

LOOSE ON EARTH
Excerpt from a Novel

by

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Loose on Earth

Bethany and William

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One

Bethany didn't go into the Safeway thinking she would steal a baby. She hadn't wanted to go into the Safeway at all. Instead, she would've been content to stay at the Circle K, in the passenger seat of the stolen Honda, spending down her high picking seat foam from the torn gray headrest, a project that had occupied her already for hours. Once she liberated enough yellow flecks, she believed, she would understand something elemental about herself or the world.

William was the one who wanted to go into the Safeway, because a man at the Circle K said he would pay him twenty dollars for a can of paint thinner.

When this man came along, Bethany and William had been parked at the Circle K for hours, smoking the last of their meth, hoping they would find someone to give them enough money for another shot of gas, enough to get up the road, to the next town. Before the paint thinner man, they'd asked the skinny boy working at the cash register and a man pulling a horse trailer. Neither had even bothered to say no, just turned wordlessly away.

Bethany wouldn't have asked the paint thinner man for anything; it was obvious this man was like her and William, young and broke and homeless. He was on foot. He was unwashed. Bethany was pretty sure he was also high because he had the same careful step she always used when she was high herself, the slow, testing flat-footed step a person used when they couldn't be sure the ground wasn't about to fall out from under them.

But William hadn't been so discriminating. "Sure, we can get you paint thinner," he said, in the too-eager way he had when he was trying to flirt and trying too to disguise the fact. "We'll be back here in like twenty minutes with it."

"You do that," the man said, "you'll be a lifesaver."

William was always getting his hopes up, always getting knocked down.

Bethany was sure there wouldn't be paint thinner at the Safeway, that there was no way this man would wait twenty minutes, and even if he did, he wouldn't pay William anything. But she understood too that it wasn't really about the paint thinner for William, and she didn't want to ruin her high pointing all this out to him, seeing the way his face would inevitably fall.

So she followed him to the Safeway with her careful flat-footed steps. The sidewalk was like an ocean, ready to tip her over. The wind ate at her skin. It was colder in Oregon than she would've predicted; when she and William left Albuquerque two weeks ago, it was all sun-blaze and sweat, and she didn't have a coat, just a too-small purple track jacket that was probably meant for a kid.

Inside the Safeway, it smelled like old bananas and floor cleaner, but it was warm. It looked like any other grocery store: lines of registers and aisles. Only one cashier, young, acne-stained. He kept his head studiously down when William and Bethany came through the door, staring with quick side-glances. Bethany and William looked like what they were: people who'd been sleeping in a car for weeks, bodies warped by the shape of the seats. Since leaving New Mexico, they'd washed only in gas station bathrooms. They knew they looked like shit. They didn't need someone's stare to tell them that.

Bethany left William standing near the Western Union sign at the front of the store and went to one of the vacant checkout lanes. She fingered the gum packs and chap stick. All their ridges and edges and curves seemed to have a taste. Like watermelon or cherry soda. Bethany felt better touching these things. All that flavor. She wrapped a small cylinder of chap stick in her fist. Squeeze it hard enough, and she might make herself explode. She pictured her watermelon guts sprayed over the check-out conveyor belt and laughed.

William came up behind her. “What the fuck are you doing?” he said.

“I’m shopping.”

She tried it on in her mind. Shopping. Sometimes, mostly when she was high, which these days was most of the time, when she was trying to stop the bubble of past things—the compound, her mother, the stained walls of the CPS office where she slept for most of her teenage years—from rising, gut to throat, she would pretend that she was doing something she would never do, something that had nothing to do with her. Eating in the Sadie’s restaurant across from the Second Street park back in Albuquerque. Looking for an apartment to rent in the complex where she ravaged the dumpster. Shopping.

It made her think both that she might one day be a person who did these things and that she was better than the people who did these things, all caught up with their soft bellies and thighs, counting their dollar bills. She was hard. She didn’t need that shit.

William pulled at her arm. “You’re going to get us kicked out before we even see if they have paint thinner.”

She let William lead her away from the check-out aisle toward the sign high on the wall that said Dairy, toward the giant glass of milk and two brown eggs mounted beside the letters. She wandered to the deli case, letting the chap stick fall from her fist, and fingered a package of

cheese. The writing on the label was boxy and small. The only thing she could make out, the price: \$8.56. She would pretend she was the kind of person who could buy cheese for \$8.56.

She put the cheese in her bag, an old orange tote that she'd scrounged from a dumpster back in Albuquerque.

"Let's just find the paint thinner," William said, almost pleading.

"You go find it."

He left her. She left the deli case and went down the nearest aisle, past the bright swirls of bread bags, stopping at the battery display at the far end. Hard metal racks hung with option after option. AAA. D. 9V. Little round bullets of watch battery.

Her mother once brought home a man who made meth out of battery innards. Maybe, she thought, she would try it. Then she wouldn't need to worry about making the most of this high. She could be high whenever she wanted. She put a package of AA's in her tote bag. She had no idea if this was the right kind of battery. If there was a special kind of battery. She'd tried to ignore the man, the way she ignored all the men her mother showed up with, so she'd never paid attention to what kind of batteries he might have used for his meth making.

The batteries swung and shivered like leaves in a high wind. That was good, Bethany thought. They might come to life, and they would tell her which one of them she should take.

They didn't. But they were beautiful in their inscrutability. They didn't have to tell her anything, she decided; they could just hang, and she might start to move like them. Swing and sway.

She swayed right to left. Bread on her left. Coffee/Tea on her right.

There was a baby in Coffee/Tea. Left alone, strapped in a car-seat, on top of a cart next to the bright Folgers canisters. Something else on display, like the batteries and the cheese.

Bethany went to the cart, taking slow, careful steps. The ground, which had steadied itself for her in the bread aisle, was back to rolling. The baby slept, white crusts of drool in the corners of her mouth. She wore a bright pink sleeper with “Mommy’s big girl” scrawled across the front. She wasn’t going to be bothered to wake up and look at Bethany.

It would be easy to undo the carseat buckle. A big red square marked the place Bethany’s thumb would press. The buckle release button grew and grew until it filled Bethany’s whole field of vision.

Often, after she’d smoked a foil or two, she started to believe that something would come along and show her what it was that she was supposed to do next, because she couldn’t believe that her life would go on forever the way it had gone so far. She began to wonder if the baby was this thing.

She told herself not to be stupid. She didn’t want a baby. Hadn’t she taken many steps, many times to make sure nothing like a baby grew in her body?

She shook the red button from her eyes.

The baby slept, eyelids thick and pink and closed.

Bethany went back to the batteries. She put a 9V in her bag. Two packages of AAA. Satisfied, she went into the aisle beyond Coffee/Tea.

It was empty. Or at least empty of people. Full of chip bags, each one like a small explosion. She took the brightest, blue like a body of water. Not that she’d ever seen a real body of water, just the sad ditches that ran brown and frothy behind her granddad’s house. But it might be like this chip bag, real water, foiled, rippling, waiting to open for her.

Ranch Doritos. She ripped at the bag. Her fingers had gone clumsy.

She wondered, as she struggled with the slick bag, where William was. Why he hadn't come back to find her yet. How long could it take him to realize there was no paint thinner?

The bag came open with a pop like a gun shot.

Bethany made a sound of shock, mid-way between a cough and a shout. She clutched the chip bag to her stomach, like she was trying to hold her own guts inside her.

She realized there was no threat. Just chips. She started to laugh. A hard-belly, deranged laugh.

Any minute, she thought, someone was going to come down this aisle and do something. She wouldn't be allowed to keep laughing this way.

But no one came.

It was the middle of the day. Not a popular shopping time. The only other people in the store might have been the baby and whoever brought her.

Bethany ran out of laughter. The long tubes of fluorescent light buzzed above her. She loosened her grip on the chip bag and looked inside. She'd crushed a lot of the chips while she was laughing.

"Fuck that," she said, dropping the bag to the grey-flecked linoleum. She took a fresh one from the shelf.

She went back to Coffee/Tea with her new chip bag. The baby was gone. Bethany felt her absence deep in her veins, like someone had drained the blood from her.

She went again to the batteries. She ate a few more Ranch Doritos. The batteries were deforming; they seemed to drip from their packages, thin strings of silver seeping through plastic, turning from beautiful to sour.

William. She would find him and she would tell him that they needed to leave.

She was coming down. The lights fizzed. The place behind Bethany's eyes started to itch. A place she could never scratch. The speaker-music was slowing down, like it had been plunged underwater, or maybe Bethany had been plunged underwater.

She found her way to Household Cleaners, the most promising place she could think of for paint thinner. But the aisle was empty of William's flannel shirt. The itch behind her eyes, unbearable. Panic boiled in her brain.

She took a bottle of purple and yellow cleaner and unscrewed the spray nozzle top. The fumes sent her choking when she inhaled them, but her brain seemed to flatten in their wake. The itch behind her eyes receded.

She told herself not to worry about William. Hadn't she lost him once before for years of her life? Ages eleven to twenty. She'd only just found him again before they left New Mexico. If she lost him, she could find him yet again.

She took another huff from the purple and yellow bottle, turned the bottle over and watched the spray nozzle and its thin translucent straw fall to the pavement. A long sea of cleaner receded from her shoes.

She left Household Cleaners. She would leave the store with her cheese and batteries, and William would find her eventually, because they were supposed to find each other. William understood the way everything inside her curdled at the thought of that word on the baby's sleeper. Girl. He understood that wasn't what she was.

But Bethany didn't leave. She wandered past the milk, came to the meat. Pale slabs of flesh under green-tinged light. She thought that she'd been cut up somehow, spread in those cases.

And there was the baby again. Parked by the salmon.

Bethany moved again toward the cart, looked at the baby's sleeper. *Mommy's big girl*. The words were like worms, squiggling away. Always a girl. That was her problem, or one of them. People thought it meant something, the way she had those small lumps of breasts rising from her ribcage, the way they could dig around in her cunt like there was something buried in her they had a right to have.

Girl. Woman. That wasn't what she was.

That wasn't what this baby was.

White worms of letters. She reached out a hand to crush them. Once they were gone, she would no longer be a girl.

She stopped herself just in time.

The music through the ceiling speaker was like the trains that shook the dirt in the Second Street park back in Albuquerque just when Bethany and William had gotten themselves to a place, not of sleep—they never risked sleep—but delirium that blocked out some of the world. The train shook them back to their lives every time.

Despite the way she was trying to get away, New Mexico seemed to follow Bethany like her own unwashed smell. The cracking 80s pop over the Safeway speakers like the wind that beat at everything back in Albuquerque. The long aisles spread in front of her only made her think of walls: the CPS offices, the treatment centers.

The speaker-music shook Bethany just like the train rumble. Except unlike the train there were words. *Take me. Take me there.*

That seemed obvious. The only question: where was there?

The song didn't tell her. The words turned unintelligible.

The carseat buckle swelled to fill her vision again. She could see her thumb pressing it. See herself moving those gray, spit-stained straps from the baby's shoulders.

Except she'd have to put the chip bag down to do that. And she was hungry. She was so hungry.

Take me.

She would finish her chips first. She withdrew into the freezer aisle and chewed.

She felt a tremor in her right eyelid. A sure sign that she was going to crash soon.

Panic scurried in her veins. Another hit. She couldn't go on long without one. The cleaner would only take her so far.

Maybe with the baby she wouldn't need another hit.

The song-words changed. *Loose. Make it loose.*

Loose. That word that was both Bethany's and not.

Lose me, baby.

Maybe it wasn't loose at all.

She tried to find something in herself that she could recognize. That small cavern, empty and gray, just above her diaphragm. She breathed into it. She made herself feel still.

Bethany would say it was like she had no choice, but it wasn't really like so many other things in her life where she truly had no choice.

The baby slept. Bethany put her hands on the cart handle, slowly, wrapping her fingers one by one around the chipped blue plastic.

If no one came in sixty seconds, she thought, she would do it.

She began to count.

She made it to sixteen and lost track.

She started over.

Sixty.

The baby slept. She was content. She was ok, Bethany thought, with the way that she might take her.

Bethany reached for the car-seat buckle. It came loose, just as Bethany had known it would, with a quick thumb-press.

She wormed the baby's arms out of the straps, trying not to jostle her too much. She tried to make some entreaty to the baby. Don't wake up, don't cry.

It seemed to work. The baby slept. Bethany got her out of the seat, put her against her shoulder, the way she'd seen actual mothers do. It was hard. Harder than it looked. The baby was so much heavier than Bethany expected.

No matter. Bethany felt a small kick of elation, like a second heartbeat, behind her ribs.

She carried the baby to the end of the aisle, her tote bag knocking at her hipbone. She looked toward the cash registers. The cashier still didn't look at Bethany, didn't act like he thought there was anything strange about her holding this baby.

And there was William at last, like the baby had led her to him. He waited by the Western Union sign, hands deep in the pockets of his jeans, head down, no paint thinner.

Bethany went toward him, slowly, like she was a mother, and she was tired after roaming the aisles of this store.

She tried it on, mothering, the way she'd tried on shopping.

"I think I've got everything," she said.

William looked up at Bethany, lines deep between his eyes. "What the fuck?" he said.

The sun came sharp through the automatic door behind him, cloud cover vanished at last.

Two

William had a thing that he never told anyone about, not even Bethany, because he knew how crazy it would make him sound. crazier than her.

When things got to a point where he didn't know what he might do, he tried to turn himself to water. Sometimes, he believed he had turned himself to water.

Or maybe he actually had. No one had watched him do it, no one saw his sinew and cell turn to a clear line of liquid, and that meant there was no one to dispute it, no one to prove that he hadn't pulled off this strange transformation.

This idea first came to him when he was fifteen, in the juvenile detention center in Albuquerque, after he'd been arrested in one of his brother Tyler's stolen cars. He'd done what Tyler always told him to do: took the blame. He was younger, Tyler always said, so it wouldn't matter.

The only thing in the juvenile detention center that didn't seem out to get him was the water that came from the bathroom faucet. It smelled like a sewer, but it made him think of the times he and Bethany would go to the ditch near her grandad's house. The water in that ditch stank too, but it was always rushing, brown sludge foaming white on the surface. It wouldn't be held back.

In juvenile detention, William was afraid. He lay on the flat piece of rubber they called a mattress, listening to the way it squeaked against the metal bed platform every time he made some small movement. Even it was out to get him. Every time he drifted into sleep, inevitably, he moved, and there was sound, and it woke the other boy in his cell, who slept above William in

the bunk, who would lean over the rim of the bed, and say, “You know I’ll kill you too if you don’t shut the fuck up.”

William was afraid of this boy. He’d told William that he’d been arrested for a drive-by shooting that killed three people, and even though he had the sheen of braggadocio on him, William didn’t want to push him, to find out what he might actually be capable of doing.

He tried to sleep stilly, but he always failed.

The night he first turned to water, he woke to the soft snores of his cellmate above him. He was cold under the thin blanket, but he tried not to shiver. His chin damp with drool, but he couldn’t risk raising his hand to wipe it away. The next movement could be the one that would wake the other boy.

His face itched. The other boy snored.

And then it came to him. If he could make himself like that drool, it wouldn’t matter who he woke up, what they did.

No one could do anything to it. It was just water.

And then William was water too. He was no longer lying balled under a gray felt blanket; he was filling the little pores in the rubber beneath him, he was dripping silently onto the concrete. He flowed under the rusted cell door, thin enough to slip through the crack where not even paper could fit.

He came back before morning, hard in the case of his body. But if he’d done it once, he might do it again.

He followed Bethany out of the Safeway, through the automatic doors, because that was what he did. He was a follower, eager for some quick sign of affection, anxious not to cross anyone, not to expose himself any more than he already felt exposed.

Together in the Safeway parking lot, anyone watching them would think they looked like a family, a normal family, even if it was not the kind of family those people wanted to see in their parking lots, in their stores.

They'd reached the second row of empty parking spaces when the announcement came: "Security. We need security."

The baby didn't stay asleep on Bethany's shoulder. As if that announcement was the thing she'd been waiting for, she started to scream.

The sound was like a bullet launching William to some action.

"Security." Wishful thinking, this announcement, as if this was a store that had security, with its one cashier, so few shoppers.

No matter. William panicked, and he ran.

He was never a good runner; it was one of the things his brother, Tyler, harassed him about day after day. But he found some speed, and he ran. Past the cart corral. Around the side of the building, letting the water-stained stucco lead him on, until he reached the dumpster behind the Safeway, a place where he was cut off by a length of fence. Beyond it, another building. The same yellow stucco as the Safeway, as if he'd gone through a mirror somehow. His terror doubled, his own trapped state reflected back at him.

Air came hard and hot into his lungs. Behind him, sirens. The baby.

When he tried to get some purchase in the fence, the toes of his workboots were too wide to fit in the wire diamonds. He remembered water, at last, but he couldn't force his body into any other shape besides its own. He would have to find some other escape.

Toward the ground, several feet away, there was a place where the chain-link was broken, as if someone had once done the same thing. He wormed his body through, shirt and skin snagging.

Once he got to his feet again, he tried not to run, tried to keep himself slow and unpanicked as he went around the side of this building.

A Walgreens. More cars in the parking lot than at the Safeway.

He thought: steal one and drive away.

Stealing cars, the one thing he might be said to be good at. The only thing that gave him some hold over Bethany, the way he could do this, and she couldn't even drive. He liked it, that he had one thing that gave him an upper hand, one reason that she found him useful. Even though it was a skill he'd learned from his brother Tyler, even though he'd learned it with reluctance. You don't like to get your hands dirty, Tyler would say to him derisively. In the literal sense, meaning William was squeamish when it came to engines, grease, the small wires that would spark a car to life without a key. Also, in the sense that William didn't want to be like his mother, bouncing in and out of jail.

But he had learned to steal cars.

It was maybe the thing that had been most useful to him.

He could do it again. Take one of these cars from the Walgreens lot.

But he knew it wouldn't work. Someone would see him, out in the open like this. He was still too close to Bethany and the baby, even though he saw no sign of her, no longer heard the baby. She didn't seem to be following him. Or maybe she'd just been stopped. Caught.

Which meant he might be next.

He'd run out of flight. He had no plan, no adrenaline left in him.

If he could evaporate, turn his legs and chest, scabby hands and ingrown beard to water, he might get away.

His heart beat too fast. His brain a racket of siren and sunflash. He stood exposed, between the cars, body swaying a little, arms held slightly out, like he was trying to find his balance. The sirens tasted like burned metal in the back of his throat.

Still himself.

He walked through the parking lot away from the store, fast, but not too fast, not fast enough that he would look strange, despite the fact that he was sure he would be marked out as strange no matter what he did.

The town was small and jumbled together, houses and businesses overlapping with no sense of order. Next to the Walgreens, a narrow gray building with a dilapidated Billington Urgent Care sign planted in the wispy grass in front of it, and beyond that, two trailers, one with rusted-out car scrap tossed around the yard, another with two small flags planted in a bed of sickly petunias near the porch.

It had the same depleted air as Albuquerque, despite the way other things about it seemed so different—its small size, its dampness. William only hoped that like Albuquerque, it was a place where people would mind their own business, where they would stare and mutter from

behind the curtains that covered their plexiglass windows but do nothing else. The cashier in the Safeway, the people they'd asked for gas money had seemed bent on ignoring them.

But he couldn't rely on that.

He walked past the trailers, tried to keep his head down, the length of his hair over his face so that no one could see him clearly, tried to do the one thing he'd never been able to do in his life. Blend in.

As a kid, people found him too tall, too clumsy, body moving in all the directions except the right one. His eyes went to all the wrong places. Just like his eyes lingered on the man in the Circle K parking lot, the sly line of his lip. He'd let himself believe it meant something, the way that man's eyes seemed to linger on him too. He should've known there wouldn't be paint thinner in the Safeway. He'd just let himself be hopeful.

He walked, kicking at the place on the shoulder where the asphalt trailed away into dirt to keep his steps slow, to fight his instinct to run. Blinds flickered in one of the trailer windows. A dog barked behind high fence slats. Rain began to fall again.

He would go back to the Circle K, he decided, and find the man who wanted the paint thinner. He'd tell him the truth—there wasn't paint thinner at the Safeway—but maybe the man wouldn't mind. Maybe the paint thinner had only been an excuse, a way to pull William to him.

He would pretend that all of this—Bethany and the baby—had never happened.

He wouldn't think about the way he'd left Bethany behind. About whether it made him a bad person somehow.

His sleeves flapped wetly against his wrists. Water leaked down his forehead. It glistened on the asphalt. Nothing could happen to that water. It didn't think.

He waited at a stoplight, legs moving impatiently, the red making his mind as frantic as the faint echo of siren.

The light didn't change. The street was empty, but he was afraid to cross against the light, like this small violation of the law might draw the police to him.

He wiped rain from his forehead. He looked to his left, past the red front of a bank, at a stripe of bright yellow fencing. This might be the main road, the one where he'd find the Circle K. He couldn't be sure; he was bad at directions, bad at paying attention to the places he passed.

But it looked familiar. He stopped waiting for the light and went left along the sidewalk. It was torn up, pummeled by tree root. It looked like the sidewalk he and Bethany had walked on to get to the Safeway.

He told himself not to think more about Bethany.

Not think of the way the air was now silent of siren. Not guess at what it might mean.

He'd been right about the yellow fence. Beyond it, the Circle K. His steps quickened, with excitement this time, not panic.

He hated the way he hoped. He knew it made him weak, knew it showed on him like a stain.

But he couldn't stamp it out of himself, no matter how he tried.

Doesn't matter, the man might say about the paint thinner and offer his cigarette to William. He imagined the little crease left by the man's teeth in the white filter.

He would pretend that once he got back to the paint thinner man, everything would be ok.

The Honda was parked patiently where he'd left it, next to the air pump. But beyond that the parking lot was empty. The Circle K sign listed slightly, in a way he hadn't noticed before, like it had been damaged somehow in his absence.

He'd been so sure the man would still be there. He'd said he would wait. So little time had passed since he'd left with Bethany. It couldn't have been more than twenty minutes.

But the parking lot was empty of people. When William went inside, there was only one other person, the skinny kid behind the plexiglass that separated the register from the rest of the store.

"There was a man here earlier," he said to the kid. "Is he still here?"

"I don't know who you mean," the kid said. His voice was flat, with a small hint of menace.

William went back outside. He pulled at the door of the Honda, then reconsidered. He didn't really want to get back inside the closed space of the car, even though he knew the smart thing to do would be to get in and drive away, and once he got to some new town, or ran out of gas, which would likely happen first, he could ditch the Honda, steal something else. He could forget Bethany and the way he'd run from her.

But he was tired. He sat on the wet asphalt, back to the low cinder block wall that separated the gas station from an auto repair shop that looked mostly like junkyard.

He felt that his life had collapsed in on itself. Or more accurately, like he'd built a ladder to lift himself out of it, but at the top he'd found only the same life he thought he was leaving behind.

He needed a plan. His mind turned with possibilities, but none of them would settle.

This was why he didn't like to get high. It stopped his thinking, but, inevitably, he came down, and his mind turned with a heavy, existential dread, the past swelling in him like it was present.

He put his shoe against the Honda's front tire. He knocked his knuckles against the unmoving asphalt. If he waited long enough, he thought, maybe the paint thinner man would come back.

A dull pain made its way from the back of his skull to his temples, leaking around his eyes. The loss of his meager high making itself known.

He wished he had something more. But Bethany had smoked it all.

Fucking Bethany.

He knew it was the wrong thing to do. Sit like this out in the open.

But also, it gave him some cover. He could say, if it came down to it, that the Honda, like Bethany, like the baby, had nothing to do with him.

In the Circle K parking lot, in the rain, he tried and tried to drip away. He stayed stubbornly solid.

Three

The baby's screaming was worse than anything Bethany had heard in her life. Worse than the Safeway speaker-music, worse than the sound of her mother fucking one of her many, many men.

Worse than the announcement that blared out over the cars. "Security."

Bethany knew it was the wrong thing to do, to run like William. She knew they should go calmly back to the Honda, and once the baby met the seat foam, things would unlock. Everyone would see what they were supposed to do. Bethany. William. The baby.

The baby screamed against Bethany's shirt with the same hysterical timbre as the person on the loudspeaker. Bethany tried to muffle her, using her forearm to press the baby's face to her collarbone, but it did no good. She was stronger than Bethany felt she should be, her small body slick muscle like a tongue. She wouldn't be held still. Her sound sliced right through Bethany.

It was getting Bethany all mixed up, confused.

Maybe the Honda wasn't the thing she wanted. Maybe she needed, like William, to get away.

This was nothing new, the way she seesawed, changeable, indecisive when she was starting to come down from a high. But this time, it mattered that she choose the right thing in a way that it never had before. She couldn't afford a mistake. She knew it, even as she waivered.

She walked quickly away from the Safeway, away from the Circle K and the Honda. The ground was still unsteady under her. She tried to be careful, lugging the baby in both arms, trying to find some way to balance the bobble of the baby's head, the tote bag with the cheese and

batteries banging her hip. The itch grew again behind her eyes, urged on by the baby's screams and the sour milk smell of her body.

Bethany passed the empty lot to the Safeway's north. Beyond that, a gray brick building, a title loan shop and a laundromat. She left the sidewalk, veering toward the cars parked in front of the laundromat with something that might have been more stagger than intention.

In the store, she'd thought that once she had the baby in her arms, something would happen, she would understand something.

But there was nothing. Only the screams, the sirens, coming so quickly. Bethany didn't understand how they could come so quickly. Call for cops in Albuquerque, and there would be hours to spare.

She crouched between the cars. Got herself and the baby and the tote bag to the ground. Down low, she'd be safe. This asphalt, full of cracks, full of little oil-rainbow rivers. Like the asphalt William collected back when they were kids. It was a safe place to be, down by this asphalt. Almost as safe as the empty place inside her.

She was out of sight. The baby was crying, but maybe no one would hear that.

The sirens were very loud, after all.

A white-haired man came through the laundromat door. He moved with the same uncertain step Bethany used, making his careful way across the sidewalk, backless loafers flapping. He was stuttering and unsteady. Bethany knew he wouldn't know what to do with her, and this would give her some upper hand. Also, he didn't seem rattled by the baby's screaming, or if he was, he didn't show it.

Or maybe, Bethany thought, he couldn't hear it. Maybe he wouldn't even be able to see her. Maybe the baby made her invisible, a force that could knock the world like the wind.

She crouched at the car tire. The white-haired man descended slowly from the curb. He put a hand on the Acura's hood to steady himself, squinted at Bethany and shuddered. So he could see her.

A disappointment. But it made her feel good, this shudder, the way someone else's fear of her always did.

"I need you to help me." She had to say it twice before she got any reaction from him, and this angered her, that his initial fear didn't translate to some quick deference.

He raised his right hand shakily. Surrender or self-defense, Bethany couldn't tell which. "I just came for my laundry," he said. "I don't have money."

Bethany shook her head. Her hair had fallen loose from its elastic at some point, and it hung tangled around her face. She hoped it made her look vulnerable, like she was the kind of person someone would want to help.

She knew it probably didn't. She never looked like the kind of person people wanted to help.

"This car's no good," the man said, a small tremor in his voice. "You don't want it." He was still afraid of her. That was promising.

Bethany tightened her grip on the baby. "Please," she said. "I just need your help." She felt the empty place behind her diaphragm swell. It made her voice a flexible weapon with just the right timbre to snag the man.

"This car's no good," he said again.

"I don't need the car," she said. "I just need..." She waited, hoping the rest of the sentence would fill in.

The man waited too.

“It’s my husband.” Words coming to her at last. “I’m trying to get away from him. I have to go to my sister’s house so she can help me.”

“Police,” the man said. “They deal with these things nowadays.”

“No, I have to go to my sister first. We have to do it the right way.”

The man nodded. Bethany could feel the clock of sirens, ticking closer, while the man took his time, fumbled keys from the sagging pocket of his jeans, struggled to find the unlock button. Bethany yanked the back door open and wrestled herself, the baby, and her tote bag inside.

“Just be quiet,” Bethany hissed to the baby, while the man made his slow way into the driver’s seat. “It’ll be better soon.”

She didn’t believe Bethany. She kept crying. She was smarter than she’d looked back in the Safeway, drool all over her face in her carseat.

The man settled himself behind the wheel, and looked back at Bethany. He knew he’d made a mistake, Bethany could see, but she could see he also couldn’t figure a way out of it.

She felt a strange sympathy with this man. He was in this way, the same as her.

She told herself to stop thinking this way. This man was nothing like her.

“My sister...” She couldn’t think of what might come next.

The baby gasped on Bethany’s lap, mouth wide, showing a small ridge of pink gum. She had a long scratch across her right cheek that Bethany knew hadn’t been there when she picked her out of the carseat.

“Where’s your sister?” the man said. His voice was phlegmy, snagging on his words. He fumbled his key into the ignition.

“She lives kind of outside of town. In that direction.” Bethany waved vaguely toward her left. Guessing, but not a big risk. There was bound to be a house somewhere in that direction.

The man put the car into drive, pulled out of the parking lot and onto the street without looking for traffic. He was a bad driver. Straddling lane lines. Lurching forward with hard pressure on the gas. He drove like Bethany. All nerves, no confidence.

Was this when Bethany first heard something banging around in her head? It was something, but she wouldn't have called it a voice. None of that carrying on about the baby-give-it-back, like she'd get later. More like a needle in the back of her brain, jabbing and jabbing.

The man changed lanes, again without looking, raising a series of angry honks. Bethany began to wonder if she'd been wrong. He might be taking her anywhere. He was old, but that didn't mean he didn't have some violent designs. Or his plan might be to take her to some police station. He might be smarter or more perverse than she'd given him credit for.

She told herself that she could still outsmart him. She could fight him off. If he really had the wherewithal to take her to the police, she'd tell them the same thing she'd told him. She was trying to escape her husband. She'd begged a ride from this old man, and he'd practically kidnapped her.

So a baby was just stolen somewhere nearby?

There were millions of babies in the world. They couldn't prove this was the same one.

There was the sleeper, but she could explain that away. Coincidence. There were probably thousands of sleepers like this in the world. Maybe Bethany and the baby's mother shopped at the same store. This wasn't a very big town after all.

The important thing was that they couldn't *prove* this wasn't Bethany's baby.

She felt confident again.

But the needle in her mind became a voice.

Give her back.

Like a radio station that wouldn't fully come in. Like the garbled speaker-music back at the Safeway.

The old man drove. Weaving from lane to lane. Bethany tried to watch the streets, make a map of them in her head, that old thing her mother always told her to do.

Her arms were scratchy with meth come-down. Her head was scratchy with the baby's screams.

She told herself soon things like that wouldn't matter.

Give her back.

Soon, this voice or whatever it was wouldn't matter.

Unless the voice was the thing that was supposed to happen.

Give her back.

But Bethany didn't think she was supposed to give the baby back. Assuming the voice was talking about the baby.

Give her back.

Bethany knew somehow it was talking about the baby.

The sky grew gloomy again with cloud. Rain spit against the windshield. Bethany could feel the chill even inside this man's car.

They reached a neighborhood. Not as run down as Bethany would have liked—the houses all had intact windows, wooden fences that were paint-chipped and weathered but not broken down, yards where the weeds had been cut back—but it would have to do.

“Just anywhere is fine,” she said. “I can walk from here.”

The man seemed not to hear.

“Here,” she said, voice harder this time. “This is it. I’ll get out here.”

The man stopped, not close to the curb.

Bethany fumbled with the door handle, heard the snap of something plastic when she finally got it to give. It gave her some satisfaction to know she’d broken it.

She wrestled the baby from lap to shoulder and tumbled out of the car, hurried up the sidewalk.

The voice pursued her.

What are you going to do?

She thought that she might outpace it somehow. It might be tied to the old man’s car, and once she put enough space between it and herself, she would lose it.

What do you want?

What did she want? The voice to shut up. That man to drive away.

That’s not what I mean.

She looked over her shoulder at the street. He was still there, car idling, watching. Maybe he was calling the police now that he was free of her. He didn’t seem like the type to have a cell phone, but there was no way to know. Bethany and William didn’t look like the type to have a cell phone either, but they’d once stolen one from an unlocked car. It had done them no good; it stopped working after a week, and they had no one to call with it anyway.

Bethany pushed down the thought of William and looked at the houses. There was one to her left with a For Rent sign planted in the grass. A high wooden fence separated back yard from front, a gate set in the green-painted boards.

“For Rent” meant the house might be empty. It also meant the man might not believe it was her imaginary sister’s house. But Bethany no longer cared what the old man would believe. She would make up another story if he tried to stop her. She just needed to get off the sidewalk. Out of the rain. Away from the voice.

You won’t get away from me.

The gate’s latch was stuck. Bethany shook it, trying to balance the baby on one arm, but she couldn’t get it loose. The baby was crying again, so loud that if anyone was in this house, they were going to come out.

She got the latch to release at last.

The man was still there, still watching, when Bethany looked over her shoulder at the street.

Fuck him, she thought. She pulled the gate closed behind her.

The yard, overgrown with weeds. A rusted swing-set fallen on its back and two toppled metal garbage cans. It didn’t look like the kind of place anyone came often.

“See,” she told the baby. “We’re fine. You can shut up.”

The baby didn’t listen.

“This is our house now,” Bethany told the baby. “So you need to stop screaming.”

The baby still cried. Maybe she understood that the house was nothing special.

Weathered green siding that was starting to break away. A torn screen on the window that faced Bethany.

She belongs in my house.

The voice had a texture. A mother. The baby’s mother. Worn-down, gray, despite its shrillness.

No way, Bethany told herself, could some part of this baby's mother be banging around inside her brain. It was the meth, or her lack of it.

She told herself to focus on the real things in front of her. The house, the baby, who had gone from scream to wheeze.

She listened for the sound of the old man's engine. It didn't come.

You don't know what to do.

Like she needed someone to tell her that.

I don't know what to do.

This wasn't what Bethany wanted to hear. If the voice was angry, she could punch back at it. This woundedness, she couldn't fight.

I didn't think anything would happen to her.

"If this is how you always are, your baby's probably better off with me anyway," she said.

That set it off even worse. No words, just a wail.

But it shut the baby up. That made Bethany feel better, like the baby was on her side.

At last, the engine, the sound of the old man's tires on the road. Relief like a hot rush of piss.

Bethany shifted the baby back and forth. She pulled at her like some new limb she couldn't figure out how to work.

Keep trying it on. Mothering. No matter that it was making her feel a little nauseated.

You're not a mother.

"Are you?"

The voice had no answer.

Bethany knocked the broken screen from the window-frame with one arm, balancing the baby between her hip and other arm, and tried to see through the glass, past the ghosts of herself and the baby. A couch. A TV sitting on the carpet. No people.

What are you going to do?

Now Bethany had no answer. She was jumbled, kaleidoscope with no pattern.

She needed a hit so that she could think again. The batteries, she thought. She could go inside and strip the batteries of their outer shells, and then what?

She hadn't paid attention when the man her mother brought home made meth. She had no idea what to do next.

"Do you know?" she asked the baby. "You're supposed to be helping me, and you're just making things worse."

Behind her, the fence groaned in the wind. The rain fell hard. The light shifted behind the clouds, shaking out the world as it changed.

The voice taunted her even when it was silent.

What was she going to do?

Bethany knew what people would say if she put it out to them plainly, what she believed. But she felt the truth of her belief like she felt the soft mud of the ground under her feet.

When she was ten, when she was crumpled under the weight of a man in the sticky sheets of an RV bed, she'd discovered something in herself. A way to slip out from under the world, to escape, to shift the borders of things: time, physical space. There was a hole inside her, a grey, fuzzy dimension.

She called it her empty place, but it wasn't really empty. Someday, it would swell, she would swallow herself with it. It would torque and twist her like a black hole, make her an explosion, a red mouth of lava. She would be so different, no one would know what to call her.

She knew what it sounded like. But she was sure it wasn't a crazy thing that she'd invented. It felt as real, this empty place, as her heartbeat, as the small lumps of her ribs.

Would this baby might be the thing that would make her fully the empty place?

She stood in the rain, outside the window. The baby cried in a pleading way, begging Bethany to do something.

Bethany's insides felt slick, rotten, her empty place full of mess. No way to grow it, no way to get inside it. She had to do something fast, so she would stop feeling this way. Also, the rain was growing harder, colder.

She held the baby with one arm, took the tote bag straps in the other. This was nothing she hadn't done before, broken a window, but with the baby, all of it was wrong. Her balance, the way she needed to draw her arm back to aim the body of the bag at the glass.

She put the baby down in the wet grass. The baby screamed again at this. The voice too, was hot and angry.

"Shut up," Bethany said to both of them. "What do you want us to do? Stand out in the rain?"

She swung the tote bag.

Glass spit everywhere.

Four

Bethany reached through the window-frame and found the lock. Cut herself a little on the remaining shards of glass. The small trickle of blood on the back of her hand made her feel that she'd earned something, made the house hers in some small way. She'd suffered for it.

And then, another struggle as she lifted the baby. The baby didn't seem to want to be lifted.

"For fuck's sake," Bethany said. "You don't want to go down and you won't let me pick you up. Do you want to stay out here?"

You'll never know what she wants.

The voice taunting like the rain.

The baby arched her back away in response. Bethany forced her against her chest, trying to keep her balance while she got first one foot, then the other, over the low sill. She had to lean against the window-frame, then the wall to stay upright.

It was exhausting, lugging this baby around.

The baby made a sound that was almost a laugh. Like this had been her goal, to make things as difficult as possible for Bethany, like she was amused by the way she'd succeeded.

Bethany was only relieved that it wasn't another scream.

She made her way carefully over the glass pieces on the carpet. She couldn't be sure, despite the For Rent sign, that the house was empty. The things in the room—the couch, the TV, crooked pictures on the wall, a floor lamp—were sad and dust-covered, but their presence meant someone might live in this place, might have heard the glass, the baby, the grunts Bethany made

as she wrestled the baby inside. Bethany had been surprised before, breaking into houses she thought were empty.

She bounced the baby against her shoulder, trying to do a thing she'd seen other people do with babies. It didn't feel right, and it seemed to agitate the baby. She listened, for some hint of life in the house. Nothing.

The only voice, the one in Bethany's head.

What do you want me to do?

"Shut up to start with." It was a mistake, talking back. Ignore it. That was the thing to do with the voice. Eventually it would have to go away.

I'll never go away.

Bethany went to the framed pictures on the dark-paneled wall just inside the window, not yet willing to move far from it in case she needed to make some hasty exit.

"Look," she told the baby. "Look at this shit."

To her surprise, the baby did seem to look.

Happy-family kind of pictures. Kids. Outside on grass, squinting at the sun. In blue shirts against a gray, school-picture background. An old lady and the kids at a wooden table, dirty kitchen counters in the background, cake with candles on the table in front of them.

Maybe, Bethany thought, she was actually one of those kids, maybe the one with the red t-shirt and the gap where their teeth had fallen out. Someone who was neither girl nor boy, just glossy reflection under glass. Someone who had a childhood full of pictures and cake, all blurred by candle smoke.

And now they were all grown up, and this was their house.

Was that what she wanted? Was that the direction she hoped her life would take? The kind of thing her empty place would make her?

The air felt still and expectant. Waiting for her.

The itch behind her eyes softened.

Bethany took the baby down the hall and into the bathroom. Did it mean something that she found the bathroom so easily, that she knew where to go?

It was her house, after all. Of course, she knew where to go.

The baby made a sound that might have been encouraging. Bethany put her on the green fuzzy rug at her feet because she was tired of holding her.

She hates being on the floor.

“She doesn’t care,” Bethany said, through the toothpaste.

It seemed true. The baby was sucking at her fist, intent on fitting as many fingers as she could into her mouth.

Bethany picked through the detritus in the bathroom drawers: a flattened tube of toothpaste, a battery-powered toothbrush with yellowed bristles, a brush full of hair that was lighter than Bethany’s own, which made her feel certain that she had changed, even though her reflection in the water-stained mirror looked the way it always did. Bethany told herself that these were her things. And all these things showed that she’d changed. She’d become a person like other people, a person who had things in a drawer.

You’ll never be a person like other people.

Maybe not. But did she want to be a person like other people? The question had troubled her whole life. She looked at the toothbrush. What she wanted was to be beyond teeth and the stale taste that collected on her own.

She brushed her teeth. She put the toothbrush and the toothpaste into her tote bag.

“Stupid, right?” she said to the baby. “We don’t need to carry our shit around with us. We can come in this bathroom and get it anytime we want.”

But it made her feel better to know that she could carry it around with her.

The baby watched, slobbering all over her hand. Watched while Bethany tried to untangle her hair with the brush. Watched while Bethany sat on the toilet and pissed.

You took her for this?

“You’re the one who left her in the shopping cart.”

The baby made some sound that might have been a laugh.

Bethany could do what she wanted and so could the baby. The voice wasn’t going to boss her around. This was her house. Her house and her toilet, not some gas station bathroom shit, one that she would never have to share.

Except maybe with the baby, once she got older.

But Bethany didn’t think she would get older. She thought this baby was not maybe a baby at all, not a person who would grow up into another person. She would become fuzzy-edged and soft, like the empty space, and then they would blur, merge, into some new not-person kind of thing.

A green bathrobe hung from a hook on the back of the door, the same color as the rug on the floor. Bethany wondered if this was a color she liked. She tried it on in her head, the idea that

she might like this vivid green. It didn't seem like a bad idea. She took the robe from the hook and wrapped it around herself.

"What about you?" she said to the baby. "What do you want?"

The baby only scrunched up her face like she was about to cry again.

"Come on," Bethany said. "Don't be this way. You can do whatever the fuck you want now."

She looked in the medicine cabinet. More leftovers. A grimy spool of red thread. A tube of concealer. Three pharmacy bottles of pills with yellowed labels. She tossed all this into her bag.

The baby gave a short cry.

"It's our house," Bethany said. "Hold on. Your stuff is here somewhere."

She opened the cabinet under the sink. It was empty. There was nothing a baby might need, no diapers, no wipes.

"Let's go find your stuff." Bethany took the baby, wincing at the way her back and shoulder protested when she lifted the baby's weight, and went back into the hallway.

She found her way to a kitchen. Unlike the bathroom, it had been cleaned out. The refrigerator silent, empty, stale-smelling. The only thing left, a box of saltines in the back of a cabinet. She made a sling for the baby between her hip and forearm so that she had a free hand to pull crackers from their plastic sleeve. She ate two. She gave one to the baby, who threw it to the floor.

"Fuck you," Bethany said, but not in a mean way. She could understand why the baby would throw this shitty, stale cracker onto the floor.

You think she can eat that?

She gave the baby another cracker. The baby put it to her mouth and sucked at it, without really eating it, like she too wanted to defy the voice.

“See,” Bethany said. “She can.” But she wasn’t sure that this baby really could eat crackers with her line of gum, no teeth. She knew nothing about babies.

Bethany put the crackers in her bag, which was starting to weigh on her like the baby, and went back to the room with the broken window, laid the baby down on the couch.

She didn’t understand why things weren’t clearer. Why nothing new seemed to be happening to her.

The baby tossed her cracker onto the couch cushion and made a sound that was laced with scorn.

The itch was back behind her eyes.

Bethany dug in her tote bag and pulled one of the pill bottles from its depth. She didn’t bother to try to read the yellowed label, just unscrewed the lid with a quick twist of her palm and swallowed two white ovals.

“Let’s see,” she told the baby. “Any minute now, something’s going to happen.”

She waited.

But nothing happened.

Just like nothing had happened when they left New Mexico, despite the way Bethany thought when they did it that it would be the thing that would change her.

When they’d been thrown out of the Second Street park where they slept in Albuquerque, when William said, “there’s no reason we have to stay here,” Bethany saw that it was true. They didn’t. The problem might be this place, and they could leave it.

“Let’s go to Oregon,” she’d said. It was the farthest place she knew; she’d once shared a room at the youth shelter with a girl who’d run away from Oregon, who’d been put in the shelter while she was waiting to be shipped back to her parents. Bethany had suggested that the girl could kill her parents and then she would no longer have to live with them. She was both joking and not. She’d tried to put her mouth to this other girl’s, to mix her breath with the girl’s, but this girl hadn’t understood her the way William did, and it ended with Bethany expelled from the shelter, back to a CPS office.

“We can’t go to Oregon,” William had said.

“You can steal a car. We can drive.”

She was both surprised and not when he didn’t argue. It made her feel, like she’d felt with this baby, that it was the right thing to happen

But despite all this, she was stuck. Sunk on a battered couch, terrible weight of a baby on her lap. Like she was what people expected her to be. Girl, woman, mother. A horror to think of something like baby emerging from her.

This was nothing she’d imagined. Nothing she’d hoped for.

Or was it what she’d hoped for? She’d wanted something strange and unforeseeable to strike, turn the course of her life, hadn’t she?

She looked at the baby for some reassurance, but her eyes were closed. She seemed to be sleeping.

Bethany herself was so tired. She didn’t want to think anymore, didn’t want to have to feel her way from minute to minute.

She’d survived her life thus far because she looked at what was in front of her and grabbed and grabbed and when one thing didn’t work, she moved quickly to the next. She’d

grabbed the baby, the old man in the car, this house because they were put in front of her, and she believed they had to mean something because what would she do if they meant nothing?

William too was a thing that she'd grabbed, when he showed up at her granddad's house at age eleven, offering, in his wavery voice, to help them out. Grabbed him again, when he came up to her in the park years later, his voice still uncertain.

Now that she let herself think of William, he worked at her like a toothache. The way he'd fled from her, like he was afraid of her. The way she didn't try to call him back.

She told herself that she would find him again.

But what if she didn't? What if she didn't need William anymore. Just this baby and the house.

It scared her, this thought.

Bethany stretched herself out beside the baby. Any minute, she told herself.

She didn't mean to sleep, but she did.

The wind drove rain through the broken window, wetting the carpet and the glass. Outside, the street saw the occasional car, people returning from work, pulling into driveways, garages. Enough time passed that the rain subsided.

Bethany woke. A fuzzy feeling marred her head. Her throat was tight, like it was hampered by a hand. The itch behind her eyes was no longer an itch but an electric fire, spread through her whole body, veins sparking with it.

She understood the past hours, like the world had only just become clear in front of her. She'd stolen a baby.

She didn't want a baby. She didn't want to be a person like she thought the baby's mother must be, tied down, her life sagging around her.

You don't know anything about me.

She didn't want this voice in her head.

She didn't want to be changed like this. She wanted to be the person she'd been that morning, when she first went into the Safeway.

She almost couldn't remember it. The bright aisles, the shape of the cart where the baby sat. The sharp red buckle release button that had called to her.

The baby was still asleep. Bethany told herself she wouldn't notice her leaving. Just like she hadn't noticed Bethany taking her.

Bethany would leave the baby, just like the voice had told her to, and then she could go back to the way things had been.

She could undo this. Make it like it never happened.

She took off the bathrobe and covered the baby with it. She put her hand over the baby's face, not hard, not in a way that might hurt her.

"I'll come back," she said, even though she didn't plan to. She just felt that she should say it to make the baby feel better, although, of course, the baby didn't understand what she was saying.

She left through the broken window.

Five

After some time, William gave up his vigil on the asphalt and got back into the Honda. He was soaked through from the rain. Everything water but him.

He sparked the car to life, shivering.

The gas needle hovered near empty. He knew he wouldn't be able to drive far. He wasn't even sure he should drive away at all, because he had no idea how long it would be before he would come to another gas station. The towns here were spread thin, miles from one to the next.

But he couldn't sit and test his luck. He'd been lucky so far, and this frightened him, because he wasn't a person who was lucky. It was only a matter of time before it ended.

Right now, Bethany might be in some police station. She might say anything about him. Blame him for everything. She was always making up stories. Before, he wouldn't have thought that she would turn on him, but also, he wouldn't have thought that she would steal a baby. She was mercurial, yes, erratic, doing things because they seemed to present themselves to her, but they were small things: grabbing alcohol from the Smith's by the park and running with it through the automatic doors, throwing trash at passing cars, picking fight after fight with the old woman who slept near them in the back corner of the Second Street park. Not serious things like the baby.

He backed away from the air pump. The sky had turned from gray to deeper gray. Soon it would be dark.

William knew he'd been stupid to sit so long at the Circle K. Hoping someone would come and tell him what to do. Hoping the man would come back. Thinking too much, mind spinning like a stuck tire.

Only two options: go the way he'd come when he'd driven into town that morning or go past the Safeway.

The thought of the Safeway made a slick, sour taste in his throat.

He would backtrack. As though he could unwind the day that way.

The windshield wipers scraped the glass. The streets shimmered with water. All of it closed to him.

If he went all the way back to New Mexico, would he be given some chance to retry things? He was never sure he'd wanted to leave New Mexico. That had been Bethany, and he'd gone along with it because he couldn't think of any reason not to.

He pulled out of the Circle K lot.

A police car passed him, going the opposite way, toward the Safeway, leisurely, without lights.

William's heart kicked with panic. He was driving too slowly, a sure way to call attention to himself. The car was stolen. He'd smeared the license plate with mud, a feeble trick that wouldn't matter if he was stopped.

But the police car vanished. It made no attempt to come after him.

He made it to the edge of town. A place where the road was hemmed by brush and pine.

He could ditch the car and walk. He might come across another car he could take.

That was the thing to do. He would drive this car out of sight, leave it, and walk.

He was sick of driving. He was the one who drove them from New Mexico in little spurts, punctuated by long stops—when they ran out of gas, when they got paranoid after smoking too much and had to pull off into some state park and lay low, when they got a flat tire and had to ditch their car and steal another. A pointless trip, one that he should have understood

was pointless as soon as their first stolen car ran out of gas. All risk and begged directions. But he'd gone alone with it, let himself get caught up in it, the way Bethany said Oregon, the flat spreads of Colorado and Nevada, the way something might open for them like this land.

But all it got him was trapped.

Instead of a place to pull off, he saw Bethany wandering along the tree-hemmed shoulder, just beyond the sign marking the town limit. No baby with her anymore.

His foot lurched from gas to brake. He didn't believe, really at first, that it was her, the way he hadn't quite believed it was her when he'd seen her months ago in the park.

He thought it might be some trick of imagination, some trick of the rain, the headlights, and soon her shape would fade. But she didn't disappear.

He thought, without understanding where the thought had come from, that he could run her down. He could kill her, and then he would be done with her.

It frightened him, that he might be a person who could do this.

He pulled to the narrow shoulder beyond her and unlocked the door to let her in.

She settled herself in the passenger seat with a squelch of water, dropped her tote bag at her feet with another. "There you are," she said. Like she'd been out looking for him all over town.

"What the fuck?" he said.

She wrung water from her hair onto the mess of seat foam on the floor mat. "What the fuck to you too."

He chewed at the inside of his lower lip and tried to think of something to say. If he didn't mention the baby, he wondered, could he make it not-real? Maybe he'd only imagined it,

the way Bethany came at him out of the aisle, the pink blob of the baby's body emerging like a tumor from her shoulder. The fact that she had no baby made him hope that maybe it had never been real.

"You're just going to take off and leave me?" Bethany said.

"I didn't leave you." Some old instinct, burned into him long ago. Deny, appease.

"I'm just kidding."

His foot shuddered on the brake. He would have to ask. "Where's the baby?" If Bethany seemed confused, he would know for sure it hadn't been real.

But she didn't seem confused. She laughed. "It's fine. I fixed it." She knocked his shoulder with her fist, that strange, affectionate gesture that she always used to reassure him.

"What do you mean you fixed it?"

"I *said* I fixed it."

When Bethany saw the car stop, she hadn't understood at first that it was William, and then when she did, she hated the thought that she would get in with him. She still hoped, despite her flight from the house, despite the way she longed to undo her past hours, that she would be changed somehow. The car was the same as it had been that morning. Filled up with their unwashed smell, the seat foam, the fast-food wrappers from meals they'd managed to beg or steal or scavenge from trash cans.

She didn't want to be a person who rode in this car anymore.

But she was wet and cold and tired of walking in the rain. She got back in the car.

She squeezed water from her hair. The seat foam, which had held so much promise earlier that morning, turned muddy and impotent under her feet. She watched William's fingers, tight on the steering wheel.

"I fixed it," she said in response to his frantic question.

You didn't fix it. The voice, loud in Bethany's head.

This wasn't right. She'd left the baby. She'd given her back. So how could the voice still be hanging around.

You don't know what I can do.

Ignore it, Bethany told herself. "Where were you going?" she said to William.

"What do you mean?" She could hear the panic in his voice, and this made her feel better. He was frightened like she was. She could push on this, make him snap and then she wouldn't have to.

"I mean, where were you going?" Bethany seemed to fill the whole car, her voice, the wet sounds of her clothes when she moved, the chemical tang of her breath.

William eased his foot off the brake a little. Keep driving, he thought, that was the thing to do. He couldn't sit like this forever, spending down their gas, half in the roadway.

"Well?" Bethany said.

"I was trying to get somewhere where no one would see me." Even though it was the truth, it sounded to William like a lie. "So I could figure out what to do."

"What did you figure out?"

"I didn't figure out anything. I thought you—" What? He thought she would figure things out? He thought she wouldn't come back? He let the car creep back out into the road. "I thought you would figure something out, ok?"

“Why do I have to figure everything out?”

“You’re the one who did this.”

“You’re the one who went to the Safeway. That was your idea.”

William knew she was only doing what she always did when she was angry, looking to make some quick strike. But he couldn’t deny this. He had been the one to suggest they go to the Safeway. All of this might be because of some deep moral failing of his own.

It didn’t make her feel better, the way she had silenced William. The itch raged behind her eyes. She dug in the jumble of her tote bag and pulled out a pill bottle. It wasn’t the same bottle she’d opened before; these pills were blue and circular in the faint glow from the far streetlights. A relief, because she couldn’t be sure the first pills had made her feel much at all. She swallowed one and held the bottle out to William. A peace offering of sorts. “Here. Have one.”

“I don’t want one.”

“Fine. More for me.”

Something beat in her like a second heartbeat, the same thing she’d felt when she first saw the shopping cart.

She felt the baby’s weight, back again in her arms, the hard ache in her elbow creases and her lower back. Her body a scramble of panic.

She had to go get the baby. The baby was all alone. She would be waiting for Bethany to come back like Bethany had said she would.

Bethany would never describe herself as a caring person. She took pride, in fact, in the way she cared about no one. Not even herself, not really. If she didn’t care, her caring couldn’t be used against her.

So she didn't understand why she felt such panic. Why she could feel herself in the baby's skin. Alone.

This wasn't a way she wanted to be changed.

Something pressed the back of her eyeballs. Hard. Sharp. Worse than the meth-itch.

It took several minutes before she realized that she was on the verge of crying.

"We have to go get the baby." Her voice was shrill with panic.

She saw William's shoulders tighten. "Go get her then," he said.

He knew he should refuse to drive her to the baby. But he couldn't think of how he might do this. And he was afraid. Of where Bethany might have put the baby. Of what might happen if someone found it or didn't find it. Of what Bethany might do if he refused her.

Later, William would wish he'd at least forced some concession from her before he drove to the baby, even though a concession from Bethany would mean nothing.

All he did was drive, following her directions. Back through town. Past the Circle K and the Safeway. She had an uncanny way of remembering where she'd been, how to retrace her steps.

"Here," she said, "turn right here. And here again." And then she started to laugh. "You wouldn't even believe the old guy who drove me here. He was the shittiest driver. Worse than me."

"No one's worse than you," William said. He laughed too. He could still pretend, at least in that moment, that they were the way they always were. It was a relief, to laugh with Bethany like this.

But it couldn't last.

"Here," Bethany said. "Stop here."

Six

They got themselves through the gate and the broken window, into the cold room in the fading light. The baby's screams cut the air. No way the people in the houses couldn't hear her, but they were all holed up inside, in the safe yellow glow behind blinds and curtains and window bars. They weren't going to come out and get dirt on their hands.

You want someone to be pissed off at, Bethany told the voice in her head, why don't you try them?

I'll be pissed off at who I want.

At least Bethany had come back.

No one wanted you to come back.

Her earlier panic faded in the face of the baby's grunting cries. Bethany no longer felt a tie to her, no longer felt her anguish at being left alone. She tried to convince herself again of the rightness of her direction, feel for her empty space. Was it growing? She thought it might be growing.

William tried a light switch on the wall, was surprised when it worked. The baby thrashed on the couch. She was real. And furious, face red and rashy from crying, inching her head toward the couch's arm with hard thrusts of her legs. No way to pretend that he'd imagined her.

Bethany went to the baby. Her chin was covered with thin bile. She lifted her with difficulty. "Hold on," she said. "Just shut up. I told you I'd come back, didn't I?" A dark stain spread across the back of her sleeper and the couch cushion under her. "Fuck," she said. "Fuck." What was she supposed to do with this?

William stood with his palm pressed to the wall paneling just under the light switch. Water, he told himself. Like the drops still falling occasionally from his shirt hem onto the gray carpet. He needed to get outside of himself. Out of his stiff spine and the greasy feel of his skin. That had been his problem earlier. He'd kept his focus too much in his stubborn, stupid body. His body wasn't the thing that mattered; it was something else, something that was beyond him. Maybe the wet carpet fibers.

Bethany was saying something. To him or to the baby?

The baby screamed in a way that made William fear she'd been damaged.

"Are you going to help me or not?" Bethany had taken the sleeper off the baby. It was no longer pink, it was soiled, stained brown.

"Help you with what?" William's voice high with panic. He should never have driven her here. He should have pretended to misunderstand her, driven them into the dark away from town, and then they could have laughed again about his bad sense of direction.

"Change her fucking diaper. We're going to have to be responsible. Fucking responsible." She laughed to hide it, the way she was close to weeping. She knew in some corner of her mind that babies had diapers, that they needed to be changed, but she hadn't thought that she would have to do it with this baby.

But she would have to do it. She would have to be kind to the baby; she couldn't do what she wanted to do in the moment, which was take her fist and slam the baby's toothless lips to her gums, to shut her up, maybe permanently.

The voice in her head, a wordless scream of terror. Or maybe it was only the baby.

"I'm sorry, ok," she said. "What do you want me to do?"

She flung the sleeper to the carpet. The same with the baby's diaper.

Then she was stuck. She didn't have another diaper. She didn't even have a way to clean the baby. Her own hands were slick with shit.

"Watch her," she said to William and left the room.

He felt relief rinse through him once she was gone. He went to the couch, to the baby, warily, like she was a snake, like she might bite.

"Hi," he said.

She stopped crying when he spoke. Her eyes were dark, accusing. She wouldn't let William off the hook for this.

"Look, I didn't know what she was going to do," he said. He was an idiot. Trying to justify himself to a baby.

But the baby looked like she was listening, although William couldn't say she seemed convinced. She sucked at her gums. She grabbed at William's shirt.

It frightened him, how she was so vulnerable, because it made him aware of how he was the same.

Bethany came back with a dripping wad of toilet paper. She tried to clean the baby, the couch, herself. She wrapped the baby in the bathrobe.

"There," she said. "See? Responsible." She laughed.

William didn't laugh along with her, but he understood the joke. People who might be called responsible, who did responsible things—worked, lived in houses, cared for babies—so far from them that they could only look on responsibility as a joke. Before the baby, he would have laughed. He would have expanded it out with her, all the ways they would be responsible, which of course they would not: find a job, get a bank account, get an ID of some sort, change diapers, dress a baby.

The baby cried, trapped fists punching at the inside of the bathrobe, desperate to escape.

“She’s going to have to eat or something,” William said.

“She’s not that kind of baby,” Bethany said, but she knew that he might be right. The baby, even if she was not a real kind of baby, would want some offering. It might be food.

William didn’t ask her what she meant by this comment. He didn’t want to hear the answer.

The itch, insistent behind Bethany’s eye. Soon it wouldn’t be content with milquetoast pills.

The baby wouldn’t be content either.

Bethany dug into her tote bag and pulled out the cheese block. She skinned the plastic wrap from its softening surface and pushed the cheese to the baby’s lips. The baby sucked at it disconsolately, but she at least stopped crying.

“Responsible,” Bethany said, again. She tried it out in her mind, like she had with shopping, mothering. It felt like ill-fitting clothing, scratchy, too-tight.

The wind gusted through the broken window. William lay on the carpet in his still damp clothes. Flattened, it would be easier for him to become something else. The water. Even the carpet would be preferable.

Bethany left the baby trying to suck some sustenance from the cheese, went to the pictures on the wall, took the bottom one, the birthday cake one and brought it back to the couch. “Look,” she said, holding it up to the baby. “You know this is us, right?” She laughed again, a manic laugh that she hoped would stave off the panic she felt building yet again in her gut.

She held the baby on her lap. She ran her finger idly over the fine hairs, the soft indentations just behind the baby’s left ear, and tried to imagine that she was fully her empty

place, in her new shape. She might have a texture like the baby's hair. She might feel that she was being held in this new shape, although hopefully not as awkwardly as she held the baby.

She wondered what it might mean to be in the baby's soft skull. What the voice might do with the baby if Bethany hadn't taken her.

She didn't know enough to know what other things she should wonder about: the baby's age, when the small, almost-invisible rims of her teeth would break fully through her gums, how much she ate, how often, whether she slept mostly through the night, if the red patches where she'd lain in her shit for the past hours would stay inflamed, turn to the kind of diaper rash that if left untreated would turn her skin green and toxic.

The baby herself lay limply on Bethany's lap, giving occasional cries. She seemed to be giving up in some way. Like she realized at last the life she'd had that afternoon, tucked into her carseat was gone, no way to get it back. Useless to hope for it.

"Food and shit," Bethany said to the baby. "Diapers. Keep the lights on." She laughed, a hard, bitter laugh. She was trying to be patient, but she felt that she'd been patient for so long already.

William tried to ignore Bethany's words. He began to understand that he wasn't the one transforming. It was the carpet under him. Turning to hard rubber. He was back in the juvenile detention center on his cell mattress.

All his life, one trap after another. He longed for another hit. He might give in and ask Bethany for one of her pills. If she would shut up, he could ask her for one.

"This house is going to give us all kinds of shit. You'll see." Why, she wondered, was nothing happening?

A car door slammed, somewhere beyond the broken window. The sound of voices, raised in some mild dispute. The baby began to cry again.

William went cold with panic. There was no way, he thought, that whoever was outside talking couldn't hear the baby, Bethany. Soon they would come in, and do—what, he didn't know, but it would end with him barred in again.

Bethany, too, felt panic. None of this, she thought, was right. This house wasn't the house she wanted. It wasn't hers. It had tricked her, tried to set her up.

“Let's just go,” William said.

He was right, Bethany thought. They should go and they would find some other, better place. This house was shit, but it was out there, waiting for her, this other, better house. She could feel it beckoning her; it had the sheen and texture of her empty place.

The baby would take her to this house, and there they would be released from the daily calculations of their lives: the food they would need to find and keep finding, the mindless ways to spend down their hours, sleep and the problem of where they would do it.

She put the photograph and the slobbery cheese in her tote bag.

“And leave her,” William said. “We have to leave her.”

“I didn't come all the way back here to get her so I could leave her again.”

“What're we going to do with a baby. This is nuts.”

“Why can't you ever trust me?”

As though William hadn't spent their time together doing nothing but this. “Because you stole a fucking baby. What the fuck are you going to do with a baby?”

“You went to the Safeway.” A non-answer that she knew would shut him up. She didn't want to think about what kind of answer she might give his question.

They left the house, William going first through the window, taking the baby from Bethany so that she could follow him through more easily. Her weight in his arms was like an electric shock. He gave her quickly back to Bethany.

The gas lasted longer than William would have expected. The car drove and drove, past scattered houses, until at last they were on a barren two-lane highway heading in what William thought was east. No guarantee, but he wasn't going to ask Bethany for help. No telling where she might lead him.

The baby's cries grew harder, more insistent. She was desperate to make Bethany and William understand what they didn't. She was starving; she was used to food every few hours and it had been nearly eight since she'd last eaten. Bethany and William knew she would have to eat eventually like they would. They knew they couldn't really feed her Bethany's stolen cheese, although they weren't quite sure what they might feed her. But for them food was an occasional thing, no necessity, nothing they had guaranteed. They had become so used to this, they assumed the baby would be like them in this way. She would know better than to expect food to come to her regularly. They couldn't understand why she wouldn't shut up.

William searched for some break in the high pines that lined the roadway, some safe place to turn off. All he saw in the quick sweep of headlights: trees and brush and more trees.

At last he found a place where the shoulder widened. He took the car to the side of the road and killed the engine, dug under his seat for his crumpled water bottle and held it out to Bethany. "Give her some water," he said. He remembered the way she grew silent when he went and spoke to her, but he didn't want to do that in front of Bethany. It was private, what he'd said to her, the way she in turn had seemed to blame him for Bethany's impulsiveness.

Bethany couldn't hold the water bottle steady. The voice was back, but wordless, a long laugh, like Bethany's own laugh. It mocked the way Bethany didn't know what to do, the way that anyone could see it.

The baby choked and spit. She wouldn't be content with water. Her smell filled the car. She'd shit herself yet again, and this time she wore no diaper to contain it. The bathrobe was wet and filthy. Bethany tossed it out into the night and wrapped her in an old t-shirt of William's.

The voice, that wordless laugh.

She was afraid. That this baby might not be a sign or a gateway or a vision. She was a screaming, stinking lump of flesh who cared nothing for Bethany and never had.

"Is she going to just keep crying like this?" William said.

"How should I know?"

"Are you sure you didn't do something to her?" William said. "Like accidentally."

"I didn't do shit to her," Bethany said. "What kind of person do you think I am?"

She wanted him to answer, to make a joke of this, but she could sense in his silence that he didn't know anymore what kind of person she was. Maybe he never had.

They could no longer go on the way they had before. They were unmoored; they could no longer be sure of each other.

William knew what he should do. Get out of the car, walk away. But this would require him to take some bold action, and this was the thing he was most afraid to do. It was better to keep his head down, to wait for someone to tell him what to do, because then he couldn't be blamed for doing the wrong thing. And what he would come up with was inevitably the wrong thing.

And there was a small part of him that still hoped Bethany would have some way to fix this, that they could go on the way they had before. Laugh about Bethany's bad driving. Play the games they played back in the park, back in Bethany's grandad's house when they were kids, asking each other the question: what's the worst thing you've ever done? Their answers, invented, fanciful. Nothing like this reality.

He reached between the seats into the back of the car, dug around in the garbage bag that held their clothes and found a bottle of Jack Daniels. The hard burn in his throat did nothing to soothe him.

Bethany took another pill. They weren't good, but they flattened her out some, took the edge off the jagged points of her mind.

They tried to sleep, but the baby refused to let them, her screams a sour revenge that pulled them back every time they got close to falling away. She seized Bethany's hand again and again with her clumsy fingers, pulled it to her dry lips and sucked at the side of Bethany's knuckle. Her shit smell was in Bethany, in her pores, her sweat, the roots of her hair. She was sure she would never get it out.

The baby fell asleep at last, body heavy on Bethany's lap. Bethany and William were afraid to follow her lead. She would sense it, they thought, and start her cries again.

Seven

In the morning, the Honda's engine refused to turn over. The needle on the gas gauge sat below the E.

"You didn't say we were almost out of gas," Bethany said, voice a hiss so that she wouldn't wake the baby who snored wheezily on her lap.

William didn't say what he wanted to say: you knew we were almost out of gas yesterday when we were stuck at the Circle K.

He knew what he had to do. The thing he'd tried instinctively when he first heard that announcement in the Safeway parking lot: run. Get himself away from Bethany and whatever this was she was doing with the baby.

"I'll go get gas." He could leave under this pretext and not come back.

But Bethany got herself out of the car too, with the baby, who whimpered in the cold wind, got a fistful of Bethany's hair and pulled meanly.

"Fuck," Bethany said to the baby, in a low voice that she hoped William wouldn't hear. "I'm sorry ok. Don't be such a bitch."

Clearly, she hadn't been quiet enough. "What?" William said.

"This car is shit," Bethany said. "We should just ditch it and find another one somewhere."

"I can just get gas. Just wait here."

"I'm not waiting here." She was afraid that he would do what he'd been thinking of doing. Leave her and not come back. She didn't really believe he hadn't been trying to do just that when she came across him on the road last night. It was a thing she might do, and William

had been around her so long, he must have gotten at least some ideas from her. She thrust the baby at William. "Hold her." That would tie him to her. He didn't want the baby. He wouldn't run away from her with the baby.

She opened the backdoor of the Honda and shoved things from the floor into their garbage bag: the half-full bottle of water she'd tried to make the baby drink from, the bottle of Jack Daniels that William had drunk from, some tattered t-shirts, a ratty sleeping bag vomiting battling through long tears in its covering. She considered leaving it all behind. Wasn't that the point of this baby? So they didn't need to drag around dirty, useless things?

Maybe she knew it wasn't. Maybe this was why she gathered these things with such diligence.

They stood on the side of the road, the baby back in Bethany's arms, William with the garbage bag. Cars flashed past them. William tried to position himself in front of Bethany and the baby, block them from view as much as possible.

In William's mind, every car that passed might be calling the police.

He looked back at the baby. She seemed strangely undisturbed in Bethany's arms. Like she'd become resigned to the hard ache in her belly and turned her attention to other things: pulling at the zipper of Bethany's track jacket, sucking the old sweat salt from the creases of her wrists, trying to make some sense of this new world, understand what she might do in it, what she might be given if it was not food.

A car stopped for them at last. A new looking-car, red, fresh-washed, with a couple inside. The man in the driver's seat was unshaven, his straw-colored hair matted like old carpet.

The woman's face gleaming and oily, the tips of her hair dyed fuchsia. Their clothes new but made to look old, crunched up flannel and shredded jeans. Their air was filled up with the funk of marijuana.

"You need a ride?" the man said.

"Yes," Bethany said, before William had a chance to think, to try and figure out if this was the right course of action. Although, he knew it didn't matter. Even if he didn't want to go, he wouldn't be able to dissuade Bethany.

"Where to?" said the woman.

"We don't care," said Bethany. She didn't know where their house might be. She was only sure it was not in the town they'd just left behind. She couldn't even be sure that these people would take them to it, but they were in front of her, and she grabbed them, the way she grabbed things. "Anywhere. We just need to get away from here."

The man laughed. "You and us both," he said.

Bethany got in the backseat so confidently that it frightened William. He imagined himself not following her. Standing out on the road shoulder while this car drove away.

He did none of that. He got into the backseat with Bethany, dragging their garbage bag of belongings. Knowing what to do was easier than doing it.

The baby was crying again. So much for the way Bethany thought she might be calming down. "She's going to scream," Bethany said. "Just a heads up. You won't get any peace."

The woman in the passenger seat laughed. "When have I ever?" And then, "Do you have a car seat for her or something that we need to put in?"

William felt in her words for some hint of accusation. The way these people would see it on them. They had no business with a baby.

Bethany leapt to this like a challenge. “You want to give us a carseat? You know how much those things cost?” She didn’t, but she was willing to bet they were expensive. And the best thing to do, she knew, when someone challenged her was challenge back.

“I’m not trying to say anything,” the woman said.

The man in the driver’s seat pulled back onto the road.

The baby’s screams were like salt in a wound. Rubbing William raw. His eyes ached for sleep. He should never have gotten in this car.

“We’re out of food for her,” Bethany shouted over the baby’s noise. “Actually, someone robbed us. Can you believe it? We were staying in our car and someone broke in and stole all our baby food.”

“People are fucked up,” said the driver.

“Yeah, they’re fucked up,” said William. He hoped Bethany would understand something in his words, a warning, a plea, how desperately he didn’t want her to do anything else fucked up.

“There’s a town not too far behind us,” the woman said. “We can go back and get food for her.”

“No,” Bethany and William said, too quick, in unison.

“That’s where they stole all our food,” Bethany said. “We’re not going back there.”

“Don’t blame you,” the driver said.

“As soon as we come to another place, we’ll stop,” the woman said. “Who would steal from a baby?”

“There’s too much of that going on. People just take advantage,” the driver said. “That’s what we’re trying to get away from.” He laughed in a way that showed some embarrassment.

“You and us both,” Bethany said. “Way too much of that going on.” There was a game, Bethany was playing with these people, one that William didn’t understand. He could only hope that it wouldn’t turn into something like the baby.

The woman in the passenger seat seemed to feel the same unease as William. She was all nervy movement; she hunched her shoulders, pulled at the colored fringes of her hair, leaned over and came up with a joint. She lit it, then quickly put it out against the pristine dash. “Sorry. I probably shouldn’t smoke in front of the baby.”

“It’s your car,” said Bethany.

“It’s your baby though.”

“That’s the truth.” Bethany laughed. She knocked William’s shoulder with her fist. He looked out the window, away from her.

“How old is she?” the woman asked.

“Three months.”

“She’s big for three months.”

The baby screamed more vigorously at this, as though to dispute it, mouth wide, exposing the white foam of saliva on her tongue, the inflamed ridges of her gums.

“You have kids?” Bethany said.

“Yeah, right,” the woman said.

“Are you looking for one?” Bethany said.

“Seriously,” William said.

“What?” said Bethany. “You’re the one who wants to get rid of her.”

“I—”

Bethany laughed, the contagious way of laughing she had. The couple in the front seat laughed too, although uneasily. Even the baby stopped screaming and made some gurgle that might have signaled amusement. Only William didn't join in.

"We're kidding," she said. "Obviously we don't want to get rid of our baby."

"Why don't we just shut up?" William said. "Let them drive in peace. They have to listen to the baby as it is."

"We don't mind," the driver said. He rubbed at the back of his neck. "We're sick of each other's company, right babe?"

"Right." The woman turned and extended her hand through the front seats. "I'm Kelsey. This is Jeff, but he goes by Brock."

Bethany looked at the woman's hand. She occupied herself shifting the baby around on her lap so that she wouldn't have to shake it.

The woman's hand hung over the seat, waiting, anxious.

William took it. "William," he said, although he regretted it, giving his name away so easily.

"What's her name?" Kelsey said. "The baby."

"Estrella." The first name that came to Bethany. Her own mother's name. She felt a lurch like she might vomit. Pushed it down. Too late. The name was already out.

Estrella gave a quick cry.

"Estrella," Kelsey said. "I love it."

And there was the voice, back again.

You know that's not her name.

But it was. Bethany felt that it would be forever, just like Bethany had become her name forever. Not a name she was born with, but a name that gave her some kind of power, or would.

Her name—

Estrella would have the same kind of power. Whatever name the voice had given her didn't matter anymore.

"Thank god we picked you up just now," Kelsey said. "This isn't the best place you know. Especially with a baby. Someone told us there was a girl who got murdered here a few years back. In a truck. They just found her body and the truck. Nothing else."

"It wasn't here," Brock said. "It was in Idaho. Miles away."

"There's crazy people out there," Bethany said. "You never know what someone's going to do."

Evaporate, William told himself. Just leak into the seat leather, stain it, ruin it. Wash away the vacuum marks on the dark floor mats. He might fill the whole car, drown everyone in it.

"That's what got to us," Kelsey said.

"Not *that*," Brock said. "Not like the murdered girl. We just found out about her."

"No," Kelsey said. "Just the way you can never tell. What people are."

"Right," Bethany said. "You can never tell."

"We just couldn't take it anymore," Kelsey said. "All the bullshit. We're going to a— Revue, it's called. It's a community."

"A compound," Brock said with another embarrassed laugh.

Bethany felt a jolt of panic. This wasn't what was supposed to happen. Was this what Estrella had brought her? Some sick joke. Pulling her back to that other compound, to the way

she'd been in her early days there, before she'd wrung some power out of hot sand and blood and the sour taste of skin on her tongue.

She looked down at Estrella for some help or some indication of betrayal, but Estrella was asleep. William too had his eyes closed.

"It's communal living," Kelsey went on. "Like everyone shares everything. We all pitch in."

"You know that shit never works out," Bethany said. She felt she had some duty to warn these people. Even though they should get what they deserved if they were stupid enough to fall for this.

"We had to try something," Brock said.

Bethany balanced Estrella on her knees, reached down, found a pill bottle in her tote bag, unscrewed the lid and took one of the blue ovals. Let Kelsey and Brock think what they were going to think. She moved her knees up and down, not caring that she was jostling Estrella, that she would soon wake her up. At least if she was crying, no one would be able to hear talk about compounds.

They came to a town. A Dollar General and a gas station with boarded up windows and empty spaces on the sign, no prices for diesel and unleaded.

"Good thing we don't need to fill up," said the driver.

"We can watch her for you," said the woman, "while you go look for some food. I can see what I'm missing."

She laughed, but it was thin, uneasy. She almost fumbled Estrella when Bethany handed her between the seats. Estrella gave a sharp sound of protest.

She knew that she shouldn't leave Estrella with these people while she went into the store. They were dangerous. But Bethany couldn't see how it would work, taking her in, trying to steal what she needed while juggling Estrella. She almost understood why the voice had left Estrella behind in the cart.

You don't understand anything about me.

"Wait here with her," she told William. She'd never told him what it meant. Compound.

Inside the Dollar General, Bethany wandered the aisles. She remembered the Safeway with longing. This place had nothing that sparked like the Safeway did.

All she saw: battered boxes of toothpaste, dull-colored wrapping paper, dented soup cans. She saw no diapers. Finally, two dusty cans of formula on a bottom shelf. Bethany shoved them into her tote bag.

Above the formula, bottles, hung from a set of sagging metal racks, the same as the batteries, back in the Safeway, all colors of plastic, turquoise, green, sickly yellow. She shoved them into her tote bag too. She'd do this right. Show everyone. The voice in her head. Whatever figment of her own mother was still hounding her. Even William who was so sure they needed to give this baby back.

When Bethany returned to the parking lot, Kelsey had gotten out of the car and was pacing back and forth on the cracked asphalt, a whimpering Estrella in her arms. She looked as awkward holding Estrella as Bethany did.

"What're you doing?" The words out before Bethany realized how sharp they were.

Something moved across Kelsey's face when she saw Bethany. But it wasn't fear like Bethany wanted. It was more like the look she might have for animals at a zoo.

"Sorry," she said. "I don't know what to do with babies."

"We'll stay here," Bethany said, pulling Estrella roughly from Kelsey, snagging her fingernails in Kelsey's shirt sleeve. "We don't need to go any farther." She thought Estrella gave a shudder of relief, back in her arms, but maybe it was only a shudder.

She went to the open back door of the car and leaned toward William.

"Come on. Get out."

"Here?" William said. "There's nothing here."

"We can take you on," said Brock through his open driver's window. "We don't mind."

"Sorry," Kelsey called, back in her place in the passenger seat. "I just thought I could calm her down."

Estrella spit something sour smelling on Bethany's shoulder. Bethany pushed down the urge to do something violent to her. The house, she reminded herself. Without Estrella, she wouldn't reach the house, her real house. Once she'd saved Estrella from these people, Estrella would be grateful, and she would help Bethany even more readily.

Bethany could no longer pretend that she didn't understand how strained, how bizarre this was.

"Get our stuff," she said to William. When he made no move to do it, she tried to drag their garbage bag out of the backseat herself, struggling to keep Estrella and her tote bag balanced.

In the end, William did what she said, took their garbage bag, because he was afraid of the way Estrella was flopping on Bethany's hip, afraid of the way the people in the car were staring.

"At least let us give you something," Brock said from the driver's seat. He'd lowered his window, extended his arm. "We've got too much right?" He laughed again, embarrassed, guilty.

William had to go and take it because Bethany wouldn't. A fat wad of cash. More money than he'd ever held in his life. He shoved it deep into the pocket of his jeans and watched them drive away, knowing that it was another chance he'd blown. He could've gone on with these people. Bethany had been so set against them, she wouldn't have stayed with him. He could've gotten a ride out of all of this mess. Maybe more money.

What was wrong with him? What was it that made him so stupid?

They walked through a field behind the Dollar General, through what seemed to be someone's unfenced backyard, past a post office, stopping at last in a park with rusted seesaws. Again, out in the open. William only hoped they were far enough away from that other town that people wouldn't be thinking hard about the fact that a baby had just been stolen nearby.

Estrella raged. She was bewildered, furious. Despite the rough arms that handled her, she was ignored. The rocking car that had given her aching belly some relief, gone. Now she had only cold and the pain of her hunger. Not even the strands of Bethany's hair that she locked in her fist would calm her.

Bethany sat at a picnic table near the seesaws. She felt a little dizzy. Maybe too long without food, maybe the pills or lack of pills or just the long exertion of her life catching up with her. Maybe those people. A compound. The way this baby was stuck with her mother's name.

“Hold her,” she said to William. “Or get this formula.”

“Fuck you,” he said. “I’m not helping you. After all your shit.”

But he took Estrella. He was afraid of the way Bethany struggled to keep hold of her, the way she was losing his old t-shirt that Bethany had wrapped carelessly around her body. They would have to get her more clothes.

He told himself not to be stupid. They weren’t keeping her long enough to need more clothes for her.

Like she understood what he was thinking, Estrella’s fist made contact with his chin, her fingernail leaving a sharp line of pain under his beard stubble.

“This wasn’t my fault,” he said under his breath, hoping Bethany wouldn’t hear. “You don’t want to stay with us, do you?”

He felt again that strange pull, the way he was sure she wanted something from him, the terrible way they were so alike in their vulnerability. He understood her or thought he did, even if he didn’t want to. He’d be pissed off too in a filthy t-shirt with some idiots who couldn’t figure out how formula worked.

He wanted her away from him. He didn’t want to feel sorry for her. Didn’t want to feel like her.

“Are you getting her food or not?” he said to Bethany.

“I’m working on it,” Bethany said. But the can was all tiny print. Bethany squinted at the diagram under the words. Two scoops and water drops. “Where’s our water?”

She expected William to tell her to get it herself, but he got down, Estrella balanced on one arm, making it look easier than it ever did for Bethany. He dug in their trash bag, pulled out the crumpled bottle, held it to her wordlessly.

She took it from him. Two fucking scoops of formula. How hard could this be?

She shook the baby bottle, until the water was foggy with formula powder and shoved it against Estrella's mouth. She sucked at it reluctantly, sloppily, leaving a trail of white sludge on her chin, on Bethany's wrist, face screwed up like it tasted bad.

But her eyelids moved slowly down over the dark wells of her eyes.

Her contentment seemed to panic the voice. *Give her back give her back give her back give her back.*

They sat on the bench. They were tired and they could think of no other course of action. William might have slept, forehead pressed to the coarse picnic table wood. He raised his head only when Bethany's elbow caught him in the ribs.

"Look at this," she said.

A woman, with salt and pepper hair, a red shirt like an alarm, making her fast way toward them.

This was it, William thought. This was the end of his life or what passed as his life. But the woman only smiled when she reached them.

"Nice day," she said. She seemed a little bewildered, but not suspicious, not ready to turn on them.

"She doesn't think so," Bethany said, with a hard jerk of her head at Estrella, although Estrella was sleeping.

"Aren't they always like that?" said the woman. And she walked away, as vigorously as she'd come.

They'd been spared again.

This might be a good place, William thought, to leave Estrella behind.

But he was too tired to fight with Bethany over it.

With Estrella asleep on William's shoulder, they walked back up the street, past the dilapidated houses, siding stained with water and decay, walked the same way they'd walked the streets of Albuquerque when they were children. Pulling at car door handles.

Bethany could see that none of these houses were right. This whole state, a joke. Her hope for Oregon melting.

You can't admit you fucked up, can you?

A hit, she told herself. That's what she needed. Something real, not those pills she was using to paper-over her need.

Just like you couldn't admit it back when you were a kid.

Once she had a real hit, this voice would shut up.

While Bethany was crumbling, William began to feel better, although he didn't understand why. Maybe only because Estrella was silent, because without her cries, he could forget the problem she posed for them. Maybe because the woman had treated them like they were that thing William secretly longed to be—normal. Maybe it was the cash that felt warm and alive in his pocket. Or the way nothing had happened to them yet, which made him have a small hope that nothing would happen to them.

They scrounged change and granola bars and half-empty bottles of ibuprofen from the first car. The second, a station wagon, pulled up in a drive against the side of a house, was unlocked, keys in the glove box, with a mess of napkins and ketchup packets.

Bethany saw it as another sign, although she was getting tired of signs, tired of pretending that she could decipher them.

William smeared this license plate with mud too and drove.

“Let’s go to Idaho,” Bethany said, when she saw a sign indicating the miles. Forty-seven to the state line.

She felt that it meant something. Idaho. It would be better there than in Oregon. Those people had said a girl was murdered in Idaho, and that meant it was a place where she might find some violence to meet her own, where she might be tested, and prevail. Explode, built a house out of her own detritus.

They drove into Idaho. They bought gas. They bought cheeseburgers and diapers. They bought blankets and wrapped Estrella and themselves with them in the cold car night. They bought baby clothes for Estrella. They bought her a baby toy, a set of plastic keys in garish colors: yellow and orange and neon green. They bought more formula, \$12.97 for a can. It made them feel like they were accomplishing something, buying these things, watching Estrella’s eyes flash at the sight of the keys, watching her hands move quickly to grab them. They bought meth to celebrate, two hundred dollars’ worth, enough to last them for days, from a man at a Greyhound station in the largest town they passed through.

They scrubbed themselves and Estrella in the family bathroom at the Greyhound station. No one questioned the hour they spent locked inside the piss-stinking space. No one seemed to think they were wrong, out of place. With a baby, they looked like a family. They were undercover, in disguise.

Even when they fought in the bathroom about whether to get bus tickets, no one knocked on the door to intervene. William was on the side of getting them and leaving Estrella behind in the bathroom, Bethany on the side of continuing on in their station wagon, sure if they kept driving, they would come to the mythic house that had begun to take the shape of her empty place. “Why can’t you ever trust me,” she wailed, in a way that seemed to William different than any way she’d spoken to him before, and so, because of this, he gave in.

After the Greyhound station, they got a motel room. Bethany’s suggestion, hoping she might find a way to get William back on her side. They showered for the first time in weeks, lay on the soft mattress and slept in a long, unbroken wave, even Estrella. They ate French fries and bacon cheeseburgers and made Estrella bottles and smoked foils, the TV lighting the walls at all hours.

They’d been given some reprieve. Maybe it had been Estrella after all.

But their money didn’t last forever.

Eight

They were in the middle of nowhere Idaho, swallowed in the pines, map-less in the dark, when they came to the house. They almost didn't believe what they were seeing when the headlights caught the plywood-covered windows. A ruin, long ago left to rot. Peeling paint, the yellow color of vomit. The only window silenced with plywood. The roof, all shingle gaps like something had tried to escape through it.

Bethany felt something in her leap with recognition. The words, ready on her tongue: "Stop here."

But William was already stopping, turning the wheel sharply, foot pressing the brake. This place looked truly abandoned, set away from everything else. No one to hear them or Estrella. No one to bother them.

Estrella woke up when William turned off the engine. She started to cry, a sad rough cry. She'd left a thick wet spot of drool on Bethany's neck while she slept. Another wet spot on her arm, that Bethany hoped was drool and not something that had leaked from her diaper.

This house was the house, Bethany thought. She gave Estrella her toy keys, and this at least stopped her crying. By the time she heaved Estrella up on her shoulder and scrambled out of the car, William was at the building, shaking the doorknob without success.

"Hold her," Bethany said, and once William had taken Estrella, she went to the window beside the door and pushed at the bottom of the plywood. Splintery, sticky with cobwebs, it swung when she touched it, not attached, not really. She wrapped her hand into a fist and punched.

The plywood wavered, fell into the bowels of the building with a weight that shook the walls. It sent Bethany's arm recoiling, knocking a sharp pain into her shoulder.

William jumped at the sound of it. He clutched Estrella more tightly, like she was a shield. She dug the small knobs of her feet into his ribs in protest.

"Sorry," he said.

"Hope there's no one there," Bethany said.

Estrella shook her keys.

Bethany knew it would be shit, that building, when the plywood went crashing down and she smelled what came out of the space behind it. Rot, mold, packed-in, closed-up stench. But didn't that make a strange kind of sense? This house was only a house in name. It wasn't like other houses. It would make them fight to gain entry, muscle it to the ground.

They shuffled in the house's dark space, raising dust with each step, sending them choking. The feeble beam of their flashlight shuddered at everything it touched. A chair, gutted by mice, gray seat-cover in tatters. Stuffing like snow tossed around it. A mattress, blue striped, yellow stained, pushed against the rusted baseboard heater.

Something that might have once been a kitchen. Yellow countertops and gaps for refrigerator, dishwasher, stove. Drywall bleeding pipes and insulation.

Bethany got herself and Estrella down on the floor, ignoring the jagged edge of torn linoleum under her palm and thigh. Estrella squirmed until Bethany relented and put her down beside her hip. She tossed her keys away, laughing, and took a clod of mud from the floor and sucked at it, turning her chin brown and soupy. "Seriously," Bethany said. "Don't eat that shit."

But Estrella wouldn't be dissuaded. She was like Bethany in this, Bethany thought. She did what she wanted.

"Come on." Bethany pulled at the hem of William's jeans until he sat down next to her. She put the tote bag between them. She reached inside and pulled out the photograph from the other house, the brick of cheese, soft and spoiled in its skin of plastic, the toothbrush, her pill bottles. She lined them all up on the floor in front of her. "There. We're all moved in."

They laughed. Even Estrella seemed to understand the joke.

They gave Estrella another bottle. They changed her diaper, Bethany tossing the soiled one through the open window-space. They laughed at the sound it made when it struck the ground outside. They drank the last of the Jack Daniels, smoked two foils, let their flashlight batteries dwindle and die, and laughed at the way the dark came over them so suddenly.

Once they were in the dark, the house began to change around them, lit with a small glow, blue, bioluminescent.

A sound came like wind. No, like the ditch they used to watch as children. Water rushing over their hunched bodies, out into the field of blue light, water that didn't leave them wet, or maybe, William thought, it was just that they didn't notice the wetness because they too were water. Estrella gave a shriek that was more laughter than terror. In the strange blue glow, William saw her grab at the things that swept past them, like she too was searching for something. Old twigs, the scraps of aluminum that littered the floor, the strange brush of jellied tentacle, the muscled water-limbs of things they couldn't name.

William held Estrella tightly to him. The light changed from blue to white. The water receded. They could see clearly, still in their bodies. They were the same, but the kitchen where they sat was different.

The floor was tile, white marble streaked with thin veins, blue and copper. A refrigerator gleaming silver, stuffed, William saw, when Bethany went to it and opened the door, with the kind of food that they didn't count as food because they would never eat it. Ham gleaming with grease. Champagne. Pineapple slices laid on plates. Jars of olives. Steaks with slick sauce.

They ate. They tried the faucet, and when water gushed out, they put their mouths to it and sucked.

It didn't taste, this food, or at least it didn't taste in the way that other food tasted. It was like bright fireworks, golden and red, like a waterfall.

Their fingers and faces were greasy and glistening. They slurped from the champagne bottle, fizz sticky on their lips.

The refrigerator shelves filled and refilled. The food came to them hot, like it was from an oven.

When William put Estrella on the clean tile, she sat up on her own, like she'd grown in the space of minutes, found some new abilities. She watched them, eyes like closed doors, hands clutched around a bottle that neither William nor Bethany recognized. Not one of the dollar store plastic ones that Bethany had stolen for her. This was clear, like glass, spackled with small pastel dots. She sucked. She pulled the bottle away from her mouth, and Bethany saw that the top of it was no synthetic thing, it was a real nipple, real flesh.

"This is it," Estrella said, or William thought that was what she said. A warning or an affirmation. Maybe both.

They were heavy with food, but not satiated. They couldn't say if they were still hungry or if they even understood in this place what it meant to feel hunger.

The room had become a long, yawning chamber. The carpet was no longer dust gray, but black, shimmering, stretching toward some strange horizon. If there was a wall at the far end of it, it was too far for them to make out what it might look like.

William pressed his palms to the floor, like a child, trying to make sense of something. It wasn't carpet at all, he realized, but a puzzle of asphalt chunks. The same ones he'd collected years ago as a child, when he stayed with Bethany and her granddad, the same ones he'd stacked and lined up, pretending, even as he knew it was foolish, that he might build his way to a world where he could do what he wanted, unbothered, unashamed.

Was this that world?

The wall to their right opened into a doorway, a bedroom beyond it.

This house grew new rooms like tree limbs.

In one of these new rooms, William found someone else, breathing close to his ear. The man from the Circle K, the one who wanted paint thinner.

“What did you bring me?” he said.

“Why should I bring you anything?” William said.

He wasn't sure he wanted this man anymore. But his interest, the fact that he'd pursued William this far, made William think that there would be something to be gained by taking the man's shoulders, pushing him roughly into the wall, which was not a wall like other walls, but something pliable and yielding, like the man, like William himself.

“Fuck, you're good at this,” the man said. Those same words that other man had used when William was a child. This wasn't what he wanted. He pushed at the man, but he could get

no traction. His hands went right through the man's skin, into his chest, his ribs. The bellows of his lungs threw William backward, off balance.

Bethany, close to William, in this same room, but also far away, expanding, flesh distending from her ribcage to envelope Estrella, or maybe it was Estrella herself who was expanding, stretching, blending her body to Bethany's.

Their blood was fed by both heartbeats, Estrella's hot and fast, Bethany's like a long slumbering beast. The thing they'd become shimmered and pulsed with the blue light from the walls.

At last, she was in a place where she had all the space she needed. The house had given her a strange forest, trees leafed with a cobwebby silver, where she might be one of those trees, left at last to rest, to be looked at with awe.

She had a strange memory that might not have been a memory but only a thing she'd invented. As a child, when she was maybe nine or ten, before the compound, she'd grown bored waiting for her mother on some bus stop bench in the summer heat and wandered until she found a narrow alley between two houses. There was a tent there, half-erect, one side crumpled by the wind or some violence. She unzipped the mesh and worked her small body through the opening. It was hotter in the tent and it had a smell of decay and unwashed socks, but she was hidden, and it was quiet, as though the red canvas had removed the world. She could do what she wanted inside this tent, even if she didn't know yet what that might be.

She wasn't allowed to find out. A man thrust his head through the door flap, a wild-haired man with outraged eyes.

"Get out of here," he bellowed at her. "This isn't yours."

Nothing was hers.

Except this house. This time, no one would interrupt her. She would be the one to burst with violence through some opening.

Nestled in Bethany's side, Estrella could feed and feed off her hot blood, a parasite. She was safe at last after all this time of uncertainty, after the smells of strangers, the days her belly spent dry and parched, the rough way she was swung into the air from chest to chest. She had wetness and food and endless ways to slap her palms against the gelatinous shapes of Bethany's organs. So many things to explore, the hard ladder of ribs, the tensile tissue between them. She would suck and suck until Bethany was dry. She'd been granted some revenge or consolation.

Nine

William opened his eyes.

A hard brick of light came through the open window-space where Bethany had knocked out the plywood. Cold like another brick, landing in his skull. The house was just a house, a ruin.

Somewhere nearby, Estrella murmured, a low sound like water. It took him a long time to remember her, the Safeway, Bethany, the house, which was no longer transformed.

He was lying on the mattress in the front room, head near the cold baseboard heater. He sat up slowly, hands buried in his armpits, trying to find some meager warmth there.

Bethany lay beside him, their sleeping bag wrapped around her body, a sweatshirt pulled over her face, like she was a corpse covered for burial. She rolled away when William nudged her shoulder.

“She needs a bottle,” he said.

“So get her a bottle.”

No water came from the once-miraculous faucet. William had to use the dregs from their last water bottle.

“We’re almost out of water.”

The wind skittered through the window-space. Bethany snored.

Nothing for William to do but feed Estrella. She watched him while she sucked the bottle’s grimy nipple. Her eyes were like thoughts, burrowing into William’s brain. She thought he was a fool. Weak. Disdainful. Why was he hesitating?

“I know,” he told her. “I know.”

He knew what he would do. He felt it like some piece of himself tearing. He couldn't keep stringing himself along, excuse after excuse.

This house would give them nothing, despite what he thought he'd seen last night. Estrella would give them nothing despite the way Bethany seemed to believe she would. She was just a baby, an ordinary baby, who probably wanted to go back to her mother.

She wouldn't stop looking at him. He couldn't stand the way her eyes fixed on him, the same way she'd looked at him back in that other house.

"What?" he said. "There's nothing I can do for you."

But he couldn't leave her.

Bethany seemed to be sleeping again. She did nothing when he nudged her shoulder.

If he left Estrella here, he had no idea what Bethany might do. She might never get up again. She might not feed Estrella. He didn't want to be a murderer.

He would have to take Estrella.

He took the remaining money from his pocket and counted it. One hundred and seven dollars left. He split it, taking fifty-four for himself, leaving fifty-three for Bethany on the mattress where he had just lain. Still Bethany didn't move. She just snored a little.

He told himself that it was justified, that extra dollar for himself, because he would take Estrella. He would have to be responsible for her, at least until he found some way to leave her.

He left Bethany the sleeping bag, two cans of beer, half the meth, some chip bags that still had crumbs.

He hesitated over taking the station wagon, but he knew that Bethany wouldn't drive it. He told himself that she could walk up the road, find another ride.

He drove away, with Estrella on the passenger seat, using one hand to hold her steady, while she slobbered on her toy keys.

He wept, sobbing like Estrella might. Whole body racked with it.

He knew that he would never see Bethany again. Wouldn't be granted another chance meeting like the one in the park.