. She slips into a pair of frayed jeans and unclips her extensions. He almost stops her, tells her they could have all this: vacations, children, love. But it’s just an act. He nurtures the hope that a place exists for him in her redefined future, but for now, he’ll take what he can get. He unzips his fly.

“Vacations aren’t free,” he says.

“Especially for the airlines,” Kelsey says. Her eyes remain fixed on her cellphone screen.

“I’m just saying, there are ways for a wife to show her gratitude.” The joke has a sharper edge than he intended, but she doesn’t seem to notice, and laughs when she looks.

“Nice try, asshole,” she says. “Keep your eyes on the road.”

Her familiarity calms him, restoring in him the canine desire to please. She calls Sydney’s babysitter and raises her voice over the rain hammering the windshield. Just checking in—OK, good. There’s a waterfall in the courtyard of the restaurant. Yes, delicious. About to head over to the movie. Home in a few hours! Lying is just another dimension of her act. She puts on a classic rock
Christopher Hathaway

mix—at the very least, their music taste is compatible—and slips in back with the bags.

“How’s Sydney doing?” Shaun asks.

“As you would expect.” Kelsey’s voice is distant, unfocused. A flash of white flesh catches Shaun’s eye in the rearview mirror before she bends back into the shadows. Her silk blouse falls into the passenger seat. “I’m sorry to part with this one.”

He fingers the material. “Should bring in something.”

“So long as Marco isn’t a dick about it,” she says. The pawn shop owner discounts according to the assumption that goods are hot, and in their case, he’s correct. At first, Kelsey was overjoyed with whatever cash they received, smiling as if she’d learned to spin gold from straw. Now she wouldn’t be satisfied if Marco offered retail.

Headlights from two lanes of opposing traffic force Shaun’s eyes to the fog line. Those cars that aren’t driving with their flashers have pulled onto the narrow shoulder, which seems to Shaun like giving up. He’d rather get sucked under the axle of an eighteen-wheeler than be plowed into from behind at a full stop. He pumps the brakes and Kelsey braces herself against his seat.

“It’s anarchy tonight,” she says.

The wetness of her breath tickles his ear and he digs a pinky into the canal. He’s a damned good driver, but the wipers are for shit and the tread is low and there’s no telling what another car might do. In his mind, he sees Kelsey’s mutilated corpse stopping traffic for miles.
“Strap in,” he says.

“I trust you,” she says, and pulls the notebook used for inventory from his backpack. He keeps his eyes on the road. His hands at ten-and-two wrestle the wheels from pools of water.

Yellow lights flash overhead before the highway narrows into a two-lane road with expansive tracts of farmland on either side. As though a curtain has been pulled back, the rain stops, and the moon appears low on the eastern horizon. Shaun drapes his wrist over the steering wheel with a sense of accomplishment. His armpit emits an odor, dank and sweet.

“Looks like we’re in the clear,” he says.

Kelsey leans forward and kisses his bristly cheek like a grade-school teacher awarding a gold star. He puts the car on cruise-control and thumps his foot to the beat of the music.

“I like this,” she says. A silver chain dangles from her hand beneath the rearview mirror. She lifts a small sickle-shaped geode in her palm. “It can’t be worth much.”

Shaun doesn’t respond. He suspects that if it were worth a whole lot it would have simply found its way into her pocket. Someday, when he needs to drop her down a peg or two, he’ll let on that he knows she’s skimming. But for now, things are going well. He considers it an investment in Sydney’s future.

Much of the surrounding land is barren, tilled but unsown, as if the farmer had been called away suddenly. One tract leading into another, like cars on a freight train. The dotted yellow line passes like a film reel stuck on the same
frame, and a chill settles on the back of Shaun’s neck. When had they last seen another car? He depresses the pedal and finds comfort in the car’s acceleration.

The music cuts out. The silence of the cabin matches the stillness of the landscape. Kelsey drips the necklace into the cup holder and reads a pop-up banner on her phone. She ducks her head to the window and scours the landscape.

“There’s a fucking tornado warning,” she says.

How did the phone company know to contact them? Shaun almost laughs at the irony of traveling in a stolen car with what is, in effect, a tracking beacon—so much for plausible deniability—but then he considers the hour of flat road separating them from the mountains.

“But there’s no wind?” he says.

The moon spotlights them from above a distant windbreak. A barn stands silhouetted like a scarecrow in the middle of a field. Though it’s irrational, he feels vulnerable in their visibility.

Kelsey pulls herself into the front seat and holds the phone up for him to see. “This is where we are.” She points to a pulsating blue circle at the edge of a green swath, the shadow of a giant shaded in yellow and red, its core a thick strip of maroon and purple Shaun has never seen.

“Is a warning or a watch worse?” he asks.

“I don’t fucking know.” Kelsey buckles her seatbelt. “It says seek shelter immediately.”

Shaun envisions a splintered piece of barnwood impaling her torso, a shard of windshield tapping her neck like a spigot, the car lifted and spiked
against the earth. He should have wired an SUV, a vehicle with a higher axle that could drive overland if necessary.

The road passes through a copse of trees, their limbs frozen in space. Everything he felt thankful for when they left the highway—stillness, isolation, closeness—flips on its head. Can you outrun a tornado? The fucking wind. He presses his foot hard against the pedal.

“Don’t these people have shelters?” Kelsey says.

“What people?” Shaun says. The random and indiscriminate nature of a tornado unnerves him. News coverage is the closest thing he’s seen. Devastated cities reduced to rubble around a swath of ground smooth as a race track. One of their tires obliterates a branch in the road.

“It’s like this whole goddamned state is abandoned,” Kelsey says.

“If we really need to, we can slip into one of these barns.” He gestures to a rectangular structure with a domed roof set back fifty yards from the road, black holes visible in its siding from displaced boards. The whole thing looks ready to collapse in a breeze.

Kelsey wakes her phone. “I’m going to call.”

Her lips tremble and a look of genuine anguish deepens the lines of her face. She is thinking about Sydney. This, Shaun thinks, is the woman I love. It dawns on him that he’s been going about things all wrong. Kelsey’s hope for escape is at odds with his hope to have her. What he needs to do is to melt her core ambition and reshape it around Sydney, show her how—together, but only together—they can create something beautiful.
“There’s no service,” Kelsey says. “I had four bars a second ago, now there’s nothing.”

Headlights emerge from a band of trees up ahead. At first, Shaun feels a sense of calm in seeing another driver, but the truck passes and quickly recedes into the distance. In the copse of trees, insects move like static in the upper reaches of their headlights.

A bend in the road angles into a corridor lined with metal fencing, its top rimmed with razor wire. Inside, cars are stacked on top of each other. The rusted skeletons of mid-century trucks perch on blocks. Decommissioned school buses line the back fence, their painted sides faded to unrecognizability under shattered windows. He doesn’t see the cat in the road until it rears up on its hind legs to swat at a moth fluttering in their headlights. Kelsey shrieks.

“Stupid. Fucking. Cat,” Shaun says, his guilt settling on top of everything else. If only it lied down, it would have slipped underneath. “It’s like he wanted to die.”

“Nothing wants to die,” Kelsey whispers. He searches her words for accusation, and finding nothing but sorrow, feels somewhat vindicated.

They pass a series of cinderblock structures with graffiti-tagged boards fastened over the windows. A mile later, there’s a farmhouse, its porch light shining welcome. Outposts of a town called Carville. Shaun eases his foot off the accelerator.

Kelsey holds up her phone. “It’s working,” she says. The dot—their car—is engulfed in the eastern edge of red, and yet there is no movement in the
atmosphere or in the deserted town. Shaun doesn’t see the car idling under a three-dimensional rendering of a donut, or the figure inside, glowing in ambient light from the dash. He blows through a traffic light.

“Cops,” Kelsey says. She twists around in her seat.

The patrol car snaps on its lights and carves a slow half-circle in their direction. The veins pop in Shaun’s neck as he rattles the steering column. Kelsey huddles against her door. None of it makes sense. The cop can’t have seen more than a dozen cars all night. Shaun pulls into a vacant lot and cuts the engine. A spotlight blasts though their rear window.

“We’re fucked,” Kelsey says, wringing her hands to stop them from shaking.

The megaphone blips. A voice commands them to follow. Down the road a quarter-mile, the officer turns into a shuttered gas station without signaling. Shaun parks beside one of four derelict pumps. A metal awning shelters the area like an umbrella on top of two thick pillars. His eyes remain fixed on the patrol car as it pulls behind them. He thinks of Sydney sprawled in her crib. At this point, she will have kicked off the quilt and flopped on her stomach—a skill she only recently acquired—stretching her gelatinous limbs at impossible angles around the white moon of her diapered rump.

The officer’s car door opens. Until now, Shaun’s fear was little more than abstraction, a nightmare in comparison with the reality of a lengthy prison sentence. Shaun turns to Kelsey and opens his mouth, ready to unburden himself of those three impossible words that have rattled inside his heart like lottery balls
for as long as he can remember. He glances in the rearview as the officer exits his
car. A black flak jacket accentuates his enormous chest.

“I’ll tell him I picked you up in a bar,” Shaun says. “I’ll swear you didn’t
know about the car, or the luggage.”

“There are cameras, Shaun.” She is scared, exasperated. She blames him.
She is fixing her hair.

“Then I threatened you,” he says. Kelsey puckers her thin, angular lips,
and he realizes that she is transforming herself into a commodity. His face
hardens. "I threatened Sydney.”

The officer’s flashlight beam rolls over the eviscerated bags and brushes
Kelsey’s cheek. He circles the front of the car and Shaun blurts, “I love you.” The
words hang in the air, and he feels lightheaded, certain that he shouldn’t have said
it, that it wasn’t the right time, as if such a thing exists. Still, he feels a sense
relief.

“I know that already,” she says.

Before Shaun can respond, the officer taps his window with the butt of his
flashlight. His utility belt—baton, taser, gun, handcuffs—rest at Shaun’s eye
level.

“I’m so sorry, officer,” Shaun says. “This weather has us both rattled. We
live a few hours from here and some message popped up about tornados in the
area. We haven’t been able to find shelter anywhere. Thought we’d make a break
for the mountains.”

“That’s a terrible plan,” the officer says.
“My wife just flew in. This place is desolate. We were panicked.”

“Excuse me,” Kelsey says. “Officer?” Her tone is affected, cooing, inappropriate to the situation and painfully obvious. The officer doesn’t even do her the courtesy of a passing glance.

“Are you aware of the dead animal stuck in your grill?” he asks.

“An accident,” Shaun says. “I didn’t know it was stuck in there. I’m an animal lover.”

“I clocked you at sixty-seven,” the officer says. “The speed limit is thirty-five.”

“That seems like a lot.”

“Yes,” the officer says. “It does.”

Kelsey reaches her phone across the steering wheel. “See this dot?”

“License and registration,” the officer says.

“What happens if a tornado kills us all while you’re holding us hostage?”

Kelsey says.

The officer bends his round head into the car and shines the light in her eyes. “Nothing.”

Shaun is incredulous. This man belongs in Hollywood the way he is treating Kelsey, not stomping around the heartland like some glorified meter maid. He envisions knocking the officer out and handcuffing his enormous body to one of the pillars. Stuffing his mouth with his own dirty socks. Shaun hands over his license.
“About the registration,” Shaun says. “I own a garage in the city. My car wouldn’t go this afternoon, so I took this one which belongs to a friend. Honey, will you check again for Ben’s registration?” The officer’s hand hovers over his pistol grip as Kelsey rifles through a stack of loose papers in the glove box. “Ben’s a slob, but he keeps meticulous records.”

A gust of wind rocks the car, but the officer seems riveted to the asphalt. “Did your friend register your use of this vehicle?”

“Is that a thing?” Shaun asks.

The officer backs away. “I’m going to need you to step out of the vehicle.”

“Both of us?” Shaun recognizes how pathetic he sounds. How desperate. The glove box yawns. Kelsey’s chin hangs on her chest, her eyes closed in resignation. He pushes his forearm against the door and is about to step out when hollow shots ring out overhead. The officer recoils and draws his pistol. Shaun ducks behind the gearshift, his face inches from Kelsey’s. Hail falls on the metal awning overhead. The whole area is curtained by falling ice.

The officer’s radio crackles over the din. He holsters his pistol and lowers his head to the receiver, responds to a series of garbled numbers. The voice on the other end continues. Tornado. Suspected casualties. The officer says he’s on his way. He thrusts his thick arm in front of Shaun’s face and points at a square building occupying the edge of the lot. “That’s concrete,” he says. “If the wind gets heavy, break for it. Otherwise, stay in the car, and return it to your friend in one piece.” His wheels spin over the ice and out into the pelting hail in the direction from which they came.
Shaun slips his license back into his pocket. The sound of the storm is consuming, as if he’s holding his head under a waterfall. He doesn’t ever want to pull it out. But soon the hail transforms into a drizzle, and Kelsey steps out of the car. She kicks a trail through the ice to a small field in back of the building and drops into the grass, sweeps her arms and legs through the little beads to make an ice angel. Shaun copies her, and then they lie there, watching the slate-blue sky expand overhead.

“Honey,” Kelsey says. “Will you check the glove box for Ben’s registration?”

It might be the funniest thing Shaun has ever heard. She wraps her fingers into a ball and he closes his fist around it.

“It’s time Sydney and I got our own place,” she says.

In the wake of his earlier admission, it feels like a gut-punch. He should never have made himself vulnerable. He considers driving off without her, but what would it prove? After all that’s happened, there’s nothing more he can do to make her love him. Nothing she can do to make him stop loving her. Their idealized lives are at odds, and guys like him don’t end up with girls like her, even the broken version. He thinks about holding Sydney for the last time, nibbling on her fat little hand as it explores his face.

“In town?” he asks, his tone ripe with desperation.

She rolls over and pulls herself on top of him, hovering her face close enough for him to taste the stale mint of her breath. He is unsure of the quality of his own, and exhales through his nose, not wanting to give her a reason not to do
what he thinks she is about to do. He crosses his arms over the small of her back and intertwines his fingers, locking her against him. Her shirt is soaked through with ice melt, and her face expresses an uncharacteristic quietude. Not joy nor sorrow, but something like contentment, gratitude. Perhaps, he thinks, she is done trying to shoehorn her way into a world that no longer belongs to her, and likely never did.

The black mass plods across the sky to the east and unveils the moon. Shimmering ice reflects in Kelsey’s pupils like a newly formed galaxy. The only thing left to do, he thinks, is to kiss the girl. But she is just far enough away, just heavy enough on his chest to make the distance insurmountable. She plants her hands on his shoulders and pushes herself to her knees, stands and holds her hands out to him.

It’s then that he realizes his role in all of this. How he and the other idolaters of Kelsey’s youth formed a chorus chanting the story of her life as if it were predetermined, and all there was left to do was to live it. Though his back burns with cold, he still feels her weight and her warmth, and decides to stay where he just a little bit longer, a boy, distant and devoted to an ideal, responsible for everything and nothing at once.
This is a section from my novel-in-progress. The protagonist, Jesse, is a 16-year-old girl. She is on a journey across Florida with her father’s best friend, Corbin. Jesse’s father, Trawler, died when she was a child. Corbin has just been released from prison, where he served an 11-year sentence for drug smuggling. The pair are trying to find a boat so they can track down the money Trawler hid before he died. They just spent the afternoon with Corbin’s friend, Lida.

I woke to the whine of a mosquito in my ear. The front door to the trailer hung open and the light outside fit like a silver rectangle in the doorway. I strained to hear any sound of Corbin or Lida, but there was nothing. I rose and crept down the sagging front steps on silent feet. Corbin’s truck was still parked in the driveway, and when I lay my hand on the hood it was cool to the touch. I walked as quietly as I could, following no particular path, just a sense for the right direction, listening to the distant sound of water, the sharp rustle of underbrush. Then I caught it. Low voices. In the distance, through a stand of bushes, a small fire burned. I pushed my way closer and peeked through the fronds of a saw palmetto.

A small group sat around a campfire. An old man, a pair of young women, two children—a little girl and a baby boy—and Roy. The old man had long gray hair gathered in a loose ponytail. He might have been 50 or 60 or 70. He had one of those faces that had been young once, briefly, and then overnight it’d changed and in the morning he woke up an old man. Hard creases ran down the side of his mouth and deep lines rayed out from his eyes. He wore a pair of faded blue jeans,
frayed at the ankles and slit at the knees, and a washed-thin button-up shirt that was stiff at the collar like it’d been hung on a line to dry. One of his incisors was capped in gold, and it glinted in the firelight as he spoke.

"Where's your jacket, boy?" he called out to the baby.

The baby stood in a pair of diapers, no shirt, dirt streaked down the back of his neck. He was eating an orange that somebody had cut in half for him and the juice was smeared all over his face. He looked up at the old man.

"Serenity, baby," one of the two young women said to the little girl.

"Come here."

Neither woman could have been more than 20. By 25, they’d be old women, stoop-shouldered, bellies sagging. One of them had white streaks running through her hair that she must have put there herself. The other had a rose tattoo that ran up her neck.

"Serenity," the blond woman said again.

The little girl ignored her and sat in the dirt.

"Come here, boy," the old man said to the baby. "Give me a bite of that orange."

The boy stepped away and held the orange behind his back. He looked to the blond woman, who must have been his mama, and back to the old man.

“Who raised these children?” the old man was saying. “They ain't got no manners. Come here, boy. Stop dancing. Come here and give me a bite of that orange. Serenity, tell your brother to come here. Get that orange for me. Give me that orange, boy.”
The baby, watching the old man, held the orange out to him. The old man leaned forward to take it, but at the last second the boy dropped the orange in the dirt. The old man howled and the little boy stuck his thumb in his mouth. This went on until the old man lifted a bottle to his mouth and took a long pull. He set it between his legs, and I stepped through the palms.

“Hello,” I said lightly.

The old man glanced at me then back at the fire. “Were you spying on us?”

“No,” I lied.

He looked me over. “Get this girl a seat,” he said to Roy. The gold tooth in his mouth flashed.

Roy was even better looking in the firelight. His features were more boyish, and the long lashes that framed his green eyes cast shadows over his face. He set up another folding chair for me.

"Where you from?" the old man asked as I sat.

"Belle Glade,” I said.

"Up near Pahokee?"

"That's right."

"What you do there?"

"I'm in school."

"Shit. How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Bet you think you're grown."
"Grown enough."

Roy shifted in his chair. "You know who her daddy was."

"Who's that?" the old man asked.

"Trawler Lowe," Roy said.

"Well, ain't this a small world." The old man’s voice had darkened.

“How’s your mama?”

"She's all right," I said.

"She still pretty?"

"I guess so."

"Cheryl was always real pretty. All the men around here were jealous of Trawler. Hell, ask Corbin. He knows." The old man took a sip out of the bottle.

"What do you like studying in school?"

Roy was twisting a piece of palm frond between his fingers. "I bet she likes snakes."

"Is that right?" the old man said. "What kind of snakes?"

"Leave that girl alone," the woman with the rose tattoo said. "She don't want to answer your questions." She turned to Roy. "You going to hold that joint all day?"

"I got it right here," Roy said, reaching into the front pocket of his shirt.

"Then light it up."

"Give me a minute."

"You ever smoked weed, Miss Belle Glade?" the old man asked me.
Roy stood and patted his pockets, looking for a light. "Nah, man," he said. "She ain't done nothing."

The old man leaned forward and pointed at the little boy. "Get that baby out of the dirt."

"He don't mind," his mama said. "He's just going to get dirty again anyway."

"These women ain't got no pride," the old man said to no one in particular. He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. "Your daddy was a good man," he said without looking at me. "Don't let nobody tell you different."

Beside me, Roy fit the joint between his lips. He struck a match and brought the flame to the edge. The paper caught fire and curled as he took a long drag.

"What about Corbin?" I asked.

"What about him?" the old man said.

"Is he a good man?"

He seemed to think it over. "Corbin is not like Trawler," he said gravely.

Roy took another long smoke. "But he wishes he was."

"Shush now," the old man said. "Don't say things that ain't true."

"It is true," Roy insisted.

The old man ignored him. "You'd ask Trawler to borrow twenty bucks, and he'd hand you fifty and say, 'Don't worry about it, man.' That's the kind of person he was. Corbin’s not like that."

"What's he like?" I asked.
"He'll take fifty dollars from you without you even knowing it," Roy said.

"Corbin’s only looking out for Corbin," the old man said. "You’d do well to remember that."

Roy held the joint out to me. "You want some of this?"

I did. I wanted everything that place could give me. I reached for the joint.

The women seemed to be waiting on me, so I brought it to my lips and took a forceful pull. The smoke plunged down my windpipe and seared my lungs. I coughed and sputtered, and the old man laughed. Roy patted me hard on the back as I doubled over.

"Take another one," he said. "It’ll be easier."

I tried again and coughed again, but this time I took in a deep lungful of smoke and blew it out slowly.

"Now what happens?" I asked.

"Wait for it to hit you," he said.

The joint went around the circle, and everyone quieted. The children played in whispers on the ground. I tried to hold onto my thoughts but they drifted away like a rowboat in a lake. The little boy toddled to his mama, and she pulled him into her lap, rocking him absently as he sucked on his thumb. After a while, the old man sat forward. He rolled up his sleeve and pointed to a tattoo of a snake on his arm. It was inked in bands of bright colors, red and yellow and black. "See this snake, boy? Don't be afraid. Look at it."

"You're scaring him," his mama said.

"You ain't scared, are you, boy?"
The boy leaned his head against his mama. His dark eyes watched the old man.

"You know what kind of snake that is? That's a coral snake. You ever seen one of them? I got bit by one a few years back. Right here on my arm. See that spot?" He pointed to one of the red bands of the snake. “That’s where he jumped up and bit me.”

The little girl, fearless, stood in front of the old man and peered at the spot where the snake had bit him. "Did it hurt?"

"Hell yes, it hurt. What you think? A snake's going to bite you and it ain't going to hurt?"

He held his arm out to her and she examined it closely. "I had a dream about that snake,” he said, “the coral snake that bit me. It happened when I was in the hospital. That snake came to me and said it’d made me stronger. It told me the poison would pass through my veins, and I’d be a better man for it. I came out of that dream in the hospital bed, thrashing and choking. They’d run one of them plastic tubes down my throat. The nurse came running. She got me laid down in the bed and took my vitals and said she ain't never seen anything like it, it was like I’d healed myself. It wasn't me, I says to her. It was the snake, the one that bit me. He was the one that did it. Tested me with his bite, and I survived.”

The sound of his words and the crackling of the flames melded together into a single sound that rolled over me like a bedsheets. The old man went on. “I went to the tattoo parlor as soon as I got out of the hospital. The one in Clewiston, right down from the WalMart. I told the man there, 'I want me a coral snake right
here,’ and I pointed to my arm. He looked at me and said, 'We ain’t never done a coral snake before.’ So, I went to the library and I looked in the Encyclopedia, but they didn't have a picture of a coral snake so I asked the lady behind the counter, and she took me to the children's section and pulled out a big book with pictures of all the snakes in Florida. We found it together, this snake, the most beautiful thing you ever seen, red and yellow and black, just like the one that bit me. I needed to take that book to show the man with the tattoos but I didn't have no library card so she helped me make a color copy. Cost me a dollar, if you can believe that. I took the page back to the tattoo parlor, and I told that man with all the tattoos, 'This is what I want.’ He says, 'Ok.’ They must get people asking for all kinds of crazy shit in that place. He tells me to come back the next day and he'll have a drawing for me. When I come back, he's got this real pretty picture ready to go and now here it is on my arm.”

The man sat back in his chair like he was satisfied with this story, and I watched him drowsily. The ground had dropped from beneath me and my thoughts had disconnected like train cars at the end of the line.

"Look at her," the woman with the rose tattoo said. "She's higher than a kite."

"Here, drink some of this," the old man said.

The bottle came around and I raised it to my lips, swallowed a mouthful that burned almost as much as the smoke. My thoughts drifted.

“Tell me something about my dad,” I said.

“Like what?” the old man asked.
“Anything.”

“You remember that yellow dog Trawler used to have?”

“Yeah.”

“You know what happened to her?”

“My mama said she ran off.”

“Course she did.” He drank from the bottle and smacked his lips together. He let out a sigh. “Trawler was a good mechanic. That man could fix damn near anything. I was driving a El Camino back then with a broke-down fuel injector, found myself up near the lake and stopped in to see Trawler. We spent the better part of an afternoon leaning under the hood. Sometime late in the day, that yellow dog came trotting up with a rabbit in her mouth. The rabbit was still alive and screaming like they do, and when Trawler told her to drop it she wouldn’t. It was hot and we were tired of working on that engine, and something got into Trawler. He told that dog to drop the rabbit again, but she wouldn’t. When he walked up to her and tried to yank the rabbit out of her mouth, she growled at him. He didn’t like that one bit, and he slapped her on the muzzle. She dropped the rabbit, but then she bit him. Now, a different man might have kicked her—might have kicked her to the ground even—but Trawler went inside the house and came back with his shotgun. I was still leaning under the hood but I stood up when I saw what was happening. ‘Calm down, Trawler,’ I says. ‘She didn’t mean it.’ Trawler didn't say a thing, just raised the shotgun to his shoulder. By now that yellow dog knew she was in trouble. She’d slunk down on the ground. Trawler took aim, and pow! That yellow dog splayed out dead in the dirt. He walked back to the house.
and leaned the gun against the side of the porch. He came over to the car, wiped his hands on a rag, and put his head under the hood. He asked me to hand him the Allen wrench, and we worked on the engine for another hour while the flies crawled all over that dead dog. Makes me sick to my stomach just remembering it.” He passed a hand over his forehead and covered his eyes. “I shouldn’t have told you all that,” he said. “You’ll want to remember Trawler a certain way, and that ain’t it.”

There was so little of my dad for me to hold onto. I had this shape in my heart, like the shape left on a sheet of stickers when you take one of the stickers away, but I didn’t know what was supposed to go inside. People kept helping me fill in that image, and I wondered if, when it was done, I’d be able to step back and known who my dad had been.

The wind brushed through the trees, and I glanced at Roy sitting next to me. His hands resting on his thighs were the most beautiful things I’d ever seen. In that moment, it occurred to me that I needed a drink. Not the low-bush lightning they were passing around, but actual water. I needed cool, clear water. No, I thought. It didn’t even have to be cool. I’d happily drink from the end of a hose. All of a sudden, I got that image in my head and that taste in my mouth—dirt-flavored water coming out of a hose. My throat felt like it’d swallowed a handful of sand, and my mouth was spitless. The next thing I knew, I was standing.

“Where you going, Belle Glade?” the old man asked.

“She’s going to look for that coral snake,” the blond woman said.
Roy’s eyes moved slowly from the ground to my face, and I held them. His dark lashes blinked slowly. I couldn’t form the words I needed. My thoughts were too jumbled, my mouth too parched. I just shook my head and took a stumbling step away from the circle. It was dark outside the ring of firelight. My throat felt tight, but the inside of my head was loose. I took another lurching step. I walked along a path made bright in the moonlight as my night eyes came back to me. My thirst was urgent. Heat, dryness, palm fronds like snake skin. An armadillo in the underbrush. I walked the dark night along the sandy path, my sneakers glowing white beneath the moonlight. They made a gentle whishing through the sand, first one and then the other, pale orbs that preceded me. My heart thudded against the inside wall of my chest.

Eventually I came upon what looked like an abandoned trailer—lights off, the concrete blocks it sat on knocked askew.

"Dang," I said aloud, my voice a flat puff of stale air.

At the sound, a dog on a chain leapt from under the rickety steps and sent me skittering into the bushes. Thorns cut my palms as I scrambled onto all fours. The dog was at the length of his chain, and when I saw that he couldn’t reach me I stood and brushed myself off. He looked about as hot and thirsty as I felt. I walked to the end of the trailer and had to lean on the outside wall for balance. The metal was still warm from the day’s heat. The dog circled back around to the steps and laid down in the sand. The chain clinked as he shifted and settled.

The mighty thirst came over me again, and I saw a coiled green garden hose attached to the trailer. I stumbled to the spigot, moaning with relief and
pleasure. The spigot was covered in rust, and the metal groaned when I cranked the knob. The pipes stirred. The hose bucked. A torrent of water gushed from the end. I reached down and brought the nozzle to my mouth. The water was warm and tasted like I’d imagined, mineral earth and rubber. I drank hard, taking in big mouthfuls until I had to stop for air. My breath came in choking gasps. I gulped lungfuls of air the way I had gulped the water then I turned back to the hose and drank until my belly expanded and my thirst slackened.

I straightened and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, looking down the path I’d come. Roy was moving toward me. He came slow. In my cotton brain, I thought he must want a drink of water too. I held the hose out to him as he got closer. "You want some?" His eyes were half-lidded, his face slack. I jiggled the hose, thinking maybe he didn't understand. "Aren't you thirsty?"

He breathed through his open mouth, and a sheen of sweat slicked his upper lip. The hose hung between us, and the water flowing from it gave off a wet black smell. Roy took the hose from my hand and let it fall. It pumped water into the dirt.

I looked at the hose lying sprawled on the ground. "You don't want any?"

“No,” he said.

He took a step toward me. I took an instinctive step back. My heels bumped against the side of the trailer. Roy braced one arm above me and leaned forward so that his face was close to mine. I breathed in his sweat and alcohol scent, and he suddenly reminded me of all the low-rent men I knew, despite his pretty face.
“What you and Corbin got going on?” he asked.

“We’re driving,” I said clumsily.

“Driving where?”

“To the gulf.”

“What for?”

“Fishing.”

“Fishing for what?”

I searched for the word Corbin had used at the gas station. “Cobia.”

“You even know what cobia is? I bet you’ve never been saltwater fishing in your life.”

“Corbin has.”

“He may have fished a few bales out of the water, but that was a long time ago.”

Roy leaned closer so that his weight pressed against me. His mouth dropped to my ear, whispering. “You two got anything else going on?”

I answered him from a slow haze. “Like what?”

“Like—”

He didn’t give me the words for it. His mouth on my neck told me. His beautiful hands on my hips showed me. He reached for my breasts saying, “You’ve got the smallest titties,” and making a noise that sounded as if he liked it. I liked it, too. Liked that he was good looking and noticing me, liked that this was how he showed it. But there were parts of me that didn’t like it. That hated it, even. Hated the way he was so sure of himself, hated how he took it as a given
that I’d go along. Hated that I did. I was caught in between, my body flooded with something that made my back arch and push myself toward him while some other part of me rebelled.

Roy was mashing my chest with his damp hands and saying, “Show me these titties.” He hiked up the hem of my shirt and felt around my bra until he’d discovered the edge of it and then he slipped his fingers underneath. He found my nipple and tugged it between his thumb and forefinger. I groaned in a way that was somewhere between that liking it and hating it, or—no. Not in between. It was both at the same time. I wanted more of it, wanted it the way I’d wanted the water from the hose, wanted to put my mouth to it and drink deeply. At the same time, I was angry at the easy way he’d backed me against the trailer.

His mouth was on mine. It swallowed the sounds rising from my throat. He ate up the words with his lips, swallowed them down with his tongue. I squeezed my eyes shut as he moved his hand beneath my shorts. Sweat ran down the back of my legs and behind my knees. He pushed his fingers inside me and felt around like he was feeling for something he’d lost, then he pulled his face away from mine and looked down at me with those sea-green eyes, now hard as glass.

"Baby, you're burning up,” he said.

That instinct that had made me take a step back earlier now heaved me forward, away from the trailer. Roy stumbled backward. He looked at me, surprised, then he grabbed my wrist. I yanked it away. That’s when he drew back and slapped me across the face. Not hard, not like he meant it, but like he wanted
to know how it might feel to hit a woman. I’d known women who’d been hit all my life, but I didn’t know what I’d do if a man ever hit me, though I had imagined it. What I did was this: I bared my fangs. I hissed at him from deep in my throat. I called up the sound of all the words he’d devoured. Roy took another step back. With three feet of night between us, he said, “You’re a crazy bitch.”

I must have been, because I took a step toward him. I opened my mouth wider so he could see my teeth. I hissed louder. The part of me that had liked it was gone. I don’t know what he saw, exactly, but it must have scared him because he didn’t let me come any closer. He turned and hustled back toward the campfire. I watched him go with my hands on my hips and my feet planted in the white sand. Then I pitched my face to the full moon and let out a sound from deep in my belly. I gave voice to all the beasts inside me, desire and shame, longing and grief, hurt and rage. The chains clinked under the house and the dog slinked out. He kept his distance, but he tilted his snout to the moon and howled alongside me. We poured sound from our throats.

When I’d been wrung out, I found an old plastic bucket that had been upended in the bushes and set it near enough to the dog that he could reach it. I filled it with that same mineral-tasting water from the hose that had so satisfied me, and then I turned off the rusty spigot. The dog was lapping noisily as I followed the path farther into the dark.

The stars overhead were like pinpricks lighting the way. The marijuana and the booze had passed through me and I was transformed. I took in the night air, and it felt good in my lungs. I was like a plant that had been dry and
desiccated most of its life receiving a drop of water. I was expanding outward, the damp air coming into me like a sponge, filling me out. I would not be the target of what men brought to me, whether it was their anger or their lust. I would sit at the tiller of my own boat. I walked in brush now, through darkness, and it felt good. I was of that wild space, steeped in its night sounds and night smells, brackish water and salted earth. I smelled of the night and the swamp, the grass and the animals, armadillos and night herons and dark-eyed snakes in the leaves.

A match struck close by. Through a stand of palm fronds, a flame burned bright. I recognized Corbin’s face. I was still, watching. My eyes strained against the dark. Corbin stood with one foot propped on a cypress log, a cigarette hanging from his mouth. A second man stood beside him. The second man was dressed in camo pants, like from the Army surplus store, and a black t-shirt. He had a leather thong tied around his head that kept his dark hair off his face.

"Doesn't have to be a great boat," Corbin was saying.

"I could get you a crab boat, maybe," the other man said. “How soon do you need it?”

The red tip of Corbin’s cigarette glowed. “Soon as I can get it.”

“I might know a man that’s got a boat to lend. He lets it out for this kind of thing.”

“What kind of thing?” Corbin asked.

“Things you don’t want people to know about.”

“I can’t pay him upfront.”
“He might loan it to you on credit. He’s got a shop near Everglades City. Sells herps, mostly.”

“Anybody I know?”

“Nah. He came down after you went away.”

Corbin nodded. “All right.” He dropped his cigarette in the dirt and ground out the butt with his heel. He started to go, but the man put a hand on his arm.

“Are you after what I think you’re after?” the man asked.

Corbin shrugged off the arm.

“If you are, be careful,” the man said. “Trawler got killed over that money.”

“That money’s not what got Trawler killed.”

“Close enough,” the man said.

“You’ll put in a word about the boat?” Corbin asked, turning.

“In the morning.”

“Appreciate it,” Corbin said.

He pushed through the brush and set off in the direction of Lida’s trailer. I stood still for what felt like a long time, watching the man. Moonlight sifted down through the palm fronds and crossed his features with dark shadows. I could see a narrow face and a strong nose. He must have been Corbin’s age, maybe a little older. He moved slowly, deliberately, with precision and control, as he pulled out an envelope of tobacco. He took a rolling paper out of the envelope, pinched off a bit of the tobacco, and dropped it inside. In the silvered light I made out that he was missing half his right pinky. He rolled the paper back and forth thoughtfully,
that nub of a pinky finger bobbing up and down. With the tip of his tongue, he licked the edge of the rolling paper and folded it, pressing down the edge. He slid the cigarette into the corner of his mouth and pulled out a small box of matches. He struck one and lit the cigarette, inhaled slowly and studied the night. After a while he said, "I can see you, you know."

I stood even more still, if that were possible. He sat in profile to me, and his face was in the shadows. The man was in no hurry. He took another slow draw and let the cigarette hang between two fingers as he eased smoke out through his nose. "Why don’t you come out from those bushes?" He ran his tongue over his lips, as if he were tasting the air for me. When I didn’t move, he said, “I won’t bite.” He continued smoking in that slow manner, and eventually I slipped from the shielding trunk of a cabbage palm and into the clearing. His cigarette was nearly smoked down, but he took another slow smoke anyway. He pulled his eyes from the far edge of the swamp and studied me. “You the skinny girl everybody’s talking about?"

“Yeah.”

“You traveling with Corbin?”

“I am.”

“You his kid?”

“No.”

“His girl?”

“No.”

"What, then?"
I looked toward the swamp. “I don’t know.”

The man nodded, as if this made sense. He put out the cigarette in the soil and slipped the butt in his pocket. He sat still for a long time, and I wasn’t sure if he was going to speak again so I asked, “Who are you?”

He glanced at me and back into the dark bushes. “People call me the Gladesman.”

“Is that your real name?”

“Haven’t got a real name.”

“Everybody’s got a real name.”

He went back to sitting in silence. I stood there, looking at him.

“Who’s your mama?” he asked, as if an idea had just occurred to him.

“Cheryl Lowe.”

“You’re Trawler’s little girl?”

“Yes.”

“You reckless like him?”

I shuffled my feet in the dirt. He leaned back on the log and stretched his legs in front of him. “You and Corbin going after Trawler’s money?” When I stared back at him, he said by way of explanation, “Everybody knows about that money.” When I still didn’t say anything, he went on. “Only problem is nobody knows where it’s at. I’m guessing you do. You want to tell me where it is?”

I jerked my head sideways. “No.”

He nodded approvingly. “Smart girl.”
He fell silent after that, staring off into the lightless night. I breathed slowly, taking in the night air, the feeling of freedom, of being cut loose from my mama and Roy and even Corbin, in that dark patch of nowhere where no one, except this man, knew where I was. Maybe I should have been afraid, but I wasn’t. The Gladesman turned his face to the night sky so long that I turned mine that way, too. We stared at the dark stretch of stars together. A night wind was blowing through the cabbage palms, kicking up a rustling from the fronds. A curlew clucked sleepily from the brush. Somewhere, a pig frog landed in the shallows with a gentle plish.

“You ever held a poisonous snake in your hand?” the Gladesman asked me.

I shook my head.

“It’s like holding lightning,” he said dreamily.

“Have you ever been bit?” I asked.

“Once.” He held up the nub of his pinky. “On my little finger. It was like somebody’d poured gasoline on my hand and lit it on fire.”

“You still liked snakes after that?”

“Probably liked them more,” he said.
(Unfinished Short Story)

I. West Oakland

It’s all about the movement. Not just the fact of whether you’re moving or still, but how you’re moving. And right now, I’m moving in my stillness and there’s nothing I can do. Hot shots rumbling up the sleeping towns.

First it was Oakland, then Emeryville, then Albany, Richmond, Pinole. And really, I don’t know the names of other cities beyond that. Martinez? I barely know the shape of my own bay.

At one point, we pass through something brilliant. Smoke cloud deflecting spotlights of piercing eyes, industry shining on its gorgeous self. I think it’s across the water or on the water or under the water, the letters “C” & “H,” dazzling waves. A sweet smudge beneath a bridge of concrete pilings.

Tractor trailer tires make a La-Z-Boy against my back. There’s more of these. But only one more pair you want to lean on. Road-hard against Jamal’s back on the opposite side. That’ll keep us separated. Cardboard for a thousand-miles beneath my re-used ass. The space between my legs is a mainline traveled, a train tunneling through my rammed body and back up on the earth again.

Luckily I got earplugs. I saw them laying in the West Oakland yard. Gemini gold Styrofoam stars in gravel growing quickly black. Shadow-filled ground-sky as the sun was leaving. Constellations.

Fuck yeah, I said, and stuck them in my dashboards.
You’re a fucking nerd.

Fuck yeah, I am, Bitch.

The night in that yard was creosote-black. The moon had deserted us by 3 pm when we were sitting on a stripped bench at the Greyhound. Stars so pale, have to peek through moth-chewed Salvation Army blankets of light pollution. We leaned against the pilings smoking butts.

Where’s a goddamn FRED.

There’s one.

That’s not a fucking FRED, dumb ass. It’s just a reflector.

Oh.

Yeah, ‘Oh.’

I’ll Fucking Rear End Device you, Bitch, I said, as his fingers found the space between my buttons.

Mmm, mmm. I love me some dashboards.

In the West Oakland yard there are wraiths. In the dawn, in the dusk, and in the night, feeding on the trains. Wraiths that don’t got no shame, that don’t tiptoe over tracks and be slinking shadows. That feed the hood. That clothe the hood. That sell hood their wares from cars. Nikes on the feet of all of Acorn. They look like your dead homie last seen beneath the overpass at the split. I remember him. He was a good ass skater. They circle as you fuck beneath the stars.
Ear plugs suffocating in my sleepy head. I can’t hear nothing but steel against steel burning up the tracks like a meteorite. Horn sounds. And even then, sound is more of a feeling in my bones. I look out at the town. It’s all rectangles. An endless lot filled with the colors of the rainbow in lines. A Crayola set of brand new cars. Chartreuse to Periwinkle, Teal to Ultramine. No discrimination here. Just miles of shiny cars un-braked from their auto cars, smiling in rectangles as we shoot through.

The one square thing I had was my mother. My lover is a deep round hole. The wind jacks off against my soft pink cheeks. It’s time to take out the Chapstick. Jamal has a jar of his Vaseline. The vibrations of the train jostle the jar bumpety-bumpety-bump in the groove between us. Jump, mother fucker. Jump, jump. I put my hand out to receive. He zips it into his pack and squats on the soft round hump.

Every Railroad fence has at least one hole. Two figures humped cardboard boxes through one we hadn’t notice when we first entered the West Oakland yard.

Jamal, I hissed, waking his ass with my elbow to watch the passing of boxes through a slit.

The slim dark frames stepped over the tracks to the pullmans. The sound of a motor getting closer. Two railroad workers got out of their vehicle. The lights of a FRED finally winked at us and as soon as we could we ran.
We paused at the couplers of each line, listening, before we jumped on the Piggyback. The air pumped like blood through the hoses, inflating like a big fat dick. We climbed under the semi tractor trailer lickety-split because the switchmen were smacking the sides of the cars with a pipe. Or something. *Come out, come out wherever you are. We’re gonna bash some skulls tonight.* Wham. Blam. Bam.

Pissing on themselves beside us were the railroad thieves standing in front of a split open regular old car. They were eye-level to our bodies, not quite invisible, squatting beneath the tractor trailer. The woman was hysterical. The man kept cussing. The switchmen bashing their way up the line towards the four of us. We hunkered against the inside of our tires.

“Will you just shut the fuck up so I can think, goddamnit?!” The man the woman kept calling Jimmy said.

In slow motion, the wheels of his mind rotated. A box car resounded like a whale. He set the package that he held in his shaking arms on the empty side of our flatcar, the pig-less side, and then ran. The woman chased after him huffing. The switchmen glanced up as they passed us, smacking cars all the way up the train. And then, a hissing that’s gonna scream. Clank, pop. Chunk-a-chunk-a-chunk-chunk-chunk. Metal thighs un-squeeze their straddle on the rails. And slowly, we lurched towards the water.

II. Roseville
When I wake up, the sun is the color of malt liquor and I can feel a poop forming in my bowels. But I’m happy I didn’t fall off the moving train in the night. Jamal is sitting up cross-legged, unconscious, head bouncing against the tire. Even if I screamed he couldn’t hear me. I take a warm sip of hose water from a plastic Arizona iced tea jug and it just makes me have to go to the bathroom badder. The train lurches. His head bonks. Eyes open to the other world.

It takes a moment for them to focus. He bends his stiff dick towards the opening of a plastic bottle and takes a long piss. I watch with penis envy.

Why you still with that Nigga, Al?

Because. That’s my man.

Then why you coming with me?

I told you. He beat me and I’m gonna teach him a lesson.

Ruthless is the movement of the train when you have to piss and crap. I should’ve known and brought more paper. In about a minute, I’ll crawl out onto the other side of the flatcar beneath the racing sun, ass to the passing landscape, discharging my toxic ways. I’ll do it there. If this train doesn’t stop.

In the rear unit, they got bathrooms, little metal crappers you can sit on while you ride. They got heat, a window, the high priest’s chair. Real first-class, this girl I once knew said. She also said she rode in a white Lexus in an autocar with the radio scanning and the heat blasting. A first-class cunt. Stripped in every place she
Sasha Hom

hit. Said, Never should you rely on a man for anything. Not even the time of day. Buy your own damn watch.

This towns nothing but squares, ricocheting us off their corners. Fields of brown grass, birds balancing on the tips of things. A school bus idling at a railroad crossing, the flashing reds tinkling bells. The train crawls through this town on its hands and knees, pulling itself through its dry commerce by the elbows. Railroad towns. Thank God. A yard that’s all rabbits and heat waves already. I jump off the car.

Where you going?

I got to take a crap.

Careful. They’re humping over there.

I look over and see a box car free falling through the hot dead air. Then blam, as the silent yard fills with the sound of their coupling. Rabbits move their haunches just a little quicker.

Wish I was too, he says, his upper teeth clamp onto his lower lip as he thrusts his pelvis into the dead weight of his heavy soft pack.

I flip him the bird and walk off.

You better hurry though. This train ain’t gonna stop for long. You want me to toss your pack down just in case?

Naw. I’ll be quick.

I hear the sound of Jamal’s feet landing in gravel as he hops off the train, hopefully not to follow. I walk about a hundred yards up looking for privacy,
bunny eyes staring as I pass by. Trains doubled-over extend into the rising sun.
Rabbit skipping over rails.

When that fucker gets sky-high, phew, they better be rattling the hocks off or we’ll be boiled bunnies. Hotshot hasenpfeffer.

I cross-over tracks counting as I go. We’re on the double-track mainline number five. The FRED still red but leaking all around. There’s the access road smooth as a baby’s bottom, but no bull. Someone took a dump right in the middle, smeared white streamers strewn about. I cross quickly, trying not to shit my pants, toilet paper sweating by my thigh now. Crossing tracks in the teens to the rip-track and there’s a caboose nestled like a lavatory in the trees.

I duck behind it, pull down my pants among some papers and try not to pee on the back of my panties. My eyes glaze over. I guess it’s not really true that my man beat me. I waddle a little forward so the tip of it doesn’t glaze my backside. Drunk fallen in the safety glass of my front windshield on the road. And exhale like an engine in release. That window might cost me a few hundred to replace. I fish around for the t.p. The back part of my panties got a few dribbles.

I know how to make a man pass out with the flex of my bicep on the jugular. It’s all about placing with precision. I was gonna do it in that puddle of thick dull glass when someone yelled, “Let her go! I called the police.” I admit, I ran. I was the sober one.

The toilet paper comes out of my pocket in half-squares. Behind me shifts the crew cabin, as they used to call them – for the crew now made obsolete by a
tailing red light. Fucking rear end devices. Canceled cabooses for hobos abound in these yards. I hear they sell them to rich folks who might want an office in their backyards.

My eyes re-focused now, I see the porn on the pages all around. An empty cardboard box that once held a rubber woman without a head. Just parts. Inflates in seconds. More sounds coming from the caboose, probably the owner of that blow-up doll. I grab a page and wipe my ass with someone’s tits, over and over and over again, until her vagina comes away clean. Footsteps gliding in the dead car. Hot piss filling another plastic bottle. Thump. I pull up my pants, rub the wet part dry against my ass, and sprint. Knees high, for that mainline track singing with the breath of angels into black hose just in time.

It was my mother who first showed me a train. That’s my earliest memory. The cradle of the sinking stroller rolling closer and closer towards a metallic ocean of sound. Ba-bum, ba-bum, ba-bum. Stronger than a heartbeat.

I thought you were gonna have to catch on the fly.

Not yet, I say, panting.

He’s smiling as I haul myself up. I realize that I’m smiling too.

Damn, I’m hungry, he says.

He plucks out a slice of rubbery bread from a plastic bag and then a can of Rosarita’s – vegetarian, because he’s straight edge. Not me. We, my boyfriend and
I, will consume anything. He slices the lid of the can halfway and puts a half-can
dollop of cold re-friend beans on bread and hands it to me. He does the same for
himself, adds an extra slice, and then tosses the empty can from the slow
lumbering train.

    Mmm, mmm. Breakfast, he says.

    We watch it roll away.

    Thank you, I say.

    And dig in.

The river flows through a crack between mountains. I can’t hear the water from
here, or cicadas, or Jamal singing at the top of his lungs, rotating his head in fits
with huge headphones turned up max. Just the muted howling of our train. And
the blood in my ears. No automobiles spotted for hours. I can piss into a bottle
now just like one of them. And I don’t even have to squat.

    The river’s a thin green line. The reflection of light off the top of a truck’s
side mirror. Two fishermen, a father and a boy. I pull out my copy of Crime and
Punishment, and try to read from where I once left off.

    The last time I saw Ma was the night before we found Dirty Matt in the
backseat of Shane’s car, with the steel warm needle in his arm. The packaging
tape on the red-tag notice on the gate all shiny. Even when Ma was there, we had
parties on the cat-shit mattress in the carport. Her boyfriend sometimes brought us
beers. Warm flat piss-tasting things.
My boyfriend said, as he carried the little hollow body, “He always said he preferred the back seat,” kicking the sharp end of it into the street.

I was glad Ma wasn’t there. Guilt is the cunt-smack of the devil’s bitch’s bitch. I see a black shiny head in the river. I know it’s an otter when it swivels onto its back and holds something on its stomach between its paws. Like fucking National Geographic. I dangle my feet off the side of the freight train. The heat hits my face like a mad pimp. I swing my legs at the river. Yo, Otter! I yell.

We’re free, I don’t dare to say. Him floating down, me flowing up. Cool in the currents of our movement. A branch comes whipping at the white side of the tractor trailer above my head. Hands clamp onto both my shoulders, and then yank me back. Jamal’s fat face hovering upside down over mine, the music still clawing at his ears.

You’ll turn into a bloody pulp! He says angry-like.

I get up off my back and laugh at him. Scootch my butt back against the dirty tire. He pushes his headphones down around his neck still cursing me.

I take my ear plugs out of my ears and say, Huh? What did you say? I can’t hear you, and then put them right back in.

He shakes his head and re-settles his headphones.

That’s when I remember that package the railroad thieves abandoned. A catsized box in front of a tire on the exposed part of the bed. If I could just crawl over. I could almost reach it if I held onto the axle and stuck my foot out. Or not. Maybe it’s a car stereo. Or Air Jordans. Or who knows. Maybe just staplers.
We move into the armpit of a curve and I can see our head and tail at the same time. Front, back, side to side. We extend for miles. I wave to the engineer, a thousand yards away.

I stow my backpack on the inside of the tire and crawl out from under the semi’s protective trailer. In this breeze, I’m a cradle in the trees. The sun is a blanket on my backside. The wheels doing Da Butt against the rails. I go flat and turn my face so my cheek rests against my warm intermodal freighter. Lips parted, drooping down to suck in its electric juice, and dribble a little upon it in return. I’m in love. But I know, if we stopped short, I’d be licked flat like a postcard and sent flying.

What the fuck are you doing? Jamal says to me with his eyes.

I point at the package towards the edge and get back on my knees and crawl again. I yank it by its closed corner. It skitters closer, but the jerking train almost sends it skittering back. Here kitty, kitty, I say. Never mind that big old dog.

I bat it closer. I get on my knees and pick it up in my arms. It’s kind of heavy. I almost stand up without thinking, but the train lurches again and I look up and notice the big old mountains all around me. Sheer green walls crowding in on me. Almost Chartreuse. They’re squeezing all God’s water into that thin wet line and soon I’m about to be floating down it too. On my back, a box clutched between my paws, watching the clouds fall on me like a curtain.

Pass it! Jamal yells, his face open, his hands spread wide to receive.
I give it a mighty shove and it glides smoothly down the center gutter straight into his chest. Then I’m jerked back onto my hands and knees. That’s where you belong, bitch, the trains says. So I crawl groveling back.

Once beside my tires, I give thanks to the engineer. A cloud passes over the sun. Jamal is staring dumbfounded into the box.

What is it? I yell. What were they stealing?

I crawl closer to him. I can smell his stank of grease and must. Creosote. And something else too. I look in: Two raw plucked chickens packed-in butt to neck.

Damn. They weren’t even taking them from a refrigerator car.

Jamal hucks the box past my face. The chickens tumble down the ravine to drown in that swift moving water.

III. Klamath Falls

What would my boyfriend do without me? Sometimes he won’t leave the house unless I make him go to the store. Bring me back some Tropicana. A pack of Camel filters hard pack, please. A scratcher or two. Maybe this’ll be our lucky day.

On the way, he’ll meet some fools. Smoke a blunt. Come back either excited or more depressed than he left. I draw the blinds. I don’t want anyone to see him like that. Either way: depressed or excited.

I hurl into a puddle beside the tracks.

What’s wrong with you? Jamal’s question an accusation.
I don’t know.

I wipe my mouth with the frayed cuffs of my hoodie and stand up.

Motion sickness? I lie.

We jumped off before we even hit the yard, landing like a kitty in its litter.

There are quarters in the bottom of my bag. We walk along the tracks. In Klamath, there’s a bull so notorious they got a song about him. The sun gives a beat down. Roger the Red-Nosed Rider. I’ll call home today, if I can find a payphone. Had a very grimy nose. It’s only been one night since I’ve been gone. None of the other riders. I imagine he could be celebrating. He could be having that hooker Chantal over. Let him lean against the leeward hose. If he fucks her, he’ll give me crabs again. Only junk trains and peddlars. Maybe I’ll wait till tomorrow. I wonder how long it’ll take us to get to Spokane?

Anyways, it was something like that, how the only way Roger was allowed around the rails was by becoming a bull. And now he takes his revenge throwing all the train hoppers in jail. But that’s in Klamath. And I think we passed that yard already.

Why are you going to Spokane again? I ask.

You don’t have to come all the way.

Naw. I want to. I was just wondering why.

What time is it?

I look at my watch, a red stolen Swatch. It’s two-fifty-seven.

I’m hungry, he says and boots a bottle so hard against the rail it explodes.
Hey! What the fuck?! 

Then there’s someone else walking along with us. And another guy, and another. We’re surrounded by six Mexican dudes from the ages of adolescence to expiration. They have baggage on their shoulders carrying things you can not see.

Que paso? Jamal says to the old man after they’ve been walking with us for a little while. The old man does not look up from his feet. They must’ve been riding the same train as us.

Jamal seems to shrink his six-two frame down as he questions the old man again. Adonde va?

The old man gestures with his chin towards the mountains, Al Norte.


Where are we going? I ask Jamal.

Pinche Washington.

Someone behind says something chingada the United States and then yells out, Canada!

The yard, Jamal says turning back at me. Then to the old man, Oh, Canada.

De donde son?

Sonora, the old man says. Y ustedes?

Which one? I ask. Which yard?


Viajaron en tren?

Si, si.
The young kid hugs his arms across his chest and bends his ear to his shoulder to demonstrate how he had to curl up to cross the border. Probably in the hole of a hopper.

For every step the old man takes, the kid takes five, bouncing like a bunny, picking shit up off the ground, stuffing butts into his pocket. He must be like fourteen. We walk on.

I’m from Oakland, Jamal declares to no one in particular.

A couple of the guys pull their heads out of their shirt holes, arms still in, futbol player style. They throw rocks at the rabbits like they mean it.

I’m fucking hungry, I mutter beneath my breath.

I put my pack down in the shade of a tree and pull out a bottle of water. One of the guys stops beside me and gives me a beef stick. I got food, somewhere in my pack, but take it, so grateful I could cry.

Muchas Gracias.

Then we both look behind us as an old man with a bed roll approaches.

Hola! He says.

I realize he must think I’m Mexican too.

Cuántos minutos más a Klamath? He asks.

And I don’t say anything.

My lover’s a deep round hole. My mother’s a green hen on a fence post. He smacks me on the side of my mouth till the blood comes, then kisses it. She flaps
her wings away. I chew on the brown fat and spit a tan stream by the newcomer’s boots.

Hola, I say.

When we get to the Klamath yard, the newcomer to our group says, What is this? The Oregon country fair?

People are lounging on stacks of railroad ties, squatting on their very own stash of thousand-mile paper piled mile-high. Because they’ve all had just that much time to collect it.

Never in all my time of riding have I seen so many people waiting in one yard, says the newcomer, or really, the old-timer.

He pulls out a folded-up piece of paper from his top pocket. He unfolds it and examines straight lines drawn across mountains. A Frisbee is tossed across the tracks in a triangle. A sun burnt guy on a bicycle wearing a cowboy hat cruises across the big sharp ballast throwing, ‘Howdies.’

And let me tell you, kids, I’ve been riding since I was...Well, before I became a psychiatrist that’s for sure...That was...When I had this patient, she was gorgeous. Couldn’t understand why she wouldn’t stop scratching herself...It has to be coming up on fifteen years.

This old-timer, man, this gringo guey, said he graduated from Yale. Was a professional. A whole ‘nother class of train hoppers, and once he found out I
understood English, I can’t get away from this white man’s babble. I should’ve
told him I just spoke Chinese.

I thought we weren’t gonna have to stop in Klamath, I whine to Jamal. We
should’ve just stayed on the train and risked arrest. Maybe our train would’ve just
rolled on through to Eugene. We’ve been sitting here for three hours.

Listen up, Jamal says. Nothing is rolling through Klamath!

A white truck cruises up the access road. People sit at the side of the tracks
and observe.

Roger’s on vacation, the Texan on the bicycle announces to the nervous
glares.

A black guy with Rottweiler puppies, seven-and-a-half weeks old, on his
way to Portland to deliver them to his buyer says, Nothing’s left Klamath all day.
Nothing rideable, that is.

Then, we’re probably due for something to leave soon, right? I ask.

See that sexy bitch right there, the Texan points at a string of tankers. The
brakeman told me personally that one there’s leaving next.

That brakeman’s just whanking on your Confederate leg, says the dog
breeder.

While Roger’s on vacation, nothing but open hoppers and tankers will be
leaving this yard, says the Texan. Then dives into his soliloquy of redneck jokes:
You know you’re a redneck when you find yourself staring at a carton of orange
juice because it says, ‘concentrate.’ You know you’re a redneck when...
A white bearded guy with what looks to me like dynamite sticking out of his pack looks me in the eye and asks, Who you riding with, little lady?

I nod towards Jamal.

He looks him up and down, from tatted toenail to nose tip, then pulls out what I think is dynamite, and hands it to him and says, Just in case.

Someone spread open a box of Winchell’s in the shade. The Mexican adolescent takes one with sprinkles. I bite into one with crème. An Osprey peeps overhead and when I look up at white-black feathers before blue-white cloud sky, I feel like hurling all over again. I drop the brown bitten doughnut back in its puke pink box.
Prohibition

Dan Arsnow stole drinks off the parents' tables on the Lower Merion Township bar and bat mitzvah circuit in the year 2000. He was one of the shortest kids in the seventh grade class at Bala Cynwyd Middle School: a five-foot-nothing, blonde-haired, blue-eyed nightmare who was absolutely fearless. One of the first to make out. The first to try booze. Three years earlier, a D.A.R.E officer came to the fourth grade class at Penn Wynne Elementary School to lecture on the dangers of drinking Bianca. The officer said Howards, the local pharmacy, would stop selling mouthwash to minors because there were rumors that it was being consumed at intoxicating levels. Dan was rumored to be the cause of said speech. Was getting drunk worth drinking mouthwash?

Kyle Glazer and his best friend, Max Friedman, didn’t think so. The two of them weren’t popular, but they weren’t unpopular. They were “B-listers. They played on sports teams, but they mostly rode the bench. They worked on group projects, but they didn’t hang out with those kids outside of school. They were a little more than socially average and they hated it.

That is why, when it came time for the first bar and bat mitzvahs of the year, Kyle and Max were absolutely terrified: terrified of whether anyone would invite them; terrified of whether anyone would dance with them. They were both on the young side of the grade, so they didn’t have to worry about their own bar mitzvahs until later that year. The fall of seventh grade was preparation season. It was time to survey the landscape.
Kyle received his first invite from Alexandra Smith, a girl in his Hebrew School class. Not a particularly Jewish name and not a particularly Jewish looking person, but it seemed that Alexandra was having a big bat mitzvah bash and she invited the whole Hebrew School class; her whole grade at the local, prestigious all-girls private school, Baldwin; a bunch of other kids in the township. Max was not invited, which terrified Kyle further, but he had a huge crush on Alexandra and Max said he needed to go (‘Dude, do it for us’).

The entrance door to Main Line Reform synagogue was huge: tall and very heavy. Kyle pried it open and inside, adults were speaking in loud circles while kids wove in and out of the crowd. The door to the actual synagogue was closed and everyone was waiting in the receiving area. Kyle grabbed a navy blue felt kippah and a program and sat against the wall across from the bathroom to pass the time. Inside the kippah were Alexandra’s full name--‘Alexandra Miriam Rose Smith’, Hebrew name included--and the date of her bat mitzvah: October 12. The program detailed her bat mitzvah portion from Genesis and which family members would come up to the bimah for each part of the service.

“Hey, Kyle.”

Kyle looked up. In front of him was Dan. He wore a perfectly tailored and pressed gray suit with a bright blue handkerchief in the breast pocket. His hands were in his pants pockets as he rocked back and forth.

“How do you know Alex?” he asked.
Kyle noticed that he was splayed on the floor and sat up. The door to the synagogue was open. Adults and kids were starting to file in.

“Oh, hey, Dan,” Kyle said. “She’s in my Hebrew School class. How do you know… Alex.”

Dan smiled.

“We hung out last summer. She’s cool.”

Cool.

“I’m heading in now,” Dan said. “Paul saved me a spot. See you at the party?”

“Cool,” Kyle said, and Dan walked in.

Kyle identified as Jewish, but the deal with his parents was that after Hebrew School, after his bar mitzvah, he was done. He was not going to get confirmed like his sister. No services. He’d do his duty, become a man, and be done with the whole thing.

During Alexandra’s service, Kyle sat with other kids in his Hebrew school class. He wasn’t close with them, but they provided social protection. Kyle looked over at Dan with a kippah on his head and a smirk on his face.

“What’s he smiling at?” Kyle thought.

Dan was decidedly not Jewish. Catholic, Kyle thought, but definitely Christian. The gold cross around his neck was a dead giveaway.
And Kyle couldn’t stop thinking about “hung out last summer.” Kyle’s “hung out last summer” was at his all-boys Jewish overnight camp. There were all-camp dances with the all-girls camp nearby, but Kyle never dared to cross the gender divide on the dance floor. He kept his distance and talked to his friends while the other boys vied for the coveted “stud of the week” Hawaiian shirt given to the boy who was seen doing the most socializing with girls.

From the service, a yellow school bus picked them up and took to the venue, the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. On the way there, Dan and Paul sat in the back of the bus, huddled around others, including girls. Girls from Alexandra’s school. Girls from other states. Kyle talked to Andrew Webber, a boy from his Hebrew School class who was something of a social outcast. Too intense, too eager. Andrew talked to Kyle about Magic cards and Kyle nodded, but really, he was watching the back of the bus. All the laughing. The playful touching. The fun.

Dan got off the bus and ran inside with the girls following close behind. Kyle and Andrew looked around and ultimately made their way to the fake archaeological pit stocked with sand and rocks. Dan and the girls were disappearing around corners. Yelling. Giggling. Kyle and Andrew dug in the pit.

During the dinner portion, Kyle sat with Andrew and his Hebrew School class while Dan seemed to be at the table with Alexandra and all her closest friends. They were laughing and looking around and then saw Dan sneaking alcoholic drinks. He did it pretty stealthily. He swiped them from a tray of
empties and near empty glasses. Kyle looked around and no one seemed to notice. He saw Dan mix the drink with some dark-colored soda and hand it around. The girls laughed and Dan and Paul high-fived. Alexandra smiled the biggest smile Kyle had ever seen in his life as the drink got passed to her and she took a big sip.

It wasn’t that Kyle had never seen anyone his age take a drink. He and his cousins were given a small portion of wine at Jewish holidays. During Passover, he dipped his finger in red wine and spread it across the dinner plate to signify the plagues inflicted on the people of Egypt. When he drank what was left, it felt bitter in his mouth and left him feeling a little lightheaded. The shock was seeing kids his age blatantly break the rules and drink to get drunk. It seemed stupid and dangerous not to mention too soon.

The giveaway, or party favor, was gluing the rocks from the archaeological pit onto a piece of cardboard that identified the different types: igneous, metaphoric, and sedimentary. On the top of the piece of cardboard it said, “I Had a Rock’in’ Time at Alexandra’s Bat Mitzvah!”

Although Kyle sensed there was something decidedly uncool about him gathering all the rocks and putting them on the cardboard, he did it with a kind of competitive pride. At the end of the night, he walked with the cardboard in hand towards the street where his mom was set to pick him up.

Alexandra was by the entrance laughing and smiling. The DJ was playing the last songs of the night and all the kids who were still there were singing as loudly as they possibly could. Kyle held the cardboard close to his side and tried to walk by without being noticed.
“Kyle!” Alexandra said.

She ran up to him and gave him a hug. Kyle kept his arms by his side, but moved them a bit and seemed to poke her with a rock.

“Ouch!” she said. “What’s that?”

“Oh, it’s your rock chart,” Kyle said. “Your giveaway.”

Alexandra sprung back in exaggerated surprise.

“Oh my god, that’s so cute!” she said. “You actually did it. My mom is going to love this. Mom!”

At that moment, Kyle understood the kiss of death that was being loved by the mother, but not by the daughter. Alexandra ran away as her mom walked over and heaped praise on Kyle. She told him the story of how Alexandra used to love rocks.

“Why doesn’t she love them anymore?” she said.

Kyle could see Alexandra return to her friends and even the hint of possible dancing with Dan, moving against him and grinding against his body. Kyle explained to Sandra that his mom was probably outside waiting for him, thanked her, and when he got to the car, he threw the rock chart in the back seat.

“Dude, you will not believe this,” Kyle said.

The following Monday he had lunch in the cafeteria with Max. Kyle explained to Max how Dan grinded with Alexandra. How Dan stole drinks and
passed them around. And he explained how Alexandra was probably drunk at the end of the night when she hugged him.

“Dude, whatever,” Max said. “Dan’s probably going to jail. He probably won’t graduate high school. He’s an idiot.”

This was Max’s blind spot: his unwavering sense of self-righteousness. There was no way of convincing him otherwise that the path laid out by their parents and their parents before them was the right path going forward. For Max it went good grades, good extracurriculars, and good behavior. Ivy League education, doctor, lawyer, or accountant, and you’re set. He was playing the long game and he understood it. He echoed his father’s words who said, ‘You boys are late bloomers. Just wait until you see all the popular kids from high school become fat losers. Just see who has the better life at the ten year reunion.’

“Who knows,” Max said. “At the ten year, Dan may be dead. Or fat.”

This was not the response Kyle wanted. He did not want to retreat into self-defensive posturing. He got enough of that at home. No, what Kyle wanted was a partner in crime; an ally in social ascent.

“Dude, I’m sorry, but I’m not waiting for the ten year reunion,” Kyle said. “That’s 15 years from now.”

They sat in silence for the rest of lunch.

The next few bar and bat mitzvahs were scattered from the fall to the new year. Dan was not at all of them, but whenever he was, Kyle saw the same thing:
Dan swiping a drink when the adults weren’t looking, mixing it into a soda, and passing it around. One time a man grabbed Dan’s wrist as he was just about to take a drink.

“What are you doing, young man?” the man said.

“I’m sorry,” Dan said. “I thought that was my soda.”

Dan could talk himself out of anything. At school he pulled pranks that went completely unaccounted for. He seemed to cheat right in the open. For whatever reason he charmed teachers. To them, he was a cute fireball. He had already established himself as a top sprinter at the school and with the gym teacher as his coach, he had a permanent ally within the teachers’ ranks.

But chance brought Kyle and Dan together. They were in the same science class and in January they were paired together to create a diorama of the planets. Mr. Silverman said he paired the names at random, but to Kyle, it was kismet: Kyle needed Dan and now Dan needed Kyle.

“Do you understand the assignment?” Dan said. “I wasn’t really paying attention.”

Another fifteen years on, Dan would have had an accommodation. He would have had an IEP. He would have had a diagnosis of dysgraphia, or dyslexia, or ADHD. But in the year 2000, he was paired with Kyle and Kyle did the work. Kyle explained the assignment to Dan as Dan looked around the classroom and made eyes with Katie Cantor.
“Dude,” Kyle said. “If you don’t care, that’s fine, I’ll just do it. Whatever.”

“Whatever?” Dan said. “Why the snippiness, Glazer? What’s wrong?”

Kyle stewed: Dan with the blue eyes; Dan with the crazy stare; Dan with all the girls.

“Dude, I was at Alexandra’s bat mitzvah. I saw you,” Kyle said. “I know you don’t give a shit about school and just drink and fuck around and whatever. And it’s fine if that’s what you do on the weekend, but this is my grade and I care about it, so please don’t f**k this up for me.”

Dan was surprised. Kyle was surprised. Kyle got quiet and looked around to see if anyone had heard him, and his cheeks became flush. He knew he’d let something out that had been bothering him for a long time.

“I’m sorry,” Kyle said. “I shouldn’t have cursed. Please don’t tell on me. The truth is, I’m jealous of all the girls and the booze and stuff. Sometimes I wish that was me. I don’t want to get in trouble, but I wonder what it would be like to have a drink and have fun. I was even thinking how much money you could get from selling that stuff. Kids would pay millions.”

Dan’s eyes lit up.

“Millions?” he said.

“Not millions,” Kyle said. “I was kidding, but you know how rich this area is. Last summer I sold my mom’s cookies at camp and I made a killing. You could sell a drink for two dollars a sip and every kid would buy it.”
Kyle no longer knew what he was saying. He was far beyond his depth. Yes, he had sold cookies at camp, but where had this selling alcohol idea come from? He was embarrassed and flustered and deeply scared that something he had said would get him in trouble so he retreated into his textbook and told Dan no worries, he’d do the project unless Dan wanted to come over the next day. He’d be working on it at home.

“I’ll come by,” Dan said.

Dan was, in fact, Catholic. On both sides of his family: his father’s and mother’s side. His father was Irish and his mother was Italian. Fifteen years on, still undiagnosed with dyslexia or ADHD, he’d learn that alcoholism ran on both sides of his family. In AA, he would be called a “double winner.” But when he was thirteen, he didn’t know any of this and instead, alcohol was something to aspire to. His brother, Shawn, drank it. His father, Bart, drank it. His mother, Anna, drank wine during dinner.

“I’m interested,” Dan said, when they met after school at Kyle’s house. “Tell me how this is going to work.”

While Kyle didn’t know how it would work, he had no idea how to steal, sell, and collect money on booze stolen at bar and bat mitzvahs, he lied to Dan and gave it a shot. Dan would steal the alcohol as he was already doing. He’d also keep giving it to his friends for free, because that was what made it cool. Kyle would work to circulate the rumor that Dan was willing to sell sips for two dollars
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(‘a gulp if they’re up for it’). Kyle would collect the money on the spot or take
down the orders on his TI-83 calculator if the money wasn’t on hand. There
would be an interest rate for money advanced. If you were paying later, it would
be three dollars.

“Isn’t this antisemitic?” Dan said. “The Jewish moneylender stereotype?”

Kyle was impressed that Dan had this thought and said so, but ultimately
argued, no, it wasn’t antisemitic, because it was his idea and he got to say whether
it was antisemitic or not.

“So we have a deal?” Kyle said. “I’ll handle the money and you handle the
booze. We’ll split it 50/50.”

“50/50,” Dan said. “Generous, Glazer. Yeah, we have a deal. Let’s do it.”

The winter months were the height of the bar and bat mitzvah season. Kids
were going to two, three parties a weekend, sometimes changing out of one set of
clothes in their parents’ car and into another as they were driven from a luncheon
in the suburbs on a Saturday afternoon to an evening party in the city that very
same night. The parties featured the status-seeking, one-upmanship you hear
about with bar and bat mitzvahs, each set of parents looking to top the previous
ones with extravagance after another, but it was also an all-consuming social
calendar for the kids. Kyle’s mom literally kept a calendar to keep track of Kyle’s
schedule as the invitations rolled in from camp friends, school friends, sports
friends, and even non-friends. The bigger the party, the more kids were invited
and it didn’t matter if you knew the bar mitzvah boy or the bat mitzvah girl, you were invited because you were in the grade and the whole grade was invited.

This led to many parties where both Kyle and Dan were in attendance. Although there were some bumps along the way (spilled drinks, lost accounts) their plan picked up steam and it became the talk of the grade. Rich boys laughed behind their backs at the price, buying five, six gulps in a night. Kids below Max and Kyle’s social status, C-listers and D-listers, sheepishly approached Kyle with sweaty dollar bills in hand and asked how they could get a drink.

Kyle stayed sober throughout the whole thing, wanting to make sure he kept a good track of the money, as Dan wheeled around the party like it was his own. The two of them orbited in different paths, but they worked in synchronicity. On Monday, Kyle would give Dan his cut of the money and Dan would excitedly pat Kyle on the back. He did this in front of other kids who saw the two boys as a daring duo. At Hebrew School, Alexandra told Kyle that she heard over AOL instant messenger what he and Dan were doing and she thought it was cool.

Kyle’s face went red.

“Cool,” he said.

Max was none too pleased.

“I don’t want to be a part of whatever you’re doing,” Max said. “I know your parents are cool or whatever, but mine would freak. They would make me go to boarding school, they would think I’m an alcoholic. This happened to my uncle Mark, my mom’s brother: boarding school. He was never the same.”
“Isn’t he a successful artist?” Kyle said.

“He draws boobs, dude,” Max said. “He’s obsessed. I don’t think he’s ever gotten laid.”

“Regardless,” Kyle said. “I’m not asking you to be part of this and I’m not an alcoholic. I don’t even drink the drinks. I’m just asking for you to be cool about this and not be dick.”

“Whatever,” Max said. “It’s your funeral.”

The biggest parties of the year happened in February. No more warming up, it was the big leagues. One boy in the grade, Sammy Goldman, rented out the most exquisite boathouse on boathouse row and the Philadelphia Seventy-Sixers cheerleaders were there along with the basketball team’s mascot, a rabbit on steroids named, “Hip Hop.” The theme was, “Sammy’s going to the NBA!” though he didn’t even make the middle school boys basketball team.

It was at that party where Kyle had his first bar mitzvah drink. Max wasn’t there, he wasn’t invited.

Dan went up to Kyle’s table and said to Kyle, “You need to loosen up and have some fun.”

Kyle took a drink from Dan and gagged on his first sip.

“That’s how you know it’s working,” Dan said.
For the rest of the night, Kyle felt a little lighter, like he was floating. He palled around with Dan and his cronies. He laughed with them and made jokes with them. Dan even made Katie Cantor dance with him. He started by holding her shoulders and rocking side to side, but Katie laughed and put Kyle’s hands on her hips. He almost died with embarrassment as she pulled him in closer to her, but one of the effects of the alcohol was to lower his shame. After a few minutes, it started to feel normal to him, even fun. And by the end of the night, he was one of those people dancing and singing until the bitter end, yelling lyrics even as the last song was turned off.

“I heard you and Katie Cantor are dating now,” Max said at lunch. “You know she gave Dan a hand job.”

“Dude,” Kyle said. “What the fuck. I get that you’re jealous, but don’t rain on my parade, just because you’re bitter.”

“Whatever,” Max said. “Have fun being sloppy seconds,” and he moved to another table.

In some ways, Kyle never felt more alone, but in other ways, he felt incredible. He did, in fact, kiss Katie the next week at a smaller bar mitzvah. It wasn’t what he expected, wetter than he imagined, but he was so excited to tell Max that one of them had finally kissed. When he got to lunch the following Monday, Max completely ignored him and he had to move over to Dan’s table and tell Dan instead.
“Congrats, Glazer!” Dan said. “You got my money?”

Kyle felt dejected, but he handed over twenty dollars and Dan was nice to him again.

The most highly anticipated party of the seventh grade year was at the Pyramid Club in Center City. No one had their party at the Pyramid Club. When you looked at the skyline of Philadelphia, the Pyramid Club was the tallest building, with a pointed top, glowing at night.

Rona Gershon was the bat mitzvah girl and you never would never have guessed it from meeting her. You never would have guessed that her party would be the most opulent of the season. Parents had to make decisions like, band or DJ? Afternoon party or night? And, the most secretive perhaps, from the kids point of view, cash bar or open bar?

Rona’s party checked all the most expensive boxes. Every kid in the grade was invited.

Inside, after an elevator ride to the top, the venue was perfectly average. A mid-sized conference room feel. The floors were carpeted and there was a DJ booth in one corner. At the other end of the room was a bar. There were large, round tables surrounding a square of hardwood dancefloor. A makeshift stage was set up in the back for the band. The difference from any other venue was the view. The windows looked out onto a 360-degree panorama of the city. Kyle was on the early side and stood with his nose pressed to the glass, looking down.
“You ready for this, Glazer?”

Kyle turned around and Dan was behind him. He saw parts of the gold chain around Dan’s neck.

“I’m ready,” Kyle said, and he explained the plan for the night to Dan and all the orders he’d already collected.

“Good,” Dan said. “I can tell this is going to be a good one.”

Rona made her entrance to the party in a big, Carrie from Sex and the City-style dress with the Sex and the City theme song playing in the background. The theme for the party was, “Rona and the City,” and the centerpieces on the tables were long-stem white roses with images of cabs, restaurants, the theatre, and more.

Dan ran up to Kyle’s table.

"Holy shit, they have whiskey!" he said. "And vodka. All the good stuff. I heard it’s all free tonight. The parents are going to be shit-faced!"

He ran back to his table with Paul and his friends.

Kyle was seated at a table with Max on one side and Sam, a Mormon boy in his grade, on his other side. Kyle thought it sweet when Sam walked around to everyone’s table at lunch and asked if people were interested in being converted to the Mormon faith. Kyle watched as kids goaded Sam, asking him what Mormons thought about sex. Sam came to school every day in a plain white dress-shirt and black slacks. He would stumble over his words. He would say he
didn't know, and he would have to ask his parents, and kids would laugh and say, ‘Ask them what they think about Cleveland steamers!’

“This is a fun party!” Sam said.

It was easy to make fun of Sam and many students did, but it didn’t feel right to Kyle. He could tell that there was something different with Sam and that clearly other students were wrong for teasing him. So Kyle responded that yes, it was fun, and humored Sam by listening to him talk about the Mormon camp he attended over the summer and how excited he was to go back.

“That sounds great, Sam,” Kyle said. “Would you excuse me?” And Kyle started to make the rounds, taking drink orders.

The numbers on his graphing calculator added up quickly. Both his pants pockets were stuffed with one dollar bills. He tried to quietly move from table to table, taking orders, as Rona invited up friends and family members for the candle lighting ceremony.

“Grandma is great; Grandma is fun, now come up, Grandma, and light candle number one!” Rona said.

By Kyle’s count, the money he received and outstanding orders added up to over 100 dollars. And, doing some quick math, Kyle reasoned that Dan would need to steal 10 drinks, the most drinks he’d ever stolen.

Kyle crab walked over to Dan’s table and gave him the news.

“No sweat, Glazer!” Dan said. “Looks like this is going to be the best party of the year.”
To meet the demand, Dan recruited Paul and a few of his other friends. Kyle watched with absolute fear. But as the operation started to get underway and the drinks were being distributed to the customer’s, Kyle began to believe that this was all going to work out. That he was a genius. They would be rich.

“My drink tastes funny,” Sam said.

As a Mormon, Sam was not allowed to drink caffeine, but he did love Shirley Temples. In fact, Shirley Temples were so beloved at bar and bat mitzvahs that caterers started putting pitchers of them on the table. And it was when Kyle filled up his glass with one and gave it a sip that he realized a terrifying truth: Dan spiked the pitcher of Shirley Temple.

“Chill out, Sam,” Max said. “Shut up and drink it.”

“No!” Kyle said, and before Sam could take another drink, Kyle knocked the glass out of Sam’s hand. It fell out of his hands and onto his shirt.

“Oh, no,” Sam said, and started to cry.

“Sorry, Sam!” Kyle said. “Let me take you to the bathroom and help clean you clean this up.”

They went together to the bathroom. Sam helped scrub the red grenadine stain out of Sam’s shirt. Kyle was panicking over what surely was happening. The entire seventh grade class was drugged with booze and they were going to get in so much trouble.

It was at that moment that Michael Garvey, a boy in his English class, ran into the bathroom and Kyle could hear Michael puking in the stall.
“Are you all right?” Kyle said.

“Man, I feel like shit,” Michael said.

Another boy came running into the bathroom. Then another. Then there were lines to the stalls, boys barely holding in barf as they got in and wretched.

Dan ran in too.

“Fuck, dude,” Dan said. “I’m sick and I think I got everyone else sick. It was supposed to be a joke. Fuck.”

He ran into the next available stall and puked.

The party ended with Rona Gershon crying into her grandma’s arms, saying “It’s ruined! It’s ruined.” Kyle put together what happened. Dan and his friends had been putting large quantities of alcohol into pitchers and distributing that liquor to each table. Dan thought this would save time, but really, it drugged just about every kid that had a Shirley temple.

It only took the parents to smell the pitcher to figure it out. Dan took full responsibility. After, on AOL instant messenger, Dan told Kyle he was sorry he messed up their entire operation. He said his parents were taking him out of Bala Cynwyd Middle School and sending him to military school. He explained to Kyle that maybe this was for the best, maybe he was spinning out of control and he told Kyle this would be the last messages he’d get, since he was about to leave and there was no access to the internet for the boys at the military school.

“It was good while it lasted,” Kyle typed.
“We were kings,” Dan wrote.

At the 10 year high school reunion in 2015, Kyle laughed with his friends about how he ran numbers for Dan Arsnow on the Lower Merion township bar and bat mitzvah circuit in the year 2000. It was practically a bootlegging scheme during modern day Prohibition.

“Does anyone know what happened to him?” Max said.

No one had heard from him. Kyle, Max, and some of their close friends kept in contact over emails and text messages. Max had gone to the Ivy League school of his choice and moved to New York to work on Wall Street. He was still there. Kyle moved back home to teach and saw former classmates around town.

“Last time I talked to him was on AOL instant messenger,” Kyle said, and everyone laughed.

That night, when Kyle got back home, he searched for Dan’s Facebook. He got a small thrill when he discovered it and clicked through to see what Dan looked like after all these years. He looked heavier, Kyle thought. He looked a little tired. And Kyle kept clicking back to see Dan age in reverse: here was Dan out of rehab, 6 months sober; here was Dan at community college, the heaviest he looked to be; here was Dan at military school with a shaved head, in uniform; here was Dan at 13, with the golden cross around his neck.

‘He looks just like I remember,’ Kyle thought.

He looks happy.
Gwen pulls two doll-sized bottles of vodka from her cleavage. She sets them on the hotel room desk, then immediately picks them up and juggles them. Her boobs almost spill out of her tank top. Her short hair, bleached to a cotton candy fluff, doesn’t budge.

“And you should see me juggle balls,” she says to her best friend, Maddie, who sits on the nearest bed snapping photos of her. Maddie, who had the idea to steal the vodka from the drink cart on the flight from Raleigh to Beijing but not the gumption, takes a second to get the sexual innuendo. Her laugh sounds like something between a cough and a choke.

From the rollaway placed at the foot of the unoccupied bed, Violet watches the scene out of her peripheral vision. She has her iPad out and is scrunching her face, using her fingers to zoom in and out on the map.

When Gwen notices Maddie taking pictures, she lets the bottles drop to the carpet. She raises her hands to either side of her face and makes V-signs. Except she’s focused on pouting her lips for the camera and her fingers drift together, look more like quotation marks than Vs, framing her smug face. “Nǐ hǎo,” she says in a saccharine voice two octaves higher than her actual voice.

Violet’s rollaway bed might as well be a different universe. The teachers chaperoning the trip had thrown caution to the wind in their decision to room popular girls with unpopular girls. They thought it progressive. They thought it would demolish clique barriers. They did not think of Violet, who hopes her
expression is a mask—looking occupied doing something so as not to draw
attention to the fact that she has no friends on this trip. She sits on the edge of the
bed, tablet in lap. Her feet are hot in her shoes, but the time to take them off
seems to have passed. She glances at them, perfect white, new for the trip. She
and Layla, her best friend, had gone shopping together a week earlier. Layla
wanted a new bathing suit for summer camp and Violet wanted new shoes. She
had reasoned at the time that white would go with more things than any other
color, and Laya approved, but now Violet suspects that with all the walking they
will do, by the end of the two weeks, her shoes will be a grayish-brown color, the
color of the air that greeted them when they arrived in Beijing two hours ago.

“Jesus, I’m bored,” Gwen says. She swoops down to retrieve the bottles
that have landed near her bare feet. “Let’s drink these, then go out with the boys.
What time are room checks?”

“Where do you want to go?” Maddie says.

Gwen looks at Violet for the first time since they arrived. “What time’s the
room check?”

It’s at eleven o’clock. She knows this, everyone knows this, or should
know it, Violet thinks, because Ms. Caufman only said it five hundred times.

“Eleven.”

“We’re going to go find more booze.” Gwen’s still looking at her. “A club
or something.” She glances at her chest as if it will grant her access anywhere.

For a second Violet imagines tagging along.
Not that she wants to hang out with Gwen and Maddie, but if they invite Jackson, they’ll invite Connor. No one, not even Layla, understands why she is so smitten with him. She has long since stopped trying to explain the effect his jumbo undershirts have on her, as if he couldn’t be bothered to get dressed. Or the way he drifts through the hallways at school as if stoned—and sometimes he is—but is quick as a trap on the basketball court, snatching rebounds, spinning off defenders, his skin glistening with sweat. How to explain that the contrast made her feel certain there was more to him than most girls could see?

“You can come if you want.” Maddie’s voice is hard, as if she expects Violet to say no. She squints at Violet and the iridescent shadow on her lids, normally visible for just a blink, lingers.

“I already have plans,” says Violet, because even if Connor is going with them it doesn’t mean he’ll talk to her. Being ignored by Maddie and Gwen is one thing—they are intentionally mean—but being overlooked by the guys hurts on a deeper level because they don’t do it on purpose. On her iPad she’d been looking at Tiananmen Square. It’s a ten-minute walk from the hotel. She’ll go there. Get a jumpstart on sightseeing. Or wander around. She doesn’t care as long as she’s not in the hotel. Because the only thing worse than being in Gwen and Maddie’s company is sitting alone in a hotel room in a foreign country. On a rollaway bed.

Her hands are like little crabs scrabbling for her stuff. Jacket, phone, iPad, wallet, notebook—she shoves it all into her backpack.
On the way through the lobby, she looks for the trip chaperones. They were told not to go out alone. She recognizes no one. The receptionist glances up and smiles.

Ten minutes later, Violet walks across Tiananmen Square toward the brick wall and temples rising up behind it that comprise the Forbidden City. This is the place, she thinks, where, a decade before she was born, students protesting against the government were killed. She wonders if the other tourists, all Chinese, are thinking about the events, too. They stroll in the same direction, clinging to shopping bags and cameras. Ahead people cluster at the edge of a roped-off area; in the center, guarded by police, is a flagpole. The sightseers jostle to get closer, aim phones and cameras at the red flag.

Violet stands near the edge of the crowd. It is almost dusk, still light out, and the summer air warms her skin. Similar to the weather in North Carolina, she thinks, except for the smog. She makes a mental note to check the latitude of the city.

“Hi! Hello!” She turns instinctively at the sound of English.

A girl about her age smiles through the window and drapes that are her glasses and bangs. Her front teeth overlap quite a bit in the center of her friendly grin.
“When you arrive in Beijing?” The girl wears a large T-shirt with a mini skirt, something Violet wouldn’t have thought to do, but the combination works. She takes a step toward Violet so they are only a few feet apart.

“Two hours ago.” At the Raleigh-Durham airport before their flight, looking around at the sixteen other sophomores on the trip, she’d felt a keen sense of both dread and excitement. It seemed as though everyone but her had come with a best friend, had signed up for the trip with someone. On the other hand, the thought of being near Connor for fourteen days sent a thrill through her. He sat there with headphones in and half-closed eyes, the side of his face slumped in his palm. His giant UNC sweatpants, which some might have thought made him look sloppy, made him all the more lovable to her. She wanted to switch seats with whoever was lucky enough to be his seatmate on the thirteen-hour plane ride. She’d start watching a movie and he’d touch her arm and ask if it was any good. She’d say yes, and then stop the movie until he caught up so they could watch together, like a date. She was looking forward to seeing the hutongs of Beijing and hiking the Great Wall, but Connor was far more appealing than anything on the trip itinerary.

“Beautiful blond hair.” The girl touches her own black hair for emphasis.

Violet’s hair is not really blond, more of a nut brown. “Your English is very good.”

Cheers rise from the flagpole and Violet swivels around.

The girl places her fingertips on Violet’s arm.

“I’m Mingzhu.”
“I’m Violet. What’s going on?” She glances over her shoulder. She’s like a child at a street parade who can’t keep her eyes off the floats, but the penny candy raining down at her feet also demands attention.

“It is the lowering of the flag,” Mingzhu says. “Happens every night.”

By the time Violet gets her phone out to take a picture, the flag is no longer visible.

The crowd disperses, people in pairs or groups of three spread out across the square. A man approaches Violet and speaks to her in Chinese. She looks to Mingzhu for a translation.

“He want photo with you—because you are beautiful. He never seen blond hair.”

Violet considers this. If Gwen were here, the man would want a picture of her instead.

“Should I let him?” What would the man do with the picture? Post it somewhere? Show it to his friends?

“Yes, why not?” Mingzhu takes the man’s phone. He stands beside Violet. “Cheese,” Mingzhu says, and then giggles. Mingzhu hands the phone back to the man. She asks Violet where she’s from.


“I love America!” Mingzhu looks at Violet as if she had just told her she was a movie star. “I have never been, but I want to visit New York and California. How about going for tea?”
Mrs. Caufman told the students not to go out alone. But if Violet and Mingzhu stick together, she can tell Ms. Caufman that she wasn’t by herself and it won’t be a lie.

“Oh, unless you have somewhere else to go,” Mingzhu adds, more a statement than a question.

“Tea sounds great,” Violet says.

Mingzhu leads Violet down a stairway to an underground passage where pedestrians clot the tunnel. Behind her, voices chant some sort of slogan. She turns to see thirty soldiers marching in rigid unison through the crowd. Violet and Mingzhu are on one side of the tunnel; the people in the middle move to avoid getting kicked. As the soldiers whoosh past, rifles grafted to their chests, several bold tourists fall in line, mock-marching with them. As if Mingzhu can detect Violet’s growing sense of disquiet, she links arms with her and says, “Just a drill.”

When they resurface, the light is beginning to fade. They cross over a bridge. Below them a park stretches for two hundred yards in either direction. Several people make their way along the path through the center of the park. A young man with the same height and build as Connor, the same buzzed dark hair, walks up the path. Where was Connor now? At a club with Jackson, Gwen, and Maddie? Still in his room? If he was with Gwen and Maddie, then they were
probably doing the same dumb shit they did in Chapel Hill, while she was already having an authentic cultural experience.

“Did you come to China alone?” Mingzhu asks.

“With a school group.” She glances behind her, suddenly concerned that Ms. Caufman and the male chaperone, Mr. Shook, might have gone out for a walk after the flight to discuss the following days’ itinerary. But the street is empty.

A few blocks beyond the park Mingzhu stops at a building. A neon BAR sign illuminates the rough concrete and gives off a cheerless buzzing sound.

“How about here?” It’s nothing like the tea room Violet had in mind: a bright, open space with hardwood floors and low tables visible through windows. When Violet doesn’t answer right away Mingzhu adds, “Or somewhere else?” With the sweep of her pointer finger she brushes her bangs from the front of her glasses, a familiar gesture because Layla’s bangs are the same length and she’s always raking them out of her eyes.

“Okay,” Violet says.

Inside, a portly girl with a round face waits behind the hostess counter. The place could be anything—there’s no bar, just a long, empty hallway, the color of a dirty sheet.

While Mingzhu speaks to the portly girl, the painting on the wall behind her catches Violet’s eye. In its center a gold dragon stands in relief from the black background. The dragon’s body is elongated like a snake, with three little lizard legs pressing close to the ground; the fourth leg is raised, and in its claw the
dragon holds a yin yang symbol like a grenade. Its lips part to reveal fangs and a forked tongue.

“Dragons are for good fortune,” Mingzhu says, following Violet’s gaze.

“Divine beings.”

The portly girl takes them down the hallway to a door. She swings it open and Violet, heart pulsing against her chest, follows Mingzhu inside.

When she sees the table with a tea set, relief washes over her. Nothing suspicious. She laughs at her misgiving. It’s just tea, she reminds herself. Sure, the room is sparse. It’s like El Guadalajara, her favorite Mexican restaurant back home, a hole-in-the-wall with taquitos out of this world.

Mingzhu slides into one chair and Violet sits across from her, lays her backpack by her feet. She studies the slatted bamboo box on which two ceramic tea pots and cups rest. Mingzhu pulls her phone out of her pocket and uses her thumbs to text, and Violet takes the opportunity to touch the smooth, tan box.

Mingzhu puts her phone away, removes the lids of five glass jars sitting in front of the bamboo box.

“Smell,” Mingzhu says.

Violet moves her nose along the row of jars, letting the different fragrances waft up while Mingzhu tells her the name of each. The second to last is jasmine—she knows even before Mingzhu says it. The sweet floral scent drowns her in homesickness. She pictures her mom’s jasmine, the delicate buds and sweeping vine clinging to the trellis. Mingzhu asks her to choose one. She almost
picks jasmine but she reminds herself that this is an adventure and her finger swerves to point at the jar with oolong.

“I’ll get this one.” Mingzhu motions to the last jar, an herbal tea with pieces of dried fruit.

Mingzhu peppers Violet with questions: Does she have any siblings? No, just two cousins. Does she like living in North Carolina? It’s all she’s known. Does she have a boyfriend? Violet replays the absurd daydream she has, the one in which she and Layla walk out into the parking lot and see Connor leaning against his old Honda. He looks up and gives Violet a head nod. She smiles, she can’t help it, and he does too. He says, *Hey, you want a ride?* There are other fantasies too, but it starts with this one. “No,” she tells Mingzhu. “I don’t have a boyfriend.”

Violet asks if Mingzhu is also a student.


When the portly girl, who has a constant sweaty look to her, barges in with a kettle, Mingzhu tells her which teas they want. The portly girl puts a spoonful of oolong in one teapot and a spoonful of the fruit tea in the other. She pours boiling water over the tea leaves and departs as abruptly as she entered.

“What is your city like?” Mingzhu says.

“Chapel Hill? It’s a college town. My mom teaches biological anthropology at UNC.” Her mother had been granted a six-month sabbatical the previous year and had opted to stay home because of Violet. This choice is not
one Violet approves of, though, selfishly, she was glad to not have to be uprooted for a semester.

In a few minutes Mingzhu picks up the teapot with oolong. “Ready now.” She fills two ceramic cups that seem to hold only a few swigs of liquid, perfect, Violet thinks, for Gwen’s tiny bottles of vodka. Violet takes the cup that Mingzhu offers to her.

Peering into the cup filled with yellowish tea, Violet is suddenly overcome with happiness. This is the sort of experience she imagined having on the trip. She unzips her backpack and gets her phone. She aims it at the cup and tea set in the background.

Mingzhu points to a sign on the wall behind Violet with a camera x-ed out that Violet hadn’t noticed before. “No pictures.”

“Then I’ll take one of us.”

“I’m Buddhist.” Mingzhu says. “We do not allow pictures.”

“But you didn’t mind taking one of me with that man.”

“Well.” Mingzhu stares into her cup. Her bangs fall in front of her glasses again. She lifts her head, brushes her bangs aside, smiles only with her mouth.

“That’s not the same thing.”

Mingzhu takes a small sip of the tea and Violet, still watching her, does the same. The sweet botanical notes hit her palate first; the aftertaste is fresh and light.

Mingzhu refills both cups with the fruit tea and they chat about the differences between America and China. When both tea pots are empty, Mingzhu
opens the door and yells. The portly girl returns with more hot water and some
plain, greasy-looking crackers, not like the seeded ones Violet’s mother buys.

Ten minutes later Violet is telling Mingzhu that she lives with her mom.

“My parents divorced when I was little.”

Mingzhu nods. “My parents are married but they not love each other
anymore. It is better if they are not married.”

“I know, right? I mean, I’m glad my parents got divorced because they
weren’t a good match.”

“When I’m older,” Mingzhu says, “I will not marry unless it is true love.”

“But, what is true love? Like a soul mate? Does that exist?” There is
Connor, but Violet isn’t sure if what she feels for him is love.

“I think so,” Mingzhu says. “I think—”

This thought is interrupted by the chime of her phone.

Mingzhu shakes her head, waits a moment before reaching for her device.

“It is my friend,” she says, though she seems barely to have glanced at the
message. “She wants to meet now, to go shopping.” There is little enthusiasm in
her voice.

Violet checks her watch. She is surprised to see it’s nine o’clock, still two
hours until the room check. It feels as though she’s been gone much longer. Gwen
and Maddie are surely out. She can have the room to herself for a few hours.

Mingzhu opens the door and hollers in a tone designed to make the portly
girl hurry.
“Thank you,” Violet says. “I had a wonderful time.” She studies Mingzhu’s face, the girlish bangs. She thinks Mingzhu looks closer to her age than that of a university student. “I want to treat you.”

The portly girl shoves the door open, plunks a bill on the table and leaves.

The slip of paper is thin and creamy. Violet can’t read the Chinese characters but the final number circled at the bottom is 1000 ¥. After she does the conversion her eyes scan the items on the table, the two pots of tea, the greasy crackers she didn’t want. It can’t be right.

“This is almost one hundred and fifty dollars,” Violet says, not able to keep the shock out of her voice.

“It is correct.” Mingzhu hesitates. “It was very good tea.” A strange expression comes over her face, as though she’s about to smile but abandons it halfway. Violet notices her teeth again, one front tooth overlying the other so a sharp edge pokes outward. They are the color of bad meat.

Violet lays ten 100 yuan banknotes with Mao Zendong’s image on them on the table. The trip chaperones had told them not to carry a lot of cash because of pickpockets. It is all she has.

Violet trudges in the direction of the hotel. Everything feels far away and large. Shops are closed for the night, the window fronts dark. Chinese characters look
like blood marks on the glass. She knows now from the moment Mingzhu complimented her hair, she was lying.

By the time Violet reaches the hotel, most of the shock has slipped out of her. The lobby beckons, vast and impersonal. She breathes in the frigid, climate-controlled air.

The receptionist stands in a white suit, trying to look attentive, but Violet can see from the way her head is angled that her attention is flagging. Violet makes a beeline for her.

When she touches the creamy slip of paper in her pocket, bitterness about Mingzhu washes over her. She places the bill on the counter in front of the receptionist.

“I just got scammed. I paid 150 dollars for tea!”

The receptionist’s eyes dart over the bill as if she’s seen it before. “Was there a menu?”

A pause. “No. I didn’t think—it’s tea.” The receptionist looks at her.

“There was a girl,” Violet starts to say. In the distance, she can hear what sounds like club music pumping from the hotel bar: uns-uh, uns-uh, uns-uh. A stone’s throw away people are having a great night.

“You should not talk to strangers in tourist area.”

“Can we call the police? I mean, it was 150 dollars. For tea.”

“For how long will you be here?”

“Two weeks.” She places her hands on the counter.

“It takes more time. And if you did not see a menu…”
She should have stayed in the room. Should have burrowed in the rollaway bed and drifted off to sleep. No, she should have stayed in North Carolina, not come on the trip at all. Why did Ms. Caufman have to sentence her to sharing a room with Gwen and Maddie?

“I have seen worse,” the receptionist says, as if this will make Violet feel better. She hands the receipt back to Violet, who takes it and heads for the elevator corridor.

Outside the room, she hears a cough-choke laugh. Maddie’s. The girls haven’t left yet. They’ve probably been monkeying around for the last hour, bored to death. While she’s been out. For all Gwen and Maddie know, Violet might have gone to a club. Or snuck into the hotel bar. For all they know, she might have had alcohol instead of tea.

She hears Gwen’s theatrical squeal and then she hears a guy—it’s hard to make out what he’s saying because his voice is so deep, but she knows that voice, loves that voice. She stands there, palms and ear against the door, and pictures herself on the other side, with Connor. But, he would ignore her. Unless the girls ask about her night. She could tell them anything she wants. They wouldn’t believe her, though, without proof, like the man who took her photo has evidence of her. She needs something tangible. Something they want. Those doll-sized bottles of vodka: Gwen must have really wanted them in order to steal from the drink cart, risk getting in trouble before the trip had even begun. Violet could sneak into the bar downstairs and order a drink. No. She has a better idea.

She catches the same elevator she took before.
“Listen,” she says to the receptionist, who doesn’t look surprised to see her. “I’m all out of money, see?” She displays the empty pocket of her wallet. “The girl took it all. Can you do me a favor? Can get me a bottle of vodka?—and charge it to the room.” She feels her body heat up.

“You’re eighteen?” says the receptionist.

She focuses on the receptionist’s left shoulder and notices that the fabric of her blazer is textured to look like scales. “Yes.”

“Room number?” Violet tells her. “Name?”

“Gwen.” It just comes out. “Gwen Campbell.”

The receptionist is gone so long Violet starts to worry she went to get Ms. Caufman and Mr. Shook instead of a bottle of vodka. That past spring a junior had been caught with a six-pack of beer in his locker and he was suspended for three days. Would they suspend Violet when they get back to North Carolina? Or worse, send her home? She thinks they wouldn’t, if only because it would disrupt the trip and cause a small scandal at school, perhaps prevent future trips like this one from taking place. Violet will tell them about Gwen’s stolen drink-cart vodka, will tell them Gwen told her to get more. Gwen had said, \textit{we’re going to get more alcohol}; Violet can tell the chaperones that she heard, \textit{go get more alcohol}, a command. \textit{But why would you listen to her?} Ms. Caufman would ask, a look on her face that says, I thought you were better than that. And Violet will want to say, this is your fault, this wouldn’t’ve happened if you hadn’t made me room with Gwen and Maddie. She is still thinking about what she will say to the chaperones when, like an angel in her white outfit, the receptionist reappears with
the largest bottle of vodka Violet has ever seen. But she sets it next to her computer on the lower desk, out of Violet’s reach.

“It will be 205 yuan,” she says. “About thirty USD. Okay?”

“Yes, fine,” Violet says, aware of not wanting to sound too eager.

The receptionist prints a bill and Violet signs it, making the G cutesy, as she imagines Gwen would. She will go to the ATM tomorrow and pay the room charge before anyone finds out.

“Thank you.” Violet reaches for the bottle of Absolut. Maybe the receptionist wanted Violet to have a good impression of her country and its people, and making up for the scam was how she could tip the scale back to even.

In the elevator, Violet holds the bottle of vodka in the crook of her arm like a trophy. She has never touched alcohol, has been afraid of what drinking could do to her and her near-perfect GPA. But for Connor she will drink. For him, she thinks she would do almost anything. She screws the top off and takes a small sip. Christ, it’s like drinking a bag of hospital needles. She pictures Gwen’s jaw dropping, a look of admiration in her eyes as she demands to know where and how Violet got the vodka. But Violet will ignore the question. She’ll sit next to Connor on her rollaway bed. And then, when the vodka is gone, they’ll play spin the bottle and on her turn the mouth of the bottle will point to Connor. She takes another swig and waits for the elevator to reach the eighth floor.

[Story continues for a few more pages]
Fantasia

Short Story/ Novel Excerpt

*Three Hundred Moons after Great-Capitalist War*

Neither my face nor figure is remarkable. You need not analyze every woman on the Cloud to arrive at that conclusion, nor do I have any redeeming qualities befitting of an exemplary Qin wife. So why I deserve your attention?

Stay or go. I have no authority here.

The origins of my crimes began on the eve of my 250th birth moon. Upon my mother’s invitation, I had connected to her via Mindbank, anticipating best wishes for my next fifty moons. Instead, Ma commanded me to update my resume on the Marriage Market.

“If I had your bitter tongue and single eyelids, your father would never have chosen me – and you would never have been born!” Ma said. “Show respect for all the memories we purchased for you to attract a suitable man. Your education was not free!”

I remember scoffing, having long refused dating matches from the Market, deeming such online communities to be frequented by laborers. But on that day, I appeased her. Upon my first login, I received a ping from an avatar who had uploaded his own features onto the Cloud, rather than the face of any Memory Epic star.

“Have I seen you before?” He bore two scars around his mouth which suggested that he had survived the Chrysanthemums Virus, that his family had been wealthy enough to procure its cure. Statistics streamed next to his avatar –
his birthplace on a man-made island near Great Bay Hong Kong, and his memory
assets, which made my eyes widen.

“Am I rich enough to marry you?”

We broke out in laughter. Within ten moons, Ming paid for my hand with
a dowry of coin so generous that even Ma experienced an unfamiliar sense of
pride, toward her only daughter.

*

Forty moons passed in our marriage. Not all do I remember, for many of
my memories had been automatically uploaded, to allow room for the Party’s
universal updates. But one fact I do recall is that early in our marriage, Ming
convinced me to stay home. His logic had been irrefutable – my financial upside
was limited compared to the respect and honor he would gain in the eyes of his
colleagues for shouldering the entirety of our family’s financial burden, respect
which was likely to steepen his career trajectory in the long run.

Ma was ecstatic to learn that I might follow her footsteps and become a
housewife, even when I expressed my doubts. “So what if Ming wants to
prioritize his career so he can provide for you as a Qin husband? Does he not put
rice on your table? Did he not move you into the tallest skyscraper with the fastest
Accelerator in the neighborhood? What problems do you really have? What more
could you want?”

I did not answer. I knew that Ma did not want to risk losing any of the coin
I sent home each moon from Ming’s salary. Staring out the floor-to-ceiling
windows of my apartment, I watched the clouds mutate below. The sunlight
which pierced my living room windows was blunted by the solar glass, which
harvested energy to power our home. I could not recall the last time I had left my
Tower, risking my lungs to breathe the unfiltered air outside. I flicked on a lamp.

“Daughter, the only power any woman has is to change herself. You can’t
demand that anyone change for your benefit, least of all your husband.”

I lay my palm on the glass, feeling its heat, then shrugged my shoulders.
Ma was right, I decided. Often, I let her be right because I wanted her to feel as if
she were a winner.

But she was wrong – because that night, my husband changed everything.

*  

“Your Mindbank is outdated,” Ming reminded me. “When will you go
outside, even if it’s just to see whether our Party has cleaned up our sky?”

I did not answer. We had recently lost our Fourth World maid following
her application for City hukou and I was folding laundry to quietly remind Ming
of my worth. Since all modern communications were done via Cloud now, I did
not understand why any Qin citizen would harbor a desire to go outside to inhale
some pollution or risk encountering any gangs which might be roaming the
ground level. It was safer, and Party-recommended, to stay in our Tower and
entertain ourselves with the latest Memory Epics, approved by the Censors.

Afterward, Ming handed me his Scroller for the first time.
“Take care of my Mindbank, BaoBao,” he said. “Stay home. I want to disconnect for a while and enjoy a change of scenery. Outside – for a run!”

I was stunned. Was this really my husband? I remember staring into his scars in shock. Large swathes of Qin had been blanketed by scorching temperatures that autumn; perhaps the heat had addled his brain. I had never heard of anyone disconnecting from his Mindbank save for repairs, much less voice a desire to leave home for the polluted air of the City. What if he suffered an asthma attack? What if a Dissident ambushed our home and stole his Scroller?

“Do you take pleasure in making your wife worry?” I chose to use a gentle line I had learned from Ma, so as not to sound like a crazy wife. Even if he were the one acting strange.

“Worry? Our building has the tightest security in the neighborhood. Besides, the most precious assets in our Mindbanks are encrypted.” Ming laughed off my concerns. “I’m tired of negotiating dams in the Arctic, spending every minute in some virtual meeting room. Many moons have passed since I’ve enjoying being in the moment.”

He lifted himself from our couch. “That’s why I’m starting with a run.” Before I had time to evaluate what illness had taken hold of him, he began pumping his legs like an extinct antelope from the African Autonomous Economic Zone, racing out our door toward the Accelerator lobby, his feet still bound in wing-tipped shoes!

In his absence, I brainstormed excuses to explain his eccentric behavior, each one more indefensible than the last. Once, I remembered hearing of Fourth
World cults which had believed in unplugging from technology – but those cults had disappeared after the War, after Mindbanks freed us from the One Moment. Not for a hundred moons, since the invention of Nutrilent, had I ever heard of any Qin citizen ‘running’ to improve his health, and certainly not outside.

Three moons had passed since our last attempts at procreation. If my husband desired a change of routine, why not reboot our efforts there, to honor our Party and boost our economy instead? Before I could organize my thoughts however, Ming returned. His blue striped shirt was drenched with sweat, pant legs rolled up. His heart pounded like an AI speaker: I could hear it throbbing as I wrapped my arms around his chest. I wanted to kiss him and say how glad I was to see him return swiftly, but Ming began to grumble about his blisters.

I pretended to listen. This is just a phase, I convinced myself. Surely, I had no cause to worry, since his strange behavior did not violate any Party guidelines from the Red Book.

But of course, my husband’s strange obsessions only grew, until soon he was spending over an hour each day outside our Tower. And by then even I, an honorable wife who had never wavered in her trust of her husband’s fidelity, began to question whether Ming was really chasing pavements each night.

* 

“Ma, when he was alive, did Ba ever ask you – for a change of scenery?”

For a rare moment, Ma hesitated.

“Odd. My baby girl, why do you ask?”
“No reason. Forget it, Ma.”

“Did you fail to hold your tongue with Ming again?”

“No. That is not it.”

“You can trust Ma.”

“No. It’s not my fault.”

“Daughter, if you won’t share your troubles with family –” I realized then that I was not in the mood to endure a lecture.

“Ming won’t stop going outside for runs!”

Relief washed over my body, even though it was only my mother I was telling. For the last week, I had felt my body become stiff with anxiety. Of course, I had first tried to occupy my mind with Memory Epics: ‘Chankonabe’, ‘Swimmer of Yangtze’, and the memories of some ancestor in Bagan, where thousands of Buddhist temples stood. But none of those stories bore any resemblance to my troubles. Compared to the trials of an armless swimmer in the Cultural Revolution or a sumo wrestler from the former Ri-Ben, my struggles appeared almost petty; for once, my Mindbank offered me little comfort in terms of distraction.

Before I could finish sharing my woes though, Ma began to giggle.

“Foolish girl! If your husband really had something to hide, why would he give you access to his Mindbank?”

I frowned. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“Why don’t you check his Mindbank history?”

I opened and closed my mouth.
“Don’t you have the right to search his things?” Ma shook her head.

“Have you forgotten that you’re his wife? I thought modern couples share everything now.”

Slowly, my surprise dulled, as I began justifying Ma’s suggestion with my personal desire to uncover the truth. For instance, you may recall that my husband was a wealthy man, therefore highly educated. Perhaps then he had anticipated that his newfound obsession would trigger his wife’s natural suspicions. Perhaps then he had intended for me to review his memories from the beginning. Why else would he have left his Scroller in my hands?

“You are lucky, Daughter!” Ma said, “You have married a wonderful husband who earns fine coin. Don’t take any of that for granted.”

What would the perfect Qin wife do in my shoes?

I opened my mouth to ask. But before I could speak, Ma laughed and then disconnected her Mindbank link, leaving me alone once more.

* 

Upon connection to his Mindbank, the first themes I noticed were Arctic Dam; Fourth World; Cryonics; Insatiable; Wife and Race. Still, for a long time, I hesitated to insert myself inside any memory. I sat at the marble dinner table, dwelling over my thoughts. I considered whether I might be able to share my quandary with some friends from childhood. Of course, that number had dwindled over the moons. There were a few whom I had kept in touch with over the moons – but did that necessarily mean I could trust them with any secret that mattered?
Of course not. If I told any of those women about my newfound insecurities, they might think that I was trying to shirk my responsibilities as a Qin wife; perhaps, they would judge me to be as odd as my husband. Perhaps they would judge me as one who lacks good sense, unable to accept that women of our social class must sometimes be willing to concede, even lose face for the greater good of marriage. What value would I gain in revealing my dilemma to such women?

No, I had no choice but to uncover the truth in secret. I settled upon a compromise with my conscience, promising myself that I would only review my husband’s recent history through the Scroller he had entrusted under my care.

I began by exploring the memories under Race.

*

How strange, I always felt, to assume another body in memory. For a few seconds, I allowed myself to simply admire the trembling power of my new form, my husband’s muscular physique from youth as I awaited the firing of a QSZ in the air to signal the start of his competition. I felt the wind on my back, then the burst of force from my legs as my ears no longer could no longer hear the crowd, my body surging over a dozen hurdles toward the finish line…

I never knew that Ming was a runner before. He must have hidden it from me purposefully, in order to appear like a more suitable husband. Yet, after forty moons of marriage, he was now seeking to return to this activity from his past. Why? Why now? What else had he hidden from me?
Before I could spare another thought, I felt an expanding freedom in my chest, a sense of exhilaration between my shoulders which felt foreign. For what must have lasted for a quarter-hour, I enjoyed the cheers from the Pre-War crowd, circling the track with that medal shining around my neck. How odd our people had been back then, to run races when the air was so polluted, even though it now tasted blissfully cool in the night. I reveled in my husband’s victory in this memory, then realized I needed to disconnect – for he would surely return soon, and I did not want to be caught snooping in his mind.

For a second, I considered simply trusting my husband’s fidelity, especially after I had confirmed his history of running. Moreover, I realized that because Ming manually severed his mental controls every night, his Mindbank could not have recorded his excursions anyway; there was no way for me to confirm or deny any of his outside activities.

Still, I decided on a whim to explore one more theme.

I chose *Insatiable*: this time, I found myself in the consciousness of a Qin man who was not my husband. Only instead of preparing for a race, I was violently thrusting my nether-regions inside those of an American-white woman! Intense pleasure flowed through my body, even as a deep anger began to course beneath my own veins.

“Fantasia! Fantasia!” he moaned. Or rather we moaned together. Our heart trembled like wild birds smashing their wings against a cage.
She had the palest skin I had ever lain eyes on.

Of course, I had experienced such sexual entertainment via Mindbank before. But since marriage, I had eliminated my consumption of such memories; I had wanted to temper any expectations I might unconsciously harbor for my husband, given our mutual agreement that we would one day honor Qin with children.

My hands were trembling. Clearly Ming and I shared different values. In the stranger’s memory, I stared deeply into Fantasia’s eyes. She was beautiful, with curly red hair, freckled almond eyes, lips of dusty pink. Her physique was busty, larger than mine.

I swallowed, then logged out. But moments later, I returned to Ming’s archive. Inserting myself into another memory, I soon found myself receiving a sensual massage. Once again, the woman of desire was of American-white descent.

I shivered. The entire archive of Insatiable comprised of sexual memories featuring pale skins. What if every night, Ming was not merely running on pavement for exercise, but rather running toward one of those hotels in the City center, one which rented rooms to foreign migrants willing to service those sexual desires of wealthy Qin men?

My body alternated between hot and cold waves of anger and dread. How could Ming do this to me! Although I did not know for certain that he had been unfaithful, at minimum I knew now that my husband suffered a disorienting attraction to women who did not even qualify for Qin citizenship! How could he
harbor such unhealthy desires for women who had never studied our Party
history, or favor such women over me, one who had worked so strenuously to
fulfill the duties of the perfect Qin wife over the past forty moons?

What did it mean that I looked so different from my husband’s ideal of
beauty? Was it wrong for him to be attracted to women of other skins? Was it
more wrong that he was attracted to a race which Qin had historically subjugated,
one with which a perpetual power imbalance was inevitable?

I stood and walked over to the solar glass. I found myself unable to focus
on the clouds which floated beneath, unable to feel any heat beyond the shame
coursing underneath my skin.

* 

Did it even matter if Ming cheated on me with his physical body?

Wasn’t it enough that my husband had cheated inside his mind? He had
hidden so much from me, not only his running habits but also this… yes, this
fetish. Then I reminded myself to be careful of using that word – for most of his
memories in Insatiable revolved around only one woman, Fantasia, and I worried
that he might be able to use my words against me in court…

“And oh, how dare I call my lover a fetish!” Ming might argue. I did not
have faith in the courts; men were always believed more than women. He could
say that he had unwillingly fallen in love with this Fantasia, that he had not even
noticed her pale skin at all. He could lie shamelessly without penalty: “I would
never fetishize anyone! I could never forget the history of our yellow women who
were once fetishized by those foreign devils, the American-white men!”

Yiming Ma
If our marriage were to be terminated, I had to be ready for all his false arguments; otherwise, I might be abandoned with no coin to my name, forced to return to poverty with Ma. I chided myself. Such a fate could not be allowed.

How much coin had that man, my husband, paid for those fantasies?

A sound escaped my mouth; only afterward did I recognize it as a sob. I wiped my cheeks. I gazed down at the Qin world outside my window, wondering whether it might be raining underneath those clouds, whether Ming might notice my tears.

What would Ma say? I suddenly heard her voice. I imagined my mother asking me if I was willing to be known only as another Qin divorcee, if I were truly willing to suffer that loss of face. I imagined her reminding me of the inevitable gossip around the virtual Mahjong Table from those women of my youth. Closing my eyes, I imagined a dark prison cage inside which my husband had unwillingly shut me. I was filled with resentment; yet, he held the key. Grasping imaginary thick metal between my fingers, I shook and screamed, the noise almost primal and unrecognizable coming out of my gentle pink lips.

*  

“Daughter.”

I stayed silent.

“Daughter, listen.”

“Yes, Ma. Of course.” Despite the legal risks, I had decided to tell her. I chose to use my voice, rather than share any of those deprived acts I had witnessed via memory.
“You should consider yourself lucky,” Ma said.

“It could be much worse, yes?”

I could not find the words to speak.

“At least now, Ming is unlikely to ever leave your marriage, since his parents would never consent to their son being with any American-white woman, at least officially…”

I could no longer hear her over the pounding of my heart, or at least that cacophony of angry voices inside my head:

What did Ma know? Had she too doubled her daily intake of Nutrilent, so that her body might more closely resemble the hourglass figures of Ming’s fantasies? In the evenings, had Ma too suffered through every memory in *Insatiable*, replaying Fantasia’s endless moans for education? Had she considered coloring her hair red, or whispering in his ear? All the while, being conflicted about how much her crimes had accomplished, wondering whether her husband would ever desire her again? Had Ma too endured my trials?

No, those sacrifices were mine and mine alone.

And then I remembered – me playing on the wooden floors of our family Tower. I was pushing around Chariots, Horses and other dusty Xiangqi pieces, watching my stubborn mother meekly nodding to Ba’s plan to sell memories from her ancestral vault for coin. I remembered her quietly shuffling toward the bedroom, whenever I lost another Xiangqi game and my father slid the bamboo belt from his pants to discipline me. I remember the sigh of relief on her face
when Ba passed away, when she progressed into widowhood no longer needing to worry about the forever-growing debts of her husband.

“Daughter, if you would appreciate them for education, I am willing to transfer you some intimate memories –”

“No!” Our silence lingered. “No, Ma.”

She opened her mouth.

“Everything is okay,” I lied. And for the first time, I was the one who terminated our Mindbank link.

*

Dear Qin citizen, please be patient. We near the end of my crimes.

Let me ask you: when the sky turns dark and the stars reveal themselves, do you find yourself ever surprised by the moon’s glow? In these last few days, while awaiting this audience, I have been replaying memories from my childhood. Those of me frolicking outside as a young girl, naively breathing in the clouds of smog – do you recall that sudden chill when the last haze of sunlight disappeared?

I found myself missing my freedom, that rebellious sense of youth. Was the air really so polluted then that the Party could justify their command for all citizens to ascend to the Towers? Yes, life within Mindbanks is superior, but were the streets really so unsafe that we needed to abdicate the ground, until the skies became teeming with those Party drones hovering above?

The night I decided to confess to Ming about my intrusions into his memories, in hopes of repairing our marriage, I stared out of my solar windows, worrying that this might be my last day living in the Tower. Of course, I did not
anticipate seeing Ming return from his run, given my vantage point above the clouds. Instead, I looked straight at the moon, my sight not obfuscated by any metal birds for a brief moment.

Then the thought came to me: what if my husband had been telling the truth? What if my husband had not cheated on me in the flesh and I should never have invaded his privacy in the first place? What if he had truly been pounding our City’s pavements, preferring the rush of endorphins through exercise to the synthetic chemicals in Nutrilent? So what if he had wanted to fulfill his sexual desires on the Cloud, even if that was deemed as odd as running within the confines of a traditional Qin marriage?

What if the Party had truly cleaned up our skies?

I swallowed. I did not want to stay locked up in this Tower anymore. I wrapped a black shawl around my neck, as if that extra layer offered my lungs any greater protection from toxins. Leaving my apartment, I walked toward the Accelerator which would transport me downstairs. Forty moons had passed since I had last stepped out. Already, I was dreading the heat of the City, my palms rubbing away the sweat which had begun to form. I closed my eyes and tried to remember the feeling of uneven streets beneath my feet. The Cloud was where we Qin citizens lived – why did I need to risk my body? And yet, I persisted.

Exiting the Accelerator and passing through the factory of air filters, I began to feel a sense of excitement, even rejuvenation by my rebellion. As I waved goodbye to the AI screens which guarded over our security, I felt an odd self-consciousness, as if those cameras were arching their sensors due to
confusion, interrogating why such an exemplary wife of Qin would exit her complex without warning.

I paced around the mixed-air lobby. An old memory of heat and humidity had surfaced in my Mindbank: the day of my wedding, when I last moved between my family home and this Tower. I remembered Ma helping me change between five qipaos across of the day – Red, Blue, Red, Pink and Red – and the joy on Ming’s face each time he saw me in a new outfit. I remembered the feeling of suffocation in my chest, the beads of sweat stuck to my belly, that heavy weight I carried in my stomach. Had I ever been able to expel that stone from near my heart? Circling the lobby, I remembered that I had survived that wedding day; I convinced myself that I would survive tonight as well.

As I stepped outside and inhaled my first breath, I felt my chest holding onto that air for a long moment, afraid to let go. My Mindbank reminded me of a nightmare in which my lungs turned black; I felt pressure build in my skull until at last, I relinquished my control.

Pant. Pant, pant.

Under the gentle moonlight, which shone upon the white carbon walls of my Tower, I blinked and realized that the moon was no longer obfuscated by smog, its light no longer dimmed by my apartment’s windows. I felt my strength return with each new breath.

To my wonder, the skies had cleared. Oh, thank you, glorious Party! I relished the quiet of the night, silent save for the hum of drones. And then, as I stood alone, I saw him racing in my direction.
Home. My husband. He was running.

The moon illuminated his wet shirt. His legs were pumping once again, but his face looked content. A trail of sweat ran down his scarred face. When he saw me, the arches of his mouth blossomed into a smile wider than any I had ever witnessed in our marriage, shouting his affections across the clean breeze which separated us.

Delighted, he pointed a finger toward the majestic banyan I had never seen before, which had wrapped its roots around our building. Why had this tree thrived here instead of any chrysanthemums or white peonies? Its branches ran up the walls wild, rampant. Nobody had predetermined the banyan’s growth; from above, I had never even noticed it.

The tree curled its tendril limbs around the Tower, embracing my building with a warmth I had never felt inside. But as I lifted my palm to the sky to greet my husband, I felt the flush upon my cheeks disappear. Because in that moment, I decided that I would no longer allow my husband to continue to dictate our marriage.

I no longer feared or envied any man or woman.

Not even Fantasia.

I began to yell. I was done wordlessly bearing my burdens, done with my former dreams of being that perfect wife. I began to cry out all those heinous acts I had witnessed in his Mindbank. I began to scream, no longer worried about coming across as a crazy woman, no longer afraid to suffer the consequences of our marriage’s end.
My husband’s footsteps slowed, then halted. I took pleasure in seeing the shame coursing through his face, which beside his facial marks of wealth, I now realized, were no more special than mine. Under the soft glow of the moon, I reveled for an instant at how beautiful I must appear to him, the luster of my skin as angelic as those of any American-white woman. But I no longer desired to earn his love through my physique or face or acts of service, because I believed that I deserved his unconditional love and loyalty instead.

Forever, I wanted him to remember my sacrifices as his wife.

Then the clouds shifted above us. I imagined the moonlight reflecting off my cheeks and watched his scars disappear into the shadows, his face as forgettable as any distant memory, as banal as any fantasy of marriage either of us could conjure.
This story/essay is one of a planned thirteen story/essay project. The organizing principle is the astrological house system. There would be one story/essay prior to this one in which we’d learn (among other things) the setting is Los Angeles, the narrator left the midwest and her mother for LA.
‘Raw Diamond’

House 2: Worth, self-worth, earned income

I brought the book _Witches, Midwives and Nurses_ as airplane reading on my honeymoon to Europe and knew, before we’d crossed the middle west, that I might have made a terrible mistake in getting married. We were honeymooning in Venice, a tiny hotel just off the Piazza San Marco. We arrived at night, the Laguna Veneta hanging quiet with grey clouds, the boat taxi rocking as we climbed out, water lapping its sides. We rolled our honeymoon suitcases down cobbled streets and across quiet bridges and past corridors, made lost U-turns in narrow dead ends, the sound of our plastic wheels bouncing off sleeping, sloping apartment walls and, even on that first night, through my jet lag and tiredness from the wedding the day before, it all felt achingly familiar. Deja vu maybe, but more. The things we see, but won’t believe. I’d been here before, perhaps in some other ghostly life, and I knew that things then had also not gone well.

We stayed in a small room with fresh flowers set on a paint peeled bureau. I’d read the hotel had been owned by the same family for hundreds of years and that, too, somehow, felt prescient and bad luck. My new husband’s grandmother had refused to come to our wedding, it wasn’t clear to me why. I was kept away from their family conversations, her absence presented to me as an after thought, and we’d held the ceremony anyway. His mother looked
radiant. His stepfather, half Japanese and half German, looked tall and lost, but happy to be there. His brother, Mark, played classical Flamenco guitar as my father and I walked down the aisle. Mark wore thick glasses and never smiled and might not have quite sided with his grandmother, but also didn’t seem to entirely approve. He played with a stoop shouldered sullenness. He spoke to no one at the rehearsal dinner. He blinked at the two hundred and fifty person wedding, the two buffets, the five tiered cake, me in a gown with a train, behind his thick glasses and said nothing. He did not dance. He might have known something I didn’t and I wished now, as we stopped at the small wooden door to the hotel and rang the night bell which my new husband pulled with a chain, that I’d checked in with him and compelled him to speak.

My husband was a dear. Smart and funny. Charming, but not overly so. Ambitious and well read. He loved me entirely and wholly. Flowers given to me on asking me on our first date. Poems tucked into my pockets as we hustled around the bookstore where we both worked and had met. A gift of pearl earrings for Christmas. A pearl necklace on an anniversary. And he could barely afford either, both of us minimum wage clerks with dreams of being more. He saved pennies. He made plans. He had been excited for the wedding and the marriage. I had been excited to go to Venice.

The next morning, three people told us that ‘everyone knew’ coming to Venice for your honeymoon was bad luck. We joked that we wished someone had mentioned that before we bought the tickets.

“Too late now!” we smiled and held hands tightly to show they were wrong. Stacks of travel books sat beside Witches, Midwives and Nurses on my nightstand and they also told stories of people living out of their time like the
Middle Ages witches, midwives and nurses who were one and the same woman, as it turned out; Crone, healer, needed and revered, whose herbs and soothings then would be science and kindness now. I made my new husband follow me as I followed the travel book maps in the afternoons, tracing red lines along curled pages and tracking the circled numbers that showed where then obscure writers had lived and died and hangings had occurred and obelisks pilfered from Egypt had been set in the town square and the rotting slips where errant daughters were shipped to neighbouring island nunneries when husbands and fathers could do that sort of thing. I drank thick hot chocolate from a tiny cup and read aloud to him about book burnings and the bacchanalia of the Carnivale and how, for a few months in winter, the festival allowed the poor and the rich to be with each other, maybe unwittingly, maybe not, making love in the dark corners, lifting up the silk of their skirts and kissing under the masks that hid their economic positions, and for this, and a few other more complicated reasons, at one point, the entire city was excommunicated by the Catholic church. I loved Venice for this irreverence. Every day, I loved it more. Like whispering after sex, safe in the dark the smell of life around you, I loved its secrets and the bones I knew rested in the mud beneath its canal waters and the liaisons in its alcoves and the chandeliered living rooms I could see, but not go in, where who knows what taffeta and candled debauchery had once been on display. We walked back from our dinners, arm in arm along empty streets of old apartments, and I felt a kind of lonely melancholy at their shut windows and empty balconies. I might have been a resident once, but not in this lifetime and could only peer into the remnants of the world in which, I was becoming sure, I had once lived. The plastic racked
tourist etchings of eighteenth century Venetians in gowns and capes were feeling like portraits of old friends. Masks and slippers in the shop windows, like accessories I’d forgotten to pack. Scandal and romance. Death and dirt and fire and candle wax. It had all been mine. The afternoon of our third day, I led my new husband to the Basilica di San Marco. We bent our necks back to look at gold ground mosaics of saints sitting in chairs. We counted winged lions, their fat paws resting on open books, standing proud on parapets. I’d read that Mary and Percy Shelley stayed at a hotel nearby. I imagined them counting lions, too. We got lost in the deep interior streets and, not having a taste for seafood, I ate chocolate and long sandwiches with thin meat. I’d studied Italian for six torturous semesters in college, this language and its endless past and future imperfects. I could manage only “scusi” and “Io no parlo Italiano” with any real confidence and understood almost nothing that was said to me in return, but still, the city felt like home. The way Persephone must have settled into Hades at some point, maybe when she knew this was her destiny and bigger than her. The way prisoners decorate their cell walls. The way soldiers in Vietnam used to roll up their sleeves or cut images of Raquel Welch into their Zippo lighters. You make the place your own. You have to. It’s the only way out.

Before Venice, we’d been in Florence and stayed at an empty chateau with painted beams above our bed. We didn’t make love and neither of us seemed to mind. I’d read about feng shui and the bad luck of ceiling beams and beds. I could swear I heard ghosts in the bathroom. The hallways were empty and we saw no one in the dining room or lobby whenever we came or left. But it was February and we were off season, I reasoned. Tired from the
wedding. It would be different in Venice. No beams, no ghosts. We’d want to make love there, so I’d sat in the window seat of our cavernous room and told my new husband stories I’d been reading of women who helped other women give birth and were burned for it and Greek girls who were chosen as Vestas and had to maintain chastity for the position or be put to death.

“But they could attend all the lectures they wanted,” I said, “So that’s cool.”

“I guess,” he took a bite of focaccia, “Tough way to get a BA.”

My new husband made me laugh. He was silly. He could quote whole passages of classics or comics on a whim. He’d grown up poor in the valley and being in Italy with a new wife was not something he ever thought would happen. I’d grown up poor in Indiana and being in Italy with a new husband was also not something I ever thought would ever happen. The first time he kissed me, he asked my permission. He asked me on our first date during a gathering of employees at the bookstore with a vase of two dozen roses in his arms. I was flattered and felt pressured, but said yes. The whole thing, he told me later, the date, the kiss, the engagement a year later, had gone just as he’d imagined. He’d had his sights set on me, always had his sights set on me, and I had no idea why.

On the fourth day in Venice, we ate croissants and drank coffee. We ate pasta. We read and walked. I wanted to visit the islands nearby, but my new husband demurred. We didn’t have the money for the special boats that took tourists there. I wanted to have one fancy meal, but he said we were too broke for that, too. We had to think about life when we got back home, “When things were back to normal,” he said. To him, the risk was everything that
came after the wedding. The jobs we didn’t have, but wanted. The rent we had
to pay, but could only just barely. The car that needed repair. The cat that
needed the vet. The success we didn’t have and might never have and all the
things we couldn’t afford. To me, I felt this with growing acuity now, the risk
was the marriage itself. It was the cliff I’d jumped off. The parachute I hoped
would hold. And I was stiff with fear that it had been an error. Already, I made
love with him reluctantly, performatively. It felt done. The free dive. The
ground below rushing toward me and the thrill of the jump not worth the fall.

We walked back to the hotel after our last dinner out. Our plane was
leaving the following afternoon. I walked beside him, crossing familiar
bridges and glancing up at darkened windows and felt lonely. Like I’d re-
turned to join the party, but everyone had already gone. Limp streamers in the
gutters of the Piazzo. Crumbs on the table tops of Harry’s Bar. A swinging
rope, but no body, at the obelisk where I’d read Venetians let the criminals
hang to show visitors they meant business. I caught my reflection in the glass
doors of closed shops and felt ancient at twenty six. Shoulders sloped, eyes
dull. My new husband reached for my hand, sensing something was wrong. I
would have told him what it was had I known. That night, hands braced on the
vanity, wiping steam sweat from the mirror with a bathrobe sleeve, I saw I
was no longer the girl he’d married and the girl he’d married was a stranger to
me. The wedding dress dropped, make up swept off, sitting at the bulb lined
mirror and seeing a ghost and seeing nothing.

“Where do you want to go tomorrow?”

“Dunno. How about you?”

“Dunno.”
“OK.”

“We have a few hours in the morning.”

“We could just walk around.”

“Sounds good. You hungry?”

“Sure.”

“Let’s order something dessert.”

“OK.”

That morning, we wandered onto a small street just off the Piazzo. I knew this area, but somehow had missed the antique store on its corner. The door was creaky black with a tiny brass bell that rang when its lip touched the doorframe. Inside were shelves of lamps and Murano vases and walls hung with dark damask and dotted with small portraits of strangers in gold gilded frames. Three large jewellery cases set out from the walls. I was drawn to the one furthest back, near the window. My new husband stayed near the door looking at books on a shelf as I stood over the case, my bag strap strung like a weapon across my chest, my fingers resting on the glass edge and stared down at the most beautiful ring I’d ever seen.

“Take a seat, please, signora.”

The owner was a beautiful old man in a slim suit. He tucked a kerchief in his pocket with graceful hands that seemed to have spent a lifetime opening smooth drawers and laying things on velvet.

I sat and pointed to the ring.

“It is this one you want?” he asked.

I nodded. He took a seat himself behind the case, perching on a small round stool. He opened the sliding door and grasped the box with his thumb
and forefinger, carried it on his gathered fingers and set it on the display cloth.
The stone was grey, but with depth. A small pond at dawn. A pool of frozen
ice on a gravel road. It had come from depth. Was torn from depth. Pulled
from the earth and here only because we insisted. It held a kind of arrogance,
as if it knew it deserved the filigree that set it and kept it from harm and kept it
in place. It was odd and lovely, this ordinary looking stone encircled by care-
fully braided reverence.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Diamond,” he said.

I shifted the box slightly toward the window light. It didn’t shine like a
diamond, not like any diamond I’d ever seen.

“It is raw,” he said, “How they used to cut diamond many years ago.”

“How many?”

“Oh, several hundred. Two, three, I suppose. At least.”

He took the ring from its box and held it slightly aloft, indicating with
his chin that I should hold out my hand so he could slip it on my finger. I did
and leaned back in the chair, fingers splayed, arm extended, and watched as
the ring sat on my hand, content and at home.

This ring was mine. I had worn it and loved it before, I was sure of it.
We were reunited, time and fate bending itself for us. The past and the present
looping and connecting like the shape of the ring itself around my finger.

“How much?” I asked.

The man told us.
I turned to my new husband. He leaned against the wall near the door now, his hands folded patiently across his belly, the hustle of Venice moving across the windows behind him. The price of the ring would be nearly all of our reserve money. It wouldn’t break us, but it also wouldn’t be prudent.

“How much can you take off?” I asked

The man pursed his lips and then he smiled, “Perhaps a hundred,” he said, “Normally I wouldn’t. But you know, it looks like it belongs with you.”

I made the mistake of smiling back, “I agree,” I said.

It might be foolish, yes, but we were young and needed to be foolish. It might be a risk, but what was this thing we were doing if not a risk. It might be a silly use of money, but we could make more money, together, and we’d laugh one day about how wreckless we’d been and I’d stare at my ring, I had visions of it, even as I told this story to myself, my hand still splayed, we’d be an old couple at a wrought iron table on the patio of a house in the Palisades, our children grown and off to college, three cars in the front, an expensive dog barking at nothing. Sunshine on our shoulders, just like the song. And me, reaching for the sparkling water, glancing, as I always did, at the ring we’d bought in Venice on our honeymoon as a symbol of our willingness to have conviction about each other and our shared bright future. When I was a child, we played ‘Light as a feather, stiff as a board’. I swear then and now, we lifted that girl in her parents’ rec room basement. Right out of her sleeping bag. Just two fingers on each hand and just three of us on either side. Not a lot, but we did it. Whispering “light as a feather, stiff as a board” over and over in the TV light. Even if we didn’t, I’ll always believe we did. Sometimes belief is a
choice. I’d finished *Witches, Midwives & Nurses* the day before and still carried it in my bag strapped across my chest. I’d turned the last page at a cafe on the Piazzo just outside the windows of this antique shop, eating chips and sipping soda, and I’d understood why the book was so thin, why there was so little written and so little to say. History is written by the winners and witches were always ruining the winners’ good time because witches believed in some things and not others, even though the others were perfectly reasonable and tangible and logical and, really, not hard to believe in at all. A good man was not hard to believe in. A man who loved you, who cherished you, who’d had his sights set on you. A man who didn’t care that his grandmother didn’t like you. A man who took you on a date he had planned in detail. Who bought you pearls. Who took you to Venice on your honeymoon. Who felt that marriage was the safe place, the destination that protected you against an unsafe world. There was a relentless paucity to that idea now. Of marriage. Of union. Of safety in numbers, even if that number was only two. A temporalness that was thin and nothing against whatever had been unleashed by a union that had rare lovemaking in it already and a raw diamond that might be denied. A thing reared up and told me so. I had forgotten its face. I had forgotten its story. But I met it again. This ring was a full circle defiance of it somehow, proof that I could twist time and erase my past and bend it to my will. I needed this proof more than I needed my new husband’s love. And without it, I could take neither. Without it, whatever it was that had been haunting me, had always been haunting me, well before I met I met my new husband, well before I thought of husbands at all, whatever screaming, yawing, frightened child thing that wrapped around the cords of my spine and made me choose not to believe,
would take hold and take over and deny me the possible safety of a man’s adoration. The bones would sing and the beams would fall and ghosts would walk empty hallways and my own ancient history would turn me around in allies and follow me across bridges, lighting candles in windows and reaching to encircle me through time.

I kept my arm stretched out ahead and turned round to my new husband, the chair under me creaked a little. I looked up at him, the ring on my finger, holding my hand out in ‘please’. He shook his head no.

“We can’t,” he said.

We stepped out of the store and walked across the Piazzo. My new husband held my hand.

“You OK?” he asked.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine.”

“There’ll be other rings. I promise.”

“I know,” I smiled and kissed his cheek.

My mother had been at the wedding. She’d told me I was beautiful only once in my life and it was on this day. Like a prize she’d been holding in reserve. A hidden Christmas gift I didn’t know I’d wanted. Our engagement had prompted my calling her for the first time in over a year, a decision made more in a gesture of practicality than anything else. Some social institutions required a maternal figure, a wedding was one of them. I dialled her number on the phone at the bookstore almost on a whim and she picked up like she knew it was me.

“I’m getting married. I thought you should know.”
She told me to come see her in Florida. She was still living there. Divorced now, her third, and wanted to mend fences she said. She’d even pay for the ticket. It didn’t sound like her, but I trusted the gesture. I was trusting gestures; Flowers in arms, the asking of kisses, proposals. At the airport she was sober. At the lunch to which she’d invited her co-workers to meet me, but no one showed up to, she got drunk. By later that afternoon at her townhouse, she was drunkeston, lying back on her sofa in a gesture of sex remembered, her arms aloft as if holding my father above her.

“I remember the moment you were conceived…I felt it…I knew.”

“…Mom.”

“So fuck you!”

“Mom.”

“How dare, how dare you treat me the way you have! Not talking to me. For months and months.”

“I didn’t come here to fight, Mom.”

“Well, I sure as shit didn’t pay for you to come all the way out here to not give you a piece of my mind.”

She held her cigarette between her fingers. She didn’t cry. Her teeth barred. She’d lost weight and wore lipstick now. It sounded as though she’d been dating her boss at the bank. He was married. Earlier she said she’d wanted me to meet him. She told me over chips and salsa at the restaurant we’d waited at until it became clear no one she’d invited from the office to meet her daughter was going to come. She lived in a two bedroom townhouse and still had the bow cabinet filled with antiques from her parents’ own marriage resting, fat bellied and glass, near the front door. Divorced in the 1950s.
My grandfather’s marriage to his secretary soon after. Pewter tankards from the university where my grandparents met sitting, waiting, inside. She’d told me earlier that she’d promised the cabinet to the neighbour since I’d stopped calling her. Apparently it was worth a fortune.

“You don’t want to know why I think we stopped talking? You don’t want to talk about that?” I asked.

“No.”

She stubbed out her cigarette and sat up and looked at me from under her eyebrows. For a woman who had charmed as many men as she had, she was a ball buster. A gangster. A lawyer telling it like it is. Bony kneeed and legs splayed. Thin hair curled in preparation for the party that hadn’t happened that afternoon. No one, it seemed, showed up for my mother. “It’s OK, Mom,” I’d told her at the restaurant, “I came to see you.”

She reached into her pack for another cigarette and bent her head back for a gulp of beer, then she had a thought.

“You know what you are?”

I said nothing, knowing I didn’t need to.

“You know?” She lowered her head to face me, “You think you’re hot shit on a silver platter, but you know what you are?” she smiled, teeth barred, “You’re a little bitch.”

“OK. So are you coming to the wedding?”

I stood up and fixed myself a Coke from her kitchen. There were always Cokes in her kitchens and I’d heard it all before.
My wedding makeup was done by a professional make up artist I’d hired from the fancy cosmetics store across the street from the bookstore where I worked. She came with a kit and cool black boots. She leaned in close as she touched me up. Dabbing brushes to my eye.

“Looks good.”

“Great. Thank you.”

She leaned in closer. I could smell the scent coming off her neck,

“What’s that scar?” she said.

“I’m sorry?”

She pulled her eyebrows together like she didn’t quite believe me. People always know the origins of their scars. It’s a lovers’ conversation, a dinner party quip. My dress felt tight at the waist. My feet hurt already. I could hear the rustle of two hundred and fifty guests on the other side of the partition.

“I didn’t know I had one.”

“Yeah, right here.” She whispered and let her finger rest just above my lip.

I let my eyes drop to hers, “I didn’t know.”

Time fell and sank to stillness. Like a small pond at dawn. A pool of frozen ice on a gravel road. Come and torn and pulled. Only here because we insisted.

The venue rep leaned in and told us they were ready. The make up artist nodded, “OK,” she said, “I think you’re good to go.”
Doroteia was nearly fourteen months old when they told me they were going back to Portugal. I had only twenty days left with her.

I was in shock, even though it wasn’t the first time I’d parted ways with a family. I said nothing and held back the tears in my eyes as Teia’s mother explained the details. It was because of the virus that had recently erupted all over China – Teia needed to go out and play, and staying here was too dangerous. She explained that they’d already explored the option of bringing me along to Portugal, seeing if they could get me a working visa, but it had not been possible.

I barely registered the words coming out of her mouth. I was angry, of course – angry at the short notice, angry at the secrecy with which they had planned everything, angry at them for leaving, for taking away little Teia. But I was holding the babe, and she was nuzzling against my neck saying “Ai, ai,” calling me. I touched her perfect little cheek and said, “Yes, yes, ai is here.” “It’s not going to be easy for Teia,” her mom said. And a moment later, “It’s not going to be easy for any of us.”

Was she thinking of herself, who slept in till noon every day and never once changed a diaper in Teia’s life? Was she thinking of her husband, who played with the baby for ten minutes every day after work before I took her for her bath? Or was she thinking of me, who had spent nearly every day and every night with Teia since she was twenty days old?

“This is settled?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s settled. We’ve bought our plane tickets and we’ll leave on February 10, at 10am.”
I excused myself, handing Teia over to her mother, and went into my room, closing the door. My room was really Teia’s room; I slept on a narrow mattress on the floor just beside her crib. I lay face down on my bed, pushed my face into the pillow, and cried. I took care not to let them hear me – I knew just how soundproof the rooms of the apartment were – and I let the news settle in slowly until it became real. I pulled a small blanket off of Teia’s bed and inhaled her scent. It was partly her scent and partly my scent. Our scents had mixed. I thought of the blanket with its little pink lambs and I swear it was the first time I had this kind of thought in Teia’s house: ‘Would they miss this if it disappeared?’

The reality of my situation hit me – I would need to find a new job in twenty days, and a new place to live. But how would I do that when I couldn’t leave the house and employers likely weren’t conducting interviews? Everyone was scared of the new virus. Teia’s parents wouldn’t even let me step out into the hallway to throw away the trash. Who would be looking for a nanny to come into their home at this time?

Then came my concerns about money. Would they pay me through the rest of the month? And how about my bonus that was due at the next lunar new year? I bolstered myself up, looking into my phone’s camera to check that my eyes weren’t puffy, and I went back out to negotiate.

Teia’s mom was holding the baby. When I emerged from the room, Teia reached out her arms to me, and I took her, resting her on my left hip, my arm around her belly. Only twenty more days with Teia. I would not get to see her walk, to hear her first sentences, to see how naughty she would become at the age
of two. These thoughts made me want to cry all over again. Teia stuck her finger up my nose and I reflexively said, “Nose, nose.”

Teia’s mom sat down on the couch and gestured for me to sit too. I put Teia on my lap, facing sideways, so they could see her as well.

“My husband has a forum where foreigners post nanny recommendations, and he will post your information. We will help you find a job as soon as possible.”

Teia’s father was Portuguese, and he’d met his wife four years ago here in Shanghai.

“Thank you,” I said. “But I can’t imagine it’ll be easy to find work during this time.”

“It’ll be a glowing recommendation,” she said.

I nodded, thinking. What else could I do? Finally I decided to bring it up – I had to speak up for myself. “And what are your thoughts about my final salary?”

“Yes, of course,” she said. They’d decided to prorate my bonus into the last month, paying me out through the end of the month. “And if you can’t find another job in the next 20 days, you can stay here in our place through the end of our lease.”

I looked around at the apartment – the small two-bedroom one bathroom apartment on the ground floor, the windows getting little light and the floors damp with mold in the summers. I had been happy in this cramped and dingy space, even though I’d had to wear my outdoor shoes inside because Teia’s father, European, didn’t like taking his shoes off.
What was this place without Teia though? How could I live my life without Teia? I remembered with relief the group that I too had a membership in, where I could post my services. My thoughts seesawed wildly between the tragic and the practical.

It was time for Teia’s nap though. I took her into our room, holding her tighter than was necessary. Suddenly I regretted the times I’d felt tired, bored, cranky in the middle of a long day. If only I’d known that my days were numbered. I stared at Teia’s dark curls that were just starting to grow out and frame her face. I took in her eyes, heavy with sleep. Her heart-shaped mouth and thin lips, the pointy little chin. She was the most beautiful little baby I’d ever seen. But was that true or only my bias as her nanny? I rocked her in my arms while walking around our small room, stepping over my bed again and again in the figure eight pattern I made twice a day every day while putting her to sleep. I didn’t need to rock her anymore, but I couldn’t bear to put her down just yet, not today. I’d say she was being fussy if they asked, that she didn’t want to go down quickly. They rarely watched the cameras anymore, anyway.

I thought back to the early days, when Teia was just so tiny. What an ugly little thing! Twenty days old, a wide mouth that took up half her face, wrinkly little eyes, and hair in the pattern of a middle-aged balding man: receding from the front in a deep arc. You can’t control what a baby looks like, especially when you’re just employed to look after it as a nanny. But you always hope for a cute one, a lovely little thing with a good personality and deep sleeping skills. Teia had none of these.
That little girl had a temper from day one (or, I should say, day 20). If you took away her favorite toy – a stuffed dog the size of my palm – she screamed at the top of her lungs. If she finished all the milk in her bottle, she screamed at the top of her lungs. If she was given an extra bottle right away, she screamed at the top of her lungs: you were too late and you’d lost your chance to make things right!

And what a scream – she’d stare right at you with those big, brown, wrinkly eyes, as if to say: “I understand everything. I blame you entirely, and I will never forgive you.”

Teia was sleeping soundly now in my arms. How many temper tantrums I’d endured with this one! How many thrown bottles and thrown toys and thrown clothes. “Wait, just you wait till she turns two,” I’d always say to her mother. “We’re really in for it with her.”

But I would never see Teia turn two, never see her become a feisty little brat, never get the chance to discipline her, to spoil her, to answer all her little questions about the world. I put her down in her crib. She slept best in her bed, and she’d be grumpy all afternoon without a good midday nap. I couldn’t help myself though: I stroked her forehead slowly, running my hands through her soft curls. She stirred, and I slowly moved away.

I’d taken care of a few babies before Teia, all young girls. They were all fine, and the families were nice enough – some more demanding than others, some more complicated. But what I felt for the previous babies paled in comparison to what I
felt for Teia. Maybe it was because I’d been with Teia from the very early days of her life. Or maybe it was because she was a formula baby and so I’d fed her almost every meal of her life, instead of handing over the baby several times a day to the mother’s breast.

On the day they left, I also packed my bags. Two nights prior, I’d finally found a family willing to hire me. They were switching out their daytime nanny to someone live-in, so that they could lower the risk of contracting the virus. They’d asked me if I wouldn’t mind not leaving their apartment for a while. What could I say? I had no other options. I said it was fine.

Teia didn’t understand what was happening. She thought she was just going to a restaurant or a daytime outing with her parents, which she sometimes – not often, but occasionally – did with just her mom and dad. I stayed just inside the door and they let me hold her until it was time to go.

“Bye bye, Teia,” I said. “I’m going to miss you so much.” Teia thought we were saying goodbye to her father, who left every day to go to work in the morning. She kept waving at him and saying “Bye bye da da.” I kissed her cheeks. I touched her hands and her little feet, until it was time to put on her walking shoes. I wanted to go get my phone and take photos of her, but at the same time I didn’t want to let her go for the one moment it would take for me to grab my phone from inside. Her parents brought all their packed bags to the cab, going back and forth through the building’s door – Teia thought it was a game, her parents popping in and out, and giggled each time they reappeared.
When it was time to go, I hugged Teia tight and gave her a last kiss on the cheek. I couldn’t help it, the tears welled up in my eyes and fell quickly down my face. Teia’s mother gave me a pat on the back, saying she was so sorry it had to be this way, that I was the best nanny to Teia that they could ever have hoped for. I was embarrassed; I wiped away the tears and turned my face. But then Teia’s mom had grabbed the baby and I turned back to see them going out through the door. Teia was watching me over her mother’s shoulder as they walked away. In an hour, the father of my new charge was coming to pick me up and take me to my new place.

The new family was picture perfect. The mother was young and beautiful, Japanese, and the father handsome and rich, a local. Their apartment was spacious and modern and bright, decorated in different shades of grey.

I was given my own room, with floor to ceiling windows overlooking the skyscrapers of downtown Shanghai – a far cry from the small room I shared with Teia in the ground floor flat in the Pudong outskirts of the city. In my new place I had a queen-sized bed with sheets so soft and washing instructions on the tag that I couldn’t understand because they were written in Japanese.

My first night there, I felt so lonely I could cry. The new baby girl, Yumi, slept through the night well in her own spacious room, and her father insisted on taking care of any night wake ups, as he rarely saw the baby during the week. With nothing to do, I sat at the edge of my expansive bed looking out at the constellation of lights that made up my adopted home. It’s what one always
imagines when one thinks of Shanghai, from the countryside, which I’d left more than seven years earlier. I thought of Teia that night, sleeping alone for the first time in her entire life. She would think that I’d abandoned her. Where is ai ai? Would her mother know what to do, how to prepare the bottle of milk Teia always expected at 5am?

Thoughts like these kept me up till the early hours. Worry for Teia, mostly, flashes of anger at her parents, then understanding toward her parents, resignation at the realities of my line of work.

I told myself, as I shed the last tears of my first night at the new place – that I would soon find myself attached to the little girl, Yumi, who was nearly the same age as Teia was, as deliciously plump as a southern squash, and, I could already tell, much more gentle-natured.

Seven years passed in the employ of Yumi’s household. [Description of Yumi’s household and mother, cut here due to space restrictions].

Over the seven years, she gave birth to two more children, both girls, both as mild mannered and as pretty as Yumi and she. When the last, Yukiko, was preparing to go into pre-school, I announced my decision to the family that it was time for me to retire. I was turning sixty, and I had developed persistent back pain and an issue with raising my right shoulder any far distance above my head. My son back home had also had a baby a year ago and was now requesting my help.

As a kind of parting gift, Yumi’s mother told me the next day that the family and I would be taking a trip to Lisbon two months later, just before my
Juli Min

retirement. Every now and again in the first year I’d worked for them, she’d ask about Teia, and occasionally I pinged Teia’s mother for updates. But the updates grew sparser.

Yumi’s mother read my mind when she said, “If you want, you can get in touch with Teia and see her during the trip. I don’t know if you’re still in touch…”

For a while after I’d first arrived, I would take breaks while Yumi slept and watch old Teia videos on my phone. I did not share them with Yumi’s mother unless asked, because I know that truly one’s child is never that interesting to other parents. Over the years though, I thought of Teia now and again, especially as Yumi grew and changed in the same age Teia would be. But I grew busier with Yumi, and then Yoko, and then Yukiko, and over months and years, I’d finally come to bond with Yumi. It was much easier to connect with Yoko and Yukiko, as their mother was busier, less attached to her second and third, and her embroidery business was starting to pick up. I like to think, too, that she’d begun to trust me more and more.

The lead up to the trip was busy and exciting. The family travelled often, at least once a year abroad, and they always took me with them. Over the seven years, I’d been to Thailand, Korea, Germany, Japan, Singapore, Italy, and California. I really saw the world with them. The girls’ suitcases were all packed, Yumi’s mother was checking that every corner of the house was clean, and Yumi’s father was working late to prepare for a week out of the office. It was only two days before the flight when Teia’s mother replied to my message:
Hello auntie! My, it’s been such a long time. How are you? Of course we’d love to see you – where will you be visiting and staying? Sorry for the late reply, I don’t check WeChat that much anymore.

I saw the message as it came through, and I waited, wondering if she’d send a photo or video of Teia as well. Over the years, I’d wondered how she’d grown, how her features might have expanded or contracted into girlhood. But no such photo appeared.

[Nanny’s thoughts and dialogue with Yumi’s mother about trip planning, cut due to space restrictions]

“Yes – and they’re wondering if tea on the sixth is possible.”

Yumi’s mother paused to think – likely going through the family’s detailed travel itinerary, which she carefully planned before every trip. Finally she nodded to herself and said, “That’s perfect, actually. Early enough into our trip so we can consult the locals for some suggestions. You’ll have to insist they come to our hotel for tea. We can do it all together.”

I was both relieved and dismayed by this response. It would be nice to have the family there as a buffer for any awkwardness. At the same time, I did not know how much time I’d have with Teia – if it would be enough. I could already see Yumi’s mother dominating the conversation with her gently persistent stream of questions about local restaurants, museums fit for children, and attractions.

“Of course, thank you,” I said, and went back to my room to make the plans.
Portugal was beautiful. Of all the places I’d been maybe Italy was closest – but from where we were in Lisbon, everywhere you turned you could see the ocean. So many places there were in the world. If only I’d known earlier, I would have started my career as a nanny for foreigners much younger. I’d only left Dongbei for the first time at the age of forty-five.

The first couple of days at Lisbon we rode a trolley tour and visited a beach. Everywhere was seafood and meat – cured hams – and no green vegetables in sight. Yoko, five years old and most attached to me, got so blocked up that I had to hold her hand and rub her belly while she sat on the toilet throughout the whole trip. Yumi – preferring only her mother in infancy – continued to prefer her mother. Yukiko, the most outgoing and fearless among them – and in that way most like Teia – had always been her father’s daughter.

And so we walked along the cobblestone streets of Lisbon, up and down hills that gave me cramps later in the middle of the night, in our pairs: Yumi and her mother, Yoko and me, Yukiko and her beloved father, who indulged his littlest, his last, and wore her on his shoulders wherever we went.

I thought about the end of my career, my working life, my comfortable and you could even say luxurious time with the Yang family. The little girls I’d raised. Had I loved them? I had, especially Yoko. Had I loved them as much as I’d loved Teia? Over ice cream the flavor of pistachio nuts and as pale green as a budding gingko tree, I imagined Teia tasting for the first time her savory ice cream in her new country. It cut a sharp pain in my heart to not have been there, here. No, I’d loved Teia like none other. Doroteia – my little girl who had been so
tiny I could hold her for hours on end in one arm. Maybe as a nanny there was always only one – like a true love. Of course I loved my own son, now grown and married. But I’d always been working away from the hometown village, and his own grandmother raised him since infancy. So it felt different; in a way, he was never mine. His own son, turning one in a few months, I’d only met once, briefly – but I’d been working then too, bringing the girls and their parents to visit Dongbei during the winter holidays last year.

The day of the 6th arrived, the girls were less jetlagged and cranky, and I took particular care in the afternoon to brush my hair down into a nice bun and put on a nice dress. Yumi’s mother had given me some pieces she didn’t wear over the years, and I’d brought along one long brown dress for the occasion. I checked my reflection on our way out – older, a bit thinner – but not too different from seven years ago. Would Teia recognize me? Would she even remember? In my rational mind I knew she wouldn’t. Babies didn’t remember anything before the age of two. But still I was nervous, was anxious to meet her expectations, if she had any.

Yoko insisted on holding my hand the entire elevator ride and walk into the lobby restaurant. I was flustered because we were already twenty minutes late to a meeting in our own hotel. But taking three children anywhere, even downstairs, always took time, and Yumi’s mom had taken a longer bath than anyone had expected.

The restaurant was only half full and I spotted Teia and her parents right away, almost directly in the center of the large open room. Oh Teia – she was a
big girl now. I’d known it but I’d not been prepared. Her face had grown long like her father’s, her jaw protruding out a bit, her wide mouth more masculine with the years. I guess I’d expected her to look like a larger version of her baby self, which was only vaguely present still.

Yumi had retained her baby face, with thick, long wavy hair that everyone commented on. The possibility hadn’t entered my mind that Teia wouldn’t be as beautiful as Yumi, Yoko, and Yukiko. I guess because I hadn’t loved them as much, and love always makes someone more beautiful.

Still, she was the girl of my heart. And memories flooded my mind – feeding her in the first weeks of her life, playing with her on the lush grounds of a university near her parents’ place.

Her parents had aged. Her father was even fatter than he’d been when she was born, and her mother looked worn out. Likely she didn’t have help raising her daughter. I knew she’d quit her job once they moved to Portugal.

I, on the other hand, was flanked by beauty – in a way, it made me feel somewhat victorious – look at the beautiful family who hired me and look at the beautiful girls I raised and look at their high quality clothes and look at the fancy hotel we stay at and how long they’ve kept me around. As if all of this would make Teia’s parents regret their decision seven years ago of leaving China during the virus and letting me go, so abruptly, so devastatingly. Hadn’t the virus spread everywhere else, anyway? Their leaving had been, ultimately in vain.

And yet, they’d had Teia, and so even with all this beauty on my side I still managed to end up with the loss.
I could not help myself. I let go of Yoko’s hand as soon as she was seated, and I walked around to the other side. I cupped my hand against Teia’s face and embraced her. She didn’t move, and so I ended up hugging her sideways while she looked at the Yangs one by one. So many words poured out:

“Teia you’ve become so big! Oh, nanny remembers you as a little baby. Do you remember nanny? Ai ai? You used to call me ai ai! Oh how I’ve missed you. Are you well and healthy? Do you like Portugal?”

Teia stared out at the Yangs and her mother interrupted, pulling me to face her and out of my embrace with Teia.

“Auntie, I’m sorry to say, but Teia doesn’t speak Chinese. It’s tough here – no one here but me to speak with her, and ever since school started, it’s been Portuguese non-stop.”

“She forgot…everything?” Seven years ago I used to take baby Teia to the grocery store every day and point out all the fruits and vegetables. By the time she left, she’d known so many words.

Yumi began a conversation with Teia in English then, and the two eight-year-olds started talking amongst themselves, showing off the dolls that they both had with them. I sat back down in my seat and watched the two girls speaking another language I could not understand. Yoko slipped her hand into mine, and I gave it a squeeze.

My last days with Yumi’s family went quickly, and less emotionally than I’d expected. I’d been in a kind of funk ever since the trip to Lisbon, like I had no
capacity to feel anything directly, like I was seeing things through a misty veil. I guess you could say I was a bit depressed. I had become nothing to Teia, and we could not even communicate. Whereas all this time she had meant so much — everything — to me. It really made me feel like all my efforts were meaningless. Who was I to all these babies and children I’d loved over the years? Even looking at Yumi and Yoko and Yukiko — they’d one day move on and forget me. Even Yoko, whose mother would take my place next to her as she strained and cried, red-faced on the toilet.

Little Kiko would not even know me, most likely. I took their generous gifts, their heavy, bulging red packet cash bonus, and my two carry-on suitcases that had come with me from house to house over the past fifteen years in Shanghai. Finally, my work was done. My long, sleepless nights rocking babies and patting toddlers, steaming milk bottles and folding little squares of small laundry. I was going home.

I could count on my hands the number of times I’d gone home. It was not that I disliked my hometown or my family. It’s just that the more days I worked the more money I made. The longest trip home I’d taken was two years ago, when my son got married. I spent 20 days at home. It was the second time I’d met my daughter in law. She seemed nice enough, if only a little young, at twenty-two. But I had been only twenty myself when I had Xiling.

After a long but enjoyable train ride (they’d purchased me a first class sleeper compartment ticket), I got off at Jilin and transferred to a four-hour bus that would take me to my village.
The landscape changed slowly from urban to mountainous, and by the time we arrived, the roads were shaded with the thick canopy of tall trees on either side. The fresh mountain air rushed in through the open windows. How often I’d talked of my hometown and the wealth of nature we possessed. The city kids I’d raised over the last fifteen years – they’d grown up on pavement and in cars and apartments and museums. A wave of sorrow washed over me; I remembered little Yoko’s face, perfectly round with perfectly round black eyes, and her blunt bangs that framed her wide brows. Maybe one day I’d visit her in Shanghai or they’d come to Dongbei. It was much closer than Lisbon.

At the same time, I felt indifferent. How would it be any better than seeing Teia? I was no more a part of the Yang family than the steaming pot I used to make Yoko’s favorite vegetable buns, no more than the doormat that said Welcome in Japanese, that they all wiped their shoes on during wet, muddy days. No matter how I felt, I was not their mother, pretty with dainty hands that she used to make her dainty little embroidery designs – flowers abuzz with bees, cherry blossom trees, items from nature that she recreated from her native Japan.

From the bus station I waited for my son and his wife to pick me up in their car. Finally I would get to know the woman my son married, my daughter in law. Would she be like Teia’s mom, lazy and carefree, messy and unmatrianal? Or would she be like Yumi’s mom, meticulous and busy, protective and loving? What would I prefer? If I were to help out as much as possible, maybe someone like Teia’s mom would be easier to work with. On the other hand, for the past 7
years I’d become a kind of neat freak, and as careful a worker as Yumi’s mother preferred.

The cool wind blew on my face and I noticed that in the last year since I’d visited, they’d put up lamp posts along the road. I noticed them because at 5pm sharp, they all turned on at once in the twilight. I was wondering what other changes I might be able to catch around my hometown, when my son’s car came up the lighted path.

His wife was in the front seat holding the baby Ping Ping on her lap. Yumi’s mother never would have allowed that – she strictly followed the rules when it came to baby safety. When we travelled to Japan we’d be flush with luggage, folding strollers, and car seats for the little ones.

My son rolled down the window and waved his arm out as they approached. He stopped right in front of me and jumped out, taking my luggage into the trunk and opening the back door. “Ma,” he said. “You must be hungry.”

His wife Lei Lei turned to greet me, and she waved the baby’s hand in greeting. “Nai nai, hello!” she said in a high-pitched voice. I’d never been called anything other than ayi, and the new role felt strange, like it belonged to someone else and I was just trying it on for size.

Without warning, Lei Lei handed me the baby from the front seat and we suddenly zoomed off, the street lamps disappearing as soon as we left the vicinity of the station and entered the country roads. If I had known she was planning to give me the baby, I would have sanitized my hands with the gel I had in my bag, now in the trunk. I kept my dirty hands out of reach of the baby’s mouth.
My son went on explaining that I’d be staying with them for a while since the renovations on my house hadn’t yet been completed. Over the years, the money I sent back had gone to the purchase of two large homes next to one another – mine and my sister’s, and my son’s with his wife. Apparently they were repainting the walls.

I listened to him explain the details of the house renovations while Lei Lei talked over him, exclaiming I must be tired, and wondering aloud about what a first class ticket would be like without asking me to give her any description.

The overlapping, loud chatter in the car was familiar and comforting, the style of my youth, and I sat back to soak it in while bouncing the boy carefully on my knee.

He was extraordinarily fat. They must have been overfeeding him to get him this large. His cheeks drooped down, and his eyelids were thick. He stared at me and said over and over again, “Ba ba ba ba.” He looked almost exactly like his mother rather than my son. Maybe it was because of all that I’d been through in the last few weeks, but I still felt drained of much emotion, and I watched the boy as if he were a baby I was watching in a television show. I wondered when I’d be able to wash my hands properly.

We arrived at the house and I was shown into my room. A photo of my late husband hung on one wall, from our wedding forty years ago. I was glad they’d chosen a photo from his youth. It was nicer to remember him like this than from later, after he’d become grey with smoke and drink, after I’d lost track of who he was, how many years we’d been apart, how many other women in the
village he’d bedded. I unpacked my two bags quickly into the shelves and went to wash and go see about the baby.

He was crawling around in the kitchen as Lei Lei was frying up some dinner. Yumi’s mom would never let me bring the girls into the kitchen. I took the baby to the living room, saw that his diaper was heavy with gel, and laid him down where they’d set up a small changing area on the floor near the sofa.

I got down on the floor. My knees hurt a little – I had some joint issues after so many years of lifting and carrying and rocking. I picked up a diaper out of the pile and opened it flat. Ping Ping lay down obediently, staring at me and playing with his ears. Unsnap, one, two, three. I put the soiled diaper away and chuckled, surprised, at what I saw. Not that I hadn’t realized Ping Ping was a boy – but seeing that small little penis dangling between his thick baby thighs was a bit of a shock. After more than a decade and a half of wiping and washing little girls, I’d almost forgotten what a little hot pepper looked like.

Of course, it was not rocket science. I took a fresh wet wipe and began to clean the area. Ping Ping gave a little chuckle. It was the first time I’d seen the boy smile. I smiled back at him, and tickled his cheek, and he giggled, making me laugh. At that very moment, he smiled wider, shivered, and proceeded to let loose a warm stream of piss right up into my face. A little even got into my mouth! I was in shock, but I also couldn’t help doubling over in laughter. “Oh you little monster!” I babbled into Ping Ping’s cheek. After I’d dried myself off, I called my son over.
“You won’t believe what your son’s done!” I said, still chuckling. My son came over and smiled down at me and Ping Ping. He began to laugh with me.

At that moment, I suddenly had a moment of déjà vu, as if I were reliving the past that had been long buried away. I had been changing my son’s diaper (cloth back then), and my husband was standing over, watching us, as my son delivered that same naughty squirt to my face, over forty years ago.

I quickly put the diaper on Ping Ping and gathered the baby into my arms. He was plush as a cloud but lighter than Kiko, who at nearly three still liked to be carried around the house. Ping Ping pinched my nose and let out a victorious squeal.

“Oh you naughty little boy!” I said, feeling a bit more like myself again. “You’re going to pinch your grandma? Then grandma’s going to pinch you right back!”

I gave the boy’s nose a quick little pinch, and his face squirmed up, unsure of whether to laugh or cry at the sensation. I quickly pressed my cheek to his – it was plump, warm, soft – and made a clucking noise with my tongue to distract him. “Oh my little thing. No need to cry! A pinch only means I love you. Do you know that? What do you know? Do you know that granny loves you?”

I smelled the thick flavors of my northeast region wafting in from the kitchen, so different from the light Japanese fare that I’d learned to cook at Yumi’s. I settled down to play with Ping Ping before dinner, pinching at his thick thighs and belly. I was not going to leave this place, not until they laid me down inside the family mountain. I said to my grandson: “You little thing. You little thing. My little, little thing.”
Children’s Story #1 (1990) by Koye Oyedeji

I.

_Though it is said that the Sex lives in us all, that it is our being made manifest,_
_Diviners assert that it is profoundly found in the female, though there has been no_
definitive evidence to support this claim, (men have been debating it for centuries). However, a significant degree of women report the feeling of having
“lost something,” or otherwise “taken,” — a small number of those questioned
claim to have freely given their Sex to man, likening it to an offering of sorts.
_Though it is hard to imagine a man freely accepting the presence of a Sex._

Junior leaps into the room as the boy is plugging the video recorder into
the wall. Kim comes in behind him, soft-stepping as any normal guest should. But
then she sits on his bed, as if she’s done it a hundred times before, parking her
jacksie on a Thundercats quilt cover that was, up until this very moment, his pride
and joy. Now the boy’s just embarrassed by it. ‘I’m gone upstairs to Gilbert’s’
Junior says, pauses and then adds: ‘to get the video,’ and when he’s confident that
Kim is not looking, the dog in his eyes threatens to bite his younger brother. Then
he is gone, as quick as he came, leaving the boy with Kim — an event the boy
wishes he was better prepared for.

Kim is in a Coca-Cola branded rugby shirt, a pair of bleached jeans, Hi
Tec Squash trainers. She crosses her legs, smooths out the creases to either side of
her, and high-arches an eyebrow at the measure of the single-sized quilt on a double bed. He can’t tell you why his parents put the double bed in his room. I can. For the guests who visit from Nigeria. He is, of the two boys, the easier one to displace.

Meanwhile, the boy can’t take his eyes off of Kim, the first girl to have ever been in his room. He’s in his head again, racing through all the things he’s seen on the Internet and all the theatrical squeals and thrills it has provided him, and he determines how he would successfully handle Kim with his soft hands, and all his other burgeoning physical assets. Rough hands, actually, if she wanted them to be.

She gives him a look, as if to say wot are you starin’ at me for? And, to be sure he understands, she says: Wot you starin’ at me for?’

The boy’s pride is unripe and skittish and he quails like a right mug — you’d think she is holding a shotgun to him. But if he cannot be confident, then perhaps he can be kind, a superhero in waiting. In the remnants of lust and imaginary bluster, he considers what’s at stake. Junior may come back with the film, but he’s going to come back with Gilbert too, and the two of them will try to convince Kim to “do it” with the both of them. Right there on the boy’s bed. And though he will be kicked out of his own bedroom, and will not witness these things, he knows what they are. He knows what ‘doing it’ means. For God’s sakes, he’s twelve, not two.

Plus, it’s happened before. He’d heard about the time Patience went up to Gilbert’s flat, when Gilbert’s mum was in hospital overnight for knee surgery.
The story goes that Junior was there too, and no one left until the morning. He can’t get Junior’s word for it, and Patience soon moved off the estate just months after that night - sent home, the boy thinks, to live with her Dad in Ghana. He wouldn’t want Kim to feel as if she needed to leave the area, and hence the superman vibrations. He reckons he can save her from a disaster. Drag her from the rails. Avoid the oncoming train. All he needs to do is open his mouth and tell her there is no pirate copy of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (though there might actually be, but that wouldn’t be the point), that she needs to leave, she needs to get out while she can and go quickly. Now.

‘Do you have a girlfriend?’ She asks, and if Junior were there, he would answer for the boy. He would say ‘Him? Of course not.’ And it would be worse if Gilbert were there too, because Junior sometimes punches the boy, on the arm, sometimes in the back, as if for Gilbert’s own pleasure, and tells his friend, tells whoever will listen, that the boy is either gay or going to be a virgin for life — his laughter roaring with just a little too much delight. Still, all of that shit — and the terrible way Gilbert looks at him — might be a goner, might be vamoose, the boy thinks, if he allows them to use his bedroom tonight.

‘I reckoned not,’ Kim says. ‘The way you gaping.’ She crosses her legs over and she shakes her head. The boy finally looks away and busies himself, swiping at the dust that has collected on the VCR. It’s a prop, and those are his fingerprints in the dust, and that makes him some kind of co-conspirator. But Kim is a big girl, and she is being rude to him. Blunt. Too blunt for his almost-teenage sensibilities, and so he will say nothing. She does not deserve his help. Besides,
she’s only into Junior because of all the gear he has — the Wallabies, the Chippie chinos, because Junior is one of few people in the area with a mobile phone, contactable almost anywhere. It’s amazing. The thing plays music too, like a Walkman, but smaller. But acting flash shouldn’t matter. So there you go. He will mind his own business, thank you.

‘What’s that?’ He only hears her on the second time of asking. She points to the stack of comics in their protective re-sealable plastic and white backboards. He sighs because he already knows that at some indeterminate point in the future she is going to use the quilt cover against him, and now there’s this too. ‘My comic book collection,’ he mutters when she asks a third time, and she tells him her brother also collects them. ‘Yeah?’ he says, because Justin is a good friend, because he fucking knows this already, but doesn’t know what else to say. ‘Yeah,’ she replies. ‘Yeah,’ he says and nods. ‘Yeah,’ she says, and smiles, her thin lips pressed together. Thin lips are no kind of lips for a black girl, he thinks, but it is a great smile and he decides that he would love her lips, if he was given permission too. ‘You remind me of my younger brother,’ she says. ‘Yeah?’ he says. ‘Yeah,’ she says, and begins to say more before she trails off. ‘What’s that?’ He says, he wants her to finish out the sentence: ‘But it’s not as though...what?’ ‘Don’t worry about it,’ she says, shaking her head. He nods, and he’s still nodding even though the moment has long since passed. She makes a face at him, crossing her eyes and tucking her tongue into the pocket of skin beneath her bottom lip. They laugh and the laughter lingers long after they’ve both grown quiet. He should tell her, he thinks. He can feel her eyes on him, but he keeps his head down and his fingers
clasped together and he is silent. He doesn’t know how long he remains this way, but it feels like years pass before he hears the sound of the front door open. He gets up and leaves the room.

II.

*Scientists believe that the nervous system is activated, to an extent that high endocrine responses are detected. There is a correlation between these responses and the midbrain structure of the thalamus, producing vivid qualitative experience. Desire is translated into subjective impressions, psychic experiences, qualia qua paranormal activity.*

Today, the boy is in the market. He is staring at the young man in the knee-length cut-offs and picky hair who sermonizes on the street corner at the mouth of the market, every Saturday, without fail. The young man talks to himself, repeating the same thing over; rumour has it he is rabid, haunted by the presence of a Sex. The boy usually ignores him, but today he steps a little closer so that he might hear him. And this is what he hears: ‘...come when you fuck with a woman, when you fuck with a woman in the wrong way. When they are mad at you, when you’ve smashed them into pieces, when there is nothing else you can take from them. That’s when something leaves them. Their Sex. You can’t get away from a Sex once it decides to follow you. You can’t shake it off. Listen, that’s why the neighbourhood’s gone to rot. That’s why the mortgage rates around
here are so cheap. And guys, I don’t have to tell you: it’s dangerous having them
around like this; they’ll drive you to suicide. Why you think rock stars are
overdosing? The poets starving themselves to death? All those politicians being
captured on camera with their pants down? Sexes have brought us men to the brink
and back, but sometimes we don’t come back; sometimes we take our whole
family with us. I’m just saying. Too many Sexes running about the place. True,
you can’t see them. But what does that matter? You feel them, you sure do. They
are here, they are everywhere. They come when you fuck with a woman, when
you fuck with a woman in the wrong way. When they are mad at you, when
you’ve smashed them into pieces…” The young man stops when he locks eyes
with the boy. He smiles devilishly then scurries into the market.

The boy is a Believer. And this is why he follows the young man,
watching him as his red Liverpool top flares through the market bustle. He keeps
his distance, stopping whenever the young man stops, tottering on the edges of the
crowd where it is at its thickest, as though reluctant to submerge himself. The boy
recalls the young man’s eyes, wild and unfocused. Maybe a Sex is like black
magic, a cousin to voodoo. Like there is someone on the other side of the world,
right now, with a set of pins and a doll that resembles the young man. He laughs
as the young man begins walking again, and squeezes by an elderly woman. He
heads further into the market. Past the Halal butcher shop, where the bruised
boiler chickens hang from hooks, a wise squint in their dead eyes. Past the fruit
and veg stall, and the middle age veteran who bellows “TWO FOR ONE-FIFTY
THE ‘EDS’” like the rest of us are supposed to know what that means.
It’s not funny. The boy knows it isn’t. He laughs to keep from crying. The truth is, he’s scared and has been for weeks now. He is convinced Kim’s Sex has been following him. If true, he can’t see how he would deserve this. He hasn’t done anything. His friend, Darren, thought the same thing when he told him. ‘Get a life,’ he said, and then reminded him that he hadn’t messed with Kim in any way, even as much as he wished he could. The boy doesn’t know; it doesn’t make sense. Couldn’t even tell you if anything happened that evening in his bedroom. Maybe this is about Junior, maybe Gilbert. But not him. Justin still comes around as usual, and hasn’t mentioned anything about his sister losing her Sex — but would the dull boy even know what that looked like? And if he did, would he bring it up with them? Darren reckons the boy should ask, to ask Justin if he’d ask, but the boy wouldn’t dare. You just don’t ask a friend about these things. That’s a no-no. That’s disrespect.

Still, he Googled it. And, according to Google, he is displaying all the Sex-possessed symptoms, experiencing all the signs: the overwhelming feeling that someone is staring at you. The ton of guilt you feel whenever you experience this. The feeling that the guilt has a pair of legs and is following you. Google confirmed it all. And I should mention this, the whole mobile phone, Internet and Google thing. While many are still messing with push button dial phones, Amstrads and Commodore Amigas, the boy has the Internet. Because Anachronisms abound in an area like this, where people are on the dole in large numbers, where large families are crammed into two-bedroom council flats, and are getting mugged left, right and centre — everybody needs a little hope in these
communities. The anachronisms give them hope. Most people have at least one or two of them. Smart phones. Smart Cars. Smart Food. The future, quite literally, in their hands. Keeps them honest.

Anyway, the young man hurries on into the throng of people. The boy follows, pushing through the openings between the cramped bodies and the dreaded pushchairs. He stops when he comes to the cross street, Portland Street, which is like a halfway point between the market; a spot where you can stop for air on these busy Saturdays. Someone shouts ‘Cross that road and I will slap the hell out of you.’ He turns to see a woman rushing towards her child, He watches it unfold. The woman catches up with the child, and clips the little girl behind the ear, despite her obedience. He looks ahead of him, to the opening of the second half of the market. He thinks he sees a snatch of red ahead of him. But then it is gone.

Normally he would head in this direction anyway, to Walworth Road, and then on to Camberwell, where he would spend four hours in one of the recreation centre’s rooms. But feeling like someone is always following you isn’t normal, it isn’t an everyday feeling, and therefore he is ill. He would not be lying. This is the very definition of ill. He turns around and heads back the way he came. Mr. Zagadou, the Saturday school leader, can mark him absent twice, three times over; he couldn’t care less.

When he gets home, back to the flat, he kicks his shoes off in the passageway, and enters the living room where he notices the blazer on the sofa, and the distinctive wear on Uncle Festus’ moccasins. Not an uncle in the true
avuncular sense of the word, but in the sense that every Nigerian man who was old enough to be their uncle was referred to as so, out of deference. So early in the day, the boy thinks, his hands in his head, as he lowers himself on the sofa, his feet between said moccasins. The carpet underfoot - balding faster than Bruce Willis, he would say - it is all a sign of the times; everything feels like it is rotting away, that the young are withering inside, while the old withering with age; and for God sakes, the melodrama — he would think the world would not have long, if it were not for the anachronisms. He hears the sound of the bedroom door open, and then someone thundering down the passageway. Then his Uncle Festus walks in, thankfully still in his shirt and trousers. ‘Will you not say hello?’ he says, with more production than offense. The boy says nothing. And then his mother is at the living room doorway. Her buba hastily thrown on. She sneers when he looks up at her, when he looks up at her like that. ‘What are you doing here?’ She says, ‘Why are you not at school?’

III.

_Some religious leaders believe that the Sexes are not Sexes at all, that it is Sin made manifest, walking the earth amongst us. The Catholic Church has denounced any belief in such ideas, Sin or Sex, but the Pentecost are fervent believers in the former. Pastor Nelson Griezmann, leader of the 3rd Chapter of the Holy Saints of David, once claimed that through prayer he managed to communicate with this Sin, who warned of nearing end times. Many people,_
clergy or otherwise have tried communicating with Sexes, but a proven form of communication has yet to be established.

Today, the boy at school, real school. He is using a scalpel to carve a knob — warts on the balls and all — into the science desk counter, when the Sex enters the room. Since he has grown accustomed to the experience, he is not altogether scared, more so surprised. Here? At School? This was a first. He feels it circle the counter ahead of him and only God knows what it is about to take place here or how he might respond in front of others. He raises his hand. Asks to use the toilet. And because the teacher is watching him leave the room, he leaves his rucksack behind. Fuck it. He’ll pick it up from Lost and Found.

The Sex follows him out into the hallway. He can feel it start to pick up speed. It follows him towards the stairs. And then he is running, running down the stairs and out the school’s entrance, through the parking lot, some people looking at him like he is skits, like he is possessed; others looking at him like he is being haunted.

He runs towards home, slowing only at oncoming traffic and as he begins to lose his breath at the tail end of the seven-minute run; he can hear his pants over the foot patter that he feels again. It is insane, worse still, it is unfair. He rushes up the stairwell, fumbles his key in the lock and is inside, slamming the door behind him, because it is likely not to follow him inside. It has never come for him at home. Not even when he wanted it to.
Not wanting things to be like this, not wanting it to seem like he is in trouble, in danger, he is convinced it is a case of mistaken identity. That Sexes can make mistakes, That Sexes are human too. It has the wrong brother, and maybe it is a case of simply explaining that. Except there isn’t any way of simplifying how he would explain that. So the boy heads to Darren’s on the weekend, with a copy of A Beginner’s Guide to Communicating With Spirits, 4th Edition. It may or may not be an anachronism.

Darren’s a talker; he sure bloody is. The boy knows this. But he also knows he needs a confidant. They try a few things. The Ouija board is shit. Darren said it would be; a proper waste of time. They try a pendulum with some string and one of his mother’s costume rings. Now they’re going to conduct a séance, even though Junior once told him that black people don’t have any good reason to be conducting séances. There’s a plastic step stool between them, which belongs to Darren’s baby brother. On the stool there’s a saucer with a candle. They hold each other’s hands. The book says so. And the book says they should chant what cannot be written. ‘You wot?’ Says Darren.

‘What cannot be written,’ the boy repeats. ‘Look,’ he says, ‘it’s written right here.’

‘We should say something,’ Darren says. His palms are sweaty. But no, the boy reckons, they should remain silent. ‘How does that even make sense?’ Darren says. ‘The whole point of a séance is communication.’ No, the boy replies, the whole point of a séance is the energy. They gotta let the energy circulate. ‘I’ve never heard of that in all of my life,’ Darren says, as though he has seen more
than twelve years. ‘Suddenly you know everything there is to know about this,’ he says, to which the boy replies, ‘See? That’s exactly the type of energy we don’t need.’

So they sit in silence, until Darren says ‘Cha, this is basic. How’s this gonna work just sittin’ here?’ The boy tells him to relax, and Darren says don’t tell me to relax, and it escalates from here, a back and forth, variations on the same theme, relax/don’t tell me to relax, until Darren pulls his hands free. He wipes his hand against his thigh, and it occurs to the boy that the sweat might’ve been his. ‘This is stupid,’ Darren says. ‘You’re getting all worked up with all this. Just go ahead and ask her, or ask Justin to ask her.’ The boy slumps back onto the beanbag behind him. ‘I’ve heard Sexes go after you, that they haunt you until you’re driven crazy,’ he says.

Haunt. The boy knows he shouldn’t use the word, that he throws the word around loosely. That a haunting is not quite what he has been experiencing over the weeks. Sexes are not Ghosts. You will never lay eyes on them, there aren’t see-through versions of them running about the place. They don’t tip shit over.

IV.

*Philosophers have argued that a Sex is mere affirmation of our darkest urges, an underscoring of the need to be more generative in the discussion of life-affirming morality. In his work, The Spitting Image of Love, the eminent philosopher, Beresford Wheeler, argues for ‘a rational deifying of our desires.’*  
*It was*
Nietzsche” Wheeler writes, “who said ‘But an attack on the roots of passion means an attack on the roots of life.’ Thus the hostile rejection of the Sex, is a hostile rejection of our very nature; it is to embrace our evolution with impotence.”

The boy decides to miss church today. He sits on the sofa, picking at where the plastic covering has come away at the armrest. His mother stands over him, giving him the What for? He mutes her, and concentrates on the task he made himself. The plastic was kept on, he was told, because they were going to ship it back to Nigeria. “Back,” his dad had said, as though it had originally come from there. Everything was going to go back once things had settled in the country. ‘Once they were ready to return,’ his parents had said again and again, and again — as though their two boys had been there before. Now the boy picks at the plastic as though it was his dad’s plans. Junior gets up to open the door for Uncle Festus, who, after dropping his wife at church early, usually came around to pick them up for church each week. When Festus enters the room, the boy’s mother greets him, prostrates, and then turns back to the boy, this time, her voice a little louder. Do not upset me with this nonsense, she says, placing an emphasis on the first syllable in nonsense. ‘What is it?’ Festus asks and Junior replies. ‘He says he can’t go to church, he says he’s sick.’

And the boy is. He’s rubbed Vicks under his eyes, until they were red and tearful. He’s placed a dice in his sock, so that he walks with a limp. But perhaps the combination of the two ailments, fever and a sprained ankle, are a little too
much for his mother. ‘Leave him, now,’ Festus says, ‘can’t you see the boy is not
well?’ And his mother replies, in English, for the boy’s sake: ‘Is church not the
place for the sick to be made well?’

No, no it is not. Not in the boy’s opinion. Not that church. Not with the
rumours that swirl amongst the congregation. They say his dad committed
adultery, that he has run off with an oyinbo, a woman with whom he is having
himself a half-caste child. Some say he ran away from a Sex, even though you’re
not supposed to believe, or at least talk about, such things in the church. It
wouldn’t have mattered if they could.. He and Junior are just children. No one has
told them shit in the last year, far less the truth. They are left to decide what they
believe. Who they believe. What it is they believe in.

‘This is not such a bad thing,’ Festus says, but the boy’s mother does not
appear to budge. She is wearing a long dress, one of three western dresses she
ever wears to church. It has a bold flower pattern, shoulder-pads. It is a holdover
from the last decade, when his mother might’ve fancied herself as a black Krystal
Carrington, given the Dynasty fan that she once was. Not anymore. Everything is
different now. Her mother doesn’t seem interested in entertainment, or leisure, or
even them — at least not between Monday to Saturday. Suddenly, the boy feels
the urge to strike her in the jaw. She relents, it’s like she can smell the threat on
him. She snatches up her purse and overcoat. ‘Oya,’ she says and they leave the
boy alone in the living room, in the flat. He listens for the closing of the door but,
before that, for Junior. But Junior doesn’t say anything. It’s like attending church
is the one thing that their mum is still able to get Junior to do without complaint.
The boy gives it ten minutes. Ten minutes of just his breathing and the miniature grandfather clock on the mantel above the gas heater. He leaves the flat, skips in the rain across the footbridge that links his building to the adjacent high rise. He turns, briefly, with thoughts of empty patter; the sense that someone is splashing in the puddles behind him. He heads down the stairs that lead from the high rise’s mezzanine to the ground, and then he walks behind the rear of the building, past the concrete football pitch to another maisonette building on the estate. He knocks on flat 52 and, to his disappointment, Justin opens the door — he was hoping he wouldn’t have to ask after his sister. They quickly exchange the typical pre-teen pleasantries and when these wilt, and the unsaid question why are you here? begins to loudly linger, the boy finally breathes in and brings himself to ask if he can speak to Kim. Justin naturally furrows his brow at that, and asks why. Not knowing quite how to put it, the boy says what he thinks might sound half-passable: that he has a message to pass on from Junior. Justin heads in and minutes later Kim emerges, brittle and impatient, her face all what the fuck you want?, a protruding vein divides her forehead, like a shivering worm trapped under skin. She barely opens the door for him, exposing only one shoulder and above. ‘What do you want?’ She says, and raises her eyebrows as he begins to stutter his way through his words. ‘I-I-I don’t know how to ask this,’ he says. She breathes in sharply. ‘Ask what?’ And when he doesn’t immediately answer, she jumps back in. ‘Your brother’s got something he wants to say to me? Tell him I said up yours, and he can get lost.’ ‘No, no, no,’ the boy says. ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah,’ she says, and then starts screaming for him to get lost, for him to get lost before
she does his head in. She slams the door, and he wishes he never told Justin he had a message, and decides he better get gone before Justin opens the door to see if he is still there.

Junior does not come home straight from Church, and when he comes home, he does so without the news, before going out again, and coming back as pissed as the devil. The boy is lying on his bed waiting for him, lying on his bed when Junior rushes into his room and starts pounding him, hard enough to hurt, but not hard enough for him to cause a commotion, to give himself enough of an excuse to holler and alert their mother, without losing some more of his already depleted pride. He assumes a defensive position until the storm has passed.

‘What’s wrong with you starr?’ Junior asks. ‘Don’t you know I will dark you? Why you tryin’ to distress a man? Why you telling her I want to speak to her? I never told you that.’ ‘I’m sorry,’ the boy says, and resumes the defensive position when his brother fakes to punch him. ‘You’re a fucking perv. So fucking weird mate,’ Junior says. ‘It’s all that wanking,’ he says. ‘Going to your head. Don’t think I ain’t found all those magazines under your mattress,’ he says, but that’s a lie. Remember, the boy has the Internet, see. There’s no need for magazines.

‘So why is Kim’s Sex following me?’ The boy blurts. ‘What?’ Junior replies, and for a moment his face is a picture of intense scrutiny, before he erupts with laughter. ‘Kim? You wished,’ he says, still cackling. ‘Your problem ain’t that a Sex is following you; problem is you ain’t got one to follow.’ The boy feels his anger rise; Kim is just another throwaway for Junior. He has no fear of Sexes. The boy recalls the time when a dad of one of the girls turned up on their doorstep
screaming and cussing, wanting to do Junior harm. He had a thug’s hallmarks this
dad, triceps the size of a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle, a flattened nose, knuckles
that could file balsa wood, fists like old school mallets. There was terror, but also
joy, a faint pleasure the boy will never admit to, the sick but satisfying thought
that his brother might finally get what he deserved. He didn’t. The man —
Jamie’s father, he believes — did not thunder his way past the boy’s mother; he
did not make his way to the bedroom where Junior hid until it was safe to emerge.
Instead, the man’s vitriol, short and bitter, was thrown at the boy’s mother. They
were a family of bloody savages, as far as the man was concerned. When they
weren’t preying on welfare, they were preying on our children, he said. He’d have
more than a word with your husband, he said, except, he added, I bet their dad
ain’t around.

Then there was the aftermath. How they sat around for hours. He recalls
his mother’s threat — the last strike she gave Junior, the last strike she gave him
six strikes ago. Their uncle-not-uncle Festus had turned up. Just as he used to turn
up on Sunday evenings, to drink beer and eat rice with the boy’s dad, and Festus’
wife would ooze to the kitchen to offer the boy’s mother a limp hand. Otherwise,
the boy would see the pair in church, scolding children, holding a hand aloft in
prayer, switching out the numbers on the hymn board. Now that their dad is gone,
Festus shows up to do the right thing — to diffuse their mother’s anger, to place a
callused hand over his mother’s equally callused hands and tell her eldest son that
he was bringing shame to their family name.
‘Get out,’ the boy says. ‘Get out.’ And with tears welling in his eyes, he continues to repeat this, until his voice is louder than the laughter, and Junior shakes his head yet again at the thought that this boy in front of him is his brother. The boy gets up off the bed, as if to make his point. Out. He clenches his fist, determined to take it to fisticuffs if he has to. And he will not lose if it comes to that, not today. He will be a winner, if even a bruised one.

V.

One theory in psychiatry is that the Sex is a disorder, characterized by our times; it has pounced on our paucity, our shallow social personalities that are now driven by a burgeoning consumer culture, and its narrow-minded counter culture. The Sex, it seems, is a result of this dissonance, a recrudescence to the atavistic instinct. It is not so much a concern as to whether a Sex is corporeal or not, but its very existence, as a disorder, cannot be denied.

The boy has come up to the roof of the high rise for a reason.

Up here is a sanctuary, a place to cotch, to get away from it all, away from everyone. He can see the expanse of the area, Walworth, from his vantage. The Michael Faraday school, the Mock Tudor houses, the other maisonettes and high-rises that belong to the estate. And, beyond all this, an urban vista that seems to scream opportunity, when really there isn’t much of any, there isn’t much of anything.
He knows why he has come up here.

It used to be a place where he would come to be alone, to sit in a complimentary rush of breeze and altitude. But once upon a time he made the mistake of telling Junior about this cotch of his, and his brother just screwed up his face, scoffed at the idea that the roof was some new revelation (even though he knew it was) and made some comment about jooking Aida up here. It was another one of Junior’s lies, the boy knew this, some chintzy off the cuff big talk. But the place had transformed under his brother’s spiel, his brother’s spell, and now the roof has been living in the boy’s head as the place where he takes Aida’s virginity, even before his brother does; where he takes Jamie and Adelaide and whispers lust driven promises into their ears; where he takes Coraline and tells her what she wants to hear, that yes, he is her man, and it is also the place where, three sexual encounters later, he breaks up with her. It is the place for all of this and more, whatever he wants it to be, the place where he tells his brother all the time to shut the fuck up, shut the fuck up Junior; just shut, the fuck, up. Just this one time.

And now he feels it, here on the roof. Beside him. This is when the Sex will finally confront him.

The boy stands up. Blood rushing at his temples. He nears towards the roof edge. Even its words, the way it speaks to him, it is through the senses, the sense that he should jump, that he should go ahead and do it. He peers over the edge, watches the cars roll up and down the roads, oblivious to what’s above them. The wind picks up a little. He steps back.
And then he does it. He runs. He bolts for the roof access door, determined
to outrun it this time. He slams the steel door behind him. He does not wait for the
lift; he races down the stairs, between the graffiti tagged walls, the piss-stained
corners on the landings. He throws himself down each flight, using the handrail to
drag himself along, the stank of refuse piled by the chute fills his nostrils. He was
never an athlete. ‘Bruv, words fail me,’ Junior would say, whenever the boy chose
to sit out a football game or fail to stay the pace as they ran for the bus. Bent over
now, at the foot of the building with his hands on his knees, he stops to catch his
breath and recall Junior’s taunts. He holds his breath, to listen to the sound of
hurried feet. Not like that. He cannot hear anything, remember. Instead, he feels
the sound the Sex makes. He feels the patter of its tiny feet. If it has feet.
Whatever it has, he feels it; it is coming.

He is running again. The boy is always running.

(Continues for another three pages)
Earth Voice

My therapist suggested I think back to that past relationship in my early twenties. What do you think of that young woman?

I closed my eyes and breathed in and out slowly. I said I could picture her, but that she wasn’t me.

Of course, she’s not you. You’ve got over twenty years on her. But, she said, she wanted me to see that younger me well enough to be able to communicate with her, and to get close enough to not feel distant from her. Could I do that?

So I laid down beside the young woman on the grass, saw those orange leaves. She was crying and I held her hand. What do you feel? The therapist asked.

Compassion, I said, looking at the young woman’s tears.

Good, the therapist said. Now, what do you want to tell her?

I told her I was sorry things didn’t work out the way she wanted, that it wouldn’t always feel this way.

Good, the therapist said. Very good. What else do you want to tell her? I turned onto my side and looked at the young woman and whispered to her gently. I could tell her mind was somewhere else, the way the tears glazed over her eyes and she was looking up at the sky as if searching for consolation. Wet blades of grass were pressing into my cheek.

What does she say in reply? The therapist wanted to know.
I think I should just keep holding her hand, I said. I don’t know if she hears me.

A belief, a lifelong belief, can form in an emotional moment, the therapist said.

I wonder what she believes, I said, one hand on my dewy face.

***

Here’s what I remember – those fiery orange autumn leaves. The grass was soft and there was dirt that smelled of iron and rain, and I was lying under a tree in Rock Creek Park watching the clouds move in the blue sky above. Leaves had fallen onto the grass, but there were more – way above, connected to thin and thick branches forming patterns that brought to mind kaleidoscopes, where seeing the whole was as important as honing in on an individual part.

I had moved from Ohio to Washington DC to work as a production assistant on everyone’s favorite news radio show. The work was very exciting—the famous guests, the famous hosts, the way I refreshed my screen and read the latest news from the wires. Imagine, “the wires!” It felt like I had moved to the heartbeat of the country, of civics. If my grandfather were still alive, he would have said I had a twinkle in my eye and a spring in my step, an attitude that had something go gettum smack dabby doo dah about it. He was an Indian immigrant, but had picked up Americanized tidbits that he morphed into his speech. He came to the U.S. after my parents, in his old age really, after his wife had died. He had had cataract surgery a few months after he arrived and always said he loved looking at his new country with his new young eyes.
I was 23 and I was in love. Not puppy love, not lust- love. Love, love. We had been going steady for four years, to use a phrase my grandfather cherished, and were still going strong. My beau, named Bo! was aiming to be a stringer for the AP and one day a full-fledged foreign correspondent, and had landed a few weeks ago in Mozambique. I had family in all sorts of former Portuguese colonies, and somehow it made perfect sense that Bo would be in a place where my people had been.

Every ten days like clockwork, I made a care package for Bo and sent it to wherever he was, hoping it would get there before he left. I would get the boxes from the Italian grocery store a few blocks away and lug them back to the apartment I shared with two other women I’d found on craigslist. Then I’d search the DC metro area for Bo’s favorite non-perishable treats: mini-lychee jellies from the Asian market and crunchy chocolate-covered Pocky sticks, beef jerky – the spicy kind—and smarties. I felt so happy gathering all these items in one place and imagining that familiar expression of delight that would spread across Bo’s face when he saw what I had gifted him. In the spring, I would take photos of the cherry blossoms around the tidal basin and make sure to include those, too.

Bo and I were going to be the best producer-reporter duo this world had ever seen. We knew this period would be hard, but we trusted that one day, a force, like a massive wind tunnel would blow through our lives, and all at once the doors would open one after another, and then all we had to do was make sure we ran through. Through perseverance, more opportunities would come. I thought about that all the time, how our small steps were part of our big dreams.
This particular care package had more contents than usual because of Bo’s and my five-year anniversary coming up. It included our greatest hits: recordings of duets we had made up and sung, and a CD I created at work with the news that had aired the exact day and start time of our first date.

We had met for that date in the room where we had a college class together. When I saw the blanket and the food underneath the seminar table, I had thought we were having an indoor picnic, but when I opened the Snapple bottle Bo handed me, I saw a clue taped to the inside of the cap. Bo had planned a scavenger hunt date around campus. We went on the roofs of the dorms, to the dining hall, and the stacks at the library. At the end of the hunt, Bo had even enlisted his entire dorm floor of guys to help launch fireworks. My jaw literally dropped. I couldn’t believe how he had pulled it off.

“Risk and reward,” Bo had said when he kissed me. I looked at the fireworks bursting in the air. Blossoms and willows, all huge and loud and unbelievably beautiful. I squeezed his hand. It had been a beginning full of lights.

Near my apartment was a Lebanese café where my new work friend Veronica would meet me to, as she put it, “dish.” No one would ever think she and I were the same age, not with her black leather jacket over a tight dress and tall black boots, “killer boots” she had called them. Veronica had perfectly blown out auburn hair and expertly applied mascara (liquid!). She curled her eyelashes each morning with a metal contraption that reminded me of something that might be used at a hospital. I was two weeks shy of my 24th birthday and the closest
thing to lipstick I had was raspberry-flavored chapstick. My typical hairstyle was an unruly ponytail. I knew beside her, I quickly started to resemble a girl scout.

At our jobs, everyone was listening; they were trained to. They were not just reporters, but radio reporters. It was safer to talk here at the café while we could dip our pita in hummus with gusto, or bite into the stuffed grape leaves, the din of the traffic on Connecticut Ave. surrounding us like a protective shield. I soon realized Veronica was a lot more sharp-edged than I was, the kind of person who might stomp the heel of her stiletto onto someone’s foot who said something that angered her, and then bat her eyelashes and act like it was a terrible accident. (She told me a story where she did that so that’s how I can say that so emphatically.) She was on the prowl when it came to dating and asked my opinion on everyone from the Pentagon reporter to the sound engineer on the classical music program. I had little to offer more than a He seems nice? or Him too! Or I think he’s married? But I soon gathered that my input wasn’t what she wanted as much as she wanted an audience for her various intrigues.

Sometimes when I was waiting for the metro after work and had nothing to do but just stand there, a feeling of exhaustion enveloped me. The weight of all the demands, hot tempers, deadlines that were marked not in minutes- but seconds, landed on me in a suffocating way. It’s like whatever I couldn’t process in real time, suddenly resurfaced, wanting to be addressed. I felt such relief when my train came and the doors parted and I could step on, and leave those feelings on the platform. The red line towards Shady Grove became my escape route.
Veronica did yoga on the regular and advised it whenever I mentioned this phenomenon. She especially advocated for this one kind where you could just lie there on your back with your legs up against the wall, and, as she put it, “let it alllll gooookoo.” I wasn’t sure about yoga. I felt I was more like those cardboard boxes I sent to Bo, someone who stored things, and found more and more places inside me, even if that meant having to reorganize. I wondered about how I could “let it alllll gooookoo” and if that just meant utter collapse.

“You know, Sadie-” Veronica had said, with timing so uncanny it was as though she had read my mind, “Wrecking your life isn’t always a bad thing.”

I wanted to talk it all over with Bo. His voice, calm and soothing, always made me feel better. I missed him so much. I missed his tall frame and broad shoulders, his too-long arms that would be over my shoulder now if we weren’t continents apart. I put my head on my plate.

“Sadie?” I heard Veronica say. “Sadie, you’re getting hummus in your hair!” I raised my head. “I didn’t mean to bum you out,” she said. “Here, let me get that.” She dipped her napkin in her glass of water and started to dab the ends of my curls.

As she was dabbing, Veronica told me about this startup entrepreneur guy who had come in for an interview on one of the shows. Minutes later, he found out he had gotten this huge angel investor and his next big dream idea would be a reality. Veronica said she was in the elevator with him when he got the news, so she took him to an abandoned floor and fucked him right there.
“Wait, you did what? Did you know him before the elevator?” I had asked.

“No, I wasn’t even attracted to him. It just felt like the kind of thing that should happen, like he was so excited, and it just felt like if he got all that money, he should get laid, too. It’s weird to think about now. It’s amazing who you let inside you,” she said with her eyes looking down as her eyelashes curled up.

“You’re so Pleasantville, Sadie,” Veronica said when I fell silent. I realized I must have had a shocked expression on my face.

“Pleasantville? What, you mean, like the movie?”

“Yeah, the movie— ”

“Veronica, I work in news. Every day I hear about suicide bombers blowing up cafes like this one halfway across the world. The last story I worked on was about infant mortality. What is Pleasantville about that?” Veronica started tapping her gel-nailed pointer finger rapidly on the table.

“Because, people in the real world let these things get them down, realize this means we’re fucked, humans suck, and all we’re really after is survival. You, you just never seem to get it about people.”

“That’s one way of seeing it,” I said, in as even and kind a tone I could muster, which is what my grandfather advised me to do when encountering people from the East Coast who seemed on the verge of causing a scene.

The server came by to tell us the kitchen was closing soon. I just wanted to get out of there, but Veronica ordered a Turkish coffee and a plate of baklava. The sun had begun to set, surrounding us in a warm peach sky.
“So, what’s yours and Bo’s secret, do you think?” she asked.

“Secret?”

“To your relationship.”

I had to think about it. It felt like there were a lot of ways I could respond.

“Well, for one - we tell each other everything.”

“Everything?”

“Yeah, sometimes it feels like I am Bo’s diary and he just spills”

“That’s intense—”

“I’m used to it,” I said, shrugging, and thankful that at least tomorrow Bo and I were going to talk. The server returned with Veronica’s coffee and she sipped it in an almost methodical way, as if she was marking time. She slid the plate of sweets towards me.

“So, you don’t think you are giving Bo too much power?”

“Isn’t that what love is, allowing yourself to be vulnerable to someone?” I said. “When you’re vulnerable, you give up your power.”

“I’ve never done that,” she said.

“You’ve never been in love?”

She pulled the baklava plate back towards her and ate silently.

“What about your sex life?” she asked, after she had brushed the last phyllo crumbs off her face. My stomach sunk. I’m sure my eyes widened.

“Our sex life?” I thought back to the last time Bo and I were together, the night before his flight. We had tried a bajillion positions, but nothing worked. Our
legs were still tangled up, but my face was turned away on my pillow, hot with tears of frustration.

“To be honest, he couldn’t get it up the last time,” I said. I’d wanted to send Bo off with us feeling close to each other. Instead, I’d never felt so pathetic, or so alone. “We’ve never had problems in that department, but I guess with him catching his flight the next day, maybe there was too much on his mind?”

“Interesting,” Veronica said, gulping down the last of her coffee and smacking her lips in a way that looked a little too close to a self-satisfied smile. “Check!” she shouted at a server.

Afterwards, as I rounded the corner walking home, I noticed the light sparkling through the leaves of the thicket of trees across from my building. If you cut through the woods you would end up at the National Cathedral and just then, the colored light peeping through reminded me of stained glass.

I wish I could say something happened, but it wasn’t like that. The only thing that happened was that I finally noticed this terrible sinking inside me. I hadn’t succeeded in leaving my troubles on the platform; there was something undeniably wrong.

That night, when I went to bed and closed my eyes, I couldn’t fall asleep. My roommates were watching a reality show and I could hear them groaning each time one of their favorite contestants was eliminated. I still hadn’t shaken that unsettled feeling. I thought of that princess and the pea story about the princess detecting the slightest difference in her bed. I had never considered myself any kind of royalty, but in that moment, staring at the lifeless ceiling as if searching
for cloud formations, it felt like I could detect that the earth had gotten slightly off its axis, that we all had slid a few millimeters in an unintended direction.

I found my mind wandering to conversations Bo and I had had when we first met, like when he first asked me about my name.

“But Sadie is super-American!” he had said.

“I am super-American!” I had countered, and told him how it wasn’t all that strange for Goans to name their kids non-Indian sounding names. I had begun listing my Indian cousins: Blake for William Blake and Svetlana, Nadine. Names were picked up through the tourism industry, or else on the ships where a lot of Goan men worked. My parents named me after a neighbor who helped them when they first emigrated, who taught my mom about coupon-cutting and garage sales while she was pregnant with me. I told him that later, when my mother learned about Sadie Hawkins dances, she was that much more excited. The idea of a woman asking a man to a dance tickled her to no end.

“And anyway, look who’s talking,” I had laughed. “Bo” was his American name. His parents were from Taiwan and he had a whole other non-English name. Probably because he grew up speaking Mandarin, he was able to learn those languages easily, even Portuguese, which would come in handy in Maputo. My parents, my mother especially, was always dead set against me learning Konkani for its lack of real world benefit. “Konkani, who speaks that? No one speaks that!” my mom would say.

Bo had been in Morocco when my grandfather had died, and had missed the funeral, though he’d met him a bunch of times. My grandfather was an
optimist. He believed in love. He and my grandmother were the only people in my whole family who had had a love marriage. The rest, like my parents’, were arranged. I liked caring about Bo, sending him presents. What about that was “Pleasantville”? Why did cynical people always get the last word?

I must have fallen asleep for a stretch because when I woke up, the apartment was silent. It was the middle of the night, but there appeared to be streaks of light above me on the ceiling, diagonal slats that feathered out into the gray. I thought about calling Bo. With the time difference, I would be able to catch him. I dialed his number.

“I can’t sleep,” I said.

“Allo?” a woman with a foreign accent said. “What can’t you do?” She was laughing.

“Is Bo there?”

“She is asking if Bo is there!” she said laughing again.

“Hey,” Bo said.

“Bo?”

“Sadie? I thought we weren’t talking until later. This really isn’t—”

“Bo, what’s going on?”

“It’s not a good time, Sadie. I’ll call you back at the time we said, okay?” I was stunned. This was not Bo’s voice. Not his tone.

“Please Sadie,” he said, and something about the quivering of his plea caused a chemical reaction in me. In a flash, I felt a fireball burst into being, erupting around my heart.
“Bo, what are you doing?” I could still hear the woman laughing.

“Nothing, just driving friends home. Talk later.” When I heard the click, I face planted into my pillow and, reaching my arm back, put another pillow on top of my head. The questions were running nonstop through my mind like a news ticker tape: Why did that woman answer his phone? Who were his friends? What was wrong with his voice? The fireball continued to whirl through my chest.

The next morning, I still couldn’t get the woman’s voice out of my mind. It had been breathy in a way that unnerved me and reminded me of a bathtub full of champagne. Her peals of laughter haunted me. What exactly was so funny?

I went to a popular coffee shop, and while waiting for my drink, saw a flyer for voice lessons on the community bulletin board. It said the first lesson was free. I spent so much of my day carefully listening to voices – both live and pre-recorded, cutting breaths for time, deleting “umms” and “likes” to lessen doubt, or pumping up the volume so someone’s ideas could be heard when their words might otherwise have trailed off into oblivion.

I had noticed some of the young male production assistants slinking into studios in off-hours and recording their own reported stories for local affiliates. I often was pulled in in a pinch to do voiceovers for the non-English voices in the foreign correspondents’ stories – a girl fleeing her village for instance, but I had no story air that I could lay personal claim to. One story early on that I tried to develop was shot down because the editor said my voice sounded “too young,” which apparently translated into no listener taking the news I shared seriously. I wondered if voice lessons could help.
When I got to work, it was clear the whole show team was already in an all hands-on deck mode. Due to a technical glitch in the audio software, we had to resort to one live-to-tape situation after another rather than airing our daily carefully produced reported stories.

In the midst of the chaos, a veteran science reporter with the same bushy eyebrows as my grandfather walked by my desk and, seconds later walked backwards, doing a double take. “You okay?”

“Worst day of my life,” I said.

“Wow. Okay, wanna talk?”

I shook my head. “Thank you though.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “Okay—"

“It’s Bo,” I interrupted him. “He’s cheating on me in Mozambique with an awful woman. I can feel it.”

“Bo?”

I nodded fervently. I couldn’t believe it until I said it aloud. Then it was too awful to take back. I started to cry. The reporter looked at my nameplate.

“Uh, Sadie, whatever is going on with, uh, Bo... it’s not the end of the world. This—” He pointed around to two interns running, then at the show producer who was screaming into the phone, 'Nonplussed! Nonplussed!' “—is not the end of the world, either. Evolution means we adapt—”

“Thanks,” I said, nodding. I realized how young I must seem, crying at work. Girl scout.

“What I'm saying is it’ll be okay eventually – trust me.”
I nodded again, though I didn’t know what "it" he was referring to. “The show must go on,” I said, shrugging.

He looked at me quizzically. “You understand what I am saying, right? This Bo fellow, he’s living his life, okay sure, but no matter what happens, you live yours, okay. You can take care of you. I see that.”

I nodded. “Okay, yeah, okay.”

“I have to go voice this now—” he said. The pages of his script were rolled up in his hand. He looked at me for some assurance.

“Yeah, yeah, go for it. Thanks.”

“Okay then,” he said, rapping his fist on the top edge of my cubicle, as though we had come to some type of understanding.

When he was gone, I sat down in my chair and cried into my hands. Then I wiped up my tears with Kleenex and got back to work. The On the Air sign clicked on, and the show went off without a hitch.

The voice teacher sang a song to introduce herself—Esmereldaaaaah!
Her voice had a smoky quality to it. She swayed around like a jazz singer and was wearing a long forest green gown. Not poofy or anything, just swishy. I wondered if when shopping, she specifically sought out material that swished. Esmerelda was quite elderly with rheumy eyes, and bright (dyed) orange hair and matching bright orange lipstick. She wore dark green glasses attached to a strap that had been bedazzled.
She wanted us to introduce ourselves in song. *You have got to be kidding me*, I thought. But, one after the other, each student piped up. When it was my turn, I sang Say-dee, in a going down way, like the “dee” was way lower than the “say.” The teacher looked tickled, though all I heard was how my voice had captured my downwardly sloping mood.

The teacher talked about her method, which involved an alchemy of yogic chakras and Jungian psychology. The five elements, she said: “earth, fire, water, metal, and air” corresponded to five voice qualities. I wasn’t in a zone where I could retain all these details, but got the gist, like when she said that you may think your voice only has certain parameters, but that if you start to bring more qualities out in your voice, “the rest of your life comes with.”

She played recordings of Maya Angelou and Adele, a few different versions of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” and of people chanting Om. She told us to imagine the voices as thick molasses that carried with it hints of flavors, the way wines carry notes. What do you taste when you hear them? Someone said eucalyptus, and another, mushrooms. I sensed charcoal, but didn’t say anything. The teacher agreed with all who volunteered, “That umami, unctuousness, life-savoriness, is linked to the earth,” she said, looking at us intensely.

“Now,” she said, stepping on her tiptoes and spreading her hands wide with gusto, “we practice!” She led us in a series of drawn down facial expressions, hums, and bellowing repeated sounds.

“Everyone stop trying so hard!!” she instructed. “People, people. This is not about projection, just allowing! You don’t have to have a low voice – just one
that comes from somewhere!” The whole thing felt like acting, but I didn’t mind being someone else just then. Esmerelda said in our next class we would explore our family stories of voice, but for now, our homework was to listen for where we detected earth voices, and see what images embodied similar qualities.

When I saw the huge tree in the park on my way home, I understood what she meant. The tree was grounded and took up a lot of space just the way an earth voice did. It stretched, down and up, just like those chants stretched throughout time. By contrast, I felt small, like a ball in a pinball machine pushed around and zigzagging through the day, through my life.

That night, Bo and I got on Skype like we had planned. It was awful, to see the person you love close up like that, and be unable to touch them. What I had loved about Bo was how he did things all the way. When he was serious, he was way serious. When he was sad, he didn’t just cry, he sobbed. But onscreen that night, Bo was neither here nor there. His eyes would not meet mine. He said he had dreamt he went to the doctor and had to decide whether he or I would get hurt, and he chose me. The doctor then injected me with something and blood ran from my arm. I did not know what to say. I was his diary, after all, and here he was recording his dream.

"You chose me?" I finally asked. He didn’t say a word.

“Bo? Does this have to do with that woman who answered the phone?” I asked. He nodded.

“What? I thought you said she was a friend. Is she more than a friend?” He nodded again.
“What so you kissed her—?” Bo was frozen on the screen. My heart pounded. “Bo?!” His eyes were still blinking.

“You slept with her?” Bo nodded and started bawling. My heart sank. I felt myself going numb everywhere, ossifying. It turned out he hadn’t just slept with her, but with a few other women in Mozambique, women he met at dance clubs that his fellow expats took him too. He said that the women there had never seen anyone like him before. They called him Chinaman and wanted to get with him fast, or that’s how he interpreted their body language.

“Their body language?”

"Yeah, these women. Their dancing. Everyone dances so differently here. Sade, I’ve never gotten this kind of attention before. Their bodies are amazing."

“Amazing?”

“Yeah, they taste different and feel different—”

Than me. That was the end of that sentence. Could he hear what he was saying? This was not how Bo talked. I wanted to hang up then, but another part of me was fixated, the way people get out and stare at car crashes on the side of the road. Who was this person? I had actually never known Bo to go to a nightclub before ever, much less be unfaithful. Had he always wanted—? I didn’t want to think about what he wanted just then. He sobbed louder, and I felt my heart lurch towards him like it always did when he was upset. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I actually couldn’t believe.

“I don’t have you here with me to keep me grounded,” he said. “That’s my problem.”
“So this is my fault?” I asked.

“No, I just, I’ve just been forgetting who I am.”

“Or maybe you want to try out not being who you are”

“Maybe” he muttered. Then, through the tears, and in fits and starts, he talked about how he finally felt like he was truly connecting to the culture, wasn’t just one of the outsiders who would never get the real stories. The more he spoke, the more it felt like I was becoming invisible, swallowed up by the room.

“So what does this mean?” I heard myself say.

“What do you mean what does this mean?” he said in a voice so clueless, in a voice that sounded so much like he didn’t understand there would be any consequences, that I momentarily snapped out of my numbness and nearly shouted my reply.

“Clean break.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“I can’t, I just can’t be in touch with you anymore, Bo.”

“What do you mean? Can’t we be friends?”

“No.”

“What do you mean?”

“No, we can’t be friends.”

“Sadie, that’s crazy. You are a big part of my life. The biggest.”

“And you’re mine,” I said. There was silence. “But now I don’t know who you are.”
“Sadie, why are you talking like this? Of course you know me! I still love you. It’s just, it’s just different here. Nothing’s changed about our long-term plan. I can sow my wild oats – that’s a thing, you know that’s a thing! – and then I can be a better partner for you for when we do get married.”

“You should hear yourself. It’s like you said, now I know who you are. You’re a person who, when given the option of hurting me, would take it.”

“That was just a dream, Sadie,” he said. “You know I would never intentionally hurt you. Even in the dream, it was the doctor, not me.”

“All I know is I thought you were trustworthy. Now I know you are not.”

When the weekend finally came, I woke up even earlier than I had on the work days. Of course, my first thought was of Bo having sex with the mystery woman from Mozambique. The mental visuals made me want to die. To distract myself, I tried to do my voice exercises – but I found I couldn’t utter a sound, just felt more acutely the tears streaming down my face. I wanted to stay curled up in bed, but couldn’t keep my eyes closed with so much light streaming in through my window. It was newly minted, that fresh sunlight that kept pouring in obstinately. So instead, I got up and walked to the park where I had seen the huge tree, and curled up under its shade instead.

The grass was thin and soft and the dirt smelled of iron and rain. At eye level were the leaves, most a nondescript brown or sickly yellow, that had fallen and were strewn all over the ground. I could not stop yawning. “Tuzo con ugraz cota,” my grandfather used to say to me when he saw me like that, a Konkani
expression for “Somebody’s thinking of you” that Goans say when someone yawns.

On my phone, a message appeared from Bo, with a photo of him holding up the package I sent. He was smiling wide so that tiny dimple I loved so much was showing and I realized he had probably held the package up strategically to show it off. I had thought the box I sent was a gift, but what I had really done was launched a time capsule, sent the past out into the future. I deleted the photo and wiped away the tear that had fallen onto my phone. I so wished one day I would understand, could make something beautiful out of this confusion.

I started yawning again and this time found myself bellowing. This was it, with the same tonal quality of the ancient chant the teacher had shown us. I vaguely remembered her saying that the mouth formation of the earth voice was the same as a yawn. The sound felt like its source was rooted deep within the ground.

I watched as a few leaves were carried by the wind and fell beside me. They were a concentrated fiery red-orange, a color so intense, it looked alive and up to something, like maybe the color itself could burst into flames.

I had no fucking clue what I was going to do. Wrecked, that’s what my life plans had become. Wreckage. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust – isn’t that what we had said at grandad’s funeral? Dreams could live and die, too.

My new young eyes, I had said in the eulogy, quoting his words about leaving one life for another. My new young eyes. And for a second, it felt like someone was holding my hand.
Nothing Special

Last night I asked my boy, Cody, how he and my girlfriend, Lorena—at least I think that she’s still my girlfriend, although she won’t answer my calls now—how they got home from the concert last weekend. He said, “Well, it was supposed to have been you came and got us, Dad, but since you didn’t pick up when I called, we finally got ahold of my Uncle Randy, and he came and got us, although he wasn’t happy about it.”

Cody is fifteen. He stays with his mother over in Mulvane where he goes to school. If it were up to her, he’d probably never come to my place, but the divorce papers say I can have him up to two nights a week, so long as it doesn’t interfere with his school. And Cody tells me he likes to come over. He says that he can relax and not be bothered by all the things his mother’s got on her mind. She’s wrapped up with ‘What would Jesus do?’ I’ve got plenty on my mind too.

I’ve been seeing Lorena off and on for a couple of months now. I met her at the filling station off Highway 15 over in Derby. That’s where I stop to get gas and cigarettes after my shift ends at Burgess’. Me and her and Cody, we all went bowling one night a while back and the two of them hit it off. We bowled a few frames, and then I went outside for a cigarette. Didn’t used to be that you had to go outside to smoke there. In fact, they still have the ashtrays right by the scoring machine. When I came back, the two of them were at the Super Mario machine laughing and carrying on, so I just sat down at the bar and had a couple of beers while they finished up their game. Cody tries to get me to play those games with
him, but I don’t know the first thing about them. Then we finished up our bowling. I’ve never counted it out, but she’s probably closer in years to him than she is to me.

Lorena was done up like what they used to call ‘glam’ when she came over the other night; the night she and Cody ended up going to the concert. She had on this white top that looked like it could have been a bathing suit. She had it tucked down into a pair of shiny, black shorts. Her hair is normally straight down to her back, but she had it frizzed out. Turns out, she was dressed that way because her friend Linda from over at the filling station sings in a cover band, and they had a show that night in Wichita. Lorena was planning to go up there to see it. She hardly even looked like herself.

Cody was watching television when she showed up, some program he’s not allowed to watch at his mother’s. He got up from his show and came over to say hi when she walked in. She told him, “Don’t get up on account of me,” but Cody said it was fine. He looked her up and down, I noticed, but he didn’t say anything about her outfit.

She pulled some ground beef from the fridge and started frying it up. She handed Cody an onion and a knife. He was chopping pieces too big, probably the size of a postage stamp, so she took the knife and showed him how to dice them up the right size. Both their eyes were watering from the onions. Lorena was laughing about it. She reached up to rub the tears out of her eyes with that knife in her hand. She about stabbed me with it. God, I wish we’d all could have just had
some dinner, and sat there, and watched some television, like a normal Friday night.

While we were eating our tacos, Lorena tried to convince me I should get dressed up and go to the concert with her. Now don’t get me wrong, I like rock music. I have this poster of Bowie taped to the wall in the bedroom. Fellow at the record store said a poster like the one I got is worth a good bit if it’s in nice condition. I got it when I saw him in Kansas City, years ago, with Cody’s mother. He has a red lightning bolt coming across his face, and beneath his eye there’s two drops of pink paint rolling down his cheek, like he’s crying. Bowie used to wear makeup like that. Vicky was into that. I put her up on my shoulders so she could see him. He put on one hell of a show, if you’re into that sort of thing.

Lorena went to my closet and found a pair of black leather pants. I used to wear them when I had my motorcycle. She held them up to me. She thought they’d still fit me. I told her I wouldn’t fit into them on account of I’ve gained too much weight, which isn’t exactly true. I probably only weigh five pounds more than I did back then. But I know Lorena well enough to know that if I had agreed to go with her to that concert, there was no way she’d have allowed me to just sit there, and have a beer, and listen to the music. No, she’d expect that I get out there and meet her friends and dance with them. There was a time that girls would ask me to go out dancing with them and I would go. We’d be drinking and I’d get loosened up and get out there, thinking that was the way you got laid. But I found that being out there, everyone acting like that, it just made me angry inside. I’m
not sure why. But I’d have to leave the dancefloor. Otherwise I thought I might end up punching someone and get myself thrown out of the bar.

Lorena must have been able to tell that she wasn’t going to get me to put on those pants, because she turned her attention to Cody. She took the leather pants and held them up to his legs. He’s only a couple inches shorter than me at this point. She had him turn around and hold them up to himself. She pressed them into his thighs and checked the length like my mother used to do when she was hemming a pair of pants for me. “I think they’re gonna work,” she said to him, and pushed him into the bathroom to try them on. I looked at her and said, quiet, “Are you crazy? You can’t take him to that concert.” She said to me, “Well, it doesn’t look like you’re going to teach the boy how to take a girl out dancing.”

Cody came out of the bathroom red-faced, wearing my pants. He was walking stiff-legged ‘cause the leather hasn’t been conditioned in so long. Lorena cuffed them at the ankle a little bit so he wouldn’t trip over them, then had him walk up and down the hallway. She put her hands to her mouth and looked over at me and shook her head yes. She asked me one last time, please, would I go with them, but I hadn’t changed my mind and wasn’t going to.

“Your mother wouldn’t have this, I hope you know,” I said to him. He looked at Lorena and then back and me, and then he just nodded. Didn’t smile or try to tell me otherwise, just nodded. Then the two of them left. That was the last I heard about the concert until Cody came over to my place last night.
When Cody showed up yesterday, he was wearing some jacket I had never seen. It was a canvas field coat with mud on the sleeves. He come right into my apartment without really even saying hello, took off the jacket, and started poking his head into every room. He was looking to see if Lorena was over—which she wasn’t—and when he realized that she wasn’t there, he sat down at the dinner table. It took me a while to get it out of him, but turned out he was worried that she would wonder why he wasn’t wearing his varsity jacket. He ran in races last fall and did real well, so he got his letter, along with a bunch of patches which his mother has sewn all down the back. It’s a good-looking jacket. It’s dark green, with thick white leather sleeves. He’s real proud of it. Whenever Lorena sees him in it she says, “Look who’s big man on campus!” Cody pretends to brush it off, but I’ll tell you what, he wears that thing around the apartment, all puffed up, when she’s here.

I asked him, “Where’s your track jacket?”, and he said, “It’s a varsity jacket. You can get one for any sport, not just cross country,” all smart-alecky.

“Well, you know what I mean,” I said. “Where’s your varsity jacket, then?”

“Randy’s got it,” he said.

So, of course, I asked him what his Uncle Randy would want with his varsity jacket. Well, I didn’t realize it, but Randy helped him buy it, and after what happened the other night with Lorena, Randy told him that he wasn’t getting the jacket back until he repays him.
Seeing as I couldn’t get ahold of Lorena, I just warmed up a box of Hamburger Helper. I was getting a little agitated about all this bullshit regarding Randy, so at the dinner table I asked Cody, “What exactly happened after you and Lorena left here the other night?”

“Well,” he said, “She didn’t think any of your shirts went good with those black leather pants, so, after we left here, we stopped by some friend of hers house, some guy named Clark that DJs weddings. I told her that I wanted to stay in the car, but she made me come in so I could try stuff on. He lives in an old farm house by the transfer station with some other guys. She told Clark that I needed a better shirt to go to the concert than the one that I was wearing. He was like, ‘Who are you?’ and Lorena said that I was your son.

“They knew about me. She had told them about me, hadn’t she?” I’m pretty sure those were the guys came in raising hell at the filling station when I was trying to talk to her.

“They seemed to know who you were.”

“Did this Clark fellow know that she and I were together?”

“I think he did because he said to her, ‘You mean the one that you're bleeping because he’s more mature?’” Cody made air quotes with his fingers and he said mature like “maa-toouur.” I guess I am, if by mature you mean not acting like a little prick.

And then Cody said, “Lorena told him, ‘shut up and find me a shirt.’ We went to his closet. I picked out a black button down with a white collar, but Lorena said that it looked like something you’d wear to church. She wanted me to
wear this purple one, but I told her I wouldn’t, so we agreed on a black t-shirt that fit real tight.” Between telling me all this, Cody was wolfing down Hamburger Helper. I scraped the rest of my portion onto his plate.

“Her car started acting kind of weird,” he said, “like it was going to die every time we were stopped at a red light. She said that it always does that, but I could tell that something was wrong. Anyway, we make it to the place where the concert was. It was so loud inside that we could barely hear each other when we tried to talk. She had to lean in and repeat everything she was saying right into my ear. Her friend Linda ran up and hugged her. Linda was like, ‘Look at you honey!’ and ran her hands all over that white outfit Lorena was wearing. I was like…” Cody opened his mouth and his eyes real wide. As far as I can tell, Linda’s only friendly if she likes you.

Then Cody said, “Linda said to Lorena she wanted to introduce someone to her and starts pulling her by the hand, but Lorena stops her, and looks at me, and Lorena had to explain who I was. Linda leans into Lorena so she can talk into her ear and then they both look at me, then they say something to each other again, and then Lorena says to Linda that I’m fifteen. I felt like a complete idiot. Linda is wearing these black boots that come up past her knee. She leans over and says to me, ‘Tell your dad he owes me twelve bucks for the vodka and cigarettes that I let him take from the store the other night.’ She said that you told her that you’d be in the next night, or the night after that, after you got paid, to pay for it, but that she hasn’t seen you since.”
I got up from the table and put my dish in the sink. I lit a cigarette and thought to myself, *How am I going to explain this one to him?* I actually had just got paid that night that she gave me the stuff. I had my check right in my pocket. But after I pay rent and set aside some money to give to his mother, I don’t have much of anything left. “Linda’ll get her money,” I said. “I just hadn’t cashed my check yet. And it was not twelve bucks, it was eight and a half, because I don’t mind drinking cheap vodka.”

And then he says to me, “Linda says to Lorena, ‘You can’t keep feeding stray dogs.’” I took a long pull on my cigarette and then put it in the ashtray on the kitchen counter and sat back down across from him, because I needed to hear the rest of this. Cody said to me, “After Linda said that, Lorena looks at her kind of laughing, kind of shocked, and does a soft slap across Linda’s cheek and she says to Linda, ‘I ought to really smack the bleep out of you, and I would except that he’s here,’ and she points at me.”

I thought to myself, I wonder what other stray dogs she’s feeding besides me, but, of course, I didn’t say that to Cody.

He goes on, “So anyway, Linda goes and starts warming up with her band and Lorena motioned for me to follow her. She poked her head into the women’s bathroom to see if there is anyone in there, which there wasn’t, and she tells me to follow her in. I was like, *what?* I looked at her like, ‘Are you crazy?’, but she pulls me in there and we go into the stall and she locks the door. I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, but,” he said.
And now I’m thinking, where the hell is this story going, but I said to him, “Go on, I’m sure I’ll hear about it sooner or later,” trying to act real casual. My cigarette had burned down, so I lit up another one and went and got me a beer.

Cody said, “So, we’re crammed into this little bathroom stall, barely enough room for the two of us. She reaches into her purse and pulls out all these different color tubes, one red, one black, and a little jar that’s gold, and she lines them up along this little white bin that’s in there. I was, like, so confused why she had brought me into the women’s bathroom. Someone else came in and went into the other stall. I could hear her peeing the way women do. I was kind of freaking out, because I knew that other lady that had come in must have seen under the door that there were four legs standing in the stall we were in.

“So, Lorena takes one of the tubes, turns out they were makeup or face paint or whatever, and she tells me to hold still and close my eyes, and she starts to smear some of this stuff on my eyelids. It feels pretty ticklish to have her touching me right there, and I’m like, ‘What are you doing?’ and she just tells me to hold still. She finishes with my eyes, and holds up a little pocket mirror, and I can see that my eyelids are bright red. Then she grabs the black one and applies it to my lips. She tells me to look at her, and she starts doing this thing with her lips where she’s rubbing one lip back and forth over the other one, and she tells me I need to copy what she’s doing so that the black lipstick will spread all around, so I do it. She holds up the mirror again and I told her that I felt like an idiot looking like that, but she said that I would blend right in, and that no one would even act
like it was weird. And she was right, that’s the way it was. I got out there and I sort of forgot that I looked that way."

“So she took you in the bathroom to put makeup on you?” I asked him.

“Yeah, but I wasn’t finished,” he said. “So after she has me all painted up, she takes the gold one and scoops out some of it and starts painting her face with it. She looked crazy!”

“Sounds like it,” I said. I’d had about enough, but he was charged up.

“Wait,” he said, “it gets better. She hands me the gold jar and takes down the straps of her top and wants me to smear the stuff all over her back!”

I’m thinking, better for who?

“So I’m trying to spread the paint across her back and not make a big mess, but it was kind of difficult because there are these hairs, little fine brown hairs all over her skin, and the paint stuck to them and made little clumps. So I’m rubbing at them, trying to get them to lay down on her back.”

Then he asked me, “Do all women have hairs like that all over them? It should have made me laugh, him asking me about her hairs. I just nodded to him.

He said, “Well, I just didn’t realize that girls have them. So, she’s got her whole face covered at this point and she pulls down her top a little further and she’s putting the stuff on her chest all the way down to her boobs! Her boobs were sort of hanging out a little bit, and I was like, oh my God, what is happening?”

At this point, I was thinking, he’s fifteen, what is she thinking? which, I guess, when I was fifteen I was probably doing a lot worse. But I stood up and
pushed my chair in and asked him, “How long were the two of you in there? How long did this all take?”

He says, “I don’t know. I couldn’t even tell you.” Well, it was clear that he wasn’t finished with his story, so I told him to wait a second while I got another beer and I sat down. Both my hands were shaking a little bit at this point.

He said, “We finally get out of the stall. There are these two ladies in the bathroom standing at the sink and they turn and look at us. Lorena acts like, no big deal. We go out to where Linda’s band is starting to play. The singer, his tongue was bright red, like there was blood in his mouth or something. Someone in the audience comes up to Lorena and hands her a cigarette, but, turns out, it was Mary Jane. She takes a real big drag on it and holds her breath. I’m like, when are you going to breathe, and then she starts coughing. She takes another littler puff and hands it back to the guy. Then she just closes her eyes and is sort of swaying to the music, not really dancing, just swaying like she was a million miles away.”

“Just alone, not dancing with anyone?” I asked him. Now I’m beginning to think that maybe I should have gone along just to make sure that I could keep an eye on her.

And he said, “She was not really dancing.”

“But she was alone, or was there someone right there with her?” I said.

And he said, “Well, I was right there next to her.”

“Did you say something to her?”

“No, it didn’t seem like I should interrupt her.”
“But I thought that she was going to teach you to dance. Wasn’t that the whole point?” I asked him.

He said, “We did do this thing where she grabbed my hand and then stretched out her arm. She showed me how to twirl her towards me and into my body. Then we would look at each other in the eyes, acting like we were real serious and everything, although we couldn’t help but crack up when we did it. Then I held her arm to her back real tight and dipped her down so far that her hair touched the dancefloor. The lights from the disco ball shined off her gold paint. I wasn’t very good at first, but we practiced it a few times.”

“And how long did this go on?” I asked him.

“What do you mean?” he said.

“I mean the two of you twirling around?”

“I don’t know. We danced for a while.”

“Was anyone even listening to the music?” I asked him. I like to listen to the music, which is near impossible when everyone is just jumping around and screaming.

“We listened,” he said.

“Tell me one song you heard then.”

“Bang It On,” he says.

“Never heard of it.”

“Well, everyone there knew it and was singing along,” he said. “All these girls were dancing around and singing. I was dancing with all these girls that I didn’t know, no spins like Lorena and I had been doing, but just holding hands
and bouncing to the music. Bang it on, bang it on. I pretended like I was holding a microphone and I was like, ‘Bang it on! Bang it on!’” He pretended he was a rock star. “People were cheering me on. When the song was over, Lorena gave me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek.”

I realized what song he was talking about. “It's bang a gong,” I said to him. “It’s about sex and drugs. They were laughing at you because you’re a kid singing about sex and drugs.”

Cody’s face straightened up. He said to me, “Randy said that they were probably demon possessed.”

And I said, “How in the world does Randy know about a bunch of stoners at a rock concert anyway?” But before Cody could answer, I just had to get something off my chest, so I said to him, “All this bullshit Randy and your mother are feeding you about Jesus-this and demon-possessed that. There ain’t nobody at that concert that was demon-possessed. They were just a bunch of assholes who got stoned.”

He proceeded to tell me that I didn’t understand about all this stuff because I don’t read the Bible. I rolled my eyes at him, but he wasn’t finished. “And I was telling Randy,” he said, “that the guy sang a song about a leper messiah, which refers to Jesus, so it was something making fun of Jesus.”

“That’s Bowie. It wasn’t anything making fun of Jesus,” I said. I told him that all that stuff is just a big show to sell records. “How in the world did Randy get involved in this whole thing?” I asked him. That’s when he told me about what happened at the river.
“The band played pretty late, like maybe one in the morning or something. After that, they turned on the lights. Until then I hadn’t really been able to see the place. It was really nothing special. The floors were just kind of like this.” Cody tapped the toe of his shoe on the vinyl flooring in my dining room. “There were some tables pushed together in the back. They had red and white tablecloths, the exact same as the ones Mom has at the house. With the lights on, I could see that Lorena’s face paint was all messed up from the sweat. She had these rings around her eyes where it had dripped off and you could see the regular skin underneath. I was thinking, I wish they would turn the lights back off.

“So she says goodbye to everyone that she knew that was still there—most everyone had already left by then—and we head out to the car. Just like I had thought, the car wouldn’t start. It was like ‘ruh, ruh, ruh’, then ‘click, click, buzz.’ She tried again. Same thing. Then it wouldn’t turn over at all. She thought that maybe there was someone back at the place who could give us a jump, but she didn’t have any cables. And besides, by the time we walked back over there it was locked up and there was nobody around, so I bummed a quarter from Lorena. That’s when I tried calling you,” he said.

After they had left my place that night, I popped in a movie and drank some beers to try and get my mind off the fact that my kid and my girlfriend were out at some bar I didn’t know where. I probably drank the better part of a twelve-pack, plus a few Crown and Cokes. “I must have fallen asleep and not heard the phone ring,” I told him.
“We tried you like four or five times,” he said.

“You know how I sleep,” I said.

“Well, anyway, of course I wasn’t going to call Mom, so I decided to call Randy, because he told me a while back that I was one of his vital relationships for Promise Keepers, which means we call on each other any time we’re struggling, he says. I wouldn’t say I was struggling, except for that her car wouldn’t start, but I called him anyways. I woke him up and he was pretty irritated, I think. He says, ‘What are you doing there this time of night?’ and I sort of explained about the concert and Lorena, and he says, ‘You know, buddy, sounds like you’re in a little bind, I’m glad you called me. I’m on my way,’ so I was sort of expecting he was going to go easy on me. Even so, I’m trying to wipe the makeup off my eyelids. At first, when he pulled up, he was all, ‘What’s going on here, buddy? What’s this on your face?’ I told Lorena, ‘This is my Uncle Randy.’ When he looked at her I could tell he was actually pretty upset. He’s staring at her in that outfit she was wearing and covered in gold makeup. She tried to explain to him that she was a friend of yours and Randy says, ‘That figures.’ He takes her keys from her and tries the engine. He knew right away it needed an alternator, so he told both of us to get in his truck.

“For probably five minutes none of us say anything. Randy just gets on the highway and heads south. Finally, he looks at Lorena and says, ‘Where am I taking you, ma’am?’ and I realize that I don’t even know where she lives. She starts explaining that she lives over on the west side of Derby, past the quarry. Turns out we had already missed her exit. Randy hits the brakes and starts to do a
u-turn right in the middle of the road, but then he’s like, ‘You know what? There’s someplace we should go first,’ and he jerks the wheel.

“I look over at Lorena and I can tell she’s pretty freaked out. She started crying a little bit. Well, Randy slows down and starts asking us questions. He was all like, ‘Tell me what you’ve been doing?’ and ‘Who were you there with?’ and ‘Does your mom know that you go to stuff like this?’ I tried to explain about Linda and the band, but that’s when Randy started talking about this sort of music being Satanic and everything. Well, she’s been sitting between us not saying a word, and Randy says, ‘Smells like you have been partaking in some illegal substances.’ She just closed her eyes and tears were coming down her face. He said to me that I should know that marijuana gives the devil a foothold to come into your heart and your mind, should I ever think of trying pot. I didn’t know where we were going, and I just wanted to get home as quick as possible, so I just said, ‘Yes sir.’

“We finally got off on County Road 53 like we were heading to Randy’s place, but instead of going west, he turns east, towards the river. He pulled off onto this dirt road that led to a boat launch. It was where they took me to be baptized. He asked me, ‘Cody, do you remember this spot?’ I nod and he says to Lorena, ‘This is where Cody was baptized.’ Then he says, ‘Ma’am, have you ever been baptized?’ and she just closes her eyes again.

“Randy gets out of the truck and he comes around to my door and says, ‘We need to get the two of you cleaned up,’ and he opens the door. She and I both just stood there by the truck for a minute wondering exactly what we were doing
and then Randy says, ‘Well, hurry up,’ and he gives us a little push in our backs. Lorena says to him, ‘Just take me home, please?’ The moon was out and it was real bright. Randy peeks into the cab of his truck and he says, ‘You’ve already made a mess of gold paint on my seats,’ and he nudges us in our backs again, and tells us to go on.

“The river was pretty low and running smooth, so I waded out up to my shins and started splashing some water on my face. Lorena is standing on the river bank and she’s crying pretty hard at this point. I can hear her crying over the trickle of the water. Then, Randy took her by the arm and led her into the water. She really let out a wail when he done that. The noise startled me and I looked around to make sure that no one could hear us, but of course there was no one out there but us.

“She bends herself over and puts her hands up over her head and I can hear her just shaking. Randy yells at her to start washing herself off or he’s going to do it for her, so she starts to splash a little water on herself, but it isn’t doing anything to get the paint off. Randy takes his hand and really starts splashing her with water, and she’s yelling at him to stop.

“Randy seems pretty beside himself at this point, so I’m using my t-shirt, the one that Clark had loaned me, to wipe the makeup off my face. Randy makes his way over to me. He’s still got his boots on and they're getting kind of stuck in the mud, so it takes him a while, but he comes over and he says to me, ‘Cody, these are the waters that the Lord used to cleanse you from your sins. You went under, and when you came back up, you were reborn.’ Then he says, ‘I don’t ever
want you hanging out with folks like that ever again, you hear.’ Before I can tell him ‘Yes, sir,’ he grabs the back of my head and pushes it down in the water, and he holds me under there for a second, then he lets me up, then pushes my head right back down into the river. He does this four or five times. Finally he lets up for good, and I’ve swallowed a bunch of water, and I’m coughing and sputtering.

“I look over and Lorena is sitting on the riverbank, and she’s crying and saying for Randy to stop doing what he’s doing to me. Randy clomps over towards her, and I’m thinking, oh geez, now he’s planning to do the same to her. She stands up and looks like she might run if he gets any closer, and I’m thinking, how in the world is she going to make it home if she runs off into the woods? Then Randy reaches into his back pocket and pulls out his handkerchief, and he dunks it down in the river to get it all soaking wet, and he walks up to her and puts in right up into her face. He shakes it a few times and finally he yells, ‘Take it!’ She took it from him and covered her face. He said to her, ‘Like a ring of gold in the snout of a swine,’ which I don’t know exactly what that was about, but . . .

“I went up to her. She was wiping at her face and arms. The makeup was all smeared down her cheeks at this point. I tried to say to her, ‘Maybe it was a bad decision,’ but she just shook her head at me, and we walked up the embankment.

“When we got back to the truck, she made me sit next to Randy. He was going on about how dangerous it was to use drugs, and what if the cops had shown up. He said, ‘Someday she’ll thank me for this.’ I didn’t know what else to say but ‘Yes, sir.’″
Cody finished off the milk that was still left in his glass and walked over to the cabinet where I usually keep some cookies or candy. I turned my chair so that I could see him. I asked him, “Did you get her home?”

“Yeah. She wouldn’t tell him exactly which place was hers, but we dropped her off close enough, she said, that she could walk the rest of the way.”

He came back to the table with a stack of Oreo cookies in his hand.

“Randy came in to check to see if Mom was up, I guess. Him and her sat at the kitchen table. I went right to my room. In the morning my varsity jacket was gone, and Mom told me Randy said that it would be his until I could repay him.” He put a cookie in his mouth. “She’s mad you let me go to the concert.”

I thought of the look on her face when I told her I was taking her to the Bowie show. “She wasn’t mad when I took her to that David Bowie concert back when we were together. She had the time of her life,” I told him.

He says to me, “I think I know how Mom felt.” He leaned back in his chair. “I’m thinking of getting into rock music. It will have to be Christian rock, but that’s ok. They’ve got that now, and it’s pretty good, some of it.”

“If you’re bored, I’ll get you a job with Burgess.”

“I’m not bored, Dad. It’s not about being bored. Why do you have to be like that?” The legs of his chair slammed to the floor and he stomped off.

I wish I knew.
The Word For House

We’d finally left behind Arizona and my father, and we were living with John in Salt Lake City, in the house that he owned. A beautiful place that I loved from the first moment I saw it. In that house I had my own bed. I liked to keep my eyes closed so that I could listen to the morning. It was the sound of water splashing: my mother washing her face, John brushing his teeth beside her. It was the deep and rhythmic breathing of my brothers, sleeping. And for the last few months it had been the rise and fall of voices, coming through the door to the living room, which we kept closed at night so that the refugee family that lived in there had privacy. Vietnamese sounded like singing to me: faint, sad singing. Ha’s wife murmured ceaselessly, her lips moved around closed teeth and breathy sounds streamed out all day.

It was back in the 1970’s. I was just a little kid. Mom had been married to John for three years. In that time she was pregnant twice and now I had two brothers. I liked this house; I shared a bedroom with the boys, and Mom and John slept just on the other side of the bathroom. It was good to be in a separate room, but to have her so close. As I lay there, I heard her move to the kitchen. I got up and dressed for school.

Lien, Ha’s sister, was laying out the bowls on the table. She was a teenage beauty, slight and fine. She stepped like a bird, with stiff legs bent sharply at the knee. Long black hair hung loose at her back that morning. By the time I returned
from school it would be twirled into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. She
gestured to the bowl and I sat down to eat some kind of soup. It wasn’t cereal, or
toast, but I didn’t care. I knew this girl had come from the war and I could eat
anything she put in front of me. I know now that it is not the same, but back then I
felt like I too was living in exile. That I could be a kind of sister to Lien, if she let
me.

Ha’s wife came in and set my little brother in my lap. Diego was always
moving his legs and arms, reaching and pushing and gripping. It was exhausting.
Ha’s wife and sister sped around the kitchen, not touching, almost dancing. They
stayed busy so that it never seemed like they were here to stay. The four of them,
Ha, his wife, their daughter and Lien had been sleeping in a roll of blankets on our
living room floor for many weeks. Eventually they would move to their own
house, a newer one in a nicer neighborhood, but none of us knew when that would
be. Sometimes, John said, you have to make amends. He was in the war over
there.

I set my spoon down. Mom walked into the room. She looked rested. Her
eyes were relaxed and I let Diego climb down off my lap. Everyone stopped to
watch him toddle from my knee to our mom’s arms. Step, step and we all sung
out our praise. It was startling to see Ha’s wife and Lien smile. Their teeth were a
matching set of tiny pearls, flat and dull.

My friend Juan appeared at the screen door, a mirage that dissolved in the
early sunlight. Time to go to school. We took the fast way, a shortcut through the
parking lot of the go-go bar. He wanted to race to the corner of South Temple. I
said sure, even though I knew I couldn’t beat him. We both crouched down like sprinters. He got a better start and already he was speeding away from me. He always joked that he was fast because his family had to run here all the way from Mexico. It was a long block and by the time I reached the corner he was laughing at me. I let my body crash into his. This made him laugh even harder. I laughed too, at how I almost toppled him.

We waited for the stoplight, and once we were across Juan asked, “Do you want to marry me?”

I considered the question, and the way he laughed when I ran into him, and I said, “Probably, yes.” He was the only kid at school that didn’t stare at my face when I wasn’t looking. And he never asked me about it. Not once. It was like he didn’t even see how messed up it was. Or maybe he didn’t care. But I knew he’d care when we were older. He’d want to marry a pretty girl, one whose face wasn’t all smashed up and shapeless. For now though, he whistled the rest of the way to school and I had to skip a little to keep up.

Ms. Cano’s second grade classroom was stifling. She had black hair that made a bristly halo around her face. She threw words out of her mouth, rapid-fire Spanish words. She spit her English words too, but they were accented with a lilt that softened her fury. Her hands were mostly balled up in fists when she talked. No air was moving in the room. The windows overlooked the blacktop. They framed asphalt, chain fence, monkey bars. My hands rested on the smooth surface of the desk. My desk. Under it I had an open compartment where I stored my things.
Roll call.

Her mouth twisted urgently as she spat out my name.

I said, “Here. Aquí.” This was the bilingual class.

“That’s not your name,” suggested a fat boy sitting behind me. I remember that he always wore a double holster, no guns.

“Yeah it is,” I whispered back.

“Well it wasn’t last year.”

“So?” I made a fist under my desk where he could see it.

After he married my mom, John adopted me. I didn’t have my father’s name anymore. Mom too. Now all of us, me, my brothers, my mom and John, we all have the same last name.

I looked up. Everyone had turned to stare at me. Ms. Cano glared, her eyes circled with dark, ashy bruises that made her look tired all the time.

“I said take out your workbook!” Then she pushed my name out like a watermelon seed.

I slid back my chair and tilted my desk forward so I could see inside it: a jumble of crumpled paper and pushed in books. I reached in to pull out my workbook and the entire desk slipped from my grasp and crashed to the floor.

Ms. Cano jumped back. She looked so scared but what she said was, “You are such a little brat!”

Heat spread over my face and I looked away from her to see Juan lift one eyebrow at me, “Que bruja,” he mouthed at me, “what a witch.” Then he turned narrowed eyes to our teacher. I took a deep breath.
“No I am not,” I told her.

Ms. Cano stared at my forehead, or just beyond, into my brain. She exhaled. “Schwa dear, escort this girl to the office please.”

Ms. Cano’s voice was suddenly sweet like candy and I thought I might cry from hearing it. Schwa was a Vietnamese girl who sat in front of me in class. Sometimes her long black hair touched my desk and I used my pencil to brush it away. She smiled the fake smile that really meant I am better than you and moved toward me. My desk was upturned, papers and books in a pile around my chair. I walked away with Schwa trailing behind me. I didn’t look at her until we were in the hall.

I never saw her talking with the other Vietnamese kids. And she signed her name with an upside down e. It’s something she and Ms. Cano worked out together when we were learning grammar: a private joke between the two of them. Schwa was taller than I was. I thought she might have been older, maybe even ten. Sometimes, John said, the refugee kids get held back so that they can catch up on reading and writing. They were in a war, he said, or in a camp, or on a sickening and crowded boat. Most of them didn’t get to go school before now.

Schwa’s face was round and her skin very pale. She was still smiling that same fake smile. “How many swear words do you know?” she asked me.

“Loads,” I said.

“Do you know pussy?”

“Yep.”

“How about shit?”
“Yep.”

“Fucker? Asshole?”

The words were shaped all wrong on her tongue.

“I can go to the office by myself, Schwa.” I walked ahead and didn’t turn around to see if she was still following when I walked through the door.

When Juan left me at our front gate that afternoon I could hear my baby brother crying inside the house. I ducked into the garden where the corn was high above my head. Silky threads brushed my cheek as I slipped through the rows. I put my hand to my jaw and tried to push it into place; I pinched my nose, willing it to rise up and take form. It didn’t work. My jaw still jutted out to the side and the bridge of my nose sunk beneath my cheeks.

My mother’s garden was prodigious. It wrapped around the side of our adobe house. There was every kind of vegetable you can think of. The rows were neat and orderly. I pulled a cherry tomato off the vine as I headed for the back door. The crying had stopped and I heard a Vietnamese song coming from the kitchen. Ha’s wife sat at the table, nursing my baby brother. I popped the tomato in my mouth and when I bit down hot sweetness covered my tongue. My brother’s tiny mouth was clamped onto her nipple, and his hair was matted down with sweat. She had her hand wrapped around his skull, protecting him. Her own baby was asleep on a blanket at her feet.

After dinner I was digging up some metal in the dirt beside the house. Rusted and yellow, I suspected it might be a lost toy dump truck. John sat on the steps of the front porch watering the lawn. I remembered the first time I pressed
my bare feet into this grass. Back then the scars on my face were still red and swollen. When John said we could live with him, my mom grabbed my hand and I could feel her relief seep into me through her skin. John wore his work clothes: blue denim shirt and jeans with a loop for his hammer. He held his thumb over the nozzle. Droplets of water arced across the walk and fell on the straight blades of grass. They were like a thousand people, standing tall in a sudden gale.

I was angry with the principal for calling my house. And my teacher: I thought of her and my stomach hardened into a knot. I pried loose the bed of the dump truck and it came away in a spray of dirt and gravel. I stood. John called me over and pulled me onto his lap. When he handed me the hose, I pressed my lips together to keep from crying and apologizing. I could tell by the angle of his shoulders that he was disappointed in me. I had to weed the garden every day for a week. That was my punishment. It wasn’t fair, but I didn’t mind the work. Next time there would be a spanking. The light was changing; shadows made patterns on the sidewalk and the grass turned from green blades to black.

Mom came around the corner of the house. I leaned my back against John’s chest. Her face caught the full glare of the setting sun: pink, forgiving. She was there to call me to bedtime. Diego rode on her hip. As he leaned away from her body, he called out, “Thân phu.” It was his first word, and it was Vietnamese for father.

I said, “I think I will call you Dad now, too.”

He jumped up, taking me with him as he danced around the porch, holding me in his arms. He swayed and lumbered and motioned to Mom, who spun into
him. They pressed together and Diego and I were in the midst of all that as they pranced and laughed and he called out, “Dad, dad dad dad dad,” like a drum tap tap tapping, or even a melody in the middle of a long song until we all joined in.

In the morning he was leaving for the weekend; he’d be back Monday afternoon. He had National Guard duty. I didn’t like it when he went on these trips, but I promised to take care of the boys, and to help my mom. He stayed in the army so that he could keep flying helicopters like he did in Vietnam. I’d heard my mom fighting with him about it late one night. I’d listened from the bathroom as he told her he couldn’t stop, that if he stopped flying then everything would be shit, and all of it would have been for nothing. “It was all for nothing,” she’d said in a hissing whisper, “don’t you know that by now?” Pretty soon after that Mom signed us up to host Ha’s family.

Before bed, I sat at the table with Ha. My brothers were in the bath and we had the kitchen to ourselves. Ha was a quiet man, with dark hair and lines around his eyes. He moved like an old man but I could see that he was younger than my parents. He smiled, and bowed, and watched us all very closely. Even me. He took out a pen and wrote a list of words on a blank white sheet of paper. Sweeping lines intersected like buildings on the page. Under each flourish he wrote the word out in careful cursive, then translated it into English for me. *Tam phu,* he murmured. Our father. *Thần phu.* Our blood-father. *Già phu.* Our mother’s present husband. *Duong phu.* Our adopted father.

That night I dreamed. I dreamed of Ha, but now he was an old man walking down a long, long road. It was a road for men. And it was only for men
who had seen the war. I was invisible in this dream. I was all air and no mass, flying. I traveled on the road at top speed, and Ha never got any closer. Instead, he multiplied until there were thousands of men, all bent over as they marched forward toward God knows what, anything was better than what they left behind. As I lapped up the miles, my body took on weight and solidity and I felt the press of Mom’s arm around me and now we were in the old truck, speeding down the highway, danger and devastation getting closer and closer. I tried to look away from what was coming next, but it would come, as it always did in these dreams. The truck sped onward, Mom’s arm tightened around my chest, I saw the car in front of us jerk to a stop. Suddenly I was hurtled forward, like falling, flying, floating on the molecules of wind and moisture and blood and fear. I woke up right before my face was smashed, right before the bones were shattered.

When Juan and I arrived at school on Monday morning I was determined. I promised Dad I would keep my cool and that’s what I intended to do. When fat Jimmy started to snicker during roll call I just held my hands on my desk and breathed like Mom taught me.

Lunchtime. Ms. Cano led us through the school to the cafeteria where we took our trays to the second grade table. It was always the same at lunch, every day. Juan and I sat together at the end, and the twins Tracy and Teresa sat nearby. They had matching cornrows. Their mom spent hours working those braids, fingers like lightning weaving in and out of their stiff black-girl hair.

The bathroom on the third floor, there by the lunchroom, was bigger than the other ones downstairs. It had so many stalls and a counter by the sinks. I saw
her first in the mirror. Her reflection was backwards, and wrong-sided, and dim with dust and layers of filmy grime. Schwa stood by the sink, eating with her fingers out of a paper bag. Her long hair partially covered her face; her sweater was draped over her shoulders. She lifted her eyes to mine. Then she froze. I passed by without a word and went into one of the stalls. While I peed, it occurred to me that I had never seen Schwa at the lunch table. Not once since school started.

I flushed and came out. “Why don’t you eat lunch at the table?”

She didn’t look up at me in the mirror.

“No one would care about your sack lunch. And school lunch is free anyway.”

She shook her head so I left her there.

Juan nodded when I sat back down. The twins were giggling as Tracy poured milk into her Jell-O. I decided not to say anything about Schwa and her bathroom lunch. Dennis, a white kid, walked around the chairs to stand by us. We looked at him.

“You look like your face was run over by a Mack truck,” he told me.

Now this was true. In the years since my face was smashed it had grown only around the edges. Flat nose, concave cheeks, and a chin that just kept growing, sideways and crooked. It happened just after my father left for the last time. He’d been gone for weeks and we didn’t know where he was. Turned out he was living in the next town over with his new lady. We saw him one day when we were driving by. From the car window he looked small and tired, standing there
on the sidewalk with his arm around some skinny woman. My mom cried, tears and snot streaming down her face, as she drove out of that town. It was on the way home that the wreck happened.

Dennis leaned down and put his face close to mine. “It’s all flattened out in the middle,” he said.

As insults go, this one was accurate. But still, I forgot my promise to Dad and stood up.

When fighting someone bigger, it’s best to strike fast and without warning. Before I could even think about it, my hand drew back and swung forward. The flat of my palm connected with the side of his head with terrible force. It felt hard and mean and right. The skin of my hand prickled with heat. I was itching to do it again. Dennis started wailing and that’s when I knew I’d be back in the office that afternoon.

After school, Juan and I took the long way home. We walked through the alley behind the car wash. Someone had built a shelter out of cardboard and wooden pallets and a blue wrinkled tarp. Juan and I peered inside as we passed by. There was a twin mattress, neatly made up with blankets and a pillow, on the ground against the wall. There was no one home, so we kept walking.

“Do you think you’ll be in trouble with John?” he asked.


“Wow,” he said. “That’s good. He is your dad.” I didn’t meet Juan until I moved here, so it made sense that he would say that. He was quiet for a moment, and then he told me that his family might move when summer comes. His dad and
uncles needed to find work, there wasn’t much in Salt Lake anymore, and they thought it might be better up north.

“But what if it’s cold up there?” It was a dumb thing to say, but I was caught off guard. I was thinking, he’s the one that wants to marry me.

He smiled and raised one eyebrow at me. “I can get a coat,” he said.

When I got home I went straight to the garden. The kitchen was full of Ha’s wife and sister and the babies took up the rest of the house. I had weeding work to do. I wanted Dad to see the clean dirt, loose and neat and free of sprouts. I crouched down under the corn and got my hands around a clump of green stems. I pulled. It stuck. This work was going to be nothing but boring. I rested my bum on the ground and a ladybug lit on my knee. When its wings folded like a paper fan into its back I saw that her pattern was reversed: she was black with red dots. I laid my finger on my knee, just alongside her miniscule body. She climbed up my skin, so light I almost couldn’t feel her at all. I imagined she was a princess among ladybugs. That was why her colors were all wrong. A princess who was in danger.

Fly away home, I told her.

Your children will burn.

I flipped her away.

The row in front of me was a long one. I had to do it all before dinner. I knew what time Dad would be home. And I really didn’t want to give him any more reasons to spank me.
By the time I went inside, it was quiet in the house and my mother was the one at the stove, like she used to be when we first moved in here, before Ha’s family came. I put my face against her hip while she stirred. She hooked her thumb around my ear and cupped my cheek in her palm. With her pinky she traced the line of the scar between my eyes, touching the ridge there. It was just a light thing that she did sometimes, absentmindedly, feeling the way that the skin had knitted itself back together.

She told me to set the table. I looked at the clock and was alarmed to see that it was 5:30 already. “Where’s Dad?”

“I don’t know. He should be home by now.”

Someone should have told me he was going to be late. He was always back every day at the same time. He walked through the door each afternoon smelling like wood and dust and salty sweat.

“Set a place for him,” she said as she turned back to the stove. “He’ll probably be here any minute.”

I held my baby brother while Mom spooned rice and beans onto each plate. Ha and his wife and Lien, too, were clustered at one end of the table. They all stared at their plates. Ha’s baby was curved into her mother’s lap. Diego was in his high chair, pressing beans into his hair. Mom told me to eat. Ha said something in Vietnamese. His wife and sister laughed behind their hands. Ha’s wife leaned forward to scoop rice into her mouth.

Ha looked over at Mom. “John?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. And then, “I don’t know.”
He nodded and spoke Vietnamese again. This time the women didn’t laugh.

Dinner was pretty quiet with Dad gone. As soon as the adults finished eating they each left the table without a word.

Soon I was left in the kitchen with Lien and my brothers. Lien rested her hand on Diego’s head, letting her fingers tangle up in his hair. For an instant, I imagined our story with Lien as the oldest sister. She slipped into my place like a cloud on wind. I was emptiness, lightness. I was a lonely middle child.

We cleared the food and dishes and she waved me away from the sink. Lien always preferred to do the washing alone. When she was done with them, the glasses lined the counter, sparkling and clear. Our dining room was the biggest room in the house. There was no table in there; we always ate in the kitchen. Instead, we had an old record player that belonged to my grandpa. Under the heavy wooden lid the needle dropped on *Get Off Of My Cloud, Mannish Boy, White Rabbit*. There was a desk too, in the corner. On top was an intricately carved stand shaped like an X where the dictionary lay open all the time. The black metal telephone crouched in the shadow of its bindings. I went straight to the desk, leaving Lien to polish the glasses, and sat in Dad’s chair. From there I could see the street and the path up to the back door. I leaned over the dictionary to read the words on the page. *Parity. Parlance. Parle.* The sun was going down, and the rays that streamed in the window were a pale pink. *Prodigious. Proditor. Prodrome.*
Waiting for Dad like this took all my concentration. I thought, when he comes up the walk he will be wearing army clothes and his boots will be unlaced; when he steps in the door, the air will rush back into the room. He should have been home by now. I thought of my real father. It was the click of his boots that came to mind. The sound of his heels on the porch of our old house. I didn’t imagine his dark curling hair, or the smell of his skin, or the shape of his hand.

Once the baby was out of the bath, Mom made a few calls. I pretended to be busy with the dictionary while she talked. Ha listened from the doorway. She didn’t get any answers so we all went back to waiting.

At bedtime there was the quiet singing of Lien. My mom was in the bedroom: nursing the baby, laying out pajamas, smoothing blankets, pacing the floor. Ha’s baby daughter cried out. His wife made the shushing sound of all mothers everywhere. My mom had been like this house, right before my brother was born. Her round belly was full of waiting and the unknown.

I got into bed and listened. Mom read in a murmur. My brothers and I closed our eyes and let her voice fill all the empty space in the darkening room. There was a line between our mother’s eyes that deepened into a folded crease when she was afraid. She and I had done plenty of waiting together. We’d been alone before. But now we had Diego. And the baby too. And Ha and Ha’s wife and their restless baby, and Lien. This house, the garden. More things to take care of than I was willing to count.

Mom unfolded herself from the rocking chair and laid the baby in his crib. His solid body fit into the crumpled sheets easily. Diego’s soft snores in the bunk
Rose Smith

below told me he was asleep. I watched her tiptoe out of the room and then I climbed down the side of the bed to follow her.

She was in the dining room. A match lit up her face as she pulled on a cigarette and deepened the line in her forehead. I hid in the doorway. She stood like that, the glowing ember on the end of her fingers gliding smoothly in an arc as she swung her arms aimlessly in the middle of the room. She moved rhythmically, like she could hear her own private song. All I could hear was the quiet breathing of Ha’s family from the living room and the floorboards creaking under her bare feet.

The telephone rang, louder than it had ever in this house. The room around me contracted with the violence of the sound. I was at her side in a flash, before she even got the receiver to her ear. I glanced over to see Ha step into the room. As she said hello, she put her hand on my shoulder.

It was a helicopter crash in the potato fields of Idaho. He was in the hospital there, but he’d walked away from the wreck. Ha widened his eyes and Mom gave him a nod. They both knew that Dad could not take another crash and keep flying. They both knew the story of his almost-death on a hill in Khe Sanh, shot down, and piled high with bodies, and desperate. Ha faded back into the dark behind him with a rustling of blankets and a sigh from one of the women. The house expanded again, quiet, but for the murmuring of Mom, on the phone with Dad. The word for house, nhà, also means family.
Below are two chapter excerpts from a novel that I’m working on this semester. They are not actually going to appear in sequence this way, but there isn’t much new information exchanged between the first and second section, and they are each meant to be part of the same timeline, so I think it will be cohesive to read. (Just told out of order, if that makes any sense at all). The novel is an intergenerational family story primarily set in Southern India (particularly Bombay, Madras, and the state of Kerala) from the 1940s through the early 2000s. 

There are multiple working timelines for the story, but all you really need to know here is that Vijaya- our matriarch- is a former city girl who was raised by a mentally ill mother and a doting father in the bustling city of Bombay on the eve of Indian independence. Just as the country’s new identity is beginning to form, she is sent down to the strange south- a region that is much more conservative- at the age of 14 to marry Vanchu, a 25-year old engineer and the second son from a very orthodox Hindu family. Luckily, they find some common ground, develop some love for each other, and overcome some of the difficulties of living with his family. (Per the orthodox Hindu tradition, new brides always live with the husband’s family for at least the first year of marriage). Their first daughter is named Girija.
The Wet Ghost

1.

Salem, 1957

The wet bathroom stank.

Girija stood by the bucket, watching the fog cloud the dusty bathroom mirror. The smell was pungent and vicious, earthy from the mud that clung to the edges of the cement. It was a new house, built by laborers who had lifted the place into its existence brick by brick. The bathroom was dingy and dark, a single square window in the ceiling illuminating the space over the small squat-toilet dug into the ground. The faucet emerged from the wall only a few yards away, no barrier or tub to demarcate the space reserved for bathing from the space reserved for shitting. It was all just cement: gray and muddy ground, the toilet in the floor, the faucet in the wall.

The water ran hot through the pipes and into the bucket by Girija’s bare feet. A bar of white soap, peeled fresh from its wrapper, had been placed in a tray by her mother and left beside the bucket with a clean folded washcloth. Her first bath alone. She was five years old.

What her mother hoped would happen before this moment was that the light that had finally arrived in Punalur that year—by wire line and infrastructure—would make its way to this village, to their bathroom too. There was only one
bulb in the house yet, hanging in the lofted sleeping area where there were still no windows. One bulb and three babies: the youngest, Girija’s first brother, was still swaddled in cheesecloth. Prakash, they called him, for the gift they were given: lightening.

Her mother had no time to bathe a child that could walk and talk: there was still cooking to be done, and cleaning, and diapers to change and plants to tend and servants to manage to keep the house running smoothly. Wealthy they were not, and Girija- young as she was- understood that what her mother needed in that particular moment, her breasts swollen with milk and her hair spilling constantly from its plait, was for her eldest daughter to be able to help herself. Too young still to prepare her own meals with knives and fire, Girija offered to soap herself down for the first time.

She stood naked and small in the bathroom, half clouded in shadow, watching the water fill the plastic bucket in loud, unsteady ripples. She still had no stomach for water: this was a new house, from the stepwell city her family had left behind, but still the sounds of deep drip and splash haunted her. With them came the memory of hours spent sitting on those steps, of thorns brushing her thighs, of Yechi’s cooing voice- still human then- burned bright into her ear. She saw the stepwell in her mind, its still depths a bellow of mystery. Here, alone in the bathroom with only the water to keep her company, she preferred the dark.

Girija dipped the soap and washcloth together into the bucket, turning the tap with her other hand. She scrubbed the two together, just as she’d seen her mother do so many times before. Somehow her hands were not as quick with the
towel, the bubbles from the soap gentler and less ferocious. She rubbed it all into
her skin anyway.

The soap stung her slightly. She waited.

She was alone.

The soap swirled into her shoulders, her arms. The cloth slipped from her
hands as she reached her back and she caught it, clumsily, with outstretched
fingers.

It was then that she noticed the swirling steam held shape.

Two vacant eyes appeared before her, level in the mirror, and then a neck-
long at first, then webbed and hunched. A long jaw for a long mouth with long
laughs.

Girija gasped. More came still.

Legs wound with the wrappings of a nine-yard sari, feet clad in anklets.
Graceful hands, long fingers webbed together with skin that was now steam. And
then last, of course: long hair that washed down her back, still twisted from the
rock that had held her underwater and killed her.

Yechi, Girija’s dead drowned aunt, stood before her, risen and remade
from steam, reborn by the water that had killed her.

Mobile and free, but suspended somehow in midair, she caressed Girija’s
face in her webbed hands, the steam leaving droplets of water on her skinny
cheeks.

“My sweet girl,” steam Yechi said, the same coo in her voice as the day
she had left Girija sitting on the steps of the well.
Girija was surprised to feel an absence of clenching in her chest. Instead she stood awash, gazing, miraculous. She felt healed, somehow, not merely marooned to the island of this bathroom, but instead ensconced again in the love of the auntie she had so abruptly left behind.

Yechi threw her hair quickly into a braid, water droplets flicking into Girija’s face as the steam strands flew over one another.

“Wash,” Yechi instructed, pointing to the bucket. “Manni leaves you alone for the bath now?”

Girija hastily reached for the washcloth, scrubbing her shoulders vigorously.

Yechi laughed, her head thrown back, the sound reverberating across the gray walls. “Come here,” she said, motioning with her hands, and scooped soapy water into her steamy fingers, rubbing them across Girija’s arm tenderly. “Does it hurt?”

Girija shook her head.

Yechi swept some soap foam into the palm of her steam hand, brought them to her lips and blew. Bubbles floated into Girija’s face. She laughed.

“I came here to tell you a secret,” Yechi said.

“What’s that?” Girija asked. In life, Yechi had always offered her secrets and delivered wholeheartedly: a baby calf, tied behind her father’s hut; glass marbles for them to play with, stolen from the market and sewn secretly into the hem of Yechi’s purse. A secret from Yechi was fun unto itself—some tidbit that the two of them shared, together alone—and a promise of what was yet to come.
She seemed to think, scrubbing soap water down Girija’s back.

“Not yet, I think,” she said, “it isn’t time. But I’m here, always. If you need me, you come here, ok? Come alone.”

The water in the bucket was cooling. Yechi began to fade.

“Next time,” she promised.

The rock in Girija’s chest reappeared, weighing her down suddenly. She sobbed.

Her mother opened the bathroom door. No steam ghosts to greet her, but only her wailing daughter and an abandoned bar of soap.

2.

Sankaridurgam, 1955

Here is how the ghost called Yechi came to be.

There came a time when the beaches and brambles of Punalur grew too claustrophobic for their taste, and anyway there was an offer, miles from their home but worthwhile nonetheless, for a job that would offer a bit more money in exchange for a bit more time. Vanchu knew it would hurt his father’s heart for him to leave, and as he sealed boxes and stuffed bags he felt the loving, guilt-ridden stares of his mother and sisters boring into him as if he were their last and only hope.

The forgotten son, suddenly remembered.

But as he gazed upon his wife’s worn-yet-youthful face- bone-thin, barely twenty years passed but forty years lived, and skin still aglow- her eyes stood out
to him like warm coalstones, and he saw the sadness that he had forced on her heart in this small house, amidst these women and these new customs, against the deep solitude and stress of marriage and children. He felt a tightening in his chest. How young she was. And yet how old, how ready.

They packed up a brand new blue Ambassador- his brother’s one gift to him: the gift of movement, of freedom- and almost all the possessions they took belonged to the very run down hut they were leaving behind. As they buried tin pots and silver pans into burlap sacks, he could see the apprehensive protest in Vijaya’s eyes. Her defiance was coated by a thick layer of youth, of unfamiliarity, but it was there nonetheless, glaring angry silences at every fork and spoon his mother and sister thrust at her. And he understood her detestation, and soothed her with easy glances of his own that she would pretend to ignore. Still, she accepted every appliance that would tie them eternally to this place, this house, this family, and even smiled easily when his parents suggested that someone ought to accompany them on this new venture, at least for a short while, to ensure that family values were kept intact.

Though he himself could not help but chuckle at this supervision, for with two little ones already out of his wife’s belly and a third (perhaps, maybe, God-willing) along the way, were family values not a long gone concern of the past?

Still, he made his selection carefully, for the choice was his to make, and in the end he decided to bring Yechi. His darling sweet sister with the webbed neck and feet- marriage would never be an option, anyway. What reason had he to shut her up in the house, in Punalur, in loneliness? He had a fancy that his sister
and his wife would become great friends, and look after his children and pound rice and oil one another’s hair like in the old days. Yechi was only a few years older than Vijaya. Surely, he thought, barriers of age and circumstance were secondary matters in the light of good companionship.

And deep in the ripe, verdant villages, that was certainly the case.

It came to pass that their new hut was much smaller than the Punalur home, though despite the smaller space and the presence of two shrieking baby girls, Vijaya had difficulty replacing the sensation of a much too much crowded house, a place with people living one pressed against the other, and loneliness nowhere in sight. Vijaya knew the one truth of home life and that was that men had nothing to do with it. Off at work, her husband built bridges and roads. Here in her house, Vijaya built family and structure. The girls were company in a small way, but even Yechi was no solace, for-babied and bartered her whole life- she was still so young herself, and in her youthful spirit Vijaya found yet another daughter for whom she had to care. She was fun, lighthearted, irresponsible, and headstrong, and she was also excellent company for the little ones, of whom she had grown so fond.

Yet even Vijaya could never purse her lips at Yechi’s laughter, or the flips of her long hair, and when she left dishes unwashed or the girls unattended to, she simply shook her head and chuckled. Girls will be girls: Vijaya, aged nineteen, Yechi, twenty-five. More than anything, something in Yechi’s spirit caught Vijaya by the heart. Perhaps it was the wild gleam in her eye, one she recognized rarely in the dimples of her husband’s smile, deeply buried by years of
school and job and responsibility. Or perhaps it was the callous, throtey nature of her laugh, which tossed and tumbled out of her belly like silverware out of a sack. Or perhaps it was the sweet gentleness with which she asked, every morning, without fail—“Akka, do you need some help?”

_Akka._ As if marriage could grant years.

And then, one morning, her husband had a dream.

He was silent in the morning when he took his coffee—cream and sugar, steaming hot and churned from cup to bowl to cup to bowl, Madrasi style. The flap of his hat, his paper, the handle on his suitcase stood bold black against white to Vijaya in the heat of his silence. Her husband was nothing if not a chatterbox. She wanted to ask what was wrong, but she did not know if it was her right yet.

It came out of her mouth anyway. “What are you thinking about?”

He swallowed deeply, and did not look at her. And when he did look at her, she felt the urgency of his eyes. “I had a dream,” he explained. “Will you listen?”

And she felt the tug of her heart in her ear.

“I don’t want my sister to go to the stepwell.”

She frowned. Yechi had expressed no interest. “Why?”

“I dreamed she would go.”

“And? So if she goes, what? You want all the women here at home all the time, is it?”
When he covered his mouth and refused to say, she understood.

“She won’t,” Vijaya assured him.

“Promise me.”

“I promise.” She took his paper and folded it and placed it under their bed. Yechi wouldn’t ask.

Of course, she did ask, and Vijaya’s heart turned to stone when, during a game of Where Are You with Girija, Yechi emerged from the bedroom and asked sweetly, as if no other favor could be granted, whether she might please go take a dip in the well.

Vijaya’s voice shook. “Not today,” she said unsteadily. “Maybe tomorrow.”


“Tomorrow,” Vijaya promised falsely, and late at night as her husband slept beside her she couldn’t find the heart to recount her lie.

“Did she ask?” he murmured.

“Yes.”

“Did she go?”

“No.”

And that was all that mattered.

Till the next midday, when once more it was very hot, and Yechi asked once more. And once again, Vijaya refused, with feeble promises of tomorrow. For three days Yechi asked, until one afternoon her patience wore thin.
“Every day you say tomorrow, but every tomorrow I can’t go!” she exclaimed.

Vijaya suddenly felt the weight of age and family bearing down on her. She felt pity for her hot little sister, for the woman whose only family and pleasure in life would ever be the smallest elements, like children’s games and well dips. She asked herself if she had no sympathy. She asked herself if her husband was a sane man. Her heart buckled against her duties.

“Go,” she said, “just go."

Yechi smiled, and picked up Girija. “My kutty supervisor,” she joked, though Vijaya was unmoved.

“Go quickly and come back,” she said, eyeing the clock. “You have fifteen minutes.”

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The stone steps of the well would become one of Girija’s first memories. They were cold and slated under her pudgy pale feet, her too-big anklets scratching uncomfortably between the rock and her soles. She could not forget the sound of Yechi’s laughing voice sitting her down, and telling her not to move.

“Where are yooooou?” Her voice rang with teasing notes as she stepped lightly away from Girija. “Where are yooooou?”

Girija’s toes touched the water.

“No no no no no.” Yechi’s voice cuddled her. “Stay here, stay here. Watch me. Where aaaaare you?”
Her aunt’s graceful glide into the pond, her hair floating softly atop the water behind her.

“Where are youuuu?”

Her head dipping under the surface, laughing still as she kicked and came back up.

“Where are youuuu?”

Her head, dipping down again.

Her hand, waving, with the top of her head bobbing close to the surface.

Girija waved back.

Her hair, nowhere to be seen.

And then.

And then. The water, the stone, the silence.

***

Girija’s eyes were blurred with tears and her legs scratched by thistles from the field as she ran, one chubby leg in front of the other, to her front door.

Vijaya picked up her daughter and lightly ran her finger across the dotted red lines splayed across her knees. She looked around the yard helplessly for a moment or two before making her way into the living room.

She picked up the telephone and a piece of paper with a number on it and, rotating the dial pad the way her husband had showed her, made the first telephone call of her life.

“Hello?” she murmured.

“Hello.”
She knew he knew, but she said it anyway. “She’s gone.”

The words coming out of her mouth hit her with a force. She dropped the phone and ran to the toilet, hanging her head over the edge and letting her breakfast, her lunch, and all the water she’d drank in between go.

Vijaya rubbed her stomach, sure that this was no accident but a work of God.

She returned to the phone.

“Vijaya?”

“We might have a son.”
The Summer House

It’s her voice I remember from that summer and all the ones before. Everyone else is there, and I can hear parts of them, the way they laughed, things they wore, but Annette is still alive to me in full sentences. “Girls, set the hors d’oeuvres on the Tole tray and put it on the davenport.” Nothing was just a table or a chair. Even the dishes had pedigree. “Use the Derutta.” I would follow behind her daughter, three years older than I, who knew the difference between hors d’oeuvres and Derutta and davenports.

That would be our last summer, though I didn’t know it yet. I would turn 13 in September. Cat, my sister, was already 15. Though I couldn’t remember the earliest visits, I looked forward each year to our two weeks at their summer house, driving from our apartment in Pittsburgh, across Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Staten Island and then the final stretch, not long at all we would say, across Long island to the ferry, hoping to make it in time for dinner, but reminding my mother in those days before cell phones, to stop and call if we hit traffic and would be late, knowing that being late and not calling was something not to do, having done it and seen the chilliness of that, of our plates still at the table but the food all gone, a reminder of what we had done.

There are photos of me in Shelter Island from before I can remember, in albums that my mother started and didn’t finish and a shoe box in her closet. But one hung on the wall of the summer house itself. In it, Tad and I, the older of their two boys, stand on the lawn. It is in black and white, shot from above, taken from an upstairs window, probably by his father, who had a serious camera with lenses
we knew not to play with. We are three or four, still toddlers really, with wide
stances and short arms. We are facing each other, our hands almost touching on
one side, our upper limbs a circle with his arm on my shoulder. He is speaking
and there is a seriousness to what can be seen of our small faces. When no one
was around, I would look at the two of us, his bowl cut, my curls, those almost
touching fingers. Because of the photo and the teasing it got from his sister and
the three adults, I thought we were meant for each other and couldn’t bring myself
to talk to him.

His name was formed from his initials, Thomas A-something Durstenfeld.
But he was never Thomas, always Tad. I thought that made him unusual. His hair
had grown out along with the rest of him. He wasn’t one of those short boys who
made you feel too tall. His hair had gotten dark and wavy since the bowl cut and
looked best wet, after he’d showered or swam. He had a deep tan on his neck and
arms that turned white under his collar and the sleeves of his t-shirt, as he spent
most day golfing with his father. He had green eyes and dark lashes, though I only
knew that from sideways glances at the table. Mostly I saw him at dinner. He left
early to play golf or touch football on the green, and I spent my time with our
sisters and his little brother, who followed us around.

The three of them, Tad, Annabelle and Will, belonged to the world of
Manhattan single-sex schools that I understood from the youngest age were
superior to ours in Pittsburgh. They understood what to look at in a painting, how
to talk about politics, and had opinions about the plays they saw on and off
Broadway. I had nothing. No thoughts worth sharing. I stayed quiet.
They had opinions about food long before that was a thing, and favorite places in the City that they missed. We had two restaurants, Chinese and Italian, neither close by or anyplace I would have wanted to take them. But it didn’t matter. They didn’t come to us.

It was always hard to leave. Not just because of what we did there, but because of what happened after. As soon as we drove off, the familiar recriminations began, along with plans to do things differently. Most of this fell on my sister, who, compared to her same-age peer, their eldest, didn’t measure up. My mother would not explicitly compare, she didn’t say names, but her focus would be on my sister and how she could be different.

“Maybe you should take up debate,” she might say, not mentioning, not needing to mention, that we had just heard about the eldest daughter’s debate exploits. “I don’t know why I let you quit the piano,” my mother would say, again, no mention of their daughter who fought practicing for seven years only to laugh about it now that she was finally getting somewhere.

“I always said you’d thank me later,” Annette had laughed, and it had been jolly. My memory of my sister’s piano tribulations no such jollity.

Maybe because school came easier to me, or because the son, my same age peer, didn’t do things my mother could imagine me doing, I got off easy. She never said, “Claudia, maybe you would like golf.” She didn’t think of me doing boy things. But I listened as my mother attempted to reinvent my sister on the long car ride back to our town with its less-than schools and limited restaurants.

During the intervening months, whenever my mother would say, “We
should go to an art gallery,” or “We should see the ballet,” we felt the invisible hand of Annette arranging our lives.

We got a slow start that year, hit traffic, and just made the last ferry. We arrived to a dark house with a note inside the unlocked front door. *The kitchen is closed for the night, but your usual rooms are ready. Try not to wake anyone.* Though we had called from the road, I don’t remember being so late ever, and my feelings of wrongdoing kept my steps light and had me shushing my mother and Cat when they whispered. We made our way up the stairs, my mother to the guest room on the second floor across from the room where the boys slept, and my sister and I to the staircase that led to the attic dormitory, where we always stayed with Annabelle and often Will, who left their rooms on the second floor to join us in the dormered room with its rows of camp bunkbeds and giant rag rug where we played board game after board game. But tonight, it was just me and Cat, who didn’t seem to notice their absence and collapsed onto one of the beds. To me it seemed wrong. Our vacation had started with a misstep, and I blamed my mother who didn’t pack the night before, insisted on stopping at the drug store on the way out of town and missed the turn off to 95.

I woke up alone in the room, the light hitting the bed, yellow parallelograms across the rows of dark wool blankets. I didn’t know the time, so got dressed in my bathing suit and shorts, fearing Cat and Annabelle had already left for the beach. The second-floor landing was quiet, doors all closed whether anyone was inside or not, the way Annette liked things. The stairs brought me down to the
living room, where I double-checked that all was the same. Over the couch hung
the dark oil painting of an old man, his clothes disappearing into the glossy
blackness around him, the paint slightly crackled with age, the light in his eyes
almost from within. He followed me with those eyes. I strolled around the room to
make sure he could still do that, hadn’t lost his powers. On the glass coffee table
sat the crystal cut candy jar with glass candies just for show, just for touch.
Nothing changed in that house. It waited for me.

At the kitchen table, with empty cereal bowls and an abandoned deck of
cards in front of them, I found Cat and Annabelle, already finished with whatever
catching up they had done, my sister drawing a mermaid on the underside of her
arm with a red felt pen while Annabelle flipped through the summer double issue
of Vogue. Annabelle had on matching pajamas with little purple flowers, the
bottoms of which were shorts. I didn’t know they made pajamas in shorts. Cat
wore her Neil Young Crazy Horse t-shirt, the neck, arms and waist of which she
had cut herself, less a fashion statement than an effort to break free of the confines
of cloth.

“Look at you, sleepy head,” Annabelle said when I came in. She got up to
hug me, and I felt the wrong of missing last night’s dinner fall away. “You got
even taller! You are going to overtake me by the end of the summer.” She had me
stand back to back. Three years younger and I was almost as tall as she. I didn't
want to be. Her petiteness, like that of her mother, seemed feminine and preferred.
I was gangly and hunched, lacking the stomach muscles and confidence to stand
up straight. “Get something to eat, and we can play cards.”
On the counter were farm fresh berries, a glass jar of milk, and granola that had never seen a box. I placed each berry as though I were a stylist for a cereal ad and then poured milk that was creamier than anything we got at home. We were on our second hand of hearts when Annette came into the kitchen in tennis whites, glistening a bit on her arms and legs. Will had joined us after the first hand, after what he called his ‘morning perambulations in the neighborhood.’

“Hello Mother,” he said, all of 10, more knowing than I would ever be.

“I thought we might have to dredge the bay for your bodies,” she said, ignoring her son. I got up from the table, and Annette pointed to a spot on her cheek for me to kiss. She smelled a bit like ammonia.

“You’ve gotten taller, Claudia.” She smiled, and I felt a pleasure in pleasing her. “Good morning Catherine,” she said a bit loud, more summons than greeting. Cat’s long hair, unbrushed, the golden parts catching the light, created a curtain behind which, I felt certain, she studied her self-made tattoo. Annette had to say her name twice. Cat finally looked up, her hair falling around her face. “Let me see you.”

My sister slid out of the booth. The outfit that seemed self-expressive, under the discerning eye of Annette, seemed like something from a rag bin.

“Catherine, while I am pleased to see you are becoming a woman, that is not appropriate attire. Certainly, not in mixed company.” I looked at Cat, barefoot, her long hair falling everywhere, her exposed belly button, the hem of the Neil Young shirt, that I remember her cutting after the concert, curled up, revealing the curve of her waist, the mermaid on her arm that she turned toward
Annette. I knew it was wrong but didn’t know what Annette found particularly inappropriate. And then I noticed Cat’s armpit hole into which I could clearly see the curve of boob and the dark of her nipple. “This isn’t a brothel, Catherine. Go put on something appropriate and wash that off your arm. If you need paper, just ask.”

My mother chose that moment to come into the kitchen, and caught the end of this. “Catherine, you heard Annette, get changed now.” Cat had worn that shirt a hundred times, had gone to the store braless in that shirt, but it was there and then that my mother caught on, and there that my mother used her full name.

“No need Lillian,” Annette said. “I have it under control.”

My mother started to say something but didn’t get far and instead turned to Annabelle and Will and told them how great it was to see them. They bounded out of the booth and gave her a kiss on each cheek, as though they lived in Paris not New York.

“You don’t know how good it feels to wake up here. The air is just better on an island,” my mother said, an observation she made frequently when we visited, but seemed to be discovering for the first time.

“I know,” Annette said. “That’s why I spend the summer here.” Annette had a childish giggle, more punctuation than expression. She poured herself a cup of coffee and announced she was going to shower and then had two-days worth of work to finish before lunch. “Catherine, I shouldn’t have to ask you twice.”
“Come on,” Annabelle said. “Let’s get changed for the beach.” We rinsed out our cereal bowls and followed her out of the room leaving my mother alone in the kitchen.

I sat on the front porch to wait for Cat, Annabelle and Will. The wrap-around Victorian porch was one of the best things about the house, with its red and green candy cane balustrades, the white wicker furniture with green cushions under the shade of upstairs balcony. Most nights, we sat there before dinner, and adults drank cocktails. After a few Campari and sodas, Annette told stories about my mother and what she was like when they met, the clothes she wore and how she spoke. They had gone to Brooklyn College; both lived at home with their parents; and Annette decided they would move out the day they graduated, get an apartment in Manhattan, and never go back to Brooklyn.

“Not even for Friday night dinners?” my mother had famously asked. I can still hear her incredulity.

“Not even for funerals.” Annette had told her.

I liked these stories, as they connected our family to theirs. I was grateful Annette had chosen my mother to be her roommate. She could have had anyone.

Cat came down in a mismatched two-piece, the top of which she had made herself out of two different colored bandanas that crossed in front and tied in back and I wondered if it would stay up in the water. She hadn’t bothered with shorts or shoes. Annabelle’s bathing suit looked new, bright white with colorful polka dots and a banded bra that made her look full up top. I wanted a suit like that. She wasn’t “giving it away,” as Annette would later say when she saw Cat’s, but was
“a classy advertisement for what lay beneath.” I wore the same dark blue one-piece I’d had last summer, the elastic long gone from too many washes climbed up my butt, too short for my elongating body.

Annabelle offered Cat flip flops to borrow, but Cat looked down at her feet, wiggled her toes and said she needed to toughen up for summer.

We made our way toward the beach, Annabelle between us, past other gingerbread Victorians, some with three and four colors on their turrets and spindles, though none that I liked more than their place.

“Did you go on any dates this year?” Annabelle asked Cat, knowing, assuming I was too young. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No,” she said. Cat had nothing. I would have known if she did.

“I went on a date,” Annabelle told us.

“Ah, the story of Daniel,” Will pipped in from behind, where he trailed, the sidewalk being not wide enough for the four of us.

“He’s from another boy’s school,” Annabelle began. “Not Tad and Will’s.” At the mention of Tad and his school, I imagined him in his tie and school jacket, and though I knew there weren’t girls there, I walked past him in the hall.

“His name, thank you Will, is Daniel, and he is the cutest.” She filled us in on the dark upper lip of a mustache and sister in her class who fixed them up, the phone call during dinnertime when he asked her out, the sight of him outside her building at seven on the dot on a Saturday night, his corduroy jacket, which Will deemed, “suitable attire for a first date,” his suggestion that they take a walk along Central Park West, and the Chicago-style pizza they ordered at the restaurant. Her
date ended with a soft closed mouth kiss outside her building and the promise of a
phone call. It was like being inside a book that I wanted to keep reading.

“What happened next? Did you see him again?” I asked. “Do you miss
him?”

“I like him, but I don’t think he’s the one.”

He sounded like the one to me. Last year, this could have sustained us for
the better part of two weeks when we played Mystery Date in heavy rotation,
Will’s favorite as well as ours, and described our dream boys to each other. Cat
liked so many boys it was hard to keep track, but now she was quiet, treating this
manna like matzah.

Tad was at the beach when we got there. I thought he’d be playing golf and
I wouldn’t see him until dinner, but Annabelle pointed him out in the scrum of
boys in the water. She called his name and waved, and he waved back at us but
didn’t come out.

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I wouldn’t see him until dinner, but Annabelle pointed him out in the scrum of
boys in the water. She called his name and waved, and he waved back at us but
didn’t come out.

“Do you guys want to go in?” I asked Cat and Annabelle, knowing Will
wouldn’t be swimming until at least August. I wanted my frizzy hair to get beach
curls from the salt water, I wanted to stand on the sand bar for hours and bob up
and down until the rhythm of it infected my sleep. But I didn’t want to go in
alone, not of fear of the ocean, but of Tad thinking I had followed him.

“Soon,” Annabelle said. “I want to get toasty first.” She set up her towel,
kicked off her flip flops, and peeled off her shorts. She poured a line of
Coppertone on her already Coppertoned legs. She offered it to Cat who said she
was fine. I took the bottle and tried to do what Annabelle had done, pointing my
toe toward the sand and coating my leg, but my leg was nothing like her clean shaved already tan one. Mine had peach fuzz and freckles. She took a kitchen timer from her bag, set it to 20 minutes, and closed her eyes. She was smart about regulating her tan. Cat lay on her stomach and would likely fall asleep and burn one side of her body. Will sat in a folding chair he’d brought and didn’t take off his shoes. He didn’t like to get sand on himself.

I lasted five minutes and then got antsy. “I’m going to take a walk,” I told them, pulling the bathing suit elastic out of my butt as I got up. I didn’t look toward Tad, but ahead, as though I knew people further down the beach, digging my toes into the hot sand with each step to find the cool parts underneath. I walked past the life-guarded part to where it got rocky and then turned back. Just inside the safety zone of the swim buoy, I walked into the water. It was colder than I expected, but calm, the cycles of the waves set to easy listening. With no surf to break, I swam out easily, hoping to find the sandbar, but not knowing how to without other kids already standing on it. I treaded water and looked back toward shore and watched Tad and the other boys playing football in the water. Tad had his hands in the air, standing in front of another boy. Even from a distance, I could see the line where his shirt usually hit his upper arms, and his chest was paler than the rest of him. The ball came toward him. He jumped up but missed and then turned to tackle the kid who caught it behind him. Both of them went under the water. I smiled as though a part of it and then, catching myself, swam out further.
I imagined him leaving his friends to meet me, and bobbing up and down in the waves with him. At 12, that was the whole of the fantasy, but I wanted him to want to be with me, to separate himself from his friends. I could hear the squawk of the seagulls and the intermittent answering call of the lifeguard’s whistle. The whistle got more insistent, and I turned to see who was causing the fuss. The lifeguard’s arm was waving, and I realized it was directed at me. All eyes had turned to see the offender. I had no idea what I had done. Maybe I was outside the perimeter, though I thought I had been careful. Maybe there was a man o’ war jellyfish baring down on me and he wanted to protect me. I came back into the shallow water and in front of the whole beach, he told me I was too young to be out there alone. I bit my lip and looked at the sand. I made my way back to our spot, where Annabelle and Cat, their eyes still closed, hadn’t noticed any of it. I couldn’t look at Tad.

“Claudia got the lifeguard whistle,” Will said that night at the dinner table. We were all there, the five of them, the three of us, talking about nothing I can remember until he said that. I don’t think he was trying to embarrass me, just relating the events of the day. And so, what I’d hoped would be a private shame, was revealed and dissected. When the story came out, with as few sputtering words from me as possible, with my mother saying she told me not to do that, When exactly? and Annette reminding me that there was safety in numbers, Tad stood up for me.

“People do that all day long. It was just Jeff being a tight ass,” He was apparently on first-name terms with the lifeguard. And then Cat, who had slept
through the whole thing, agreed with him. I looked at the green beans on my plate waiting for the conversation to turn to something else.

On the afternoon of our third day I sat on the porch waiting for Annabelle to get showered and changed. Cat had gone for a walk after the beach and hadn’t come back yet, not even for lunch. I was getting more of Annabelle to myself, which thrilled me, but I worried I would lose her to her island friends if Cat didn’t come back to hanging out with us. I picked up the Johnson O’Connor word list that sat on the undershelf of the wicker coffee table. The book came out at cocktails, usually read by Stanley, though sometimes by one of their kids. You got points for using the word of the day at dinner. I never tried out loud, but used them in my thoughts, constructing sentences with all of them for the weeks we were there, wishing we could take the book home. Annabelle, Will and Tad used them aggressively, dismissively, easily. My mother tried from time to time and would get it wrong, get corrected. She would think it funny to use one in a definition of itself. No one would laugh.

"Boning up?" I looked up and there stood Tad, talking to me. His shirt and shorts were wet with sweat, and some of it dripped from his face. He held a soccer ball under his arm. I closed the book, embarrassed to be caught. I remember how it felt, seeing him, the electricity of it. I had no idea if he felt it too, but in my mind that only worked, that kind of chemistry as I’d come to believe, if both people felt something. That was the nature of a spark. "Don’t stop on my account,” he said and went inside. I had said nothing.
“We need lettuce for the salad, girls,” Annette instructed. Annabelle and I sat at the kitchen table playing gin rummy. It was midday, exactly half way through our visit. Will was macraméing a home for unwed spiders on the porch, Cat had taken off by herself that morning, not interested in the beach, and Tad was most likely at the golf course. Annabelle and I had come back from the beach early. I suggested we walk in town, as Annabelle liked to do. The drug store held an enormous fascination with its makeup aisle, some of which could be sampled, and its two metal rotating towers, one with sunglasses, the other paperback books. We moved between the three locations, buying nothing and eventually settling on a pack of gum or candy bar at the front counter, something that could be bought for a quarter.

Town offered an excuse to walk by the hardware store, where we needed nothing, but Annabelle liked the son of the owner, who worked summers. A townie. Her townie. At 17, he was two years older than she and, to my mind, manly and scary. But I dutifully followed her so could occasionally “stop in and say hi to Carl.” I felt she was betraying Daniel, who had written twice since we’d been there. She’d let me read his letters. Some days we just walked by the store, and when I asked if we were going in, she would say, “I don’t want to give him the wrong idea.”

When Annette saw us in the kitchen, she said she was in the mood for a steak salad and sent us out to pick the lettuce.
We went out to the garden with the sheers and baskets and found my mother, who had set up her easel to sketch the flowers. Annabelle stood and watched. “I like the perspective,” she said, “And the complexity of the middle ground.” It was just flowers.

“Thank you, Annabelle.” My mother never went to art school but took a class early in her marriage, when we were young and wasn’t expected to do anything. She had patience, I gave her that. She could sit and stare at a person’s face and adjust the brow line until it looked right, get the nose set, and soon the person in front of her emerged on the paper. She tried to move onto paint but didn’t have the color sense to make it work, so went back to charcoal and pencil. After my parents got divorced, it was her one semi-marketable skill.

Annabelle and I were making our way through the rows of lettuce, cutting away from the outside – don’t touch the inner leaves, Annette had taught me, give them time to grow up – when my mother came over with her sketch pad. “Stay like that,” she said. She sat cross-legged on the ground with a pencil and her pad. “You could be migrant farm workers.” I doubted that. Annette was waiting for our lettuce. Annabelle, ever polite, was willing to pose, and so I stayed still too.

I helped Annette make lunch, washing the lettuce and following her instructions on the other ingredients. She asked me to tell her when the steak reached two degrees above room temperature and I felt certain I wouldn’t know, would get in wrong, but in the end, it came together.

“Aren’t you glad we didn’t finish off the steak last night and get to have it for lunch?” I’d never been more excited by a salad. “Call the others.”
I got Will from the porch and went back outside to see Annabelle with my mother and told them lunch was ready. I doubted my sister was upstairs and didn’t want to go up two flights to find out. Stanley and Tad would be “eating at the club,” as Annette liked to say, though Annabelle had told me it was just a hamburger shack by the public course.

“You should wear a hat, Lillian,” Annette said to my mother when she came inside. “You’ll ruin your skin.”

My mother touched her face as though feeling for scars, the damage already permanent.

“You should see Lillian’s sketches,” Annabelle said, taking off the floppy hat she’d worn in the garden to pick lettuce.

“We would love to look at what you’ve been up to,” Annette said. “After lunch.”

I’d set the table for six but when we sat down, Cat appeared and, after a few minutes, Tad.

“I thought you were playing golf?” Annabelle asked.

“I was in my room,” he said.

After lunch, my mother brought her sketch pad to the table at Annabelle’s prompting. It looked different from her usually style. Looser. The rows of lettuce formed perspective lines that drew you in, and Annabelle and I, hunched over the rows, did look a little like migrant workers.

“I thought of Hart Benton too!” Annabelle said, her hand on my mother’s.

“Here,” my mother said, carefully tearing the page out of the sketch pad and offering it to Annette.

“It’s not quite there yet. I’ll take the next one. Once you’ve mastered it.”

And she handed back the page.

It’s funny that my mother was, I guess, an artist, as it was Annette who knew about art. She could talk about the lines in a painting, the role of color, and knew endless facts about each artist. She was getting a doctorate in art history and had a floor-to-ceiling case of art books off the living room. I liked to take them out and look at the glossy images, thinking how to talk about them the way Annette did.

“If you think we have a lot of art books here, you should see what we have in the City,” Will said to me one day when he saw me there. But we never got invited to the City.

That night at dinner, Annette told us about research for a possible dissertation. “I’ve been reading about these medieval cloistered nuns who prayed over miniature Romanesque icons. They would wake up at two in the morning to kneel on a cold floor and pray for an hour before going back to bed by candlelight and getting up three hours later to do it again. Each order had a few of these small, hand-held devotionals. Most were of the later stages of the cross, of the crucifixion itself and the pieta. The youngest novitiates could only hope to glance at the idols. That was how precious they were, and then to have the honor of being the one to hold it while you prayed, that was the highest honor.”
“That could have been the three of you, if you’d been lucky enough to be born in the 13th century,” Stanley said. Tad laughed.

“Can we see one of them?” Will asked. “I want to see what they’ll be praying over.”

Annette took down one of her books and showed a photo of Jesus, dead in his mother’s arms with oval shaped holes on his body and blood pouring out of them.

“Just think, you could sit up all night looking at Jesus slashed though with wounds,” Tad said.

“The wounds. They look like vaginas,” Cat said. Stanley and Tad both laughed.

“Catherine.” Annette said, “That is not acceptable talk.”

“I think she has a point,” said Tad.

“How would you know?” Annabelle asked.

“I’m just saying, maybe it was medieval porn, and the only way they could smuggled in, was to hide it in plain sight, right on Jesus’s body.”

Annette ignored this like one would a barking dog. “These women made these devotional images themselves. I’m not certain it is enough for a dissertation, but I could travel to Germany where a lot of these icons are in private collections.”

“Ach, Deutschland,” Tad said, and his brother and sister laughed. I smiled but didn’t get their joke.
That night I woke to Annette’s voice whisper-shouting and my mother crying, but couldn’t make out the words. The three lumps in the other beds didn’t stir, and so I went down by myself. The staircase to the dormitory was enclosed and dark, and I tried not to creak the stairs. There was no door at the bottom, but I could hear them to the left of me, probably in the hallway.

“You don’t control your children. I am shocked but in no way surprised.”

“What do you want me to do? I can’t undo it.”

“No, you can’t. We will all have to live with it and soldier on.”

Annette sounded angrier than I’d ever heard her. I felt certain I shouldn’t be seen by them. I peeked around the side of the stairwell and was surprised it wasn’t just Annette and my mother on the landing, but Stanley, and though I was certain I had just left her upstairs, a lump under the covers, my sister. She stood between Annette and my mother, wrapped in a bed sheet. They were outside Tad and Will’s room, and Annette had one hand on the doorknob, using the weight of her body to pull it shut. My mother’s back faced me, in a posture I knew well. I had an urge to rub her back as I had done countless times before when she cried. The mystery was Stanley, whose voice I hadn’t heard before.

“Nettie, don’t say things you will regret. She’s a girl, just like ours. A 15-year-old girl. Let me go in and talk to him.” But Annette didn’t let him, her eyes were on Cat, and she wasn’t letting go of the knob. She held it like a weapon.

“Go,” she said to Cat. “I can’t look at you anymore.” I hurried back upstairs, afraid they would see me.
When Cat got into bed I pretended to just wake up. “Where were you?” I said, pretending not to have heard.

She didn’t answer.

“What did you do?” I still didn’t understand what had happened, but I knew it was bad.

“Don’t worry Claudia. I don’t think we have to come back here.”

We left the next morning before breakfast. We didn’t talk about debate or discontinued piano lessons in the car. My mother asked Cat if she was okay, and if she used birth control, and Cat said she did, and my mother said, “That’s good. That’s smart of you.”

I don’t know how Annette found out. Maybe she got suspicious of things I hadn’t noticed, maybe she heard something, the sound of a girl doing something she shouldn’t in a room where shouldn’t have been, but I learned much later from my sister than when Annette opened the door, it wasn’t just the finding of them, Cat straddled atop her son, but for the moment before Annette said anything, before Tad knew what was happening, Cat had looked her in the eye and just continued.

I missed them and for a long time couldn’t forgive my sister for taking them away from me. They appeared in the art history classes I found myself in at college, in the flower pots on the fire escape where I tried to grow lettuce, and in the boys I wanted that I never got to have.
Keith, the newly promoted grocery manager of the Donelan’s Supermarket in Littleton, Massachusetts—a local chain founded in 1948 by John Donelan, and whose son, John K. Donelan, hired the teenaged Keith, incidentally and mostly out of pity, to be a very quiet bag boy during the remodeling nightmare of 2009, a decision that would lead to Keith being the third choice for grocery manager eleven years later—knocked over an entire cart of dill pickles on Sunday morning.

Joan was playing harp, as she did every Sunday from ten to two. When the jars hit the floor, the shock of the initial sound—ice-sheets splintering in the middle of the Arctic circle—traveled down her nerves to her pre-arthritic fingers and her fingernail snagged on a string. Joan was brought back too quickly to remember her surroundings: her skinny hips bruising on a chair inconveniently staged just behind the Mother’s Day balloons and lilies wrapped in neon colored foil. She brought her hands up to her bad eyes like broken birds and ripped the nail off. As she spit the nail onto the carpet she saw a short man in a leather jacket far too small for him pushing a cart through the apple bins. He was gripping the handle so tightly his knuckles were white. Her harp let out a sharp, tinny bark on the overhead speakers, buried immediately in the gnawing rain of the still-shattering glass.

That newt eyed little fuck Keith had gotten her fired from her teaching job, she was sure of it. She could see his familiar loping stride as he ran for a “Wet
Floor” sign. He had had that urgent gait since he was an anxious kindergartener. She closed her eyes and started up again, a crimson eyelet beginning to form on the brim of her index finger as she played the opening notes of “Scarborough Fair.”

She worked twenty years at the high school and had made not one friend, though there were people who would nod to her. Her sharp look kept students at bay, but in order, until overly sensitive little shrimps like Keith started complaining to the principal that her strict standards were borderline abusive and that she failed people arbitrarily. She got more than one student off of their track to Harvard. Perhaps it was her purpose to prick the privileged bubbles around their spoiled little heads.

She knew that the women understood her. The female faculty looked to her first when they let out a long-fermenting “Fuck!” as they closed the door to the teacher’s lounge, or when they burned their fingers on the boiling water that spurted out of the broken tea kettle. They were the few who would still nod to her when they saw her here in Donelan’s or in the used bookshop across the small triangle of the town park. Perhaps that alone had kept her from moving away for almost forty years. She caught that commiseration in her irises and knew with a pinging certainty they wished they could wear their anger like she did.

Hannah wouldn’t be home for another six hours. Victor thought he could buy some groceries for her as a gesture of thanks for letting him visit for a couple weeks, even though she had just moved into a new condo. It was a retirement gift
to herself, and he thought a worthy one: she had only ever had one job at
AstraZeneca Labs, in Waltham, starting out as a secretary and eventually rising
high enough on the administrative side to become the head HR manager. By the
time she retired, her office had a wide view over the silver pate of the reservoir,
angled just enough so that she couldn’t see the highway. She was adored; she was
still getting notes and gifts from old coworkers when he arrived.

He knew by the glossy “Oh, of course,” she had given him over the phone
when he asked if he could visit her three weeks ago that he had spoiled the glitz
and victory of her retirement. She treated him like she did her peers and
underlings, with a distant warmth that made him stammer. He felt as shy around
his younger sister as he had when they were children—fifty years had done little to
ease his self-consciousness. He had sixteen dollars in his bank account.

When he was standing in front of the apple bins, a sound erupted so loudly
its sharp hands reached deep into his pockets before he could figure out what it
was. It was the sound birds make flying over remote ocean waters, the parts and
frequencies a human can’t hear. It was the kind of sound that made him feel
alone.

Joan’s fingers kept stumbling today, even before Keith broke five hundred
dollars worth of kosher dill pickles. She refused to look at customers while she
played. Some days she could turn invisible, so entwined with the produce mister
and the metal carts slamming together like bells that no one looked at her either.
She could hear the lockstep of the broom sweeping up the broken glass; the teeth
of the jars glazing the floor in frost patterns. Through the fog of vinegar and dill there was something like old leather, something like worn down skin. It punched its way through her sinuses; it smelled as clear as her father’s old jacket chafing her bare arms when she was ten years old, running down the road screaming for Peggy the little black dog. She was too old to be afraid of the dark. The winter air crystallized her voice as it echoed off of the parched ground; tree fingers scratched at the cirrus ribs in the sky. The world was a horrible, persistent violet.

There were moments Joan was sure she had died: there were shadows that didn’t belong here. Even though Peggy reappeared within seconds, a liquid black out of the rattling cattails, she was sure it was not her dog. She threw pebbles at it; she ran all the way up the hill and into the sleeping quarters without pulling off her shoes, still wearing the leather jacket, so Peggy would not hop in with her as she did every night. Peggy came in panting minutes later, and after hovering near the side of Joan’s bed whimpering for half an hour, she curled up on the hard floor by the cracked windows. As Peggy started snoring, Joan watched the darkness stay the same. The leather jacket stayed cold for a long time.

It was startling, realizing how little he had thought of the geography of Hannah’s routines. He felt a membrane of sweat slicking the bar of the grocery cart beneath his hands; he tightened his grip. This place he had never seen was so familiar to Hannah: what would she notice? What would she forget? Victor was sure she wouldn’t notice the worn slope of the tiles, the small woman playing harp in the middle of the produce section. Hannah would notice the timbre of the
ceiling fans and the searing fluorescent lights above the aisles. Victor noticed the miasma of garlic and vinegar coming through the vents, the anxious rhythm of the broom bristles as a grocery worker pushed together wet piles of glass. Had Hannah touched any of these apples? What were the odds both of them would have considered the same apple? A sticker from a large Braeburn rolled up neatly between his thumb and index; he worried the backside until he could feel the glue wedged between the ridges of his fingerprints.

As a child, Hannah had loved to tear the sprigs of basil from the garden and chew them like tobacco. She made him fresh bruschetta the night he arrived. Her hands moved across the cutting board with the grace of someone he had only seen in dreams: her hands, older than he thought they should be, threw the supermarket basil—wilted, captive—into the bowl with diced tomatoes and mozzarella.

How could he tell her? A man named Albert had $5,000 from Victor’s savings in exchange for a safe return of Victor’s files. The morning he wired the money he turned on his computer and waited, refreshing his inbox page every few minutes. The daylight was thin, mottled and muted by the incoming clouds. There were birds singing.

He was certain Albert was Russian: there were grammatical slips that sounded similar to his father’s. Victor’s father Alexander was an accountant, the son of a landowner who fled just after the Revolution. Victor was sure his grandfather had been as cruel as any Bolshevik propaganda suggested because Alexander had also been cruel. Alexander died twenty minutes after eating an
orange popsicle on the stoop with his second grandchild. It had been August, one of the hottest ever recorded.

A venomous shame flushed Victor’s cheeks. Why did he obey this hacker so easily? That he had so readily and so urgently handed over so much money for files that were little more than detritus now seemed insane, or at the very least incredibly embarrassing. His niece had scanned all his old files—copies of family photos, family trees written out in the spidery cursive of his long dead grandmother, extinct work orders and receipts from his work as a contractor—for a school project almost ten years ago. He hadn’t talked to her since then.

He refreshed the page again. The glass of water on his desk had been there since the previous afternoon: he could see the greasy marks of his fingerprints. The light was fine enough he could see the ridges, a thimbleful of stratum.

Two days after wiring the money to Albert, nothing appeared in his inbox other than notices from the library and ads for items on Amazon he had already purchased. Someone will come for him to seek old, fragile revenge, he was sure of it. He could think of no other reason why someone halfway around the world would terrorize an old man for worthless files.

The water was still on his desk. It had grown bubbles over the past two days and three nights: their thin edges were limned in yellow from the forsythia in the backyard. Their cancerous stillness shattered when he took a drink.

“Come here,” he wrote to Albert. “My house is big enough for two people. I have nothing of value. I can buy you food. I can buy you a plane ticket.”
The water glass showed a bird swooping down like a meteor onto something hiding in the long grass. He had to cut the lawn if Albert was coming.

Joan’s father wore that leather jacket in the middle of the September she was nine, the year he found their new home in an overgrown and abandoned cluster of Shaker buildings. He had won it in a poker game, along with several thousand, and was convinced Joan and the coat together were lucky charms enough to make him invincible. The hills were covered in thick vine; the night was yellow with heat. Sweat beaded on his manic face like pimples of light.

He told her he was going to talk to the squatters there about buying the place and to wait at the Stop sign at the top of the hill, he would only be a minute. Tall grasses shuddered and danced. She should have been working on a summer reading list for school right now, she should have been getting ready for bed. Stars forced their way through the murk, the crickets screaming for them to answer.

After what felt like hours, after she whispered and then howled for him to come back, she started running down the packed dirt road into which she had seen him so quickly vanish. After a few seconds, the thick dark broke on a small pond: she stopped, threaded through the young trees on the bank like a halting needle. She followed the bank to the moss-covered walkway cutting into the lake. She was so light the rotted wood only bent a little to accommodate her small frame as she sat down. The surface showed a confused and angry sky: silver and blue waters with stars and lightning bugs wrestling each other until dawn.
She fell asleep at some point, waking up in the mid morning filmed in sweat and raging with mosquito bites. She snapped at them and stood up. At the top of the hill, behind the pond, where she must have come from, there was a corner of a red barn. Her stomach sent a whip of acid up her throat and she started running.

She couldn’t find evidence of any people: her father, the squatters, the Shakers who built this place over a century ago. When she opened the barn door the space inside it was woven dark, heavy and protective. Sweet and tightly wrapped smells rushed to freedom, made her gag: the ground was soft and swallowed up her boots. Something dead white, grey white, exhaled in the corner. There were bones every half-step, like eyelashes: picked clean and half-gone, sheeps heads and cow brains pocked the ground.

Later that morning, the police gave a cursory examination but found nothing incriminating: only a grinning man with long hair hoping to settle the property with some back-to-the-land shit in mind, and an angry girl reaching into a bag of apples on the picnic bench behind him. Her hair was thin and brittle.

One night Victor had a dream Albert was his father, almost a hundred and four, pecking out emails with his curled up hands. He had long, well-kept nails and was wrapped up in a bedsheet. From the albumen glow surrounding his screen, Victor could see he lived in a hovel: rough wood boards, damp mold in the corners and a fire that wouldn’t stop hissing. He didn’t look up when Victor came into the room.
When they were evicted from the Shaker compound, Joan saw them as the cops saw them: skinny and ringworm-covered and loud. Joan's father could charm anyone, so could her mother. They both tried their best and when things were looking sour, her mother bit the cheek of the young deputy who put her in handcuffs. She spent six months in jail, unable to make bail. Her father let her rot in there and then used her piano hands for planting seeds and washing coarse clothes and slapping the children that kept on coming, while he got to sit in the sun and think about the commune he was never going to build.

In her dreams she could never get out of there. It was always the same: her family had fallen asleep in the kitchen, collapsed over their bowls like they had been drugged. She was out in the courtyard between the buildings, reaching for fireflies but unable to catch them. The tall willow tree in the center of the courtyard raked her skin and sent it bubbling, stinking, crawling. She ran from the tree into the tall pine woods, up the mountain, where the earth started glowing: knots in the deep ground began to pulsate, oozing gold, pure sunlight, curled dead embryos reaching out a warming haze in the oily night. Granite melted and wrapped her up in a slippery, choking film that peeled her eyes open.

Every time she had that dream her bedroom, when she awoke, seemed like a flimsy set. The twisted blue blanket and the plain walls seemed to tremble on their stilts when she let out her breath. When she snapped the light on they returned to their solidity and regained their shadows, but still, she was sure she had died another time.
Victor wrote to Albert every day the week before he flew out to stay with
Hannah. He never shut his computer off; he never left it’s eye for more than
fifteen minutes. At night, he watched the flashing colors from ads walk on his
ceiling, never making it more than three inches across before they doubled back
and started their rituals over again.

Keith swept the pickles into one pile and the glass into another. Both
caught the sunlight like running water. Sweat ran in salamander twists down his
back. There was so much dirt: winter pebbles and salt and sandy dirt from lettuce
halfway around the world, all floating together in pools of vinegar. It was only
now, two minutes after the crash, that he felt his shuddering: a small, guttural,
animal sound echoing in the empty aisle, in his throat.

The vegetable mister switched to life; there was a gurgle of recorded
thunder. In the diluted morning sun, a small rainbow crested over the musty
carpet. No one looked up to see it.