

Millennium

a student anthology of literature and art

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Millennium

ELIZABETH CLEMENS

Shadow

Sunlight reflects through a bottle
of Wild Turkey. On the bare wooden floor
it sits beside a man, his composure
like that of the willow tree
outside his wall of windows.
One hand circles a glass
half empty.

Sun shines on his right side revealing
a worn half-face. White walls reflect
beside, behind, in front.
The simple door on his left
slowly moves closed,
the aftershock of a sudden pull
on the brass knob.

Light glistens in a shattered
shot glass laying in the corner.
Rich gold draws down white wall
to the pieces beneath;
bitter liquid pools on the floor.
Fingers caress the one glass
still unbroken.

Sun sparkles between leaves
of the hunched tree. Blades of
bright green wave to the figure
inside the white room. His blood-shot eyes
turn but evade the warmth,
returning to a solid stare at the bottle
of Wild Turkey.

(continued)

Light travels across the hard wood
 floor. Colors fade, sweet mahogany
 turns to gray. The plain stucco walls
 become lost in the dark.
 Leaves rustle against the glass,
 sound takes the place of light.
 He sits.

Big Dan's Boys

Big Dan

Big Dan's frown disappeared when he spotted his nephew. He actually smiled—a big, silly grin full of summer teeth and dappled gums ravaged by years of unchecked gingivitis. It was an unforced, natural expression of happiness that Big Dan rarely wore. When Big Dan Fontenot smiled this smile, everyone knew he meant it. Dickie had finally arrived.

Big Dan looked at his watch—3:30—Dickie was an hour and a half late. Big Dan wondered what could have delayed his normally punctual nephew. He shrugged and inhaled the meatballs and cubes of cheese from his little party plate. As he studied his nephew, Big Dan noticed that Dickie seemed somehow different.

An obvious change was the salt-and-pepper beard. It made Dickie look older and gave him a different presence. There seemed, however, a more profound change in his body language that bespoke a transformed Dickie Hanes, one not merely older in years but deeper in soul. Missing were his West Point bearing and his accustomed manner of deliberate precision. A kind of serene balance, marked by smooth movements and an overarching gracefulness, had replaced them. Big Dan sensed that something must be wrong with Dickie. He quickly dismissed the thought, however, his mind's eye projecting Dickie as he was 30 years ago, a proud cadet in the Long Gray Line.

Dickie was the son that Big Dan never had—strong, even-keeled, confident. He was nothing like the Fontenot boys. Neither of them had become what Big Dan had expected. Little Dan Fontenot was a sad-eyed servant—both public and private—voluntarily saddled with a harpy wife and a pregnant 18-year old daughter. His younger brother, Rich, was a career ne'er-do-well, currently tilting with the

windmills of hip-hop stardom.

Big Dan usually paid his sons little attention, dealing with them primarily when his hand was forced by little twists of life, such as today's party to celebrate his granddaughter's engagement. The lives that Little Dan and Rich had led violated an elusive standard that their father unconsciously created for them well before they were born. Big Dan could not articulate this standard, nor did he ever make an attempt. For Little Dan and Rich, the existence of this standard was a matter of conjecture, but their failure to reach it was, for Big Dan, an undeniable reality.

Dickie was a different story. Big Dan had a high measure of esteem for his nephew and saw him as a man of substance. Big Dan truly respected no one; but, given the hell from which Dickie had emerged and the great success that he had attained, it was impossible for Big Dan to look at Dickie without admiration and more than a little bit of paternal pride.

Big Dan's deceased brother-in-law Dory Hanes was a pedophile who preyed on Dickie and his two sisters throughout their youth. When Dickie was 13, Big Dan left work early to surprise his nephew and nieces with circus tickets for later that evening. There was no reply when Big Dan knocked, so he opened the door with the key his sister had given him. Big Dan caught Hanes with his pants around his ankles and his bruised, half-naked children cowering together in the back bedroom of their grimy apartment. Big Dan beat his sister's husband so badly that he dislocated his own shoulder and broke both his left hand and right foot.

Dory Hanes never really recovered from the beating. His voice receded to a choked whisper that was largely unintelligible. After his release from the hospital, Hanes slipped away from his family without a word, leaving them with a line of creditors and a carousel of emotional baggage.

Big Dan arranged for Dickie to move in with another uncle in South Carolina, where he was a model student and celebrated athlete. He was admitted to West Point and became a champion wrestler,

patterning his style after a young Big Dan Fontenot. Following graduation, Dickie spent 20 years in the Army rising to the rank of Colonel before leaving the service to teach literature at Vanderbilt. After three years there, his wife prevailed upon him to move to her hometown of Milledgeville, Georgia, to take over her father's dairy. Dickie adapted to the business world quickly and the dairy thrived and expanded under his stewardship.

Big Dan reflected on his nephew's accomplishments and swelled with heartfelt satisfaction. Dickie was an unqualified success, exceeding all expectations anyone could have set for him.

Big Dan bulldozed his way through the engagement party crowd to greet his nephew. He muttered clipped "hellos" to those he could stomach and ignored everyone else. Dickie was speaking to the Rich, but Big Dan was not about to let that spoil things. He elbowed Rich to the side and delivered his trademark powerhouse handshake to his nephew.

"God damn, am I happy to see you, boy. Let's get the hell out of here and catch up," he boomed.

"You got it, Big Dan," Dickie replied softly. "It's been a long time."

Dory

Dory Hanes, Jr. smiled inwardly as he noticed Big Dan across the room. Rich was putting every fiber of his being into his performance, but Dory had stopped listening when he caught sight of his uncle. Dory was happy to see Big Dan, but he was dreading the revelation inevitable that afternoon.

"There he is," Dory said to his cousin, after Rich had finished helping a waiter clean up a dropped tray.

"What? Oh word, he is gonna SHIT when you tell him everything that's gone down, yo," Rich chuckled.

"Yeah, I expect he will," Dory sighed, as Rich headed back to the bar.

Big Dan was the overbearing relative everyone has, but few understand or appreciate. Because he and Dory shared the same name, he refused to call Dory by his by it. Big Dan preferred “Dickie,” a nickname he had hung on his nephew years ago. Dory did not really mind. He owed his uncle a lot, and they both knew it.

Dory rubbed his heavy beard. He started to grow it when his divorce began in earnest. His wife Randi had vehemently objected to Dory’s decision to step down from his job as CEO of Mercer Dairies. She bristled when Dickie told her he wanted to hike the Appalachian Trail, start what would probably morph into a pseudo-autobiography and generally withdraw from his accustomed regimentation. However, his commitment to order and routine was one of the things that had Randi initially found attractive about Dory. She was impressed by his unwavering dedication to whatever task was at hand and the discipline he exhibited in all facets of his life. They had been married for 23 years and the constancy and reliable nature Randi came to expect from her husband was a cornerstone of their relationship.

The abrupt decision to quit the dairy blindsided Randi and she reacted with a blinding white fury. She cursed Dory mercilessly as she threw him out of the house and threatened to render him penniless. When the divorce papers arrived at Dory’s apartment, he threw away his razor. Randi hated facial hair. Dory was going to grow this beard down to his knees.

Rich returned from the bar and handed Dory another bourbon. He gave his cousin an empathetic grin and a pat on the back: “You gonna need this, dawg. Big Dan don’t handle the unexpected too well, know what I’m sayin’?”

“Yeah, I sure do,” Dory whispered.

“Well, holla at me about those rhymes, Dory. I know you feel that poetry shit. I ain’t even know you were down with Zen, doe, for real. Maybe we’ll get enlightened wit dat Ph—” Rich was cut off by a sharp elbow to the gut from his father.

Rich

Rich Fontenot did not want to go to this party. He adored his niece, but family gatherings made him uneasy. He always seemed to be between girlfriends, between jobs, between unemployment checks or all of the above when his family got together *en masse*. On this late afternoon in early Spring, it was all of the above. Rich stepped out of his associate’s Navigator into the steady Virginia drizzle.

“OK, playa. Yo, you gonna pick me up at 6:30, right? I can’t be up in here too long. Big Dan’s gonna be up my ass all night, ya heard? Aiiight, yo—PEACE!”

Rich lit a Newport, which the rain quickly extinguished while he searched his pockets for the address of the restaurant. He found the address and frowned when he noticed that Nature’s better judgment had defeated his cigarette.

“Damn. My last motherfuckin’ ’Port, too,” he sighed as he flicked the ruined menthol to the pavement.

Rich entered the restaurant and found the room where his niece’s party was just hitting its stride. As he removed his jacket, he noticed Dickie doing the same a few feet away. Rich beamed at his cousin for a moment then hustled over to speak to him.

“Oh, shit! What is up, my brother?” Rich grabbed Dickie and administered the playa’s hug. Dickie was initially taken off guard, but quickly fell into the rhythm of his cousin’s stylized greeting.

“Hey Rich. How are you? I am really happy to see you, buddy,” Dickie said, as he extricated himself from Rich’s boisterous embrace. “So, Aunt Liddy said you’re in the studio now, right, working on some demos or something?”

“Well, you know, I’m *at* the studio, you know, um, I got some peoples up there. They been tryin’ to get me a job up in there doing mixes and whatnot. You know. It’s all good,” Rich lied, averting his eyes and shuffling self-consciously.

“That’s great. I’m glad to hear you’re doing so well. I always knew you were the creative type.” Dickie finished removing his hat

and coat and wiped his beard dry with his hands.

“What the f—? Peep that! That is a *crazy* beard, yo! You look like Jerry Garcia or some motherfucker, hahaha,” Rich hooted as he clapped his hands and rocked with laughter.

Dickie straightened, and shot Rich a bad look. Rich instantly remembered the submission moves his cousin inflicted on him during his early childhood.

“Oh shit! Naw! Naw! I think it’s dope, Dick--, uh, I mean Dory. That beard is *dope*, ya heard?”

Dory smiled and gave his cousin’s bald head a playful rub. “Just a little divorce present to myself,” Dory laughed. “You know, I’d really like to hear some of your lyrics some—”

“For real?” Rich interrupted, “Aw shit. Hold up, playa. Let me get us some drinks so I can come correct. I need a Courvoisier like a motherfuck. What you drinkin’? Wait, I know you gonna have a bourbon to represent the Dirty Dirty, right? Hahaha.”

Rich returned with the drinks and fumbled through his pockets looking for his notes. A cigar dropped from his oversized jeans and Rich spilled half of his beer as he tried to pick it up before his cousin noticed. Dory gave Rich a knowing smile.

“A Phillie,” Rich said sheepishly. “You know, for later. I know Big Dan’s gonna be stressin’ my ass.”

“Sure, I got you. Now let’s hear those, what—rhymes?”

“Word up.” Rich smiled and got down to business: “Aight, peep this—you know Black Thought, right, from The Roots, right? No? Well, anyway, I was thinkin’ about calling myself *White* Thought, you know, but then I was like, naw fuck that, that’s bullshit, especially, you know, since I’m from the South and all and I don’t want no motherfuckers gettin’ the wrong idea thinkin’ I’m tryin’ to be Eminem or some motherfucker, revokin’ my ghetto pass and whatnot, ya heard? So I thought for a minute, and, BOO-YA!—there it was, yo—*Right* Thought! Word is bond! *Right* Thought, you feel me? You know like the Zen Buddhists? Word up!” Rich puffed out his

chest, well pleased with his inspiration.

“Zen Buddhists, huh? Right *Thought*? Aren’t you thinking about Right *Attitude* or maybe Right *Practice*?” Dory asked. “I don’t remember Right *Thought*, where is Right *Thought* from? I must have skipped that part.”

Rich frowned as a crimson tide rolled to his face. “Yo man, do you want to hear my rhymes or what?”

Dory laughed. “Of course I do, Richie. Go ahead, I’ll keep my mouth shut,” Dory said, trying to suppress his giggles.

“Aight. Peep this—” Rich took his rapper’s stance, shook his arms, loosened his neck and shoulders, rubbed his head and cleared his throat. He hesitated a moment, got out of his stance and then backed away slightly. “Hold up, yo, wait a minute, yo.” Rich cleared his throat, rubbed his head, shook out his arms, loosened his neck and shoulders and reassumed his rapper’s stance. “Aight, yo, hear it go, for real, yo

Yeah, motherfucker, yeah!
What! What? What!
Right Thought,
I represent Suzuki-roshi,
Beginner’s Mind—
100% Constancy
Mind Weeds?
You ain’t gonna
Find ‘em in me,
Beginner’s Mind—
100% Constancy
What? Hull!
100% Constancy!

Yeah, motherfucker! What! What!” Rich strode about in a circle like a man possessed, high-fiving scandalized party guests before chest-bumping a stunned waiter carrying a tray full of empty glasses.

(continued)

Little Dan

The day moved Little Dan along. He smiled his melancholy, half-smile—the Big Sad Buddha Daddy smile, as Rich had labeled it. It expressed neither happiness nor amusement, simply a gentle acceptance of things as they were.

He eyed the carrots and broccoli sprigs on his plate. Forget this, he thought, as he tossed the little plate into the trash and walked over to the table where a chef deftly carved a succulent-looking steamship round. He knew he would catch it from his wife, but that was going to happen anyway, given that he was well into his fourth glass of wine. Tina didn't like it when he drank.

Little Dan's expression hardened. Why shouldn't he drink? And for that matter, why shouldn't he eat to his heart's content? he thought. This little shingdig was costing him a bundle, he had no idea how he was going to pay for the upcoming wedding, his daughter was pregnant and, and...*goddamit*, he was hungry. He signaled to the chef to add a few more layers to the growing pile of meat on his plate.

“How about a little more buddy, it's been a while since I *really* ate,” Little Dan laughed.

He had come to grips with Trish's pregnancy rather quickly. He understood that teenagers have sex and that sometimes when these teenagers have sex, someone ends up pregnant. Hadn't it happened to Tina and him? His wife, however, was inconsolable. Her mother gave birth to her at sixteen and Tina had Trish on her seventeenth birthday. She did not want to believe that her daughter had joined this ignoble line of succession.

Little Dan left college to take care of Tina and Trish, working an assortment of demeaning jobs and going to school at night. He eventually graduated and worked his way into a position of modest importance in the Mayor's office in Richmond. Little Dan had paid for his modicum of success by essentially leading an ascetic life, save his voracious appetite for fatty foods and his bi-weekly trips to the public links. In all other aspects of his life, he had amazing powers

of self-discipline, and constantly sublimated his wants and needs for those of his wife and daughter.

Big Dan and Liddy had never forgiven Tina for making Little Dan struggle so hard. They never embraced Tina, insisting that she call them Mr. and Mrs. Fontenot, despite the fact that she had been a part of the family for nearly two decades. Tina responded in kind to the Fontenots' chilliness. She rarely visited them, and would claim a previous engagement or develop a sudden illness in order to avoid family gatherings. Despite Little Dan's entreaties, she also tried to steer Trish away from the Fontenot family, constantly pointing out Big Dan's surliness, Liddy's tendency toward drinking and gambling and Rich's general worthlessness. As Little Dan pondered these things, the Big Sad Buddha Daddy smile returned. He shook his head, softly chuckled and drained his glass. Down the hatch, he thought.

On his way to the bar his future in-laws, the Boons, waylaid him. He blithely accepted their thanks for the party and brushed away their apologies for not having participated in the matter of the bill. Little Dan did not like to hassle about financial issues. Things usually had a way of evening out, and if they didn't, well, he would figure something out. He always did.

As the Boons debated the relative merits of Jeff Gordon and Tony Stewart, Little Dan excused himself, having spotted his younger brother at the bar. The NASCAR enthusiasts did not miss a beat, the words “restrictor plate” and “no-good sum'bitch Gordon” bouncing off Little Dan's broad back as he approached his brother.

“Where you been man, yer almost two hours late?” Little Dan asked with a tone of feigned annoyance.

Rich began stammering excuses about his cell phone not working, being out of cigarettes, his ride being late, having to finish up his demos and forgetting his Kangol when Little Dan cut him off with a wave.

“I'm just playin' with you, Richie. How 'bout just bringing me some wine over and joining me at that table. I'm just going to fill

up this plate a little bit.”

Rich obliged and met his brother at a table by the back door almost completely obscured by some class of giant fern.

“Damn B, I thought you was on one of your diets or some shit,” Rich exclaimed noticing Little Dan’s overflowing plate. Little Dan looked at his brother imploringly through his steadily glazing, sad eyes.

“Yo, I don’t give a fuck, Little Dan. Eat ‘em up, I say, yo. You hit three bills, Moms owe me two hunny anyway, ya heard? Hahaha,” Rich laughed. “Yo, how come y’all ain’t got no Courvoisier up in this piece or some Hennessey or some shit? I’m back there tryin’ to bust some rhymes for Dickie and I only got some Miller Lite or some shit to straighten me up, ya heard? My shit ain’t even come out right neither.” Rich shook his head disdainfully. He then remembered the incident with the waiter and the broken glasses and cleared his throat, his bellicosity transforming into understated contrition.

“Uh, yo, um, I’ll hook your ass up if those motherfuckers make you pay for them motherfuckin’ glasses that fool-ass waiter dropped when I tried to get some propers from that motherfucker after I busted my rhyme, ya heard?”

Little Dan’s head was awash in his fifth glass of wine and the torrential downpour of lingo and profanity coming from Rich swept over him, adding the perfect accents to his blissful confusion.

“I’m not really sure what yer talkin’ about, Richie,” Little Dan gurgled, as he laconically attempted to get the attention of a waiter passing out more wine. The waiter noticed that Little Dan seemed unsteady on his seat, and catching sight of the bald man whose assault had cost him a tray full of glasses, he looked away and hurried back to the kitchen.

“So, d’ja say Dickie was here? I didn’t even see him.” Little Dan was well on his way to being drunk. He swayed in his chair and rested his double chin on his arms, which he crises-crossed on the table.

“You, I isn’t trying’ to dime out my homier Dickie, but that

fool was late too, ya heard? Came in same time as me. Bet you don’t give him no shit neither. Hoo, hoo, yo, you should see that motherfucker’s beard, L. D. Shit long and thick like a grizzly bear or some shit. Said he started to grow it when Randi kicked his ass to the curb. Ha, ha. He’s a crazy motherfucker, yo,” Rich laughed.

“Well, I’m juss glad he made it, I’d noticed that he was late and I wondered what kept ‘em. He’s never late for anything, he’s always been on Army time. It’s almost slike it’s in his blood or something,” Little Dan slurred, “Where’d he go anyway?”

“Big Dan dragged his ass outside. That poor motherfucker,” Rich chuckled. “Moms ain’t even tell Big Dan about they divorce.”

“My sweet Lord, she never tells him *anything*. Big Dan’s gonna have a litter of kittens,” Little Dan sang. “So d’ya know what’s happening with Dickie? I mean, did Mom tell you what was goin’ on?”

“Yeah, I got the full deal. Peep this: you know how Vickie has the mad power, right, be bustin’ that dairy out, makin’ all kinds of money and whatnot? So I guess that fool just had enough one day. Told Randi he was gonna quit, go hikin’ or some shit and write a book. So, you know how she roll, with her proper-ass, plantation shit, she start screamin’ on that poor motherfucker, threaten his ass, kick him out they house, and tell him she gonna take every bit of his loot. Bet she do, too. Her family’s some vindictive, rich-ass crackas. Gonna fuck poor Dickie up.”

“Oh my goodness, thass awful, Richie, thass *reecallly awww-ful*” Little Dan opined. “Did ya talk to Dickie about it?”

“Naw, didn’t have a chance to, yo. But you know what? I don’t even think he cares. He has changed like a motherfuck, word is bond. Seem serene, you know, ain’t stressin’ shit,” Rich mused. He then shook his head. “Fuckin’ Randi, doin’ my boy like that, bitch-ass bitch. You saw how she do, always be bossin’ my boy around—‘Do this and that, and bring me this and that’ and all that shit. She was at that poor motherfucker like a motherfuckin’ slave-driver or some shit. Shit, remind me a little bit of T--” Rich caught himself. “Um,

word. Shit, um...word, uh...yo, so how 'bout them Lakers, yo? Kobe been lightin' it up for real doe."

"Yeah, she reminded me a little of Tina, too," Little Dan sighed.

"Aw, shit L. D. I ain't mean it like that, yo, you know Tina's my girl, right?" Rich pleaded, "You know that, right?"

"She can be sutch a handful, Richie! Jesus H. Christ!" Little Dan buried his face in his arms. "I try so hard, Richie. D'ya have any idea? I really try hard, I do."

Rich shook his fist at the ceiling, reproaching himself for his *faux pas* then looked at his older brother with sympathy and concern.

"Yo, B, I think you might be gettin' a little fucked up. You slurrin' like a motherfuck—sound worse than Moms. I'm gonna get some coffee for yo' drunk ass and we'll step outside, aaight? We'll get some air and clear up yo' head a little, ya heard?"

Little Dan looked up and smiled at his brother through sad, bloodshot eyes brimming with tears. "Okay, man, thass a good idea. Thank you Richie, yer the bess brother in the world, Richie."

"Better recognize," Rich proudly smirked, "Now keep yo' drunk ass behind this motherfuckin' tree so Tina don't fuck you up."

Big Dan

Big Dan could not believe his ears. His earlier inkling that something was amiss with Dickie had been on the mark, as usual. He could elucidate what was going on with his boys by simply looking at them. You always know your own, he was fond of saying. What he had not guessed however, was the extent of the mess that Dickie had gotten himself into.

"So, she kicked you out? There's no chance of her taking you back?" Big Dan frowned and rubbed his chin. "What about the dairy? Jesus Christ, Dickie. What are you thinking, boy?"

Big Dan was beside himself. His face was bright red and the perspiration on his head mingled with the slight drizzle that continued

to fall to the patio outside of the restaurant.

"Well, Big Dan, I just got tired of trying to live up to everyone's expectations. The board, Old Man Mercer, Randi...it was starting to drain the life out of me," Dickie explained, "nothing was ever good enough."

"You got tired? What kind of bullshit is that, boy? You sound like Richie. Tired? Tired of what? Being a success? Being respected? Jesus, I can't believe you would do something so stupid. You've got a good head on your shoulders, boy. Always have." Big Dan shook his head in disbelief and looked up at the grey, black clouds. "So have you even talked to Randi? And what in God's name is this beard supposed to be about? Is that supposed to *mean* something? Jesus, you're being so irresponsible."

"Listen Dan, I just needed to decompress. I've been going non-stop my whole life. I was starting to fall apart, I need to do something to, I don't know, feed my soul."

"Here we go," Big Dan rolled his eyes and threw his hands into the air. "Who has been warping your mind with this hippie shit? You're too old for that mess, Dickie. You're a CEO for Christ's sake. Where's your sense of responsibility? Who do you think you are?"

Dickie's annoyance degenerated into anger. "That's what I'd like to find out! Don't you get it? That dairy never had anything to do with me; it was always about Randi and the Mercers. They fought me tooth and nail on everything. It's just not worth it anymore. And for your information nobody's warping my mind, and I'm not too old for anything. Where do you get off acting like you know what's best for me? I'm not *your* child, it's about time you understood that."

Big Dan was stopped in his tracks. This was so unexpected coming from Dickie. With his new appearance and odd manner, Dickie did not look or act anything like the boy Big Dan had known. Who was this and what was he saying?

"I'm just trying to help you. That's all I've ever done," Big Dan whispered, clearly hurt.

“Listen, I’m sorry Dan, you know I didn’t mean that.”

Big Dan shrugged and attempted to hide his injured pride and mask his confusion. He needed to be strong for his boy and help to focus his attention. He tried to appeal to Dory’s diminishing practicality.

“Well, what are you going to do for money? Those Mercers are a powerful bunch.”

“I don’t need much, Big Dan. Plus, I’m going to have a job waiting for me when I get back from the hike. I’m going to be running the Flannery O’Connor Memorial in Milledgeville helping new writers and raising money for lupus research.” Dickie smiled hopefully.

“What? What kind of job is that?” A returning exasperation replaced Big Dan’s hurt feelings. “I thought I understood you boy, but you’re just as bad as Little Dan or Richie. Can’t any of you do anything right? Why do you have to make things so hard on yourself?”

“It’s going to be okay, Big Dan. I need to do this for myself.”

“But it’s not what’s expected of you, boy.” Big Dan cleared his throat. “Little Dan is *soft* and Richie is an *idiot!* You’re all we have! Can’t you get that through your head,” Big Dan pleaded.

“What are you talking about, Big Dan?”

Both men were confused. The conversation was obviously going nowhere.

“Never mind. Listen, Liddy’s bound to be drunk by now, so I’d better get her home before she picks a fight with somebody. She’s going to have one with me anyway, and I’m going to be the one picking it.”

Big Dan rubbed his flushed face and collected himself. He spoke with great care, in an even tone devoid of his earlier emotion: “Now I want you to think about what you’re doing, boy. You’re taking the coward’s path, boy, and I know you’re not a coward—at least I thought you weren’t. You have a responsibility to your wife

and to the Mercers. And you have a responsibility to *me*. You know all about that.”

Big Dan removed a handkerchief from his shirt pocket and wiped the sweat and rain from his forehead. “You call me in a couple of days and I expect to hear that you are putting an end to this divorce business and that you’re going back where you belong. You hear me, Dickie?”

Dory cast a blank stare at his uncle.

Dory

Dory watched Big Dan storm back into the party. He was angry with himself for losing his temper. For reasons unknown, he always expected the next conversation with Big Dan to be the breakthrough, and each time the breakthrough did not arrive brought Dickie fresh disappointment. He thought about his uncle and tried to uncover Big Dan’s motivations.

Big Dan came from a generation of men who displayed their character flaws like badges of honor. They held onto their notions of race, class, station and propriety with a ferocity usually reserved for the battlefield. Too young to fight the Nazis and too old fight the power, these men existed in a perpetual limbo from which there was no escape, whether they desired one or not. They felt a sense of insignificance when they compared themselves to their older brothers, feeling cheated of the opportunity to save the world. They looked at the generation immediately following their own with outright contempt, feeling cheated of the opportunity to shake up the world their older brothers had saved.

They forced themselves to find self-worth through a staunch adherence to a set of values that only they seemed to fully understand. They lacked the nobility of the preceding generation and the vitality of spirit of the subsequent one—they were the merely guardians of the status quo. They expected things to remain as they were, since things were as they should be. But with each passing day and each passing year, the gap in these men’s eyes between what things had

been and what they should be grew. And their obsolescence grew near.

Dory felt the sun break through the wall of clouds overhead, warming his damp shirt. He looked at his watch—it was only 4.15, much too early to retreat from the party. For the first time in his life, Dory wished that he had a cigarette. This must be the type of situation where one of those could do somebody some good, he thought.

Rich

Rich had not seen Little Dan this drunk in years. He found it refreshing as Little Dan rarely displayed any type of emotion, other than that of tempered resignation, if that could be called an emotion. Rich collected a large cup of coffee from the bar and returned to his brother's hideout behind the fern.

“Yo, let's kick it outside and let you get yo' detox on,” Rich instructed.

He helped Little Dan to his feet and directed him toward the back door. When they got outside, Rich handed the coffee to his brother and looked up at the clearing sky.

“Motherfuckin' rain finally let up, yo. It's about time. I can't remember the last time I saw the sun, for real.”

Little Dan stumbled a little as he tried to look up at the sky and walk at the same time. He spilled some of the hot coffee onto his hand, and let forth with a stream of obscenities worthy of his little brother. Rich laughed heartily, abusing Little Dan with playful insults colored with fraternal regard. When he collected himself, he noticed Dory observing the proceedings with a warm grin. Rich led Little Dan over to where Dory sat.

“What you smilin' about, dawg? I saw you go out here with Big Dan, and ain't a damn thing coulda been funny about that shit. Word is bond,” Rich speculated.

“No, there certainly wasn't. I was just watching you boys.

You cut a funny picture. By the way, congratulations, Dan, I'm real happy for you and your family.”

“Thank you, Dickie. Thanksalot for comin' all the way yup peer. Thass real sweet of you man, *reeeally sweeeet* .”

Dory, wondering at Little Dan's condition, caught Rich's eye. Rich responded with a glug-glug motion, cocking his head at his older brother. Dory smiled and gave his seat to Little Dan. Little Dan sighed a thank you, sat down with a thud, and quickly slipped into a gentle doze.

“Hey, I don't suppose you have an extra cigarette, do you, Richie?” Dory asked.

“Naw, I'm all out, yo,” Rich responded, surprised by Dory's request. “What you want with one of them anyway? You actin' weird, yo, I ain't even gonna try to front.”

“Yeah, I guess so. There's just so much happening. I feel really antsy, I guess. Trying to fit into my skin, you know?”

“I feel you, Dory, I feel you.” Rich thought for a moment. “Peep this—my watch just told me it's 4.20 and this Phillie's about to burn a hole in my pocket, for real. That'll do you a lot more good than any motherfuckin' Newport. Let's go over into that alley. Grab that chair for Little Dan.”

Rich jostled his brother. “L.D., wake yo' ass up, playa. We gonna go to the alley and smoke a victory cigar for Trish's baby, ya heard?”

Little Dan struggled to his feet and followed his cousin and brother into a shadowy alley leading away from the patio of the restaurant. Rich scouted for a secluded spot and settled for a little nook between a dumpster and a chain-link fence overgrown with vegetation. He nodded at Dory and his cousin set up the chair for Little Dan facing the alley.

“Why doane we juss smoke the see-gar on the patio, Richie? It smells like *shit* over here, man.”

“Chill out, playa. You know Tina'd kick yo' ass if she see you

smokin' a cigar," Rich explained, as he removed the blunt from his pocket. He smiled from ear to ear as he looked down at it. "Got this motherfucker from some of Redman's peoples—best shit in Brick City, word is bond."

Rich wet the blunt slightly, removed it from his mouth and assumed a prayerful manner: "*Breathing in, I calm body and mind. Breathing out, I smile. Dwelling in the present moment, I know this is the only moment.*" Rich looked at his cousin, "Thich Nhat Hanh, yo. How ya like me now?"

"Very impressive," Dory averred, "Somebody's been doing his homework. Now are you going to light that thing or we just going to stand around and wait to get arrested?"

Little Dan

The coffee was beginning to cut through Little Dan's alcohol haze. He realized that he was smoking marijuana a few minutes into the session. Initially, he guessed that Rich didn't have enough cigars for everyone, but the secrecy in which they smoked and the distantly familiar sensation that came over him a few minutes later clued him in.

A slow breeze blew past with a hint of the warm days to come. Early spring birds chirped cheerfully at the long absent sun, as Rich tossed the spent roach into the dumpster, and quietly led Dory and Little Dan back to the patio.

They gathered around a table and took their seats as if assembling for some sort of council. No one wanted to disturb the positive vibration that they shared, but moments like these were best fulfilled through conversation rather than personal meditation. Little Dan broke the ice.

"So what did he say, Dory? I mean, was he upset, you know, of course he was upset, but I mean, you know, overly?" Little Dan heard the words leave his mouth and watched them head toward his cousin. Dory chewed them and digested their meaning.

Dory looked at Little Dan thoughtfully as he formulated his

answer.

"Yeah, Danny, I think he was pretty pissed," Dory broke into a deep chuckle that spread to the Fontenot brothers like a yawn.

"That's heavy man, that's heavy," Little Dan giggled, "and I know *all about* that word," as they continued to laugh.

When the moment had passed, Rich spoke up: "Come on Dory, what did he *say*?"

"Well, he told me to call him when I put an end to this divorce business and had gone back to where I belong—I think that's how he put it. Then he made an excuse about having to rescue Aunt Liddy and left in a huff." Dory smiled at his cousins, who hung on his every word. "I'm afraid he's going to be waiting on that call for a while," he laughed.

"Wow. So did he lord that business about your father over you again," Rich asked.

"Of course he did, that's his patented move," Dory said, staring straight ahead. "But I don't think it's working this time. I think I'm beginning to understand that what he did back then was done as much for himself as it was for me and the girls," he said slowly, measuring each word. "Don't get me wrong, I appreciate what Big Dan did for us—we would have been nowhere without him. But he just refuses to adjust to the fact that children become adults and have changing lives. But I'm sure you guys know all about that. How are you getting along with him these days, anyway?"

"I'm a little surprised he showed up, to be honest with you," Little Dan said. "Tina's got Trish so set against Big Dan and Mama that they're convinced that she hates them. And you know what? They're probably right. She hates them like he hates me. Nobody gets what they expect in these relationships, you know? It's all so screwed up."

"Big Dan just acts like I don't exist," Rich admitted. "That can't be too healthy for me."

Their words evaporated, leaving a faint haze of mutual

identification lingering over the table. Dory pulled pensively on his beard. Little Dan sat back in his chair, closed his eyes and rested his hands on his belly. Rich sat straight with his arms crossed on his chest, lost in a sadness all his own.

Little Dan began to hum softly, his eyes still closed. Dory and Rich awoke from their reverie, recognizing the tune but unable to place it. Almost inaudibly, Little Dan began to sing:

*Take me to the station
And put me on a train
I've got no expectations
To pass through here again
Once I was a rich man
But now I am so poor
But never in my sweet short life
Have I felt like this before
Your heart is like a diamond
You throw your pearls at swine
And as I watch you leaving me
You pack my peace of mind*

He continued to hum and soon his soft snores betrayed him.

Rich looked up and noticed Trish standing at the patio door looking out at them. He smiled and beckoned her outside. She was radiant in a stylish purple dress with the first hint of a belly emerging from her tiny body. She kissed her uncle and cousin hello and wrapped her arms around her father's shoulders.

"Wake up, Daddy, we need to settle up before the party winds down completely." Little Dan stirred and patted his daughter's head.

Rich returned Trish's happy grin. "So how are you, my dear?"

Trish laughed and rubbed her tummy. "Well, I'm expecting."

STACY WRIGHT

A Barbie's Dream Vacation

I am five, and Sherry and I sit on the hardwood floor still dressed in our pajamas. We open the toy chest that contains our most prized possessions: our Barbie doll collection. Sherry and I are one year and ten days apart, but we were raised as twins, so there are two of everything. We have two Barbie-doll carrying cases that can hold clothes and six dolls. We have two pink '57 Chevy convertibles to drive around. We have two pink catamarans complete with sails. We have, though, a severe lack of Barbie furniture, and must make due by using our dollhouse furniture, which is for small dolls and Barbie is too tall for most of the pieces. All the contents of our toy chest are now spread across my bedroom floor.

We democratically pick one Barbie at a time from the pile. We have some different dolls because friends have given them to us at birthday parties, and I have one more Ken doll because I bought him with my allowance. Sherry is too frugal to buy Barbie dolls with her allowance. We also pick clothes systematically so that neither one of us feels slighted. Somehow, Sherry always ends up with the blue and pink cheerleading skirt that is my favorite.

Part of the reason we start the whole Barbie mess in my room is because I have a children's table with four small chairs that we use to construct houses and hotels out of. I move two chairs side by side and place a Golden Book encyclopedia on the seats to make a third room on the second floor. I find a nice small blanket and throw it over the tops of the chairs to create the roof. Sherry's construction looks almost identical to mine except she has found paper to draw rugs on for her floors. I must then find paper also.

Our Barbie storyline follows the same plot every time we play. Our dolls go to college together, meet one of the three Kens, get married, go on a honeymoon to Hawaii, and come back home to

their new mansion.

It's my first time flying even though I'm an adult, and I pull the end of the seatbelt strap tightly until I feel securely tied down. The seats resemble those commonly found in charter buses: blue pattern fabric with a comfortable cushion but in an upright position that makes it difficult to relax. I grasp the armrests with sweaty palms as I look out of the window at the black asphalt. I'm feeling a bit queasy with each passing second, but I reassure myself that it's just anxiety. I try to forget what my boss said to me a few days before: "I'm not worried about whether or not God says it's my time to go. I'm worried about whether or not God says it's the captain's time to go!" Lelia looks back at me and smiles; she tells me that people do this all the time and not to be afraid.

It is 6:15 a.m. on a Thursday morning and we have been up since 3:45 a.m. Zach woke up with a temperature of 104 degrees and is sleeping across the aisle from Madeleine and me. Lelia thinks he caught something at kindergarten the day before. Chris has found an empty seat in the rear of the plane and is trying to sleep. There is no way I can fall asleep with the loud pounding in my chest going on.

The flight attendant is young and has a reassuring calmness about her. She has youthful bronze skin, and she has pulled her dark hair into a tight bun at the base of her neck. Her brown eyes seem to smile behind her thin-framed glasses. I can't remember what she said her name was, but it doesn't seem to matter. She explains safety procedures and tells us to remain seated for take-off. I'm pretending she's a guardian angel.

We begin to move towards the runway and my heart is racing as fast as the plane. Just as the calm before a severe storm, the plane stops a moment before thrusting forward at full force. The acceleration causes me to sit stiffly with my back embedded in the seat. I cannot breathe. I cannot take my eyes from the ground. Madeleine takes hold of my hand, and I feel silly by the comfort I

get from it; a 21-year-old being comforted by a 3-year-old seems ridiculous to me. We continue to ascend into the sky, and soon I can't see the ground anymore.

It is the first time I have seen the clouds from this angle and they look as fluffy and sticky as cotton candy. It looks as though if you walked on them you would be stuck in them and you would be inhaling sugar. I can't look away from the sight of the clouds and how soft they look. The rising sun casts a golden hue to the tops of them, creating a secret golden world. Everything has turned from scary to surreal.

I remember that as children, my older sister and I would ask my mom where heaven was, and mom would answer, "Heaven is where God lives and is way past the tops of the clouds and the sky—somewhere near the end of the universe." I would have to agree that if I were God, I would want to live here and see this magnificence all the time, especially if I could be proud of the fact that I created it.

Once the plane lands, I can see the ocean and palm trees. I can see the tallest mountains I have ever come across. The Beck family and I walk out of the airport and into a warm tropical paradise. They used to live here on Oahu, and I ask them how they ever left the beautiful Hawaiian island.

Our Barbies fall in love with Ken, are planning the wedding, and are choosing the destination for the honeymoon. Sherry and I always choose Hawaii because our parents had gone there, and we have pictures of Hawaii throughout the house. After the Barbie wedding, which of course is a lovely triple wedding since I have two Ken's and Sherry has one, our Barbie couples magically arrive in Hawaii. In all of our creativity, it did not dawn on us to create a plane instead.

Nonetheless, as soon as our Barbies transport themselves to Hawaii, wedding gowns fly off and sundresses replace them. Ken stays at the hotel most of the time while the girls go shopping in the

tropical paradise.

All three Barbie dolls are tan with blonde hair. They look beautiful in their floral printed, strapless dresses and matching heels. The dolls take over all the shops—money is no object for them. Their plastic bodies and fake hair embody no cares in the world; Sherry and I, who manipulate the dolls' every move, will hand all the things these Barbie's will ever need to them on pink plastic platters.

People in Hawaii are all tan because the sun is usually out and shining. I had to try extremely hard not to get sunburn, which has the power to turn a fun vacation into a painful memory. Each morning I take a shower and lather up with Hawaiian Tropic SPF 30 sunscreen. I know that at some point in the day, the Beck family and I will be lying out on the white beaches soaking up the sun.

On the walk back from the beach, the Becks and I pass a Plumeria tree that has the prettiest flowers on it. Lelia tells me that different Plumeria trees produce different colored flowers. On the tree by our house, the flower is yellow in the center and fades to white at the tip of the petals. Five petals on the flower join in the center and fan out in a circle; each petal bends in a semicircular shape, which allows the flower to sit nicely behind the ear. Lelia picks the flowers for the kids and me; in Hawaii, it is not impolite to pick flowers off someone else's trees if the trees are by the road. Madeleine is afraid of flowers but seems content to have one in her hair under her barrette. Zach likes to have one flower behind each of his ears, and smiles proudly at how his mom decorated him like a true islander. I smile too and put one behind my right ear. The sweet smell of nectar drifts to my nose, and I realize I have become one with paradise.

Lelia and I go to the local Paul Brown salon to be pampered for a few hours by professionals. Lelia wants to get her hair colored and cut, and has a short male stylist named Bruno attending to her. I am embarrassed to admit it, but I have come to the island with long toenails with the polish chipping off. I did not know about

the tradition in Hawaii, which requests guests to remove their shoes before entering the home of the host. Unfortunately, there were many people who had seen my unattended feet by this point, but it is only the second day that we are here and I can fix the problem with an hour and a half pedicure through a woman named Ginger.

Ginger has mistaken me for a native islander, perhaps because of my nice pair of Capri pants and tank top. I'm certainly not tan which should have been a tourist giveaway. She asks me if I'd like a sequin flower design on my right big toe, and I say sure. I am relaxed in this environment. I have no care in the world. I try to remember this feeling of relaxation as I am told that my pedicure is sixty-seven dollars and some change. The total cost with tip is seventy-five, which I smile and pay. I wonder why everything in Hawaii is more expensive than in Virginia, or anywhere on the mainland.

The pedicure is beautiful though. Ginger has chosen a light tropical pink polish with the sequin design, which she says is the favorite of all the local girls. Every friend of the Beck's we meet comments on the beauty of my feet.

What is most important, more important than the price of the pedicure, is that I have been confused with an island girl. I may not be tan, but I feel trendy and fashionable. I also feel that I fit in with this tropical paradise; this place is beautiful and I am beautiful in it. In Hawaii, you do not have to look like a Barbie doll to feel like the world is at your feet.

Mom fills the white, fiberglass bathtub with warm water more than three-fourths of the way full. Sherry and I like the tub to be almost overflowing with water so we can pretend the tub is a swimming pool. We both have on our bathing suits. The Barbie dolls change into their bathing suits, too. All three Ken dolls are wearing the same swim trunks they have had on since the honeymoon began.

Mom delivers the pink catamarans to the tub, along with towels for Sherry, the dolls, and me. Sherry and I step into the bathtub. Sherry sits closer to the faucet because the water is deeper at that

end of the tub, and I am left to sit in the shallow lukewarm water.

The Barbie dolls ride along on the catamarans, chatting about the nice weather, while the Ken dolls surf the waves. It is a beautiful summer evening and the water is a perfect temperature. The riding of the waves and of the catamaran end after a while, and

the dolls climb on “shore” to dive into the water off the side of the “cliffs,” both of which are the built in shelf on the side of the tub where the soap and shampoo sit.

Sherry, as she does with so many other simple things, turns the carefree diving into a contest. I’m not sure what the prize is, but it does not matter. I do not like to lose any more than Sherry does. The Barbie and Ken dolls begin doing flips all over the place, staying airborne for more time than humanly possible. Of course, Sherry is the only judge (my opinion does not ever matter to her) and gives the prize to her Barbie doll for achieving a perfect ten dive. The biased opinion of the judge throws the fun-filled event into an uproar, and Sherry and I are forced to leave the tub because of our loud argument.

Barbie and Ken dolls lie in the bathtub to dry, smiling and dumb. Sherry and I put on fresh pajamas, and we place the pajamas we wore all day in the dirty clothes pile. In the morning, Sherry and I will pick them up and put the dolls into their respective cases. Sherry and I will also have to clean up our mess, which I will clean up mostly by myself because all of the toys are located in my room on my floor. In a week or so, we will start the endeavor all over, playing as though we were best friends again.

The Pacific Ocean feels warmer on the southeast side of the island, almost like bath water. I have to take my shoes off to wade in the water to the catamaran stairs. The boat rocks back and forth in the Waikiki waves, and I watch surfers challenge the immense waves as they ride them into shore. I do not want to surf while I am here, but I am very excited about seeing the sunset over water for the first time. Living on the east coast all of my life has prohibited

me from seeing the sun set over the ocean.

There are clouds over the westward horizon, but I am not disappointed. Clouds at sunset create the most exquisite visual images. Without the clouds, the color has nothing to bounce off of, and the dynamic landscape of the sky is lost. I am disappointed, though, that the clouds will most likely prohibit me from watching the sun graze the top of the water, reflecting with all of its glory on the tops of the waves. I can see a small slither of luminescent orange-yellow peeking through the clouds, and I see it disappear.

The actual setting of the sun is not the focal point of the beauty of that night, however, the beaches of Waikiki, the hotels and restaurants, and the boats lining the shore all radiate, cast in a golden light. Waikiki has become a golden city. It is as though the great King Midas has floated down from heaven and has touched everything in sight. The transformation of the city from daytime shopping center to the center of nightlife has left a brief twenty minute period for the gods to paint and create a vision of beauty.

I drink a Mai Thai and soak in the evening. If I could, I would take this hour and a half catamaran excursion every night so as not to miss a single moment of heaven on earth.

Recently, I started working at The Goddard School near my house. The Goddard School is a preschool that emphasizes having the best resources for early childhood education, and the local wealthy residents of Chester send their children to our school. The Goddard School is where I met the Beck family.

Chris and Lelia Beck have two children, Zack and Madeleine. I have cared for five-year-old, Zach, and three-year-old, Madeleine, for over a year now. The children are two of the best-behaved children I have ever known. Chris and Lelia have included me in their family by leaving me their children, sharing tough family issues with me, and by taking me with them on family vacations.

The Beck’s moved to Hawaii before the kids were born, and now the family visits there often to see old friends and familiar places.

Our visit to Hawaii in November 2004 has a special motivation: Lelia has recently passed the Hawaii bar exam for attorneys and has hopes to practice in Hawaii half the year and Virginia the other half.

Sometimes, when Sherry is home, she comes with me to baby-sit Zach and Madeleine. Sherry lives in Harrisonburg, Virginia with her fiancé, Terrence; and I live with our mom and our sixteen-year-old sister, Tana, at our house in Chester, Virginia. Sherry moved four years ago when she was accepted at James Madison University, and ever since then she and I have fewer arguments and a much better relationship; she has even made me her maid of honor.

I showed Sherry all of my pictures when the Beck family and I arrived back in Virginia. I wish Sherry could have come with me to Hawaii; she may be the only other person that could possibly understand how the experience affected me. Sherry and her fiancé are now talking about going to Hawaii for their honeymoon and just maybe it'll rival the ones we've already gone on so long ago.

Hunting for Sport

Easter can mean a lot of things to a lot of people, and to some it means nothing at all. For me, Easter is a day on which I rejoice. This rejoicing takes place when I opt to use my free will and not go to Sunday Mass. The way I see it, I can spend forty-five minutes daydreaming on a hard, cold pew or do the same on a soft mattress with fluffy pillows and silk sheets. I always vote in favor for the most comfortable choice of the two. Alleluia to that.

Sacrilegious, you say? Not even close. I'm the product of Catholic schooling. Plaid uniforms, penny loafers, disgruntled nuns, and daily praise of the Lord were all key ingredients in my upbringing. I can to this day quote the Bible and recite "Hail Mary" and any other prayer at the drop of a hat. Every time I utter a bad word I have an urge to go to confession. I frequently picture the nuns with rulers in hand when I am stuck in the middle of rush-hour traffic and yell out "Goddammit!" due to sheer frustration. Not to mention that I feel the worst of guilt trips when I describe shit as holy.

I've come to the conclusion that the nuns placed little Catholic microchips in our innocent, unknowing heads so that now, even in my twenties, I cannot help but remember everything I learned while in parochial school. Unfortunately I lack the proof necessary to subpoena Sister Maria Rose and her habit-wearing posse for a trial.

Easter for me was not a religion-oriented holiday though perhaps in hindsight it should have been. My interest in Easter was instead held by the large white furry rabbit with the big plastic eyes and deep voice at Fair Oaks mall.

"What do you want for Easter, little girl?"

There was only one answer I knew to give. One word that I

shouted at the large androgynous creature on whose lap I sat.

“Candy!”

That’s right, candy. And lots of it. I didn’t have a sweet tooth; I had sweet teeth. I’m surprised I managed to stay as skinny as I did when I was a child because I know I ate more than my share of sweets.

Sadly enough, my belief in the Easter Bunny went on far longer than it should have. I was twelve-years-old and in the sixth grade when I found out the truth from an evil classmate named Maggie. Leave it to a girl to break my heart.

I was devastated for the next several years but gradually got over it. Eventually the same thing happened to my younger sisters and then we were all non-believers. Together we analyzed the facts and came up with questions that served to only further our rather late-bloomed reality check.

How the hell can one rabbit standing upright go to every house around the world in one night?

How in God’s name can this same rabbit carry enough eggs and hollow chocolate bunnies for us and all the other children in the neighborhood? (We were spoiled. Very spoiled.)

Wouldn’t the hollow chocolate bunnies be susceptible to breaking easily?

And for Christ’s sake, what pedophile’s lap have our parents been allowing us to sit on these past several years?

I could tell my parents were saddened by the fact that Michelle*, Marie*, and I had found out the truth. Their little girls were growing up. Next would come the awkward sex talks.

There is, however, one childish event that my sisters and I have

**There is a very strong possibility that my sisters will be embarrassed that I have written about the OSEEH, so out of consideration of that fact and because I am a genuinely nice person, I have used their middle names instead of their first.*

continued to willingly participate in even though we are now “young women”: The Odom Sisters Easter Egg Hunt (OSEEH). This event is one which the three of us anticipate every Easter Sunday. Each year, my parents plan it out in detail fifteen minutes in advance, scattering the colorful plastic eggs throughout their large backyard. Each year, my sisters and I, for approximately one hour, transform into the giggly and obnoxious little girls we once were. This transformation is by no means difficult.

You see, most *public* egg hunts—the ones held in parks, Church lots, the White House lawn—have the cut off age of ten. That’s when a child is supposed to no longer enjoy participating in this activity. According to the *Easter Egg Hunt Rules & Regulations Handbook*, some egg hunt officials got together back in the seventies and voted in favor of this unjust decision. Their ruling has remained intact ever since.

Fortunately though, because I have always looked younger than my age, I was able to continue going to the public egg hunts until the age of fifteen. And then my parents said that I should stop—that it wasn’t fair to the young children who found five eggs while I held a basket full of fifty. I pouted for a bit but lightened up when I realized my parents would never put a cut-off age on their hunt for Michelle, Marie, and me. But I asked my mother one day just to make sure.

“Honey, of course you can still look for eggs with your sisters. We will keep setting up the hunt for as long as the three of you want to do it. You know you’re my favorite child.”

Well when my mother said this to me (minus the favorite child part) I don’t think she anticipated having a senior in high school, and both an undergraduate and graduate college student still very much wanting the OSEEH to occur. I mean, who would?

But Mom doesn’t seem to mind at all. In fact, I know she enjoys hiding the eggs with my father and watching her daughters battle it out to the end. And it is a battle. The older we’ve gotten, the more competitive we’ve become. I even train in the off-season, scattering

eggs around my apartment and sprinting around to find them. I often skip soccer practice in order to devote more time preparing myself for the all-important event.

“Coach, I can’t make it tonight. I’ve got egg hunt practice at six.”

“It’s alright, Odom. I understand completely. Good to have a player on the team that has her head on straight and her priorities in order.”

Finally the day of the OSEEH arrives after the months of fictitious training, and my sisters and I wait anxiously in our parents’ kitchen while they hide the eggs outside. We are all in workout attire: running shoes, shorts, T-shirts, and sports bras. Michelle dons a white shirt that reads “No Fear,” in an attempt to intimidate Marie and me. I wear a yellow shirt that reads “Field Hockey: One of the many sports I play” in an attempt to intimidate Marie and Michelle. Marie wears a “311” blue T-shirt in an attempt to intimate Michelle and me. She claims she is going to find three hundred and eleven eggs outside. And that might make sense if our parents actually hid that many eggs, but they understandably do not. Later Marie confesses that it was the first clean shirt she could find in her unkempt bedroom.

For the past two years I have come out victorious in this competition, so on this particular lovely warm spring afternoon my sisters are really out to get me. They desperately want my reign to come to an end so I will no longer be able to brag about my winning streak. They want to bring me down.

Once my parents have finished placing the eggs strategically around the fenced-in backyard, we are allowed to step outside and get in position. Like Olympic sprinters, we line-up beside one another and scan the track of freshly cut green grass and carefully trimmed shrubbery. In my mind I map out the directions in which my feet will swiftly take me to the colorful targets. I am sure my sisters are doing the same. We look alike and act alike, so all bets are on that we think alike as well.

After each being handed a large straw-woven basket by our

mother, our father speaks the words we have been waiting for.

“Alright ladies, there are 100 eggs to be found. On your mark, get set, go!”

Quickly we dart out on the lawn with our game faces at their finest. Some of the eggs are easy to find, others take a careful eye. I’m doing pretty well, holding a fairly full basket of eggs, until my sisters do a Velociraptor attack on me, darting out of bushes and bumping into me on both sides. Clever girls.

Several of the eggs tumble out of my basket as a result and their greedy claws quickly snatch them up. I consider my options of how to react to this unfair occurrence:

1. Whine to Mom and Dad
2. Cry
3. Remind myself that I am in my mid-twenties and participating in an egg hunt.

Deciding to go with the third option, I suck it up and move on, away from the merciless predators and their evil cheating ways.

When the hunt comes to its close, we walk back toward the house, out of breath and sweaty. It was quite a workout and we’re all feeling the burn. Now comes the moment of truth: the egg count.

Marie thinks she has won for sure and gives a big smile before announcing her grand total.

“36!”

Michelle, in denial that her younger sister found more eggs than her, calls into question eighteen-year-old Marie’s math skills.

“You can’t have *that* many more than me. That’s not possible. Count again. And this time I’m watching you do it.”

Slowly Marie recounts her eggs as Michelle stares intently to make sure Marie hadn’t counted by fives the previous time. Again Marie comes up with thirty-six.

“See, I told you Michelle. I didn’t cheat.”

So, according to the final results, it appears my winning streak has yet to meet its end. For here I sit with thirty-eight well-earned eggs, two more than Marie and twelve more than Michelle. Another entire year in which to boast until my heart's content.

As I look over at my sisters and regard their disappointed faces, I begin to feel bad that I have won yet again. These two women that I love so much wanted nothing more than to beat me this year and now I've spoiled their fun. The bad feeling lasts for the duration of about sixty seconds, when at this time I am hit in the eye with an orange plastic egg. As my sisters laugh hysterically, my sympathy toward them significantly subsides.

Michelle grabs one of the twenty-six eggs from her basket and opens it up. Inside are two small Reese's Cups, wrapped in pastel-colored foil. She unwraps one and pops it in her mouth. Marie opens up one of her eggs as well. She takes the candy out and closes the plastic egg back up, then throws it at Michelle's forehead. Michelle ignores

the possible pain she is feeling and unwraps another Reese's. She looks at me questioningly as she chews, her eyes narrowing before she speaks her standard lines of doubt, the same lines she had previously directed toward Marie.

"You know, there is *no* way you can have that many. That's not possible. Count again. And this time I'm watching you do it."

I have these lines memorized because she never fails to utter them each year. She said them when she was thirteen, she is saying them now at the age of twenty-one, and it is my firm belief that she'll say them at the age of thirty-one.

And even though both she and I know I counted accurately the first time, I will never mind taking the time to sit with her and Marie and count them again.

 MATTHEW CRICCHIO

White Noise

In the morning it was quiet, slow, and the noise was coming from under the skin of the ground, under the dirt and I could feel it coming. Now, though, it was summer and the air was heavy and the noise was slow, slumbering, and I could only hear the red and green lights clicking and birds calling and nothing else. My bed was warm and soon, when the noise was rising, and Ma was up, I would be out of the bed and in the bathroom with books or with something else or outside with Bing. But right now it was no noise, like white, and I was in bed thinking about no noise and becoming scared of it being without noise. We would have to clean our room soon. Ma always made us clean our room. My room had only books and clothes that hardly fit and some shoes and a poster of a baseball player Dad liked and a pennant that had my name on it:

Thames Felix Cupa!

There was a baseball bat with a baseball under it as an exclamation point. Someone had given it to me when I was a baby, when I was just born. Before I was a baby I was nothing. Ma and Dad told me I was in heaven before I was a baby because I ask them where I was when they talk about stuff that happened before I was born.

"You were in heaven," Dad would say.

"How come I can't remember it?" Ma would say something I can't remember and Dad who has almost died before from getting shot in a war said he doesn't remember heaven either. Then I think that if I can't remember before I was born when I didn't exist what would happen after I died and didn't exist? Dad who had been in a battle and was shot, which means he almost died, said he doesn't remember heaven either and I wonder if there is even a heaven. On my first communion, which was a year ago when I was little and seven years old I wondered about it because Jesus was on a cross

and then he came back from the cross and defeated death. If death was undefeated once and it worked to kill you forever, how could it be reversed? I thought about Sir Isaac Newton and gravity and an apple hitting his head and I wondered if Jesus could make what comes up must go down into what comes down must go up by doing something spectacular again. How could a law reverse like that? A law is a law because it can never change. It can never change. Then I stop and become really scared of dying and forget about laws and heaven before I was born because I am afraid and those don't explain afraid. They don't even begin to rub onto confused.

Ma says I am an old man even though I am only in second grade.

Dad is eating breakfast downstairs and Ma is there too and they are talking. Dad talks low and has an early beard. It is black and white. His face is broad and dark brown and his cheek is scared deep and it is a jagged scar. I don't know if it is from where he was shot. I ask him all the time and I always forget. Ma tells me to pour some cereal for myself and sit down because after that I would clean my room until it was ready for her to inspect it. The cereal was mush and the skim milk was sweet. I ate fast and then went up there and did what she asked me to do.

My room was so clean anyway that it only took ten minutes to straighten and then I watched cartoons for a long time. It was the Fourth of July and everyone was home and Bing and Rod would come over soon and I would see if Ma would let me go out. My room was clean and she should let me go because it was clean. Cartoons were shiny and I smiled watching them. I was on my stomach with my chin in my hands. I was wearing red and white G. I. Joe pajamas. My feet were swinging in the air like reeds. I tried to be still and quiet on the cold linoleum floor and listen. The day now was filled with all noise, outside noise, lawn mower noise, helicopter noise, kid noise, parent noise, car noise, and I couldn't even hear the click of the red and green traffic lights. Then I remembered about heaven and I wondered about battles and I had been reading a book in the Bible called Revelation about battles and I was terrified.

I asked Dad, who had been in a battle, a battle with Mr. Gray across the street and Bing's dad, what Revelation meant. He told me not to worry about it. He said the early Church people wrote it to give hope. I could not understand how all that death and plague could give hope. I was scared of it. I asked Dad how battle was and he had been in two wars, Vietnam and one against Iraq and he said not to worry about Revelation anymore. I was too scared not to worry. I was too scared to try to force it all the way out of my mind, but I did sometimes, like now, but sometimes, like sometimes when I am sitting here I become scared and I let it turn over and over in me until I feel sick.

At lunchtime Mr. Gray came to the door and asked if I wanted to go fishing.

"Thames, it might be nice," he said. Ma said I could go, which did not happen a lot, hardly ever, and I put on my sneakers and my sunglasses and I ran out to meet Bing and Rod on Mr. Gray's driveway. I wanted to see the water and the sand and feel the splashing.

Bing and Rod were there when I made it and we were jumping up and down and running around when we saw each other.

"Hey guys," I said.

"Got any new toys?" Bing asked.

"I got a new book about the Bible and then my mom got me a new pencil."

"What toys did ya get?"

"She didn't want to get me any toys," I said. I took off my sunglasses and folded them into my pocket.

"Why not any toys, Thames?"

"We don't need them, she said. She doesn't want us to be spoiled."

"Well I got a new Batman and a new Ninja Turtles car," he said and Rod, his brother, nodded and stomped on the driveway.

"Good for you, I don't care." I said. Mr. Gray put the fishing

rods into the back of the truck and told us to climb in, Bing at the window, me beside him, then Rod, who was the smallest between me and Mr. Gray. He started the engine and began to pull out but then he said the s-h-i-t word that my mom will not say but Dad will. I laughed and so did Rod and Bing was not laughing at it. Mr. Gray got out of the car and went into his house through the front door and after some time, during which me and Rod and Bing did not talk, he came out of the garage door and closed it and we pulled out of the driveway. Bing's dad was cutting the grass and mine was inside, and Bing's dad waved goodbye to us as we went off to the river.

The only thing I saw, when we got out of the car, was the river, and it was incredible. The dock was something and I didn't pay attention to it. There was only the river. Mr. Gray put on sunglasses and told us to shield our eyes but I didn't have to because I had sun glasses to but it didn't matter because there was only river to me. It was blue and it was wide. The ripples and the ridges in the ripples gleamed like strong diamonds and I did not want to shield my eyes. The light from the sun was hot and the wood on the pier, or dock, was warm and there were splinters. We walked out to the end of the dock and I sat down and watched the noiseless river. The only sound was the intervals of splashing water against the legs of the pier, which was, in my ears, like the clicking machine of stoplights that I can hear at night from my window. Mr. Gray asked us if we had been fishing and Rod talked a lot and Bing complained about it being hot and I watched the river under my feet. I thought about falling in, which was gravity. To fall from a pier to water was gravity and that was Isaac Newton. What goes up must come down. And if I go down and forget how to swim and I drown then that is death. This was a law that was defeated by Jesus Christ, like our priest says. But how can a law be reversed? Dad was in a war and he was shot and he didn't die, but he almost did and he doesn't remember heaven before he was born. If he died he would go to where he was before he was born, which was nowhere, which is the law. But would he? I became very scared dangling my feet and I tried to hear the no noise, the quiet noise, the white noise, and I turned to the others.

Mr. Gray was baiting our hooks and talking. He said that we were good guys for fishing. He said this before we even started to fish. Is a good fishing buddy someone who catches a lot of fish or is he just a guy who will come along? I stopped thinking about that and I looked out over the river and the blue and listened to the no noise like earlier this morning, and when I was watching cartoons and I took my rod that was handed to me and sat down on the pier with it.

I did not cast but I let my lure fall down between two glinting ripples in the water and I moved it around. Bing was beside me and he tried to cast a couple of times but he could not get it so he did the same as me. Rod was wildly throwing his out and Mr. Gray was doing it smooth and his lure sailed out, with only the buzz of the reel behind it, it flew out with white noise into the white hot ripples on the surface of the water. Then he dragged it back in with a fish on the end almost every time. I stopped watching him and tried to catch fish this time and not worry about no noise and then Bing yelled

"A fish," and I turned around and Rod said, "I want to trade with Bing!" and I, caught in the flash said, "Me too!" and suddenly, like in a very nice dream, we all began to catch fish and the day was great and I forgot about the white noise and laws and what I learned at my first communion.

We came home and helped Mr. Gray clean the cooler he brought with us and we also helped with the fishing rods. Bing and his brother used the hose and I used the cloths to clean. I didn't mind because I was feeling good.

Then, like always, suddenly, like the noise rising after a hesitation in the morning, Mr. Gray said we should play with firecrackers and I knew Ma would not let me and I would be in trouble. So I left. Bing and Rod were mad and I was mad too at them but I went home and shut the front door and then I ran up the stairs to my room and from behind a parted curtain I watched them.

Below, in the driveway, Mr. Gray lit a string of firecrackers and

everyone ran back. Then, after hesitation, like the morning noise, they would sputter off and in the air there would be nothing but sweet clear ringing, crystal noise. And I was scared again. I watched them light and run and then the clear sweet noise came again and after all the explosion noise the white noise was not a help anymore, it didn't make me think of anything nice, it only reminded me, or showed me, that after battle, like in Revelations there is only silence like that and after death, where we go to where we were before we were born, there is only no noise and that is like the silence of white noise. There were flashes in my eyes of death and it was like when you take a picture and the bulb goes off and you can't see for shit, which is what Ma won't say but Dad will. The bulb goes off and there is only white and there is nothing else. Suddenly I felt like I was being oppressed by something huge, which I was, and I forgot about the rest of the day.

And that was a funny day. I shouldn't forget about it. Bing went deaf in his left ear from firecrackers that he stole from Mr. Gray. He was in the hospital for three days. An ambulance came to Mr. Gray's house and two bodies came out even though he was the only one home. He was the only one who lived there. I think he was dead. All I remember about that funny day was it was the Fourth of July. There were fireworks. And after the cling and clamor and ding of the ambulances I lay in my bed and heard nothing. Only trees and soft, warm wind. Only the sound of nothing and I wasn't used to it. I couldn't be used to it. I won't.

What goes up must come down and nothing, ever, could change that.

Prayer of the Night on Grace St.

In my gaze toward Grace St.
 Grasping visions come alive in my mind
 like the ovals on a calm lake
 during a rainstorm.
 I see Christ.
 He adorns no expressions,
 he only looks at me;
 my blasphemous eyes dare
 not look into his,
 for my Shame is potent
 and unbearable
 to pass onto him.
 These visions are too much
 And I cannot bear to see them.
 So I take a drink from glass
 And smoke from my cigarette
 And pray I never see Christ again.

Whip

at impact, blood rushes to the strip of skin, creating a line of red on his bare shoulderblade. and another, to match it, soon appears on the opposite side. the sound, unlike any other: a hiss and a slap, his only warning.

whistles and pops outside the window—independence day, random, American city. the official ceremonies are long over. this is the sound of renegade drunks, innocent fans of fire and mischief, swinging their contraband rockets off rain-dampened roofs into the cloudy orange sky.

there is only a short silence.

pain comes again, slicing and brilliant, a white line through his consciousness. displaced air up, displaced air down, and it comes again: a black tongue licking magnificent agony down his spine. the doubt: oh god, why? he chose this. he's trapped, wrists bound, at the mercy of his courage and his pride. he can bear it—oh no, he can't—he can't fight it, and yet he's trying.

he's found a deep place, blue-black, perhaps he can hide there. but the pain, disguising itself as sweetness, a distraction, rips him out of himself, out of the known, out of control. things stop making sense. wounded and aroused, desperate and bestial, he claws in his heart for a vestige of the world he can understand. nothing. he is no longer body, only nerves in spin, the crack of the whip signalling nothing now, except the brighter and brighter glow of the embers

across his back.

pops and crackles outside. his imagination, to distract him, poses this question: what color was that one? but he doesn't care enough to answer. the pain has drawn him in, fooling him into thinking that he battles it, when in reality he welcomes it—the shameful realization that at first increases the sting, then transmutes it into pure bliss.

the moment of transition. he can feel every braid again, each one the voice of god, speaking a different language. he speaks along with them, anticipating randomness, winding his inner soliloquy between the black blows and in the spaces of red between. he talks to the pain, he is the pain talking. now it's aglow again. this intimate sun, his, theirs, a different kind of holy—acknowledged by Spirit and living behind the retinas of each human being, expressed or not. he is close to breaking, the moment when he cracks, when the blows push him over the edge of his endurance. he will fail, he will fall, he will surrender; and he will float for a few precious moments in the primordial sea of a sensation greater than himself, greater than reason, greater even than bodily perception...and all his days will be spent trying to replicate and explain this place, where abomination and beauty collide. and as the final blow falls, as he feels the call back to himself; as he struggles down the winding path back to rationality and his agonized souvenirs, he knows he will take a little more of the primordial with him, a little bit more fire behind his eyes, till one day they burn right through the world's veils, into the ghastly immortality behind.

the city hums.

Harley

A dancer straightens herself in her box,
 Again preparing to face the sundry faces of night,
 Kisses a photograph on the shelf. A sudden blare
 Of music, the spotlights flare red and blue,
 Glistening off the gaunt, pallid exterior—
 An apparition drawing forth clouds of fiery pillars
 Into a whirling arabesque, and finally
 Falls a swan.

A businessman staggers forward with a ticket stub,
 She forces a smile and looks to her stage,
 Spray-painted black like his starved,
 Sunken eyes—they swallow her back
 Leaving only flesh.

He licks his lips at the proposition. His hand is a gavel
 Stamping the red piece of paper down flat
 Against the boards, against the shell
 She tries so hard not to crack.
We'll go after one more, she says...

In her dressing room, she sits
 Flaying her swollen lip,
 His musky scent on her throat—
 The vague taste of blood and rubber. She searches
 The vacant expression before her
 Whispering,
I said just one more...
Just one more...

White

EXT. SOUTH DAKOTA—DAY.

A snow-filled meadow. A state highway.

It snows heavily. A thin, fresh layer of snow is piled on top of the road
 as the highway shoots straight into the flat-to-eternity landscape.

A deep, crescent-shaped, cradle-like ditch separates the road from
 the frozen wasteland beyond.

With a swift and very loud WHOOSH, the wind picks up. It lifts
 an avalanche of white snowdrift, eclipsing all sight and sound. The
 white eclipse lingers for what seems like an eternity.

Then just as suddenly as it had started, the wind dies, and the snowdrift
 settles to reveal a white car lying in the middle of the ditch. The
 Dodge Intrepid is half-immersed in the fresh, wet snow. Sounds of
 frantic POUNDING from inside the car fill the air.

INT. CAR—DAY.

A platinum-haired BLONDE GIRL, early twenties, struggles to get
 out. She RATTLES the handle. KICKS against the door. It doesn't
 budge.

The car sinks deeper into the snow.

Blonde girl pauses, looks around. She turns, reaches across the back seat. She grabs a huge, iron snow shovel and SMASHES it into the driver's side glass. The glass SHATTERS.

She cleans out the glass edges of the window with her shovel and her gloved hands. She takes off her bulky winter coat and leaves it in the seat. She grabs and pockets her car keys.

She opens her glove compartment and takes out a long-range HAND GUN. She pockets the gun, and climbs out.

EXT. SOUTH DAKOTA—DAY.

Blonde girl's petite, slender body makes it easily through the opening. In a bundle, she unceremoniously drops out onto the snow.

She gets up and dusts off the snow from her attractive red sweater.

She stands momentarily motionless in the thigh-deep snow, relieved. A chilly wind blows, lifting and plastering blonde girl's well cut, shoulder-length, platinum-colored hair to her face. She shivers, hugs her arms about herself.

She reaches into the car and grabs her red Columbia winter coat, puts it on.

She looks out onto the road; it is empty. She looks all around her. Empty space.

She takes out a cell phone from her coat pocket, turns it on, waits for a signal. No signal. She stares at the phone, pulls at the antenna, holds it up over her head. Nothing happens. It is a dead zone.

Blonde girl pockets the phone, wades through to the back of the car. She takes out her keys, steps closer to the trunk. She loses balance in the deep snow and falls onto the car, dropping the keys.

She gathers herself up, frantically searches for the keys, finds them in the snow. She picks them up, inserts the key into the trunk. The lock turns but the door remains stuck.

With all her might, blonde girl BANGS at the trunk with her knee. The door lifts up.

A HUGE, BLACK DUFFEL BAG occupies most of the storage space.

For a long moment, she stares at the black bag. Her arms involuntarily reach across to touch it. The solid bulk seems to reassure her. She opens the zipper reverently and peeks in.

Little white packets fill the contents of the bag.

She closes the zipper and starts to pull the heavy bag out when she hears a NOISE...

It is the NOISE of an approaching vehicle.

Blonde girl leaves the bag in, swiftly shuts the trunk and runs to a snow bank a little distance away, crawls behind it.

A white South Dakota HIGHWAY PATROL CAR pulls up a few hundred yards ahead and stops. A POLICEMAN gets out, dressed in the usual dark uniform.

The policeman is very tall, very hefty. His black face gleams in contrast against the white surroundings.

Standing at the edge of the road, he surreptitiously looks this way and that, spreads his legs, opens the fly of his pants. He lets out a sigh of relief as he pees all over the place.

The policeman finishes up. He re-fastens his belt and looks out into the white nothingness around him. For one moment, he pauses, looks ahead towards the ditch. The Dodge's incriminating tire tracks are only a few yards away. He does not notice them.

With bated breath, blonde girl looks on as the policeman walks back to his car and gets in.

She heaves a sigh of relief. But the car does not move. The policeman gets out of the car.

He walks closer towards the ditch, approaches another small snow bank invisible from the road. He circles and walks behind it, takes out a bottle of Scotch from his coat. He grimaces as he drinks the whisky straight.

As he turns to leave, he pauses and looks straight at the tracks of a car, the Dodge, leading directly into the ditch. He starts following the tracks.

Blonde girl shivers as the policeman moves deeper into the ditch.

Presently, the policeman almost stumbles upon the nearly invisible white car, half-buried in the fresh snow-fall.

In a flash, blonde girl takes out her gun and shoots him without missing a beat. The loud BLAST shatters the snowy silence.

The policeman falls down soundlessly, instantly dead.

Blonde girl rushes towards the car, literally rolling down into the ditch. She quickly takes out her keys and inserts the key into the trunk. The lock turns. But the door remains stuck.

She cursorily BANGS the trunk, tries to pry the door open. It doesn't budge.

She tries harder. Again and again. No luck.

She looks at the dead policeman and his police car on the road.

Her thoughts in a whirl, she looks all around her, as if begging someone to help.

Suddenly, she takes several steps back, extends her arm and lines up the sights of her gun on the lock. She pulls the trigger. The bullet RIPS the latch apart.

As blonde girl retrieves the bag, she hears a NOISE...

It is the NOISE of an approaching vehicle.

She looks out and sees a HIGHWAY PATROL VEHICLE approaching from the opposite direction.

Blonde girl looks out onto the road, her face an agony of confusion as we can almost HEAR HER THINKING, THINKING, THINKING.

FADE OUT.

SHAHEED HARUN

Autumn Leaves

outside my window...
 i hear nature's eloquent whispers
 from migrations of october
 til' lasting days of november rain
 shedding to a dryness of season
 witness as she lowers her panties
 for divineness has a strong pull
 to her long tampon string
 spring has now a month vanished
 leaves fall gently; radiantly red
 as if spaces between the clouds bleed
 they hit the autumn soil
 soft-spoken, and quaintly
 later in the evening...
 they decay, so brownly
 occurred spots of liquid female

on white, cotton-fluffed squares
 all waiting to be drowned
 in a cool whirlwind beneath
 to imitate the rustling leaves
 outside moving in its round-and-round spin.

(continued)

and outside up ahead...
 the moon in its waning phase
 after a beautiful, effervescent period
 once elicited to the sacred howls
 of salvaging wolves off in the distance
 making the blood curdle within
 surges of feeble mucuses
 and tissues spilling
 drip! drip! go these saucy ingredients
 and later in the evening...
 the smell of wicked flesh gone unrefresh
 by downpours of ovulation
 forgotten unflushed in its way
 with a lonesome pubic hair floating within
 that sticks as an eyelash to the brown-eye
 as they await the whirlwind
 to imitate the rustling leaves outside
 moving in its round-and-round spin.

outside my window...
 autumn breezes gives that warm feeling
 like morphine flowing through crusty veins
 like cookies baking in an oven
 or like a ray of florid sunlight
 autumn leaves which so eloquently fall
 like drops of menstruation.

Be Sweet

They came together, all of them, for the first time since the five-year-old's christening. From five different directions, five siblings with five different lives converged on the one place where they had all been one in the same. Four of them brought their spouses and their children. The fifth, having neither, brought himself.

The celebration marking Pop's 70th caused missed baseball practices, skipped recitals, postponed meetings and the general disruption of routines. It brought minor grumbling from wives, husbands and teenagers, but it ultimately came off the way that Gram wanted: all of her family under one roof.

A solitary sunbeam snuck through a small opening between the living room drapes and awakened the five-year-old. She sat up, rubbed her eyes and jumped when the deep chime of the old clock on the mantle above her head sounded the half hour. She whimpered, frightened by the sudden noise and her strange surroundings. She relaxed, however, when she saw her ten-year-old sister, unaffected by the sunbeam or the chime, still very much asleep on the floor a few feet away in pajamas that matched her own.

The five-year-old looked around. She remembered she was at Gram's house and they had Pop's birthday party at the restaurant on the big hill the night before. She remembered nine cousins, a couple of the aunts and an uncle. She remembered that her uncle had a red face and a red beard and that his breath smelled funny. She remembered he told her to "be sweet" after she punched her seven-year-old brother when he took her SpongeBob doll. She remembered she liked him because he played Little Mermaid with her, and she felt sorry for him because he was by himself.

Her belly growled and she looked down at it and giggled. She crawled over to her sister and tried to awaken her: "Time to eat."

The ten-year-old grumbled, swatted her off with a pillow and

rolled over: “Shut up and go to sleep.”

The five-year-old stuck her tongue out at her sister. Then she heard the familiar snores of her father coming from the room below. She descended the stairs, holding onto the rail like she was supposed to even though no one was around to make her. She walked into the den and saw her father asleep on a pallet with her brother. She noticed her uncle lying on the couch. He had one eye open looking at her and had a grin peeking out from his thick beard.

She ran over to him, bringing her face a few inches from his own. His breath still smelled funny.

“Time to eee-eeat,” she said and laughed when he picked her up and sat her on his lap. She farted on him.

“Thanks,” he said.

He had come to take her little trick of farting on him every time he picked her up as a token of affection. He tickled her and planted a kiss on top of her blonde head.

“What are you making?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes at him and grabbed his hand “helping” him up off the couch as he groaned fake protests. They walked up the stairs and he was surprised to find the kitchen empty. Usually his mother was halfway finished with a mammoth Southern breakfast by this time when family was in town. She must have been exhausted from putting the party together, he thought.

The five-year-old’s stomach growled again and he smiled at her.

“I’m hungry—it’s time to eat,” she said with a tone of mock desperation.

“OK then, what do you want—cereal?” he asked, pulling down a box of Total from the cabinet.

She looked at the box. It didn’t have the vampire on it, so she scrunched up her nose.

“Yuck. I want eggs. Mangled eggs because I don’t like sunshine eggs, they’re gross!”

“Yeah, I don’t like sunshine eggs either,” he agreed and made a face to register his shared disgust.

“And no shells!” she instructed, wagging a threatening finger.

He picked her up, turned her upside down, blew a raspberry on her belly and put her back down. She giggled like a five-year-old, said: “I’ll be back” in a miniature Schwarzenegger voice and ran into the living room.

He scrambled a couple of eggs and began cooking them. She returned with Ariel and Sebastian dolls and held them out to him: “This time you be Ariel because you have long red hair like hers.” She thought for a beat then said: “But she doesn’t have a fuzzy beard!” before erupting into another cascade of giggles.

“In a minute. I’ve still got these eggs to mangle,” he replied, winking as much to himself as to her.

She played Little Mermaid while he cooked the eggs and looked out of the window over the sink. He drank in his hometown mountains and drifted off into his childhood, thought about all of the breakfasts in this kitchen, all of the family, all of the love. He rebuked himself for having been away for so long and vowed not to let as much time pass before he saw them all again.

The eggs were already unsalvageable before he noticed the smoke drifting up from the frying pan. He cursed loudly—the bad one, all four syllables—and snatched the pan off of the flame. The eggs were now an ugly brown and truly mangled.

He looked over at the five-year-old, her face locked into an expression of horror and disbelief at the same word she heard her brother use one time that had cost him an extended stretch in time-out. He started to stammer an apology, happy that no one else was yet awake.

As he struggled with his words, her face constructed the most beautiful smile he had ever seen: “Be sweet!”

He scraped the eggs into the trashcan and, as he walked over to the refrigerator, he stole her nose as ransom for her silence about the bad word.

“Let’s keep that between us, OK?”

She nodded her complicity and raised a tiny forefinger to her lips. Relieved, he started on another batch of eggs. She went back to Little Mermaid, apparently none the worse for wear.

He started another batch of eggs. She turned something over in her head and put down the dolls.

“How come nobody likes you?” she asked.

He was taken off guard by the question.

“What do you mean? Everybody likes me.”

“But you don’t have a wife. Your brother has a wife—and we him kids!” she said with excitement, sweeping her arm to indicate her siblings. His brother had told him she’d been having some pronoun issues. “How come you don’t have any kids?”

Again taken aback, he struggled for a response.

“You see . . . uh,” he began, paused to scratch his beard, ultimately letting an exaggerated shrug and sheepish grin serve as his answer.

“Well, I think you should get married and have kids,” she declared and resumed playing Little Mermaid without further interrogation.

He thought back to Sesame Street: “One of these things is not like the others.” Well, not yet anyway. Who knows?

He watched her blue eyes, the same deep blue he shared with his brother, dart back and forth between Ariel and Sebastian as she played. She twisted the end of her hair around her pinkie, the same way he did all the time. He wondered if he would have a five-year-old of his own one day, wondered what she would look like, who she would sound like. Then his niece gave him another perfect smile and he understood that he already had one.

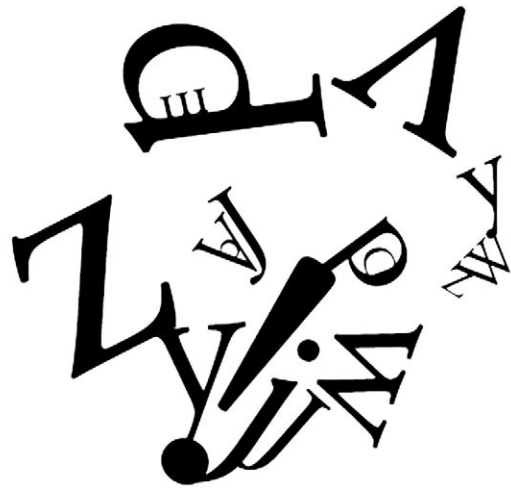
In fact, he had nine others scattered throughout the house. They were all his own. He realized that each of them contained a little bit of him. There might come a time when there would be a five-year-old to serve as his breakfast companion every morning—one that he named, one that looked exactly like him. But for now, this five-year-old fit the bill just fine.

ERIN BYUN

Rain



Fox



Collage Art



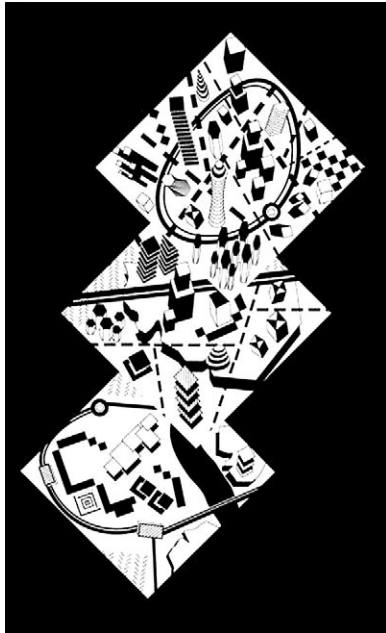
Fan Blades Sculpture



Men



City



Metro



Untitled [Blue]



Six Haikus

Spider webs resting
Suspended on the thick bush
Mist collects on them

Between grass needles
A city of little ones
Scurrying, frantic

Crimson and brittle
The dying leaf collapses
Strange insects trample

After the calm rain
Spider crawls along the dark glossy
Leaves of a giant

Blubber of a carp
Lethargic and lazy fish
Mosey through the glue-like pond

The violet flowers,
They wiggle and move strangely,
As sea creatures do.

PETER IMHOF

Winter Reading

I am stale bread, my life two weeks behind,
even my shadow

 seated behind me
 shakes his head.

My wife says, I'm going to curl up in bed
and read. Good, I say,
my shadow wants to sit with

Of Art & Memory

about urine's
iced artwork adorning
a broken cast-iron pipe
outside the warehouse converted
to a painters studio
where Kurt and I cheerful chatter
over wine, bread, & salty cheese.
Through the thin wall
Raymond, the plumber, singing along
with Charles Aznavour from his phonograph.

Raymond and I installed a shower
in the stone built hallway
of the farmhouse an hours drive
outside Paris. The kid frail, the skin
transparent white, a mean cough;
the doctor recommended
hot water and its vapors.

(continued)

The shower floor a square pan
on a hinge to stow away,
the pipe exposed, ringed
by a white plastic curtain
behind the kid still coughing

falling wet and limp into his mothers arm.
Good thing the moon was full
& the ambulance faced no headlights.

Kurt chips crumbled bread, even the plumber
and Aznavour stopped singing.

This silence is healing. Loading the truck
outside the farmhouse
during that cold night, Raymond shrugged,
and these stanzas were just night light that flickered
over a flat field. I feel better now. My wife
who has fallen asleep with the light on
still clutches her book.

Accident

I let the rain
Blur my vision,

cover the lens

soak my hair

and chill my hand
holding the camera stand.

Orange cones had been placed
two and a half hours ago
creating a road block
for both lanes of North I-83.

We had to redirect the drivers
and their rubber necks
to the median.

It had to be blocked off
So my partner could finish his job:

removing the debris from the road.

I stood in the grass,
focusing the lens
On the
half-crushed car.

A few feet off,
the steel oil tanker was stopped.
The sticker pronouncing its purpose
“We Care for You”
clearly visible through my lens.

It had been thoughtful enough

To force the car
off the road
to the left
median.

However, the car
was crushed
before it could
roll into
the soft grass.

My partner had metal shards,
blue plastic frame
shattered windshield
to gather up, and police reports
to file after we got out
of the cool, drizzling rain.

No matter how far I zoomed in,
Checking for damages,
the oil tanker still seemed
to come out unscathed.

(continued)

The ambulance had left us long ago, taking
 What they could with them, to the hospital

Or to the morgue.

The entire front
 half had been crushed
 flat, up to
 the back doors.

Remnants of the
 front seats,
 the steering wheel
 crumpled
 like a ball of paper.
 And a smaller seat
 near the back,

for a small child.

The rain falls harder,
 causing my eyes to sting.
 How will I know if the pictures
 come out all right
 if I can't see them?

(continued)

The red splotch of color
 within my shot
 attracts my eyes,
 causing me to squint,
 to focus myself on

A doll.

It's merely a stuffed doll,
 some unknown creature
 used for comfort
 and protection
 from the frightening
 monsters of the world.

Whitman Bridge

The Delaware is a black gash
 Peppered with undulating lights,
 Reflecting blue flames like flaring candles
 Dotted the chemical plants
 And oil refineries. You see this
 Driving slow across Whitman Bridge
 Well after midnight so the obscene
 Commuters won't gesture crassly
 Or blare their pissed horns at you.
 Camden is hard to make out
 Through summer haze mingling
 With burning fossil life.
 Jersey hangs low to the river, hardly
 A place at all. To the west trembling
 Twins of light blink promise and invite
 Through the sooty fog, and City Hall
 Is shedding its exoskeleton.
 Here are the outskirts of a city
 Absorbing the outskirts of another city.
 You are passing through it:
 A cell through the strangled artery.
 You become Whitman on Brooklyn Ferry
 With the shore fires of foundry chimneys
 Burning high and glaring, the wild
 Red and yellow light over the tops
 Of houses, down in the clefts of streets.

(continued)

You will see the white oil cans
 As neatly dozed eggs
 And the river is choked with freight.
 You will see the cargo lifted
 By long-necked beasts with bending spines.
 The junkyard makes neat cubes
 Of the scrap with magnets and vises
 Because cars go like elephants to die there.
 The road rises above the river
 For the dead to roar above the water,
 Exhumed from the rock beneath
 To thunder and shriek in the dark.

Painting the Memories

The paint hitting the wall makes the sound of a hand slowly slapping skin. My mother is painting the walls, from the ceiling, around windows, all the way to the floors. She is slapping paint and erasing the old, Bleaching the house with paint. She lets it dry, no cracking allowed, but the memories are too strong. They show through, rising to the surface like the dead body bloated with gas after three days of submersion in the murky river. The same river that flooded its banks and swept on land painting the green grass brown. After the water receded, the grass stayed brown for days, over a week, until the rains came again, gentle this time and washed away the brown coat, revealing the green grass like a memory of childhood hidden under a thin coat of white paint.

Docked

Cakes and casseroles are piling up in the kitchen. Mark's teacher stopped by with a carrot cake last week and yesterday Mrs. Muldoon from one block over brought potpie. "I just thought you shouldn't have to cook," she said. Entire dinners sit in the sink, uneaten and molding.

People bring flowers too. Frank grumbles about them: "They just sit here and die." I only nod. I want to shout at him, *don't say that word!* I want to dump the flowers out back. I want to say, *Can't you tell that it's the same way I feel? That I'm just sitting here and dying inside too?* I want to throw the food on the floor, break the casserole dishes. Instead I only nod. "They mean well."

For weeks I have heard whisperings. Family and neighbors I don't really know come and go from the house, sliding in and out like shadows. Frank says they are here to help, to take care of things I'm not ready for. My agent tells me I should take a break from writing since I have been killing my characters. Even the grandmother in my children's story dies on her way to see her grandchildren for Christmas. They want me to "take it easy" from everything that would probably keep me sane. I hear them talk about me in the kitchen. *At least she has Frank. At least they have each other.* I cannot bring myself to heat the lasagnas they bring.

I can't even take care of myself. I've heard them say that, too. *Look at the way she's been keeping herself*, they say. My highlights have melted an inch down my head, mousy roots coming out of hiding. They can't see what I do when they aren't around. I am glad they don't know that I don't change into nightclothes when I finally climb into bed, instead just stripping off my pants to sleep in my panties and the same shirt I wore all day. I am glad they don't see how I still tiptoe past Mark's room at night. I am glad they don't

see how I sleep with his shirt in bed.

Frank was the one to tell me. Poor Frank. He always carries the burden of bad news. He had to tell Mrs. Bazinski that her only son had been arrested for trying to sell drugs at the middle school. He had to tell Mort Meyers that his wife, out for a morning walk, had been hit by a teenager distracted by the radio. He then had to console the teenager and her family. It is part of his job. Police officers are always the ones to alert the families of the victims. I've always thought, even before this, that the ones left behind are the real victims. They are the ones who suffer.

Now we suffer.

"Laura," he had said, and his voice cracked like it had when we first met, "something happened to Mark on the way home from school. An accident in carpool."

My shoulders shook.

Frank started to cry. "A lug nut came loose from a tractor trailer. The wheel, it—" his voice broke—"it hit the van. The doctors say there couldn't have been any pain. Laura, he didn't feel a thing."

My head felt like it had cracked open. When I was little, I smashed an overripe watermelon on my parents' driveway. I thought of that for some reason.

I don't remember anything else.

Memories have been happening to me lately, tricky things. They attack me—sharp, scissor-like pain through my stomach when I breathe. I stand outside Mark's bedroom and think of how the door always needed to be open an inch and a half for him to fall asleep. "Mama," he told me, "if I can see everything, I'm not scared."

Mark doesn't see anything now.

"Laura, come away from the door." I turn and see Frank standing in the hall, the overhead light casting hollow shadows under his eyes. "You don't have to go in there."

And I walk down the hall toward our bedroom, carrying the satin-trimmed blanket, one thing I have that still smells like Mark.

Weeks have passed and I think about what Frank said. "He didn't feel a thing." But what if he did? What if the doctors just tell parents that to help ease the pain or because there is no way to know if they're lying? What if he heard the glass shatter around his ears? I wonder. And did he have time to try to grab onto a headrest, anything, before his tiny body flew through that glass? I don't want any of these things to be true. I want to think instead of the things he might have felt had he gotten to the hospital just a bit faster, received more blood or hadn't hit his head as hard. What would he have felt if he had been allowed to live to have his first kiss? It might have been a girl with brown pigtails, like Anna, his crush in class, her hair grown long by then. I pause near Mark's bedroom, my toes resting on the doorjamb. His second-grade photo, taken two months before the accident, hangs on the wall. Mark will always have that haircut, brown hair curling over his collar. I wonder how he would feel if he had to one day stand in a cemetery with his wife by his side and bury a parent, the way it should be. But that would have been after years of feeling other things: nervous excitement on his wedding day, joy at the birth of his children, pride when his first child brought home a school picture like the one I still hang on the windowsill. But he doesn't feel and he never will and nothing is how it should be.

Once upon a time, we were a family. We were a mother, father, and son you could post on the front of Christmas cards. But we were more than that because, if you only looked at us in a picture, you wouldn't see how Mark called potato chips *putta-putta* until he was four. You wouldn't see how he rubbed the satin on his blanket back and forth to fall asleep at night until he wore holes in it. You wouldn't see how Frank sent him in while I was writing because he knew Mark could get me to come out. My family meant a life intact. It is not just that one of us is missing; now, we are changed. *Family* means something different now. It is a word I use to measure what we have lost. Without Mark, Frank and I are no longer a family. We aren't even parents; we are only husband and wife again, a step backward in time. We are often alone now.

Mrs. Muldoon comes regularly to check on me. She has stopped knocking, which bothers me, but I don't know how to say it. I am trying to write in the study when she arrives today.

"Knock, knock! Somebody looks like they've gotten some sleep."

I look at my quote-a-day calendar and read it out loud. "Today is the first day of the rest of your life. I didn't think anyone ever wrote that quote down anymore."

She blinks, wrinkled apple face scrunching in puzzlement. She opens her mouth, closes it, and then opens it again. "That's true, isn't it? Every day is always the first day for something else. I mean, just look at you. A young thing like yourself? You and Frank will have plenty of time to try again. So I guess, in a way, today is the first day of the rest of your life."

She smiles, eyes blinking even more quickly behind her big glasses. She seems pleased with her statement. I am sure she thinks I am strange, but she doesn't know anything. My throat closes and I clench my hands until my wedding ring digs into my right palm.

"Mrs. Muldoon, I'm not sure if I want to try anything again. I'm not sure I will ever want to. I'm not sure I even would know how to try again."

As soon as I say anything, I am sorry. Mrs. Muldoon stops blinking, her owl eyes wide and staring behind her glasses.

"What do you mean, never try again? That's absurd, dear. People understand mourning, but to say you won't try anything again—that's just unacceptable. You don't just give up. You know that." Now, I have to go to—" she gathers her coat, pausing—"I just have to go." She picks up her pocketbook and umbrella and was out the door. Good.

Friends and neighbors come less lately. They will humor your grief for only so long, until it becomes uncomfortable for them, like it has. The first weeks are fresh, and mourning is expected, encouraged. But those were the times I was most numb. It is not until now, weeks later, that I know what it is to have Mark no more.

So now it is only Frank and myself at the breakfast table and I still do not know what to say to him, so I say things that don't matter.

"The kitchen needs painting again." The buttercup yellow is faded now to a jaundiced shade.

Frank looks up from his plate. "I think we have a can left over in the shed. I'll look for it if you want."

"Thanks," I say and then "You didn't say anything about the new birdfeeder."

He twisted around, resting his thick forearm on the back of the folding chair. "Oh, I see it. It's nice."

Idiot. It was the one Mark made last year in school and he didn't even notice. Pinecones bound together and smeared with peanut butter hang outside the window near the sink. A cardinal lands, only for a moment, and is gone again.

Frank dredges a piece of bacon through the syrup on his plate and watches it pool again on the white enamel. It is like it was when we first started dating, but there is nothing new to discover, only things we don't, won't, talk about.

"I had an idea, Laura. You remember that place on Long Island we went to right before we were married? We said it was kind of a pre-honeymoon?"

"Yes," I say and watch a bluebird, or maybe it's a bluejay, peck at the other one, pushing it off the feeder.

"Well, I thought we might go back to spend a little time away." He looks down after speaking, as if he knew conversation about vacations sounded forced, phony.

I know he wants me to nod quietly and say, *Yes, Frank, what a lovely idea. I hadn't thought of it, but maybe getting away would help.* But I can't. Something rises from somewhere in my belly inside my throat and will choke me if I don't open my mouth.

"Oh, for God's sake, Frank! Are you kidding me? Get away for a little while? This isn't one of your cases, you can't just dish out stupid advice and expect me to just go with it."

Frank runs his fingertips over his forehead, a tired roadmap of lines that weren't there even a year ago. I should stop, but I don't.

"I lose my son months, months, not even years, ago and you want to take me away from the only place I know to find anything from him?"

Quietly, Frank says, "He was my son too."

I know he is right, but I won't say it. Looking at him, he is gross, stupid, talking about vacations and us and the way things were before marriage, before Mark, before the accident.

"Look," Frank says, leaning forward and stretching his hands across the table. I ignore them. "I can see it would be hard. But it's hard here, too, isn't it?"

Frank tilts my chin up with two of his fingers.

"The way I see it is, if it's hard here and there, at least there we'll have a change of scenery. Get you out of this damn house and away from Mrs. Muldoon. She'll only age you more."

His fingers on my face make me tingle for a second. I clench and unclench my hands into a ball and notice how tight my wedding band feels. I twist it, looking at him, how his eyes scan mine for a way to read me. He didn't used to have to do that.

"You could get some writing done." He says it like a question. "And I haven't taken any vacation time, so I have a good three weeks."

I want to say no and stay here, in the house, with Mark. I want to lie in his bed and smell his pillow because I don't know how much longer it will last. *I want to remember*, I think. And I do want to; I just don't want to feel.

I open my mouth. "All right." *Did I just say that?*

"Good. Good, great, I think this is what you need, what we need, and it will really be the best thing for a while just to split. It's not healthy to be in this house, not for you and not for me." Frank says all this in a stream, hands gesturing. Maybe he is convincing himself too.

Frank and I leave that weekend and make the drive from Maryland to New York. Somewhere on the Jersey Turnpike, I realize how far away from home I am and how, for the first time, I am glad. My stomach, tight for the past four months, relaxes and I sleep.

At the end of Long Island on the eastern most point of Cutchogue, is a place where it is almost Tuscany. Wine makers still crush grapes by stomping on them, splitting them open so the juice spills out, staining their feet and the towels inside the storage. I remember this from the last visit, eight years ago. Frank and I were barely twenty-one. I mention this to Frank now.

"Sure, I remember that," he grins. He is sure that getting away is already working.

We arrive at the house, the car stopping like a genie bottle in a cloud of dust kicked up from the road. Frank leads me by the hand like a little girl up to the door.

Inside, while Frank unpacked the car, I walk through the house, past the yellow breezeway and the blue tiled kitchen, past the dining room and dusty bookcases full of books visitors borrowed and then left. I stop, hands behind my back at first, then using them to pick out books: Carolyn Keene's *Nancy Drew and the Clue in the Old Album*, Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Maeve Binchy's *Tara's Road*. I wonder who left them and how long ago. Putting the books on the couch, I slide open the door to the bedroom.

The house, built in 1898, has seen the birth of a century. In the back, the soggy marsh grass divides the creeks that yawn wide into the bay. Locals on the Island told Frank and me when we first arrived that during Prohibition, smugglers had converted the house into a warehouse to store liquor. I used to love lying on my back at night after Frank had fallen asleep and listen. I breathed in as the night exhaled its salty breath. I closed my eyes, imagining that every lap of the water was caused by the oars of a smuggler's rowboat, pulling closer.

It is different now, and I am not imagining pirates or smugglers or the romantic ideas I did eight years ago. I imagine the house has

seen several couples and families come and go since our visit. I feel Frank's hands, big and rough, covering my eyes. They still smell like gasoline from the last rest stop, mixed with Old Spice aftershave from the morning. I tease him, saying he smells like an old mechanic.

"Boo."

I turn around and smile. "Weird to be back, isn't it?"

Frank nods. "Nice, though." He sits on the bed and pats it next to him.

I sit down. "Did you know that I used watch you every night we were here? I couldn't fall asleep away from home." He always slept on his side and I'd kiss his neck just to see if he would wake up. His neck had been thinner then, a perfect curve.

"Yeah? Well, I'm sure things will be different now." He inches closer, nuzzling my ear. "Now I know exactly what to do to help you sleep."

I duck his kiss, uncomfortable with how familiar everything is. I get up. "Wait here. I want to show you something." I bring in the books. "Isn't it weird to think that people have been here since we were? I mean, they slept here and left their books and now they're gone and we're here."

Frank frowns, the skin between his eyes working into parallel lines. "I guess so. I never really thought about it."

I sigh. "Well, try to." *Why won't he ever really talk?*

He picks up Hemingway, turning the book over in his hand. "Well, this one had to have belonged to a writer." His eyes scan the back. "Or maybe a student. No one reads this stuff unless they have to." He pauses. "Yeah, definitely a writer. Kids would use Cliffs Notes."

I roll my eyes. Reading for Frank was something reserved for on the toilet and was usually the directions on the back of the Tylenol bottle. "C'mon, use your imagination, Frank." I take the book from him and hold it, weighing it in my hands. "No, this book belonged to someone in a book club. Wait, wait! No, a man

brought this on vacation with him to read so he could talk about it with his girlfriend, or fiancé."

Now Frank is the one to roll his eyes. "Probably *pretend* to read to get her into bed."

But I am not listening. I am on a roll, rotating my ring excitedly with my other hand. "But it's weird to think about, isn't it? All those other couples or families and kids coming and going. Some of them might come back one day and who knows, some of them probably have even died or—"

"Jesus, Laura," Frank interrupts, "Come on, now. We're here to shake off all those things." He turns, shaking his head. "I'm going to finish unpacking the car. Jesus."

After that, I don't mention families anymore.

Being away is better for me than I want to admit. Before we left, everyone including Frank had said it was the best thing for me and they were right. Staying in Long Island is like living in dog years. A week seems like a month and a month seems like a year. Two weeks later, I feel like I have been here much longer than that.

I wake to a seagull screaming. I realize what the sound is and sink back in bed. Rolling on one elbow, I turn to the empty place where Frank slept. Getting up, I push open the curtain, wrinkling my nose from the musty smell. I should get mothballs.

Outside, the smell of grass floats on the breeze. I fold my arms over my chest and walk to the bank where the yard slopes downward in its best effort to meet the dock. The overgrown whippoorwills guard the cracked step up to the dock, which is where I find Frank battling them. His arms are tan and I think of the first time we came here. I was always wrapped inside those arms.

Frank glances up, still cutting away the ivy sealing the door to the boathouse. "There should still be that little rowboat in here," he says, breathing hard. "I think," he hacks again, "that the oars are in the garage. Tonight, you and I are taking a cruise, like the first

time we came here.”

I am happier than I have been in a long time and, at that moment, I almost forget why I came. Then guilt stabs me; I realize that today is the first time since the accident that I have not cried.

It is darker now, the time of night when the sun is gone but the stars are still hiding and the sky almost glows blue. The moon climbs halfway to where it is supposed to be and Frank pushes the boat into the creek beside the dock and wades in its wake. He holds his hand up to me and for a second I am twenty-one again and about to be married. Frank is young and innocent and we don't know anything.

Frank is three feet below me. He shakes his hand impatiently and the boat bobs with him.

“Lady.”

“Hold the boat straight.”

I jump down into the middle and it rocks unsteadily. Frank jumps in and water that had splashed up rinses out the bottom of the boat and pools in its center.

For a while we don't say anything, just row, maneuvering our way through the creek. It is quieter than it has been in a long time. But it is a comfortable silence, not like the gaps in conversation back home. We are saying less, but somehow it is better. Here, away from home, I can pretend that it's okay not to talk about Mark. An osprey stands guard over the marsh, its nest atop a pole that impales the creek bed. I lean back on one elbow, the other arm hanging over the side, fingers trailing in the water. I watch my engagement ring glint underwater as the moon splatters the water like graffiti.

“Keep all hands and feet inside the ride, ma'am.” Frank smiles at me. I look at him.

“Cute.”

“I know.”

I lean back again. Things are better than they were when we first started dating. “I like it here, Frank. It's like no time has gone by.”

He looks at me closely, his left eye squinting like it does when he thinks I am not realistic. “Yes, but it has, though.” He opens his mouth again, but I put my finger on his lips.

“I don't want to talk anymore.” My mouth curls up. “Let's swim.”

And we do, bodies absurd in our nakedness. Holding my breath, I float on my back, ears beneath the water. I can't hear anything and I love it. Coming up, we laugh and splash and maybe it's the water, but I feel lighter than I have in months.

We navigate our way through the creek out to the bay, and Frank pushes the boat onto the sand, beaching it.

“You want to swim for real this time?”

I shake my head. “No, you go on, though. I'll watch.”

I sit on the sand, hugging my knees until they touched my collarbone. A castle, built by some brave sand soldier, has fallen to defeat under an attack by the tide sometime that afternoon. The wind spits seawater at me, tangling my hair around my jacket zipper. Jellyfish spot the water, phosphorescent dots in the inky sound. They aren't the type that sting. They are glowing blobs of jelly, squishy and slippery. Last time I was here, I loved to grab them and let them slip in between my fingers. *You can catch them but not keep them, not for long anyway*, Frank had explained to me, *If you hold onto them too long, they will die*. Jeans rolled, I wade midway up my calves into the water and kneel down, cupping my hands to catch one. I pick it up, sliding it around in the palm of my hands and it slips through, plopping back into the water. I lean back onto the beach and watch it shimmer right underneath the surface, comforted to see the faint glimmering.

I hear a splash and Frank jogs up, shaking his wet head, beads of water flying onto my face. “So what do you think? You about ready to head back?”

“No.”

“What do you mean, ‘no?’”

“I mean I’m not ready to go head home. I like it here. I told you that.”

Frank rolls his neck and stretches down, his backbone like a strand of pearls under his skin. “I meant head back to the house, Laura.” He looks at me. “But we’ll have to do the other in a couple of days. You know that.”

We row home in silence, but the whole time I am thinking of reasons to stay: I could stay on and work on the house, like a project or something, maybe even get paid for it. I still need rest too. Then I start stretching: I’ve always wanted to try fishing, or working on a vineyard and this is the best place to do those things. But I don’t need any more rest. When it comes down to it, here, nothing bad has happened. This place is before the accident, before Mark. It is before marriage. I draw my knees close to me and lock my hands under them, fingers interwoven. The ring on my left hand feels tight, constricting blood. My finger is cold. I twist my wedding ring again, around and around, circling it around until it is off my finger completely. I look at Frank rowing, his eyes looking ahead as always. The cool metal of the band is suddenly heavy and I ease back in the boat, draping one arm back, over and out of the boat, and let the ring fall. Twisting around, I lean over the boat, peering down into the water. It is high tide now, the water deeper than when we left.

“Laura, what the hell are you doing? Get back from the edge.”

I lean forward, lighter, smiling.

“Laura, don’t fool around.”

I don’t turn around. I don’t face Frank. Instead, I watch the boat cut through the water and look at where I just dropped my ring. “It’s okay, Frank. I wasn’t going to do anything. I was only kidding.” Light catches the ring and it winks, just for a second, and it is gone.

In Waiting

Full young woman lying close,
Your eyes jerk from side to side
under rice paper lids so clean
I feel dirty just staring.

Across the room
one brutal window sieves a shadowy glow on my frail frame.
My breath is weak.
My body tired.

Drugged in the day
the pills
big, medium and small make me dull and weary
but at night
watching you
I am a capsule of speed
swallowed and digested in this toxic body
unable to drain
drowning beside you.

Have mercy on us.

Tired of waiting
I crawl from your side
my blood so thin
the spot where I have lain day and night is cold.
Outside,
A chorus of acute chirps
wired from a night of frenzied breeding follow me.
I bow my head in defeat,
jealous of the horny crickets.

(continued)

Slower than a rheumatic monk who welcomes death
 I head towards the pier
 long ago abandoned
 and floating on an entangled mass of putrid algae.

At the edge of the splintered planks,
 I release one final raspy sigh.
 Thoughts of you and my pathetic shortcomings
 empty into the humid air.

Toes curled around the rotting edge,
 eyes shut,
 I lean over
 but faintly,
 hear the familiar flap of sandals
 kiss the muck earth behind me.

Why do you still care?

Infected by the prick of the bonewhite princess
 and dirty black temptress
 for years this disease has been my partner
 but you my desire.

I haven't done a damn for you,
 but still feel your warm breath on my hollow back.
 You refuse to leave.
 I refuse to dive heavy footed in front of you.

KINGYO

Goldfish

Each day passing
 the elder pond
 at a center
 of this old monastery
 to toss stones;

The patter
 of droplets over rafters
 in the distance—
 an incessant trickling
 off rooftops onto the ground,

The odor
 of cherry blossoms creeps
 across the courtyard
 in waves
 and settles on my tongue,

These rocks feel worn
 from the stream and separate
 the pond
 from the Mandalas
 the other monks use,

With this orange
 brilliance surfacing through
 the murky water—
 crumbs in my empty palm
 shrink in my depth,

(continued)

(How pitiful—
 living in thirty-second
 intervals—
 to be starving yourself
 your entire life,)

To this fish,
 I am the constant
 hand that he feeds from—
 had he this ability
 to reflect...

 PETER IMHOF

The poet playing dead

Remember, as kids we would wither in a fake fall
 as if we were empty potato sacks,
 suffering imaginary attacks by Red Skins or even
 Nazis with machine guns; we had to grunt
 and cry out before lying still, smelling earth
 clutching the rubber band

we did not shoot first.

Now the poet chants to us, & takes us
 into a world of self-pity, into a day
 turned to night by diesel exhausts & streaking airplanes,
 or a burning grassland

consuming its creatures,
 asking & longing for a hand to take Orpheus-Dante
 into the mouth of the earth, with every heartbeat
 a doubt, a question to an unknown force, the voice
 of Yom Kippur, or Golgotha, or the mind
 of a monk dehydrated after a long fast: Every line,
 every question, & every

statement to take

us to the edge of existence, '*how will I know
 I was and I was alive*'*? Some believe
 I will know when I am dead, or when I am
 dead, I no longer need to know.

Here I lay limp,

faking dead in this poem,
 saying: I smell the earth of the garden, still
 clutching a rubber band, & never have time
 to ask the question

why I still have to.

* Philip Levine, *What Work Is* (New York: Knopf, 1999). 47.

TYLER BASS

Moment

It was an anxiously cold December afternoon when Lorrie and Sam had arranged—after nine months of dating—to marry. They treated witnesses of their wedding to a somewhat lavish, sappy dialogue but a heartfelt one nonetheless. Sam blubbered chubby tears onto his gut, a once mighty thing that not two decades before had been a mighty mound of flesh that barreled defensive ends to humble meals of dirt and grass. His special, store-bought deckled paper (“ordered from Ireland,” he had insisted) shook in his hands as he gazed into Lorrie’s also tear-filled eyes.

A thin veil covering her wan Christian face, Lorrie thought to herself, *This is it.*

Her entire family had shown up for it, too. Considering how the extended family had moved around so frequently this was quite a feat. For her unit of the Cunninghams alone, it had been Tokyo, then coastal Georgia, then River City, and then finally to New York City itself. Her father Dan stood beside her, beaming and proud that he had not focused on money so much his whole life and that, when he did, was for the best of causes: the perfect Church wedding—a great thing that, for a long time, he had not thought would happen. He wrung his hands behind his back, nonetheless, and was almost certain that he could smell burning tobacco. He sniffed the air.

It must be the boys from the bachelor party. Couldn't they wait just another two hours? Out of compulsion (but what appeared to some of the guests to be a waist spasm) he checked his belt to see if the hospital was paging him.

Sitting behind him was the only one interpreting correctly the cause of the spasm, his wife Susan. The night before she had said a simple prayer:

Please lord,

Please grant my daughter the lifetime with Sam that she deserves: give her the best of everything, children as beautiful as you have granted me. And if they honeymoon in Cancun, don't let Sam leave the seat down or do anything to cause panic. That's all for now.

Amen.

She had not been close to running out on her own wedding at all, but the concept had outlived what usually died out with the rest of youth’s fantasies. Yes—maybe there was a certain amount parents wished that their children were exactly like them, even clones, but not in that anxious facet. She stared at her daughter looking for signs. Nothing. Poker face or genuine empathy. It was hard to read Lorrie.

The Cunninghams’ friends and in-laws sat dutifully, never taking glances too obvious at their watches.

Sam read. “The way that you’ve completed me completed my very existence. Ever since I first met you, I have loved you more and more every day. I found myself growing, growing higher and higher, like the beans that Jack threw out of the window.” (*Oh please, like the book stuff, please!*) “We’ve grown higher and higher towards God together. The way you’ve touched me has also touched my heart.” (*Did that sound wrong? It sounded wrong.*) “Everything I do I do for you. To those of you who believe that there is no such thing as love at first sight, believe it. When I didn’t, it kept me away from true happiness.”

Carl sat in the back, and he pushed his glasses up on his nose a little farther. He scoffed. *Simpleton.*

Uninvited, he had made his way inside and was sitting ready, listening for his role. Carl considered himself as “devout an agnostic” as most of his friends were, so he was basing his knowledge of wedding protocol on traditional weddings he’d seen portrayed in movies. Carl would never tell people that because Carl told people that he never watched television.

Carl considered his theological persuasion not as some grudge with the divine but rather as one of those tree-falls-in-the-forest, sound-of-one-hand-clapping sorts of deals.

He tongued his silver canine tooth. It was a nervous habit. Its smooth surface was stronger and better than the realistic tooth he had never had it replaced with. He was waiting for that line that the priest always issued right before...what was it? Oh yeah, there it was:

“...why these two should not be wed, speak now or forever hold his peace.”

He put out his cigarette on the bench and stood up. In about five seconds, a little flashback charged back up through his brain.

Part One

Carl trudged into the locker room. His half-length locker was off in a corner of the place past the showers that no one had used since the 70s. As soon as he opened the door, the butt of a hand flew into the back of his head. That blow sent the bottom corner of the aluminum locker into his lip and his lip into his teeth. A dull crunching sensation throbbed in the front of his mouth. He fell backwards dizzy and into the sweaty embrace of a student who could perform a particularly effective sleeper hold. The high-school colleague spun him around to see the face of Sam, a boy with a case of rosacea in a full chapped fall bloom.

Sam snared Carl's cheeks within his hand as if it were a set of talons. “Just what did you think you were doing out there?”

The blow had deadened Carl's expression. “Aw, c'mon, Sam, you know that wasn't intentional.”

Sam had no patience.

Carl continued. “I mean, do you think I even have the skill with a basketball to Hail Mary it off of a backboard and onto your face?”

“Wronganswer, faggot.” Sam slammed his knuckles into Carl's

kidneys.

Gasping for air, Carl's mouth let go of a tablespoon of blood that had pooled below his tongue as a result of the locker blow. This disgusted Sam's friend so much that he dropped Carl onto the floor and took off.

Carl was then on all fours, and Sam above him—his blue eyes gleaming.

“I am having a bad day,” said Carl.

“Try to embarrass me in front of my friends again, and it won't be your last.” Sam kicked him in the ribs. Carl lost tidal breath and fell off of his knees.

His back against the locker, Carl saw a wild flurry of black hair fly out of a side hallway, leap onto Sam's back and clamp his thick neck in an arm. Sam struck desperately at his back. Suddenly, he froze when he saw a sharp metal point held close to his Adam's apple: a calligraphy pen, but threatening nonetheless to a fellow whose gluttony only four months prior had made necessary an emergency Bic® tracheotomy on the floor of the River City Grill. The only thing he feared more than pieces of gristle the size of golf balls was another makeshift stoma.

“Now you listen,” the voice near his ear said, “and you listen well, motherfucker. Unless you want me to carve a medieval letter *H* into your esophagus, you will get out of here, and you will run.”

Stunned, Sam nodded with absolute complacency, and sprinted as soon as the threat was off his back.

On the floor, still passive, Carl could see that the figure was a full foot shorter than Sam was. He watched as her small frenetic hands lassoed her hair down into short pigtails. She was slowly counting down from ten, carefully exhaling and inhaling to calm herself down.

A long stain of blood and drool covered the front of Carl's T-shirt. Carl had not been at all successful at righting himself. In his first good clear breathe, the girl heard him croak, “Cool.”

“Are you OK?” she said, kneeling beside him looking very concerned.

“Er...I think so.” Carl felt into his mouth, past his lacerated upper lip, for a tooth that swung like one of the bar doors in an Old Western. “I think I hurt a tooth.”

“Let me get some TP.” She limped to the bathroom. She was wearing a cast on one ankle.

“No, I mean, but you’re going to be late.”

“So are you.”

“I’m late for every class,” said Carl. “What difference does it make?”

The girl in overalls brought him a handful of toilet paper from the nearby bathroom.

“Seriously,” Carl said. “Go. Who knows how far you have to go after this period?”

“Don’t worry. Just get dressed. Let’s go.”

“I’m sorry; I’m really bad with names. Who are you?” Carl had managed to pull some jeans around his ankles when Coach Dexter stepped on widely placed feet into the locker room.

“I swear,” he said, “sometimes you kids think I am going to let just anything go down in here. Well, well, well, well, well, well, well! *Cavorting with the opposite sex in the locker rooms.* Hope you two like detention.”

He watched the girl and Carl as they made their way quickly out of the locker room. He saw Carl’s bloodstained shirt and frazzled appearance and the girl’s limp on the way out.

Mr. Dexter packed up his things for his next class. “Damn, they’re getting into kink younger and younger.”

Carl walked slowly to government class with the girl, who was limping on crutches. The adrenaline rush, her menstrual period, or whatever he thought she had been under the influence of back in the locker room intrigued him.

“You’re going to love Mr. Dexter’s government class. This guy is really smart.” Carl thought she was a transfer student.

She gave Carl a funny look. *Is this guy serious?*

“Hold on a sec,” he said, “have I seen you around somewhere?”

The girl stopped. “I’m on the cross-country team with you, and I’ve been at the last half a dozen practices. Also, you just *might’ve* seen me sitting behind you in government.”

“Oh, God, well, you see,” Carl stammered and tried to force a smile. “I usually don’t have the nature to look behind me. I mean, gosh, everyone on the team is so much faster than me that I usually never see any of them.”

“But we all stretch together, at the very least.”

“Well, yeah, except then.”

“Maybe you just hadn’t noticed me before.” The girl looked at him and smirked.

“That’s probably it,” he quickly agreed.

He stopped in the hallway to think and broke from the daydream to realize how far away she actually was.

“Lauren, was it?” he asked.

Twenty-five minutes late, she and Carl walked into class. Carl was very nervous about anyone noticing the toilet paper in the front of his mouth.

But everyone took notes—no, scratch that, the students who were not sleeping took notes on everything that Coach Dexter (the self-described “man of many hats”) was saying.

“So consider Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. In it, Bob Cratchit is a constant complainer about working conditions that even his employer Scrooge can’t stand to tolerate.

“Dickens has three ghosts—” Mr. Dexter stopped for a fervently raised hand. “Yes, Ms. Cunningham?”

“I think the frigid temperature of Scrooge’s office (as well as Scrooge’s indifference to it) was meant to parallel Ebenezer’s figurative cold-heartedness, not to necessarily—”

Mr. Dexter chuckled as if she were a six-year-old girl on his lap in a shopping mall telling him what she wanted for Christmas. “OK, thank you, Princess.”

“So, *anyway*, Dickens devises three ghosts to visit Scrooge in the middle of the night to indoctrinate him with what would far too late become known as Leninist-Marxist principles.” Mr. Dexter wrote *Leninist-Marxist Principles* in huge letters on the whiteboard. “Dickens, incidentally, was a big adversary of allowing children to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.”

“Just take a look at the socialist ideas he advocated outside of his written propaganda. His call for public schooling was successful mostly because people needed to keep the vagrant, idle youth...”

Zach Rivers interjected softly, “Hellyeah. Idle youth.” Robitussin was Zach’s breast milk.

Mr. Dexter continued, ignoring him. “...Off of the streets and from contributing further to the crime epidemic in nineteenth-century England. If Tiny Tim hadn’t been a cripple, most likely he would have been out there in Fleet Street picking pockets and trying to further fatten the Cratchits’ Christmas goose.”

The students not sleeping all laughed, except for Ms. Cunningham. Carl passed a scrap of paper to her.

“Have a first name, Ms. Cunningham?”

She passed back the note back a moment later. “Lorrie Park Cunningham.”

Part Two

“I just realized,” said Carl, “that I never thanked you for getting rid of Sam two months ago. That was absolutely amazing the way you did that.”

“Thanks a lot,” she said, “but I beat up my brother all the time.

What made you think of it now?”

“Just occurred to me.”

“Right,” said Lorrie, smirking. “It just slipped your mind, didn’t it?” Lorrie shrugged.

“Aw, you knew I was grateful.” He tried to put his hand on her shoulder, and she leaned into it.

“Did you bring it?” she asked.

“Bring what?”

“The poem you told me you had written about me! I said I would bring you something if you brought me the poem.”

Carl winced. He had forgotten. “Look, I wanted to, but my mom kept me from writing on the floor, and—”

Lorrie did not want to hear it. “What?” she cried incredulously. She shoved into his hands a piece of high quality paper.

Coach Dexter woke from the light sleep from which he usually oversaw detentions. “Will you two over there shut your mouths?”

Lorrie buried her face in her hands.

“Lorrie,” Carl said, “listen.”

“I mean it, Willington!”

Carl went silent. He unfolded the paper, and his eyes went wide.

There before him was the Old English alphabet. Sample capital letters regally drafted next to their corresponding lowercase forms. But even in the motionless letters, he could see the grace and passion Lorrie had put into crafting them. They were just letters, he knew, but they were not combined to produce obvious, trite content. They were tools of an abstraction second only to one other that Carl knew of.

So Carl did something that he had not done before. He took his journal from his book bag, tore out a piece of poetry that he had never intended to show anyone (if he even planned to read it again

himself) and shuffled it under Lorrie's folded arms.

She did not respond verbally, but he could tell she was reading it because she lifted up her head a little bit to allow light into her folded arms. He waited a minute or so, watching her slightly raised head intently. Then, it sank again.

With it, sank too his spirits. *Shared all I could*, he thought. He was about to reach over and grab for the page when he felt a hand on his inner thigh.

Part Three

"Absolutely amazing!" said Carl. "I can't believe it. That was the coolest date ever. She is a genius, man! The real thing! She waves at strangers! At homeless people! Can you believe that? The altruism! This girl's dreams are about going to Haiti and helping children with dysentery relieve themselves to death into streams. Absolutely incredible! She reads books not because she needs to label everything in the world but because she needs to be able to get inside people's heads sometimes and just relate to them. There's literature for literature's sake, Zach, and then there's literature for people's sake."

Zach nodded and was vacant. "True. True."

Carl was sitting in Zach's living room, watching a program chronicling the Third Reich on the History Channel. It was Thanksgiving Day, and they were stuffed after hours of marathon eating earlier that evening.

"I mean, not like you read Thoreau or anything," Carl snickered and lit a cigarette.

Zach's complacent grin died. "Where do you go about telling me that I don't read Thoreau?"

Carl was silent.

"How do you know anything about what I read?"

Carl was silent.

"That's awesome. Great. You know the opinions of a lot of dead white guys, but what's it getting you? Really. You get off on ego trips so easily. It is going to come back to you and bite. I guarantee it."

Carl had been thinking of how to defend himself the whole time. He had not been listening. "Look, I'm just a bit absent-minded; that's all."

"Yeah, professor, so you're so forgetful. But not so forgetful that you can't remember whose responsibility that is."

Carl was thoughtful and introspective for the next two minutes, but he was struck by Hitler's adamant proclamations to the crowds on the television screen. For all of their faults, Zach and he came to the flaccid rationalization *At least we are not Hitler*.

"So are you getting any, dude?" Zach tried to raise the mood a bit. "Here, take this."

"Oh, it's going very well." Carl stood up and walked over to pinch the joint. When he sat down again, his bottom bumped his cell phone, which in turn called Carl's speed dial #1.

The Cunninghams were devout Christians. Dan Cunningham was a friendly yet reserved man, and Susan was very much the same. Their resolve to hold family dinners (especially the most important of them all) at exactly eight o'clock was absolute.

The phone rang at about 8:02, right in the middle of Dr. Cunningham's pre-dinner prayer. He stared at his wife when the phone rang and smiled; there was no way he was going to answer it, especially when all of the Cunningham sisters had come home from college just for this one special time together.

"And heavenly father," he continued, "we thank you also for this family and its strong roots. Those alone are all we need to—"

The answering machine beeped, and little snippets of conversation rattled loudly from the speaker.

"...stay together..."

"Nah, it's never been like that."

“...and keep the moral fibre of this family...”

The sound of Carl’s laughter.

“...strong...”

“No, she’s OK.”

“...pure...”

“It’s just so cool when she gets that wet and your fingers can slide really well.”

“...wholesome...”

“Yeah, exactly. Oh, and Jesus Fucking Christ, is she a moaner! Great head, though...let me tell you...”

“...and clean...”

By this point, of course, Lorrie was on her feet, desperately trying to silence the machine. But she had never had to silence an answering machine that was still collecting messages.

“Yeah, as soon as she gets that cast off, I think we’re going all the—” Only when Lorrie unplugged it did the answering machine fall silent.

Lorrie turned to face her family, and delivered what was the least plausible faux smile of her life. “Well, so much for those interruptions. Don’t worry, Dad, I’m sure it wasn’t a really important call.”

Back in the cloud of smoke, the conversation was flowing, but it took another turn.

“But, dude,” said Carl, “I don’t know if I should even be talking about any of this. I mean, I’ve heard war stories from people about how ugly this kiss-and-tell stuff can get.”

“That’s probably a good philosophy. Hey! Puff—puff—pass, fool!”

Part Four

“You make me sick! What am I to you? A piece of meat? A

fuck?!” When Lorrie became emphatic, her voice became shrill.

“No. No! Of course not!”

“You make my father sick. You make my mother sick. You make my family sick. I am so ashamed of your, your—”

“Candor?” Carl suggested.

“Yes! I mean, no! I mean, I don’t know. That’s not the word.”

Carl and Lorrie sat overlooking a sunset in a vast field of long straw grass. That’s where they went to talk about things all the time.

“You know that was a mistake.”

“Yeah,” she said unconvinced.

“You know that I didn’t mean anything bad about you.”

“I know, but...” Lorrie had no idea what to say. This was completely new territory for her.

“Say, I know it’s a bit late,” said Carl, “but thanks for sharing your penmanship with me. Those were so lovely.”

Lorrie sniffed away a tear and smiled. “I was just messing around. I don’t know.”

“What are you talking about?” said Carl. “You’re a ninja with that pen.” He elbowed her.

They sat for about ten minutes not speaking. They watched the sun as it sank into River City and reflected newer hues of auburn and indigo off the crawling water.

“What are you thinking about?” Lorrie asked.

“Why do you like me?”

“I like you because you’re real,” she said.

If, at the moment, someone had put a white piece of paper in front of Carl’s eyes, in the white noise, he would have been able to make out the crystal clear inversion of Lorrie’s olive skin tones and brown eyes.

“You’re not like them. You’re not the label. I feel like you’re on the surface, like I can trust you.”

Lorrie grabbed Carl’s hand, meshing her fingers with his.

“You read it,” said Carl, “and I meant it.”

“Me, too. I’m just really confused.”

Part Five

Carl swaggered into the River City Grill with his hands in his pockets. He stood looking at all of the crazy crap that these sorts of restaurants always put there. A 5x5 poster of the cover to *Meet the Beatles*. A wooden billboard commemorating *Hee Haw*. A plastic 70s Mickey Mouse Go-Cart.

Inside of American pop culture of the past 80 years, he could not discern any theme; he thought as he went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. He was alone in the bathroom. He wanted to say something right.

“I’m so glad you agreed to eat here again, especially after things went so wrong.”

He stopped. *Dammit, it wasn’t things. It’s that you screwed up.* He scrunched up his face.

Yeah, that was it.

He grimaced to think about owning up to her disappointment. However, it would make her very happy. He smiled in the mirror trying to see what his own joy really looked like. Then, he said this:

“You love her,” he said. “You don’t know if she’s believed you, but you haven’t believed yourself until right now.” He paused thoughtfully, put his hands in his pockets and jangled his keys. “If you haven’t made that clear to those you love, if you can’t be effective enough to communicate that, what is the point of living?”

He smiled. He knew what he wanted to say for once. He knew well what he felt, which was an even bigger surprise. He examined

a plant on the sink. It was real kudzu, and the one piece of décor in the restaurant he saw that celebrated the natural, as opposed to that which had already been celebrated to exhaustion. It was so ubiquitous in River City, yet it seemed so special amid all of that crap in the restaurant.

He imagined her forgiving him (he wasn’t entirely sure that she had) and everything blowing over. He looked in the mirror and did an impression of Lorrie forgiving him and everything blowing over.

Lorrie being twenty minutes late, Carl decided it was probably high time to call the Cunningham residence. He did, and Dr. Cunningham talked nervously for a moment before giving Carl what he described as Lorrie’s cell phone number. When Carl asked how long Lorrie had had the cell phone, her father told him that it was “one of those one-time-use disposable phones.”

Whatever, thought Carl.

[Pickup.]

?: Hello?

CARL: Hey, baby! Where are you?

?: [giggling] Yeah, “baby,” it’s great.

CARL: Haha. What’s so funny?

?: Nothing. You were saying?

CARL: Well, where are you?

?: Um...you know this isn’t Lorrie, right?

CARL: Oh. Who is it?

?: It’s Janice.

CARL: Oh, hey Janice! Can I speak to Lorrie?

JANICE: Um...no.

CARL: Do you know where she is?

JANICE: Yes.

CARL: Where is she?

JANICE: She's right here.

CARL: Well, why not pass the phone to her?

JANICE: Because she doesn't want to speak to you, dumbass.

CARL: Would you mind if I heard this from her mouth?

JANICE: She would, OK? I'm here because you're a real prick to her just using her as a toy to show off to secure your masculinity! Or whatever is wrong with you.

CARL: Look, just let me speak to her, OK? [*starting to sob*] I've got some things she needs to hear.

JANICE: Well, that's new, isn't it? Anything that will soften her to jerks like you? You're always twenty years too late for everything, Carl.

CARL: Look, please, I love her! You don't know me, Janice!

JANICE: It's too bad she doesn't care about your lies anymore, man-pig!

CARL: Shut up, you femno-nazi! It's not my fault you make 76¢ on the dollar!

JANICE: She's done with you! Here, just ask her yourself.

LORRIE: Hello? [*sobbing*]

CARL: Yes? Lorrie!

LORRIE: Look, do not try to contact me. We really can't even be friends anymore, OK? I've given you too many chances. Do not call me again.

[*Hang up.*]

The manager tapped Carl on the shoulder and said, "Sir, you're making a scene. If you can't control your volume, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"I'm having a bad day."

The manager was, too.

"Mr. Willington."

Carl stared into space groping his beard. "Hi, Bob. What can you do for me this morning?"

"Well, a lot of us around the office were talking, and we were hoping that since November's editions were selling so well that you would consider this list." He passed Carl a list with approximately 120 signatures on it, names that Carl thought he vaguely recognized from around the office.

Carl exclaimed, "What's all this? RAM upgrades? A new copy machine? Two hundred *new* versions of Office 2020? How many times have I turned this stuff down? I run a tight ship here, and this has gotten old."

"Please, Mr. Willington, sir. We're only operating these machines on 100 gigs of RAM *tops*."

The editor-in-chief of *The Times* sat back in his plush chair, and produced a wheezing noise only recognizable as laughter ten years earlier in his smoking habit. "Well, Christ, Bob. I am relieved. Someone needed to foot the bill."

"What do you mean?"

"You've got a Christmas bonus on the way, right?"

"Uh, yes."

"Who else does?"

Bob said, "I suppose everyone except the mail boys and interns."

"You'd call yourself a team player, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And a reflection of the commitment that my other underlings have to the company?"

"I'm sure, sir."

“Well, there we go, then! Problem solved. A small annual sacrifice from everyone on this list should solve all of our problems. Thanks a bundle, Bob. Send my regards to Linda.”

Carl was satisfied, but Bob was not leaving.

“What is it, Bob?”

“You remember how you said you wanted to catch a gander on all articles that received over 200 reader responses? You know, good PR, like you always say.”

“OK, yeah, put it right there.”

Bob walked off, all bounce in his step gone.

Carl perused the most apparently controversial of *The Times*'s articles.

“Rylstone Women's Institute of North Yorkshire To Release Hardcore Calendar.”

“Homeless Find Occupation Extracting Asbestos.”

“Sam and Lorrie Carter.”

Carl did a double take upon seeing this and looked again. This had not been one of the articles Bob presented, but one on his desk the whole morning. He looked at his watch, cursed, and ran out the door.

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So when Carl stood for the priest's inquisition, the congregation turned with the utmost, honest curiosity of rubberneckers passing a horrific multiple car pileup. Sam stared in intense anger. Lorrie brought her hand to her mouth and mouthed, “Oh, my God.”

With the exception of a couple of boys looking onto a Gameboy, the room's faces all stared at Carl.

He stared around fresh out of the daydream, his assumptions examined, his mind empty except for an acute sense of how meaningless time was in reverie. His gaze fell upon a stream of kudzu Dr. Cunningham had had shipped up from River City.

It had been years, but Lorrie finally got to see what he looked like when he remembered something important on time.

Carl nodded affirmation to Lorrie and then fell to his rear in the pew. The creak echoed into the atrium.

would love to

would love to
 love a rough skinned woman
 un pale skin of sand
 feeling like I feel 90 days
 dirty;
 a calvacade of soft (small) scratchings.
 femine flesh flaying mine
 that
 aroused un aroused nerves
 while still her hands of grains
 the imaginary her slow dragging coarse on and on
 far reaching limbs lingering lovely
 the very art of skin to skin
 among the itchy
 impacts of hand held hand

Need

Colin placed the last of the clean glasses onto the shelves, trying to ignore the deluge of spring rain that continued to pound the roof of his empty tavern. A bad night, definitely, when even the regulars wandered off two hours before last call. But just a bad night, he told himself, nothing more. Every business had its ups and downs.

In the dining room, Dory continued to set the tables for the next day, removing unused linens and setting out paper napkins and placemats. Every so often the ting of silver rang softly. A pleasing sound, really, like the halyards of boats rocking in the harbor across the street. He tried to think of it that way, tried to settle into the sound, rather than worry about the money he'd failed to make that night. He glanced her way but she didn't seem aware of him as she made her way from table to table. She'd been distant all night. He opened the register and took the out the cash drawer—not a moment he was looking forward to, recording another night's loss.

The kitchen door whacked open and Jeremy approached the bar. He didn't say anything as Colin counted bills and slipped them into the bank pouch.

“Almost done?” Colin asked.

“Completely done.”

Colin checked his watch. “Completely? It's ten-fifteen.”

Jeremy checked his watch too. “Right, yeah. Can't quite get used to this hourly pay thing. I keep forgetting to milk the clock.”

Colin poured a pint of Guinness and placed it on the bar. “That's for not milking the clock. Did you lock the back door?”

Jeremy took his denim jacket off again and pulled out a bar stool. “It's locked. I take it this was a record for lack of business.”

“Well, not quite,” Colin said, “but close.”

Jeremy dabbed at tan foam. Apparently satisfied that the Guinness had settled sufficiently, he raised the pint to his lips and took a swallow, leaving sudsy traces in his moustache and beard.

“Who’d go out in this if they didn’t have to?” Jeremy said. “I wouldn’t worry about it—not the beginning of a trend or anything.”

Colin gave up on the change, dumped the coins into respective baggies to be counted in the morning. He carried the bank pouch back to the office. He locked the office door and crossed back through the kitchen, checking the fryers and heat lamps, just to be sure. He flicked off the kitchen lights.

At the bar, Dory had taken a seat next to Jeremy, guest checks, credit vouchers and cash laid out before her as she attempted to determine what she’d earned in tips that night. She glanced up at Colin.

“Offer me a glass of wine,” she said.

“Dory, would you care for a glass of wine?”

“That would be lovely. Thank you.” She resumed counting.

Colin took a bottle from the back bar, one of the bottles of cabernet he’d been saving. Something was bothering her that night, something more than the absence of business. She lived with her ghosts, but usually it didn’t show. But he knew all about pretending things were fine—his wife part of the past now, his brother and sister-in-law dead less than three months. Soon he’d go home to see if his nephew was still up staring blankly at MTV. Colin wondered if Michael ever slept, but who could blame him?

He opened the wine and filled a glass for Dory.

Dory continued counting, barely looked up. His best bottle and she didn’t notice. “How about I buy one for Jeremy too?” she asked.

“Not really a wine drinker,” Jeremy said.

“Funny,” Dory said. “You know what I meant.”

Jeremy nodded and studied his pint of Guinness, as if consulting it. “Right, yeah. Thanks. But I think one’s good for tonight. Rain-check, maybe?”

“Couldn’t have picked a better night to ask,” Dory said.

Jeremy drained the rest of his beer, stood and slipped back into his jacket. He pulled his bill cap from his jacket pocket and put it on. “You guys have a good night.”

“I might as well lock up behind you,” Colin said. “We’re definitely closed.”

“I should probably get going too,” Dory said. “As soon as I finish this.” She tapped at the money spread out before her.

“Take your time,” Colin said. “Not like it’s late.”

He followed Jeremy, who opened the front doors to the sound of rain slapping brick and asphalt. Jeremy trotted off toward his car and Colin secured the doors. Not wanting Dory to feel uncomfortable now that it was just the two of them there, he took his position behind the bar again.

“Not much of a night,” Colin said. He shot some soda water into a rocks glass and drank it. The soda water tasted salty and warm.

“Even so, thought I would have done better,” Dory said. “Oh well, maybe I dropped some money. Whatever.” She sealed her bag of money and slid it across the bar toward Colin. “Always tomorrow and all that.”

“How’s the wine?”

Dory took a sip, went to set the glass down, then tasted the wine again. “Really good. What is it?”

“Chateau Montelena,” Colin said. “Thought you might like it. I haven’t actually tried it yet. Good, then?”

“Excellent. Why don’t you try it?”

“Okay, sure.” Colin poured a splash and took a sip. “You’re right, this is great.”

“Are you going to keep standing back there?”

Colin swirled his glass. “Should I put more in here? Wasn’t sure. Seemed like you were ready to go.”

“Like you said, it’s early.” Dory took another sip, paused, then drank half the glass. She closed her eyes, briefly, then leveled her gaze at Colin. “Before you sit down, how about filling this back up?”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely.”

Colin put Dory’s turn-in into the register and locked the drawer. He filled both their glasses and left the bottle on the bar.

“Wait,” Dory said. “Any cigarettes back there?”

Colin didn’t sell cigarettes at the tavern, but sometimes packs were left behind. A quick search of the back bar drawers produced three.

Colin held them up. “Which?”

Dory pointed to the Camel Lights. “Those. Big Joe Camel fan.”

Colin tossed the pack onto the bar. “But you don’t smoke.”

“Just on special occasions.” Dory opened the pack of cigarettes and then closed it again without taking one out, apparently satisfied knowing the pack wasn’t empty. “And sometimes when I drink.”

Colin came around to her side and sat next to her. “So which is this?”

Dory traced her index finger around the rim of her wine glass. “Both.” She didn’t add any more but something convinced her to light up after all. She slid the pack at Colin. “Want one?”

“I quit.”

“Which means you want one.”

“Of course.”

Dory cocked her head and squinted at him, as if something had just occurred to her. “So, have one. I won’t tell a soul.”

Colin slid the pack to a point equally between them and left it there.

“Maybe later.”

Dory laughed and nodded, then tossed her hair back. “Willpower. Good for you.” She drank and gazed at the ceiling, raised her cigarette to her lips and exhaled smoke. She remained quiet for a moment, then said, “So tell me about your wife.”

Colin reached for the cigarettes but then chose his wine instead. “Pam, right,” he said. “My ex-wife.”

“Pam, then. Tell me a little about Pam.” Dory drank more wine, keeping her eyes on his.

Fair enough, Colin thought. He’d asked her his share of questions. More than he should have in his early clumsy attempts. But he hadn’t known then, and he’d backed off after.

“Okay, Pam.” He drummed his fingers on the bar. “Kind of quiet, overall. Now that I think about it, she was always reading. She hated television, the noise bothered her and we almost never turned it on, except for movies. Which was fine, I guess. I ended up reading more myself.”

“So, this was good for you or she was too detached?” Dory slid her wineglass his way. “Do you mind?”

Colin emptied the bottle into their glasses.

“No, it was good, fine. Not a problem there. I liked that about her, the way she didn’t need anyone or much of anything to keep her occupied. But I have to admit there were times I wasn’t sure how much she needed me either. Our marriage wasn’t like yours, it really wasn’t—”

“I don’t think you should talk about that yet,” Dory said. “What was she like when you first met her?”

Colin wondered if she were laughing at him, had been waiting for this moment of payback. But Dory's expression betrayed no malice, just open curiosity. Colin went behind the bar for another bottle of wine. He took his seat again.

"Well, she was great," he said. "I was managing this place in Berkeley—a seafood place, amazing view of the San Francisco skyline—and she used to come into the bar and sit at one of the tables. By herself, a couple times a week, usually in the afternoon. She was working on her masters degree and she hated her roommate, but I didn't know any of that yet. One day she asked her waiter if she could talk to the manager, and I went over to see if there was a problem. 'Everything's fine,' she said. 'It's you I'm worried about.' She waved me closer, you know, so she could lower her voice. I'll never forget what she whispered. 'I get the feeling you're pretending to be here.' Here's the thing: She was dead right. I stood there for a few seconds not knowing what to say and she closed her notebook and slid out one of the chairs so I could sit. So I did, and she said, 'So who are you really?' The fact was, I had no idea, and she could see that. But rather than see that as some sort of tragedy—the way my family did—she saw it as being interesting, not so much a flaw as a challenge. She saw me, that much was for sure, although at first I tried to act as if she didn't know what she was talking about. Like I was going to admit my entire life was bullshit. But I asked her out, of course, and we met later that night at a bar and talked until they closed the place."

"So, she saw you in a way no one else did." Dory pushed her wine glass his way and Colin topped it off.

"Definitely. She looked right through me. Which was a little scary. But, it was intriguing too. I mean, how often does that happen?"

"And that's what attracted you to her?"

"Well, she wasn't bad looking either."

Dory snorted and nodded. "Honest answer. Good. What did she look like?"

"I'm pretty sure she still looks about the same."

Dory gazed into her wine, silently, for a moment. "Right. What does she look like?"

"Blonde, well, sandy-colored hair. Cut kind of short, usually not much past her jawline. Light freckles. Thin. She likes to play tennis and she jogs a few times a week. At least, I guess she still does. It's been...almost a year." Colin ran his hand through his hair, disbelieving things a little. "Yeah, almost a year," he said softly.

"She sounds pretty great."

"She was," Colin said. "At first, she really was." He reached for the bottle of wine and filled his glass again. He nudged the cigarettes his way and withdrew one from the pack.

"Need a light?" Dory plucked a pack of matches off the bar.

"Sure, thanks."

The match flared and Colin leaned into the flame.

"So, what happened?"

"Well, you know, time. Things changed."

"Sorry, you're not getting off that easy. When in time and what things changed?"

Colin considered, suspecting Dory would never view him the same way again. Or, at least, not in the way he imagined she did. "Maybe it's what things didn't change," he said. "Maybe that's really it."

"You?"

"Exactly. Me. That's what didn't really change. Pam was right when she said I was just pretending to be where I was. I had no connection with things at all. And I guess she thought she could change that; I guess it became something of a mission for her. She changed; that's for sure. She finished school, got a high-paying job as an account exec for a marketing firm..." Colin paused and sipped his wine, knowing he couldn't turn back now. "She was ready to take all the next steps married people are supposed to take."

“She wanted children.” Dory lit another cigarette, the flash lighting her green eyes. “And you didn’t.”

“Not then, no. I’ve thought about it a lot—I can’t begin to tell you how much—and I guess it comes back to what Pam originally saw in me. She was right, I was just pretending to be there. I had no idea who I was or what I really wanted. She saw that, which made me think I must have wanted her. When someone pegs you like that, you feel, I don’t know, almost obliged to credit them with being able to provide the answer since they’re so keenly aware of the question. I guess, with Pam, I assumed she was the answer. I think she thought she was too. And she was for a while, she really was. The whole thing’s confusing, but in the end we were pretending to be together and we didn’t know who *we* were. Like the whole spell had backfired and suddenly where my life had been meaningless now our life together was. The strange part was I saw that first, and I knew we couldn’t take those other steps. Pam had become the one pretending. Does any of that make sense?”

“Sure, it makes perfect sense. It’s ironic as hell but it makes sense.”

“Then can you explain it to me?”

“Sure, she tried to save you before you were ready to be saved.”

“From what?”

“From not knowing what you wanted, from not knowing who you were. She tried to keep you from getting sucked under before you were even struggling. She preempted your crisis when a crisis was exactly what you needed.” Dory burst out laughing, then filled her glass again without even pretending to think about whether she should drink any more. “Talk about ironic.”

“Not sure I’m with you,” Colin said.

“Colin, I’m here to get past something that will change me forever, and you’re here because you needed something to change you forever. You didn’t need your wife, you needed your nephew.”

Colin shook his head and looked down at the wood of the bar. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“That’s because it’s my turn to see something. Colin, I know it hasn’t been easy having him live with you. And I’m sorry about what happened—you know that. But you needed someone who needed you, not someone you needed. Does that make any sense?”

“Maybe,” Colin said. “I’m going to need some time to think about it.”

Dory raised her glass and drank. “It will,” she said, “it will. God, I love special occasions. That bottle looks empty. Is there another one?”

•

Dory knew Colin was right in convincing her to leave her car at the tavern. While she didn’t imagine he could be sober, she knew she was in no shape to drive whatsoever. Still, even in her buzzed state, she also knew that allowing the two of them to leave together that way—locking the tavern doors behind them before climbing into one car—would have suggested to anyone watching that they were a couple. But no one was watching, right? She was on her own in this world now. That was the truth, and she had to face that sooner or later.

On this night, of all nights, she desperately wanted someone nearby. No, not someone. Colin. The fact was she needed him tonight, even though she wasn’t sure she was being fair to anyone. Eric, Colin, or herself.

What she wanted, needed, was to go back in time. But that wasn’t going to happen, no matter how much she wished or drank. And there was Colin next to her, driving her home. A good man. A man she might have fallen in love with if she’d met him at some other point in some other life. A man she might be in love with now, but she couldn’t allow that. Still, she needed him right now. At least to get her home, she told herself. That much longer and she could face being alone again.

Colin slowed the car and Dory squinted out at the street,

realizing where they were. “Oh, God,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“What?”

“Keep driving.” Dory laughed, knowing she was acting drunk but not caring. “I’m such an idiot; don’t stop. Keep going before anyone sees us. Gina’s an incredibly light sleeper.”

“Okay, sure.” Colin picked up speed. “What’s up?”

“I’m really sorry. God, I moved out of there. I should have told you; I wasn’t paying any attention.”

Having no idea where he was supposed to go, Colin cruised slowly through the neighborhood. Few lights shone from the windows of Colonial homes. Just a couple TVs flickering, but mostly people were sleeping behind dark windows. Dory imagined lives. Children tucked in, their peaceful faces. Stuffed animals and storybooks fallen to the floor. Parents exchanging news of the day, laying side by side, keeping some secrets.

“Where do you live these days?” Colin asked.

“I rented an apartment on Sycamore, in that brick building. Know that one?”

“Sycamore? That’s right by the harbor.”

“I know. I should have been paying attention. Are you mad?”

“No, of course not.”

“You’re mad.”

“I’m not mad,” Colin said.

She let her head sink back against the seat and looked up at the darkness. She let herself speak—she knew she could do that around him.

“I couldn’t stay at Gina’s anymore,” she said. “I was starting to feel like an intruder there. You know, every time I walked in on her and Bill, they acted like they weren’t talking about anything. Which meant, of course, they were talking about me. On top of that, the whole widow thing was freaking the kids out. Eye contact was out

the window, you know? They kept staring at their shoes when I was talking. God.”

Dory burst out laughing again.

“After a few weeks I just stopped looking at their faces and started talking to their feet. Anyway, I love my cousin, but let’s just say I needed a little privacy.”

“Definitely a lot to be said for privacy.”

“Oh, my God. You must be an expert by now!” Dory glanced over at him, her head still lolling against the headrest. “How have you managed the last four months without going crazy?”

“By going crazy,” Colin said.

Dory heard herself laughing again. This was good. She hadn’t laughed nearly enough lately, but Colin usually made that happen.

“No, c’mon. You’re doing great. Hey, what are those lights?”

Colin kept his eyes on the rearview. “We’re being pulled over.”

“You’re joking.”

“No.”

“Shit.”

“Exactly. Do you have any mints?”

Colin pulled over to the side of the road, and Dory rummaged through her purse.

“Here.” Dory slipped a couple squares of gum into his hand. Despite the situation, she let her fingers trail across his palm. He had nice hands, Colin. Strong looking, like Eric’s, with veins bulging across the back. She’d noticed that many times.

Their eyes met, while the blue strobe light kept flashing around them. The cop knocked on the window.

Colin raised his eyebrows. “Write to me in prison?”

“Every day,” Dory said.

He rolled the window down, and rain gusted into the car. The cop shined his flashlight in at the two of them, across the floor and back seat, and then back into Colin’s face.

“Mr. Cooper?”

“Sergeant Kelleher? How are you?”

Colin sounded fine, sociable, it seemed to Dory. She was glad he knew the cop’s name—probably didn’t hurt to own a business in town. Still, she tried not to bite her lower lip.

“I’m fine, Mr. Cooper. How are you?”

“Fine,” Colin said. “Was I driving too fast?”

A blast of tinny chatter crackled and Kelleher spoke into the radio strapped to his shoulder, reporting the time, his location, and the make of Colin’s car.

“Did you know you have a taillight out, Mr. Cooper?”

“No, I didn’t,” Colin said. “Which side?”

“Left,” Kelleher seemed unaware that he was getting soaked. He peered into the car again, this time letting his gaze rest on Dory. Colin turned her way as well. He raised his eyebrows again, and she thought he might have smirked.

Dory kept her face open and relaxed. She managed what felt like a poised smile. “Good evening, officer.”

“Good evening.” Kelleher didn’t smile back at her. He turned his attention back to Colin. “Everything okay tonight?”

“Just heading home,” Colin said. “Giving a friend a ride.”

“Have you been drinking tonight, Mr. Cooper?”

“No. Well, we had a glass of wine with dinner, but—”

“I see. I’m going to have to ask you to get out of the car.”

Colin paused briefly, then unfastened his seatbelt. Dory’s heart sank. God, all of this was her fault. She’d urged him to keep opening wine, to keep talking. And when she’d gotten drunk, he’d

been put in the position of driving her home. On top of that, she’d failed to tell him she’d moved. Selfish!

Please, please, please, she thought. Not tonight.

Not tonight!

Colin opened the door just as Kelleher’s radio squawked to life again. Kelleher held his hand out, palm flat, fingers spread. Colin remained in the car.

Dory squeezed her eyes shut, shot another quick prayer out there, then popped them open again before the cop saw. It amazed her that he could make out the garbled words through the clicks and static, but she clearly heard *robbery* and *pursuit*. After a few seconds, she heard Kelleher say, “On my way.”

Yes, Dory thought, just go! Leave us alone.

Us. Not him, us. The word bounced around inside her brain. That word she hadn’t considered using since Eric died, one she’d imagined lost to her vocabulary.

Despite the emergency call, Kelleher looked in at Colin again. “Mr. Cooper, I suspect you’re a lucky man,” he said.

Colin didn’t say anything.

Kelleher shoved a piece of paper through the window. “You need to get the taillight fixed. This gives you thirty days.”

Colin placed the ticket on the dashboard and patted it as if it was something he intended to pay special attention to as soon as time allowed.

Kelleher fixed him with a hard stare. “How’s your nephew doing?”

“Much better.”

“Good. Glad to hear that.”

Kelleher sprinted back to his cruiser. The lights on top of his car flipped into a sequence of increased urgency and in a moment the cruiser screeched past them. Colin waited until the lights disappeared around the corner, and when the siren blared he started his own car

again and pulled away from the curb.

Dory looked out at the neighborhood as they drove, relieved but still grappling with that word that had come to mind so naturally. Us.

“Old friend,” Colin finally said.

“Seemed like there might be a little history there,” Dory said. Funny, she felt almost sober now.

“Same guy who brought Michael in two weeks ago. He’s a little critical of my parenting skills. I tried to explain the difference between being a bad parent and being a bad uncle, but he didn’t seem all that sympathetic.”

“Maybe you should have him over or something.”

“Right, good idea. We could fondue and smoke Michael’s weed.”

“Exactly, a bonding thing. Just the guys, you know?”

A few minutes later, Colin pulled up in front of her building. Embarrassed, Dory realized it had taken them almost an hour to arrive someplace that should have taken five minutes. Colin turned the lights off, and she noticed he glanced into the rearview.

He shook his head and exhaled. “Thought I was going to end up in jail there for a moment.”

“You should probably come up and have a drink,” Dory said. “You know, to settle your nerves.”

“Are you *trying* to get me arrested?” Colin asked, but he laughed. He checked his watch, and Dory guessed he was thinking of Michael. But he shut the car off.

“Come on.” Dory got out, leaving him almost no choice but to follow.

Entering her furnished apartment, Dory found it comforting for the first time that it could have belonged to anyone. Like a hotel room. No memories there. Somewhere to begin, just stay for a while, or end. Up to whoever rented the place.

Colin stood in the living room, looking around. He seemed uncomfortable. He ran his hands through his hair and he looked pale. The near arrest had rattled him; she could see that now.

“Have a seat,” Dory said. She went into the kitchen, speaking over her shoulder. “The furniture’s hideous, but it beats sitting on the floor.”

“I’m good with plaid couches,” Colin said. “I think they’re coming back.”

Dory returned carrying a bottle of red wine and two squat green tumblers. She left the bottle and glasses on the coffee table and bent over a small stack of CDs next to the portable stereo on the floor at the end of the couch.

“Maybe I should use your phone,” Colin said, looking around again.

“I didn’t bother; I just have the cell phone.” She gestured toward the kitchen without looking up from the CD selection. “In my purse. It’s fine—don’t worry about it. But aren’t you just going to wake him up?”

“Not likely, but it’s not like I don’t get home really late sometimes.”

Dory wondered if his intention of calling Michael signaled his hope that he wasn’t coming home at all. A covering of bases. Was he going home tonight? She didn’t want him to, which was exactly why she couldn’t look at him.

She took a seat on the couch as music rose from the CD player, something new she’d picked up a couple weeks ago. A female folk singer, and at the moment Dory couldn’t remember the singer’s name for the life of her.

Clearly, Colin wasn’t sure if she wanted him to sit next to her. She’d forgotten that the only other chair in the room held a basket of folded laundry. He kept looking around.

“This is nice,” he said. “You have a balcony.”

“On a good day you can see the roof of the Stop and Shop.

Did it stop raining?”

“Think so.” Colin opened the sliding glass door and peered out into the darkness.

Dory filled the tumblers and crossed the room. “C’mon, let’s take advantage of the luxury.” She handed one of the glasses to Colin and stepped outside. “I felt like having another cigarette anyway. I stole them—hope that’s all right. Want one?”

“Sure.”

They smoked and drank wine, standing at the iron rail, not looking at each other. The clouds were beginning to part, clusters of stars reclaiming the night sky.

“April twenty-third,” Dory whispered, realizing only after she’d said it that she’d spoken out loud.

Colin waited for her to continue, but at the same time he seemed to know she was speaking to someone else.

“Six years ago,” Dory said. “We were married six years ago today.”

There. The words were out now.

A few silent seconds passed and she leaned into him, just her shoulder to his. He steadied her at first by straightening up, but then he put his arm around her, probably afraid she might fall. And his instincts were on. She might fall, if someone didn’t hold her up.

Dory flicked her cigarette into the night, a tiny sky rocket. She wrapped her arm around his lower back. “When was your anniversary?”

“It really doesn’t matter,” Colin said.

Dory thought about that. She looked at the sky above. “In a way that’s even sadder.”

“I’m really sorry,” Colin said. “You could have told me, taken the night off.”

Dory turned and drew him to her, resting her forehead against his chest. “And what? Sit on my rented couch staring at my rented

walls? Most of my photos are boxed up in a storage unit three thousand miles away. I don’t even have those.”

She wiped her eyes with her sleeve, then raised her lips to his. They kissed, and for a while they couldn’t stop. She wasn’t sure where the taste of him ended and the rest of the world began again. She kept her eyes closed, not wanting to know, at least not at that moment. Tomorrow, she’d remember again. Tomorrow. Just not tonight.

Not tonight.

“Should I go?” Colin said. “It’s late.”

A good man, this Colin. And in the apartment there was nothing, really, to remind her of when she’d been alive in a different time. And it had stopped raining, and they’d made it home safely. Us.

Three Views from the Nihonbashi

Drifting snow sticks
to panging boards, packed down
by fisherman
coming and going
from the market below,

Masts disappearing
into the icy canal,
float, suspended—
little Ichikoku lost
in the haze of the mountain,

As darkness, still
approaching the castle,
lurks in the forest—
the red maple waits,
mighty Tokugawa waits,

A sudden shower
breaks the silence and toil
of summer—
Mt. Fuji sits undisturbed
on the horizon.

