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Roman Norma of the Manor

Ben Brooks

She worked in a bank.

He knew her only by NORMA, the name, spelled out in capital letters, that was engraved in an aluminum-plated rectangle positioned on a stand in the corner of her teller's window. Since there were six windows, and any given window was used by different tellers at different times of different days, the name stands were portable rather than fixed, and the tellers carried them from window to window. The letters of Norma's name were cut so shallowly, he noted, that they might have been scratched into the metal by a pin or a paper clip rather than imprinted by a machine. Norma stood tall behind the bars of the teller's window, and willowy, and she had dark hair that was cut short and arranged in a rather old-fashioned style with prim, crisp curls running across her forehead like a row of fish hooks. She had a wide, loosely constructed mouth and a warm smile with a hint of irony when she greeted bank customers—as if there was something amusing about the entire situation of money—and dark purplish lips to which she never seemed to apply lipstick. Eugene Gechter liked that Norma didn't feel compelled to tamper with the natural color of her lips, which went well with her dark complexion. She was, he guessed, about thirty years old, which would make her more than half his own age.

He could not recall the exact day he had become obsessed with Norma, or the day that he finally acknowledged to himself that he was obsessed. He could not recall the first time he noticed her at the bank either, only that she had been there for months. Eugene was certain that Norma recognized him by now, and he fancied that she thought about him in the same way that he thought about her—and that each and every day she would keep one eye fixed on the doorway until he stepped through it.

He found himself stopping in at the bank three or four times a week. He would no longer use ATMs to deposit a check, no matter how small the check was, or to withdraw cash, and he would come to the bank every time he had a new check, even if the check was only for five or six dollars. Although Eugene had never personally had a complication using an ATM,

an acquaintance at work once complained that a machine had either lost or eaten a check he inserted into it, and that he had a devil of a time getting his bank to credit the money to his account. So on the basis of this secondhand testimony, Eugene convinced himself that ATMs could no longer be trusted to handle his financial transactions, and he had to carry them all out in person.

If, after waiting in line, it was a different teller who signalled that she was ready for him, Eugene was tempted to step back so the next person could go to the window in his place. What he should do, he thought, was smile and indicate that he was waiting until Norma was free. But he never did that, because he knew it would be too obvious, and when he did finally get to Norma's window he would have to come up with some explanation for picking her out. If Norma was not at any of the windows, Eugene would leave without conducting his business and save it for after lunch or the next day.

He timed most of his trips to the bank around the lunch hour, and after depositing a check or withdrawing ten dollars, he went to a nearby restaurant to eat. He took a table facing the door, and he fantasized Norma coming in over her own lunch break. She would recognize Eugene at once and stride straight to his table, and in a shy voice ask if she might join him. Eugene would gesture to the seat across from him and say, "Of course, I'd welcome the company." They would order together, as if the assignation had been planned, and at the end of the meal Eugene would insist on settling the bill.

It occurred to Eugene that Norma knew a lot more about him than he did about her—or at least she knew if she cared to know, since she had access to so much information. It would all be on her computer screen, every time she called up his account. She would know his full name, for example, whereas he only knew NORMA. She would know that he was married, or at least that he shared his bank accounts with someone named Sharon Gechter.

She would know how much money he had in savings and how much he kept in checking, and what his bi-weekly paycheck came to, and how many certificates of deposit he had and what their values were and when they were due to be renewed or cashed out. She would know that he had a safe deposit box, although presumably she would not know what was inside it—he imagined her wondering: is that where they kept his wife's jewelry? their stock certificates? the title to their house? their passports? She would know his social security number, his address, his telephone number, his credit card number, and the names of his children, who were listed on the account as beneficiaries. But Eugene didn't mind that Norma

might know things. In fact the more she knew about him, he thought, the better he liked it.

The rain came down in sheets, so rapidly that the gutters overflowed and the roads filled up with enormous puddles of water that shifted back and forth like miniature lakes. All morning Eugene had watched out the window as a gray sky turned darker, until at noon the sky was nearly black. When the rain began, it let loose with gigantic raindrops, so few of them that Eugene could count them one by one as they broke against the window by his desk. But that only lasted for a minute or two. Then the plug slipped out overhead and the torrents began. Eugene could have stayed inside and eaten at the employee cafeteria, but he had already made up his mind that he needed to go to the bank.

He pulled his car into the parking lot, and for a second or two let the windshield wipers continue their flapping. The bank had a drive-up station, but Eugene never used it. He tucked the envelope into his jacket pocket. Inside the envelope were two checks his wife had received for cosmetics she sold and a small stock dividend that had come to him, plus a deposit slip he'd already made out.

Even before he pushed open the door, his eyes had scanned the bank through the glass and seen that Norma was on duty. There was nobody waiting in line. Another teller signalled to Eugene, but he ignored her and walked to Norma's window. He approached with a grin as if he had some kind of news to tell her. Meanwhile rain water leaked out of his hair onto his temples, and he wiped it away with the back of his wrist.

"How are you today?" Eugene said. He neglected to clear his throat before he spoke and there was a frog in it, and the first word came out a little funny. But there wasn't time to get self-conscious.

"Fine. How are you?" Norma smiled.

"I'm fine. Except for all that rain. It got me coming in here."

"I bet," she answered.

Eugene pulled the checks out of the envelope and slid them across the chrome slot beneath her window, along with the deposit ticket. The amount came to just over seventy-one dollars. He watched Norma's long, dark fingers pull the checks out the other side. There was polish on her nails, burgundy in color. She had the same ring on her left hand that she always wore, but it didn't look to Eugene like the kind of ring that signified she was someone's wife—not a simple gold band, but a gaudy silver ring with turquoise chips set in the shape of a star. If that meant she was married, he thought, it was the damnedest wedding ring he had ever seen.

Every day when he came, he thought he would ask her a question—both

to get information, and also to show Norma that he was interested in her. He wanted to know her last name, for starters. He wanted to know where she lived and which one of the cars out in the parking lot belonged to her. He wanted to know where she was from originally, or if she had always lived in Ellsworth. He wanted to know if she went to church on Sundays, or if she was an atheist, or if maybe she was an agnostic like himself, never sure what to think about the larger questions. He wanted to know the kinds of things that grabbed her attention. He wanted to know if she had a boyfriend, although he couldn't imagine that she wouldn't. He wanted to know if she planned to have a career in banking, or if this was just a temporary thing for her. Along those same lines, it was important to know whether she was looking for another job. Because if she got one—without any way of tracking her down — he knew he would probably never see her again.

"Any cash back today?" she asked.

Eugene shook his head.

Norma completed the transaction, and the computer printed out his receipt. She slid it back under the window.

"You have a nice day," she smiled.

Eugene felt the question that was right there on his tongue slide back down his throat, the way it always did. He pulled his receipt out of the tray and tucked it into the envelope. With gritty determination, he kept his eyes on hers. "You have a nice day, too," he told her, his voice once again croaking out the first word.

At dinner he recounted his day to Sharon, and Sharon recounted hers to him.

"The country club," Eugene said. "The bloody country club, the bane of my life. I'm stuck on that roof. That's what I did all day—the roof. You know, it always comes down to the details. The details are going to make or break a building. They've got this interior courtyard planned, see. They want it to be round, and it's where the roof curves that's making me crazy. It's getting all the pieces to fit, you know, gutters, everything. Making sure the water flows right, positioning the downspouts. If the water doesn't flow right, the next thing you know it finds the cracks and starts seeping in. That's when the lawsuits start coming."

Sharon nodded. "Yeah," she answered, "so you've said."

She stood up with her plate and helped herself to another chicken wing at the stove. She was tall like Norma, Eugene thought, but far more filled out. Thicker in every part. And not as dark, hair or skin. Older. And more familiar to him. Too familiar—she began to chew on the wing before she sat down, ripping away the skin with her teeth.

"So how was your day?" he asked. "More interesting? What did you do?"

"Well, I showed four houses today," she said. "I put on a few miles."

"Great."

Sharon had taken a real estate course and gotten a license to sell property, but sales were sporadic. The market was stagnant, and people took forever to make up their minds. Persistence was the name of her game, she always said.

Real estate was what she spent the bulk of her time on, but she also sold a line of cosmetics on the side, by private order. The profit margin was slim—a few dollars here, a few dollars there—but the cosmetics were more satisfying because she made actual sales every day.

"So who'd you show the houses to?" Eugene asked.

He bit off the end of a wing bone and sucked at the marrow. He tried to imagine his wife's day, but the picture wouldn't form. All he could see was his own office, and that trip to the bank.

"The Hodsons. They're these people who have come in every Thursday for the last three months. It's practically a standing appointment. Two o'clock, after they feed. They're holding out for this exact house they've created in their minds. They think it's my fault it isn't out there. But if I tell them there is no such house, they'll dump me for another agent."

"You don't want them to do that. Not after the time you've put in."

"I certainly don't," she answered.

After dinner Eugene washed the dishes because Sharon had cooked. They took turns with that, depending on their schedules—whoever got home first put the meal together. When he was done with the dishes he dried his hands on the towel and filled a glass with water. He skirted the living room on his way out of the kitchen. Sharon had settled in with the television, and Eugene knew he was better off alone.

One conversation, he thought, was that so much to ask?

He laid his head back on the car seat. There was always a trick—they needed an ice-breaker. A few quiet words, and to share a chuckle. But that would never happen at a bank. Not with those bars over her window. Not with other tellers around, and customers, and Norma's supervisor lurking about. Not amid the sterile world of monetary exchanges. The conversation had to take place beyond the bank, the two of them alone, in some friendly setting. If he could arrange that, he thought, then anything was possible.

He slid his shirt sleeve up and checked the time. It was three minutes past noon. The car was in a corner of the bank parking lot, where Eugene had sight lines to both the main entrance and the back door. He had already

cashed his check. He had not gotten NORMA for his transaction, he got a teller named SHERRY. But Norma was there. And if she didn't come to where he went for lunch, then he would have to go where she went.

He played the radio. A symphony, music without words—not the kind of music, he was certain, that she listened to. But he could introduce her to it, to all the greats: Mozart, Bach, Haydn, Mendelssohn. He imagined Norma's appreciation, her touching her head to his shoulder, grave thanks for letting her in on the secret. That would be something they would have between them. Shyly, her hand would take hold of his, her fingers slip between his, and their eyes would shut in unison.

Though it was cold outside, the windows were cracked open, and that made the wind whistle through the slits. But if he kept the windows shut it was too stuffy in the car. The air got stale—he ended up inhaling the same molecules over and over. Also, without the outside air, there was nothing to smell but himself, the whiff of his own anxiety.

When the symphony ended he pressed a button and switched to a station that was delivering news. A crick had developed in his back, and he shifted in the seat. His foot was on the gas pedal as if the car were moving—it had been there the whole time, he realized. He looked at his watch. Now it was twelve-forty.

He had no idea what time her lunch break was. He didn't even know for sure that she got one, although he assumed she must. But she might bring her lunch to work and sit in back with a magazine, or chatting with co-workers. A sandwich and apple in a bag, he pictured, her slender fingers pinching over the end of the bag, a crisp, even fold. There would be tuna fish inside the sandwich, he guessed, or egg salad, and a leaf of lettuce trimmed down to the edges of the bread. Or else two slices of ham.

Maybe, he realized, the tellers ate in shifts, and Norma's was the first shift, and she had been to lunch and come back before he even arrived. In that case she wouldn't come through the door until the work day was over. He couldn't stay forever—he had to get back to the office. He had phone calls to return—and for all he knew, more had come in—and a memo to write regarding the roofing specifications, and then a meeting at two-thirty.

The news was over, and Eugene switched back to the classical station. An opera was playing—it was not one he recognized. The words were in German, and it made him doleful. He squirmed to alleviate the pain in his back, and drilled the bank door with his eyes as if that would make Norma step through. He waited until one-ten, then switched on the engine. If she came out now, he thought, he wouldn't have time to eat anyway. He would no sooner follow her into a restaurant than he would have to leave. When he got back to the office he would grab something from the cafeteria. Then

head upstairs, and eat at his desk while he worked.

Norma, he thought. Normal. Ordinary. No, not ordinary. Not ordinary at all. Therefore, not normal. So, abnormal. Or maybe it's me who's abnormal, he said to himself.

He leaned forward and stared at the drawings spread around his desk. They were large drawings, blueprints, forty inches across, and they were arranged in such a way as to overlap one another. It was the roof he was concerned with, where the building curled around the courtyard in a U shape. He tilted his head back. It was not easy to focus on a roof.

Using a black marker Eugene wrote it out on a sheet of paper, in block letters, all capitals, the way he knew it best. NORMA. Then he paused, and then beneath the name he wrote AROMA—but that was wrong, two A's and no N. He wrote MORON, but that was wrong, too. MORAN, it would be. Maybe that was her last name, he thought. NORMA MORAN. MOAN, if he dropped a letter, and he wrote that. MOAN MOAN, first name and last name. MAN if he dropped a second letter. Not WOMAN, but ROMAN. Meticulously he cut the letters apart with his Exacto knife and spread them atop the drawings with his fingertips. MANOR—ROMAN NORMA of the MANOR. ARMOR, almost, ROMAN NORMA of the MANOR wearing her ARMOR. And MORAL, almost. MORAL ROMAN NORMA of the MANOR wearing her ARMOR, he thought. Or maybe IMMORAL, adding a couple of letters. AMORAL. MORAL or IMMORAL or AMORAL, NORMAL or ABNORMAL, or maybe just ORAL. ORAL NORMA of the MANOR, MOAN MOAN. And RAMON, if she were Spanish, and a man. She could be ROMAN RAMON. NORM, he thought. MORN. RAM. ARM. NOR. ON. NO. MARN, he arranged with his fingers. AMRON, NOMRA, MOARN, NAROM, ORMAN. He pushed all the letters together in a jumble. *I'm the moron*, he said to himself, swiping the letters into the trash. *I'm the moron of the manor. Moral or immoral or amoral, normal or abnormal, take your pick. If I don't figure this roof out, I'll be here all night.*

He spent so much time in the parking lot, and in the bakery across the street pretending to peruse trays of cookies while watching the bank through the window, and inside the bank itself, it was like he was casing the joint. A bank robber, from the Roaring Twenties or the Depression Thirties: Clyde, and she was his Bonnie, working the heist from the inside. Eugene smiled. He wondered if Norma would have a key to the vault, or if she knew the combination. And what did they keep in the vault—stacks of cash, standing as tall as a man? Bills of every denomination, up to thousands and millions? Bricks of silver and gold so heavy that it took two people to lift them?

The dream was good for a laugh—guns blazing, bags full of loot, then his car screeching away. Norma would be reckless at the wheel, her head thrown back, hollering into the wind. Out the window Eugene would be trailing bullets behind them as thick as a swarm of bees, at anyone who tried to follow. But he needed someone to share the dream with—he longed to tell her. And to ask if she ever had thoughts like those, too.

Every morning Eugene worked up his nerve to talk to her, to say something besides "I'd like to cash this check, please," or "Here's another deposit—I must be your most faithful customer." He swore to himself he would follow her to lunch, or skip out early on his job and wait in the parking lot for her to leave.

I'm too old for these fantasies, he also thought, too old for these dreams. Nearing fifty—the idea subdued him. That was the age when blood slowed down. Twenty-eight of those years with Sharon, more than half his life, their three kids, all now done with college and moved away. Lily was going to be married in four months, the first to do that. They were waiting to become grandparents, that's the phase they were in. Beginning to talk about retirement. Growing old together, not dying yet but fading away. He was growing lighter in both color and weight, he thought, turning to a wisp, slipping back into the air that surrounded him.

He looked at the checks. There were three, all made out to Sharon. For perfume, skin cream, lipstick. Together, they came to twenty-two dollars. Sharon gave them to Eugene and he brought them to the bank. He told her he didn't mind. And tomorrow, he knew, there would be more.

Sunday morning he padded about the house, not able to make himself focus. Something had awakened him early, before four—he thought he heard the doorbell ring, the sound jarring him from sleep, though when he went to check there was no sign of a visitor. Of course, it took him a while to get to the door after he realized he was awake and made the association with the bell—he had to roll out of bed, find the floor with his feet, steady himself against the bureau, put on his robe and slippers, and shamble downstairs, still half asleep. And who would ring the doorbell at that hour anyway? Eugene opened the door cautiously to darkness and a wall of cool, dewy air. His eyes peered into emptiness. It must have been a dream, he concluded, but if it was, he couldn't remember the rest of it.

Afterwards he had not been able to get back to sleep. He didn't want to wake Sharon, so he rolled out of bed again and went to the kitchen and this time brewed coffee. That's where he sat, eyes sore, sipping from a mug, until the sun filled the room with light.

"You're making me nervous," Sharon said. She rattled the newspaper

and looked over the page she was reading. "Could you quit that pacing?"

"I'm not pacing. I'm walking," he answered. "There's a major difference."

"Walking aimlessly, Eugene. If there's a difference between that and pacing, it's pretty small, you have to admit. Hardly worth mentioning, in fact."

"So say you. Aimless—hah. Like you'd know where I was headed, like you can read my mind. Keep this clear, dear, your husband has a purpose. I'm a man with a plan."

"Look, I know you're tired, and I'm sorry you didn't sleep enough, but there's two of us in this house, and your pacing, or walking aimlessly, or whatever you want to call it, is making me crazy." There was a sour note in her voice that she didn't try to disguise. "So as a favor to your wife, if you would knock it off, I'd appreciate it."

Eugene glared at Sharon, then turned away. It was true what she said—he had been pacing ever since the sun came up, five hours now. His legs made him do it. They'd got the jitters and he couldn't stop them.

He headed for the stairs. He was too tired to read the paper, too restless to sit. He paced on the second floor, room to room—the bedrooms, all but the one he and Sharon used, empty now except when the kids came home for visits. He kicked off his shoes and lay flat on his bed, and his eyes went shut. His mind flooded. Behind Norma's window at the bank, crisp curls across her forehead. Eugene wondered where she would be on her day off. What she was doing, who she was with.

It was like he had entered a room without windows, a room without doors. The walls sealed, not even seams. As an architect, it was not hard to see the conundrum: Without openings, how had he gotten in? The most fundamental flaw of design, an error so basic as to be unimaginable. Yet there he was, no denying it, trapped inside such a room. Spinning himself in circles, scanning the walls and the floor and the ceiling for that elusive way out. Not even a crack—vapor would have trouble escaping such a place.

All that time he'd thought she was inside his head, and now he realized he was locked inside her. She absorbed Eugene, no part left out.

The room, he thought, must have been built up around him. That was the only way. And yet constructed so silently, so surreptitiously, that he had never been aware of any sawing or hammering. He was lulled into a state of dream, so everything going on was muffled. Then when the room was complete, the dream melted away.

He saw her at work and he saw her at home and he saw her in the car when there was no one beside him. He saw her at the movies. He saw her face in faces that he passed on the sidewalk, and he touched her when he

touched his wife. He touched her all over, the curls in her hair, her hands and her feet, warm spots inside her thigh, her belly and her breasts. He made love with Sharon as always, once each week, but the heat that ran through him went straight to Norma.

He sat to the side, his legs out beyond the table instead of beneath it, as if waiting for a signal to stand. They ate without speaking, nothing but the sounds of chewing and of the oven's heat ticking and settling. Nine minutes, Sharon timed, from seven-twelve to seven-twenty-one. The meal was like a race. All of nine minutes from the time he sat down until the time his plate was empty, four courses including the salad.

"You're distant, Eugene," Sharon said. "You've gone away without me. Don't you see I'm still here? You know, I might like to come, too. I feel lonely left behind."

"Distant?"

"Yes, distant. You're never here anymore. I'm asking you where you go."

"You're exaggerating," he answered. "Never here? I'm here right now." He laid his fork and his knife across his plate, careful to do so without clanking them on the ceramic. Then he touched Sharon's hand, as if to establish his presence, although he didn't take hold. Once the touch was done, he let his hand roll to the side.

"I never exaggerate," Sharon said. Her voice was grave. "I'm serious, Eugene. I'm asking you where you go. I get upset when you leave me by myself."

He felt surprised she'd even noticed—she'd never said anything before. The blood drained from his face and filled his neck. "If I go anywhere, it's back to work, I guess," he answered. "You know, the way things pile up."

"You're sitting there thinking about work?" She drummed her fingers on the table.

"I don't know. Not actually thinking, if you want to be technical, but it's on my mind."

"You want to talk about it?" she asked. "You want to tell me what it is?"

"It's too boring," Eugene said. He tipped the salad bowl toward him to see if anything was left besides shreds of lettuce. "It's just details. You know. It's everything I have to do."

Sharon scraped her chair back and stood up, a dish in each hand. She shook her head at Eugene. She took the dishes to the sink.

"What?" he said. "Why are you so upset?"

"You look like you're in prison," she told him. "You know that? Like I've got you all locked up and you can't find the key. If you want to get up,

then get up. If you want to go away, go away."

"I don't want to get up," he answered. "Who said I wanted to go away?"

Sharon ran water in the sink and squeezed in dish detergent. She stacked the plates in the water. She had her back to her husband.

"You cooked," Eugene said. "Let me wash the dishes. Come on."

He went and stood behind her. He placed his fingers on her hips, familiar as they were.

Suddenly Sharon slumped her shoulders and leaned back into him, and Eugene's arms circled her waist. The water was still running from the spigot. It was piping hot, so steam rose out of the sink. Eugene squeezed his arms together, and Sharon pressed her cheek to his. That's when he felt she was wet—tears sliding between them.

"Don't cry," he whispered. "Everything's all right. Really. I just got distracted."

"It's not all right. I hate it when you leave me alone."

Eugene felt her tremble. "But you're not alone. I'm right here, aren't I? Who do you think this is?" He planted a kiss on her jaw, but even as he did, it was Norma's skin that he tasted.

On Monday she wasn't there, on Tuesday she wasn't there, and on Wednesday she wasn't there either. Eugene went before lunch, noted the lay of the land and held onto the checks, then came back after he ate but she still wasn't there. He lingered in the lobby, pretending to read brochures about home mortgages and retirement accounts. He wanted to talk to Norma about the way things were, because he had no one else to tell it to. On Thursday he stopped on his way to work, just after the bank unlocked its doors.

His wife's cosmetics checks piled up.

Okay, she could be sick, he thought. A flu or a bad cold, it didn't have to be something serious. Or she took a vacation, a week off to catch up at home. Or she went on a cruise, five days in the Caribbean—everyone deserved a little time in the sun. Or maybe her sister got married, he thought, or her grandmother died.

What he felt, before he allowed his eyes to gaze through the glass, was a rush of anxiety bordering on panic. This rush stimulated sweat, and he stood at the bank entrance soaking through his clothes.

He wanted to talk to her. As a matter of record, he told himself, this was the week he had resolved to speak. Not just instructions about the checks he brought in, not just tell her about his own dilemma—but to ask Norma that certain first question about herself. To let her know that he'd noticed her.

On Friday she wasn't there once more. Eugene was positive she'd quit,

and he would never see her again. He slid his checks through a window, to a teller named DONNA. Donna with her hair bleached blonde, the dark roots showing, her face thin and pinched, the skin sallow. Her sweater was too large, and there was something perfunctory about the way she addressed Eugene. He wanted to ask where Norma was, but he felt stifled. He couldn't make the words come out.

Or maybe she was dead, he thought. He looked at the receipt in his hand. Lost not only to him but to the world. Things like that did happen. A car crash, a murder, a fire, an accident, tumbling out of her fifth floor apartment when she leaned too far trying to adjust the screen. She fell asleep in the bathtub and drowned. Or she had a sudden seizure—she'd never had one before—and there was no one around to help. Eugene thought about all the bizarre deaths he had ever read about in the newspaper. A friend kept exotic pets, and one got loose from its cage, and Norma was bit on the ankle by a cobra. Or she went to the drugstore to fill a prescription and the pharmacist handed her the wrong combination of medicines, a mistake that twisted her insides into knots. No one said life was forever. There were no guarantees, not even something so simple as that another day would follow the last.

He stood in the doorway until a woman bumped past him. Now I'm in the way, he thought, interfering with the eternal flow. The week was all but over. Three of the windows had tellers in them and three did not, and Norma was nowhere to be seen. Or maybe it was only something like appendicitis, he mused, consoling himself again, soothing his nerves, forcing the panic down—and she was in the hospital recuperating. If that was the case he ought to think about picking up some flowers, which he could slide through the slot along with his checks. Certainly she would be back on Monday, hardly the worse for wear.

But it was Sharon who got the flowers, not Norma. Eugene put together a bouquet himself, picking out one flower here and one there. He mingled colors, pulling the flowers from the refrigerated case as well as from the display by the counter. Orange and pink and white and violet, some buds still new and tight, some in full bloom. He stopped at the florist's on the way home from work. He had not been kind to his wife, he thought. She deserved better—what had happened was through no fault of hers. It was all Eugene—he had gotten distracted. He paid her no mind. He couldn't remember when it started, though he knew it was months.

Sharon was upstairs, so Eugene arranged the bouquet in a vase and set the vase on the table. In the center, sticking above the rest, was a daffodil, bright yellow, head drooping forward.

Eugene slipped off his jacket. The country club was finished, at least

the drawings phase, and his next project had not kicked into gear. He'd had two weeks with little to do but think. But without being able to lay eyes on her, Norma had faded, and it was Sharon who rose to the fore. She had been there so long, he thought, then got crowded out by someone he never even knew.

For all he did know, Norma had simply been transferred to a different branch. But Eugene never inquired. Words no longer shrank from his tongue, they didn't form in the first place. Urgency yielded to mere curiosity. And curiosity ground away and flattened itself out. The questions didn't disappear, but they drifted off to the side. There were a million and a half possible explanations, but nothing was asked and no reason was given. The teller's face, so vivid before, was now a colorless blur.

When she came downstairs Sharon noticed the flowers right away. "Oh," she said. She leaned forward to sniff them. "These are nice. They're beautiful, Eugene."

"They're for you." He gave her a smile. "A little something from my heart to yours."

"Really?" Her eyes drilled into him. "How come?"

As he had grown more distant, so had she. In the evenings they ate in silence, then went their separate ways. Mornings, too, neither had much to say.

"I don't know," he answered. "I guess I just felt like it. I've been missing you."

"Missing me?"

"Inside."

He dropped his jacket over the back of a chair. It was comforting the way his wife melted against him, comforting and familiar. It was a matter of the possible, Eugene thought, the possible versus the never. And here Sharon was, far more than possible. She was right there.

Savory

Leta Keane

Just after Jasper Pennington turned seven, he began swallowing objects, things he found and put in his mouth.

His father, a child psychologist, despaired. "I thought we'd done right," he'd say to his shocked, sympathetic co-workers. "It strikes indiscriminately, that damned oral fixation."

Jasper's mother took to vacuuming the rugs with militant vigor. She cleaned every surface, under the couches and refrigerator, the tops of fan blades, the undersides of chair legs, with hospital precision. Jasper's teachers grew tired of finding pen caps and erasers and glue sticks gone missing, and the neighbor accused him of consuming the hollow, ceramic rabbit she used to hide her spare house keys.

Jasper wanted to explain that he couldn't help it—food had lost its appeal; there was no sustenance there. No exciting edges, no dangerous corners, no tongue-curling flavors. What carrot could rival the tang and sharp curves of a miniature wrench? What apple could match the rainbow slick of the marble he found in an oily puddle of rain on the side of the road?

He woke to this world of risk and dare, this world of sensation and flavor, just three weeks ago, four and half days after his birthday. The detritus of the festivities still lay about the parlor floor, his mother having decided to do nothing about it for the time being. Out of boredom on this long Sunday afternoon, Jasper had wedged himself beneath the settee, the one with the mahogany legs carved in the shape of taloned mahogany feet, each clutching a mahogany ball. He lay on his back staring at the hidden underside of the sofa, studying the frayed ends of the brocade upholstery and the unvarnished strips of wood and the ugly oxidizing staples holding it all together. He ran his hands along the carpet at his sides, extending his arms out and down, like making snow angels. Or, what he imagined it would be like to make snow angels. Jasper was a sickly child, and his mother and his governess wouldn't let him play outside once the temperature dropped below "brisk." Jasper found the months between December and April sadly tedious.

As he moved his arms about in slow, swimming parabolas, Jasper's

fingers brushed a red plastic bow that once sat in shiny glory atop one of the resplendent presents. It moved slightly with every pass, making a quiet shishh sound. Shishh shishh shishh shi—

The parabolas stopped halfway through their arc. Jasper's fingers closed around the bow, gently, as though they were holding a bird, or a dandelion fluff, so as not to crush the graceful bends of the iridescent ribbon. He brought it before his face, eyes crossing a little, trying to focus on the bright patch of red that hovered so closely. He touched it to his mouth, enjoying the cool smoothness of the flat ribbon, as well as the unexpectedly sharp tug of an edge catching against his lip. And without really thinking about it, Jasper put the bow in his mouth. And his tongue, acting out of habit built on years of swallowing eight pills every morning for various ailments and maladies, swallowed it, shine and all.

Jasper's mind went white. Every nerve along his esophagus reported the bow sliding down on its way to his stomach. Slick, prickly, satin, razor, rigid, pliable—each axon, dendrite, and neurotransmitter stood up and screamed a dozen impossible, delicious paradoxes at him.

After the fireworks had died down, Jasper found he was ravenous. He'd never been ravenous before. His slight, frail constitution wasn't designed for such energetic impulses. Nonetheless, Jasper craved more.

Slowly, the ribbons and paper that once lay strewn about the carpet disappeared, as well as a small ivory carving of an elephant that stood on the piano, a dried blossom from the bowl of potpourri on the end table, and a seashell from a small dish. Jasper trotted out of the parlor, snuck past the living room where his mother sat watching soap operas, and found himself standing in front of The Door,

It was the door to the attic, always locked, strictly forbidden. And, therefore, a place of ceaseless desire to Jasper's seven-year-old mind. All Jasper knew was that things were "put away" into the attic when they were no longer useful or needed. If the debris of his party had been so delectable, what would the leftovers and scraps of a life be like?

Jasper picked the lock with a paperclip, which he put in a pocket (it was too useful to eat). He had to use both hands to turn the ancient, heavy doorknob. The door opened slowly, disappointingly silent, without the classic creak that heralds danger and excitement. The dark stairs rose up into darkness. Jasper tingled, and the skin on his arms prickled in nervous anticipation. He set his left palm on the second stair up, and began his climb.

The stairs creaked, making up for the well-oiled hinges of the door. Some of them moaned like a tree twisting in a bad storm. Some of them cracked and popped like bones. With every noise, Jasper jumped, and

grinned.

At the top, he stood for a moment in the darkness. There was one grimy window at the far end of the attic. It let in enough light to illuminate the dust in the air. Jasper knew there was a lonely light bulb somewhere, because his mother refused to go into the attic if the light was out, and made Jasper's father (on the rare occasions he was home) change it. In the dingy light, as his eyes adjusted, Jasper saw the string which operated the light hanging in the idle of the attic. Dragging a box over, he climbed up and pulled on the string until he heard it click. When he released it ...

... he was in paradise.

Instead of the rows of sealed and labeled boxes he'd been expecting, he saw piles, shelves, heaps of what could only be called junk. Bags of buttons, a deer skull or two, ancient hunting gear, a violin with three strings snapped, moth-eaten lacy dresses, a jar full of clothespins, four full-length mirrors, yellowed newspapers, tarnished silverware, ribbons and trophies from some parent's childhood. He didn't know where to begin. Some terribly mawkish music wafted up the stairs, meaning his mother's soap opera was almost over. He pocketed one of the bags of buttons and switched off the light. All but sliding down the stairs, he closed the door and locked it, picking it closed with his paperclip.

His mother found him in front of the door. "Jasper," she scolded, "you know you're not allowed up there. No amount of staring is going to open that door."

He allowed his shoulders to droop, and mustered up what he thought was a beautifully petulant whine. "But, Mom ..."

"No, young man. You march yourself up to your room until dinner."

"Fine," Jasper huffed quite convincingly, and stomped down the hall to his bedroom, where he spent not a few happy hours sifting through the bag of buttons. He ate them with the patience and relish of a connoisseur. Later that night, over a cup of sweet tea, his mother asked him if he was feeling well—he hadn't eaten much at dinner. Jasper shrugged in response, and wondered how the sugar tongs would taste.

Old Wars

Dennis Vannatta

My wife used to joke that everybody I met reminded me of someone I knew in the army during the war. But that was a long time ago for that young couple, recently married, long ago for that war—Vietnam—now relevant only as an object lesson, a cautionary tale. These days, no one reminds me of someone I knew in the army. At least not until Monday morning two weeks ago.

I never went to Vietnam myself. Contrary to what Hollywood would have you believe, not everyone who served in the military in that period was a combat infantryman subjected to all the horrors of warfare along with its attendant guilt, ambivalence, etc. No, the majority of us saw no combat; the majority of us never saw Vietnam. As for me, I went directly from MP school in Ft. Gordon, Georgia, to Germany, where I spent twelve hours a day sitting in a security tower guarding pine trees. Probably half our company were Vietnam vets, though, three-year volunteers who'd served their twelve months in country and were finishing out their enlistments in the land of schnitzel, warm beer, and hairy-legged women. We envied them a bit, I think, even then realizing that Vietnam was the great event of our generation, but we'd missed it. For the most part, though, you couldn't tell them from us. If we pressed them about what it was like over there, they'd talk about the abundant weed, the cheap PX stereo systems.

But then there was the case of Howard Reese, which brings me back to Burger King, two Monday mornings ago. A dozen of us old timers meet there about every day for coffee and gossip. We call ourselves the "young fellas," ha ha. Almost sixty, I'm one of the youngest and one of the few still working. Most of the others will already be there when I arrive at eight and they'll still be at it—joking and arguing and pontificating about sports and politics and the general sorry state of the world today—when I leave for the office forty-five minutes and two cups of decaf later. "I expect you guys to have it all figured out this time tomorrow," I'll say as I make my exit. And they'll tell me to get a move on before one of them has to whip my young ass. That sort of thing. Loud old man stuff.

That Monday I'd no sooner sat down than I spotted the new guy. He was hard to miss, sitting in a booth by himself near the front, white shirt and tie, plastic pocket-protector festooned with pens and pencils, silly grin on his face and one of those paper Burger King crowns on his head. Any time a customer came within ten feet of him, he'd hold out his hand and say, "Howdy! Shake hands with the king of Burger King!"

"Well, he's going to be a change from ol' Bill, ain't he?" George Lapouge, one of us young fellas, said.

"What do you mean?"

He nodded toward the guy in the crown. "Him. He's the new district manager. Bill Milton got canned over the weekend."

"You're kidding me!"

I've been a young fella long enough that I'm familiar with the whole Burger King operation. Ed Arnett owns "our" store plus seven others in the city and environs. Bill Milton—big, beer-bellied, red-faced, abusive to employees and vaguely hostile even to customers—had been the district manager. Clearly, this new guy was no Bill Milton.

"What's his name?" I asked.

No one knew. "Don't worry, young Charles," George said, "we'll get it figured out before long."

"That'll be the first thing you get figured out," Al Koppelman said. Then they were back arguing about whatever they'd been arguing about when I came in. The Iraqi War, most likely. It was good for at least a half-hour's analysis and debate a day, especially this time of year, the dog days of summer, the pennant races not to the crisis stage yet, football not even on the radar.

I couldn't keep my eyes off the new guy, my age, match me wrinkle for wrinkle, sitting there with his sappy grin and paper crown. But it wasn't the crown. Then it came to me: I knew him.

That night at the dinner table I announced to my daughter, Kathy, who despite my protests had been coming over to cook for me two or three times a week since her mother—Donna, my wife—died, "I saw a guy today I knew in the army."

"Oh, really!" she said brightly, the way she greeted any sign of life from me. Her mother—Donna—would no doubt have just rolled her eyes. "Who was it?"

But I didn't know.

At my age, the harder you try to remember something, the more it eludes you. I figured I'd just sleep on it, but sleep doesn't come too easily these days, either. It's the bed, too big now that it's just me. I'll roll around

all over it until I'm exhausted but generally find sleep only once I confine myself to "my" side, up against the left edge, about the width of a coffin, I think as I lie there with my hands crossed on my chest. Or, it occurred to me that Monday night, about the width of an army cot in the big bay we MP's slept in in our company barracks in Germany.

That's when it came to me, who the guy in Burger King was: Howard Reese. My problem had been trying to be too logical about it, doing a CSI thing on his face, mentally removing those sixty-year-old wrinkles, smoothing his skin, restoring a youthful bloom, smile, zest. Only when I'd begun to drift off to sleep did my subconscious or whatever take over, and I suddenly saw Howard, the way he'd in reality been: no guileless smiling twenty-year-old but a man old beyond his years, sallow-skinned, rheumy-eyed, hands trembling when he tried to light a cigarette. His black hair was greasy. His teeth were green. He smelled. None of us ever saw him take a shower.

"We ought to give him a shower, use a goddamn shoe brush on him," some of us said. "Hell, give him a goddamn blanket party," others suggested. But we did nothing. It wasn't that we were afraid of him, exactly—he seemed too far gone in a state of decay to effectively do anything to anybody. It was more like we were afraid to get too close, afraid of contamination.

"A smack freak," we older hands in the company, self-respecting juicers and hash-smokers all, snorted. But the other smack freaks in the company—the "younger generation," as we thought of them—refused to claim him, either.

Mostly what I remembered of Howard Reese was of somebody always alone. He talked to no one, rarely made eye contact. On his off days, he'd take the bus into Pirmasens—by himself. We never knew what he did there. Back in the barracks, he'd sit on his cot staring at the floor and have the damnedest time lighting his cigarettes. It'd make you nervous just watching him. And then of course there was also his screaming.

Every night, at some point, early or late, it'd begin, a low moan at first, then increasing in pitch and intensity as he clutched the steel frame of the cot and clenched his teeth and his head whipped from side to side, mmmmmmmmm-eeeeee-aw-aw-AW-AW-AW-OOOO!... on and on until he'd throw himself off the cot and rush into the can, where he'd stay for an hour or two, in a fog of cigarette smoke.

Finally, we went to our platoon sergeant. "Sarge, we're going to do something to that son of a bitch. We can't take it any more."

"Aw, cut him some slack," Sergeant Reynolds said. "He went through hell in Nam, what I heard. Give him a little time, boys, give him just a little more time."

We took our cue from the other Nam vets. They never asked for any special treatment—as I said, they rarely even talked about Nam—and they'd been as irritated and repulsed by Howard's body odor and night terrors as the rest of us. But now they backed off and simply watched with curiosity or respect or awe—I don't know what to call it. Maybe it was the way the rest of us, covertly at least, saw them. They'd been there—Nam—and we hadn't. They'd been there but hadn't been through hell. Probably most of them had never even experienced combat. Howard had. So we all just watched, and waited.

As it turned out, we didn't have to do anything about Howard Reese. Only a few days after our meeting with Sergeant Reynolds, Howard disappeared.

It'd happen all the time that somebody would be late coming back from a three-day pass. These were nineteen, twenty-year-olds we're talking about here, farm boys who'd never been out of the county they were born in before and tough-talking city boys who at home still had their mama cutting up their meat for them. They had a hell of a time with those train schedules, inconveniently written in German. Nor was it unheard of for a guy to go AWOL for a week or two—generally when his wife or girlfriend came over for a visit and the CO, the bastard, wouldn't give him leave. But this was different. This time the CID was called in, the NCOs were questioned, and so were a few of us who bunked near Howard. No one knew a thing. What was going on?

The army being the proving ground for shit-house rumors, theories were varied and imaginative. Howard was in cahoots with a drug ring in Pirmasens, and he'd been bumped off. Howard was in cahoots with a drug ring in Pirmasens, and he'd bumped off someone else and was on the run. He'd stolen a box of M-16s from the armory and had sold them to . . . fill in the blank. He'd sold secrets about the ordnance we guarded out in the security areas to the Commies. Etc., etc. Most of the speculation was farcical with the exception of the drug-ring scenarios. There were a lot of drugs around the depot. It had to be bought and sold. Somebody was making a ton of money on it. Where there was money, there was potential for bad shit happening.

We were convinced that bad shit of some sort had happened when the whole company was rousted out of our bunks one night, given flashlights, and led out into the woods surrounding the depot. We formed into one long rank and began to make our way slowly through the trees. We were not told by anyone in authority to look for Howard Reese, specifically. "Keep an eye out for anything suspicious," was all the CO said. At a certain point the word went up and down the line that we should look for something that

could be a freshly dug grave, but I suspect that falls under the category of ye olde shit-house rumor, floated by one of our own. Later, the word passed to look up in the trees. "Howard Reese hanged himself! He's hanging up in one of those trees! Pass it on!" We walked forward. We looked up. We looked down. Some jackass had sneaked a transistor radio out with him, and suddenly we were accompanied on our march by Donovan singing "Hurdy-Gurdy Man." On that strange night, black trees writhing under a bright moon, the song sounded weirdly ominous. I was glad when some NCO hollered for the radio to be turned off. We never found Howard, of course, and after that night the CID left us alone and neither the CO or the NCOs mentioned Howard Reese again. I don't remember him being a big topic of conversation among the rest of us, either. I suspect few of my fellow GIs thought of him at all. Why that night left such an impression on me, I don't know. Maybe it was as close to Vietnam as I ever got, my own little search and destroy mission, my night in the shit. For years afterward, whenever "Hurdy-Gurdy Man" came on an "oldies" station, I had to resist the urge to look up into the trees.

Instead of seeing Howard Reese hanging in a tree, forty years later I saw him sitting in Burger King with a paper crown on his head.

He'd been altered very nearly beyond recognition, not by time so much as by happiness, or so I imagined. He'd been through hell. He'd seen the worst, and survived, and gone on with his life—no, not just gone on but made it better, by God. I'll admit it: he gave me hope. I couldn't wait to see him again.

He wasn't there Tuesday morning. On Wednesday I was just about to bail out early because the discussion had turned to Wayne Cramer's wife, who'd just been diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease, a long, hard, bad way to go, when Howard Reese walked through the door.

He glad-handed a few employees and asked several customers, including our gang, if we were being treated OK, but there was no paper crown on his head today. Today, he wasn't playing the fool. He hollered around to the front that the napkin dispenser needed to be refilled, checked the ketchup dispenser, eyed the floor and said that it needed to be mopped—now. He was professional, competent, in charge. I was proud of him.

He went out the side door—to inspect the parking lot, probably. I followed and cornered him by the trash receptacle.

"Say, I could be way off base here, but you wouldn't by chance happen to be Howard Reese, would you?"

He extended a hand and grinned before saying, "Guilty." Then he cocked his head quizzically and waited for me to drop the other shoe. I

did.

"My name's Charles Moulder—but I'm sure you wouldn't remember that. I think we knew each other once upon a time, close to forty years ago, in fact. In Germany."

He cocked his head the other way, squeezed my hand. "Germany?"

"Yeah, the army. An MP company out in the boonies about thirty Ks from Pirmasens."

He started pumping my hand furiously. "No kidding! No kidding! No kidding! What did you say your name was again?"

I told him, said I was glad to see him again, glad to see him doing so well because the last time I'd seen him he was having a tough time of it. I mentioned the company looking for him that night, described it like a big joke, a lark that nobody took seriously, and he joined right in, laughed so hard he had to lean over against the trash receptacle.

When he paused long enough for a deep breath, I sprang the question: "Look, Howard, it's absolutely none of my business, but I've been wondering for forty years: what exactly happened to you?"

This started another round of laughter, including pounding on the rounded top of the trash receptacle. Finally he got himself under control again. "A girl, Charles, a girl," he said. "Marie was her name. German girl. Tall. Blonde. Oh, man, she was something. I decided my time was better spent with her. I had this room in Pirmasens, and we shacked up there for, oh, two or three months before they caught up with us."

"What happened?"

"Court-martialed me for being AWOL, busted me down to E-1, and I spent the last two months of my enlistment in the stockade in Mannheim. Let me tell you, though, Charles, it was worth every minute, every penny of it. That Marie, oh, mama mea!"

We laughed some more.

I'm human. I'll admit I was, well, not disappointed, exactly, but I felt a little let down. Some of the scenarios my buddies had come up with for Howard's disappearance were a lot more dramatic than a guy shacking up with his girl. But I felt good for him. And maybe I'd be able to listen to "Hurdy-Gurdy Man" again without a shudder.

At the same time, I couldn't help thinking that something didn't seem quite right about his story. I had a hard time reconciling beautiful Marie with Howard Reese's green teeth, BO, and screaming fits.

I saw him again a couple of days later at Burger King and asked him, "So, Howard, whatever happened to Marie?"

"Who?"

"The German babe."

"Oh, that Marie. Well, you know, kind of hard to carry on a relationship from the stockade. Those German bitches were just after your money, anyway."

"So you didn't bring back some Fraulein to the States?"

"No."

"How about now? Married?"

"No. You?"

"I lost my wife a few months ago."

"Oh. Sorry... Say, I have to be hitting the road. I have seven other stores I have to whip into shape."

"Right, right. Say, maybe we could get together some night, share a few beers, talk over old times."

"Right, right. Definitely! We'll talk later."

"Definitely."

I waited almost a week, but he never came in again at breakfast. I asked up front and Joy, the assistant manager, said he'd taken to coming in later in the day, around noon. I usually took a sack lunch to the office, but I came in to Burger King for lunch three days in a row, and finally there was Howard Reese again.

He wasn't exactly pleased to see me. He did an about-face and went back out the door. I followed him onto the parking lot.

"Hey, Howard, what's the deal? If you didn't want to see me, why didn't you just—"

He pushed himself back into a corner formed by the outer wall of the restaurant and the fence surrounding the play area. He held his hands up in front of his face like I had an M-16 trained on him or something. He seemed to shrink right in front of my eyes—to shrink and his back to bow and skin to grow sallow and oily as if from death sweats as he splayed his trembling fingers and his eyes narrowed to red teary slits and he pleaded, "Don't, don't, please don't, I don't want, don't..." He was shuddering, crying. I couldn't stand it. I fled.

I didn't get much work done at the office that day. Mostly I sat there trying to figure out what had happened with Howard on that parking lot. No point in making it too complicated, though. I'd reminded Howard of the bad old days—ultimately, Vietnam, which, obviously, he'd never gotten over. Should I have been surprised? Do we ever get over anything?

Almost all of us "young fellas" are veterans. I'm not sure about John Huerta. Either he wasn't in the military, or he just doesn't want to talk about it. The rest of us talk about it—a lot. It's a shared experience, and it's in

the past, and the past—the army, childhood escapades, how things were in the good old days—is our chief topic of conversation. We'll talk about the present, too, of course, especially sports and politics. As for the future, well, we all know what's coming. The less said about that the better.

I'm a relative newcomer to the group. I've only been a young fella for seven months—since Donna died. Some of the old timers have been here since before the playground was added, back when Westmorland Avenue was two-lanes. No one has died since I joined, although Clyde Summers told me we lose a couple a year on average. So we're about due.

Four of us are widowers. Two of us have wives in the process of dying. And then of course Wayne Cramer's wife was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Gregory Bohne is the only bachelor among us. We tell him he's a lucky bastard, and maybe one or two of us actually believe it.

Simon Johnson, eighty-seven his next birthday, is the oldest of us. He has the shakes and forgets things easily and is rarely seen unaccompanied by his buddy, Jim Noyes. Simon is dropped off at Burger King every morning by someone driving a Volkswagen bug, one of those new ones. He'll sit nervously watching the door until Jim comes in, and then he'll wave and holler in a mixture of anxiety and relief, "Jim Boy, Jim Boy, over here!" Someone told me he is so attached to Jim because they were in the war—the Big One—together, but I suspect it's mostly because Simon is a widower, and Jim is all he has left, war buddy or no war buddy. You get lonely.

When word spread this morning—Monday, two weeks to the day since Howard Reese sat there in that paper crown—that they'd already made a change in the district manger position, Simon took it hard. "Howard Reese is gone!" he exclaimed, voice cracking. "He's gone! Old Howard Reese is gone. Oh no, oh no, Howard Reese is gone!"

He wouldn't let go of it. Even Jim Noyes couldn't get him calmed down. In a minute he was blubbering like a baby. The others thought it was pretty funny. Al Koppelman laughed so hard he had to take a pill. I tried to laugh, too, but it got to me, and I had to leave.

I went into the men's room and splashed water on my face, only then remembered there were no paper towels. I didn't feel like sticking my head down by one of those hot-air hand driers. I stood there at the sink, looking at myself in the mirror and waiting for the water to dry on my face so no one would think I'd been crying.

My god, my god, look at me. Look at me! My head tilts forward on my scrawny neck like a buzzard's. And my hair—when I was a teenager I'd stand in front of the mirror for an hour, tapping at that thick hair with a comb, getting it just so. Lord, how my father would hoot, Hey, Troy Donohue,

I'm going to make you pay rent on the bathroom! Where are the snows of yesteryear, hell; where is the hair of yesteryear? I see a mole poking through what's left of my hair over my right temple. I'll have to have the doc take a look at it. Another mole in my right eyebrow—is the doc already keeping an eye on that one? My hairy earlobes hang down like a dachshund's. My nose, I tell you no lie, my nose grows more bulbous every day. And the wrinkles, the wrinkles! My god, I look like a burn victim. And I am so lonely.

We are all veterans. Everyone has gone to the wars.

Redwood

Letitia L. Moffitt

Something always happens when I order a drink in a bar—something I dread. I take out my ID and give it to the bartender. He reads the birth year: 1985. He looks at me. He looks at lineless eyes and acne. He says *You're 45years old*, in a tone that doesn't require adding *You've got to be kidding me*. So then I have no choice; I have to explain that I'm one of the Lao babies, otherwise I won't get my glass of merlot. In New York that's usually enough; the bartenders look surprised and pleased, as though I'm a minor celebrity gracing their humble watering hole, but they don't ask questions, instinctively assuming a desire for privacy. This one was no exception.

But then you happened to be sitting next to me.

The Lao babies?

Yeah, don't you read the papers, the bartender sneered at you. He looked at me with that we-get-all-kinds-in-here look. You looked abashed, then curious—then something else. Something I've seen before, the kind of look only men in bars have.

Lao. It means old. Old babies. I told you this as you kept looking at me, hoping it would be enough, but of course it wasn't.

And this has happened before, too: Someone will start telling the story, the bartender or another customer or even someone on the TV news. They always tell the same things, because they don't know about the other things—the things I remember, the things I won't tell either.

The Lao babies. The covert joint operative in China. The funds turned out to be European and American; the scientists and the subjects, Chinese; the location, a few extremely remote villages where the women had an unusually great life expectancy, remaining neotenous from puberty through menopause, each stage stretched out longer than normal. The women were studied, examined, and ultimately persuaded to give up their newborn daughters. It didn't take much persuasion—a little hush money, an implied threat, and the promise that no one would ever know. And, of course, that the girls would be more than adequately cared for.

I remember a sound, not a room. As though we were contained by the sound. The sound was us. When we were crying, when we were silent,

always the same sound. That sound was fear.

Then the experiments: genetic mutation, gene splicing, untested drug combinations, all investigating the possibility of cells regenerating without becoming cancerous. They had to stop the project, though, soon after Tiananmen Square—too much foreign scrutiny. The files were destroyed, and the organization had to play along with its cover—that it was taking these babies to be adopted overseas. The girls all found good homes across the industrialized world.

I remember us disappearing and reappearing. Some not reappearing. The sound remained, though, until one day we all disappeared. Sometimes I hear it as a memory. Sometimes I still hear it like a room around me, keeping me in.

Of course, not everything was swept clean. After a few years, a couple of the relocated lower-level scientists began to talk. They didn't say much, but generated enough rumors to make up for it. Was it true that less than half the babies survived? That some of them were exposed to high levels of radiation to see if they would get cancer? That all sorts of other unspeakable horrors occurred (unspeakable except to the press, that is)? Eventually the story was uncovered, the babies tracked down.

Still, because of the potential impact on international relations, not many details were revealed about this "Shanghai Shangrila," as it was sometimes called, never mind that the research was done nowhere near Shanghai. It was simply referred to as "controversial experiments that began in the 1980s." More attention was paid to the scramble of newly formed companies to get in on the "Asian fountain of youth," their stocks skyrocketing with every new hint of a possible development that might be down the road, some day, in the near to distant future. So far no one had come close to reproducing the Lao experiments, mostly because the Lao scientists had bypassed usual procedures and went right to human subjects.

A human subject. Me, in a room full of fear.

No one knows with any accuracy how long they'll live, of course, but the life expectancy is projected to be somewhere close to three times the normal average. Well over 200 years. They appear to have strong immunity against most known diseases, though of course car accidents and earthquakes can still be unavoidably fatal if decapitation or burial under a ton of rubble is involved.

You nodded, still looking only at me. *Of course. I knew all that. I just forgot the name.* Then quickly, to keep the conversation going, to show that you did in fact read the papers, *Say, didn't one of them just die in a plane crash?*

Yes. I'd just been to her funeral.

Maria. She's the only other Lao baby I've met, both of us having ended up in New York adopted by do-gooder types, me a middle-aged ethical culturalist on the Upper West Side, Maria a family of blue-collar Baptists in Queens. As soon as we met each other, we became friends, different as we were, finding comfort in the thought that *We both know what it's like. We understand each other. No one else does.*

She hugged me when we met. She said later that she's never been the huggy-smoochy type, but she just had to. *We're here, the two of us*, our bodies said, two mountain ranges embracing. No, not mountains, not something solid and still; Maria was more like wind, or flame. Or maybe both at once. She never stopped moving, had to do everything, didn't fear anything. Ultimately we were disappointments to each other, thinking we'd each found a kindred spirit and instead found, in her view, someone determined to stay locked up in her own self-made prison; in mine, someone who seemed, for no good reason, determined to squander her freedom.

But Maria was like that even before she knew she was a Lao baby, just as I had been like this before I knew. Finding out only made each of us more *us*. It made me more fearful, more withdrawn. It made her go skydiving. She'd enjoyed hang-gliding tremendously, so why not?

So it wasn't just any plane crash. Maria had been the pilot, newly minted. She'd asked me if I wanted to make her first solo flight a twosome. She knew I'd say no, of course.

At the funeral, her parents nodded coolly toward me, shook my hand as though it oozed pus, turned away. I didn't take it personally, though I'm sure it was personal. One thing Maria and I did share was the way we were treated—as though we, all the Lao babies, were Frankenstein's monsters, only instead of having been created from corpses, it was as if we were made of soil, the earth itself, like their own walking graves. They look at us as though we'll absorb them into a dark, gritty oblivion. Plus I knew from Maria that her parents weren't exactly the friendly type, much less the huggy-smoochy type. *I tell you*, she'd said, *the happiest day of my life was the day I realized I was adopted. Never mind the Lao baby stuff; that was icing on the heredity cake. Just knowing I wasn't related to that sad, grim little family—hell, I could have been the bastard child of a terrorist and a junky whore for all I cared, so long as I didn't share their DNA.*

They meanwhile had just buried her in the family plot. *Such a shame*, they said, although I think secretly they enjoyed the irony. It gave them a chance to spout aphorisms. *Just goes to show. You never know, do you.* And then, privately, cold and mean as gunmetal, *She was one of us after all.* Then, piously, *She lived a good life. It isn't the quantity of life that matters; it's the quality.*

I don't know how many times people have said that to me: *not the*

quantity, the quality. I would always nod my head politely, of course, but in the back of my mind I think—I *know*—that this is simply their hopeless, angry rationalization. If you have limited quantity, of course you're going to value quality. What choice do you have?

Apparently people don't like thinking this, though, and they want to make sure no one else thinks it either, not even those of us who will outlive them and their children. I suspect this is the reason for that urban legend, the one about the serial killer who's tracking down Lao babies, one by one. People have been telling me about it, eagerly, for the last two years, even though no one really believes it, or so they say. Maria of course embraced it with her usual perverse enthusiasm. That's how I met all those others like you—hanging out at bars with her, sizing up potential Rippers. She made it into another game—*There, that one in the corner with the briefcase. Bet he's got the hacksaw in there. It's your turn; ask him if he knows a good place for dim sum in the neighborhood.* She'd hoped the legend was real, wanted to grapple with him. When reports about the mythical slasher no longer seemed to place him in New York, she followed the legend on out of town. She turned it into an excuse to hitchhike across the country that summer, yet another something she'd always wanted to do. Meanwhile I finished another online degree and repainted my apartment walls. Eggshell.

Maria sent me a postcard from the Redwood Forest that July. I looked at the picture for about an hour without blinking or moving, barely breathing. I never did read what she'd written on the other side, since it was usually something along the lines of *wish you were here smoked some bad shit the other day almost got raped but it's all so beautiful you know?* I kept looking at the trees. They had lived hundreds of years. They were quiet and still, with none of the buzz and boil of emotion. Most people would call that quantity, not quality. Yet that's what I want.

But someone always has to ruin it. Someone right now is starting up a great big electric saw and preparing to slice into a redwood like it's no more than vertical meatloaf. Right now that someone is you, not because your hand brushing mine cuts to the bone but precisely because it doesn't. Because you think that with that touch you'll simply be allowed in, without force or violence. Because I could be fooled into thinking that too, until I remember that sound, and it closes in around me.

I don't think Maria would have thought much of you. *Too conventional*, she'd snort, *and too young*. Well, you are young, genuinely young, not an old baby like me. Yet you know things I don't; you live in the world in a way I never could, treating it as though it was yours to play with, not the other way around—as if you represented the permanent, it the transient. But that's one thing I've seen that you haven't. Your baseball-capped swagger, the same thing I saw twenty years ago, the same thing I'll see twenty years from now if I haven't been cut down by then. If one of you doesn't cut me down.

But I didn't tell you any of that about me; I only told you about Maria. You listened, and then you told me about Pauly. Turned out you'd just been to a funeral, too. *What a coincidence*, you said, as if there could be anything surprising about two deaths on the same day. Pauly, a friend from way back, once as close as a brother. Time took care of that, though—*eventually we went our separate ways*—and then took care of Pauly, young as he was, as you are. *Burying him was like burying a piece of me*. You meant to show me you understood. You did understand a little, about Maria, but you couldn't ever understand the rest of it, the part about me, because after a moment (meant to be reflective, the two of us humming with shared emotion) you imagined a door opening for you. You decided to make the move.

Let's go somewhere.

I couldn't. I had to go see my mother.

Where does she live?

She's living, she's dying, across the street. Oncology. Visiting hours at six.

I'll go with you.

I tried to warn you, and not just as a tactful method of turning you away: This is not someone you want to see after you've been to a funeral. If you tell her you've just buried a friend, she'll say *I'll be next. Then you will*.

Ruth. She didn't used to be this way. Ruth had once—most of her life, in fact—been steadfastly positive. She was privileged, she would say humbly, and so she felt it was her mission to try to make the world a better place. She was so privileged she actually believed she *would* make the world a better place.

When Ruth first found out that I was one of the Lao babies, she was ecstatic, as though she'd found out *she* were one of them. Reporters sought her out and she gave intense, glowing interviews. *I always knew she was special, from the day I saw her*, she would beam beatifically at me. *I had always wanted to adopt a little Chinese girl, of course, because I wanted to be able to take her from a culture that to this day refuses to value women and show her that she is valuable and important. I wanted to show this to her from day one, in the very act of being a single mother.*

The reporters nodded, faces and fingers twitching impatiently: *get to the*

point, will you, lady? *this article's for the science section, not op-eds or inspirational.*

A reminiscing laugh, a fond gaze. *I knew something was wrong when she reached 20 and still hadn't gotten her period, but Dr. Grimaldi—she's the best gyno in New York, you know—she was the one who first suggested the Lao baby possibility, and then of course I starting putting the pieces of the puzzle together.* I writhed and winced through every one of these sessions. I couldn't believe she was discussing my period with reporters. She would have shown them evidence if they'd asked.

Later on, though, when the interviews trailed off and the few that there were seemed to be mostly for me and not her, she became sullen. It wasn't just the interviews, though. She resented it, this thing that I had that she hadn't, this thing that made me special that I hadn't done anything to achieve. I was *privileged*, in a way that completely outstripped any possible advantage she might have been accused of having enjoyed. When her health started to go with the pancreatic cancer, one of the last of the killer cancers still untamed, it went beyond resentment. It became pure hatred, the desperate, poisonous hatred of someone who wants to spoil things for those with something to lose. *Nice of you to stop by, angel*, she would snarl.

This time you were with me. Before she could say it again, I introduced you: a friend, I said. *To replace the dead one*, I anticipated her saying; *you'll be doing a lot of that in your lifetime, won't you? You'll bury us all!*, the last a sarcastic shriek. Instead she merely gave you a scowl of indifference. She must have been feeling better, a potage of new-and-improved drugs for lunch.

You nodded agreeably at her. *Hey, Mrs. Lowe.* You even waved, as though she were your high school English teacher. For your sake I tried to look like I was trying not to laugh, though in truth I was trying not to flinch, waiting for the onslaught.

It's Ms. I never married. Never. I had to raise her all by myself. No one was there to help me. Her eyes razor-edge narrow.

Yeah, I know—your daughter's told me a lot about your amazing life.

Has she. Well, young man, it's true. I've lived a good life, a full life. An amazing life. And right now I'd trade it for an empty, worthless one if I could, if it meant my health back, if it meant myself back, if I had more time.

You edged away. Well, I warned you.

So she turned to me, and started it all over again. *Why you? Why you and not me?*

Ruth. I choked the syllable. Don't do this again.

Oh? Why not do this again? If not now then never. Never again.

I played on the one thing that usually gave her the most self-righteous zeal: What about all the good deeds you've done? Surely that makes it worthwhile.

She opened her mouth cavernously, but instead of a scream—a squeak, a last bit of air escaping from a balloon. *It doesn't! It doesn't!*

Then she went back into her snarl. *But you'll get yours. They'll reproduce that Lao research, improve it, perfect it. Of course it'll only be the rich at first. Whoever patents the thing will charge a mint, never mind ethics. The rich will become immortal before the poor get a decent bite to eat.*

That sounded more like the old Ruth, and I turned to look at the window to hide a real smile: Ruth, railing against the wealthy, never mind her own status as lifelong trust fund baby.

She went on, though. *By the time you're old, people will be living twice as long as you. Then see how you feel. Like that soldier, the one who gets killed only two days before the war ends. Can you imagine it? Lying in a field bleeding to death knowing that if you'd just held on two days you could go on for decades more. Instead you'll be rotting away within weeks when everyone else is celebrating. Going home heroes. Settling back in. And you're dead. You're dead. Your body's rotten. Your brain's wormy. You're gone, for the next ten years, the next hundred, forever.*

I wanted to tell her to stop. I couldn't, though, because we both knew she would stop soon enough. I had to let her make the words come out into the room, while she could still make something in the world before it made her into nothing.

I warned you about her. I warned you about me, too, though I don't think you heard that warning.

And now here we are.

You met me in a bar. You listened, you looked. You kept looking when you were supposed to be listening. You felt something pulling you toward me, or so you've said. So you listened to me talk about Maria and went with me to visit Ruth and then you took me back to the bar. Well, here we are. And it's getting late.

Now you look abashed again, boyish, eager to explain. *Look, just because I went with you to see your mom and all doesn't mean that I'm expecting anything.*

Good. I don't expect anything any more, either.

Then grinning, sly. *Hey, 25 and 45 aren't so different.*

No, they're not. Not for me, certainly.

I mean—you've had a day and so have I. I just—want to take you out, that's all. Out to see the city, out to show you the world.

But I've seen the world, at least enough now to know what I want from

it: Nothing.

You laugh, though there's impatience in the sound. *You don't really believe that urban legend, do you? C'mon, I'm not a serial killer. I'm just...well, me.*

Indeed. But why you? You're nothing to me, nor I to you. Has it been hours that I've known you, or years? It doesn't matter. You'll still be just another one to breeze through, to flicker in and out of my life. Even if you stick around a while, I'll still have to watch you come and go.

So when you say these things, when you want me to go out there with you, I start screaming no no no! Not so that you can hear it, but screaming all the same because I don't want to go out there any more, into that world of yours.

That's impossible. What, you 're never going to leave your room? Come on, that would be like—a living death, you reason dismissively. Trite, I think, but not true. After all, when are we more alive than when we're alone in our heads?

I want quiet and stillness and calm. I want to enjoy what I won't when I'm dead.

You want details? I have a place, close by, with eggshell walls. In it I have what I need, and whatever I run out of can be bought and brought to me by people I don't see or touch or talk to. I have a job that I can do without leaving this place, processing legal forms for people I'll never meet involving other people I'll never know. It's all there—births and deaths, accidents and lawsuits, employment, unemployment, marriage, divorce—but it all just comes and goes, quick like that, like Maria, like Ruth, like you. None of it has to touch me.

But it does anyway.

You. You stand there with your hand out ready to pull me with you. Why? Why the pull? It starts when we are yanked into life; then the hand pulling lets us go and we go flying, and whoever saw flying as a bad thing? Except me. The way I see it, we aren't flying at all; we're being flung away. The awful hurtling through empty air. Waiting for the impact. Hands reach out to us as we go, but they can't stop it, they only keep pulling.

And yet—we reach back to them.

There's your hand, pulling. I want to resist but I can't—and anyway, resisting would only be more pulling. So I get pulled along. Stop, I want to say, can't we stop? Here, with my hand in yours, stop here like two trees whose branches have laced together. But no, we can't, because something is pulling you along as well. It insists, roughly; it doesn't turn around to look at you the way you turn to look at me, and it isn't gentle, not at all, though your touch is, your words are. It won't be gentle as I absorb you, as I wait to be absorbed. It won't be like you are now, wind and flame licking the thick,

hard, unprotected surface of a redwood.

Slaughtered Cows

Julia Rubin

You are lying with your cheek on concrete, shivering in the thin shift you wear to sleep. Grey light bleeds through the night, silhouetting low buildings, lampposts. You raise your head. On your right is the Hudson River, on your left, Fourteenth Street, beneath you, the median strip of the West Side Highway. You don't know how you got there.

The highway is empty. You rise to your knees, then to your feet. Out of nowhere a car roars by, then another, and then the highway is filled with cars racing towards you. You gasp and throw your hands over your eyes and the roaring stops. In the silence a light breeze rattles a street sign and tugs at your shift. You lower your hands and a storm of cars roars by. You cover your ears but the noise grows louder. Then you close your eyes and it stops.

All is quiet but the pounding of your heart. You try to breathe. The air smells of the river, garbage, exhaust, but the exhaust is not stronger than the other smells. You listen again. Silence. Eyes still shut you throw yourself from the median and run.

Within steps of the other side you slip on cobblestones and your eyes open. A truck is heading straight at you. Brakes screech as it swerves and slams into a lamppost. The highway is empty again, quiet beneath the rose-tinted sky.

A thud comes from the back of the truck, and another, and then the truck erupts in a violence of banging and crashing and the rear doors burst open. You scramble to the sidewalk and crouch behind a lamppost as cows pour out, the sure-footed trampling those that stumble as they stampede down Fourteenth Street.

The shallow rays of the rising sun graze the fallen cows, shimmering over pools of blood, glinting off of vacant eyes. Absorbed by the horror and the beauty, you cannot look away. In your mind's eye you frame photographs. You've never taken such pictures.

A bang comes from the wrecked truck and you jump to your feet. Pain shoots through your right knee and blood runs down your leg. You look

back at the truck. A small, wiry man stands beside it smoking a cigarette. He wears a white tee shirt and blue jeans. Tattoos cover his arms.

"You a working gal? I got no time for that now. If you need money go round up those cows." He is suddenly beside you, his hand gripping your arm. You close your eyes but the pressure remains. You make yourself go limp. His grip loosens. You jerk your arm away and run. At Ninth Avenue you turn north, running, running, until, near collapse, you grab onto a lamppost and sink to the ground.

*

A hand touches your shoulder and you jerk away. You look up into the face of your neighbor. You think his name is Bill. Behind him is the building where you live. He helps you stand. Pain shoots through your right knee and blood runs down your leg.

"I think it looks worse than it is," he says. You realize that you are wearing only the thin shift you wear to sleep. You blush and cross your arms in front of your breasts. He touches your shoulder. "Were you walking in your sleep?"

Bill walks you up to your apartment. A few minutes later his wife comes over with a bottle of mercurochrome and a cup of tea. You think her name is Maureen. To please her you take a few sips.

Once she's gone you limp to the bathroom, fill the tub, and sink in. You try to think of nothing but your mind fills with streaks of salmon-colored light shimmering over pools of blood. You've never made such a photograph. You are not that bold. Your photographs are gently beautiful, but beauty doesn't sell.

A knock on your front door jars you from the tub. Bill has brought over the Sunday Times. You spend the rest of the day on the couch, reading the paper, dozing.

You wake at first light, your knee throbbing. You take three aspirin and make a cup of coffee that goes cold as your mind drifts to Fourteenth Street. Your nightmare has scrambled the images so that you can't tell what's real.

You throw on jeans and a sweatshirt, load your camera, and walk over.

The street is busy with thick-armed men off-loading carcasses from tractor-trailers onto conveyers of hooks that carry them into long, low buildings. The carcasses are covered in hide but have neither heads nor legs. Scraps of flesh litter the street.

You photograph trucks and lampposts and carcasses, shooting most of a roll before something blocks your lens. You lower your camera. A wiry man with tattooed arms stands in front of you. He asks what you're doing.

Your heart starts to pound.

"I'm a photographer."

He doesn't move.

"Life as art," you say.

"They're dead," he says.

Beyond his shoulder the sun glints off a hook that protrudes from a carcass, looking like a soul escaping. You start to raise your camera. The man pushes you towards the conveyer until you're so close you can see the hairs on the hides. The man's breath is hot on the back of your neck. You stand still, waiting for it to retreat. Then you bolt. From across the street you shoot a picture of the man, then take off at a dead run.

After six blocks you stop, gasping for breath. In front of you is a payphone. You pull a quarter from your pocket and dial.

Tom lives in Tribeca in a loft with a darkroom. It's been two years since you were lovers, but you are still friends.

"Come over," he says.

You head towards the subway but an image of cattle cars pushes you back. Despite your knee you decide to walk, picking up bread and cheese along the way. When Tom opens the door you hold these out along with a roll of film. He asks if you are all right, his voice as calm as ever. Only then do you realize how fast you are still breathing.

While he takes the film to the darkroom you wander into the living room. The coffee table is covered with magazines. You flip through them, one after another, unable to focus on anything until you come to you a catalogue from a recent art auction. You photographed some of the pieces for the catalogue: the slipper beside a pile of dog turds, the bovine ribcage covered with hide, the mound of manure skewered with dollar bills. You throw the catalogue to the floor as Tom comes into the room. He says nothing, just holds out the contact sheets. The pictures show no shattered lampposts, no wrecked trucks, no cows. When printed backwards they do not say "Paul is dead." You tell him about your nightmare.

"You've always had nightmares."

"This one was different."

"Because you walked in your sleep?"

"Because it was so real."

Tom leads you up to the roof, bringing the bread and cheese and a bottle of wine. It is late afternoon. The low angle of the light sculpts the buildings, pushing doors into shadow. Its warmth softens brick and concrete. You sit and stare, absorbed by the light, but do not get your camera. Tom hands you a glass of wine and asks you what you've photographed recently, besides dead cows. You've photographed nothing.

"If I mounted the pictures of the carcasses on rotting cows I'd be famous." You start to laugh, but your laughter turns to tears which you wash away with wine. Tom touches your shoulder, refills your glass.

A second bottle replaces the first and your eyes drift shut. Tom leads you back downstairs and you fall asleep on his couch, waking in the morning with a blanket tucked around you.

By the time you get home the clock says noon. Something nags at you and you open your appointment book. It reads: food shoot - Mercer - noon. You grab a dozen rolls of film from the fridge and toss them into your camera bag, then race downstairs and hail a cab.

A vast table covered with meat fills the studio. You spend the next two hours photographing steaks and ribs and roasts and chops, all looking like dead cows sprawled in the street.

The minute you're done you rush home, stopping only to drop off the film. For the next two days you hole up in your apartment watching movies on T.V., one after another. You doze off, wake to the flickering of the screen, doze again.

*

You are leaning against a lamppost, shivering in the thin shift you wear to sleep. The sky is barely light. Dead cows litter the street, and walking among them is the man with the tattooed arms, holding a knife. He stops at one, cuts off its head and legs and stacks them beside the curb, then moves on to another. As he raises the knife you step back. He looks up, then starts towards you, knife still raised. You step back again but something blocks your foot and you gag on the stench of rotting flesh. Holding your breath, you turn and run. The cows disappear and you are running on pavement and then you stumble and fall.

*

You are lying on the sidewalk in front of your building. The main door is propped open. You stand slowly. Pain shoots through your knee and blood runs down your leg. You feel nothing; not fear, not despair, nothing but the throbbing as you limp to your apartment.

You wash and bandage your knee, then put up coffee to brew, but when you try to pour a cup it sloshes all over the counter. You use both hands to carry the cup to the table where you sit and stare out the window. The courtyard below is empty but you continue to stare until your eyes start to drift shut.

You wake in darkness, curled up on the couch, your heart pounding. You've no memory of a nightmare, only the terror. You are home. You are safe. You cannot breathe. You get up, throw on jeans and a sweatshirt, then load your camera and leave your apartment, locking the door behind you, checking the lock.

It is late, the streets empty. Eyeing every shadow, you walk down Eighth Avenue to Fourteenth Street, then turn west. At Ninth Avenue an Irish bar is still open, spilling light onto the sidewalk. Across Ninth the street is dark save for a sliver of moon. You walk on, taking pictures of shuttered buildings, broken street lamps. Approaching Tenth Avenue you see, near the curb, a large bone. Against the darkness of the pavement it appears luminous. You raise your camera. An engine roars behind you and light floods the scene. You turn and are blinded by headlights. A car screeches to a stop beside you and a man sticks his head out the window.

"You a working girl?"

You step away but he grabs your arm. You jerk it back, wrenching his shoulder. He screams and lets go and you run.

At Ninth Avenue you plunge into the bar. The bartender asks what happened. His voice is calming. When he's convinced that you're alright he walks you outside and hails a cab. He hands the driver some money and closes the door.

At home you lock the door behind you, check the lock, then check it again. You turn on the T.V. and pace the apartment, waiting for morning.

You buy another lock, the kind with a metal bar to brace the door against the floor. It is awkward to use, just as you'd hoped. You check that you can open the window that leads to the fire escape. Fire used to be your worst fear.

For the next few days you sleep restlessly but wake in bed. Then you wake in the entryway clutching the bar. The next night you slip a chair between the bar and the door and jam it under the knob.

Early the next morning an ambulance stops in front of your building. Your neighbor, Bill, leads the EMTs to the courtyard where you lie, breathing but not conscious. Your face is as pale as the thin shift you are wearing. Against the dark grey of the pavement you appear luminous. Despite his distress, Bill cannot help thinking what a beautiful photograph that would make.

Someone Told Me I Rely on Honesty to Avoid Telling the Truth

Kyle Mangan



SHE HELD HER EYES OPEN PRETTY WIDE, FOR A THERAPIST. ON ANOTHER FACE, IT'D SEEM TERRIFIED AND MAYBE INNOCENT. THEY LEFT ME UNEASY, AND I SPENT OUR FIRST SESSION SPEAKING IN EUPHEMISMS. BUT I HADN'T MANAGED TO SHOCK HER, SO I DECIDED TO TRY HARDER.

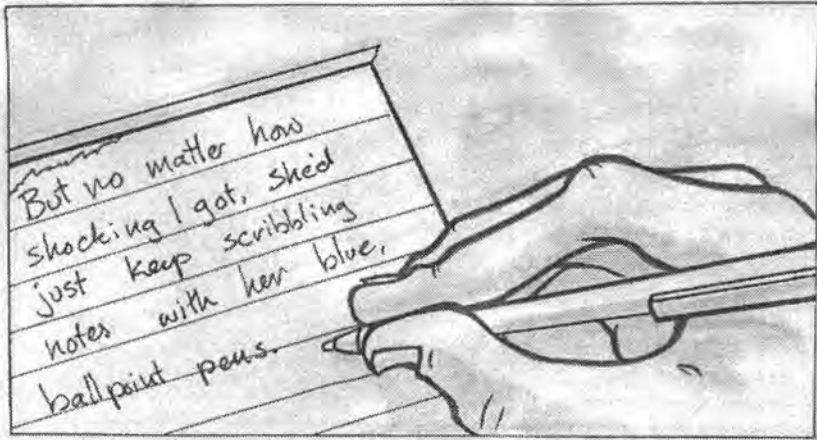


OH, AND THEN I CLOSED MY EYES, TURNED ON MY HEADPHONES AND WALKED INTO THE STREET, I'VE BEEN NOT EATING AND I STARTED CUTTING MYSELF BECAUSE IT MAKES ME FEEL BETTER ABOUT BEING SO LONELY. I CAN'T SLEEP BECAUSE WHEN I LIE IN MY BED I JUST START PONDERING MY OWN MORTALITY, ALSO I'VE BEEN HEARING BELLS RINGING AND VOICES CALLING MY NAME, WHICH IS INCREDIBLY WEIRD.

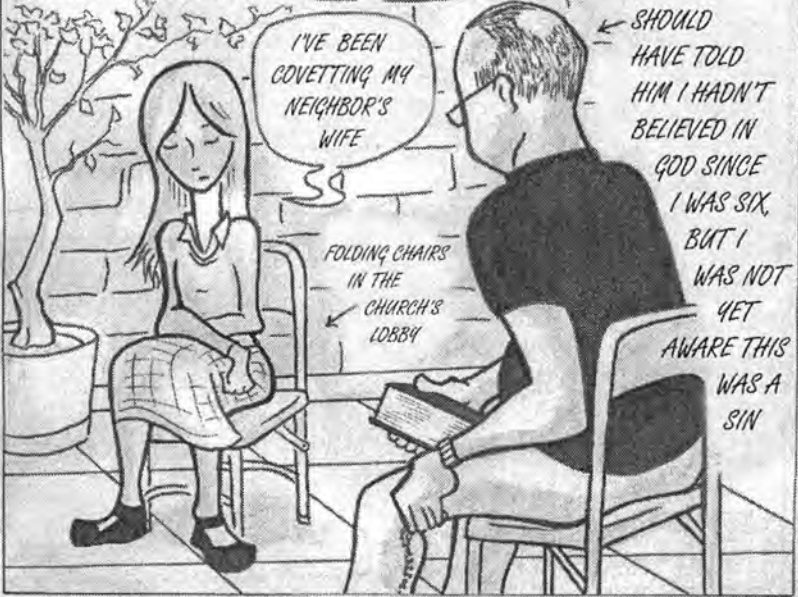


ALSO THE FIRST TIME I HAD SEX, MY BOYFRIEND CRIED FOR TWO HOURS BECAUSE HIS EX DIDN'T LOVE HIM ANYMORE, AND THE NEXT DAY HE TRIED TO HANG HIMSELF. UH... OH, NOW WHEN I'M DRIVING I SEE CHILDREN DARTING IN FRONT OF MY CAR, SO I THINK I'M HALLUCINATING, AND GENERALLY I JUST FEEL THIS TERRIBLE SENSE OF EMPTINESS.





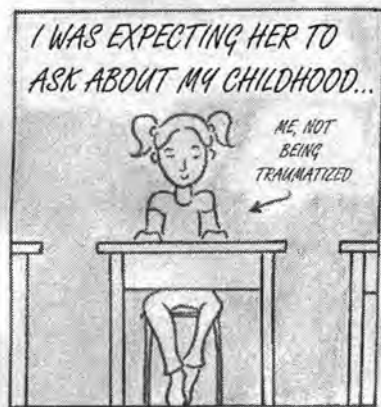
I CONSIDERED EMBELLISHING THE TRUTH, OR MAYBE JUST MAKING SOMETHING UP, BUT THAT REMINDED ME TOO MUCH OF MY BRIEFLY "CATHOLIC CHILDHOOD"



"WE WOULD GO TO CHURCH ON EASTER AND CHRISTMAS, WHICH WOULD EVENTUALLY BECOME "JUST EASTER," THEN, "ONLY IF THERE WERE CHAIRS," AND THEN, "ONLY IF THERE WAS PARKING." FINALLY WE JUST "GOT DOUGHNUTS INSTEAD."



SHE WOULD SIT THERE, SMILING AT ME, FROM ACROSS HER DESK, A VERY CAREFUL SMILE. IF I PAUSED FOR A SIGNIFICANT LENGTH OF TIME SHE'D TILT HER HEAD AND ASK SOME OPEN-ENDED QUESTION OR PRODD ME TO CONSIDER HOW SOMETHING I'D SAID OR DONE HAD AFFECTED THE WORLD.



I WAS EXPECTING HER TO ASK ABOUT MY CHILDHOOD...

ME, NOT BEING TRAUMATIZED



ME, BEING TRAUMATIZED BY A SEX EDUCATION LECTURE GIVEN BY MY FOURTH GRADE GYM TEACHER

...OR MY EARLY SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT...



...IN NINTH GRADE I FOUND AN OLD TAPE PLAYER IN THE BACK OF A CROWDED DRAWER, UNDER OUR STEREO. I USED IT TO NURTURE A TERRIBLE AFFINITY FOR MUSIC YOU COULDN'T PAY ME TO LISTEN TO NOW, AS WELL AS A PROFOUND APPRECIATION OF SOLITUDE.

BUT NONE OF THAT CAME UP. IN FACT, THE ONLY TWO TIMES THIS WOMAN ASKED ABOUT ANYTHING THAT'D HAPPENED BEFORE WE'D MET WAS OUR FIRST SESSION, WHEN SHE ASKED WHY I'D DECIDED TO START THERAPY, AND OUR THIRD, WHEN I TOLD HER I'D SORT OF TRIED TO KILL MYSELF A FEW TIMES.



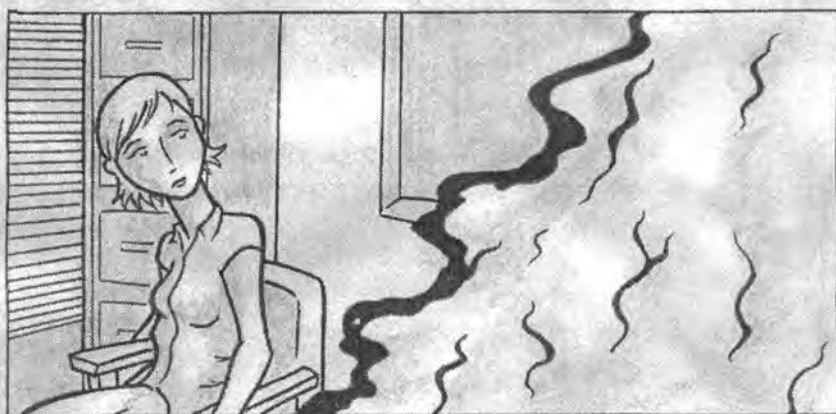
I SAY "SORT OF" THOUGH, BECAUSE I NEVER ACTUALLY TRIED TO DO IT. I MEAN, NEVER ACTIVELY. I JUST SORT OF CREATED SITUATIONS WHERE I VERY WELL COULD HAVE DIED, BUT I NEVER LET IT HAPPEN. IT WAS MUCH MORE ABOUT, I DON'T KNOW, GAMBLING THAN DESPERATION. YOU KNOW? I THINK GRAHAM GREENE USED TO PLAY RUSSIAN

ROULETTE WHEN HE WAS AT UNIVERSITY, ALL BY HIMSELF, JUST BECAUSE HE WAS BORED. I NEVER WENT ANYWHERE NEAR THAT FAR THOUGH. "THE RUSH" SOUNDS TOO, I DON'T KNOW, BUT IT WAS REALLY JUST THAT.

I WAITED FOR HER QUESTIONS. BUT SHE SEEMED SATISFIED, AND THAT'S WHEN I REALIZED, SHE WASN'T INTERESTED, AT ALL, IN MY STORY. I MEAN SHE WAS PAYING ATTENTION, BUT SHE WASN'T TRYING TO FIGURE ME OUT, SHE WASN'T PRIVY TO SOME COMPLETE UNDERSTANDING OF WHO I WAS BECAUSE I'D TOLD HER THE SECRET, SHAMEFUL, EXCITING DETAILS OF MY LIFE. I THINK WE ALL ASSUME SECRECY GIVES INFORMATION SOME VALUE, SOME PECULIAR STRENGTH WHICH GRANTS IT THE ABILITY TO DEFINE AN ENTIRE PERSON. DESPITE WHAT I'VE TOLD THIS WOMAN, I'M NOW BEGINNING TO GRASP JUST HOW LITTLE SHE KNOWS ABOUT ME



AND THAT
WAS IT.



I UNDERSTOOD SHE WASN'T
INVESTED IN WHO
I WAS.

WHICH ISN'T TO SAY SHE DIDN'T
WANT TO HELP ME, SHE IS A
DOCTOR. BUT I REALIZED HER
NOTES WERE A CONVENIENT
DEVICE TO VISUALIZE HER
TECHNIQUE, NOT MY
MIND. AND I WASN'T
UPSET ABOUT IT.
INTERESTINGLY,
I FOUND
MYSELF
RELIEVED.



I STOPPED TALKING. I WASN'T TRYING TO HIDE ANYTHING. I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE I WAS DECEIVING HER. I JUST FELT BETTER KNOWING I DIDN'T OWE HER THE CHANCE TO... I DON'T KNOW... FIX ME MAYBE? AND WE'D JUST SIT THERE COMFORTABLY.



WHICH IS REALLY IT, I GUESS. I MEAN, MOSTLY I JUST DON'T FEEL LIKE THERE'S ANYTHING LEFT TO DISCUSS. I'M GENERALLY FEELING BETTER AND I MEAN, I DON'T REALLY KNOW HOW WE... I DON'T THINK I NEED THIS ANYMORE.

THIS WAS TRUE. I'D JUST ABOUT FORGOTTEN WHY I'D STARTED THERAPY TO BEGIN WITH.

WE BOTH AGREED WE WERE PROBABLY DONE, AND I PROMISED I'D TAKE HER CARD IN CASE THE FEELING PASSED. WHEN I REACHED THE SIDEWALK AND BREATHED IN THE STILL WARM, AFTERNOON AIR, I PULLED HER CARD FROM MY POCKET. THERE WERE THREE NAMES ON THE CARD, IT WAS A SHARED PRACTICE. I REALIZED, I'D NOT BOTHERED TO ASK WHICH NAME WAS HERS.

Henry Fragmentary

Ben Martin

Henry Matejka ranked with the suave seducers of Don Juan and Casanova, the glib romantic you become in wet dreams to women far more beautiful and exotic than the gum-chewing cheerleaders in Math class or the lanky braces-wearing girl poking out of a book in the library, smiling at you with uncomfortable sincerity. Henry's women wore high heels, smoked long, thin cigarettes, and wore their smiles with a shimmer of sex and sophistication. They spoke of Surrealist Art, Sartre and Nietzsche, Camus and Dostoyevsky—with passion, not awkward high school interpretation. You lounged with them and suddenly felt the air wandering over your skin like a wave of pin pricks; your senses relished every sight and sound with superhuman clarity; you could color a smell, like seeing the rose in a blonde's perfume, or connect wild images, like the rushed unzipping of a glittered evening dress floating in the pearl white dot of a brunette's eye.

I had just graduated from high school when I met him. I had come from a world where sex was acknowledged as a locker room high five, boasting about Prom night, blow jobs in your car while parked along the curb of some dim residential street, fogged windows, unreturned phone calls, gossip, girls running down linoleum high school hallways crying with their hands over their faces. Because of that world, I'd felt awkward, misplaced, incompetent at love. I wasn't very good at sounding smooth with teenage girls. I wasn't a member of the football team. I didn't look cool smoking cigarettes behind the school during lunch. I never walked the halls, slapping hands with fifty people as I went, snapping fingers, smiling, moving on, knowing everybody, holding my head up, winking at girls swooning against their lockers and making them drop their books. I was the guy with my head in a book in the library, the one you see and whisper, "Geek," and then forget when the first guy comes along. You slap his hand, you swoon, you pay attention, and you forgot about me. That's the way it was for four years, and I hadn't expected anything different to come along. I never had trouble believing that high school was a microcosm of the adult world, an introduction to the ironclad social hierarchy that would be imposed upon me for the rest of my life. Henry changed that.

We became friends the summer after I graduated. He was sitting in his long-reserved corner of Sojourners, a coffee shop in Dallas' uptown, against a backdrop of slow-falling summer sun and distant neon lights buzzing awake for the bar-bouncing Saturday night crowd. I noticed him tossing a chess piece over with his fingers and staring at nothing. I carried my coffee to his table, asked him if he wanted to play, and we killed several hours that night playing several games, "pressing lidless eyes... and waiting for a knock upon the door" as T.S. Eliot once predicted.

During the game, Henry was sprawled across a heavy brown suede chair, eyeing the chess pieces while bouncing one leg on the other, bracing his chin in the palm of his right hand. At the moment, I blamed his messy appearance on a lack of sleep; around the deep brown centers of his eyes there were rims of red streaks, like the frame of a southwest sun, and his hair bolted away from one of his temples as if he'd tried to sleep on that side all night. He took several breaks to use the bathroom, have a cigarette outside and make a phone call, at which time, his hand and facial gestures, the wry smile tipped to one corner of his mouth, the way he tilted his back and shut his eyes, to name a few, conveyed a medley of emotions, precisely dramatized. He would come back inside, skip past the cash register and lean over the serving counter, whisper something to the lady making drinks with his mouth close enough to tongue the recesses of her ear, and he would come away with free drinks for both of us. Other than what I'd seen of him, I knew very little that first night. He wore stylish but cheap clothes, Salvation Army chic, you might say, a hat like Fievel in "An American Tale," and a pair of sunglasses tucked into the middle of his shirt. He spoke softly, coolly; he was confident, and he never stumbled over his words. He said he was an actor, and that was the first thing that made sense about him. He was too young to be so streamlined. He was the kind of guy, you knew, had a handle on life, knew exactly what he wanted and how to get it. That's one of the things I admired about him. He was generous, too. He procured several drinks in the course of the night, always shaking his hands at me when I reached for my wallet. He was all those things I had a feeling I'd never be, and, as if by association, after taking his number and hanging out several times, I soon came to fantasize that all of it, his style, his articulation, his whole appeal, might rub off on me.

A few weeks after we met, Henry became my best friend. He called often, and I enjoyed every detail of his life, what I saw, what he told me, and what they would say when he wasn't around. It became a habit of mine to occupy the chair opposite him at the coffee shop even when he was absent, as though, like him, I'd become a regular, I'd become a character in the story, and the seat that was always mine said it all. I'd spend so much time there, especially

on weekends, that I had a handle on most of his women: I knew what time they'd show up, which ones he was going out with that night, and, with a mix of fear and delightful anticipation, which schedules might conflict, which girls might scream, which ones would cry, and which ones might get physical and slap him. The girls came with such diverse, yet equally eccentric, personalities, that I came to feel I knew them intimately in a very short time. They came to know me, too, and, if Henry was running late or didn't show up at all, they'd sit with me, probe my mind for answers to their questions about the mysterious Henry, and, when I made it clear to them that I was as much of an observer as they, they'd tell me things. The better I knew them the more it seemed like they'd sit for hours and hours, rambling on without my saying a word, inventing their own lives right there in front of me, soaring through memories with descriptive detail, interpreting them, interpreting Henry's language, posing rhetorical questions that, a few times, I'd made the mistake of answering, such as "Don't you think he meant this or that" and following them with an immediate "Of course!" or "It couldn't be!"

Chloe. Chloe shuffled in to the coffee shop almost every night around seven o'clock. She wore patent leather boots up to her knees, and her thighs poured into them like waterfalls. She was an artist, and paraded that fact around on her body with every necessary accoutrement dangling on her purse, her wrist, her neckline—two bracelets, one hemp and the other turquoise mounted on silver, a dog tag necklace with a rusted edge, bearing the name Charles Goodwin, whom she never met or heard of, a thin piece of Vietnam World War II antiquity that fit the "outcast artist" aesthetic, long seventies-style dresses with psychedelic circles and eye popping splashes of yellow and pink, shade and sunshine groove, and sunglasses that she wore even when inside, mahogany red on brass rims. She was a walking canvas, so that art and artist were indistinguishable. She had a manifesto of sorts that it all came down to the fate of astrological signs and palm lines, and she made it clear that she embraced the undeniable fate of an unappreciated, forty-year-old suicide/artistic martyr, a being that no one would ever really understand and that would be her legacy.

It took her several meetings to remember my name, and of those times I watched her glance my way and stop cold with embarrassment for having forgotten me. She would escape to some excusable chore, like going to the bathroom or buying a drink, all the while covertly snapping her fingers at her memory. She rarely ventured a guess, but I always relented first and found an excuse to announce myself.

"Hey Chloe, how are you?"

"Ya ya... I'm good... ya know... I've been working on some stuff... getting

stuff done... trying to go back to school... ya know how it is."

"Sure, sure... seen much of Henry?"

"Ya... he's meeting me here... it is seven, right?" She then gave herself a slap on the forehead and squeezed her eyelids closed. "Oh my God, dude, I have smoked way too much pot... I'm late, huh?"

I checked my watch and saw it was half past seven. But I hadn't seen Henry anyway, so I figured what's the harm.

"No, you're good... it's just a little past seven. Henry'll probably be along in a minute."

"Cool, cool... Hey, you haven't seen Henry, have you?"

"I see Henry all the time... you mean today?"

"Right, ya, today."

"Nope, but I came by only an hour ago, and earlier I was stuck at home working on some things. Why'd you ask?"

"Oh, nothing, just wanted to know... making conversation, you know."

"Right."

"Oh no, it's nothing like that, it's just I thought you knew what he was up to today."

"You mean earlier?"

"Ya ya, earlier."

"I think he went clothes shopping, and then he said he was going to see his parents for a bit."

"Good!"

"Whoa... you okay? Why so happy about that?"

"I dunno, ya know, I just wanted to see if he was going where I thought he was, ya know, not a big deal, ya know, right?"

Her eyes suddenly felt like searchlights. Behind the small lamp between us, her eyes loomed like crystal balls steaming with violet haze. She was a dormant beauty, idling incognito behind contrived attire, something natural that went far beyond first impression. Her eyes told her life far better than all the clutter and clatter hanging on her like kitsch on a restaurant wall. At that moment, she became my favorite. She was delicate and thoughtful, and I wanted to shake her and tell her to speak naturally and stop decorating herself into a puzzle. I wanted to acknowledge the fact that she was hiding, from herself, from the world. I figured her being with Henry was just another cloak to pull around her uncomfortable skin. She saw in him what I had. Whether it was being Henry, or being with Henry, it was like a glimpse at the good life.

"So, you don't trust him?"

She giggled and sighed. "You don't know Henry very well do you?"

As a matter of fact, I had gathered enough of Henry's life story at that point to know precisely who he was.

"Maybe not, tell me then. What should I know?"

"Henry has a record, I found out. This girl, the other day, when I was up here, said he had been with more than forty girls. Un-fuckin-believable. Don't you think? I mean how can a guy like that be trusted? And I don't care what you say, there's no way to get around this."

"I haven't said anything yet."

"I mean, what am I doing. I must be fuckin crazy. Did you call him? I should call him. He was supposed to be here an hour ago."

At the moment she was rummaging in her purse, Henry strolled through the door and tiptoed up to her. She didn't notice, too busy searching for the phone, and Henry bent near her, casting his shadow over her face, and kissed her on the head with a loud smack. Startled, she accidentally flung the bag onto the floor and screamed.

"You bastard, why'd you do that?"

"Nice to see you, too, Chloe. Wait long?"

"Yeah, where the hell have you been?"

"I was having dinner with my folks. Conversation got a little too involved. You know how it goes."

Henry twisted his head to face me, and nodded with a wink. "Hey, man, doin' all right?"

"Just fine. I've been keeping your girl company."

"Discussing me, were you?"

"A bit, among other things."

"What could be as interesting as me?"

"Not much, pal. I don't know what we were thinkin'."

"So, what's the plan, boys and girls? Are we drinking or driving?"

"Both." Chloe quipped, as she tossed her hand into the air for a proper *enchante* and a tug out of her seat.

"Coming with?" she asked me.

"Not tonight, I have other business in an hour or so. You kids have fun."

"Give me a call later if you change your mind," Henry said, and, arm in arm, drunk on each other's eyes, the two charged off to some unknown destination.

When Henry was eight years old, his parents went through a nasty divorce that led to a tug of war match for custody. Henry spent time being interviewed by several different strangers who asked him how he felt about each of his parents. At times, as Henry retold it to me, he was asked to recall specific

aspects of his parents' behaviors and confirm that it was true or untrue. According to the final ruling, his mother had been unfit for a list of reasons, including, but not limited to, unrestrained verbal profanity, a penchant for recreational drugs, and many unabashed public displays of nudity.

In the fall of that year after having lost custody, Henry's mother swept him away one Friday afternoon from his elementary school for an extended vacation. She drove for eleven hours into the Kansas countryside and hauled into what looked like a ranch at least a mile off the main road. They parked somewhere among a tangled stretch of trees and emerged from the car with only a spotlight of moon glow to guide them forward. They hiked into shorter grass and sparse trees, down a hill, until Henry's mother led him to a large rectangular red house with an inconspicuous facade now unraveled by the change in elevation. Despite the hour (it was two a.m.) and the utter lack of exterior lighting, the door swung open after a knock, and there before them was a hearty group of thirty or so nudists slow-dancing to Doo-wop tunes and casting a net of smiles as long as the room, the moment that captured Henry's heart forever in favor of the sexual revolution. Whenever he told the story, he paused and leaned in before the words "free love," as though it were a divine revelation or the most brilliant fucking rule to life he'd ever heard.

When I imagined the scene in my head, I pictured Henry pulling his hand from his mother and approaching all the flesh moving in slow motion with his hand out, pointing with one finger, like Sleeping Beauty stepping toward the green light and spinning wheel, wanting to touch the thing that'd kill her.

After several months of hanging out with Henry, I'd gathered a few things about him. The high school football player was a passe seducer in this world, and Henry's approach seemed easier to learn. He played the game like a pro; he listened intently and asked questions, responded to everything the girls said without once mentioning himself, making them feel uniquely interesting, laughed at corny jokes and anecdotes; he kept eye contact until the girl would look away; he dipped his eyes over her breasts and crotch, quickly, while she was looking, only a moment's suggestion, only a hint of it; the girl would become still, suddenly intrigued, smile, begin asking questions about him; he knew then he had them hooked; he always gave vague answers. His key was to seem beautifully mysterious, and he never gave too much information.

I must admit I couldn't wriggle out of knowing Henry was two-timing Chloe. I knew too much, and it was the guilt of knowing paired with Chloe's irascible nature that welded my mouth shut that night at the coffee shop. Other girls, Sarah, Nadine, Luna, and Marm, waded in and out of Henry's headquarters with less personal interest for me than Chloe.

Sarah was a not yet socialized debutante budding on her twenty first

birthday who played Henry's game as though the setup were some Disneyesque ballroom spectacle, leaping into his arms as the ravished mademoiselle, finding in his eyes a supernatural twinkle of the fated happily ever after marriage with children, while Henry's grin rooted from nothing more than his expectant hand crawling up her skirt. She flitted about the coffee shop with a cell phone perched against her shoulder, mentioned "Daddy buying this" to all her friends; days later she'd drive up in a new car, saunter in clutching a new seven-hundred dollar purse, and then complain about the "proletariat" staff taking too long with her drink, a cafe au lait, extra sweet to go with her adorable smile; she'd skip into Henry's arms, and gasp hyperboles and sexual metaphors, "Oh, Henry... it seems like years since we've seen each other. Shall we dine out before having our desert?"

Henry tired of Sarah after only a few weeks, but, although he'd never admit this, her money made her tolerable. Sometimes, I'd tag along for Henry's sake, and she inevitably faded out of the conversation. At the end of dinner, she'd slap her daddy's plastic on top of the check, huff, and glare at Henry for not paying attention to her.

Around the first of October, along came Nadine, twelve years Henry's senior, a Philosophy professor with over expressive non-verbal sexual gestures, nearly girlish in nature, such as twirling her hair, feigning appeal to banal jokes, her one rebellious finger that played circles on Henry's knee, all the while, making high conversation on important topics like the debate of determinism vs. free will and the twentieth century's geopolitical struggle toward socialized government. Henry rafted the waters of discourse with expert linguistic application, exploring every nuance of her overworked rhetoric and making sly references, such as comparing the current state of government to a massive, steaming train barreling headfirst into a dark tunnel, to the joys of sex he foretold of their future. Henry delighted in this acquisition, because it proved his skill in seductive rhetoric, and she challenged and refined his ability to maneuver in and around the more skeptical intellect. He could infuse any mind with fantasy, it seemed, and Nadine never noticed Henry's tricks.

Two others cropped up in his black book shortly after:

Luna was a sassy Latina, who pranced around in club wear wherever she went, her steps made her ass pop and drop, pop and drop, she wore bright silver loops on her ears that hung an inch from her shoulders, and she answered her cell phone with her head tilted to exaggeration, her hair napping out of place, and a roller coaster of Spanish words that sounded like bubble gum between a school girl's teeth.

Marm was a well-paid tattooist in punk rock chic with spiked blonde hair and a ring or stud in every facial orifice. She read Bizarre magazine, drove a beat-up '93 Corolla with a "Fuck the Government" bumper sticker, and

played endless shooting video games on her days off. The woman dizzied your eyes the way a fingernail dragged over a chalkboard rang your ears, but, at the same time, she was stunning for her complexity, every fashionable detail a la mode of the revolution.

Henry had all of them on a routine for his pleasure, making appearances at the coffee shop on certain days and times and hardly ever grazing the field in sight or sound of the other. I knew this was true, because I had made such a routine of the coffee shop myself that it would've been hard to miss them within inches of interaction, a possibility that seemed to dangle over Henry like a spider spinning silently in the dark. I sat in my chair opposite Henry and checked the calendar for which purse would drop in front of Henry's chair: Mondays, the Black Gucci bag, with a clumsily exposed black and silver cell phone peeking from its depths, Tuesdays, a canvas bag with a large, circular black-and-red anarchist patch ironed onto the front, Wednesdays, a large red leather backpack with numerous loose papers, paper clipped and folded, resting inside, Thursdays, a blue-and-white spaghetti strap purse rattling with plastic make-up utensils and few neon glow sticks, and Fridays were Chloe's. She didn't carry a bag. With the exception of Chloe, they sat and talked of only two things, Henry and the feeling of not being with Henry, as though their worlds were summed up by those two states of existence and all their passion and interest in other things had been set aside as marginalia, a mere distraction from real life, the life they found in Henry.

Chloe came by off schedule one Sunday afternoon, before Henry showed up. I expected her to fall into Henry's seat, flustered, blow the hair from her brow, and begin with the long, anxious speculation of his recent goings on, but she didn't. When she came in and spotted me there, she beamed and shuffled across the hardwood floor in foam house shoes, before bending over to hug me, back stepping toward the other chair, and settling into it.

"Why so happy?"

"Oh, I don't know..." she purred. "Guess what?"

"What?"

"I found out about Henry's other girls!"

"What are you talking about?" I said, hoping to sound dumbfounded.

"Don't worry. I'm not gonna say anything."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about..."

"Here's the thing. I know you've had your eye on me. You don't have to play dumb. Henry even mentioned it once."

"He did?"

"Yeah, he said he figured you had a crush on me?"

I let this run through my head several times still didn't know how to an-

swer it. I was attracted to her. She and I had common attributes, a common motive for hanging around Henry, the same lurking insecurities that brought us into each other's acquaintance. In making such a bold statement, however, I itched against an insecurity she in fact didn't have. In calling attention to my private feelings, she'd spotlighted the feeling that I didn't have a voice.

"Well, Henry's mistaken. I never said that."

"I won't tell Henry. He's a bastard. Why would I? C'mon, tell me the truth. You still like me, don't you?"

When she framed it this way, rejection leapt out of possibility. I knew she was ready and willing to let me usurp Henry's former position. I raced through the idea of becoming her lover, leading her around on my arm, having late night chats about art, making art together, playfighting with paint, and making love among the half colored canvases standing like dominoes in her garage.

"I can't."

That race my head was running finished with Henry. Then I recalled seeing the two of them laughing together, hearing them spout sweet nothings to each other on the opposite chair, and even Henry complimenting her, something he rarely did with any of his girls.

Chloe's eyes started floating in more water, and I cringed at what was coming. She stopped looking at me, and muttered, "So you're not attracted to me?"

"Chloe, you know damn well you're attractive. Why do you think I can't? Isn't it obvious, I'd love to start seeing you?"

"You're not acting like it."

"I'm acting like a good friend," I said without thinking, and immediately I wondered if Henry would do the same.

"You don't think he's an asshole? Do you really care?"

"If he is an asshole, it doesn't change the fact that he's my friend. Henry really liked you! A lot! You're the only one he ever talked about."

"This is bullshit! I thought you'd be different. I'm not coming back here. This place is full of all kinds of fucked up, man."

Chloe left. Ten minutes later, Henry whistled his way through the door.

Henry plopped down across from me, pressed his head back into the cushion, and sighed, wiped the sweat from his brow, making every indication that he'd just mowed ten lawns in a row in the hundred degree heat and needed a nap. He sat like that for thirty of forty seconds, before he opened one eye and grinned.

"So, what's goin' on?" I asked.

"I'm having a great day, man."

"Really? From the looks of it, you're about to pass out from exhaustion."

Henry chuckled and pulled a wide grin.

"Brother, you have no idea. I'm probably more exhausted than I look. She wore me out."

"Oh yeah, that should've been obvious. What was I thinking... that you'd been doing something productive?" I said with a laugh. "So, which one was it this time? Luna?"

"Oh no, definitely not Luna. I haven't called her in a long time. She's off the list."

"Sarah?"

Henry opened his eyes to glare at me for making such an outrageous suggestion.

"Ok, ok... hell, I don't want to guess. Tell me who it was."

"I think I'm going to stop seeing the other girls. I'm really starting to think that Chloe's the one. She's really rearranged my thinking on the whole notion I had about free love."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I think I shouldn't be lying to Chloe anymore. I'm gonna cut it off with the others."

"Why so tired?"

"I was at Chloe's last night. We were up late. I didn't leave until four A.M."

"Oh."

When Henry was a freshman in high school, he saw his first girlfriend and sex partner tumble down the steps of the school's main stairs with tears running down her cheeks in little black rivulets of Goth black eye shadow and mascara. Above her standing at the top of the stairs were two blondes standing akimbo and watching the scene in petty glee. When the girls had brushed their hands in job-well-done fashion and disappeared in a trail of high-pitched giggle gossip, Henry approached and lifted the girl to her feet.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Oh my God... fuck it. Just fuck it, you know!" She spewed and ran with her face cradled in her palms to the nearest bathroom.

The next day, Henry convinced her to join him behind the school for a cigarette, and she told him her long history of freakish misfortune, her obsession with death and suicide, and explaining the small cuts forming a ladder on her arm. Henry, overcome with feeling a human connection similar to what he felt upon barging in and seeing the nudists dancing in artificial twilight,

lunged, lips first, for her mouth and, as time, space, and the cigarettes they were holding burned to ash, he fell in love for the first time.

Despite Henry's miraculous sexual awakening, his first relationship came to a halt at the beginning of his sophomore year. The girl was a senior, fed up (as Henry's methods were not yet effective enough to cure the worst afflicted), and had talked Henry into an unthinkable deed that would secure her revenge and prove his loyalty.

One late Sunday night, Henry walked hand in hand with his lover to the high school, where she helped him corner the school mascot, a peacock, strangle it to death, and hang it in the front doorway of the school to the shock and dismay of Monday's students.

The next morning as I drove to work, Henry called. I could hear in the background a rush of wind and dull music bellowing from a car radio, and his voice, hovering only slightly above them, was practically indiscernible. I figured out that he was in a convertible with his new true love, that his suitcases had been packed, and that he was headed out of town with no particular destination.

"You're with Chloe?!"

"Yeah, why do you sound so surprised?"

"Oh, I didn't mean to. When will you be back?"

"I'll send you my new address."

"No... Henry, When will you be back?!" I hollered into the phone.

"Not coming back."

"What the fuck, Henry? What do you mean you're not coming back. You're just leaving, for good, everything?"

"Great, isn't it?"

"What do you want me to tell everyone else?"

"Nothing. Doesn't matter."

"But you can't just..."

"Hey, sorry man, gotta go... I can't hear you. I'll call later."

I clapped the phone shut and tossed it into the passenger seat. I punched the steering wheel. I imagined each of the girls in their own little spaces at different places all around the city, washing their hair, driving to work, still sleeping, teaching class, jumping for joy at the final stage of some new video game. And Chloe, reclined in a leather passenger seat, arms folded behind her head, a coastal breeze blowing out her hair, watching the dawn come up at the end of some country road, fully aware of all the things surrounding her that make her her, and thinking of Henry and Friday nights and feeling completely real beyond her imagination.

The Desert Between Us

Thomas Boulan

Annie crosses the street in front of me, and I slide down behind the steering wheel. I've been sitting in my car for fifteen minutes. I don't want her to know I've been waiting. In one hand she holds a small, brown bag, and in the other her black cane. A stiff October breeze blows through her wavy hair, and I worry her ears are cold and that she's shivering under her fleece jacket. Her hands are bare, too; she should be wearing her gloves. When she reaches her building, she hobbles up the four steps to the entrance and goes inside. I count to twenty-five and leave the warmth of my car.

Tapping her door, I listen as the thump of her cane moves towards me. My heart rocks—it knows I haven't seen her in days. She says hello tentatively, with caution.

"Annie, it's me. Dennis."

I smooth my hair, and the door opens in front of me. She flashes me a smile and gives me a stingy hug. We begin to pull away, and I impulsively brush her cheek with mine. She lays a hand on my chest and mouths the word Don't.

Annie gestures towards a chair covered with a fraying yellow quilt in the living room. "Have a seat," she says. "We can share my chicken soup."

I take off my coat, fall into the chair, and kick off my shoes. The apartment is drafty, and I hug myself, thinking, come on, Annie. Your ex-husband sends you plenty of money—why don't you turn up the heat?

She moves around the cramped kitchen. On the counter, near the refrigerator, is an army of small containers, medication for arthritis and an assortment of vitamins and supplements. Her toaster and blender are draped with hand-sewn covers made of fabric scraps, and a perfect line of five pot holders hangs on the wall above the stove. The quilt she's been sewing is draped over a chair, and her journal and pen sit in the middle of the table. Annie's wearing loose-fitting jeans and a pink sweatshirt with "SAVE THE SEALS" on front. The sweatshirt looks odd on a forty-seven-year-old woman, but I know she couldn't care less. Her long hair, normally pulled back with headband, hangs lifelessly at her shoulders. This is a sign—the pain is bad today.

"It's nice to see you." I break the silence but then feel a flush of embarrassment. She's told me my eagerness is irritating at times; I act like "a poodle begging for affection."

Opening a drawer she pulls out two spoons. "I've been waiting for you to come by. I assumed Rebecca was keeping you busy with raking leaves and cleaning the garage."

I squeeze the armrest. "Please don't mention her name."

"But it's true, Dennis. Wives are like that." She removes two mugs from the cupboard. "They have to be. Husbands are perpetually getting into trouble. Look at you sitting in my chair. You're a poster boy for mischief."

"It's not like we're having an affair."

She smiles smugly and brings over the cups of soup with tablespoons buoyed inside. She then sits in the chair facing me and supports herself with several pillows. The cup is too hot to hold, and I place it on an end table off to the side. Annie does the same, and then stiffly raises her right foot and places it between my thighs. I slip off her white cotton sock and her slender toes are cold against my palms.

Annie begins to relax and the wrinkles in her forehead disappear. The beauty that must've been hers a decade ago—the alluring blue eyes, the small and delicate chin, the heart-shaped face—blossoms again, and I feel a sudden attraction for her. Slipping a hand into her pant leg, I stroke her calf.

"How do you feel today?" I say this slightly aroused.

"The cold makes my joints swell—you know that. Even though my knees hurt, I made myself go to the deli for soup. I've got to get out sometimes. This apartment can be a prison."

"You could've waited. I would have—"

"Dennis, I never know when you're coming." Her bitterness adds to the chill in the room, and I want to push her away. She must see the emotion wash from my face, because she wiggles her toes and pushes them against my stomach. Grateful for her forgiveness, I lower my chin and brush it with her toes. I then kiss the top of her foot and think, Rebecca doesn't forgive this easily. She holds onto grudges for months, sometimes years. She's made me pay for being sterile, constantly referring to the kids we could've had as our "lost children." To punish me more, she refused to consider our options and, after twenty-three years, the issue has filled our house with a ghostly presence.

I stop to sample my soup. The broth is salty, and the wide, flat noodles are soft and nourishing. Annie sips from her cup, and then slowly lifts her other leg up onto my lap. I remove her sock, and then move my palm along her the bottom of her foot, long strokes from her heel to the underside of her toes. With a thin smile she studies my face. I've told her she elicits

something from me that others rarely see, a need to nurture, a need to give. At Pemberton Laboratories I test hair, blood and tissue samples for defense attorneys and write uninspiring reports—there are few opportunities to practice my benevolence.

I learned about caring at the age of eleven, when I found a sparrow with a broken wing and kept it in a shoe box on a shelf in the garage. I fed my secret pet for weeks, until it died one Saturday morning. I cried in my room afterwards, stunned by its death and the loss of the magic that moved its eyes and opened its mouth to accept pieces of milk-soaked bread. The tiny body quickly stiffened. I buried it behind the garage then sat under a tree, weak from the weight of helplessness. Not only was my bird gone, but also my mission to keep it alive.

Annie reaches out for my hand. I pull her up from the chair, and then support her as we make our way to the bedroom. She sits on the edge of the bed and wiggles out of her jeans. I roll up my sleeves and turn on a portable heater. As I light several candles, I catch my reflection in the glass of a framed Monet print across the room. At fifty-two I'm someone you'd ignore on the street, an average man with a turtleneck sweater, a conservative haircut and a hawk-like nose. Not someone who cheats on his wife. But then I ask myself, is this cheating?

I peek at Annie's bottom as she climbs over the bed, and then mix eucalyptus and castor oil in a small metal bowl. Carefully swirling the liquid, I warm it over the flame of a candle, and its sappy fragrance brings the past nine months to life. The sweltering summer days with the ceiling fan above us. The afternoons late last spring, when I pushed open the window to allow the perfumed scent of lilacs to enter the room.

Our visits began on a frigid evening in January, when I found Annie slumped on the sidewalk. She had fallen on the ice, and blood leaked from a cut in her forehead. I helped her inside and held a washcloth to the wound, which was smaller than it seemed. The next day I stopped to say hello. We drank strong black tea, and Annie described the years of arthritis and said massage had helped ease the pain. Six visits later I offered to give it a try, and she reluctantly agreed. On that rainy afternoon the outcome was laughable: I spilled oil on the bed; my hands pinched and prodded her flesh; she giggled through whimpers of pain. We eventually found a process that worked, and I would lie in my own bed at night, fantasizing that she'd soon give me access to the rest of her body. But this temptation quickly died. During one of our visits, Annie revealed she hadn't had sex in seven years, since her divorce. She joked she'd rather have a good piece of chocolate cake than the "complication of screwing."

She stretches her thin, milky legs out across a white sheet. I arrange a

blanket across her torso to keep her warm, and brush hair away from her forehead. Pouring a small amount of oil onto my palm, I rub my hands together and lay them on her left thigh, just below the line of her underwear. Fine dark hairs succumb to the weight of the oil, and my fingertips leave trails of red. I reach her knee and surround it with my fingers, smoothing the oil onto both sides of her kneecap. I then caress her calves and work my way to her ankle, before massaging each and every toe. When I've finished with this leg, I pour out more oil and move to the other side of the bed. Annie lies in silence with her eyes fixed on the ceiling. I sneak a look at the puff of pubic hair pushing out from her underwear, and briefly visualize what lies beneath.

When the massage is complete, I pull the blanket over her legs, and then go to the bathroom to wash my hands. The small tiled room is filled with sculptural containers of soaps, creams and shampoos, and I linger, not wanting to leave. I return to say goodbye and find Annie asleep. Kissing her forehead, I let myself out and leave.

Rebecca is reading on the sofa when I come home at six o'clock. I say hello from the doorway, pretending to scratch my nose. The scent of oil still remains on my hands, so I go to the kitchen sink and scrub them with the powdered soap we use in our dishwasher. My hands now reek of lemons, something more familiar.

I return to the living room. "So what's for dinner?"

"I thought we might go out. I'm craving seafood."

Rebecca is wearing a new black blouse, revealing a gaudy gold necklace and a noticeable amount of cleavage. She dresses provocatively when she wants to have sex and likes to draw attention to her breasts. Over the years I've become bored with them and prefer women with smaller builds. Although, I do give her credit for going to her aerobics class—she does not look forty-nine. Glancing at a potted plant, I think of Annie and her sweatshirt. She hides the shape of her slight frame, as though she's embarrassed by it. One afternoon she told me her husband left when the arthritis became severe. He never wanted a "disabled wife" who couldn't ride a simple bike or go cross-country skiing. I listened to this and thought, no—he was disappointed with the changes in your body.

"Seafood sounds good," I move across the room and drop into our new leather recliner. "I had a late lunch but I could go for a piece of swordfish."

Rebecca rises from the sofa and walks over to me. Her smell is a mixture of sweat and the flowery perfume she favors, an odor I've learned to associate with my wife. Her dyed blond hair is beginning to reveal its graying roots, but it's still neat and stylish pulled behind her ears. She's put on fresh

lipstick; each lip is blood red and perfectly shaped. I close my eyes and allow her access to my mouth. Her kiss is wet and tastes like coffee and toothpaste. Annie and I have kissed on four separate occasions, back in the beginning of our relationship. Her lips were soft but always chapped, and she'd pucker like an aunt. Rebecca lingers above me, and I keep my eyes closed, assuming she wants me to notice her blouse.

At the restaurant she sits next to me in the booth. I push my shoulder against brick wall to my left, and the table leg digs into the side of my knee. We order drinks from a waiter with spiky, gelled hair, and then Rebecca tells me about a new saleswoman at the jewelry store.

"She simply talks too much, and I think she's annoying our customers."

"Why don't you mention it to her?"

"I'm afraid it would hurt her feelings. She tries so hard and seems so innocent. I'm afraid if I say anything, she'll start to cry."

"I'm sure she'd get over it."

"Maybe you're right, Dennis. But the truth can be painful."

I think Rebecca's talking about herself. She may be revealing the tip of our iceberg, the long-ignored emptiness that looms deep within our marriage. Has she ever wondered about another woman? And what would she think of Annie? I gulp my whiskey and water and smile into the glass, thinking my relationship with Annie is almost comical: foot and leg massages, kisses on the forehead. I finish my drink and picture her lying in bed, with a blanket pulled up to her chin. This woman is a threat to no one.

The waiter comes back to take our order. For the first time I notice his right ear is deformed, and I imagine a frightening attack by a rabid dog with snarling teeth. He reads today's specials off a sheet of paper, and I feel embarrassed for him. I want to say it's okay. Leave the paper. We can read it ourselves. I order another drink, and Rebecca wrinkles her nose to show her disapproval. The waiter offers to take my glass, and I joke that I haven't had time to lick it clean.

Twenty minutes of empty chitchat follows, and then the waiter brings out two over-sized plates. I order a third drink, and then Rebecca and I eat while making brief comments about the garlic mashed potatoes and the tastiness of our shrimp and swordfish. When our meals are finished, the waiter stops to offer dessert.

Rebecca smiles. "No thanks. We have something waiting at home."

She slips her hand between my legs and squeezes my thigh. I gasp, and the waiter turns his head towards another table. He then says he'll bring our bill, and I allow myself once last look at his ear. I focus on the uncertain night ahead—Rebecca and I haven't had sex in weeks—and drink the rest of

my whiskey. Suddenly I feel loose and mischievous and a thought comes that gets me to smile. Pleased with myself, I touch the back of Rebecca's hand.

"Let me drop you off and I'll make a quick run to the office. I need to pick up my laptop and some materials. I've gotta throw a few charts together for a meeting tomorrow. I can do it before bed."

Rebecca's mouth sours. "Now? You need to do this now?"

"I'll be home before you know it. I promise. Give me thirty minutes, forty tops."

I pay the bill and leave a generous tip. Rebecca leads the way back to our car.

A man with no legs sits in a wheelchair under a streetlight outside our business office downtown. The area contains a number of restaurants and bars, a good place for panhandling. I often give him dollar bills, sometimes fives, and will chat with him if I have time. He's a Vietnam vet, and his family no longer sends him money. He sometimes reads me his poems and they echo in my head for the rest of the day.

I hand him a ten-dollar bill. "Don't spend it all in one place."

"I won't. God bless you. Your family must be missing you tonight."

"You might say that."

In the office I throw on a light switch and hurry to my desk. Documents clutter my workspace, and a rumble of shame stirs the food and booze in my stomach. I disconnect the laptop from its power supply and arbitrarily grab a report I completed a week ago—Rebecca will never know the difference.

In ten minutes I'm in front of Annie's building and almost trip as I race up her steps. I knock on her door, and then lean against it to catch my breath. My mind whirls as I wait—ten seconds ... twenty seconds. She doesn't answer, so I knock again. I heave a sigh when her cane thumps against the floor. She says hello, and her voice is thick and unfriendly.

I grab the handle. "It's me, Dennis. Open up."

"Why are you here so late?"

"It's only eight o'clock. I just want a quick visit."

"It's not a good time. I took my pain meds an hour ago and I need to sleep."

"You can go back to bed, and I'll lay next to you. Just give me five minutes."

"Not tonight. I'm too tired. Call me tomorrow."

"Annie, but wait..."

She pushes away from the door, and it creaks against the jamb. I let go of the handle and walk away, hating the slap of rejection. I would've accepted so little, one of her hugs, even a handshake, any contact at all. I leave the

building and have a craving for more alcohol, but my promise to Rebecca rings in my head. In the car I bat the pine tree-shaped air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror, and it swings wildly before sailing to the floor.

Rebecca calls out for me when I open the front door. The bedroom light glows at the end of the hallway, and I slip off my shoes and walk towards it. A familiar piece by Mozart plays in the living room and, as I stop for a drink of water, I pick up the fragrance of a vanilla-scented candle. Throughout the years Rebecca has been the one to create romance in our marriage, in spite of her disappointments. The candles, the music, a special blouse. I enjoy her efforts but don't like the baggage they create when our lovemaking is over. An orgasm is no match for the emptiness and guilt that follow.

I remove my pants, socks and turtleneck and lay them on a chair in the bedroom. Rebecca is lying beneath a peach-colored sheet, her breasts perfectly displayed on top.

"Did you get it?" She says this quietly.

The computer!—I left it in the car. "Yep, it's in the living room."

This lie gets added to the others from this evening, a ring of half-truths that surrounds my head like tangle of thorny vines. I walk over to the bed, drop my boxer shorts, and sit next to Rebecca. She smiles like a shy, college freshman, and the innocence that once charmed me now makes her seem naive and simpleminded. She takes my hand and places it on her right breast. The gesture feels mechanical; my hand is limp and detached. I want her to not want me. I want to be with Annie instead. Rebecca gathers my fingers and passes them over her nipple and under the flesh that flattens against the sheet. She gently guides me around the warm slope of her skin, and then repeats the process. I can't resist the promise of sex and slide my fingers under the weight of her breast. Bending over to kiss it, I then freeze.

"Rebecca, I feel something."

"You're supposed to—I'm trying to turn you on."

"No, not that. I feel a lump. Right here. Give me your hand."

I press her fingertips into a knot the size of a pea.

"You're right, Dennis! My God, it's a lump."

She probes the area, as air rushes in and out of her mouth. A tear squeezes out of the corner of her eye and cascades down her cheek. Another follows and her eyes glisten.

"Remember what happened to my sister? She died when she was thirty-six. And then my aunt—she was only forty. Jesus, I thought I was safe. Hold me, Dennis, will you? Just hold me."

I lie next to her, pull the sheet over us, and take her into my arms. The music stops playing in the other room, and Rebecca whimpers against my

cheek.

I squeeze her. "It's all right. I'm here."

Sobs displace the silence in the bedroom, and I think about the last time I saw Annie cry when her knees were swollen. I picture her pale, bony legs and see myself running my hands along her thighs, trying to offer relief. I ask myself if our connection would be lost if her pain were gone and she didn't need me. I answer yes—her poor health is what keeps us together. My thoughts shift to Rebecca. I search my mind and try to define my connection to the woman lying next to me. I find nothing and rub my face with a free hand.

I wake with my arm across Rebecca's chest. She stirs, and I tell her to go back to sleep. She releases a soft moan, a flutter of helplessness, and I kiss her shoulder. Her skin is salty, and perfume dulled by pheromones lingers in the folds of flesh between us. I pull my moist arm away from the bed of her breasts and lie on my back. The empty expanse of our white ceiling stretches above me, and I grapple with the future that might lie ahead: doctor appointments and lab tests, maybe some kind of biopsy, Rebecca getting chemo and losing thirty pounds. She was sick with the flu three months ago, the last time she took time off work. She lay in bed for days with a fever, and her voice became hoarse and masculine. I'd leave Annie's, and rush home to bring her ginger ale and ice cream. We'd then watch TV in bed and she'd lay her head on my shoulder.

This was the last time I felt love for my wife.

I sneak off to the kitchen, still naked, and call the office, telling our receptionist I'll be taking a sick day. I consider calling Annie too, but it's only 7:45—she usually wakes at 8:30. Staring into the kitchen sink, I bite my knuckle, not knowing what to do next. I don't want the fuss of making a pot of coffee, or even toast, and go back to the bedroom and stand in the doorway. The bed sits regally across the room; a spotless stretch of wool carpet leads up to its sturdy wooden legs. Rebecca lies on her side, cradled above the floor, sleeping with her hands clasped under her cheek like a child. I want to go to her, but in the moment the desert between us is more than I can travel. Lowering myself, I lean against the wall and sit with my arms around my knees, waiting for something to change.

The Smell of Mortality

Adam Berlin

Let's get this straight. I look young.

I'm at the fortieth birthday party of my friend Steve Borwick. There's a display of shrimp, sushi rolls and cheap caviar set up on a patio table and I've already been to the bar. My second gin and tonic is halfway done. The pool behind me is empty except for two women floating on rafts, lined eyes hidden by tinted sunglasses. One of them is Steve's ex-wife. The other also wears a bikini. I haven't seen Steve's wife since their wedding ten years ago. I've seen Steve an average of once a year since then. I place six shrimp on a plastic plate, put a spoonful of red sauce next to the shrimp, walk along the pool to where Jenny sits under a striped umbrella. She's twenty-nine and smart and blonde and it was her car service that drove us here. As the right-hand woman to a major corporate player, she enjoys the perks of Wall Street profits. As her boyfriend of two years, some of the residuals trickle down to me. Jenny's halfway through her first gin and tonic. She smiles when I place the shrimp in front of her, dips one, bites, places the tail on the side of the plate.

"So let's dish," she says.

"That should be easy. Who should we start with?"

Jenny looks around. She's clearly the best-looking woman here, but the competition at this party isn't too stiff. The guests are not quite city people and I've found that the farther from Manhattan the suburb, the less beautiful the people. Steve Borwick grew up in the city, but his childhood was sufficiently rough to create dreams of Westchester houses. To his credit, he's fulfilled his dream.

"What about the two bathing beauties?" Jenny says. "They look kind of rough."

"One of them is Steve's ex. She's the one on the left. The other one I'm not sure about. I think she may be one of the secretaries he's screwing."

"Did you go to his wedding?"

"I was there. I knew it wouldn't last."

"You always say that."

"Well, I'm right fifty percent of the time."

"Great," Jenny says and bites into another shrimp. "You're a real ge-

nius."

"I like to think so."

"So Steve Borwick is screwing his secretary."

I met Steve my sophomore year at college. We both sat in the back of the room during Russian class. When I asked Steve why the hell he was taking Russian, he gave the same answer I was giving. I want to join the KGB. The real reason we were taking Russian was the instructor. Professor Pavalova was a Russian beauty and an easy grader. Neither Steve nor I were linguists so we wanted to get through our language requirement as painlessly as possible. He was studying Political Science with a long-range eye on law school. I was taking acting classes with no goals in sight except a vague idea I'd get picked up in Hollywood. I was getting laid constantly in college so I figured I had the it in making it. Steve, it turned out, was even more promiscuous than I was. He had a reputation for out-drinking and out-smoking the competition and he was supposed to be hung like a horse. I'd never seen him naked and his hands didn't look too big to me, but reputations usually had merit and when we started drinking and smoking together, he more than held his own so I figured the rest was true.

"Did you ever screw one of your bosses?" I ask Jenny.

"I always keep a distance with my bosses. If they think they have a shot with me, they stay interested and pay me well."

"That they do."

"It's all part of the corporate game."

"I screwed a lot of my leading ladies," I say.

"Wow."

"I'm just trying to find a parallel."

"You should have screwed some casting agents instead."

"I should have."

"That's where the power is. Then you could have been a star."

"I am a star," I say.

Jenny rolls her eyes, chooses a third shrimp, bites off the meat, lines up the empty tail next to the other two.

"You could be rich if you married one of your bosses," I say. "You'd never have to work again."

"I've never liked any of my bosses. Why would I want to marry them?"

"So I could predict you'd get divorced."

I recognize the guy coming towards us. His name is Ryan and I've met him a couple of times. He used to be a lawyer in Steve's firm before he set up his own practice. He specializes in handling sexual harassment cases, which is ironic because the few times we've been out, he's always the most

lecherous prick in the bar.

"How's it going, big guy?"

"Good to see you, Ryan," I say and introduce him to Jenny.

His horny eyes scan Jenny's breasts. Jenny has a great pair of tits, which are pretty much wasted on me since I've never been a breast man. I have a theory about men who love breasts. I believe they're all sexually stunted, looking for mother figures to nurse their little needs. Ryan starts asking Jenny the standard what-do-you-do questions, his eyes roaming up and down, up and down. They start talking hot investments, economic forecasts, interest rates, and, as I always do when talk turns to business, I tune out. I look at the two women floating in the pool. I look at the people crowding the raw bar. I look at Steve's house, a large four-bedroom with a pool and a hot tub and expensive landscaping. I look at Steve, standing shirtless in his bathing suit, a few extra pounds around his gut, his hair thinning, his eyes tired from sixty-hour weeks.

"So what about you, big guy?" Ryan says. "What's new with you?"

I have a theory about men who call other men big guy. They're the same kind of men that love breasts too much.

"Nothing new," I say.

"So Steve's turning the big Four O. I hit that milestone last month. Forty fucking years old. We're not getting any younger, are we, big guy?"

"Speak for yourself."

"I'm speaking for all us old men," Ryan says and laughs. "So how's the acting going?"

"Slow. I just did a showcase, which may get picked up by The Public Theatre."

"Sounds good."

"And he did a reading with Pacino," Jenny chimes in.

"Al Pacino?" Ryan says. "Al "Godfather" Pacino? Al "Scarface" Pacino? That Al Pacino?"

"That's right," I say. "That one."

"Cool," Ryan says and suddenly I've got something he's more interested in than Jenny's tits. I've got a theory about men who are fascinated by celebrities.

I've done extra work on close to one hundred films. I've seen just about every living actor who's made it. On the set, I've stood in the background of Russel Crowe, Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, George Clooney, Sean Connery, Julia Roberts, Sharon Stone, Susan Sarandon. I literally bumped into Mel Gibson in one movie and sat at the same table as Dustin Hoffman in another. I rode a subway with Robert DeNiro and served a mini-quette to Meryl Streep. I'm not impressed by stars. They're just people, not nearly as good looking in

person, and while I'm still in their background, I know I'm just a phone call away from doing the scene instead of being the scenery.

"So what's Al Pacino like?" Ryan says.

"He's short."

"I know that. But what's he like? Was he cool? I mean, did he talk to you, or was he stuck up?"

"We did a reading together," I say. "He had to talk to me."

"I mean for real. Did he talk to you when you were just hanging out?"

"He said hello. We didn't go out for drinks afterwards or anything. My part wasn't that big."

"Well that's still cool," Ryan says. "That's real cool. You're still giving acting a shot."

"I still am," I say, but Ryan's eyes are back on Jenny's tits.

If I took the long-shot view, if I focused the movie camera on myself from some omniscient angle, I'd look like a definite loser. A literal loser. I was losing. I had taken a gamble in life and, so far, I'd lost. I knew that Ryan had pegged me for years. And he'd pegged me right. Right out of college, potential wasn't an ugly word. At twenty-two years old, the dream of making it was possible. I had as much of a shot as the next guy and Hollywood loved to discover the next big thing. At twenty-five making it was still possible, especially for a man. The women were over the hill by then, but leading men were coming into their prime. At thirty it was a little less possible, especially when you hadn't done much, or at least not enough. At thirty-nine, well, it could seem impossible, at least from the long shot. But I still look pretty up close, prettier than all my peers. Ryan and his potbelly and his private law firm and his new Lexus convertible he's telling Jenny about can kiss my firm ass. I've stayed with it. I'm staying with it. If you stay with it long enough, eventually you get the call. That's what the common wisdom is. I have a theory about common wisdom, but not when it comes to my life, my shot, my need to make it.

"And it looks great when the top goes down," Ryan says. "It slides open so smoothly I just sit back and watch the show. And it makes driving an adventure. I feel like I'm on the Autobahn every time I pull that baby out of the garage."

I excuse myself to get a drink.

The bartender mixes me a gin and tonic and I force myself not to look too closely at his set up. I work as a cater-waiter to make money and sometimes it's hard to be on the other side, a servee and not a server. When I make it, I wonder how long it will take to stop noticing the movements of waiters in the background. When I make it, I wonder how long it will take to stop noticing the extras.

I decide to go over and pay my respects to Steve Borwick. The birthday boy is talking to a thin man with pasty legs and a plaid bathing suit that looks from another time. Steve takes me around and hugs me and I hug him back and wish him a happy fortieth.

"Can you believe it?" he says. "Me. Forty. It just doesn't make sense." Looking at him, it makes sense, but I don't say a word.

Steve introduces me to the thin man. He's a partner in Steve's firm. Steve tells the man I'm one of his old college buddies and a great actor. I'm hoping the man will throw me questions about college and not acting, if he questions me at all. There's a lot to say about acting, but the questions are always about what I've done.

"An actor," the man says.

"Hey diddle dee dee," I say sarcastically, my most current line of diversion. "So birthday boy, how do you feel?"

"I still feel like a kid," Steve says.

A little girl runs up to Steve and starts saying Daddy, Daddy and I remember Steve is a dad. I sent the kid a present when she was born, but I've never actually met her. The kid wants to have another ginger ale and she's asking Steve if it's all right. The thin man is smiling stupidly at the kid. I look across the pool. Jenny and Ryan are still at it.

"Excuse me a second," Steve says and walks with his kid to the bar.

"Nice meeting you," I say to the thin man and escape.

I make up a plate of shrimp at the raw bar for myself. I don't bother lining the bitten-off tails in a row. A breeze blows over the grass, over the pool, over me. All of a sudden it smells fishy, more than a raw bar should. Maybe it's the sushi in the sun that makes the smell too ripe. I have two shrimp left, but I put the plate down. I make a muscle for myself and it's rock hard. I press my fingers into my stomach and it's flat. I look at all the people, my age and older, looking older and much older, and I feel like the kid. I always feel like the kid. Whenever I meet people I automatically assume they're older than me, more settled, less strong, closer to death. That's how I feel here. Lined eyes, thin hair, potbellies, stooped shoulders, that horrible look of resignation that the apex of their lives is over. Once they held the world in strong hands, but now their grips have loosed, they're sliding away, falling apart. Me, I still have potential. Up close I still have potential. Steve can't believe he's forty, but I can believe it. I'll be forty in three months and that I can't believe. Nobody can. Nobody.

"How do you know Steve?"

She's young, probably about nineteen. She must be a new arrival at the party. I didn't see her before and she's the kind of girl you see. Great body. Great skin. The clearest blue eyes. Lustrous brown hair that belongs in a

shampoo commercial.

"He graduated from the same school I did," I say.

"I thought so."

"What does that mean?"

"I saw your picture. Your 8 by 10. You're the actor Steve went to school with."

"That's me," I say and I guess she's off the hook. If she saw my picture, if Steve told her we went to college together, she had too many preconceptions about my age before she saw me.

"And how do you know Steve?" I say.

"I sit for his daughter sometimes."

"And what do you do with yourself the rest of the time?"

"Oh. This and that."

"Sounds like a very specific life," I say.

She smiles. She has perfect teeth.

"You're almost as handsome as your picture," she says.

"Well, thank you. I love you too."

"I'm very loveable," she says and holds my eyes.

"Are you?"

"I am."

She keeps her eyes on my eyes. If I was another kind of man I might blush, but I've been around so much that I don't really care. That's my problem. I just don't care. If Ryan took Jenny in his Lexus convertible and drove away, I'd carry on like it was just another afternoon.

"So what's the life of an actor like?" she says.

"I wouldn't know."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm not living the life of an actor yet. I do some acting, but I don't make a living at it."

"Well, I'm sure it must be fun."

"Fun," I say.

"Are you a depressed person?"

"Me? I'm happy all the time. Nothing beats a birthday party to cheer up my life. Especially a fortieth birthday party."

"I think it's great. Besides, older men are much sexier."

"Are you calling me an old man?"

"Not at all."

"Good. I was almost going to have to throw you in the pool."

She looks across the pool and waves at Brian's ex-wife.

"Feel that," I say and flex my arm for her.

"Very nice."

"Feel it."

And she does.

"Very strong," she says.

"Rock solid. Feel that," I say and guide her hand to my stomach.

"Very nice."

"I just want to make sure we know where we stand."

"You're crazy," she says and smiles.

"Crazy in a good way. Are you crazy?"

"I can be," she says.

"How crazy? How crazy can you be?"

Now it's me holding her eyes and even though she's only nineteen, even though she's only a babysitter, she holds mine back. I don't blink. She doesn't blink. I don't smile. She doesn't smile. I just think about fucking her and that's what I give her, from my eyes to hers, I'm going to fuck you, right there, in my stare.

"Very good," I say and my voice is low.

She doesn't say anything, just keeps holding my eyes, and I'm thinking I have a real fighter here, someone who reminds me of me when I was nineteen, which isn't that tough since I'm no different than I used to be, not really. A woman I'd gone out with met me again after many years and told me just that. She had a husband and a kid, and when she asked about my life she looked at me and told me I hadn't changed at all. She even accused me of living an empty life, as if her pedestrian existence was full. She brought her kid along, to show me her big accomplishment, and after lunch her kid said something about wanting to put on his mother's lipstick. The kid was old enough to know better and the woman laughed it off, but I knew she was embarrassed. I didn't rub it in her face, I didn't tell her that her meaningful existence wasn't exactly working out picture-perfect, but she knew. I smiled at her kid and winked, a gesture he'd use one day when he became a full-fledged transvestite.

I'm still looking at my nineteen-year-old and she's still looking at me.

"Should we keep this staredown going or both turn away at the same time?"

"You like games, don't you?" she says.

"I just like these heightened moments," I say.

"So you're one of those."

"One of those? Am I a type to you?"

"I'm not sure yet," she says and in that vague statement she has the upper hand.

She's right about the games. I do like games. My favorite game is the one where I tell women I'm twenty-five and then after I fuck them I show

them my ID. I haven't played that game in a while. I look across the pool at Jennifer and she really is twenty-nine. I look at Ryan and he really is forty. I look at my nineteen-year-old and there's no doubt about it. She really is nineteen.

"Do you do most of your babysitting at Steve's house or his wife's?"

"Mostly here," she says. "Why?"

"Then you know where the guest bedroom is."

She holds my eyes, then smiles her straight-toothed smile.

"It's right over there," she says and tilts her head toward the house, her hair falling, lustrous, smelling fresh.

"Heightened moments," I say.

I follow her inside, up the stairs, down the hall, into the guest bedroom. There's a flowered bedspread and pillows with ruffles and I wonder what's gotten into my college friend Steve. Maybe he's making enough money to hire interior decorators for every room. My nineteen-year-old doesn't wait for me to make some smooth move. She has her shirt off, her shorts off, and she's taking off her bathing suit.

"I assume you have a condom," she says.

"I'm always prepared."

From outside the closed, draped windows, I can hear the noise of the party. I wonder if anyone will miss me.

I get undressed, put on the rubber, move to the kid on the bed, move my mouth down her neck, over her breasts, circling her nipples. Her body is perfect, not an ounce of fat, not a centimeter of age. I open her up with my fingers, put my cock in and fuck her and fuck her and listen to the young sounds she makes. I'm a marathon fucker. My power comes from showing any woman that I can go longer and harder than she can. It's another game I like to play.

"Not bad for an old man," I say.

"I told you. I like old men."

"I'm not old."

"You're not young."

"Am I fucking you old?"

"You're fucking me good, but you're not young."

I start fucking her harder, fucking her to win. Maybe she's playing her own game. Fucking with me like whipping some horse to go faster. Outside I hear applause and then quiet and then I hear Steve's voice. He's thanking everyone for coming to his party. He's telling everyone that forty is a milestone age, an age where you have to take stock of your life because the decisions you make now will last the rest of your life, how you have to realize that the spring in your step is not quite as springy.

"And the wood in your dick is not as woody," Ryan yells out from across the pool.

"That too," Steve yells back and everyone laughs.

I'm not laughing. I'm fucking a nineteen-year-old. The spring's in my step. The wood's in my dick. They can all grow old and weak and fall apart, but I will not succumb.

"Are you almost done?" she says.

"What?"

"You old guys take a long time to come. Steve always needs me to talk dirty to him."

"You're fucking Steve?"

"Why not?"

"Because. Because he looks old. Because he is old. Did you hear what he just said?"

"It sounded true to me. You are what you are at your age."

"I'm not what I am," I say.

"What are you?"

"Whatever."

"Whatever," she says.

"I'm the guy who's fucking you. That's what I am."

I'm fucking her, my ass is moving, my cock is going in and out, but I'm not really with her. Not really. I never am. I'm an extra. I'm an extra on film and an extra in life. I live in a tiny studio without a kitchen. I cater other people's weddings. I've never had a serious relationship in my life. I run and I work out and I sleep enough to stay pretty and a nineteen-year-old girl is asking me to hurry up and come so she can get back to the party and a guy I went to school with is telling me I am what I am and a potbellied idiot is surprised I'm still acting, looking into my horizon, seeing a life of losing ahead of me.

"So are you almost done?" she says. "I think we should get back downstairs."

"I'm a great actor," I say.

"Okay."

"I mean, I can really act. I'm a great actor."

"Whatever."

"Whatever."

I pull my cock out, pull off the rubber, throw it against the wall. It sticks there for a moment, the lubricant holding strong, and then falls.

"You didn't come," she says.

"You know us old guys."

I pull on my pants and shirt as fast as I can, but she's even faster.

"Nice meeting you," she says and leaves the room.

I smooth over the comforter. I take a tissue from the flowery box on the night table, pick up the rubber, fold it into the tissue, put it in my pocket.

When we were in Russian class, when we were in college, Steve Borwick and I used to whisper what we'd do to the professor if we were stranded with her in Siberia. She was a young professor, but I assumed she was older, far older than I was as I sat in the back of the room. But she was far younger than I am now. If time stood still, and the years only passed for me, the Russian professor would look at me as far older. If she knew my age. If she knew I'd been in her class. If time stood still like that. I have a theory about time.

I pull the flowered curtain back and look over the party. There's Jenny still talking to Ryan about the world of finance. She looks young, but not that young. There's Steve talking to his daughter about whatever fathers say to their daughters. He looks a believable forty. There's the nineteen-year-old walking past the raw bar and over to Steve. She hugs him and I can hear her wishing him a perky Happy Birthday. Next to her Steve looks almost foolish, but not when you see him as a successful lawyer and father. He was a kid in my Russian class, only he's not that kid. He's a forty-year-old man. The nineteen-year-old picks up Steve's daughter, kisses her cheek, puts her down. The nineteen-year-old walks over to the pool, undresses to her bathing suit, dives in. She starts to swim, her young body cutting the water, a perfect crawl stroke, and when she lifts her face to breathe her mouth is calm, serene, practically smiling.

A breeze ripples the water.

I smell it.

The raw bar in the sun. The fish going rotten.

A Phone Call

Bradley Bosma

"So how about this weather we've been having?"

"How's that?"

"This weather. We've been having weather. How about that, huh?"

"Oh, I hadn't really noticed. I usually work nights. Indoors. I work indoors at night and I don't have much need for weather."

"Nights, huh? You know, Anne, many people think owls are nocturnal, but that's just a myth. I saw a special about it on the Discovery Channel. Everyone thinks owls only come out at night but, you know, they don't. They come out during the day, too."

"Yeah, well, Jack, if owls made double plus overtime down at the Scrub n' Rub for working nights and were single-handedly supporting 2 children—I bet more owls would come out at night."

"I guess they didn't really mention it in the owl special. Anyway, have you given any more thought to that thing we were talking about earlier?"

"Yeah, I've been thinking about that. Listen, Jack, I haven't talked to you since we—"

"Boned that last time."

"You've always had a way with words, Jack. Anyway, I haven't talked to you since then and then I get this call from you out of the blue and you want to... well, actually I think I'm a little confused still; what is it exactly you wish to do?"

"I want to rent your kids to pick up divorcees and widowers at church."

"Right, divorcees and widowers. How does that work exactly?"

"Well they meet regularly, every Thursday night, at 7, in the church. So there they are, Thursdays at 7, and I read about this meeting in the Church bulletin, I picked up—on the floor of a bar, the Scrub n' Rub, actually, small world, huh? Anyway, they have these meetings, and I haven't dated in a long time, like a really long time—did I tell you I haven't dated in a really long time? Well I haven't dated in a really long time so I start going to these meetings..."

"Right, and where exactly do the fruit of my loins fit in, in helping to

get you laid?"

"Well I go to these meetings, and they all have kids, and I don't have anything to talk to them about, so I start telling them about my two kids..."

"Which you don't have."

"Right."

"But you need."

"Right."

"Do you know who Clucky the Chicken is, Jack?"

"Well, no, I can't say as I do actually."

"Clucky the Chicken is this jackass who dresses up in a chicken suit and plays children's songs on his guitar."

"Well, that sounds nice enough."

"Try listening to those songs on repeat for 12 hours a day, over and over and over, while you're trying to get in a nap before you have to go work nights at the Scrub n' Rub and all you want to do smash the god damned tape player but you've got to keep it together because your deadbeat ex-husband is too busy getting drunk and getting covered in whore glitter at the strip club and all the time that jackass in the chicken suit is singing about those fucking puppies in the god dammed golden rainbow meadow!"

"So... I can't rent your kids?"

"If you can put up with Clucky the Chicken, you can keep 'em."

"All right! I'll call you Thursday."

How They Came to Call it Love

S. Asher Sund

A little cough, a little snuffle—that was how it started, as a simple little cold. A day later it was followed with a little reddish bile in the diaper (not blood-red, but brown-red, as if only a slight case of food poisoning or a touch of the flu). Nothing to worry about. Her husband's words that she had used for a time with the baby. Nothing to worry about, she said, while patting her daughter gently on the back until she got what she was looking for, a little burp, though it didn't smell right—nothing looked or sounded or smelled right—and that was when she finally wasn't willing to take the chance anymore, after the burp with the stinky taint to it. She sang softly to her baby as she drove the five miles to where the doctor was waiting. Leaves were dropping, falling from the sky. A little trip to the doctor's while singing a little song and afterwards everything would be okay. Nothing to worry about.

A week after the funeral, her gay Pentecostal friend Maxine brought over a sympathy basket from Harry and David. She brought over flowers and left them on the porch. On the card that came with the flowers was the image of a dove with a fig branch in its beak. Inside the card it said, God is faithful. Put your trust in Him.

Darla ate the food in the gift basket alone at the kitchen table late one night. She ate the Royal Riveria apples and pears, the cheddar and jack cheeses and the sausage. She ate the preserves on bread, preserves on crackers, preserves on lemon cake, preserves on preserves. She ate the Chocolate Moose Munch caramel popcorn and the honey roasted cashews and peanuts, leaving the chocolate truffles for the very end, though not because she was saving best for last or because dessert should be eaten after the main course (or in the very least after the preserves), but because the package was harder to open, the package was difficult and she was in a hurry and only after everything else was gone, when there was nothing left to eat except the reusable basket and sympathy ribbon, did she take a knife to the box and stab and stab as if she had to kill it first.

While eating, she traced with a pen the words on the inside of the card—God is faithful, God is faithful—until it began to read God is faithfoul. It

was some sort of foul religious slump she was going through, an appetite of demonic proportions, demanding truffles. Truffles and milk.

Several months later, while driving on a deserted stretch of road on the outskirts of town, she saw the sign: Marble & Fritz. Below the names, on soggy cardboard, it said, Free Kittens! Dark pulled over to the side of the road, backed up and drove beneath draping pine boughs down a long gravelly driveway to a house that was sloping a bit to the right.

She honked twice and was beginning to back out when a man the size of a fridge—a fridge in overalls—stepped out onto the porch and squinted at her. Was this Fritz? She yelled through her open car window that she came for the kittens. He nodded, stepped down from the porch and motioned her around back where she imagined him bludgeoning her to death with the handle-end of an axe and feeding her body to the pigs. He led her to a large wooden crate sitting in the shadow side of a broken barn. At the bottom of the crate were the kittens.

Can I? she said, looking at Fritz.

Help yourself, he said.

She saw then that she had been wrong about the pigs. He was working a toothpick with vigor into his bottom front teeth as if he had killed the first woman visitor, the kitten lover, and ate her himself.

Dark picked up the most mild-mannered kitten. Something seemed wrong with the kitten's eyes. One eye fixed onto her as it should, but the other drifted over her shoulder, disappearing back there, into the woods.

Fritz said, That's from my wife dropping her. He knuckled the kitten's skull. But see? Didn't hurt her melon none.

At this, the kitten let out a tiny bark though perhaps it was only Fritz farting.

Speeding home, she held the kitten out to Edwin sitting on the front porch with a beer bottle. He hadn't known what to say afterwards, after it all happened, after their baby came and went, but what exactly had she expected him to say? Say sorry, say I'll get us another one, drop your drawers, say oops? No. Just that he had been wrong. There had been something to worry about after all. And if only they had worried earlier, but he didn't want to be one of those couples, the over-protecting couples in matching Disney rugby shirts who became for the doctors and their staff a laughing stock, running in whenever their Steven or Jonathan or Margaret or Mary had a simple little cough. A little cough or a little snuffle.

He had been holding a magazine. He had been reading a magazine in the waiting room when they both stood up to hear the news that he told her emphatically, again and again—while waiting, while flipping pages of his

magazine—they wouldn't have to hear. He promised her. It was nothing to worry about. He had the magazine in his hand, and then he dropped it. The magazine fell for years. It took a long time to fall. She watched it lying there. Admission. That was all. Admit it! I was wrong.

The kitten was a way to bridge the gap, to help him along, and because she was sure he had had a share of his own problems after the death of their daughter. She didn't know what these problems were, of course, because he never talked about them or about anything at all. This much she could say: Marina. As in: It's okay, I forgive you, you were stupid, you didn't know better, and I believed you as I shouldn't have, but it's okay.

Marina: their dead daughter's name.

Edwin pressed the kitten into his neck. No, he said. Let's call it Love.

He looked at Darla. She looked back. He said, Okay, we'll flip for it. He put the kitten into his crotch long enough to set a bottle cap on his thumb and said, This end here is heads.

He flipped it in the air.

Heads, Darla called out as the bottle cap landed and tinked around at their feet.

It turned out tails.

So that's how they came to call it Love, though as the kitten grew, Darla called it the cat, or when addressing the animal directly, simply cat. As in: Get away from me, cat.

He tells her one night that she needs to get over it. He brings the TV into the kitchen and plugs it in.

Over it? I need to get over it? What are you doing? Get that TV out of there.

Yes, he says. Get over it. It's been two years.

Two years! She's standing at the sink washing lettuce, slamming it into the bowl, leaf after leaf. And you think that matters?

Yes, I do. You're lucky. I mean, we can have another one. It's not all over. You need to watch the news. You need to see how bad others really have it.

She slams the bowl of salad onto the kitchen table and runs into the bedroom. He tries to come in and hold her, but she pushes him away until he leaves again, and then she can hear him out in the living room watching the news.

Later in kitchen while he's sleeping, she rips into a package of Swirly DeLIGHTS, endorsed by a professional athlete who says they taste sinful but add speed to your legs, followed by one turkey pot-pie only because she's never had this brand before.

Not bad for a frozen pot pie and screw it, she'll have another.

While waiting for it to bake, Darla falls into his chair and takes up the remote. TV wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the damn programming disrupting the otherwise nice flow of advertisements. She flips for the food commercials and then by accident lands on a late night news show about Winnie, a woman diagnosed with Trichotillomania.

Trichotillomania is a nervous disorder that prompts the person to pull out their hair. It started for Winnie in the fourth grade with her eyelashes and eyebrows but quickly progressed to hair in other places, so that by the sixth grade she said she had cancer to avoid getting teased. Today she wears a wig. Coincidentally, Jim, Winnie's husband, is also bald, though from natural processes, Darla assumes.

The final straw, Winnie says to the interviewer, and here she stops to clear a tear from the edge of her eye as the camera cuts to Jim reaching out for Winnie's hand and then cuts back to the startling bare dome of Winnie's head. She continues after a long and somewhat dramatic pause. I was at a tradeshow. I'm an elementary school teacher. I remember it clearly. The Paper Moon Tradeshow in Portland. A huge show at the Double Tree. Booths for arts and crafts, software and other stuff. You know, ideas for the classroom. And her story goes that somehow a baby screech owl from the zoo booth gets loose from its leather strap and takes Winnie's wig into the upper regions of the convention center, flying straight through the large paper moon.

I knew I had to go public after that, Winnie says.

But why didn't you just stop? the interviewer says.

Well, the strange thing, Winnie says, is that it's become almost soothing to pull my hair out.

And not just hair, Jim says and laughs. The camera cuts quick to him, then back to Winnie.

That's right. Winnie giggles. If truth be told, I ruin rugs. It's silly perhaps but also somehow liberating.

Most mornings Darla can be found scratching out the day's agenda on her favorite stationery. Across the bottom of each page a gray kitten chases a colored ball of yarn, one paw reaching for the trailing string. On subsequent pages the yarn changes from red to yellow to blue and back to red, and so on. Darla loves kittens. She's starting to hate cats. The morning after burning her second pot-pie while Winnie wept: blue yarn. Hmmm, she says, though there's no real connection, her daily life never as lucid as those nights when she eats.

She scribbles a quick grocery list and heads for Us Foods, a supermarket near their home. The checkout lady is in her late twenties and pregnant. Says on her name-tag:

FERN

Without U There Is No Us!

You like kittens? Fern says.

Darla looks at her.

That piece of paper there. Fern points at Darla's grocery list.

Darla nods that she does.

Fern brings the 47% Less Fat Sweet Surrenders back and forth over the scanner until the package beeps. Fern says, Honey, you don't look so good. You doing okay?

I'm fine, Darla says.

But sweetheart, Fern says. I'm afraid there's only great allowed in lane five. She points up at the lane indicator. Below the glowing number 5 of the lane indicator, somebody had taped a handwritten sign that says: Nothing but Great. Think Good thoughts. Nourish your Heart & Sole.

Great then. I'm great, Darla says, offering a quick up-down with her shoulders, but secretly pinching—actually grinding back and forth, ripping and tearing—the kitten stationery between forefinger and thumb.

Back at home, she lifts packages from their plastic sacks, organizes cans into cupboards, sets perishables into their respective refrigerator drawers, vacuums cat fur from the living room carpet, gets the dryer going with yellow sheets of fabric softener.

By day, life as ordinary, proceed with caution.

It's her nights that are suddenly cold and empty and without form. While lying next to him in bed, she has the sudden craving for creamy peanut butter spread across anything really: white bread, hot muffins, forearm, kitchen countertop.

She can do this. Eating is a real something she can do and with recognizable results. No longer is it a simple matter of taste or preference or nourishment, but that she can conquer something, beat it, devour it, finish what she started—gulp, gobble, swallow, gorge—and with a fierceness known only to her, at her most private moments, in the kitchen, with a fork and knife and spoon. This is eating. Eating is power. Power is protection. Protection a friend. This has nothing to do with food. After finishing most everything in the kitchen, she considers eating the baby things—the pacifier she finds between cushions of the couch, the mobile of spinning planets lying on the floor in the back of the closet (she would start with the earth), the leftover diapers coated with syrup and butter.

While on her knees in front of the toilet with her hand in her mouth, Edwin walks in on her. What's the problem? he says.

No problem, she says.

He says, It's three in the morning.

I'll be right to bed.

Well?

Well?

Can you get out of the way so I can pee?

Here's the difference between dogs and cats. You die alone in your house and, assuming nobody finds you, a dog will eventually starve to death. Same thing happens with somebody who owns a cat and the cat will eat you to survive. This was what Maxine once told her while the two of them were remodeling her friend's bathroom.

Maxine then shared a story about her sister who lived in New England with three small children. They had a sick cat. Her sister took the cat to the vet and by a freak accident, the cat died. The office called asking if they should dispose of the body, but she knew that she needed to bring the cat home so that her children could say goodbye. They really loved this cat. The only problem was that after they had the ceremony, they couldn't bury the cat because it was winter and the ground was frozen. They decided to put it in the freezer so that they could bury it in the summer. The summer came and went, they forgot about the cat and then Maxine showed up the next Christmas. One early afternoon her sister called her from work and asked her to go out into the freezer in the garage to get some meat for the meal they'd be having that night. By accident, Maxine took the cat out of the freezer, wrapped as it was in wax paper, and left it to thaw in the kitchen sink.

Later I told the children that since the cat would have no qualms about eating us, we should have no qualms about eating the cat.

Darla stopped sanding the floorboards to look over at her friend.

I'm only joking, Maxine said. I threw it out with the garbage before the kids got home from school.

They mostly manage a peaceful coexistence, though if truth be told, there was that one time when the cat got too close to the open dryer as Darla was throwing clothes inside. How simple it was then just to toss her in and turn it on for a moment or two. After the dryer episode, the cat caught a mouse and hid it in the toe cup of one of Darla's slippers. But conflict like this is rare. On most days, the cat moves back and forth to her dish and Darla to the litter box with a plastic scoop. On nicer afternoons, Darla sometimes works out in the yard, bending over the front flowerbeds up next to the house as gracefully as a whale, an Orca wearing stretch pants.

But always, as reward for her labor—her soiled fingerprints and clubbing side aches—she can count on happy aimless meanders along florescent aisles, cans and bottles and boxes smiling down upon her, bestowing blessings.

Undetected today, avoiding her planned explanation and the ensuing dialogue, Darla directs her cart into an open lane. And then from behind her, a voice—her subconscious? Hey doll, whatdaya have there?

Darla turns around. Oh, hi Fern.

Feeding some sort of army? Fern picks up a can of CheezPleez and sets it back into her cart.

Oh you know, my husband—

He likes to eat, that's what I know.

That's true, Darla says, and then in hushed and somewhat shameful tones, tells Fern about the weight issue, Edwin's bed-ridden, thousand-pound bulk they'll have to lift out with a crane, or Jaws-of-Life, when he goes.

Oh my God! Fern says. Is that true?

More than you even know, Darla says.

Fern says, Push that right over to my lane, you hear?

That's okay. I'm in a hurry.

Nonsense. Fern unhooks a wire cable nearby and moves beside the register to receive the packages trudging toward their sure coffins of plastic or paper. Any coupons?

Darla shakes her head.

I think I may have one for the cookies, Fern says, and as she digs into a pile of coupons on top of the register, Darla tries shaking these peach-pits from her gut, turning them back to life, sweet fruit.

You okay? Fern reaches over the credit card machine to catch one of Darla's tears with a glittered fingernail. Would you like to talk?

A nod, a nod, and a small smile.

She meets Fern in the parking lot after Fern's shift and follows her to a nearby park. On the back bumper of her car, Fern has a Jesus fish with a small cross through its head. The cross also looks a bit like a spear, or a hook.

Darla parks beside Fern's car and steps out near a play area where children are squealing and sliding and digging in sand. Their mothers, sitting and chatting together nearby, are quite oblivious, if would seem, of this weather, of what their children could catch in weather like this. The whole scene makes Darla a bit nervous. She asks Fern if they can take a walk.

Together they move side by side on a marshmallow-soft path around the park. They talk about shoes. They spend about ten minutes talking about shoes, or mainly Fern does. Fern tells her about these really comfortable Swedish-made shoes that have saved her life as a checker. And then she talks some about her troubled life. Fern has a water heater problem and a husband that can't find a job.

As they near their cars and the slide and the sand and the mothers and the

screaming children again, Darla tries to say some things about her own life, about the happenings with her. She says that she might still love her husband, or could certainly try again, but nothing makes much sense anymore. Not since the death of their daughter.

And his weight, Fern says. It must be difficult.

Yes, Darla says. His weight.

When they reach the parking lot, Fern digs into her purse and scribbles on the back of a receipt. Here's my number, she says, and then laughs, something horsy, a neigh. The baby's kicking. You wanna feel?

I guess so, Darla says, and while she does so, while she spends a quieter moment palming the woman's taut belly, Fern tells her about a dream she had.

I was birthing quintuplets, and I named the first four babies George, George, George and George, but couldn't decide what to call the last one. Isn't that weird?

Darla nods that it is.

But that's not the whole of it. Get this. I dreamt it a second time, right after the first, except this time the babies weren't babies at all. Fern grips Darla's shoulder so that she understands exactly what she's saying here, the seriousness of such a thing. In this second dream I give birth to withered tomato plants. Five total. Four of them named George. Is this a sign of something? Fern says.

Maybe, Darla says. I don't know. I'm not sure. But maybe.

She approaches Edwin's chair during commercial break, Love curled in his lap, purring against his genitals. He loves Love. He sleeps with Love. He plays with Love. Perhaps he's Love's molester.

He looks up at her, his thumb hovering over the key pad of the remote control as if it was simply a matter of changing this channel they've been tuned into for months now, or—as is more likely his style—turn it off altogether.

The cat, she says. Can you move the cat?

Love growls and jumps to the floor as Darla crawls onto Edwin's legs, but of course that won't work because he can't see the TV. She picks a spot on the floor beside his chair and asks him about the shop where he recently found a job selling bathroom tiles.

What about it? he says.

Do you like it?

What's there to like?

Anything about it you like is all? I'm trying to make conversation.

He shrugs, yawns, gets up for the bathroom, and after a few moments she can hear water moving in pipes, booming through the house. When he

returns to the chair, Love hops back into his lap. He says, What happened to this cat?

She begins to itch for chocolate. Chocolate is equivalent to foreplay. Chocolate is better than foreplay actually. Chocolate is like sex. But then, or therefore, in fact, who needs sex when there is chocolate?

He says again, What happened to this cat?

Clapper board. Take two. It's part of their script. It's what they do, this talking, but suddenly she can't remember her lines. She says, Nothing to worry about. Missing a little hair, so what? Thinking, Be thankful I don't ruin rugs.

Edwin grunts some, runs his fingers over the hairless parts until the cat begins to purr and turns the channel to a new show, *The Most Precarious Places to Get Stuck Caught on Home Video*. The first video captures a zookeeper on his knees behind a hippopotamus, checking the animal's stool for something—this isn't clear. But what is suddenly very clear is how, as the animal slips backwards, the man's head simply disappears, neatly encapsulated inside the hippo's rectum. Something that would seem just about impossible if they hadn't seen it—Edwin, the cat and her—at least four or five times in replay, giving the impression after each rewind that the man, coming out a bit soupy as it were, a bit beef stewy, but otherwise no less for wear and tear, has found something new here and keeps returning—in slow motion, in and out nice and slow—for more.

While on the toilet, she watches the cat squat in her litter box, both of them using the bathroom at the same time, a scene almost precious. The cat steps out of the box, shakes off her paws and looks behind her for one moment at the dark pee spot. Darla wipes and flushes. This is her life: peeing with the cat (peeing with Love, puking with Despair), digging through the front flowerbed, strolling fluorescent aisles. And then also of course the occasional thundering headache, the accordion press in and out of her heart, the sometimes-wheezing struggle she endures from the checkout line to the car, her body dragging along after her like a barn.

It doesn't help today that she's got some serious Satan cramps, straight from hell. Makes her want to bang her cart into the woman in front of her, surely no bigger than a size 4—how dare you! Just pin her to the candy rack, cause the managers in red vests and name tags to come running from all over the store to take her down in a four-point restraint and send her away in the back of a cop car.

She moves into Fern's lane with three packages of Heavenly Honey Hugs: An ounce of golden heaven in every hug!

A dozen grape-filled jelly donuts.

A box of fish sticks, a bag of potato chips.

Two cans of CatSoBright cat food. There's a cartoon cat on the can below a white think-bubble-cloud that says, I deserve the best (because cats are people too).

A twenty-four pack of Diet Riot.

A tin of instant mochaccino.

Four rolls of spearmint Life Suckers because here she is and there they are and who isn't a sucker for the impulse buy or for that matter a sucker for life? And besides, better Life Suckers than those trashy tabloids. She grabs another roll and then just one of those trashy tabloids. Vegan woman gives birth to 10-lb. cheese loaf.

So a dozen of this, a box, a bag, two cans of that, a pack, a tin, another roll of fat.

And finally a thing of Skinny shake mix with a very skinny woman on the carton pulling at her waistband and saying, I've got the skinny on Skinny! Shouldn't you?

Fern working the express lane today. She says, How's my sweetie?

Not good at all, Darla says. Terrible.

A man says from the back of the line, Hey, you've got more than ten items there.

Fern bags her up and says, You come back at three-fifteen. I'll be off then. We can talk.

Later the two women move along their marshmallow-soft path. Edwin's always telling me why don't I try losing weight?

Fern shakes her head. Wow, and for him to talk.

That's absolutely right, and in the next sentence he'll say, Tonight be ready.

For what? Fern says.

Sex.

Oh God! How does that work?

It's difficult, Fern. Darla stops in the middle of the path, puts a hand on her friend's forearm and tells her about the sweaty crumbs and sometimes wrappers hidden inside the folds of his fat.

Oh my God! That's so awful! Is that true?

Yep. And then you should see that damn stupid cat and him. The two of them all kissy and lovie like that. I could kill the cat. Really. I sometimes could. I have these images of just strangling it.

Fern lets out a bit of a gasp, cradles her pregnant belly like a jumbo popcorn at the movies and begins to slowly back away from Darla until she's standing up against blackberry vines. Darla imagines suddenly just pushing her friend into the vines, scrape her all to hell. She's feeling cranky and mean

but tells herself it's the cramps. It's just the cramps. She needs a candy bar, a candy bar or a Belgium waffle smothered with bloody, sugary strawberries and whipped cream from a can.

She's slowly turning into the food she's consuming, a woman all sugar and lard, sweet and fat.

He's slowly turning into a sports channel, a fart machine, an iceberg, a man.

She snakes Melba toast through cream cheese, crushes pecan shortbread over Luv 'N Stuff ice cream. And then those little frozen pizza pockets, in and out of the microwave, talking a matter of seconds. Dipped of course in Cool Ranch dressing.

He drags himself through the front door completely exhausted, as if up since four a.m. emptying people's trash.

Because what's life without Cool Ranch dressing?

He only sells bathroom tiles from nine to six—how hard can that be? He stands at a counter and flips through a sampler, pointing out his favorites.

She clanks silverware as she eats away. She eats. She eats until she stuffs herself and then some and some on top of that. Corn dogs, chocolate chips, muffin tops, ham.

He suggests a certain this with a certain that, depending on color and sunlight and how many bathrooms are there anyway, and will this be for the guest bathroom or for the kids' bathroom?

There's play-by-play analysis here, no carmelly-voiced television guy diagramming the slow-motion replay—but simply twenty-five, forty-seven, sixty-two pounds of fat, as if where'd this come from all of a sudden and without her consent? Who signed the papers for this? Surely this wasn't her life, the life meant for her, all sweet and fat. She just somehow inadvertently opened the door, cut in line, intercepted the call, that's all, a terrible mistake, and now she wishes to complain or at least whine a little, send it back to the chef, fill out a comment card, write a letter to the editor, buy a bumper sticker, picket the street corner with a sign. Abandon ship.

All the factors you must consider when picking the right pattern for you. Because we guarantee this tile for as long as you own the home. And that, as you can imagine, is not a guarantee our competitors smile upon. Smiling then. Showing the potential customers his teeth.

Desperate afterwards, she dials the phone.

Hello? Fern's voice is slow.

Darla says nothing.

Hello? Who is this?

Um, Darla says.

Who is this? It's after midnight!

Fern, hello, this is Darla, I—

What is it? Everything's okay, I hope.

Yeah. Um. Edwin fell through the floor, into the basement. The bed and all.

Oh my God! Is he okay?

Well, I guess. He's just lying down there, groaning a little.

Have you called anyone?

Like a tow truck?

Well? Somebody.

Just then Edwin picks up the phone. Hello?

Hello? Darla says.

Hello? Edwin says.

Do you mind? I'm on the phone.

I thought I heard it ring, he says.

Well it didn't.

He clicks it down.

Is this some sort of joke? Fern says.

No, I just... Hello? Fern? Hello?

She gets into the car. The snow that fell only a few weeks earlier has already turned into dirty brown mounds on the side of the road. Christmas is in two weeks. She wants to believe in something, throw tinsel on a tree, believe in a star leading the way, but in her heart is a darker star, full of cool, dark light. And that's when she sees him out of the corner of her eye, a man dangling from his gutter while apparently stringing Christmas lights, the ladder leaning against the side of the roof just beyond reach of one of his outstretched hands.

It's none of her business. She's heard plenty of stories about Good Samaritan types pulling over to help somebody only to be shot or raped. The man would find a way, would yell for help or else would eventually fall, and then somebody would surely come to his aid. Besides, she has places to be. She knows of a 24-hour diner where she could count on the menu to promote some variation along the theme of starchy, fried or syrupy-sweet. It was that way all over town. At every hour of day and night the lines for the all-you-can-eat buffets were out the door. Another way of saying that was that fat people lived here. On a Sunday afternoon after church at one of these buffets with her parents, she heard a woman in front of her in line say to her companion—the two women, in Darla's estimation, bordering on elevator maximum capacity—Mmm, breaded shrimp. I could eat a whole plate of those. I'm starving.

But why did people say that? It was never a matter of starving. Who was

ever starving or even that hungry? Darla herself couldn't remember the last time she was truly, really hungry. It was probably just that people were afraid of being alone and food was good company, not to mention that the added weight could sometimes feel like a second body—a second, warm and fat body snuggled up to you, spooning you as you went about your daily business to the drycleaners or pet supply or grocery store where, quite apart from your will, this same said body could lead you to the glass freezer doors where you found yourself staring in at the rows of ice cream.

She speeds a little. She parks. She is led to a booth and points to a picture on the menu. She says to the waitress, Number three, then holds up her hand and gives the peace sign. Two, she says.

The waitress is a bit confused. Number three or number two?

Number three. Two orders of three.

Let me get this straight, the waitress says. You want two number threes?

That's right, Darla says, and then adds, I'm expecting company, shoving the laminated and somewhat sticky menu away from her.

Soup or salad?

Soup, Darla says. Clam chowder. For both of us.

The waitress leaves and returns with a basket of warm bread and a slab of butter on a little plate. She returns again, not a minute later, with two bowls. Here's your chowder. Pronounces it chowda. Careful, it's hot, she says and smiles, a wad of gum the color of radioactive grinding in her teeth.

After she steps away again, Darla leans over the bowl nearest her, takes a deep breath, and picks up a spoon when something jars her concentration. A man has slipped while hanging Christmas lights and is now hanging from his gutter in the freezing cold after midnight.

Oh my gosh!

She grabs her jacket and purse, fishtails in the snowy parking lot as she speeds away. A few minutes later she pulls over to the side of the road in front of the house. As it turns out, the man hanging from the gutter is just a stuffed dummy dressed in cowboy boots and blue jeans, a flannel shirt and leather gloves. She sits in the car for a while until the reality catches up and begins to chuckle, laughs, roars with laughter, and then—perhaps thinking of all the dummies she's turned around for in her life—begins to cough. Just a little cough, a little snuffle, the warm sugary icing of tears streaming down her cheeks.

The middle finger of the dummy's gloved hand attached to the arm not reaching for the ladder is pointing up to a white seam in the clouds, a crack in the sky where a fuzzy moon is trying to get through followed by a sudden opening full of blazing stars. It's a message perhaps, from the hanging man,

telling her hush now, it will be okay, just hush now, her blinker blinking, blinking, blinking, until she reaches over to turn it off.

And then the clouds pour in and block her view, and then the sound of crunching metal from behind and the ensuing force slams her into the steering wheel and back against the seat, a crash that seems somehow connected to her, but too slow, it's all too slow, as if watching it happen to her, a movie version. Afterwards she steps out onto the broken glass.

Lady! The driver of the other car is already out onto the street, staggering towards her. Why the fuck were you parked halfway into the road?

Me? she says. You're blaming me?

He is obviously drunk and has a huge cut on his forehead, the blood pouring down his nose and over his mouth and chin as porch lights from the surrounding homes begin to come on. Yes, you, why the fuck! It's then, while glancing over her shoulder, that he sees the dummy hanging by the gutter. He says, Somebody better help that man. He's gonna fall!

It's fine, she says. He's not going to fall.

But the man doesn't understand, or doesn't hear her, and runs toward the house, for the ladder, yelling, Just wait! I'm coming! Don't fall, man! Don't fall!

But then he himself falls, trips on a snowdrift and lands badly in the concrete of the cleared driveway. He gets up very slowly on his hands and knees, blood pouring from the cut on his head. At this, strangely, a hybrid bulldog of some sort comes out of the shadows on a chain and attacks the man's leg. He beats at the dog and shrieks for help while hitting the dog hard enough in the head and neck two or three times until the dog whimpers and retreats into the shadows. After another moment, he stands and limps toward the house where he looks up at the man hanging from the gutter and then back at Darla standing by her wrecked car on the side of the road. Everything's okay, he yells at her. It's all okay. Nothing to worry about.

Oil on Canvas

Kyle Mangan

Part I

A Haggard Look in the Mirror

My God, I look like Hell. I feel like hell. I haven't had a hangover in three years. I look better than I feel, though. Which I feel is important to note. I think it's the lights, they're florescent, and bluish, or not bluish, I don't remember how it works, but the highlights all seem cool and the shadows feel kind of warm. This is a strange place. These are strange lights. This is a strange mirror.

I should have sat somewhere else. I should be eating somewhere else. I don't want a cheese dog. I don't know why I ordered a cheese dog. Yes I do. I ordered a cheese dog because I taste death in my mouth and the restaurant that caught my eye, as I drove past last night, with the neon yellow painted windows promising healthy food, fast service, and low prices, "Pita Pete's"—clever—doesn't open until noon and I have no intention of being anywhere near Pete nor his Pitas at noon.

So now I'm waiting in this diner for a cheese dog that I had no intention of ordering and doubt I'll finish, as I really would just like to have something substantial in my stomach before I start driving, which means something high in fat, which means processed, neon, liquid cheese. I ignore the somewhat relevant fact that I've never eaten a hot dog in my life, much less a cheese dog, without having the benefit of spending the next four hours using my uvula to bat it back into the acidic depths reserved for most anything that enters my mouth, making an exception for gum, those packing peanuts they put in your mouth at the dentist, seven tongues since I was sixteen and Jesse Jones decided argyle sweaters and converse shoes made me the most irresistible sophomore since Holden Caulfield... he was a sophomore right? Doesn't matter, I don't care. I should have been nicer to Jesse. Where was I, though?

The taste of death. Sounds like something from a nineteen thirties radio serial; trench coats, fog horns, everyone's sporting a fedora, chasing dames in red satin cocktail dresses wearing poison lip balm. But that's not this. This is different. This is frothy. This is the result of twice filling a bathroom sink with a spattered coat of burgundy Sangria, all ingredients swallowed separately of course, substituting beer for 7-up, rum for fruit, and wine for everything else, though there were thick chunks of pineapple which I

cannot, for the life of me, account for.

No, it was on the pizza. And cigarettes, there was smoking, a lot of smoking... I don't even smoke... fuck I got high again. I remembered doing that. Why am I pretending to be surprised? But it tastes something like that, an empty stomach that doesn't understand why it's not full and a tongue that burns from what it knew was a bad idea from the beginning. My tongue is the hapless victim of my recent exploits. A wriggling Houdini, bound by pearly white locks with no piano wire to pull from its cheek... my tongue's metaphorical cheek... huh.

They haven't put anything on the grill yet. I smell gas. I do not want to be a charred remain. This is a certainty I've come to accept. Nor do I want to drive into a frozen lake. Ever since I was young, I knew frozen lakes meant trouble. Cars and frozen lakes mean trouble. Cars, frozen lakes, and bridges mean trouble. I do not want to be a charred remain nor a frozen, bloated corpse, buckled up for safety, who died after going into shock whilst waiting for the car to fill with water, so as to equalize the pressure and allow the door to be forced open. Big Book of Things I Won't Ever Need to Know, page three hundred and forty eight, paragraph three, before halting a brakeless vehicle, using only the guard rails and a few slower moving sedans, but after the proper course of action for when one finds oneself leaping from a motorcycle to a nearby car at speeds approaching seventy miles per hour, the key here is not to die.

This is a strange mirror. In it I find gray highlights in tangled brown hair and the gaunt face of a heroin addict or cancer patient tactfully avoiding eye contact. My shirt is wrinkled and black. It should be buttoned wrong, I should have skipped one to let everyone know just what kind of night I'd escaped from, but unfortunately the buttons have found their proper holes. My skin is white and my veins seem to be pushing further and further toward the surface with every passing day, and yet still, I look better than I feel.

I can smell the hotdog now... Burning rubber, hotdogs shouldn't smell like vulcanized tires and popcorn shouldn't smell like urine, but both always do... Two hands almost at eleven. It's been 17 minutes. Should have just settled on a muffin at the gas station. Of course it'd be a shame to have missed this ambiance.

Shirley's Diner... my guess built in 1984, mostly because the words, "quick, clean, and friendly" hang over the counter. Ministry of Allusion. Last night someone recommended it, attempting, and failing, to nonchalantly slip the term "greasy spoon" into an otherwise pleasant conversation. To me this place reads more as the evolution of an American anachronism. Not a fifties diner, in so much that it was almost certainly redesigned in the early nineties to resemble a fifties diner by someone who paid close

enough attention in their junior year, US history course at "wherever the fuck high school produces people who decide to grow up and design fifties diners" high. There's a general overview of things that happened at some point in the past hundred years, a vague sense that Ronald Reagan came after Dwight Eisenhower, and that between the Revolutionary War and the year 1935 nothing all too interesting occurred. In twenty years I believe I'll remember my birth as something that happened after Vietnam but before 9-11. Movie posters spanning from "the Thing that did something terrifying to an unsuspecting suburban housewife" out of the mid fifties, to the "group of kids in some nondescript suburban high school learn a valuable lesson about themselves and the world around them" flicks of the mid to early eighties clutter the walls between standing mirrors screwed into neon pink trimmed drywall, coated with gray paint that seems simultaneously both wet and chipped, despite the inherent logical contradiction... This is a place where time comes to jack off.

I hear my order shouted across the room, a sea of heads that have no business being shocked this early in the morning turn my way. I noticed each of them come in, order something nauseating, then wander about avoiding each other, waiting for their "to go" orders.

I do not want this.

Part II

My Perfect Woman

There was a cute girl in the bookstore upstairs. She stood behind the back counter, in the art supplies section, and asked if I was an oil painter. There was a tube in my hand, so I told her that I tried.

She smiled and asked, "Oh, so it's not your major then?"

I smiled and answered, "Oh no, it is, thus my dilemma."

She smiled and tucked an imaginary strand of black hair behind her right ear. It was cliched yet enthralling.

I flirted, probably not as well as I should have, but I could have done worse. She knows I'm from Iowa, she knows I paint, she knows I write, and she knows I like to make pretty girls laugh in the art supplies section of university bookstores, and she probably knows I'm terrible at flirting.

I'm not from Iowa.

I do paint.

I haven't written anything in months.

I do like to make pretty girls laugh.

I am terrible at flirting.

I know she goes to Northern Illinois University, works at the Northern Illinois University Bookstore, is majoring in art, most likely painting, and that she made me feel good about myself at nine thirty in the morning while I waited for anywhere selling food to open its doors.

Instructions on how to make a pretty girl:

- Black hair, parted off center poking out from behind her ears, cut short in sharp curls under the jawline.
- Soft bright cheekbones.
- Big smile, but only after making eye contact, reactionary smiles are appealing, pasted on smiles are terrifying.
- Green turtleneck... olive green, almost brownish, loosely woven.
- Big doe-ish dark eyes. The eyes are what matters.

I noticed her while debating whether burnt sienna or burnt umber would offer me a better array of colour relationships. Her manager, a shorter man, graying blonde beard and dark, glazed eyes, the left one just a bit higher than the right, instructed another employee, a black kid in a red hooded sweatshirt, bald with arthritic fingers of hair descending from his chin, and pointy ears, to keep an eye on anyone wandering into the art history section of the upper level, presumably where the nude photography books were kept. My mind raced with images of wide eyes and full body blushes.

I turned away and so did she. She smiled. I smiled back. She didn't look away. I did.

I was circling the pottery shelf, wondering why I've never bothered with three dimensional art when she asked me if I was an oil painter.

I didn't ask her any questions. I answered hers with half smiles and told her I had to leave because my friend, whom I was visiting from Iowa... uh yeah, I'm from Iowa... oh no, it's not that bad... okay it is that bad, but at least it's not Nebraska... where was I? Oh yeah, my friend passed out last night and I should really make sure he's still in that bush. You have a nice day. Thank you.

I realized I hadn't asked her name. I decided to buy my oil paints, but only after grabbing a sketchpad and giving her another half faced smile.

Part III

A Cheese Dog Before Noon

Or

I Should Have Asked that Girl For Her Name or if She'd Ever Considered Quitting Her Unfulfilling Career at the Bookstore and Drive Away with Some Stranger at 9:37 on a Saturday Morning

I am going to taste this in the car. Either the hotdog or the cheese, the cheese I can handle, which means I'll taste the hotdog. I'm going to taste beer for the next three days. I hate beer. I hate the taste of beer. Barley wine is not wine, it is beer. This is an important lesson. I'm going to taste beer until I drive the concept of what beer is from my mind. It's carbonated... I don't trust carbonation.

Last night the beer came out first. I stood over the sink staring into my own dark black eyes. I don't have black eyes, but I couldn't see rust, or olive green, or copper-gold, or any of the other bullshit colours I'd use to paint my eyes. I could see an automatic flashing distress signal triggered by the self destruct command code. I clenched my abs and let my neck coil backwards, letting the humidity drip up my nostrils. I brought my shoulders up to my ears and jerked forward.

A mouthful of bitter foam.

I spat into the sink like a child on Christmas morning opening a box shaped like an action figure only to find a clever parent had learned the ancient art of molding an origami kit into the shape of something that someone would actually enjoy owning.

I stared at the ugly, sweaty thing in the mirror. Withered arms and giant hands clenching the edge of its beige tile countertop. Scars and bruises, darker than they should be, darting across both arms supporting a gaunt frame with slumped shoulders, dark blue veins cracking through oily gray skin. The slender fingers flail and crack with bulging knuckles to pull back a now wild patch of once combed auburn hair, just long enough to start curling around the ears.

I asked myself if the bubbling froth in the sink was enough. My mouth tasted acid, bitter, not stomach acid, which I can handle, but bubbles of beer still popping as they transverse my tongue's crevassed terrain. This was not over.

Another quick clench. My head jerked. Bent at the waist I closed my eyes and heard it splatter. The water was running.

I opened my eyes. The sink was full of red water and floating chunks of pink pineapple. It had been my understanding that pineapple should not be pink, though I wasn't feeling all too concerned.

An advantage to the sink, as many party goers and fourteen year old girls will surely attest, is that with the water running the splash of bile is virtually undetectable from the other side of most bathroom doors, no matter how thin.

The major downfall of the sink is that little metal stopper. If you can

manage to pry it loose then this becomes much less trouble, otherwise you've got a few minutes spent reaching into this makeshift cauldron and pinching, in the warm soup, pieces of things you should recognize but don't, until they're no longer quite so bite-sized.

It is important to wash the sink afterwards and then your hands, sometimes twice.

I stared at the glowing white monster, wiped my eyes, and then tried again. I feared I had somehow made it angry. I clenched again, staring at the ugly thing staring at me, shaking and losing its footing. Another full sink. I could still taste beer.

Its nose dripped red. I smeared it across my cheek and lowered my forehead to the mirror. The creature's skin was cold and hard, but definitely comforting. I closed my eyes and pulled loose some fruit from under the stopper, waiting for the hollow sucking sound of an unobstructed drainpipe.

I try to pull the hair from my eyes, but, greasy as it is, it won't stay behind my ears. These fries were warm a minute ago, potato should retain heat better than this... maybe it's the oil. Maybe it's cold in this diner.

I don't feel cold. A huge man three tables from me is wearing a huge man sized black leather coat. He's eating an entire chicken. It's not even noon. I'll bet he's a football coach. Red sauce, pink meat, brown fingers, pursed lips, fierce chewing noises from three tables away... this man knows what he's doing. He knows what's coming.

- Diabetes.

- Heart Disease.

- An ultimatum from an ironically heavysset man in a white lab-coat and sewage green scrub pants.

- Two days of chicken salads.

- Two months of Big Macs.

- Two months of Whoppers.

- Two months of addiction.

- Two minutes of tightening chest muscles.

- Two minutes without oxygen in his brain.

- Two extra pallbearers.

I don't want these fries. I think I'm done here. I don't want to leave yet. I haven't started my cheese dog. I dig down deep, as I imagine the coach would shout, encouragingly spitting little white bits of chicken.

My stomach clenches. I breath some more and sip the large Dr Pepper, it's been a long time since I've had a Dr Pepper. My arm hurts.

It was the corkscrew.

Part IV

It was the Corkscrew

I was sitting on the kitchen floor. I'm pretty sure the oven door was keeping me upright. I don't know how long it's been, but there were only seven or eight of us in the apartment, so it must have been late. Dave was punching Jon in the arm. Jon could take it, he cried... back and forth, both knew it would hurt tomorrow, both knew it hurt right now, but that's not what this exchange was about. A chair falls over and Jon lies on his face laughing. A loud cheer carries itself to the kitchen from the girls on the living room couch.

Dave concedes victory to Jon, but I don't feel this game is so easily won. I raise my arm like a hesitant first grader and my hand fumbles along the countertop against my back. "Gimme Shelter" creeps in from the living room and I'm telling them all I'm like a rolling stone, no direction home, like a complete unknown.

I look Jon in the eyes and my fingertips feel cold coiled metal somewhere above my right shoulder. I push the linoleum under my ass away and ask, "How's your face?"

Still laughing he coughs a phlegm filled, liquid cough and punches himself under the right eye. I'm fingering the corkscrew we'd borrowed from the downstairs neighbor six hours ago. The couch is still cheering and I'm pushing up the sleeve of my left arm. I close my eyes and feel cold. Then burning. My left arm's burning and the right's feeling heavy. Jon's back in his chair and I think I count several more bottles than I remember having been on the table. I'm pretty sure no one was drinking Coronas.

There's been a running joke about Coronas since the summer after my freshman year when I took that Human Sexuality course online through the Community College twenty minutes away. I didn't need the credit, but twenty minutes of class each week kept my father from demanding I seek gainful employment. The anatomical name for that ridge at the head of the penis, the one that separates it from the shaft, is the corona. Since then I've waited anxiously for someone to tell me they planned on spending the night sucking back some Coronas. It's happened twice. Both were equally hilarious. My arm is burning.

Dave tells me to knock it off.

I open my eyes and I'm washing my arm in the kitchen sink. I count at least forty red lines. Thirty of them are still beading with little red dots.

None of the lines are all that deep, but the general consensus is that I'm no longer allowed near the corkscrew.

"Your party needs better lighting," I politely inform Dave. He shrugs and tells me he stepped on one of his Christmas lights last year, shattered the glass and drove a piece deep into his foot. I laugh and probe at my arm with my fingers.

Part V

How am I still here?

I'm halfway through the cheese dog and I tell myself that's enough. The radio tells me I'm listening to the station that plays anything and Madonna starts dancing in my head to a looped sampling of an Abba song that I wish I didn't recognize. I lick cheese from one of my fingertips. Then the backside of my hand... I have no idea why. I drag one of the fries along the hotdog and swallow it.

It's forty minutes to noon and I'm sure someone's wondering where I ended up. I suppose I should get back to the apartment and let them know I'm alive, but I have everything I brought on me. My coat, my bag, and a blanket. It's the softest blanket I've ever felt.

I love this blanket.

It smells like someone else and that's what I like about it.

I woke up wrapped in it this morning, folded to fit a reclining easy chair that hadn't reclined since 1997. It was nine in the morning and the sun was in my eyes. My mouth tasted like smoke and froth. I tasted like death.

I folded my blanket like I always do, three times over, then rolled from the top. I have no idea why I do this. I stepped over my friends and out the kitchen door. The hallway was cold, but I finally felt like breathing again.

I'm staring at half a hot dog, two halves of a yellow stained bun and six assorted bits of French fry that were just a little too misshapen or discoloured to eat reflexively. I don't want to be here.

I pass the coach on my way out and give him my best attempt at a "good luck this Friday" nod. He understands. There's a drawing of a husky pup on the garbage can that reminds me "not to throw away Shirley's plates and trays."

I walk up the brick stairs after leaving what I'm assured is the famous Shirley's. I pass the bookstore windows again hoping to see the dark haired green sweated girl, but the window's nowhere near the art supplies. My

car is a few blocks away at the Northern Illinois University Visitor's Parking Center, which is fortunately free of charge on weekends.

Six Extra Strength Tylenol and three gulps from a bottle of pineapple juice later I'm driving west. Back towards Iowa, but I don't plan on stopping till I'm well past all of this.

Gut Bay

Elizabeth Eslami

There is a story I have not yet told my young wife. It is not that I don't trust her. It is not that I am afraid of how she will react. It is a story my previous wife knew, a story she and I can reminisce about, even now, when we have drinks and talk about our divorce, and the days before our divorce. But I will not tell my new wife, because right now, she is perfect. Something fresh out of a box, something which smells like newness.

It is a story I will tell her some day, maybe, when it feels right in the telling. The way fishermen know when to pull up their lines or when to come in from the ocean.

Even now, as my new wife cuts sushi, making long, smooth movements with her slender wrist, I see the red of the salmon against the cutting board, and I am back there, back on that island, walking up to the cabin.

And I wonder if I will ever tell her.

From a distance, I remember the curtains looked like pieces of drying caribou meat, like what those Eskimo women hang from homemade racks and trees and the abandoned frames of rusted-out cars. There was something almost shocking about those curtains, all that red and white color against the gray sky and ground. Dora had made the red checkered curtains and hung them in the windows. You could see them all the way from the bay.

I kept staring at the cabin, with its red windows, ignoring Mr. Voss' complaints as his shoes sunk deep into the tundra.

Joe, I think it was, was the one who saw the curtains. "Let's dock at Baranof," he said, "til it calms down a bit. There's a cabin over there." The deckhand shrugged, went up to talk to the captain, and the next thing we knew, we were tying up the boat and hiking through knee-deep fireweed towards the cabin.

We probably made a spectacle, three city guys from California. I'm sure we did, because just before we got to the door, a young boy came out and stood on the porch, staring at us. His mouth was open and loose, glittering with saliva. He shouted for his Daddy, and that was when we met Lloyd.

I knew him as a careful and skilled man.

He was the father of fourteen children, a homesteader with his wife,

Dora. They had purchased ten acres of government land on Baranof Island—or maybe he had inherited it from his father—and established a small cabin not far from Gut Bay.

The first cabin blew over in a storm and scattered across the island like driftwood. Lloyd went around on foot, gathering up the pieces, one by one, until he put it back together. He laughed when he told that story. Even though he found every last piece of wood, the cabin looked nothing like its old self. It didn't matter, though. They got where they no longer remembered the way the first cabin looked; they never thought about it at all, except when the wind blew strong, and then they became nervous and stared at the joists and each other.

I believe I met him on my second fishing trip with Joe and Mr. Voss, but that detail is not important. We had been out in the boat almost two hours before the water got choppy and the deckhand told us we would have to go back. The wind swept the water over the dock and spilled hundreds of coral-pink crabs over our feet.

Perhaps I am telling you more than you need to know. But I guess it is important to know the beginnings of things. You can go your whole life without getting tired of the same story, the same beginning. I know because when I have drinks with my first wife, she makes me tell it, over and over, the beginning of us, how we met. When we lost the baby. When we lost the dog. When I first met Lloyd.

I don't know how Lloyd and Dora and their fourteen children managed to fit into that tiny cabin. You would think to look at it that the children would be hanging out of the windows. There was one big room, and a bathroom with a wash tub. Lloyd explained it was easier to stay warm that way. No running water or electricity.

In the winter, when the edges of the bay froze up, Dora went down and cut blocks of ice with an ax, carrying them back on her shoulders. She kept the cabin neat, with an old jelly jar full of wildflowers on the table.

They invited us in for lunch and for as long as it took for the water to calm down. I felt uncomfortable at first, guilty somehow surrounded by their simple things, all homemade, and their fourteen children sitting on the floor so we could take some of the chairs which Lloyd had carved out of trees. Mr. Voss looked down his nose at the pancakes Dora served us, with raspberry syrup she and the children had made from what was growing on the island the summer before. I swear to this day they were the best pancakes I've ever eaten. I can still see that pinkish-red syrup crisscrossing the empty plate, pooling in the middle. Dora watched us eat and clapped her hands together forcefully once we finished.

She was a sturdy woman, thick in the middle. Someone you could hold

on to and feel you were holding on to something. Or at least, she seemed that way to me. My wives, when I first touched them, were slight and thin, their faces like something whittled in miniature. Dora's face was almost masculine, hardened by the sun and cold.

Lloyd and Dora stood side by side, he with his arm tightly gripping Dora's waist. They looked like pioneers. I don't know why I say that, why I thought that, but they did. They were careful and skilled. They were capable pioneers. I felt embarrassed, as a man, to know so little about what it meant to be a pioneer.

Lloyd asked us about the fishing in Gut Bay and shook our hands when we took our leave. He smiled, his face crumpling up like wax paper, and he wished us good luck. I remember one of the small girls wrapping her arms around his thigh as he stood out on the porch. We started walking back through the fireweed toward the boat, and when I turned around, they were all standing there waving, just like a photograph, the children small, sober versions of their father, and Dora in the back, behind Lloyd. She wiped raspberry syrup from her hands with an old towel.

That is the way I think of them sometimes. Maybe I am being romantic—my first wife always said that of me—but I do not think so.

It became a tradition after that. No one talked about it beforehand, but each year, every fishing trip, we stopped for a meal with Lloyd and Dora. It didn't matter that Mr. Voss didn't particularly care for the "country experience," as he called it, or if the water was still and the fishing good. Joe and I would walk over to the deckhand and tell him we wanted to dock at Baranof Island, and then we would. Sometimes the children would see our boat coming long before it got to shore, and they would run along, drawing deep lines into the sand with rocks and wood, making arrows pointing toward the cabin.

Maybe none of this seems important, but that is how traditions are. They just start, with a momentum of their own. I try to explain the concept of tradition to my new wife, but she laughs and wraps popcorn garland around her body instead of around the Christmas tree. "I'm serious," I tell her. "There are things you have to take seriously, like tradition," I say over her squeaks of amusement.

There is something comforting about these things while they last, until you start to realize that they change, whether you want them to or not, in small subtle ways. And before you know it, they resemble nothing you've seen before.

I'm not sure which trip it was that we brought along Dr. Renard. He only came once—spent the whole time bent over, vomiting—and he never caught a single fish. It was Mr. Voss' idea. They were golfing buddies, or

Dr. Renard had once done a favor for Mr. Voss, something like that. We knew it was a mistake when he climbed aboard with lightweight tackle and a freshwater rod, his dress shoes slipping on the dock. He wore jewelry, rings and a necklace with some mystical SoCal symbol which dangled against his neck when the boat rocked. It was a dolphin eating its tail, I think.

It was a bad day, with rough weather and dark, foamy seas. We were glad when we docked at Baranof and knocked on Lloyd's splintered cabin door.

It began to snow a little as we stood there on the porch, waiting for the door to open. Little flecks of white gathered in Dr. Renard's hair—he was standing right in front of me—and the whiteness made his head seem small and sharp. When Dora opened the door, he stood for a minute smiling at her, and then he bowed a little, and backed down the stairs toward the ground.

I was embarrassed when Dr. Renard wiped his shoes on the grass before coming in. (There was no mat.) I cut my eyes away when he knelt down and took each of the little girls' hands in his own, turning them slightly as if they were small prisms. He shook the hands of Lloyd's sons firmly, with a half-serious look on his face. He treated them like city children.

He didn't seem at all like someone who had spent the last hour and a half vomiting. He pulled coins out from behind his ears. He did a handstand in front of Lloyd's old boots.

I wanted to pull him back out of the cabin then, tell him not to play-act with these boys, for they were already small men. Each one had already held a gun in his hands, had already skinned an animal. They had helped their mother birth their siblings. They had held their Daddy's tools.

Yet when Dr. Renard came into the cabin, with his New Agey-ness, with his civilized good will, he erased the truth of that. It was like none of it had ever happened.

I do not think that it is all a matter of hindsight to remember the wrongness of that day. There was something about it from the start that made me feel like everything was changing, or about to change. Later, on the boat as we went back, I threw up all of Dora's griddlecakes, and I never, ever get sick on the sea.

Maybe it was my mistake. We had always acted a certain way when we visited Lloyd and Dora. We talked to them, we ate their food, but we didn't treat them with anything but distant respect. We didn't wipe our shoes before we came in. That, we believed, would have been an insult to Dora, who felt honor bound to scrub our bootprints off the wood floor after we left. When the children offered us their chairs, we took them. It was what they wanted. We didn't take a seat and lift one of the girls onto our laps, as

did Dr. Renard. We didn't tell them they were pretty or ask them what they wanted to be when they grew up. It was not what they wanted.

Though who is to say what anyone wants at all?

But wait. I am getting ahead of myself.

There was nothing lascivious in Dr. Renard's gaze, nothing untoward in his actions, only a slight violation of an implicit country law. He talked to Lloyd like he was more than a careful and skilled man, like he was an artist. He treated each child like a prodigy. And when we took our leave, he was late in walking out the door because he stood for several moments, talking softly, inaudibly, in Dora's ear, leaning into the door frame of the bathroom which Lloyd had hewn years ago so simply, without any casing.

Dr. Renard. That man, he was like a charm machine.

He looked into Dora's face for what seemed to me a long time. I remember Joe cleared his throat, trying to break the moment. Mr. Voss said, "I suppose we'll be on our way," and walked out on the porch. "Doctor!" I finally shouted, unable to contain my irritation. His eyes fluttered over Dora's face one last time, as if they were the flitting yellow butterflies which drank daily from the fireweed, and then he turned and looked at me with surprise. His face was arranged in an open welcoming, his eyes wide, his mouth curved, as if he was just meeting me for the first time.

Back on the boat, nobody said much, and when we docked, the doctor smiled, turned toward us, running one hand through his hair, and said, "It was pleasure, gentlemen. A real pleasure." He pumped our hands until his clean fingernails were smeared with the guts of our catch. Joe and I watched in disbelief as he walked back, carrying his dry rod, and climbed into a white sports car. The plate said RENARD. He peeled out of there, spraying gravel dust all over our fish.

Dr. Renard never went fishing with us again. I might never have thought of him if not for what happened.

When I think about it, which is often, I am aware that I have never met anyone like Dr. Renard. No doubt it was the same with Dora. He had a way of talking to you that left you with a wound. When he stared at your face, it was like a needle, gently, slowly, steadily, going in and out.

"Sushi?" my new wife asks, holding the fish out to me. A few drops of water fall to the kitchen floor.

"Better not," I answer, wrapping my arms around her, trying to understand her newness. "We're having dinner with Nancy and Joe, remember?"

"I thought it was just drinks," my wife says, scratching her thigh under her skirt so I can nearly see her ass. Tonight, when I see my old wife, I will

study her face for traces of that newness, or for signs of what I should watch out for in my new wife. I learned from Lloyd that you can never prepare yourself for what life will throw at you. But you can know the signs.

It was two years before Mr. Voss, Joe, and I went back to Baranof Island. That was our last trip, mostly because Mr. Voss said Gut Bay was all fished out, and because it wasn't fun for him anymore. He didn't want to stop at Lloyd's cabin, and when we did, it was different. Lloyd came to the door with his paper-thin face, and opened it wide enough to tell us that Dora was sick, that he couldn't invite us in that day. We were polite—Joe even offered to send for a doctor—but we could feel it, walking back through the unstable tundra, that something had changed.

The next year Mr. Voss and Joe went to Kodiak to take a brown bear. I was invited, but I declined. I don't shoot animals. It's not a philosophy or anything; I just don't like to get that much blood on my hands.

There isn't much to this story. I talked about beginnings a while ago. What about the end?

I took my vacation in '94 on Baranof Island. It wasn't some nostalgia trip. I just wanted a place to clear my mind. Gut Bay is the kind of place to do that for you, with the wind blowing over the water, still and flat as a sheet.

This was when my first wife threatened me with a knife and told me it was over. You have to understand, she is of the dramatic type. She enjoys, she used to enjoy, talking about death. When we first starting dating, she asked me routinely if I would die for her.

My new wife is not dramatic, or if she is, she isn't dramatic in the same way. She cooks spicy foods from Mynamar. She surprises me with expensive driving gloves. She visits me at work wearing nothing under her trench coat, and we do it in my office chair. When my old wife threw me out, I went to Baranof Island for the last time. I brought a tent with me and kept my food in tins to keep the bears out. I was pretty far out on the tundra, far from where we used to dock. To tell you the truth, I hadn't thought about Lloyd and Dora for a long time.

But the wind blew up and cold, and I started to get lonely, so I decided to move my camp. He was on the porch when I came hiking up, all folded over like he had been hollowed out.

"Lloyd, remember me?" I called out over the roar of the wind on the bay.

When he looked up, he seemed to have aged into an old man.

When I say that, you have to understand that age is a different thing for country people, for island people. He and Dora spent their winters leaning

into the ice, the wind ripping at their faces as if they were paper masks. They had rough hands and rough faces, lines as deep as if the ice had carved them, like water settling down into a rock where it will stay forever, freezing and melting and freezing again. That was the way it was with them, and that was normal. That was right. Lloyd, flapping over the way he was, defeated, was something entirely different.

He invited me to sit with him, and he told me what happened.

The first thing I noticed was that all the children were gone. The oldest boy, Thomas, was eighteen and capable. He was sent to Fairbanks with the children and all the money. That, I suppose, is another story, the story of what happened to the fourteen children and their new city life among buildings and telephones, but that is not a story I know. Lloyd set them free into a world of which they had an incomplete understanding, but he was not thinking of them anymore.

After that last fishing trip, the one with Dr. Renard, something happened.

"It snowed all day after you left," Lloyd said. "Just snowed and snowed."

I watched his lips as he talked, but he didn't look at me.

Dora would not watch the snow falling, and she always watched the snow. He looked at Dora and her face, and he felt like something had changed.

Lloyd experienced the change from the inside. Dora became distant. She grew shrill and irritable and banged his shoulders when he came near her, yearning to be free of him, of the island. She wanted to be a free woman.

Lloyd, however, didn't say this. In his simple way, he saw simple things. Dora stopped putting wildflowers in the jelly jar. Dora no longer came to bed. Dora walked away from him with her handful of homemade dresses balled up in a pillowcase, and when he asked her where she was going, she didn't say anything, but fixed her jaw tight and still and walked out toward Gut Bay. He caught her three times, running after her, following the trail of flattened grass. He picked her up and threw her over his shoulder and carried her all the way back to the cabin. She did not struggle, but she did not go limp, either. She made her body straight and stiff like a mannequin, her face turned toward the water.

"She never wanted to leave before," Lloyd said, in his simple way.

The children became afraid. The girls cried and tried to climb into her lap; they rubbed their teary faces into her breasts. The boys stood in the doorway, their eyes wide and clear, and asked "Momma? Momma?"

She did not strike them or push them away. She was already changing,

making her body into something it wasn't. She made herself not a mother, but something hard, unyielding, so that when the children clung to her, they felt their arms were wrapped around a tree or the frozen ground.

Once, she ran out in the winter, at night, and when he brought her back, her face burned brightly, but the snow stayed on her skin for over an hour, even when he placed her close, near the fireplace. "Dora," he whispered, watching the snow finally melt into moisture. "What has happened?"

On the fourth try, she escaped. It was after the children had left, not more than two days since Thomas had taken them to Fairbanks, and Lloyd, exhausted, had slipped into sleep. By the time he woke and realized she was gone, there was nothing he could do. He wandered for hours in circles, looking for some sign of her. In the distance, far back into Gut Bay, he could see the light of a boat. Perhaps she had found her passage with it, or perhaps she was somewhere else, hiding from him on the other side of the island.

It is a sad story, and yet, when I remember it clearly, I can recall how I felt when he told me. How sorry I was at first, looking at his bent torso, his thin lips, the empty cabin, but then how I felt this vibration in my stomach, this elation. Because it was not my life, and it never would be. Because I could sit there and listen and be sorry, but I knew I would walk away and sleep in my tent, in my sleeping bag, and, if I wanted to, never think of the story again.

I told my old wife about that feeling once. It was right after we signed the divorce papers at the lawyer's on Sepulveda. We had gone to some place to get brunch and talk once more about old times. We both ended up drinking too many White Russians.

"Isn't that a strange feeling?" I asked her, hiccuping a little.

"It's a sad feeling," she said.

"Why sad?"

"Only sad because you men never get it," she said. "You men never do." I didn't know what she meant, and when I tried to ask her, we got into a row, and she got boozy and flirted with the waiter until I dragged her out of there by the arm.

She's married to Joe now. Sometimes Joe and my ex-wife invite me and my new wife out for drinks. We're all good friends. We sit around telling stories, even when they aren't the right stories.

It's strange to think how my old wife is new, if only to Joe.

It was a year before Lloyd got Dora's postcard. I'm alright, taken care of. He's a good man who sees me. Don't come after me, please. It was postmarked "Los Angeles."

It was another year before Lloyd had the money to get there. He had a year to think of possibilities, and one of them was Dr. Renard.

It makes me ashamed to think of poor Lloyd in Los Angeles, getting honked at and half-run-over. Getting lost, asking for his first hotel room. If I had known he was there in the city, perhaps I would have offered my aid. I doubt he would have accepted it.

When Lloyd took the elevator up to Dr. Renard's office, which was on the fourteenth floor of a glass building on Venice Boulevard, he suffered from vertigo. The elevator was glass too, on all sides, such that he could see the slender cables over his head, the floor disappearing under his feet. Something about it made him utterly disoriented, like when he was out in a squall on Gut Bay, everything white all around him. He clenched his eyes closed until he made it to the top.

The receptionist, her face gleaming and pink from a recent chemical peel, tried to take Lloyd's name, tried to glean the reason for his visit. He sat down for a minute on a white leather sofa with silver legs, his back to the glassed view of downtown Los Angeles, but he did not relax or pick up a magazine. He observed the situation long enough to see the door to the hall where patients entered and later left, their faces raw and red and sometimes blue and partially wrapped in bandages. Then he stood up and walked toward the door.

You can imagine the ruckus which followed, the receptionist chasing after him in her five inch pumps, grabbing at his arm. Finally she gave up and ran back to her desk where she pressed a button and shouted things into the enormous black phone.

The office door was open a crack. From all the commotion, Lloyd expected Dr. Renard to lunge at him, to try to run past him, but he was just sitting there in his swivel chair, his hands calmly folded in his lap, as if he had been waiting for Lloyd all afternoon, as if he had known he would come.

"Lloyd, good to see you again. You've come a long way."

Sometimes I imagine their conversation. Lloyd, you see, is not a man of details. When I asked him what happened that day on the porch, he told me, but he didn't talk about what Dr. Renard said, or what he said to Dr. Renard. It is hard to imagine what those two men had to talk about, what they possibly could have had in common, except Dora, of course.

She wasn't living with Dr. Renard; that would have been a problem since the doctor was married and had been to one of his patients for ten years. But he had helped her find an apartment in Encino—it is amazing I never ran into her there myself, as my wife and I live in Sherman Oaks—and they were, Dr. Renard said, quite close in a way Lloyd could never understand.

When Lloyd said this last part, I had the urge to laugh. It was exactly like Dr. Renard wiping his shoes on the grass that day, like him whispering into Dora's ear. There was a wrongness, the wrongness of the city life mingling with these country people, these island people. Lloyd and Dora never talked about their feelings. They were close when they needed to keep each other warm. When they passed each other in the narrow frame of the bathroom door.

I do not know, but I am certain that Lloyd remained calm. That is something his kind does. When they have made a simple mistake with the ax, they are calm and quiet and they quickly stop the blood. There is no fanfare, no dramatic exit. Not like my wives.

"I have done nothing that your wife did not want," Dr. Renard said.

The doctor supposed that Lloyd would need proof; he had, after all, come such a long way. He turned in his swivel chair and pushed a button on his phone. He asked that Dora be sent for. Then he and Lloyd waited. God only knows what they talked about in that big, glass office. Perhaps the doctor was polite and asked after the welfare of the fourteen children. Or maybe he asked about the fishing this year on Baranof Island.

In any case, after a while, the secretary's voice sounded through the phone, and the door opened, and in walked Dora.

It seems obvious to say that Lloyd did not recognize her at first. Her face appeared shiny and flat, as if she was asleep, though her eyes were wide open. Her lips were pink and puffy, like a sturgeon's. She spoke through them, and it was her same voice.

"Hello, Lloyd."

Lloyd stared at the once sloping bosom on which his children's heads used to rest, now tanned and protruding through a tight, low-cut blouse. She was an unnatural copper color, like a penny left in the grass over summer.

"Dora?" Lloyd's voice was weak, weathered, and threatened to give out altogether. He had not had anything to drink in ten hours.

Dr. Renard explained the process to Lloyd in a matter-of-fact tone. He had Dora pull up her dress and turn, her body illuminated by the afternoon light coming through the glass wall behind the doctor's desk. Carefully, skillfully, the doctor traced the places he had changed with a purple marker, creating lines across Dora's breasts and stomach and face.

"And that's just the tip of the iceberg!" he said with a smile. Slowly, he pulled down Dora's underwear to her knees. "As soon as she heals, we're going to go ahead with the labial reconstruction."

Dora clasped her hands together in excitement. "Isn't it amazing?" she asked. "It can all be undone. What's done can be undone!"

Lloyd blinked hard at her changed face, her youthful face at twenty

again somehow, and wondered if their life together and the children and the cabin had all been a dream.

You have to understand, I don't have anything against plastic surgery. I live in Los Angeles, for heaven's sake. I'm just telling you what Lloyd saw, how he saw it. Hell, my new wife talks about having something done from time to time, and I tell her that's okay, it's up to her, as long as she can still move her face when we make love. As long as I can see her and tell the difference.

The doctor began drawing more lines around Dora's pubic area, extending to the inner thighs. He explained, in his calm, clinical voice, how he was going to reconstruct Dora so that it was like she never had all the fourteen babies, so that they had never passed through her, leaving her different. Just as he had given her a new face, a baby's face, melting away all the ice, the winters.

Dora gasped in girlish excitement and threw her arms around Dr. Renard. He blushed and shrugged.

"So you understand?" Dr. Renard asked Lloyd. "Any questions?"

Lloyd did not know what to say. It was like when he went to the front desk of his hotel to ask directions to the doctor's office on Venice, and he wasn't sure how to begin. He had just stood there for several seconds, blinking, until the desk clerk laughed. He stared at Dora.

Dora ran from the doctor and embraced Lloyd, her stiff, round breasts pressing against his neck like two rocks. She held his face in her hands.

"I've made it a long, long way from Gut Bay, haven't I?" she said. His face crumpled as she tried to wrap her swollen lips around the words.

And that, I'm afraid, is the end of the story.

Of course, it isn't, but that is the last of what Lloyd told me. He slumped back over in his chair, as if he had been gutted.

I offered my help, even though there wasn't much I could do. I asked him if he wanted me to talk to her when I got back to Los Angeles, and he shook his head. I suggested kidnapping her and sending her to one of those de-programmers all over California, but he looked at me like he didn't know what I was talking about. I asked him if he thought she'd ever come home, and he just shrugged.

"That woman's not my wife," he said, and stared off at all the fireweed.

We went fishing before I left Baranof Island for the last time. I caught three kings. Lloyd didn't catch anything, but I don't think he was really trying.

He kept taking these deep breaths and throwing his line out, willy-nilly. There was no caution, no skill to it. When I asked him what he was doing,

he said he was going to try recklessness. It seemed to work for Dora, he said.

We fished for a long time, until it got dark and I got worried about bears coming out. It was hard to see anything where we were standing, and they can come up on you all of a sudden on the soft ground.

Lloyd was telling me about his fourteen children. Some of them were coming back, he said, but some of them might not. That was the way it often happened when children left Baranof Island. There was so much to see in the city, so much newness, but then there was the island. It was all they had ever known.

I wonder what happened to those children.

My new wife doesn't want any. She says they'll ruin her figure. My first wife and I lost one, but when it came out, it was nothing but blood and bits of tissue, not entirely unlike a fish after a bear gets through with him, so it didn't feel like a child at all. Still I sometimes wonder what it would have been like if it had lived. But I don't talk about it with my new wife. It is not a story I tell her.

The last thing I remember about Lloyd was him throwing his line out on the dark water, a crazy look on his face. It was like he was desperate to fish something out of the water, to collect something back, little by little. He was quiet, though, and he kept looking into the darkness as if he could see.

I wondered what Lloyd would do now, all alone in that cabin. I worried about him with the cold, with the bears. He pressed his lips together until they disappeared.

My new wife is threading a new pair of earrings through her small ears. I can still smell the sushi coming from her skin, from her naked back in front of me. I wonder if I'll ever tell her this story. I wonder if I should ask Dora to join us for drinks so she can tell it herself, and answer all those questions, about whether she ever misses her children and her homemade things, and Lloyd, and how it feels to be restored.

Contributor's Notes

Alonso Avila is a Mexican ninja who enjoys a good headrub and giggle. He is a 4th year student hailing from Chicago with a double major in English and Spanish. He also has a minor in bad ass-ery.

Adam Berlin has two novels published. Belmondo Style (St. Martin's Press) came out in 2004 and won the The Publishing Triangle's 2005 Ferro-Grumley award. Headlock (2000) was published by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. He has also published numerous stories and poems in literary journals. He is an Assistant Professor of English at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City.

Bradley Bosma is a English Major & Creative Writing Minor from Newton, IA. Bradley intends, one day, to write something, and, perhaps, given the correct conditions, even more than that.

Thomas Boulan is a social worker and belongs to a writing group that meets in a pathology library. His work has appeared in a number of print and online journals, including Natural Bridge, jerseyworks, Pindeldyboz, The MacGuffin, Thieves Jargon, Word Riot, keepgoing, Taj Mahal Review and Southern Ocean Review.

Ben Brooks has published over seventy short stories in literary journals, including Sewanee Review, Chicago Review, Virginia Quarterly Review, Epoch, Alaska Quarterly Review, Other Voices, Confrontation, and elsewhere. His stories have been awarded the O. Henry Prize and the Nelson Algren Award. His novel, The Icebox, was published in 1987. Currently he is writer-in-residence at Emerson College, where he teaches fiction writing and literature.

Karin Carter hails from the small town of Castle Rock, Colorado. She dearly misses the mountain sunsets and generally more interesting topography of Colorado, not to mention the convenience of always knowing which way west is.

Swagato Chakravorty is a junior from Calcutta, India. He is majoring in Business Administration with a minor in English. When not listening to beautiful music from Bristol, England, he fantasizes about Dagny Taggart.

Kaitlin Emig lives in awkward moments.

Elizabeth Eslami received her B.A. from Sarah Lawrence College and her M.F.A. from Warren Wilson College. Her work has appeared in Thin Air, The Steel City Review, The G.W. Review, Bat City Review, and Weber: The Contemporary West. She is currently working on a novel and a collection of short stories, and lives in Oregon with her husband and their big, black dog.

Virginia Floring lives in a little white house with a handful of cats, a whole lot of rose bushes and sets things ablaze when the moon is full and the wind is right.

Iris G. Garcia is from Albuquerque, and she is a senior at Coe. She loves the Coe Review and gives it a place in her tiny heart (3 sizes too small). She is realizing that although Coe has been her nest for the past four years, it is very likely that the rumors from seniors past will be true and on May 4th she will get a friendly, "Now, get out." Presently her "Mood" is: terrified. She still writes her "I" as an upside down "T."

Emily Ingalls is a sophomore from St. Louis Park, Minnesota. She is majoring in psychology and hopes to go to graduate school for Counseling/Clinical Psychology. She enjoys overwhelming herself with activities and has loved the flashback to high school laying out the Coe Review has provided.

Leta Keane is a junior who hails from the Chicagoland area. Despite the repeated warnings of her friends and family, she persists in her ambition to write for a living.

Kyle Mangan is the kind of person who needs constant reassurance, or else he'll start acting up and moping about. He thinks he's a genius, quite possibly the funniest man alive, and at least twice during any conversation will find a way to work in the phrase, "You know, some people say I've never failed to satisfy a woman." It's best not to acknowledge this, save for a reassuring nod, at this point he will offer his hand for a somber high five, you're going to want to accept. Trust me.

Ben Martin recently graduated with a BA in English with specialization in Creative Writing from Southern Methodist University. In 2006, he won

the Department's Lon Tinkle Prize for Most Outstanding English Major in Creative Writing, and his poem Losing Your Page has appeared in the department's newsletter, Erudition. Winter 2007, Issue 2. He is also an instructor at The Writer's Garret in Dallas and, in the fall, plans to begin graduate school.

Melissa Mickael is a senior at Coe College who studies art history and writing. She wants to live in Glocca Morra. Loves zombies, the Ultima Weapon, and editing with giant red pens. She lives an interesting life, the best curse she could ask for, really.

Heather Mitchell is a junior from Colorado Springs, Colorado. She thinks she wants to be a librarian when she graduates from Coe, while working on her writing. Her favorite author is Neil Gaiman.

Letitia L. Moffitt has been published in literary journals including Black Warrior Review, Aux Arc Review, Jabberwock Review, Fairfield Review, The MacGuffin, and Dos Passos Review. Moffitt received a doctoral degree in English and creative writing from Binghamton University in New York and currently teaches creative writing as an assistant professor at Eastern Illinois University.

An Pham is a freshman from Vietnam and she wants to be an engineer after graduation.

Becca "P" Pfenning is an amazingly wonderful lady who loves her baked potatoes and bacon, the essentials of a true Revolution. One of her many favorite sayings is "git 'er done" and she is from Iowa/Nebraska-ish.

Joseph Ponce is a sophomore from Joliet, Illinois famous for one Blues Brother, a jail, and a casino. Joe is a hack/aspiring new age traveling salesman, and loves the smell of Play-doh.

Katie Puchalski is a freshman from Chicago, Illinois. She plans on majoring in psychology and political science.

Julian Rubin has stories published in The Bitter Oleander, Pangolin Papers, Nexus, Nuthouse, and online at nycBigCityLit.com. Julia received her B. A. from the University of Pennsylvania in Islamic and Hebraic studies. She currently works as a union stagehand on Broadway.

Katie Sherman is a freshman from Sandwich, Illinois. She plans on using her English and writing majors to continue working with editing and publishing.

Vivek Shrestha is a senior at Coe College. He made his entire thesis class fall in love with carrots through his writing, a feat no other can claim to have accomplished.

S. Asher Sund has been published in the Mississippi Review, Margie, Clackamas Literary Review, Willow Springs, Briar Cliff Review, and elsewhere. In 2005, he won first place in the Marjorie J. Wilson Best Poem Contest, judged by Joyce Carol Oates. He writes and produces music with Andi Starr (www.andistarr.com).

Dennis Vannatta has published stories in many journals and anthologies—including Boulevard, Antioch Review, and Pushcart XV—and three collections, This Time, This Place and Prayers for the Dead (both by White Pine Press) and Lives of the Artists (Livingston Press).

Valerie Zaric is a senior art major from Monmouth, IL. She likes pretty things.



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