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THIRSTY BIRDS LIKE YOU

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

ABIGAIL GREENBAUM

May 2011

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ABSTRACT

This short story collection follows the lives of thirsty people. These stories explore their searches for love and freedom, set in the treacherous and occasionally redemptive places where they try, however foolishly, to do an honest day's work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This collection is indebted to the thoughtful and incisive reading of my excellent committee: Tom Franklin, Jack Pendarvis, and Annette Trefzer. In my time at the University of Mississippi, my writing has also gained much from Beth Ann Fennelly's editorial eye, John Brandon's good sense, Greg Shirmer's vision for narrative prose, and Mary Hayes's vast knowledge of both the English language and the occult. Thanks also to Anya Groner, Burke Nixon, Bill Boyle, Cari Gervin, Elizabeth Kaiser, Jessica Stock, and Ryan Bubalo for all the rest. Without Barry Hannah, none of this would have happened: "Ladies and Gentlemen, it's all power and light."

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The evolution of oil production is reflected in thousands of marginally producing oil and natural gas wells quietly reaching for often stubborn reserves.

--American Oil & Gas Historical Society, on the invention of the counterbalanced oilfield pump jack, or Thirsty Bird.

We had money. We were grimy and tired. Usually we felt guilty and frightened, because there was something wrong with us, and we didn't know what it was; but today we had the feeling of men who had worked.

--Denis Johnson

SLIPPING

Because Kerenza would earn money--six dollars an hour!--her mother, Maureen, did not forbid her from staying out late for the babysitting job. In theory, Kerenza's mother was all about earning money, but lately she'd taken to stretching her alimony checks, wearing a bathrobe all morning on weekdays, calling up her girlfriends at work, and repeating how thankful she was that Kerenza's father's "Little Swimmers" had only once knocked her up. If the girlfriends tired of this chatter as much as Kerenza did, they didn't say so, always picking up, always hmm-ing and shrieking with laughter on the other end of the line.

"I mean, I think we both know," Maureen was saying to Amy or Lupe or Louise, Kerenza slouching toward the door, "he wasn't Olympic material."

Kerenza eased the door from its jamb, flinching as the bolts clicked free. Her mother looked up from her fresh red toes, held apart by foam earplugs.

"The sitting job," Kerenza said. "Remember?" Maureen dragged on her Pall Mall, closed her eyes, and blew smoke into the slotted light of the kitchen. She always kept the blinds down, and Kerenza lost count of the hours. Leaving, she blinked at the brightness on the balcony, even though the rational part of her knew it was only five-thirty, early May, the whole Chicagoland area reveling in late light and the dangling carrot of warmth.

They lived in what Kerenza's best friend Joan called a Heavy Metal Apartment. The two-storey building, common throughout Summit and the other towns that rimmed the city's southwest side, looked like a roadside motel. Instead of hallways, concrete balconies with iron

rails connected the apartments. Some tenants attempted to grow coleus or hibiscus during summer, but little rain reached the balconies, and the plants faltered in their plastic pots. Only the occasional Northern Prickly Pear survived. “No offense,” Joan had said, “but it’s just like the place my cousin Leo lives. And *you’ve* met Leo.” Kerenza still had trouble gauging the age of men. There was wild and perfect Joseph Lipinski’s age, eighteen, and then there were the grown up ones. Leo, with his beer gut and receding hairline plus ponytail, just seemed old. Kerenza’s building did house several men like Leo, men who shuffled out to the mailboxes shielding their eyes as if daytime might destroy them. Her mother had slept with more than one, seen it as some form of revenge on Kerenza’s father, who didn’t even live in Chicago any more.

Kerenza rode the Harlem Avenue bus north over the shipping canal. In her interview for the baby-sitting job, she said she’d always been close with her mother. She hadn’t mentioned how two weeks earlier Maureen had followed her to the playground at St. Blase Polish Catholic, where Joseph Lipinski was palming Kerenza’s hip and pressing her deliciously back against the launch platform for the monkey bars. Maureen had scraped the curb, cranked down the passenger window of her Taurus, and shouted at Joseph that since they’d moved back to Summit, her husband gone, she kept a .38 caliber revolver in her glove compartment, and if he kept touching her daughter she might just take it out.

The bus crossed the rail line at 34th street and Kerenza could see the Sears Tower way down at the other end, the rest of the skyline clustered around it as if waiting for gossip. She tugged her corduroy skirt down toward her knees. It was too short, shorter than it had been last year when she culled it from the Village Thrift on Cicero. She pictured Joseph tugging it tonight, when he saw her at the sitting job.

Each time a man boarded the bus, Kerenza sucked in her stomach and fiddled with her

braided friendship bracelet. No one sat next to her, which made her feel both relieved and scorned. “So it’s true,” Joseph had said at the playground. “Mama Wasserman is packing. That’s some pretty ridiculous shit.” “Yeah,” said Kerenza, “I should have told you.” Joseph, done with high school, bar backed at a rock club in the city. After Kerenza’s mother had snapped shut the glove box and squealed away, he’d gone right back to kissing her. They’d stayed that way for hours, hands in each other’s jeans, until it got so cold neither one of them could feel their lips. Kerenza didn’t know what she liked better, his mouth pressing hers, tongue slipping in a forceful, snakelike way, or the fact that he didn’t care if Maureen shot him about it.

The bus neared the leafier neighborhood where the Greens lived. Mrs. Greene, at the interview, sported the sloppy looks only rich women could get away with, a red and turquoise scarf coiled around her head like a fortune teller. Kerenza started listening as the driver called out the stops. She didn’t want to stand too early, like the nervous tourists Joan always snickered at when they rode the train downtown.

*

Kerenza stood across the kitchen island from Mr. Greene. His tie, loosened, hung below the opened buttons of his shirt. He’d cuffed his sleeves, and his arm hairs had silvered, even though he seemed younger than Kerenza’s father. He drummed his fingers on the granite, and Kerenza imagined they played pool in some bar on Harlem Avenue so hidden it didn’t have a name. The table was hers to run; she could sense that.

“So,” said Mr. Greene. “There’s a frozen pizza. Emergency numbers on the fridge. Help yourself to anything.”

Mrs. Greene had left hours ago. The little Greens stayed downstairs in the den, what sounded like baseball bleeding up to the kitchen. “I’m picking her up from Rush Outpatient, then

dinner at Francesca's," said Mr. Greene. "We'll be back around 11. Does your bus run that late?"

"Sure," Kerenza said, although she didn't know. The only time she'd hitched, she and Joan had squeezed into the cab of a landscaper's pick-up, swallowing their terror and giggling when he reached across both their laps to lock the passenger door. He dropped them, untouched, at Cicero and 47th, and the ride had since become their favorite funny story.

"I'm happy to drive you," Mr. Greene said, his voice higher than normal. Kerenza watched him slip into a familiar and polite paralysis that these days conquered all the grown up men she found herself alone with. Mr. Cummings, her Geometry teacher, the Mexican father in apartment 2G, now Mr. Greene: Nice Guy Statutory Panic was what Joan called it. In such moments Kerenza felt like a searchlight raked her, lingering on her collarbone or her hemline, or any other places where her new body threatened to break out from her clothes. The more the men looked away, the more she felt what they were seeing.

*

John and Martina Greene, six and four and named for tennis luminaries, remained downstairs until their father left. "I'm off," he said, checking his bare wrist then turning toward the wall clock. "Shit. Her appointment will be over by now."

Kerenza frowned. "And the kids?"

"Better you just go down yourself," he said, "they're totally steamed at me right now."

Kerenza stood at the back window and watched Mr. Greene blaze toward the garage. His headlights torched the alley and disappeared. Downstairs the children jumped up and down, screaming the name of a White Sox slugger. Kerenza found a bottle of gin and poured an inch into a yellow coffee mug. She sipped, added Seven Up, swallowed hard, and then stomped down the stairs.

In the den, John Greene shifted in his red beanbag chair. Martina threw a stuffed monkey at the TV, where an ad with Michael Jordan in baseball black and white advertised the season.

“Team’s going to be alright now he’s back in Triple A,” Kerenza said. “I mean, I love Jordan and all, but no way the guy can play baseball.”

John grunted. Martina retrieved her monkey and threw it at Kerenza instead.

“Double play ball!” Kerenza caught the monkey. “Inning over.” She sidestepped toward first base, or the Sorry! Board. Seven Up sloshed onto her wrist. “Nice throw, Martina.” Martina held her hair in one fist, running her other hand up toward her scalp so the strands tangled.

John and Martina were more or less the age of Kerenza’s stepsisters, who lived with Kerenza’s father and Miriam, their mother, near a beach in Massachusetts. Kerenza spent two months with them every summer. Those girls spoke Hebrew and drew lifelike sidewalk chalk horses and laughed if you as much as crossed your eyes.

“Remember me? I’m Kerenza. You want your pizza during the game?”

John shrugged, turned away, and the beanbag chair creaked beneath him. The TV screen zoomed in on the home plate umpire, muzzled and striped. “What are you, blind?” said John, leaning his tongue on a loose front tooth.

Kerenza pulled hard on her cocktail. Gin was disgusting, but they always drank it, unlike the other girls with their wine coolers and Zima. Gin, said the one pool hall bartender who always served her and Joan, came from poison.

“I was in a movie,” Kerenza said. John swallowed whatever remarks he was about to make about the pitch count. Martina drooled from the small O of her mouth. “Yeah, that’s right. And you know where we filmed? Guess.”

“The Mergency Room?” said Martina.

“A car chase!” said John.

“Wrigley Field. The movie took place in the 1940s, and they haven’t changed a single brick in Wrigley Field since then.”

“Probably one brick has changed,” said John.

“We were all out in the bleachers, you know for an hour so, and we had to wear historical clothes.” Joan had been the extra in the movie filmed at Wrigley and she hadn’t given any details about the costumes, but Kerenza wanted to keep talking. There was something coiled and dark about the Greene children, and it made her want to fill every second of silence.

“It was a super hot day,” Kerenza said. “Perfect baseball weather.”

“We always wear SPF 45,” said Martina.

“We were supposed to be cheering for the game in the movie, but there wasn’t any game. They just filmed us cheering at nothing.”

“You’re a liar,” said John.

“I’d never been to Wrigley before,” Kerenza said. “I’m a Sox girl.”

On the TV, the South Siders were coming up to bat. The score remained lopsided, and the Chicago batters sauntered to the plate as if nothing that happened anywhere could spoil their day.

“You know what I said? You can’t cheer for a fake baseball game. So I just sat there in the bleachers, at Wrigley Field, and shouted at the top of my lungs Sox Win! Sox Win! Sox Win!”

This was Joan’s favorite part of the story and when she told it at the Harlem Avenue bar Kerenza chimed in on the refrain. They thumped their palms on the lip of the counter and whirled around on their stools. Buzzed by that time, they played to the crowd. Unlike the afternoon drinkers back in Summit, John Greene did not seem impressed, and Martina returned

to teasing her hair into natty tangles.

“We don’t care,” John said, “about the White Sox. We just hate the Cubs right now.”

Kerenza set her mug on the bookshelf and gloved Martina’s hands with her own, tugging the small fingers away from the hair. Water rimmed the girl’s eyes.

“I know it hurts, Martina, but don’t worry. I know this thing with ice cubes. We can even braid it if you want.”

“I hate Wrigley.” Martina was bawling now.

“We had season’s tickets,” said John, sighing as if the rest should be obvious. “But we had to auction them off for money. It’s all because mom is so sick.”

“Hawaiian pizza,” said Kerenza, groping for her gin. “Is it time for pizza or what?”

*

Martina had cried her ya-yas out for the rest of the evening, even as Kerenza plied her with every toy in the house. During dinner the boy did not answer her questions, only pushed his loose tooth forward with his tongue when she looked at him. Kerenza remembered an illustration in a book she’d checked out multiple times at the library, first in Belmont Harbor where her parents had lived together, then later on interlibrary loan from the smaller, more faded branch in Summit. Kerenza’s favorite picture showed the tooth fairy, spent, returning at dawn to a single-family palace bricked from molars and bicuspid and lateral incisors. She thumbed over Martina’s bright bookshelves, hoping it might be there, but came away with a unicorn story instead. In time Martina’s lungs gasped more and more slowly. When Kerenza closed Martina’s door, the girl sang to herself, a teetering nonsense song in which only a measure or two of wakefulness remained.

From the bathroom, John Greene demanded a glass of apple juice. She heard thudding

and splashing, the boy cannonballing into the deep tub. Kerenza paused in the hallway, gliding her palm across the bathroom door. “Give me apple juice or I’m telling,” he said. She pictured him slapping the water in the tub, his little naked body jerking and slipping across the tile.

“Drink from the tub,” Kerenza said. “I’m not coming in there.”

“I’m telling,” said John. “I’m telling on you.” On the other side of the door, he trumpeted cheekfuls of bathwater across the room. Kerenza pictured Mr. and Mrs. Greene’s monogrammed towels soaked from the spit. Water would dry. She wanted another drink.

*

She’d told Joseph to come at nine thirty and stand in front of the neighbor’s house. She waited in front of the refrigerator, steadying herself on the ice dispenser. The list of important phone numbers fluttered on the fridge. *Rush Oncology Outpatient Care, Dr. Stephens, Dr. Mitchell, Radiologist-Dr. Mehta*. Kerenza twirled the number plate on the Greene’s rotary phone.

“You’ve reached the office of Dr. John Stephens and Dr. Anne Frank.” Kerenza hauled herself up on the island and swung her heels against its base. “Please note that Dr. Frank will be on her honeymoon for two weeks and immediately upon return will begin practicing under her married name of Saltamacchia. Our offices are closed right now, but if you want to leave a message consider the following options: If you are a patient of Dr. Stephens, press one. If you are patient of Dr. Saltamacchia, press two. If you need to schedule a mammogram, press three.”

The cord hung between Kerenza and the wall like a jump rope. She twirled it a few times then pulled the phone across the opposite counter. “I’m sorry,” said the voice inside the phone, a robot now replacing the receptionist. “I couldn’t process your response. Please try again.” Kerenza hauled the phone in, hand over hand. She slammed the receiver down.

Upstairs John Greene hurtled through the hallway. Kerenza flinched as he leaped into his bed, directly above the kitchen.

After dialing another number, Kerenza crossed all her fingers and hoped her father would be the one to pick up the phone.

“Hello?” he said. “Who is this? Hello?”

His voice made Kerenza feel spacious. She swallowed her breath.

“Kerenza,” he said. “You have to stop with this. We have *caller ID*, now, and Miri is starting to freak out. I know, I know, this isn’t your mother’s number. And it’s not that bar that apparently lets you use their phone sometimes, which, by the way, I’m going to speak to your mother about you and bars.”

Air strained inside Kerenza’s lungs, and she exhaled the tiniest breath, holding the receiver away from her lips. His palm scratched over the mouthpiece, then he mumbled, “No, honey, it’s nothing. Just some unfinished stuff from work. Hey, you,” he said, louder now. “You have to cut this out. She thinks you’re unhinged, you know that? That you shouldn’t be around Sarah and Izzy. I want you to come visit this summer. Isn’t that what you want? Say something. What do you want from me?”

Kerenza wanted to stay on the line, her ear on that snug, salted house by the water. Maybe Izzy’s soccer team had practiced on the beach that day, as they did sometimes, Izzy swore, because coach said sand taught them to run faster. Maybe Miriam stood in the porch door, frowning at her husband on the phone, shaking the grit from a pair of cleats. Kerenza hung up. She lay out on the island, knees pointed up to the ceiling. John Greene, above her, turned on his mattress.

*

Joseph did not wait outside. He leaned on the doorbell, waking Martina Greene from her dreams. “Mommy!!!!!!” The girl thudded through the hallway and down the stairs just as Kerenza sprung the deadbolt and revealed him. He wore army boots, a black jean jacket and sunglasses.

Kerenza slammed the door and bolted it again. She lifted Martina up by her armpits but by that time the girl shriveled and reddened, screaming, kicking Kerenza in the stomach and hips. “I know, I know,” Kerenza said. “He’s um, he’s a Jehovah’s Witness, okay? Do you know what that is? They just want to sell you books. You’ve already got like a million books, don’t you?”

“Is Mama coming home?” the girl said, hiccupping now.

“Yes,” Kerenza said. “But you’re going to have to go to sleep to make that happen.”

“If I sleep, Mama comes home?”

“Yes,” Kerenza said.

“I’m sleeping right now!” Martina closed her eyes and relaxed her limbs. Kerenza paused on the upstairs landing to recover her breath. When she looked down, Joseph Lipinski pressed his face against the leaded glass that bordered the doorframe.

*

Now they stood in front of the fridge, Kerenza’s ear angled to the ceiling, monitoring for any indication of waking Greenes. “This is disgusting.” Joseph spit back his gin. “How do you drink this?”

“Oh, you can take it,” Kerenza said.

“Nah,” said Joseph. “I’m good.” He shook an envelope folded from a magazine page until a tiny pile of cocaine silted on the island.

“Dude,” said Kerenza. “You are so much awesomer than the boys at Morton West.”

“You’ve never snorted before, huh.”

“No, I have.” said Kerenza. “You know, they should have told me Mrs. Greene had cancer.”

Joseph pushed the powder around with his library card.

“Don’t you think?” Kerenza said. “What am I supposed to say to a kid about that? Oh, Kerenza, there’s pizza in the fridge, the kids are a little upset, but don’t worry, it’s just ‘cause their mother is dying. It won’t be any big deal, though, we’ll be back at 11.”

“Just bum,” Joseph said, dipping his key in the powder, “for starters.”

Kerenza let him palm her cheek and walk her back against the island, holding the key under her nose. The nickel bit into her skin as she inhaled quickly, his fingers hard against her other nostril. She tasted metal in the back of her throat.

“Don’t move,” he said, “you want more, don’t you.” He dropped his hand down her neck, over her left breast, her ribs, pinching her side as he backed away. He ripped a sheet from Mrs. Greene’s magnetic note pad—Honey, I’ll Love You If You Buy . . .it read in orange letters at the top—and rolled it into a straw. On the piece he ripped off someone had written sponges.

She sucked in the skinny line he’d separated for her, then one more of the remaining four. “Hey,” he said, smacking her across the shoulder blades, hard in a good way, as if she were choking on something.

Kerenza felt like she could run all the way back to her apartment and not get winded. But now, though, she didn’t want to leave. Joseph was kissing her and that was the whole point. The evening so far clumped together in a heap of baseball and unicorns and fruitless, gin-soaked consolation. These children might lose their mother, and Kerenza had nothing to do with that. She was razoring forward. Joseph’s hands seemed to move so fast over her that she couldn’t

keep track of where they were. The second hand lurched around the wall clock. Her blood got loud.

She didn't hear John Greene on the stairs, and she didn't know how long he stood in the kitchen before speaking.

"I almost swallowed it," said John. "But I knew what to do. I just spit it out. Like a watermelon seed." He held forward his palm, still raised from the bath, and as Joseph stepped away from her, Kerenza saw a canine tooth nestled against the boy's lifeline.

"Congratulations," she said. "I guess you'll be getting a visit from the tooth fairy, won't you." Kerenza ground her jaw and forced slower breaths.

"I bet this kid knows what's up with the tooth fairy," Joseph said. He tousled John's damp hair so it stuck up in clumps. "Don't you, my man?"

"She's going to come for your tooth," Kerenza said. "And then John, you're never going to believe this but she's going to take your tooth and cement it into the wall of her house. She's got my teeth there, and Joseph's, and your dad's and your mom's, and Jim Thome's teeth and Michael Jordan's teeth and that short stop who can't speak English, but guess what the tooth fairy has his teeth just like the rest of us and some day she'll come back for Martina's and by that time you might know that she sometimes has to contract out to people like your dad"

"Seriously," said Joseph. "Chill."

"What?" she said.

Joseph crouched at John's level. "Women." He twirled his index finger in a slow circle around his ear. "What can you do?"

John smiled, his gum flopping over the empty space.

"Awesome," said Joseph. "Do you realize how far you're going to be able to spit? Come

up here, buddy, let's get this pearlie cleaned up.”

While Joseph hauled the boy onto the counter, rinsed the blood from his canine, and described in ultimate detail how to hawk milk and Hi-C and chicken noodle soup insane distances through the gaps left vacant by baby teeth, Kerenza focused on silence. She rolled the tip of her tongue over every tooth in her mouth to keep from grinding them against each other.

“I don't have any teeth left to lose,” she said, as if taking stock for the first time.

“Well, duh,” said John. “You're a grown up.”

“Yeah, Kerenza,” Joseph said. “You heard the little guy. You're all grown up, aren't you.”

*

The tooth, now cleaned, had been planted under John Greene's pillow, and instead of returning Kerenza's goodnight, he flopped onto his stomach, lifted the pillow, and burrowed his head next to the tooth.

“I'm telling,” he said, voice muffled. “Why shouldn't I tell?”

Above them the sky glowed through the slanted window.

“Guess what, John. Did you know that the lights here are so bright that at night you can see Chicago from outer-space?”

“Why shouldn't I?”

“What's wrong with you, John? Don't you want to be like, an astronaut or something?”

Kerenza imagined John Greene floating above the beds and babysitters and season's tickets of his life until it all looked small and blurred.

“Tell,” John continued. “Tell tell tell tell tell tell tell.”

She patted John him on the back, switched off the bedside lamp, and left him to his

stubborn murmurs. She would probably lose this sitting job. John McEnroe Greene knew power when he held it.

Downstairs, Joseph had left the kitchen. He'd swept the remaining cocaine from the island. Kerenza leaned over the counter to make sure, hoping to sense him behind her, feel his weight over hers. She wanted him now, touching her, before she lost her nerve. "Joseph? Where are you?" She wobbled down the den stairs, dark now, but when she flicked on the overhead lights she saw no one in the beanbag chair, no restless shadows across the TV. She frowned at herself in the blank screen, one button undone halfway down her shirt. Her ears looked too big. She twisted her hair out of its ponytail and finger-combed it forward over her shoulders.

On her way up, she wondered where Joseph hid, and the thought that any minute she might feel his hands over her eyes, arm locking under her ribs, sped her pulse up more than the drugs did. It both disappointed and calmed her that she returned to the kitchen, not assailed.

Joseph's jacket slumped over the breakfast bar. She could sense him, still and waiting, as if a magnet plunged through her circulatory system, straining her veins toward his north. Darkness coated the downstairs rooms of the Greene's house. Now, the children asleep, the strange family's coats and whiffle ball bats and rocking chairs assumed more menacing shapes.

*

When she walked in the Greene's bedroom he perched his boot on the bed. "Did I scare you?" he said, waiting for her to walk toward him, and then reaching for the unfinished job he'd done on her shirt buttons. "I wanted to see you a little bit scared."

"Please," Kerenza said. "How old am I, ten?"

"Right," he said. "You're a grown up, remember? You've lost *all* your teeth." He traced her gums with his tongue, bit her lip. She wrapped her fingers around the back of her neck.

Too soon, he dropped his hands from her shirt and shrugged her off him in a move that seemed practiced. Kerenza felt all the other girls he'd kissed filling up the room, a jealous and transparent army. In this bedroom, the lampshades matched the extra blankets, the pillows piled against the headboard. "Don't move," he said, wagging his finger at her. "Don't move an inch. Check out what I found."

He kneeled below the TV and slid open the console to reveal more than ten videotapes with black covers and stick-on labels.

Kerenza dropped backward onto the Greene bed, letting her skirt slip up around her hips as she snaked across the mattress. Joseph clicked the TV on, and the screen filled with wobbling, grainy home video. He thudded onto the mattress next to her.

In the video, Mr. Greene held the camera. His wife pranced close to the lens in garters and a white night gown. Joseph rolled onto Kerenza, blocking her view. She'd never thought about how heavy his body would be. He kissed her and she lost circulation in her arms. "Watch," he said, rolling and then pulling her onto his chest. "Watch and learn."

On screen Mrs. Greene unbuttoned her gown, pulling it up so you could see her garter straps. Her arms fluttered and her hips swung in an attempt at dance. Her hair, short and thin as grass, spiked out from the bones of her skull. The postal clerk in Summit had had chemotherapy, same with Maureen's cousin Margaret, but they wore wigs and Kerenza had never seen beneath them.

"You're slipping," Joseph said.

"Oh," she said, "I'm sorry."

On the screen, Mrs. Greene stopped moving, stomping her foot and grasping at the uppermost button. "Hey, lady, this was supposed to be hot," Joseph said. Mr. Greene perched his

camera on something, the bed, maybe, and walked to help his tangled wife pull her nightgown over her head.

“Here we go, here we go, watch now.” Joseph tightened his arm across Kerenza. The Greens kissed, their bodies pressed close, the half-removed nightgown wreathing their shoulders. Mr. Greene reached for the camera again, his palm lurching toward the lens. When he regained focus, his wife had finished molting her gown. She was bony and sharp, starved looking. Her skin seemed translucent against the black lace of her belt. A crooked brown gash, thick as Magic Marker, tracked through the skin where her left breast had been.

“Stop this tape,” Joseph said, throwing her off him.

Kerenza pulled herself up against the headboard, tugging her skirt back down toward her knees.

Joseph pointed at the remote. “Turn it off,” he said. “Did you know about this?” He sat now, his shirt crumpled.

“Just about the cancer. I told you, downstairs.” She picked up the remote control, waved it at the TV, but did not press the power button.

“Forget all that. That’s not why we came here.”

She wondered if he knew any way of touching her that might reverse the course of the evening. She wanted to travel between his hands, kiss him pressed against the island, or the jungle gym, trade this bedroom in for anywhere. His palms flopped on the bedspread.

“Maybe,” she said, holding the words against her gums, deciding to say each one only as she said it. “Maybe you should leave.”

“What?” he said. “I thought you were cool for it.”

Kerenza kept watching the video. She had thought so, too.

“Are you alright?” As he stood, the bed swelled like a lung where he’d been sitting.

“What are you looking at?”

Mrs. Greene swabbed her hands across her thighs and stomach and chest, even the empty part. The camera hiccupped and then steadied, as if her husband’s heart sped and his hands shook, but he couldn’t look away.

“Nothing,” she said. She did not know how to say that nothing--not drugs, not kissing, not Maureen’s revolver, not stolen, gasping love in the bed of a strange couple--could save them or keep them or shield them from the room, this room—immaculate and matching—where Mrs. Greene turned her body in dance. “Please,” she said. “Leave.”

Kerenza closed her eyes. When she opened them, she wanted Joseph gone, the house hers for a little longer, this night once again a story she could tell any way she wanted. The children hadn’t stirred in what felt like hours. They must be asleep: toothless and learning to mourn. She waited, still, hoping for the creak of his boots across the hardwood hall, the front door sucking shut behind him. When she opened her eyes, she would be alone. Mr. Greene would be steadying his lens, following every twitch of his wife’s body, every muscle she moved.

MY BROTHER, THE DISCOVERY CHANNEL

By late June, the summer my father disappeared, I'd heard nothing from him and I'd grown sick of girls like Tracy Colangelo, whose fathers held video chats from their command centers outside Baghdad. "I've *seen* Iraq," Tracy would say, propping her tanned self out the service window of the beach concession, "it's nothing special." I hadn't seen shit, so I decided to bust up some mailboxes, starting with mine.

I did it while mom and my older brother Luke worked out back in the garden, pitching salt hay in wreaths at the foot of her Brandywines.

"We'll have to grow all our own vegetables," she was saying all the time. "Stay strong together. Me and my boys."

"Chickens!" Luke said. "What about getting chickens?" And the two of them would keep at it for hours, until they'd built our lives into a whole damn ark.

Exploding our mailbox wasn't a hard job. I stuffed the box with newspaper, soaked it in lighter fluid and tossed a match. It burned quiet. I walked down the street and watched it go from behind the snowplow on cinderblocks in our neighbor's yard. When the plastic melted away and the stake began to char, I turned and walked out of our neighborhood, toward the Point. I figured someone would stop the fire before our yard caught, but I didn't wait to find out.

That summer I worked my way from our house to the Point, always hitting the houses with yellow ribbons on the trees, or "Support our Troops" decals on their rusted minivans. On the Point all the houses had metal boxes so I couldn't do much damage. Once the neighborhood

caught on to the pattern, some people rented an address at the post office downtown. Mail still came to their houses though, and the carrier dropped it by the charred posts. Dew soaked the letters, ink bleeding through to the envelopes. The ruined mail blew over onto our lawn and stuck to the bottoms of my sneakers. My mother didn't seem to notice or care. It's not like she was expecting anyone to send her anything.

She'd always been a messy, distracted person, but after Dad left she lived in our house one room at a time. She started painting blue stripes on the kitchen walls and stopped sweeping. After finishing one and a half walls, she moved on to the mudroom, pasting shards of beach glass over the windows. I flipped off the abandoned paint job each time I left the house, as if those stripes chided me get out, get out, quick, before the lady fixes her spurned heart on you. She forgot to plant anything else but tomatoes. We ate tomato soup and tomato sauce and tomato smothered chicken. The still distant winter threatened frozen lasagna and chili. The ripe fruit rolled on the countertops and you had to be careful where you set down your glass. Sometimes when I came in at night I stomped through the kitchen, hoping to rattle the counters and send all that bounty spinning and bursting to the floor.

I burned all through the summer, until one night early in August I found a new job. I'd run out of mailboxes, anyway, and targeted the firewood stand out near the RV campground, halfway to the beach. It was a little pathetic, even for me, burning up a firewood stand, a wooden rack built on the roadside. Cedar planks divided the shelves, each section stacked with ten dollars worth of dry oak. "In God We Trust," read the hand-lettered sign on the slotted bank box. "All others pay cash." Still, I diligently soaked the shelf and its wares in lighter fluid, knowing that at least this victim would blaze up higher than my head.

"I knew you had some time on your hands," he said from the window of his Sable.

“Don’t stop, not for my sake.”

“Mr. Caldwell.” I perched my can on the lip of his window.

“I might be going to Bangladesh,” he said. “I’ve got a line on some unprotected tigers.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, pissed at myself for showing so much respect. I was six months into a long career tormenting summer people: giving wrong directions when they were lost, raiding their wine cellars in March, motoring to their moorings and getting hammered on their boats. Mr. Caldwell summered in the biggest house on the Point, the biggest on the island I bet.

Our town isn’t much of an island, but we call it one. There are three bridges and a train line linking it to the rest of the state, and the only kind of boat that could make it all the way around with enough draft is a canoe. Anything bigger would run aground in the maze of marshes, channels that trick and change and strand sandfish to rot twice a day with the tides. I don’t know my way through half these channels, and I’ve lived on this island all my life.

In his Sable, Mr. Caldwell didn’t seem capable of blinking, as if sighting me down a gatling gun, or a semi-automatic, whatever you use to kill tigers. He’d been summering here for longer than I could remember, but the past few years he’d arrived each May with a foreign wife. Cuban, I thought. “She’s a real mamacita,” Luke had said, as she rode by us one year on the Mayor’s float in the Fourth parade, an honor that caused our mother no less than three weeks of rage, and left us swallowing blueberry pie so sour you couldn’t close your mouth. “Mama-what?” I’d replied, staring at the slim, tan lady in the picture hat as the truck bed careened down Main Street. I never thought I’d be face to face with the man who’d married her away from her hot, wild country.

“When you’re finished with this business,” Mr. Caldwell flapped his hand toward the doused firewood. “Be in touch. I need a caretaker.”

“Yes, sir,” I said again, but his window had already closed.

*

My mother sat Indian style on her bedroom floor and pulsed an electric drill through a steamer shell the size of her palm. Soup cans gathered at her knees like patient children. I knew the routine: she’d tie the shells and cans with twine, drip them from a hanger, the kind of wind-chime a kid might make. Luke would spend all afternoon positioning a bracket and arm out the window, angling for the most likely breeze. In two weeks when some hurricane—Florence, Gideon, Harriet, always grandparent names--rumbled around down the coast, the heavier winds would wreck her effort on the granite floor of the outdoor shower.

“Do you know this girl, this Tracy Colangelo?”

“What about her?” I gripped the door-frame and leaned forward, only my toes on the ground.

“Your brother’s taking her out, you know.”

“Really? Luke’s taking out a girl?”

“He deserves to. He really does, I mean, in here with me all summer. But I want to know, is she worth it?”

“Sure, sure, it’s just I don’t think Tracy’s the only girl--”

“Always here when I need him.” She looked up, drill still buzzing, boring through so fast that the shell cracked in pieces. “No trouble at all.”

“No,” I said. “No trouble. But between you and me? Tracy, she’s kind of a snob.”

The bit whirled near her shin.

“No girl is too good for my Luke.” She waved the drill in the air like an extension of her arm.

“A frigid snob,” I said.

“Luke! Come here and ask your brother why he talks so mean.” She folded her hands in her lap, the tool skewering her jean skirt.

Luke, entering, hustled to the socket and yanked out the cord. As he leaned over, his tee-shirt rode up his rib cage and I saw he’d jammed a snorkel tube in his pocket. Probably he picked that up from Sarah-West Stewart, a tenth grade girl who claimed that one time she’d seen a three-foot devil ray rippling below her in Brace’s Cove. I suspected Luke was stealing from all the girls he fooled around with that summer--how else could you explain the feather boas and costume wings and Indian bead belts that were piling up behind his dresser? I hoped when he got to Tracy Colangelo he’d pinch her laptop, snapping it shut on her honorable father and his war.

“Also,” my mother said, shaking the drill, wondering why it stopped. “Women are not whores.” She peered at the bit as if waiting for it agree. When she looked up again it occurred to me that my mother was not beautiful. The pieces of her face looked stuffed together, as if someone had taken her apart too quickly, and then couldn’t remember where everything went. I’d spent all summer looking at high school girls. They dried the Rolling Rock on my tongue, made me want to stick my hand in my pants right there in the woods by the commuter line. Sometimes I imagined doing just that, with Sarah-West, or Tracy Colangelo standing in front of me, her breasts mooning above the low, laced edge of her top. I could feel my tongue on her collarbone, whoever she was. Right in front of everyone at the party I would start unzipping her shorts, her spinning in tight little circles to wiggle out of the close denim, showing more and more of her tanned skin.

These girls did sometimes ruffle my hair and smile with their whole faces at me, but I knew that was just because they wanted to get serious with my brother, the heroic son, the one

who wiped away tears from the face of his mother. Or maybe they already had, and the fact that I shared his blood made them think back to some dark evening, his fingers pinching them under their shirts.

My mother pushed her palms into her thighs to stand, drill flopping down like a disappointing Bluefish.

“Look what you’re doing to her,” said Luke. “Be a gentleman, dude.” He palmed my mother’s shoulders and I saw her look slip past him, not toward me, not out the window to any visible oak or gutter, but back through time to a moment when the body before her belonged to a husband and not a son.

“That a snorkel in your pocket?”

“Shut up, Simon.”

“Where’d do you get that snorkel?”

“You care so much why don’t you buy your own damn snorkel? All that money, from this new job of yours. That’s right, I heard about your job.”

“Simon, a job? How much? Where?” I could never tell when my mother was listening, or when she’d slipped away.

“No, he’s just messing with me. Sorry, Ma. I don’t have a job.”

That night I dreamed of swimming with my dad in a quarry on the island, only instead of deep, clear water it was filled with marinara sauce. We were doing dead man’s float, and I woke, parched. On my way to the kitchen I turned on every light. Luke’s door was closed but I knew he’d gone. I knew what he did at night, or in any case I had my ideas about it. I really wanted him to bring a girl home, so I could listen to the thud where he pushed her up against the wall, the sound of her half-moans and his grunting and the slapping of their bodies against each other

and the wall. If Luke planned on making it with every girl in our town worth making, with tan and bratty and beautiful Tracy Colangelo, than I wanted to at least have an ear on it.

He never brought girls home, though, and he didn't that night. I checked every room for my absent mother, and as I stood by the screen door at the back of the kitchen, letting water run into a jumbo Fenway park slurpie cup, I saw her.

Rabbits and squirrels rustled in the woods and my mother stood in the center of the garden, shouldering my father's drill rifle. She turned from one side to the other, aiming at nothing, or whatever might be lurking between the sumacs that edged our yard.

When I was six, I had stolen that rifle while Dad sprawled in the recliner, asleep. I'd nudged the barrel under his tee shirt, a maroon one from the ice factory where he worked. He startled, smiling, lifting his heavy eyebrows. "You got me good, Mr. Simon," he said. "Real good." I jumped up and down, flapping his shirt, awed by his lightheartedness while facing down the death I thought I held in my hands. Here sat the man I would grow into, laughing down the barrel. Then he included me in the truth.

"Ma," I said, screen door checkering my lips. "That gun is only for show. Don't you know that by now?"

If she heard me, she said nothing, sighting the dark spaces between the trees. Our house glowed from every window and she didn't even notice the light.

*

Although I'd seen the Caldwell house from the beach, the stretch of their land stunned me. Granite columns higher than my ears flanked the beginning of the drive, an iron pineapple sauntered to each one. The road, paved, wide as a boulevard, curved up a gentle hill planted with crabapple trees.

After you pass the orchard the road crests a bluff, and for a brief stretch you can see down over the moraines, across the bay to where white dunes teeth from the water. The land seems laid out to tease you, flashing that ocean view before dumping you into a cedar grove. If you look hard, you can still see the water glint between the needled branches, but maybe it's just your mind tricking you, wanting so bad to look out over it all again, to believe you are the king of everything.

The woods open again on the other side of the Caldwell house, where a stone porch faces the marsh. Whale-shaped boulders pepper the lawn, and when I went to work for the first time, Mr. Caldwell waited for me, sunning on a rock. I'd been circling the house, calling his name, letting the syllables rocket off the high brick walls.

"Where should I start?" My shadow crossed his linen shirt. He eyes stayed shut.

"Easy there, tiger. Don't you want to see the house, take in the sights? I'd like to show you around."

I followed him through the arched door, down a thick corridor, and into the sunny living room, where the skin of a female lion splayed across the tiled floor. Trophies punctuated the room: zebra skin ottoman, polar bear throw tossed over a canvas couch. Tall ferns clustered around the lamps.

"Aren't you a good little pussycat?" Mr. Caldwell purred and cupped his hand around the lion's neck, rolling it over. He slapped the tanned underside and stood up again, pushing through to the patio. The glass doors dwarfed him, reached up to the ceiling, almost two storeys high, as if at any moment a giraffe might wander in.

"Sit," Caldwell pointed to an iron chair with a red and white striped cushion. "Smoke with me." He lifted a joint from a marble table. It was Friday afternoon, and I slipped into that

familiar mix of laziness and anticipation. The chair molded around my legs, as if it had been built with my body in mind. Maybe this would be *the* weekend, the time I'd been waiting for, when a girl turned away from Luke and wanted me. I wasn't scared or shamed by Mr. Caldwell's money. He made me feel like my life was about to get easy, like whatever I wanted I could pluck from the nearest vine.

"My husband, he want the chairs of wood. But I am creature of comfort."

I jerked around in my chair and the joint startled from my fingers. It winked up from the flagstone and a brown-haired woman with wide hips stood behind us. She wore a straw hat with a red ribbon. The brim flopped across her narrow features, masking and then revealing parts of her face.

"Simon?" she said. "I am right? Take drink." She handed me an ice-filled glass with mint leaves crushed against the side. Usually when I drank rum I mixed it with Coke, but sipping this I learned a better kind of sweetness. It crept up, disguised between the lime and mint, and stayed longer at the edges of my mouth.

She handed a drink to Mr. Caldwell but they didn't speak. He turned his chair toward the water and readjusted his sunglasses. I'd seen Mrs. Caldwell from a distance, combing the tide line on the private beach, examining whatever broken mussel she'd found and then, if the pearl didn't shine enough, casting it back for the birds. Once she'd called our father, late, and as she pleaded him to open the ice lockers and sell her a block, mom had pulled all the trays from our freezer, smacking them against the counter until cubes popped and glimmered over the vinyl floor. *Fiona*, my father said, his boots deliberate and slow through the hazardous kitchen, *it's business. You know how these people are, any hour of the night they air-lift some dead wild something, Christ, a dinosaur, even, and want you to freeze it.* What my mother said, and kept

saying, was *you can't rescue her*.

“Will you go to a party tonight?”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Caldwell?” My hand wavered and syrup glommed onto my knees.

“Call me Laura, darling, that’s my name.”

I nodded, although I doubted I would ever pronounce it right. It sounded like the word loud. I looked at Mr. Caldwell, and he shrugged.

“No ma’am,” I said. “No parties I know of.”

“The best ones you just discover,” she said. “Don’t plan them too much.”

“That’s true,” I said.

“You learn Spanish, Simon? You know *madrugar*, I can tell. In this country everybody learn Spanish.”

Mr. Caldwell grunted, but she kept her eyes on me.

“No ma’am. I’m no good at Spanish.”

“It is an action, but also a state of mind. It means you keep going, awake, until the one day turn to next. When future arrives. When does that happen? What hour is that? I do not think a clock can tell that time.”

I stared at my knees, skinny and small. Mr. Caldwell leaned back in his striped chair so far that the front legs hovered over the patio. I didn’t look at Mrs. Caldwell, but I felt her dark, unstill eyes fixed on the side of my face. My stomach clenched up. I swallowed the rest of my drink, ice cubes slopping my upper lip.

“I fell for my husband at a party like that. My friends, they no want Americans, too many drinking, they vomit in their shorts. But it was my birthday, and the man so quiet and tall. Darling! Watch you will fall.”

Mr. Caldwell's chair legs clattered down against the stone.

She eyed my empty glass. "See, Simon? Just swallow more slowly. That's how *te madrugas*." She smiled and cupped her fingers under my chin. The rum should have gone down already but it honeyed at the back of my throat.

"You'll like Simon, I think." Mr. Caldwell said.

Her hand slid down and pressed the edge of my neck, less maternal. A procession of dead lions lumbered through my mind.

"Mrs. Caldwell," I said. "I'm here to work."

Mr. Caldwell snorted in his chair and spit out a mint leaf. It stuck to the patio like a ruptured bug. "See?" he said. "Another island boy who'll do anything for you."

Mrs. Caldwell stole her hand from my neck. "Nothing happened. I told you million times. That woman lives in her wild mind."

"Maybe," he said. "But I'll never know for certain though, will I. You can start tomorrow, Simon. *Low-ra* will be here to let you in."

Her name sounded like a spiteful word when he said it.

"When you marry a stranger, you go everywhere and nowhere all at once." Mrs. Caldwell walked over to her husband and pried the empty glass from his fingers. He did not look up at her. Thick wooden bracelets rattled around her fine-boned wrist and brushed against his arm.

*

That night, after closing the beach concession, Luke's girls rustled up two cases of Busch Lite, a fresh set of Double D batteries, and laid their blankets where the woods thinned out across the commuter rail. I sucked down a couple cans and by the time Luke showed up I was feeling pretty right.

The girls kelped in a messy circle, their fingers lifted in the moonlight. On the boom box played something with too many guitars. Tracy snapped her fingers above her head, as if calling the world to attention.

“You know you’ve been saying her name wrong,” I said, pinching another Busch between my fingers. “Low-ra. Low-ra!”

“I don’t need to say that name. I got plenty others.”

“Hey Sarah-West,” I said, stomping toward the dancing girls. “Can I borrow your snorkel? I want to follow a sand shark.”

One girl peeled herself from the dancing and looked from me to Luke.

“My brother, the Discovery Channel.” Luke shrugged.

“I have your wings, angel” I said. “They are green and they glow. Now tell me who you are.”

Another girl, her face rimmed with tiny braids, drop kicked her beer can toward my brother’s head. “You promised,” she said, “you wouldn’t tell anyone about that.” The can missed and he turned to me.

“Enough.” He palmed by chest just hard enough to send me stumbling into the leaves. “Hey Tracy? You got any chips over there? My little brother needs to soak up his booze.”

She tossed a shiny blue Wise’s bag in our direction. “You need anything else,” she said, pulling on her cut-offs. “You shout.”

My brother stuffed a fist full of chips into my mouth, not looking up at Tracy. “Hey genius,” he said, as the fragments stabbed into my beer-numbed gums. “Don’t blame me if my girls are more fun than your mailboxes.”

“Girls?” I said. “I’m finished with girls. Tomorrow I’m going to see Low-ra.”

“Don’t even think about it. Don’t you know why he hired you?”

I propped myself on my elbows and tried to swallow. “Why?”

“You’re a toy to them, you know. Like Dad was. If I were you I’d stay the hell away.”

But I needed the job more than Luke did, and not for the money it paid. It salted me how Luke hurtled ahead, kissing and laughing, while my life had halted in its prints the day our father left, like a snow leopard discovered on the frozen mountain, staring down the hissing barrel of the hunter’s hot gun.

The only way forward involved Laura Caldwell’s lips pressing Spanish words into the side of my face.

I didn’t leave when my brother did, flanked by the usual assortment of Sarah-Wests and Tracys. I sunk my spine into the mulch, damp from hundreds of winters’ worth downed and rotting maple leaves. It smelled indulgent, like a secret. One girl, an ugly one, still danced, even though Tracy had taken the boom box when she left. I didn’t worry about Tracy or the ugly girl. I lay where I was.

*

My mother stared at her coffee as if it might prophesy the future, but she looked up as I passed.

“Where are you going?”

I tugged at the snorkel gear thumping between my shoulder blades.

“Luke know you borrowed his mask?”

“Sure,” I said. “His mask.”

Her wrinkled denim skirt reached the tops of her sneakers. “Well, that’s nice of him,” she said.

“Going to try the rocks round the Point. Who knows what’s wrecked off there.”

“And up spoke the cabin boy, boldly up spoke he!” she sang. It was “The Golden Vanity,” this old ship song she liked to sing about a cruel ship’s captain and a wronged but brave young boy. I knew she hoped I’d join in, but I wanted to slam that door, run the road, hang the snorkel kit from a crabapple, and begin my work at the Caldwell house.

“He said to the captain, what would you give to me, if I would swim along side of the Spanish enemy, and sink her in the LOWlands, LOWlands, LOW. . .Please, Simon.”

“Oh I will give you silver and gold I’ll give to thee.” I said the words instead of singing them.

“Yes!” she said. “Gold. Silver. What else?”

“I don’t know the rest of the words.”

“You’re doing just fine. My own fair daughter. . .”

“And my own fair daughter, your very bride shall be.”

“Sink her in the LOWlands, LOWlands, LOW,” her voice shrieked above the clatter of the screen door as I closed it behind me. “Sink her in the Lowland Sea.”

*

When I reached the house someone had drawn curtains, custard color, across the many windows. I hoped briefly it had all been a trick, that Laura Caldwell had vanished back to wherever she came from.

She answered the door in a dress that somehow hid and showed off the curve of her hips. The fabric looked wrinkled, but restlessly so, as if her day had already seen such wild delight that her clothing could barely keep up.

I followed her into the living room, lifting my feet high above the sprawling lion. A rhinoceros head sneered down from above the fireplace. She leaned over the back of the couch

and lifted a fur throw over her shoulders. Polar bear. When she turned back toward me her cheekbones glowed over the white fur. I wanted to touch her skin below the smooth folds, to pull and tear at her dress. The time, had it come? I didn't know how to begin.

The day before Mr. Caldwell had outlined a list of projects in addition to general maintenance. He wanted me to shrink-wrap their sailboat, a 20-footer named "Siren Song," already stored in the boathouse for the fall. Storm windows also needed to be cleaned and installed, as well as turning over new ground for next summer's vegetable garden. Everybody was jumping on the vegetable bus.

"I'm going to pull the floating dock today," I said. "Unless of course you planned on going swimming."

"Fine," she said. "I can jump from the shore if I want."

I abandoned her in the house, her bare feet on a zebra ottoman, and walked down through the parched grass and cedars to the marsh. I hadn't thought to look at my mother's tide chart, those wavy blue high and low lines tracking across the calendar days like a heart monitor. It was low, the marsh sucked dry, the floating dock lodged a foot deep in mud. I had no idea how to land it, and I realized I hadn't thought to bring a sand-blaster or sealant or any kind of tools in fact.

"Simon," she said, from the high ground behind me, not stepping onto the mud flat like me. "Wait for the water."

But I stripped my shorts and shirts and threw them onto the dock. On my way out to the floater, my legs sank knee deep into the bank. Pieces of razor clams scraped my skin, and the mud sucked at my ankle bones as if something alive breathed inside it. I didn't look to see if she was still watching, and in a piece of luck, I managed to undo the wing nuts on the floater drums

by hand. Stripped of the blue plastic air canisters, it wasn't so hard to drag the dock, which I balanced on my shoulders and neck like a cape. I walked three paces at a time, pausing to shake the mud from my feet. At the first stop, I saw Laura's back shrinking up the path through the cedars, back to the house. I told myself she watched from the upper windows, pumping her fist in silent pride as I cleared the flats and collapsed under the dock. I stayed in the hollow darkness for a moment, enjoying the relief, wet grass tickling my ribcage. By the time I'd hauled everything, drums and dock, to the boathouse, mud had dried like a new skin all the way up to my boxers.

I sprayed the mud from my legs in the outdoor shower tucked outside the Caldwell laundry room. It was hard to imagine these people doing laundry, stepping away from their lounge chairs and bear skins to bend over a front loader, checking for stray socks.

"Simon," she said, leaning from an upper window. "Come inside and have a drink. I'll find you the key to the boathouse."

I shook my legs out, and when the sun had dried them, put my shorts and shirt back on. Back inside, I saw that she'd taken the white fur upstairs with her. Three sets of Encyclopedias lined the bookshelves behind the couch, one in Spanish. I fingered the thick leather bindings. The scent of leather rose from my hands and from the animal hides that filled the room.

I pulled the C volume of one of the English sets and opened it to the "Cuba" entry. *A small island country in the Caribbean Sea*, it began, but pollen and broken petals smeared across the rest of the page. Flat, dry petals fell from between the pages and tore into pieces at my feet. I tried to put them back together, but it was hopeless, and I returned Volume C to the shelf. I hadn't seen a sign of Mr. Caldwell all day, although it seemed like too much luck if he'd already split for Bangladesh. I wanted him gone, but I wanted him there too, a witness to however I might leave my mark on his house.

Laura still upstairs, I settled on the couch. As I reached for the rum and sugar water, I saw a tiger skin laid out below the glass coffee table. In the failing light, the stripes moved and twisted and I looked away. A drink, that's what I needed. I finished the first and poured another. I would swallow, slow, like a man this time, and then I would climb the stairs and find Mrs. Caldwell.

But I poured another drink. After all, I could still feel my blood thudding in my chest. Above me the ceiling fan spun in lazy circles around a hanging lamp made from antlers. I drunk enough it looked like the antlers were spinning, along with the fan.

I didn't remember falling asleep, but I woke in twilight, and Laura Caldwell stood in the room. Who knows how long she'd been there. The white fur fell from her shoulders, dipping just low enough to show she wore nothing beneath it. The time, was it now? I didn't ever really believe in this moment, not when I bragged to Luke by the commuter rail, not when I slammed the door on my mother's singing, not as the mud swallowed my toes and made me teeter under the weight of the dock. Now, my head clogged, the room dark, I opened my mouth, like I'd turned fish, somehow, and whatever I needed might simply swim in.

"My father taught history," she said. "So committed to the Revolution. From his classroom I could see straight down to the sea wall. But history changes. He read from a script." She shifted the fur across her shoulders, revealing her breasts for a faint second before covering them again. "For me, out was the only way out."

What did it matter to me, this country she knew and I didn't? Rum and sleep clogged my mind, but I saw her like a slow light before me. She'd lived in a Revolution—who else on this island could say that?

"But this husband, he hunts all year long. He's going to stuff our house with dead things

because he thinks that will frighten me.” In that moment I knew I wanted to steal her and in the same moment I knew that she had never been mine to steal. All that separated me, my mother, Tracy, Sarah-West, Luke, from the Caldwells was this: In a month or two, when the water blued your lips and paralyzed your lungs if you dared snorkel in it, we would still be on the island. No matter how many windows I broke, how many abandoned halls I stomped my boots on, Laura Caldwell would be somewhere else.

Someone, walking, sounded through the house behind me. I looked at Laura, but her face told nothing, not fear, not surprise. She did not let the bearskin slip from her shoulders. I counted the wild beasts Caldwell had hunted, counted every country he’d walked. I counted his reasons from not leaving, Laura in the darkness, number one on the list. I counted to stall what was coming, the way I used to on dark winter mornings, just one minute Mom, I promise. Let me count to sixty and then I’ll get up.

But when I turned Mr. Caldwell shrugged at me and sweat shone on his shoulders. “You want her, don’t you,” he said. “Always the same. But you, a kid! It’s ballsy, I’ll give you that.”

I pictured myself running out of the house and down the drive and over the railroad bridge until I quit this place. I could feel it, the branches that would sting my cheeks, the pavement on my bare feet, the fact that I was leaving. But I instead I walked to the mantel and chose a caribou hoof, the matted ankle hide hot against my palm. It felt right in my hand, like I had shot and dragged and preserved the beast myself. I could grow to be my father, second man in the hunter’s house, or I could be Mr. Caldwell. Or, I could mark the place for my own, guard that hoof in the hopes that Tracy might refuse my brother, follow me up the drive, some bright throat-burning October day, the Caldwells long gone, and I might lead her through the ghosted rooms, promise her the kind of love I didn’t know my heart could offer.

“I’m keeping this,” I said. “If you don’t mind.”

“You’re what?” said Mr. Caldwell. “Thirteen? And that floater dock must have been jammed like hell in the mud.”

I worried Laura would laugh out loud, but instead she offered me a drag of her fresh-lit cigarette.

Soon they were pouring drinks.

“To Simon,” said Mr. Caldwell, swirling the rum in his glass. Laura laughed privately and they were holding their drinks in my direction, the hunter and his wife. I would never shake that moment from my mind. The rims of our glasses clattered together. For the first time, I wanted summer to end. I wanted whatever came next. I wanted it to happen.

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, GOOD LUCK

I insisted that the book ride shotgun while I sat in back, feet curled under me, knees pressed against my chin.

“After all,” I said to my husband, as our Cherokee bogged down in the last gasps of morning rush hour out of Providence, “who’s worth more in this equation? Dollar value, I mean, not any sentimental crap. Me? Or the book?”

The book, it should be noted, was bound in human skin. *Anthropodermic bibliopegy*, Nathan had explained on an early date, years before they assigned him this trip. This is the kind of thing I learn from him: Since the seventeenth century, kings and doctors have rebound books in human skin. If the magistrate in your dukedom convicted a murderer, why not use the hanged man’s love handles to cover the court records? Fashion, it turns out, is not always the same thing as taste. When it comes to fleshly book jackets, the world is full of fakes. Calf, sheep, and lamb all masquerade as human skin. But this book was honest Abraham, the skin as human as it comes. *Why don’t you go with me?* Nathan had said, between bites of meatball, the night before he drove the book two hours down 95 to where the country’s most esteemed conservator waited to rethread its leaves. *That book has always been your favorite thing about my job.*

Traffic loosened a little. “Will you please come sit up front?” Nathan said. In the rearview his eyes widened as if he were an animated heroine, recognizing some old woman for a witch. Be gentle with me, he pleaded, in every slightest movement that he made, for I am gentle with the world.

I shook my head. “We know who brings home the bacon.” And I believed what I said.

Because if there weren't books rare enough to steward, then a man like Nathan would be all but adrift, and I would have to double my income. Managing medical records, what I do all day, while my husband monitors the appropriate temperature for skin, isn't exactly where you go to strike it rich.

I leaned forward between the two front seats and palmed the locked box that held the book. If this were a courtroom, I'd be perjuring myself on a volume called *Dance of Death*. I'd seen it once before, when I'd picked Nathan up after his shift at the Library. He wanted to show me a King James Bible, on loan from somewhere in England. But as soon as I caught wind of *Dance of Death*, no other display would do. On each page, woodcuts by some famous engraver depict a hooded, dark-faced, scythe-carrying Death positioned nonchalantly in daily scenes: Death as shepherd, Death goes to market, Death sits through Wednesday Mass. Two hundred years later, some sick fuck had rebound the book in human skin.

Nathan fiddled with the AC, held his palm against the vent. "It just doesn't seem cool enough." He pulled a thermometer from the breast pocket of his pale green collared shirt and squinted at the tiny numbers.

Brake lights loomed up the Interstate. "Watch the road!" I said.

He grabbed at the wheel and the thermometer sailed from his grasp. It slapped against the gearshift and rolled below the pedals, out of reach. "It has to be cool," he said. "As cool as it is in the library."

*

"Do you think it was a choice you could make?" I said, as we passed the first signs for Foxwoods Casino. "Like organ donation?"

"The skin is an organ."

“It could be cool, no? I’d consider it.” I rubbed my palm over Nathan’s cheek. “Just imagine. Your face in the hands of kings. Conserved forever. Isn’t that what we’re all so afraid about? That after we die we just disappear, leave nothing behind?”

“Bess,” he said. “Please.”

We’d spent the last year, year two of our marriage, trying for a baby. In any case, that’s what Nathan thought we were doing. He wanted a baby, any idiot could tell you that. Look at how he burped my sister Alice’s number three and number four over his broad shoulders. *Twins*, he’d said, beaming. *You might have the right stuff for twins!* Alice would corner me by her dwarf ficus. *What is wrong with you?* She’d whisper, as Nathan danced around the room with her still purplish sons. *I saw pills in your purse, does he even know?* I didn’t know what he knew, because he never said anything to me, not out right. I sometimes hinted at barrenness and Nathan--sweet, sweet man--passed no judgment on that ultimate of feminine sorrows. Maybe he’d resigned himself to whatever I provided, like he resigned himself to drive with the dead man’s skin as his front seat passenger.

Alice was right. I was still taking pills, which surprised me as much as anyone. I always thought I’d be right there with her, pushing strollers through the park. Nathan would make a wonderful father, and it wasn’t as if I were a heart surgeon or a helicopter rescue pilot or a war correspondent, something wild or brave that you couldn’t abandon just to help some kid could get through his day. I’d never said this to my sister, but I was beginning to think about pregnancy as some kind of invasion. Love Nathan? Sure I did, but was love the same as some spawn of him floating and turning and flapping its gills inside me?

I reached for the cup holder, pinching the small silver key between my fingers.

“Bess. What is wrong with you? Please leave the book in its box.”

“You have no idea what’s wrong with me.” I lifted the box into the back seat. Nathan shook his head in quick, nervous jerks, switching between the road ahead and me.

“What are you going to do about it?” I said.

He raised his palms from the steering wheel and then set them down again three times. He dragged his sleeve across his high, round forehead to wick away the sweat. “It’s already too hot in here. Please leave it in the box.”

“Leave it in the box.” I pitched my voice up somewhere in my nose, like a tropical bird, and slid the key in the lock. “Please, please, please. Leave it in the box. Leave it in the box, please, leave it in the box.”

I wanted to throw the book out the window. I wanted to stand up between the seats and stick my shoulder through the sunroof and yell out to anyone in earshot that I’d married a sissy of a man. I wondered if that would make Nathan drop the please from his words and just take charge of things one damn time.

I got more serious about Nathan the first time he showed me *Dance of Death*. His hands dwarfed the small book as he laid it out before me, as a giant might hand you the heart of a dragon he stepped on by mistake. Nathan is a bigger man than most. Not fat, but broad-boned for real, not the kind of consolatory nonsense my sister had spun me in high school when my belly spilled out under a halter-top. I thought I’d found a man who could make me feel small, fit me fearlessly in a single hand. Now, though, Nathan wasn’t looming like I thought he would.

“Nathan, look!” I held the book up in front of the rear-view mirror, bending the spine so far that it almost opened flat. “Death and the cobbler!” In the engraving, Death in his black robe peers over the cobbler’s shoulders. The shoes in the picture, low shoes with large square buckles, might well outlast their maker.

“Bess, the binding!” He looked sideways again, as if hoping to teleport the book out of my hands. Traffic sped around us, cars sliding back and forth between four lanes. Nathan gripped the wheel until tendons popped up from the backs of his hands. He hunched forward like an old woman, unable to take his focus from the road.

The book opened wide with no resistance. The binding stretched and pulled like dough. I found it easy to forget, as I had the first time, that I clutched all that remained of someone else’s mortal body. Sure, it creeped me out at first. But there we were, skirting reservation land, the lights of the casino billboards already flashing and burning even though it was far from night. Not a single person on this highway had human skin on their minds, even though we were all wearing it. Not even Nathan, not really, since all that mattered to him was preservation.

“Nathan, can we stop? I need to go to the bathroom.”

He sighed and twisted his wrist until he could read his watch. Plenty of time before the famed conservator rested his tools for the day.

“Alright,” he said. “And then will you put the book back?”

“Make me,” I said, snapping it shut.

A bus with a Dead Man’s Hand painted on its side pulled into the Mobil station behind us. I waved the book at the Aces and Eights, a good hand. Yellow letters on the front of the bus read FOXWOODS CASINO! Before Nathan even set the brake, I flung myself from the car and headed into the convenience mart. Across the lot, older women debarked in numbers from the gambling bus.

Of course I did not return the book to its box. I brought it inside. It thrilled me to stroll between the racks of Slim Jims and sunflower seeds, pressing the book to my chest. Plaster lighthouse sculptures perched on craggy granite bases lined the shelves, crafted in a wide array

of sizes, the highest three feet. *Death buys a bandanna. Death, for the first time, chews on Turkey Jerky.* Through the station window I saw Nathan stand to stretch his legs, which would be cramped in any human vehicle. He turned in a slow circle by the front passenger window, shaking out his calves in careful jerks.

In the bathroom, I needed both hands to unbutton my jeans, so I lodged the book under my chin, gripping it to my chest until my jaw ached.

Death takes a pit stop, I thought, thumbing through the book while I peed. This is the kind of woman I've become, preferring this to the perfectly considered bathroom reading at my sister's, magazine rack stuffed with *Ladies Home Journal*. Christmas isn't Christmas without a dessert to serve in flames is the kind of thing you learn while shitting at my sister's house. Nothing adorned the walls of this bathroom except for a medicine cabinet above the sink. A dog-eared bumper sticker slanted across its mirrored door: IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, GOOD LUCK. The medicine cabinet hung less than level. At least it looked that way from where I sat.

When I entered the truck stop, I didn't have a plan. That was already my problem—the plan was blowing up in my face. Did all this mean I should abandon Nathan? Pull the band-aid off before it oozed and infected? But I couldn't see myself squirreled away in the cab of an eighteen-wheeler, or swaying my thumb on the shoulder like some lonely-heart waster at Lilith Fair.

People who purposefully abandon valuable books in interstate bathrooms shouldn't throw stones, my sister might say, if she saw me putting the book into the medicine cabinet. I wanted Nathan to hear me, but I didn't have words to tell him what felt wrong. Instead I went for his ward, his baby of the hour. I abandoned *Dance of Death*.

Once the medicine cabinet door closed on the book, I washed my hands for a long, long

time.

The next woman in line slipped in the bathroom before I left it. “Today,” she declared, from somewhere below my shoulders, “I’m going to walk away with enough cash for a high-def TV.”

“Really?” I said, “You know that?” but the bathroom door closed over any possible answer.

“Ignore Annabelle,” said another woman outside, wearing rollers and a fur coat. “She judges her luck by which joint aches. Lumbar? It’s all in, but ankle? Honey, don’t even get off the bus.”

Death rings out the slot machine. Death sees and calls. Nathan loomed above all the casino bound women the crowding.

“Bess,” he shouted above their buzzing. “The keys! They’re locked in the jeep.” He slapped his forehead with a wide palm. The ladies turned in his direction, as if he were just another son for them to scold. “Thank God,” he said. “Thank God the book’s with you.”

Fifteen or more grandmothers separated me from my husband, and in that distance I could feel my common meanness piled up, like so much brush I had to burn.

“I left it in the bathroom,” I said.

Nathan turned away, pressing his palms into the sides of his head as if the world were a scary story he didn’t want to hear.

Annabelle remained in the bathroom. “Excuse me,” I said, tapping her companion’s synthetic shoulder. “Can I get back in there.”

“What are we,” she shouted, “chopped kidney? You want I should bust in front of you?”

“No ma’am,” I said. “But this is an emergency.”

The ladies began to circle me. They smelled like catnip and freesia. I rattled the doorknob. I kicked and slapped.

“Emergency?” said a woman farther back in line. I could see her teeth lift slightly from her gums. “You bear five children, you lose bladder control, I show you emergency.” A few women toward the back of the line were Chinese, and they, too, yammered at me in urgent and dismissive tones. I wondered if that calm and marginal seventeenth century Death that appeared in my book would even know how to handle these ladies. I didn’t envy him his task.

They pushed me with their raisin hands away from the door. Annabelle emerged, her teal tracksuit a beacon in the dingy hallway. She clutched her quilted purse. Behind her I saw that the cabinet door sagged open, its shelves swiped clean.

She was less ignorant than I had been. She knew a thing of value when she saw it.

I unzipped the jacket of her tracksuit, praying to hear *Dance of Death* thud to the floor. I found nothing concealed, not even ketchup packets, my own mother’s plunder of choice.

Annabelle cackled and smoothed her lavender hair. “You’ll have to do better than that, child.”

It may be that most travelers have no desire to open the medicine cabinet in a truck stop bathroom and see what’s inside, but I faced Annabelle, the one willing to risk all fortune on the throbbing of her bones.

“What,” I said, “do you want from me?”

I looked to the other women, but they waited in silence, as if for doctor’s appointments or the express checkout lane. They let Annabelle name her price.

“Tell me a secret.”

“I’m pretending to be barren,” I said. “I don’t know why. I guess because I want

something that's only mine to know."

Annabelle lifted *Dance of Death* from her purse, pinching its cover between her papery fingers. "Interesting," she said. "But is the kind of secret that can last?"

"Last?" I said. This time I did not lunge for the book. It looked right in her hands, and suddenly I wanted to earn it.

"For forty-seven years," she said, "I wipe sauce from my Martin's mouth. But what else? I write letters with a black jack dealer. He's twenty-two. An Indian."

"You'll get too old for the pill," Fur and Rollers said. "It will stop up your blood."

"Sooner or later," said the crone with the failing bladder, "every woman wants a baby."

What I told her wasn't true, but standing there, the fluorescents buzzing above us, I knew it could be. "Once a month," I said, "I wear shades and go across town near the cooking school. I use my grandmother's name. Sometimes, when I'm supposed to be at work, I go there instead, this room I rent. Hello, Loretta, says the lady who runs the place."

"That's better." Annabelle laid the book in one palm and held her hands out to her sides, a scale not quite in balance. "But what do you keep in your secret room?"

"I don't know," I said. "We've only been married two years. Don't you think I have time to figure that out?"

"Don't wait too long," she said, serving me the book. "Your friend here wouldn't approve." *Death comes back to momma. Death, that old peace bringer, learns for himself sweet relief.* For some reason I feared that pages would be missing, so I thumbed through the book, the stale, dark whole of it, before leaving the truck stop for good.

*

Walking out to the lot, I watched the world from a long way away. At the diesel pump a man

washed his windshield too slowly, and the soap stained his glass like ridges on a heart monitor. And then Nathan. Nathan brandished the lantern end of a three-foot lighthouse sculpture in his palms. As I have said, he is a giant man. And although he used its granite base as a battering ram, he did not have to haul the lighthouse with any noticeable violence. He ambled around the Cherokee, breaking every window.

“Triple A is two hours,” he said, pausing by the driver side, letting the lighthouse linger in the air until he saw the book in my palms. “But we’re still going to make it.”

“You bet we are,” I said. My heart stuttered at the splash of the glass.

The Cherokee was going to be dangerous for a while to come. Nathan bought a newspaper to line the passenger side, and I sat there, holding the book to my chest. The shards hummed around the backseat as he rolled by the weigh station and onto the now empty midday road. I held the book so hard that a shirt button dug into my collarbone, marking my skin. But no button could trouble the book. It was tougher skin than mine, tanned and tried. Nathan seemed pleased by the lowered temperature inside the Cherokee. As we passed through Mystic the sky grayed, but it did not rain. The highway ran right over the sound at one point, and we tasted the salt. We should have done this from the beginning. We should have taken out the windows and let in the air.

LADIES NIGHT AT THE SONY CENTER

The spring I finished high school, a man called Stick brought rolls of film into the Photomatics where I worked. “Doubles,” he’d say, leaning his hip against the faded Home Alone 2 poster stapled to the counter. “Take your time.” I’d heard my mother and her girl friends talk about how black people don’t show their age like we do, and though they were hardly gurus about men, black or otherwise, in Stick’s case, they were right. I didn’t know if he was twenty-five or forty, but as the days stretched later and the garbage started to smell in the alley, I passed my shifts watching the door, hoping he would shoulder through it. He wore starched dress shirts and expensive jeans, even on the warmest days, when sweat beaded my forehead.

In May I started skipping class and driving south of the city. I had already been accepted up at University of Illinois, Chicago, and I wanted to make the days turn quicker toward a season where I could shed the south side for good. My manager told me that Stick ran the Sony Center, an outdoor amphitheater in the south suburbs, and on my aimless drives I scanned the shoulders for him, even though I knew he wasn’t the hitchhiking kind. On bright days, I lay out in soy fields or by abandoned barns, sucking up the light.

“You burned,” said Stick one night, when he came to pick up a round of pictures. He pressed his index finger into my shoulder. In the fluorescent glare of Photomatics my skin didn’t look pink, but when he pulled his finger away he left a small, white mark.

“It’s nothing,” I said.

“Right. Get yourself some Vitamin E cream. You’ll thank me later. Where my pictures?”

The thing about working at Photomatics was that most customers didn’t seem to realize how much I saw. They pulled cash from their wallets and grabbed up the yellow plastic envelopes, eager to see if they captured something wild or joyful in their lives. I knew the real truth—cigarettes burning through carpets, angry children, women who looked away from the lens. This new batch of pictures featured Stick having sex on a suede couch with a skinny white girl. The couch was in the Star dressing room at the Sony Center, but in my Photomatics days I didn’t know that. In the developing room, I had studied those pictures for hours, neglecting other orders. The girl looked tiny as a doll pinned under him, and I wanted to know how that felt. No high school boy I’d been with seemed to know I had my own desires, let alone how to answer them. I wanted Stick’s long hands with their pale undersides, his wiry upper body, one arm stretched out to hold the cameras. I imagined myself as the girl, my legs curled over his hips, ankles locked in the small of his back. His skin glowed, young and smooth, dark as Guinness.

I stacked the photos on the counter but Stick did not gather them right away. The negatives peeked out from the envelopes. I stabbed at the register, entering my employee discount so the price dropped.

“No need for that,” he said. “I can pay. You look at those?”

“Of course not.”

“I know, I know. Don’t quit my day job. Tell you what,” he said, looking so hard at me it felt like he could see through my skin, down to where my blood was pumping in thrilled and furious circles. “Come by the Sony Center and see Audrey about a job. I could use a girl like you backstage.”

I didn’t finish the week at Photomatics. By the end of my interview with Audrey, I

recognized her as the girl from Stick's pictures. Two days after graduation, I started on the dressing room crew at the Sony Center.

*

The land around the Center stretched flat and open, and as I steered my Sentra through the soy fields each morning, I could see the concrete bunker from miles away, parking lots rolled out on either side like an airport. Even though the shows didn't go up until dark, we started before seven a.m., mopping the vinyl floors, combing pot stems from the couches, bleaching sweat, face paint, and blood from the towels. I reported each morning to Audrey.

The day Mötley Crüe played the Sony Center, I met Audrey by the Dumpsters in the parking lot. She perched a compact on the Dumpster ledge and checked her face. Audrey bleached her hair and rimmed her eyes with heavy black shadow. The other girl on our crew, a Mexican girl named Marla, pushed on her cuticles as if the day contained nothing to earn her attention. Audrey strutted her seniority at these morning meetings, gracing us with precious scraps of information from her one-on-ones with Stick.

"Here's the story today." She snapped her compact shut and stretched her undershirt down past the stud in her belly button. "I've worked at maybe twenty-six Crüe shows. The old guys have about six brain cells left. And the young ones? A bunch of trash in the position to boss someone around for, like, probably the first time ever in the history of their lives. So be cool, all right? Especially you, Mar. Bunch of crackers, I'm sure."

"Ten trucks," said Marla, scanning the lot. Ten cabs grumbled in careful rows across the parking lot, four trailers already dropped in the docks. "Good God. We're gonna have some cranky sons of bitches on our hands."

"Remember, Kerenza." Audrey turned to me. "We're here to take care of these people."

Think you can handle that?”

“Get us some coffee.” Marla slipped into her Sony Center polo and rolled up the already short sleeves. “No sugar for me. Skim. And you know Audrey likes Sugar in the Raw.”

“Also. Find me four ratchet straps. It’s important.”

“No problem,” I said. “Ratchet straps.”

“You know what one is?”

“Duh.” Actually I had no idea what a ratchet strap was, but I knew not to let Audrey see that. In high school, girls like her had never bothered me. I hitchhiked sometimes, made out with dropouts, chatted my way to getting drunk at old man bars on Harlem Avenue, and they left me out of their road maps to bad girl power. Whenever I didn’t know how to gaff down electrical cords, or shake martinis, Audrey would toss off a typical “and *you’re* going to college?” Probably she didn’t give a damn about higher education, but she saw anything I didn’t know as a way to bring me lower. I knew about her and Stick, and maybe she could sense that.

Sometimes I wanted to say something mean to Audrey about sleeping with her boss, but it didn’t seem smart to toss out the only ammunition I had against her. Better to bluff about ratchet straps. “Should I bring the straps to the dressing room?” Rock stars always wanted weird stuff, and when their people asked us to source out their desires, we never said no. We always found the necessary trays of wheatgrass or cocaine or trampolines.

Marla cupped her hand over her lips and giggled.

“Really?” Audrey said. “You serious?”

“I don’t know, why not?”

“A little after-show bondage? I mean they *might*, but they’re probably too arthritic to be love slaves, or whatever you’re thinking. Just bring me the straps, okay?”

“Love slaves?” I said.

“Don’t play the innocent,” Audrey said. “I’ll report you to Stick. I’ll ask him to fire you.”

She pointed toward the black scrim fence that surrounded the backstage compound.

“And he would do that for you, just like that?”

“What are you standing around for?” Audrey poked my shoulder. “I don’t have all day.”

At the far end of the lot, six more black Mötley Crüe tour busses snaked toward us, new model, one or two years old at most. Probably trimmed with slide-outs and grinders, but I didn’t know about any of that then. That morning, I needed ratchet straps.

Already, sweat welled on my face. Only 7:00am, but the air had thickened and stilled. If no wind stirred up by afternoon, electrical storms would open above us, tornado warnings, maybe, debates flaring about the seats on the lawn. “I know this weather,” Stick would say, his calm voice breaking in through a raging tour manager. “This will break by show time. It always breaks.”

*

Before I could investigate the ratchet straps, I swabbed bacon grease from the catering room floor, while Mötley Crüe roadies plowed through their breakfasts. The trash bins filled fast, and they left their plates piled with mangled Dr. Pepper cans, yesterday’s set lists, ripped bandanas and even a Hustler magazine brought in from a bus.

A young man with four different kinds of wrenches clipped to his black shorts sat at a table in the corner. Despite the neon orange No Smoking Signs posted in the catering room, he held a cigarette over the mound of bacon on his plate. The ash burned long, and he made no move to tap it. He stared at me as I swirled my mop around the chair legs.

“I’ve heard about you Sony Center girls,” he said. I could see his smooth chest inside the

ripped-off sleeves of his tee shirt. “Everybody has. Looking forward to later.”

“Oh, you have?” I smiled for a second then concentrated on the strands of my mop. Before the Sony Center, I only knew men from Chicago, mostly the south side. But this world seemed like one where I could make a name for myself. Here sat Smoking Bacon Man, come from Las Vegas or Los Angeles or wherever, riding half way across the country hearing about Sony Center girls like me. I loved the feeling, maybe because it scared me, and I didn’t quite know what he meant.

“Hey,” I said, trying on the power that came with being recognized. “Do you know where I can score a couple ratchet straps?”

“Sure thing, doll. In a truck.”

*

That summer people always cursed when they came in the building. At first I thought roadies steamed by nature—they yelled and scowled and rolled their eyes before they even had both feet down from their busses. But the Sony Center dock spilled out right behind the stage, leaving no real estate to let cases pile up while you sorted them. If a tour knew their show, no problem, but that day, with the Skin and Bacon Express, the dock swarmed with boxes and racks and steel truss moving in and out, off and on and then back off the trucks again, no discernible order.

As I walked across the dock during load-in, road cases zoomed toward me like floating brick walls in Super Mario, video game threats from before game-makers learned how to draw the world with round edges. All around me fast, heavy boxes charged past. The men who pushed and pulled them shouted clipped and unclear commands.

“You lost, girl?” A bulging man wearing coveralls and a union pin snorted at me, but kept pushing his own stack of boxes toward the stage. No one saw me hop into the first trailer,

now unloaded.

You could live in a semi trailer. Easy. My mother and I had moved around our neighborhood more than a few times, and I could picture her getting to work, hanging plants in the corners, scrubbing the dusty wooden floor until it shined. I had learned to live lightly in these places. Whenever I found something to love, a hibiscus filled balcony, a rooftop you could lay out on, we moved.

Empty cases lined one trailer wall, stacked to the roof. I tripped and a load bar clanged down to the floor. I caught myself on my palms and stayed still as the echoes faded, waiting for someone to scold me for snooping in the truck.

But instead, what sounded like a dog started barking. Not loud, just a gentle yapping, close and quiet.

“Crystal Mae,” a woman said, toward the front. “I just don’t understand you. I give you real pig bones, and a bed in my rig, and you just insist on hiding out in this damn trailer all the time. You know how these boxes would flatten you? You know how Mommy’s heart would break?”

Crystal Mae kept yapping.

“Oh, my sweet little girl. What’s gotten into you?”

Crystal Mae darted out from behind a stack of blue road cases and came at me. Long white hair trailed from her tiny body. Instead of rearing up on her back legs she kept jumping straight up in the air, then hovering for a second, all four paws below her, before tumbling down on top of the load bars. She wore a black and purple bandanna tied around her throat.

“Hey, there, little dog.” I reached out to pet her but kept missing as she hopped around, my fingers just brushing against the ends of her hair.

“They already pulled the dimmer boxes, if that’s what you need.” A woman wearing four different shades of denim walked out from behind the cases at the front of the truck. I kept kneeling, on the level with her black high tops. I hadn’t seen Velcro sneakers in years.

“No, ma’am. I’m just on the cleaning crew.”

“Come on now, hon! You don’t have to be cleaning in here. We look after our trailers.”

“Is this your dog? I think I scared it. Do you know where I can find some ratchet straps?”

“Off, Crystal Mae.”

The dog huddled by my sneakers, but I could see it shaking. I heard once that because of how the breeding works, little dogs end up with just as much adrenaline as big ones, rushing around in their tiny bodies. And sometimes, if the breeder flubs the match, they hold more juice than they can stand and they die. Crystal Mae seemed to have her fire under control.

“You girls still running a fight?”

“Ma’am?”

“Maybe I’m thinking of somewhere else. Is there another shed in Chicago?”

“Not really, just up in Wisconsin you got—”

“No. It’s here. Used to be, anyway. I bet it’s another fun thing about rock and roll that they’re taking away from us. You know how much this business has changed since I first started up with Crüe? It’s a damn shame. Company’s got me booked on American Idol next month. Now what kind of sissy shit is that? And I’m *devoted* to this band. Have you seen them up close? Hair to break your heart.” She scooped the dog up to her low-hanging breasts. “It’s been pissing me off since Omaha. Would’ve been nice to throw some fists tonight.”

“I don’t know about all that. I just started here. But ratchet straps?”

“You know what? Let’s make a deal. You get me in the fight, and I’ll give you all the

straps you need. Belong to the damn company anyway. Bastards try to split me up from my Crüe after nineteen years hauling them. Nineteen years. Is that love or what?” She pointed at a stack of tightly wrapped canvas straps in the corner of the trailer. “Help yourself. It’ll be our little secret,” she said. “Just between us girls.”

I heard Stick’s voice from across the dock. He stood with one hand on his hip. I couldn’t tell what he scanned through his Oakleys, but I smiled in case he looked at me, ready to jump from the lip of the trailer. As always, he had on a pair of cargo shorts and steel-toed boots with clean white cable socks scrunched around the tops. The load-in roared around him, but unlike me, he didn’t dodge and skip away from the cases. He just stood there, still.

*

When I brought Audrey the straps, she Windexed a toaster in the Male Band dressing room. “Took you long enough,” she said, not glancing up as I dropped the straps in a tangled heap on the couch. I wondered if she’d made love to Stick on this couch, too. Then I asked her what fight the lady driver had been talking about, and she dropped her spray bottle to the floor. It cracked and leaked.

“So maybe you’re not as clueless as I thought. Has Stick talked to you about it?”

“No, I come to you,” I answered, repeating the Sony Center’s main principle. “Chain of command!” I bent down to retrieve the spray bottle.

“Leave it,” she said. Windex stained the air. She scrunched her nose. “Maybe Stick hired you here for more than just your legs.”

“My legs?”

“You’re going to college, you figure it out. What did you think it would be? Your tits? No disrespect, but those are still pretty Maiden form. You ever hear of padding?” She dropped

her rag and smushed my breasts together with her palms.

“Ow,” I said.

“Yeah.” She kept trying to jam my chest into some kind of cleavage. “Definitely your legs.”

I wriggled out of her grasp and bent down to stop the Windex from spilling. Audrey stomped on the bottle, almost crushing my fingers with her sneakers.

“You need to do what I tell you. Got that? This is my gig. I’ll call you if I need a tampon pulled from a toilet.”

“The lady driver wants to fight you.”

“You mean you’re not looking to—which one, the fat one, lady mullet, high tops, little dog?”

“She’s not that fat.”

“Believe me, she’s fat enough. You know it’s not true what people say, black men and big women. That’s some ignorant nonsense.” Audrey yanked the banana clip that held up her hair, which now piled on her shoulders. “Is it better up or down?”

“How does Stick like it, when he’s fucking you?” I said. “Is that how come you’re in charge?” As soon as I spoke, I realized the words didn’t cut her down the way I’d wanted them to. I sounded like the girls I hated at high school, jealous, hoping that meanness would fill some hole that yawned in my heart.

“Tell the lady driver she’s on. You know every chick roadie in the country wants to try me? It feels damn good. Stick says I’m the best *fighter* he’s ever seen.”

“Stick says that?” I asked.

Audrey leaned her head to one side and cupped her hand around her ear. “What’s that?”

Do I hear stage towels that need to be folded? Do I hear Kerenza not doing her job?"

A few hours ago I hadn't known about the fight, but now I wanted Audrey to lose it.

*

I decided to check the trashcans in Stick's office, even though I knew they were never full. I fixed my hair before going in, or fixed it as much as possible, since by afternoon the air dripped, and not even my Frizz-ease would do much good. The members of Mötley Crüe had already arrived in the building, so I used the spare bathroom next to the mop closet. I snuck through the backstage hall hoping no one would suspect me of hunting autographs, or trying to steal the lead singer's socks. In the fluorescent light I looked tired, and I understood why Audrey went so heavy on the eye shadow. But maybe it could work to my advantage, those dark circles above my cheekbones. Maybe Stick would see me as some kind of wild girl who never slept; maybe I could *be* that wild girl. Didn't he like fighters and night crawlers like Audrey? I globbed clear gel onto my wired hair, but I couldn't corral it.

The hallway seemed to get colder as I hovered outside Stick's office. "Who's out there?" he called. I leaned against the doorjamb, hoping to hide the fact that I'd been hunched out of view.

"Kerenza, come in. Been wanting to talk to you. But you know that's the best thing about this business. You might think you need to hurry around, taking care of things for people. But the secret is, if you sit back and don't show your sweat, everyone, and I mean *everyone*, will come to you." He leaned back in his cushioned chair, propping his boots by the computer.

"Do you need your trash can emptied?" I said. I could think of nothing more seductive. When I reached for the plastic bin, his eyes followed me as I leaned down the side of his desk.

"Slow down. Never let them see you hustle." He reached back, picked a folding chair

from a stack, and snapped it open next to him. Even though he ranked too high to push cases across the dock, Stick stayed strong. Not like the boys at high school, who grew muscles overnight and pulled out stop signs because they could. Stick's strength seemed contained, saved for some particular purpose. I wanted to throw myself against him, thrilled by how little his body would give.

"Sit yourself, Kerenza," he said, smacking the plastic chair with his hand. I loved the sound of my name from his mouth, like he touched me somehow when he said it. "What's your hurry?"

"No hurry," I said. "No sweat."

He looked at his watch, white gold, with lines and V's where the numbers should be. "As I said, sit down. They brought unlicensed pyro. But see? I'm chilling here, not worrying about it. Talking to my latest backstage girl."

I pulled my shorts down over the thick part of my thighs and sat where Stick's hand had just been.

"You know what I like about how girls box? The silence."

"You mean the fight," I said. "I guess it's Audrey versus the truck driver. The one with the dog."

"The lady driver?" Stick palmed a stack of union payroll sheets. "That's not exactly what I'm looking for. Audrey doesn't run this place."

"I do what she says," I said, my chest still a little sore from Audrey's experiments.

"Chain of command."

"Good girl," he said, smiling. "But I didn't hire you to be a parrot." He slid his hand under the sleeve of my polo, holding my arm muscle away from the bone. "You're small," he

said. "But you're wiry. I bet you could deck a girl if you needed too."

"Sure," I said. "No problem." He could probably lift me with one hand, and I had only hit a girl once, but I hoped Stick razored through to some secret truth about how strong I was. I wanted to prove him right.

"You heard what happened at Pulaski Middle like six years back, with the Puerto Rican girls?"

Stick lifted his eyebrows, close cut hair shifting back over the broad bones of his face. Once I slapped Vicky Hohmeier across her face when she called my mother a whore. That was back in fifth grade, when I bothered to defend my mother. Other than that I steered clear of trouble in school, tough enough that no one wanted to bother me, not so tough that I challenged anyone else. At first I lied to hold Stick's attention, but as I talked, the words lifted me, turned me into a whole new girl with a whole new story to tell. "I was in it. All those busted noses and teeth. One girl had to get her face re-stitched. Not me."

I attempted a graceful gesture toward my unmarred face.

He dropped his hand down over my elbow, fingering the bones of my wrist. "Audrey expects to win. That's her style."

"We'll see," I said.

"That's it," he laughed. "I knew you'd fight if I asked you."

I stood up and reached for his trashcan, not bending my legs, letting him look. It was too bad for Audrey, but she'd have to understand. She knew who held the cards at the Sony Center. She knew why I had no desire to say no to him. Silence steeped his office, no noise from the hallway, sound check not yet booming from the stage. Quiet enough, I started to think. Quiet enough to fight in.

I found the lady driver by finding Crystal Mae. Gates had already opened, and as I chased the little yapper through the parking lot, the lawn filled up on the other side of the building. Until I left the south side, I never knew Heavy Metal as an eighties thing; the Sony Center always sold out. The fans unpacked their coolers and spread their blankets on the grass.

“I don’t know,” she said, when I asked if I could fight Audrey instead. “I’ve been waiting for this since Boise.”

“I’m ready,” I said, hoping that by saying it enough it would be true. Crystal Mae wove in and around my sneakers, quick, feisty. Maybe she could teach me.

“Walk with me,” the lady driver said. “If I don’t run Crystal Mae in the afternoons she’ll holler until Indy.”

We walked toward the man-made pond by the entrance to the Sony Center. The radio on my hip grumbled and whined, but I didn’t give Audrey my location. “Eyes on Kerenza,” I heard her call. “Anyone have eyes on Kerenza?”

“You must really want this, blowing off your boss.”

“She’s not my boss. She’s the one I want to take down.”

“That doesn’t sound right. Fighting in your own house?”

“I think that’s maybe why he hired me. Stick, you know, the man who runs this show. He knew I could challenge her.”

The dog sprinted toward the water. She disappeared, and the splashes echoed back to us.

“He the one you’re fighting for? That’s not right, setting you girls against each other.”

“It’s what I want.”

I jumped from one toe to the other, like a boxer in a movie. “Please,” I said. “I need your

help.”

“Make a fist,” said the lady driver.

I held my hand in face. The weeks of shoveling ice into coolers and champagne buckets had chapped and swollen my fingers.

“Thumb on the outside,” she said. “Don’t be a girl.”

Sometimes I wonder why she let me take the fight. She saw the trouble that might come from winning, but she perched her foot on a rock by the pond and explained how to protect my face with a peek-a-boo stance. Maybe she realized that my desire for Stick, for whatever grown and free version of love I thought he would give me, was the reason I worked this gig. She held up her palms and I sparred at them and she knew not to stand between me and what I wanted. Her only choice? To teach me something about hitting.

Crystal Mae splashed by a stand of cattails. After a Queensryche reunion show last summer, three kids drove right into the middle of the pond, almost flattening two cops and a security guard on their way. “That’s metal,” Audrey had said when she told me about it. “Can’t find a deep enough pond to drown in.”

If any pieces of that car remained under the water, Crystal Mae did not bring them to light. My radio crackled but I stayed out of range all afternoon, leaving Audrey in the backstage alone. The lady driver held up her palms, and I practiced punching them. I imagined Audrey naked and pinned, as in the snapshots I had held in my hands. It made it easier to picture the hits.

*

When the show came down, Mötley Crüe left immediately in three black Suburbans. I hadn’t encountered a band member the whole day. I could see their headlights and the blinking blues of their police escort for miles. I didn’t feel nervous. I felt strummed by great strength, Cassius soon

to be Mohammed. I didn't tell Audrey about the change in plans, wanted to surprise her when I stepped into the lights. And it turned out there would be lights. That's what she wanted the ratchet straps for, to hook between the flood towers in the parking lot. To make a proper ring.

"Don't fall back on it," the lady driver whispered in my ear. Her breath smelled like smoke and meatballs. "It's only for show. You're going to have to hold yourself up."

The load out went fast. The roadies said please and thank you to the union guys, and the building hummed, everyone itching for the real performance. This time, when I walked across the dock, I didn't cower from the steel racks and motor boxes that came zooming around me. I wanted to find Stick. I had nothing to say, saving my big show for later. I just wanted to watch him stand at the heart of the chaos.

"You looking for something, Kerenza?" Audrey's voice called from the other side of a forklift that beeped across the dock. The work lights over the stage cast a harsh hue, almost green. She stood with Stick, his hand on the rise of her shorts. He didn't look in my direction, but his touching her flamed like message. You want my heart? He seemed to be saying. All you have to do is fight for it.

*

"You know the rules," said Stick, pacing under the floodlights. He still wore shades. "This is Ladies' Night. We'll give you fifteen seconds to get back up."

I stood in one corner with the lady driver. "Peekaboo," she whispered. "That's all you need to know. Just keep your hands in front of that pretty face."

Audrey hopped in her corner, winking at the stagehands gathered around the so-called ropes. Marla lifted a water bottle toward her face so it splashed up to Audrey's cheekbones. She took her Sony Center polo off and twirled it over her head. It floated through the clumps of

mayflies that you could see in the light, hovering above us. Mötley Crüe roadies wandered the edge of the ring, tilting green beer bottles up toward the sky and socking each other in the shoulders. Audrey looked tall and tight, her arms long enough to hold back a gorilla. The only advantage I had was surprise, the fact that she expected the lady driver to step out, not me.

“We’ll do ten rounds tonight,” Stick continued, pausing for the crowd to hoot and chuckle. I didn’t get the joke, didn’t know that no chick boxer without gloves could possibly last that long. I eyed Audrey, appraising her face as the lady driver ducked under the strap, leaving me alone in the ring.

“You?” her feet stilled. “What is this, a trick?” She looked at Stick.

He shrugged, and then stepped to a corner, thwacking the ratchet strap with his hand.

“What are you, Audrey, scared she’ll take you down?”

“Okay, genius.” Audrey stared at me now, and started moving her feet again. “But don’t expect any special treatment. Not from me.”

Stick clapped his hands together three times, fast. I waited for her to come to me.

It felt like years as we bounced and popped toward each other. I couldn’t take my eyes off her hands. The waiting hurt, almost as much as the punches. Because you could fall away, or throw an arm up, but while waiting, every possible hit might knock you out.

Her fist slammed into the top of my stomach, stopping my breath. I dropped my hands and stumbled backwards, and she jabbed at my shoulders, backing me toward the straps.

“Get your hands up,” someone shouted, and from the yapping that followed I figured the lady driver. I managed to block Audrey’s uppercut with my wrist, but her knuckles pounded the bones in my arm. “Keep ‘em up,” said someone else, a man this time, Stick.

Audrey chicken-flapped her elbows and I bit, lunging forward. Under her bra, the skin

was soft and white, and I tried for her rib bones, tried to make them sting like mine. Then my right jaw throbbed, and I felt something hard and flat against the other side of my face. Her skin seemed to glow, like one of those light up skeletons you hang in your window. I swung more but she stayed out of reach.

“Round,” Stick said. I saw haloes around the floodlights. “Audrey, that’s you.”

In the opposite corner, Audrey and Marla talked about something that seemed serious. I swallowed, and the saltiness restored me, forcing my blood back inside where it belonged. It tasted like tomato juice.

Stick stood still in the corner. I wanted him to finger the bruises that already bloomed on my ribs. I imagined that the two of us would remain, long after the fight, in the silence of the empty Sony Center. There is nothing as quiet as a place where ten thousand people have jumped and shouted and danced, and then left you.

“Audrey,” I said, throwing my water bottle down on the ground. “What you waiting for?”

Audrey turned to Marla and shrugged. “See?” I heard her say. “She wants it. I’m just giving her what she wants.”

I rolled my Sony Center polo shirt up my sticky chest and wrangled it free from my shoulders. I wanted to tie it around the top of Stick’s arm like a tourniquet.

We passed that round tossing trick half way punches at each other. I tried not to look at her hands this time, and to keep moving. When Stick called the draw, Audrey rolled her eyes at me. “It’s not supposed to be a line dance,” she snorted. “Are you going to come at me, or what?”

We started up again and I promised myself to make an impact. Her arms were still longer than mine, so I tried to move faster, zigzagging across the parking lot. In my side vision, I saw Smoking Bacon Man lean so hard on the ratchet strap that it dipped almost to the ground. If he

fell in the ring, would we keep going? He grunted and pitched forward over the strap, like a fat kid playing Red Rover. In the second, only a second, that Audrey looked away, I smashed my fist into her throat. I aimed for the veins, for the neat curve under her chin where only last night Stick might have kissed her.

She stayed quiet, proving Stick right. She swayed a little, and I imagined her falling at my feet.

Anyone at the fight—Stick, Smoking Bacon Man, Crystal Mae—could have told me that in order to win you have to finish what you start. Maybe they did, shouting over the straps, flapping their arms in warning. But if there was noise, I didn't hear, and soon I wasn't even seeing anything, the way Audrey came at my face. I tried to lift my arms up for protection, but they wouldn't stay where I wanted them, flopping and numb.

“Round,” Stick called again. “We all know the winner.”

“Do we?” said Audrey, spitting toward his boots.

I kneeled by the straps, chipped tarmac mauling my knees. I couldn't find the lady driver, but someone slipped his palms under my arms and lifted me, let me fall against him. “I can call this,” Stick whispered, his breath burning my ear. “Get you out of it, take you home.”

I looked over my shoulder at him, grinning even though it made my split lip sting.

“You're alright,” he said, turning me and kissing my forehead, not looking to see who might see. He held me that way for the rest of the summer, oblivious to Audrey slamming platters and mop-buckets around the backstage.

“No,” I said, his hands pressing my ribs, the tipsy roadies blurred and shouting behind us. “I can take it.”

As I stumbled away from him, Audrey loomed in the opposite corner, hands fisted, white

ponytail swinging under the lights.

*

In the fall I trained at an underground gym instead of going to class. I failed to register for spring semester and when it opened for the year, I worked full time at the Sony Center. Often, before the season started, no one showed up at the Center except Stick and me. I don't know what happened to Audrey. Later that summer, the gate police reported a bleached blonde girl, strung out, who beat up a security guard trying to get backstage, but they couldn't say for sure if it was her. I didn't think about her much in those early weeks, when Stick and I roamed the empty dressing rooms and made love up in the catwalk that hung over the stage. Even though I should have known, it floored me to find a new girl on the crew when summer started, younger than me, who filled out her polo shirts and had learned to fight in the city schools. I matched her in the ring, but it didn't matter. My bruises had healed, and Stick wanted someone new and raw.

PRECIOUS MOMENTS

My friend Steph keeps her cat in the fridge. This sounds cruel but I kid you not--the cat likes it. I go in for another glass of coke, and it's curled in the second shelf on the door. Pickles, giardiniera sauce, cat.

"Champagne should be cold," Steph calls from the other room. I bob for the bottle, down through the ice water stopped in the sink. The grey cat leaps from the fridge before the door shuts, and follows me.

Champagne hisses as I cannon the cork. It hits the opposite wall and falls behind the TV. The cat paws through wires in pursuit.

"That's dangerous," says Steph, as she pours champagne into the water bowl. Then she pours for us in plastic flutes. We're still a couple hours short of midnight, but Steph's had a terrible year, and drinking champagne with her is the least I can do.

"Oh Joanna." She mashes the syllables together and kisses my cheek. "I needed you so much through all this shit."

In the corner the cat's eyes dissolve into colorless pools. If not colorless, then a color I don't know the name of. I press my face into Steph's tangled hair to avoid his gaze. We slurp over the thin edges of the flutes, refilling them more than once.

The cat bats the splintered cork between his paws and squints across the bright squares of modular carpet. I know this carpet like you'd know a puzzle you'd completed a hundred times, a hard one, 5,000 pieces, "The Garden of Earthly Delights" by Hieronymous Bosch, maybe, or

some other painting where the snow and the sin and the wagon wheels blur together. Steph and I worked together on a modular carpeting catalog last year, before her husband Jeremy died, on location at a farmhouse owned by two rich gay men outside Michigan City. She crawled between wrought iron sewing tables and exposed pine beams. As a photostylist, I barely had to add any props to our sets, those rooms already pitch perfect American pastoral. Steph spent that shoot on her hands and knees locking carpet squares together. In the pre-shoot meetings, the client and I had mapped out color patterns for each room and I'd posted them on our war-board, a six-foot high corkboard laying out each page of the catalog. At the end of our second day, when the client had gone home and the photographer was dicking around with exposures, I wanted to bail with Steph, to drive past the burger shacks and the supper clubs down to the lake. She wouldn't come with me. She'd promised her contact at the carpeting company that she and she alone would handle the carpet pieces, and Steph honors her promises.

Look at how she's taken in this cat, even though whatever promises she's made to him have been private, not vested with the authority of the State of Illinois, like her promises to Jeremy. She found the cat right after the funeral, while disposing of a condolence fruit sculpture. "Abstract Expressionism?" I'd wondered, after we'd mauled the skewered honeydew formerly arranged to look like flowers. When Steph opened the door, she says she saw the cat perched on a Dumpster, licking his one white paw. Steph falls in love in record time. I guess the sight of him, mewling and licking, provided all the promise she needed.

I don't fall in love quick and deep like Steph does. I put my toes in first, double check the flag at the lifeguard stand, consider the bacteria count in the water. When I first moved to Chicago, nineteen, I'd slept with four boys and loved none of them. During our years at the art school downtown, Steph promised me that if I only visualized a space in my heart, love would

come in and fill it. I pictured a smartly dressed British woman injected into my ventricles, shoving aside unpainted canvasses and German color theory books, brisk as Mary Poppins while she cleared my life for love. Steph was right, but she didn't suspect it would be her cop boyfriend, the husband of her not so distant future. One night he came to my apartment alone—her idea!—to inspect the locks. I rented in a converted residence hotel south of the South Loop, an area that still contained enough chain-linked lots and empty buildings to seem post-apocalyptic. The kids from art school loved it. “You know how easy it is to jack art students,” Jeremy said, after we fucked the first time and stared up, naked, at my plaster ceiling. “I can't believe you've been living in a place like this.” He jabbed his finger at my stomach until I turned over, sinking my laughter into the bed. “Some people *I* know,” he said, “call this neighborhood the mall.” He moved on top of me, pinning my shoulders into the thin mattress. “I'm broke,” I said, lifting my hips. “You know that. I've got nothing worth stealing.”

Despite its perils, I stayed in that downtown apartment for the bay windows on the eastern end, where a hard morning sun sprayed onto the canvasses. Only this year, when Jeremy left me, did I quit it. After we finished school, Steph married Jeremy and I loved him, too. Steph told a photo producer she knew to start hiring me, and I learned to style. There was the set and the photograph, and in order to be a good stylist, you needed to understand the dynamics of both. I already knew about double vision. Steph's husband was not the man in bed with me. My good friend wasn't his wife. I went to work every morning. Sometimes I saw my reflection in the windows of the train, and it looked like I stood on the other side of the platform, that girl who'd come defiantly up from Missouri. Where was she going? Downtown when I headed up, west instead of my east, but always away, out of reach, slipping the opposite direction.

*

The cat staggers back from his water bowl, which Steph continues to replenish with bubbly. He's creeping me out, and I wish he'd go back in the fridge. Steph seems charmed, though, by the way he alternates between somnolent and frantic missions to the corners of the room, as if he sees some urgent presence that our human eyes cannot detect.

When I go into the kitchen for yet another bottle, the clock on the microwave reads 1:47AM. "Happy New Year!" I shout, running. "Happy New Year! Happy New Year! We're late!"

I expect Steph to share my joy that time is officially passing. In September, the Chicago Police Department Bagpipe Corps rattled our eardrums at Jeremy's funeral. I gritted my teeth, while Steph squeezed the bones in my hand. When a husband dies in the line of duty, then time clicking ahead, one year becoming the next, must be the only possible comfort.

But now, she takes that cat to her breast. "Well, hello, you," she says to its scrunched gray face. Her familiar tone makes me stop where I am, and I take a long pull straight from the bottle.

"Steph?" I say. "Happy New Year?"

The cat bends around her shoulders, a breathing, hissing stole. Steph sticks out her tongue in his direction, jerking it left and right, and the cat juts his paws in playful pursuit. His small tongue flicks in perfect miniature. Either I'm more hammered than I thought, or their tongues are actually touching.

I lift the water bowl and stale champagne slops over my fingers, but I can do nothing to distract him. I want to lure him away from her, put him back in the fridge where he belongs, but they have eyes only for each other, and if I didn't know otherwise, if I didn't have hard proof--my reflection in the unlit TV screen, the sensation of sugar making headache in my skull--then

their behavior would suggest that I'm not here at all.

I begin to drink from the cat's water bowl, although pieces of hair send spasms through my throat. But even then he doesn't leap from her arms and pursue me.

I make a resolution, don't say it out loud. I've cradled Steph through her grief, never letting on that she is not the only mourner in the room. In this New Year, I'm going to ease out of our friendship. I want to slip into a fuzzy corner of her memory--that girl I knew in college!--leave her before the hurtful truth bubbles up. If I can just excise myself from the tendons of her mourning, then their marriage, as she remembers it, anyway, can remain unharmed.

On the way home I'm too drunk to be driving. At a red light the battered Aerostar in front of me overshoots the stop line, then comes crunching back into my bumper. There is no one else on the road. The Aerostar door opens, and a small man steps out. I pinch my temples, try to concentrate, prepare my defense. But it turns out the man speaks no English and is just as drunk.

"Don't worry, don't worry," I tell him. "I am fine. I just want to go home."

Maybe it's the collision, or that I only moved to this apartment a month before Jeremy died, but I don't recognize anything in my neighborhood. The dark stores seem to have switched places, and at one point I make an erroneous hard left, traveling away from my street. I see a Currency Exchange on every block, and I don't know where to turn.

I circle the neighborhood, hoping to light on my building by dawn. The more I can't find it, the more my champagne headache seems to drill tiny holes into my face. The car bucks when I stop, yards ahead of every light. Jeremy always told me that coming to an early stop is a tell tale sign of drunk driving. He used to laugh at how nervous I got when we were out after hours, brush his tongue against my cheek, saying, *let me hold the wheel*. I can feel his weight on my arm. I swat at my sleeve, at the memory of his presence. Cat hair scatters and floats through the

air, lit through with the dulled shine of the street lamps.

*

The first catalog of the New Year is *Precious Moments*. I steam background fabrics while Steph unpacks the wholesome and religious figurines, shipped to us by the client in preparation for the shoot. She strips the bubble wrap from a three-foot statue holding a baby. It's been six months or so since we last shot these wide-eyed collectibles, which look like a breeding cross between Disney-drawn deer and cartoon aliens.

“Is it me, or do they get bigger each time we shoot this book?”

“I think she's pretty,” says Steph.

“A new gimmick,” I say. “The miracle of Carthage, Missouri. In a noble, honest home the figurines will *actually grow*, nurtured by your faith and love.”

I grew up one township away from Carthage, home to the entire *Precious Moments* operation. When I was in high school, boys hunting trouble used to stalk the perimeter at the *Precious Moments* chapel, casting around for a window to break or a figurine to steal. But the place had more security than our courthouse, floodlights, an all-night guard.

“I should send this kind of angel to Jeremy's mother,” she says.

My steamer drips Braille-like patterns on the wooden studio floor.

“Really?” I say. “You think that would help? I know that in my case, well, let's just say I lost someone I loved. No ceramic cartoon Gabriel would make my day go better. Don't shush me like that. Clients aren't coming until Monday.”

My problem with *Precious Moments* is not a fear of breaking the collectibles, that doomsday scenario where an assistant rolls a prop cart into a shelf of overpriced figurines, which chip and splinter and lose us all our jobs. Steph always handles the Merch for *Precious Moments*,

and all distraction aside, she's good at her job. What unsettle me most are the client representatives, good mothers and businesswomen, model citizens from the place I have fled. Their daughters always ignored me in school.

Steph inventories the angel. Next, she shucks away bubble wrap and coos over a girl child in a light pink dress holding a lamb.

I walk toward the outline sets, where the photographer's assistant roughs in lighting. White sweep paper, hung from two t-stands with curtain clips, droops down and stretches across an empty table. The table perches on wooden apple blocks. He fires the camera five or six times, then leans over the monitor of his computer.

"Can you get me Little Darling?" he asks. "Or any small, simple one, so we can see how this looks with something *precious* on it."

Two steps ahead of him, I am already placing the figurine on the set. Before I can step away the camera whizzes. I roll my eyes at the assistant, a boy in his early twenties, Velcro biking straps still binding the cuffs of his jeans.

"Too dentist office," he mutters about the way the light appears on the digital camera. "But Joanna, you look fabulous."

I peer at the computer monitor. In one of images, I am staring at the blue figurine as if it has told me something shocking. I know what Kathy, the main client rep from the Carthage office, would say about these test shots. She would complain that although the figurine looks lovely, of course, she's not looking at the camera enough. We always have to do these shots a million times, because *Precious Moments* lives and dies by eye contact. Make sure they're looking at the camera! We must see their beautiful eyes!

I return to my prep area, where Steph continues to unpack and sort. When she sees me,

she begins to lift a Madonna figurine above her head, although the thing must weigh at least 30 pounds. “Ascension!” she says, as the figurine floats in her hands, the bubble wrap ballooning under it like sea foam at the birth of Venus. I rush toward her and hold my arms out under the statue, like I am waiting for a trust fall. Her firm and gentle hold on it reminds me that I haven’t been to her apartment since New Year’s. Whenever she invites me I claim work: shopping for fabrics, scouring antique stores for props, other tasks that will keep me from time alone with her.

“How’s the cat,” I say, wanting him to slink against my calf or sprawl on my thighs.

“Sometimes, when I’m dreaming, I feel him curl on my pillow like a person in the dream.” Steph returns Madonna to solid ground. “Whatever I’m being told, whatever I say, it’s like he’s speaking to me.”

I’m not a superstitious person, but Steph moves through the world with such bright confidence that when she says stuff like this, I always make room for it in my mind. As she pushes the figurines back on the shelves, I have to reassure myself that her Humane Society project isn’t going to speak for Jeremy, or for me. This is Chicago, 2009, and the dead will stay dead. You can make a New Year’s resolution in their memory, or buy a Let Your Heart Not Be Troubled figurine from *Precious Moments*, or even adopt a cat to hear footsteps moving in your rooms again. But that’s all, right?

*

At the turnover meeting, we get some big news about the artistic inclinations of *Precious Moments*. Me, the art director, Steph and Kathy from Carthage sit in the client lounge at the corner of the studio, the only finished room in the place. The couch looks mid-century modern, but it’s from Target. I know because I bought it last week, when the art director, a skinny, gay, Puerto Rican man who often wears mango-colored cravats, booked me an overtime gig to furnish

the room. “They’re threatening to take outside bids on their Christmas book,” he’d said. “We’d lose two months shooting in June, so more perfect than perfect, okay?”

“We’re just so through with the guardian angel look,” says Kathy. She clicks her French manicured nails on an older catalog. This means no more lace, no drapey purple, no taffeta. I will have to go shopping again for fabrics and props, those teacups and ferns I arrange around the products, call it a career. But that’s fine with me, more reason not to hang with Steph. I remember Kathy. I went to school with her daughter, and they hosted the PTA barbecues my mother used to drag me to so we could show face. But when I see her at the *Precious Moments* shoots I don’t think she can place me.

“Are you thinking something more like Donna Hay?” I say, and the art director nods, hmm-ing at the layouts, as I mention the first lady of Australian home cooks. Kathy opens her mouth, but says nothing, and I know I’ve got her just where I want, not knowing what I’m talking about, but not wanting to admit it.

“More modern lifestyle,” I continue. “Isn’t that what you mean? Less ‘scary doll in the attic.’” The art director frowns as I say this, but I’m not worried. Kathy’s with me, all the way. “Bright,” I continue, “clean. A fresh start.” I want to look at Steph here, but I keep my eyes on Kathy, who starts to beam.

“You’re wonderful, Joanna,” she says, clasping her palms together. “You always know just what we want.”

I’ve seen this all before. Kathy wants her catalog to look like *Martha Stewart Living*, but doesn’t want to be seen as someone who reads *Martha Stewart Living*. This I am good at. This I can do.

It’s possible that Kathy does remember me, but doesn’t want to, and she’s stuffed who I

was down deep, so that she can work with me. If you'd been in Missouri in the late nineties you might have seen me bumming cigarettes from Gulf War vets in roadhouses off I-71, or thumbing it early in the morning to get up to the Kansas City Planned Parenthood before my 72 hours expired. I was in high school with Kathy's daughter, but I didn't spend much time in class.

Now that we've settled the style of the book, Kathy lays out family pictures on the burnished steel coffee table, a classic client move. She knows we have no choice but to ooh and aah about her descendents. Steph excuses herself, and the art director frowns, but I'm sure he'll understand that she's still raw about this kind of thing. I usually hate looking at some stranger's next of kin, but today something in the clear light of the photograph holds me. Kathy's daughter Alexa stands in front of a new house that looks old, flaunting a baby in a blue knit cap. Two more children pull at her blue jeans. A husband I don't recognize holds her with both hands around the waist and I get the sense that sure, he'll pose for this family portrait, but he can't believe how skinny and hot his wife still is, and he can't wait until Grandma drives away with the kids, sating them with *Precious Moments* paraphernalia, so that he and Alexa can make it all afternoon.

After the meeting I call down to the Merch department but they don't have an eye on Steph. When I get my coat from the studio, I find her sitting in the corner, holding the Mother figurine in her lap. Bubble wrap and cardboard pile around her.

"Let's grab a drink," she says. "I can't face home tonight. Not til I'm plastered."

I shake my head. She holds onto the figurine even as I try to pry it from her hands.

"Please? What do you really have going on, anyway?"

I flinch, but Steph keeps looking out the window, although it is covered in black sweep paper to block the light.

“What about the cat?” I say. “He’s probably been starving for a while now. I wouldn’t leave him alone any longer than you have to.”

“Thank God for that cat.”

“Is he still sleeping in your bed?”

“You know what I really want?” she says. “To dream about Jeremy. I will, right? Is that weird? I feel like if I could just feel him holding me one more time, that would be alright.”

Maybe, Steph, but when I dream of Jeremy, I forget that he’s dead. And I forget he’s your husband. Just me and him, shadowed by whatever park we’re kissing in. Waking is the most brutal wreck I’ve ever felt. I don’t trust her dreams, and, for reasons that don’t entirely make sense to me, I don’t trust this cat. Suddenly I want him in my sights.

I take Steph’s train home, even though it will be a long, cold walk to my new apartment. We wait for three trains until one comes in reasonably empty. The car screams around the curves. The city has been working for years on this track, and it finally moves fast enough that you can feel your heart and your gut left behind, if only slightly.

I stall outside her building. She stomps on a frozen pile of muddy snow. Upstairs, the cat is pinned to the window, a witness.

Steph fumbles with the bolt on the inner door and then disappears into the building. The cat remains at the window, its grey fur melting into the darkened room.

Shortly after he died, Jeremy told me that he’d decided to become an honorable husband again. That night he refused to touch me, driving me instead in his patrol car. He promised to find me a cheap place in a safer neighborhood. His talk buzzed in the car but didn’t fill it, idle comments on the places we drove through. Did I know about the rise of local gangs like the Maniac Latin Disciples, or how condo development was forcing out old time residents who

police their own streets? I couldn't bear him talking to me as if I were any other woman. I looked away into an empty lot where two men in puffy coats ate McGriddles sandwiches by their car. In another lot, another car was burning. He left a message for Steph, saying he'd be home in a couple hours. I could hear her on the answering machine, a transmission from a life I was orbiting around, peering in on, never making it past the door.

*

The next morning, Steph makes no mention of Jeremy, but she does bring the cat to work. She lets his tongue brush against hers for a minute, then jerks her face away and smiles. "Come and get it," she says. "Just a little closer." Its paws dangle like uneven ornaments toward the floor. No one really takes to him, except for Kathy from the Carthage office. Over the first three days of the shoot, Kathy holds him to her ample chest as she drinks her morning decaf in the client lounge. "Precious," she calls him. There she is, the PTA mom slash businesswoman, naming what Steph and I have been unable to name. The art director pinches cat hair from his iridescent shirt and grimaces at the animal. Steph talks more than she has all week.

On the fourth day, Steph and I stand by the war-board. She peels the back from green dot stickers and slaps them onto the mockups of all completed shots. "We need to knock out a big one, today," she says. "What's your plan?"

"I have a model booked, a blond girl. This afternoon we'll do 'Friends in the Garden'" I signal the catalog's back cover.

"Perfect," she says. "'Friends in the Garden.' That's easy for me. I might skip out early and hit Giovanni's with the cat."

Giovanni makes the beef sandwiches Jeremy picked over all the other sandwiches in the city. I lift a pink-clad shepherdess figurine and dust her skirt to hide my shock.

“Steph?” I mutter. “You alright?”

“Why’d you move?” she says. “Why’d you leave your downtown apartment?”

“The Whole Foods got built, remember? Then the rents went up. City gone to hell in a yuppie basket.”

“That’s not what I hear.”

The pink-clad shepherdess falls from my fingers. I can feel it slipping, but I do nothing to stop the way it shatters. The cat slinks between us, as if recognizing his name. He pushes the shards with his paw.

I lift him to my breast, where he strains and hisses. “Careful,” I say. “That mess will hurt someone. Is that blood?”

“I won’t let him get hurt,” says Steph, trying to pry him from my arms. “So. Whole Foods? Really?”

“No,” I said. “He’s bleeding. Let me take care of this.”

Before she can say anything more, I hurry away, paws flapping against my blouse. I am no virgin to flight. I crank open the freight elevator and bump down to the floral cooler on the second floor. It’s colder than Steph’s fridge, but it will have to do for refuge from Steph and whatever it is she seems to know. The light whines on, and when I let the cat go, he rifles in the gladiola buckets. I’ve chosen that flower for its height. A shot like “Friends in the Garden” takes up almost the whole page. I need tall flowers, tall enough to fool the viewer into seeing our ramshackle set as a thriving garden. Now the cat leaps onto a shelf, and wrests a yellow gerber from a vase.

“Hey,” I say. “Cut that out.”

I gather my flowers and plants on a prop cart. Did she find the key he kept to my

apartment? Was he saving something of mine--a paintbrush? A set of negatives, our faces kissing and black on the film? I can't stay in here all day. Soon enough I will return to her, and the question loudest in my mind is not how can I salvage this, but instead, will she give me whatever it is she's found, this evidence of his love for me.

Now the cat has the gerber between his teeth. He stares at me and chews at the flower, slow, patient, until he severs the yellow head from its stem. The petals land on the floor between us.

"What do you want from me?" I say, although I am glad to have the cat to myself. I feel his eyes on me for the first time, feel him arrowing through my bright blouse into the lumped up muscles of my chest where my heart keeps beating faster.

There's something strident about the way he continues to decapitate the flowers, and I resist showing my back. When I close the door to the floral cooler, leaning my whole body against the aluminum until I hear it click shut, I have to stop myself from saying "Take that, betrayer," to the animal trapped inside.

*

"Friends in the Garden!" I call over to the client lounge, dodging Steph's eyes. "A child model is coming this afternoon."

In this shot, we'll have a young girl on a porch swing, holding a Heavenly Child doll. In the garden around her, figurines the size of fire hydrants will peer through the bushes. I've had the carpenters prepping all week and assistants rolling sod across the floor, combing and tufting the grass with their fingers. I've already placed the potted shrubs around the porch; now all I've got to do is fill it out with flowers.

"What have you done," Steph tromps behind me. "With my cat?"

“He’ll be alright,” I say. I thread stalks of gladiola between the shrubs and the porch, making the cut flowers look planted.

“Maybe tonight,” she says, “you and me and the cat should sit down for awhile. Figure out what actually happened.”

“He’s an animal, Steph.” I jam too many glads in one place and the whole section flops forward onto the shrubbery. “He can’t tell you jack.”

“Look, honey, I may be heartbroken, but you know I’m not really talking to the cat, right? I mean, I don’t need to.”

I wish I could shrink and hide among the gladiolas. “Need to?” I say.

“I don’t know if we were going to survive it. That’s a question I’m left with. But for the first time in a while Jeremy was telling me the truth. And I can hold that, cat or no cat.”

I pause for a minute, because this, this I did not see coming. I thought I had a hidden life with Jeremy that gave me power. Before I can open my mouth, before I scream that she always ends up with everything, even my secrets, Kathy hovers at the edge of my now convincing garden.

“Take lunch,” she says, “before the model arrives. You girls have done enough work this morning.”

I stand there, empty-handed. I want Steph to slap me. I wish I had some way to shake her from her self-satisfied rightness, her ability to love a world that has always loved her back.

In the test shots on the monitor, I kneel in the garden, and Steph blurs at the edge of the frame like an avenging angel. Kathy nods and smiles at how real the garden looks, then pulls my sleeve toward the lounge. At lunch, the entire crew parses the latest scandal about the corrupt governor of our state.

“I’m so outraged,” says the photographer’s assistant. “Some people are gonna have to, like, rise *up* about this or something.”

“Politics is always about money,” says the art director. “This one was just stupid enough to make his deals on a wired phone.”

“Maybe that’s how things are in Chicago,” Kathy adds, handing me a black plastic *pad thai* container. “But where I come from, honesty is still in style. Right, Joanna?” I pretend not to know what she’s talking about, but Kathy presses on. “Oh come on. You remember us. We live on Oliver Road. Alexa always loves my reports on you.”

She sounds sincere, but I can picture Sunday dinner back in Carthage, where she winks at her daughter across the syrupy ham. Although the kids may threaten to break the plates and they don’t understand what the grace is about, I know Kathy wouldn’t trade Alexa’s life with mine for anything. She’ll probably run into my mother at the grocery store, and tell her that although I appear to be doing well at work, shouldn’t there be a man in my life?

“Please tell her the children are beautiful,” I say, and I’m surprised at how much I mean it.

Steph hovers at the edge of the lounge. I look up and she mouths something to me that I don’t understand. Now she’s making index finger pistol motions toward her head.

“Okay, okay,” I say, excusing myself. As much as I can’t stand the sight of Steph right now, it feels good to get away from Kathy and all talk of her non-home-wrecking daughter.

“We’ve got problems,” she says. “Have you seen the cat? I can’t find him anywhere.”

I swallow my smile and imagine him shivering in the floral cooler, moaning up at me, made gentle in waiting.

“No,” I say. “But don’t worry. He’ll turn up.”

“He’s gone!” She says. “I just know it!” She half whines, half shouts these words and begins to rip away the paper on the windows, looking into the street as if she might locate him down there.

“Shhh,” I say, putting my hands on her shoulders. “We’ve got clients.” Below us, skinny men on bicycles weave through the traffic, carrying too much weight on their backs.

“He left me,” says Steph, more quiet this time.

“Shhh,” I say again, and Steph forces herself into my arms.

“You know how much I miss him,” she says. I slide one hand through her hair, imagine that Jeremy’s spirit has fused with mine, and I am slipping my fingers through her thin hair as he would have done. I also notice that Kathy has left the lounge and is staring quizzically in our direction.

It only takes a second for me to realize that I can’t handle Steph’s forgiveness, if that’s what this is. I feel disarmed, my secret nights with Jeremy no longer a rail I can cling to. Now it’s just me running up against the broad plain of her goodness, and I don’t belong there.

“Thank you,” says Steph. “After everything that’s happened, I know I can count on you.” I look down, and the cat is still gone.

When the child model arrives, Steph keeps the mother occupied with chit-chat about the travails of the child modeling circuit. “You’ve got to up your rate if there’s animals involved,” I hear Steph say. “Did you know those twins who got bit by the macaw?” She’s turning on her ample charm, and I hand the assistant the pink shirt and sparkle lace sneakers I’ve picked out. “Get the girl dressed,” I say, “while the mother is busy.”

I should dress the model myself, that’s what stylists get paid for, but I have another obligation.

When I wrest him from behind the flower buckets, he's cold and angry. I hold the cat at arm's length, feel him straining against my hands as we thunder across the empty studio toward the set for "Friends in the Garden." I drop him in a beach rose bush, let the small thorns stir him up to even greater rage. I am ready to do more, to kick him, even, but he's already pissed off enough to do some damage.

*

We walk out to the set, Kathy, the model, the mother and me, in a careful parade.

"God Damn it!" says Kathy, and the mother covers the young model's ears with her palms. "What happened here?"

I glide toward the set. I know what to expect, but still the wreckage shocks me.

He's torn the sod into strips and knocked the bushes out of their casters. He's clawed through the rope holding one end of the swing, so the board limps down against the cedar planking of the porch. Gladiola blossoms dot the yard in strange patterns. The three garden figurines, were they angels or prophets? Now they lie in illegible shards through the sod.

Everybody storms through the studio, looking for the cat. I want to find him first, and when I do I will take him into my arms. I want him all for myself. A trail of small muddied paw prints leads toward the freight elevator, but the trail fades, and I can hear nothing.

"I want her gone," says Kathy, pointing at Steph. "Her and that goddamn cat."

*

Precious Moments wraps without further incident. I manage to convince Kathy that despite what happened with "Friends in the Garden," we're the only studio for her product. This puts me in good with the art director again, and he books me for every catalog on his schedule. He asks if I know anyone who'd be good in Steph's position. "I know how close you are," he says. "But I

just can't risk another *Precious Moments*. She's out. I'm so so sorry."

When Steph finds out, she insists that I come over to her house. I'm almost excited to go, because maybe she'll be angry now, she'll smash picture frames against the wall where I stand, releasing us both from this shiny shell of a friendship. I skip work, but when I reach her apartment, she acts like *Precious Moments* never happened. Instead, she's curled on the couch, gearing up to watch the State Senate impeach the governor on CNN. She cheers as the senators file in to their seats.

"I'm thinking about tropical birds," she says. "A pet that can talk to me, not ruin my life! Hey mix us some bloodies. We should drink every time a vote goes against him."

When I troll the fridge for Clamato juice and pickles, the empty shelf where the cat used to be gapes out at me, eyeball white.

In the living room, Steph revels in the unanimous downfall of the governor. Retribution bustles up the Senate aisles, tallied in the bottom corner of the screen. By now, it must not surprise you to know that despite his wrongs, I feel sorry for the man.

"This is just what I needed," she says, when I return with the next round. "A new situation. Start over."

"What?" I say.

"That cat appeared for a reason, you know, to make me lose my job. Who can say? Maybe Jeremy did send him, a message. Like, I need to let him go, let go of the life I had with him. We're getting older, Jo, it just gets easier to believe in that kind of thing, don't you think?"

"You're happy?" I say. "You lost your job for bullshit, and you really think it's all for the best?"

"You know me," she says, leaning back on the couch and closing her eyes. "I'm not one

to hold a grudge.”

“Steph, I can’t take this any more,” I say, pointing the remote and powering off the TV.

“It’s a massacre.”

“If you say so,” she says, stretching out her legs. “Can you grab me an afghan before you go?” She falls asleep as fast as a child, like someone changed the channel and she clicked over from waking to dreams.

Outside, chilled, I turn away from the wind. A homeless man in a purple suit staggers toward me. The habit of my downtown days returns, and I avert my eyes, pretend not to see him as we pass between the snow piles. In the alley, I hear a cat, or some other animal, clucking its paws across the lids of the Dumpsters.

THE PRESERVED WRECKAGE OF THE WORLD

Susan wanted the Polish sausage to spoil. Her stepbrother Harrison, restaurant co-owner and lifetime vegetarian, was coming for dinner after the shift, and she wanted to feed him bad meat.

“They stuff it right there at the deli,” she said to her manager, Esteban. “You know how I feel about local food. Good for the body, good for the soul. Like yoga!”

Susan knew Esteban despised Cleopatra’s Kitchen, and more so, the fact that she owned the place. Half owned it, anyway. It would be another year at least before she could put the money together to buy Harrison out.

“Very good,” said Esteban, sucking in his puffy cheeks and assessing the brown paper bag, which now dripped sausage grease onto her calendar. “You want to taste from the line?”

Susan walked past him toward the kitchen. As they cruised the pastry station, she heard him mutter at Luis. *Jefa*, she heard, *aguantala*.

Susan did not hate being in charge. She was not what her kitchen staff would consider an admirable woman: single, almost forty, no children to speak of. And she loved bossing these men.

Susan glanced back over her shoulder at Esteban and Luis: Yes, yes, yes. Deal with me.

The administrative structure of Cleopatra’s Kitchen didn’t win Susan any peace and love points with Harrison, who was always grilling her about a new health insurance plan, and did she really have to check those social security numbers so closely? She’d offered to cook at home for him that night because she didn’t want him stopping by the kitchen. He had a tendency to wander

on the lines, showing off his backpacker Spanish, and then sit her down in the office and repeat the sob stories in an urgent, serious tone. Was she aware that Julio's rent had gone up? That his wife had been sent back to Honduras? It's not a commune, she wanted to yell at her brother. It's a fucking kitchen. Somebody's got to dump the grease.

All around Susan, knives whispered against stations. She sloshed her finger through Pedro's saffron marinade, then licked and nodded. "More saffron," she said, and Esteban winced as the pricy spice clouded above the bowl.

But the stock for the lentil tagine tasted like boiled garlic. "I should spit it right out," she said to Esteban. "Who's running this place?"

Esteban bowed his head and said nothing. Everyone in the kitchen swallowed their jokes and would not meet his eye. They waited for Susan to call out the next order. There was no telling what she would want, and whenever she wanted, they jumped.

"Get me a coat," she said. She whirled between the tables, adjusting the cut on the carrots, spraying just a little more pepper over the beef. Line cooks assembled on either side of her, their hands trembling around hotel pans. They presented their work to her one by one, like patient ambassadors.

In the office, once they'd seated the bulk of the wait, Susan called her brother and opened a bottle of wine.

"Good, good," said Harrison. "What are you making me?"

"Sweet potato and tempeh hash," she said. The bulbous tempeh would disguise the meat. "The Harrison special." Her chef coat crumpled on the floor by the desk.

"See you sooner than soon," he said. "I know something you'll want to know."

Her body felt well worked and deserving of rest. The newspaper on her desk explained

about Seventeen Year Cicadas, but Susan couldn't quite do the math. Were there crops that came every ten years, and different, less ominous ones every seven? Or was it ten plus seven and now was the seventeenth year? It sounded like bible math, lean years and fat, skinny cows preceded by plump ones. Susan didn't think a cicada and a locust the same, but everyone preferred the second word, sucking on the drama of it. Believe it! Plague Insect Returns!

Susan hadn't ever been good at math, although she felt good at it, back in high school, when Harrison gave her tabs with cow skulls on them to hold under her tongue as they walked the farm road to school. The acid made the numbers stop swimming through her mind, as if she stood at the edge of a stone pool looking down to where integers buzzed patiently in trim, final equations, unmoved by the turtles or moccasin snakes. What they told you in health class was true: once experienced, a trip stayed with you, no two ways about it. Susan pictured little brown cow skulls lurking in her synapses, dormant, but ready at any moment to shake their curved horns in her mind. She'd tripped through so much of her fifteenth year. It still surprised her she'd been able to deliver the baby at all.

Before leaving Cleopatra's Kitchen, Susan staked out some space by the ovens and began working through the *asanas* of a sun salute. She could feel the floor under her stomach, flecked with peppercorns. She raised her hips up toward the ceiling and straightened her arms, not worried about the vegetable peels that hung from her tee shirt like dwarfed pieces of moss.

"*Surya Namaskar*," she answered to Esteban, as she brought her hands back down into a sharp point of prayer against her ribcage. He shook his head and moved back toward the cooler.

"Speak English," he shouted, over his shoulder. "This is America." She decided to leave the bottle of wine half full on her desk. She often scattered the kitchen with this kind of temptation. Despite the Whole Body vibe and farm fresh menu at Cleopatra's Kitchen,

restaurants were more Dog-Eat-Dog than anything else, and trust must be tested every day. Every shift.

She was halfway through the second repetition when Esteban returned. He frowned for a minute to see her sprawled on the floor, and then his face lapsed back to its mask of disinterest. “Don’t forget your sausage,” he said, holding the brown bag in her direction, as she peeled her breasts away from the floor and bent her spine backwards. “I put it away in the fridge.”

*

Harrison moved in when Susan was fourteen, and what she felt for him in those wild times she now recognized as some half-formed parody of love. But after their baby was born, and adopted, she’d run off to the West Coast, bussing it for three days, trying to leave Illinois and its dark forests behind her.

In California, she lived in the basement of a shack on the beach, close to Mexico. There were men who lived upstairs, Heath and Tyler and Jesse. They smelled like salt and did nothing to repair the house. All day, Susan curled on the ripped plaid couch in the basement, and watched the sand blow in through the splintering foundations. She did not learn to surf. She did not sidle up to the night bonfires, but she could smell the burning, and knew that another day ended. Sometimes a boy--Heath? Jesse?--would come down and lift her onto the floor and unzip her sweatshirt and palm her collarbone. But it wasn’t really him, no matter how hard he pressed her into the floor, no matter how much grit speckled her shoulder blades. It was always Harrison, in one form or another, grinning above her, just as he had in the Forest Preserve. She drank Thunderbird and snorted heroine when the boys offered. When her hair got too salty and tangled to brush, she cut it off, and the shorn pieces lay for weeks in the corner of the basement until someone –Jesse? Heath?—swept them away while she slept. She ate vinegar potato chips for

weeks at a time.

She didn't know how Harrison tracked her down, or how he had the balls to stage a rescue. But that was who Harrison had become, she learned later, a salvage man. He worked for himself. He built pedestals for museum exhibits, steady places where the preserved wreckage of the world could stand.

Now he wanted to own her again, in a different way. Not only for the money he was offering--enough to start a small restaurant--but for the fact that he arrived one day at the beach shack and lifted her up in his arms.

As they drove away from the beach, small grasshopper pump jacks bobbed up and down on otherwise empty lots. *Thirsty birds*, he had said, patting her shoulder, *like you*. In the years that followed, first in a clinic in the suburbs, then in the small brick house where she lived alone, and then finally in Cleopatra's Kitchen, those oil derricks became the center of her meditative practice. I am breathing in, she thought, and the rusted hammerhead teetered toward the ground. I am breathing out. The cross beam tilted up toward the sky, drawing forth precious slick from inside the earth.

*

While Harrison picked nasturtiums for the salad, Susan smashed the raw links into tiny pieces and folded them into the rest of the hash. Even though Esteban had prevented the meat from spoiling, she could still serve the meal before it cooked through. She filled the steel pan with peppers and fresh thyme, glazed onions and orange potatoes.

They ate on wooden chairs in the garden. Small children shouted in Spanish on the other side of the fence, and baseballs hung in the bluish air, threatening to fall into her unkempt garden.

“I don’t hear any locusts,” said Harrison, swallowing.

“You wouldn’t, not in the city.”

“It’s a fear tactic, really, drummed up to distract us from what they really don’t want us to know.”

“Okay, so let’s say I humor you and your paranoia for a minute. *What* don’t *they* want us to know? And who are they, anyway? Let’s put aside the perfectly reasonable explanation that cicadas live in the ground, that’s where they come from, down in the dirt, and in the city there just isn’t any dirt left. But I’ll put that aside, I’m with you, really, I am.”

“You used to believe me.”

“I know. Conspiracy is very reassuring. No matter how sinister, it means that somewhere out there--” She lifted her hand and arced it overhead toward the baseballs that rose and fell like dull, leather moons in the darkness. “--Out there someone exists who knows more than I do.”

“Listen. Am I right? No cicadas.”

They sat in silence for a while after that, chewing and sipping and swallowing. They scanned the silhouetted houses on either side, and tires hummed through the alley.

Inside, a telephone rang. “Leave it,” said Harrison. “Stay with me.”

“Eat up, eat up,” she said, as she moved toward the house, “You’re all bones.”

On the phone, Esteban asked direct but tender questions. He didn’t know whether to order more pork.

“Can’t I trust you alone for one night?” Susan stood by the kitchen window and watched Harrison scrape his fork across his plate. Should he order more pork. Should he chain the dumpster, should he lock the door.

“Vault the cash,” she said, slow, measured, as if repeating the alphabet. “Change the

water in the renunculus.”

Outside, Harrison leaned back in his lounge and closed his eyes, hands folded in prayer against his ribs. She’d grown used to her brother’s mystical moves, had even adopted them to a certain extent, although for her the yoga poses felt as urgent and vital as blood sport. She found comfort in Harrison’s trances, the way it was comforting to watch *The Wizard of Oz* on cable, having outgrown its terror. Now she could see the makeup and the wires, the slips between real world and dream. But still, Kansas lurked only a few states away, and the frames of the movie were colored by her younger self, who thought any slight wind might turn the world upside down.

“Very good, very good,” said Esteban. “You take day off tomorrow?”

“I’ll drop by again in the afternoon.”

“Well,” he said. “All right. We’ll be ready.”

“Of course you will. Take that bottle of Chateau-neuf home with you tonight.” She wondered if he’d already taken it, nestled in his bag, chosen the prep cook to frame.

“Oh thank you, Ms. Susan, thank you so much.”

Other restaurant owners she knew had warned Susan about holding the whole thing too tightly, strangling the vibe. One day, they warned her, customers smile as you pass the table, and the next you hover too close, inspecting the lamb and lentil pharaoh burgers, until they begin to wonder what has gone wrong.

“Tomorrow, Esteban. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Susan clapped her hands until, outside, Harrison stirred up in his chair.

“Brother! Didn’t you have a story to tell?”

“Come back out,” he said. “The beautiful silence. We are free from the plague of the insects.”

“No,” she said, hand still clutching the phone, that plastic comfort where moments before she’d practically been able to hear Esteban cringing and deferring to every sound she made.

“Come to the window.”

He deposited his plate on the flagstone and stood below her in the darkness, a low blur.

“Cheers on the grub. Didn’t I always know you were a natural? Who needs meat?”

“Just that our teeth are made for it. But you know I’ll always look out for you. Least I can do.”

Harrison rubbed his stomach, unsnapping a pearl button.

“You did say you had something to tell me, right? Am I making that up? Sometimes I swear I’ve got a sieve for a head. Almost put sausage in that hash. How sick would you be?”

“My fault, I bet. All those drugs I made you.”

“More than drugs, though, wasn’t it.”

“Quiet, Susan. Here’s the thing. I talked to someone at the agency.”

“So?” She switched off the porch light so he disappeared completely. “I waived my rights. But you know that, don’t you? What do you want from me?”

“I got the address,” he said. Susan felt reeled back in by his calmness, that face so sure it would get what it wanted that you wanted to play along, be the one to give in. Once again he had something she wanted, and her desire, and her fear of that desire, battled it out.

“It’s time,” she said, “to get going. At the very least I’m going to find us some locusts.”

*

Susan steered her Jeep between the recycling bins and ragged corn patches that stuck out in the

alley.

“Take Lake Shore,” said Harrison, although she hadn’t asked. “Go North.”

“Maybe,” said Susan.

“Doesn’t it blow your mind, knowing he’s out there somewhere?”

“People have babies all the time. It would blow my mind more if he weren’t.” Although she didn’t say so, Susan had been waiting for a chance like this, some proof that she could hold in her hand, squeeze and burst like a peach, the juices trickling over her fingers in a sticky reminder that what happened had happened.

“Careful.” He reached over and steadied the wheel. A man crossed the road in front of them, his shopping cart teetering with drywall and mattress coil.

“He can stop for me.” Susan slapped Harrison’s hand and yanked her vehicle in front of the oncoming cars and onto the Avenue. “I weigh more.” The man cursed them with a wrist wrapped in gauze.

It didn’t surprise Susan that her brother had talked the confidential info from the agency. Harrison had always been a natural talker. He’d coached her for the adoption agents, sitting Indian style on her bed. *You tell them you don’t remember the man. You tell them you were too young and too scared to press charges. If this makes you sad, just go with it bawl.* The best lies, he’d taught her, were husks around something true.

The day the caseworker arrived a stray sheep flailed next door in the Nixon pool. Susan sat in the living room, looking over the lady’s thick shoulder pads, out the window, out to where Harrison came to the rescue. *I didn’t see the man*, she said, and the caseworker scribbled on a legal pad. *I didn’t tell anyone until I had to.* She reached down and pinched her swollen belly. She wanted kicks. She wanted proof.

While the caseworker talked to Susan about how final it was, how she was giving up all the rights to her child, Susan watched her brother stride to the pool house and remove the hinge pins from the door.

I get it, she said, when the caseworker pressed her lips together. *Why do you think we called you?* The bright red lipstick smeared past the blond woman's lip line, marring her skin. Susan didn't bother with lipstick anymore. It seemed beside the point. Later, Mr. Nixon would build a stockade fence to keep out sheep and restless children, but on the day Susan waived her maternal rights, his pool glittered in plain view. It wasn't more than three feet deep, not where Harrison was standing, but still Susan gasped as her stepbrother lowered himself into the water. *Are you alright?* the caseworker said, and Susan snorted. Now they lifted the door on their shoulders like a coffin and marched out of the pool. They laid it on the grass. Susan sat in silence and the caseworker fidgeted with her pen. Only after the sheep remembered its legs, righted itself, and shook the pool from its wool, only then would Susan waive her rights.

*

"North side, you said?" Susan rattled her Jeep onto the Expressway and aimed for the glitter of down town.

"Why not go straight to the lake?"

"Highway's faster. This hour, anyway."

"It's messing with our carbon footprint, head south just to go north again."

They cruised through the industrial corridor around the river, a thicket of warehouses and processing plants and steel forges that separated the outlying neighborhoods from the Loop.

"I say take your carbon footprint, and shove it up your—"

"You're really starting to talk like a chef."

The painted walls of the buildings seemed to taunt Susan in a personal way. The three-story fetus, sponsored by the Polish diocese, waved its fins at her, *choose life!* On the roof of the Morton Salt warehouse, the young girl with the purple umbrella, yellow smock too short, kicked at puddles the size of Susan's house. Susan imagined that she drove a flying car, a wonder machine that could carry her and Harrison through the city, past Lake Shore Drive, and out over the lake.

"What's the address, again?"

"Near Hollywood and Clark. You should be in the other lane. This will put you on 55."

"You look a little pale. Are you feeling alright?"

"What? I feel fine. We're headed south, though."

"I swear you look a little pale. I don't know, I'm just not sure if I'm up for this." Susan wanted to stall until Harrison sickened, until his body rallied to expel the toxins she'd prepared, until she could travel to her child's home alone.

"This is one of those moments, Susan. Swallow and jump."

"You have a service code for the Museum of Science and Industry? Show me that exhibit you've been working on."

"Body Worlds."

"Right," said Susan. "The blood and guts people." Susan had been reading up on Harrison's latest contract job, a traveling German exhibit slated for September. Body Worlds displayed plastinated bodies, real people, dead but preserved. It was creepy and famous. Advance tickets had already sold out through Christmas.

"You want to see that? You know there's women who died pregnant in that show."

"I have no problem with fetuses. Dead, born, whatever."

“There’s guys in there now.”

“Perfect,” said Susan. “I don’t really want to be alone with you.” She hoped the meat would hit him in front of some superior, leave him sweating and wrenching under the high ceilings of the museum. Maybe he’d get fired. Sell her his shares to Cleopatra’s Kitchen for a desperate basement rate. All that mattered was that some time before he collapsed, shivering, drained, he told her the exact address, and she could go on her own.

They stashed Susan’s Jeep in the loading dock and Harrison waved his pass at the all night guard. “Stay in the Exhibit Hall,” Harrison said, as they tramped down a vinyl hallway that belonged in a state nursing home, not a state of the art museum, “the rest is alarmed.” Susan pictured a lattice of lasers guarding the cases, how museum alarms always looked in movies. She had no idea if that was real. And then, Harrison pushed open a door stenciled “Exhibit” and they were standing among the bodies.

As promised, the show displayed real bodies, chemically treated to maintain the shape and color of living, laughing human parts. They’d been sorted out so that each figure contained no more than one organ: the cottony wisps of nerves, the red flaps of muscle, the comforting structure of bone.

“Would you do something like this? Sign yourself over to display?”

Susan stared at a man, posed running, stray veins trailing behind him as if in the breeze. “I don’t believe it,” she said. “They’re not real.”

“I’ve been trying to decide all week. Which is better, the veins or the nerves?”

“Isn’t blood supposed to be blue?” They moved past a display filled with smokers’ lungs. Susan frowned, inhaled, tried to hold her breath for the longest time. She’d quit cigarettes five years ago, but still, did she harbor small heads of sooty cauliflower inside her ribcage?

“I don’t get the address thing,” she said.

“Is it really so hard to believe that I might be trying to help you out? What can I do to be right with you?”

“Would the agency even have the right address, though? Think about it. I’m thirty-eight. So that’s what, thirty-eight minus fifteen. Twenty-three he would be today. Give or take a month.”

“Extend-O-Lescence,” said Harrison. “Haven’t you heard? Kids don’t grow up anymore.”

“Do you even know he’s home? That the place has a window you can see in?”

Plywood crates marked “Body Worlds: Chicago” were stacked in the corner. Empty pedestals, not yet rooted in their places, clumped together in the middle of the room. It horrified Susan to think that somewhere, in some German warehouse, there might be hundreds more of these crates, more preserved bodies than the world would ever see. What’s worse than school kids pointing and squawking and spitting at your cartilage? Your cartilage carefully prepared for show, and then hidden away.

“I don’t know anything, Susan. I’m trying to truck through it all, same as you.”

“You look pale. Sure you’re feeling alright?”

“Look at him, he’s feeling alright.” Harrison nodded toward a blistered liver.

“This is cool,” said Susan. “But a bit moralistic. Why does everything need to be a cautionary tale?”

They moved into the alcove devoted to pregnancy. The bodies remained in their crates. Small crates for the little ones.

“Who thinks about this crap,” said Susan. “When they’re dying in childbirth? No way all

these bodies are here by consent.”

“It’s consensual for sure. I know for a fact.”

“Here’s something you don’t know for a fact: you’re a carnivore.” Susan turned for the exit, knowing Harrison would follow. She’d seen enough. As she marched back to the service hallway, she passed a horse, skin peeled back, heart the size of a basketball, rearing toward the arched ceiling of the exhibit hall. Probably the man slung over the pedestal would be riding it in the real exhibit, but for now he lay, thrown, below its hooves.

*

It only took a few minutes to swing back onto Lake Shore Drive from the Museum. Even though abandoned stockyards and emerging art factories separated them from downtown, the Loop loomed fast in front of them, as if the northern half of the city and the evening’s unanswered questions returned like a boomerang, too quickly.

“I feel fine,” Harrison said. “I’ve been veg for over twenty years. If I swallowed some poor creature, I would know.”

“Believe what you want to believe,” said Susan. “But on this one thing, I am right. You can’t cleanse it out of you. No matter how much lemonade with cayenne pepper you drink.”

His nonchalance disappointed her. But what did she expect? That with one lurch of his stomach, one roll through his gut, he’d know what she wanted, divestment from the restaurant, a vanishing act, freedom? She’d never been the one to come with the airtight plan. That was Harrison’s thing, that ability to see your life scroll forward on a certain path, to follow it. She chose the fog. Always had.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said. They were passing Soldier Field, uplit so the renovation looked like an oversize flying saucer pulling an emergency landing in the side of a Coliseum.

“Maybe I should see where he lives. Maybe that will clear something.”

“Now you’re talking.” Harrison thumbed down his window. In the harbor, water slapped against the leisure boats. “See? Insect silence. No cicadas here, either.”

Susan pumped the gas at the red light. She wanted to get through downtown, start cruising by the northern beaches. When they moved forward again, she refused to speak. The nets hung limp between their poles. Susan, not long sober, had foolishly attended Singles Volleyball on the North Avenue beach. Carolina, she said, when one corn broker asked her name, Soledad, she’d answered another.

Lake Shore jagged onto Hollywood, and although Susan knew this, she still had to downshift from fifth to third, surprised by the high rises springing up where the Drive should be.

“Easy,” said Harrison, gripping his stomach. “Pedal on the left. You’ll have to get off Hollywood, you know.”

She knew he was right, that you couldn’t cross Ridge to Clark, that the neighborhood where her son had maybe broken windows with baseballs was a maze of crooked one-way streets, a weird abandonment of the city’s insistent grid. She steamed north on Ridge, doubled back with an illegal left turn. Harrison checked the alleys for cops. The Chicago Police had cast off the Crown Vic, and Susan knew it was harder to spot traps now, the new cars smaller, more fuel efficient, what any young professional might drive. She knew they wouldn’t get pulled over. That would be too simple, an officer of the law peering on their stagnation and their struggle and their guilt. No, they were going to have to face this themselves.

Susan parked and suggested they cut through the alley. Maybe the smell from the Dumpsters might help along his food poisoning, although she wasn’t holding out for that.

“What are we going to do, ring the bell?”

“Maybe,” said Susan. “I don’t know. I am waiting for a path to reveal itself.”

“This should be the block,” said Harrison, as they moved onto a dark side street. In the shadows Susan saw a mix of three-flat buildings and cottages, long yards heavy under spruce and catalpa trees. It seemed too dark for the city. Although she knew she wouldn’t, she expected to hear cicadas here. In almost all the houses, the shades were drawn. In one second-floor apartment, window clear, Susan saw a young woman looking at herself in a mirror, big hair, strong bones, bra. She was too young to be the boy’s adoptive mother, and Susan knew she didn’t have a man in there. She stood in the mirror, sunk in some other, more peaceful kind of loneliness. She had nothing to do with Susan or Harrison or their son.

“Something doesn’t add up,” Harrison said, resting his sneaker on a fire hydrant. “The block just stops. Numbers are too high still, but they stop.” A courtyard building elbowed around the street’s end, halting their progress.

“I told you, they wouldn’t provide information like that. It’s confidential. I waived my rights.”

“What do you mean?”

They turned back toward where they’d parked.

“I bet they have a list. Ghost houses, flaws in the system, buildings that don’t exist.”

“You think they set me up.” They were back in the alley now, close to the car.

“This must be where they send all the fools like us.”

“I feel sick.”

“Well,” said Susan, waiting as he leaned against a latticed backstairs. “That’s to be expected.”

“Please,” he said, wincing and sucking his lips over his teeth until he looked like an old

man. "Take me home."

"Not yet." She pictured them climbing back in the Jeep, continuing north toward the dark suburban shore. "I'm going to find you some locusts."

*

"Harrison, roll down your window." They were lost in the suburbs now, out of the city, no system to how the streets, all named for trees, fed and thwarted and escaped one another.

"Right. The air might do me good."

"No," she said. "Listen."

Susan heard buzzing in the trees, but not loud enough to warrant special attention. When Harrison started talking again, he did not increase his volume, just continued in an indoor voice.

"Is it worth it? I feel wrecked."

It was worth it, actually, but she didn't tell Harrison that. She saw the most obvious things. There were her hands on the steering wheel, driving deeper into the dark, nameless town. There was Harrison sticking his head out the window, letting the branches slap and poke around his face. There were cicadas in the trees and in the bushes, in the air and in the ground. She saw their shadows flit through the headlight beams. All over the Chicago area they were doing their business, seventeen years worth of desire before they sunk back into the ground. Whoever he was, she hoped her son was listening.

Four teenagers idled in what must have been their parents' Lexus. Cigarettes glowed inside the car. One boy leered out the window as Susan passed, screwing his brow into knots and distortions, waving his middle finger above his fist at her.

Susan squealed into the shoulder fifty feet in front of the boys. She smelled rubber. Before Harrison could say a word she opened her door and walked toward the Lexus.

The driver gunned the engine but Susan kept walking toward their car, daring them to get into trouble. She placed both her palms on the edge of their hood and stared into the steamed up windshield. One of the boys had written something across the glass. The letters were backward, and Susan couldn't decipher the name. The boy on the passenger side twisted his head and shoulders out the window.

“What you going to do about it, lady?”

“*Viparita Shalabhasana*,” she said, throwing his face into confusion. He looked down toward his friends in the car and she shouted the English translation. “Reverse Locust.”

Susan knew that you weren't supposed to do yoga without taking the proper precautions. A flat surface was the minimum, of course, and also the presence of eyes you could trust. Every studio worth its mats would tell you that, although Susan suspected that in this department, if not in others, concerns about litigation had polluted the ancient teachings.

She wanted to grab that punk by his scruff, to say stop, stop, stop, go home, go home to your mother, but as far as trust went, his eyes would have to do. Even if the math was wrong, Susan felt like any son in the world could be hers.

She bounced her feet once on the bumper, then crawled roof-ward like a spider. She spread her body out to its full length and began to breathe in time. As Susan prepared herself for the posture, the boys in the car sat up out the windows, and their heads appeared to float along the sides of the roof.

Susan counted her breaths. Fourteen, Fifteen, Sixteen. By now he's much older than that. Inhale--he knows nothing about you--Exhale--nothing about Harrison, the night he was made-- Inhale--no matter what--Exhale--he is through these woods.

Once she had set her shoulders in the correct position she kicked her legs up toward the

night sky until they steadied somewhere in front of her head. She knew you were supposed to empty your mind of all its consideration, to breathe all the trouble of yourself out like sand from a pail. But it was too late for that. Behind her she heard Harrison, puking by the side of the road. The boys did not make a sound. They opened and closed their mouths as pet fish might, bumping against the glassed-in limit of their world. Her spine was curved like an early moon and below her shoulders the roof of the car seemed to crumple up like foil.

GENERAL DANCE

I swipe my employee unlimited Chicago Transit Authority card and push through the crowd of business people going home. The card, my apologetic boss has assured me, will not be deprogrammed at least until the end of the week. I hip check the turnstile, lift the bank box holding my office décor sideways through the gate, and coast down the elevator to wait for an outbound train.

When the train starts moving, the objects in my box jostle and buzz. I fish out a photograph of my wife and son, to keep the stapler or pencil sharpener from shattering the frame. I took this photo last summer at the Lincoln Park Zoo Monkey House. Claudine holds Henry on her hip and he clutches at strands of her straight hair. She rolls her eyes at me, but despite her protest I know she loves how much I love to take her picture. Her cheekbones, like those of so many women in her native France, announce themselves. Henry smiles at my lens like he owns me, which he does. He knows that if he says stop I will stop. If he wants the monkeys to swing from the papery branches, I will bang on the glass until his wish comes true.

The train rattles toward the west side, through the ghettos and out again to the wide, well-planted streets where Claudine and I have made our life. Out the train windows, I can see the red brick building where my son takes dance lessons. His class, General Dance, will meet tomorrow.

Fathers and nurses and secretive teenagers pile toward the sliding doors at my stop. But before I can detrain, before I can start for home, the train is already grunting and pulling away. I

grip the photograph tighter. Look at Claudine and Henry, happier than monkeys, so comfortable in the rightness of our life. That's all I can think of wanting: one more night with these joyful versions of my wife and son, frozen as they are in the photograph, before telling Claudine that I have lost my job.

I ride each spur in the transit system to its end and back. Claudine calls my cell phone so many times that the mailbox fills. I ride through the commuting hours, past back porch herb gardens and alley drug deals, windows open on sex and dinner and overtime. I float above the darkening streets and I steam below them, each tunnel proof of my work and the work of all excavation consultants who have come before me. We are a proud bunch. We dig through the basements and the sewers and graves of this city to make room for its trains.

*

Morning blooms over the elevated tracks and I do not know how much I've slept. In my dreams I was home with Claudine, not zooming somewhere below her. I have already told her of my failure. She feeds me warm milk and we take Henry to a baseball game. Somehow, the sun stays high for all nine innings, and it doesn't matter if I have a job.

When I realize where I am, and that I have not even seen Claudine since yesterday, let alone told her anything, I feel drained. See that man who passes your station, nose pressed to the window? He's hollow--his capillaries pulse with nothing but dread. The train I'm riding fills again with serious people on their way to work. They seem stained by purpose and destination, offices in which to shed their winter coats. My bank box remains on the seat next to me.

A man in ear muffs glares at the seat. He wants me to make room for him. His brown shoes glint below his trousers, even though the streets are filled with mud and melting snow.

He thinks he deserves this seat, that by every sense of right and obligation I should take my bank box into my arms and mourn those artifacts of my lost desk. Yesterday, I *was* him, sharp, en route to an office of my own, but he does not recognize how we are kin. I am wrinkled now. I shuffle through the box until I find the horse scapula, souvenir from my graduate research downstate. I wave the bone in his face.

“I am you,” I say. “Tomorrow, you might sit where I sit.”

The man decides he does not want the seat. Overnight, I have become as unwanted as any homeless man--the citizens would rather stand than cozy up to my horse bone and me. They shrink away.

Box and bone in hand, I transfer at Jackson for the westbound train, as if to announce to all these haters that I can, at any moment, return home. The tracks resurface in the middle of the expressway and sun scours the car. My skin itches under the suit and overcoat I have slept in.

A young woman carrying a toddler boards the train. The kid’s face prunes and darkens, and soon he is bawling, a terror words couldn’t name, if he even knew them. The mother glares at me, and only then do I remember the horse bone, still clutched in my hand.

“Freak,” the mother says, then, to her darling: “Don’t worry, love, I won’t let him near you.” The child still wails as the conductor calls my stop, and I leave the train.

*

Why does the sun blind more in early spring, when cold fronts still trouble the plains? I have no free hand to shade my eyes. I stumble in the general direction of home.

Mothers peer through the windows of World of Dance, the brick studio where my son takes lessons. I did not know that Mrs. Sobieski, owner and maestro, offers morning classes. They drink coffee from paper cups and I join them, our breath frosting the plate glass. Mrs. S.

does not acknowledge our shadows. She is twice Claudine's age, childless, and bless her, unable to pay attention to anything else while her students learn Intermediate Hip Hop and various forms of ballet.

I was not an advocate for enrolling Henry in General Dance. Claudine played that part to perfection. Even though she's been away from her native France for over ten years, her accent still gives certain arguments a power I'm sure they don't contain. What good is dance to my son, general or any other kind?

But now, my fingers numbing around the corners of the bank box, I wonder if Mrs. S. might shelter me, if I can hide here for a little while, at least until I figure out a plan to present to Claudine. I can't go home empty-handed. This horse bone, solid as it feels, won't make her believe in me again.

I circle back through the alley and stash my bank box in the recycling bin. I try the studio back door: open. My eyes adjust to the dusty enclosed porch light. A mess of keys dangles from the ribbon of a faded toe shoe, hanging from the inner door.

I know these rooms from when I have brought Henry to class, when I felt proud to stand with Claudine before the other parents. Look at me! I wanted to shout as if convincing myself, a man who is loved! There is a sofa, velour, and a small stove. It looks like the kind of stove that will fill a room with gas, but light no fire. Claudine is fearless about that kind of thing, snaking her hand below the burners, pinching a match. Not so much me. Besides, I happen to know that the stove is where Mrs. Sobieski keeps her stack of sombreros, the ones she makes her little dancers wear on *cumbia* day. *Cumbia*, I have learned, is a type of Mexican folk dance. There is one Mexican boy, Ramon, in Henry's class, and if he takes issue with the whole sombrero

cumbia charade, he keeps it to himself. I imagine Claudine at home, rolling shortbread and cursing my name in her native language.

I can see into the studio from where I stand in back. Mrs. Sobieski wears turquoise satin genie pants. Her hair teeters above her brow, a topknot that threatens to tumble as she hurls herself across the floor. This is a toddler class, and any sound I make will be small below the shriek of children and the music Mrs. S. plays on her portable stereo. She carries it in one hand and flaps the other arm like a wing. When the toddlers become too wild, she presses stop. “Come one, come all! Come see the mystery of the shrinking shoes!” They cluster around her and she takes off her dance slippers, which crinkle up like raisins. Henry loves to watch this, too. Shoe worm! He says constantly. Again!

A calendar of Polish Saints hangs inside the studio. I don’t recognize this month’s martyr, but I can read what’s written on today, the sixth of March. 4pm. General Dance. When Claudine enrolled Henry, I didn’t protest for very long. I have always felt a chilly shadow over even the smallest disagreement, as if her love for me is fragile as an ancient bone, and might disintegrate if held wrong. Now, that mark on the calendar anchors me, a time somewhere near the end of this ragged day when I know I can see my son. I will take a key from the toe shoe. I will watch him dancing, and maybe, by then, I will have something good to tell them.

*

I should have left my overcoat at World of Dance. Sweat builds under my clothes, but it seems I can only answer one need at a time. Hunger, first, then later I will consider where to shower. Before I see Claudine, I need to be scrubbed clean.

I have never been one to gamble on the musty flavors of middle-eastern food--an Italian beef would do me fine for every meal. But you don’t see Italians in this neighborhood any more,

and the first eatery that springs to mind is the corner market, which is owned by this guy named Mike who was born on the Gaza strip. He cooks in back, even though he doesn't have a restaurant license. "That name doesn't sound very Palestinian," was what I said when he introduced himself to Claudine and me. "Mike," he said again. Claudine, ever more apt and graceful, wrinkled her forehead at the newspapers and shook her head. Lately the papers are filled with news about the latest violences in his corner of the world.

I find a newspaper on the stoop of a yellow brick three flat, though, before I make it to Mike's. The wet steps soak my coat and my pants beneath it. I peel the plastic back from the paper and imagine it is Sunday morning at the kitchen table with Claudine. Whoever owns this building and this paper, mercifully, remains inside. The newsprint smudges my palms and I picture Claudine's long hair brushing the page as she leans in to refill my cup. Henry would be somewhere near, pushing plastic trains across our toes.

I stop wishing to be with her, though, when I turn this paper to the City page. STATE FUNDS TO CTA, the headline reads. Yesterday my boss rubbed his face and muttered about the shrinking budget. CITY READIES FOR MAJOR BUILD.

A man passes the stoop, his open parka listing back like a cape.

"What budget shortfall?" I say. "I've been tricked!"

He does not lift his head in my direction. This is not a city where a man in a rumpled suit shouting at a newspaper begs for any particular attention. Hunger tightens my stomach, but I don't have time to eat. Claudine will read this paper. She is reading it right now, Henry already walked to Pre-K, cereal bowls fanned in the rack. If not today, then soon, she will figure out that the Chicago Transit Authority has culled me from its grand and moneyed plans. I no longer trust

time. A year ago I felt young, settled, on the rise in the world I had chosen. Nothing has changed, so why am I now somehow ancient, no longer of use?

My cell phone feels small between my fingers, which have swollen from the bad night's sleep, and I dial my mother-in-law by mistake before aborting the call. Claudine's name scrolls across the screen, and I hold the phone away from my ear while it rings, as if that will save me.

"Thank God," she says, and in the same breath, "What the hell is your problem?"

"I have new information. I'm going to make this right."

"Jonah, where are you?" She adds a string of French expletives. I am not a language person, but I get the idea. "How could you not come," she says, "Henry couldn't sleep. And why, *why*, are you not at work?"

I scan the block. Who was that man in the parka? How does she know? Do the buildings and the breezes report to Claudine? Usually I love how she knows everything about me, can skewer my fears and frailties before I even know their names. Today, though, I can't face the mirror that she will hold up to my stinking sweat, my unshaved face, my sudden irrelevance.

"I have a meeting," I say. "Please believe me. I'll see you at General Dance."

"This is not alright."

"General Dance. It will be by then."

"I should have made you buy the phones with GPS. You are never disappearing like this again. Please. Be honest with me."

I want to fall in her thin arms like a child, her loose hair shrouding me. But if I do, how will she trust that I am grown? What can I give her that she doesn't already have from Henry-- the love of a small, dependent being, the love of a son?

*

On the inbound train I memorize every inch of the article and prepare what I will say to win back my job at the Transit Authority. I am not much of a speaker. Before Claudine came along I kept to myself, content to be a lone archeology student. I passed the bulk of my time in limited company: my professors and the ancient dead.

I try to imagine my former boss at the CTA as an *Australopithecus*, me towering above him insisting he hire me back. This is a technique I use when I am nervous. In graduate school, my favorite professor obsessed about the tiny ancients. *Don't ever forget*, he chanted, brandishing the small femur of an Egyptian prince. *We've grown tall, us humans. We might as well be the prophesied giants, putting cracks in the world when we walk down the street.*

When I first knew Claudine, the sharp-tongued exchange student, kissing her made me believe in my own height. I marveled when she followed me north, one of those terrifying but beautiful spirits that sometimes dog tomb raiders in movies. *Why?* I tried not to ask too often. *Why do you choose me?* I have been trained not to accept the obvious answer. I want to know the wild horse from the domestic one, the junkyard from the shrine.

Who am I now, I wonder, as the inbound train slips under ground and hurtles toward the inner heart of the city, now that I have no more holes to dig?

*

“I see you’ve been enjoying your leisure time,” says my former boss, with whom I have not made an appointment, whose office I will not leave until he hires me back. He fans a report in front of his face, but the clear plastic cover does not dislodge even a strand of his gelled comb-back. “Jonah,” he tips back his wheelie chair, “do yourself a favor. Go home.”

It occurs to me that my current living situation might seem somewhat outside the norms of the American work place. “Home?” I say, testing. “Where else do you think I’ve been?”

On his desk a scale model of the downtown kidney sculpture, modern art, shines under the fluorescents.

“This,” I say, jabbing the metal bean with my finger and leaning toward him, “is why you need to hire me again.” The little sculpture skids across his desk, knocking a stack of folders, probably resumes for my replacement, across the fake wood. “This is the way those upstarts you’ll get are thinking, curves and shiny trinkets, not weight-bearing structure.”

“Okay,” he says. He picks up his desk phone, pauses, and then restores it to its cradle. “Do you know how bad you smell?”

“I know how this town was built. I know the system. They wouldn’t know a pre-Great Fire foundation if it bit them in their throat.”

“Jonah, be reasonable. And sit back down in your chair.” He tips further away from me on his wheels.

“I just have to say this,” I say, and I imagine his bones shortening. “Do you know what’s going to happen tonight?”

“Wait, let me guess.” He tidies the resume folder. “Nope. No idea.”

“I am going to tell my son that his father has been promoted.”

“Generally speaking,” he turns a photograph of four meaty boys in my direction, “you’re not supposed to lie to your kids.”

“Please,” I say, and it seems as if he’s growing again before my eyes, like those small plastic capsules I give Henry during his baths that when watered billow and stretch into spongy tigers and seahorses. “I know you have state funds.”

When I wave my newspaper over the desk, it feels crumpled and small.

I pray for another line of argument to occur to me. He tells me that Claudine's been calling all morning, that she's concerned about me, and also increasingly pissed off. He says he'd been thinking about recommending me for a freelance position with the state's excavation consultant--one family man to another, you know? But given the mess with Claudine, and how badly I look today, he thinks the gig might not be a sure thing after all.

"We're going to have to wrap this up," he says. "Do you want some caramel popped corn?" I refuse, although I'm starving, and can picture myself bobbing nose first into his medium-sized decorative trashcan full of popcorn. There's a gift shop in the lobby of the city building, and my boss sometimes trades month-long train passes for snacks. When I step off the elevator, the smell of sugar spurs my empty gut almost to puking, and I rush for the street and the train.

*

Mike fills a clamshell Styrofoam box with rice, olives, and cubes of lamb. "Where do you live, anyway?" Mike says, gagging and then leaning away from me.

I throw my hand back loosely over my shoulder, a mangled politician parade wave, and shrug. "Over there," I say.

"Oh," he says. "Over *there*." He nods, and then the bell sounds over the door and he hurries to conceal all evidence of food preparation.

I want Mike to talk to me. I don't want to wait for Henry and Claudine alone. I want to stay with him until General Dance. A woman in a cape enters the gas station.

"Is your family alright?" I say, pointing to the Tribune rack, where a photo shows a Gazan woman standing before the remains of her building.

“Please,” he says, holding his palm over the NASCAR lighters lined on the counter,
“Five seventy five.”

I pay but linger by a stack of blue and green potato chip cans.

Now Mike stares at the woman, flicks his head toward my food, and then hisses at me.

“Don’t stay here.”

I am sure the caped woman is no Health Department shill, but Mike continues to pace behind his scratch tickets.

What I don’t want to do is eat alone. Of course Mike owes me nothing. He cooks for me, and that is no small thing.

*

Mrs. Sobieski changes out her window display. As I walk back by World of Dance she kneels on the slanted ledge and scatters pink and yellow cloth flowers across it. An inflatable rabbit waits for air in a crumpled heap and she’s already hung two posters of Jesus on the cross inside the window. Leave it to Mrs. S. not to forget the somber side of the holiday. For her, sorrow and joy and pain and gladness combine in one great rhythm, and all a body need do is master the steps.

When I let myself in the back door, I nod to the hanging toe shoe and the sombrero, as if greeting neighbors. The small bathroom contains a claw-foot tub, and I consider the risk of bathing while Mrs. S. arranges the windows. I plunder the back porch keys again, removing every one that might open the upstairs apartment. I may be out of work, but I bet whoever lives upstairs holds down a job.

On the second floor, I open the refrigerator door and stare as if I am home at night, Claudine and Henry already asleep. I imagine the slap of my son’s Footies and watch the bright colored packages in the fridge. This must be what it felt like when Pompeii was unearthed. The

juice carton tilts toward the bread and the celery wilts. By opening the door, I have interrupted some whole society, whose orders and ways will always be strange to me. The motor hums and I find it hard to look away.

The man, whoever he is, is clearly not at home. As I close the fridge door a pizza delivery menu flutters under its magnet. No Sippy Cups or stray plastic train tracks mark his quarters and unless his woman is so young she needs no make-up, no lotions, no pumice stones, he lives alone. The bathroom is very clean. I stain the tiles when I remove my socks.

I help myself to his razor blades. The hot water, so hot, stings my newly opened skin. I want to sweat out the last twenty-four hours of my life, but that of course, is impossible. I can apologize to Claudine, I know, and hope for the best. But here the evidence of my professional training paralyzes me. How can I not take the cloudy view of things, having held in my hands proof that every civilization will fall?

I wear my undershirt inside out and feel clean. The building creaks under the weight of someone jumping, and for a moment I believe that the tenant has come home. The sounds rise up to me, though, and it is only the early rumblings of General Dance.

*

I stand at the back door of the studio, watching the children rattle and dip. Hip hop, ballet, *cumbia*: my son Henry will master them all. His bowl cut swings around his eyes as he jumps straight up in the air and struggles not to fall on landing. Not a dance step Mrs. S. endorses, but from where I stand, it's the most beautiful movement in the world.

In the far corner, a fat red-haired boy feels compelled to throw down what appear to be break dance moves, and instead throws down three china ballerinas from a shelf. "Imagine," says Mrs. S, "that the pull of earth's gravity has no effect on you." Now her entire head is wrapped in

a fringed purple scarf shot through with silver thread. “Walk lightly,” she says to the culprit, “as if your feet don’t touch the ground.”

And then she’s headed in my direction, looking for something to sweep up said carnage of dignity and figurines.

“Henry’s father,” she says, before I can even consider retreat, “are you looking for the bathroom?”

“I know where it is,” I say.

She tilts her head so far to the left that fringe stripes her face. Her mouth pauses, a dark O, but she says only, “Excellent. I have shards to sweep.” As I walk toward the bathroom, she asks me to give her a hand with the sombreros, distribute them to every child in class. “In the stove,” she says. “That’s where I keep them.”

When I return with the hats I beam bright as a porch light and these moth children believe me the sun. They crash against me, their small hands reaching up for sombreros.

“Daddy!” says Henry. He’s not worried about his hat. He strangles my thighs. “Henry,” I say, crowning him with a sombrero, “it is time to dance.” He jumps up and when he lands the hat slides forward over his nose. I would still know him from a mile away.

Ramon lingers in the corner with Henry. They are quiet. They are the worst dancers in the class, and maybe that’s why Mrs. S. pulls them by the sleeves of their turtlenecks to the center of the floor.

The mothers are waiting outside, chatting in small clusters on the sidewalk. I join them and even though I know she’s there, my gut still plummets and then soars at the sight of Claudine. The cold air and her anger stain her cheekbones red. She tosses a look at the honey-

skinned woman standing next to her who, I'm guessing, belongs to Ramon. Probably she already knows where I haven't been.

"I'm so sorry, Claudine," I say.

"Right," she answers, detaching herself from the swarm of mothers and meeting me by the Easter bunny, now inflated to his full potential. Between his ears I can see the children dancing. Mrs. Sobieski shrieks out the beats of the *cumbia*. One! Two! Three! Four! One! Two! Three! Four! Her shouts fall flat, no correspondence between her calls and how the students are moving. This is a rhythm-less bunch, and I feel more substantial, watching them flail over the wide-planked floor.

"Here's the situation," she says. "By the way, if you're pretending that I'm some kind of mummy right now, please stop."

I stop.

"As far as all these people are concerned," she slices the air with her brown leather glove, "we're going to walk home, eat food, kiss and bath our son, blah blah blah."

It sounds distinguished when she says it, blah blah blah.

"And when we arrive *home*," she holds her toggle coat high up under her chin, "we talk." I stand very still, willing the world to reverse its spin. Please, let the sun not fall below the buildings, the buildings not recede into darkness. I want the bricks to crumble and rot away. I want weeds to grow up through the cracks in the pavement, molting the street back to prairie.

When General Dance concludes, Henry barrels out of the studio and sails over the low stoop. I lift him, straining a little under his weight. Claudine sucks in some air. Our reunion causes Ramon to get seriously pissed off. He punches my kneecap. This is a different, more intent Ramon than the one who thudded and wobbled across the dance floor. It's as if by

standing with Claudine again I've completed that childhood dream dig, the hole down to China. The rain falls up and the attics are basements and everything is what it's not.

"Hello, Ramon." Claudine rests her hand on his puffy jacket. "Did you have good class?"

Ramon's mother, stabbing for keys in her large purse, stops and begins to walk in our direction.

"The watching man." Ramon points at me. "Do you know the watching man? He hides inside the dance class."

"Watching?" says Claudine. Ramon's mother, now in earshot, narrows her eyes and reaches for her cell phone, ready to call in the predator.

"Ramon," I say, "what do you know?"

He unfists his small hand and a smile splits open his face. "*Cumbia!!! Cumbia!!!*"

Claudine steps away from me and somehow explains this all to Ramon's mother, not a task I envy. Ramon's mother holsters her phone and gives my wife a quick peck on the cheek, a promise to see her next class. I want to take care of this woman. I want to shore up our house and buy her an alpaca wool coat and carry home our dance worn son. But I am not quite ready.

"Claudine," I say. "Go on home. I think I've left something inside. I'll be right behind you."

Mrs. Sobieski has already turned off the barre lights and I hear her rummaging in the back rooms. In the mirrored wall, I am blending in with the remaining figurines. I am becoming part of this place. The sombreros are scattered at my feet like a restless audience. I stand in the corner where only an hour ago my son was standing with Ramon. Outside, Claudine waits for a minute, but our son is hungry and tired and the temperature drops. They turn away from World of Dance. *He'll be home*, she must be saying. I wonder how long she will believe it, if she even

does. I will stay here one night only. And then tomorrow I will sign on for any work I can find. I don't have much time. Henry isn't getting any smaller.

FINDERS KEEPERS

When Piper and her daughter arrived at the cranberry washing plant, the first truck had already rolled over the weigh station and started its groaning climb to the hoppers. The land, dark with spruce trees, sloped up behind the corrugated steel building, and when Piper saw the truck again, it appeared to float above the washing plant, angling to dump the fruit. A man in tan overalls and rubber boots stood on the flat roof and waved his hands at the driver. Piper considered waking Sadie--the little girl loved to watch the truck bed crank up until mounds of berries thundered into the green vats. The girl shifted against Piper's shoulder, thin brown hair whorled across her tiny back like finger paint. Was it time for another cut? Since Sadie now insisted on keeping it long--like Pocahontas!--Piper sometimes forgot about trimming. And brushing, too, such a painful and hated process for both of them. Nightmares had woken Sadie three times last night, and Piper decided not to rob the child of any more rest. Anyway, she was late. Maybe in the afternoon, when Bill Peabody, the manager, had disappeared for his long gin lunch, they could hike to the upper lot and watch the trucks unload.

The cranberry washing plant worked from top to bottom. Above Piper, barrel washers wearing bright yellow rain suits already crowded the metal floors that tracked through the air under the twenty-foot tables. As far as Piper could tell, the berries still spun in the barrels, couch-sized drums that whirled above all of them, three storeys or so, spraying and rinsing the fruit. Piper plucked a spare jacket from the hamper and covered Sadie. As soon as the berries started to sift down through the tables into the crates below, the plant floor would turn hectic and slick.

Maybe she could find some time to let Sadie splash in the puddles, stained red water and bog debris raining around her, but for she now she wanted to keep her daughter sleeping, peaceful, and dry. If Bill Peabody hovered among the sweepers, those glass-eyed boys who pushed excess water and junk into grates all day, he might not notice the child curled at her side. He knew Piper kept the girl during shifts, but so far, one week into the harvest, he hadn't complained.

"Relax," a voice called from the catwalk. "It's dry. Like this county on a Sunday."

"Hey Kris," answered Piper. "Seen Peabody yet?" Kris shook off her hood and ran one hand over her scalp. As far as Piper knew, Kris cut her own hair, short and spiky, and didn't have a mirror when she did it. She smelled like air freshener mixed with toilet tanks, bus station, but she played with Sadie if the child woke up.

"Saw him last night," said Kris. "He's probably still picking his guts off a sidewalk somewhere. You want your samples from yesterday? Want to relax?" Kris pulled a joint from somewhere under her yellow plastic overalls, which fit like a cave over her skinny frame. The other barrel washers shied away from her, clucking and muttering in Spanish. Why here? Piper made out, why not out back, why so stupid? Two teenage boys, their rain pants rolled over green and red Adidas--kept somehow shining clean despite the wet and messy work--clapped and grinned at Kris.

"Let me get Sadie settled."

"Hide her, you mean? You need to relax."

Kris shrugged and reached the joint down toward Piper. The whole scene might have seemed awkward with anyone else, but not Kris. Her knuckles had dirt in the wrinkles when she came to work, not just when she left it. She had an Anarchy tattoo on her left shoulder, the loose lines of the A inked as feathers. She didn't care if anyone took the joint when she passed it. Piper

wanted to know where she'd grown up, what sent her running all the way out here to the Cape Cod cranberry bogs, but even when Kris was stoned and delighted, like right now, she clenched the corners of her mouth as if already refusing to answer.

“Hey boss,” she yelled, turning toward the short, stocky man who stood in the doorway. “Take the edge off?”

“Can it. If my daughter were railing around with a bunch of berry-pickers. . .” Whenever Bill Peabody ragged on Kris, he never finished his sentences, as if the justice he might bring down was too righteous for words.

“*Hay!*” shouted one of the teenage boys, looking up toward where the cranberries spilled from the barrels. “*La fruta.*” Soon the shaking tables would fill with wet, rolling berries, sifting down from the big grates to the tiny ones. Hands would hover over the redness, unclogging the grates, wicking away the leaves and vines and frogs, whatever else had been sucked up from the bog in the harvest. She had to get Sadie to the lab before all that started falling around them.

“Maybe I already know your daughter,” Kris continued. “Like, *know* her know her.”

Peabody leaned into the rain gear hamper and starting hurling ankle waders at Kris. Even hung over, the man had a nasty arm. Kris refused to dodge or duck, but Piper could see her stagger and grip the railing.

“Pipe Pipe Piper!” Sadie murmured from under the raincoat. Lately the girl had dropped *momma* and started to use her given name, which gave Piper the creeps. She mouthed a “thank you” to Kris for distracting Peabody and hurried toward the lab. Kris winked back as a rubber heel slammed into her jaw.

Sadie arranged herself in the center of Piper’s lab and demanded her crayons. With Sadie in the world, Piper’s own desires had been upstaged by how much the girl could want. A tit to

slurp from, a finger to chew, Italian ice in the summers: since the beginning, Sadie hungered hard. Now, after almost four years with the girl, Piper could sniff out desire in anyone, even other women. Like Kris, self-proclaimed anarchist, who seemed hard to most people she met-- look how little she cared about Peabody. But Piper saw how the girl was eyeing her, even now, as Peabody thundered, as berries reddened the tables. Kris wanted love, not a world without order.

Sadie discovered the asterisk key on Piper's computer, and after she'd filled a three-page document with exuberant stars, she slumped over the desk. Piper lifted her onto the canvas cot in the corner and molded a blue afghan around her shoulders. Yesterday's batch samples were still stacked, untested, on the elbow high lab counter. Maybe if Sadie slept she might have a chance to catch up.

Piper pushed aside the scraps of birch bark that littered the linoleum counter. Earlier she'd taken Sadie out to the old cattle run in the woods behind the station. The girl loved to climb and jump from the lichened stones. They peeled bark from the trees, and back inside, Sadie drew houses and dragons on it, spreading her masterpieces across Piper's desk. Piper plunged a syringe into a cranberry from the first batch, squirted a perfect circle of juice onto a slide. She held the slide up to her color chart, matching the darkness, then entered the batch number, farmer info, and price point into her database. The darker the berry, the more the farmer got paid. You didn't need all day for this work, and by the time Sadie woke up, she'd be almost ready to call Kris in for today's samples. The thought of Kris, the spark her impish figure would bring to the quiet lab, made Piper grab for the next batch so fast the cranberries spilled and squirted on the floor. She salvaged one and reached for her syringe.

“She’s in here,” Peabody said outside the door. “The kid, too, unless they’re out roaming the woods again.”

“Thanks, Bill,” a man’s voice answered. “Owe you one.”

“It’s not right,” Peabody continued. “Girl growing up half-wild. My daughters use the pre-K school at church.”

“Right,” the man said. “Well, thanks again.” At the sound of Jonah’s voice, Piper held the door closed.

“Why?” she said. “Why did you come here?”

“Let me in.”

“Maybe. Why are you here?”

“This is ridiculous. What are you, naked in there?”

She pulled the elastic from her messy ponytail and finger combed her hair.

“Shh,” she said, cracking the door and stepping back from him. “Sadie is sleeping.”

Jonah wore his World Series hat and a button down shirt. Piper did not see him often, and today he seemed lessened somehow, blurred around the edges. It wasn’t just the sags of skin that had started to puddle under his jaw, or the way his neck bulged a bit against his collar. The lab at the washing station seemed to hold two versions of the same man; the hard and young and restless one who refused to marry her when Sadie came along, and then this tired stranger, whoever he’d become, swaying from sneaker to sneaker.

“Why is she here? What I’m sending you should be more than enough for a sitter.”

“We don’t do sitters,” said Piper. “Not even with your hush money.”

“But this crowd, for a child? Really? Peabody tells me you even got some waster dyke train-hopper on this shift.”

“Actually, she’s an anarchist.”

“I don’t get the train-hopping thing.”

“Quiet,” said Piper.

“I didn’t even know people *did* that anymore.”

“It’s always about that with you. Being the right kind of people.”

“She should be in school. Everybody thinks so. You can’t hide her forever.”

“Look, Jonah. You’re lucky she’s sleeping right now, because it keeps me quiet. But if you think you can swarm in here, what, four years, after the fact and start calling the plays.” An old anger floated up in Piper, and her muscles were jittery, awake. She felt like she could run an incredible distance.

Jonah rubbed his temple, pushing the World Series hat up on his crown. “I’m sorry, I’m coming at this all wrong.”

“Coming at what? She doesn’t even know who you are.” Piper walked over to the cot. Sadie blinked, and reached her fists up toward Piper’s face. “Good morning, baby.”

“I’m her father.”

Sadie scrunched into a kneeling ball and pulled the afghan over her head. Jonah leaned over the cot and put his hand on what was most likely the child’s shoulder. “Sadie?” he said.

“Sadie, can you hear me?” The girl stayed under the blanket.

Kris darkened the lab door, fiddling with the leather thongs tied around her wrists. “You alright in here, hon?”

Jonah looked at Kris, then Piper, his lips a dark O.

“Give us a minute?”

“Sure. Can I get a ride with you tonight?”

“Yes, Kris. Yes you can. In fact, why don’t we get a some takeout and some wine and make a night of it?”

“About time,” said Kris. “You hear that in there?” she called toward the afghan. “We’re going to have a party tonight, *Turtle Girl!*”

Sadie sprung from her blanket and clapped her hands at Kris.

“Okay,” said Jonah. “Please excuse us.” Kris clapped back at Sadie and returned to the shaking tables.

“Look, I know this is out of the blue,” he said. “But I want to be more involved.”

“Four years, Jonah. Four fucking years.”

“Fuck King Ears!” Sadie screamed.

Jonah opened his mouth, and then closed it.

“Don’t even start. You have no idea what you’ve done to us.”

“I know. I’m just asking you to think about it. You look real tired.”

“I am tired,” Piper said, turning from him and slamming the trays of cranberry samples back into their stacks. “Any wild guesses why?”

“Okay.” Jonah pulled his hat back down over his eyes, worrying the brim with one hand.

“Okay. Just think about it, Piper, won’t you?”

“Yeah, I’ll do that, sure, think about it.” She kept her back to the door until he was gone, jabbing at her computer screen until the database came back to life. She’d discovered that if she timed her exhalations to the exact moment when she dropped the slide cover over the drop of cranberry juice, then her hand never wavered, and the juice bled out in a perfect circle. The company only cared about color matches and price points, but Piper liked to keep her glass free of stains or smudges. It only mattered to her. Inhale, lift the slide cover. Exhale, drop it over the

plate. She absorbed herself so much in the rhythm that she didn't notice Sadie walking over or reaching up, didn't see the girl until those tiny fingers had already grabbed the stack of untested batches, pulled them to the counter's edge, and yanked them, tipping, clattering, squishing, onto the uneven concrete floor.

Piper and Kris sat on the front steps of Piper's duplex, sucking on beer bottles while Sadie built a castle in the gravel drive. Piper was starting to feel buzzed, and Jonah's intrusion at the washing plant now seemed fake, or staged, like the dioramas she sometimes took Sadie to see near Plymouth. Inside those glass windows little Pilgrims hoed their yards, while Indian feathers the size of straight pins lurked outside the stockade fences. Sadie had inherited her mother's love of miniature, a world so small and complete that it escaped the notice of more dangerous forces. Even the Indians, poised for attack, could do nothing.

"You should get of Massachusetts," said Kris, twisting the end of a joint. "Don't you ever want to be somewhere else?"

Piper sucked on the thin paper until her eyes watered. Her beer weighed as much as a boulder when she tried to lift it off to her mouth.

The tenant next door, an older lady, paused at the stairs until Kris and Piper shifted out of her way. "My heat isn't on." She gripped the metal railing with two hands, hauling herself up the stairs. "I need it tomorrow."

"It's just past Labor Day, Mrs. P. You know it won't be on until October."

"It's a funny thing," the old lady said. "The way they pay you to tell me nothing."

"I'm just the property manager, Mrs. P. I don't turn on the heat."

Now Sadie was sneaking toward the stairs. She walked like the Indians she learned about

in Plymouth. Toe. Heel. Toe. Heel. Testing the ground before it cracked or hollered beneath her. The key to any good ambush.

“Cool braids,” said Kris, as Sadie approached. The girl shook her head so fast she pelted Kris with the blue balls on her elastics. Sadie held out one chalky palm to show a penny, rubbed clean of all the usual marks.

“Finders Keepers,” said Kris. “Good for you.”

“Losers Weepers!!” Sadie ran away from them, spraying gravel with her feet, tilting her arms from one side to the next like an airplane.

“See? She knows all the usual games. Coming along just fine.”

“Bringing her to the plant--what’s the damage?”

“My mom stayed home all day baking cookies. Look how awesome that turned out.”

Piper could hear Jonah’s voice boomerang through the evening. Great, Piper, just great. Taking parenting advice from an anarchist? What next? A mermaid tattoo for our girl? But Sadie did look happy, banking out toward the road, knowing to stop before she crossed onto the blacktop. “You talk to your mom much?”

Kris lifted Piper’s hand, which still held the joint, and pressed Piper’s fingers against her lips. “That’s what I’m talking about,” Kris murmured, sucking in. Piper kept her hand against Kris’s face. Her jaw felt strange under Piper’s fingers, sligher than a man’s, more evasive, like she might slip away at any point. Piper had only brought a few men home since Jonah, and how could she, really, with one bedroom and Sadie such a light sleeper. Maybe this was the kind of thing the women at the YMCA’s Baby Mama fitness class giggled about while they toweled their hair. Maybe every mother in town learned to swallow her moans, and lie still to keep the bed slats from creaking. Piper had stopped taking Sadie to the Y. She hated to see those women

in their bathing suits, so much skin and muscle that Jonah might have touched. But Kris came from somewhere else.

When Kris kissed her, Piper opened her mouth without thinking, moving her hands over the skinny girl's collarbone. She wished Jonah could see her now.

"Finders Keepers!" Sadie zoomed toward the stairs again, this time holding a dead worm that she'd plucked from the shoulder.

Piper dropped her hands from Kris's skin, stood, and pried the flat, papery form from Sadie's fingers. "Tomorrow we'll get a live one," she said. "Promise."

After she'd scrubbed a sponge over Sadie's body, dust swirling off the girl through bathwater, then watched her daughter talk herself to sleep, she drank another beer with Kris in the stand-in kitchen. Half of yesterday's grocery bags remained on the counter. Piper yanked the milk from the plastic, but before she could drop it in the garbage, Kris grabbed her wrist. "It's fine," she said. "Really. Food isn't anywhere near as perishable as they tell us."

This time, Piper stayed stiff when Kris tried to kiss her.

"What?" said Kris. "Cat got your--?"

Piper peeled the plastic cap from the milk, and tilted the half-gallon toward the sink, trying not to inhale as it bubbled through the rusty drain.

"My mother killed herself," said Kris. "When I was seventeen." The milk jug thumped into the sink, half empty. Piper wanted to take the anarchist in her arms, but a hug seemed like cheap shelter.

"I know your husband--"

"Not my husband."

"--thinks I'm just some waster, but not for nothing."

“I believe you,” said Piper, stepping away. “But please be patient. Sadie is my number one girl.”

“True that,” said Kris. “She’s a lucky daughter.”

Piper did not let the anarchist stay the night, but after Kris left, she lay for hours on the sofa, a black and white movie on mute, picturing Kris at seventeen, even skinnier and not yet tattooed, riding away from the house where her mother died. The thought of Kris relaxed Piper, kept her from peering in Sadie’s door through the night like she usually did.

*

Piper started to blow her hair out in the mornings again. She stood for a long time in the tiny bathroom, wisps flipping away from her face like in a movie. Sadie got into the spirit, standing on the counter and holding her palms in the hot forced air. The harvest picked up and Jonah, give him some credit, wasn’t forcing her hand. Not that she spent much time considering his offer. She preferred to imagine leaving with Kris. She didn’t have family in town anymore, and here people always bragged on how far back they went. The frigging Mayflower, if you were Mr. Peabody. Piper didn’t see the pride in that. From what she’d heard, they were so hard up on that particular voyage they suckled their children on ale. Actually, she wouldn’t be surprised if the Pilgrim parents had resorted to drinking their own piss. It bore down on you, so much history in a place.

“How about it, Sadie girl?” Piper said as they waited one morning for the berries to come in. “Want to split?” Maybe that was the best thing she could do for Sadie, plop her down somewhere unknown, no expectations, somewhere western, grand and steep and lonesome. She could ask Kris. Kris had been everywhere.

Mr. Peabody slammed through the lab door. “Alright, Piper, where is she?”

“Sir?”

“Don’t play dumb. You’re covering for her.”

“Cover me!” said Sadie, lying long and plank-like on the cot.

Piper stepped back toward her daughter, wishing she could wish the girl quiet.

“I can still see her, you know.”

“She’s very quiet,” said Piper. “No trouble at all.”

Mr. Peabody walked over to Piper’s bench and lifted a tray of cranberry samples.

“Already logged, Mr. P.”

“So where is she? Your little girlfriend?”

“I don’t have a—”

“Spare me, Piper. I don’t actually care you’re a switch-hitter. But I need my barrel washers to show up for work.”

“She’ll be here.”

Sadie wrapped her arms around Piper’s hips and Piper exhaled. If she wasn’t at work, Kris must have a damn good reason. Maybe turn up at the apartment tonight, bearing yellow corn to boil, or a gift for Sadie.

“Since you’re so caught up on those samples,” Mr. Peabody said. “Why don’t you jump in at the tables?”

“Mr. P, I can’t leave the lab like that.”

“Piper. I’ve been more than fair. But I need you on the tables. You know where the gear is.”

“Jonah put you up to this? That’s so like him, to be all nice, and oh, take your time with all this, but meanwhile he cocks up some crazy plan to show I can’t handle it all.”

“That’s paranoid. You really think Jonah is in it with Miss Anarchy?”

“Fine. I’ll make a call.”

“You’ll get on the shaking table. Whatever. I’ll watch the girl.” The door banged behind him.

Piper pulled unused coloring books and cut up apples and a can of Play Dough from her tote bag. The toys looked small. In less than half an hour Sadie would be rattling the door, screaming for a trip to the woods.

Piper knew that as soon as she put on the yellow overalls and raincoat her daughter would not be able to recognize her. Sweat welled under the plastic gear as she climbed the metal stairs up to the second level of the plant. Above her, the barrels whirled and spilled cranberries onto the metal tables. She had never been so close before. She held her hands above her ears as the cranberries jumped and skittered on the grates. Across the table, two teenage boys pointed at her and laughed.

“*Hija,*” said an older woman. “Watch the floor slots.”

All down the lines, hands fluttered above the vibrating sorters. They pulled reeds and lilies and Venus flytraps from grates, slinging the debris into openings at their feet. It splattered onto the plant floor. Below them, the sweepers moved in slow circles. They found beer cans and life preservers, children’s shoes and maps.

At first Piper feared catching her hands in the shaking metal, but it didn’t take long until she was picking away junk like the rest of them.

“Barrel up!” called a woman at the end of the table, when most of the berries had already dropped through to the crates below.

“Barrel up,” answered a voice above them, and the spinning washers poured a new batch

of wet fruit.

She thought about ducking out before the next barrel load to check on Sadie, but Mr. P. was on it, and the fast paced work distracted her from her daughter more than anything she'd ever done. More than sex, even, when she managed to have it.

Toward lunch, Piper opened her cramping fingers to find the shell of a painted turtle huddled in her hand. She paused to admire the deep greens and blues, and then swung her arm toward the refuse bins. But just as she was about to let go, she felt an amniotic kick against her palm.

"Give me five minutes," she said to her neighbor. The woman rolled her eyes and hurled a cattail to the floor.

"For my daughter!" said Piper. The woman smiled.

As she threaded through the plant floor toward the lab, Piper saw Mr. Peabody standing to one side. "Thanks!" she said. "Thanks for being so cool."

"Sure, Piper," he said. "You know the shift's not over, right?"

"Right." She snapped her hand up in a mock salute.

When she opened the lab door, printer paper covered the floor. "Oh Sadie," she said. "It's a good thing I found something new for you."

"We're doing alright," said a man--Jonah!--camped behind Piper's chair. "We're drawing a map of an invisible country."

"You can't do this."

"Relax, Piper. Peabody called, said it was crunch time around here. I thought it might be a good chance to get to know my little girl."

"This is the apartment!" Sadie said, dragging a purple crayon in an approximate square.

“Awesome,” said Jonah. “This is where the flying horses land.”

“Flying horses??!” said Sadie, running toward him so the paper rumbled beneath her feet.

Piper hid the turtle under the cuff of her raincoat. She didn’t want Jonah to have any part in her surprise. Damn the tables. She was done for the day. “Just let me get rid of my gear,” she said. “Then I think we’re good here.”

“I’ll leave,” said Jonah, standing and walking closer to her. Sadie traced the outline of a winged horse with her finger. “But this doesn’t have to be ugly.”

“This,” said Piper, tilting her head toward the papered floor, “is ugly.”

Word had spread through the plant that Piper was collecting the animal survivors. Before she walked out, Peabody screaming at her across the sweeping floor, more breathing things had found their way into the bucket where she’d placed the turtle: two salamanders and one blue frog.

*

On the car ride home Sadie pouted at the salvaged creatures, gripping the bucket to her chest. They stopped for fish sandwiches, and later gathered small flat stones from the old cow run in the woods behind their duplex. Piper ripped sheets of moss from the ground. Sadie leapt off the loosely piled rocks and pumped her fist in the air. She did not slow when Piper asked. It was only when they returned home that Piper remembered to pour water into the bucket. Sadie stared at Piper and gripped her arms across her cotton dress.

“You turn quick,” said Piper. “If I knew all it would take was paper on the floor I’d have bought you out years ago.” She knew this was no way to talk to a child, but Sadie said nothing. Maybe she stored her in some quiet place, where fifteen years later it might spike up, fully

preserved, as the force behind some risky, wild evening.

Sadie pinched one salamander's tail and threw it into the air.

"Damn it, Sadie," said Piper, catching the thing and cupping it between her fingers. It was rioting around on her palms. She needed to regain control.

"Get the bucket," she said. "If we don't do this now, they'll crinkle up and die. And it will be your fault."

Sadie lifted the bucket with both arms and hid her face behind it. It was easy to forget how quickly the girl could be taken down. Piper was embarrassed that she'd even felt threatened. She needed to chill before she saw Jonah again. Or she needed to never see Jonah again. But that plan depended on Kris, and where was Kris?

Piper felt the bottom of the tub with deep, green moss. "We'll wash at the sink," she said.

Piper formed the moss into bluffs and low places. She plugged the drain and ran the faucet until water pooled in the hollows. She stacked the stones into unsteady towers and released the creatures into their new world.

The frog balanced on a stack of stones and sucked a massive breath. Its jowls ballooned beneath its shrinking face. The stones teetered and the frog fell, rolling confused circles across the moss. Sadie clapped her hands and shrieked with laughter. In the distant corner of the tub, the solemn turtle did not startle when she slapped her palms together. It just continued like a waning wind-up toy across the stones.

*

The next day Piper took Sadie to the library. In one corner of the children's room, a librarian perched on a stool, reading some kind of frog and princess story to a restless circle of kids.

“Anything I can help you with?” said the tanned librarian behind the desk.

“No thanks, Maisie. We’ll figure it out.” The small woman returned to her stamping station. On and off Jonah had dated her last year, and Piper wanted to hide Sadie in the stacks. But the library didn’t have any books about keeping amphibians as pets.

Sadie pulled the painted turtle from under her dress and perched on a metal shelf. Another woman browsing the Romance novels stared at them. Jonah had wanted to keep his connection to Sadie a secret, obviously, but in this town keeping a secret usually meant everyone whispering, everyone promising not to tell.

“Put the turtle away,” Piper said.

“Make me,” said her daughter.

Piper looked out the window. She half-expected to see Mr. Peabody shaking his fist, or Jonah, once again alerted to her negligent presence. She needed to find Kris. Once the harvest ended, there was no good reason to stay. Piper knew she could squeeze at least a couple thousand miles out of her Charger. And Kris, tough as she claimed to be, must want a break from the trains. Kissing her hadn’t been so bad, either. Now *that* would take some explaining, but Sadie already liked Kris, at least as much as she seemed to like Jonah.

“Okay, Turtle Girl. We’ll do it your way today?”

“I named him Jonah,” said Sadie. “What do you think?”

Piper yanked her daughter by the wrist and tried to walk calmly past Maisie and her piles of returned books.

“She’s got such light eyes,” said Maisie, nodding toward Piper. “Nothing like yours. I’m sorry we don’t have the book you need.”

“Actually, Maisie,” Piper said. “Do me a favor. Get me these books from another

library.”

Maisie scowled and ripped an Interlibrary Loan request form from a pad. *E is for Enchantment: A Frog and Toad Alphabet*, Piper wrote, hoping the fake titles would throw a wrench in Maisie’s easy day. *Wild Salamanders of New England. Mating Habits on the Bog.*

*

That afternoon, Piper lay on the couch while Sadie squealed and clapped in the bathroom. The amphibians held her attention more than any game. Piper ignored the furious blink of the answering machine, Mr. Peabody yelling or firing, Jonah expressing his concern, or staking his claim.

Kris walked in as Piper drifted toward sleep.

“Any sign of your bastard today? Antonio told me he showed at the plant.”

Piper stayed on the pilly couch. She lifted her hand, let it fall on her stomach. Her muscles swelled and receded. Piper felt relaxed. Kris looked paler than usual, her eyes rimmed red, ratty sweatshirt pulled over her palms even though it was Indian summer.

Kris pushed Piper’s bag from the couch. When it hit the carpet it exploded, car keys and plastic letters, R, Q, F, spilling out. Kris lifted Piper’s head and slid under it. The anarchist smelled like salt.

“You shower at the beach?” said Piper.

“I do what I can.”

“I haven’t showered today either. You’ll see we’ve got a Magical Kingdom of Swamp vibe going in the bathroom.

“Sounds like fun,” said Kris, moving her hand over Piper’s shoulder, sliding it across her collarbone and under her tee shirt. “But I’d rather stay right here.”

Piper was grateful when Kris offered her a joint. Messing around with Kris felt safer stoned, like she could watch herself from a swooping distance. In the last year she'd been with Jonah, she'd wanted him more than he wanted her. Sometimes, when they had fucked, it felt as if he were marking a chalkboard, scoring her need against hers.

“Where’s Sadie?”

Piper nodded toward the bathroom. “Feeding bugs to the hungry masses. Have you ever been to the desert? I think you’re right. I think we need to leave town.”

Telling Kris about the plan made it seem possible. She felt a rush of energy, imagining Jonah when he came by the apartment, all trace of them gone, their dresses and their frogs. She imagined the women chattering at the playground, their perfectly garbed children swinging to a perfectly safe height. *Jonah wanted them back*, they would mutter, as always distorting the story, *and she abandoned him. Jonah! Nobody turns him down*. Meanwhile, she and Sadie and Kris would be sprawled out in some dry, warm place.

Kris stood and pulled Piper up with her. “Why not?” she said. Kris put her hand on Piper’s collarbone and walked Piper backwards toward the small bedroom. It didn’t seem as bad to Piper, bringing another woman in the house. As far as Sadie knew, Kris was there to talk about diets, or getting Day Camp for free.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” said Kris. “Knowing you can run?”

Piper jogged the bedroom door into its casing. “If you drown in a cranberry bog,” she said, kicking off her buckled boots and letting Kris pull her to the bed, “your body stays the same for hundreds of years.”

Kris rolled Piper’s tee shirt over her ribs, palming her breasts. “You’re nervous!” she said. “Stop talking.”

“I’m not nervous.”

Kris plucked open the button on Piper’s jeans, and slid her hand inside.

“Sometimes, though, I just wish I could throw myself in a bog, come back five years later when I know what I’m doing.”

Kris placed her other hand over Piper’s lips, pressing until the words dulled. “Shut up,” she said.

Piper felt the bottom of her stomach drop out. Already, her body was charging ahead on its own. Kris’s hand felt harder than she expected. She lifted her hips.

As she came, Piper pulled Kris’s hair. “Mmm,” she said. “Huh. That was easy.”

“It’s not heart surgery,” said Kris. “I can do it again. I can do it in the desert.”

Piper felt chosen. Wasn’t that all you could hope for, the sense that this person, her hand on your hip-bone, was the first in the world to recognize you?

Piper started to unzip Kris’s sweatshirt. Kris covered her hand and pulled it away.

“I once got stranded at the freight yard in Santa Fe.” Kris squinted toward the vertical blinds, which Piper had already drawn. When she started talking again, her voice was low, as if some invisible person was speaking through her, and moving her lips in time.

Kris traced one finger over the bones of Piper’s face while she talked. She’d been traveling with one other girl and her border collie. They were eighteen. Maybe it was the dog, or being eighteen, but they weren’t scared of anything. When the man had pulled up to the switching yard in his Eldorado, all they were thinking was wasn’t that a cool old car. They both got in back. His old lady was out of town, he said, and they giggled at the term, which they’d heard mostly in movies. He had a trailer in the desert; they could stay on the couch. Is this for real? they whispered to each other, are we going to die? They were stoned. It was funny. Then

they noticed the shotgun on the dashboard, just sitting right there in plain sight. They'd never been to Santa Fe before, never seen the desert, so they had no way to tell how far they were driving, or if they were even heading anywhere at all. The rocks rose from the shoulder like giant puppets. Everything was pink. Are we going in circles? they mouthed to each other. Are we going to Mexico? For a while, Kris fell asleep, and only woke because Junebug was barking. A shot. In the front seat, the other girl was crying in silence, her cheekbones smudged black. The dog lay crumpled on the rumble strip. They drove for hours, all night long, and they were scared now. In the morning he left them on the shoulder. They sat on the pink stones, which were cold.

"I don't remember how we got back to the yard," said Kris, lifting her palms toward the stucco ceiling. "You know, one of those black spots in life."

Piper wanted to take Kris in her arms, but it was too quiet in the apartment.

"Sadie!" Piper shouted. "Sadie!"

A voice echoed from the bathroom. "Sadie! Sadie!" The girl repeated her name until it sounded like nonsense to Piper, stopped sounding like a given name at all. She ran to the bathroom, feet slapping the vinyl. Sadie sat with her back to the door. The frog teetered on the rim of the tub, preparing to jump onto the peeling vinyl. From behind, in the dull light, Sadie could be anyone's daughter, waiting for the frog to plant its wet feet beside her. She could be waiting for her father to come home from work, his knuckles stained with cranberry juice. She would drape herself in the shower curtain--a map of the world--and greet him like a queen or a superhero, each day for the whole of her childhood.

Piper lifted the girl to her chest, small legs gripping her like a seatbelt. Maybe right now Sadie was just a strange and solemn child, content to stare for hours at a salvaged frog. But whatever Piper brought home wouldn't always be enough. In some desert, far from here, when

the Eldorado pulled up, she'd want to get in.

"Momma," said Sadie. "Don't cry."

"I'm not crying." On her neck, Sadie's palms felt hot. The girl's body still seemed small enough to crush.

Piper heard the sputtering for a minute before she knew her own car turning.

"Kris?" said Piper. "You still here?"

The girl's eyes widened for a minute, as big as quarters, and then she smiled. "Kris!" she said. "Where is Kris?"

Piper tried to put her daughter down but the girl's hands locked behind her shoulders. As she ran toward the front door, Sadie bounced in front of her. "Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!" Sadie screamed, but she was laughing. Despite what other mothers had told her, it still wasn't so easy to tell pain from delight. When they reached the door, Kris and Piper's Charger were already gone.

*

By the time *Wild Salamanders of New England*--a real book, it turned out--came in to the library, one salamander had died, and the cranberry harvest was over. Mrs. Pelletier refused to let them use her shower anymore, and Sadie's hair had grown too long and tangled to wash in the sink. "How about a couple reptiles?" Piper asked Maisie, when she stopped by the library to pick up the book. "I can get them for you cheap. You know, something for the kids to look at when they come in?"

"I don't know." The date stamp snapped onto the page. "You got a tank?"

"I'll work it out. I promise."

Piper watched Sadie, who was sitting on the floor in the children's corner. The librarian

was still reading a book out loud, this time about a family of animals living in a tree. Two boys built a shaky house out of hardcover books.

“You know what?” said Piper. “Never mind. We don’t need that book anymore. Just a phase, you know. Salamanders. We’ll take them out to the bog. By next year’s harvest they’ll probably be dead, anyway. What’s next? Horses? Daughters of the American Revolution? Is someone always here to read stories?”

“We run story hour every weekday morning. Until noon.”

“Can I leave her with you for bit?”

Maisie flapped her hand in the general direction of the children. “You see my kids there, don’t you? Tell Corinne. She’s in charge.”

Piper knelt on the scratchy carpet, gripped her daughter’s shoulders and told her she’d be back. Corinne smiled down from her stool. “Pick a book, Sadie. Any book and I’ll read it.”

Outside the library was a fountain. During the summer, three bronze fish spat streams of water into the air, but it had already been turned off for the year. The fish, greened and chipping, looked ridiculous without the water--their mouths open wide, as if they were trying to swallow the sky, or whatever might drop from it. Piper stood by the fountain for a minute, watching through the window as Sadie held the librarian’s skirt in her fists. She turned away, before finding out if the girl would rip it to shreds. Maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing, letting her stay with Jonah sometimes. Odds were he still wanted to figure it out, and she could walk to his office from there. She was getting used to walking.

VITA

ABIGAIL GREENBAUM

EDUCATION

University of Mississippi Oxford, MS
M.F.A. in Creative Writing (Fiction), 2011.

Brown University Providence, RI
A.B. in History, *magna cum laude*, 2003.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor, English Dept. University of Mississippi, 2008-2011
Courses Taught as Instructor of Record

English 101: Introductory composition course focused on rhetoric and academic writing
English 211: Introductory creative writing course focused on the reading, writing, and editing of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction
English 311: Beginning fiction workshop structured as an introduction to the reading, editing, and writing of the contemporary short story

Courses Taught as a Teaching Assistant

English 221: World Literature Before 1650, or foundations in the Western Canon including Homer, Ovid, Chaucer, Dante
English 224: American Literature after the Civil War, or studies in Naturalism, Realism, Modernism, Postmodernism, and the relationship between literature and national identity

EDITORIAL EXPERIENCE

Manuscript Reader, Soft Skull Press, 2010

Evaluated fiction and nonfiction manuscripts for senior editors at Pulitzer-nominated independent press. Drafted personal rejection letters.

Contributing Editor, *Venture*, University of Mississippi Undergraduate Journal, 2009-2011

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE and DEVELOPMENT

Contributing Writer, Southern Literary Review, 2011

Faculty Development Workshop, University of Mississippi, 2010-2011

Participated in bi-monthly workshops directed by Professor Karen Forgette, Center for Writing and Rhetoric.

Broken English Reading Series Coordinator, University of Mississippi 2009-2010

Organized, promoted, and hosted a reading series designed to create community and showcase work in the University of Mississippi M.F.A. program and broader community.

Teaching Mentorships, University of Mississippi, 2009-2011

Observed, taught, and received pedagogical evaluation by participating as a student teacher in courses taught by expert instructors and professor.

Graduate Student Council, M.F.A. Program Representative, University of Mississippi, 2010

MFA Program Admissions Committee Student Representative, University of Mississippi, 2010

Southern Literary Festival Delegation Leader, Spring 2010

Chaperoned a delegation of University of Mississippi undergraduates attending regional conference on literary arts.

HONORS and AWARDS

AWP Intro Journal Award, nomination for story "The Bicuspid Palace," 2011

Creative Nonfiction Essay Prize, finalist, for "The Pie Tour," 2010

Graduate Research Fellowship, University of Mississippi, Summer 2010

AWP Intro Journal Award, nomination for essay "The Other Abby," 2010

PUBLICATIONS

"General Dance," *Copper Nickel*, forthcoming (story)

"Charles Portis and the Comedy of Extinction," *Southern Literary Review*, June 2011

"Barry Hannah in the World," *Oxford American*, March 2011

Review of Karen Russell's "Swamplandia!" *Knoxville Metro Pulse*, March 17, 2011

"Complicit in the Ugliness of the Moment: A Conversation with Wells Tower," *Yalobusha Review*, Spring 2011

Review of David Mitchell's "The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet," *Paste Magazine* (contracted for publication)