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2001–2021

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INTRODUCTION

Jane McCafferty

Four years ago, after many years of serving as the editor of the Drue Heinz Literature Prize, the poet Ed Ochester asked me to take over the role. I felt this was an honor and a chance to show gratitude for the role the prize played in my own life, when way back in (gulp) 1992, Ed called me on the phone to tell me that John Edgar Wideman had chosen my manuscript as the next winner of the Drue Heinz Literature Prize. Every writer who receives the prize will forever remember being notified of winning, and how, after the shock wears off, the feeling of having been catapulted into another universe sets in. In this universe, created by Drue Heinz and sustained by the dedication of a consistently great press, people actually care about short fiction, care that you've spent years of your life writing and revising short stories. You always knew they didn't sell, that they were largely ignored by the majority of readers (unless you were in Ireland, where the short story has always been beloved) but you wrote them anyway, loving how they offered distinct occasions for exploring different points of view without having to take the risk of committing to the endless project a novel can be. Best of all, you could fail countless times and dust yourself off and begin again—until you got one right. As Lorrie Moore wrote, "Short stories are love affairs. The novel is a marriage."

At the time Ed Ochester called me to say that I won, I had been teaching John Edgar Wideman's book *Brothers and Keepers*, as Wideman was someone who'd inspired me for years both as writer and human being, thus making it even harder for me to believe that the phone call wasn't a dream, something my unconscious had concocted. So the first thing I wanted to do when asked to write this introduction was to read John Edgar Wideman's introduction to *20: Twenty of the Best of the Drue Heinz Literature Prize*, the first volume of twenty Drue Heinz Literature Prize winners, which I'd admired years ago when the book was initially published. I remembered how Wideman reflected on how few African American writers were getting published, but the years had blurred my memory of the story he told of his own short fiction being rejected from the *New Yorker* on the grounds that they didn't publish what they had termed in the rejection letter as "vernacular fiction." From this vantage point, it seems shameful that this didn't inspire fervent, collective, immediate protest. Why didn't I, why didn't many, respond more passionately to this racism at the time? Of course many are asking questions like this regarding race in every sector of the society.

The *New Yorker* editor was probably unconscious of the role they played in keeping closed the white gates of publishing in America. Multiply Wideman's story by thousands, and it's easy to imagine how countless Black writers turned away from writing (speaking here of the minority who had the privilege to honor their talent to begin with), sensing they would find no genuine invitation to attend the ongoing literary party.

Things have changed some—or are certainly in the process of changing. No editor from the *New Yorker* would tell a Black writer that their short story had been rejected on the grounds that the magazine didn't publish "vernacular fiction." On a recent list of twenty must-read short story collections from Penguin Random House, eleven of the twenty are writers of color. Six of ten writers of color are featured on Electric Lit's Favorite Short Stories list for 2020. The lens is on race now, but according to an intensive 2020 study of writers published in the *New York Times*, "Just How White Is The Book Industry," 95 percent were white. The more significant changes will be charted in the coming years, when the moral reckoning this culture is in midst of

starts to bear more practical, measurable fruit in the literary world. And that's when we'll see more diversity in the Drue Heinz Literature Prize winners.

* * *

Some say short stories will become increasingly popular as podcasts seduce more readers. (Who doesn't love being read to?) The short story, as a form, will live on, and the Drue Heinz Literature Prize will thrive at the center of that living and continue to reflect the always changing societal forces that be. I am grateful to each of these prize winners, and have taught most of their books and some of them more than once, appreciating the variety of sensibilities and the risks these writers have taken. They've offered the world memorable characters, unique moral vision, and often surprising beauty, with each writer bearing witness to the power of imagination and the ability of language to reshape experience and to shine light on events and interior lives that otherwise would be overlooked. I've just finished a semester where I taught 2020 Drue Heinz Literature Prize winner Caroline Kim's *The Prince of Mournful Thoughts*, one of the very best collections I've ever read.

Whether we're celebrated story writers, mostly anonymous in our pursuit, or devoted readers and fans of this form, I like to think we're woven together in an evolving spiritual community, and that this community will continue to reflect, deepen, and expand our sense of what it means to be a human being, alive in our particular given history.

Long live the Drue Heinz Literature Prize and all the writers and readers who keep trying to make sense of the broken world.

20 MORE

2001

DESTINATION KNOWN

from Destination Known, selected by C. Michael Curtis

Brett Ellen Block

It was noon and Margaret was sitting in her car in a parking lot watching a teenage boy dig through a dumpster. She had convinced herself that by the time he found whatever he was looking for she would be able to start the car and drive home. Ever since her apartment had been robbed, she'd begun having these moments where she would freeze up, like a window jammed in its frame, and today thirty minutes had already slipped by in that way. This time it started while she was in the hardware store. She had laid five different types of locks out on the counter and the clerk, who mistook her anxiety for indecision, had told her, "Just buy two. Hell, buy three. It'll make you feel better." Margaret bought all of them.

The July sun beat down on her car, and even with the windows open the heat was getting to her. Patches of tar on the parking lot were glistening in the sun. The teenage boy she was using as a sort of timer had fished a sandwich out of the dumpster and begun to eat it. He was wearing a black T-shirt and a dog collar around his neck. As he ate, he leaned over the rim of the dumpster casually, as if what he was doing were perfectly normal.

No matter how bad things got, Margaret thought she could never resort to something so depressing as searching a dumpster for a meal. But as she watched the boy eat, she considered that it was more a matter of circumstance.

If she had ever guessed that she was going to be robbed, Margaret probably would have said that, though shaken and put out, she would manage. Because that was how she was, always able handle whatever was thrown at her. Months earlier, she had picked up and moved out of her boyfriend's apartment the morning after she overheard him making plans with another woman on the phone. Without a second thought or a glance at a map, Margaret drove north and settled in the first city with a name that she liked. She'd hoped that after a certain number of miles all of the painful memories and doubts racketing through her mind would fade, like a radio station she'd lost by driving out of range.

Leaving the town where she had lived for the last five years was like getting off at the wrong exit on a highway; she didn't know what to expect. Surviving the breakup as well as the move had proven to her that she could cope with almost anything. However, she soon realized that she had overestimated herself. In the few days since the robbery, she had barely slept. But it wasn't simply because she was afraid. The shock of her own reaction was keeping Margaret up.

She heard an engine start at the other end of the deserted parking lot and turned. Then she saw a wide, blue Buick peel out in reverse and smash into the station wagon that was parked behind her. There was a crackle and a flourish of glass from the wagon's headlight. The grille had caved in, the bumper was bent, and the front corner was a pointy snarl of metal. Margaret watched as the driver took off away from the accident, jumping the curb as they sped out of the lot. She craned over her headrest but couldn't see the person in the front seat.

They didn't even get out, she thought. *They didn't even stop*.

The one time Margaret had backed into a car, she left a note even though she hadn't made a scratch. For whoever owned the station wagon, there would be no note and, like her with the robbery, they would never know who was responsible for what happened. Margaret wasn't sure who she felt worse for.

The night she had arrived home to find her television, jewelry, and some of her furniture missing, Margaret got her first taste of a feeling that was worse than fear—uncertainty—and it felt like mud in her heart. When the police

arrived, they were of little comfort or help. They basically had only two questions for her: did she have the serial numbers for any of the missing items, and could she think of anyone who could have stolen them. The answer to both was no. With that, they explained to her how unlikely it would be that they would ever find the burglar. The chances were slim.

Sometimes Margaret envisioned her furniture being set up identically somewhere else. It was almost amusing, like some sitcom-type practical joke, but not knowing who took it, who was in her apartment, was truly and profoundly unsettling. As a child, she had fallen down a flight of stairs, and the feeling was the same. One minute she was at the top of the steps, the next she was on the floor. Like her unpredictable loss of balance, the world could change without warning, and to Margaret that had always seemed unfair. Each night, her thoughts whirled uncontrollably. She couldn't look at any of her possessions without wondering if they had been touched. The question of who had done it loomed like an open door inside her mind, one that she could hear being kicked in the same way her apartment door had been. Finding the thief seemed to be the only way to close it, but what worried Margaret most was that no one ever would.

After her boyfriend Daniel had realized that she'd caught him, he said everything he could to try and make her stay. He talked continuously, pleading and explaining, and his words overwhelmed her, like a string of waves breaking on her head. She lost all of their meaning. Margaret found herself demanding details, where Daniel had taken the woman and what they had done, anything she could picture and hold on to. In the end, though, the truth—the brand of wine they drank and the spot on the couch where the other woman sat—didn't help Margaret. Those images became as vivid as her own memories, and they haunted her. It was like she'd been scraped raw, inside and out.

Margaret stared across the parking lot at the wrecked station wagon, then started her engine. The Buick hadn't gotten far up the street. She strapped on her seat belt and hit the gas.

Before she knew it, Margaret was only two cars behind the Buick and gaining. Speed blurred everything in her peripheral vision. The hot air rushing in through the windows buffeted her skin. Margaret couldn't believe what she

was doing, that she was actually chasing the person. Who knew what they might do? She wouldn't let herself think that far. She ran the scene in the parking lot back to herself only to find that she'd totally forgotten about the teenager in the dumpster and why she'd been waiting for him in the first place.

After the robbery, Margaret felt as though she'd just been awakened out of a deep sleep. Every noise was shrill, excessive. The sun was too much for her eyes. She thought she could feel every thread in her clothes and the weight of air on her head. The hard, new edges of the world only made her feel more out of place. She missed her old town, if only because it was thoroughly familiar. People used to recognize her when she went to buy coffee or pick up a newspaper. Her friends were unable to make the long trip to visit, and even after a few months Margaret had barely met anyone in the new city. The move had begun to seem more like a step down than a fresh start.

One of the cars separating Margaret from the blue Buick turned onto a side street. She flashed her brights at the van in front of her, then it changed lanes, clearing the way. Margaret gunned the engine and laid on her horn for a full minute. There were other cars on the road alongside her, but she didn't bother to check if anyone was staring. She didn't care if they were.

The Buick showed no signs of slowing. Margaret tailed closely for another mile. She was anxious to see what would happen. She wanted to know what she would do. She wasn't sure. Fence posts were hurtling by, and the weeds behind them, which had been burned to blond by the sun, blurred into a yellow glow. Margaret took a deep breath and leaned into the steering wheel like she was driving through a snowstorm.

The Buick finally slowed and pulled onto the shoulder near a field. Dust rose behind its tires. The mangled, unhinged fender kept swinging after the car had come to a stop. Margaret threw her car into park, causing her wheels to grumble against the dirt. She tossed off her seat belt and sent it reeling backwards, thinking only of the faceless thief carrying her furniture away in the night.

As Margaret sprang out of her car, a series of possibilities came to her like headlines: Woman's Body Found on Side of the Road; Woman Hit by Car. Margaret knew that her thin and unimposing body probably would not match

or threaten whoever was inside, so she grabbed her purse and held it in front of her as though it concealed a gun. That was all she could think of, and, like all she had done so far, it seemed somehow reasonable.

Margaret approached the Buick slowly, her footfalls audible on the gravel. When she got to the driver's window, Margaret saw a pair of hands raised in surrender. The hands belonged to a woman in her seventies with a narrow head and short, tightly permed hair. The woman's blouse hung off her bony shoulders and was tucked into a pleated skirt. She looked up at Margaret

fearfully and asked, "Are you with the police?"

"No," Margaret said. "Not really."

The woman frowned, confused. "If you're not with the police, then what do you want?"

"I saw you," Margaret said. "I saw what you did."

"I don't know what this is all about, but. . . ." She let the sentence trail off, though her expression gave her away.

"Yes you do," Margaret declared. Her voice sounded odd to her, like an angry child's. "You hit that car in the parking lot, then you ran. I was there."

"I don't have to listen to this nonsense. I'm leaving."

Margaret couldn't let the woman leave. "Wait," she shouted, pretending to take hold of the imaginary gun.

The woman froze, apparently believing that she indeed had one. Margaret was unsure of what to say next, but unable to move.

The woman touched her keys and Margaret forced her hand deeper into her purse, saying, "Hey. Stop it. Take the keys out and put them on the seat."

"You're not with the police. You can't—"

Margaret pointed the imaginary gun at the woman.

"All right. All right. Please, just don't hurt me," the woman said, removing the keys from the ignition, then placing them on the passenger seat. She was afraid now. "I just don't know what all the fuss is over."

"What you did is illegal. It's against the law."

"I was going to go back."

"Then why were you going in the opposite direction?"

"Well, what are you going to do, put me under citizen's arrest?"

"No," Margaret said slowly, and the woman drew back. Then Margaret realized how menacing she sounded. That wasn't the effect she was going for, but she was too nervous to take her hand out of her purse. Her wallet was digging into her wrist, but she didn't dare shift it. Her shirt, which was already soaked through with sweat, was sticking to her skin. With the sun beating down on her, the wet material felt like a hand on her back.

"Look, I'm sorry, but I didn't mean to hit that car," the woman said. "I pushed the wrong pedal. It was a mistake. That's all."

"The wrong pedal?" Margaret couldn't believe her ears.

"I said it was an accident."

"Exactly. That's why insurance companies call it that. Has this happened before? I mean, do you choose the wrong pedal on a regular basis?"

The woman put her hand to her chest, insulted. "My Lord, no. Never. I don't drive that often."

"Do you *have* a license?"

"Yes, I do have license, thank you very much. It's just that my husband was the one who usually drove."

With that, the woman's face changed, her expression darkened. She looked tired, almost puzzled. Margaret instantly realized that the woman's husband must have died.

"But I didn't know what to do," the woman pleaded. "I saw what a mess that car was after I hit it, and I just drove away. I don't know why. I don't even know where I am now. I'm just driving, and I don't know where."

The woman was talking to Margaret, but she seemed to be speaking to herself. She gazed at the dashboard and put her fingers to her mouth, stunned by her own confession.

Margaret took her hand out of her purse. The blood that had been rushing through her body seemed to come to a full stop. She hadn't considered the possibility that the woman wouldn't know why she left until she said so, the same way Margaret couldn't conceive of being robbed until she saw the dust rings and the wear marks left on her carpet after her things had been stolen.

The road in front of them was clear, but when Margaret looked back, there

was a patrol car coming toward them. The woman saw it in her rearview mirror and gasped. She turned to Margaret with plaintive eyes. There was no time for Margaret to get back into her car.

The patrol car coasted to a stop, and the officer on the passenger side rolled down his window. Margaret could feel the cool air from the air conditioner. "Flat tire?" the officer asked.

Neither Margaret nor the woman answered.

"Is there a problem, ladies?"

Margaret leaned back, putting her body in front of the crumpled corner of the woman's car. She could feel the officer following her with his eyes. The woman was silent, a stiff figure at the edge of Margaret's vision.

"No, sir," Margaret said. "I was giving this lady directions. She was lost. But I straightened her out. She knows where she's going now."

The officer studied them for a minute. Standing there between him and the woman's damaged car, it became clear to Margaret that she would never get back her chairs or her necklaces or the tiny television she had saved her money to buy. And she would never know who took them. The hazy face of the thief that she kept in her mind disappeared like a soap bubble bursting midair, then all that was left was the dull impression that she was missing something.

"All righty then," the officer said, raising his window. "You two have a good day now."

"Thank you, sir," the woman said, visibly relieved.

The patrol car pulled away, and Margaret stepped back from the Buick. As she did so, a string of cars shot past her, sending gusts of wind through her hair and clothes. She shut her eyes, but she knew that the woman was watching her, the same way she had watched the boy in the dumpster, waiting for the moment when she would be able to leave.

"I suppose I should thank you," the woman said, though she still sounded worried that Margaret would turn her in. "What are you going to do now?" she asked.

Margaret didn't answer. She kept her eyes closed and listened as the sound of the speeding cars was replaced by the low buzz of insects in a nearby field. She was going to get in her car. She was going to drive away.

2002

BACON ON THE BEACH

from American Standard, selected by Elizabeth Hardwick

John Blair

He walks gingerly out into the water, feeling for broken glass. Mud squeezes up cool between his toes. When the water is chest deep, he pushes up from the bottom muck out into the lake. He aims for a yellow porch light on the far shore and starts swimming, plowing through the chilly water in a slow freestyle.

Halfway across, he turns over onto his back, breathing hard against the cottony wetness of the air. He feels tight all over but not crampy.

This late, all he can see of his neighbors is the occasional flash of a car's headlights as someone pulls into a driveway or the bitter blue flicker of a television, far off, framed in a window.

Winter is short in this part of Florida, though the March air is still crisp sometimes at night. The chill keeps people inside, which is good. Only once, as far as he knows, has anyone noticed him out in the water. He had made it to the far shore and turned back when he heard voices in the dark. Two people, a man and a woman, had stood up from the matted Bermuda grass of the lawn and peered through the darkness at him.

"Nutria, or big damn catfish," a man's voice had said, very distinct in the clear night air.

He was a mystery to them then, disconnected and maybe a little frightening. It was a great sensation.

Tonight he stops thirty yards out from the far shore of the lake and treads water. Somewhere beyond the first row of houses, the ones on the lake, someone turns up headbanger music loud enough that he can feel its beat inside the water around him. It plays that way for twenty or thirty seconds, then it's turned suddenly back down. He can hear voices, then the flat, high sound of laughter echoing across the water.

Kids. Some of the college students who rent the duplexes farther back from the lake. The development is only a mile or so from the university. When he had first moved in, he'd resented them and their music and the way they roared down the streets in their daddies' BMWs, running down dogs and making pests of themselves. Now, somehow, the frantic sound of their music seems comfortable.

He takes a deep breath, letting the air buoy him up so that he floats on his back. When he exhales the rusty smell of the water through his nose he has to flutter his arms a bit to keep his chest and face above water. The water is just warm enough that a thin, smoky haze rises from it into the cooler night air.

He floats that way for a long time, listening for the occasional sound from the faraway world of the human. Cats yowl somewhere, mating. He feels detached and serene.

When he finally eases back over and starts to swim slowly toward his own porch light, the moon has begun to rise, almost full, ponderous and flat on the horizon beyond the roofs. He feels enormously comfortable, and he has to fight the urge to roll back over and lie face up on the water and just drift until he falls asleep.

* * *

Three weeks before she left, his wife had suddenly decided that his son needed a dog. Jack thinks about this, wading through the last thirty feet of water before the edge of his backyard. The bottom is mucky and soft and he keeps stubbing his toes on cypress roots.

"He's a boy," she had said. "Boys need dogs when they're twelve. It'll give him someone to order around. Someone to bitch about his parents to."

That Saturday they drove to the Orange County SPCA and adopted a beagle/basset hound mix puppy. Lucy had wanted to call it "bagel."

"Get it?" she had asked. "Basset-beagle. Bagel."

"Jay, what do you want to call it?" Jack had asked his son.

Jay had shrugged, not wanting to get between his mother and his father. "I don't know yet."

"It needs a name," Lucy had said, becoming impatient. "You can't just say 'dog' all the time. 'Come here, dog.'"

Jay had sighed and rolled his eyes. His mother was always impatient or angry. Or his father was.

"I don't care," he had said. "Call him what you want to, I don't care."

For three days they had called the puppy "dog." Jay had finally named him "Hoover," because he always had his hound dog nose down in the carpet, searching for the lost and forgotten bits they had dropped there. When Lucy left Jack she left Hoover, too. He found out about it when he woke one morning to find her dumping clothes into a Hefty sack. He sat up and she walked out of the room.

Look at it this way, he told himself. When your wife leaves you, it's really a sort of beginning. The world is now livid with possibility. At six-thirty in the morning, in the dimness of his bedroom, it didn't sound convincing.

He lay back on the bed and listened to the sounds of Lucy's packing, the bang and rattle of her leave-taking. The sheets smelled musty. Lucy had been sleeping in the den, on a futon, for over a year. He'd been doing his own laundry for somewhat more than a year.

He could hear Hoover scratching and whining at the door of Jay's bathroom. Lucy had locked him up in there.

Ah, damn, he thought.

"I'm going now," Lucy said on the next pass through.

"I gathered."

"Jay's coming with me."

"Well," he said. "I guess I thought as much."

She looked at him for a long minute without saying anything.

"Is that it?" he asked.

Her jaw tightened. "You're damned right it is." She strode out of the room, jewelry box in hand.

"What about the dog?" Jack yelled after her.

"What about him?"

"He's Jay's, isn't he?"

"My mother doesn't want him in her house."

He got out of the bed and caught up with her as she was trying to open the door to the garage without dropping the jewelry box or the pair of pumps she had picked up with two fingers of her other hand, each finger inside a heel.

"Well, what the hell am I supposed to do with him?"

She managed to get the knob turned and pushed through the door with her shoulder. "Be original," she said without turning her head. "Take care of him."

He went back to Jay's room and let Hoover out of the bathroom. Hoover cowered and slinked out, looking as if he thought he had been locked up as punishment. Jack patted him reassuringly. He felt quite calm.

"Old son, you don't know what a shitty turn your life has just taken," he told the dog.

On impulse, he unbuckled Hoover's collar, with its clattering rabies tag and dog license. He made it to the front door with the collar in hand just as Lucy was starting the big Chevy Suburban they'd bought last year.

She saw him coming, and he could tell by the way her eyes narrowed that she was considering roaring off before he could get a chance to talk to Jay. Either that or she was considering running him down.

Jay rolled down his window as Jack came up. He looked a little scared, Jack thought. Probably of me. Probably thinks his old dad is going to do something insane and violent, like the dads on the news who go berserk and murder their families with shotguns before blowing their own collectively addled brains out.

Summoned like a genie by the thought, a seductively violent impulse

grabbed him for a second before he could shake it off. Jay's eyes went a little wide, and Jack thought he must have sensed it.

He tried to be reassuring, but standing in his underwear in the steamy Florida morning, he felt conspicuous and threatening. He jingled the collar in his hand, feeling foolish, wondering what maudlin impulse had made him think Jay might want a memento of the dog he had to leave behind.

"I'll come visit," Jack told him.

"No," Lucy had said, without looking over at him.

"You can't keep me from seeing him," he said, talking across Jay. Jay closed his eyes, squeezing them shut.

"I'll bring him here."

"When?"

"I don't know. On weekends. Sundays."

"How often?

"I don't know." There was an edge of hysteria in her voice, which Jack felt the need to ignore.

"You're going to have to be more specific than that, sweetheart."

She slammed the gear lever into reverse and he jumped back to save his bare toes as the tires barked and the Suburban bumped out of the driveway.

"Great fucking move!" he yelled.

She jerked the truck into drive and peeled away down the blacktop, the tires screaming. He watched until it disappeared into the blinding distance of white-stuccoed ranch style houses.

Then he threw the dog collar after her. Across the street, his neighbor stared out at him from his living room window. The collar rang and clattered across the pavement, sounding like Christmas bells.

* * *

A wind picked up while he was swimming and now it blows through in anxious little gusts. The wet swimsuit clings and drools ice water down his legs. Hoover is standing expectantly by the door when he gets to the porch, doing the dance he does to let Jack know he needs to go.

Jack lets him out and stands shaking by the door while Hoover trots out

and sniffs around the landscape timbers Lucy put in around the clumps of caladium.

"Do your business," Jack says to the dog. Hoover nuzzles a cypress knee.

"Now, dammit."

Hoover looks up and watches him, stupid and willful. Something swells up into Jack's chest like a breath of live steam. He takes a step toward the dog, and Hoover cowers away.

Jack rushes up and grabs him by the scruff of the neck and holds him belly-first against the base of a scrawny redbud tree. The dog whines and struggles and it is everything Jack can do to keep from balling up his fist and punching him, very hard. He wants to hurt him. He wants it very badly, the relief tangible and waiting, just on the other side of violence.

He lets Hoover go and the dog runs down to the edge of the water and squats there, looking back, whining and beating the muck with his tail, all submission and love.

"Christ," Jack says. He's bitten the inside of his cheek. He can taste the rusty flatness of the blood.

"Fucking, fucking dog." Calm down, he tells himself. There's no reason for this. For just an instant he can imagine Lucy there, in his face, telling him *control yourself, asshole*.

"It's not my fault," he tells her, but all of her contempt and a dose of his own hangs in the air like a stink.

* * *

The next morning he goes out into the too-bright Florida morning to get the newspaper from the driveway. It's already getting hot outside, the air over the street starting to crinkle and crawl in the distance. Hoover comes out with him and snuffles happily in the grass.

The paper is there once again, in its clean plastic bag, though he stopped paying for it two months ago. Somewhere, he thinks, there is a computer racking up points against me, just waiting. An almost pleasant needle of paranoia shivers though the top of his spine.

Noah, his neighbor across the street, looks up at Jack from the azaleas in

his side yard. Jack waves and Noah waves back. Jack picks up the paper and shuffles back inside, feeling Noah's eyes on his back.

He remembers Hoover just as he closes the door. He opens it again and Hoover is already across the street, squatting in Noah's grass. Noah watches him, then glares across the street at Jack. Jack holds his hands palm up near his shoulders to signal What Can I Do Now?

Hoover finishes. Jack whistles and the dog trots back from the fatted green of Noah's lawn to the burned out brown of Jack's.

"Get over here," Jack says to him as he crosses the pavement, putting some anger in his voice for Noah's sake. Then he calls out, "Sorry." Noah shakes his head.

Hoover comes in and Jack closes the door. He can see Noah through the fist-sized, cut-glass window set at eye-level into one of the door panels. He looks at Hoover's shit, then he looks at Jack's house, expecting him, he guesses, to come trotting out with a newspaper to scoop the mess up.

"Guess again, pal." Hoover whines and wags his rear end, thinking Jack is talking to him. "You did fine," Jack tells him.

Noah disappears for a long moment, then comes back dragging a hose. He opens the nozzle and uses the stream to blast the feces off his lawn and out into the street. When he shuts the water off, his grass glistens in the sunlight as if it is strewn with tiny shards of broken glass.

* * *

Hoover's whining wakes him. He stands by the front door, waiting for Jack to let him out. He thinks about Noah, and leads the dog through the kitchen to the back.

He makes a cup of coffee by pushing a filter into a colander and running hot water from the tap over the grounds. It's weak and bitter and he pours a little milk in to cut the taste. Then he joins Hoover out in back.

The afternoon sun is high and blazing. He squints against the rhythmic silver flashes of light coming back from the water. Hoover is down by the dock, drinking from the lake. A breeze puffs up from off the water, smelling like mud and cocoa butter.

Two of the neighbors' kids, both girls, are standing on the end of the dock. As he watches, they dive in and begin to swim out toward a platform about fifty yards out, anchored there by his neighbor to the immediate south. Jack settles into a lawn chair left under one of the cypresses and watches the girls swim.

One, the youngest, dog-paddles intently. The other girl, maybe eight or nine, swims with considerably more grace, ducking under the water and swimming a few yards before she pops again to the surface. Her tank suit is a steely blue color that makes her look like a skinny porpoise in the water. She makes it out to the platform and heaves herself up on top. The boards must be hot, because she dances around a bit before sitting down on the edge, her feet in the brown water.

She sees Jack and waves. He recognizes her. She had been one of Jay's playmates for a while, until he decided he no longer wanted to associate with girls, especially not younger ones. Jack waves back. She starts to splash water up on the platform with one hand to cool it off and he is amazed that it had seemed so cold only twelve hours or so before.

He whistles at Hoover and the dog raises his head and looks at him, but doesn't come.

He settles deeper into the chair and drinks his coffee.

The air is charged with steam. It rolls up over the lawn from the lake, to settle over him like one of the prickly green-wool army quilts his grandmother had used on his bed when he was a kid. It feels comfortable and personal, as if it has come off the lake just to spread itself across him. He feels the sweat popping out all over, and he wishes he had thought to bring a beer out with him. As it is, it just seems too much effort to drag himself back up from the chair and into the dark and lonely air-conditioning.

Hoover wanders over after a while and settles down under the chair, his tongue lolling. Jack closes his eyes and tries to force a daydream about a girl with red hair he saw yesterday in the grocery. It doesn't gel, and he lets it go. Someone cranks up an outboard, and Jack listens to the throaty sputter of the motor counterpoint itself against the shrieking of the girls as they chase each other around on the diving platform.

Suburban bliss. Light splinters up from the lake. Hoover pants and the world hums with heat-pump fans.

* * *

Hoover whines and Jack wakes from a doze to find the older little girl standing between him and the lake. Hoover trots over and she kneels down so he can lick her face.

"Hi," she says.

"Hi back," he says.

"You sit out here a lot, don't you?"

"Not all that much. Just sometimes."

"My aunt Jean is going to get married."

Jack thinks about it. "Well, that's nice."

"My mom wants to know if you want to come."

He takes off his sunglasses. "Your mom wants me to come to your aunt's wedding?"

"Aunt Jean's getting married in our back yard. We just found out. My mom said to tell you that she's sorry she couldn't invite you in person herself, but she's getting everything ready and all. She said to tell you she's inviting the Garcias and the How-weirds, too, and some other people that live around here."

"The Garcias and the who?"

"The Howards. My mom calls them the How-weirds. 'How weird are the How-weirds?'"

It takes him a second to remember that Howard is Noah's last name. "Does your mom know my wife can't come?"

"Uh-huh. I think so." She squints at him. "Aunt Jean has to get married. She's going to have a baby. Her boyfriend's in college."

"Oh," he says. "When is this wedding?"

"Tomorrow, at six-thirty."

He thinks for a minute. "Tell your mother I'll try to come but I might not be able to make it. Tell her I said thank you, OK?"

"All right. Can your dog come, too? I don't think my mom'd mind if he came, too. Probably she wouldn't."

"I don't know. Maybe."

She clucks her tongue and Hoover jumps up, trying to get to her face. "I bet he likes cake."

"I'll bet he does, too. What's your name?"

She squints up at him. "Margaret Henson. My mom calls me Maggie."

"Maggie Henson. I like that. Maggie, I had a little girl like you once."

"Where'd she go?"

"She died." He looks at this little girl and says, "Somebody hit her with a car while she was riding her bicycle."

She thinks about it. "Wow. That's too bad."

"Yeah," he says, "it is." He is amazed at the lie he's just told, and mystified at why he's told it. He looks at this child, squatting with his dog pressed against her thin chest as she tries to hold him still and he nips at her pale and girl-simple face, and he wants for no real reason at all to cry.

"I guess you miss her, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess I do."

"Where's your little boy?" she asks.

"He moved away, to live with his mom. They live in St. Petersburg, now."

"Oh." She gives her attention back to Hoover. Then someone calls out and she looks up. Her mother is standing by the lake below their house. She's holding a cordless phone to her ear. He waves and she waves back. "I got to go. See you later, Mr. Lewis."

"Bye, Maggie," he says. He whistles to Hoover to get him to stay and Hoover wriggles in a circle, trying to watch Jack and the little girl at the same time, to see if Jack might relent and let him go after her.

"Come on, dammit," he tells the dog, and leads the way back up to the house. He opens the door and Hoover scoots into the dark kitchen, giving him a nervous glance as he goes by.

* * *

He sleeps through the early part of the afternoon and wakes up to the weighty, astricted grumble of thunder. He goes to the front door and watches the clouds roll in, blunt and gray. The first few heavy drops slap themselves flat on the concrete of the driveway, making perfect dark coins. The storm seems to hesitate for a second, the wind puffing in damp and fragrant from across the street, only slightly cooler than the air it displaces. Then the bottom drops out of the clouds and the rain comes down in black, drowning walls of water. The gutters fill in an instant and overflow. Water splatters up from the stoop onto the carpet where he stands. He steps out into it and shuts the door behind him.

At first it is like standing in a waterfall. The rainwater plasters his hair down and runs into his eyes. For a few seconds it is hard to breathe and the drops thunder like a blizzard of tiny fists pounding down on his head and the ground and the roof of the house.

He walks out into the middle of the yard. It feels extraordinary, intense and a little frightening, as if he is being softly thrashed by someone who might not know when to stop.

Then the torrent slackens, a little at first, then falling off suddenly into a warm steady shower. After a few minutes of that it simply quits.

He stands breathless and grinning at himself out in the muddy center of his lawn and listens to the rush of water start to taper off in the gutter spouts. One of them is loose and it rattles noisily in its stream. Thunder grumbles in a sodden and stubborn way off in the distance.

He wipes his face with his hands and looks around the neighborhood. Everyone else is still tucked away, weathering the storm. He walks out to the street, enjoying the way the muck squinches up between his toes. The storm drains suck and sputter with authority. The pavement steams and he wonders if, behind the water roar, it had hissed like an iron when the first sheet of rain had hit it.

Across the street Noah stares at him through his kitchen window. He waves and Noah closes the blinds.

How weird are the How-weirds? Certainly no weirder, he is sure, than Mr. Lewis across the street.

* * *

His neighbor's backyard has been decked out in yards of white crepe paper, strung from porch to water oak to palm tree. The dock is decorated too, and someone—Maggie, probably—has swum out to the diving platform and strung more white crepe paper and paper flowers around its edges. He wonders how she kept it all dry.

Maggie's mother flitters around her guests, seating people and ferrying their wedding gifts to a card table set up for the purpose. He feels bad about not having a gift, but she doesn't seem to notice that he's come empty-handed.

The wedding itself is quick and efficient. As soon as everyone seems seated, the music begins—Chopin played on an electric piano by the hostess. Then, as soon as everyone is sitting straight and paying attention, she drops into the march and Maggie and another little girl he doesn't recognize come down the aisle between the rows of folding chairs, tossing handfuls of flower petals from what look like Easter baskets. Then the bride follows, walking alone and wearing a white dress that doesn't look much like a wedding dress. If she is indeed pregnant, the dress hides it well.

The groom stands waiting for her beside the minister, looking decent enough, young and clean cut, wearing a black tux. The minister says his words, the couple kisses, and it is over.

Afterwards three or four of the groom's friends grab him and threaten to throw him in the lake. The bride stands to one side, surrounded suddenly by her sister and her sister's guests, all wishing her well. He wanders up to the porch, where a bar and a buffet have been set up on folding tables. Noah from across the street is already there, loading up a plate. He blinks, then says, "Hello."

"Hi, Noah," Jack says. Noah seems embarrassed. He waves his paper plate a bit. "Nice wedding," he says.

As the evening settles into gray, everyone brings folding chairs down to the concrete pad near the lake and eats together, balancing the paper plates on napkin-covered knees. The bride and groom duck into the house and come back a while later in shorts and T-shirts. Both T-shirts have the same logo, a pink pig, the size of a fist, lying on his stomach on a brown streak of air-

brushed sand, sunglasses perched on his snout. Printed underneath the logo is the legend, "Bacon on the Beach." The newlyweds hold hands but don't look much at each other.

When Jack is finished he takes his plate off to the trash barrel and drops it in. Noah is there, standing behind the barrel, one hand in a pocket, one holding a drink, watching everyone else eat now that he's through.

"Nice wedding," he says again.

"I noticed," Jack says, then thinks he ought to be friendlier, even to Noah, given the nature of the event. "Your wife couldn't make it?"

"No." He looks at Jack and takes a drink of his cocktail. "No, she couldn't."

"Oh," Jack says. He's noticing for the first time how really old Noah is. He's always assumed he's late fortyish, seeing him working in his yard. He looks older now. His face is leathery and he has a pencil mustache cut straight across his upper lip, a forties detective movie-looking thing.

Noah feels he has to explain. "She isn't too good out with people anymore. Mostly, we stay home."

"Oh," Jack says again. "I'm sorry to hear that."

He shrugs. "It's OK. We get along."

The post-sunset gray of the sky has darkened into blue-black. The concrete pad sits in a scalloped pool of light from the floodlights. Noah follows as Jack walks back to his chair. He pulls a vacant chair up and settles in next to Jack. The moon has started to rise on one side, still a thin sliver, needling up through the trees with one narrow pale horn. The water below picks up all the light and breaks it into pieces, jelly-shaking it around on the little ripples.

People have started to drift away from the reception. He notices that the bride and groom in their pig T-shirts are gone. Maggie Henson comes bouncing up from the lake into the light, wearing her steely blue tank suit. Her hair is dry, though, and he assumes she hasn't been in the water. She sees him and comes over. She gives Noah a little wave and he nods to her but keeps talking.

"Where's your dog?"

"He's at home."

"How come?"

"Oh," he says, "I don't think he likes weddings much, after all."

"Oh," she says, not sounding particularly disappointed. She pulls a chair up beside him, on the side away from Noah, then sits in it with a little backwards hop that makes the aluminum legs jerk grittily an inch or two across the concrete.

"Thinking of taking a swim?" he asks.

She leans forward in her chair, letting her legs swing back and forth underneath it. "I was."

"You changed your mind?"

"No. My mom won't let me. I was going to go out and get the flowers off the float, but she said I could do it tomorrow, because it's dark now."

He thinks about his own excursions into the midnight lake. "Makes sense to me," he tells her.

"What's that?" Noah asks, leaning out from his chair. Jack explains.

"Christ Almighty, I would hope not," Noah says. He shakes a finger at Maggie, the way an old maid schoolteacher might in a TV movie. "Last thing you need to be doing is swimming in that lake, especially when it's already night out."

"Why's that?" someone asks, a heartbeat before Jack does, her tone considerably less sarcastic than his would have been. She's a young woman, early twenties, Jack thinks, and he wonders if she is a friend of the bride.

Noah holds up one finger to say "wait a minute," then stands up from his chair and walks without another word off into the darkness between the Henson's house and the next.

"How weird are the How-weirds?" Jack says to Maggie. She giggles. He sees that her mother has positioned herself up near the porch and is saying goodnight and shaking hands as people leave. She seems to be having a good time, smiling a lot.

Noah comes back, carrying what looks to be a spotlight and a big, brick-sized battery. He sits down and starts hooking the light's wires up to the battery's terminals.

"This is a Q-beam," he says when he's finished. He holds it up to show them, a lens case about six inches across on top of a pistol-grip handle that

trails a coil of wire. "Quartz-halogen, brighter'n hell. Real powerful. Now look."

They look. He points the spotlight at the lake and snaps it on. A bright, solid-looking beam jumps out and becomes an oblong on the water beyond the dock. He holds the spotlight low, down below his knees, and sweeps it out across the water like a searchlight, as if he's looking for something. After a second he holds it still.

"See?" he says.

"What?" Jack squints out to where the light is pointed. Then he sees it. Two pinpoints of red, maybe a hundred yards out, sparkling in the spotlight's beam like tiny, faraway car taillights.

"See 'em?" Noah asks again.

"Yes," the girl who might be a friend of the bride says.

"Yeah, sure," Jack says. "What are they?"

"'Gator eyes."

"You're not serious."

"No kidding," the girl says. She sounds intrigued. "A real alligator?"

"Yup. As real as they come. They're all out there." He plays the light out across the water again, sweeping from left to right. Jack squints, watching. He counts six separate sets of eyes glinting back at them. Most of them are way out, scattered along the far shore, but some of them are closer, little demon eyes glaring back.

"Those are just the ones looking at us," Noah says.

Jack feels a shrinking tingle in his bowels. "I didn't think about 'gators being out here, in the city almost. There weren't that many around when I was a kid, not even in the boonies. Not that I remember."

"Those suckers are everywhere now, bud. Big lizards all over the place, like in a movie, since they got protected back in the seventies. Or sixties. I don't remember. Lots of 'gators around now—people hittin' 'em with their cars out on the freeway, too, like speed bumps. I've seen 'em. They don't stay out there long, though, the dead ones. People pick them up, take them home. Alligator tail's like gourmet food, these days. Fifteen, twenty bucks a pound."

"Gourmet road kill," the girl says. "I like it."

"'Gators don't mess with people usually," Jack says. He's rationalizing, trying to make himself feel better. It's true, though, at least he thinks it is. Still, his skin crawls at the thought. How close has he come to one of those things out there, late at night, thinking he was alone? He has vision of a mouth, wide like one of those big machines that crushes cars but full of teeth, pulling him down.

"No," Noah concedes, "they don't. Not full grown people. But I'm damned if I'd let a kid out there. And dogs. They eat dogs. I'd watch that one of yours, boy." He wags a finger at Jack.

"I'll do that," Jack says. He feels a sudden rise of irritation at Noah. It isn't that he knows things Jack doesn't and should, having grown up not sixty miles from Noah's smooth, green, overindulged front lawn. It's that he is right and Jack is wrong again, or stupid, or worse. Jack thinks then that he must have known all along about the alligators, somewhere underneath. Maybe that had been one of the appeals of the swimming, the danger he knew about and didn't acknowledge. Now it is out there and he'll even have to be careful about letting Hoover take a shit too close to the water.

It doesn't matter. Noah is playing the spoiler, full of good advice and high-sentence, and what Jack really wants at the moment is to belt him one, just to shake up his smugness. Give it to him, right in the teeth. Polonius behind the curtain with a rapier stuck through his liver. Fucking know-it-all old man. He can feel the knot of muscle alongside his jaw spasm.

Maggie leans in close and whispers conspiratorially, "I've seen them before, the alligators. Sometimes they swim right by the float. Don't tell my mom."

The girl looks at Jack, her eyebrows raised, and laughs. "Can you beat it?" Her teeth look yellow in the light and glossy, like a row of corn.

He lets it go. He sits back in his chair. "No, I can't," he says, "not with a stick."

Noah makes a pass with the Q-beam again. Far out on the water red eyes light up and twinkle like malevolent little stars.

* * *

He's not as surprised, he thinks, as he ought to be when he wakes up and someone is in bed with him. She's lying on her side next to him, her head tucked under, and he has to lever himself up on an elbow, peel back the comforter and crane over her to see who she is: the girl from the wedding, asleep and achingly young on his bed, wearing the same Bacon on the Beach T-shirt the bride and groom had worn. She must have had it on under her blouse. He figures it's some sort of group thing with them, like gang colors.

He settles back and listens to the magnified quiet in the house, the tiny ticks and groans of clocks and things shifting and settling into themselves in darkness. Then he slips carefully out of the bed and goes into the bathroom. His swim trunks are on the towel rod inside the shower and they are dry and stiff when he pulls them on, balancing on one foot at a time on the slick, cool tile.

The dog bumps his tail against the wall when he comes into the kitchen and he hisses at him to keep quiet. He opens the door carefully and takes a deep breath. It's maybe three A.M., foggy outside, the air glowing a luminescent white. Everything is damp and clean smelling and loud with the sound of drops falling off of the trees onto the grass.

He wades slowly out into the water. The water is chillier than he'd expected. He launches himself out into it. He swims for a few minutes in a steady freestyle, warming up, feeling the blood start to flow. When he judges he's halfway across the lake, he flips over onto his back and drifts. The fog hangs low over the water, glowing slightly with the light from the city and the streetlights. Just the fog and the crisp sounds of his own movements in the water. Womblike, he thinks. No, not womblike. More like how he might imagine an afterlife, cool and dark and fertile with the punky smell of the lake water.

But even as he thinks that, he feels the terrible isolation of it. He lets his legs sink and treads water. All he can see is fog and darkness and he's a little unsure in which direction the house lies. It doesn't really matter, he knows. The lake is small; swim in any direction and he'll come up on shore pretty quickly. Still, it's an uncomfortable feeling. Noah's 'gators surround him in their hidden reptilian hunger, ready to pull him under. He's amazed that the

thought doesn't scare him much. He forces himself to recall the stories he's heard again and again, part of the suburban myth of a city where almost every neighborhood has some kind of lake. The skier who skied into a huge knot of mating water moccasins. The fisherman who fell out of his boat and got tangled in an old fishing line and struggled until he got so wrapped up in line and hooks that he couldn't swim and drowned. All bullshit, or mostly. Nothing's ever as bad as people make it out to be.

He takes a deep breath and then another, feeling his lungs fill.

Then he hears Hoover bark nearby, and a woman's voice singing the single broad syllable of his name in an unwavering, anxious soprano. The wedding girl, shivering, he imagines, thin and naked under her pig T-shirt. She must have woken, missed him. He must have left the door open. Hoover would've gone down to the water, looking for him, sniffing the grass. She keeps calling and he listens to her voice for a moment, cutting its clear way through fog. Her voice is a prayer on the water, an appeal to his solitude. He takes a slow stroke and turns so he's floating on his back, hidden in the lake's weedy ease. At the far end of the lake where the fog has started to rise, the stars seem to rumble through the horizon's thin blue lip. He imagines the girl on the shore waiting for him, thinking of him, her arms across her chest, holding herself unselfconsciously, as no one else will ever hold her.

"Hey," he calls out to her. His voice echoes strangely across the midnight water. She doesn't answer, but he hears sudden splashing and he thinks she has decided for some reason to join him out in the water. He waits, but it's Hoover who comes swimming up, paddling frantically, his narrow head just above the reflected flickering of the porch lights on the water's surface.

"Ah, hell," Jack says. He's thinking about the alligators again, and what a tempting mouthful Hoover must make, flailing away in the water. He swims hard toward the dog but Hoover veers away from him. Jack can feel his temper flare, but he reins it in and angles over to intercept the dog. He catches up and grabs Hoover by the scruff of the neck and accidentally shoves him under the water in the process. Hoover comes up twisting and yelping and it's everything Jack can do to keep a grip on the slippery, wet fur. He sidestrokes back toward the shore with the dog struggling hard both to swim and to break free.

When he reaches shallow water, Jack pitches the dog up toward the shore and Hoover lands with a splash a few feet out and scrambles up onto the grass, where he stops and shakes himself. Jack trudges up out of the lake after him, the mud sucking at his feet.

The girl is sitting on his lawn chair with her feet tucked up under her and her T-shirt stretched down over her knees.

"Weird," she says. Hoover runs up and jumps on her and she rubs his head and pushes him back down. When Jack walks up to her, he can see two brown muddy streaks from Hoover's paws across the picture of the pig on the front of her shirt.

"How weird are the How-weirds," Jack says.

"Huh?"

"Nothing," he tells her. She puts her feet down and the shirt slides up to her waist. She puts her hand out and he takes it and pulls her up out of the chair. She comes into his arms and he thinks that he doesn't even remember her name. He kisses her with something that's pretty close to desperation. She smells like beer and sex and sleep.

"Jesus, you're wet," she says. She bends her head back from him, holds him off a bit. "What were you doing out there?"

"Swimming with the 'gators," he tells her.

"I get it," she says, "I know what that's like."

He doesn't know what she means and then he thinks that he does. She's here with him, after all, taking the kind of chances that people probably shouldn't take. Hoover barks and Jack looks over his shoulder to see him down by the water again. He's looking out into the lake and Jack can feel the eyes out there, little and red and reptilian, watching for a chance. He shivers and says, "Hoover! Get back from there."

The girl whose name he doesn't even know says, "I'll bet you're freezing. She comes in close again and he can feel the warmth of her through her T-shirt. She puts her head against his chest. "Maybe we ought to go back in and warm you up."

He almost says *sure* and then he almost says *no thanks* but ends up saying nothing at all until the silence gets strange and uncomfortable and she shifts

in his arms to look up at him. He doesn't meet her eyes. He's thinking about being alone. He's thinking about how much he's going to miss swimming late at night, how in his heart he's already granted the lake to the alligators. He thinks, in a moment we'll go back inside. I'll go back and talk to this girl, ease her out of my house and my life. I'll go back in and keep on living the life I've been living.

He wants to tell this girl something, to warn her. But a cold breeze blows across his back and Hoover whines to be let back into the house. *It's not my fault,* he wants to say. He takes her hand, gently, the way he might take a daughter's hand if he had a daughter, to take her inside, sit her down, give her some good advice. *Be careful, watch for alligators, stay away from men like me.*

But he's not her father, and her hand is warm in his, and he guides her up the slope of the grass to the house. He opens the door and Hoover rushes in past them, his nails clicking madly on the tile.

"Guess he's glad to get back," Jack says.

"Well, it's scary out there," she says, and presses herself into his arms again, willing and soft in the dark kitchen.

"It's scary everywhere," he tells her.

"I'm not scared," she says, and he marvels at how lovely she is, how confident and young. When he pulls the T-shirt off over her head, he can feel the cold clamminess of the material where it has soaked up the lake water on his skin. He can smell the lake on her, transferred to her body from his own. It smells, he imagines, like the alligators do. He wants to do something crazy, drag her outside to the lake, make love to her in the water and the fetid, soft mud, in the glare of cold eyes everywhere, watching.

But he puts his hands on her hips and turns her. Then with his palm pressed against the warm reassurance of her backside, he guides her into the safe inner rooms of his home.

2003

SPEED-WALK

from Speed-Walk and Other Stories, selected by Rick Moody

Suzanne Greenberg

Two months after my wife, Becky, died, I went on my first speedwalking date. I followed behind Corrine and watched her thighs move. Tight and brown, they reminded me of roasted chicken legs. They made me hungry for a kind of take-out Becky used to bring home. I didn't know where to find it. I pumped my arms as I walked, the way I'd seen others do, so it looked, I hoped, as if I were hard at work.

When we got back to Corrine 's house, her daughter-in-law was bench-pressing her baby on the couch in the living room, both of them wearing bright orange T-shirts, the television on mute. We walked by them on our way to the patio, and for a moment the baby's fat diaper, with its comforting powder smell, passed in front of my face.

I followed Corrine through her shining kitchen out back to the hot tub. She sat on the wooden ledge and kicked her feet to an efficient, private beat. Everything exercise.

Still wearing my gym shorts, I lowered my body in and tried to convince myself that this was different than taking an actual bath together. I positioned myself so a jet was poised against my lower back. This felt not altogether pleasant, as if I were having a single, neglected tooth cleaned. Before Becky died, I never understood people who claimed they had simply ended

up somewhere or with someone or in some job, but now maybe I was starting to.

"You can bet they're not doing this in Chicago right now," Corrine said.

As I walked up the street toward my house, slowed down as I always was by the lump of hill, I could hear my seeing-eye dog barking in the living room. Twice a day, I had to clean the saliva off the window he barked onto. He jumped on me when I walked in, followed me until I shut the bathroom door against him, and whined as I showered off warm chlorine.

The dog was Becky's retirement project, but she died before she'd finished training him. Becky had always had an idea or two going, and without her around, I didn't seem to have any. In Chicago, she had taken a single class and come home and sponge-painted our entire kitchen purple. Our backyard was full of compost and tomato plants, and our thirty-eight-year-old daughter's first drawings were laminated and arranged on the wall of the den.

In California, she had just gotten started. Training the dog was it. The Guide Dog of America people had warned against getting too attached. "Let's just call him the dog for now," she'd said, rubbing him behind his ears. All our friends in Chicago had grandchildren, but our daughter wasn't even on her first marriage. Before Becky's urine had turned bright red, she'd set off with the dog down the street several times a day, his leash twisted short and tight around her hand.

After Becky died, the guide dog people decided they didn't want him back. At the volunteer luncheon in Sylmar, a Guide Dog of America official tapped me on the shoulder when I was in the middle of eating my peach cobbler, took me into the small blank room, in which moments earlier Becky's dog had been evaluated, and told me that the dog was ruined, and for a hundred dollars he was mine. The dog smiled up at me and offered his paw, the one trick I had taught him myself to amuse Becky. "Cute," the official said, "but completely useless."

* * *

When the doorbell rang, I turned down the Simon and Garfunkel record that I had taken to listening to during the day while I folded my laundry,

rinsed out the coffeepot, and generally padded around my little house as if I were trespassing. The music depressed and stirred me. I felt buoyant with suffering, part of a huge arc of human failure.

Corrine's daughter-in-law and her baby stood at my front door, their thin blond hair in high ponytails above their ears, their rounded bellies exposed between black gym shorts and yellow shirts that looked as if they had been peeled open in front like bananas. "Christ, I hate to bother you like this," the daughter-in-law said.

"I didn't know she could walk yet."

"Well, I am sort of helping her up a little," the daughter-in-law said, and I could see now how the baby's head was propped against her mother's knee.

"A-hoo," the baby said to me.

"She doesn't really talk yet either," the daughter-in-law said. "Hell, she's only thirteen months. What do people expect?"

I tried to remember what to expect at thirteen months. My own daughter was nearly middle-aged now. It was her Simon and Garfunkel record.

"She looks fine to me," I said.

"A-hoo," the baby said and pointed next to my leg. I looked down at the dog who put out his paw. The baby reached forward to take it and fell into my house.

"What am I thinking? Come in," I said. The baby crawled over to the couch, where she pulled herself up and gurgled at the dog who stayed by her side.

"Maybe he thinks the baby is another dog. He's not that quick," I said.

"Here's what I was wondering," Corrine's daughter-in-law said, still close enough to the entranceway to be neither completely in nor outside my house. "What would you think about giving us a ride to the mall?" I looked around for an excuse, but everything looked in order.

"Can you give me five minutes?"

* * *

On the seat next to me in the car, the baby bounced around on Corrine's daughter-in-law's lap. I remembered my own daughter loose in the backseat,

hopping from one window to the other, depending on the view, but weren't there laws now, complicated provisions about car seats and seat belts?

"Is she okay like that?" I said. The daughter-in-law waved her hand at me in a gesture of dismissal.

"What are we talking about here? Two, three miles?" She pulled down the visor and, while her baby bounced, examined her teeth in a mirror I didn't even know was there. Becky had always applied her makeup before we left the house and then left it alone.

Becky's seeing-eye dog sighed heavily in the backseat, as if commenting on the general dullness of things. The baby wouldn't stop crying until I agreed to take the dog along with us, and now I was stuck with him for the foreseeable future.

"We're Baby Spice," Corrine's daughter-in-law said to me, "in case you were wondering. You don't think it's a problem that the group broke up, do you?"

"Certainly not," I said, although I had no idea what she was talking about. I longed for nothing more than to be back in my quiet little house.

"A-hoo," the baby said to me.

"But you can call me Rose. Not Rosy, whatever you do. Man, I hate that."

The parking lot at the mall was crowded, despite the fact that it was Saturday and seventy degrees and sunny. Back in Chicago, if we had weather like this in the middle of February, everyone would be standing outside looking startled, as if jet planes had just landed on each of our front lawns.

"There's just the matter of the entrance fee now," Rose said to me as we walked through the lot, the baby squirming in her arms to touch the dog that I walked between us. I had the dog in full training harness, the way I always did when I had to take him somewhere dogs weren't normally allowed. I found there was no need to wear dark sunglasses. I'd simply give into a dazed fog I'd been fighting off since Becky's death, and no one ever asked me any questions. "But you can bet we'll be winning it back for you momentarily. You don't know what it means to me, a near-total stranger like you believing in me this way when him and his whole family don't."

Once, two weeks after Becky died, I came to this mall at eight A.M. on a

Tuesday for free coffee and donuts and to circle the perimeter before the stores opened with fellow senior citizens. Senior Day. The donuts were small and dirt brown, and everyone seemed already to belong to informal groups, and I didn't come back. Instead I began to wander my own new neighborhood, which is how I met Corrine, and which is how, I supposed, I was led into this very situation.

It turned out the entrance fee for the Mother-Daughter Look- Alike Contest Rose planned to enter was only twenty dollars, so I paid it, pretending to finger the money in my wallet as if finger-reading the denominations.

"Cool, Gramps," a teenage boy said to me. He handed Rose two white squares of cardboard with the number 68 printed on them in red. I helped her peel off the adhesive and centered one of the squares on her back.

"Mommy's putting wings on you, sweetie," Rose told the baby, who held onto my knee. "Stay still just a minute."

All around us were mothers and daughters, wearing matching numbers, straightening out each other's makeup and examining each other's teeth for pieces of food. Despite their matching hairdos and outfits, Rose 's baby looked more like the other babies than she did her mother. I picked out the mother-daughter set I thought would win: an adolescent girl and a woman in her late thirties who wore big skirts and red neckties and had the same wounded-looking, eager faces. Rose pulled the baby away from my leg and held her up in the air.

"We'll show that daddy and grandma of yours what's what," she said. Becky's dog pulled at his harness, and I told Rose I was going to take him for a walk and come back soon. I let him lead me away from the Mother-Daughter contest to the food court, where the smells were large and urgent and where the dog tugged harder. He sniffed at a garbage can, and a woman held her burrito away from her mouth and pointed at him to her friend.

"I thought they weren't supposed to do that," she said.

"Shh," her friend said. "Just because he's blind doesn't mean he can't hear."

"What did I say that was so terrible?" the other woman said, clamping down on her food.

Maybe they were sisters, not friends, I thought. I pulled the dog away

from the garbage can and slowly circled the edge of the food court until I found a smell that was so familiar I nearly sat down on the floor and wept. Instead I stood in line and waited for my turn. Behind me in line, someone whispered, "Their other senses are highly developed."

"I'll take a bucket of legs," I said when my turn came. I paid my money, stepped to the right, and was handed a white beach bucket full of roasted chicken legs. I found a spot at the end of a long table and sat down. The dog reached out his paw to me. I put a leg on the ground, and only after the dog had snatched it did I remember Becky's warnings about bone splinters. I had forgotten to order a drink, and it seemed too late for that now, so I ate just two legs and put the bones back in the bucket. I thought about Becky bringing home this chicken for me and how I was now going to bring it home for myself and how this wasn't the same thing at all.

I pulled the dog back out toward the area of the mall where the contest was being held. A tight circle had formed around the motherdaughters, but people moved apart to let us in. Two women with curly red hair and lots of gold-colored jewelry stepped into the center of the circle when their number was called out. They spun around in front of the judges in unison, then shook their wrists in the air as if their bracelets were tambourines. The crowd applauded and the dog barked. All around the inside of the circle were mother-daughter look-alikes, smiling hard at the judges who sat behind a long card table. I looked around for Rose and the baby but didn't see them. Then someone pulled at my hair. I turned around, and the baby said, "A-hoo." Rose said, "Ready to roll?"

Rose didn't talk as we walked through the parking lot, the baby tight against her body, and I thought about several different ways of asking her what had happened but thought better of each one of them. I put the bucket of chicken legs down on the seat between us and didn't say anything when, the baby on her lap, Rose dug in.

"Fine print, my ass," she finally said. "Who ever heard of disqualifying someone because they couldn't turn around on their own in front of the judges yet? At least they should have given me my money back."

My money, I thought, but I didn't say anything.

"Slow down here for a minute, would you?" Rose said.

I couldn't imagine driving any slower than I already was, as worried as I was about the baby loose on her mother's lap in the front seat, so I pulled over by the side of the road in front of a strawberry stand."

Hey, Rosy! Is that you?" the man behind the stand called out.

"I said 'slow down,' not 'stop,'" Rose said, but she was already putting the baby down and pushing the car door open with her pink sneaker.

I put the baby on my lap and let her pretend to drive while her mother leaned over the rows of strawberries and talked. She got back into the car and slipped a piece of paper into her pocketbook. "High school," she said. "At least I didn't marry *him*."

When we pulled up to the front of their house, Corrine was watering the front yard in her bathing suit. She started to wave at us and then stopped and frowned and turned the water off. I threw a leg in the back for the dog, dumped the rest out on the street, and handed the baby the bucket. "For the beach," I said.

"A-hoo," the baby said, reaching for the bucket's handle and grabbing the air next to it instead.

"I mean, she just turned one," Rose said to me, taking the bucket. "What do people expect?"

I watched them walk to the front door and then drove my car down the hill and around the block, the long way to my house. I pulled into my driveway and shut off the engine. The dog sighed heavily in the backseat, his chicken leg devoured. Tomorrow morning, I'd bring the DustBuster out to the car and clean up bone chips that he missed, but for now I stared at my little house, this place where, after so much time, I had ended up living.

2004

BRING YOUR LEGS WITH YOU

from Bring Your Legs with You, selected by Michael Chabon

Darrell Spencer

My brain is not wired for chess, so the Tuesdays me and my dad Gus got together he punked me good, game after game. "One move at a time," he told me. "Don't be counting your chickens." All that talk about calculating ten, fifteen plays ahead, Gus declared it crap. Be his guest, you're such a pistol. You're such a genius, you can calculate infinity? Because that's the number of plays is possible. It ain't like making doughnuts. "Go ahead, ace," he said to me. "Tell me where I'll be one play from now." Trouble was I bogged down on the board, and he took me apart.

Tonight he cooked linguini and tossed a seven-layer mile-high salad. He baked breads. Poured wine, a port, and me and Gus, the two of us in front of the TV we cheered on the Utah Jazz, loving their game, the many ways they embarrassed the showboating Lakers, all the time Gus talking about the years he was acquainted with the mobsters who ran Las Vegas when Grandpa Jersey owned one mortuary rather than the twenty Gus now let run themselves here in the city. Story I hadn't heard before was how Grandpa Jersey chewed cigarettes when the cops brought in a body they found in the desert, one that had been stewing there a week or two in a shallow grave. Tobacco killed the stench. Allowed him to breathe. Grandpa Jersey laid out the prob-

lem for an air conditioning guy named Phillips, who designed a system that pulled fresh air down across the body and out of the room. Phillips got rich. Grandpa Jersey caught his coattails and bought land cheap out near Red Rock and along Paradise Road. Turned nickels into gold.

Gus grabbed a bottle of wine, studied its label, mustered up a face, and said, "Portugal. Supposed to be what the gods imbibe." He set the bottle aside. Said, "Tommy, you want a real drink? Whiskey do you? Bourbon?" I shook him off. On the TV, the Jazz ran the Lakers dizzy, which is what you get when you think money can buy you what only busting your butt can do. Sports, at a pro level, is 99 percent mind. One percent agility. It's a given you're quick and strong. Question is: What's in your chest? Do you have the fire? Second question is: When your big guy thinks he's Aristotle, how far are you going in the playoffs? Gus poured himself bourbon, neat, and said, "You know this Brit calls himself Prince?"

I told him I saw the man box on HBO, Friday Night Fights.

Gus said, "What, and you didn't call?" He took me by the elbow and was walking me and him through his billiards room toward the backyard.

"How'd I know you'd want to see it?" I said. "It was close to one in the morning."

Gus said, "I'm old. I'm roaming the house all night."

I said, "The man backs up his mouth. Hits like a sledgehammer in the night."

"They say he's the second coming," Gus said.

"I got to admit he had me sitting up in my chair," I said. The ringside announcers, a couple of poets in their own right, talked about fistic thunder in Prince's hands and a three-punch rhythm, left, left and right, equal weight and speed. He brought his legs with him blow after blow. The man was a headhunter bell to bell. A show and a half.

"A knockout?" Gus said.

"Right here." I showed Gus where Prince bopped the other fighter on the crown of his head. Where he thumped him. He stunned the guy, who was a lanky piece of barbed wire, a treacherous puncher from Scarborough, England, who was putting up a cockfight of his own. Threw darts himself.

Gus opened the slider to the patio. Stalled. He said, "Am I going to see you fight?"

I stepped aside and said, "You go ahead. I'll catch up with you. I need to see a gent about some land."

In the john off Gus's bedroom, I took a leak and went hunting for Gus's cocker spaniel, Vegas Vic. He came to Vic or Victory. He was standing on the bed in the guest room, perched at the foot of it, calculating the distance he would need to travel to reach an ottoman shoved up against the baseboard for him to use. Vic was fifteen and wore sadness like an overcoat. He had seen that life was a carnival ride at its best. Gus got him as a puppy, one more dog sold out of a cardboard box on Fremont Street. Vic suffered from what the vet called paperfoot, which was the least of the problems the man had diagnosed over the years. There was a heart murmur. Vic had gone deaf in one ear. Lost teeth.

"Show me what you got," I said to the dog.

He blinked real slow. Baleful. Had a look in his eyes that said he had spent some of his nap time chatting with St. Peter and the message he was bringing back wasn't quite what we expected to hear. The other side didn't differ much from this side. You got flats on heavenly highways and the nectar of the gods soured if you left it out. Fruit rotted. Hearts got broken.

Vic made the big jump, came off the bed, hit the ottoman, stumbled, then righted the ship of himself, putting forward the effort the old make to get up from a sofa.

"You did it," I said.

He still had to get to the floor, so I airlifted him. Vic did his pins and needles walk down the hall, me at his side, the two of us pals. Outside, we took the flagstone steps to where Gus was sitting on a lounge chair by the pool. Gus tipped his head back and polished off his bourbon. Heard us behind him. He said, "You think you'd be on his list?"

It was clear to him I didn't catch his meaning. He was completing a conversation I hadn't followed.

"The Prince has a list," he said. "He's checking names off and knocking everyone out."

"Once upon a time I'd have been on it," I said. Prince boxed featherweight, which was where I did my amateur fighting. As a pro I moved up through the weight classes, and in the end, I retired from the ring holding two belts. Never lost. Not once. Thirty-one wins, twenty-nine by knockout. Now I roofed houses, not out of need, but for the love of a task physical enough to keep me sweaty and light-footed. My doing so made no sense to Gus. His argument was: *Who notices a roofer on the roof unless it leaks, and then you're only a noise?* He shakes his head at my walking away from the money, the fame, the celebrity.

"You'd've been the top of his list," Gus said.

I said, "Number one, number two, and number three."

"You'd've knocked his frigging head off."

I had enough of the boxer left in me to think so.

Gus in tonight's Bermudas and sandals was a disturbing picture. Beachcomber Gus. My dad was looking like he took a detour that was leading him too far out of his way. If he had been a sign he would have been missing some letters. Maybe the u from his name. Would be just G . . . s. I was growing up, he was Armani suits before Armani came to Las Vegas. I once saw Gus wear a white linen jacket and trousers and wide-brimmed Panama hat at a funeral. You could have used the shoes Gus bought as collateral on a loan. He wore nothing but silk ties a lady, one of those personal shoppers, chose for him.

"I'm thinking of a plan," he said. He was frisky, jittery, grinning, flashing his newly bought-and-paid-for choppers, teeth so white against his tan they made you think of death riding a tricycle. I pulled up a chair. Vic flopped on his side and rolled in the grass, wiggling himself around, cooling off. Gus said, "It's about your mother." Edna, she died seven months ago—cancer, quicker, sneakier, and more vicious than the worst scenario you can imagine or have ever read about. Ain't no words for what can happen to a body. If there is such a thing as a soul, cancer's got its number. Trust me. Edna was fifty-seven. She could have been a tree stump by the time she let go. Looked that bad.

I said, "You going to do something behind her back, is that it?"

"Not possible," Gus said. "Nobody got nothing past her dead or alive."

I could see he could use another drink, so I hoofed it up the steps and

carried home the bourbon. Poured till he signaled stop. Halved his tumbler. He stared at the drink and said, "I met her mother's mother once and that was it."

Met was the wrong word. Our family drove to Ely, Nevada, in time to be told Edna's mother had just died in the hospital. I don't think I was in high school yet. An Indian girl named Naomi, chasing a dog down a hill, ran into Constance, my mother's mother, and broke her hip. Then Constance, the day she was to go home from the hospital, fell from her bed and rebroke it. She never was released. No one phoned Edna until after the second break. Too late, like I said. We drove through the night, went straight to the hospital, and Constance was dead. Second time around on the hip, internal bleeding. Edna refused to stay for the funeral, and she didn't try to reach her family. Not even Gus ever learned what the trouble was, if it was a feud, who had offended who and in what way, how deep it ran. He never shook anybody's hand—not her dad's, not brothers' or sisters'. Not one of them. We had a couple of photos left was all.

"It's time to solve the mystery," Gus said.

Vic moseyed over to the pool, and I got up to keep him from toppling in. I turned on a hose and filled one of the bowls Gus kept on the patio. The dog wandered over, pawed at the water. Huffed off.

Gus said, "I'm going to Ely." He sipped his bourbon, said, "You up for it?"

"When?" I said.

Gus said, "What's wrong with right now, this minute?"

I walked Vic and his fleece pad next door to the Kimballs, good people and dog lovers. Gus located my sister, Ginger, at her fiancé's. Let her know she was on her own for a couple of days, and we were packed and gone by midnight. It was one dark ride up 93, a two-laner that took us through Alamo and Caliente. No moon sitting pretty in the blue-black sky, just Gus sawing logs.

Out of Pioche, on a long stretch, the sun appeared. Popped up and gave me a boost. I felt the way you do when you open the blinds in the morning

after a sleep on your pal's couch. The desert lay to our left and right, gorgeous in its soft haze. Sagebrush, then a dry lake, and a range of mountains, different shades of blue and purple like a jigsaw puzzle. Middle of June and there was snow on a couple of peaks to the east. It could have been five miles or a thousand to the foothills.

"Obdurate," Gus, eyes slits, said. He was leaning for a slow look out the passenger's side window.

Sure, I thought. No pity. Hard hearted. But not only. You limit your vocabulary and you miss the beauty. You turn the desert's rigor ugly. You miss its point. You forget what resolute can mean.

Gus realigned himself and buzzed his seat up, then down. We were driving his Cadillac. "Coffee?" he said. We had a thermos in the back. I pulled over, and we stood on the shoulder, the sun already burning color into the desert. Reds. Pinks. Yellows. The blue-green sage. Gus said, "Do you know how far?"

"Another hour," I said.

He filled our tin cups. "My plan runs out once we get there," he said. "Then we play it by ear." Up ahead, where the road cut through a ridge, five coyotes drifted toward the highway. Not more than fifty yards away. "Sweet Jesus," Gus said.

I said, "You want to talk about obdurate."

They moved easy, relentless. Body fat 0 percent. Rangy and unyielding. They glided, loped, turned north. Try talking one out of its desire. Good luck. Creatures like that, if they got hungry enough, would, on the move, tear off a piece of their own chest or leg muscle and chew on it.

Gus said, "You don't see that every day."

Ely, Nevada, Gateway to the Great Basin National Park, the crossroads where US Highways 50, 93, and 6 met. We topped Connors Pass, swung through the grasslands and past Comin's Lake, and there it was. Our room at the Bristlecone Motel sat on us heavy as a root cellar. Gus showered and volunteered to locate some breakfast. He had put on fresh shorts and, this time, a Hawaiian shirt, a flora-and-fauna print to it.

Edna's family name was McCarty. Edna McCarty. Only one McCarty in the book, P. T.—Paul, Gus said, her father—and we found the address in five minutes, a one-story house on one of the avenues laid out into and along a hill. The houses on the low side dropped away so that you could see beyond them to Highway 93 running north to McGill. It was clear from where we parked in the street the McCartys hadn't replaced their roof in forty years. Shingles were missing. Others were curled, and the felt and wood showed through. The sidewalk in front was ragged, the slabs tilted, off-shot. Weeds grew in the cracks. There was a four-foot retaining wall running the length of the entire street. A set of steps led you to the McCartys' walkway. The handrail was plumber's pipe, galvanized, painted silver. The wall in front had been whitewashed. The house itself didn't match its surroundings. It was brick, the color of red wine, was the house you would see in a neighborhood crowded with trees. There ought to have been shrubs and gooseberries surrounding it, rose bushes bordering the yard and in bloom. Maybe a dogwood. It had arched windows, an arched porch, arched doorway. Reality here was that the front yard was hardpan. Not one blade of grass. Not a tree. The driveway was gravel except for two narrow strips of concrete.

We reached the front door, and a man came around the side of the place. He was carrying a punch bowl. Had to be crystal. He was holding merchandise worth five thousand dollars, I was thinking. He could have been seventy given the way he moved, which was a little like he'd been forced out onto a diving board. His face said ninety—there was that much detail to it. Not a hair left on his head. No lips to speak of. Bitten eyes.

"What you peddling, gentlemen?" he said. He was dressed in a black suit I would have bet he wore for one hour in the 1950s, maybe to his own wedding half a century back.

Gus said, "We look like salesmen?" He swept a hand over his shorts, his Hawaiian shirt, his sandals.

"Peddlers come in all shapes and sizes," the man said. "You know as well as I do they say you don't judge a package by the package."

I said, "We're not selling anything."

"For sure you're not giving it away," he said. "No offense, but no one is." He

crossed the yard and set the punch bowl on a porch chair. He had jammed a ladle into his back pocket. He set it inside the bowl. We followed, and he came at us to shake hands.

Gus said, "We're trying to find P. T. McCarty's."

"Art Worst," he said and we shook. "Worst of the Worsts is our joke," he said.

"Is this McCarty's place?" Gus said.

"Is," Worst said. He picked up the bowl and said, "Was." He started down the walk, stopped to punctuate what he was about to say. Said, "Surprising, isn't it, the turns life takes?"

We tagged along, Gus saying, "You've got our attention, Mr. Worst."

"Call me Worst," he said. We stalled at the top of the steps to the sidewalk. He handed the ladle to me and said, "You mind watching over this, if you're coming along?" It had been sliding around inside the bowl, making a racket. I took it, and he said, "This fine crystal is for the funeral. Mr. Luther McCarty's passing to the other side, which, I'm guessing is why you're on my doorstep."

Gus said, "We didn't know."

"I was thinking you're family," Worst said. He hustled as best he could down the steps, talking, telling us he was running late. "Hands to shake, babies to kiss," he said.

So Worst filled us in. Luther McCarty was P. T. McCarty's younger brother. There was an older sister named Emerald. P. T. died ten years ago. Prostate cancer he didn't have an inkling of until he was too late and one month from the grave. P. T.'s name was left in the phone book for privacy reasons.

"Whose privacy?" Gus said.

Worst said, "Patience. I'm getting there."

A year after P. T. died, Worst married his widow, a woman named Selma, who had been P. T.'s third or fourth wife, Worst wasn't recalling exactly, him and Selma both over seventy at the time, both of them still good in the feet and the head, pals more than anything else. She died, cancer again, the twentieth century's undertaker. Her passing left Worst alone in the house. "You

know what they say," Worst said. "You live long enough, and, hell, your body's going to take matters into its own hands." So Selma died, and Worst stayed on. Luther McCarty came to live with him, fell off a ladder, broke his hip and never recovered, hip death—so the logic went—being a family curse.

"You lost me," Gus said.

"Point is," Worst said, "house is mine. I'm family by the law."

We followed the hill down a couple of streets, Worst talking a blue streak. Gus told him he had married Edna, P. T.'s daughter. We reached a stretched-out, flat building, looked like the low-rent place you'd sell insurance from, the building that might house the post office temporarily, where you'd go for a notary. Across the front were Venetian blinds hung in elongated windows. Worst handed Gus the crystal and unlocked the door. He took the bowl back and stepped aside for us to go ahead. It was freezing inside. One hundred on the dirt out front. Sixty in here. Worst said, "I'm thinking I didn't know Edna."

"Edna McCarty," Gus said.

Worst said, "Isn't a name I recall."

Inside, at one end of a hall was a casket, a pot of carnations at the foot of it, yellow day lilies near the head. There was a banner that said *Luther "Luke" McCarty/God Rest His Soul*. In a corner was a Yamaha keyboard, not quite a piano, but the kind of music maker you see in some family's rec room. It had foot pedals. A short boxy speaker sat on each side of it on the floor. A padded bench was waiting for the musician. Worst placed the punch bowl at one end of a long table, next to a box of Dixie cups. I laid the ladle by it, heard Worst say to Gus, "She sister? niece? what?"

"Edna was my wife," Gus said. "P. T.'s daughter, like I said. Constance was her mother."

Worst said, "First wife? Second?"

"I thought there was only one," Gus said.

"None of it rings a bell," Worst said. "Except P. T.'s name." He shifted paper napkins so they were next to the bowl. They were blood red. Worst said, "It's all in one day we'll be doing the ceremony. We got the viewing starting at five, and then we load Luther up and it's ten minutes to the cemetery. I'm saying five words at the grave site and that's all the service there will be.

You're welcome, the two of you, if you'd like to come along." He laid out silverware, saying, "Luther's dying wish was to be under the ground within forty-eight hours. It was all he asked for, a pine box and quick burying, and I'm killing myself to oblige."

Gus talked to Worst, and I wandered outside. Across the street, there was a garage sale going on. A woman holding a papillon was sitting in the shade of a tree, the pair of them on one of those plastic chairs you buy at gas stations, the kind you stack. This one dark green. She had covered three card tables with knickknacks. Clothes hung on hangers along the edges. There was a row of vacuums next to her. There were floor lamps. She was selling a mower she hadn't bothered to hose off. It was caked in grass and mud. An extension cord snaked out of a window of her house and plugged into a fan at her back. It stood tall and rotated 180 degrees. On an end table at her elbow was a CB walkie talkie, its antennae extended.

She called to me. Said, "You family?"

I walked toward her. "You know the McCartys?" I said.

She was wearing wrap-around sunglasses, the lenses big as the ears on her dog. Her clothes made me think of a garden of sunflowers, one badly watered. She wore a scarf for a hat and had on her feet wrap-around shoes that fit like bandages. I waited until I had crossed the street, until I'd gotten the squint out of my eyes, and I said, "Edna McCarty was my mother."

The woman had white paper dots stuck to the backs of her hands. Prices on them, $4, $.50, $5, $6.50. She saw me staring and said, "It's how I keep track of what I sell and whether or not I've removed the price if it's a gift wrap." She pointed at a paper sack full of jewelry boxes, most of them white, some gray.

I said, "Did you know Edna?"

"If Edna was your mother," she said, "then that would make that other gentleman the gangster she went off to marry, if he's your father, I mean, and I'm thinking he is because I seen bits and pieces of him in you from where I'm sitting."

"Sharp eyes," I said.

She said, "The way you put your shoulders is one example." She showed me what she meant, and I recognized me and Gus in the way she held herself. The woman said, "She flew the coop still wet behind the ears."

This, of course, was not the story I'd been raised on. The gangster part had to be small-town foolishness. Was stupid gossip. The story I knew was Gus met Edna in Las Vegas at a Frank Sinatra show on the Strip. A man named Lenny Shafer introduced them, rubbed his hands together like that matchmaker he was being, and said, "I hear wedding bells." Their courtship was flowers and Perry Como songs, was long and slow and romantic. It involved boating on Lake Mead, and they loved the movies.

I said, "The gentleman is my father. I'm Tommy Rooke, and he's Gus. If he's a gangster, you've got a scoop."

"I'm just saying what was being talked around, and we're going back thirty, forty years, or so." She licked a finger and held it up. Testing the wind. She said, "Maybe not so long as that." She said, "i. e. God." Said, "Tick tock. God's lips to your ears. Throw away the key." And she did. She zippered up her mouth, locked her lips and tossed the key over her shoulder.

"That's one sorry-ass way to run a funeral," Gus said. We'd gotten back to the car, and he had the air conditioning on high. Gus slapped his dark glasses to his face. He said, "Let's find some decent clothes."

I said, "We're going to the burial?"

"There's got to be some family there, right?"

I said, "The woman running the garage sale tells me the word in Ely is that Edna ran off and married a gangster."

"Me?" he said.

"She tells me so."

We pulled out, Gus saying, "She could have. Who knows. Anything can happen in this world. She never told me one word about her life before we met. That subject was off limits, completely, no negotiation."

"You talked some about it?"

"Your mother was an incomprehensible woman."

"But you would have known."

"You'd think so."

Gus bought himself some duds, downtown, Ely, Nevada. Slacks a goat would have worn only if it didn't have any say at all. We did our best at Penny's and had an afternoon to kill before the service, so it was back to the McCarty home. No one answered our knock, and Gus walked right in. It was like we stepped into one of those boxes they use to ship bottles. Rooms the size of cells. You wanted to move so you didn't touch the walls. Off the short hallway entry to the left was a kitchen. A squat table, one of those with bowed legs and the chrome sides, that style that's popular again, was shoved into and squared up with a corner. No way could you have sat across from someone. You had to sit kitty-corner. There was a napkin dispenser, like you see in cafes. Salt and pepper shakers, cat motif. The floor was linoleum, acid green mostly, but the tiles speckled like a bird's egg, and white squares here and there, no pattern to them, replacements. To the right was a dinky family room. The floor was hardwood, ancient oiled six-inch-wide planks. There had been water damage near the window. Dead center on an oval rug sat two ladder-back chairs facing a thirteen-inch TV on a crate. It was hooked up to cable. The chairs looked like contestants. On top of the TV lay a hammer, a few nails next to its head. I wandered over to a cluster of photos. My best guess was they were all of Worst—Worst as a kid, Worst in his twenties, Worst middle-aged, Worst somewhere around fifty, where they stopped. The grouping formed a square.

I found Gus in one of the two bedrooms. It was empty, except for a cot, and was not much bigger than a walk-in closet. A window looked out onto the backyard, which was narrow like an alley, like it was here only to shuttle you from yard to yard. Its dirt looked hard as concrete. There was a T-bar clothes line. No wire or cord to clothespin things to. Straight back, the yard ended at a cinder block fence, ten- maybe fifteen-feet high. It had been painted white and patched. A crack—a scar—zigzagged down it. One block

had fallen and broken. Two heavy-duty poles were angled into the ground and wedged into the wall. To keep it from collapsing was my guess. You could see there was lettering under the paint. A big window on the other side of the room framed the neighbor's garage.

Gus said, "So you wake up every morning, and you see what I'm looking at. What do you do?"

"You die a little," I said.

"You're fifteen. You're sixteen. You're seventeen."

"You're staring at your future."

"Like there is one. Like you have any choices."

I said, "The garage-sale lady says mom flew the coop."

"With a gangster."

I said, "There's a door that must lead to a downstairs."

"Cellar," he said. "They call it a cellar."

Then there was nothing to say. This was where my mother grew up. She had a couple of brothers. Gus knew one of their names. Clint. Clint McCarty. Sounded like a gun fighter. There had been a baby sister who died. We think there were two other sisters. The next bedroom we located had a brass bed in it. There were a couple of throw rugs on the floor and a chest of drawers in a corner. Clothes in the closet. Worst's, we figured. We couldn't get the door to the cellar open. There was beer in the refrigerator, and we took a couple. Gus set a five-dollar bill on the rack inside. We stood at the kitchen sink, and a square window showed us Ely, Nevada. We could see a drive-in movie screen alongside the highway to McGill.

Gus said, "I don't know when she left."

I wasn't sure what he meant.

"She could have been fifteen years old," Gus said. "She could have been twenty."

I said, "I'd have left at ten."

"It's creepy, isn't it?" Gus said.

"It's hard to imagine it being livable, even in its prime. Every minute you'd be within three feet of someone else."

"You think it sounds like much of a family?"

I had no idea. Shrugged so.

"It's no kind of a family," Gus said. He turned his back to the window. I did too. We could see the two chairs in the living room. Heartless. Forsaken. "She graduated from high school," Gus said. "I know that. But I don't know where. She was in Las Vegas a long time before I met her."

"The garage sale lady might know," I said. "You got to be a certain age to leave to marry a gangster."

Gus polished off his beer and opened the cupboard below the sink. Cleaning supplies, but no waste basket. He set his bottle on the counter. "I don't want to know," he said. He looked directly at me—first time since we walked in—and he said, "Do you?"

"It doesn't really matter," I said. "You had your life, the two of you." I set my bottle next to Gus's. Said, "Was there ever a day when she wasn't smiling?"

"She slept in that room and woke up to that wall. There's no question about it," Gus said, and he headed for the front door. Just like that, he was leaving. I heard him say, "You see what I saw? Fucking cinder block wall shoved in your face every fucking morning you wake up?"

I caught up with him out front. He was glaring at the house and was beat up around the eyes. Had gone eleven rounds of a twelve-round bout, and in three minutes, if he could stay on his feet, if he could keep from hitting the mat, he would be decisioned. That was what he had to look forward to. His one hope was to counterpunch, was to walk the other guy into a big left hand. To cut him off and time a knockout blow. Only the other guy was too smart. He had nine, maybe ten rounds in the bank, so he was hitting and stepping out. He wasn't even showing Gus his face.

Gus took a long hard breath. "You spit in the ocean," he said. "End of story." We took the steps to the street. Gus fired up the Caddie and said, "This is a nightmare. This is a one hell of a goose chase."

Like Gus said, our plan ended when we got to Ely. We rolled dice from that point on. We still had a couple of hours before the service. A sign told us the Railroad Museum was open, but the door was locked. We ate Mexican

and shot pool at the Outpost Bar, nine ball, Gus on my turf, and I took him for fifty bucks, trapped him, as payback for our chess games, in a niggling battle of safeties, me kicking the ball two, three times off the rail shot after shot until I ended his misery with an impossible massé, curling the cue ball around the six and dumping the three in a side pocket. Skill? Sure. But the make required luck you understood you would some day have to pay for. The gods don't give it away. I ran the table out. Cruising Ely took us twenty minutes. Waves of heat shimmered above the intersections, and the day was fry-your-brains hot.

At five, we drove over to the building Worst had taken us to. The garage sale was still going strong. There was a family picking through the clothes, and a guy in a dusty Jeep was pulling out, a floor lamp next to him in the passenger's seat, belted in. He was wearing a do-rag and a nose ring. I waved to the lady running the sale.

"You sure you don't want to talk to her?" I said to Gus.

"Maybe rough her up," he said.

Inside it was like a wedding reception. The crystal bowl was bubbling, some kind of pink punch. There were paper plates and those Dixie cups. Finger sandwiches and cookies that had red and green fruit bits stuck to them. Leftovers from last Christmas was my guess. A woman was playing the keyboard. Loud. Obnoxious as hell. "Rock of Ages," and stuff like that. You had to pick up your voice to talk.

Worst met us at the door. "Please," he said, "sign the book." We did, and he said, "Luther would appreciate your presence." There were three names above ours. No McCartys. We were probably it, as far as the family was concerned. Worst escorted us toward the refreshments. A man and a woman sat at a table, and two boys were running wild, were racing tin cars across the floor. The man wore a mustache, thin, like in the movies forty years ago. Sign of a personality defect to my way of thinking. They turned out to be Worst's people.

"Eat up," Worst said to us. "Waste not, want not."

I said, "Is there family coming?"

"There's been no communication," he said.

"Which means?" I said.

He said, "What it means."

Gus said, "Did you know P. T.'s family at all?"

"The one wife, Selma," he said. "We was—I told you—married."

"Besides her, I mean," Gus said.

"There was me and Selma. Then there was me and Luther, and we didn't pry after each other. Your business was your business. Where would snooping get us? Can you tell me?"

"You didn't talk about family?"

Worst said, "I can't say we did."

"Selma have any children?"

"Never laid eyes on any."

"We're not after you for anything," Gus said. He tried to square himself up to Worst, to cut down on the man's constant two-step. Gus needed to look him in the eye. He said, "We don't want jack from you, Mr. Worst."

Worst said, "You don't, then you're a rare bird for sure. You're a first." He dipped himself a drink and said, "Ain't one thing you can get your hands on even if you hired yourselves a lawyer."

Gus moved closer, and I sort of got between them, was afraid of him lowering himself into that peekaboo squat he had been working on and letting one fly. I could hear him breathing at my back—puff, puff, puff, like he was rowing a boat.

"House, land and mineral rights is in my name," Worst said.

Gus said, "You hear me?"

Worst cupped a hand behind his ear and said, "I'm old but I ain't deaf, dumb or stupid."

"Jesus," Gus said.

I took his arm and walked him over to where we grabbed paper plates and a couple of sandwiches. Tuna fish and white bread. The crust had been cut away. The music got inside your head and made you want to find a cave. Gus and I wandered over to the casket, and there was Edna's father's brother. Screwed up as he was in his coffin I saw her in him. Particularly the cheeks and the set of the eyes. Me, I think you see relatives in distant blood, in kin, in

the brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, more than you see the parents themselves in the children. Gus said, "Could be anyone." He settled his plate on a table and said, "I'm telling you this is no way to run a funeral." He reset Luther's tie, a stiff K-Mart piece of cloth, diamond shapes on it.

The door opened behind us and let a triangle of light in. The heat followed, rolled in. A tall couple met Worst, and he hugged the woman. The man shook his hand. No way to hear over the music what they were saying.

I said to Gus, "Family?"

"Not likely," Gus said. He looked over at Worst and said to me, "Was there a family or just the rumor of one?" He circled me. "If there is anyone, they're not coming," he said, and he stepped us away from the coffin, saying, "You saw that house. Would you bother with it if you'd ever lived there?"

I checked the signatures on our way out. LeRoy and Stella Brown. Gus got the Caddie's door unlocked, and we heard the garage sale lady. She whooped, like she was hollering down a horse. She got to her feet and walked her papillon half way across the road. She said, "Hold on," and she bent and gathered in the dog. She was carrying her walkie-talkie and had to do some juggling. The dog yapped, lifted one foot, then the other one. We waited for the woman to reach us. The dots on her hands had grown to about fifteen or twenty. She had had a good day. She said to me, "I couldn't get your face out of my mind." She breathed hard, short and insistent, and I reached for the dog. It growled. "She bites the hand that feeds her," the woman said. "Don't be offended."

"I like that in a dog," I said.

She said, "You're Tommy Rooke."

"Like I told you."

"Well I didn't put the name to the face."

"No reason for you to."

"My husband, Errol," she said, "he got cable just so we could watch the fights. He was a boy who growed up in New Jersey."

Gus said to her, "Tommy tells me you knew Edna."

She shifted the dog. Got a grip on it, about lost the walkie-talkie doing so, said, "I knew her business was all. The way it is in a small town."

"She left to marry a gangster?" Gus said.

"They say she did."

"Did this gangster have a name?" Gus said.

She said, "Tommy here tells me you're the gangster."

"I'm the one she married."

"What kind of a gangster are you?"

Gus said, "Only in my heart."

"Edna was a fighter," the woman said to me. "She wanted what she wanted. You had to know she was that kind of girl. She had a mouth on her." She released the dog on the dirt, and it was dancing right away. Too hot. The woman looked directly at me, and she said, "My husband said you had murder in your hands before you quit fighting."

I said, "I'd put it another way." We were walking with her back to her chair.

She said, "You got it from Edna." She stooped for the barking dog and said, "She was, like I said, a fighter. She had pluck. That's where you got it. My husband says you fight with what's inside you." Her walkie talkie squawked. "That'll be Errol," she said. "The husband," and she pointed toward the house. There he was, a face in a window, looking like one of those photos on a T-shirt. Errol pulled a curtain back and talked into his own walkie-talkie. We didn't hear him on this end. The woman said to me, "He forgets to push the button." She shook her head, sad, like the world wasn't as difficult as Errol made it. She said, "After you drove off, he was telling me if you came back to the funeral to see if you would shake his hand. He wanted you to understand it would be an honor."

I said, "It would be my pleasure."

She got on the walkie-talkie. Said, "Errol?" There was a squawk. "Errol?" she said.

"Over," Errol said.

"Over my ass, Errol."

"Ten-four."

She said to him, "The man says it would be a pleasure."

We had all of us sought out the shade, Gus examining some pottery on a table. Errol said something I couldn't make out. Then the woman said to me,

"You'll have to go over there. He don't come out. Hasn't for twenty-three years now."

I looked at the window. Couldn't see Errol. I said, "Over there?"

"If you would."

I followed a rock path to the door, then crossed to the window, careful of a square plot of marigolds. The window came open—I heard it more than I saw how—and out shot Errol's hand. Felt like I put my buck worth of quarters in one of those fortune-teller games. "Errol?" I said, and I accepted his shake. "I'm pleased to meet you," I said.

Nothing. Not a word. His hand was a big as his face, and it was dry. I think he had clapped talc on. He let go of my hand and the window came down.

Errol's wife—I'd gotten back to the street—she said, "He can talk. He just don't, much."

Gus's dad, Grandpa Jersey, he met Jack Dempsey in the hallway to a restroom in a cafe somewhere in Montana. They stepped aside for each other, and then Grandpa Jersey recognized Dempsey and said, "Holy shit" and stuck out his hand. Dempsey shook it, kicked the door open, and walked out.

There you had it. Holy shit.

What more do you want? What more is there to say?

"Errol says you never ducked anyone," Errol's wife said to me. She was wrapping an ashtray in tissue paper, one from the Copper Queen Hotel and Casino. She had stuck the price to her wrist. Seventy-five cents. Gus paid for it. She said, "He says you took on all comers. He tells me he's proud of you."

I said, "You tell him how good it was to meet him."

She said, "You can count on it."

Me and Gus, a more stubborn pair of competitive personalities you'll never sit down to dinner with, so come midnight, the two of us in our tiny room here in Ely, and we got into a nit-picking quarrel about what looks easy to do but isn't if you try it. Gus, to my way of thinking, was being small minded, so I fed the pot, neither of us quitting until we were all-in, raising

and re-raising, double popping. Our one-upmanship was the result of a TV ad for tonight's upcoming movie, *Rio Bravo*, John Waynesday, Turner Classic Westerns on TNT, the Duke himself one-arm cocking a Winchester rifle, butt over barrel and then back again, and Gus saying, "That's harder than you think it looks."

We had the set on mute, it being halftime of the basketball game we located, the Jazz again, taking on Sacramento and its gang of nitwits, and we didn't want to listen to the ex-jocks, to hear how the has-beens know what some guy is thinking when he bricks a free throw or doesn't run his lane on the fast break, like having played the sport at that level gives them the right to another man's brain.

"My bet is it's a stunt double," I said.

Gus said, "To cock a rifle right in front of your eyes?"

"Everybody with legs can see it's special effects."

"What, a stunt arm?"

"You know what I mean."

"Tommy, Tommy, he's in front of your face," Gus said. "The Duke, he was doing that back then when they couldn't do to a film what they can now. Nobody was trying to fool you. He had to do it for real. A little practice and I could."

So I countered with the everyday, with the down to earth, with what I told Gus was real life harder than it looked if he or the mouse in his pocket dared take at shot at it, which was shingling around a mid-roof chimney, flashing and counterflashing one, a subject whose real purpose was to irk Gus, him, as I said, not understanding how a boxer could quit at the top and take jobs roofing houses.

"Flashing is no picnic," I said.

"Tommy, Tommy," he said. He threw left and right jabs from where he sat. "But, Tommy," he said. "Tommy Gun. Tommy rot." He punched. "Rat-a-tat-tat," he said. He threw an upper cut. Said, "Fighting is an honorable profession, Tommy."

Result was we ended up on our feet where he liked us to be, me showing Gus how hard it is to be the boss inside the ropes and how easy you got to

make it look. Gus now in khaki shorts and a bowling shirt, gray mostly but a butter-yellow yoke, black piping, bowling pins embroidered between his shoulder blades, a ball hitting them, the pins flying. He was wearing those thick sandals you see on college kids, no socks. He set his fists the way I had shown him a hundred times, Floyd-Patterson peekaboo style.

"Don't let me in," I said. I redrew that invisible line between us. I said, "I'm coming in your house. The doorway's yours. You own it." I came at him, said, "You letting me through?" He jabbed, and I tapped him on the chin. "You hang your head out there, I'll knock it into October," I said.

He retreated, all defense, covering up. Not bad footwork. He achieved a good angle.

I said, "Don't allow me to put it together. I throw, you break it up."

He let go an uppercut. Rotated his shoulder, turned his hips. Spun on his toe.

"Protect that handsomeness," I said.

He took stock from behind his fists. Squinted. Gave me his scowl.

"You come through the doorjamb, don't retreat," I said. "Don't be wiping your shoes off, all polite. I'll murder you. You come through the door throwing, you keep coming. Put it together yourself. Come on in and turn the room upside down. You don't need no warrant."

"You got to be in it to win it," Gus said. Huffing, puffing. Gus was over sixty. Unyielding as hickory and just as hard-nosed. "Fighting dumb's okay," he said, his breathing choppy. "But fighting without fire's not." He snapped a left I took on the chin. It landed, and he did a mule's version of the hallelujah shuffle. He threw his hands up. Jitterbugged. His nose whistled. "Whew," he said, and he dropped his arms, plopped into a wingbacked, saying, "Whose house is it?"

I said, "You tell me."

He said, "Who's the boss?"

I said, "Who *is* the boss?"

He said, "The one who throws or the one who catches?"

I said, "The one who catches?"

He said, "The one who throws."

We sat through *Rio Bravo*. Midnight, and the credits were running. "Plan C," Gus said. "We wing it."

I said, "We had a plan B?"

He said, "Somewhere in all this it got lost."

Plan C was basic. We got some sleep.

"You'll slap me if I ever get another bright idea?" Gus said.

I said, "You bet."

I woke around five. No Gus. Not in his bed. Not outside.

McCarty's.

I left the car in the parking lot and walked. Ely was a ghost town this early. The sun, just up, yellowed the air. I never think about birds—who does?—but today, there they were. You couldn't ignore them. They had their commentary.

Gus stood in McCarty's back yard. He was staring at that wall. Challenging it. He spotted me and said, "You wake up every morning and this is what you see."

I said, "You don't know for sure, Gus."

But he did, and so did I.

We looked at the window of the room Edna slept in, and there was Worst squared-up in its frame. He wasn't more than ten feet from us. The house was his. The yard was his. We were trespassing. I don't even know what a mouth harp is or how they work but it hit me that the man ought to be playing one.

Gus turned to the wall. He said, "Tommy, it's seven months now, and it's like I made Edna up." He was shaking. He said, "Did she live?"

"Without a doubt," I said.

"Jesus, Tommy," Gus said, "if I made her up, did I put this wall here? And the gangster? Did I add the gangster to the mix?"

I said, "Gus, be logical," and he said, "I am, Tommy. I am. You see, that's just it. I am. I can't touch her. It don't matter what I do, I can't touch her. You want proof she existed. I can't give you proof. You going to tell me you had your own eyes, and she fed you, and all that other stuff she did. That ain't proof."

Remember, this was a mortician talking.

He said, "Photographs? Might as well eat bullshit for breakfast for all a photograph can really mean."

I reached for my dad, and he put up his dukes there in McCarty's back yard. Over Gus's shoulder, there was Worst like a store dummy in the window. Gus dipped into the peekaboo I taught him and said to me, "I'm coming through the door."

I said, "My door?"

"All yours," he said. "I'm coming in."

I said, "Gus, don't stop to wipe your feet."

He said, "Polite's out the window, the baby with the bath water."

"This is ten rounds of hell."

"Ten rounds of bloody hell."

2005

MISDIRECTIONS

from Between Camelots, selected by Stewart O'Nan

David Harris Ebenbach

My wife is using the mice as an excuse to let our marriage fall apart. All night they crawl around in our walls and we can hear them gnawing. They're gnawing at the foundation of our marriage, she says. She complains I won't do anything about them, or about anything else, and that's the problem. Neither of us mentions the man whose sweat she smells like these days.

But I put out humane traps, little plastic opaque boxes for them to get cornered in. Our son loads the peanut butter into the back ends. That same evening, we've got our first mouse. The box rattles on the kitchen tiles.

My son and I are going to go release it by the lake, and he asks his mother to come. He knows and doesn't know. She wipes her hands dry and reluctantly agrees.

I can feel the mouse moving in the box as we walk down Jenifer Street. Because it's a strange feeling, I let my son carry it a while. He squeals with the thrill of it, but my wife is silent.

I think of something. I ask my son, "What if it finds its way back?" His eyes grow wide.

"It's three blocks," my wife says. "The mouse isn't that smart."

"Well, maybe," I say loudly, and wink at my son. "I just hope it doesn't remember to head for *Spaight Street*, and *turn left*, and go to the *fifth house*."

That's not how you get to our house. I'm giving the mouse misdirections. My son laughs, excited. Despite herself, so does my wife.

She looks at me and then at our son. Surprising me, she says, "I hope the thing doesn't tell all the other mice about our house on *Spaight*, either."

Soon we're all giving loud misdirections, just like a family.

By the lake, we all stoop down and I prepare to let the mouse go. Our son has his eyes wide and mouth open, surprised and awed in advance. I look up at my wife and she is looking at me, expectant, hopeful. This mouse, I think, is giving me my family back. Lowering the box to the ground, I put my finger on the little door, ready. I am almost asking her, with my eyes, whether we might keep the mouse. *Can we?* When she sees that question, though, her face answers by sinking out of its smile. She sighs and looks away from me.

I open the door. Before I've even caught sight of the mouse, it's completely gone.

2006

COLUMBINE: THE MUSICAL

from Newsworld, selected by Joan Didion

Todd James Pierce

On Wednesday morning, between math and PE, I learned that Robbie Fenstermaker, who was set to play Dylan Klebold in our school's production of *Columbine: The Musical*, had wrecked a driver's training car and fractured his collarbone. "Collarbone?" repeated Mr. Baxter, my PE teacher. He combed his fingers through his sparse, aluminum-toned hair. "We're talking a good two months' recovery. More if it was a nasty break. When's this play set to open anyhow?"

"In a week and a half," I told him.

"Better scratch him off the program. He's not doing any acting for some time."

Here was my problem: I was Robbie's understudy. I knew some of his lines. I'd even practiced them with my girlfriend, Susan, who got a little turned on when I imitated Robbie's stage voice, but I never thought I'd need to play this role in the actual production. I was a quiet kid. I'd only tried out because Susan was in the play. I stood there dumbfounded, dressed in our school's PE uniform: blue shorts, gold jersey, my name, Greg Gorman, thickly inked across my chest. After the activity bell rang, Mr. Baxter sent us out for six laps while he settled into a beach chair and asked one of his female assistants to bring him a diet Coke.

With the other boys, I ran my laps around our school's new "safety" track—a quarter-mile circuit enclosed by a ten-foot fence topped with barbed wire. I generally did what I was told and believed this would be the key to my future success. I was good with directions, liked organization, never challenged the teachers or security officers at my school. For example, I was happy in my role as "Library Victim Number Four." I was good at feigning panic, good at singing the soft, low chorus of death we all sang lying on the floor while other students who played our parents walked through the library holding poster-sized reproductions of our dental records above their heads. I had no real ambition to be the star of anything, let alone our school play.

All morning long I told no one about Robbie's accident, not even Susan, who stood beside me in the lunch line. She was a tall girl with dark blond hair that fell in a straight line to her shoulders. On that day, she wore the Abercrombie leather necklace I'd bought for her as a three-month anniversary gift and a tank top that showed off her tan shoulders. Occasionally I wondered why she was going out with me at all—clearly football players were interested—but like me, her father had left her family when she was in junior high. I believed we shared something because of this, a certain hopefulness perhaps, though I can't say for sure what that was. When we got near the front of the line, she pushed through and ordered for us both. I had the same thing every day—a cheeseburger and Coke.

After Susan's father left, her mother had become an executive secretary for a law firm specializing in lucrative class-action suits filed by ex-smokers. My mother, on the other hand, experienced repeated episodes of road rage until she finally gave in to the beauty of a quasi-Eastern inner peace and enrolled at the community college to become a certified workplace counselor specializing in conflict management. Because of her, I'd found my own inner peace as well: I looked for the best in other people and had learned that the meaning of life was found in universal goodness. That is, I believed we were all basically good people just trying to get along, though sometimes because of our own flawed understanding of the world, we had trouble seeing how other people were trying their best to get along with us.

I spent the afternoon in history class, then in study hall, where I worked

on my algebra homework, graphing parabolas that stretched toward infinity. After school, I stayed in the library long enough to miss the beginning of our daily rehearsal. As a rule I hated to be late for anything, but I hoped Mr. Sweeney would select someone else to take the role of Dylan Klebold if I wasn't there on time. Only when the library was about to close did I finally load my books into my mesh backpack—the type of backpack our vice principal had instructed all students to use at the beginning of the school year.

I arrived at the theater a good half hour late, my backpack slung over one shoulder, and sat on the outer steps next to a publicity poster for *Our Town*, the play Mr. Sweeney had directed the previous spring. Though he was interested in the "force of negative publicity," he had yet to put up posters for *Columbine: The Musical* because he was tired of local reporters stopping in to see how we were doing. Already one of these stories had been picked up by the wire service, a short column accompanied by the headline: "Whatever Happened to Hamlet?"

Through heavily tinted glass, I saw that the other students weren't rehearsing a scene, nor were they practicing the song "I Have a Gun, I Have an Arsenal" that Mr. Sweeney had rewritten over the weekend. Instead they were sitting on the bare stage in a circle, their hands joined, as Mr. Sweeney said how proud he was of them, his troupe of teenaged actors. "Musical theater has a message," he reminded us, "and that message is, 'Wake up, America! Hear the song the youth of your country is singing.'"

As always, Susan was sitting beside her friend Rosemary, who played Cassie Bernal, the Christian girl who died a martyr. She looked so pretty there, Susan did, with her hair pulled back, dressed in the thin, striped sweater she wore as part of her costume, complete with tear-away patches on the stomach and sleeve where Mr. Sweeney would hide blood-packs on the night of the actual performance. I watched her eyes move around the room and wondered if she was looking at other guys, but eventually her gaze settled on me. Or rather it settled on the tinted window beyond which I sat, as if she knew I was out there, resting on the steps.

For ten minutes, Mr. Sweeney went on about how this play would expose real-life violence as the means of entertainment it had become. I watched him

walk across the stage, his hair pulled back into a ponytail, his black turtleneck tight enough to reveal a slight paunch, his hands gesturing in a certain William Shatner way whenever he got excited. When he was almost finished lecturing, I left my spot on the stairwell, slipped into the theater and leaned against the sound booth.

Mr. Sweeney stood center stage, next to a rack of plastic guns designed to look like the real thing. His gaze shifted to me, his eyes so blue most kids thought he wore colored contacts. Surely he knew how content I was as "Library Victim Number Four," lying deathly still while the students who played my parents carried me to the steel autopsy tables located in the side aisles of our theater. I did not have the ambition to take the role of Dylan Klebold, hell-bound follower of Eric Harris. Clearly Mr. Sweeney saw my reluctance, but what choice did he have? "Every great play has its own reckoning," he said. "No doubt this will be ours."

* * *

After rehearsal Susan and I went to our lockers to get our books. Our lockers had new clear plastic doors so teachers could see what we kept inside them, though I kept nothing but notebooks and granola bars in mine. On our way out we nodded good-bye to our school detective, Officer Brubaker, who liked us so much he didn't make Susan walk through the metal detector again whenever something in her purse set it off.

Officially, Mr. Sweeney had told the school board he was producing a "musical to help students understand the effects of school violence," but we all believed this play would've been canned if our principal had not been on heavy chemo that semester. Even with this, Mr. Sweeney only got the green light once the SafeCampus Corporation agreed to sponsor the play, thereby giving our school a much-needed ten-percent discount on all the video cameras, see-through locker housings, and security fencing our vice principal had ordered that year.

In truth we all wanted something from this play. Susan wanted to get into an acting program at Rutgers. Mike Rogers, the boy who played Eric Harris, wanted to be a paid spokesperson for Youth Against Violence. Mr. Sweeney

wanted critical attention so he could leave our school and direct revivals off-Broadway. As for me, I wanted to be with Susan as much as I could because we were both seniors. After graduating, I was planning to study business in college—Rutgers if possible—and after college, I wanted to manage a store at the mall. That is to say, I wanted to find a job like my father held before he fell in love with Loni the flight attendant and moved to Burma.

As we dumped our backpacks into the backseat of her car, Susan turned to me somewhat cautiously. Recently she had begun to treat me as though she were slightly older, more experienced. I never said anything about it. The best way to deal with trouble like this, I'd learned, was to push it away from you—to say to yourself, Self, I am not a perfect person either.

Once buckled in, she said, "You don't want to be Dylan Klebold, do you?"

"I'm not a good actor."

"Well don't you have all the luck? You don't even *want* a lead role and you end up being Dylan Klebold. I mean, *Dylan Klebold.* You get to carry around a gun. You shoot people. You look cool. Me? I get popped twice, then lie on the floor singing that stupid chorus of death for ten minutes."

"I like lying on the floor and singing that chorus of death."

"You like it because it's easy. You know, pop-pop, down you go. Anyone could do that. But Dylan Klebold. He's, like, super-wussie, patsy to the stars. It takes skill to play a role like that." She started her car, the engine catching on the second try. "God, why couldn't Rosemary run her car into a ditch?"

"You might regret saying that," I told her.

"Seriously, if I got to play Cassie, I'd be in Rutgers like you wouldn't believe. I'd be on scholarship. I'd be doing commercials on cable within three years. Mark my words, made-for-TV movies would be in my future."

We left the parking lot slowly since the street was heavily patrolled. We both checked for cops before passing a billboard our school boosters owned. "Remember, Kids," it said, "Stay Off Drugs!"

We spent the evening at Susan's house, just like we always did. She helped me practice the role of Dylan Klebold. Truthfully, the role wasn't as big as those of Cassie, or Eric Harris, or even Sheriff John Stone, but we both felt it was important in its own way, especially with its "Manhattan Monologue." In

it, Klebold talks about his fantasy of hijacking a passenger jet and crashing it into Manhattan. On stage, while Robbie Fenstermaker—or rather while I—read this monologue, Mr. Sweeney planned to project slides from Klebold's and Harris's actual diaries onto a screen that dropped from the orchestra shell. At the same time, the students who played the eventual victims were to line up behind me and hum the soft, low chorus of future dread.

Without much prodding, Susan sensed my frustration. I was still speaking in my "Library Victim Number Four" voice. I couldn't seem to get beyond it, not even when I described the passenger jet as a "burning comet of hate" I would commandeer into Park Avenue. She pretended not to think poorly of me, but eventually clicked on the Playboy Channel. She told me, "Watching nude women will help you take hold of this role." We watched a segment called "Totally Naked Women Smoking Cigars" and part of a game show called "You Bet Your Clothes."

As usual, we ended up in her mother's four-poster bed with its faux-satin sheets. Since meeting Susan, I'd become much better at sex than I would've thought possible a year ago. On our second date she'd told me I was exceptionally well endowed, and on subsequent dates she began to teach me how to move in such a way as to better please her. By the time her mother got home, we were dressed again. Around her mother, I liked to pretend we weren't having sex, but Susan said her mother didn't really care about things like that, as long as she stayed on the pill.

I spent the rest of the night at home reading my lines out loud. I was doing my best to get words like "mother fucker" to sound right when I said them. I stood in front of my mirror and repeated the line, "All you asshole jocks must die!" but no matter how I said it, the lines lacked a certain youthful power and conviction I knew they required. I was good at enunciating all the syllables, but couldn't get my voice to project the right emotion, even when I took myself back, moment by moment, to the day my father left for Burma. He'd left a note on my dresser—a small piece of paper, folded in half. "Catch you later, Greg," it said. "P.S. Don't be a stranger."

* * *

The next morning I woke at 5:30. I liked waking early because it gave me extra time to contemplate my life. Often I visualized my father, dressed in a red Hawaiian shirt, sitting beside me on my bed. Usually he said little words of encouragement, like, "I'm really proud of your algebra homework" or "Way to go on that Latin test, Greg!" I can't tell you how much these affirmations helped me get through a hard day of school. But on this particular morning, he sat silently, dressed in his red Hawaiian shirt, his hands folded into his lap. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't visualize him saying anything. Eventually he removed an imaginary pack of smokes from his shirt pocket and lit one.

By 6:30 I was dressed in my gym clothes, ready to head off to school. "Something's different about you," my mother said. She was wearing one of her periwinkle blue suits. Periwinkle was one of the three recommended colors for certified workplace counselors specializing in conflict management.

"I have a new role in the school play."

She fixed me with her trained gray eyes. "You're going to knock them dead. I just know it."

As I jogged to school, I noticed the first advertisements for the play on telephone poles and in shop windows. They featured the title in an elegant copperplate script along with a small publicity photo of Mr. Sweeney wearing a black dinner jacket and bow tie. In the bottom margin was the SafeCampus logo, along with their slogan: "Because You Don't Really Know Who Lives Down the Street." By the time I reached school, I felt a certain dread settle into my stomach, a feeling I didn't know how to push aside, but after Officer Brubaker gave me the thumbs-up, I felt I owed it to myself to go about my morning just as I would any other.

I went immediately to our new "full-security" gym. By spring I hoped to have pecs and abs so developed that Susan wouldn't be embarrassed to be seen with me at the pool. After my first set of sit-ups, however, I couldn't concentrate. I kept thinking of my impending failure as Dylan Klebold, boy murderer. How would I ever fit my body into his? Twice I forgot how many reps I'd done on the bench press, and while racking dumbbells, I dropped one on my foot, a good fifteen pounds right across my toes. I was so upset and mad I

had to sit on the floor and hold my injured foot in both hands. Only after my toes stopped throbbing did I glance into the two-way workout mirrors that lined the opposite wall. I almost didn't recognize my own face. My eyes were slits, my lips an angry line drawn above my chin. For the first time, I isolated a piece of the actual pain that Dylan Klebold must have felt, the first grain from which he formed his murderous beach.

"Mother Fucker," I said. I listened to my voice. It sounded good—as good as Robbie Fenstermaker's had sounded when he stood onstage holding a replica of a TEC-DC9 handgun with detachable metal clip. "*Mother Fucker,*" I said again. "*All you asshole jocks must die!*"

A boy straddling a free-weight bench turned to me. "Hey theater geek," he said, "shut your fat mouth."

* * *

All morning I focused on this pain, the crunch of the dumbbell landing against my toes, how I crumpled on to the neoprene mats that padded the floor and held my foot. For a few moments I forgot about myself entirely. I forgot about the other people using the new "full-security" gym, I forgot about the cameras mounted to the four corners of the room. I was simply mad and hurt. To be honest, for one split second, I felt like hitting someone, but then I realized the power of this insight. I was given this moment of pain so I could *be* Dylan Klebold in our school's play.

Between classes, I practiced my new persona. I spoke with more force, issuing my desires as statements rather than as simple questions. "Please let me through to my locker," I said to a group of freshmen conversing in the breezeway. To our school's librarian, seated at her desk, I said, "I'm ready to check this book out." At lunch, with Susan, I held my own place in the cafeteria line and even pushed toward the window I felt would serve us the fastest.

We sat on the far edge of the lawn, Susan and I, just inside the ten-foot fence, amongst other kids involved with theater arts. She kept staring at me, her eyes narrowed, searching for the origins of my change, but I wanted to keep the exact cause of my transformation a secret. Its power came in part from its mystery. Eventually she sat next to me and touched her shoulder to

mine. "You know what would be great," she said. "It'd be great to have some place to go for lunch. Like a friend's apartment. Someplace with a bed. I have all this stress from my morning classes, and I just want to let it out."

I focused again on the pain I'd felt that morning, that white-hot flash of irrational anger. I let my voice slide into the lower register so it sounded just like Robbie Fenstermaker's. "Let's ram this burning comet of hate into Park Avenue," I said.

She turned to me, her eyes swimming in desire. "Don't do that to me now," she said. "I'm horny enough as it is."

* * *

That afternoon I asked my study hall monitor, Mrs. Glass, if I could practice my lines outside. I explained that I was now Dylan Klebold in our school's play, an important role, and that I only had a few days to memorize the lines. "Whatever," she said. "Just don't sit by the cameras. I don't need any more heat about kids ditching my class."

I sat outside the woodshop building, one of our school's camera-free zones—also a big druggie hangout. Under a maple tree I ran through those lines I didn't know by heart. I even began to stylize them in a way I thought appropriate to my character. I didn't just say, "Locked and loaded," like I would if I were "Library Victim Number Four." Instead I said, "Locked," then waited a moment before I came through with the expected close.

At rehearsal I was nervous again. I was aware how much more talented the other leads were compared to me. In the far corner, by the piano, Rosemary and Susan practiced their duet, "Calling Me Home." On stage, Ms. Jacobs, our choreographer, walked the students who played the victims' parents through the dance steps for the number, "When Hitler's Birthday Comes to a Small Town Like Ours."

At last I read through the "Manhattan Monologue," doing my best to become Dylan Klebold. "Let people throw rocks at me," I said. "Let them call me a wimp. We will all go down together. Then they will know how I felt—outcast, loser, a boy looking for someone to be his friend." I stood there silently, center stage, as a hoop of tangerine light dropped down around me;

then Mike Rogers, who played Eric Harris, walked onstage. We gave each other our usual greeting, "Sieg heil," slapped hands and walked off together.

After rehearsal, I could tell Mr. Sweeney was impressed. He took me into his office—a small room at the back of the theater, furnished with two couches from the Goodwill and a desk. He patted me on the back and motioned for me to take a seat on the sofa opposite him. He held his hands before him, much in the classic manner of William Shatner, indicating he was about to say something important. "Earlier today I was worried," he confessed. "I thought I'd need to find someone else to play Klebold. I don't believe much in method acting. Typecasting is the practical way to go. But this afternoon—*this afternoon*, that changed. I figure if we just trim back your lines, cut one of your musical numbers, we'll be ready to open on schedule."

"Thanks, Mr. Sweeney," I said. "You can count on me."

* * *

For the next few days my life fell into a routine organized around my role as Dylan Klebold. I woke early, went through my visualization exercises, only to find my father sitting silently on the bed beside me. Not even when I showed him my algebra homework, parabolas meticulously drawn across graph paper, could I persuade him to say anything. I had breakfast with my mother, who commented on the changes she saw in me. "I'm learning to use pain," I told her, "on account of the play."

After school I went to our dress rehearsals and worked especially hard on my monologue, even though Mr. Sweeney had cut it down to just seven lines. "You'll remember it better this way," he told me. I also worked with the choir director on my big number, "Making Pipe Bombs in Eric's Garage," until I could project my pain into the notes themselves—deep, heavy sounds, the music of distress. On stage, I felt I was becoming Klebold. I resented the students who played the victims for treating me so poorly. I disliked the students who played my teachers for not taking me aside, giving me a little pep talk and trying to point me in the right direction. I began to feel significant longing as well as a deep-seated resentment for Mike Rogers, who, as my only friend,

Eric Harris, was clearly manipulating me into becoming his sidekick in the school shooting.

Everyone was impressed, even Robbie Fenstermaker, my predecessor, who occasionally attended rehearsals in a partial upper-body cast. Very carefully, he laid his good arm across my shoulders. "You're okay," he said. "You're not as much of a puss as I thought."

After the long weekend rehearsals, I felt the spirit of Klebold follow me outside the theater and into my regular life as a student. I intentionally spilled coffee on one page of my algebra homework. I showed up late to Social Studies two days in a row. In the gym, I mimicked noises of impatience when larger boys monopolized workout stations I wanted to use. On Wednesday, between classes, while focusing again on the incident with the dumbbells, I felt a regret open inside of me, a dark, soulful longing for a missing piece of my childhood. In that moment, I understood that this was how the rest of the world felt about their existence, this longing, this sorrow I had learned to manage through creative visualization techniques my mother learned about at the community college.

After rehearsal I always went home with Susan, who turned out to be my biggest fan. Virtually every afternoon, she asked me to recite my lines, to strut around like I was Klebold himself ready to storm into the school cafeteria. If I was feeling especially randy, I'd run through a piece of the "Manhattan Monologue" or list off two or three household items you could use to make a pipe bomb. As my reward, she'd strip off her clothes, garment by garment, until we were naked inside her mother's bed, having sex, then watching the Playboy Channel. By now I had a fair knowledge of the Playboy Channel. My favorite segments involved Mandy and Sandy, the Reinholt twins, demonstrating advanced Tai Chi movements in the nude.

On the night before our play opened, my mother confronted me about my behavior. "You've been walking around here like you own this place," she said. She crossed her arms, then uncrossed them. She was dressed in one of her shell pink suits. Shell pink was another recommended color for women in her field. "Your entire attitude has changed. I sense an anger coming from you, an anger I don't believe you're entirely in control of."

"It's not me, Mom. I'm practicing for the school play. I'm Dylan Klebold now. It's a big role. He carries a gun."

We walked to the living room couch and sat down. In recent years, I'd learned a great deal about life from her: how to handle anger, loss, a shrinking sense of yourself in the new world order. The trick to happiness, she'd once told me, was to realize you were no more important than anyone else. Our big mission in life was to get along peacefully with people different than us. In the tradition of these earlier lessons, that afternoon she told me, "You need to keep your emotions in check. We live in an age where we must put aside our own troubles so that everyone feels comfortable and safe." She placed her hand on my shoulder, a kind, disarming gesture I imagined was very effective with her clients at work. "You've been brooding around this house for over a week."

"I just want to be good in the school play," I said. "As good as Robbie Fenstermaker."

"You shouldn't hold yourself up to the standards set by others."

"But I do. I don't want everyone to think I'm a wuss."

"No one thinks you're a wuss. And if they do, you can tell yourself, Self, I'm not a wuss no matter what people think. That was your father's problem. He cared too much what other people thought and didn't know how to find the peace that was inside him all along."

That night I felt a strong discontent settle into my heart, the sense that I was living in a very small box—a comfortable box, furnished with a nice bed, nice bookshelves, a faux-antique lacquered desk where I did my homework, but a *small* box nonetheless. In my dream, I walked along a corridor lined with security cameras until I came to a white sand beach where I saw my father in his red Hawaiian shirt drinking a piña colada from a plastic cup. The sun slanted down onto my face, and in the distance, small waves curved ashore. "Don't be such an asshole," my father said to me. "Clearly Burma is the way to go." He was trying to hand a piña colada to me when I slipped away from the beach and into the darkness that marked the general landscape of my dreams.

In the morning, as I imagined my father sitting next to me on the bed, he

was silent again, not the chummy, free-speaking individual I'd seen the night before. He didn't even look at me. When I walked in front of him, he offered me an expression of wide-eyed condolence before he patted his pockets in hopes of finding a new pack of smokes. In the shower, I practiced my two songs for the play, and when I returned, I found not only my father but the transparent image of Dylan Klebold sitting beside him on my bed. Klebold wore a black coat and sweater and had two bandoliers of ammo draped across his chest. He leveled me with his eyes, one of them discolored with a bruise. I could tell he was about to leave by the way his form kept growing lighter, but I asked him to stay, to tell me what I needed to know to be him on stage.

"Be me?" he laughed. "You have no idea how to be me. You drop a dumbbell on your foot. You think that's insight. You think that's pain. Ha. I wanted just one good friend. A friend to sit with me through the long, dark hours of the night. And when I find him, he turns out be a psycho-Nazi, intent on dragging my sorry ass down to the seventh level of hell. Go shove that in your school's piano and sing about it."

With that he was gone. My father gave me that sorrowful look once more before his body dissolved into the early morning light as well. I sat on the floor stunned. I felt empty, much like my mother must have felt when my father left, like someone had scraped my insides out with a stick.

In the gym, I waited for two football players to finish with the bench press. After five minutes I made my usual noises of impatience, but they pretended I wasn't there. One said, "You hear something?" The other responded, "Cut the comedy and throw on another ten pounds." In the breezeway I told a group of freshman to move away from my locker, only to have one respond, "Oh, bite me." In the cafeteria, I tried to push toward the fast window, only to have some girl elbow me in the spleen so hard I nearly doubled over.

Clearly I'd lost my connection to Klebold, that gossamer string that had tied our two hearts together for the past week. He'd appeared in my room just long enough to claim whatever part of him I'd found, then leave again. While sitting on the lawn with Susan, I did my absolute best to call up my Kleboldian self, to drag it up from the seventh level of hell and return it to its rightful place inside my chest. I recalled the exact details of the dumbbell fall-

ing on my foot, how I crumpled on to the neoprene mat so angry I could hit someone. I imagined the correct sound of Klebold's voice, the repressed edge of anger evident in it. When I was so focused I could almost hear it, I said, "Mother Fucker, this cheeseburger is a little cold."

Susan deadpanned me, her eyes entirely absent of lust. "Hey," she said, "are you coming down with something? You sound like you are. Maybe we shouldn't screw around today. I need to sound good tonight. I'm sending the video off with my Rutgers application." She scooped the remains of her lunch into a bag and slid away from me.

That afternoon at our final rehearsal we walked through each scene, practicing our lines and dance numbers, but saving our singing voices for the actual performance. I could tell Mr. Sweeney was disappointed in me because my voice wasn't right; neither were my gestures. I knew all my lines, but when I said them I sounded like "Library Victim Number Four," not Dylan Klebold. Mr. Sweeney didn't say anything, though. He kept glancing toward the theater seats, all of which were empty except for two. Reporters from the local *Sun-Times* sat quietly in the second row, yellow legal pads in their laps, expressions of guarded disbelief mapped across their faces. Mr. Sweeney couldn't have been more delighted. Between acts, while standing in the wings, I heard him tell Robbie, "You get attention any way you can."

At the intermission, he stepped to center stage and said what he usually did about our play, that it was a cautionary tale designed to expose real-world violence as the unacknowledged form of entertainment it had become. He was joined by Mr. Dickerson, vice president of the SafeCampus Corporation, who said how proud he was to sponsor a play with such vision, such enthusiasm for the high-tech, fully monitored world of the future. He told the reporters about the security retrofitting his company had already completed at our school. "With cameras like these in virtually every hallway, no crazed mutant is going to mow these kids down in an ambush. Ain't that right, kids?" We all said, "Yeah," as we'd been directed to do. He smiled while one of the reporters took his picture, the eight library victims arranged in a semicircle behind him.

All through my "Manhattan Monologue" I was nervous. I said my lines as

best I could, while Mr. Sweeney projected his slides onto the white screen above me and the students who played the victims formed a row and pretended to hum the chorus of future dread, a number that had been significantly shortened so as to match the new length of my speech. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Susan. She wore her striped sweater, her hands clasped behind her back. Like the other victims she pressed her lips together, though did not actually hum. How I wanted to impress her, to let her know we could find something in this play, some memory we could hold on to, a piece of our lives stitched together, but after rehearsal I didn't find her outside the girls' dressing room. Nor did I find her in Mr. Sweeney's office thumbing through those acting magazines she so liked to read.

I knew why she'd left. Of course I did. Because I wasn't the actor she'd hoped I'd be. During our one-hour evening break, I walked aimlessly around our school, past Officer Brubaker's security substation, past my clear plastic locker, past the half-completed kennel where our school planned to house a watchdog. I sat in the Humanities Courtyard beside a maple tree and asked Dylan Klebold to return to me. *I* will be your friend, I told him. *I* will listen to you through the long, dark hours of the night.

Across the courtyard, beneath a hand-painted banner the pep squad had posted for our football team, he appeared, translucent and fading, dressed in his black coat and sweater, his eye socket still bruised, his arms crossed. I walked slowly toward him, transfixed by the see-through iridescence of his face. He regarded me differently this time, his eyes wide, reconsidering. I saw he was a little like me, somewhat cautious, perhaps lonely, yet without anyone like Susan to help get him through those especially tough days.

I stopped a good ten feet from him because his form was growing dimmer. "What do you want?" he asked.

"To do a good job in the school play," I said, but he could tell I wanted other things as well.

"Experience doesn't come cheap."

"I know," I said. "I realize that." I started toward him again, his brown eyes fixed on me, an expression of pity falling across his face. He stood very still, arms at his side, not angry anymore, but sad for some reason. He vanished

before I could reach him, leaving me alone with the security cameras and trash cans, early lines of moonlight washing the ground at my feet.

* * *

By the time I returned to the drama wing, Susan was already in the girls' dressing room being fitted with blood packs. Outside the theater parents lined up, as did a few reviewers, most of them milling around an information booth staffed by representatives of the SafeCampus Corporation. I went to the boys' dressing room, where Mr. Sweeney handed me a black sweater very close in design to the one Klebold had worn in the Humanities Courtyard earlier that evening. He reminded me where my two weapons were kept, the TEC-DC9 and a shotgun with the stock and barrel sawed off, then handed me a clear plastic bag filled with carpenter's nails and another filled with bits of colored plastic made to look like broken glass. I was supposed to carry these props into "Eric's Garage" when I walked on stage for the first time.

Clearly he must have sensed how nervous I was, reviewing my lines, looking for Susan when I could. From behind the curtains, I saw my mother in the third row, her hands clasping a congratulatory Hallmark card she had most likely signed earlier that day. Seeing her there, all pretty, waiting for my big performance, I felt bad all of a sudden because my father hadn't said a word to me all week, not even something as casual as "Break a leg, Kid," which was the type of thing he liked to say.

As the houselights dimmed, Mr. Dickerson took center stage. He introduced the play, repeating a number of things Mr. Sweeney had said that afternoon about violence and the role of musical theater, but concluded by saying, "Tonight's play has reminded me of the important service SafeCampus can offer to schools like yours all across the country."

As the curtains swung open, I can't tell you how nervous I was. I stood in the wings and watched the first act, the students who played the victims' parents sing "When Hitler's Birthday Comes to a Small Town Like Ours." Backstage, I looked for Susan. Twice I took small sips of water from our drinking fountain, even though Mr. Sweeney had warned us against this. Again I asked

Klebold to return to me, to be with me tonight so I wouldn't be nervous, so I could say my lines as I had the week before.

While I waited for him to appear among the pulleys and ropes, I felt a hand on my shoulder—Mr. Sweeney's hand. How glad I was he was there with me, among the props constructed for "The Library" scene. He put his arm around me, just like I visualized my own father doing on those mornings when I had a big test or a student presentation. "You're getting nervous," he said, "aren't you?"

"A little," I confessed. "But I want to do a good job."

"I know you do." He guided me out of the shadows and toward the sound booth. From the music, I knew the time had almost arrived for me to step on stage, to claim the role as best I could. "Sometimes when I'm nervous," he said, "I picture something that motivates me. Like my name on an off-Broadway marquee. Nothing fancy, just small letters nicely fixed above the box office." He pulled me to his side, a very warm gesture, but as he did I saw Susan down the hall. We were at the exact right angle to see into the makeup room. She was examining herself in the mirror, her hair pulled into a ponytail, her face dusted with powder. Beside her was Robbie Fenstermaker, his partial upper-body cast holding more student signatures than all three of my high school yearbooks combined. Then he did something odd, Robbie did; he slipped his good arm around Susan's waist very gently, so that she turned to him, her eyes wide and happy, just like they were in her mother's bedroom when she looked at me.

"Clearly," Mr. Sweeney continued, "you were the best choice for an understudy. I'm very glad you decided to take this role." He moved me toward the stage, but I kept glancing at the makeup room, my eyes darting around the other students in hopes that I might glimpse Susan again. As we waited in the wings, listening to Mike Rogers sing the song of teenaged hate, a feeling of rejection rushed into my heart, a feeling so strong I couldn't push it away no matter how hard I tried. In the audience, parents watched the stage intently. Around me students glanced my way with a certain callousness I'd never noticed before.

When the song changed keys, Mr. Sweeney handed me my bags of carpenter's nails and colored plastic. "You're the man," he said and gave me a little push. With the spotlight on me I walked across the stage, doing my best to move with determination and purpose; then I sat on a bench and pretended to empty Fourth of July fireworks into cylinders made of steel. When I started singing, my voice was louder than I expected, filled with a heartache so large Mike Rogers looked somewhat surprised to find this sound coming from me. I let this feeling swoop down around me, an arsenal of notes falling from my lips. I didn't care who heard: my mother, Susan, even Mr. Sweeney. I was doing my best, trying to remember what to say, where to stand, but in my mind, I was already at home, hoping Klebold would return so he could tell me what these feelings meant, where I should go from here.

2008

IN THE AGE OF AUTOMOBILES

from **Out Loud**, selected by Scott Turow

Anthony Varallo

Cody was surprised to see Mr. Turner getting into a Toyota Tercel. He would have imagined Mr. Turner driving something more like his mother's car, a Pontiac Bonneville, or maybe even a Town Car. But of course Mr. Turner couldn't afford a Town Car on a teacher's salary. Mr. Turner wore polyester-blend dress shirts and had a habit of taking large swallows of coffee from a Colonial Williamsburg coffee mug, a souvenir from last year's disastrous field trip there. That was the day Cody had been sent home for fighting but hadn't even thrown a punch. He'd cried in front of the entire seventh grade, a humiliation he couldn't afford to think about now if he wanted to get home before his mother. Her shift at the supermarket ended at four-thirty.

Mr. Turner had already started the engine when Cody put his hand to the passenger window and knocked. A loose beard of snow fell from the window. "Mr. Turner?"

Mr. Turner rolled the window down. "Well hello, Cody," he said. He was wearing the fake fur hat everyone made fun of behind his back. "Didn't see you there for a second, then voila, there you were."

"Sorry," Cody said.

"Everything OK?"

"Uh-huh."

"Did you miss your bus?"

Cody hadn't missed his bus. He'd stayed late for band practice, then got off the activities bus when Jason Kiefer and Mike Rowe threw his snow boots out the window. "Yeah," Cody said. The boots had landed right-side up on a plow-packed snowbank. "I guess maybe I need a ride. I'm really sorry about asking. I really am."

"Don't be," Mr. Turner said. "Hop on in."

"I'm really sorry," Cody said. Again. When would he stop saying sorry so much?

"It'll warm up in here in a minute," Mr. Turner said. Inside, the car smelled faintly fusty, like a library book. The defroster sent widening half-moons of clear glass across the front windshield. "You can put that in the backseat if you want," Mr. Turner said, indicating Cody's clarinet case.

"That's OK," Cody said.

"Is that an oboe?"

"Clarinet."

"Ah," Mr. Turner said. "'The clarinet, the clarinet, goes doodle-doodle-doodle-det!'"

"Yeah," Cody said.

"Don't ask me how I remember that," Mr. Turner said.

They pulled out of the parking lot, where Cody could see the snow already beginning to adhere to the highway. The sight of that always pleased him, since he felt in some way responsible for the snow, although he knew he really wasn't. It was amazing, all the dumb things he thought he might be responsible for.

"Everyone keeps telling me I'll get used to this weather eventually," Mr. Turner said. He reached across the wheel to pull the turn signal again. A car even smaller than Mr. Turner's turned past them, an enormous Christmas tree stuffed into its hatchback. A yellow tag hung from the tree's sappy stump. Although Christmas was less than a week away, Cody's mother still hadn't gotten a tree. He would have to remind her of that.

"Who's driving who, right?" Mr. Turner said.

"Yeah." Cody tried to laugh, but nothing came out. The defroster had

worked its way to the top of the window, Cody noticed. The noise of it offered comfort, the way his vaporizer did. That was a secret Cody was glad no one knew: he still slept with a vaporizer sometimes.

"I don't miss the lightning, though," Mr. Turner said. "That's one thing I can say about this weather: at least there's no lightning." Mr. Turner was from Florida. "No hurricanes either." An odd place to be from. It was embarrassing the way Mr. Turner wore leather sandals in the springtime, the way he cheered for incorrect sports teams like the Miami Dolphins, the way he pronounced lawyer as "law-yer" instead of "loi-yer," the way everyone else did. Part of any respectable Mr. Turner impression included grabbing your crotch, saying, "Who would l*ay*k a Floorida *oor*ange?!"

"—but Delaware is as far north as I could ever live. I've got a brother back in Tampa, says he could never imagine living north of the Carolinas, but I always say to him, You know, they get snow there too. Sometimes. Not all the time, but sometimes."

Cody nodded. He tried to think of something to say about Florida, but the truth was he'd only been there once, when he was five. His memory of the place was of a crowded beach where his bucket was dragged to sea, of the strange solitary cactus plant that grew in his grandparents' stony lawn, of the alligator farm where his grandfather had encouraged him to throw a fistful of feed from a fenced-in footbridge. The feed had dispersed in the air like chimney ashes and landed on the alligators' backs, who neglected to lick it away. This depressed Cody.

"—but I've got a good little car." Mr. Turner was telling Cody about driving the car from Florida to Delaware, all in one shot. Twenty-one hours.

"Wow," Cody said.

"I tell you, by the end I was seeing phantom deer, if you know what I mean."

Cody didn't know what he meant. "I know what you mean," he said.

The snow picked up enough that Mr. Turner had to use his wipers. Cody was glad to have the wipers, since they helped cover the silence that had sprung up between them. Again. It was horrible, trying to think of things to say. How did adults always manage to think of things to say?

"I'm glad, actually, that we ran into each other today," Mr. Turner said. "I've been meaning to get back to you about your research paper."

Cody felt his face grow warm. "Sorry," he said. "I'm real sorry about that."

"No need," Mr. Turner said, then sneezed. Mr. Turner looked sort of sad when he sneezed. Cody wasn't sure whether to say bless you or not. "Have you given any thought to our agreement?"

Cody nodded. "I'm real sorry about that," he said. "I'll get it to you after the break." The paper had been about the moon, a topic of Cody's own choosing, but he'd forgotten about it until the night before it was due. The only reference books around were the paperback dictionary his mother kept in her sewing table and his father's old 1961 encyclopedia set, still smelling like aftershave, with its short but rapturous entry about the possibility of a manned moon landing. Cody had lifted most of his paper from the text—it was fun, figuring out how to reword things—using the dictionary for long, unnecessary definitions like *crater, atmosphere*, *gravity*, and *galaxy*. His mother typed the paper up on his father's old Royal typewriter while the two of them watched *Dallas*.

"That would be terrific," Mr. Turner said. Outside, cars were slowing to a stop. Cody watched a white station wagon pull up alongside them. "I'd be glad to read your revision." A woman sat behind the wheel. Cody stared at her, but she didn't notice him. "I'd be glad to read anything you might like to write," Mr. Turner was saying. "You've got quite a flair for words."

"Thanks," Cody said. The woman reminded him of something he hadn't thought about until now: the year before, Mr. Turner had been engaged, but his fiancé had broken it off. Everyone knew. It wasn't even a secret, really, except that Mr. Turner never said anything about it. Cody remembered the one time that the fiancé had come to school, sitting at the back of Mr. Turner's classroom reading a magazine while Mr. Turner lectured about the Marshall Plan. The fiancé was pretty, clearly ten years younger than Mr. Turner, with a habit of tapping her pen across the edge of the page, then laughing when she read something amusing. "Does anyone have any questions?" Mr. Turner had asked, and the fiancé had raised her hand. "Does everyone know that Lawrence and I are engaged?" she said. Cody had joined the others in a

low, sustained oooooh until Mr. Turner waved his hands, saying, "Gentlemen, *please*, let's give it a rest." But it was too much to think about. Lawrence!

"Plus a vivid imagination," Mr. Turner said.

Cody nodded. Everyone made jokes about Mr. Turner's broken engagement, lousy puns about being turned down, turned away, turned off, and so on. Nothing too mean, by school standards. Pretty mild stuff. That was thing, Cody thought, you couldn't really like Mr. Turner, but you couldn't really hate him either. He was the kind of teacher your parents forgot to mention after parent-teacher night, drunk on Mr. Olsen's good looks or praising Ms. Trent's affability and sly English accent. You saw Mr. Turner's faculty picture in the yearbook and didn't even think of cutting it out and gluing it to a bobblehead doll, a ritual reserved for Mr. Thomlinson and Principal Wallace. You didn't think anything of Mr. Turner, really, not even the time last spring when he'd paused in the middle of his lecture and said, "Don't you think I know that everyone in this classroom is smarter than me?" His voice had sounded on the edge of tears. A U of sweat showed through his shirt. "Don't you think I'm aware of that?" Looking back, Cody realized, that must have been around the time his engagement had fallen apart. They'd done impressions of it anyway. "Don't you think I'm aware of that?" someone would say, then everyone else would break out laughing.

Mr. Turner turned the radio on. Oldies. "The only music that makes sense to me anymore," Mr. Turner laughed, as if they'd been talking about this all along. The traffic began to move again. Across the windshield, snow vanished into itself, over and over again. Cody watched, wondering if his mother would leave work early because of the weather. Sometimes her boss, Mr. Jackson, let her out early when the roads got slick. She'd show up at three-thirty with bags of day-old bread and overripe fruit, right in the middle of Cody's after-school snack, cinnamon toast with double butter. It was awful when his mother came in, ruining it, spilling bruised plums onto the kitchen linoleum and telling him to wake her for dinner; she was going to take a nap. It was embarrassing to see her winter coat, twenty years out of style, with its fake fur hood and humiliating trim, still torn from the time she'd caught it in the car door. It

would be a disaster if she was home by the time Mr. Turner dropped him off. What if she was waiting on the front porch, where she sometimes let the newspapers collect for days? What if she greeted Mr. Turner in her Phillies sweatpants?

"Is that your bus?" Mr. Turner said. Cody could see the bus ahead of them, stopped at a traffic light. He felt as if someone had casually handed him a refrigerator.

"I dunno," he said.

"I think that's the activities bus," Mr. Turner said. "But I can't read the insignia."

Cody could see the back door they were biannually asked to jump from, the bus driver, Captain Leroy, shouting at them through a rolled-up *Sports Illustrated*. "You're toast, Hitchens!" he'd say when Cody lingered at the door's edge. "Toast!"

"Too short," Cody said.

Mr. Turner pulled closer. "Bluebird," he said. "I think ours are Bluebirds, aren't they?"

Cody saw the back of Mike Rowe's head, the cowlick no one had ever thought to mock, not once, not ever. Rowe's teeth wore the most awful chain of braces Cody had ever seen; these, too, were granted acceptance, as were Rowe's sometime stutter and habit of saying "templature" for "temperature."

"I dunno," Cody said.

"I'm pretty sure," Mr. Turner said. By now Mr. Turner had pulled so close that Cody could see Jason Kiefer, too, propped against his Eagles coat, its green and white logo pressed against the window. Jason had thrown the coat over Cody's head while Rowe unlaced his snow boots. Its lining smelled like frozen butter.

"Wouldn't mind having that kind of traction," Mr. Turner said. "Those tires." Cody reached for his clarinet case. If he had to, he could run. Sure, it would be awkward, explaining it later to Mr. Turner—there was no getting around that—but at least Cody had the Christmas holiday coming soon, a whole week in which he wouldn't have to see Mr. Turner at all. He'd play his new video games, watch football, slice the gift fruitcakes that always became

his holiday lunches. Fruitcake was sort of OK if you smothered it with grape jelly.

"But I could live without the manual steering."

But what about the few days left before the holiday? Those would be excruciating, Mr. Turner greeting him in homeroom with a phony smile, not wanting to make him feel embarrassed. Perhaps pretending like nothing at all had happened, the worst. Perhaps asking, after everyone else had left for recess, how things were going at home?

"And the noise," Mr. Turner laughed. "Right?"

They had pulled so close it seemed to Cody they were now under the bus. The bus's bumper held a ledge of dirty snow. "Right," Cody said. The bus pulled forward, then suddenly stopped with a rocking motion. Cody felt the Tercel lurch forward. "What's the prob, buddy?" Mr. Turner said, but the problem was clear: they were inches from the bus's rear, where Jason Kiefer and Mike Rowe's gleeful faces could now be seen, laughing. Soon these faces were haloed by a half-dozen others, fingers pointing at Cody and Mr. Turner in their sad, brown car.

"It *is* one of ours," Mr. Turner said.

Cody had looked away the moment Jason's astonished eyes met his, but now he chanced another glance, and saw Rowe licking the window with his remarkably long tongue.

"Oh, boys," Mr. Turner sighed.

Jason's face, which always looked as if had just registered horrible news, contorted itself into a pained kiss—an idea the other boys quickly cribbed, puckering their lips and hugging themselves like zealous lovers.

"Comedians," Mr. Turner said.

Rowe pressed his hands and face to the glass, puffing his cheeks. This distorted his usual expression, but Cody felt he could still read its single, urgent question: should I imitate fellatio or not? Rowe's imitation was pretty good, what with the way he closed his eyes and made mmm-mmm sounds the way everyone knew adults did, but part of its power was its infrequent use, judiciously saved for ripe moments like the time Cody had accidentally worn his mother's tennis socks, or the time a bus of cheerleaders waved hello.

"Real jokesters," Mr. Turner said, but Cody detected a whiff of unease. "Aren't we lucky?" The semester before, someone had nailed Mr. Turner's roll book to a drafting table.

"Yeah," Cody said. He wished he was one of those people who could laugh whenever. The kind of person who threw back their heads after hearing a dirty joke and said, *Good one*. But he wasn't. He was the other kind of person. He felt himself beginning to cry.

"I'll tell you something," Mr. Turner said. "Sometimes I think about all the things you kids are going through, all the teasing and peer pressure, and I just want to stop classes for a week and talk it out. Put it out there, in the open. You know?" Mr. Turner looked over at him. "What would you think about something like that?"

Cody nodded, but he was already going through his anti-crying mental exercise, envisioning a series of numbers collapsing into themselves, 1 through 10, like the ones his clock radio wore. He had failed to summon them the day at Colonial Williamsburg. "Okay," he said.

"I mean it," Mr. Turner said. "It's something I've given a lot of thought to." When Cody looked up, he saw the bus pulling away. His eyes met Rowe's, which conveyed satisfaction in these unprecedented events, already shaping themselves into legend around them. Rowe would, his smile informed Cody, never let him forget.

"I've thought about it so often my friends say they're sick of hearing about it," Mr. Turner said. "'Just do it,' they say. Have it out with them. It'll be tough, but the most important things always are. The things most worth doing—"

The problem was getting from 10 back to 1. If Cody imagined the 0 falling away, this left the 1 on the wrong side of things, requiring the 0 to acrobatically jump the 1 so that the numbers might ascend from 01 on.

"Cody? You OK over there?"

Cody gripped the clarinet case to his chest. "Sorry," he said, but the sound of his own voice only made things worse. He began to cry. He couldn't stop. When Mr. Turner pulled the car into a shopping center, he finally did.

* * *

"I was fat," Mr. Turner was saying. "Do you know that? *I* was a fat kid."

Cody, twirling a French fry in ketchup, said no, he didn't know that.

"Honestly—do you want me to tell you something honestly?—I was a fat teenager *and* a fat twenty-something, too." Mr. Turner made his eyes wide. "That's right."

They'd stopped at Howard Johnson the moment Cody told Mr. Turner he could walk home from the shopping center. It wasn't far; he'd walked it a hundred times. But not in this weather, Mr. Turner had said. Not after a day like this, no. He wouldn't think of it. They'd grab a snack, then Mr. Turner would drop Cody off at the front door. He'd even go inside with him, explain things to Cody's mother, if that was what Cody wanted. If not, fine, he could just drop him off in the driveway. That was fine, too. He wanted Cody to know that whatever he chose would be fine with him. That was an important thing to know, he said.

"Do you know what it's like being the only fat kid in a family of four boys? *Four*." Mr. Turner held up four fingers. "One All-State track three years in a row, one the local high dive record holder, one model good-looking with a voice like Neil Diamond, and one, well," Mr. Turner raised his hands, "one kid so flabby and pale and lonely-feeling he fell asleep on the beach one day and woke up in the hospital. The *hospital*." Mr. Turner waited until Cody had registered the necessary look of surprise. "Nearly died," Mr. Turner whispered.

"Wow," Cody said.

"Exactly."

A plate of salad greens sat between them, untouched. A fat fly toured its lone yellow raisin.

"You see? Those are things I remember about growing up. Feeling humiliated. Feeling alone. Feeling like I was somehow not allowed into everyone else's happiness. That's a state crime, by the way, in Florida. Not feeling tan and happy." His look told Cody that this was a kind of joke.

Cody attempted a laugh. "Not feeling tan," he said.

"In grade school they called me Lardwrence. 'Lardwrence, how did you get to be so fat?' or 'Hey, Lardwrence, what's shakin'—besides you?' Go ahead, laugh. Some of it seems funny now, doesn't it?"

Cody shook his head.

"Well, you better believe I laughed it off. What else could I do?" Mr. Turner forked a lettuce leaf without bringing it to his lips. "I imagine you know a little bit about that."

Cody tugged at his coat sleeve. The one he'd used to wipe his stupid tears away. "I dunno." That's what he'd been, stupid; stupid to let the incident get to him; stupid to ask Mr. Turner for a ride in the first place; stupid to cry in front of his teacher, stupid to accept Mr. Turner's offer of a quick meal.

"That's something we have in common, isn't it?"

Cody nodded, a gesture that felt required of him.

"I've seen the way they tease you," Mr. Turner said. "Did you know that?" He took a bite of lettuce. "I've seen it for a long time now."

Cody shrugged. "It's not so bad."

"No, Cody." Mr. Turner shook his head. "Do you know what that is? Do you know what you just had?"

Before Cody could answer, Mr. Turner said, "A Junk Thought, that's what. Do you know what a Junk Thought is? It's all those thoughts in your head that keep telling you things are OK when things are definitely not OK. Because accepting things the way they are is hard to do. Really hard. But worth it, Cody, so, so *worth it*." He gave Cody a look above the rims of his glasses. "Trust me. It took me most of my life to figure this out. A long, long time. My life was a series of Junk Thoughts. Had them every day. It was like I woke up in the morning feeling lousy about myself, spent most of the day feeling worse, went to bed feeling even worse than when I started. You see what I mean? Just like they say; it's a cycle. Right? It's like—" Mr. Turner described a circle in the air. "You know? Like, 'Help! I'm trapped! Who can help me? I'm all alone!'"

"Right."

"Well, you're *not* all alone," Mr. Turner said, as if Cody had been arguing this. "No one is. That's something Justine helped me to see. Justine helped me come to terms with my Junk Thoughts." Mr. Turner nodded. "That's something I'll always owe Justine."

"That was nice of her," Cody said.

Mr. Turner went on as if he hadn't heard. "Do you know that Justine was the first woman I was ever seriously involved with? I mean seriously involved with. In a mature, adult relationship. I never even went to my senior prom. I never really even went on a date until my senior year of college. That's the truth. Do you know how old I was the first time I ever even kissed a girl?"

"Well—"

"Twenty-*two*!" Mr. Turner said. "Twenty-two years old and kissing a girl for the first time." Mr. Turner clicked his tongue. "Tough to think about."

The waitress brought them the bill, which Mr. Turner tucked beneath his placemat. "In college I was always hitting the library when my friends were hitting the bars. Most of them were in fraternities, partying it up, having a social life I could only dream about as I sat in the reading room and wished I was anywhere else." He shook his head, ruefully. "Justine always said she couldn't believe I'd spent my time that way. She was the complete opposite, of course. Studious, but fun."

Cody understood that it was his job to nod.

"Oh, she knew how to have fun."

Outside, the snow had stopped, but it looked deeper than Cody had realized. If it snowed tonight, maybe they wouldn't have school tomorrow. A blizzard and Cody might not have to return until after the holiday.

"People say, 'Sorry to hear about you and Justine,' or 'We're sorry to hear things didn't work out,' and I always say 'Why? There's nothing sorry about it.' Am I sorry we're not together right now? Well, yes, I am. I admit that. I'd be lying if I said otherwise. But the fact is, Justine was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. Ever. And there's just no way I can look back at having that kind of experience as—" he held his hands apart, "as, as anything to be sorry for." Cody chanced a look; he saw that Mr. Turner had his eyes closed. When Mr. Turner spoke next it was in a whisper. "Do you know why I'll get over Justine?"

Cody didn't say anything.

"Because I've got *self-respect*," Mr. Turner said, and brought his hands to his face. He made tiny whimpering noises. His shoulders shook. "That's what I've got."

Cody watched, imagining Mr. Turner telling his mother all about missing the bus, about the taunting. He imagined Mr. Turner telling her all about Justine. He imagined him saying he loved her. It was the idea of Mr. Turner sitting at their kitchen table, whose fourth leg sometimes fell off for no reason whatsoever, that informed Cody he had to decide something. That was certain. He would have to make a choice. But it wasn't until Mr. Turner announced he'd left his wallet in the Tercel that the decision revealed something of itself to Cody. Mr. Turner said, "I'll be back in a second," and stood from the table. "You hold the fort, OK?" Mr. Turner donned his furry hat and pushed through the heavy glass doors to the parking lot.

It was cold outside; the wind was up. When Cody pushed through the side door, he found himself in the hotel parking lot. It was the lot he sometimes cut across coming home from Walgreens, his pockets stuffed with trading cards. The lot was bordered by a stand of pine trees, whose boughs hid the entrance to a dirt path that led to Cody's neighborhood. The sight of virgin snow there pleased Cody, as did the view the path eventually afforded him: the front lot, Mr. Turner riffling through the Tercel, searching for his lost wallet. For a moment Cody wondered if he should call out to him. Should he? Should he let him know he was heading home? Should he say thanks for the ride? Didn't he owe that to Mr. Turner? He couldn't decide. And that was the thing: even as Cody entered his neighborhood, even as he shook snow from the heels of his boots, even as he opened his front door, he felt like he was still deciding.

2009

PIONEER

from Triple Time, selected by Ann Patchett

Anne Sanow

Up in the cliffs, protruding from a crevice no wider than a plywood board, there is a tail, maybe a goat's, flicking up and down again. There's a suspension of movement and then the animal backs up, defecating. Chris rests his nose against the fence to keep his sightline level; the goat continues to scrabble and root while its excrement drops behind it, turning the same baked yellow as the escarpments. It's that hot. The goats will eat nearly anything and they are adroit, vertical climbers—and here just across the road from the building site it's feastland, a cornucopia of discarded food containers, insulation strips, chunks of wood and plaster, and tin cans, which in accordance with all mythology they gnaw vigorously. Wild dogs assist by messing about in the garbage at night and distributing it on the road. Over the past weeks Chris has seen the goats become fatter, roly-bellied and tottering, and each morning as he rides out in the truck he sees them ambling about the mosque in the village, their side-planted eyes following him as he passes, mouths chewing in mockery or greeting.

The village is the sentry to the Wadi Laban. At least this is how Chris, who is nine, sees it: the road from the city passes down the chute of the canyon, and then there is the sharp brow of rocks straight ahead. A cluster of mud houses and some palms sprout from seemingly nothing. To the left is a

narrow path for men and goats, and the only way for a car or truck to proceed is to the right, down the new paved road that winds one mile to the place where Chris's father is supervising the building of a housing compound. The turn past the village is sharp and precise, and there is always someone watching them drive by. Usually it is the old man who owns the small grocery. Chris's father often stops there, leaving the truck idling, and buys gallon jugs of purified water for the men at the site and sticky cans of sweet Vimto soda for Chris. When Chris's father goes in the store he says to the shop owner *salaam alaykum* or *alaykum salaam*, depending on who has initiated the greeting. At the building site, he jokes with the other Americans who have dubbed the village B-1; the future government compound has already been designated B-2 by some people back in Washington, and the workers are behind schedule in completing it.

It's some strange trick of time but in the month that he has been spending in this place, Chris is never bored. They are long days, too, and because it is July they begin early, with the sun gleaming from the horizon at five and pulsing with full force by eight-thirty or nine. It will be a hundred and ten, a hundred and twenty degrees; at least it isn't humid, Chris's mother says, like it would be if they were stationed in Jeddah, which is on the Red Sea. Chris can't imagine what the Red Sea might look like. For now he is obsessed with his waiting game, in which he holds himself rigid for hours like a stalker. His efforts pay off and he keeps a tally of the goats and lizards he spots every day, and he hopes for additional wriggles or thrashings in the craggy rocks, anything he can study and fix on so that he can learn its movements and habits.

"That shit'll be all over the fucking road again," says a voice behind him. Chris jumps, then relaxes. It's Radi, whose mimicry of the tough-talking Americans is made comical in his clear, flutish voice.

"Yeah," Chris agrees, watching as Radi hops up onto a rock next to him, flipping his ghotra back from his headband to look through the fence.

"*Yeah*," Radi says, drawling it out. Sometimes he just repeats words and inflections, and he remembers them all; other times, Chris can't be sure that there isn't a mean streak in him, an older boy's hazing reflex. Radi is fourteen.

Instead of joining the Saudi National Guard this summer he works on the site, organizing tools and supplies.

"Want to shoot?" Radi asks. He aims up into the rocks, *psh psh*. "Think your dad will let you?"

"Maybe," Chris says. Not that his father ever has.

Radi's eyes widen. "No shit?"

"We have a gun at home."

At this Radi laughs. "Ah, *we* have a gun. I see. No, I think it is your *father's*. Yes? You're too young." He steps off the rock. "Come on. I'm here to get you."

Chris gets down from the fence and follows Radi. It's useless, Radi doesn't take him seriously, but Chris says, "My father was in Vietnam." Radi slows a bit and smiles, and for a moment, facing Chris, he looks malevolent. Maybe it's the sun, backlighting his white thobe so that it looks flamed around the outline of his body. But then he waits until Chris catches up and says, "Maybe I'll show you *my* father's gun. He was in a war too. Okay?"

"Okay," says Chris. He doesn't want to admit that he does not know which war Radi means.

They go into a white tent where Chris's father and his fellow engineers are unpacking lunch from big coolers brought in by some Yemeni boys. The ice in the bottom of the coolers has gone to slush. "Look sharp," Chris's father calls to him, lobbing a sandwich. Chris catches it, low at the waist. It's soggy in the wrapper, probably salami and weird German cheese. Never ham. "Radi?" his father says, gesturing. But Radi signals no with a palm and backs out, casually, like he has somewhere else he needs to be.

"Masalaam,'" he says. He taps Chris on the shoulder as he goes.

"Masa*later*," one of the engineers calls back. Chris's father offers Radi a sandwich every day; he never takes it. Sometimes he eats with the laborers, or he goes back to the little family farm a few miles down the road. Either way, they won't see him again until after noon prayer.

Chris's father sits next to him on the floor of the tent, which is covered with dusty rugs. He wipes some of the reddish sand from his sunburned forehead. "So," he says, "how's the Great Laban Wildlife Survey?"

"There are two kinds of goats," Chris says, all seriousness. "Those ones

we see all the time, and then these smaller ones, with different horns. They're like antelope."

"Okay," his father says. "We'll have to check that out." He's tired, Chris can tell. This work is not diYcult for him—he's always worked long hours, as far as Chris can remember it, but now they need more money and Chris's mother waits for them each day back at the house. It all seems to be making his father look older than he should, but he's trying. He's pleasant around the other men but quieter, more controlled.

"Hey, Chris," one of the men says from the other side of the tent. His accent is one target for Radi's imitations: words coming out with a hard twang. "How do you feel about getting a baby sister?"

Chris shrugs, watching his father. "It's okay," he says.

"Gives your mother something to do, that's for sure." The men who are married agree; the wives are at home all day with no jobs and no cars. Chris has heard his mother complain that she isn't allowed to drive here.

Someone else says, "Well, if you gotta bring 'em with you, you know it's best you just keep them knocked up—"

"Keep them *happy*," the first engineer says, winking at Chris. "*Inshallah*, right? God willing." The other guy looks at Chris's father and says, "Sorry, Mike." His father nods.

"Good timing though, yeah? Just when you get here."

Chris's father joins in the laughter this time. "What are you supposed to do?" he says.

* * *

There's not much happening after the food; prayer call has wavered over them from the village mosque, and the workers will pray and then rest for an hour. They stay inside the tent for a while, out of the sun. Chris looks at the blueprints his father is explaining to another man—No, the guard gate needs to go *here*, he says, so they can't see over to the swimming pool—and occasionally his father looks over at him. "That's right, isn't it?" It's a new thing for Chris, the first time he's been included this way, and he feels like he's a lot older than he was two months ago, back home.

When prayer ends Chris plays backgammon with the old men from the date farm, who move with the shade every afternoon, tracing the periphery of the site. One of them can say "okay," which he does every time Chris makes a move that is right, or he'll shake his head with a sharp "*la, la!*" and point to the mark that would have been better. The others speak in Arabic but they are all mostly quiet, sipping sweet tea from little glass cups and leaning back with rolled-up rugs under their haunches.

Chris is thinking out his next move when they hear the shout. It comes from the direction of the site, and Chris feels suddenly cold all over. He runs back to where the tallest building—the unfinished prefab concrete of a two-story house—is surrounded by the laborers and the engineers. Chris doesn't think anyone could be hurt too bad from falling, it's not that far, but he looks for his father anxiously. He sees him kneeling over a broken concrete slab, and under the slab is Radi's leg. Radi is stretched out and staring at it, eyes wide, but he is not making a sound.

There's a sharp disagreement of voices, made cacophonous by the wadi's echo. "Dad," Chris says. He comes up behind him. Radi starts to hyperventilate, and Chris's father tells him, "Easy, easy, okay? Don't try to move."

"Get back here," one of the engineers says, guiding Chris away. "We're going to lift that off." One of the laborers, breaking out of the group, goes over to Radi and says something. Radi nods, eyes closed now. "*Hinna, hinna!*" the man says, and other men come over to help. When the slab is pulled away Radi does scream, a high, strangled sound. From where he stands Chris can see dark wet stains where the thobe sticks to his leg. "Okay, okay," Chris's father is saying. Someone brings a first-aid kit and takes out bandages. "No, fuck, that is *not* it," Chris hears his father say. "That's all we've got?"

As Chris stands watching he sees a look that he's seen on his father's face before, that quick fall into frustration, something that melts down. Sometimes Chris thinks that his father spends most of his time inside himself making sure that the look doesn't get out. It happened when he told them that they were going to Saudi Arabia. I don't *have* a job here, Jenny, he'd said to Chris's mother. Two or three years, okay? An adventure, hey Chris? You'll go to school there. There's a bunch of other kids coming too.

Now his father gets it back together. He waves Chris over. Radi's leg is wrapped and splinted, he's stopped groaning but Chris can see he doesn't feel good. He manages a weak grin. "Hey, *sadiq*," he says to Chris.

Chris high-fives him—this, at least, is something he's taught to Radi, who's just called him *friend*. "Are you going to the hospital?" Chris asks. The men have a wheelbarrow, and Radi eyes it.

"Later," he says, waving a hand. Chris looks at his father, whose mouth is a line.

"He's going home first," he says. "Then he's going. But we're gonna see you, right, Radi? We'll come check you out when you're all set up."

Chris knows that Radi's leg must be crushed—there's no way it couldn't be, under the heavy concrete. "We should take him now, Dad," he says. "In our truck." Radi watches him. The men with the wheelbarrow are arguing with one another, and Chris can't understand what they're saying.

"His brother will take him," his father says, with finality.

"But Dad—"

Radi looks away. "Later," he says again, wincing as he gets lifted into the wheelbarrow, splinted leg straight out in front. "You come see me, okay?" The men kick up dust in their hurry to get him down the road.

* * *

"Linda Garcia told me it happens all the time," his mother says. "Rich has a couple of guys out on his site with permanent limps." She seems to float in the tiny kitchen, a light blue butterfly or bird with a round stomach. After the days out in the baked earth, where everything is pounded by the glare, Chris can't bring her into focus.

"I'm following it up," his father says, head in his hands at the table. "We promised to go see him."

"We?"

"I'm going too," Chris says. He's worried, now, that Radi's leg won't be all right. His father explains that Radi's family won't let their son go to a hospital with strangers; they want to see him themselves, and then decide what to do. "We have to respect that," he says.

"Oh, baby, he'll be okay," his mother says. She smiles at Chris. "We'll all go see him when he gets to the hospital, and after the baby's born you can have Radi come over here to visit, all right?" She's breezy this evening, hummingly cheerful. Chris ducks as she comes by with a plate.

They eat at the card table that is shoved into a corner next to the refrigerator. It's warm there, and the air conditioner wheezes and spits. The house is slapped up from cheap wood and tin, one of forty in neat rows, surrounded by walls. A chain-link fence bars the entry; a boy Radi's age stands guard, holding an automatic rifle. There's nowhere to go except a playground with monkey bars and a slide, which Chris disdains, and is anyway impossible in the heat of the day. He has seen only younger children on the compound so far, no one really his age. His father says they will come when school starts. His mother has made one friend, Linda, whose husband works on another building site. The two women spend their days indoors with the shades drawn, drinking iced tea and making baby clothes.

Chris and his father watch her. She's talking about the Bedouin spice sellers, how they came to the compound with their trucks and camels and were almost turned away by the guard, but then she and the other women banged on the gates and the nomads just pushed right by him. "The poor boy didn't know what to do," she says. "I don't think he has a clue with that gun."

"Which is what I'm afraid of, Jen."

"What, that you'll come home some day and find us all carried off somewhere?" She laughs, but it sounds cracked. Before his father can speak up again she goes on: "I got turmeric, marjoram, some ochre-colored stuff—I don't know the name, but it smells heavenly . . ."

"Did you have an abayah on?" Chris's father interrupts. He looks at her stomach, pushing up the hem of her long Indian dress so that only the back of it brushes the floor.

"Oh, honey," she says. "Don't worry about *me*." She sounds light again, but Chris is on the alert. She was like this when she announced she was pregnant, telling Chris and his father together. What do you think? she'd asked Chris. We're going to Arabia and you're going to get a baby sister.

His father was surprised. Then he asked why she thought it was a girl. I just do, she said.

"Okay, Jen," his father says now. His voice is gentler. She looks away into the kitchen, her fork in the air. "Mom," Chris says, "I want to go see Radi tomorrow." She turns to him slowly with a polite smile. "Oh," she says.

"*Mom,*" Chris says, and his father says her name again, but she trills at their joint tone of concern. "Lighten up, you two," she says.

* * *

Chris awakes to familiar sounds: he can hear his parents' bed, in the room across from his, creak in its metal frame. He knows his father is getting up when the springs give a quick shriek. Then there will be a long grind as his mother rolls over, and a see-saw melody as she balances on the edge. He listens and thinks: *Wve minutes.* While he tries to move from his own cot—it's Army-issue, and the mattress is blue-striped and thin—he holds his breath as he lies on his back, carefully sliding his legs over.

The bed groans anyway, so he gives up and puts his feet on the floor. A sticker on the mirror over the dresser points a green arrow in the direction of Mecca. In the next room he hears a long sigh and more protests from the springs. *Ow,* his mother says.

In the kitchen Chris finds a lizard on the wall and picks it up by the tail. The tip of it comes off and jerks for a moment in his fingers. "Chris!" his father calls. The lizard skitters under the counter.

"I need you to stay at home today," his father says. He's standing in the doorway, combing wet hair back from his forehead.

"But I thought we were going to see Radi."

"We will. Not today, though. Your mother's not feeling well."

Chris says, "So what?"

"Don't give me that," his father says. He doesn't say anything else as he starts up some water on the stove for coffee. Chris wants to protest: an entire day at home, where he will have little to do; their shipment of household goods has not yet arrived and he has no toys except for the case of Matchbox

cars he brought on the plane. But his father looks at him and demands, "Well?" and Chris knows that however they are on their days together on the building site, it is not how they are here.

"Okay," Chris mumbles. He doesn't offer an apology, but his father seems satisfied.

After his father leaves Chris listens for sounds from the bedroom. Deciding that his mother must still be asleep, he goes outside.

It is deserted. Each little house is exactly the same—square and white, window screens matted with dead bugs. Curtains are drawn against the sun. All of the cars and trucks are gone. Chris makes his way around the rectangle of the street, dragging his shoes on the asphalt; the noise seems to get sucked up into the air. Finally, he sees someone: at the end of the block, where tired palm trees make a thin shade over the picnic tables, there is a girl sitting Indian-style with a book and crayons.

She stops what she's doing and looks up at Chris as he comes near. "What are you staring at?" she says to him.

"I'm just walking around," he says. He hasn't seen her before; her blonde hair is cut in feathers, and she has bright blue shadow smeared inexpertly on her eyelids. Her pale arms and legs poke out from cutoff denim shorts and a T-shirt printed with daisies. She must be new here, Chris thinks—certainly she's pretending not to be miserable, just as he is.

When he walks over to the table and sits down, he can see that her face is young and chubby. But when he tells her his name she says, in a mean tone, "Well isn't that nice," like she's trying out something from someone older. She folds her hands over her coloring book, but not before Chris sneaks a look at it: *Charlie's Angels*. She's been coloring Farrah Fawcett's hair, mixing different shades of yellow.

"Forget you," Chris says, getting up to leave. This is the last thing he needs, he thinks—this girl shouldn't talk to him like she's his babysitter. He shoves his hand into his pocket and takes out a Matchbox car.

"Oh, wait. I didn't mean it," she says. "You can sit here if you want to."

"I don't care."

She says, "You have to do something, you know." When she narrows her eyes at him he can see the crease where her eye shadow is melting.

Chris watches her for a few minutes. The only thing she says for a while is that he can't put his car near her book, but this time she sounds conciliatory. Finally he asks her if she is new here, but she says, "No." When they keep talking it's strange: they trade little bits of information, where they're from and how old, and to Chris it seems like a different kind of conversation than he's ever had with anyone his age. It seems like it goes on and on. She hardly looks at him, just concentrating on her coloring and putting the crayons back one by one as she finishes with them.

Then she stands up. "I have to get home or I'll get killed," she says.

Chris shrugs at this abrupt dismissal. "See you," he says. He still doesn't know her name.

As she's walking off she turns around and says to him, "Your mother's having a baby. I know all about it." She hugs her book to her chest like she's protecting herself from a chill, even though the sun is directly over them now. "You don't know how *stupid* that is, do you? Everyone says so."

Chris doesn't know what she means, not exactly, but he doesn't want her telling him anything. The girl stands there, clearly waiting for his reaction. "Shut up," he says finally. It isn't as forceful as he wants it to be.

"I'm just saying," she retorts, haughty. Two more steps away and Chris yells after her, angry now. "Why don't you go home to your *mother*," he says. It's something he's heard before, and right now it's the worst thing he can think of to insult her with.

"She's not my *mother!*" the girl says. She stalks off to the house across the street. With a flush, Chris thinks: that worked.

* * *

That night Chris sits in his room while his parents talk with the Garcias, who have come over for dinner. The house smells like the spices that Linda Garcia helped his mother mix into the beef-noodle casserole. Now they are drinking beer with ice, which Rich Garcia says tastes better with home brew.

They've been here for a year already, making them old hands—their voices are the ones that predominate from the living room, telling stories and insisting that soon enough, this will begin to seem like home.

"In fact, you won't *want* to go back," Linda is saying. "Just wait until summer's over—it's the worst time, everyone gone. After Labor Day there's the ladies' club again and you'll be so busy the days will just *zip* by. Trust me."

Chris's mother says, "Well, but the baby—"

"Oh, don't worry about that. You can always get a part-time nanny."

Chris hears his father mumble something about money, what they can afford, and the two conversations diverge while the men talk about work and the women are quieter. Then Chris hears Linda coming down the hall toward his room, where the bathroom is. "I'll ask the gardener's wife for you," she calls back. "I'm sure she has a sister, or a cousin or something. They all do." As she pushes into the bathroom her long, brightly patterned skirt flares out and she seems to bulk there for a minute until she gets the door open.

It's been the longest day Chris has ever known.

He's examining the property cards from a Monopoly game—Linda brought it over for him, saying that since her kids were still in the States with their grandparents, he might as well have it. He can't play against himself, but he reasons that at least he can memorize what the cards say. He's trying not to be bored.

When the rain starts it hits the roof as loud as bullets. Everyone in the house exclaims—the storm has come up without their noticing it. Out of the bedroom window Chris can see that the sky has gone darker, but it does not look like any storm he's ever seen. The wind is hurling sand. When the rain pelts down it is reddish brown, and it splats against the window so that he can barely see out. All of a sudden it seems cooler.

It's loud, with the rattling sound of the rain, and Chris finds it easy to walk right past the adults, who are now milling about in the kitchen opening and closing cabinets, like they're preparing for something. "Flashlight," Chris's mother says, giggling as she rustles through a drawer. Linda moves to help her, saying, "You always want to—" but Chris's father cuts her off: "Jen, I've told you." He slams the drawer shut and reaches under the sink.

Chris goes out the front door, closing it quietly. It's like he's in a different world, and it is wonderful: the sky is still light in the spaces where there are no clouds, and the mud-rain is orangey now, spewing from the gutters and snaking down the white of the little houses like fiendish tails. His arms and face are getting covered too, and even though it stings when it hits it also feels soft and warmish when it runs off. The street has become a small river. The water swirls around the tires of the cars parked next to each house; it's like they're all floating. Chris takes long strides down the street as if skating. He's almost surprised to feel the drag of his sneakers on the concrete underneath.

Sloshing to the end of the block—the muddiness covers the street so that he can barely see it, and he's pretending that he can walk on water—he stops at the picnic tables by the playground. Across the street is the house the girl went into earlier. The curtains are closed but the house glows. Chris sees a bicycle in the driveway, pushed over by the wind.

There's no one else outside.

For a moment he considers taking the bike. But what would he do with it? He could wheel it over to the playground and leave it there, but it would hardly get any wetter and dirtier than it is already. Also, he thinks, he would be blamed for moving it. He could still do it, though—it would be something to do, something more than he's doing. Things come to his mind as he stands there getting wet: the bike, the girl, the goats out in the wadi by the building site; the Garcias and his parents, who talk at one another and at him, but seem to be speaking another language; the wall at the end of the street that he can't see through; Radi and his broken leg, which everyone seems to have forgotten about. He's not sure which of these things make any sense, or why they're all in his mind together.

In the end he doesn't take the bike. When he comes home he feels like he's been gone for hours, but his mother merely looks up from the couch where she's still talking with Linda and says, "Oh, you went out?" She puts her hands on her stomach and smiles. "He's probably all wet," she continues, but she's not looking at Chris as he drips his way down the hall and back to his room.

* * *

The storm has dried up entirely by the next morning, but it has left swaths of red mud that streak across the roads. Out at the site, the men have knocked down the frame of the house that fell and are going to start again. Chris sorts Radi's tools. "They'll do it," one of the engineers says, gesturing impatiently to the laborers, but Chris's father says, "No, let him." "Fine," the engineer says, and backs off. Chris's father looks down at him, frowning. "You okay there?" Chris nods. He organizes by size and type, standing the large axes and shovels against a wall.

Chris is glad he's been allowed to come out again today with his father—*Bye now,* his mother waved them off this morning, distracted. Here, at least, he has a task. It seems important to complete it before searching for more animals; there has been no word about Radi, but Chris wants to have his things ready for him.

A truck careens through the gate, billowing sand. Chris sees that it's the gardener from their neighborhood, yelling and waving at them through the window. "Dad," he says, standing. His father looks up. They both know.

They can see nothing but stillness when they get back to the house. This frightens Chris; there should be activity, people should be doing things, like the gardener who came out to get them. He led the way back, leaning on his horn down the highway and clearing the way for Chris and his father to follow.

In the house, though, there's noise. Linda Garcia and some of the other wives are here, filling the kitchen and the bathroom and bringing things into the bedroom. The kitchen table is stacked with pots and pans. One of the women pulls a pair of scissors from a drawer, and then a knife, weighing them in her palms to consider them. Chris's stomach twinges. He hears muted, urgent argument from the bedroom. His mother is saying a lot of things: It's too soon, not yet, it's only eight months, fuck this, I can't believe it. Then she makes a noise that sounds like she's wounded, like Radi when the concrete slab was lifted away.

"I raised Rich on the landline," Linda says to Chris's father, stopping him in the hallway. She checks her watch with a frown. "I'm sorry it took so long; we weren't here, and when we got back from the souks the only line working was the Colonel's—"

"All right," Chris's father says. "Jen, it's all right." Chris follows him to the bedroom door. "No, no," Linda says, pulling Chris back out. He sees Maryam, the gardener's wife, squatting on the floor by the bed and holding his mother on her lap. "She knows what she's doing," Linda says. His mother is going to have the baby here, Chris understands, in this hot little house, because the hospital is too far away and they are too late.

"Chris," his father says. He comes back from the hallway to where Chris is standing by the table. "I want you to go over to Colonel Macpherson's and stay there until I get you. Okay?"

"I'll take him," Linda says. Chris shakes off her hand; he's afraid of what will happen when he leaves.

"Chris."

"Yeah." He looks at his father. His face is tighter than when Radi was hurt, his eyes bleak, but steady. "Please," he says to Chris. "Go on. Look—" He sighs, coming over and taking Chris to the window. There are two little kids on tricycles across the street, wearing paper Uncle Sam hats with *1776/1976* in silver glitter on the rims. "It's better for your mother this way. Do you understand?"

"She's going to be okay," Chris says, though he is not certain. "That's right," his father says.

Linda takes Chris three blocks away to the house of Colonel Macpherson and his wife. Their daughter Kimberly is ten years old, Linda tells him. She gives Chris a little pat on the shoulder when he goes in the door. The house is just like his on the outside, but inside there are red rugs on the floor and leafy plants in brass pots clogging the entryway. It is midafternoon but the colonel is home from work. He is a large man, taking up half the couch where he sits next to his wife, who stops talking and glares at him when he gets up to greet Chris.

"There you are," the colonel booms, as if they'd been expecting him for a long time. "Make yourself at home there, Chris. Why don't you go meet Kimberly."

"Okay," Chris says. Neither of the adults moves, so he walks down the hall automatically to the bedroom that's in the same place his is. When he looks in

he sees the girl from the playground. She's sitting on the floor next to the bed, wearing bell-bottoms now, and a halter top that cuts into her stomach. Her room is covered with posters. Rainbows, kittens, and *Teen Beat* heartthrobs all blur together in a haze of pink and purple.

"Oh," the girl says. "Hi." She sounds as unsurprised as her father. Glancing through the door, she rolls her eyes in the direction of the living room.

She says that Chris can sit with her in her room if he doesn't bug her. She puts a record on her turntable and when Chris asks what it is she says, "Led Zeppelin." Chris thinks for a moment: he remembers music pounding out from passing cars in his old neighborhood, radiating from open doors and fire escapes of the apartments where they lived, a long time ago, it seems.

"Led Zeppelin is a fag," he says to Kimberly, affecting a knowing tone. She gives him an arch look that scares him; she is, suddenly, discernibly older than he. "Moron," she laughs. She puts on her headphones so that he can't hear the music, and leans against the wall.

Chris leaves her room and sits in the hallway. He pokes angrily at a filmy-legged spider crawling up the wall. It is insulting to be brought here, after everything he has seen and done, after Radi, after his mother. Colonel Mac's wife is talking to her husband in a shrill voice and Chris can hear her easily through the thin walls. "I don't care anymore," he hears her say. "I don't." The Colonel is harder to hear because he slurs, in a much deeper voice, and the ice in his glass is loud like castanets.

* * *

It's a miracle, his mother likes to say now. Can you believe it? They are home together in the evening, Chris and his mother and his father, and the baby, his new sister Melanie. The gardener's wife has come every day with Linda Garcia for the past three weeks. When Chris and his father come home it is Linda who shoos them to the table to eat. "Now don't you be doing the dishes," she says to Chris's mother as she's leaving. "That's what Maryam's for."

Chris still hasn't seen Radi yet, though they have had vague assurances, from a man claiming to be Radi's uncle, that his broken leg is mending. *La*, the man said when he visited the building site: there was no need for a doctor.

He flicked his ghotra back with an unhurried gesture when he spoke with Chris's father. The other engineers stayed away. "He'll be back for money," one of them said later. His father replied that maybe they should just give him some, if that's the way things were done around here. He was angry; tonight, he just seems discouraged. "I don't know if Radi *will* make it back," he says, as he and Chris eat their dinner together.

"What?" his mother asks. She's sitting on the couch, fussing with a laundry basket of cloth diapers, which she complained about having to use because Pampers are too expensive here. But now she seems happy enough. She makes three tufts of white fabric into a stack, smacking it flat. "Who are you talking about, Mike?"

"The Saudi boy," his father says to her. "Chris's friend from the site."

She frowns. "I didn't know that," she says.

"The one who broke his leg, Mom. He's not better yet. I want to go see him." Chris looks at his father; he acknowledges him but also casts a warning glance toward his wife. "I don't know—" she begins, smoothing the diapers and pulling the edges straight. Chris and his father watch her.

"It's okay, Mom," Chris says. All in a rush, he explains that he knows everything on the building site, the date farm next to it, the farmers, and the direction down the road past the escarpments. He has been watching and he remembers the direction Radi walked every day, probably where his family lives, and it would be easy to find if he just walked down the road. If he could see Radi he could make sure that he was feeling all right. It might be better if he went, he says, because it would be okay and Radi's parents would understand. It is the right thing, and it would be better than doing nothing. There is nothing to do on the compound and they know it. He has absorbed something of this other place now, the unmarked edge of what is still foreign to them, and as he tries to explain it he sees his father looking at him the way he sometimes looks at him in certain brief shared moments together out on the site.

Chris stops. He has no idea if he's said anything that he really feels. But the look between him and his father still hangs there across the table.

"What are we doing here," Chris's mother says softly. Chris and his father

look up; the plaintive interruption feels expected. Her hands are in her lap, twisted into a clean diaper that is bright as snow. She's had nothing to say, except for the same things over and over again with Linda, how to live here and what that means, and now, Chris sees, she is finally through with it, her effervescence deflated. She's just alone in this place, while Chris and his father are gone. "Is this really going to work out this time, Mike?"

His father doesn't say anything for a moment. "I don't know, honey," he says. "I have no idea, except that I think it will be good. I know that we're a unit, and we're in this together. Okay? All of us." He pushes back from the table to join her on the couch and lets her lean into his arm. "It was just—everything," she says after a minute. "All that." He strokes her hair. "I know, honey," he says. "It was awful. But you're brave, you stuck it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." He encircles her, pulls her close.

She doesn't say anything for a moment, resting her head and looking out the living room window. Chris follows her gaze and tries to see what she sees. There is the corner of the Garcia's house, where the sun is hitting metal and flashing as it goes down. The Garcias have a little flag waving from a pole stuck into a window frame, and though the stars and stripes have already faded from the sun, it flips jauntily in the breeze. There's the chain-link fence, and beyond that just hot sky and sand and the city. Somewhere out there is the school he will go to, and other things being built.

"Baby," his mother says to him. She's smiling now, looking content with where she is. "Will you go and look in on your sister? Just a quick look."

"Okay," Chris says. He goes into the bedroom. Melanie is sleeping on her back, making gentle tadpole movements with her legs and wriggling her fingers.

"She's fine, Mom," Chris calls back. "She's good."

"Thanks, baby," his mother replies.

Chris goes over to the crib again and looks at his sister lying there. She's kicked the sheet back and he moves to carefully pull it up again. He doesn't want to wake her because the house is so quiet now. As he tucks it up his hand rests for a moment on her chest; she's heaving snuffy baby sleep, and

at his touch she grows calmer. He keeps his hand lightly there for a moment. She's fine now. There is her breath, Chris thinks. There is her breath. There is her heart.

2010

VISITATIONS

from The Physics of Imaginary Objects, selected by Renata Adler

Tina May Hall

There was a squirrel trapped in the wall behind my stove in October. We could hear it clawing back there, but what to do? "Maybe it will leave of its own accord," Paul said. We sat at the kitchen table, an old farm table so heavy it took two people to shift it, and listened. Perfect, I thought. One of my friends had come home one night to find her hunter husband had skinned a squirrel and put it in the Crock-Pot. She had lifted the lid expecting rice and beans and had found the pink body curled like a fetus.

One day, I said, "The squirrel's gone — listen, quiet."

He said, "Or it's dead in there."

The stench started three days later. Paul had gone to Phoenix for a conference on new soil technologies, leaving me with the changing leaves and the dead squirrel. At first it was just a tang in the air, sweet-sour, like menstrual blood, like the hair under his arms where I liked to bury my nose. Then it turned gamey, thickened. It spread through the house, a smell that gnawed at me like an itch I could never reach. Paul said it was the baby, said pregnant women had an enhanced sense of smell. Only four months in, and already he had read several books on the subject, was after me to start practicing my breathing and do squats to prepare my pelvic floor. He did not understand it

was all I could do to shower and do a little work each day. The morning sickness had not let up, despite what his books predicted. It wasn't really nausea, but more like a shaky hunger, a yearning mixed with claustrophobia. The only thing that helped was meat. Roast beef, steak, sliced ham, chicken cutlets. As long as I ate a good helping of meat every few hours, the sickness stayed at bay, a buzz in my throat. I knew it wasn't really the baby's fault, but I felt robbed of my last few months of freedom. Whenever Paul called from sunny Phoenix, bitterness choked me, made him think I was crying. He was perplexed and irritated. He used words like *miracle* and *new life*. I opened the windows, and the spiders came in. They clustered in the corners of the high ceilings and masqueraded as cracks in the plaster.

October, four years ago, I was also pregnant. This was before Paul. I was a dating a lumberjack who actually wore plaid shirts and had arms like tree trunks and a sweet quirk in his cheek and a habit of cleaning the snow off my truck. When I went to the doctor because my period wouldn't end, she said, "Did you know you were expecting?" I misheard this as expectant and smiled gamely, in a way I thought might be hopeful-looking, wanting to please. Then she took me to a small sterile room and sent me home with a stack of thick cottony maxi-pads like the ones my mother kept in her bathroom cupboard even though she was menopausal. And I was neither mournful nor guilty. It was as if nothing had happened. If I had any feeling about the event, it was a feeling of mild gratitude, the surprise of a small blessing. One night soon after I told him about it, the lumberjack wouldn't come in from chopping firewood. By morning, he had disappeared into the forest, leaving me enough logs stacked against the house to last the winter.

Paul called from Phoenix to tell me about the palm trees. He said they were everywhere, shaggy spires lining the highways and yards. At the conference, they showed pictures of the newest cell phone towers, sculpted to look like everyday objects so that farmers would agree to install them on their land. Everyone liked the one that looked like a windmill. The next time Paul

went out, he noticed that some of the palm trees were metal, their split fronds stiff with the business of transmitting and receiving.

When I was alone in the house, something expanded. I slept sprawled across the bed. I left books piled in the living room and plates in the sink. Sometimes it felt like my heart beat so slowly it stuttered and paused, and I could trace the whole path of a leaf falling outside the window before it started again.

The stench kept getting stronger. I could smell it everywhere, even when I was away from the house, walking in the woods, trying to outpace the morning sickness. Even with the cold autumn air stinging my nose, the smell lingered, crouched at the back of my throat, and no amount of swallowing would get rid of it. "We have to do something," I said, the next time Paul called.

He said, "Let's wait it out. It won't last forever."

I met him in a feed store. I was buying tube sand for the back of my truck, and he was checking prices on phosphate. He was a landscape architect starting his own nursery. It was March, and he leaned against the counter, wearing a denim jacket with a dirty sheepskin lining and flirting with the woman ringing up my four bags of tube sand. She must have been eighty years old, and as she ponderously searched out each key on the register and stabbed at it, he said to me, "Isn't a bit late for that?"

He disagreed. He said we met at a wake for a neighbor. I remembered the wake — early spring, the long line of black-clad people strung like beads spilling out of the Victorian house of the mortician — but not him. One of us was forgetting something.

The first snow came while he was still in Phoenix and the dead squirrel was tight in my wall. The small flakes sifted in through the open windows and powdered the hardwood floors. As the snow fell, I felt the baby moving inside

me. I hadn't been expecting it for weeks still. Paul had told me that first-time moms often didn't recognize the baby's movements, mistook them for indigestion. It felt like someone tickling me from the inside. I felt bones slipping where there should have been no bones. I went to the stack of pregnancy books on the coffee table and flipped through the pages of the fattest one as if divining from a Bible. My finger stabbed a line drawing of a closed-eyed fetus, its nose tipped up, sniffing, the cord foregrounded, knotted like a sailor's rope. That night, the stars shrank and hardened and the screens in the windows shuddered, punctuating my sleep with aluminum whispers.

My refrigerator was a bloody mess, all that meat rotting imperceptibly. For breakfast, I had half a chicken and I fried a pork chop for a midmorning snack. The baby was hungry for flesh. At the grocery store, I was a werewolf, flinging lamb shanks and ham hocks and rump roasts into the cart. The village ladies giggled and stared at my stomach. The cashier double-bagged everything.

When Paul moved into my house, it was because I refused to spend the night at his. It was a principle of mine to never stay the night at a man's house. And I never had. In all the years of lovers and flings, they always came to me.

I was spending more time in the basement, where the smell was nagging but not unbearable, like a tooth going rotten. The basement was where I had set up my workshop, a grand name for a couple of banquet tables and old file cabinets filled with paints. The knives I kept in a rack on the wall. The handles were black with touch, but the blades shone, oily and flexible. I used linoleum blocks for my woodcuts, and in the cold weather I wrapped them in a heating pad to rid them of their stiffness. Magazines bought these illustrations more often than one might think — duck hunting at dawn, lost in the woods, the persistent mayfly, bear attack.

One morning, soon after the first snow, a bird tried to get into the house. I was coming upstairs from the basement, and the full stench of the squirrel

hit me before I heard the thumps. For a moment, my heart jumped — I thought the squirrel had come alive and was trying to escape. Then I went into the kitchen where the smell was most dense and I saw the bird, a small brownish-gray one, maybe a sparrow or a wren, hurling itself at the window. Finally, it stopped, and I went outside to look for its body, but nothing was there, just a few feathers on the ground and a tear in the screen.

The story of the bird didn't seem to upset Paul. He said it was the change of seasons and he'd seen it happen before. He said Phoenix was still hot and fragrant with bougainvillea and chives. He said the woman who ran the bed-and-breakfast had a wonderful yard filled with stones and cacti and tropical blossoms. I asked when he was coming home. The conference was over, but he was learning about conifers and water conservation from a soil engineer he had met there. I reminded him winter was coming.

Paul had moved in during the summer, and the first thing he did was plant a ribbon of hyssop that smelled of licorice and drew the bees. Next, he planted a vegetable garden in the backyard, at the edge of the forest. He said it was too late to plant anything but kale and radishes — bitter, earthy things. When he found out I was pregnant, he was angry I wouldn't marry him. He was angry it took me three weeks to tell him and that when I did, I said I was considering my options. From the garden at his own house, which was only two miles away straight through the woods, he brought tomatoes and yellow squash and peas, which he shelled on the porch while I worked downstairs. All things I couldn't bear to eat. I gnawed at bones while he made summer soups and pastas. I could see his feet moving past the high windows at the top of the basement as he dug dozens of holes around the house — "Surprises," he said, when I asked him about it, things that wouldn't come up until spring.

Wasps came in through the torn kitchen screen. They made their way to the basement and buzzed me as I worked. They were building a nest in the corner of the room, above the water heater, and I didn't bother them because I hoped it might be one of those large paper nests so prized by artists and

naturalists that one sometimes found for sale in junk stores. I would have liked to see how such an elaborate home evolved, but it quickly became clear they were just regular wasps building a mud nest. I ventured into the kitchen for the fruit that was rotting on the counter and piled it on my worktable. The two plums and a soft, late-season tomato lured the wasps, and they posed for me, busy and unhurried, as I cut them into the linoleum blocks. I sent those prints to a women's magazine for a story about love betrayed.

Ten days after the squirrel died in my wall, the smell moved into the bedroom, and I gathered up the down comforter and the Mexican blankets and started sleeping in my pickup truck. The mornings were cold enough that when I woke, the windows were misted with frost and the rough fiberglass ceiling of the camper dripped condensation.

One night, while sitting in the back of the truck, bundled in covers that held the faint scent of the squirrel, I argued with Paul and heard my voice echo back through the cell phone, dummy windmills and palm trees working overtime in the expanse of country between us. As I hung up, a large, dark shape moved past the truck toward the house. There were three deer there, sniffing at the kitchen door. One of them butted its head against the wood. The smell of the squirrel rose up around me like the scent of one's own scalp or the hidden folds of one's skin. The deer made odd sounds, muted moans and snuffles, and tapped their noses against the door as if demanding to be let in.

Every now and again, I tested my limits. I went for hours without eating until the sickness was so bad that I could hardly move for the shaking. Then there would be that scrabbling feeling, that little bony body twisting inside me. On the ultrasound, its spine had been a line of seeds, its fingers twigs finer than anything I could have cut.

The radio in the truck ran reports of home invasions, terrorist alerts, deadly viruses — all stories of hospitality abused. The wasps continued to

seep into the basement, and the deer showed up each night to scrape at the door. It began to seem there was something gone wrong in the house. I had spent several winters there, and the animals never had acted like this. I couldn't help but wonder if Paul had brought something with him, a ghost or a curse or an unhappy soul. I went through the two cardboard boxes of clothes he was still living out of and found nothing unusual except for a sock of mine. It was from my favorite pair — a fuzzy lurid pink sock with a cartoonish Virgin Mary stitched in blue. I couldn't tell if the sock had dropped into his box by accident or if he had taken it for some reason, maybe to stop me from wearing them around the house all the time, maybe for love. I left it there, tucked into the sleeve of one of his shirts.

The walls in my house were poorly plastered, the joints in the sheets of drywall rising up like veins in the back of a hand. I considered knocking a hole in the kitchen wall myself and entered the kitchen with an old silk scarf tied around my face. The scarf had been my mother's and smelled like one of her drawers of clothing, dust and lemons. In the kitchen, all I could smell was the squirrel. I leaned against the heavy, old, cast-iron stove but couldn't budge it. The woman I bought the house from had told me the stove used to sit away from the wall to leave space for a box where she slept as a child through the northern winters. A dangerous practice, I had thought at the time.

At night, the baby was particularly active, twisting and squirming inside me. If I spoke or sang, it stilled. I liked it for its caution. I always piled the blankets highest around my middle, even if it meant my feet grew chilled. I sang colors to counteract the onset of gray winter. Cadmium yellow, brown madder, cerulean blue, I whispered, invoking pause.

It snowed again, and I shut the windows to prevent water damage to the wood floors. There was nothing to do but to call the contractor in town. He said he'd send his cousin who had come down from Canada to work through the winter. His cousin was an artist, he said, a master of restoration, and I explained I just needed a hole, an extraction, and a patch, nothing fancy.

Really, I just needed someone to help me move the heavy parts of my house, but I didn't want to admit that Paul was still in Phoenix, under the spell of succulents and irrigation systems.

The cousin was older than I had expected, in his late thirties, and I wondered what kind of life he had in Canada that he could leave behind for months at a time. He went unerringly to the wall in the kitchen and stood looking at it, still in his coat and leather work gloves. I apologized for the heat being off and gestured at the wall, the smell, in explanation. Together, we moved the heavy stove and he took off his gloves, placed them carefully in the pockets of his coat, and kneeled to put his bare hand on the plaster. He said he'd have to leave the wall open for a while to air it out, but that he would come back and patch it so perfectly that no one would guess it had ever been touched. I looked at the snowflakes melting in his hair and without knowing why, placed my own hand at the back of his neck, just at the point where his hair met the corduroy collar.

The kitchen table was just as hard and uneven as I had thought it would be, and I worried about splinters, even while enjoying the warmth of him against my ribcage and thighs. He was slow and silent and didn't seem to notice the solid bulge of my belly. *A minor restoration*, I thought as I breathed against his stubbly throat. My fingers measured the ridges of his collar as he moved over me. From that angle, I could see how the aged glass of the windows was much thicker at the bottom than the top, and it seemed for a moment that I could see it slide downward, cloudy, viscous, sinking under its own weight.

When the contractor's cousin finished cutting the hole in the wall, he called to me to come see what he had found. Instead of one squirrel, there were twenty or so, twined around each other, decaying into one mass. They had obviously followed each other down into the space and had not been able to find their way back out.

While he cleared away the bodies in the kitchen, I stayed in the basement. Though I hadn't eaten yet that day, my stomach was calm. I remembered the leaking mass of squirrel upstairs. Nothing. I thought of zucchinis and tomatoes. Nothing. I imagined eating eggplant, asparagus, endive with sliced radishes. The baby squirmed a little but that was all. The sickness seemed to have disappeared, just as the books said, with no warning. My whole body, even my skin, relaxed, no longer braced against the nausea. The contractor's cousin's boots tapped on the floor above me, making trips from wall to door. I made a woodcut of a charmed house, surrounded by birds and deer and squirrels and wasps. I was working on a buck rearing upright when he called down to me that he was finished, and the knife slipped, gouging away one of the deer's legs before sliding into the thumb of my left hand. When I went upstairs to pay him, he looked at my hand wrapped in the scrap of an old t-shirt starting to seep blood, but he didn't say anything until I handed him the money, and then he said, "Thank you" — twice he said it, shyly, not meeting my eyes.

Paul called to say he was coming home. I was in the basement working on a print for a nature magazine of a man in a forest holding up an old-style lantern — lost in the snow. I struggled with the flakes falling through the tree branches — a tricky thing, determining how much to pare away. My cut thumb stung, reminded me to go slowly.

When Paul walked into the kitchen, he gasped at the hole in the wall and the smell that lingered. It was clear we were not going to be able to stay in the house. He stood in the center of the room, looking around, and I saw him touch the table, noticing it was shifted from its usual space.

There was no use in taking anything with us because the smell had permeated everything. His house was only a few miles through the woods, and we decided to celebrate the first real snowfall by snowshoeing there. It was already night. The air was so cold the trees cracked. Above us, the gibbous moon, deflating. Between us, this understanding, a tether, the thing we

wouldn't talk about. I wanted to tell him about the kitchen windows, the thickness of glass, the cost of a wall filled with squirrels, the spiders claiming their corners. I wanted to tell him I loved him and I couldn't remember how we met. He had things he wanted to tell me too; I knew by the way his breath hung in the air before us. There were so many things inside us, and it comforted me to think of them there, curled up, content, for the time being, to be hidden.

2011

THIS IS HOW IT STARTS

from The Necessity of Certain Behaviors, selected by Alice Mattison

Shannon Cain

There is a boy and there is a girl. Jane sees the girl on Tuesdays and Fridays and she sees the boy on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The other three nights she sleeps by herself in her big, firm bed.

She gathers the dogs each morning at six. This requires both the boy and the girl to leave her apartment and refrain from preparing her breakfast. Given the chance, the boy would make eggs benedict. The girl would make cheese omelets. On Jane's mornings alone, she eats cold cereal with sugar.

The girl is fond of her strap-on. The boy is fond of cunnilingus. This is satisfying to Jane. Plus, Jane can say this to the girl: "It would be nice if your dick were bigger." Jane would not make this statement to the boy, though it may be slightly true.

Jane goes to art school in the afternoons and walks dogs six mornings a week and again at night. She realizes this is a cliché, the student dog-walker, but such is her life and she can't help it. She lives in an apartment that has been occupied since 1948 by a member of her immediate family. In New York, you treat rent control like an heirloom.

Outside her window there are identical brick buildings surrounding a courtyard with mature elms and a well-maintained playground. Jane grew up on those swings. Twenty-five thousand people in a half-mile radius live in

apartments identical to Jane's, with their metal kitchen cabinets and square pedestal sinks in the bathrooms. She is comforted by this sameness, and by her place inside it. Eight years ago, Jane's mother moved to Boca Raton in a nest emptying role-reversal, as per family tradition. Unless Jane produces a child, the corporation that owns the buildings will quadruple the rent when she moves out. Her mother takes for granted that Jane will prevent this from happening. So, she supposes, does Jane.

The girl often gets lost in the maze of buildings when she comes to see Jane. She calls from her cell phone. "I'm at a fountain," she says. Sometimes there's no landmark other than a mound of daffodils. Jane comes down to find her.

The girl is a doctor. The boy is a lawyer. If they were married to one another they'd have kids who resent their ambition. They'd live in Upper Montclair and commute to Manhattan. The boy, in fact, does live in Upper Montclair. The boy is someone's father but the girl isn't anyone's mother. Jane is not necessarily reminded of her own mother when she looks at the girl, but nevertheless the girl frowns in a disapproving way from time to time that makes Jane feel like lying to her.

Jane calls the girl at the hospital and says she'd like to play nurse. The girl is a feminist and reminds Jane that patriarchal power trips do not turn her on. Jane takes the number six train uptown and waits for the girl in her office, and when the girl's shift is over Jane crawls under the desk and performs some oral tricks she learned from the boy.

In his law office on East 52nd Street, the boy represents children with chronic health conditions caused by lousy medical treatment. Jane doesn't know how he can bear to spend so much of his day with heartbroken people.

The girl is shorter than Jane and has beautiful breasts. They are small and oval, with very pink nipples. A tuft of turquoise hair sprouts from the left side of her head, and her ears have many piercings. Her eyeglass frames came from the 26th Street flea market. In the emergency room where she works, teenage patients tell her their secrets. It is not uncommon, she tells Jane, for adults to ask for a different doctor. Despite Jane's status as an art student and

its accompanying expectation of hipness, she cannot match the girl's effortless bohemian chic.

The boy is tall. He has two children, a son and a daughter. They attend a private Montessori school on the Upper West Side. His daughter plays the oboe in a junior symphony, which is unusual for a child of eight. His son plays soccer, which is not unusual for a child of any age. Sometimes Jane goes to Upper Montclair on Sunday afternoons to watch the boy's son run around the field with other four-year-olds. The boy's enthusiasm for his son's team is endearing. When the boy spots his ex-wife at the game, he puts his arm around Jane's shoulders.

In her big, firm bed, the boy is huge, a 240-pound sandbag. Jane likes the feel of his heaviness; likes to know she can handle the weight of his body without gasping for air. On Fridays, the girl, who is considerate about such things, brings paraphernalia in different sizes. She is a hundred pounds lighter than the boy.

The girl and the boy know about one another. Jane sometimes considers introducing them. The next part of this fantasy involves Jane floating a proposal that they both occupy her bed, maybe on Thursdays and Sundays. Jane knows the girl would not go for this. The boy, it goes nearly without saying, would.

The boy surprises Jane with expensive tickets to see a famous lesbian comedian. The show is on a Tuesday, which is the girl's night. Jane calls the girl.

"I need to reschedule," Jane says.

"This is how it starts," the girl says.

Jane's apartment has two bedrooms. In New York, this is sometimes more space than entire families occupy. She makes her art in the spare bedroom, painting on panes of glass purchased at the hardware store. The paintings are meant to be viewed in reverse, through the smooth surface of the glass. To accomplish this, she must paint her foregrounds first, top layers before bottom. She must put the blush on a cheek before she paints the cheek. Some-

times she sits for an hour, looking out the window at her slivered view of the East River, planning her layers.

Jane has always been this way with boys and girls. She likes boys for their size and for their crudeness, the way they bumble through life thinking they're in control. She loves girls for their strength but mostly for their skill in the sack. She doesn't like the way that girls talk so much, the way they sit and talk cross-legged and shirtless on the couch or sit and talk in the recliner by the window or sit and talk on the bed, straddling Jane.

The girl is a talker. Often when the talking mood strikes the girl, her lips are pink and maybe still slightly puffy from her vigorous interaction with Jane's. Jane makes sounds to signify that she's listening.

Jane's mother calls from her duplex in Florida. She wants Jane to find a photo of her grandfather she believes is located in a cardboard box in the hall closet. Jane conducts the search holding the phone with her shoulder. Dust stirs.

"The house next door finally sold," her mother says, "to a couple of women."

"I'm not finding it, Ma," Jane says.

"Don't make me come look for it myself!"

In her retirement, Jane's mother has become a smart aleck.

"I hope you aren't harassing them," Jane says.

"They told me they're cousins. Such bullshit. Seventy-year-old cousins buying a house together? What do they think, I'm Anita Bryant?"

"The picture isn't here," Jane says, and sneezes. "They're afraid. Bring them a cake."

"God bless. With a frosting yoni, how about."

Jane is the only dog walker in the eleven thousand identical apartments outside her window. Her mother started the business when Jane was seven years old. The complex has an economy of its own, a closed system, of which

Jane is a part. Hardware stores nearby sell fans that go neatly in the small horizontal windows, shelves that fit in the dead space between the coat closet and the front door, replacement kitchen cabinet knobs. Jane does the math: there are 198,000 cabinet knobs in her complex.

Jane has twenty-five dog-walking clients. She takes the first group at six a.m. and the next at eight. She repeats the pattern at four p.m. and again at six. The dogs are grateful. The humans are in fact technically her clients, but she knows she works for the animals. She picks up the dogs' warm shit only because they can't do it for themselves.

"Let me come to work with you," the boy says. His kids are at their mother's house. It's a bright Sunday and the boy's lips are still slippery from his adventure down below and she feels in no position to deny him. They get dressed and fetch the dogs.

In each building's lobby, he holds the leashes while she runs upstairs to collect more clients. This makes the work go faster. "I'll leave the law," he says, "and be your doggie boy." His hair stands up in back, pillow-mussed. The bill of his baseball cap is frayed, the cardboard showing through. His T-shirt says *Vito's Pork Shop*. He hasn't yet shaved.

"No you won't," Jane says.

"Dare me." He pants a little, sticking out the tip of his tongue.

"The pay is lousy, my friend," Jane says. She takes the leashes from his hand and pushes past him, to the next building.

The boy walks behind her, all the dogs at her side. There is silence, during which she assumes his thoughts have moved on to football or food. But at the next doorway he says, "Lousy pay is why they invented rent control." His eyes flicker upward, in the direction of her apartment.

In evolutionary terms, her job at this moment is to encourage him. Her girl instinct is clear about this. She is supposed to say something to spark further comments regarding shared domesticity.

To make her art, Jane is required to know everything about the image before she starts painting. She cannot paint a table then put an orange on it later. She must paint the orange first and then form the table around it. She

enjoys the puzzle of this technique. Her teacher frowns at her work. He says if she insists on preventing the painting from emerging of its own accord, her art will have no depth. He cannot see that flatness is the entire point. She will probably fail his class.

The girl does not appreciate animals. This is unusual for a lesbian. She plants her bare feet in Jane's kitchen and prepares a vegetable upside-down cake with organic carrots and fresh dill and basil. Jane drinks wine at the dinette table left behind when her grandmother moved to Phoenix in 1981 and watches the girl through the kitchen doorway. The fluorescent lighting makes the girl's short blonde hair glow like the wood fairy in a picture book belonging to the boy's oboe-playing daughter.

The girl scoffs at Jane's paltry collection of spices.

"I've survived so far with no sage in my life," Jane replies.

The girl removes her blouse and finishes her cookery performing an impersonation of Emeril on ecstasy, topless. Jane pours more wine for the girl and holds the glass to her lips. She is wildly attracted to feminine women with an edge.

"I love you," says the boy.

"I love you," says the girl.

The boy has purchased a society-building computer game for his daughter. The child constructs a virtual room with no doors and places her avatar inside. The avatar pees in the corner. She grows depressed and lonely. After two weeks she curls up and dies. The boy makes an appointment with a child psychologist, who advises him to ask his daughter how much she really enjoys the oboe. As he tells this story to Jane, he cries.

The girl has deeply green eyes. She asks Jane to leave the boy. She says this, and then is silent. Against this self-assuredness the boy doesn't stand a chance. Lying in the girl's arms, Jane should be thinking about what to say next, but she ponders instead the unfair advantage of girls over boys. Their

adaptable body parts and their ability to say what they mean. She falls into a bewildered silence.

In the subway car, the boy sits with his knees spread apart. Jane compensates by pressing her legs together, sideways. Other men on the train sit this way, too. She points it out to the boy. "It's a physical thing," he says into her ear. "One mustn't constrict the package." Also the boy has a loud voice. He doesn't mean to occupy all that aural space, but it happens. Often she feels a great need to tell him to pipe down, especially in restaurants.

She calls the girl at the hospital to cancel their Tuesday. "I'm sick," Jane says. "I think it's the flu."

"Drink fluids," the girl says. Being a girl and a doctor, she knows a lie.

"I'll see you next week," Jane says.

The girl doesn't say anything more. The girl is figuring her out.

Jane's clothing accumulates on the floor around her bed. At six a.m., she roots through the pile for jeans and a T-shirt. There is a faint smell of dog shit. She collects the dirty pants and shirts and piles them into the wicker laundry basket that has lived in the hall closet since before she was born. When members of her family abandon the apartment, they buy new household items upon arrival in their retirement communities. She imagines her grandmother breezily pushing a modern lightweight iron over her housedresses. Serving poolside cocktails in tropical drinkware made of plastic. Objects in Jane's kitchen have vintage value: a mirrored toaster shaped like an egg, a set of Flintstones jelly-jar glasses, a pale yellow Fiesta Ware butter dish.

The laundry room in the basement is empty. She pushes quarters into the slots and starts a load. When Jane was twelve, her mother sent her downstairs to bring up the whites and she walked in to find a man she recognized from the elevator fucking a woman who wasn't his wife. The woman sat on the washer containing the bed sheets Jane had come to collect. It made a vibrating, spin-cycle racket. With great earnestness the man pumped away, his pants around his ankles. The woman's blouse was off her shoulder, her skirt bunched around her waist. Her head was thrown back, an unselfconscious expression on her face. Jane stayed rooted to the cement floor, looking at the

woman. "Run along, now, honey," the woman said to her, and smiled. She panted, as though she'd been running. She didn't cover herself or jump off the washer. Jane smiled back and went outside and sat on the swings.

She leaves her laundry to its cycles and collects her clients from their sleepy owners. She walks them through the silent green grounds between the red brick buildings. There is so little sky in the city.

It is part of her routine to leave the kitchen light on so she can find her window from outside. She notices the harshness of the fluorescent bulb, and the way that her window stands apart from the others. She's supposed to walk the dogs briskly, give them some exercise. She is aware that some of the owners watch from their windows. She sits on a bench outside the playground where in the third grade she kissed Sissy Hirshfeld. It was St. Patrick's Day, and Sissy had a four-leaf clover painted on her cheek. Sissy's brother, Donny, whose Valentine to Jane had a picture of Minnie and Mickey Mouse holding hands, watched them.

Jane is painting a pair of women on barstools. One wears red sneakers. She hasn't done the background yet, but when she does it will be an outdoor scene, with a river flowing behind them and dark clouds in the distance. The woman being watched has heavy-lidded eyes, which Jane didn't intend. She was going for a detached gaze, but has ended up making her look sleepy. She works on the figure in red sneakers, who seems to have lost interest in participating in the scene. She looks like she'd prefer a naked run along the beach. Jane stares at the picture for thirty-eight minutes. She finds a pair of pliers in the drawer and using the handle cracks the glass neatly in half with one firm tap. The two heads look out at her. One is distracted, the other just tired.

The boy buys Jane a puppy. It is inordinately cute. "What am I supposed to do with this?" Jane says.

The boy is crestfallen. "How can you deny this face?" he says, cradling the dog. "She's purebred. She's smart."

"I have plenty of animals in my life already," she says.

"But you love dogs," he tells her.

"Other people's," she says, and kisses him. He's just come from work; his tie is loosened. She pets the short hair at the back of his neck. He puts the dog down and carries Jane to the kitchen, where he plops her on the counter and removes her jeans. Over his shoulder Jane watches the puppy sniff around the closet door, where she keeps leashes and poop bags. The puppy whines and scratches at the floor. The boy moans. Jane thinks about the girl.

At two o'clock in the morning, Jane's doorbell rings. The boy is sound asleep in Jane's big, firm bed.

"How did you get into the building?" Jane asks the girl.

"I fucked the doorman," the girl says.

"There is no doorman," Jane says.

"I have something for you," the girl says, grinning seductively. "In here." She brandishes a leather backpack, and eyes the closed bedroom door.

"You're a little bit drunk, aren't you?" Jane says.

From inside the bathroom, the puppy scratches. Jane lets him out and he bounds over to the girl, butt wiggling. The girl doesn't bend over. "What's this?"

"I'm not keeping it," Jane says.

"It's cute," the girl says. "Maybe I'll take it home."

"You hate animals."

"I'm starting to come around. What's it called?"

"A golden retriever."

"I know that much. What's its name?"

"Untitled," Jane says. "You don't want this dog."

"Why not?" the girl says. She hasn't touched it. "It's growing on me already."

"For one," Jane says, "it's a boy dog."

"And for two?"

"For two." Jane pauses. "I haven't decided whether to keep it yet."

"I thought so," the girl says.

They sit together on the couch. It's a small couch, upholstered in horses and carriages and ladies in hoop skirts. Their knees are touching. The puppy

slinks to the corner. The girl puts her hands over her face and cries. Jane hadn't expected this.

"You aren't sick," the girl says. She takes her damp hands from her face and puts them on either side of Jane's neck. "Your glands aren't even swollen." Her voice is louder than usual.

"I'm sorry," Jane says.

The girl looks at her through red eyes. The girl begins to talk. In her speech there are references to needs, to respect, to truth. She talks for nine minutes. The clock on the VCR is just over the girl's shoulder. The girl curls and uncurls the strap on her backpack. She winds down with a mention of survival, then intimacy. Jane watches her face, which is beautiful.

There is a pause, during which Jane does what she always does when the girl finishes talking. She searches for something relevant to say, some piece of information, something that will not require her to form a sentence containing any of the same words the girl has just used. She looks for a small fact, a clarification. What she ends up with is this: "The dog was a gift."

"Ah," the girl says.

"I'm giving it back," Jane says.

"Don't," the girl says. "Give it to me." She glances at the bedroom door. "I dare you."

"You don't want this dog."

Outside, a window across the courtyard goes dark.

"Right," the girl says, and leaves.

"I'm going back to my wife," the boy says. They are sitting at the dinette table. Normally he would be gone by the end of her first dog shift but today she comes home to eggs on the table.

She pushes her plate away. "This is my great-grandmother's china. It's antique."

"It was on the top shelf," he says. He gestures vaguely toward the kitchen.

"Don't tell me," Jane says. "It's for the sake of the children."

"Right, that's about right."

"Yeah. You owe it to them."

"No need to get bitchy, Jane. I needed to do this"—he gestures to the space between them—"to figure myself out."

"Glad to be of service."

The boy stands, picks up the puppy. "You never really wanted him."

"No," she finally says. The dog licks his plate. "Give it to the kids."

"Jill is allergic."

"Jill. Christ. What's your mother's name? June?"

"All right, then." He puts the puppy down and takes their plates to the kitchen. "Say what you will. I deserve it, I guess."

It's a trick of the modern boy, Jane thinks. Show us the best of yourself on the way out the door.

"So the dog was a consolation prize."

He stands in the kitchen doorway. "I get it," he says. "You're pissed."

She stands up and removes her pants. "I'm getting in the shower." She moves toward the bathroom. With her back to him she takes off her shirt, then her underwear. She does not turn to face him. "Do the dishes before you leave. Chip a plate and I'm giving my grandmother your phone number."

She sits on the bathroom floor, which is chilly against her naked skin. It is tiled with ceramic octagons the size of a quarter. They need re-grouting. Oyster crackers, she thinks they're called. While she waits for him to leave she does the math: in the bathrooms of her apartment complex there are 3.2 million oyster crackers.

She must turn in something for art class, which won't do much good for her grade but will at least represent having taken a stand against professorial interference. In her newest painting, a woman in a black cocktail dress sits on a large empty box in the middle of a prairie. She is barefoot. The prairie grasses are long, and bent by the wind. In the distance are fat white clouds. The woman's head is thrown back, taking in the sun. Her legs hang over the side of the box, whose black interior is the only stillness around.

Jane rents a storage room roughly the size of her kitchen in a twelve-story building near the docks on the West Side. The location is inconvenient, which is probably for the best. The hallways are carpeted and lined with padlocked doors. The view from the stairwell window is magnificent. She wonders how many years it will take for the owners to install plumbing and rent the units as studio apartments.

She calls a moving company, which sends two large men to her apartment. They take away her grandmother's table, the couch, the boxes in the closet. She wraps the jelly glasses and the china in newspaper and packs them in a wooden crate. The men haul it all away, wordlessly. Vacated by her mother's needlepoint, the walls are spotted with clean squares. Jane's footsteps echo. She puts her mattress in the middle of the bedroom floor and hangs her art in the living room windows. Through the painted glass, the light throws muddy, deformed images against the bare parquet tiles.

After two weeks the girl hasn't called. Jane is pregnant. She calls her mother, who is pragmatic about such things.

"You're not ready," her mother says. "Live a little, I say. I'm sending money. I'm doing it now." Jane can hear her mother licking the envelope. "Don't go to the place in Queens, whatever you do. Helen from 4C went there and the nurses were bitchy."

Jane sits on the kitchen counter with the phone to her ear and is silent. Her mother talks, filling up space, which is good.

"Call the doctor," her mother says.

At first Jane doesn't know what she means. There's a silence. "She isn't in the picture anymore, Ma."

"I'm walking to the mailbox with this check," her mother says.

"How about you bring it here yourself?" Jane says.

Jane is pretty sure her mother is crying. "Tell the doctor you need her, is my advice. She'll come along, she'll drive you home afterward, feed you soup." Jane hears her mother's footsteps on the gravel driveway. She pictures an open sky and palm trees.

2012

THE SOURCE OF LIFE

from The Source of Life and Other Stories, selected by Sven Birkerts

Beth Bosworth

The dogs don't know it but we're running out of water. The power went out for a day, a few days ago, and they told us to boil our tap water but the pump isn't working right. We can go down to the stream but the stream is pretty much off-limits, even for dogs, and the plumber hasn't answered my calls; I tried three other plumbers before Mr. Pike, who's semi-retired. My husband—who does call each day at 11:00 a.m.—says I should drive straight down to New York City where the best water gets piped in, but as it happens, I point out, we need new brake lights. I could take the car to a man in Manchester but he charges an arm and a leg.

"And then some," I say.

"How are the dogs? What can you tell me about them, Arielle?"

"You sound like a talk show host."

He reminds me not to let them near the lake and we hang up.

We used to swim at Lake Aftsbury. It's a small lake and actually, up here in the north country, might very well be called a pond. I wasn't a strong swimmer but toward the end I experienced a breakthrough: the water had grown somewhat viscous, although nobody was getting sick (later a boy died), and suddenly I could swim for an hour at a time. I could breaststroke out toward the island and stroke around to the southern shore, where I'd noticed other

women swimming. I believe that we all of us come from water. I believe also that, late in life, our bones hollow out and our breasts and thighs act like buoys; I felt buoyant, like the queen duck of Lake Aftsbury.

When my husband calls, I don't ask him how life is in New York. His name is Albert, and he used to have this talk show on radio and television, and then he was only on satellite but that meant taxi drivers could tune him in. The "hook" of his show (you needed a hook) was that listeners chose the topic of the day. Albert had, has, terrific recall, and his audience loved how no matter what they chose—car mechanics, water maintenance, sex toys—he knew enough to shift into high gear. He was handsome in a Jewish way, with warm brown eyes and a proud nose. For a while after that he tried another "hook," linking up mothers—always mothers—and their long-lost children. The longer the children had been gone, the better, he discovered. If they'd failed to call home for five years, their mothers were still furious. But after ten years, especially if they were in prison, their mothers would soften. He had on this one mother, though, whose son had murdered his pregnant girlfriend, and the son was about to be released in San Diego, and the mother told him she was moving to Mexico City the day he got out. "Buenos Días, Adios," Albert said, which I told him later wasn't very funny.

I hear a noise and look out: the younger dog, Fidel, is heading toward the barn, where our garbage is stored.

"Excuse me?" I shout but he either can't hear or is pretending not to and it occurs to me, as I hoist myself with two hands off the couch, that I don't remember leaving the barn door open. The older dog and I are circling each other, me hunting for my loafers and him not quite panting in my traces. When I open the door he glances up as if he knows he's going to disappoint me and slinks through it. I'm looking for my other shoe and listening for that old clicking of his nails on each wood step; but no. Even the smell from the barn—because of the cost of gas, I drive to the dump only every two weeks—no longer tempts him down those stairs alone. As for the barn, I call it that because we live in the country, sort of (there's a half-built development up the hill, another reason to boil water), but it's actually a three-car garage. And the house is really an old hunting shack, what they call around here a

"camp," somewhat improved. As soon as I saw it, I knew it was home. I knew I wouldn't have to clean or cook or sew for anybody who set foot here, and if you think that sounds old-fashioned, well, I am.

At Lake Aftsbury families would come to barbecue, fly kites and dunk their offspring. I used to watch from where I lay dogpaddling, my breasts the niftiest flotation devices and my hands flapping: how the land creatures loved emitting noises from their mouths, how they waved their arms and made odd faces! The water had a smell, I admit that much. I only ducked my head under long enough to swim beneath the rope and out to the free side. Sometimes I was the only person swimming, sometimes another woman floated within sight. And children—within the roped-off area, for a long time after adults gave up swimming there, young children would hop and dive and paddle, and urinate, of course.

It's fun to remember all the things we used to do in water. You're invisible in water. Around here you'll hardly see young people (or older people) expressing physical affection, except underwater, where they'd grope quite shamelessly and make little breathing noises as I stroked on past. On my husband's show the mothers would jump up and down for joy or horror, and the sons and daughters would shout and throw open their arms in what I thought was a rather desperate gambit, at times, but up here their reunion after many years would have gone something like this:

"Hey, Mom."

"Is that you, Zander? Goodness, I'd have hardly known you."

"Yep."

"Well, don't stand on ceremony, give your mother a firm handshake."

I find the shoe where I'd left it, by the sink, which gives off a certain odor these days. Outside, the older dog is just sitting on the deck. "What's going on, my friend?" I ask. When he doesn't answer, I stamp my foot and the deck shakes beneath us. He turns then and noses between my thighs and I take his muzzle in my hands and move his nose this way and that and together, step by step, we descend the stairs. I don't want to miss Albert's call, it occurs to me, and as we cross the yard I quicken my pace.

"I was saving that, Fidel," I point out.

The younger dog doesn't look up: he's too busy mauling an empty sack, the black plastic kind that nobody is here to tell me used to be crude oil.

Once, on my husband's talk show, a woman stood up wearing a T-shirt that read, "I love Albert Steinbaum," which is my husband's name. "You aren't my mother, are you?" he asked so that the audience cracked up. They really did; he never used laugh tracks.

"I want to know," she said, "what we're going to do about it."

Albert held the microphone out but nobody even inched toward it. Finally a young girl leaped out of her seat. She wore little braids with innumerable bright-colored barrettes, and her skin shone the color of the wood dye of our house as the older dog and I move more swiftly now across the yard. "It's not like it's the end of the WORLD," the girl squeaked and dug her face into the shoulder of the man sitting next to her. He must have been a relative because he patted her bent head and said, "There, there."

"Fidel, what are you up to?" I ask sternly.

Animals, probably raccoons, I tell myself, have gotten into the garbage. This time they've torn not only into the heaped sacks but into the seven aluminum pails with lids that I myself would have trouble removing. When I move closer, grabbing Fidel's collar so that he leaps and rolls his eyes, I think I see gashes made by teeth—long sharp teeth. I haul Fidel right around and he and the older dog and I make it back to daylight; I slam the garage door so that the bottom panel, where the wood is going, splinters half off. I'll have to fix that panel before nightfall unless Mr. Pike answers my call.

The plastic sack lies like a puddle of congealed oil on the gravel.

Fidel's name wasn't always Fidel. It used to be Bobo.

One day on my husband's show a boy with bone cancer wanted to hear people's ideas about get-rich-quick patents. "Doesn't that defeat the purpose?" Albert asked, humoring him. "How about a way to tie up your dogs in front of a deli?" a woman asked. She was from Brooklyn and insisted on explaining. "There're all these dog owners who'd like to shop in your store," she told the television camera, "but there's nowhere for them to tie up dogs. Shop owners should take notice." She sat down proudly. A thin man with a caved-in lower jaw stood up. When Albert handed him the microphone, he couldn't say a

word. Albert waited not impatiently but no go. Then I stood up. If I'd known what Albert was hatching, I would never have set foot in that studio on the fifth floor of a six-story walk-up overlooking a brown field. "Yes, Arielle," he said quietly. "I would like someone to invent a rain-sensitive windshield wiper. In other words, a computerized device would tell the wiper how fast to go according to how hard it was raining." He'd heard that one that very morning, at what might have been the last breakfast (or lunch or dinner) he'd ever get cooked for him by yours truly, and he'd grunted his approval, but now he only looked at me.

"Fine," I said and sat back down.

I turn to go inside, thinking it's time to try Mr. Pike, while the dogs nose around in the bushes as if hoping for a stroll. I climb the stairs, step by step, and fetch the water bowls and clamber back down the stairs and kneel by the stream and fill them, one red, one blue, and carry them slowly up the stairs again and inside. The dogs watch as I set their bowls down and they step forward, first one, then the other. After all this time, I still love the sound of a dog's tongue lapping at the source of life.

The telephone rings once, then desists with a squawk.

The sun has floated over the distant mountains.

After I dial his number, I hold the receiver out as if the recorded voice were deafening. "Mr. Pike," I say, "if that was you, I've been waiting for your call. We need your help, Mr. Pike. There's more garbage, and the roof, and wood to be chopped for winter. It's never too early to start drying out wood, Mr. Pike. And this isn't your problem, but the bathroom sink's backed up and what if that means septic? Please, Mr. Pike, please don't go fishing on us."

I hang up. A lone bird wheels, cries out, darts out of sight.

Is it my imagination, or has the odor from the barn begun to make itself known here even with the doors shut? I glance at my watch: 11:05. I like Albert to find the landline busy because he worries. "I don't want you staying there alone," he used to say. "Yes, you do," I told him. "Your bitterness is killing us," he told me right back. "In order to effect change, Arielle, you need to embrace the possibility of change."

"You sound like a talk show host," I told him.

"Bobo," he said then, "dance, Bobo."

Whenever he said that the puppy would do the Victory Dance, which began with him flopping down, legs splayed and muzzle lowered to the floor of our two-bedroom in Boerum Hill. Our son had wandered home from college and brought the puppy. He—Zander, I mean—was pasty faced and underachieving and piping up about responsibility and carbon footprints. He was majoring in carbohydrates, from the looks of him, which I mentioned just once. "Tell him how we met," I demanded of his father.

"I know where you met," our son said.

"At the last rally against the Vietnam War," I said when he didn't go on.

"What a great dog my dog Bobo is," Zander remarked, leaning down with a Hot Fry. And "Dance, Bobo," the two of them shouted because Bobo chose that moment to do his Victory Dance. The older dog wasn't jealous; he isn't the type. He just looked at me and sidled over and together we observed the performance.

Fast forward: I was packing to leave and Albert must have known it, because he kept taking his old transistor radio, the one that runs on batteries and has its own faux-leather case, out of my suitcase. I kept putting it back in. "Did you really think that through?" I asked him.

"I thought you would be pleased," he said after a moment. "I thought you and our son would find it in your hearts to forgive each other."

"He never did anything except eat us out of house and home."

"Maybe that's what you have to forgive him for," Albert said smugly.

"I've never been so humiliated, but that's what you want me to say, isn't it?"

As if in response, he reached down and pulled out the transistor radio. After a minute or two, though, he walked back in and laid it atop my stretch slacks. "It's not too late, but it's getting later," he told me before stalking out again. "That woman was right," I called, meaning the woman from Brooklyn, the one who wanted a better way to tie up your dogs.

When the telephone squawks I pick it up and hear a click and that's when I hear them, whatever's roaming through the barn; they're making animalistic noises and when I look out, expecting hogs or foxes or bears, I see a small

band of disheveled teenagers, boys stripped to the waist, girls in sweat suits, all grabbing old milk containers and empty plastic bottles in which, it's true, a sip of water here or there resides, and they see me seeing them and lift their booty high and rush off down the driveway. They hoot and laugh as they pass running through the trees, which only last week still had leaves, green leaves.

Well! I pick up the receiver and call Mr. Pike and I leave him another message, and then, because the machine cuts me off, I call back and leave the rest of the message, and then because I'm worried that the two halves might confuse him, I call a third time and leave the message in brief: "Mr. Pike, please have the human decency to call about this problem," I say and slam the receiver down. There's something about Mr. Pike that gets to me, but what if he takes it into his head never to answer?

"Is he all right, Mom?" he asked in front of the entire universe. I mean Alexander, my son. I've read, and I believe, that radio and television waves, even cable, shoot right through the lower and upper stratospheres and then they're in Forever Land. You could be tooting along in your spaceship on the far side of Paradise and there Alexander and I will stand, awkwardly facing one another, the two of us at least three times the size of who either of us used to be. At first I thought he meant his father, who was standing there with the microphone. "Give your mother a hug," he was saying. "But she's huge," Alexander blurted, stumbling forward. The joke was that he was too; I'd have cracked up myself. Instead I said the first words that blundered into my head: "Zander," I said, tears streaming down my broad cheeks, "I'm *starving*."

Never mind: the dogs have emptied their water bowls and for a moment I'm tempted to scold them for always needing more! Instead I pile them into the car and slam the rear door and then I go into the garage and grab a sack and throw it in my trunk and another and another and I turn on the motor which splutters but does start and I drive down the driveway and onto the road, a nice dirt road, and I pass the band of teenagers yanking up my neighbors' sprinkler system just in case, I suppose, there's residue in that hose—I hate to think how it would taste or what it'd give you. And the dogs are sitting up very straight, very noble, in the backseat by the time I drive right up to Mr.

Pike's house and get out and slam the door as loud as you please, so that a woman peers out the window. She appears to be sitting in the window. There's something about her but it doesn't matter: I haul the sacks, which sag but don't break, right out my trunk and heave them one after the other onto Mr. Pike's lawn (where one does burst with a spattering of coffee grounds and chicken bones) and then I drive out of there breathing hard. I drive past weathered farmhouses and newer developments, condos mostly empty now, and although my heart slows I start thinking like a teenager: those condos must have gallons of H2O stashed away. After the tragedy in New York, I should explain, a lot of "flatlanders" raced up here and a lot of money changed hands and a lot of septics got built without much attention to the water table, but also some of those families, heads of families, must have stashed guns and flashlights and cans of soy mash or tuna fish, and water. I can imagine in this moment becoming the woman who with one thick fist on a windowpane breaks in and makes off with other people's life sources.

We turn in at the state park sign.

In principle the lake is off-limits too, but people always came here of an evening once the state had turned its back. You could walk your dogs around the lake or trout fish. I wait to catch my breath but the older dog is already whining; and if I'm not careful, the younger dog will make a break for it. He's straining at the leash, all right, so much so that as I reach around to open the rear door he throws himself forward and I bang my elbow hard. "Goddamn it, Fidel," I shout.

"Easy does it now," a voice says.

It's one of the teenagers, I think, but clambering out, still cursing the pain in my elbow, I see that he has a wizened, young-old face and bad teeth and what he means by "Easy does it" is "Your dogs are climbing my trousers."

"Mr. Pike," I say, "is that you?"

Mr. Pike hesitates, then nods. Both dogs are sniffing at his pockets like crazy. "It's because they know you," I explain and lean down for their leashes but they bound out of reach and circle us excitedly. There's something about Mr. Pike and his wife that I'm trying to remember.

"I had some garbage," I tell him and smile. I wait for him to say, "I've been meaning to come around." "It was piling up," I would have told him next.

"These two giving you problems?" he asks, unsmiling. He grabs hold of their leashes and holds the ends out stiffly. He is a thin man with no pate hair and a red face.

"Nothing I can't handle," I say, motioning for the dogs to settle down. After a while they almost do. "The garbage, though, is another question."

Mr. Pike makes a downward curve of his mouth so that his jowls bunch. Is he about to apologize? I don't know what I'd do if so: I don't always know. I move closer, meaning to let him have it, when I see that his lips are quivering. "People get so hot and bothered," he says, his face afire. He raises a fist at the scrim of trees as if they were homeowners. "It is not fitting," he goes on. "I never helped them but for the money they paid me. If people want to be saved, let them trust in Jesus. Let them call up him, not me."

I remember then what it is about the Pikes. There was a wife, a pretty young wife—younger than Mr. Pike—who had an accident; she used to ride with him into the forest, and once they were felling a tree but she was hard of hearing. Sometime after that they conceived their boy. "I let her have a child," he told me once in a burst of confidence: "She wanted one, and she couldn't come out with me no more, and she missed the woods." They were Christians, I knew, serious and born again, and in those days I was full of anger at religious people and imagined that he took his wife, who was paralyzed from the neck down, with the superiority of the Christian male; but all that seems a long time ago.

"The Lord helps those who help themselves," Mr. Pike says now. "People just need to learn how."

"Mr. Pike," I say in a certain voice.

Mr. Pike stares straight ahead, not at me and not at the lake because it's curled out of sight behind that cement dam. He doesn't have his fishing pole or gun; he must drive here so people like me won't know where to find him. I open my mouth to tell him a thing or two or maybe three and that's when I see Albert in my mind's eye. He's standing there with his hands spread in a slightly theatrical gesture. In fact, I used to make fun of him for it.

"You did everything you could," I tell Mr. Pike. "You worked hard all your life to help other people enjoy nature. Don't blame yourself, Mr. Pike, no matter what anybody tries to make you believe."

"Thank you," Mr. Pike says after a while. "That is good of you, Mrs. Steinbaum."

I shrug and he reaches his scrawny hand out, not looking at me. I don't know what else to do so I take his hand. "Your fingers are cold," I tell him.

"You shouldn't stay alone there so much," he says.

"We're all neighbors now," I agree somewhat vaguely.

"This town is not like some." He nods as if conversing with a third party, then adds: "If you have a problem, you call us and we'll try and help."

"Thank you, Mr. Pike. Your son," I gasp. "How is he?"

"He is a strapping young man, a comfort to his mother in her affliction."

"I'm so glad to hear that. He must be a comfort to you in your—in these times."

"You're a fine woman, Mrs. Steinbaum, a wife and a mother," he says presently.

"Thank you, Mr. Pike." I'm about to add, "I have to go home, now, I'm expecting a call," when he pulls his cold, trembling hand out of mine and says something I don't quite hear.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm asking your forgiveness, Mrs. Steinbaum."

And before I know it, he's down on his knees and throwing his arms around me and pressing his mostly bald head hard into my stomach. I can't even see him now except for his legs sticking out and his dirty soles, and beyond them the path that leads through the woods toward the hidden lake. "He was the cutest baby boy you ever saw," he whispers, pressing the words hot into my stomach. "You should have seen her face when they brought him in."

"I do forgive you, Mr. Pike," I say.

"The first three days were tough because she had all this milk," he whispers. I reach down to pat him on the shoulder, only I end up stroking his chicken-bone arm through his jacket. He goes on telling me things, intimate

things that I never in my life asked to know. "She never once," he whispers, shuddering. His hands are cold, his fingertips poking through my layers of jacket and flannel. I think to tell him about my son. I think to tell him about how I renamed Fidel as a kind of joke. "In Cuba," Zander announced on the last day, "they don't just throw away old cars." He stood there stripped to the waist and crunching Hot Fries and trying not to let us see past him into the mess that puppy was making of his room. "You could at least cover your body," I told him. "Arielle," someone said swiftly. "I want that body out of my hair," I insisted, my voice rising, "I want that body out of my body." "Poor Bobo," Albert murmured because the puppy was slinking across the indoor-outdoor carpet as if he knew Zander would stomp out and leave him behind. "Please feed and walk regularly," he wrote once and that was that.

"His name isn't really Fidel," I tell Mr. Pike.

I start to explain that's why the dog never listens, but Mr. Pike's arms around me are already loosening.

With a last sort of shiver, he rises to his feet and runs his two hands' worth of fingers through his hair. He tucks in his shirttails and slaps dirt off the knees of his trousers.

"You could show me how to cut wood," I say somewhat impulsively. "I would like to learn how to save fuel. I mean other types of fuel."

"First things first," he tells me.

"Oh, Mr. Pike, I never—"

"I'll come directly," he says and backs up a few paces. His smile is rising a little tighter across his cheeks. Already, so soon, he's in a hurry to be gone, the old me can't help thinking. The new me thinks right back: You'll have to start trusting people sometime, Arielle Steinbaum! It occurs to me that I can't wait to tell Albert about Mr. Pike. You're right, I want to say: it's never too late. If today's is a bitter rain, tomorrow's may bring all manner of news. We'll find our boy, I tell my husband in my mind's radio broadcast. We'll find him and bring him home and we'll be kinder, all three of us, to this rental unit we call Mother Earth. Maybe the young people will invent something planet-saving; who knows? "There're worse things than being overweight," I say aloud, "or sloppy in your training. He never killed anybody or anything. He never even

scolded his dog. That's what we used to argue about, but that's hardly what matters, is it?"

Mr. Pike looks around as if he'd been wearing a hat, which he hadn't, and with a last nod he moves toward his pickup and opens the door. "I'll come directly after work and we'll take a look at those pipes," he assures me.

It isn't until Mr. Pike has climbed in, the whine of his engine turning briefly to a roar and a puff of smoke wafting in the wake of his truck, that I remember his words: Easy does it. Albert will have Zander's telephone number, I realize. He must, because of the show. In my mind's eye I'm dialing him up on one of those old telephones, not even touch button. It's dark and corded and its dial makes a slow clicking sound each time you release it. Zander? I ask, is that you? Mom, he says, I really wanted to hug you.

I really wanted to hug you, too, I tell him.

I hear something that isn't a splash or a whimper so much as the absence of either; when I look down, the old dog is flaring his nostrils in the direction of the dam. "What?" I ask but he can't tell me anymore than I can fly. So we take off along the path, me waving my arms and shouting and him following just behind, until we arrive at the clearing in the woods where, especially in this late season, the whole lake (or pond) has seemed to spread itself out. The old dog is panting as we descend the last few yards.

2013

THE OLD PRIEST

from The Old Priest and Other Stories, selected by Amy Hempel

Anthony Wallace

1

The old priest is a Jesuit, brainy and fey. He smokes Pall Malls fixed bayonet-style in an onyx and silver cigarette holder and crosses his legs at the knee. He tells stories as if he is being interviewed for a public television special on old priests. A small, guttural chuckle serves to launch one of his very interesting anecdotes: it's a kind of punctuation that serves as transition, like a colon or dash. You bring your latest girl to see the old priest, you always bring your latest girl to see the old priest.

"Mildred, what are you doing with this rascal?" asks the old priest, ordering a Tanqueray martini "standing up."

Mildred squeals at the idea of you as a rascal. Everything is very jolly. The old priest's hair is the same shade of silver as the end of his cigarette holder, a prop that fascinates Mildred.

"This cigarette holder was given to me by the mother of one of my students," explains the old priest. "She didn't think priests should smoke non-filtered cigarettes, and she objected to the bit of tobacco that became occasionally lodged in the corner of my mouth. Later that same mother, emboldened by one too many grappas, tried to seduce me in the sitting room of the country house where I was to spend the weekend."

Your latest girl is rapt at the stories of the old priest, they are always rapt, the old priest does half the seducing for you.

Back in the room Mildred says, "That's some old priest. Is he gay?"

"What do you think?"

"I think all you Catholic school boys seem gay."

Another girl and the old priest, always ready to be bought lunch or dinner. He smokes, drinks, laughs, tells stories—makes people feel as though they are participating in the history of their own time. The old priest is a monologist of the old school, tossing brightly colored balls into the air and keeping them aloft.

"Another time, we were in Madrid and wanted to get out and see the night life," recalls the old priest. "We concocted a story that the American ambassador had invited us to dinner, but the prefect said that in order to receive permission to leave the house after nine we'd need the permission of the provincial. The provincial said, 'If the American ambassador really wants to see you, he'll invite you to lunch.' My friend Arthur Ramsay thought we were sunk right then and there, but I convinced him that we should go through with it anyway, even though it was against the rules. We danced the flamenco till three."

Everything is very jolly. Your girl is from the South this time and refers to the old priest as a "sexy old queen."

Time and again you meet the old priest. Years fly by the way they used to mark time in the movies: wind and leaves, the corny tearing of the calendar page, the plangent tolling of Time's own iron bell. You either bring a girl along or, if you're depressed, you go by yourself and expect to be consoled.

"I want to write but I can't write," you say.

"It will come," says the old priest. "Give it time. But the pattern is that you should have written your first stories by now. You're a bit behind schedule, you know."

You can almost convince yourself that he knows what he's talking about. He speaks with the authority of a grammar book and is relentlessly optimistic.

2

Life takes you through a couple of twists and turns, you do things you never thought you'd be doing. You live in a rooming house, you drink a lot in the evening, you work a day job as a blackjack dealer in Atlantic City. You wear a white tuxedo, red bow tie and matching red buttons, which your fellow croupiers refer to as "the clown suit." Nobody, not even you, can believe it.

In summer the old priest comes for a visit. You shake martinis in your third floor efficiency. The heat is stifling, oppressive. Through the walls wafts the scent of frying meat, and a loud conversation that goes on and on.

"This is a house of failure," the old priest says, jaunty in his white polo shirt and Madras shorts.

"It's experience."

"So is being bitten by a shark."

"I need a membership card that provides entrée into the historical moment."

"Dear child, I have no idea what you're talking about," the old priest says, pausing for the transitional laugh. "When I was your age I was going to the bullfights in Spain. We actually saw Ava Gardner one time. I went beforehand to ask for permission but the prefect said, 'Jesuits don't go to bullfights.' When we got there the place was crawling with Jesuits in mufti."

In your spare time you read Rimbaud and crave poetry, mystery, illumination. You find an old fish tank somebody has left at the curb and in it, according to the directions of a mail order kit, you raise a crop of hallucinogenic mushrooms. Two weeks before Christmas you visit the old priest at his sister's house on Cape Cod, in Wellfleet, where you plan to spend the weekend breaking into the ancient mysteries. Poetry, mystery, illumination: you'd like to get to the bottom of it.

The old priest says to you as you're unpacking: "Be careful not to leave anything behind. A friend of mine left a pair of black briefs in the guest bed and now my sister says she is beginning to believe everything she reads in the papers."

"Just from a pair of black briefs?"

"Well, apparently he had *Booty on Board* embroidered into the rather narrow seat. Oh dear heavens!"

You drink a pitcher of martinis accompanied by three slices of American cheese and a box of stale Ritz crackers. For dessert you chew the mushrooms, one or two at a time, unsure of the proper dosage.

"This is a fine delicacy," the old priest says. "It's a first-rate cocktail snack."

You nibble the mushrooms, dried and crumbling in your fingertips. The pattern and texture of the desiccated stems and tiny caps become increasingly interesting until, without much warning, the old priest has sprouted tufts of white hair on his face, and his pinkish hands also have sprouted coarse white hair and the hard dull grayish-black points of two cleft hooves.

"Don't look now, but you've turned into a goat-man," you say to the old priest.

"Is that true?" wonders the old priest, lighting a cigarette. Even as a goat-man the old priest has not lost his taste for tobacco.

"Just look for yourself in the mirror."

The old priest stands to look into the gilt-framed mirror that hangs full length above the red velveteen sofa.

"I suppose I have," remarks the old priest, vaguely amused. "Is it permanent, do you think?"

"For the next eight hours or so, anyway." You laugh. The idea of the old priest transformed into a goat-man is hilarious.

He examines himself in the glass, puffing his cheeks and shaking his oversized head. When the cigarette is finished he shakes the cigarette holder and the final few filaments of burning tobacco fall to the floor. He stands before the glass with the empty cigarette holder and begins to wave it in front of him in frantic, cross-like motions.

You take life, but you can't give it," says the old priest, his hand trembling but his eyes fixed steadily forward. "Gangsters," he says, "Cosmic bully--boys—"

"Who are you talking to?" you ask.

"I have to chase these demons away," is his response, but after a few more swipes he sits down on the sofa, places the cigarette holder in his shirt pocket,

and laces his fingers together. "We're not supposed to see this," says the old priest, plainly worried. "This is a sin we're committing."

"It's just in our heads," you laugh. "It's the power of the human imagination."

That's what you intend to say but it comes out, *It's the power of the fungus humungination*.

"Oh no it's not," is his answer. "It's even worse for you if you think it is."

He gets down on all fours and in the process the cigarette holder drops suddenly to the ground. He clatters goat-like back and forth in front of you on his knuckles and knees, shaking the walls and knocking his sister's knick-knacks from the mildewed shelves.

"Look what you've done to me now," says the old priest, goat-like and forlorn. "Look what you've done to me now."

"Where's your God now?" you say, laughing, in your best Edward G. Robinson, then are immediately sorry to have said it. You are sorry to have turned the old priest into a goat-man. You are sorry to have spoiled his religion, to have brought him pagan-low. You are sorry for everything. This is something you've been taught, something that will not go away. You are sorry for *everything*.

The Baltimore Catechism: "O my God I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins, because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin."

"This is a bad trip," you say, then add that it is his religion, not a handful of dried mushrooms, that makes one sorry about everything. Then you are sorry for that, too.

3

You find a new girl, it's been awhile, things have cooled a bit between you and the old priest since the magic mushroom incident. The three of you get dressed up and go to the best French restaurant in Boston, where the old priest is taking a year's sabbatical at a Jesuit house in Cambridge. He is wear-

ing his Roman collar and all signs of the goat-man have vanished. He looks a bit less puffed around the edges, and his sea-glass eyes are sparkling. It occurs to you that the old priest has been consigned to a drying-out facility.

"Wine," the old priest says, lifting a full glass of Nuits-Saint-Georges. "Bringer of *ekstasis* to pagans and Christians alike."

"What's *ekstasis*?" your new girl Ruthie wants to know.

"Well, it's a bit different than ecstasy as you probably know the definition of that word," explains the old priest, and it occurs to you that he is making a pronounced effort not to leer. "It's the state, literally, of standing outside oneself. Of being able to step outside the prison of one's own body, if only for a moment or two. Isn't that what everybody wants, after all?"

"I guess I've never thought about it that way," your new girl admits, leaning in.

"I dined with a Swiss Jesuit one time," the old priest chuckles, passing Ruthie a bite of his Veal Oscar. "He ordered beef and I ordered duck. I wanted a taste of his beef and do you know what he said? He said, 'If you wanted beef, you should have ordered it, and if I wanted duck, I would have ordered it.' Oh dear heavens! The Swiss, well, you know what Harry Lime says: the great product of their civilization, the cuckoo clock!"

"Were you in Europe a long time?" Ruthie asks.

"Seven years. I wanted to stay and earn a doctorate at the Sorbonne, but the Society of Jesus had other plans for me. I came back to Washington just in time for the Kennedy years, which was quite a spectacle."

"What do you know about anti-Semitism in Europe?" Ruthie asks, a bit pointedly.

"The place is crawling with it, I know that much." He puts down his knife and fork. "Once, during my novitiate, I stayed for a time in a Jesuit house in Vienna. This was in the early fifties, not even ten years after the war, and the city looked it, too. The Jesuit house where I was to spend the summer was an old castle with parapets and ramparts, battlements and whathaveyou. In the first few weeks of my stay I made friends with a Jesuit from Argentina. He liked to joke that so many people from this part of the world had relocated to Argentina that he had to come to Vienna for a while, just to balance things

out a bit. Father Madero hated the Viennese Jesuits, though. In the evening after supper we used to go up on the roof to smoke and watch the sky change colors, flocks of swallows darting and diving among the chimneys, and one night he pointed down to a side street—I suppose we were up about eight stories—and said, 'There used to be a synagogue down there, where that kiosk is now standing. One night we were all gathered out here after dinner, smoking cigarettes and chatting, and from this roof we watched a group of men come down the street with sticks and bats. They broke every window in that synagogue, then beat the Jews as they tried to run away. And do you know what your fellow Jesuits did?' asked Father Madero. 'Well, I don't suppose there was much they could do,' I offered, for I knew by then that Father Madero hated the Society of Jesus. 'They cheered,' was his reply, and he began clapping and whistling. Dear sweet Jesus."

"An honest man," Ruthie says, and for a few moments nobody says anything.

"An honest man," Ruthie says once more, reaching with her fork for another bite of his Veal Oscar.

The old priest, it seems, will stop at nothing to impress one of your girlfriends.

You go back up to Boston, this time alone. The new girl once again has not worked out and you are feeling depressed, ahistorical.

"I'm feeling depressed, ahistorical," you tell the old priest.

"Well, so you're making a pile of money, anyway," the old priest says, exhaling cigarette smoke.

"Not a pile, exactly."

"If you're not making a really large sum of money, then I don't get it."

"It's a job to do like any job. I'm not writing anything, so what's the difference?"

"What's the difference with anything?" the old priest wants to know. "Are you living your life or are you not?"

"I have no sense of my life as a part of the historical moment."

"*Idiot*," he says, as if the French pronunciation will soften the blow.

"Maybe I should go to graduate school."

"I was a contrary student myself," the old priest says, though you were in fact a very good student, bursting with promise and the will to please. "If they told me to read *Hamlet* I'd read *Macbeth*, and if they told me to read *Macbeth* then I'd read *Hamlet*. My junior year in high school I despised my English teacher. One time I handed in an E. B. White essay on skating in Central Park, except that I changed it to Boston Common. I got a C. I wanted to write E. B. White and tell him he'd gotten a C in high school composition. They kept me back a year, and I started to wise up."

"They kept you back with Cs?"

"There were other factors."

"Such as?"

"Unbridled contempt. They told me I'd never be accepted at an accredited university, so one day at the end of my senior year, only a couple of weeks before graduation, I walked over to Boston College. They asked me where I was going to high school, and when I told them they simply had me sign the forms and I was admitted at once."

4

The old priest, who was built like an oarsman when you first met him, is nicotine-thin. He is in Philadelphia for the time being, visiting with friends and trying to convince his superiors to reassign him to Boston, where he still has some family in Southie. He eats hardly anything and insists that the second martini be on the table before dinner is ordered. He likes to drink in tablecloth restaurants because it is more seemly than standing at a bar. However, the new smoking regulations land you at a table near the bar most of the time anyway. The bars are noisy and the old priest hears not so well. The evening ends when you get tired of shouting and pantomiming.

The new girl is a red-haired gold digger named Tanya who has the cheek to order beluga caviar whenever the opportunity presents itself. You eat the caviar on toast points and wash it back with iced Russian vodka. The old priest says, "I was once the guest of a woman who took us to a restaurant in Paris where the waiters came out with great crystal trays of caviar in crystal

bowls that were somehow illuminated from the bottom. The lights were extinguished, they brought the caviar out in a procession, a long line of waiters holding the trays aloft on their right arms, the bowls rising up, lit by candleflame, unreal."

The red-haired girl sits rapt, convinced she's stumbled onto a pile of money and that the aristocratic bearing of the old priest proves it. However, this is the third or fourth time you've heard this story, and your attention, like the candleflames beneath the caviar, is quavering.

"The old priest the old priest!" the red-haired girl says, back in the room. "I've never met anybody like that, a character out of a Waugh novel!" The gold digger is a gold digger, but at least she's not an illiterate like some you've brought round. "It's interesting," she says, "the urge toward self-creation. I guess it's what most intelligent people do," she says, then stares at herself in the hotel mirror.

"Whatever happened to the gold digger?" asks the old priest, raising his martini glass. "I liked her. She spent all your money and told you you were a pompous ass when she was through with you."

"The gold digger hit paydirt, packed her shovel. Is off to another dig, I suppose."

"You shouldn't be so hard on women," says the old priest. "It's their nature to be acquisitive."

"You should have it happen to you sometime."

"Oh dear child, if I were not in the Society of Jesus I'd be prey to every manner of boy hustler." He fixes a cigarette in the holder. "As it stands, I have God on my side and they line up to buy *me* dinner."

"God and history," you say.

"They're not exactly the same thing. Tolstoy calls on us to end the false and unnecessary comedy of history and to dedicate ourselves to the simple act of living."

"Joyce calls history a nightmare," is your response.

"I'm inclined to agree with Tolstoy," laughs the old priest, waving his ciga-

rette in the smoky air. "But that's enough about history. Let's talk about eternity for a while!"

5

The next time you see the old priest he is in Washington, living in a Jesuit house in a sketchy part of Capitol Hill. The Boston plan, it seems, has not worked out, but neither of you mentions it.

"I'm teaching slum children how to speak French," says the old priest. "I must say it's better than working for the man. But what about you? How's the writing going?"

"I haven't written anything in years. A false alarm, I guess."

"A velleity."

"Huh? How's that?"

"A wish for a wish. But what *are* you doing these days?"

"I left the casino business, finally. I'm waiting for my teaching certificate to come through."

"Congratulations, you've finally done something sensible. But don't be like that English teacher I had. He was giving me Cs, so one time I handed in an essay by E. B. White. It was on ice skating, and I changed the location from Central Park to Boston Common. Have I ever told you this one?"

"No, I don't think so."

"He gave me a C. I wanted to write E. B. White and tell him he'd gotten a C in junior composition at Saint Francis Xavier High School."

"I won't be that kind of English teacher."

"Good."

6

A year later there is a female English teacher, and the two of you take the train from Philadelphia to Washington. Her name is Dawn; she is twenty-three years old and very pretty and also economy-minded, the way natural-born high school teachers always are. When the old priest starts talking about caviar she blenches, orders a tossed salad with low-fat dressing.

"The bowls were themselves of carved ice and illuminated from the bottom, luminous in the dark against the black sleeves of the waiters' jackets and the gleaming white of the doubled cuffs."

"Such extravagance," Dawn says. "Another time in history."

"The woman who threw that party became attached to a gigolo from Argentina who used her, took her money, and left her addicted to prescription drugs."

"Now *that's* a good story," Dawn says.

The old priest comes to Atlantic City for the wedding, even though you've insisted on a civil ceremony, and the two of you have a bachelor party at one of the casino buffets.

"I remember the last day of my first year at Boston College," the old priest tells you, exhaling cigarette smoke. "Have I told you this story?"

"I don't think so."

"My friend Pat Dempsey was waiting for me in a car with the top down. I went into the office and there was this Jesuit behind a desk and I said, 'I want to sign up here. I want to sign up now.' He told me to finish college first, and I told him that if he did not get me right then and there, on that particular day and time of day, he would not get me at all."

"What did he do?"

"He signed me up at once."

"So why didn't you just turn away?"

"It's a vocation. That's what I'm trying to tell you about: something you absolutely have to do, regardless of what anybody thinks. You have no choice in the matter. Like you with your writing."

"But I don't write—I haven't written anything for some time now. I told you before. I stopped all that."

"You're young yet. It will come to you. You can make a pile of money in the casino business and then retire."

"That's what I'm planning on, yes. I'm considering teaching high school English after I retire. What do you think?"

"That's good, as long as you leave yourself time to write."

"I think I can work it in."

"Sink roots down like the roots of old trees."

At the reception the old priest tells stories to Dawn's parents.

"My friend Itchy and I wanted to go to the movies but you had to go to Confession on Saturday nights, so Itchy said to my mother, 'He can go to Confession in my neighborhood, it's on the way to the movie house.' On the way we met this girl Itchy knew and she said, 'Suckenfuckenickel.' I said, 'What?' And she said, 'Suckenfuckenickel.' As we walked away I said to Itchy, 'What did that girl just say to us?' What she'd said was that she would suck and fuck us for a nickel. Oh, dear heavens! Then Itchy took me to his church and pointed to a confessional box and I went in. There was an old German priest in there and he said, 'Who ist das? Is you boy or girl? Speak up! Speak up!' Oh, it was dreadful. I told him my small few sins and he cried, 'Oh you bad boy, oh you wery bad boy!' and began to beat his hands violently against the wooden walls of the confessional box. When I came out Itchy was standing in the vestibule of the church, leaning one elbow against a holy water font and roaring with laughter. We went to the movie but could not contain ourselves. Every time there was a break in the dialogue one of us would shout, 'Oh you bad boy! Oh you wery bad boy!' The third time we started up, the usher came and threw us out the fire door."

"Where'd you get that old priest?" Dawn's mother asks when you come back from the honeymoon.

"He was my French teacher in high school. French and senior guidance. We've stayed in touch."

"He's a scream," Dawn's mother says.

"He is that."

"You should take a page or two out of his book," Dawn's mother suggests.

7

A year later you go down to Washington by yourself. Your English teacher, you've just found out, is having an affair with the school nurse—a pair of lipstick lesbians is the word in the halls—and you want to be con-

soled. The old priest seldom leaves his room, which reeks of tobacco and is heaped with dirty clothes and cardboard boxes. Wads of crumpled Kleenex are strewn about the floor and heaped atop the dresser. His hair is greenish in a certain light, and his eyeballs and fingertips are different shades of yellow. He wears a mauve crewneck sweater, loose black corduroys, and bedroom slippers with the toes snipped off. His knees, as he stands for a moment to greet you, open and close stiffly as a churchyard gate.

"This is my last weekend in this room," explains the old priest. "They're moving me to assisted living. Father Lemmon was behind it. I helped him through his novitiate and this is the thanks I get. But I shall die as I have lived, safe within the arms of the Society of Jesus!"

You bring Chinese takeout from around the corner and almost get mugged on your way back to the rectory. You set up all the little cartons on his desk, festive as can be, but he barely takes a bite. His hearing has dimmed considerably, and to communicate with him you have to shout. Tufts of coarse white hair sprout from his nose and ears.

"My wife is a lipstick lesbian," you shout.

"How's the cat?" is the old priest's reply.

"I have dogs."

"How are the dogs, then?"

"Fine."

He stares at you, blinks, stares some more.

"*I said they're fine. The dogs are just fine.*"

"Dear child, why are you shouting?"

"I'm passionate about my dogs."

"How's the writing?" the old priest asks.

"I haven't done any writing since I was a young man."

"But you're a young man still."

"That's a matter of opinion, but whatever the case I haven't done any writing for quite some time."

"Well then, how's the casino business?"

"I got out of it years ago. I teach English at Atlantic High. 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,' that sort of thing."

"There you are, I knew you'd come to your senses. And you've had children?"

"No, not yet. Maybe soon."

"Don't wait too long: you'll shorten the time you have with your grandchildren."

"That's a point."

"My brother got married at fifty, a very Irish thing to do. He died when his only daughter was still in her teens."

"I didn't know you had a brother."

"Oh, I had two of them, one still alive."

"Why did you never say anything about them?"

"How's that?"

"*Why did you never tell me you had two brothers?*"

"I don't suppose it ever came up. But Itchy was more like a real brother to me anyway."

"Whatever became of Itchy?"

"Have I not told you that story? Itchy's mother ran off with a man who arranged a ménage à trois between himself, the mother, and the daughter. Itchy stayed with his father, who became very bitter and drank all the time. I think he beat poor Itchy. I came to the door one time and Itchy said, 'Oh, it's you again. Go 'way,' he said, and I went away. I never saw him again."

"Why do you think he did that?"

"He was embarrassed by the situation, I suppose."

"That his father beat him?"

The old priest gazes at you, and again you realize you have to speak up. "*He didn't want people to know his father was beating him?*"

"That I loved him." The old priest leans forward to take your free hand, the hand not holding the drink, in his own two hands. He sits peering at you as if by lantern light. "Dear sweet beautiful child of light and grace. He was embarrassed that I loved him."

8

You picture the old priest in his ritual garments, his "vestments," lifting the host up high at the Consecration, the process of transubstantiation, the moment when a dry disc of unleavened bread becomes the body of Jesus Christ.

Per omnia saecula saeculorum.

Amen.

Pax Domini sit semper vobiscum.

Et cum spiritu tuo.

You picture the old priest in Europe in the fifties, spotting Ava Gardner at a bullfight in Madrid. She is wearing a beret, he is wearing a soutane. This is history. No, wait, he is not wearing a soutane, he is wearing mufti. He is in history and he will lead you into the promised land of the historical moment, the instant in time in which history is happening and you are in history, you yourself present in that unique and meaningful moment: the moment in time when everything makes sense.

This is only theoretical, of course, but even so it seems clear enough to you that there are those who stand inside history and those who stand outside, like beggars at the gate. This is not a matter of money; it is a matter of something else, though it is hard to say exactly what. Whatever it is, though, the old priest seems to have plenty for everyone.

To penetrate time you must go outside of time. Outside of time is the world of myth, of eternal and meaningful recurrence. Even as the old priest tells his anecdotes again and again they acquire substance, a kind of permanence or narrative integrity that goes beyond their literal level. No longer does the old priest as a young boy simply knock at Itchy's door; he eternally knocks at Itchy's door. Itchy, perhaps having just come from a fresh beating, eternally answers the door. This is a cool trick. You'd like to try it yourself, but you keep steady contact with so few people that there aren't many whom you could repeat your stories to, if you had any stories you considered worth repeating. Well, you do, as it turns out. The stories of the old priest.

9

You call the book *The Old Priest* and you get an agent interested, and he gets a publisher interested. Priests old and otherwise are hot news that year because of the sex abuse scandal that is in all the headlines. In the popular imagination priests are rapidly becoming synonymous with pedophiles.

"I like the way you leave the whole sex thing ambiguous," your editor says. "That's really the heart of the matter. The idea of the priest as traditionally representing good is juxtaposed against the current idea or perception of the priest as representing evil. And you walk the fine line down the middle. Very 'Young Goodman Brown' of you. And of course your character is destroyed the same way as Young Goodman Brown. We don't know what or how much really happened. It could all be in his head. Was there sex between the main character and the old priest?" the editor wants to know. "I mean, just between us."

"I don't know. I left it up in the air, so I never really had to make that decision."

"Smart. Play both ends against the middle."

The Old Priest is a short novel that was formatted and marketed as a novel, on the supposition that some people would like to say they've read a novel but not spend a lot of time actually reading one. It is written in the second person; it is "mannered, overstylized, derivative," to quote one reviewer. As a writer you have some talent, most people seem to agree, but you also have an odd quirk that has proven a fairly severe limitation: you are only truly comfortable writing in the second person.

In fact, you wanted to change the title of your book to *The Second Person*, but the publisher didn't want to do it and the book went out into the world as *The Old Priest*.

"Old priests are what sell," the editor told you, "not witty references to grammar books and Graham Greene. Let your character be the sap and you be the smart one."

He was smart, that editor, but he missed the reference to Jesus, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Also perhaps the second person as the conscience or moral self, now that you think of it. (Can the self be parsed out

grammatically? The self of the first person, the self of the second person, and the self of the third person? Our own interior Holy Trinity?) All the same, you liked that: "Grammar Books and Graham Greene" really should be the title of something, though nothing you will ever write.

10

Somewhere along the line it occurs to you that you should let the old priest know you've written a book about him. Well not about him, exactly, but a book in which he served as the artist's model. You don't, though; something stops you whenever you think about it.

The last time you saw him was right after Father Lemmon had him moved to the assisted living facility outside Baltimore, and the room and his condition were even more depressing than they'd been when he was fending for himself in the Jesuit house on Capitol Hill.

"They seem to have taken the assistance out of assisted living," you observed dryly.

"They come in once a week to give me a shower, shave me, comb my hair. Then I sit here for a week, smoking and doing crossword puzzles, until they come back again. I get a carton of cigarettes and some books, two meals a day brought to this room. Oh dear sweet Jesus." No irony, no dry twist: no guttural colon or dash.

"Are you getting any visitors? Any family members dropping in?"

"My brother Jack came by two weeks ago and brought me a crab cake," said the old priest, and gave you a sharp look.

He also mentioned the name of former student X, who'd arrived the week before with a six-pack of beer, drank all six cans, then went off to the National Gallery for an afternoon of Vermeer. You've dined with former student X on a few occasions, have even bought him dinner once or twice. He is one of those people who are always working on their dissertations. Sometimes if you came with a new girl the old priest would bring former student X. You always wondered if he and the old priest were having an affair, although that might not be the right term. Illicit sex, in any case, since priests young and old take a vow of celibacy, and also since homosexual behavior is considered sin-

ful by the very organization which the old priest claims to represent. At these dinners there would always be too much drinking, and sometimes former student X would sit across the table and leer at you in the manner of a gothic double, your very own William Wilson. He is six or seven years younger than you, athletic, not as bright as you but possessing an ingenuousness the old priest seemed to consider a highly valuable quality: an ingenuousness that liked to flirt with disingenuousness. The old priest would frequently say about former student X, "Oh, he is like a big kid! Oh, he is like a big big kid!" You asked one time, rather pointedly, why big-kiddedness should be such a desirable quality, but the old priest waved the question away with a puff of cigarette smoke and the hoarse, watery laugh. "Oh dear heavens!" he laughed. "Oh dear heavens!"

It occurred to you in the assisted living facility outside Baltimore that you would be happy to see former student X never again.

11

The old priest appears to you in a dream. He is eating duck liver pâté and drinking a glass of Meursault. The grayish-brown pâté froths at the corners of his mouth. Then he turns into a goat-man, cloven hooves and wispy white fur on his hands and cheeks. Then he uses the cigarette holder to subdue the goat-man. When you wake up you think you finally know the secret of the old priest, but as the day wears on you see that you were mistaken. The idea of the old priest is a mass of sticky contradictions and reversals.

The old priest is a kind and gentle man, a generous and considerate friend. The old priest is a pedophile who enjoys the company of high school boys or their equivalent. The old priest is old as sin. The old priest is witty as redemption.

12

In the Catholic grammar school you attended as a boy the priests kept themselves at a distance while the nuns ran the show, dour and plentiful in their identical costumes, as if they'd tumbled out of a machine that vended them a penny apiece. If a priest came into the classroom on the odd Tuesday

afternoon it was like Jesus Christ almighty had come down from the cross to tell a few jokes or riddles. One priest was a fanatic for spelling, another asked questions plucked randomly from the Baltimore Catechism.

Who made us?

God made us.

Who is God?

God is the Supreme Being who made all things.

And so on.

Another priest, an older man, the pastor, came into the classroom a few times a year and claimed to be able to read everyone's thoughts. As he went through the catalog of what all the children were thinking, he threw his arms around and paced violently, in the manner of Bishop Sheen. He scared the bejesus out of you, you have to admit. Then too, that was the whole point.

At a certain time of year the parish priest came to bless the house. You remember your grandmother kneeling down in the cramped living room, her head bowed, the priest intoning the words and sending sprinklets of holy water flying from a small, occult-looking bottle drawn from his inside pocket. You like to remember his black suit, his black hat with its short brim, his small black cigar balanced nimbly on the railing just beyond the open doorway. The priest reeking of cigar smoke and spewing holy water on the dated furniture. Your grandmother kneeling on the spinach-colored carpet, kerchiefed head bowed low. Years later this memory or set of memories was triggered by the climactic scene in *The Exorcist*: the two priests standing in the room with the possessed girl, throwing holy water and chanting, "The power of Christ compels you! The power of Christ compels you!"

There have been other movies, other movie priests:

Pat O'Brien as Father Jerry Connelly, the slum priest who has turned away from a life of crime in *Angels with Dirty Faces*.

Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald in *Going My Way*.

Bing Crosby once again as kindly and melodious Father O'Malley in *The Bells of St. Mary's*.

Spencer Tracy as fighting Father Flanagan in *Boys Town*.

David Niven as the ambitious but unhappy Episcopal bishop in *The Bishop's Wife* (helped to a deeper level of spirituality by Cary Grant's angel Dudley).

Karl Malden as the two-fisted activist priest in *On the Waterfront*.

Oskar Werner as the tormented and dying theologian in *The Shoes of the Fisherman*. Also in that same movie Anthony Quinn as the pope who opens the coffers of the Roman Catholic Church to the world's poor and hungry. The pope, don't forget, is also a priest (he roams the streets of Rome, gives tender counsel to an English woman whose marriage to David Jansen is on the rocks).

A not very well-known actor as the priest in *The Song of Bernadette* who believes Jennifer Jones has had a true vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary. (The same actor played the father-in-law in *Days of Wine and Roses*, if that is any help.)

Rex Harrison as the pope who commissions the painting of the Sistine Chapel in *The Agony and the Ecstasy*.

Tom Tryon, before he became a novelist, in *The Cardinal*.

Richard Chamberlain as the priest with the untamable lust in *The Thorn Birds*.

Robert De Niro as the priest who tries to play the complicated game of church politics in *True Confessions*.

William S. Burroughs as the junkie priest in *Drugstore Cowboy*.

There should be more movie priests, priests we have yet to see upon the silver screen.

The priest who solicits oral sex in the sacristy, then absolves the altar boy when he is finished with him. *Absolvo te* blah blah blah. There has never been a language better than Latin when it comes to being an old priest. Mysterious, arcane, dripping of the long ago.

The cheerful parish priest who lives a decent life, ministers to his flock,

likes to treat himself to a good dinner, likes even better to be treated by his well-heeled parishioners. He is affable, physically soft, a guy who knows how to go along to get along.

The priest lost in the mysticism of his own religion, sitting alone in his room, chanting gibberish. If he were not a priest he would be on the street, living in a cardboard box. His illness is legitimized, yet who is to say he is not a true mystic? Then too, who is to say the guy living in the cardboard box is also not a true mystic?

The priest who leaves his order and breaks his vows to marry the woman he met working behind the counter in the pizza shop. The priest who leaves his order to marry the nun he met in the grammar school. The priest who leaves his order to marry the priest he met in the seminary or, much later perhaps, the one who reminds him of that charming young fellow.

There was an old woman, one time, the grandmother of a high school acquaintance, who said that you should be a priest, you had just the right look. You pretended to wonder what she meant by that, but you knew exactly what she meant by that.

You are sitting in a bar in downtown Atlantic City on a weekday afternoon.

"The Catholic Church," somebody says.

"Yeah, the Catholic Church," somebody replies.

"The Gay and Lesbian Society of North America," the first man sniggers.

"So it would seem," is the only thing you can say.

"They take their training in the *semenary*," another man chortles.

"They're just like anybody else," someone else says.

"But they say not," another man, all the way down at the end, puts in. "They say they're in the know."

"Who says that?"

"*They* say. They themselves."

"Someone should be in the know, shouldn't they?" you wonder out loud.

"Sure," the first man says. "But we all know nobody is."

13

The old priest no longer answers his phone, he does not have voice mail, he does not have e-mail. A few years go by, a few years then a few years more.

Once, when *The Old Priest* was first published, you did a reading at a Barnes and Noble in Philadelphia and former student X turned up, leering at you from the back of the room.

"This is great," said former student X, coming forward after the reading to have his copy of the book signed. "This is absolutely fantastic."

"Thanks. I guess my writing has finally come to something, though I'm not expecting much from this financially."

"Does he know?"

"Who?"

"Who!"

"Oh, well, no, I've lost track of him, actually. He's become fairly reclusive, it seems." Then you looked at the book in former student X's hand, the book jacket with its illustration taken from the Baltimore Catechism, the three milk bottles that illustrate the soul in its various states: the full milk bottle is the state of grace, the empty milk bottle is mortal sin, the milk bottle with some spots in it is venial sin: heaven, hell, purgatory.

"Oh—oh, I see—you're jumping to conclusions there, but of course I can see the impulse. I can definitely understand—"

"He mentioned you, you know," said former student X. "Last time I was down there, in that terrible place in Baltimore. He was wondering why he never hears from you anymore."

"Oh, was he, now? I'll have to be sure and give him a call and tell him all about this, though of course the character of the old priest is a composite of a lot of priests I've known over the years. Some that are now in jail, actually!"

You broke into a loud, obnoxious laugh then moved to sign the flyleaf of your book for the next person in line.

That was the last time you saw former student X, thank God.

14

After his novitiate in Europe the old priest came back to run a Jesuit high school in Georgetown, beginning in the early sixties, the Kennedy years through "We Shall Overcome" and "Burn, Baby, Burn" right into the middle of Watergate, the old priest always one to stand with both feet planted squarely in the historical moment. He came to Philadelphia in the fall of '73, he was your senior guidance counselor and also became your French teacher when the original Jesuit who was your French teacher left midyear to marry a woman he'd met in a pizza shop. Those were somewhat different times, the seventies, when a man might suddenly drop whatever he was doing and run off with a woman he'd met in a pizza shop. (Of course that is still possible, but it no longer seems quite so commonplace.) Love was in the air, also anxiety, depression, the mounting dread brought on by Vietnam, Nixon and Watergate, Black Power and Women's Rights, the death of the patriarchy that seemed likely to accompany the gradual breakdown in faith in government and religious institutions, a return to individuality and the pleasure principle, the inevitable victory of subjectivity and moral relativism, blah blah *blah*—

You remember how he seduced you, the old priest, how he charmed the David Bowie pants off you. Maybe that was part of it: '73, David Bowie and Rod Stewart, a little later Mott the Hoople and Queen: androgyny was just then having its fifteen minutes. The David Bowie pants? Oh, well, they came up really high at the waist and then billowed out in an exaggerated three pleat, descending to two-inch cuffs designed to go with platform shoes. You had two pairs of each, an incongruously apt style for a skinny seventeen-year-old prep school student, it lasted about fifteen minutes.

One day the two of you smoking cigarettes in his office after hours he told you all about William Peter Blatty and the young Jesuits of Georgetown, in a smoky pub one afternoon merrily gathered round a mongrel-brown Lester spinet. Stories were told. Information was leaked. Classified material about the Devil got out. There really was an exorcism, though it was performed on a Lutheran boy by not one or two but an entire team of exorcists. The exorcism itself went on for months, the whole thing audio taped and the tapes themselves locked away in some vault in the Vatican.

The best parts of the book, according to the old priest—the best parts, of course, being the scariest parts—were taken directly from the secret transcripts. He knew people who knew people who knew the Devil! Talk about being on the inside track!

The old priest told his stories—he always told stories—which meant of course that he had stories to tell. You fell in love, *whatever that means*, can you just admit that much? People fall in love: kids and old ladies, middle-aged bachelors and hot young kindergarten teachers. The heart has its own secret life, like the family cat, and what it might drag home is anybody's guess.

Not love, perhaps, but a schoolboy crush. Something glandular but at the same time completely non-glandular.

Can you admit *that* much?

Of course you can. Sometimes. Once in a while.

1 5

You remember your childhood, the lower-middle-class Irish neighborhood in South Philadelphia, the corner tap rooms with their blacked-out windows, Krause's bakery each Sunday morning after eight o'clock Mass. You remember polishing your shoes for Easter Sunday, the church the next morning filled with fresh white lilies, the pews and the side aisles, all along the stations of the cross, overflowing with parishioners there to perform their "Easter duty," which is another way of saying that they didn't go very often but neither did they wish their membership to lapse.

When you were eight years old you watched *The Song of Bernadette*, in rerun, on your grandmother's black-and-white Motorola. You looked up at the dark place at the top of the stairs, hoping that the Blessed Virgin Mary would suddenly appear to you. Wanting that to happen more than anything else in this world. Also not wanting that to happen more than anything else in this world.

You think sometimes of the candy store lady, whose response to everything was JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryand-

Joseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph.

One day a punk of the neighborhood came barreling into the store and knocked your pinball machine on tilt. You backed down, of course, the boy took your machine, and the old woman sent up a fervent chorus of JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph.

Then there was the time with the little girl in the alleyway, exposing yourselves as little children sometimes do. You were both five: tiny Adam and miniature Eve. The girl, you've heard, has grown up to be a junkie, a prostitute, a queen of the do-it-yourself porn industry. "Her name was Grace," you say out loud. Her name *is* Grace, you correct yourself, though not out loud. But you don't know if she is among the living or the dead.

1 6

One time, very drunk, as drunk as the two of you have ever been together, the old priest said: "I send this one out to live in the world. This is the one you see. You like this one. But you wouldn't like the other one."

"How do you know?"

"Trust me, you wouldn't."

"Just give me a peek."

"I'm afraid I can't do that. He can't be trusted. No, I'm afraid it's absolutely out of the question. He's locked up safe and sound as The Man in the Iron Mask. Ha ha."

You went home, thinking of the real old priest bound and tossed into a dungeon, the iron mask locked securely to conceal his face, the brutal, ignorant guards to glimpse only his wry mouth and sea-glass eyes. Of course the question then becomes which old priest is out in the world and which one locked away? It occurred to you then and has crossed your mind a few times since that the old priest is an archfiend, an imposter who walks the earth while the true old priest—well, it's too horrible to imagine.

Years later you realize that you've done much the same thing with the old

priest, or rather with the simulacrum of the old priest. He imprisoned the real old priest while you imprisoned the fake one. He's in a book you wrote called *The Old Priest*. He's in there, drinking Tanqueray martinis and telling his charming anecdotes. He's locked up, safe and sound.

17

The Old Priest, as it turns out, pretty quickly became a period piece. It went almost at once to the remainder tables, probably due to its lack of explicitness. Old priests are what sell, but only if you catch them *en flagrante*. Once in a while you take a peek at the book yourself. It is not very good. It is "mannered," as one reviewer pointed out, and it is also derivative, a retelling of the old priest's stories combined with some mildly ambiguous hints at homosexuality, a strange and self-conscious amalgamation of *The Power and the Glory* and *Brideshead Revisited* by way of *A Separate Peace* and *The Trouble with Angels*.

It is as outmoded as those lace things they used to place on the tops of parlor chairs so that one's head wouldn't stain the fabric. Why would one's head stain the fabric? Hair oil, perhaps, or dye the color and consistency of shoe polish. The old priest would know what those things are called, were called. But you don't, although among your students it is well known that when asked your favorite book your immediate response is the *OED*. Nobody, not even your colleagues, seems to remember that that was Auden's famous reply. You've got your tweed, your manners and your mannerisms, a few chestnuts in the one hand, a couple of shibboleths in the other.

Still, it was your dream, publishing a novel, the dream of your youth, and since you have a novel, albeit one that has not done very well and is currently out of print (alas), you now have a job, comfortable enough, in which you will live out the rest of your days, professionally speaking. Teaching English in a posh New England boarding school, well talk about mannered! Tweeds, rep ties. For a joke on the first day of school you sometimes wear a boater!

And so once again you are back in Boston, this time without the old priest, a strange and portentous reversal to have ended up where he would like to be but is not. You are getting on in years, living by yourself in a large

but shabby one-bedroom on Washington Street, the bedroom itself facing the street so that you have to protect your sleep with a white noise machine or an air conditioner, depending on the time of year. The white noise machine, which looks like something designed for a low-budget sci-fi movie, sounds like the endless slosh and chop of some eternal ocean. The air conditioner sounds like the void: empty and metallic, within its steady whoosh the pock and ping of atoms whirling into extinction.

Whatever has become of the gaiety of the old priest? Sitting at a dinner table, enraptured with the present moment, seeing and being seen, fine clothes and expensive bar drinks and first class victuals, all of life's possibilities laid out before you like a flight of oysters. Now you are getting old and have resigned yourself to bachelorhood. Your talent, paltry at its best, has left you; you walk the cold streets of Beantown in shabby clothes, a denizen of the pubs and secondhand book stores.

Your students like you all the same. You are an affable old failure who is nevertheless a tough old bird, an eagle's eye for the misplaced comma and the misused semicolon: some of the hipper students call you "Old School" behind your back, or you wish they would. The truth is you give them all Bs, and the girls with pert breasts get B plusses. Oh, even the girls without pert breasts get B plusses, who are you kidding? The poor sad pimply-faced freshman boys, arms and legs askew, get the B minuses, and they deserve them, too. They themselves admit as much.

"Walk among them," advised the old priest when he found out you'd become a high school English teacher. "Always teach standing up. Be a presence among them. Let them feel your presence as you walk among them."

You walk among your own students and wish to tousle their hair or to trail your fingers across their downy arms as they sit, scribbling in their notebooks. And what would be so wrong in that?

In your free time you tinker with a second novel, which you call *The Western Gate* after a line from "Luke Havergal." These days if you can only get to twenty thousand words they'll package it some way to make it look like a novel, or at least they will if they think they can sell it that way. *The Western*

Gate is the story of a dissipated novelist, a drunk and a womanizer who is his own worst enemy. He drinks, adulterizes, insults powerful people while going about his drinking and adulterizing. Once again the material is a combination of thinly veiled biography and heavy-handed fantasy. You use the details of your own boarding school and place within those details yourself as an idealized creation, a writer talented but with a checkered past and an unreliable conscience. You yourself have neither—at least not to a degree anybody would find interesting. You have never adulterized, have rarely insulted anyone, and go quietly home from the pub after two pints. You have no illusions about leading your students into the promised land of the historical moment; in fact, you have no illusions about anything at all.

18

Life goes on this way—wind and leaves, the corny tearing of the calendar page—until one October afternoon, after explaining to your AP seniors the theological underpinnings of "Everything that Rises Must Converge," you go to check your e-mail and there is death—exactly where you expected it would be.

> (Salutation,)
>
> I am sad to inform you Fr. passed away. He has a viewing this evening in Philadelphia and then a mass tomorrow morning at St. Ignatius Church in Baltimore and then afterward is being buried at the Woodstock cemetery, also in Baltimore.
>
> I think of you often, and gather you are a quite successful writer.
>
> Be well,
>
> (Former Student X)

19

You write back, describing what you were doing on the day of the old priest's passing—the conversation you had with your students about "the world of guilt and sorrow" just moments before reading of the old priest's death—expressing regret that you were not present and asking the obvious

questions. What you really want are the details that will allow you to form a resolution—the resolution that will allow you to close the book.

(Salutation,)

The viewing was in Philadelphia at Manresa Hall on Friday, October 27th. A place for old and dying priests. There were about 10 really old priests in walkers and wheelchairs, as well as former student Y and former student Z and myself from the class of 1982. There was also one gentleman from Gonzaga's class of 1961, who is an architect in Bryn Mawr now, and one other impaired middle-aged man present. I overheard the gentleman with a short leg and hearing aid tell another priest that when he was at Georgetown Prep he was bullied because of a speech impediment and his limp, and Fr. helped put an end to it. The day was cloudy, cold, and drizzling wet. After the viewing he was taken to Baltimore. Fr. Lemmon did the ceremony (I was not there) at St. Ignatius Church. Apparently, there is a Woodstock cemetery in Baltimore, and that is where he will be buried.

As for not seeing him...no one knew how sick he was. I saw him in mid-September. My wife Susan (I recently got married) and I went to the Provincial's House in Baltimore where he was living and took him out for lunch. We showed him our wedding pictures. Of course he had his cigarettes and martini. He was frail. When I inquired to his health, as I always did, he said "not bad for a man of my age, don't you think?"

In early October, he was sent to Manresa Hall in Philadelphia. They could not care for him at the Provincial's House in Baltimore any longer; for the last year he had been struggling with throat and neck cancer. Yet not even his sister and niece, nor anyone close to him knew until a week or two before he died. He was in Philadelphia, 15 minutes away from me, and I did not even know. His sister remarked that it was the typical Irish way, not to talk about illness and dying. That is all she could understand of not knowing, and she would be likely to do the same, if she was dying.

As for "the world of guilt and sorrow," remember Flannery O'Connor also said "All is sacred, nothing profane," and as Fr. used to quote to me from St. Julian of Norwich, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of

thing shall be well." Fr. would not want us to spend any useless time on guilt and sorrow.

In the last month, the cancer became extremely aggressive, and he developed a large tumor on his neck and left chin. It was visible, although I did not see it a month ago. On his last day, Friday, October 20th, he got up, although hard to eat and talk at this point. He got dressed. At lunch went outside to smoke and had a drink while reading the *New York Times*. After lunch he told the head nurse he was going to take a nap. She went in to check on him, because that was not typical, and after a time, he appeared to wake up abruptly, got halfway up from the bed, looked her way, collapsed to his side and died. He went without pain, quickly, doing what he loved—smoking, drinking, and reading. He said to me, he thought of death as a perfectly open door, with bright light radiating, and that one day he would casually walk through the door. He also told me he cared about this life, and that he did not give a shit about death because it was completely unknowable.

It is particularly strange that you were teaching Flannery O'Connor and the underpinnings of theology. I am sitting here with Fr.'s Master's Thesis from Louvain completed April 2, 1954, entitled "Theology and Prayer."

In it Fr. writes, "A book is a machine to think with. In a good book this statement is verified both for the reader and writer alike. I do not flatter myself that this short paper offers that advantage to any reader it may have. My problem is too personal, as is the solution I have worked out for myself. This paper is a nothing more than a machine for thinking out a problem that has long troubled me. It were better compared to a loom upon which I propose to weave some of the unraveled elements of science, service, and prayer. My problem in its simplest form was this: how to integrate the elements of prayer, theology, and daily routine into a unified whole? Or more exactly, what is the point at which theology can become the living source, the principle of prayer and action? If such a point of insertion existed, and I did not for a moment doubt that it did, I wanted to find it and to formulate it as accurately as possible. Because, above all, my solution had to be a practical solution. I wanted a principle that would be operative

beyond the walls of the Theologate, that would prolong, not only the effects of our four years of study, but would keep theology as the central point of reference from which all flowed and to which all returned, so that no phase of my life as a priest would not know its permeating presence. I think I have found such a principle in that method of theological reasoning we call the 'Argumentum ex Convenientia.' I look upon the 'Argumentum ex Convenientia' as the summit of theological reasoning, that towards which all the rest of theology is ultimately oriented; and I find that it is at the same time a form of prayer, a method, if you want to place it in a category, which partakes of the nature of contemplation.

"If the objection were raised at this point that I am assigning too large a place to Theology in the life of prayer, that the spiritual life can be lived on the highest level without any reference, explicit at least, to theology, I would reply that although this might be true, it should not be true in the case of a Jesuit."

Fr. goes on to say that "To highlight one aspect of this interdependence of Theology and Sanctity is my purpose here." Much of the writing is in French and hence I am unable to translate, given my poor skills as a French student. There is another passage I think you would like, a few pages on, in which Father talks about eternity as a place that contains everything that has ever been, every lost dog, as he describes it, every broken watch and burnt dinner, then adds, "If eternity really is eternity, then nothing is ever lost. It's all there, for all time, safe and whole within the sight of God. This in itself is the 'living source' that Theology describes and that prayer allows us to stand in daily relation to and which, properly understood, is the source of meaningful action."

As for my life, I am a tenure track assistant professor of counseling at Community College of Philadelphia. I love my work. I hear Fr. in my work every day as a teacher and counselor. I got married in June and live in Collingswood, New Jersey with my wife Susan, a medical writer from a Nebraska farm of strong willed German stock. She has a Ph.D. in food science and an MBA, was in the Peace Corps in Ghana, and lived in Tunisia

for a year doing research. She is a fascinating woman, and she makes me a better man.

I struggle every day with good and evil in my life, but it is a worthy fight. I am not a very good Christian or Catholic, but I never give up the fight. Sometimes I make the fight harder than it needs to be, but I guess I fight better as an underdog.

Life is beautiful, fleeting and tragic, and I love every minute of it.

I have attached a picture of Father a little less than a year before he died, and a wedding picture. I picture Father now at this moment frolicking among the lost dogs and broken watches and burnt dinners of Eternity.

I hope you are well. Thank You.

Your brother through Christ,

(Former Student X)

2 0

In Maytime of a certain year, in the auditorium of your Catholic grammar school, you attended a vocational fair hosted by the Maryknoll Fathers, who are missionaries. You saw a glossy illustration of a Maryknoll Father who'd been tortured by savages, and you got an erotic charge. In the same week you read *Dracula*, which was your favorite novel until *The Scarlet Letter* came along a few years later. In Maytime of a certain year you began to see the connection between sex and death. Sex is sin is death. Then, as you continued to look, it really got confusing. Sex is sin is death is the resurrection and the life.

The old priest: "Once, in that Jesuit house in Vienna, I found a room that was like a medieval torture chamber. There were whips and straps, iron benches and wooden racks. Good heavens!"

"But why would anybody want to do such things?"

"To abase the flesh, of course."

"But why would you want to do *that?*"

"*Idiot*."

"Did you try it?"

"I went in there one afternoon, the room completely empty and still, sunlight coming in through the barred windows and the little chinks in the wall, and I thought of Itchy, and I flogged my bare back mercilessly for one hour. There are some things lost to us in modern times that ought not to be lost. Many things, actually, that most people would call barbaric, or medieval, but ideas and practices we might need all the same. Things lost to us that we can't do without, even if we don't know we can't do without them."

In the end you are alone, a bachelor-teacher at a posh New England boarding school. Not the worst life you could have imagined for yourself, though a suite of rooms at the boarding school would be better than taking the train each morning from North Station. Your colleagues are entertained no end with the stories of your colorful past, the casino days of your profligate youth. Oh, how they wish they had lived such a varied and adventurous life!

In the end you are alone in your room, still thinking of the old priest, what to say about your friendship, your "relationship," what not to say, how to write an end to this, if the ending is yours to write. As a young man you were awkward and depressed, youthfully morbid but far from Keatsian. Women found you dull, ponderous—"bloodless," as one of the cleverer ones observed from the other side of an open doorway—intelligent but without much style or imagination. The old priest alone took an interest in you. Years later you read a few newspaper articles that caused you to see this overweening interest in a somewhat different light.

In the rooming house in Atlantic City where you settled down after college the old priest came for a visit that very first summer, jaunty in his white polo shirt and Madras shorts. You sat up all night smoking cigarettes and drinking gin and tonics, the two of you talking with the drunken high-mindedness of fraternity boys. Later you found out from former student X that it was the real and true modus operandi of the old priest to stay up all night smoking and drinking with a former student, talking all that drunken, high-minded talk until daybreak, but then, at that moment in time when it was taking place, you thought it was the first time it had happened to either

one of you. In the morning you walked the block to the beach and swam before breakfast in the gently breaking waves. He sang "O Mio Babbino Caro," plunging up and down in the easy current, and you can still see his face as it was in the early sunlight, spouting water from both nostrils and singing in Italian. Later you cooked cheese omelets then lay together side by side on the pullout sofa which was his bed, holding hands. As he drifted off to sleep his final words were not his own. They were Shakespeare's, sort of: "I will grapple you to my bosom with hoops of steel."

After he left you decided the whole thing had been a terrible mistake. A few months later you went to see him, in Philadelphia, to explain it. You walked along the cobblestone streets of Old City, sullen and intractable, refusing to hold his hand. "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang," was his reply, gazing up into the leafless branches of the maple trees.

Two lines of Shakespeare (plus a little Puccini) to fix in place the simple but overwhelming fact: you loved another person, even though you did your best to cancel it out or turn it into something else, even if it was your right to cancel it out and even if it really was something else, something other than what you took it for at the time, whatever that was.

The ending, then: you loved him, something you were in a big hurry to forget but which he was in a bigger hurry to remember. For he loved you also. That is the one thing you seem most of all to avoid considering. Others he loved as well, perhaps—at least that has been your suspicion all these years, supported mainly by the leering presence of former student X—but he loved you, or at least the person you were in your youth. The handsome boy with the David Bowie pants and the nicotine-stained fingers, the frenetic teenager bursting with promise and the will to please.

All right, love is love but resentment is also resentment, and little by little you came to resent the way the old priest continued to look at you, as if he could fix you in a certain moment of your life and experience and keep you there. As if you yourself were a story to be told, and told the way he'd decided to tell it!

As if you alone could save him.

And so one day you went away, intending to return, as many another time

you'd come and gone, but things happened, one thing and then the next, time and distance, and you never got the chance to go back.

You abandoned him, is what really happened.

Just face up to the ending, the real ending, even if that's not how your book ends.

The book ends with you and the old priest having martinis and Chinese takeout the evening before he is to be placed into assisted living. The book ends with the old priest, having gone a bit senile, drinking martinis and casting out imaginary demons between bites of tea-smoked duck.

But this story does not end with imaginary demons and cold dim sum.

He betrayed you, is what really happened, following which you betrayed him. You abandoned him also, following which he abandoned you.

Just face up to it. Be honest. Admit what happened and move on.

2014

ALBA

from The Spirit Bird, selected by David Guterson

Kent Nelson

Ultimo Vargas had been in Hatch, New Mexico, only six months, since March, and already he owned his own business to compete with Netflix, delivering compact disc movies and video games to ranchers and people who lived within twenty miles of town. He had worked out a deal with Señora Gaspar, who owned the video store, to pay him 90 percent of the delivery fee, and if he took out more than fifty videos in a week, a premium on the extras.

Último had a moped, which made it feasible. Gas prices were high, and the delivery fee saved customers money. Also, it was convenient—they didn't have to wait till they had an errand in town. Most of the customers were Mexican families who worked the land for Anglos, or Anglos who owned cattle or pecan groves. Último organized his schedule by time and direction to avoid random trips. It was a lot of riding on the moped, but he liked the terrain—the low hills, the bare mountains, pale blue in the day and silhouetted in the evenings, the vast sky. He liked seeing the fields of onions and chiles, the pecan trees, the alfalfa growing, the cattle grazing. He saw hawks, antelope, badgers, deer, and learned their habits.

In a few weeks he knew most of his customers—the Gallegos family out Castenada Road, who grew green chiles, the Brubakers farther on, the widow woman, Señora Obregón, who still ran the Bar SW. The Michaels family was

a mile east, the Garcias were on the other side of Interstate 25—they owned the bakery—and Tom Martinez lived in the turquoise trailer a mile past. Many of the families grew chiles—that's what Hatch was famous for—and marketed them to the co-op in Albuquerque or along the town highway, pickled or fresh, or in jellies, or as *ristras*. Everyone knew Último, too, the *chico loco* on his moped.

The more people knew him, of course, the more people knew about his business. He was strong, had a good smile, and was a natural salesman. He talked to the Mexican families in Spanish, asked where their relatives came from, who was left in Hermosillo or Juárez or Oaxaca. He talked to the Anglos to improve his English and to show he was a serious businessman. He expected great things of himself one day.

Último's English was passable because he'd worked almost a year in Deming before he came to Hatch. He'd washed dishes at Si Señorita from six to two, and at four he mopped floors at the elementary school. In between he spent his off hours at the Broken Spoke, where he met people, even some women, like Brenda, who was a hairdresser, then unemployed. One night Último was walking home to his trailer at eleven p.m., and Brenda stopped in her Trans Am with the muffler dragging. She gave him a ride, and one thing led to another. He fixed Brenda's muffler and relined the brakes, and she fucked him like there was no tomorrow. After a month Brenda wanted to get married—she was pregnant, she said—and Último said why not. Two weeks after the wedding, when he found out there was no baby, Brenda ran off to California with a wine salesman.

To pay off Brenda's debts, Último used his meager savings and took a third job unloading freight at the train yard, though he still wasn't making enough money, or sleeping enough, either. One evening, after he had been threatened with eviction from Brenda's apartment, his boss at the school found him dozing at a teacher's desk. He was finished in Deming and he walked north with his thumb out, but no one picked him up. In two days, forty-six miles later, with nothing but the clothes he wore and a blanket he'd brought from home, he staggered past Las Uvas Valley Dairy and a few broken-down adobe houses and into Hatch, where he saw a HELP

WANTED sign in the window of the Frontera Mercado. He went in and got a job stocking groceries.

Hatch was in the fertile cottonwood corridor along the banks of the Rio Grande, the interstate to the east, and open country in every other direction—ranches, pasture, rangeland. The days were getting warmer by then, and he slept in the brush along the river, shaved and washed himself there, ate for breakfast whatever he had scavenged from the *mercado* the day before. If he wasn't working, he spent sunny mornings in the park and rainy ones in the library. Then Señora Gaspar hired him to work the morning shift at the video store, checking in rentals, cleaning, replenishing the stock of candy bars and popcorn. He established a more efficient check-in, organized a better window display, and built a new sign from construction waste: GASPAR'S MOVIES, and in smaller letters, Pregunte sobre nuestro servicio de mensajeria.

"What delivery?" Señora Gaspar asked.

"Our delivery," Último said. "I have bought a moped from Tom Martinez."

Some of his customers ordered movies for the company Último gave them. Señora Obregón, fifty-five years old, had lost her husband and wanted someone to talk to. She reminded Último of his abuelita in Mexico, and he often made the ranch his last stop of the evening so he had time to sit on her porch and listen to her stories. Her husband had been killed two winters before when, as he was feeding the cattle in a blizzard, a fifteen-hundred-pound bull slipped on a patch of ice and crushed him. They'd lost a hundred head in that storm. Her children were in Wichita, Denver, and Salt Lake City, two sons and a daughter, and none of them wanted anything to do with the ranch. Señora Obregón dressed well, as if Último's presence meant something, and she offered him steak and potatoes and always leftovers to take with him afterward.

Another person who ordered movies but didn't watch them was the Garcia's daughter, Isabel. She was seventeen, had bronzed skin, short black hair, and a good body. One day in June, she called the store and ordered *Babel*, "Pronto," she said. Último was alone, so he put a CERRADO sign in the window and took off on his moped. Isabel came to the door in a tank top.

"Let me find the money," she said. She didn't invite him in, but she paraded around the room pretending to look so Último could see the sunlight on her body. She found the money and came back to the door. "Come again," she said and handed him a five-dollar bill.

Elena Rivera also ordered movies. She had lived all her life in Hatch—her family owned a small dairy that competed with Las Uvas—and she was married to a village trustee, Manuel, who grew chiles. Manuel was often there when Último came by, as was their son, Aparicio, twelve years old, who was sick. Elena Rivera thought it was good for the boy to see other people, and Último obliged her by playing games with Aparicio and telling him jokes. The more time Último spent with Aparicio, the more movies the Riveras ordered.

Último was born in the village of Ricardo Flores Magón and raised there with two older sisters without being much aware of the wider world. Growing up, he thought of his father, Fidel, as already old. He slouched, his face was wrinkled, and he wore a straw hat with the brim coming apart. The hat had a blue-gray heron's feather tucked into the sweaty red band. "This hat keeps me alive," his father told Último. "You don't know." His mother kept goats and chickens and a small garden, watered by hand, and made baskets from yucca fiber and marketed them in Chihuahua. Then his father disappeared, no one knew where, and money arrived from different places Último had never heard of. His mother said in the States money grew in the gardens like squash and beans.

Último was an altar boy—every boy was—but he had doubts about God. Último had been to Chihuahua with his mother once and felt the energy of the city, had seen the lights and the cars, the radios and TVs, the clothes, soaps, and a thousand other things, and why would God make such things that belonged to so few?

Último did well in school without much effort, and girls were kind to him, especially his sisters' friends who came over to their house all the time. When Último was fourteen, the padre warned him of sins Último had never thought of, and when he inquired of his sisters' friends, they laughed and

kissed him and showed him what pleasure a boy might receive from their hands and mouths. Último was troubled that God should not want him to do what felt so joyful.

So he passed his days playing, reading, and learning from the girls and playing soccer. When he was seventeen, his father came home for several months. He had a car and nice clothes and wore a hat that was useless against the sun. He told stories of Fresno and cotton picking, of Castroville, where artichokes grew, and Yakima, Washington, where apples were heavy on the trees. If a man was willing to work, he said, there was money everywhere.

His father wanted to take Último back with him to California, but Marta, the older sister, was pregnant in Buenaventura and needed help and the younger sister, Lorena, couldn't be left alone. Most of the day she sat with their abuelita under the thatched awning, but sometimes without warning she screamed at a lizard or a bird, and once she'd torn off her shirt and run through the village crying out "God is chasing me." Another time she took the knife she was slicing papayas with and stabbed herself in her arm. The abuelita was too old to do what was necessary for Lorena, so when his father went back to the States Último had to stay longer in Ricardo Flores.

Elena Rivera appreciated how good Último was with Aparicio and saw no reason not to help a tall, good-looking boy who had gotten himself to the United States. That's what she told Último one afternoon in September when he brought over a video of *Abu and the Giraffe* for her son. "What will you do when it gets cold?" she asked. "You can't sleep at the river all winter."

"Maybe I will rent from Hector Lopez when his pickers are gone."

"My parents have a vacant house at the edge of town," Elena Rivera said. "There is a spell on it, because a child was killed by a rattlesnake."

"The place by the dry arroyo?" Último asked. "It has tires holding down the tin roof."

"That's it," Elena said. "The windows are broken, and who knows what else is wrong with it. You'd have to do some repairs. Are you afraid of snakes?"

"Yes and no," Último said.

"Which?"

"No," Último said.

"Then, if you're interested, I will ask my parents about it."

At the end of his days in Ricardo Flores, Último had a girlfriend, Alba, three years older, a friend of Marta's, whom his mother had gone to help. Alba was devout and shy, and she went to Mass every day with her mother. She wasn't one of his sisters' friends who'd shown him what pleasure was, and he knew better than to coax her or to try to kiss her. Instead, he asked to see her naked body.

"Once," he said. "I want to remember you when I'm gone."

"You can remember me with my clothes on," she said.

"I promise I won't touch you."

"You will look at me with lust. That's a sin."

"I might look at you with lust," Último said. "That will be my problem, not yours."

"Why would you ask this," she said, "when you know I cannot do such a thing?"

"There is no cost for a question."

The next day, as they walked outside the village, Último asked again.

"I have already answered you," Alba said.

"You might have changed your mind," Último said. "You might have decided there could be no harm in it because I will go to the States."

"When are you going?"

"Soon," Último said. "When my mother comes back from Buenaventura."

"In any case, where do you think we could do such a thing? Lorena and abuelita are at your house, and my mother is at mine."

"In the church," Último said. "There's a room behind the altar where we used to wait before Mass. No one is there in the afternoon."

She laughed "You're as crazy as your sister."

"Only once," Último said. "I want to walk all the way around you so, when I am in the States, I will remember clearly your whole body."

"Without touching?" Alba said.

"Yes."

"It won't happen."

A week passed. Último tended Lorena, who was seeing the Virgin Mary in the clouds. He humored her, sang to her, told her she would live to be one hundred and three years old. They threw stones into the ravine. Último read her stories from a magazine.

Their mother returned, grieving for a lost granddaughter. "It was God's will," she said. "The child was never well, but did it have to die?"

"God's will," Último said, "what is that?"

A few days later, Último filled two plastic bottles with water and loaded his backpack with food that wouldn't spoil—peanut butter, bread, cans of stew—and said goodbye to Alba at the *tienda* where she worked. "I am leaving tomorrow before daylight," he said. "I am going alone so I won't get caught. I promise I'll write."

"How will you find your way?"

"I am destined for great things," Último said.

"I have changed my mind," Alba said. "I will do what you asked."

Último said nothing.

"At two o'clock I have a break," Alba said. "I will meet you at the church."

"Promise?" he asked.

At two o'clock that afternoon, Alba appeared at the church as she said she would. The room Último remembered was behind the altar, though he had forgotten how barren and simple it was. There was only one square window high up in the wall, and light fanned down onto the plaster of the wall opposite.

"You have to turn around," Alba said.

Último turned around and stared up at the light. He heard the swishing of clothes, a dress fall to the floor, then quiet.

"Now," Alba said.

He turned back slowly and saw her body, her small, dark-tipped breasts, her long black hair over one shoulder. She did not hide herself with her hands, but she lowered her eyes. He was aware of her face, the expression of chasteness, but of joy, too, as if she were both ashamed and glad of the moment. Último walked all the way around her so that, for a few sec-

onds, his shadow fell across her body and then her body returned to light.

Elena Rivera's parents agreed to let him have the house in return for his labor fixing it up. An abandoned shack was what it was, with waist-high weeds in the yard. The door was padlocked, but Último looked through the jagged glass of the broken windows. Swallows had nested on the rafters, and the stuccoed walls were covered with graffiti—VENCEREMOS! VIVA ZAPATA! ANGLOS SUCK EGGS. There were three rooms, one with a sink, but no running water. The outhouse in back was functional, but it leaned two feet toward the dry arroyo where cottonwoods grew. A barrel stove had heated the place, but the barrel was in the yard, and the stovepipe was gone. Último tried the outdoor pump and gave thirty pulls on the long, curved handle. Dirty water came out, but in another thirty pulls the water came clear.

Early mornings in October, before he went to the video store, Último cleared the weeds and burned them. He borrowed tools from the Riveras—hammer, saw, chisel, level, tape measure—and bought plaster, nails, window glass, glazing compound, and a stovepipe. At night he scavenged for plywood, bent two-by-fours, one-by-fours with nails still in them. He fixed the hole in the floor, repaired the damage to clapboard outside, filled rocks into the holes raccoons had made under the house. He scraped away the swallows' mud nests, covered over the graffiti with fresh plaster, moved the barrel inside and cut the stovepipe to fit. He propped two fallen cottonwood branches against the outhouse to make it stand straight. The electricity was turned on. From his customers he cadged two lamps, two chairs, a mattress, and a card table. He saw no rattlesnakes—it was getting cold.

October 25 he moved in and not long after, an unusual thing: one evening he stayed for steak and green chiles at the widow Obregón's and drove home late on his moped. It was windy and dark, and when he pulled up to his shack he was chilled. The moon illuminated the tin roof with the tires on it, and the stones in the yard were silver. When he opened the door to his house, the moonlight came in with him, and there was Alba in the kitchen. She had on

shorts and a pale blouse—he couldn't see what color in the dark—and her face was calm but conflicted with desire. "Let me make a fire," he said. "You must be cold." He turned on the light, but no one was there.

Último knew people claimed they'd seen Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary and even Jesus Christ, but this was Alba, an ordinary girl from Ricardo Flores. Despite the promise he'd made, he hadn't thought much about Alba. In Deming he'd written her several letters scrawled on torn paper, and he'd received three from her, written on a lined school tablet, the last of which offered him more of her if he came home. But he was with Brenda, and he hadn't written back.

The night after Último saw Alba, he came home from his last delivery with a keen anticipation of seeing her again. Perhaps she'd be at the table or lying in bed, or she'd be at the window looking west into the moonlight, but when he opened the door, the house was empty. He thought it might have been a difference in the clouds or the moon's waning by a single day. Several weeks went by, each night getting longer and colder, and he got over his disappointment and wondered whether he'd ever seen Alba at all.

It rained. At the Goodwill he bought a coat and hat and gloves. With the winnowing light, people had longer evenings to fill up, and he hustled videos even harder because Señora Gaspar was always getting in new movies and his premiums were good money. But with the cold and the early dark, deliveries were more of a burden. Yes, he was familiar with the signs, the location of the poorly banked curve on the Canal Road, the washboard gravel by Jaime Delgado's adobe house where seven people lived, but Último couldn't see the blue hills in the distance or the hawks circling or the silhouettes of the mountains, except as a jagged black line against the stars.

His solace was his house. Each day he became more used to it, more comfortable. The barrel stove was smoky, but it heated the rooms. He had built a platform for his mattress, and he slept well. For a couple of months, he sent money home to his mother and Lorena.

In December, Elena Rivera's parents asked for rent, starting the new year. "You've lived there for free," Elena Rivera said. "What you spent for labor and materials has been accounted for."

"How much?" Último wanted to know.

"Two hundred a month. I've argued your case, but the dairy business is not going well, and my parents want what's fair."

"There's no heat," Último said. "No running water. I'm already paying the electric."

"That's why it's not four hundred," Elena said.

"I understand," Último said. "I will pay the rent."

At Christmas, Señora Gaspar went to Albuquerque to visit her son, and Último was left in charge. He opened the store, answered the phone, logged in the returned videos. He called the people whose DVDs were overdue and offered pickup service. Of course, Señora Gaspar needed someone in the store when Último was making deliveries, so at three her niece, Rosa, came in with a four-pack of wine coolers. When Último returned half-frozen from his pickups and deliveries, Rosa was sitting on the stool with a space heater under her reading comic books.

The next morning the till was short twenty-two dollars. To avoid suspicion, Último made up the difference from his own pocket. The next morning, another fifteen dollars were missing. He didn't know what to do. Señora Gaspar would be gone another eleven days.

Último was saved from one despair by another, because the next night when Rosa closed the store, she left the space heater on, and too close to the wastebasket. It melted the plastic and set fire to the computer tear-offs and then to the desk. It was three in the morning, and by the time the volunteer fire department arrived, the building was ablaze, the inventory destroyed, and Último's livelihood gone up in flames.

For several weeks after the fire, Último sat by the barrel stove and looked out the window at the gray sky. He bought a cheap bottle of red wine and drank it but felt no better. He slept. Only a week before the fire, he had sent money home, so when he paid rent, he had no money left. His only possession to sell was his moped, but it was a mile to town.

He might have looked for his father in California, but where? Or, of

course, he could have gone home, but in Ricardo Flores he could not do the great things he expected of himself. Then, on a dark morning, he was lying in bed, dozing, waking, pondering, when Alba came again. She was in the doorway to his bedroom, embracing the wooden jamb, hiding her breasts from view. He sat up and pulled his blanket up to cover his chest and shoulders. Alba's expression was no longer conflicted, but wanton and eager. Último called to her softly. She wouldn't come closer, so he stood up to go to her, and she disappeared.

He interpreted this vision of Alba as a sign to stop moping, and that afternoon he asked Señor Garcia for a job in the bakery. Último had to go in at four a.m., and each day he understood his mother's desperation. How had she endured the long journey to Chihuahua to sell baskets? What had she thought, leaving her children behind?

One of the Garcias was there, Mercedes or Alfonso, and Último helped prepare the dough, knead it, and put it into pans. He learned to make dulces and churros and cinnamon rolls, and at six, they opened the store. Último brewed the coffee. There were three tables for sitting inside.

At eleven, Mercedes or Alfonso, whoever was there, took a break for lunch and left Último alone for an hour. He was not allowed to sit at the tables, but he might drink coffee in the back room, from which he could watch the store. One day, as he was behind the counter gazing at the street, Isabel touched his shoulder, and he jumped. She had come in through the back door from the alley.

"Are you alone?" she asked.

"I'm here where I'm supposed to be," he said.

"They say you're a good worker and do what you're asked. Would you obey me, too?"

"That depends," Último said.

Isabel slid past him, and he smelled her scent. "You don't come to see me anymore."

"I never came to see you. I delivered the movies you ordered."

"Hatch is the end of the world," she said. "I can't wait to leave."

"For me it is the beginning of the world. What should I do?"

She took a bite of a churro. "I'll think of something," she said. "Be ready."

On the day Último left Ricardo Flores he had said goodbye to his abuelita who was old, but not to his mother, and hitchhiked to Buenaventura, where he got a ride north to Las Palomas. In the evening he hiked west into the desert, and a three-quarter moon led him into the mountains. In the morning he hid in a cave, and the next night he walked again. He followed animal trails, and in the morning he was in the United States, at the edge of an encampment of RVs. All that day he watched what the people did there, who was leaving, and at mid-morning of the second day, he saw a couple on their way out stop their motor home at the restroom. Último ran from his hiding place, climbed the ladder to the roof, and lay down.

The ride was easy. He held on to a vent to keep from rolling off on the turns. Most of the time he lay on his back and looked at the sky, the same one that arched over Ricardo Flores, and he daydreamed of Alba—her bronze skin, her black hair, the shame and joy on her face as she revealed herself to him. Several times he raised his head to see where he was, but everywhere around him was desert and mountains.

Once they stopped for no reason Último could see, and he heard voices—questions and answers. Someone opened the back of the camper. Último didn't move. If he couldn't see anyone on the ground, no one on the ground could see him. Then the RV gathered speed again and kept going. A half hour farther on was a town with stop lights, where the couple pulled into a gas station. Último climbed down from the roof and ran.

One afternoon after work in the bakery, Último was in bed but hadn't gone to sleep yet. He'd got a raise of fifty cents an hour and was calculating how much he could send home when he heard the door open in the living room. For a minute he didn't hear anything more. Maybe it had been the wind, maybe Alba. Then the floor creaked. He opened his eyes, and Isabel Garcia came into the room.

"I thought of something to ask," she said. "Do you want to make love?" She walked to the bed and pulled her shirt up over her head. "Move over."

He moved over—he had no choice—and she slid in beside him.

Isabel visited every few days, and it wasn't punishment to feel her hands on him, her mouth, the weight of her body. He liked her sighs, the notes of pleasure she sang to him, the urgency she felt, but he didn't feel love. He felt an uneasy peace, and he slept after, but he worried about who had seen her car there, who might talk, and he knew his days at the bakery were numbered.

He went to talk to Elena Rivera. "I want to grow chiles," he said.

"Everyone in Hatch grows chiles," she said.

"That's the idea," Último said. "I want to be everyone. But I will grow the best ones."

"Do you know anything about growing chiles?"

"I will learn."

"And where will you grow them?"

"On the land around the house that has tires on the roof, on my land."

"You want to buy it?" Elena Rivera asked. "I laugh at you. My parents will laugh at you. But in case they don't, how much are you intending to pay?"

"Ten thousand dollars," Último said. "The house is barely a house, and there are rattlesnakes. Two thousand now, and a little at a time over five years."

"Will you be here in five years?"

"If I get the land."

"The land is full of stones," Elena Rivera said, "and the creek is dry."

"More reasons for your parents to sell."

"But how will you grow chiles there?"

"Magic," Último said. "I am destined for great things."

A week after he talked to Elena Rivera about the land, she came into the bakery. She bought two cinnamon rolls. "Aparicio likes to eat these," she said. "I'll tell him you made them."

"I did," Último said, "only for him."

"I talked my parents into selling," she said. "Who else, I said, would buy a house like that in a field of stones with tires holding down the roof?"

"Others like me," Último said.

"There are no others like you. They want fifteen thousand, three thousand now, and the rest in four years. They will charge no interest."

"Give me two weeks," Último said. "I will find three thousand dollars."

But he had no idea how he would get the money. He tried the bank, but, as he thought, he had no assets and no credit, and even Elena Rivera's recommendation got him nowhere. He thought of asking the widow Obregón for a loan, but that would change their friendship. He had only one other idea, and on a Thursday after work at the bakery, he drove his moped to Deming.

He went first to the Broken Spoke, where the bartender remembered him. "Your hair is longer," the bartender said.

"You've gained weight and look prosperous," said Larry Munzer, sitting on the same barstool he had been on a year ago.

"I am almost a chile grower," Último said. "Do you understand what that means?"

"You're almost a man," the bartender said.

"I'm looking for Brenda," Último said. "We're still married."

"She's back in town," Larry Munzer said. "She's started up the Hair You Are Salon. She married a nice guy from California."

"All the better," Último said.

Brenda was surprised and not at all happy to see him. The upshot was, in return for three thousand dollars, he offered her a divorce, silence, and forgiveness of the money he'd paid on her debts. She siphoned the money from her loan. It took a few days—Último had to ride back to Deming another time—but he signed the contract to buy his house and the land around it.

Before offering to buy the property, Último had examined what he was doing. The cottonwoods along the arroyo were healthy, and, though the arroyo was dry, the well in the yard was good. Último disassembled the hand pump and measured the well casing—fifteen feet, not very deep. He borrowed an electric pump from Tom Martinez and ran an extension cord to the house. Whether there was a stream underground or a reservoir Último didn't know, but the pump produced five cubic feet per second, which was plenty to irrigate five acres of chiles.

Then Último eyeballed the highest point on his property, figured out how he would get water to it, and traded away his moped to Alex Tomar for the use of his tractor. On Sunday, when the bakery was closed, he plowed up the stones. The plow blade broke, and Último welded it. It broke again, and he welded it again, and he finished plowing in the dark. On Monday, surveying the field of loose stones, Último had more work than ever.

For the next two weeks, every spare minute, he carried stones. Aparicio helped. They gathered the stones into a pile, loaded them into a wheelbarrow, and wheeled them across a plywood trail laid out over the broken ground. The wheelbarrow was too heavy to dump, so Último turned it on its side, and they heaved stones into the arroyo.

After work, Último had no time for siestas and no time for Isabel. He loaded and unloaded the wheelbarrow hundreds of times, each day creating more arable ground. Then one day when he came home Isabel was there and asked her usual question.

"I can't now," Último said. "Come back when it is too dark to work."

"You'll be too tired."

"I'm too tired now."

"Would you want me to tell my father about us?"

"What have I done but what you wanted?" Último asked. "What kind of love is it if you force me?"

"Better than nothing," Isabel said. "Come inside, Último. I need you now."

When the stones had been carried away, Último broke apart the big clumps of earth with a hoe. That took another week. Then he borrowed back his moped and visited the widow Obregón and asked to buy manure.

"You can't buy it," she said. "I will give it to you."

"Can I rent one of your trucks to haul it?"

"I will lend you the truck."

"Thank you," he said, and he listened to her complain about her son in Wichita who worked for Cessna but never came to visit her.

Último spread the manure with a shovel, fifteen loads over ten days. He hoed furrows three feet apart and arranged a flexible plastic pipe to the high-

est point in the field north of the house and irrigated the dry ground so it could get used to moisture it had never experienced except as rain. He did the same thing from the highest point to the south.

He spoke to other chile growers he'd met when he delivered movies—the Gallegoses who marketed their chiles to Safeway; to Arnie Yellen, who grew chiles on an acre behind his house and sold them on the highway; to Alfred Saenz, who was the biggest grower in the Hatch Valley. He talked to Ned Cruz, the owner of The Chile Store, who sold chiles year round as paste and in powder form, dried, fresh, and frozen. In the library he read in Spanish and English about green chiles and red chiles, their growing seasons, the ways to keep insects off the plants, how to make sure the chiles flowered. He called the agricultural extension agent of Doña Ana County for recommendations and learned that the less water chiles had, the hotter they were.

As the weather warmed, the bakery became busier. Locals shed their winter isolation and moved around outside. Motels were full of spring travelers, and these people wanted dulces and coffee for the road. Último came in at three a.m. to make more bread, more cinnamon rolls, more churros. Even Isabel helped. She was at the cash register before school and came back for an hour at noon and complained the whole time.

Still, Último labored every afternoon on his land. He had carried the stones away but continued to find new ones; he broke clumps of earth smaller and smaller; he irrigated the ground. Then, finally, in April, he was ready to buy seeds.

There were too many choices—sweet or mild, hot, super hot. A habanero was fifty times hotter than a jalapeño. There were bird chiles, Bolivian chiles, Peruvian chiles, all undomesticated, plus bell chiles, Cherrytime, Hungarian Hot Wax, Hot Cherry, red, cayenne, and serrano. And there were specialized versions of these, too, like Cherry Bombs, Marbles, and Bulgarian Carrot, as well as hybrids like Ancho 211, Thai Dragon, Conchos Jalpeño, and Serrano del Sol.

He was pondering what to buy when Isabel came over and asked him to go with her to Las Cruces to find an apartment. "I'm moving as soon as school's finished," she said.

"Is it all right with your parents?"

"I'm not asking."

"When do you want to go?"

"Now," she said, "right after you fuck me."

Isabel had read a newspaper ahead of time and had marked the ads, and by three o'clock she'd found a one-bedroom not far from the university. The manager of the building wanted a month's rent in advance, which Isabel supplied. "You can visit me anytime," she said to Último, "and you'd better."

"Since we're here," he said, "do you mind if I run an errand? I want to buy a hat."

They found a hat store in the Yellow Pages, and Isabel drove him there and waited in the car. He bought a straw hat with a brim to keep the sun from his face.

"You look silly," Isabel said.

"It's a hat like my father's," Último said. "Now I have to go to the university."

"I have a friend there," Isabelle said. "I'll see if he's home."

Isabel let him off on the corner of Espina and Frenger, and Último found the Chile Pepper Institute of New Mexico State. He asked to see the director, and after a short wait was ushered into a small office and sat down across the desk from a young woman. "I am going to grow chiles in Hatch," he said. "I need magic."

He set seeds in the ground in rows three feet apart, each seed eighteen inches from the one he'd planted before. He marked every seed, fertilized it, and watered it by hand from a bucket he carried along. He moved on his knees from one planting to the next like a pilgrim crawling for miles to atone for his sins. It took him three days to plant the seeds—the experimental ones the institute was paying him to grow.

Then he waited.

So the water wouldn't evaporate in the heat of the day, he irrigated after sundown, again at midnight, and a third time when he got up to go

to the bakery. On his break at nine a.m., he ran home and turned off the pump.

One afternoon he came home and saw two trucks parked along the arroyo, an old one and a new Dodge. He recognized Señora Obregón sitting in the shade with her hired man, Paco. Último came up, and they all shook hands.

"It was my turn to visit you," Señora Obregón said. "I see how hard you've worked."

"I have planted chiles," Último said. "I can offer you a drink of water. It is a humble house."

"I would like you to bring me chiles from the harvest," Señora Obregón said

"I will be glad to," Último said, "but the harvest is far away."

"Closer than you think," Señora Obregón said. "That's why I'm here. How would you bring me chiles without a truck?" She nodded toward the old truck. "The tires are worn, and it has a hundred thousand miles of use. But it's a Toyota and has lived well."

"I am honored," Último said.

"The title is on the seat," Señora Obregón said. "Here's the key. Now you can visit me again."

May 21, a long day. Último had hardly slept because at two in the morning, something had made an eerie, quavering sound in the cottonwoods. He stepped outside with a flashlight and heard the unmistakable buzzing of a rattlesnake. He found the snake in the beam of the flashlight, coiled, with its head raised, its tongue flashing. Último got to his knees and shone the light into the snake's eyes. "I will leave you alone," he said, "if you will leave me alone."

The snake didn't answer, but Último believed they had made a deal.

He heard the quavering again—like a saw blade being played—and he skirted the snake and walked to the arroyo. The sound came from upstream in dark billowy trees, but each time he reached the place he thought it was it moved farther away.

The night was cool, but the stars were out, and as Último waited to hear the sound again, he urinated into the arroyo. Like every man in history who had done the same thing, Último felt the enormity of the sky, the deepness of space, and his own tiny greatness in the effort he had made in his field. Then the quavering came again from the trees nearby.

Último shone his light back and forth into the leaves until he found the shining eyes of a small owl. It was thirty feet away and a little above where Último stood, and Último made a deal with the owl, too, never to die.

Último lowered the light, and the bird flew deeper into the trees.

He set water and went back to bed, but still couldn't sleep because he felt the air move though the house, sweet air, humid with the earth's smell. He got up when it was still dark and went to bake bread.

At nine o'clock he drove his new old truck home and cut off the pump and sat for a minute on the smooth stone he had put down as a step to his door. He was wearing his straw hat against the sun. The snake's path was carved in the dust in the direction of the arroyo, and cottonwoods tattered in the breeze. Because he hadn't slept, Último felt part of everything that lived nearby. He remembered his mother and Lorena in Ricardo Flores, Marta in Buenaventura, his father in California, wherever he was, and wished they all could see him at that moment, tired and exultant.

He closed his eyes for a moment and leaned back against the door, and when he opened this eyes again, he saw tiny sprigs of green coming up through the soil. He stood up and ran into the field. The chiles were coming up, three feet apart in the rows and eighteen inches one plant from another. He knelt down in a wet furrow between two rows and kissed the ground, and when he looked up again, Alba was a few feet away, gazing at him. She wore jeans and a white blouse, and her expression was dreamlike, as if she had believed in him all along and was answering his call.

2015

TEN THINGS

from This Angel on My Chest, selected by Jill McCorkle

Leslie Pietrzyk

These are ten things that only you know now:

ONE

He joked that he would die young. You imagined ninety-nine to your hundred. But by "young" he meant sixty-five, fifty-five. What "young" ended up meaning was thirty-five.

In the memory book the funeral home gave you (actually, that you paid for; nothing there was free, not even delivering the flowers to a nursing home the next day, which cost sixty-five dollars, but you were too used up to care), there was a page to record his exact age in years, months, and days. You added hours; you even added minutes, because you had that information. You were there when he had the heart attack.

Now, when thinking about his life, it seemed to you that minutes were so very important. There was that moment in the emergency room when you begged for ten more minutes. You would've traded anything, everything, for one more second, for the speck of time it would take to say his name, to hear him say your name.

Later, when you thought about it (because suddenly there was so much time to think; too little time, too much—time was just one more thing you

couldn't make sense of anymore), you wondered why he'd told you he was going to die young. The first time he said it, you punched his arm. "Don't say that," you said. "Don't ever say that again, ever." But he said it another day and another and lots of days after that. And you punched his shoulder every time, because it was bad luck, bad mental energy, but you knew he'd say it again. You knew then that there would always be one more time for everything.

T W O

He once compared you to an avocado. He was never good at saying what he meant in fancy ways. (You had a boyfriend in college who dedicated poems to you, one of which won a contest in the student literary magazine, but that boyfriend never compared you to anything as simple and real as an avocado.)

You were sitting on the patio in the backyard. It was the day the dog got loose and ran out onto Route 50, and you found him by the side of the road—two legs mangled and blood everywhere—and you pulled off your windbreaker and wrapped the dog in it while your husband stood next to you whispering, "Oh God, oh God," because there was so much blood. He drove to the vet, catching every red light, while you held the dog close and murmured dog secrets in his ear, feeling his warm blood soak your clothes. And when the vet said she was sorry, that it was too late, you were the one who cupped the dog's head in both hands while she slipped in the needle, and you were the one who remembered to take off the dog's collar, unbuckling it slowly and looping it twice around your wrist, and you were the one whose face the dog tried to lick but couldn't quite reach.

So, that night, out on the patio, the two of you were sitting close, thinking about the dog. It was really too cold to be on the patio, but the dog had loved the backyard; every tree was a personal friend, each squirrel or bird an encroaching enemy. It was just cold enough that you felt him shiver, and he felt you shiver, but neither of you suggested going inside just yet. That's when he said, "I've decided you're like an avocado."

You almost didn't ask why, you were so busy thinking about the dog's tongue trying to reach your face and failing, even when you leaned right down next to his mouth. But then you asked anyway.

He looked up at the dark sky. "You're sort of tough on the outside," he said. "A little intimidating."

"Maybe," you said, but you knew he was right. In photos, you always looked as if you didn't want to be there. Lost tourists never asked you for directions; they asked your husband. It was something you'd become used to and no longer thought about or wondered why anymore.

He continued: "But inside, you're soft and creamy. Luscious, just like a perfectly ripe avocado. That's the part of you I get. And underneath that is the hardest, strongest core of anyone I know. Like how you were today at the vet. Like how you are with everything. An avocado."

At the time, you smiled and mumbled, but could only think about the dog, the poor dog. That was five years ago. What you remember now is not so much the dog's tongue but being compared to an avocado.

THREE

He predicted a grand slam at a baseball game. It was the Orioles versus the Red Sox, a sellout game up in Baltimore, on a bright, sunny June day, the kind of day when you look out the window and think, *Baseball*. But in Baltimore it wasn't possible to go to a game just because it was a sunny day; they were sold out months and months in advance—especially against teams like Boston, which had fans whose fathers had been Red Sox fans, whose kids were Red Sox fans, and whose grandkids would be Red Sox fans. He'd actually bought the tickets way back in December, not knowing what kind of day it would be, and it just happened to be that perfect kind of baseball day.

He'd grown up listening to games on the radio, sprawled sideways across his bed in the dark listening to A.M. stations from faraway Chicago, New York, St. Louis. He still remembered the call letters and could reel them off like a secret code. Now he brought his radio to the game in Baltimore and balanced it on the armrest between your seats, and the announcers' voices drifted up in bits and snatches, and part of him was sitting next to you eating a hot dog and cheering and part of him was that child sprawled in the dark listening to distant voices.

The bases were loaded, and Cal Ripken came up to bat. Cal was your

favorite player. You'd once seen him pick up a piece of litter that was blowing around the field and tuck it into his back pocket. Something about that impressed you as much as all those consecutive games he'd played.

"What's Cal going to do?" he asked.

You looked at your score card. (He'd taught you how to keep score; you liked the organization and had developed a special system, with filled-in diamonds for home runs, a K for a strikeout, and squiggly lines to indicate a pitching change.) Cal wasn't batting especially well lately—the beginnings of a slump, you thought. "Hit into a double play," you said. Cal had hit into a lot of double plays that season, ended a lot of innings.

He shook his head. "He's knocking the grand salami"—meaning a home run bringing in all four runners. You'd never seen one in person before.

"Cal doesn't have many grand slams," you said—not to be mean (after all, Cal was your favorite player), but because it was true. You knew Cal's stats, and his grand-slam total was four at the time, after all those years in the majors.

"Well, he's getting one now," he said.

After Cal fouled twice for two strikes, you glanced over at him. "It'll come," he said.

On the next pitch, Cal whacked the ball all the way across that blue sky.

Everyone stood and cheered and screamed and stomped their feet, and he held the radio in his hand and flung his arm around your shoulders and squeezed tight. From the radio by your ear, you heard the echo of everyone cheering, and you thought about a boy alone in the dark listening to that sound.

FOUR

He was afraid of bugs: outdoor bugs and indoor bugs; bugs big enough to cast shadows and little bugs that could be pieces of lint. Not "afraid" as in running screaming from the room, but "afraid" as in watching TV and pretending not to see the fat cricket in the corner or walking into the bathroom first thing in the morning and ignoring the spider frantically zigzagging across the sink.

"There's a bug on the wall," you might say, pointing, hand outstretched,

forcing him finally to look up and follow to see where your hand was pointing. You'd repeat: "There's a bug on the wall."

Still he'd say nothing.

"Do you see it?" you'd ask.

He'd nod.

So you'd grab a tissue and squish the bug, maybe letting out a sharp sigh, as if you knew you weren't the one who should be doing this. Or, if it were a big, messy bug like a cricket, you might scoop it up and drop it out the window. Sometimes, if you waited too long, the bug (silverfish, in particular) would scurry into the crack between the wall and carpet, and you'd imagine it reemerging in the future: bigger, stronger, braver, meaner. Bugs in the bathtub were easiest, because you could run water and wash them down the drain. You learned many different ways to get rid of bugs.

He never said, "Thank you for killing the bugs." He never said that he was afraid of bugs. You never accused him of being afraid of bugs.

FIVE

He kept his books separate from yours. Certain shelves on certain bookcases were his; others were yours.

Maybe it made sense when you were living together, before you were married. If one of you had to move out, it would only be a matter of scooping armloads of books off the shelves, rather than sorting through, picking over each volume, having to think. It would allow you to get out fast. Plus, with separate shelves, he could stare at his long, tidy line of hardcovers, undisturbed by the scandalous disarray of your used paperbacks. He liked to stare at his books with his head cocked to the right—not necessarily reading the titles, just staring at the shelf of books, at their length and breadth and bulk. You never knew what he was thinking when he did this.

After your wedding, when you moved into the new house, you said something about combining the books, maybe putting all the novels in one place and all the history books in another and all the travel books together and so on, like that.

He was looking out the window at the new backyard, at the grass no one

had cut for weeks and weeks. Finally, he said, "We own every last damn blade of grass."

"What about the books?" you asked. You were trying to get some unpacking done. There were boxes everywhere. The only way to walk through rooms was to wind along narrow paths between stacked boxes. There were built-in bookcases in the living room by the fireplace—two features the realtor had mentioned again and again, as if she knew that you were imagining sitting in front of a fire, reading books, sipping wine, letting the machine take the calls. As if she knew exactly the kind of life you had planned.

"I'll do the books," he said. But he didn't step away from the window.

It was a nice backyard, with a brick patio, and when you'd stood out there for the first time, during the open house, you'd thought about summer nights with the baseball game on the radio and the coals dying down in the grill and the lingering scent of medium-rare steak and a couple of stars squeezing through the glare of the city to find the two of you.

Again you offered to do the books; you *wanted* to do the books. You wanted all those books organized on the shelves; his and yours, yours and his.

"I never thought I'd own anything I couldn't pack into a car," he said.

You felt so bad you started to cry, certain only you wanted the house, only you wanted the wedding. "Is it so awful?" you asked.

He reached over some boxes to touch your arm. "No, it's not awful at all," he said, and it turned out that this was what you really wanted—not the patio, not the built-in shelves next to the fireplace, not the grass in the backyard, but the touch of his hand on your arm.

You did the books together, and suddenly something about keeping them separate felt right, as if now you realized that the books would be fine on separate shelves of the same bookcase, in the house you'd bought for the life you had.

SIX

He once saw a ghost. He was mowing the lawn in front, and you were in back clipping the honeysuckle that grew over the fence. Your neighbor—an original owner who'd bought his house for seven thousand dollars in

1959—wanted to spray kerosene and set the vines on fire, but you said no. You liked the smell of honeysuckle on June nights. You liked the hummingbirds flitting among the flowers in August. You even liked all that clipping, letting your mind go blank as you wrestled with the vines, cutting and tugging, yanking and twisting and pulling—knowing that whatever you cut would grow back by the end of the summer, that in the end the honeysuckle would always come back, maybe even if your neighbor burned down the vines.

It was that time of the early evening when the shadows were long and cool and the dew was rising on the grass; that time when, as a barefoot child, you would start getting damp toes. You half heard the lawn mower whining back and forth, back and forth, and you were thinking ahead to sitting on the patio and watching the fireflies float up out of the long, weedy grass under the apple tree. Then the lawn mower stopped abruptly; it needed more gas, you thought, or maybe there was a plastic bag in the way. When the silence lingered, you walked around to the front yard, curious, and found him leaning up against the car in the driveway, the silent lawn mower in front of him. The streetlight flicked on as you reached him; he held out his arms for a hug, and you felt his sweat, tacky against your skin.

"I saw a ghost," he said.

You pushed the hair back from his forehead and blew lightly on it to cool him down. His forehead was pale compared to the rest of his face.

He pointed over toward the big maple tree, the one that was so pretty each autumn. But nothing was there.

"What kind of ghost?" you asked. You still had your hand on top of his head, and when you removed it, his hair stayed back where you'd pushed it.

"Like a soldier from the Civil War," he said. "He was leaning against that tree, and then he was gone."

"Confederate or Union?" you asked.

He looked annoyed, as if you'd asked the wrong thing, but it seemed a logical question.

"It was a ghost," he said. "I saw a ghost."

"Did he do anything?"

"Maybe it was the heat," he said.

"Maybe it was a real ghost," you said. "Confederate encampments were along here." There was a silence. A car went by too fast, music spilling from its open window. "That tree's big enough to have been here then."

"This is stupid," he said, and he leaned down and pulled the cord on the lawn mower. The engine roared, and he couldn't hear you anymore, and you watched him push the mower across the yard. You saw nothing under the maple tree, just newly cut grass spit into lines and shadows stretching slowly into the dark.

Now you're the one who cuts the grass. People tell you to hire a service, but you don't. When you're done mowing in the evening, you lean against the car and wait, but all you ever see are fireflies rising from the damp grass where you leave it long under the maple tree.

SEVEN

When he ate malted milk balls, he sucked the chocolate off first. Thinking you weren't watching, he'd roll the candies from one side of his mouth to the other, making the sort of tiny noises you'd imagine a chipmunk would make, or a small bird, or something else tiny and cute. If he caught you watching him, he'd instantly stop. Sometimes, just to tease, you'd ask a question to make him talk, and his words would come out lumpy and garbled, pushed around the sides of the candy. "What?" you'd say, still teasing. "I don't understand." But no matter how much you teased, he never chewed.

That's the way he was. He had a special way of doing everything. He developed a method of eating watermelon with a knife, cutting slices so thin the seeds would slither out, and setting aside the juiciest fillet from the middle to eat last. There was an order in which to read the newspaper (sports, business, style, metro, front page). The two of you never left a football or a baseball game until the last second had ticked off the clock, regardless of a lopsided score or a ten-below wind chill or being late to meet someone for dinner. He always carried a pen in his pocket and kept long lists of things to do and places to see on little yellow sticky notes inside his wallet.

If someone had told you about a person who did all these things, who

imposed these rules on himself, you would've thought he was odd, annoying. But you found out piece by piece—like putting together a puzzle—and now you couldn't imagine your husband being any other way.

You watched him eat malted milk balls one Easter morning (you'd made two little Easter baskets, setting them up on the kitchen table, each different because you liked different kinds of candy), reading the Sunday paper in his usual order. You were about to tease him, to make him talk around that gob of candy, to see if he'd bite down just this one time, but before you could say anything, he mumbled something to you, and you didn't say, "What?" because you knew exactly what he'd said; there were always more ways to say, "I love you," and through a mouthful of malted milk balls on Easter morning was only one.

EIGHT

He hated his job for years. You lay in bed and listened to him grinding his teeth at night, unsure whether to wake him. You fantasized about waking him: "Let's talk," you'd say, and he would tell you all the things he was thinking, tell you exactly why he hated his job and how he really felt about the long, endless reports he wrote that no one ever read. You would offer sympathy, advice, kindness; you'd tell him to quit his job, offer to do his résumé on the computer; or maybe the two of you would just cry and hold each other tight.

But that's not what happened the times you did wake him. He told you he was fine, told you he was tired of complaining about his stupid job, told you to go to sleep. He used kinder words than these, but his voice was expressionless, like a machine that runs on and on by itself. And then you both pretended to be asleep, and then he really was asleep, because he was grinding his teeth again.

You tried to bring up the subject during the day. "No job is worth this," you said when you called him at his office.

"I can't talk now," he whispered.

"Then when?" you asked.

There was a pause, and you heard his boss being paged in the background.

He said, "My father worked for forty years on the line at Chrysler. You think every day was great?"

"This is different," you said.

And he said, "Nothing's different."

The conversation never went farther than that. It was his boss; it was the nature of the business; it was turning thirty; it was stress; it was long hours; it was making enough money that most other jobs would be a step down; it was too much overseas travel; it was overly ambitious coworkers and unambitious secretaries; it was rush-hour traffic; it was sucking up taxpayer money to fund projects that improved nothing except the bottom line of the firm; it was living in an expensive neighborhood in an expensive city on the East Coast; it was a wife who wanted to be a writer and consequently was earning no money; it was needing his health-insurance plan because that was when you still thought you could have a baby together; it was being the oldest child, the responsible one; it was being raised in the Midwest; it was trying to prove he was as tough as his father and his grandfather—tougher; it was being brought up to despise weakness and whiners. You knew it was all those things, but you suspected there was something more that he didn't want to or couldn't explain but that you could help with . . . if only he would talk.

This is what you thought about on those nights when you pretended to sleep: You prayed for him to talk, even though you hadn't been to church in ten years. It felt strange to ask God to make a man talk. You thought about numbers: How many Monday mornings are there in a year? How many Fridays when he had to work late? How many quick lunches at a desk? What do you get if you divide *X* amount of dollars in his paycheck by *Y* amount of unhappiness and multiply the result by a year, two years? How many times can one man grind his teeth in a single night?

"It doesn't have to be me," you told him. "Talk to anyone. A friend, your dad, a therapist, a bartender. Just talk. Please."

"There's nothing to say" was all you got from him.

The silence was thick and hard and invisible, like air before a storm. You waited and waited.

One night, you woke up and he wasn't next to you. When he didn't come back to bed, you got up and found him downstairs at the kitchen table writing on a yellow legal pad. A tiny moth circled the overhead light; you watched it instead of him. You asked, "Working late?"

He shook his head, kept writing, flipped the page over, wrote some more, and finally said, "I'm writing a movie."

He might as well have said he was being beheaded in the morning; it was that surprising.

The moth flew too close to the light bulb then dropped onto the table next to him. You leaned in, brushed the dead moth into your cupped hand, threw it in the garbage, and went back to bed.

The next day, he told you the plot of his movie: a guy who hates his job goes to baseball camp to relive his childhood fantasies and wins the big game—not by blasting in a home run, but by bunting.

It took him months to write the screenplay. He thought he was going to sell it in Hollywood and buy a house with a pool and retire. By the time he realized that wasn't going to happen, it didn't matter, because there were changes at his job, new projects that he'd developed and was implementing, ideas that made sense, that made people pay attention. It wasn't the same old story.

You liked that he was happy at work. He talked to you about what he was doing, about his projects, about the results of his work.

The handwritten manuscript of his movie stayed on your nightstand.

NINE

The combination to the lock on the garden shed (0–14–5), where you keep the lawn mower, the rake, the snow shovel, the garden hose.

Every fall, mice took over the shed; you never actually saw them, only the traces they left behind—dry droppings like caraway seeds; a corner chewed out of the box of grass seed; footprints crisscrossing the dust. He looked into poison. A neighbor across the street told him the right kind. "It shrivels their body from the inside," the neighbor explained, "so they dry up: no smell, no mess in a trap, no nothing. Clean and easy."

You didn't like mice. No one likes mice. But what kind of way to die was that, leaving nothing behind?

He set out the poison anyway.

Now, when you open the shed to drag out the lawn mower, you look for some sign of the mice, but he cleaned out the shed in the early spring, swept up all the droppings, hosed away the dust. You think that maybe you thanked him, but maybe not. After he was gone, faced with so much more to do than anyone could imagine, as if the world's to-do list had ended up on your own, you were relieved that cleaning out the shed wasn't on the list.

Now you're somehow disappointed that there are no mice, no way to know they were once here. You think, *They'll be back in the fall.* And you know that during the winter you'll keep the shed locked, that you won't look. Then you can think, *The mice are there,* never checking to see if you're right or wrong.

TEN

You cheated on him. Once. Barely. Not enough to count, not really. But it was with his best friend, the one he'd grown up with, the one with the odd nickname you never quite understood, the one who met you at the emergency room and cried as hard as you did.

It happened in your kitchen at a party one night when you were drinking too much and your husband was drinking even more than you and, even though it was his birthday, you weren't talking to him, and he wasn't talking to you, but no one knew this except for his best friend, because you both acted how you were supposed to act at a birthday party. You were telling his friend your side of the story, why you were right, and he was agreeing, and the next thing you knew, you were kissing the friend, not a quick, simple kiss, not an embarrassed kiss, but a real kiss, lingering.

It was that sudden.

You thought about that kiss for a long time afterward. You remembered every detail—and that, as much as the kiss, was the cheating part, wasn't it?

The friend said he wouldn't tell, but he did. You didn't find this out until a couple of weeks after the funeral, when you were talking to him on the phone

late one night because neither of you could sleep. (There were a lot of long, late nights; each time, you thought, *There couldn't be a longer night*, but it seemed the next one was always longer.)

"Yeah, I told him," the friend said. "It seemed like the right thing to do."

"What did he say?" you asked.

"He broke my nose," the friend said.

You remembered the broken nose, the funny story about walking into a ladder.

"I thought things were pretty much fine between us after that," the friend said, "because we were talking and joking again. But now I think there was something different. I can't say what." There was a pause. Then he said, "What'd he say to you about it?"

There were so many ways to answer that question, so many lies you could've told this friend, but you picked the easiest: "He was furious. Absolutely furious." Then you faked a yawn, said you were getting tired and wanted to grab some sleep while you could. But you didn't go to sleep for a long time—OK, not at all—because you were trying to remember a time, any time, a minute, a second, anything, when there was something different between you and him. But there was nothing to remember, nothing.

That's how much he loved you.

And that's the thing you know most of all.

2016

DOG YEARS

from Dog Years, selected by Richard Russo

Melissa Yancy

The Berger family is in a big-box store, one they have driven several miles out of their West L.A. neighborhood to find, and the cart is piled so high Ellen has finally conceded to getting another. With their speed through the aisles and the ziggurat of toilet paper, tissue, and toothpaste now cresting over the lip, the scene is suggestive of an apocalypse. Or the late great game show *Supermarket Sweep*. It is odd, Ellen thinks, that the possibility of racing through a supermarket, knocking rows of pure maple syrup, wrapped hams, and giant wedges of parmesan into a cart to compete for the highest sales total ever sounded like a good time. Was it wish fulfillment for the thrifty, this one chance to buy only the most expensive—if arguably unglamorous—items? Or was it the hope that all those hours spent in actual grocery stores, hunching to see prices, dodging mindless carts, and placating babies (who kept dropping their binkies on the floor) were training days, that there would be a moment when all of that wasted time would find meaning?

They are near the end of this trip but have come to their customary paralysis at the cereal aisle, the place where every color has its chance to compete: yellow to suggest wheat or corn; red and neon green to suggest candy; brown for all things chocolate; purple to simply say raisins; white or understated blue to attract adults; and orange, the most conflicted, which

can signify honeyed wholesomeness in its more subdued hues or full-on space food in its brighter versions. Ellen has been arguing for the regular Cheerios (yellow), which are on sale for $2.28 for an 18-ounce box, but her younger son, Zach, prefers the peanut butter ones (orange for regular, white for multigrain), which are $3.68 for a 12.25-ounce box. They have a rule about cereal in their house—no more than $2.50 per box, even for the smallest size. Two dollars is better. But they've never bothered to adjust for inflation, so the options continue to diminish.

Her eyes keep drifting across the aisle to a display of melamine plates printed with blue anchors and sand-colored starfish. Summer is almost here. If she had those plates, they could have people over and she could serve—what is the least troublesome thing she could serve?—Prosecco, maybe, and some decent beer; they could do it if they make it easy enough. She begins to wander away from the aisle toward the display of plates and little votive holders wrapped in beachy rope, even though she promised herself on the way to the store—no melamine! no duvet covers! no scented candles!—and when she leans over to look at the price, she sees the red tag instead of the white, the color that would normally give her a hit of pleasure until she realizes that the plates are on sale because it is the *end* of summer, not the beginning. She knows that, of course, how can she not *know* that, but for a moment, it still seemed like there was time for summer.

Her husband Gordy calls her back to the cereal. Zach's legs are getting tired and Tyler, their sixteen-year-old, will be late for his guitar lesson. There is still no agreement about the Cheerios. They have considered other options, compared ounces, become nostalgic for Raisin Nut Bran (orange, purple, *and* white, a real crowd pleaser), which has not been on sale for many years.

"Just get what you want," she says, less magnanimous than tired. But at moments like this, she can't help but think, Zach will live a short life, and you are going to deny him Peanut Butter Cheerios? But it is the principle of the thing, of living a normal life, that includes grocery thrift.

This is why their house assistant, Jeanette, who is away for a friend's wedding, usually does the household shopping. Jeanette, who spends her free time gorging on house porn online, determined to bring beauty to their lives.

"I'm still getting these," Ellen says, balancing the box of plain Cheerios on top of the cart. "It will bring the per-box average down, at least."

"This is not going in the movie montage," Gordy says.

The watch on Ellen's wrist spells out eleven fifty-three. It was a gift from Gordy for her forty-sixth birthday, and she gasped with primal relief when she opened it: some product designer had understood how little energy she had in reserve to translate numbers into words, let alone the geometry of hands into numbers into words. The watch is actually a small computer designed to keep her even more tethered to demands, when her head is already a ball on a string, getting whacked around a pole. She ignores the zings and pulses on her wrist and enjoys the Helvetica, instead.

Eleven fifty-three means running only four minutes late to make it to north campus by noon, where Ellen has been asked to speak to an undergraduate seminar about her research. Twenty minutes of zipper talk, fifteen for questions and she can get back down the hill and review a fellow's grant application by 2 p.m. She speeds up the main walk, running her hands along the tops of papery reeds planted beside the sidewalk, reeds that look like small bamboo but are another, noninvasive species. She likes to do this, as though she is not a professor but a young girl. It makes her feel present, somehow. Like she is stopping to rest while still moving forward.

She arrives only two minutes late, good enough to make a detour to one of the powdered coffee machines that Gordy calls her transfusion centers. On south campus, she knows how they are all calibrated—some sweeter than others—and can choose accordingly. The plunk of the cup being dropped, the plastic door sliding open in its Jetsonian way, and the sight of the little froth the machine leaves at the top fills her with the deep, chewy comfort another person might get from a basket of rolls passed at a dinner table.

There are five versions of the zipper talk that scale in complexity: versions four and five don't contain a zipper analogy at all, because the transcription and translation of DNA to RNA to protein is more complex than that. The zipper is a lie, but the kind of lie that helps people understand.

"DNA replication is like a zipper," she begins, sipping at her froth. "A gene is a section of DNA that contains instructions for producing a protein.

The gene is split into exons—the part that codes for a protein—and introns, the junk. Duchenne muscular dystrophy is caused by a mutation in the dystrophin gene. In Duchenne, an exon is missing, and because of that, the rest of the strand can't be assembled. Imagine the offset teeth of a zipper and a missing tooth. The rest of the zipper won't zip. So the body can't code for dystrophin."

She recognizes a few of the students near the front, overly eager undergraduates who have had summer internships in the lab and who refer to Gordy as Dr. Gordy, since no one can bear to call him Gordon, much less refer to him by last name. They do all but call him *swell*.

"The concept of exon skipping," she goes on, "is that we inject a molecular patch that hides the exon you want to skip. So, if someone were missing exon 52, the patch would hide the neighboring exon, so that now 51 and 54 will match up again. You still have a gap, but the rest can zip up. The trial that our Center for Duchenne is working on now is for a drug that enhances the effects of the patch."

At the end of the talk, one of the girls near the front raises her hand. She is a small Asian student who looks about twelve, in pink Converse and a T-shirt silk-screened with a butterfly, the kind of student Ellen often finds surprisingly formidable. She wants to know—although she asks it quietly, her head gently cocking—which came first, the research or their son?

"Is that okay to ask?" the girl says, even though she has already asked it.

Ellen is a molecular geneticist; Gordy is a clinical geneticist; their son, Zach, has Duchenne's, a genetic disorder. In the movie version of their lives, scientists scribble on whiteboards while kids in wheelchairs pull wheelies and give high fives. Two scientists born to find a cure . . . racing against the clock . . . to save their own son! Ellen likes the moment in a movie trailer when the screen fades to black and the tinkling of piano—over which the dramatic problem has been laid—bursts open into chorus, and someone driving down a country road in a convertible throws her hands up in the summer air. "Where is my convertible?" she asks Gordy.

"The genetics came first," Ellen tells the student. "But we didn't study muscular dystrophy. We both were—are—cancer researchers. But if we

could devote some of our time and resources to Duchenne after Zach was born? It only made sense. There wasn't enough being done."

The gene for muscular dystrophy was discovered in the '80s, and since then, nothing: that was academic freedom for you. Now, she and Gordy run a center that has NIH funding, clinical trials, boys coming from across California to receive care, the kind of success that was hard to come by in the crowded world of cancer immunology. For a different audience, Ellen likes to say she will not cure cancer in her lifetime, but she can cure Duchenne muscular dystrophy. And that cure will lead the way for other genetic diseases. But this is a student, and she doesn't like to spin with students.

"I want to study Alzheimer's because it killed my grandfather," the girl says. "But is it bad to study something so close to you?"

"Define bad," Ellen says.

Over the years, Ellen and Gordy have run through almost every actor in *who would play me?*, one of Gordy's favorite games. The running joke is a comfort, but it also indulges a narcissistic streak that no one but Ellen sees. Perhaps, having spent so many years in Los Angeles, he can't help but frame their lives this way.

"Michael Nyqvist," he says now. It is Sunday morning, the few minutes he calls Temple of the Bed, when Ellen brews coffee right on top of her clothes dresser, where she has stationed a machine along with her computer chargers, lotion, water bottles, and other bedroom blight.

"Who's that?" she says.

"The Swedish actor. The Stieg Larsson series?"

"When did you see those?"

"Just a photo online. I like the look of him."

"Melissa McCarthy," she says.

"Oh-kay." He pauses in the way of all seasoned husbands who sense conversation hazards ahead.

"I want someone really funny to play me. I finally figured that out."

"But you're not funny," he says.

"I laugh a lot, don't I?"

"That's not the same as being funny. That's like being—funn-ied."

"Or funee—like a donee."

"See what I mean?" he says.

It is Zach's birthday. He is turning nine. This year, he has not requested a trip to Magic Mountain or the Safari Park but a backyard party with friends. They have set up a volleyball court and bought every kind of foam ball and stick game ever manufactured. Jeanette has hidden the family's hoarding from sight and bought marinated pollo asado from a Mexican grocery down the hill. Ellen's job has been to select the cake: it is the Space Shuttle *Endeavor,* in patriotic hues, the last year Zach may like something like this. As a joke, Tyler has bought the fat numbered candles for thirty-six, since Zach argues that because of his short life, his age should be treated like dog years. He gives himself four years for every one and shouts out *dog years!* when they tell him he isn't old enough to do something.

Zach's two closest friends from school arrive first so they avoid the awkward school dance feeling that can descend on a child's birthday party. Within seconds they are outside, fencing with foam batons. Zach is unsteady in the fencer's pose, easily knocked off balance by the strikes. She sees him wobble and look for a flatter space on the grass.

Zach has always had plenty of friends from school, but now that she and Gordy run the center, a few families of boys with muscular dystrophy have entered the fold. It is supposed to be good for Zach, or for them, and although it has made him less alone, it has introduced him to his future, a perverse variation on the way older children so often introduce younger kids to things they aren't yet ready for.

Ellen opens Sauvignon Blanc and the women congregate in the kitchen, drinking, while they watch the men outside on the grill. The women like to mourn at birthday parties, and the men just want to relax. She remembers when Tyler was growing up, how they would sit around and groan that their boys weren't little boys anymore. It was bittersweet, a feeling that had felt complex then. But now that she has added another dimension, a child whose health degenerates each year, the old feeling is so flat, so easy.

"Gordy is such a great guy," her neighbor Rosie says as they watch Gordy scrape the grill and hold court with the other men. Rosie has lived down the street for years; she knew them before they were *these* people.

"Is he?" Ellen asks, sipping her wine. She can't afford to get drunk, exactly. But she would like to feel that feeling that butts up right against it.

He *is* a great guy but she is bothered by how often people remind her of this, the implied commentary about equivalence. He is more exuberant than she, it is true. He is still trim and his thick beard masks the age on his face. She looks tired and, by virtue of the expectations placed only on women, more unkempt and therefore less happy. But there might be something else she fears people can see manifested in their physical forms—that inside, they are each telling themselves a different story, something they do not talk about or always talk around.

One of the center's patients, Gilbert, a twelve-year-old who is now in a wheelchair, arrives with his mom Lena. Zach greets him briefly then runs crookedly off, putting as much distance between himself and the boy as he can. Tyler gets Gilbert an orange soda and goes out to the patio with him and keeps him company. She cannot believe her boy Tyler. He calls adults Mr. and Mrs., gives firm handshakes, and puts his plates in the sink. Tyler is a muscled, pimply saint.

"When did you get that?" another neighbor asks, pointing to the electric chair lift that's been installed on the stairs.

"A few months ago," Ellen says. "We wanted to get Zach used to the idea of having it there. So it's not a big deal."

"While he can still walk?" one of the non-Duchenne mothers says. "Doesn't that feel defeatist?"

"It will be worse to put it in after the first time he can't make it up the stairs," Ellen says.

"How did he take it?" Rosie asks.

"Not well," Ellen says. "He can't imagine he'll ever need that."

"I get it," says Lena. She pours herself a glass of the wine. "He won't have to admit it this way. He can just use it—when he's ready." She turns to the other women. "You can't imagine how hard it is for them to admit

they can't do something they could do the week before," she says. "They're boys."

"Oh, yes," Rosie says. "Boys and men. That is why the crown molding in my living room is hung upside down."

"And why the water knobs on my sink are reversed," the other neighbor says.

There is always someone who makes the conversation light again. Ellen has a sudden urge to take them down as far as this well goes, to squeeze the wine glass in her hand until it breaks. But she does not do that. It is her job to quip. Without that, no one will follow. People will turn away.

Before they are ready to blow out the candles, Ellen pulls Zach aside.

"You need to spend some time with Gilbert," she says. "Be a good host."

He looks away from her, over his shoulder at the boys playing. How many more days will he be able to walk, to do this?

"Are you listening to me?" she says. "He came here to see you."

He doesn't answer her, but when the cake is cut, he goes to sit by Gilbert, and when they're done eating they throw cake at Tyler who artfully dodges all but one splat of frosting.

She thought it might help to have friends who understand, but she feels like the Duchenne parents are watching her and wondering where their cure is. They volunteer and fundraise for Ellen and Gordy's research. And she can't help but think they are judging her for sitting there with a glass of wine in hand.

But in her heart she makes the opposite case. Zach may be able to walk only for another year or two. Shouldn't she spend every moment of the good years with him that she can? Or should she wait and be there for him in the harder years? It is not a race against time. They will not cure their son. They will cure an idea of their son, while her real son diminishes each day.

Dr. Stame, the CEO of the medical center where she and Gordy work, is a child psychiatrist by trade. His office is more like a tech guru's than a doctor's: in the center is a large standing desk topped with three monitors. On the wall above a large conference table is a melting Dalí clock, the kind of decoration Ellen imagines belongs in a college dorm room. There are framed

quotes: from Wayne Gretzky, *Don't skate to where the puck is, skate to where the puck will be;* and from the Queen in Alice in Wonderland, *It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.*

Stame is known for TED talks, for believing that a story is always the solution, and his stories, in Ellen's estimation, often have little medical relevance; he will tell how they arranged for a young pregnant woman to travel across the state to their medical center to give birth so that her grandmother, who lay dying two floors up, could hold her great-granddaughter just once.

Cultivating Stame is Gordy's job. She finds the whimsy unsettling. But Gordy has a meeting with the dean and so she is here instead to ask him to be a sponsor for their annual fundraiser for muscular dystrophy. It feels like begging from Peter to pay Paul, and it is; this is how the money flows from the medical center to the medical school.

She begins by telling Stame how successful the past events have been, but he raises his hand to stop her. "You don't have to convince me," he says.

She has been told he grades people on their conversations and she imagines the deductions he is already making.

"Your husband is a good man," he says.

"So I'm told," she says.

"He's been helping me with a side interest of mine," he says.

"Oh?"

"I ask people to track moments of meaningful coincidence," he says.

Hearing those words is like smelling another woman's perfume on her husband. Lately, Gordy has been babbling about synchronicity, and Ellen has wondered if he was getting religious on her. She will catch him smile, or shake his head in a private thought, and when she asks him what it is, he says nothing. Because when he has tried to explain it—how a particular name or book or song keeps coming up—she has been dismissive. She understands the coincidence part but not the meaning: What exactly is the universe supposed to be telling him? Now she knows why he has been looking. Synchronicity is a total Stame word, juvenile and Jungian.

"And what has Gordy come up with?" she asks. The idea of his conversa-

tions with Stame feels like an infidelity, telling stories out of turn. The difference between Ellen and Gordy is that she finds purpose, not meaning. There are circumstances and she has decided to make herself of use; it is causal, linear, and does not fold in on itself in a way that is supposed to mean more.

"This kind of information is more interesting in the patterns," he says.

"Patient confidentiality?"

"He's not a patient."

Just a subject, Ellen thinks. She knows that Stame is collecting information to use them, to feature their story as one of *his* stories, which is his occupational right. It is the kind of story Stame lives for, that he would make up if he could.

Get dressed, Gordy is saying.

She is trying. She has squeezed into a stretchy girdle and has been digging through the hamper for her only thick-strapped bra that smoothes out back fat. It has managed its way to the bottom where the pilly sweaters she has not committed to discarding rest.

"I need a zip!" she calls out to him, and he comes in, one shoe on, one shoe being shimmied into as he moves across the floor.

She brushes her hair in front of her shoulder and feels his hands move the zipper up and then stop.

"What?" she demands. "What's going on back there?"

She cranes her neck around. He smells like cologne. She has not smelled cologne on him in months.

"Just hold on," he says. She feels him unzip, then rezip and stop again, tugging.

"MOM!" Zach screams from downstairs. "We're going to be late."

"I'm too fat," she says to Gordy. "I'm too fat!"

"No, it's just stuck. It's a bad zipper. But maybe suck in a little?"

But the zipper won't budge.

"I've been telling you!" she yells at him as she goes to the closet, as though if he had only acknowledged the fact of her girth, she would have been transformed. She almost never wears dresses, and fundraisers are the only time she's required to doll up.

"MOM!" Zach screams again. "Come on!"

"Your mother is NAKED!" she screams back at him. "Naked!"

She grabs her silk robe from the bathroom and Gordy stops her. "What about that?" he says.

"What about what?"

"That looks like a dress. Like one of those wrapper dresses."

"You're insane," she says. "My boobs will fall out."

"We'll tie it tight," he says. "Or we'll tape it underneath."

It is black, it is silky, and with her gold flats and a red beaded necklace, it almost looks like something that could be worn to the Beverly Hills Hotel. She dabs at a speck of toothpaste on her chest as she gets into the car.

"Why are doctors always late?" Zach says.

"Zach," Tyler warns. "They are not in the mood."

The patient who is being honored at the gala has just graduated from high school with honors. In the last year he has grown an impressive mustache, and Zach and Tyler now call him Selleck, which he loves. At the Duchenne Center, the physical therapy team has recently fitted him with a new arm-assist that helps him use his hands to type or bring food to his mouth. He gets food caught in the mustache all the time but doesn't care. He has been admitted to UCLA and begins in the fall. For people who think of college as only a preparatory exercise, it probably doesn't make sense. But what Selleck has left is the life of the mind.

A colleague once explained to Ellen, using a smudged equation on the back of a greasy lunch receipt, that if you assumed you would live to eighty, and you chose five as the perceptual beginning of your life, then twenty was the perceptual halfway point. She was thirty-five at the time, blithely thinking she had five more years to a halfway point, not that it had blown by long before she had even understood the cruelties of time. She would worry this thought like a hole in her pocket for years, the tear only widening the more she wriggled her fingers against it.

And now it is a strange comfort, her life no longer measured by her own years. To think that even if Zach dies in his early twenties, he will already have lived half a life. She understands the logical error in that but does not

care. And a part of her still believes, whatever the math might say, that if only she could be more present, she could control its speed.

Ellen and Gordy skip most of the meal, splitting up and covering the room. She has perfected the art of the leaned-in interruption. She squats, one hand on the back of the ballroom chair, trying to keep her breasts tucked in. She meets strangers, friends of friends who have been enlisted in the cause. They are in the door and now she must sell: she must not let them leave without a car.

When dessert is finally served, the lights go down and they sit. The video is seven minutes long, as dictated by the fundraising consultant. That is precisely the length required to garner emotional commitment without boredom and the video must make the audience cry three times. If they fail to produce actual tears, there must be goose bumps, a prickle in the heart. There is a strict formula: it begins with a toddler at the moment of diagnosis, and then the sobering facts—*it is universally fatal; there is no cure*—and the progression with each passing year, the gait growing more awkward and slow, the wheelchair, the loss of hand use, the ventilators, and finally the heart, the last muscle that goes. There are stories of the parents, cradling their teenaged sons down into bed at night, and then the screen goes black: when it comes back up, it is stop-motion in a busy clinic. And then Gordy and Ellen are in the lab, talking about how much has been discovered in the last ten years, how they are close enough now that the toddler diagnosed today has real hope. The end of the video is the familiar punch line, the reveal that half the audience already knows. In comes Zach, their son. There are parents and there are researchers and then there are Gordy and Ellen: Is there anyone in the world who could want this more?

The grand prize of the night is backstage concert passes and a personal visit with Justin Bieber. Ellen sits there like a clerk at an airport foreign exchange as people bid on items, translating money into project costs. She has spent every dollar before it is raised. The tyranny of money would be as bad as the tyranny of time, except that she holds out hope that there is a great supply of it they are about to unearth. But to raise the money *takes* time, time that could be spent elsewhere, so the two tyrannies intertwine.

They are watching the second half of the third *Mission Impossible* movie. They don't have two hours of free time, so they watch the forty-seven minutes that remain, trying to piece together what is happening. Her sons have seen it before and Gordy is snoring on the floor, his face smashed against one of the rough couch pillows. When people ask Ellen if she has seen a movie, she shrugs. She has seen several scenes of several hundred and she is fairly certain she is not missing anything. Gordy calls this *cinemas interruptus*.

"Pulchritude," Ellen says to Tyler.

"Mom, stop," Tyler says. "Watch the movie."

"It's one of those words where the meaning doesn't match the sound of the word."

"I'm studying for the SAT," he says. "Trust me." But she is afraid Tyler is sabotaging, that he is putting off the decision that will come if he gets into the colleges he wants.

"Wait," she says, when the villain rips off his face mask. "I think maybe I have seen this before."

"I told you," Zach says.

Zach has seen far too many R-rated movies but he has claimed *dog years!* and Ellen is too worn down to object. Zach, who has always had a gift for the dramatic, is finally getting to take an acting class in school and can now add the ammunition that television and movies are research.

"Oh my God!" Zach screams out. "Oh my God!"

Gordy bolts up from his sleep. "What?" Ellen and Tyler yell back.

"We're supposed to bring, like, cookies or something tomorrow. It's my turn at school for the birthday month."

It is 9:30 at night. In half an hour, they should all be in bed.

"I guess it'll be a sad birthday this year," she says.

"Mom! We *have* to," he says.

"We don't have anything to make," she says. "You should have told me. Or told Jeanette."

"I know, I know," he says. "My bad." He gets up from the couch and walks to the kitchen. At night, his steps are a little stiffer, and she can see his left leg

is bothering him. He opens the pantry and pushes aside cans of stock and old vegetables that they will eventually donate.

"Look," he says triumphantly, holding up the value size box of cereal. "We have this entire box of Cheerios that no one will eat."

"Great," she says. "You can bring that."

"We can do something with it," he says. "Like they do with Rice Krispies."

"I'll Google it," Tyler says, jumping up to the computer.

Gordy stumbles into the kitchen, his hair mussed and cheek red with upholstery stripes.

"Aren't you glad you bought those Cheerios?" he says with a dumb smile. A Dr. Stame smile. And he means it, in his everything-happens-for-a-reason way.

"Fuck you," she says. "And the universe, too."

She thinks about the perfect days—how many were there? 500? 550?—and how she hadn't known then they were perfect. She tries to remember when she knew something was wrong with Zach, but there had been no singular moment, just times they had compared his development to Tyler's. It had been so long since they'd had a toddler that they didn't trust their recollections. They were too busy and too old to worry. Her pregnancy had been a surprise, inconvenient and miraculous. They had always wanted another child but had never gotten around to it.

She remembers those early days now through the scrim of memory—stitched together moments of Zach, milk-drunk, and she, in a kind of blissed-out exhaustion. She would sit at the end of the couch so she could rest her arm on a pillow and position herself in the sun so that it warmed her back but didn't hit Zach's face. She would listen to NPR while he slowly nursed. That's what having an infant means, in her memory, basking in a warm corner like a housecat. When it was not anything like that.

Just as when she sees undergraduates gathered around a table in the union, oily faces reflected in their computer screens, she feels nostalgia for a time in her life she knows she didn't especially enjoy. She can remember being

lonely, eating rice and soy sauce and obsessing that other girls were pretty. But now she thinks only of the freedom, the days stretching out like a long yawn, spontaneous trips to the beach on unexpectedly hot afternoons.

And she knows that these days now, while Zach can still walk, will be the perfect days for her future self. She will not remember the grant applications and the broken garbage disposal and the flesh that is folding over her waistband. And yet knowing this makes almost no difference at all.

Ellen is at a college fair for Tyler in a generic hotel ballroom where she can be a generic parent among strangers. At the snack table, she has found herself next to a shuffle-and-speaker, the kind of woman who must strike up a conversation as they move sideways down the line. Ellen balances her plate of carrot sticks and cheese squares on top of her plastic cup of lemonade so she will have a hand free to eat (one of the problems of the world an engineer should have solved by now), and the shuffler is planted beside her, entering full confessional mode.

"I always wanted a daughter," the woman is saying.

"I didn't," Ellen says, which is true. "I only had brothers growing up. I wasn't sure what I'd do with a girl."

The woman looks her once over, as though realizing this is probably so. The woman wears skinny white jeans that are snug in the rear, a chambray shirt artfully half-tucked and a coral necklace. She is the kind who has made enormous effort not to let herself go. Ellen was never successfully hanging on.

"But we lose our sons," the woman continues. "We have them until what? End of college, if we're lucky. After marriage, they're gone. Girls stay."

"This is true," Ellen says. And she has the strange urge to hug this preening creature. She wonders—in the most hideously Stame-like way—if people are actually saying things to her she needs to hear or if she is just editing everything else out.

She watches Tyler patrol the room, noticing whether he picks up brochures from out-of-state colleges. She excuses herself and trails behind him, collecting those he has missed.

"Mom," he hisses. "Back off."

It will get harder in the coming years. Zach will be able to do less for him-

self. It would be easier to have Tyler at home. But a part of her wants him to go to New England, not just far away but to a new cultural landscape, a place where he must become his own person. Of course, she would settle for San Diego or Santa Barbara, enough distance to have his own life but only two hours away.

Some of the admission lookbooks are thin and glossy, and others are saturated with matte hues: students play Quidditch in one frame, build an electric car in the other. There are violinists and kids in lab coats, paint-splattered fun runs and Nobel Prize winners and everyone is laughing, sometimes in the rain. A bearded boy stands among llamas; a bikini-clad girl swims underwater with a sea lion. Everyone is multicultural and has good teeth. It is all real and yet in snapshots—in its omissions—it becomes a lie. Yet she loves that lie. That is exactly the problem. She loves the lies. She always has. But in lies, there is hope. And she cannot hope. She must have all the ambition, the urgency, as though there were hope, without the actual hope itself.

They have promised, as a family unit, to make the foyer their designated dumping ground, to shed the detritus they carry and keep it from creeping past the entryway into the house. Jeanette has purchased stylish linen bins in striped shades for each of them, hooks have been hung, a new console table that hides the mail assembled. And yet dirty shoes have mounded like a pile outside a sacred temple, and magazines threaten to block the door; there is a soccer ball and never-used rain gear and reusable grocery bags everywhere. It was brilliant in the magazine spread Jeanette brought home, the kind of home publication full of special lies like alphabetized spice racks and magical cord keepers.

Today, Ellen wants to walk into stillness instead of chaos for a change. She steps along the pavers that are spaced irregularly in the gravel around the side of the house, then goes to the patio. She feels like a burglar approaching her own back door, a funny kind of familiarity, like when she leans over to kiss Gordy upside down on the couch and thinks that this is what counts for novelty in her life.

She steps in through the French doors and sees the soda cans that signify her boys are here somewhere, but for a moment she can't hear them. She

wonders if she is now obligated to go to the foyer and divest herself of her junk, or if she should put her computer in the office, her tote in the closet, her papers on the kitchen station they use for their nightly work. What she needs, she realizes, is a cart. She can put her things on the cart and have her cellphone, her laptop, her lab and class papers near, and then leave the cart by the door so it is all there when she's ready to leave in the morning.

Her linen bin in the entry is full but she smashes her bags on top and forces it back into the storage bench and when she turns the corner there is Zach, cruising down the stairs from the second floor on the motorized chair. It hums with electric life but moves with an almost comically slow pace as the teeth in the rack and pinion engage one-by-one. She sees his look of surprise, as though she's caught him with the bathroom door open.

"Oh hi, Mom," he recovers, and she stands there, waiting for the seat to descend to the bottom.

"I thought I'd give it a test run," he says, when he reaches the ground. He gets out and leans against the baluster, in a pose of mock relaxation that she knows is actually for balance. "Dad said maybe I should run it once in a while, like a car. For the motor's sake."

"What do you think?" she says.

"It's kind of funny," he says. "It reminds me of the haunted mansion in Disneyland. Maybe you could hang some creepy pictures and mirrors on this wall." He grins.

They tell you about the resiliency of children—they do—but what they do not tell you before you have children of your own is what they will do to *your* resiliency: how on the one hand, you will see how brittle you are in relation to them, and how on the other, you will develop a resiliency that flows from them and for them, as though taking in secondhand air from their exhalations. And how, if you will ever have to be without them, you will not be put back together again.

"I'm hungry," he says. "I can't *take* anymore string cheese."

"There are tater tots in the freezer," she says. She looks at her watch. Six forty-five. She has a deadline tomorrow morning. "I told Dad to bring home pizza."

"Pepperoni?"

"No, anchovies."

"What? Dis-gus-ting!"

"I'm your mother," she says. "You think I don't know you want pepperoni?"

She is about to sneak to the office for a minute when Zach says he wants to show her something he has learned in school that week. "It's kind of hilarious," he says, and she follows him into the living room. "Just watch."

She doesn't recognize the music at first. It sounds like science fiction, a mysterious blooming synthesizer followed by chimes. And then the heartbeat comes, a skipping pulse, and it arrives: the piano. The introduction to *Chariots of Fire* blares in the room.

At first, she thinks something is seriously wrong. Zach is frozen in space, like he's about to seize. Then she sees he is moving, running in meticulous slow motion.

Tyler comes barreling down the stairs with the thunder unique to teenage boys.

"Oh my God," Tyler says. "We had to do this in Mr. Dwight's class, too. This is total flashback." He stands next to Zach and positions himself to race. "I can go way slower than you," he says.

"Let's see you try."

Soon, both sons are in exaggerated running poses. Zach keeps losing his balance and resets. Tyler's back leg is high in the air, as though about to come around for a hurdle.

"Come on Mom," Zach says. "You have to do it, too."

"I think not," she says.

"It's a warm up. It loosens up the mind."

"They're teaching you this in school?" she asks. "What is the purpose of this exercise?"

"Mom," Zach says. "Not everything is science, okay?"

The song is the most undeniable kind of lie, a story with no words at all. She gets up and feels ridiculous, grateful that there is no one there to see, and lunges her right leg forward, her right arm back, and pushes her left leg from

the ground. It is hard to move slowly, like tai chi, harder than it is to move fast, and yet why should she be surprised? If she knows nothing, it should be how hard it is to bend time, how pointless it is to muscle against.

When Gordy walks in, holding the pizza box aloft with one hand, his bag in the other, they are just reaching the treacly crescendo and mother and sons are standing, fists wild in the air, necks craning forward, and she has the stupid feeling for just a moment that she can feel the wind.

2017

THE MOUNTAIN ROAD

from The Islands, selected by David Gates|

William Wall

James Casey drove off the top of Rally Pier. His two daughters were in the back seat. The tide here falls out through the islands and away west. It runs at a knot, sometimes a knot and a half, at springs. Listen and you will hear it in the stones. This is the song of lonely places. The car moved a little sideways as it sank. And afterwards great gulps of air escaped but made no sound. I know these things, not because I saw them but because they must have happened. The sky is settling over Rally and the hills. It is the color of limestone, a great cap on the country. Ten miles out the sky is blue.

I heard it on local radio, suicide at Rally Pier. I knew who it was.

You cannot see the pier from my house. I got up and put my jeans and sweater on and climbed the hill behind the house, through heather and stone, to where I could look down. Bees sang in the air. Watery sunshine filtered through thin clouds. When I turned after ten minutes of climbing, the whole bay lay before me, the islands in their pools of stillness, the headlands like crude fingers, boats out beyond Castle Island pair-trawling a mile or more apart but connected forever by cables attached to the wings of a giant net. James was on the boats once. He it was who explained all that to me. I saw the police tape on the pier head, a tiny yellowness that was not there before. If he left a note, what did it say? Suddenly the song came into my head. "Dónal

Óg." Even as the first words came I knew what it meant for me. You took the east from me and you took the west from me and great is my fear that you took God from me.

When the song was finished with me I walked back down home. I was accustomed to think of it like that—not that I stopped singing but that the song was finished with me. I made up the bed with fresh sheets and put the soiled ones in the washing machine. I washed out the floor of the bathroom. Why do we do these things when we are bereft? Then I had a shower and put on dark clothes. I got out the bicycle and pumped up the leaking tire. My father had shown me how to mend punctures but I could not remember now. I still have the same puncture repair kit, a tin box, but now I keep hash in it.

Then I wheeled the bicycle down to the gate and onto the road and faced the hill to the house where the dead girls lay.

They closed the door against me when they saw me turn the bend. Cousins make these decisions, but I leaned my bicycle against the wall and knocked and then they had to let me in. Perhaps it was inevitable anyway. People around here do not shut their neighbors out. They showed me into the front room where the two girls lay in open coffins. Three older women sat by them. I did not recognize them. Aunts, most probably. They had their beads in their hands. I did not bless myself. I go to neither church nor chapel and they all know it. I stood for a long time looking down on the faces. When old people go, death eases their pain and their faces relax into a shapeless wax model of someone very like them. People say they look happy, but mostly they look plastic. But when a child dies it is the perpetuation of a certain model of perfect beauty. People would say the girls looked like angels. There was no trace of the sea on them, no sign of the panic and fear that bubbled through the ground-up sleeping tablets that their father had fed them for breakfast yesterday morning. According to local radio. His own prescription. He had not been sleeping for months.

When I stopped looking I shook hands with each of the aunts. Nobody said anything. I went out of the room and found the cousins waiting in the corridor. I asked for Helen and was told she was lying down. The doctor was

calling regularly all day. She was on tablets for her nerves. She was very low. I was about to ask them to pass on my sympathy when a door opened upstairs. It was Helen herself. She called to know who was there. It's your neighbor, one of the cousins said. She could not bring herself to name me.

Helen came unsteadily down the stairs.

Her hair was flat and moist. She was wearing the kind of clothes she might have gone to mass in, a formal blouse and a straight grey skirt, but she had no tights on. Her bare feet looked vulnerable and childish. She stepped deliberately, stretching so that at each tread of the stairs she stood on the ball of her foot like a dancer. She came down like someone in a trance. I think we all wondered if she knew who she was coming down for. And if she did, what was she going to say.

Cáit, she said, is it yourself? Thank you for coming.

Her eyes were flat, too. There was no light in them.

I'm sorry for your trouble, I said, taking her hand. I held the hand tightly as if the pressure could convey something in itself.

Helen shook her head.

Why did he do it? she said. Even if he went himself. But the girls . . .

Helen, will I make you a cup of tea?

One of the cousins said that. She was by Helen's side now, she would like to take her arm and lead her into the kitchen. They did not want her going into the front room and starting the wailing and the cursing all over again. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, it would terrify you to hear the things she said. And here she was now talking to Cáit Deane like nothing happened at all.

There was cake and several kinds of bread and honey and tea and coffee and a bottle of the hard stuff and stout and beer. The house was provided against a famine. They'd need it all by and by. This is the way things go at funerals.

He always spoke well of you, Helen said.

We were childhood sweethearts, I said.

He always said you should have trained professionally. He said you had a great voice.

I shrugged. I heard this kind of thing from time to time.

He said it was a pity what happened to you.

I felt my shoulders straighten. I was fond of him, I said, everybody was.

He said you had terrible bitterness in you.

I moved towards the door but there was a cousin in the way. Excuse me, I said. The cousin did not move. She had her arms folded. She was smiling.

He said you were your own worst enemy.

I turned on her. Well, he was wrong there, I said. I have plenty of enemies.

Helen Casey closed her eyes. The only thing my husband was wrong about was that he took my two beautiful daughters with him. If he went on his own nobody would have a word to say against him. But now he cut himself off from everything. Even our prayers. If that man is burning in hell, it's all the same to me. I hope he is. He'll never see my girls again, for they're not in hell. And the time will come when you'll join him and no one will be sorry for that either.

One of the cousins crossed herself and muttered under her breath. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

The doorkeeper unfolded her arms suddenly and stepped aside. I opened the door. I was taken by surprise to find the priest outside preparing to knock.

Oh, he said.

Excuse me, Father.

I pushed past him. I noticed that the tire was sinking again; it would need pumping, but I could not do it here. I turned it to face away from the house. People say I'm cold. A coldhearted bitch, some of them say. They say such things. The priest was watching me. He was smiling. The new man in the parish, most likely he did not know who I was. They'd fill him in on the details in the front room with the two dead girls and the old women with their beads. The cousins would know everything. It was how crows always knew there was bread out. First came a single bird, a scout. There was always one. Then they gather. Before long they're fighting each other over crusts. You can knock fun out of watching them and their comical battles in the back yard. But the minute you put the bread out, one of them turns up to check it out and the others follow soon enough. If you dropped dead on your own lawn they'd be down for your eyes.

I swung onto my bicycle and launched myself down the tarmac drive and out onto the road and I turned for the hill down home but that was not where I was going.

I met the car at the place where the road was falling into the valley. There was no question of slipping past. I braked hard and dragged my foot along the road. By the time I stopped I was by the driver's door and there was a drop of a hundred feet on my left-hand side. He rolled the window down. It was James's brother Johnny.

You'd think the council would shore that up, he said.

The crows are gathering.

He nodded.

The priest was at the door.

He nodded again. He looked at me silently for a moment, then he said, He could have asked for help, Cáit. You'd have helped him, wouldn't you? I would any day. All he had to do was ask.

Johnny, I said, you know very well I was the last one he'd turn to. And the last one who could help him. And anyway, there is no help.

You could but you would not.

No, I said, I just could not. You know that very well.

Do you know what, Cáit Deane?

I probably do, Johnny.

He looked at me, frustrated. You were always the same. You're too sharp for around here.

I shrugged.

My brother James, he said, you destroyed him.

He destroyed himself. I didn't drive him down to the pier.

Why did he do it if not for you? You took him. You took him and you wouldn't keep him and then you left him. Why else would he do it?

I got my foot on the pedal again and faced down the hill.

Spite, I said. He was always spiteful, like a spoiled child.

I launched myself forward and went clear of the car. In a moment I was past the subsiding section. Fuchsia speckled the roadsides with their first

bloody skirts. In the valley the last of the whitethorn blossom. The river at the very bottom gleaming like concrete in a field of bog iris. And ahead was the bay and its islands and the vast intolerant ocean.

I chained the bicycle to the stop sign outside the funeral home. The street was a long one that ran into a steep hill; the funeral home, the graveyard, and the church were all at the top of the hill so that the dead could look down on the town, and the townspeople when they looked up from the pavement saw death looming like a public monument to their future. People joked that it was the only town in Ireland where you had to climb up to your grave. To make matters worse, the funeral home was owned by the Hill family. There were several Hills in the parish and naturally the funeral home was called the Hilton. They say that the only people making money out of the economic crash were accountants and funeral directors. Even the bankrupt had to be buried by somebody. At the door in a plastic frame was a poster with a picture of an anorexic bonsai plant and the words: Our promise to you, Phone ANY TIME, day or night, You will NEVER get an answering machine.

Funeral homes are always cold. There were pine benches in lines like a church. They had been varnished recently and there was that heady smell. It reminded me of my father's boat, the wheelhouse brightwork newly touched up. It was the smell of childhood.

James Casey lay in a plain wooden box at the top of the room. I could see immediately that the brass handles were fake. Someone had examined a funeral menu and ticked *cheap*. I went to look down on him. I thought I had nothing to say but when I was standing there I had plenty.

You stupid bastard, I said, you stupid murdering fucking bastard.

There was more like that. I surprised myself with the flow of anger, the dam-burst of fury. After a time I stopped because I was afraid I was going to attack the corpse. And then I thought I might have been shouting. No one came; perhaps funeral directors and their secretaries are used to angry mourners. I stepped back and found my calf touching a bench. I sat down.

They'll all blame me, I told him. They already blame me.

Then I cried.

James Casey looked tranquil and unperturbed. In real life he was never like that. After a time I got up. I looked down at him. His eyes were stitched closed because when he was pulled from the sodden car of course they were open. They are not very expert in our part of the world; I could see the stitches here and there. The funeral director knows from experience that the eyes of dead people do not express emotion but he knows that his clients would see fear in them. Nobody wants to look a dead man in the eye. It's bad for business.

Fuck you, I said.

I turned on my heel and walked out. A tiny sigh escaped when I closed the door, like the seal opening on an airtight jar. My bicycle lay on the ground in its chains. They knifed the tires while I was with James. I was not going to give them the satisfaction of watching me wheel it down the street. I was going to leave it where I found it. Do not slouch, my mother used to say, stand up straight, put your shoulders back. But I slouched just the same. How many years since I first loved James Casey? I pulled my shoulders back but I kept my eyes on the ground. The thought that I had done something unforgivable was always there in the dark. Things come back in the long run, the way lost things are revealed by the lowest tides: old shipwrecks, old pots, the ruined moorings that once held steadfastly to trawlers or pleasure boats. There are no secrets around here.

2018

THE DOGS OF DETROIT

from The Dogs of Detroit, selected by Lynne Sharon Schwartz

Brad Felver

Nights, when Polk cannot hunt the dogs, he instead attacks his father. He has grown to crave the hot pain spreading over his face, the bulging of his knuckles when they connect with bone. His father fights back just enough. They roll around on the floor, struggling and grunting, sneaking in shots to the ribs and the temples. When they tire, they each collapse, wheezing, moaning. They rub their flushed faces and lick away the blood pooling on their gums and retreat to their corners. No resentment or words, as if they are not punching each other, not exactly. A narcotic hunger being fed, one which brings no joy but rather is a conduit for torment.

After their fights they lay there, panting, blinking back tears, and only then does Polk confide in his father. He lists off the revenges he wants to take on the universe. He imagines the worst things possible: toddler coffins, flayed penguins, pipe bombs in convents, napalm in orphanages. He hates himself for it, his selfishness, his appetite for sloppy justice. Always he ends up wondering the same thing: *Does God hate me more than I hate God?*

His father reaches for Polk's hand, but Polk pulls away. No touching unless it is to create violence. "Patience," his father says. "We must learn grief."

After school, Polk hunts. He ranges across the urban wilderness of the East Side, ducks through the cutting winds off Saint Clair. He lugs a Winchester bolt action by the barrel, dragging the stock on the ground, leaving a crease in the snow. He tracks dog prints through the industrial fields, through the brambled grasses and split concrete and begrimed snow. Through decomposing warehouses and manufacturing cathedrals which nature has reclaimed. Hundreds of deserted acres. These are wild dogs he kills, no longer bear any trace of domestication. Few people left, but the dogs—thousands of dogs, abandoned during this great human exodus. There is no Atticus Finch to blast the rabies from them, no little girl to drag them home by the scruff to her father and say *May we please?* As all else crumbles, the dogs remain.

And then one day: his mother's tracks, long and narrow, weight on the outside ridges. Keds. She always wore Keds. She has been gone two months now, disappeared. She was there when Polk went to school, sitting at the kitchen table, sucking on a menthol, gone when he got home. But these are her prints. He knows them. They mix in with the dog prints, as if she has joined them. Perhaps has been hunted by them, perhaps something else altogether.

Eventually, he thinks, *I'll whiten the canvas, leaving only her tracks. Eventually, a pattern will emerge.* But with each dog he kills, his palate mutates: joy. The heavy thunk of bullet piercing a ribcage. Eliminating a contagion. A growing pleasure to be found in mindless violence. Carcasses left to rot, to ravage by predators. Always there seem to be more dogs, like a muscle in need of constant stretching.

At school, he sits alone. He is a large boy, the largest in the junior high school, his feet flapping on the concrete hallways as if they were made for an adult but then attached to him instead. The art teacher, Mrs. Roudebush, prods him to rejoin the world. More pictures of mom, Polk? More charcoal? Why not try the acrylics? Some greens and yellows and magentas.

"No, thank you," he says. His face remains placid, all its topography flattened, grown numb, unable to flex. He refuses to look up, and she soon wanders away to check on other students.

After school, he walks home to their house on the East Side, then through the tunnel of tall grasses, which have swallowed up all but the second story where they never go. Collapsed staircase, plywood windows, a contentedness in allowing it to erode.

These winter days the sun never truly rises. No direct light, no marbled streaks or roiling clouds, just a vast gray slab. Slowly, the night mottles into blued steel as if other colors have not yet been discovered. He grabs the Winchester and sets off, follows the freshest of the dog prints as far as they will take him, across the freeway and toward the old Packard compound, its remnants. He nestles onto a hillside, his favorite perch, downwind. A sniper in Stalingrad. He takes down two dogs quickly, the echoes of the rifle shots ballooning around out in waves. The sun droops. A mangy pit bull trots into the field, and Polk takes it down, the round ripping through the dog back near its haunches, and it stumbles, tries to limp away, dragging its paralyzed legs. For several minutes it struggles forward, and Polk watches. Then it stops moving. Polk trudges home, stomping wide holes in the snow, the butt of the Winchester digging a crease behind him. His mother's prints, which had been clear the day before, have vanished, taken by the wind.

Mrs. Roudebush introduces tertiary colors: chartreuse, magenta, russet, azure. "These," she says, "are the gems. The true colors of nature. Turned leaves are not red or yellow or pink. They are citron, plum, vermilion."

"Hey, *Poke*," one boy with shaggy hair and an earring whispers across the table. "Hey, mamma's boy." Polk used to know the boy's name, but he has forgotten it. Usually, they leave him alone, but sometimes he is such easy prey they seem not to be able to help themselves.

The kids at his table whisper just loudly enough that he can hear. "His mom used to smoke crack," a girl says.

"I know it," another girl says. "I seen her do it with my stepdad."

"Poke likes crack too, don't you, Poke?" The boy leans across the table, but just then Mrs. Roudebush kneels next to Polk.

"This is one of my favorites," she whispers. She hands him a tube of paint. "Viridian. I wonder if you might try it today."

Polk feels that this lesson is designed specifically for him. Adults talk differently after tragedy, as if he is suddenly six years old rather than thirteen. He paints a picture of his mother at the kitchen table. The tip of her cigarette is viridian, the smoke coiling off is slate. Her hair is russet, the table is buff. The clock on the wall, which is actually yellow, he decides to paint plum so that it barely distinguishes itself. He catches the shadows with gray-browns and blue-grays, and before long the scene emerges from his memory, protrudes through the paper like a hologram.

He paints her teeth, paints the spaces between them, wide enough for a pencil point. Her rotting gums are some mix of gray and brown, like frozen mud. Her foggy eyes tired, unable to focus. Her head rocking as if to some silent melody. He paints his father standing in the doorway, arms crossed. He is half looking at her, half looking at the floor, as if he cannot decide which is more painful.

"Fetch your mother a Diet," she says to Polk, and he does. It's warm. Broken refrigerator. She tries to light another menthol, but she shakes too badly. She puts her elbows on the table, leans down toward the lighter. Polk watches her struggle and fail, and then he snatches the lighter, bends down, and lights the cigarette for her.

"You love you mother, don't you, Polk?"

"Marie," Polk's father says. They stare at each other.

"I know it," she says. "Tomorrow."

"Time for school," his father says, reaching for him, drawing him away from the kitchen, out the front door. What he remembers now is that he never answered her question—*You love your mother, don't you, Polk?* He went to school instead. *Yes*, he should have said. *Even like this*.

That afternoon she vanished.

Polk's father is waiting for him on the front sidewalk. Polk tries to sidestep him and go in the house and take the Winchester and do his duty.

"Polk," his father says. "No more guns."

Polk stares blankly.

"The police called again. They're done understanding."

"Have they found her or not?" Polk asks.

"Polk, that's not—"

"I know what you think."

"You don't."

"I know you don't miss her. I know that. You never even cried."

His father sits on the top step. He won't look at Polk. "I know you feel like you're stuck with me now. I know you loved her more. I can't do anything about that."

Polk points toward the industrial complex. "I see her prints."

His father squints. "All kind of bums and druggos hide out in that place. What are you doing over there?"

Polk doesn't answer.

"You can't trust those. Those could be anything. We both knew her."

"I can tell when people think I'm lying," he says.

His father sighs and looks away. "Polk," he says but then decides not to finish. Finally, he says, "We can't keep doing this."

"You don't believe me. You never believed her either."

"Polk, I believe you."

"Don't do that."

"Polk, you need to stop this."

Something in Polk fractures. Can't compartmentalize anger and pain anymore. They bleed together. He puts his hands on his knees, tries to slow it, long breaths, closed eyes.

His father recognizes the signs. "Can it wait?"

Polk shakes his head, no, and his father nods, alright then.

They stomp through the high grass and dirty snow of the front yard, tamp down a wide circle that feels like a cage. Polk tackles his father but can't bring him down. He yanks and twists a leg, secures it under his armpit until his father finally goes down, knees to the snow. They're trundling around then, back and forth like a rolling pin, neither gaining position. Polk takes an elbow to the sternum, which knocks his breath loose, and he rolls to his back. He kicks up, punches, his father smacking his face raw and red. Polk feels the meat of his fist half connect with something but doesn't know what. White noise and blur. His nose gets mashed, and the tears come then, no stopping it.

He bucks, loosing the last bit of his anger, exploding up, pivoting at his hips, and driving his father down, then hammering his fists into chest. He clasps his fists together and churns his arms down like a piston, boring his way down onto his father.

And then it's over. No more energy, no more anger. They exist together. For several minutes they hardly move, just pant and cough. This is the normal trajectory. Soon, they will rise to their knees, then stand and move into the house.

"Syringe Ebola into baby formula," Polk says. He's gasping, the words pulsing out in blurred waves. "Hack a newborn giraffe with a machete."

"Okay."

"Dynamite the Statue of Liberty."

"Enough now."

"Grocery bags full of puppy ears."

"Polk."

Polk stops sleeping in his bed. Too soft, too warm. Goodness to be found in small miseries: cold floors, festering splinters, fingertips burnt on light bulbs. He lies on the floorboards, no pillow, no blanket.

Outside the wind ravages the old house. The dogs, he can hear the dogs, howling and snarling, and then more snow comes, dampening the yelping echoes and covering old tracks. There is no sleep, not anymore, only an untended aggression that needs fed.

She is near, he knows this. He begins smelling her perfume, flowers and vanilla. More than once he moves her old ashtray from the table to the counter only to have it moved back by the morning. His father does not smoke. And of course, her prints. Is she too ashamed to come back? Is that it? Or is she angry with him because he didn't say he loved her?

He sees her tracks again one morning, fresh tracks in the fresh snow. Not twenty feet from the front door, pacing around the grass cage where he fought his father. Keds, very clearly Keds. They slither through the tall grass, around the north side of house, up to each of the front windows. There they shrink

and push deeper into the snow. On her tiptoes, peering in. He feels her lingering presence, as if they are trying to occupy the same space, as if she is trying to make sense of what has happened since she left. He examines each print, follows them out the backyard and through the split chain links. He tracks them north, fifty yards into the fields, the longest he has ever been able to track her, but then they enter into a depression of ice and evaporate. He circles around looking for an exit point, but there is none. Gone again.

Nearby is the pit bull mix that he shot the week before. It has a distinctive brindle pattern to its coat. Dilutions of gold on a black base crawl as if trying to escape. He is exposed, vulnerable without his rifle. Its stomach has been opened up, devoured. The other dogs, hungry for whatever protein still exists in this wasteland. And he thinks for a moment of the oddity of it all, how he kills the dogs and leaves them to rot, how the other dogs eat their pack-mates to survive. He hunts them and hunts *for* them. This canvas will never whiten. He isn't sure what all this means, but he does know that the natural order of things has been upended, that he is caught up in it somehow.

Polk steals paint from school, tertiary colors, fills in every set of prints that might be hers. He squeezes paint into each print, filling it fully, cleanly, spreads it over every contour, and then moves on to the next print, and soon her trail glows, emerging from the snow and mud like collapsed stars. The paint will harden, freeze, will remain fixed there for as long as it takes for Polk to make sense of them. No more disappearing trails. He uses his stash of paints to categorize them by color, by direction, by timeframe, then draws a tape measure around the expanse of compound, slowly, from one set of prints to another, even measures stride lengths. He notes everything.

The dogs eye him but keep their distance, curiosity and mockery. Like an undertaker gazing at a body, perhaps. Polk doesn't feel hunted exactly, but he feels something at the base of his skull, their lurking curiosity, feels how little he now belongs in this place. It belongs to the dogs.

Nights, he sits at the kitchen table. He moves the ashtray with her menthol butts to the counter, begins drawing a scaled map, every feature of the area, every print of hers, every color noted. He feels like a scientist tracking

the migration patterns of some near-extinct species of bird. In time, her own patterns will emerge, her location. They must. For the first time since she disappeared he feels a goodness in himself, a warmth not from violence.

"What's this?" his father asks.

"I'm not allowed to shoot the dogs anymore."

His father sits next to him, looks the map over for a moment. "These are places you've seen her trail?"

Polk nods.

"This many?"

Polk keeps drawing, tracing a pencil across a ruler. Slow, precise movements.

"Polk?" his father says quietly, but Polk ignores him. He spends all evening drawing a map of the area, each set of prints noted and appropriately colored to indicate a timetable.

"My little cartographer," his father says, but Polk ignores him still. This is more than a map. This is a timeline, a psychological study.

The next day, her ashtray is back on the table again. There are cigarettes in it, menthol butts that do not seem new but that he can't recall seeing before.

He begins to see her footprints everywhere, glowing at him. They emerge from his father's eyes. He sees them in headlights and oddly thrown shadows; during art class; in his dreams when he sleeps in short, hateful spurts. Sometimes the dog tracks morph as he stares at them, become longer, narrow, deeper on the ridges. Sometimes they are large and sometimes small, but they are all hers, this he knows.

"It's not fair," his father says. "None of it. I know that." He tries to massage Polk's shoulders, but Polk shies away. These attempts are clumsy and practiced now. They aren't a family; they're remnants of one. When she disappeared, their tripod crumbled.

There was a time, not very long ago, when they had been happy. He knows this now because he never thought about being happy. They had jobs, his father at the machine shop, his mother in the deli at the Kit Kat. She always brought home bologna that was almost expired, and they would fry it up until it bubbled and popped.

He clings to a single memory. Sledding a small scoop of a hill near baseball fields, dirty snow packed down. He tries to remember where this hill was, but the location eludes him. *Was it a false memory?* he wonders. Something he has manufactured to cope? His mother would give Polk a big shove, and he would slingshot down the hill, skittering and spinning where it turned into ice and when the speed became too much, he closed his eyes, afraid to see what lay below. Each time he shot down the hill he lost control, but always he would end up at the bottom, face up in the snow, always his father waiting, asking *Should we go again?* Then walking back to the house, having to wedge himself between his mother and his father because they were holding hands. He remembers her smell, flowers and vanilla. When they got home, he took a shower, but the water had gone cold again. Bad plumbing, dud water heater. When he walked into the front room still shivering and wet his father pulled a towel from the oven and swaddled him with it, and his skin slowly softened, his breaths lengthened until he felt whole and content.

Polk stops going to school, spends the days painting tracks, updating his map. He is meticulous, always bent over a set of prints or making notations. The pattern will emerge, the methods to her movements, this he knows. He plunges deep into the grounds of the Packard compound, even venturing into the buildings when he is feeling brave. Sometimes he sees vandals, other times photographers, but mostly he sees dogs and homeless who share the various buildings in relative peace. He maps and paints, maps and paints. He stops sleeping, just expands the map, growing weary and unpredictable. Everything begins to feel random. It begins to look like a star map, with constellations emerging, glowing at him.

One day, Polk comes home to find Mrs. Roudebush sitting at the table with his father. She clutches her purse and smiles at him, her sad smile like an apology. "We've missed you," she says.

Polk looks down, and his eyes land on his hands, his large and awkward hands smeared with paint. He looks back up at Mrs. Roudebush, but before he is forced to speak, she reaches into her purse and pulls out a paper bag. She sets it on the table. "I was doing some cleaning," she says. She stands up to

leave, hangs her purse from her shoulder. "My husband," she says, "he died three years ago."

Polk feels himself flinch and stare at her.

"I used to roll over in the middle of the night, and he was in bed with me. Sometimes I even heard him snore. I swear I did. Sometimes I would wake up, and his radio would be going. I told my sister about it, but you could tell she didn't believe me. That was hard. I couldn't understand why it had to be like that. I refused to change the sheets because I thought he was in there somehow. I slept on those sheets for a year, every night hoping to feel him or smell him or hear his snores. Sometimes I did, and sometimes I didn't. It was all I thought about. I moved the microwave and the television into the bedroom. I lived in there. One day, my sister found me like that, and she made me take a shower and wash the sheets. Do you know what we found when we stripped the bed?"

Polk shakes his head, no.

"A small painting, an acrylic on canvas, no stretcher. At first I didn't recognize it, but then I realized it was a scene I had done, probably thirty years ago, not long after we were married, my husband thin and clean shaven, me thin and with a long pony tail. We were standing in front of our first house, not far from here. I had forgotten about that painting, but there it was under the mattress pad."

She looks to Polk's father. "There's no explaining that."

"Did he put it there?" Polk asks.

"I don't know, dear. I really don't. But I think the dead teach us how to grieve," she says. "I don't understand it, either, but that's what I think. Sometimes people can be gone and not gone at the same time. They know things we don't know." She smiles at him. "God doesn't hate you, Polk."

That night Polk lies on the floor. The bag of paint sits next to him. He hasn't yet opened it, but he knows what's in there. He wants to go outside right then and use them, take a flashlight and find the tracks and paint them. *What are you trying to teach me?* he wonders. He finds himself packing a bag of supplies: bottles of water, beef jerky, Skittles, dog treats, extra socks, a Maglite, toilet paper. He rolls his set of maps up tightly.

He walks out into the kitchen, where his father is sitting at the table. He turns to look at Polk, and dangling from his lips is a cigarette butt. Remnants of her. It has been stubbed out and twisted, unlit, hanging limply. His father is startled. "Polk," he says. "Can't you sleep?"

"She's out there," he says. "Every night, right now, she's out there. Her tracks are freshest in the morning."

"No," his father says. He pulls the cigarette from his mouth and delicately places it back in the ashtray as if it is some fragile treasure. "You're not doing this."

Polk shrugs. It's time, he knows this. If he waits much longer, he'll lose her.

"I've let this go on too long."

"You have to sleep at some point," Polk says.

"I won't allow this."

"I'll bring her home," Polk says.

"She's not out there, Polk. You're looking for trouble. You want to join her."

"You're just glad she's gone. You don't have to help her now."

His father smacks him then, the flat of his palm on Polk's cheek. This is by no means the first time his father has struck him, but this time is different—this is anger.

Polk pounces on this father. They tumble over the table, spill onto the floor. They struggle. Polk hears himself grunt and snarl. He doesn't punch and kick so much as he thrashes wildly. Then he catches an elbow to the eye, and the world blurs. He yelps with the pain, grabs at it with both hands. His father stops, bends over Polk to examine it.

"Let me look at it, Polk."

There is a cut clean through his eyelid, like a half-peeled orange. It won't close all the way. Even when he tries, light seeps through the crack. Everything is mottled, ill-defined edges, blurred colors. They put ice on it, then a hot rag, then some ointment. "Polk," his father says. "Jesus, Polk. I didn't—"

"It's fine. I'm fine."

"You need stitches."

"Stop." Polk wheezes and coughs. "It felt good, didn't it?"

His father looks like he is the one who is wounded. "Do you really think that?" His face is drawn, defeated. He bends and picks up the ashtray and butts and sweeps the ashes into a pile. He doesn't look up. "If you want to go, I can't stop you."

The moon glows full, or near-full, throwing an eerie sort of light, like the structures themselves blush. Polk must cock his head to the side or cover his thrashed eye to see more clearly. Soon he is trolling the site, rummaging from building to building, tracing his way methodically, following his maps. Even after months of scouting dogs, tracking his mother, noting everything, he has explored only a fraction of the compound. It is like a series of cave systems that turn out to be linked, spreading out forever in all directions. But he has supplies. He will mimic her movements for as long as it takes.

He sniffs his way through one building at a time, one floor at a time, scouring every closet, every side room, behind every pile of rubble, his flashlight flickering in every direction. Collapsed staircases and crumbling masonry and bowed walls. Drips through the open roof, frozen like milky stalactites. All abandoned, as if in haste: filing cabinet drawers thrown open like gaping maws; a '57 Clipper, no engine block, sitting mute on the line; rebar poking through split concrete; cottonwood trees growing from floorboards, leaning away from Saint Clair's wind. He shoos away dogs, passes sleeping bodies without a word. For the first time, Polk feels real fear, a coldness clenching his torso. The feeling that he is not alone, that he is the one being tracked now. Until now he didn't care what happened to him, but the vast quiet of this crypt is too terrifying, the fact that he see shapes and colors more than fully defined objects.

He soon feels that he could map this system for years and still be no nearer to finding her. All night he explores, makes notations on his maps, stoops to examine prints. Prints all over. This is a populated world, crowded with life: dogs, cats, foxes, at least one coyote. Humans. He passes them silently as they lay curled, backs to the wind. Some of them shiver, but most seem not to notice him. He is certain he hears a baby cry at one point. He stands still, waits for the cry to pierce the silence again, but there is only the

long quiet, the creaking of the buildings. When he moves off there is a long and shrill howl of a dog, first a single wail, and then others respond, some far off but others nearer, too near. He twists his head to listen. Are they communicating? Pack-mates on the hunt?

Then a crawling sensation, like the shock from a nine-volt on the tongue. Then the smell: his mother's perfume, flowers and vanilla.

He spins around. No one. He narrows his eyes like an eagle, glares into every crevice of the room, tilts his flashlight at every angle, sees nothing, no one. He tilts his head, uses his good eye. Nothing. He sniffs deeply: menthols.

"Are you here?" he says. The first words he has spoken all night. Then: "Why here?"

This is when he would usually attack his father, loose that confused anger onto the world where it might dissolve. But there is no one here, no violence he can inflict. He tries to think of brutal things to do to the world, but none come to him. It is as if some awful weariness has flattened him. How long has he been here? When did he last sleep? Everything is tertiary colors pulsing from a fuzzy black background, moonlight, haze.

When he moves away from the wall, it is green moss everywhere. Where there was snow, now there is moss. Plush, spongey. Her prints stamped into it. They should be his own prints, but they are hers. The deeper trenches at the ridges, the veiny webs on the soles, the short span between each heel strike. They are hers. He follows them, careful not to trample. They lead up a grand staircase, through a series of offices, over creaking wood floors and concrete ground into gravel. Silence, all silence and the cutting reek of menthol.

He follows the trail, follows the smell. They tug him along as if he wears a belay line. Soon he is trotting, climbing upward, ignoring the stomping noise he makes, the commotion of disturbing a closed system. He emerges on the roof, a surface so vast it seems like he is back on the ground. He meanders among a grove of cottonwoods that poke through the concrete. They are leafless, their icy limbs shaking in the wind, clattering and creaking. The tang of menthol grows stronger. He coughs and has to wipe away the hot seep from his eye. He doesn't trust this, none of this. To the east, a small breech in the darkness, the sun climbing toward the horizon, the moonlight diffusing. The

scent dissipates. He turns and looks behind him. No moss, only snow, pure and untouched but for his fat mashed footprints. He gazes around, everything blurry like he is under water. There is nothing here, not his mother, not even traces of her.

Another high-pitched wail, closer this time, washing over the whole rooftop. Silence for a few heartbeats. Silence. And then the response, an answer that seems to emanate from the cottonwood grove behind him. The limbs clatter in the wind, camouflaging its stalkers.

Polk walks on the sides of his feet to dampen the sound, but his commotion still echoes about. He moves to the edge, looks down at the vast fields below. Then he sees it: glowing prints. The paint. Whether it is the foggy haze, moonlight, and sunrise occupying the same world, or perhaps his own split eyelid distorting things, or if it is perhaps God himself, he does not know. But those painted tracks glow. All those tertiary colors erupting from the ground. Colors that do not belong to this season or to this place.

Polk sits on the edge, his feet dangling. He stares at the painted prints. It is the prettiest thing he has ever seen, he cannot look away, like staring into the belly of a fire. New colors. He loses track of time, just stares, his breaths coming quicker. They seem alive, crawling tracks, blurry emissions from the core of the earth.

"Is this what you wanted me to see?" he says aloud, his voice bleating through the hush. He waits for a response he knows is not coming. After all this? Mrs. Roudebush was wrong.

Polk hears the soft padding of paws before he sees the dog. A thin squeaking sound, fresh snow being tamped down. Not so much a palpable noise as an echo with no architect. He is afraid to turn around, to see what he already knows is there. When he does turn, he first notices the ribcage bulging through skin and fur. Such hunger. That distinctive brindle pattern, writhing, uncoiling around the torso. The low rumbling of anger, not a simple growl but slow-burning fury surfacing. Behind it, more movement in the cottonwood grove, a slow swaying not caused by wind. Polk stands slowly, his heels hanging over the edge of the roofline, afraid to make any quick movements. Is this about survival? Or is it revenge? The pit bull encroaches like a lurching

shadow, deliberate and menacing steps, its muscled haunches tightly drawn and trembling. Polk edges along the roofline, but there is no retreat, no escape.

He turns away, looks back down at the glowing prints. He can see very far, miles, can see the individual glass panes of windows in the skyscrapers downtown and the mossy roofs of hundreds of houses on the East Side. All the city is out there, yawning itself awake. He looks down. Is it far enough to kill him? Or just to maim? To break his body apart. He pictures this for a moment, tries to feel the swelling terror in his gut as he plummets, the piercing ripple shooting through his legs, collapsing his body into an accordion when he strikes ground. Would this be the moment of relief? He wonders when the pain would strike, how long after impact? One second? Five? Never? He wonders about the precise instant when life stops and death starts. He wonders about that moment for his mother, for all the dogs he has killed.

The low rumbling draws closer, so close it seems to emanate from Polk himself. He squats down, his back to the pit bull, cinching his body into a defensive crouch. He squeezes, fights against trembling. And yet some strange joy tempers the fear, like a return to the world. He closes his good eye and waits, several ragged breaths he waits.

When he opens his eye again he sees in the distance the baseball field, the chain-link fence of its backstop. That small scoop of sledding hill next to it, so much smaller than he remembers. There it is, no so far away, a handful of blocks to the west. Has it been there this whole time? His mother pushing him down, his father dragging him back up. And then he is falling, skittering downward, spinning in some wobbly oblong orbit, the pull of gravity on his stomach. He will crash, he can feel it, he is moving too fast, out of control. Once unleashed, gravity takes over, no stopping it. Blood pulses into his head and he clamps his eyes shut and multicolored stars pour over him like a meteor shower. A piercing throb. His breath catches and he clenches, hardening muscle into concrete, bracing for impact, and when it comes, it jars the breath loose from him, and all seems lost until his father pulls him up and brushes the snow from his face and says, *Should we go again?*

2019

MICK'S STREET

from Driving in Cars with Homeless Men, selected by Min Jin Lee

Kate Wisel

I throw the keys at the mirror and they crash, a pitcher of water shattering during a high note. Applause-worthy. Mickey says I fight *ghetto*, and I always say, "That's right," like I'm proud of who I am.

"Why are you doing this?" I say.

"I'm not the one doing it," Mickey says. He nods to the pile of clothes beside the suitcase. What I hear is "the one." What I hear is the wind outside, snapping branches. Mickey says I'm a liar, that I hide things from him, from myself, too. He slips out a pack of 100s from his pocket, then slow-claps them against his palm.

"Going through my stuff?" I say.

"That's my suitcase, Raffa," he says.

What I hear is "my." What I hear is our wedding song, Elvis Presley. Mickey picked it and I panicked. New Year's Eve. I watched Serena's face till she blurred into Rima's, my head chained to his chest.

"You told me to leave!" I say.

I throw myself onto the bed and try to cry desperately into a pillow. It doesn't work, not at all. I hear him blending a protein shake in the kitchen. I want to be a list. Things that haven't been done yet on paper. Possibilities.

But then I pick up the keys. Mickey has a rental house on the Cape. We went there last winter and had sex in the loft, drunk and crying about things we'd never once talked about. I'd steal off to smoke on the porch, my hands shaking like Rima's, the keyholes of her fingers. I felt him watching me from upstairs.

Now Mickey's standing on the front steps in his huge parka with his hair slicked back like a real estate agent. I roll my suitcase past him. At him. Why has he done his hair for our breakup?

Just get out, Mickey mouths.

He runs forward to catch up. He's in sneakers, and I'm thinking that he's worn these on purpose, to chase after me.

Now that I'm going, Mickey shouts, "Where are you going?"

"I could run you over," I say, rolling down the window. Mickey throws his hands up. Then they're on his waist as I jerk the wheel, counting my luck that there's no one caught behind me as I swerve out. In the rearview he's already gone.

My car. The only thing in my name. One long stretch of highway, Xanax-smooth and soundless. The Cape, a weird place to go in winter. The Sagamore Bridge waiting in the distance. The water beneath it mirrors the sun, cracked as hairline fractures on X-rays. There's so much traffic, everyone honking and inching up. Profiles in the windows switching like a show of mug shots. I cross the bridge, pressing the window down for a smoke. The cold has teeth.

Cape houses are deceiving from the outside, little Monopoly pieces, all roof and rectangle. I'm carrying a twelve-pack of Heineken under my arm. I can smell my armpits even through my coat, some kind of hot sandwich with onions. I haven't showered since Friday, ever since Mickey sent me the divorce spreadsheet.

I remember the shrimp cocktail we ate, so fat the veins popped between my teeth. The night I said yes. And the way Mickey looked, self-possessed, satisfied. I snuck a cigarette out on the balcony. But where could I have

crawled if not back to the table? If I were a movie, the credits would have been rolling up my face.

On the front drive, I take the wheezy steps of a Martian, sensing the quiet. Then I have to drop everything on the crushed shells of the driveway to search for the key Mickey leaves in the fake rock. The grass is cut but dead from the late March snow. A green hose is hidden behind the bushes. Water trickles out of the metal head, a sound like gasping. The knob is freezing and it screeches as I twist it off. Below it is the rock, gleaming plastic, broken open. Someone's been here.

I knock the top off a Heineken on the kitchen island, size of a paddleboat and flecked with sparkling granite. If we get divorced, I'll get nothing. Maybe I'll get a couch, the piano Mickey bought but never plays. Where the fuck would I put a piano? I want a Steinway smashed through these floor-length windows so I can watch it hit, disturbing the skin of the lake.

On the dock, two boys with their backs turned are casting lines into the water. With their hoodies up around their heads, their figures are small and slumped as shepherds. From the dock, the path is soft dirt up the hill to the house. I'm not afraid of whoever has been here.

After I check the fridge, tuck my clothes into the stained oak drawers, bring the mound of newspapers inside, spread out the obituaries, then light a ghostly fire, I zip my coat and trudge down to the basement for a smoke. The glass glides open onto the gray slab, but the screen is torn and taped shut with Band-Aids. Fresh butts litter the edges of the concrete. Newports. I collect each one as I watch the boys, still standing with their backs to me on the dock. I shout to them and they turn, their hoods framing their faces.

"This is private property," I say, motioning to the floating raft they're standing on. The raft is anchored deep down in the muck. The lines are anchored to the boys, and their feet to the raft. The birds to the branches, their heads still as assassins. The boys gather their rods, leap from the dock to the shore, kicking sand on their way back up past the kayaks.

When they pass, I see their faces, one so pale he glows. He looks down at

my hand, at the cigarettes jutting out of my fist. It's only when I'm inside that I see it, a backpack, slumped in the corner of the basement. It sits by the mantel, right under the antique Nude Beach sign with its arrow facing the lake. The bag is just there like a basket outside a church.

I pick it up by the shoulder straps, then stomp up the stairs. It's a black JanSport, jagged teeth for a zipper. I'm emptying its contents onto the kitchen island. I hold up an Angry Birds T-shirt, then bring it to my nose like I'm sniffing a carton of milk on the sour. It smells like wood chips and musk. I lay it flat.

In the front pocket is a crumpled pack of cigarettes. Newports, nine of them left. I splay each cigarette out under the shirt's sleeves, skeleton fingers with a pinkie missing. There's a pair of gardening gloves, and I scoop out candy wrappers and loose Band-Aids littered at the bottom, separating the Band-Aids from the candy and placing the wrappers in the palms of the stiff gloves. Two lottery tickets, scribbled silver at the scratch. I set them down, slide them as if across a Ouija board beneath the gloves. Backpacks are for addicts.

In the basement, I'm a PI. From here, I can see the curved wooden couch legs, electrical sockets. I crawl closer. There's a Samsung charger snaking out of the wall. I march back upstairs and pull open drawers at random. I drop the charger into a Ziploc, seal it shut, then hold it up to the light. It's just a phone charger. It goes straight onto the counter with the rest of the things. On the counter, the whole of the mound focuses into the shadow of a running man, a scarecrow smoking his own fingers.

Back downstairs, I pull on my winter driving gloves, which I never actually wear when I'm driving. The couch has a skirt and I flip it. It's damp and smells like Lysol. I reach out for a Coke can. In the natural light, it's dented and pocked, aluminum melted into a lip-sized hole. I seal it. It goes on like this: a side glance at a single-edged razor in an open puzzle box, gleaming there against all the colored pieces. Next to it, a torn Suboxone packet, which in my palm looks like a blue pack of two Advils you'd find in a hotel lobby, all the medical letters like a miniature résumé on the back.

When Benny overdosed, I found Suboxone wrappers crumpled and hidden in his closet. I studied the back, Rx only, then buried myself in his sheets. Once, numb from vodka, I brought Benny up with Mickey. There was a bread basket set between us, two knives. He told me to get over it. It'd been nine years since high school. He sipped his water at me, his eyes still, the ice rattling.

"Would you be over it?" I asked, even though I knew the answer. Mick makes so much money selling first-rate health insurance. He doesn't give a damn about anyone else's life.

It's not everything. I'm back on hands and knees, a beach crab. In the floral basement bathroom, the shower curtain is askew. Slumped on the tile is a white towel. Under the sink, a spoon bent at the neck with a melted cotton swab in the center. An empty foil blister pack of Percocet. An oversized Ecko jacket in the dryer, the hood lined with sopping fur, folded aluminum tucked in the pockets, bright in the center with a gleaming burn. I seal it with the last Ziploc.

A Heineken cap cracks against the counter and I slug it. I tuck the T-shirt inside the Ecko jacket. Long arms, long torso, arms stretched out flat, cross-like. Through the floor-length windows, the lake swirls a sunset, Nyquil pink and pulsing. I rearrange the squatter's stuff, put his cigarette finger up by his shirt's neck. He'll be back. His things are here. I turn out the lights, the lake dividing itself into darkness.

In the morning, I go for a drive. Where is this guy? He could be anyone, but not anyone exactly. He's XL tall. I know that for sure. He buys lottery tickets. I pull into the parking lot at Liberty Liquors. I stay an extra minute before getting out, watch the clerk haul trash into the back bins. I have an insane thought. *Is that his father?* I hoist my twelve-pack onto the counter. The checkout girl's bangs block her eyes. It smells like powdered doughnuts in here.

"Is this it?" she says. I point to the Marlboro 100s. Then toss a Snickers into the mix. The surveillance is grainy and slow. The trash guy comes back

behind the counter, and his neon vest flashes like a caution sign. He undoes the Velcro.

I drive all the way to the ocean and sit in my car. I chew the Snickers and tap ashes out the window. I knew Benny was high when he ate sweets, but towards the end it was better that way, seeing him at peace, the lifelines of his palm glowing orange. Cheap off-season candy corn in the big bag, the waxy teeth in his palm. He'd eat them one by one, eyes closed and red-rimmed.

I roll up the window. I lied before. The water scares me. It's different from the lake, which stays the same. Maybe the squatter will be there when I get back. I'll have to shut off my car a few houses down, tiptoe in. Maybe he'll be shooting up in the shower, his hair dark and his tongue pearled in froth. His eyes too far gone to look distraught when I kneel down to touch his cheek.

In my windshield, the clouds hang low. I'm not scared of addicts. Real estate agents terrify me. Housewives, cheerleaders. I turn up NPR so it feels like someone is talking to me on purpose. Below, on the tiers of slate, the ocean rolls forward, a foaming mouth, then pulls back into itself. Such restraint. One more smoke. I roll the window back down a finger, tapping more ash onto the hardened sand of the lot.

I drive through Falmouth, unmarked roads. Trucks on blocks in driveways made of crushed white shells. Deserted restaurants, abandoned bookstores, old white churches, buoys on the lawns. A hangover starts late, the current blooming behind my eyes. By now I know my way around, so I'm just speeding down the narrow roads till I turn onto our street. Mick's street. Everything Mick's. I remember when he held my hair up to his face with his fist after I swore I'd quit. You can only smell nicotine on people who aren't you.

"Can I have one thing to myself?" I asked, oddly weightless.

In the driveway, there's a truck. There's a truck. I leave my coat on the seat and click the door shut. A leaf blower drones in the backyard, the singular whine loudening as I climb down the path. Off by the trees, slimed leaves lift, then hurl themselves against the fence. A tall guy wearing sagging Dickies

holds the blower like a wand, turning it back and forth over the grass. He has big headphones over an orange beanie like an air traffic controller. He doesn't see me. Then he does. I wave my arm out. The blower groans as the dust lifts into the air. A whiff of spring. I can't help it. I smile.

"Hey," I shout.

"What?" he says.

"You the gardener?" I say. He slips off his headphones, then his beanie. Oversized diamond studs in both ears shine like a truck pulling up.

"You Mick's wife?" he says, swiping his hair back, tangled and tied. The leaf blower looks like a toy in his hand. The tarp on the grill flaps.

"I asked you first," I say. I'm not afraid. He is an animal cooperating pre-catch. I'm already walking down the path. The blower hangs by his side. The wispy hair on his chin resembles the fuzz on a tennis ball.

"I might be," he says. Boston draws up thick in his throat.

"You want to come inside?" I ask. He turns to face the lake, the wind picking up. A chime on the porch crashes hard.

"I have to finish up," he says. He swings the blower and points to the sand at the edge of the water, the leaves and broken branches trapped on the shore. "It's going to start raining like a bastard."

His bottom lip twists as the arrogant wind picks up. He's young. He thinks he knows how everything's going to go. A top tooth juts out against his bottom lip like a loose blind zigged against the row. He kicks up the blower, it roars, and then he turns again, his shoulder blades jutting from under his shirt. Leaves circle overhead. Down at the shore he revs it, annihilating the debris. And then the raindrops begin to prick, needling the length of my arms, then slipping fast through my fingers. I picture us inside as it storms, him on his knees, taping those Band-Aids down to my wrist. He cuts the blower like a murderer on Halloween as the rain makes a sheet between us. He struts his way up towards where I'm waiting at the sliding door.

I'm hiding my head in the fridge, rearranging bottles.

"I just have Heineken," I say. "And you left your things here."

I set two beers on the counter next to the stuff. His things spread into the

distinct shape of a body outlined in chalk, the frame like a free fall. He stands looking out at the water with his hands punched into his pockets, his shirt dark with rainwater.

"Are you going to call the cops?" he says.

I walk behind him with a beer, then pick a clung leaf off his back. The belt loop of his sagging Dickies has come apart.

"No."

"I don't understand," he says.

"I do," I say. "You needed somewhere to stay?"

He smiles, a huff. "I don't have a place. Right now, I mean. I don't mean any harm."

"I don't, either." I hold out the beer. He looks down at my hand, then back up at me. He takes the beer and sits at the table, one leg out, his construction boots big and rimmed with dirt.

I join him, thumbing the side of my beer. "What's your name?" I say, twisting my hair up.

"Jordan," he mumbles.

"Where are you going to stay now?" He leans, his elbows on his knees, rubbing his palms together.

"Nowhere. In my truck. I'm from Bourne. Just up Route Six."

"I know where that is," I say. I read the obituaries. Cape Cod in winter. The land of overdoses. Cop bringing the same girl back with Narcan three times in one day. The narrow highway, empty liquor stores, the ocean swallowing hard as it draws back from the rocks.

"My boyfriend was an addict," I say. Jordan takes a swig, stays quiet. Breaking in, it's probably not the worst thing Jordan's done. I see Benny's clenched teeth, braces fresh off. His fist around a hammer and his palm flattened on the desk. The hammer *pounds pounds pounds*. I wait with him in the ER to score pills. Or in the parking lot at the pain clinics in New Hampshire, something to mend his anger. Driving home, waiting for the complete close of his eyelids, the jerk of the wheel to grab onto. I was a waiter.

"I was in sober living," Jordan says.

"What happened?"

"I don't know," he says. His palms shush together, eyes flitting from the counter to the door. "I stayed there awhile. I started working again at my buddy's construction company."

"That's hard work," I say.

"It's not. I like to be outside building houses, fixing roofs. Problem was his brother."

"Why?"

"I went over to his place just to see if I could be strong, not use. I guess that's not true. Junkie etiquette is that you don't shoot up a guy in recovery because you don't want them to wind up back like you—unless they ask twice."

"You asked twice."

At Al-Anon long after Benny died, I sat away from the circle in a church basement bubbling in the letters on the handouts. Women subdued, pink tissues damp in their clenched fists. And then they would start talking and they wouldn't for the life of them stop. Rage cut through my notebook, scribbling on its own like a lie detector test. I'd think, *You don't run out on people.* I'd think, *When someone is suffering, when someone you love is hurt, you go to them.*

"This place helped me let go of my son," a woman across from me said, her lips cracked down the center.

The wind overturned a kayak and rained twigs onto the grass. I have a life vest in my hands.

"Put this on," I say. We're outside the wet shed, the wood smelling like pencil shavings.

"Nah," he says.

"Fine," I say. "We'll do it your way."

We flip the kayak, then pull it through the oatmeal of the sand. The water ices up around my ankles till we leap onto the rain-splattered seats and push ourselves out into the lake. I've never been on a boat. The oars bump up against the plastic and the handles are heavy as trash bags. I think of a drain gasping dry and what's at the bottom of all this. But there's a glittering still-

ness when we stop, the boat spins in the center of the water, and we're far away from all the leaves and the trees and the houses. A low fog spills into the boat like karaoke smoke.

"It's nice out here," I say.

"I've come out here, like, every day, past two weeks," Jordan says, smiling. He's handsome when he smiles, like maybe if I turned his teeth back together one after the other, he'd have a chance.

"You just take the boat?"

He shrugs, chucks a tiny rock into the water, and it breaks the surface again and again until it stills. I want to tell him that you can't go home, how I wouldn't recognize home if I woke up in my childhood bed.

"This is my house, you know," I say. "This is my boat, these are my oars, and this is my fucking lake."

Jordan looks at me crazily and I break into a cackle. We laugh hard and I reach out and slap at the water. The two boys are back on the dock, their heads the size of pennies. They whip lines that fly riblike in white arcs, then sink. Even if I shouted, "This is private property! I'll call the police!" they would never hear me. The kayak starts to spin. I pull out a cigarette and Jordan reaches over. His lighter snaps and the flame is neon and surreal; it colors his face with a glow that isn't there. Mick said he'd divorce me if I didn't stop smoking. I won't and he will.

The wind picks up harder. Jordan reaches out his other hand to cover the light. The boat bobs, gaining power, the water coming up over the edge, and then in one rough curve we're flipped. The cold is painless, at first. I swipe out to feel Jordan, slice my arms through the water, then open my eyes against the muck. Above is Jordan's sneaker, and when I grab hold he kicks, and the light sparks like power lines. We come up through the circle of water, choking and weightless. The water at the surface looks clear, like you could sip it if you were thirsty enough, which I am. Jordan's breaths are short, his eyelashes sparkling with beads of water. I wrap my arms around his neck. My thighs around his torso. Kiss his twitching eyelids like a mother.

Earlier, Jordan got up to go to the bathroom. I almost grabbed his arm. I was popping off another cap when he came back. He stood, looking out at the lake again. He laughed and it scared me. We faced each other on the dining room chairs. He was sweating through his hair. I saw it. His face looked like the delayed surveillance at the liquor store. He rolled up a sleeve and his forearm was scratched and purpled.

"Did you get high?" I whispered. I started to cry.

"Yeah," he said. His eyes swung lazily.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I said. I was in tears, and crazy.

His head bobbed back. He took me in with a squint and sucked in his breath. "Shit. I don't know," he said. "Sorry?"

"You're not sorry," I spat.

"You're kind of freaking me out," he mumbled. "Are you going to call the cops?"

His eyes flickered, chlorine-shot like he'd been staring at a penny for days on the floor of a pool. He was ruining it, this fight. Outside the rain slowed and I reached for his shoulder. I swept my hand up the solid curve beneath his T-shirt, then pressed my thumb to his neck, felt his pulse jump.

"I would never do that," I said, my thumb unmoving. When the cops found Benny slumped against the tile in a Laundromat bathroom, he was two hours dead.

I looked up at Jordan. "Shoot me up?"

The pressure from my thumb remained even as the beat from his neck raced on and on, then broke in a twitch.

"No," he said. "Let's go out on the lake."

But I asked twice. The lighter clicked under the spoon and the bubbles popped up tiny as Jordan flicked his wrist to shake them down. The kitchen filled with a sweet burning smell, candy in a bonfire. He took a Q-tip from his pocket and rolled it into a ball between his fingers, then sank the cotton into the bent spoon. The syringe drew up swirling and cloudy.

"Do some push-ups," Jordan said, so I got to the floor. Back on the chair, dizzied, he slapped the crook of my arm. I watched as my blood drew up

dark, Jordan's lips by the needle. For a second I was stunned, something warm siphoning up my throat. I threw up, spit and beer all over Jordan's shoes. Later, on the floor, the sun was out, my head was pricked with warmth, but it was just Jordan's fingers in my hair.

We swim to the dock, which sways afloat. The boys are gone. I'm sure of it now. We kneel on the raft, our clothes hissing out streams of water from all sides like piss. I tilt back my head. The sun warms my neck and spins little rhombuses on the surface of my hands. We jump off the dock onto the starch of the sand.

The house waits for us as we trudge up the hill. Inside, beer, a fire, the warmth. A place to stay, though I'm more afraid than ever. Our sneakers squeak muck. I peel off my sweater and it slaps onto the concrete.

"Fuck," Jordan says. He's pulling on the back slider but it's good and locked.

He pounds on the glass. He pounds and pounds. I tilt my face back, feel the specks of sun but can't slide inside its center. Its warmth caught and laced through branches. Anything out here could happen, the March rain switching back to snow. Even sheltered, the homicidal birds that own the trees call out into the void as though possessed.

2020

THE PRINCE OF MOURNFUL THOUGHTS

from The Prince of Mournful Thoughts and Other Stories,

selected by Alexander Chee

Caroline Kim

Excerpt from *Journey to Korea: My Life and Travels in Chosun, Land of the Morning Calm, 1810–1815* by Jeremiah Davies

I had the pleasure of meeting Yi Young Dal in a drinking house half a day's travel from the Chosun capital of Seoul. This simple establishment, made mostly out of the humble materials of mud and rough wood, sat near the top of a hill, flanked by a higher hill behind it. I was traveling in those hills, staying in a different hamlet each night, discovering anew the delights of finding oneself in a foreign land. I told myself I would spend the next night on that higher hill.

There was a celebration taking place at the inn. It was brightly lit and loud with merriment from the many people sitting around small tables and eating. Drink also seemed in great supply. They welcomed me joyously and I soon found out the party was for Yi Young Dal, who had reached the venerable age of eighty. He was surrounded by a large family and many friends enjoying the last of the summer night air. I explained my journey in their country. This

noble gentleman agreed to meet me the next day for an interview, and surprised me by telling a most remarkable story.

As translated by me through my guide, these are the words of Yi Young Dal.

Though I was born here in Suwon and will end here as well, there was a time when I worked in the palace. I would like to tell you about this time.

My family was yangban, of the gentleman class, but we had no money. This was worse than being born a peasant, for at least a peasant lived or died by his ability to work. An enterprising fellow could really make something of himself. In fact, some of the rich, landowning families had started out in just this way. But you must understand, for a yangban, working with one's hands, with one's body is shameful. We are expected to study, to become scholars, the best of us rising to become advisors to the king.

Though we were distantly related to King Taejo, our family had fallen out of favor many generations ago, and we lived in exile until we were forgotten. At first we had land and slaves and many lis of cotton and rice, but like every decaying family, we were beset by the overspending, bad judgment, and ill fortune of first son after first son. By the time I was born, we were only a short step away from peasantry.

Still, my father insisted on sending me to the seowon, the Confucian school for yangban, in the village when I was seven so that I would begin the study of the Chinese classics. While my younger brothers and sisters worked in the fields and grew brown in the sun, I stayed pale from living indoors, my nose pressed against old, moldering paper marked with fading Chinese characters. But I did well. At thirteen, my father sent me farther, to the school in the provisional town, and at nineteen, I traveled to the capital and sat for the Hanseongsi, the first part of the state examination. Out of over ten thousand of us throughout the land who took this exam, only 330 passed. Happily, I was amongst this number. After the third exam, the Jeonsi, thirty of us received civil posts. They said our names in the order in which we passed: I was third. We top three entered the Royal Office of the Secretariat. My father's bet had paid off; my salary would keep us from starving when the

crops failed as they seemed to do every few years. We might even be able to get ourselves ahead—buy more land, differentiate our crops, marry off the older girls so that they were safe from the yearly tributes to Ming China.

The Royal Office of the Secretariat required the most learned and literate of men. For it was the royal secretaries' job to write down the king's every word, public or private, excepting his most intimate quarters, of course. We also had to read all the memorials that came in for the king, all those scrolls with complaints, supplications, and tattling—who stole whose pig, who slandered whose name, and so on and so forth—and decide which needed the king's attention, which could be summarized for him in a short report, and which was to be cast aside. We also wrote the king's responses to the most important memorials, after conferring with him, of course. In 1746, we also began keeping a diary for Crown Prince Sado when he officially became prince-regent. He was fourteen at the time.

I was hired to assist one of the two royal secretaries who would pass down to future generations the words and actions of the Prince. It was my job to carry the writing box, to arrange the paper and ink when it was time, to make sure the brushes were kept clean. My master was a lax fellow and did not expect much of me, so for a long time I felt happy and content in the palace. I ate well, was clothed in the blue silk of my rank, and partook of the many feasts and festivals that required royal attendance. The Prince spent most of his time with the royal tutors, and it was the responsibility of the other royal secretariat, Lord Jang, who was more versed in the Chinese classics, to keep the Prince's diary when he was studying.

Lord Lim and I were in charge of public and private meetings, and that was all, because Prince Sado was just a child. Later, we would be required to be with him at all times, and if Lord Lim weren't already dead, this surely would have killed him. For my life changed as Prince Sado grew older, and not for the better.

To understand the Prince, one must know his beginnings. He was born a solemn child, slight of build, long-necked, with a sad expression in his eyes. Perhaps this was because he was always lonely, having been taken from his

mother when he was only a hundred days old and moved to the prince-regent's palace. Privately, we all thought this separation too early but the King was fifty-six years old and had already been ruling for twenty-five years. He gave Prince Sado his own palace in order to establish him straightaway as the future prince-regent.

During his early years, the Prince's mother, Lady Sonhui, came often, sometimes daily, and was even sometimes accompanied by the King, but it was not the same as living under the same roof with one's own parents, and the Crown Prince learned early that everyone he loved would go away. Until the Prince married at the age of ten, there were no children around him. He sometimes visited with his sisters, the Princesses Hwasun, Hwapyong, and Hwahyop, but not very often. And when they did, they sat in a room like grown-ups—conversing while eating sweets and drinking tea.

Most of the time Prince Sado was surrounded by silly court ladies and lazy eunuchs who let him do whatever he pleased.

According to those who knew of the Prince's early years, he was an extremely bright child who delighted and astonished his parents by walking at four months and speaking at six. At seven months, he could point to the four cardinal directions. At three years he could recite half of Confucius's Analects. But at five, he suffered an ailment of unknown origin. It struck suddenly, taking all strength from him, and for many months, the palace feared they might lose him. But he recovered, though he was pale and listless for many months, and some say he was much changed by his illness.

In terms of temperament, the Prince was a thoughtful child, slow to make decisions, listening carefully to others without letting his own opinion be known. In this way he was quite different from his father, King Yongjo, who was extremely decisive and opinionated. Where the one acted quickly, the other hesitated, unsure which path to take. One could see from the beginning how unfortunate it was that Prince Sado and King Yongjo had such different personalities. The King simply could not understand why it took the Prince so long to answer a question from the royal tutors, and he made his frustrations plain, shouting at the Prince to answer more quickly. He mistakenly

took the Prince's silence as a sign of stubbornness. As a result, he demanded the Prince spend even more time studying with the royal tutors. He even grew so angry he stopped inviting the Prince to royal banquets and celebrations unless it would seem odd if he was not present.

All the Prince wanted to do was please the King, but he did not know how. When the King posed a question such as: "In times of uncertainty in a kingdom, when the people are suffering from drought and pestilence, should a ruler follow the ways of T'ang in the first century or Chu Kow in the fourteenth?" Well, one could be like T'ang, who believed a ruler should open up his coffers and share the fate of his people, or like Chu Kow, who thought the ruler must be protected, first and foremost, so that he could live to serve his people. The Prince could always see two sides to every question. How could he choose? And yet, the Prince was also keenly aware that his father was expecting a wise answer. He started to speak T'ang's name, then stopped. He began to say Chu Kow, but hesitated. In front of all the ministers in the main audience hall, the King would then ask the Prince if he was an idiot.

The Prince began to dread the morning audiences, and who could blame him? Half the time, the King ignored his presence, not once looking in his direction. Or if he did notice him, he grumbled about his clothing, his hair, or his tardiness. There was some justification for this. For when the Prince became terrified of the King, he began acting in such a way that could only bring more scorn down upon him. For example, so anxious was he about meeting his father that he would wake in the dark, even before paru, the bells from the water tower that ring to lift the night curfew, and demand to be dressed in his royal robes. Then he would sit at his desk before a lighted lamp and commence memorizing his books, until inevitably, he fell asleep again. He would snarl at the eunuchs who came to wake him, and though they nudged and pushed without seeming to, he was late washing his face and combing his hair. His clothes by this time were, of course, rumpled and untidy. Without fail, the Prince found himself morning after morning, running to the main audience hall in Changdok Palace, his mind so filled with useless information he could hardly remember his own name. Of course, all this further infuriated the King.

As if this weren't bad enough, he then became afflicted with a terrible stutter that only appeared in the King's presence. When the King heard the Prince's stutter, he grew enraged and made fun of him in the company of others. The Prince paled and cowered before him. The very sight of the Prince grew to disgust the King.

We who lived in the Prince's palace loved and feared for the Prince. We saw how he struggled to gain the King's favor, and how he suffered under his father's disappointed glare. It was sad for all concerned.

Around this time Prince Sado's obsession with clothes began. In order to impress the King, Prince Sado began to take great care with his clothes, buying up all the silks that arrived from China so that there was hardly any left over for others. He ordered upwards of thirty sets of new clothes at a time, burning some as an offering to the spirit gods. He had to try on many different robes before selecting one, discarding them because they were too long, too short, too plain, too bright, too tight, too loose, too scratchy, too unlucky. He changed so often, his skin became raw and overly sensitive. Sometimes he bled from the skin. Once he was dressed, he would wear the same suit of clothes for days until they became rank and filthy. In this way everybody, except the King, came to know about the Prince's illness.

It became an especial problem for Lord Hong, the Prince's father-in-law. Since the Prince's allowance was insufficient for his need for the best silks, Lord Hong sold some of his own best agricultural lands in the South to pay for it. Both Prince Sado and his daughter, Lady Hong, could be put in great jeopardy if the King discovered the Prince's actions. The King wouldn't see the Prince's pathetic appeal to him; he would only see the foolishness of wasting money on silks, and indeed of the mind that was so narrowly obsessed with clothes. It would prove once again how disappointing was his son, how little fit to be King.

But much could be hidden from him. Because the King did not like his son, he preferred trying to forget him.

The Prince had a roomful of seamstresses working day and night making ceremonial robes to wear in the King's presence. One of these seamstresses was a palace maid named Sunbi, whom he first saw at his mother's residence. For us who worked in the Prince's palace, she was at first truly heaven sent.

Sunbi was a fair-faced girl of sixteen, fresh from the provinces, a little chubby, a little simple. The Prince took to visiting his mother more often, arranging to meet Sunbi afterward. Without anybody noticing, he managed to get her a job hemming and ironing for his seamstresses. Like a true peasant, she worshipped Prince Sado, and loved Lady Hong. She never worried Lady Hong might feel jealous of her; in her mind, it was unthinkable that the Prince could love her more than he loved Lady Hong. After all, she was a slave.

But the Prince did love her. He respected but could not love his wife. Lady Hong was everything he was not—filial, obedient, graceful in her duties. She was never late for the early morning greetings required by tradition to the King, the Queen, and the Dowager Mother, all at their different residences. She did not seize up when asked a question by the King, but answered clearly and succinctly, and in a manner that even caused the King to smile. Prince Sado could never manage this. Worst of all, Lady Hong was even loving toward him, calming him when he was distraught, sending him healing teas and medicines, and giving him good advice about how to behave in the King's presence.

With Sunbi, it was he, the Prince, who gave freely, openly, presenting her with gifts of jewelry and cloth that amazed her, awed her. He loved her simpleness, how she asked for nothing but delighted in everything. He liked watching her eat, sleep, laugh. He understood something new when he was with her, something he imagined most peasants must already know: that taking care of the woman you loved, generously, gracefully, was the pinnacle of human happiness. His usually anxious mind was calmed when he was with Sunbi. He could imagine having been born into another life outside of court.

For a time, the Prince righted himself. He gave up his strange reading, stopped wandering at night, only changed his clothes once or twice a day. He

returned to his duties. His mother, Lady Sonhui, rejoiced, and even the King began to hear good things about the Prince. For the first time, the King invited Prince Sado on the annual visit to the hot baths in Kaesong.

The Prince was overjoyed. He had never been invited to Kaesong by the King, nor anywhere, despite being Prince Regent, though the Princesses often went along. Thus he had never experienced for himself the festive air of the King's train and how the people lined up on either side of the road and waved their handkerchiefs and shouted "Long live Your Majesty!"

However, on the day they set off, a hard rain began to fall, not stopping for even a minute, drenching the entire retinue and making everyone miserable. Even the crowds who normally rushed the roads stayed away, causing the King's mood to deteriorate. Halfway to Kaesong, King Yongjo called a halt to the procession and demanded that the Prince be sent back to the palace. He blamed Prince Sado for the inclement weather, saying every other time he had gone, the weather had been pleasant and warm. The Prince was understandably distraught. "There is no way I can go on living now," he said.

Upon returning to the palace, the Prince consulted with his regular shamans, who read his face and his hands, tossed grains of sand. They told him what he feared and longed for most—the throne, and his father's love. They only made his mind more unsteady, and when the King returned a few days later, chastened by the Dowager Mother for his thoughtless and superstitious actions against the Prince, he found the Prince's private quarters in disarray, the Prince himself bewildered of mind and body. King Yongjo even thought he smelled wine in his rooms even though it was strictly forbidden in the palace. This was not the case, not yet, but the King was so angry, he slapped the Prince harshly across the face and declared that he would never be allowed outside the palace again.

After the Prince was forbidden from leaving the palace, we who lived with him could see the Prince had given up. He stopped trying to please the King altogether. He gave himself fully over to his own desires, playing more and more war games with the royal guards, and even disguising himself and

leaving the palace to wander about the capital, consorting with prostitutes and unscrupulous men. He invited them to his residence, holding parties that lasted several days and nights, examples of debauchery that is still sickening to remember. But even that was not enough. Now he was truly turned and could find only one way to relieve his burdens.

The first time was an accident. He was sword-fighting with a royal soldier attached to guard him, a man whom he respected and who had taught him many maneuvers. They had been fighting for an hour in the full sun when the soldier, an older man, began to tire. He tripped on the root of a tree and as he fell, his sword tipped up and grazed the Prince's arm, drawing a thin line of blood. At first the Prince laughed, then an evil look crossed his face and he fell upon the man and severed his neck. Everyone was quite shocked. Most of all the Prince. He recoiled and threw his sword aside. Then he turned and ran back to the palace. He tore off his clothes and demanded they be burned. We gathered up the soldier's body and took it outside the palace. Nobody spoke of it again, and the soldier's family was too fearful to complain. We knew that some terrible line had been crossed, and once crossed, the way back could not be found. The air grew heavy.

But some months passed with no further incident and we told ourselves that it was just an accident and that the Prince had reacted without thinking. Then one day, when he had put on and taken off twenty different robes, finally wearing only his underclothes, he asked for great quantities of wine to be brought to him. For ever since the King accused him of bringing wine into the palace, the Prince had begun to do so.

That night, a shaman who was drunk told the Prince that his life would end in a horrible manner, by suffocation. In a different mood, the Prince might have laughed it off, spared the man. But it had been a particularly bad day. The King had once again reduced the Prince's household budget. So when the shaman spoke his thoughtless words, the Prince flared up with rage and called the shaman a fraud. Having realized his foolish, deadly error, the now sober man kneeled before the Prince, apologizing, rubbing his hands together, begging forgiveness. But the Prince pulled his favorite dagger out of his clothes and stabbed him in the stomach. Because it did not kill

him straightaway, the Prince stabbed the man many more times before pushing the bleeding body away from him.

There were perhaps ten people in the room, all of us frozen and helpless. Finally, Eunuch Han stepped forward and in a calm voice said, "Perhaps the Prince would like his nightly bath," while the Prince nodded and wiped the blade of his dagger on the dead man's robe. He said, "I feel better now that he is dead. I feel an enormous sense of relief!" We tried not to show our horror.

One morning after the King imitated the Prince's stuttering at a morning audience with the ministers, the Prince came home shouting for his horse. He played war all that afternoon with several dozen of his royal guard, drawing blood and bruising without seriously hurting anyone. He began drinking as soon as he went back indoors, sitting in his private chamber, alone with his mournful thoughts. By the time a eunuch appeared with his nightly snack of dukkboeki and red bean cakes, he was pacing the room and talking aloud. He had opened a chest of weapons he kept in his room, and was fingering the inlaid pearl on his favorite sword, testing the curved tip of the blade.

Without looking up, he told the eunuch he would count to ten and then he would chase him down like a boar in the woods. "Excuse me, Your Majesty?" said the eunuch, lifting his head in surprise.

"Run!" the Prince shouted.

But the poor eunuch remained standing there, unsure what to do, and was taken completely by surprise when the Prince threw his dagger at him, hitting him in the upper arm. The eunuch shouted and grabbed the offended limb, blood dampening his fingers. Without thinking any more about the matter, he turned and ran away. He fled to the courtyard, the Prince whooping behind him, shouting at his guards to step aside. He had a spear in his hand and chased the eunuch through his gardens, finally catching him near the back wall. He took his time, running him back and forth like a rabbit, before he finally lunged toward the eunuch, screaming, his spear raised high. The Prince stabbed him in the abdomen. Then, looking completely crazed, he took out a knife and hacked at the eunuch's neck until it was separated from his body. He stuck it on his spear and raised it high.

From this moment forward, none of us could be at peace. We were all besieged by fear, not knowing when we might be killed. None were safe—royal physicians, court ladies, eunuchs, palace workmen, translators, musicians, shamans—every day several bodies were carried out of the Prince's palace. Eventually, even the King could no longer ignore the horrors taking place and had an audience with the Prince.

"Why are you killing people?" the King asked.

The Prince bowed his head and replied, "It gives me relief."

"Relief! From what?"

"From shame, Your Majesty."

"Why do you feel shame?"

"Because you do not love me, Your Majesty, and because I am a constant disappointment to you." The Prince then confessed the exact number of people he had killed, and even provided details on how he had done so. We who were present expected the King to be fearfully angry and perhaps even strike the Prince with his own hands, but instead, he was quiet before saying, "I understand. I will try to act differently in the future, if you will."

The Prince was very surprised and tears coursed down his face. "Thank you, Your Heavenly Grace. I will not act this way again."

How wonderful and unexpected! I slept well that night for the first night in many months.

For a time after the Prince's audience with the King, we were hopeful that the Prince would right himself. However, it was too late. Whatever this sickness was, it had taken too tight a hold on the Prince's mind. One morning, Sunbi was helping him dress, as he had killed the eunuch tasked with dressing him. His skin was red and hot to the touch. Born under an unlucky moon, Sunbi scratched him with her nail as she was helping his arm into his sleeve, and enraged, he began to beat her. He must have forgotten who she was, the mother of his two youngest children, and the only person he had ever felt at peace with. Though we could hear her scream terribly, we could do nothing to save her, so we wrung our hands and trembled, beating our chests in frustration and fear, praying it would not end with her death. When the Prince was

exhausted and numb, he stumbled out in his bloodied clothing and, calling for his horse, went riding off to no one knows where.

We ran in to where Sunbi was lying on the ground, insensible, though her labored breathing let us know she was still alive. Her face was unrecognizable, soft and misshapen, her nose and cheekbones broken, her jaw out of alignment, her eyes like grapefruits, sealed shut with blood. We called the royal physicians and had her moved to Lady Hong's residence, where we hoped she could stay hidden until she healed. But alas, her injuries were too severe and there was not much the royal physicians could do for her. By the evening of the same day, she passed.

Poor girl! How unfortunate she was to catch the eye of the Prince! She had loved him purely and sincerely; if only her love could have given the Prince what the King could not. I will never forget the sight of her poor children crying piteously before they were sent out of the palace for their protection. Lord Hong gave Sunbi's family a great deal of money for funeral expenses so that they were able to swallow their resentment.

When the Prince returned to his residence and learned what had happened to Sunbi, he made no change in his expression and never spoke her name again.

A few days later, the Prince slept for an unusually long time. The ladies who attended him could not rouse him with loud clapping or movements around his body. Of course, no one dared touch him. We could see he still took breath but it was shallow and uneven. Finally, a eunuch was dispatched to bring a physician.

The man was trembling even before he entered the Prince's quarters and started shaking visibly as he grew close to the Prince's form. Clumsily, he opened his medical box, filled with small glass bottles and powders wrapped in specially waxed paper. He pulled out a vial and held his hand over the stopper, ready to remove it, but froze. "I cannot," he said. "I am afraid."

I grew impatient with this cowardly man and took the vial from him. "What do I do with it?" I asked.

"Hold it under his nose, just briefly," he said. "And the Prince should wake."

I did as he told me. The Prince jerked once, turned his head away and then back, before opening his eyes. They were glazed and unfocused.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," I said as cheerfully as I could while pressing back the fear everybody felt in that moment. "How do you feel?"

"How do you expect me to feel waking up with the lot of you staring into my face? Out! Out!" He shooed everyone out except the ladies assigned to help him relieve himself and me.

"How are you feeling?" I asked again, keeping my head bowed low so nothing could upset him.

"How do you expect me to feel when the palace is against me?" he asked.

"I do not think the palace is against you," I said timidly. "There are many here who love you and want only the best for you."

He snorted, taking off all his clothes, holding on to his manhood, while the ladies tried mightily to avert their eyes. I might have laughed at another time.

"How would you know anything?" he said. "You don't know what it's like to be the son of the King. You don't know what it is to be hated and scorned by your own father."

"If I may, Your Majesty, the King wants you to be at peace."

The Prince stormed up close to me, grabbed my face in both hands, and stared at me directly in the eyes. They glittered with a terrifying menace and he smiled in a way that made my body go cold and blank. It took the greatest effort of my life not to quiver, but I knew without a doubt that if I did, he would kill me.

"You dare to tell me what the King thinks? What the King wants? You presume to know more about him than I do?"

Never breaking off his staring, he reached down for the dagger he kept always in his robes, then realized he was naked. For a second, uncertainty loomed large. Suddenly, he pushed me away and laughed. "Fool," he said. "You know nothing."

Catching myself before I fell down, I righted myself and bent over at the waist, bowing and saying, "I know nothing. I know nothing."

Once out of the room, I held my chest, trying to hold down the galloping legs of my heart. I wanted to run out of the palace, but caught in misfortune after misfortune, I could not.

In one of his lucid conversations with Lady Hong, Prince Sado terrified her by saying about their son, "Now that the King has a grandson with whom he feels great affinity, he no longer needs me and will kill me off soon. When that happens, please remember me fondly."

Indeed, it was true that young Prince Chongjo was a great favorite of his grandfather's. A bright, confident child, he shared many traits with the King. When the boy was only seven, the King invested him as a Royal Grandson, and a little later on, as Grand Heir. Even though a child, he was invited by the King to attend the Morning Audience of the Ministers, where the King's many praises were recorded by the court annalist. "The Royal Grandson is smart and dutiful," it was written the King had said. "I will entrust my kingdom to him."

Now, the Crown Prince loved his son and was never less than kind to him when they were together, exhibiting no signs of jealousy or anger. However, since he did not have a natural father-son relationship with his own father, how could he be expected to know how to behave with his son?

Knowing that his son was greatly favored by the King, Prince Sado asked the court annalist to send him the speeches that were made in the morning audiences. When he read how the King had extolled the many virtues of the Royal Grandson, his face would turn red and he would shout for wine to be brought to him. "He loves and praises the Royal Grandson," the Prince would say, "when he never showed any affection for me. Why? Why?" It was a certainty on those days that one or more would be killed.

Lady Hong rightly grew fearful that the Prince might attack his son if he continued thinking in this manner and entreated her father to have those passages cut out of the court recordings. Everyone participated in keeping hidden the King's true feelings toward his grandson so that Prince Chongjo

would be kept safe. What a situation this was! Between these three generations there was only strife and misunderstandings. Indeed it was most tragic for Prince Chongjo, who truly loved his father and grandfather, and wished for them to be at peace. Alas, it was impossible.

When Prince Chongjo turned ten, the proceedings to find a wife for him commenced. There were several important rituals that were to take place surrounding this royal event, and to our surprise Prince Sado conducted himself in a worthy manner. Though he was pale and sweaty, he managed to dress appropriately and sat quietly while the selection process unfolded. However, at the third selection, when the young girl who would become Prince Chongjo's wife was to be presented to the King and Queen and also to the Crown Prince and Lady Hong, Prince Sado reverted back to his strange ways. He put on and took off several sets of clothing, burning the ones that had been rejected. He did the same with his hats. Because of this, he ended up burning the jade beads that belonged on the hat strings of a crown prince and had to borrow ones from a third-rank bureaucrat. King Yongjo was incensed. When he saw Prince Sado's hat, he declared before all that since he hardly looked like a crown prince, he was not fit to be one, and sent him away before the Prince's daughter-in-law-to-be could even be presented to him. The Prince wept bitterly, saying, "He wants me dead, that much is clear."

From then on, he stopped speaking of the King in a respectful manner, even using the informal banmal with his mother. He had the court ladies and eunuchs in his residence shout unspeakable curses to the King and Queen in loud voices, though they quaked and cried as they did so. They shouted vile accusations of a sexual and violent nature while the Prince looked on, smiling and nodding. When Princess Hwasun, his sister, came to visit, worried about the rumors spreading through the palace, he attacked and attempted to rape her. Even she was too afraid to say anything to the King, and the sickness proliferated.

Now the Prince became obsessed with death. He turned his rooms into a tomb, even constructing a bier that he slept in. Once that was complete, he began excavating a great underground tunnel that would lead from his resi-

dence to the others. Rooms were created underground, big enough to house all his weapons and even horses, should the need arise. He began threatening other royal family members, saying he would come through the tunnels and kill them in their beds. The whole court was in disarray.

By spring, life had become so unbearable in the palace that the Minister of the Right committed suicide. Within the next two weeks, the Minister of the Left and the new Minister of the Right also killed themselves. Lady Hong tried to hurt herself but was stopped before she could injure herself critically. I vowed to leave the palace but could find no way of doing so. The Prince had always left us royal secretaries unmolested, as he was afraid of what would be written down for future ages, but now nothing seemed certain, and we all wished and prayed to be relieved of our duties. Of course, there was no one who wanted to take our place.

Finally, the brother of a workman who had been killed sent a memorial to the King asking for justice. At first the King turned his anger on the man who sent the memorial and had him killed for his insolence. Then, upset and confused, he went to Lady Sonhui and asked her what should be done.

This kind lady who had suffered so much already assured the King she would visit the Prince and see if he could be helped. She knew it was hopeless but blamed the sickness and not her son. When she arrived at the Prince's residence, she came upon a strange scene.

Prince Sado had prepared an elaborate feast for her as though it were an important royal occasion. He had tables piled high with fruit and even served ginseng cake and wine. The Prince read aloud a poem he had written on long life. Further, he arranged a big parade in her honor, so that while they ate, royal guards in new, brightly colored clothing rode by waving their banners while a military band played behind them. There were dancers and many musicians playing gayageum, a long stringed instrument with a sorrowful sound. Then a palanquin appeared with a flag raised high above it, accompanied by trumpets blaring and drums beating. Lady Sonhui was surprised when she was asked to ride in it, for it was most inappropriate. But she was so frightened by this exhibition of the Prince's madness that she dutifully got in and was carried around the Prince's residence. Though she was supposed to

spend the night, she excused herself by saying she was not feeling well and went away. Before she did so, she took Lady Hong aside and, gripping her hands tightly, said, "What should we do? How are we to act? It seems so hopeless." The two women wept together.

Returning to her own residence, she dictated a letter to the King, which read:

A mother should never write these words and yet I am left with no other recourse. In order to protect the life of the Royal Grandson and to preserve intact the Yi Dynasty, which has lasted these four hundred years, the Crown Prince cannot be allowed to live. Even to make such a suggestion is an outrage and a sin against humanity, and may I never be forgiven.

Lady Sonhui then took to her bed and refused all sustenance.

The King reacted promptly on receiving Lady Sonhui's letter. He announced that he would appear at the Prince's residence within the hour and that the Prince should prepare to meet him. When the Prince received this message, he was uncharacteristically calm. While he dressed in the dragon robe of the Crown Prince, he called Lady Hong to him.

"This is the day I will be killed," he told her.

"No, no, Your Majesty," she said. "Speak to the King sincerely and he will forgive you. Ask him to help you, to give you more guidance. He cannot refuse."

"He has refused me all his life. What makes today any different? That is not why I called you here. I want to see the Royal Grandson."

Lady Hong trembled at these words but did not show her dismay. "He is with the royal tutors," she said. "I will send him to you when he returns."

"Send him to me now!" the Prince shouted. "Don't you understand? It may be the last I see of him!"

Lady Hong then bent her head in grief and left to delay the Royal Grandson as long as she could.

She was helped in this regard by a message that had come from the King. He announced that instead of coming to the Prince's residence, the Prince should come to him at Hwinyong-jon Shrine. One would have expected the Prince to forestall, but he did not. He gave in and immediately set off.

I cannot adequately relate the deep anxiety and dread that we in the palace felt. From the top ministers down to the lowliest of palace workers, none were immune from constant agitation. Now it had reached such a state that King Yongjo and Prince Sado could not both remain alive. And yet, how was it to resolve itself? By law and tradition, a royal body could not be injured even by the King himself.

I accompanied the Prince to the shrine, walking beside his palanquin, wondering at the fate that caused father and son to act like enemies. What would others who lived after we had died, what would they make of our actions? Would they have pity for us or would they blame us for our cowardice?

Even before we came through the gate to Hwinyong-jon Shrine, we could hear the King thundering. He sat on a high seat, a sword in his hand. Meekly, Prince Sado exited the palanquin and knelt before the King.

"You are a disgrace!" the King bellowed. He struck the point of his sword down.

"Father, Father, forgive me," the Prince said. "I have done wrong. I know it. I will change. From this time forward, I will work harder, I will obey you in everything."

The shrine was empty except for the four of us: King Yongjo, Prince Sado, Lord Munno—the King's chief annalist—and myself. Because there were usually many more people about, it felt eerily quiet and peaceful. A flock of magpies suddenly flew up from the wall, all crying out at once. Lord Munno and I looked at each other in terror.

King Yongjo struck his sword down again. With a mighty face, he said, "You are no longer the Crown Prince. You are a commoner. Take off your robe."

Prince Sado turned white and appealed to the King once more. "Father, please, give me one more chance. I beg you."

But the King's face did not change.

"Don't do this to me!" the Prince cried.

"Will you take off your robe or must I call the royal guards?" the King asked.

The Prince stood up awkwardly, nearly falling over so that I wanted to rush over to him. But one look from the King stopped me. The Prince first took off his hat with the jade strings, placing it on the ground, and then disrobed slowly, afterward folding the robe neatly and placing it next to his hat. Underneath he was wearing a suit of unbleached cloth, normally worn in mourning. Upon seeing this, fury overtook the King again, and he said, "See? You are hoping to mourn me."

It was just another misunderstanding among a multitude of misunderstandings between father and son. We who knew intimately about the Prince's clothing phobias knew that only unbleached cotton kept the Prince from the rashes that tormented him. But there was no way for the King to know this. Ah, what a fate is this!

"You leave me no choice," the King said. "I need to see no further signs of your disobedience." And he called for a rice chest to be brought to the shrine.

The three of us wondered why the King wanted a rice chest at this moment, but of course we could not ask. Prince Sado hung his head and swayed, an utterly defeated boy. The King stood up and paced back and forth, not saying anything further. It was the middle of summer and the heat was extreme. I felt it as a visible presence pushing me down. My throat felt raw with thirst.

In a short time, a rice chest was brought into the courtyard of the shrine. The King told the Prince to climb inside it.

Surprised, the Prince looked up at his father and said, "No, Father, no. Please, don't do this."

"Get in!" the King thundered, striking his sword once more.

One would have expected the Prince to object further, or run away, or fall prostrate on the ground, but he did none of these things. Perhaps he thought it would only be for a short time, that if he showed the King his obedience now, he would be forgiven. But I do not know what truly went through his mind. He simply stepped into the rice chest and sat with his knees up and his

head down. The servant who had brought the rice chest then lowered the top. I knew that ever since he was a boy the Prince was afraid of the dark, burning candles all night long. Thus, it must have been terrifying for him to be enclosed in this way. From inside, he continued pleading with the King to be let out, not in an angry, impetuous way, but calmly and beseechingly. It hurt my heart to hear him.

At this moment, the Royal Grandson appeared at the outer gate, crying, "Sire, Sire, please forgive my father! Please spare my father!" He was on his knees, crying very loudly and striking his head on the ground.

"Go away!" the King bellowed. "Leave here immediately!"

The Royal Grandson struggled, but he was taken away by members of the royal guard.

The King then ordered that everyone leave the shrine, and so we left without the Prince, who remained in the confines of the rice chest.

One day passed, then two, then three. From beyond the wall, we could hear the Prince crying out for the King's forgiveness, and then food, and then water. Nothing was brought in.

We were in the middle of a drought, and even in the palace, there was hardly any grass, just pale, sandy dirt outside the stone pathways. How hot it must have been in that prison of a rice chest! How the Prince must have suffered! We went around with heavy, angry hearts, able to blame no one for what was happening. It was all inevitable and preordained from heaven. This King and Prince were born to hate each other. How strange that one was born to the other!

On the afternoon of the eighth day, a storm broke. The sky turned black, roiling with ominous clouds, and a heavy downpour rained on us. Thunder hit with such force that the palace shook, lightning splitting a tree just inside the courtyard, a large tree that had stood there for centuries. And the Prince, who was afraid of even the character for thunder, how did he endure this terrifying storm? Before this, we knew he was still alive because we could hear him muttering, but after the storm, all sound from the rice chest ceased.

The next morning, the King had the rice chest opened and it was discovered that the Prince was dead.

I tell you this story, Sir, in order that you may know that nothing in life is to be taken for granted, not even the love between a father and son. And that you may know something of our lives here, how we lived, and how we suffered. Do not judge us nor the King harshly. Because the King had the strength to kill his son, many countless lives may have been spared, as surely discord and chaos would have ensued at the crumbling of the dynasty.

Was our King right or wrong? Hearing this story, good Sir, what might you have done?

2021

ROME

from Now You Know It All, selected by Edward P. Jones

Joanna Pearson

There were ruins and fountains and a fury of beeping horns. Naked putti lounging fatly in marble. Gorgeous, long-armed women in skirts and strappy sandals, and young men leaning out of their cars in mirrored sunglasses. Old men in storefronts arranged cheeses and sausages tenderly, as if tucking in sleeping infants, while chattering tour groups trailed guides holding red umbrellas, and honeymooners licked perfect gelatos. There were long, hushed halls filled with onlookers crowding around famous paintings: Jesus flanked by apostles, emperors crowned with laurel, mythical women in half-dress being chased by centaurs. There were churches in which frescoes glowed in dim magnificence above altars. Gold coffered ceilings. Pietàs. Aqueducts. Domes.

In the catacombs, we followed a man with a bowtie and a stutter who told us of the city, its slaves and rulers, while the bones around us listened in untroubled silence. We'd seen so much beauty by then we'd been rendered insensate to it, like gorging on sweets to the point of sickness, or until one tastes nothing at all. Our eyes could not absorb one more basilica. We were tired and dust-covered, our shoulders sunburned. We were sick of each other and sick of washing our underwear in sinks. We were finally seeing all the

things—beautiful, famous things we'd waited all our young lives to see—but we couldn't appreciate any of it any longer.

"Please don't talk to me," I said to Paul in the hostel's small kitchen while a troop of merry Australians cracked open beers nearby. Friendships formed quickly here, and yet somehow Paul and I had managed to remain alone. We were pinched and irritable-looking, clutching our respective *Lonely Planet*s like shields. We must have resembled a couple even though we hated each other. Maybe this even made our coupledom appear more authentic.

"Believe me, I have no desire to," Paul said, slapping two thickly slathered pieces of bread together into a peanut butter sandwich, like he did every night, no matter where we were. Who ate peanut butter sandwiches in Europe?

The trip had seemed a good idea at first, but now even the sight of Paul—his socks, the sound of his breathing, the way he chewed—repulsed me. It was like a horrible stranger had assumed Paul's shape, donning his body like a cheap suit. Everything about him I'd once found pleasant or appealing had been twisted into cruel caricature.

And yet here we were, with a coveted semiprivate room in the middle of July, the height of tourist season. Travelers from all over the world crowded outside the gates of the hostel each evening, waiting to see if one of the dorm beds might open up. Every hostel in the city was full to capacity, and late-arriving backpackers found themselves having to pay for low-end hotels, or, more bravely, sleeping in parks with new friends made on nights out. We had reserved in advance, following a travel itinerary plotted by Paul, who preferred to leave nothing to chance. It was just the two of us, and one silent girl from Japan who rolled her nightshirt neatly, tucking it under her pillow in the morning. How could we give this up? Rome, of all places. City of Seven Hills. We were bound together, Paul and I, by our good luck, by our reticence with others.

Our first night there, while the other backpackers were still out exploring the nightlife, sharing wine at little outdoor tables in the piazzas, falling in love, Paul and I read silently in our room. Even the quiet Japanese girl did not

return before the curfew. I listened to Paul whispering to himself before he went to sleep, and I knew he was reciting words to stave off disaster, a godless prayer. When I'd first met him, I'd found this ritual endearing. It had given him a certain pathos. Now, of course, it was but one of the many things about him I hated—almost as much as he made me hate myself.

So I went on a day trip without him.

That morning, while the rest of the hostel slept off their Chianti and Paul lay in the half-light with his mouth hanging open, I rose and dressed quietly. In the relative calm of the early hour, I made my way to the tour company's designated meetup spot. The tour company was family-owned and specialized in intimate walking tours, guided day trips with no more than eight other people. I'd chosen Tivoli almost at random. I'd seen photos on the brochure—grand fountains set against statuary of ancient gods, lush hillsides, Hadrian's Villa. My eyes would blur at yet more ruins, more beauty. But I wanted the rush of water falling, crumbling walls, a place where I might pretend to be a Roman emperor, a plebe, anyone but myself.

When I got to the location, I saw two middle-aged parents and their five blonde daughters, the girls arranged from tallest to smallest like a line of nesting dolls. They all wore the long blue skirts of pioneer women. Although her face looked ancient, the mother had the round, taut belly and loose-hipped gait of a woman in late pregnancy. Her skin was the deep golden bronze of an aging sun-worshipper; the rest of her family was fair.

The father stepped forward, formal, almost bowing as he spoke.

"We're the Gooleys," he said with a sweep of his hand to indicate his brood. He retreated to the spot beside his wife before I could offer my own greeting.

"Hullo," the oldest girl said then, moving out from the line of her sisters. Her voice was warmer than her father's. She wore a braid that fell down her back to her waist, Laura Ingalls Wilder–style. "You're our eighth!"

She thrust her hand toward me, unnaturally self-possessed for a child her age. A preteen? An early teenager? It was hard to tell with her prairie-settler clothes.

"I'm Lindsay," I said, accepting her handshake.

She beamed at me like someone emerging from a cave, from hibernation.

"Welcome," said our tour guide, a bearded Irishman. "It'll be you and the Gooley family today. Not how these things typically go. But it'll be grand."

"I'm Martha," the oldest Gooley girl said, squeezing my hand as if I were her new best friend. "I'm so happy you're joining us." She introduced me to the rest of her sisters as we all piled into a van. Connor, our guide, turned from the driver's seat to smile at us, and Martha took the seat next to mine, leaning into me as if we'd known each other for ages.

We wended our way toward Tivoli while Connor told us little facts about Hadrian's Villa, the Villa d'Este, and the town of Tivoli, where we would have lunch. I studied passing Vespas, squinting out at the hills to which we were headed.

"Where do you live?" I whispered to Martha, and she bowed her head slightly.

"Japan," she said, answering with polite formality. "We're there on mission."

I nodded, careful to keep my face neutral. It hung there unspoken: an understanding she somehow confirmed with the steadiness of her gaze. I had intuited a fundamentalist religiosity about this family from the moment I'd sighted them. Now the only question was of which variety.

"Mother teaches us," Martha said, "She used to, when she felt well. But we also go on trips like this as part of our education."

She spoke to me in a way I'd come to recognize in the handful of homeschooled children I'd encountered: with a strange, otherworldly adultness, a lack of self-consciousness I found unsettling. Martha was fifteen, an age at which awkwardness was not just to be expected but mandatory in my experience.

I explained to Martha that I was in college, about to enter my final year at the big state school back home. A wonderful education, I told her when she asked. A funny little wistful look passed over her face. I found myself delivering a brochure-ready vision, which she absorbed with rapt attention: heavy textbooks and students gathered in glossy quads before bearded professors

with elbow patches, football games and friends on the weekends. All this was pure fantasy. The whole reason I'd ended up in Italy with Paul in the first place was because of our shared sense of alienation. Both of us had fancied ourselves special eggs, the type that ought to have been coddled in boutique classes at a tiny liberal arts college with an expensive price tag. That hadn't happened; we'd ended up lonely at a gigantic university, consoling ourselves with our own perceived intellectualism—a shared sense of grievance that had proven an excellent homing device. We'd met in class, connecting over the fact that we felt awkward and overlooked, the kind of people who signed up willingly for honors seminars on restoration drama and then complained to each other when the professor seemed not to notice us.

"I bet you have a million friends," Martha said, her heart-shaped face wide open with sincerity. "You seem so nice." She sighed and clasped her hands like a schoolgirl, laying them in her lap.

I flushed and didn't respond.

A bump in the road jolted us. Two of Martha's sisters had begun to sing a round up front—it was a song I recognized from a church camp I'd attended as a young girl. So maybe Protestant, not Catholic? Then again, maybe everyone sang that song.

I wondered what Paul would think when he woke and found me gone. I must have sighed unconsciously.

"What's wrong?" Martha asked, leaning toward me, all pale blondeness like a Northern Renaissance angel.

"Nothing," I said. "I'm happy to be here."

"Me too," she said, pressing my hand again. Her touch was warm; my hands were cold no matter the season, but once again she didn't flinch. "Cold hands, warm heart," she added, giving me a little smile.

We parked in a large lot with several other vans and tour buses. Martha's sisters spilled out into the sunny morning, their braids and long skirts and white ankle socks catching the light with too much brightness. Their laughter was wholesome, like a stream of fresh milk from a pail.

Or seemingly wholesome. Wholesomeness was a slippery quality. The first time I'd met Paul, I told him I'd been struck by this very quality of his.

He was unfashionable, almost prim with manners. He'd been offended when I remarked upon it. He told me he'd grown up on a small hog farm in eastern North Carolina.

"See?" I'd said. "Exactly."

"*Wholesome* isn't the word for it," Paul answered.

His parents' farm had been bought up by one of the big industrial farming operations when he was finishing high school. They'd been one of the last holdouts in their county. The air smelled like shit there, Paul told me. If you called that wholesome, then there you have it. In school, he'd been shy and lonely, made odd by his habits; he was unable to stop himself from counting ceiling tiles, touching light switches again and again. He'd hated school but preferred it to home—his father, the gummy-eyed piglets slick in their afterbirth, the stench of the full-grown hogs. He'd been scared of them, the way they grunted, their snouts and tails, the horrible human quality of their squeals.

I followed Martha and the line of Gooleys through the ruins of Hadrian's Villa. I was already thirsty and tired, eager to hurry through the sprawling complex. But I could feel Martha pausing behind me, taking the measure of the place. We came to a large, open area: the Serapeum. The water of the Canopus gleamed, reflecting back trees and sky. Martha exhaled, holding up one hand as if to snap a photo. I touched her elbow gently. She smiled at me. For a moment, it felt like we'd stumbled onto some other ruined world, the stripes of trees painted onto the still, dark water and the silent columns rising above. It really did snatch your breath—I almost said this to her, but I figured she, too, must be thinking it.

"The rot of decadence," Martha whispered.

"What?"

"Papa said he'd show us where it all started."

She drew one finger down the line of the column.

"The Romans were a culture of decadence," she said. "Immodesty. That's why their empire collapsed." She raised an eyebrow at me. Or just raised her eyebrow. And I felt conscious of my bare legs, my uncovered shoulders, multiple piercings in my ears—although in no way did I look avant-garde or rebel-

lious. Then she locked eyes with me, and her gaze was serene and without judgment. I had the sense that she was parroting something she'd heard many times and didn't wholly believe, testing out the sound of it.

Ahead of us, Connor made polite conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Gooley. Mr. Gooley was broad-shouldered with the serious shuffle and stoop of a clergyman. He wore fat white tennis shoes that looked like they'd come straight from the box. His wife was squat as a saltshaker, her gray hair pulled into a stringy ponytail and her heavy belly a hindrance to which she seemed to subjugate herself unquestioningly, like a cow or a mare. I watched her listening, absorbed, grave. From a distance, her face looked like Martha's.

"They're so serious," I said finally, because I did not know what else to say. "Like Roman senators."

Martha laughed generously.

"My father would appreciate that he's given that impression."

We trailed her sisters and parents past statues and the remnants of friezes, making our way to the Maritime Theatre. Even when we weren't talking, Martha didn't leave my side, careful to match her pace to mine.

"Do you like having such a big family?" I asked her. My only brother still lived at home with my parents. He worked for the same towing company as my father. They had the same gestures, the same long nose and humorless mouth. It was almost like they were a single blank-faced person split in two, leaving my mother and me completely to ourselves whenever I was home.

Martha laughed again.

"Oh, my family's not all that big," she said. "My grandfather, on the other hand, had twenty-five brothers and sisters. And my father is one of eighteen."

"You're Catholic?" I asked her finally.

She shook her head.

"No," she answered. "But we're suckers for Catholic saints. My mom really likes them. She's into miracles. That's why we came to Italy."

"For the miracles?"

She nodded, looking even younger, more childlike, in that moment.

"We could use some. For my mother," she said, and then her voice dropped several decibels. "And for the baby. The baby needs a miracle."

I looked at her, awaiting further explanation, but she turned away. Her mother seemed so old—Biblically old, like the fact of any pregnancy for her at this point was in and of itself a miracle. No wonder there was something wrong with the baby. Martha appeared distracted now, gazing upward at a broken hunk of wall looming above us. By then we'd caught up with the rest of the family. One of Martha's younger sisters, who was sucking on a red lollipop, tugged at her arm with a sticky hand. We both turned to our tour guide, who was describing the architecture of the Maritime Theatre. The remaining columns seemed to huddle together above the murky water.

We formed our own semicircle, listening to Connor as he spoke. The air was hot and still. Clusters of other tourists moved around us. I thought of Paul, wandering the streets of Rome alone.

Paul and I had gotten along well at the beginning of our trip. Bright-eyed, fresh, we ticked off cities. First Paris, with its cafés and wide boulevards, the Parisians so elegant and dismissive; then Geneva, placid and pretty and a little dull; then Interlaken, blue-green picturesque and mountainous, the night air so clean and cool it made breathing seem like sucking a peppermint. We'd quickly assumed the attitudes of backpackers, joining that temporary, rootless world wherein tips are easily traded and breezy acquaintanceships made and forgotten. Paul took little notes in a notebook he carried. We both were there on travel grants, theoretically doing research.

Before we'd left the States, our friends had made little jokes about this being the culmination of our secret romance. But I knew otherwise. Paul had confessed to me his crush on Lulu Robinson, a gloomily poised poet who'd already published a chapbook and would graduate a semester ahead of us. I'd always hated Lulu, with her dark hair and big eyes, her raw talent, but I softened for Paul's sake, for the melancholy that crept into his voice when he spoke of her. I knew better than to mock him for the way he dissected their paltry exchanges. She might as well have lived on a different planet—perfect and untouched, not yet spoiled by humankind—for all her awareness of him. I confessed a similar crush on Rhett Williamson, just to even things out. Rhett had had the same on-and-off-again girlfriend since sophomore year.

We were friends, of sorts, and Rhett did leave me tongue-tied and pitiful, but I knew it wasn't quite the same.

"You're better than that," I told Paul once when he described an encounter he'd had with Lulu at a party. "You just haven't figured it out yet."

He smiled wanly at me.

"Of course you'd say that," he said. "You're the only one who gets me."

This had pleased me so much, so painfully, that I'd had to leave him in the library abruptly, telling him I must be sick from something I'd eaten.

I understood the pleasing, problem-solving symmetry of Paul falling for me. I had, of course, considered it. I knew the shape of his mouth, the way his lips moved silently in class. I could read the tension in his jaw, could gauge, by his expression, when he was arguing with himself internally. No one else would notice, though, unless he told them. He'd had a lifetime of practice concealing his compulsions, starting back when his father used to smack his knuckles with a hanger anytime he caught Paul touching the furniture, or made him sit with his hands in hog shit whenever he washed them until they bled.

Things were fine until Milan. We'd missed the train we meant to catch and so had ended up on a slow train with no seats left. We stood there, gripping the poles and swaying, while the train swung along the track. It was dark when we finally reached the station, and we were tired, our legs wobbly.

Paul got an email from his father just after we arrived: his mother was in the hospital again. Her white count had dropped precipitously. I'd met Paul's mother once when she'd come to visit: a tiny woman, elven almost, shrunken down to the bone, with big brown eyes and shoulders like the handles of a child's scooter. She'd been in treatment for breast cancer on and off since Paul was fifteen. I knew all of Paul's stories of her; she loomed like a demigod in Paul's private mythology. A self-described Southern Baptist housewife, Paul's mother loved him, in her way. He loved his mother back, ferociously, inexplicably, despite her sharpness.

Paul blinked furiously when he told me. I looked away to let him collect himself. A crowd of adolescent Milanese boys passed us then, speaking loudly. One of them knocked against Paul's pack so hard he stumbled. He flushed, and I watched him tighten his hands into fists.

"Please," I said. "We just got to Italy. It's only a few more weeks."

We continued down a series of increasingly narrow streets looking for our hostel. By the time we found it, we were ravenous. A group from Sweden happened to be standing in the entryway, having predinner drinks and discussing where they could find a late dinner. They invited us to join them.

Maybe it was the shots the Swedes had offered us before we left, which we'd accepted despite our empty stomachs, but there was something loose now about Paul, jolly and volatile. Normally, he was slow to warm up in a crowd, but now he strode ahead of me, exchanging banter with the tallest of the group, a dimpled blond guy with a big laugh. It worried me. I thought of Paul's mother, back in her room at the community hospital in the eastern part of the state. They were considering moving her into hospice, Paul had said, but his father was very clear that his mother didn't want him to feel he needed to come home yet, didn't want him to cut his trip off early. "Once in a lifetime," his mother had said to Paul, squeezing his wrist before he'd left. She'd only ever gone as far as the Maryland state line.

"But I feel like I have to go home now, right?" Paul asked me. "No matter what he says."

I didn't answer him.

He seemed to interpret my thoughts correctly, though, and his mouth hardened.

Then he hurried to catch up with the two Swedes leading the way. Paul fizzed and crackled with energy, jabbering with our new acquaintances. It unsettled me to see him so lively.

As we entered the small, dark restaurant, I pulled Paul aside.

"It's okay if you're not up to this," I said. "We can find a slice of pizza somewhere low-key. They have that here, right?" I meant to make my voice light. I didn't want to mention his mother again. He shrugged, already seeming a little drunk, which wasn't impossible given the strength of the shots, his low tolerance, our hunger and fatigue.

"I could use a night out," he said, and I saw him do a counting gesture with his fingers. It was quick—a pressing of each finger onto his thumb.

"Okay," I told him. I touched his arm gently. He was my friend, truly, and

so when I chose to touch him—rarely, platonically—it was meant as emphasis. *I'm here if you need me*, I tried to make my touch say.

He brushed me off, maneuvering to the bar and ordering his drink beside two of the Swedes. I sat down with one of the women, Karolina. The restaurant was dark and cramped, built to look like the inside of a cavern, and filled with the loud chatter not of Italians but of other backpackers like ourselves. Ordinarily, I would have hated such a place on principle, avoiding it at all costs in search of an "authentic" trattoria, but tonight there was an energy carrying us, and I was prepared to submit to it.

When Paul and Karolina's friend Erik brought back drinks, we all cheered. Eventually, there was pizza. We tore into it brutally, laughing and calling one another by new nicknames, citing inside jokes created only an hour beforehand. We had the air of old friends, friends who went back years. Paul outtalked everyone, and I watched the strange glitter in his eyes, the reckless way his hands swirled. There was a new edge to him.

I went with it, emulating the volume of his speech, the way his hands moved. I laughed louder. We ate and drank like animals, laughing with pizza sauce smeared on the sides of our mouths. When I felt Erik's body shift beside me, moving a bit closer, I let myself lean into him, his carnal warmth and smell of sweat. I found him loud and unfunny, a little bucktoothed, which was maybe unfair, but for tonight, I decided that wouldn't matter. I saw the way Paul was openly flirting with Karolina, something he would never have been able to do unless he was very drunk. He was funny, charming even—I could see this reflected back in the way Karolina beheld him.

By the time we walked out of the restaurant into the surprisingly cool night, it was like we were engaged in open competition. Karolina had slung her arms over Paul, pretending she was unable to walk. Maybe she couldn't quite walk—we'd had a lot of sour-tasting wine, stuff they surely only doled out to tourists. I let Erik hold my hand. It would all end quietly at the hostel, I figured. Paul and I had our own room, and the Swedes shared one of the large coed rooms lined with bunk beds.

"Wait here," Erik said when we got back. "Sit with me awhile and watch the stars." He gestured to the open courtyard in the center of the hostel, a

small atrium with plastic chairs and potted plants, cigarette butts and empty wine bottles and abandoned novels.

I looked up. There were no stars, the sky choked with clouds and city light.

Ordinarily I would've said no. I looked to Paul, wanting some signal, perhaps, but his eyes were dark and inscrutable.

"Sure," I finally said. Erik flung himself onto one of the chairs, and I settled onto his lap.

Karolina made a clicking sound with her mouth, waiting, it appeared, for Paul to say something, to invite her up to his room. But when he said nothing, she made the clicking sound again, and then she and the rest of the group headed off to bed. Paul waited a beat longer, watching me. I saw him touch the pad of each finger to his thumb five times quickly. His mouth moved like he was going to tell me something, but instead, he walked away.

I kissed Erik for a while, letting him fumble at my bra until his motions slowed and his head lolled back like a flower too heavy for its stem. He began to snore softly, his breath smelling like cured meat. I said his name, but he didn't respond. I rose and padded off to find my room.

It was dark when I entered, well after 3:00 a.m. I closed the door quietly, careful not to wake Paul, but then I heard the creak of his bed. I could make out his shape, alone in the darkness.

"You're awake," I whispered. I no longer felt tipsy, only dehydrated and wired.

"Couldn't sleep," he said, and his voice sounded like it came from the bottom of a well. I thought of his tiny mother, feverish now, praying in her hospital room. She was hateful, too; I knew that. Whole lists of unfamiliar people and ways of being scared her, and so she hated them.

"Oh, Paul," I said, and I climbed into his narrow bed with him. He let me take his head and pull it against my chest. I felt sorry now—for my selfishness, for not correctly reading the evening. Paul moved his hands to my back. I could feel him breathing, the thud of his heart.

"Lindsay?"

I knew what he was asking, and I let him. He was nervous, as if engaged

in an elaborate act of contrition. He whimpered at the end, then collapsed to my side. I felt the urge to brush his hair back from his forehead—it was a maternal gesture, which was maybe the wrong sort of expression in that moment. I felt a giddy sadness that I distrusted—it was too much like nostalgia. We pulled apart. It was dawn.

We slept late into the day. I woke sweating in a hot stripe of midday sun. I was parched, my mouth bitter. I had a terrible headache. I felt Paul's familiar-yet-unfamiliar body against mine. I decided I would not say a word. It would ruin what had happened.

But when Paul woke up, I saw the way he looked at me. His repulsion was so powerful I could have believed I'd transformed into one of the bristled sows on his father's farm.

"Oh, God," Paul said. I could see his mouth working in silent, anxious recitation. "Oh, God," he said in disgust, in anguish, in regret. "That shouldn't have happened. I'm sorry. Are you—should we?" He made a kind of raking gesture then that I somehow understood.

Relax, I told him. I'm on the pill. I had been for years, to help regulate my cycles.

Of course, I should have known Paul well enough to have predicted what might happen: he kept at it. He muttered to himself. He teared up. He worried aloud. While we wandered the Duomo, he calculated due dates, his brow furrowed. Of course, he said morosely, his parents would want him to marry me. As if there were a baby definitely happening. As if that baby were a monster. As if I were a monster who'd entrapped him. He paced like a prisoner. He did not let up in the days that followed.

"You'll tell me when your period comes?" he asked, not once, but many times, contagious in his misery. "You'll let me know?"

I scoffed.

"I can't go home now," he said, shaking his head like a scolded child. "Not now, not with this."

"There's nothing keeping you," I said, but it wounded me to say it.

"You don't know for sure."

"It's your mother you're worried about," I said, but it wounded me again,

and deeper, the way he went on. "This is about her. Your mother. We're fine. The same. Like nothing ever happened."

I explained to him the unlikelihood, the almost-impossible odds. Eventually, when no logic would prevail, I gave up. I laughed bitterly in his face while he fretted. I called him an idiot in the lovely, uneven streets of Florence. Finally, on a train from Venice, I brought him into the swaying bathroom stall and showed him what he wanted: blood.

I was wicked about it. Disgusting, like a hog on his daddy's farm, wallowing in filth.

"Here," I said. "Touch it."

He blanched, but he did what I said.

"You know your mother's dying."

I said it plainly, watching his face contort. He already knew, but saying it out loud was cruelty. "She's dying, and there is no baby. Go home to her if you want. Just go home."

The train swung on a curve, and he fell back, catching himself against the foul little sink. I could see it in his eyes, the frantic way they flickered: fear, relief, fear. I shoved him out of the way so that he couldn't even wash the blood from his fingers.

And then we arrived in Rome.

To see the full majesty of Hadrian's Villa, of much of the grandeur of ancient Rome, we had to imagine it in its unruined state. The complex had been set up as a sort of retreat, an imperial enclave from which Hadrian could govern outside the city. By the time of the decline of the empire, the Villa fell into disuse, and people stole the most valuable statues. Marble was burned to extract lime to use for building material. The Villa, we learned, was eventually used as a warehouse during the Gothic Wars.

"It had to be trashed before anyone bothered to protect it," Martha observed.

"Isn't that always the way?"

Two of Martha's little sisters were chasing each other near one of the shallow pools.

"Stop!" Mr. Gooley yelled, his voice sharp enough that several other passing tourists paused to stare. He grabbed the arm of one of his daughters and yanked. The little girls went silent, chastened, but it was Martha's reaction that I noticed. She'd flinched. The angles of her face had hardened. I saw the way she'd stiffened all over.

"You okay?" I asked her.

She nodded, but her jaw didn't unclench.

As we followed Connor out of the Villa, Martha touched my arm to stop me. Mr. Gooley had an announcement for us. He cleared his throat and spoke. Instead of going for lunch as planned in our tour package, the Gooleys would be heading back to Rome early. Mrs. Gooley wasn't feeling well.

"We don't want to spoil your fun, though," Mr. Gooley added, knitting his shaggy brows. He and Mrs. Gooley both had mirthless, Old World faces, so it was improbable to think of them in any proximity to the word *fun*: laughing at a little table with a white tablecloth, passing bread and olive oil, drinking aperitivos. I couldn't even imagine it.

I shook my head.

"It's okay, really. I'm not so hungry. We can all head back together."

I dreaded the thought of the forced conversation with Connor if we had to ride in the van alone. A wild and inexplicable panic was also rising in me at the thought of Paul, whom I'd left without a clue to my whereabouts. But he hated me, I reminded myself. He would be fine.

"Please," I said. "It's okay." I smiled at both the Gooley parents in a way I imagined to be earnest and appealing. "Martha and I have had such a nice time. It'd be lovely to have the drive to chat more."

I smiled weakly at them, realizing the truth of my own words: I *did* like Martha. It felt simple and reassuring to talk to her. To take a brief reprieve from Rome, with its constant horns and sirens, the frenzy of traffic and majesty. I was not yet ready to take leave of Martha, but there was something else I felt—a sense of protectiveness. Mrs. Gooley rested one hand on the curve of her abdomen, where I could envision the baby floating peacefully. She had to be fifty at least, I thought, the good Mrs. Gooley. I wondered about the magnitude of the miracle this baby required.

I looked to Martha, thinking I might see gratitude in her face. I believed that I offered her something fresh, a vision of life outside the stultifying duty and discipline of life as a Gooley daughter.

Martha wouldn't look at me. She held a bit of her long skirt in one hand and twisted it. She bit her lip, glancing at her father.

Mr. Gooley shook his head.

"No," he said. "You're very kind, but we must be getting back. You've paid for the tour. You should get your money's worth. I've already hired another van."

I laughed a nervous laugh. The whites of Mrs. Gooley's eyes looked yellowish, her face almost gray in the strong sunlight.

"Please," I said. "I don't mind at all. It's okay, isn't it, Connor?"

Our tour guide lifted his hands in a helpless gesture.

"I'm sure Martha agrees. Don't you, Martha?"

I was uncertain why this direct appeal felt so important, why I was making myself such a fool.

"No," Martha said softly.

She still wouldn't meet my eyes. Mrs. Gooley knelt then, slow, like a hot-air balloon on its descent. She vomited quietly, and the dirt darkened and ran sour with bile.

I hurried over and knelt beside her. Everyone else seemed paralyzed, unsure what to do.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Let me help you up."

She touched the back of her hand to her mouth and then wiped her lips. Our backs were to the others, offering us some semblance of privacy. Mrs. Gooley stood up carefully, refusing the arm I offered her, then turned to face her husband and daughters again.

"I'm so sorry," I said to Mrs. Gooley. "About the baby."

Her face jerked up then, the cords in her neck tightening hideously. Her hair was dry and sparse, thinning at the center part. When she looked at me, her lips peeled back into a grimace.

"I know what it looks like," she said, shaking her head, still cradling the heft of her belly. "But there is no baby."

I turned to Connor now, trying to meet his eyes, to find someone who would witness and affirm my bewilderment.

The Gooley girls lined up like doleful ducklings, Martha included. I watched the way their expressions shuttered and went blank. They wore now, down to the tiniest girl, perfectly unperturbed masks of docile stoicism.

Mr. Gooley heaved out a great sigh, leaning down and offering his wife an arm. His knees clicked as he helped her to her feet, handing her a white handkerchief to dab at her mouth.

"Mrs. Gooley has liver cancer," he said to me, his voice flat. "It causes fluid in the abdomen."

He wheeled around with more grace than I expected from a large man, and the rest of the Gooleys followed him. I watched them go with a swishing of skirts, Martha at the end. She turned to me for a quick moment and her face briefly opened before closing again, completely. Her eyes flashed a warning to me, and I thought I understood then what she'd meant about a baby. A hideous prickling sensation ran down my spine. I almost called out for her to wait, to come with me, to run away from her poor, sour mother, great with tumor, and her father, the patriarch. But I couldn't have been sure. I feared being wrong. I watched Martha recede, and said nothing. The Gooleys filed neatly behind a line of parked vans and buses, then disappeared.

Connor and I got sandwiches and sodas from a little tourist stand on our way out of town instead of lingering. We both ate while he drove, and then I fell asleep. When he shook me awake, I thought I saw relief on his face. Perhaps I really was the unbearable one. I'd behaved awfully with Paul. I had to make amends.

It was late enough in the day that small clusters of weary backpackers were leaning against the walls near the reception desk inside, waiting to check in. One of them, a sunburnt boy with blond hair and a sprinkling of acne on his chin, nodded at me. I hurried past him, up the stairs and down the hall-

way, to our room. My hand was shaking as I worked the key into the door. I was breathless when I entered, ready to face Paul. To apologize.

His bed was neatly made, the sheets pulled tight and crisp under a shaft of afternoon sun. My pack slumped against the bed, next to the Japanese girl's. Paul's belongings were gone.

There was a torn bit of paper on my pillow with a hastily scrawled note: he had changed his flight.

I sank onto my bed, the golden yellow light of the Roman late afternoon washing over me. I closed my eyes.

What I'd shown Paul, in my cruelty, in my desperation to calm and absolve him, had really just been sleight of hand. I'd cut myself—the dumb, soft meat of my inner thigh. I'd transferred the blood.

The truth was that my little plastic clamshell of pills sat on my dresser back home, along with the floss I'd also meant to bring but had forgotten.

Rising, I opened the window and looked out onto the street below. A man was pushing his bicycle up the sidewalk and a group of girls in tank tops coaxed along a nervous little dog on its leash. Bells were ringing from a campanile in the distance. Martha and her family were somewhere in the city, maybe saying grace before a quiet supper. Elsewhere, across an ocean, lay Paul's mother in her hospital bed. Two pigeons landed on the windowsill, heads bobbing as if to better appraise me. Brushing them away, I stuck my own head out a bit farther. At the end of the block, a small crowd had gathered to watch a fire-eater. She tipped back and opened her mouth wide to extinguish the flame, making it look effortless—an everyday sort of miracle.