DISUNITED STATES

AND

OTHER STORIES

by

Sarah Cypher

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE CLAY O'HARA BAND

The first week of her vacation Maggie tripped down some stairs at the B&B and strained all the ligaments in her left ankle. Her husband kept to himself about it, generally, but on the train from the West into Dublin, he slept poorly and she knew how he got when he couldn't get to sleep.

"Just like you. One glass of wine and then there you go, tumbling."

"O come off of it, for Heaven's sake." Maggie pushed at her windbreaker where it was wedged against the window and tried to make a better pillow.

"We had tickets," said Frank again.

Maggie closed her eyes and pretended sleep. The previous night in Dublin, the Clay O'Hara Band reunited for a concert at the Point Theatre for the first time in seven years. Everyone had thought they were going off the map for good when the band toured the United States and then said goodbye to the world from Florida, the year of Frank's retirement. He had camped out in front of the TV set that night and fiddled with the VCR control until he managed to erase the whole entire last hour by accident. Months later he had still moped, still come into the kitchen at night and sat down across from Maggie at the table with his hands on his knees to say, "That's a shame," as if he had only just discovered his mistake.

Four weeks ago Maggie came home and found all sorts of scribblings on the kitchen table – flight numbers, prices, phone numbers that began with the international calling code, 011 – and then Frank came out from the bedroom and told her they were going to Ireland. The Clay O'Hara Band would play again.

As the train paused in tiny countryside towns, Maggie made notes on their quaintness, but soon the towns grew larger and drabber and soon Dublin was around her. Frank had fallen asleep. She nudged his leg with the metal crutch the hospital had given her.

"We're here."

He sat up and coughed. Heuston Station was tiled in black and gray, but there were flowerpots along the green wall where the sun never fully reached them. Sounds echoed. At the other end of the platform, men in florescent yellow vests collected the tickets from passengers as they stepped down from the train.

Maggie couldn't carry most of her luggage on account of her ankle, so she waited on a bench beside the train as Frank pulled suitcase after suitcase from the door. He still cut a nice figure, anyway for a man in his seventies, and Maggie felt that she had gone downhill in later years. She tended to forget about her body sometimes, as if it was just a big organic heap that sat underneath her brain and was responsible for carrying it to and from work, and now, her windbreaker zipped up over her torso only with an effort, and under her nylons, the bandage around her ankle looked like skin bulging over her shoe. Maggie decided that she would wear something nice to dinner later and make herself feel pretty.

Frank dragged the suitcases. "What is this? American Gladiator?"

"You're doing fine," said Maggie. "Watch out for the curb." They had come to the taxi stand outside the station. "Look at that – how they drive from the right side of the car. Aren't you glad we didn't rent a car?"

Frank stamped his feet farther into his moccasins. There was a line for the taxis, and in front of he and Maggie a pair of women waited. They were Irish.

"Did you go to the Clay O'Hara concert last night?" Frank asked them.

A blank hesitation. Maggie knew right away that they didn't know who he was talking about, but she had always been more perceptive than he that way.

"No, we couldn't make it like," said the one. "Where in the States are you from?"

"Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh."

"Really? I have a sister in Los Angeles."

"So do you like Clay O'Hara?" asked Frank, and when the woman didn't respond straightaway, he looked up the road for the next taxi. Maggie smiled at the Irishwomen. Frank could not hold a conversation to save his life. When the taxi arrived, he sat next to her in the back seat and brooded out the window.

"Will you take us past the Point Theatre?" he asked the driver.

Maggie pulled a Dublin map from her pocket and studied the route. But she didn't say anything to Frank because he was already irritated, and she just wanted a nice dinner later. He had his moods. Since retirement, he spent too much time at home and that made him worse – more sullen, more given to odd obsessions. In the recent months, Frank had sorted through forty years' worth of National Geographics on the living room floor, and the one time Maggie mentioned that no one could navigate the sea of 500 magazines blocking the stairs, he gave her a dark answer. "Better to do it now. The kids won't want to have to do it when we're gone." Maggie had gotten very cross and told him to throw all the magazines out at once.

"Slow down when you get there," Frank told the driver.

The driver nodded.

Frank put his head between the two front seats. "The Clay O'Hara Band played there last night."

The driver laughed. "Never heard a saxophone the like of his in my life – and he gave one hell of a concert! So you were there, yeah?"

"Supposed to been. My wife hurt herself in Sligo, and we were at the hospital all night."

"Pity, that. Don't know that they'll get together again, unless you can wait another seven years." He drummed his fingers on the wheel. "One hell of a concert."

"Mm."

"My wife hates 'em, but even she was nearly in tears last night."

Frank sat back and rubbed his hands on his knees.

The driver looked in the rear view mirror. "It was so good."

They turned onto Parnell Street and went by a shopping mall, and then a long wall covered with concert posters. He sat for a while and then interrupted Maggie's study of the map with, "That's a shame."

Maggie patted his hand. "You don't have to go crying about it. We'll have a nice dinner tonight, and enjoy our stay while we're here. Our hotel is supposed to be really lovely, remember?"

She saw that he was in one of his moods again and decided that she'd best be quiet for a while. They came upon the theater in a few more minutes and the driver slowed down to let Frank gawk. Maggie looked at it too. It was just a building after all but she imagined that it must be different when it was full of people and music. But on the taxi went, carried ahead by traffic and the ticking meter.

The taxi turned; Maggie checked her map and the little annotation in her guidebook – O'Connell Street, named for Daniel O'Connell, the great Catholic liberator, whose face was also on twenty pound notes – and saw at the south end of the street there was a great monument to him. Across the River Liffey next, shallow and unhealthy looking, but supposedly cleaner these days; and a bit to the east there was Custom House Quay and the great Georgian spectacle, the Custom House itself, all gray with a green dome like a drop of mint jelly. People at home had told her that Dublin was not a good city to visit but she found she was enjoying it already. She hoped Frank would soon be better. A traffic light stopped them along the wrought iron boundaries of Trinity College. An educator herself, Maggie wished to see inside, but trees blocked her view and she could see only foliage, soft and green and full of life. She flipped through her guidebook. She wondered if the leaves stayed on year round for lack of any real winter. She figured they must.

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Their hotel was the Davenport, near Merrion Square. Maggie unzipped her suitcases and hung all her clothes in the closet – the red suit she adored because it never went out of style, the jeans that stretched in the waist, the flattering sweater that lacked both bold colors and horizontal stripes. She went down to the lobby to replace the shampoo she had left out of her cosmetics bag, and when she came back to the room Frank was still sitting on the bed, clicking through the channels for highlights of the Clay O'Hara concert.

"I hear that there's a good Italian place not too far from here," said Maggie.

"My body doesn't want food."

Maggie thought this was an odd thing for him to say. She put on lipstick. In the mirror her face looked almost young; she had had a pale complexion as a girl and that was the best kind of skin for aging. Frank perhaps had not aged so well after all, or so she thought when she saw his reflection, from which she could also see that he was still planted in front of the TV. He never put on weight, but in past years the skin under his face had sagged away from his throat and become two soft ropes of flesh that brushed his shirt collar, and his hair had fallen out. But Maggie had seen gentlemen look just the same but have all the energy of men half their age, and she was certain the Irish air would do her husband good. She herself felt fine, except maybe for her ankle which had begun to throb again a little, but that would heal too.

Maggie went and stood next to the TV. "Let's go out and have a nice dinner."

"Clay doesn't matter at all to you."

"But Frank, please. You've put yourself through enough of this, and you just need to turn the TV off and relax over a good meal. You don't even need to change clothes."

"I'll never see them now. Seven years is too..."

"Oh for the love of God." She brushed a line of dust off of the screen and reached for the power button.

Frank held the remote control out before him, thumb on the power button as if fencing to keep the television turned on. Maggie heaved a great sigh from the bottom of her empty belly and sat down in the chair by the window.

"It's only the weather report."

"Just a bunch of hot air," he muttered.

"A meal would be so nice right now. Why don't you want to eat?"

"It's not hunger."

"Frank—"

Frank looked away from the little electronic clouds on the screen and pushed himself up onto his feet. He came toward her. Maggie felt something, a flutter in her stomach that was indeed nothing like hunger, and it made her husband seem terrible. He tugged the curtain open with a rattle and Maggie peered at her dim reflection in the glass, but saw also the giant, flat field of gray clouds over Dublin.

"Call for delivery. I'm tired from traveling." Frank put the remote control on the table and laid down on the bed without even taking off his shoes. His hands curled over each other on his chest. Maggie was drawn by her concern and confusion to sit down next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. He watched the ceiling. She sensed that he was seeing something beyond even the sky and the city, and she looked again at the window expecting to see a pale face floating at the glass, or a sudden bolt of lightning, but all was as it was before. On television the news had gone to a commercial break. The noise made her jittery. Maggie got up and pressed the mute button, and stood before the television staring at the screen. Without sound, the pictures no longer seemed lifelike.

Frank picked up his head. "What's wrong?"

"You're scaring me."

He shifted his elbows underneath himself and sat up a little bit more, and then twisted his legs around over the edge of the bed and put his feet on the floor carefully, as if they were a puppet's legs and feet on delicate strings. Maggie felt fat. She helped him stand, and heard joints click all over his body.

He went to the window again. "I'm sorry."

Maggie's ankle hurt her, and she sat down on the bed. Something made her look at the television. What she saw made her frantic. On the screen was a camera shot from the crowd and Clay O'Hara onstage. The lights in the Point Theatre made the sweat shine on his face as he leaned in to the microphone to sing of some poetic emotion to a sold-out audience, and behind him was the rest of the band strumming and singing and playing the drums. Fans waved their hands. Mist poured out of a smoke machine across the stage for the finale. On the muted television nothing made a sound.

"Oh, no— Frank look— I didn't just—"

Frank picked up the remote control and shut off the report. The only light had been from the television, and now it was gone; and in the end Maggie's eyes filled up so much with tears that she went to stand by her husband at the window where the dark room didn't seem quite so lonely.

DAID'S

Aaron Rimes did not much care for his mother, and did not much think of her. If he did, he thought back to a single picture he had in his mind: she stood at the end of the street, waved once and the last he saw of her was her red hair glinting in the June sun. It had been eveningtime when he left, and a not very special evening at that, but all considered, Aaron did not attach significance to many things. He had won a baseball championship when he was sixteen, and had incredible sex with a brunette from San Jose the time he drove across America all by himself. Those were the events in his life that he considered special as they were happening. Aaron's mother had told him once, before all the troubles started, that no one could hurt him because he remembered only what he wished, and it was true that his less important memories slung back in his mind like stones in an overstretched slingshot, memories that had little hope of being released. But it is also true that stones pulled back the most will fly the hardest.

It was seven years later in Dublin that something happened to make Aaron Rimes turn around and consider where he had come from. He had taken up working in a candle shop at the far end of Grafton Street, and at the end of the evening the walk home to his new apartment took him past a hospital along Peter Street. It was just past six o'clock and the nurses were changing shifts, when on her way out one of them passed by his shoulder; a pleasant smell followed her, and the smell brought Aaron so strongly and suddenly back to his childhood that he turned around and called out for the nurse to stop.

Aqua scrubs stuck out from under a shapeless raincoat, in the pockets of which she had shoved her hands. She seemed in no mood to stop, but turned around anyway.

There was a construction site farther down the road, and Aaron had to shout to be heard. "That smell – is it perfume? I'm sorry, but I don't mean to—"

"It's fabric softener, if it's me you smell. Excuse me, but I've had a long day." She stepped down onto the sidewalk.

"Wait! Sorry, but it reminds me of home." He spread his hands wide. "Could I maybe buy you a cup of tea?" The nurse was not attractive, but that, in Aaron's mind, made his chances seem all the better.

"I'm married. Good night."

This time she did not stop, and Aaron watched her disappear up the street in the direction from which he had just come. No use chasing her. The crowed thinned as he got away from the city center, and eventually he picked up his pace and stopped looking over his shoulder for her face. The woman had treated him rather unfairly, he thought, because he had really not asked for anything more than to spend a few pounds on her. His luck had been better in the States. Here, there were differences in the subtleties of affection that he could not understand, or adopt, hidden somewhere in the rejections he had received time and again. Not at all fair, really – he himself would have been glad for a cup of tea, and content to share it with someone. He wondered what he had said to make himself dismissible. Having grown up playing baseball, he had a fit body, and his face, although a bit long through the cheeks and chin, had never received a complaint. He looked at himself in a store window, at the ghost of a reflection that floated among the display of cellular phones, and felt sad to be walking home alone. Nights in his new apartment were sad and empty, and if he had known that he had been better off with roommates in his old place outside the city, he would have stayed. But the lease had his signature.

Aaron continued on for several blocks feeling sorry for himself before remembering the reason why he had stopped the nurse at all. The smell, the fabric softener, had taken him suddenly back to a memory. Aaron rolled it around in his mind, studying its clarity. The memory was this: caught up by a rare mood, his mother had wrapped a sheet around him as it came out of the dryer and laughed. Outside, through the laundry room window, snow fell and collected on a patio of empty flower pots. He was seven. The memory had so surprised him that he seemed to think it came from some long-ago movie he'd made out to in a theater, anyway another life, and the more he thought about it, the more of a surprise it became.

In his coat pocket his fingers brushed paper, and he pulled it out. A letter he had found last week when he was moving to the new place. His mother's return address sticker was pasted neatly on the corner of the envelope, and inside was one sheet of purple paper. *Dear Aaron, I'm sorry for everything. You know I love you. Remember*

Ponderosa's? I haven't had a good chocolate sundae in years. Please please come visit, Mom. For reasons he had promptly forgotten, he had chosen not to write back. This was a few years ago.

Ever parsimonious with his memories, Aaron pulled forth the one that the letter asked him to. In childhood and into high school years, Aaron's mother occasionally took him to lunch. She made a great fuss about it – the enthusiasm of the suggestion, the chatter in the car, the bright smile on her face as she asked the hostess for a table for two, non-smoking please. The buffet was never delicious; the chicken wings a bit soggy and the macaroni and cheese too artificial. But they went back to this place every time as if the brown booths and faux stained-glass lights were ropes between them, tied to keep Aaron from drifting. He had gone, though. She was right – he knew she loved him, but it was guilt-love, crying-and-clutching-and-you're-just-like-your-father-aren't-you-love, and he threw it off like a wet shirt seven years ago.

Aaron thought of his mother again, saw her at the street's end, dyed red hair too bright against her yellow shirt as she waved once. And she knew it had been goodbye.

It was easy to grow cynical about these things, so before Aaron reached his street, he took another route and found himself in the cloud of pounding music outside Daid's, on the fringes of Temple Bar. The ladies inside invited him to a table by the window and coaxed a drink into his hands, and soon Aaron caught himself up in the spirit of the place, forgetting all about the nurse and memories of his mother. A lace of cigarette smoke wrapped him up. He watched and drank, and proffered pound coins where he thought they were deserved.

At half ten he spotted a friend of his, another American, coming down from the pay-only upstairs of the club.

"Claypool," he called.

Jack Claypool brought two stouts from the bar and sat down across from Aaron.

"How was she?" asked Aaron.

"Give it a go if you want."

"No, not in the mood."

Claypool laughed. "Didn't think I'd hear you say that. Losing your red-blooded love of life now, are you?"

Aaron lit a cigarette and blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling. He and Claypool understood each other because their reason for leaving America was the same – Ireland had felt like an old America, already comfortable and ready to welcome great-grandsons back for a good time. This was as much of his reasoning as he would share with Claypool. They had met in another club like this one, and saw each other only in that atmosphere. Aaron did not know where Claypool worked or lived, and their conversations were limited to women and could be pulled and stretched to fit any length of evening.

"Saw a nice one today," said Aaron. "A nurse at Adelaide."

"Oh yeah?"

"She would have been all over me if she hadn't been married, I'm telling you."

"Pah. That's Irish morality for you."

Aaron snorted a laugh and flicked his cigarette at the ashtray. Across the room the evening's peacock, a belly-dancer in red damask and bells, shivered out into the floor and began to rove among the men, who cheered and tossed pound coins in her direction. A short man in a tuxedo and a red cummerbund followed her about and collected the money in a pouch under his jacket.

Claypool turned back to Aaron, drunk. They both were. "Irish morality is a farce nowadays. It doesn't mean what it used to, anyway. Just look at them," he said, poking his cigar at the men around the belly-dancer, "they'll go home and be back here on a Sunday morning looking for more. It's a victory, really." He laughed, and it made an echoey, painful sound in Aaron's head. "Look at America. If you're a son in America, it means something totally different than what it meant to be a son in Ireland ten years ago. These idiots used to practically bow down and worship their mothers here. We never had any of that growing up, did we? No, I'd say not. They're learning from us finally, and are better for it."

Claypool finished his lecture with a whoop and tossed a coin at the dancer. Not to be outdone, but weary of the evening, Aaron tossed two.

"But mothers know how to stay." He stopped before he said more. Claypool didn't want to hear it. Yet he couldn't help himself. "You can't leave your mother. Mothers wave goodbye to you, and she stays. Mothers take care of you when you're sick and nobody can ever do it better. Mothers take up a lot of space in your head, and you can't forget them because they stay. Claypool. Claypool? Do you hear what I'm saying?" This was more deeply felt than his stale drunkenness or early hangover, or the place between his knuckles where his cigarette burned. "You can't say goodbye to your mother."

The man in the tuxedo picked up the coins and stood facing them. A moment later, the belly-dancer took his cue and she swirled over to the table. Claypool propped up his elbows and smiled at her as she shook her hips at him, but it was Aaron that she moved towards, because he had thrown in more money. He leaned away from her dance, not touching, looking discreetly only to be polite. What was in him earlier in the day had gone out of him, and he wished only that she would leave him and go to Claypool.

The dancer drew off her shawl, flashing with sequins, and hooked it around the back of his neck. Men cheered at the next table. Her breasts shook in Aaron face and she laughed loudly, too loudly, and drowning him in the heat of her body. A rare mood, he thought, and turned his head away. In front of his face was the window, and outside it had begun to rain, filling the empty gutters to gushing with water.

He hurt with homesickness, and felt a need to give his memories a life of their own, a whole sea of them that crushed and pounded in a place he didn't know about; and his eyes burned with what he desired.

A SLOW GREEN TRAIN HOME

Sam the hygienist thought about the dentist's schedule as something nearly martial and when he went home at five-forty-five he went as if on honorable discharge for the day. There was no wife or lover to tell him that his job had turned off his brain to the mysterious, to the shades of violet and gray that sustained more poetic people, and so he had never in his whole life allowed anything to shatter for the sake of love. Instead he found pride in his life, which he lived in a small Pennsylvania town, and knew by heart what everyone's mouths looked like, and on account of his gossipy mother had much to share with his patients as he administered floride treatments. Among his many acquaintances he had only one friend, old Mr. Tenner with his thirty-two brilliant teeth, and Sam went first to him after the accident.

The accident took away October-11-nine-thirty's ability to speak. Her name was Lorrie Policcio and Sam allowed a sneeze to distract him as he administered a novocain injection to her wisdom tooth. The needle pierced far into the gum and severed the pale thread of her lingual nerve. Her tongue spasmed and then slipped into the back of her mouth, pink and limp. When she woke up and tried to speak, she could not feel it. Thinking that it had been removed, she clawed at her mouth, felt with her fingers, found it, failed to recognize it, panicked, and then tried to pull it out. Sam and another hygienist struggled to restrain the woman's wide-eyed battle with her own tongue. A day passed and the dentist told Sam to find another job.

"Malpractice," Sam told Mr. Tenner on the phone. "There isn't a dentist in the whole state that's going to hire me after that."

"Take up woodworking."

Sam didn't feel humorous. He wheeled his bicycle out of the garage and pedaled down to the river later that afternoon to find Mr. Tenner and talk to him personally. He thought that if the old man could see his face then he wouldn't feel like joking.

The town was Tarentum, an old steel town that still got heavy traffic to its K-Marts and grocery stores. It lay along the Allegheny river north of Pittsburgh and its most public feature was the bridge that connected it to the highway. The traffic across the bridge was steady most days, but on the afternoon of October 12 Sam was the only cyclist on the footpath. The back of his t-shirt billowed out behind him, full of cold autumn air, and the inside seam of his white scrubs was black where it touched the greasy chain of his bicycle. Only after he had dressed for work as usual that morning had it fully sunk in that he no longer had a job. He had heard from one of the receptionists that the girl, Lorrie, would be fine after some minor surgery, but Sam could hear only that he had wounded a patient and caused her pain.

At the center of the bridge Sam stopped and looked down at the river. Mr. Tenner occupied his normal fishing spot on the end of the dock. He had greasy gray hair that poked out at angles from beneath the mesh ball cap on his head, and you wouldn't know he had made a fortune on soy crops if you drew inferences from the union worker's logo on his shirt, or the smudged paper towel that pushed out of his breast pocket. Folded up inside it were earthworm pieces, cut up small to fish for minnows. His feet, where the flesh showed inside his bedroom slippers, were pale roadmaps of blue and swollen veins. When Sam looked at the whole of him he often felt overwhelmed by pity, but Mr. Tenner's two strong features were his teeth and his money, and the latter of these was on Sam's mind today. He parked his bike against the side of Mr. Tenner's lavender Buick and walked out to the end of the dock, where he sat down with his feet hanging just above the river's surface.

"I need to borrow money."

"How much?"

"I have to visit my sister. I have to get out of Tarentum for a week or two. The patient's brother threw a turkey carcass through my bedroom window last night."

"How do you know it was him?"

"What other goddamn redneck owns a turkey farm around here?"

Mr. Tenner wound up the creel on his fishing rod. "I don't see how leaving for two weeks will make him forget that his sister Lorrie is in surgery."

Sam was scared and his first reaction was to be angry with Mr. Tenner. He was used to being both liked and ignored, and negative attention brought a hot tingle of blood up into his face. The turkey had come crashing through his window in the middle of the night, and when he got up and looked, there was the white glittering mass on the top of his television. A note had been pinioned to the carcass with a sharpened pencil, reading "Get Plucked." Sam waited a long time before crunching across the broken glass to the phone. He called his sister, Ginny, in Colorado. She said not to take any chances. Sam agreed. He needed only the money for a plane ticket.

"I just need to get out of town," he told Mr. Tenner. "It's only going to get worse."

"Ain't my problem."

"You sent the mayor's son all the way to Ireland two years ago when he dropped out of college for a semester. I only want to go to Pueblo West."

"Do I look like a travel agent to you?" Mr. Tenner dipped his hand into the white bucket next to his lawn chair and pulled out a minnow the size of his thumb. He squeezed it until it opened its mouth and then jabbed a hook through its upper lip. "Glad this bugger can't slap me with a malpractice suit," he said, and cast the minnow out into the water.

"So what do you say?"

"I'll think about it. I'll call."

Mr. Tenner had enough money to put the entire town on a plane, but because Sam was unaccustomed to bargaining, he could make no better argument. He thanked the old man and left him on the riverbank. Only when he had mounted his bicycle and pedaled back to the bridge did Sam remember that he had stuck his hand into the minnow bucket, and the thought made him feel slightly sick. Along the river below him, next to Mr.

Tenner's chair, the plastic bucket contained the circling fish, all lithe wet bodies swimming behind eyes that never blinked.

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At home Sam put more duct tape over his broken bedroom window, a task that made him invent a dozen more nasty scenarios involving the patient's brother. Sam's answering machine blinked eight calls, but no messages had been left. He recognized a need to calm himself, and so took out his planner and worked out when the monthly bills would come due. Then he checked his clocks against the time on evening news and wrote carefully on the calendar above his toilet: "Consulted Mr. Tenner." On the kitchen table he found a raisin cupcake – his mother must have let herself in while he was gone. There was no note, but no one else would have come visiting. Sam ate it for dinner with a cup of beer and went to his bedroom to read the newspaper. If the patient's brother came around again, he couldn't throw another turkey through a duct-taped window.

Mr. Tenner called at ten o'clock and startled Sam awake from his sleep.

"Son, I've got a deal for you."

Sam turned on the bedside lamp and held the receiver closer to his face. "You'll send me to see my sister?"

"No, to see my daughter, Marolene. She's a dike."

It was fair that Sam did not immediately make sense of the call and thought that the patient's brother was playing a prank. "Mr. Tenner?"

"Yeah. Look, if you really want to leave town I'll send you to Ireland. She and my ex live in Dublin. You convert Marolene, or at least find out if she's batting for the home team again, and I won't ask you to pay me back."

Sam knew very little about Mr. Tenner's private worries, and did not know about his daughter. He thought it must be very unfortunate to have a homosexual for an only child. Out of self-consciousness and awkwardness he expressed his sympathies to her father.

"That's right, son. A shame. How are you with women? When was the last time you had a girlfriend?"

"I—a few years ago, I think—" Sam's record was a foot-shuffling embarrassment. He used to date a retail clerk from Bed, Bath and Beyond four years ago. She was younger than he, and his mother thought she was pretty, but she made Sam feel like an outcast. It was no fault of hers; he had a selfish streak that caused him no end of guilt, and he could only feel sorry for himself when she told him that he was the most simpleminded fellow she'd ever met for being afraid to eat a raw tomato. Around women he was kind and usually relaxed, but that was because he never mentally undressed his patients and didn't think of them as potential girlfriends.

"Good enough for me," said Mr. Tenner. "I've just about given up hope. The plane leaves Thursday afternoon at six. It's an eight hour flight, but with the time difference, it'll be seven a.m. the next day when you get to Dublin. My ex and daughter are happy to meet you. They'll look for you at the airport."

"All right." Sam hung up the phone and lay down again. His brown suitcase, circa 1970, accommodated three pairs of pants and seven shirts, plus briefs and toiletries. Sam sketched out in his mind which shirts he would choose, and if packed carefully he could find room for a hostess gift. A set of placemats seemed right. He would go to the store tomorrow.

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Flying was not new to Sam – sometimes he visited his sister in Colorado. That was nice enough because he could leave the humid Pittsburgh summers for five hours and emerge into the mountains' sweatless heat. His sister's place was a yellow stucco cottage in the midst of a housing plan that had not been there ten years ago, but the climate made lawn care a black-and-white issue – lawns that were not watered and trimmed simply burned away. The result was a nice neighborhood into which Sam always felt welcomed. He had spoken to his sister the night before he left for Ireland.

"Mom doesn't want you to go. She says you're acting like a middle-schooler, or some such bullshit."

"She didn't call *me* about that."

"I think she was afraid you'd stay in Dublin forever if she made you mad." The tone of Ginny's voice made Sam add, in his mind, "Honest to God in Heaven I swear that's what she said."

"How hurtful," he answered, half a joke. Sam and Ginny's mother was prone to chronic exaggeration, and Sam, living closest, found himself in a position to provide material for her fabrications. The two of them had never gotten far enough away from each other. Most of the time they were like two tent poles, ready to collapse if the other disappeared or shifted. Their dependence on one another was remarkable considering the lack of emotional sustenance they provided, but once in a while Sam would feel himself slagging through life for unclear reasons, and would stir. These were the times he left Pennsylvania to visit his sister. When he returned his previous muzziness would retreat and all was pleasant for a while. Only now as he boarded the plane from Pittsburgh did he recognize that he had needed this vacation for quite some time.

"Have fun, kid," Ginny had said before she hung up, and Sam hoped that he would.

The inside of the airplane reminded him of the dentist's office; it was cool and scrubbed, and filled with the background whine like a drill. In the next seat sat a college professor from Florida who had told him a little bit about herself and that she had taken sleeping pills in the airport bathroom. A few minutes later she was out, curled cozily against the pillow she'd brought from home, and Sam was left to pass the time by himself. When the stewardess came around with drinks he ordered a bloody mary, but he drank only a few sips before the murky red mix reminded him of river water and he could drink no more without imagining that one of the minnows was going to slip past his lips and down his throat. He fell asleep somewhere over Newfoundland and woke an hour later feeling as if no time at all had passed. The woman next to him snored peacefully. Around the plane people were making the first tentative adjustments toward sleep, and outside the window late afternoon turned into twilight. No one talked. With the growing darkness a fear grew in Sam that he could not name or describe – he knew only that it kept him awake and watchful. A dike. Would she have short hair? Sam did not know of many lesbians but there was one his mother sometimes saw at the grocery store in the cat food isle. He had heard that they are difficult to talk to if you are a man. But he had placemats – he would give them quickly so that she knew he came in peace. The monitor in the forward cabin showed a bright blue map of the Atlantic Ocean and a white cross that stood for the plane, and it said that he was just south of Greenland, and that the air temperature outside was below freezing. Sam thought of that great expanse of water thirty thousand feet under the soles of his shoes and his hands got cold. Ahead of him in miles and time, two women were waiting for him. He knew nothing about them except their names, and the names seemed as insignificant as two bobbins on a wide and deep river.

Just after dawn, Sam woke suddenly with a crick in his neck, unaware that he had gone to sleep. The woman beside him had roused herself as well. A cup of water was on the tray table in front of her.

"Did you sleep?" she asked.

"I think so. I must have." Sam looked out the window at pink clouds. "It's morning."

"We're almost there. The pilot says we're on our way down."

"Really?"

Sam saw green-black land underneath the clouds. He knew nothing about it, but to him the land looked Irish. Pressure made his ears pop.

"Is this the end of it?" he asked.

"Yes. It wasn't too bad at all. Sometimes these crossings take forever."

When you don't know where you're going, Sam thought, the getting-there never takes long enough.

The boarding ramp was cold with fresh autumn air. Sam pulled his suitcase behind him and climbed up toward the terminal. It was inevitable now, meeting strangers, and he only hoped that he didn't look too pale-faced from his nap on the cold airplane. People streamed around him at different speeds, some happy to be off, others as slow-footed as himself. The ramp turned and ahead was the door, and beyond a glimpse of a low-ceilinged gate, rows of black chairs, and a gray acrylic ticketing booth. People waited. Sam stepped into the gate. He looked for eyes as searching as his own must have been, looked for a reflection of his anxiety or some scrap of hospitality.

No one was there.

The fear that had kept him awake on the plane popped loose. He felt like the membrane holding his internal organs in place had suddenly torn, and everything slithered down into his calves. He sat and fumbled with his shirt pocket. Mr. Tenner had written his ex-wife's number on a piece of paper towel. He found it and pulled it out. There it was, a jumble of oddly grouped numbers that he didn't know which to dial.

Irish payphones wanted a phone card. Sam didn't have a card. He went through a hassle with his credit card company, and finally got connected to a phone line that didn't ring, but pulsed twice, and someone answered but did not speak.

"Hello?" Sam said.

"Yeah?" It was a woman's voice. She had been asleep.

"This is Sam Roper. Is this Mrs. Tenner? I'm looking for Mrs. Tenner. I was at the airport – I mean I'm there now, and someone was supposed to—"

"Shit. Yeah. Shit, I'm sorry. This is Marolene, her daughter. Hang on—" On the other end of the phone there was a rustle and a click. Sam imagined her sitting up to light a cigarette. When Marolene's voice returned, it came with the soft strain against a lungful of smoke. "Okay, I'm coming to get you. I'll be there in like forty-five minutes, no, more like an hour. Be in front of the airport where everybody else waits."

Sam was too strung out and forgot to ask what she was driving. Only after he had hung up and started for the exit did he noticed his mistake, and then hurried back to the payphone. Marolene was already gone.

*

When the town of Tarentum commissioned the bridge across the river, the construction crew reported that they saw six-foot carp as they installed its support pillars underwater. Carp being one of the ugliest fish alive, having rot-green scales and fleshy pink lips, the story had unsettled Sam so much that he stopped going to the river with his friends to catch crayfish. He was in his teens but possessed a child's imagination, and that hot summer weekend he had gone instead to visit his grandfather in the countryside. It was the first time ever: throughout Sam's childhood, his grandfather would drive in from the weedy Pennsylvania countryside and park his 1965 Chrysler in front of the house for his visits. There was always something sour between his mother and his grandfather, but they would sit on the porch swing and talk at intervals about Sam's grades and his sister's new boyfriend. "Those kids, they have it tough, growing up with everything that's going on in the news," – but nothing his mother said ever had the ring of personal experience. His grandfather was little better; he had left his concern for the world behind with the memory of his wife, Sam's grandmother. That was all he knew about the man. At the end of the visit Sam's grandfather would climb into his car and drive out of town, and in afternoon's last light, Sam would wave goodbye to him from the sidewalk. A decade later, the invitation to visit the mysterious country house was a mingling of the old man's fear of death and curiosity about the boy that was supposedly so much like himself. He invited Sam and Sam agreed to go, out of respect.

His grandfather's house smelled like synthetic carpeting and mouthwash. It was decorated to an old widower's tastes, heavy on the magazine racks and beer glasses and boxes of facial tissues throughout the first floor, and the guest room upstairs was not a room at all but merely a nook in the wall large enough for a twin bed beneath the window. All around the house various doors had been shut but not locked, as if with the memory of his dead wife, whom Sam never knew, the rooms beyond had been shut off from the routine of his grandfather's life. If Sam's mother criticized at all, and it was a rare time indeed, she criticized the ease with which her father had guided himself into the placid waters of old age.

They had no conversations long enough for Sam to remember. They sat at the television until his grandfather could coax him to have a few sips off his beer, and then Sam would make an awkward remark about the bridge construction. By now even his face had drifted out of focus, and Sam was left only with the impression of messy gray hair with eyes the color to match, and a face that sagged into a neck like a turtle's. But the one thing that made the visit worth thinking on was the last evening of his stay.

At the table Sam's algebra homework was spread out in front of him. It was damp from his sweating hand and a fly buzzed in wide loops around the kitchen lamp, and if he had had the energy to kill it, he would have done. But the heat took away his concentration even as it pressed around him and made sweat drip down his neck onto his bare back, and he was angry that he had left home. His grandfather kept no fans. Behind him he heard the old man's footstep. He did not want to talk anymore, so he pretended to focus on the algebra, frowned at the textbook.

His grandfather touched the top of his head. It felt like his mother's hand, its touch was so light.

"Sure is hot, isn't it?" Sam asked heartily.

The fingers worked gently in his hair. Something rubbed off, worked its way into Sam's skull, but he wouldn't know it yet for years.

*

But at 8:15 in the morning, Marolene found Sam sitting on his suitcase by curbside check-in. He had been thinking about the time his grandfather gave him a sweater vest for his birthday. The Ireland Sam had stepped into recalled nothing else about his grandfather besides that thick cable-knit and its snugness under his arms, how it had squeezed his shirt into tiny wrinkles all around his shoulders. One of the sixth-graders smacked him in the face for it, and Sam never wore it again.

"You Sam?"

Sam looked up. The woman in front of him was in her forties. She was built like a rugby player but under the layer of sleep-smeared makeup she had a feminine face. Sam thought she looked like a lesbian, but he wouldn't have thought this if he had not known.

"Are you Marolene?"

"The car's in the lot."

She took off across the road and crossed into the parking lot without him. He hurried behind her. The hope surfaced that Marolene Tenner would give him a cigarette, because for the first time in fifteen years he wanted a smoke, but inside the car, Sam found it fastidiously clean and with an empty ashtray. He put his suitcase in the trunk and sat down on the left-hand side, normally the driver's seat, but here in Europe everything was switched around.

Out on the highway, Sam started to feel a little better. The car was moving fast, and Marolene knew where she was going. At least he was in someone else's hands besides his own.

"So what do you do for a living? Your father said you worked."

"Travel writer. You?"

"I was a dental hygienist."

Marolene let out a hoot of laughter. "Teeth? What kind of job is that?"

"That's how I met your father. It's a nice job. I like it."

Mr. Tenner's daughter put both hands on the steering wheel and seemed to settle into her own private amusement as she drove. Sam let her do the talking.

"I think it's funny," she said, "how people wind up in jobs that really don't go anywhere. What makes a person settle? You might have done so much more if you had focused when you were in your twenties. That's my theory anyway. I mean, maybe not – that depends if you're smart. Are you smart?"

"I still go to school sometimes. I-- I get by."

Sam wished for another woman. He wished that the sleepy professor from the airplane was driving, not Marolene with her sharp energy that seemed to rattle out around every word.

"Your father seems like a nice enough guy," Sam said.

"Mm."

"If he sent me all the way here and is letting me stay with his family."

“He just wants me to meet some nice man my age.”

Sam’s stomach fluttered and he tried to laugh. “Well, I, well I don’t want that—“

Marolene closed up into herself, as if conversation was tiring her out. Sam watched the road. They drove straight through Dublin together, first through the poor neighborhoods north of the River Liffey, then down O’Connell Street and across the bridge. He saw the office for the *Irish Times* newspaper, but after the river was out of sight he grew disoriented. His hostess did nothing to explain what he was seeing. When he thought about all the miles that was between him and the brick dentist’s office by the river in Tarentum he thought, what a mistake.

“So your mother’s waiting for us at the house?”

“She’s in the West this week. It’s just you and me the whole time, unless you want to stay somewhere else. There’s a lot of good B&B’s in Dublin.” Her suggestion sounded like a threat.

“Greystones will have to be fine,” he said.

South of Dublin the traffic thinned out and Sam could see the beach. He gathered from the road signs that they had just gone through Dun Laoghaire, the port, and in the harbor he could see all kinds of boats all docked in rows on the water. Farther south they drove, and on the sand flats two women in windbreakers walked through the shallows with their pants rolled up above their ankles. Marolene cracked the window for a cigarette and cold air rushed into the car. He watched the two women a moment longer and imagined the freezing water on his feet. There must be something sterile about water so cold, and the idea of walking in it seemed almost inviting. Then Sam thought of Mr. Tenner’s veined pale feet, and the notion of cold water left him.

Greystones was a coastal town on the other side of a hill thick with trees. Train tracks ran alongside the beach and out from the town, and the town itself was a cluster of clean buildings and shops that attracted visitors from Dublin city. Marolene stopped at a petrol station near the train depot, went into the convenience store, and came out with a white bag that she set in his lap. Three sandwiches, he saw, each cut into triangle halves and packaged in a plastic shell.

"Thank you, Marolene," he said. And after a moment, "Who's got the third?"

She put the car into gear and drove off to her house. It was a square gray cottage with window boxes of chrysanthemums, which from Mr. Tenner's stories Sam knew could be credited to Marolene's mother. The flowers stirred a pang of homesickness for his childhood; until his father died, Sam's mother had planted chrysanthemums in the front lawn every autumn. His eyes lingered on the window boxes as Marolene unlocked the front door, and then he went inside after her. The question about the third sandwich solved itself. As Sam set his suitcase on the couch, he saw a pale shirtless figure watching him from the bedroom. He saw breasts and averted his eyes.

"Who's your friend?" he asked Marolene.

"Grace."

"Hi, Grace."

The lover held a sheet to her torso and leaned out of the bedroom, exposing more of her yogurt white shoulders to the living room. "Hello." Grace was Irish.

Marolene didn't want Sam in the house; he could feel her wishing him away as if he was a bad hand of cards. The three of them sat down on the living room couch, the only uncluttered piece of furniture, to eat their sandwiches, Grace in her sheet on the bedroom side, Marolene in the middle, and Sam by the door. The room was quiet except for their soft chewing noises.

When the meal was done Grace poked Sam's suitcase with her toe.

"Where you from?"

"Pennsylvania."

"What's it like?"

"Quiet. Lots of trees."

"Do you all play Robin Hood in the summertime?"

"What?"

"Nothing." Grace chuckled. "You got a girlfriend?"

Sam shook his head.

"Boyfriend?"

His neck blushed. "No."

Marolene got up and took the empty sandwich boxes to the garbage can. Then she bundled up the garbage bag and set it by the back door. She had not taken her shoes off when she came inside with Sam, and now noticing dirt on the floor she took down the broom and dustpan and whisked everything into a pile. A chain of small chores took her away from her guest for several minutes as she swept and wiped and washed up a stray pan in the sink, and growing slightly flushed, she looked to Sam like a Dutch milkmaid come in from the cold. He felt that he had offended her.

"Her father's done this to us before," said Grace.

"Won't you at least get dressed," Marolene said as she dug through a pile of dishrags, looking for a clean one. "This isn't a toga party."

"I'm making a point."

"What point is that?" Sam ventured to ask.

Grace moved her bare shoulders to face him. She was pretty.

"The point is we're together. Marolene and me."

Marolene wiped the refrigerator door and seemed to speak to her reflection. "If you'd rather not be here you might find some friends at the pub. It's just down the street to your left."

"I didn't say that." Sam experienced Marolene's same need for action. He pulled his suitcase over to the couch and rooted around in it for his slippers. Cordovan dress shoes pinched his toes, and he regretted trying to make a good impression on new people. The encounter with Marolene and Grace left him feeling that he had ripped off a scab too soon and now stared at the raw layer beneath, and that made him think of the wounded patient, Lorrie, and her useless tongue. She lived with her parents. How did she wish them goodnight, tell them she loved them? The speed and size of his thoughts made Sam uncomfortable in his body, and was disappointed when then sensation failed to dissipate even after he put his feet in his slippers. Grace watched the operation with the focus of shoe store clerk. Marolene had stopped cleaning the refrigerator and stood purposeless in front of it.

Sam looked down into his suitcase and saw the placemats. He was proud of his gift, and the realization of this brought tears to his eyes. Suddenly he felt very sorry for himself. "Here," he said, "for whatever it's worth." Grace was closest so Sam held the placemats out to her. They weren't wrapped, and when Grace took them the woven fabric hung down over the edges of her hand.

"Placemats?"

"Yeah, sorry."

Marolene didn't look up from the refrigerator. "Usually we get flowers."

Sam looked at his hands. They seemed clumsy. "But I wasn't trying to impress you."

Marolene walked into the living room and took the gift from Grace. "Well, placemats." Sam waited for her to turn the action around into a joke on him. She turned them over and checked the washing instructions. "The plastic ones stick when you put a hot dish on them. Right Grace? These are okay."

Sam looked up from the couch to Marolene. "I don't want to marry anyone."

Marolene checked their color against the couch, and then laid them out on the table. She started to smile, but turned her back to the couch. And then, as Sam watched with astonishment, she burst out laughing louder and louder and after a moment's hesitation, came right over she sat down between he and Grace and put her hand on both of their knees. Her hand warmed Sam's trousers and skin and he felt that the person next to him was not Mr. Tenner's daughter at all.

"I know it. And for the love of God Grace would you please get dressed. Sam is putting on his coat and then we are all going out."

*

A slow green train took them north back into the city and to the Pearse Street station. He stepped off the train, and stalled. Echoes built up around the cavernous platform like schools of fishes, alive and flickering around Sam's head to bewilder him, and when Marolene put her hand on his shoulder, he let her guide him. The stairs took him down to a row of automated booths that wanted his ticket, and through to glass doors onto the street. Outside the train tracks rumbled overhead.

"Where in Dublin are we?"

"Right smack in the middle. C'mon skippy."

Marolene took him a block to Lincoln's Pub. It was a dark and narrow storefront with a sandwich case at the end of the bar, and if anything monumental had ever happened on the premises it happened before the current management had inherited the business in 1983. A barman in a drab teal shirt seemed to recognize Marolene, and he broke off conversation with a crowd of businessmen to greet her. There didn't seem to be a logical place to stand and wait, so Sam leaned back against the wall. He felt watched.

Grace took a seat in an empty barstool. She glanced at the one next to her, and then at Sam. He sat gratefully.

"You sit and wait till your Guinness settles out, then you find a seat in the back," she said quietly. He sensed that she was trying not to embarrass him. "It's different than in the States. Usually you seat yourself here, even in restaurants."

She ordered a pint of Bulmer's for herself, and waited Marolene brought back a Guinness for Sam. He sipped and cringed. Grace got the second round at they found the last vacant booth in the rear room. As he watched the two women drink, Sam was reminded of the boyhood visit to his grandfather – the cracked furniture, the comfortable cavish darkness, the smell of beer – and he felt again the pressure of his grandfather's fingers on the crown of his head. Sam scratched his hair.

"My dad said you left the States for another reason. What's the story? You kill somebody?"

Away from the fear of turkeys crashing through windows, a guilt cramp seized up inside Sam. He had forgotten. "I turned a girl into a mute."

"She probably talked too much anyway." Grace lit a cigarette and passed the pack around. "So are you ordering us a round of Jameson or what?"

"She can't feel her tongue anymore. I sent her into surgery."

"So can you show me how to do that? There's this woman at work, like, a real Chatty-Cathy if you know what I mean—"

Sam hung his head.

Marolene lit a cigarette and perched it between Sam's lips. "Inhale. Repeat. Good. Now what's the matter? Is she that way forever?"

"Not forever," he admitted. "Maybe it's already fixed."

"Is she suing you?"

"Not me personally. But I'll never get another dentistry job again, ever."

"Maybe this is the big sign in the sky: Sam, it's time to try something new."

"But it's all I know."

The words came out quick, as from a dispenser, and only after they were gone did Sam lock up and hear himself. Dentistry – it was college, med school and job for over half of his life, and when his mother met new people in Tarentum she introduced her son as the nice boy at Dr. Caro's. At work he scraped off other people's plaque and flossed out bits of their last meals, and sucked their mouths dry so that they didn't drool on themselves. He offered a wide selection of colored toothbrushes two dozen times a day. He consulted schoolteachers about bad breath.

Marolene rubbed his back. Sam wasn't sure how to respond, as he was so unaccustomed to people touching him, but after a moment realized that she had a nice touch. Her fingertips brushed over his spine and shoulder blades, and to the base of his neck. It relaxed him in a way he had not known since childhood.

"Let's have that whiskey," said Grace. "Knock back your Guinness and see if you remember what I taught you about ordering drinks."

Sam picked up his head and readjusted the cigarette. He felt better already. The bartender even welcomed him to Dublin as he poured the Jameson, and when Sam's turn came around again, the bartender congratulated him for putting away six rounds like a real Irishman. He didn't remember that part until quite later.

They ventured out that afternoon to louder, busier bars and at one point Dublin became a carnival of whooshing lights and storefront music and happy, stumbling people along the O'Connell Street midway who smiled at Sam and his friends. His sense of time was skewed, a mirror in the funhouse, and when Grace and Marolene put their arms across his shoulders he felt younger than he was and seemed to remember the three of them on the riverbank years ago, blue jeans rolled above the ankle, wading in for crayfish together.

Outside the window of the slow green train home, his first day in Ireland kept him company. The boats in Dun Laoghaire bobbed on the water like toys. Inside his head lay an unusual silence, as if he were diving, and all around him pressed a river's weight of emotion that he could not describe to himself; he knew only that it buoyed him up and away from the guilt he had felt before, and carried him toward something new. He stepped off the train with Grace and Marolene in Greystones and walked along the road toward their gray cottage. When they passed the beach Sam spotted a kite resting the sand for the night, reminding him that he was ready to sleep, and when they reached the cottage and Marolene unlocked the door, they promised to fix up the couch for him and then send him to bed. It was late.

A memory swam up. He'd promised to call Mr. Tenner no matter what time of the day or night. Marolene sent him into her bedroom for the phone, and in the room's blue darkness Sam let himself sit down on the foot of the bed while he made the call. In the lighted living room Marolene and Grace were busy. Grace shook out a sheet and laid it across the couch – it smelled so good to Sam, the clean laundry scent wafting into the bedroom. At the table Marolene had the placemats and when Grace looked up the two women smiled at each other. When Marolene saw Sam watching she winked at him.

The phone rang twice.

"Hello?" Mr. Tenner's voice was rough and tired. "Hello? Who is this? Hello?"

Sam coughed.

"Sam, is that you?"

The voice was an intrusion from far away. Sam still watched the two women, transfixed.

"Hey, what the hell's wrong? Did you get to Ireland okay?"

"Yes, I... all..."

A hairline fracture spread across the gentle surface of his voice.

"Sam? Sam?"

Something shook inside Sam, a soft vibration.

"Hey, talk to me."

Mr. Tenner's voice started to fade out, and Sam realized that he had allowed the phone slip down from his ear and rest on his shoulder. The bedroom door framed Marolene and Grace as they rested across from one another at the kitchen table. Sam let out a voiceless sigh and then hung up on the old man. His voice, drowned out and broken by a stronger tide, had left him.

ELI'S TOYSHOP
(A FAIRYTALE)

Thirty years ago, a man retired to open a toyshop near the sea, and one day shortly thereafter, I lost my kite on the seashore and set out in search of a new one. A pair of kite-fliers ranged far up the beach, away from the umbrellas and tiny footprints in the sand, and I walked the distance to ask their advice. I had been stuck in the city for years and was determined to make a good day of this, but already the sun was on its way down and my clothes and hair were stuck to my body, held in place by bracken and sweat. So much for adventure – I was a woman nearing thirty and felt aged by the realization that life was not meant to be surprising.

"Can you tell me where I can purchase a kite?" I asked one of the kite-fliers. She wore a blue bathing suit and heavy white sunscreen on her nose. Wet curls fringed her bathing cap, and when she looked at me, I felt that I was speaking to a 1920s water ballerina. Her husband was broad and heroic.

"Out there," said the wife, and pointed up the beach. I saw nothing but sand diminishing. "To the head."

Her husband's kite began to plummet toward the water, as mine had, but the woman took the string from his hands and restored the kite to the air. They stood with their shoulders touching, and he said something to her that I could not hear. She smiled for him. My presence had made them uncomfortable, or at any rate, I felt as though I watched something not meant for my eyes. I thanked them and started toward the head. I had nothing better to do.

The city where I come from is unworthy of mention. I cannot recall what my home looked like, only glass checkerboard skyscrapers and brick streets outside my window. In my mind all was the same. If I had friends, I cannot find their faces in my memory, and childhood, even then, was too far gone to wish for.

The sun set as I walked. Beyond the dunes lay nothing, only salt marshes, and I saw no one ahead of or behind me. Broken seashells and bits of dead ocean life marked a trail like breadcrumbs along the high-tide line, promising that I would find my way to the head. Sometimes I spotted crabs among the debris, but their color blended with the sand, and when they saw me, the creatures scuttled into their holes. Gulls swooped in the air over the water, crying out in their search for fish.

I had enjoyed talking to the woman and her husband. But realizing that they were long gone, I felt stubborn and angry both at once, and I kept going. Sand kicked out in front of me. The psychology of the uncertain made me doubt. Perhaps the woman had lied to me, perhaps the head was only another quarter-mile, or perhaps it was ten.

After dusk turned into night and the beach got dark, I couldn't see my way. I would not stop; the air became cold and I needed to find a place to spend the night. So as not to wander off into the dunes, I walked in the wet sand and let the sea foam wash over the tops of my feet. When the tide came in, I would be back up to the brine-trail and no higher, but I could not say for sure if the tide was headed in or out. Never had I wanted to be a seafarer, not when solid brick roads were always at my doorstep, but here, alone, I imagined the landless stretches of water, and the frozen oceans in the north, and believed that they were not foreign to me.

I felt that I walked for a long time. Long enough that I felt like a tall extension of the sand, part of the beach, aware of the ocean and of small details among the dunes. My eyes would not adjust to the dark, so this awareness was more intuitive than sight. I might have imagined it. The mind does play tricks on itself. But I believed that I felt the tide going out and leaving a wide, damp beach open to the air. I believed that I felt the wind drying out the stranded seaweed. Salt hardening on seashells. Water soaking quietly down through the sand.

Yet nothing changed in the sky or beach around me, so it was difficult to say for sure – but I also had a sense that I was no longer alone. I felt the pressure of footsteps behind the dunes.

I was afraid. I walked faster and tried to ignore my fear. I hurried along quite well across the sand, having a sense for it, and did not trip or stumble at all for maybe a mile. But there was no walking away from this fear once I was caught in it. The beach's emptiness had completely persuaded me that solitude was not only a comfort but a special kind of knowing, and here I was feeling offended and afraid that another person was nearby. I couldn't stand the thought. It dragged me down. It slowed my pace and wore me out, and finally, all of a sudden, I stopped walking and turned around.

The shells, the seaweed, the drying salt – all of that – drained out of my imagination like water from a bathtub until I was just a woman standing in sand feeling a bit silly for thinking such things. My feet hurt. And now that I listened, I did hear footsteps, irregular ones, struggling up the loose sand on a dune immediately to my right. Someone sounded out of breath.

I backed away toward the water in a hurry, but stopped again.

"Hello?" I said.

The breathing paused. "Hello?"

"Yes, hello – are you following me?"

The sand was a pale color, and against it, I saw a man's outline. He did not seem to have much hair on his head. He wore a short jacket and jeans that were rolled to the middle of his calves.

"No, I didn't know anyone was here," he said. "Do you mind if I walk with you?"

I curled my toes in the sand, then began to back away. I turned again toward the head and started to hurry through the sand.

"Miss?"

I started to run.

"Come back!"

I ran harder. After a few hundred yards I glanced over my shoulder. He followed. I could see him like a shadow, stumbling along through the sand behind me. I pushed myself to go even faster, and glanced again. There he was, not far away but coming no closer, keeping up my same pace although less gracefully.

We ran like that for a long time. I believed that even if I flew as fast as a bird, he would keep up with me. The tide went out as far as it would go. I sensed that I had run into the deepest part of the night and was about to come out on the other side – either into a new day or another night – and here, roughly, I began to feel less afraid of the man. It was not the lessening fear that caused me to perceive a change. Actually the reverse was true. I was tired of going on alone.

I stopped. He ran a few more steps, caught himself, and then stopped too. I waved for him to come closer.

His face was unclear in the dark. He walked toward me, found my hand and shook it, and clung onto it. "Please," he said, "It would be nice having someone to talk to."

His fingers felt damp as if he'd been digging in the sand, and they were terribly cold. I pulled my hand away.

"I suppose I don't mind. But I'm not going anywhere important."

I started to walk again, and the man kept up with me – in fact never strayed more than a few feet. The tide turned and began to come in again, beating against the shore and breaking our conversation into pieces that fit between the waves' noise. In one of the silences he asked me where I was going. I told him about the toy shop.

"People talk about it you know," he said. "They say it's really something. How do you know the way?"

I explained about my kite, and the couple on the beach that afternoon. "It's really nothing. Just a kite. I had this weekend off, and now look at me. Here in the middle of the night, miles from anywhere."

When I shook my head and looked down at my feet, he wiped his hand on the front of his coat, paused, and then patted my shoulder.

"It's okay," he said, "everybody walks off of the edge of the map at some point." He took his hand away and buried both in his pockets. "I'm just as bad. I'm supposed to be in California right now. Now nobody knows where I am."

"California?"

"Yeah. I'm a physisict. For all my colleagues know, I might have fallen into a black hole and into a parallel universe." He laughed. "Maybe I did."

"How did you get out here?"

"Same as you. I just started to walk. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

He looked at me and I nodded, but when I met his eyes he looked downward. In his hesitation he seemed to get annoyed. He took his hands out of his pockets, thrust them back in again, and then flung one arm out toward the dunes.

"There are other people, too," he said. "I haven't run into anyone in a while, but you're not the first I've seen today, you know. When I was on the other side, I saw three others just walking alone somewhere off in that direction—" he continued to wave his arm generally behind us, "but I think they were as lost as I was."

"So?"

"So! It's not right, not at all. You can't have everybody wandering around lost."

"Then why are you mad at me? I didn't put them out there."

"I'm not mad." His hand waved around again, and then he plunged back into his pocket. He seemed to pout. "You sure you know where we're going?"

"The toy shop."

"Right, but specifically."

"I think so."

"Think so? It's cold out. You look cold. We're both cold. Is this really the way to the toy shop?"

I didn't answer him. Instead looked out toward the ocean and imagined it was getting brighter. I wanted to be on a boat, a clean white boat that would bear me out to sea and away from the man. In my mind I held onto the boat's ropes and touched its sails, and braced my legs as I rode over the waves alone— but even as I thought this I felt its impinging smallness, and the loneliness of an open and empty sea.

"Well?" he asked.

"Look, mister, I don't have the map open in front of me. I didn't know you were looking for a navigator. You can trust me or not, but I'm doing the best I can."

After a minute he took off his jacket and handed it to me. It smelled like cinnamon chewing gum and cologne. I put it on and said, "Thank you," which I meant. Strange how you don't notice the cold until you are made warm again. Strange that it takes a second person to notice for you.

"Do you think we're the only ones out here?" he asked.

"On the beach? I haven't seen anyone but you, not since I left the kite-flyers last afternoon." I looked up and down the shoreline and saw no footprints but our own. "How many people did you see on the other side?"

"Maybe half a dozen. It's nothing but a salt marsh and mud."

We both watched the dunes as if someone would stumble across any minute now. We walked as though we knew where we were going.

And then, although we had almost forgotten, he saw the toy shop.

"Look there!"

Beneath our feet the sand coarsened. We walked on pebbles. At a distance the toy shop was little more than a faint light. The light in question was warm and rectangular: a small double-paned window. It hovered a ways off and above me, part of a cottage that sat atop a grassy headland. On the horizon was a vestige of dawn, and against it, smoke rose from the cottage's chimney. The cottage itself perched atop the head, warm and bright in spite of the turmoil beneath it, and waves from all the sea's directions collided against each other and with the great pile of boulders that tailed out into the water.

We walked faster, and then climbed, until we stepped up from the rocks and into the grass. A path was cut. On either side of it were wooden frogs that led to the cottage door. It was the old-fashioned type with strapped-iron hinges and an iron knocker bolted at eye-level.

On the other side I heard the clatter of dinner plates. Hours had passed since my last meal. I knocked. The man and I looked at each other.

"You're coming inside with me, aren't you?" I asked.

"Sure. I'm the expert on kites. Lots of physics."

An old man opened the door. He resembled a carnival midwayman – his shoes gleamed at the hem of tattered cavalry trousers, and beneath a faded jerkin his shirt was starched and pressed. He had an ugly head. His forehead was covered in moles, his earlobes sprouted fur and the bottom lid of one eye was swollen and shiny like the skin of an overripe plum.

He said, "Hello, friends," and offered his hand. "I am Eli."

"I am – I've been traveling a long time, I think." I took his hand. It felt like warm wax. "I'm here to purchase a kite."

"Kites. I have those. Come in."

I stepped across the threshold to his home, unready for the sights within. Shelves jammed the cottage interior. They smelled of raw cedar and housed a jumble of handmade toys: rocking horses, dolls, trains, cap guns, whistles, easels, checkerboards, chessmen, wooden puppies, cowboy boots, hula hoops, suits of armor, fairy wings, yoyos, jacks, dice, marbles, puzzles, goggles, tinker toys, toboggans, telescopes, and yes of course, there in the corner, kites.

Eli led me around the shelves to the kites' corner. They hung from the ceiling, pinned up by tacks, and I saw that he had put them there so he could look at them as he sat at his fire, which threw light on their strings and the nearest shelf of toys.

"Please sit," he said, and guided me into a chair. My legs hurt.

"Does anyone else live here?"

Eli found a ladder and propped it against the corner. "No."

"And you? Do you get many customers?"

"Oh, not many, but always by the pair." He set foot to the rungs and climbed up to the ceiling. "This is a new place. When people know more about it, they'll come from all around."

"It's a long walk."

"Oh yes," he said. He smiled to himself as he unpinned a kite for me. "How's this one?"

"Yellow, all right." I felt comfortable in his home – a combination of its spectacle and my own tiredness. "May we have something to eat?"

"Of course."

He edged down the ladder, and then presented the kite to me. It was almost weightless. The crossbars were shiny wood and hollow like the bones in a bird's wing. Its tail was decorated with paper flowers.

"You like it," he said, and shuffled off among his shelves. I heard pots clank, and more dish clatter.

I reclined in one of two chairs by the fire. They were fine pieces of furniture – varnished and polished and very comfortable. Between them was one ottoman. My friend sat down in the other chair and shared the ottoman with me. I lay my head against the chair's back. It smelled of leather and pipe smoke. Outside the cottage waves pounded, but I was high above them and heard only the normal, peaceful sound of an ocean.

"Are you happy now?" he asked me.

"Are you?"

"Sure I am."

"Then I am, too."

"Roast beef," announced Eli. I heard him pull silverware out of a drawer, and then he shuffled back to the fire and laid a feast on the ottoman: I couldn't see our plates underneath the great pile of sliced meat and peapods and wedges of fruit. Eli handed me a fork.

"I've never eaten so well. How can you get—"

"I can get anything I want. I used to be a king."

"A king," I said, and stuffed my mouth. The meat was delicious. It was the best meat in the world. I did not care if the man was lying.

Eli sat down on the hearth and stirred the fire. "Of a place very far away. But one day I made a very fine boat for just myself, and sailed across the ocean to this place here." He threw another log into the flames and hung the poker on its stand. "Who knows why. Sometimes the loneliness is awful here. It sneaks up in the middle of the day, a beautiful day. Just when you're expecting to have a fine time weeding the garden, or making soup. And then you feel quite alone and it's all you think about all day. It ruins everything." He closed the fire grate. "But then, you get visitors."

"Where's the boat?" My mouth was full of peas.

"Here," said Eli, "in the toys. In every one of them."

I looked around at the shelves, and imagined the toys upon the ocean, covered in barnacles and salt – the jack-in-the-box cresting a wave, and the sailboat tumbling until its sails were limp and wet.

My dish was almost empty. I had gorged myself. Now that the food was gone I saw the plate. Like the chairs, it seemed to come from a better household. Whatever Eli said, I still imagined him in a boat alone – no, myself in a boat alone – and I was struck with fear. I thought of the salt marshes with wandering people and believed that sailing alone would be like that, only worse. Horrible. Waking and sleeping in the same small space with no one to talk to, and seeing no face except yours. I put down my fork. My friend set aside his plate and crossed his hands over his stomach, and Eli rubbed his face and nodded at us both. The three of us had all gone quiet, and the only sound in the room was from the fireplace.

We stayed together in the toyshop for a long time.

STRANGER AT THE GATES

Two years after graduation, Raymond returned to the office of Professor Owen Warner looking like a refugee. The faculty wing's lighting was as foreign as a seascape. Eggshell-blue artwork blocked out impressions on the wall, and potted plants softened corners in the front lounge. It made Raymond feel shaggy and sad. He looked around at the office doors, disappointed that he had forgotten whose was whose.

Two female students came into the wing, loud and laughing. They saw Raymond at the same time. The attractive one, a short brunette with a heavy bookbag, gave him a territorial look and sat down on the couch with her back to him.

"Excuse me," he said. The laughter died out. "Is this Owen Warner's door?" He put his hand on the one that seemed most familiar.

The attractive girl ignored him, but her friend nodded. Raymond felt warmer; he had expected to find that Owen had been killed in a car accident or, more subtly, been struck down in his prime by a brain tumor. At least it wouldn't have surprised him. His experiment in poverty had not worked out for him; he intended to live a life that his mother could bail him out of if necessary – one that was supposed to give him a taste of gritty life – but he instead ended up sick without insurance, poor without support, and less creative than he had been when he left college.

Raymond tucked his only collared shirt into his jeans and wiped his hands on it, then tapped on Owen's door. He had felt a little touch of welcome every time he'd entered the faculty wing to do homework, especially if Owen's door was open and the office was silent, which meant he was working quietly and would be open to a conversation.

A trickle of snot gathered on his upper lip, which he smeared away with his sleeve. He knocked a second time, louder. The autumn after graduation, Raymond moved to rural Louisiana to be poor and independent. He'd not spoken to anyone from home, even his mother, in seventeen months. Instead, he hauled shingles up ladders six days a week, returned to a one-room apartment and went to bed in a sleeping bag, and on Sundays, drank too hard and picked fights. He'd never taken a punch in the face until last year, but now his nose was crooked as a hockey player's. When he'd had enough, he caught a bus home. The first thing he discovered was that his mother had moved away. Raymond had begun to search, to make the first panicky tracking calls that revealed how much things had changed while he was gone.

Owen was not around. He pressed his hand to the door and let it rest there for a moment, as if he could leave some trace of himself for Owen to find. A scrap of warmth, a palm print for later.

The pressure of all the places he'd been made the faculty wing seem smaller. The rest of the world and all his troubles had crumpled it up into a compact space. He held back another sniffle. A wall of mail slots had been added on the far wall; Raymond went to it and sifted through the papers until he found a flyer that didn't look important, and on the back of it wrote, *Owen, can you please meet me in the Underworld Café tonight at 8? I'm back in town and I need a lot of—* he stopped, erased and rewrote: *I really need to see you, and it's kind of urgent. Raymond B.* He read the message to himself, then spelled out his last name, Bandy. Then added *Class of 98*. Before he slid the note under the door, he realized that Owen might see only the printed side of the flyer and throw it away, so he Xed out the information on the front and drew an arrow to flip the sheet over.

The two students had been quiet all this time. He felt like he should apologize. They sat together on the couch, backs of their head to him. The attractive one had a book in her lap and her friend scribbled words in a small notebook. Raymond's friends were somewhere, just like his mother was somewhere, and it made him feel irrelevant – a second-thought that had flown up from a dark space in the mind. He left the students to their work, and heard their conversation resume as the door swept shut behind him.

*

The first night after Raymond had returned from winter holiday, senior year, he had coffee with Owen at the Underworld Café. It was the first time they met outside of class. Raymond remembered putting a lot of thought into his outfit – it had to be casual but tasteful, maybe a little avant-garde, enough to imply that he was a more colorful person away from campus. Then there was the matter of conversation. In case things didn't get rolling from the get-go, he prepared a funny anecdote, partially true, an argument for the importance of Hemingway's early novels, and some recommendations for restaurants around the city of Pittsburgh.

Raymond used none of them. He and Owen talked about ex-girlfriends and what their parents had gotten them for Christmas. "I love Christmas stockings," said Raymond, "because you always forget about them. When you think all the presents are gone, oops! There's a few more!" He remembered thinking, while he spoke, My God, Owen's actually into this.

That last semester, things got crazy in school and at home – he still had a slew of college requirements to finish, and after three years of separation, Raymond's parents finally got a divorce. He didn't have coffee with Owen again. Most weekends he drove home to be with his mother. His house was quiet and boring. Everything was just so; the rugs on the kitchen floor were always shaken clean, the bathroom floor always vacuumed. Raymond made a lot of coffee and tried to talk to his mother about Hemingway, but she would just smile at him from among her dyed black curls, then turn her head to light another cigarette.

*

Oakland was Pittsburgh's college neighborhood, the kind of place that bounced students on its knee and gave them liquor for breakfast. The streets were full of neon and trash, human or otherwise, and kept its storefronts in a steady stream of come and go. Its pulse came in nine-month bursts, then altered itself enough to welcome new blood and make the old feel as if it was time to move on.

The Underworld Café was still along the main drag, but the whiteboard of specials had been replaced by a permanent sign with a stylized Pluto and Persephone logo. It was backlit with a black light; how very chic. Inside, half the tables were occupied and there was a line at the counter. The clock read half-past seven; Owen had thirty minutes if he was going to show.

"A coffee," Raymond told the man at the register. The word sounded like something strangled. He cleared his throat hard. Ever since he'd crossed into Pennsylvania again, a knot had tightened in his throat and it would make his words come out tearfully if he spoke too quickly. He used to get away with being weepy, and had never shrugged off the impulse. Blame it on sensitivity, or on being raised by a mourner-for-hire (his mother had many black dresses and could cry on command), or even the climate. Pittsburgh was a wet place. Tears came easier here. He even cried at his high school graduation – not like a wuss, just a few manly drops that left dark speckles on the front of his robe. He cried for his mother when she was sad, even when she had enough tears to keep herself busy for weeks. *Expressive*, that was his family's word for itself. *Volatile* was another good one.

Before his parents had split, their family vacation game was the dictionary hunt; Raymond would sit in the back seat and pick out adjectives for each person in the car, starting with A, and the winner was whoever had the most words when they pulled into the hotel lot.

In the first months after his father left, Raymond did his schoolwork in the living room while his mother chain-smoked through a pack of cigarettes and drank entire bottles of straight club soda. After *The Wheel of Fortune*, she'd turn off the TV and slip on her sequined Vanna White heels, then sit in the recliner with the dictionary in her lap. "*Outré*, Ray, what do you think of *outré*? Do I 'violate convention or propriety'?" If he got up for another liter of club soda from the refrigerator, and put it in a glass for her, she would usually stop the game and just sit in silence until *Night Court* at nine-thirty.

Raymond forgot about the game until he boarded the bus to Louisiana, the first autumn after college graduation. He took three books with him – *The Hobbit, Imajica,* and *The Stand.* Every time he found a word that he remembered from old rounds of the dictionary game, he gave himself a point. When he got to Baton Rouge, he had twenty-one points. He found a bar and knocked back twenty-one shots, and every time he threw up in the restroom sink, that was another few ounces of his old life out of him. That was a bad night, a final bow to college parties and all the lonely years that had gone before, and then the gates closed on his boyhood.

Raymond settled into a window table with his coffee. Owen had fifteen minutes before he was late. He went to the restroom to kill time. He had a coughing fit in front of the mirror, and he watched his forehead and neck flush with the effort of pushing up phlegm. That kind of thing was supposed to go straight into a jar for medical examination – he'd had pleurisy for a while, and no money to see a doctor – but as long as there was no blood in it, he was all right. In his pocket he kept a sandwich bag of roots that were supposed to help out with the pleurisy. They tasted like shit and dirt, but he was still alive. He went back to the table and washed the last fibers down with coffee.

Coffee – caffeine – was what made Raymond like Owen in the first place. He was the only professor that brought a whole coffee pot to class with him, and was willing to share with students. They got to be friends at the same time Owen's girlfriend moved out of the house, taking the coffee maker with her, and Raymond was quick to buy him a replacement. He didn't wrap it like a gift, but he stuck an index card in the box that said, *This machine is better than your ex because it will make you coffee every morning and won't bitch if you don't call.* Owen liked it. In fact, when Raymond came to Owen's office the next day, he saw the index card tacked on the wall next to his photographs.

Eight o'clock, no Owen. Raymond was casual – he propped his feet on the opposite chair, watched the people go by, scratched his neck in such a way as to require the turn of his chin towards the clock. He finished his coffee. No money for another, but he kept putting the mug to his lips to look like he was doing something. The cough came back to him, a wet hacking fit, short but gross. People glanced. Raymond got another root from his sandwich bag and tried to pretend it was soft and sweet, a brownie from the dessert case. But he chewed down on it many times, more than if it was a brownie. Shit and dirt, make no mistake.

And then Owen arrived. He pushed open the door, a bit of a smile on his face as he looked around for the Raymond who'd once discussed Christmas presents with him. How young he looked for forty-two. How nicely he was dressed, how carelessly comfortable. A few books were tucked under his arm. Raymond already knew that Owen had brought them for him.

As he sat up to catch Owen's attention, Raymond remembered that his last shower was in the Baton Rouge bus station. It was a detached calculation to count the days, something that was too late to change. Owen spotted him. His smile widened, but already a curtain was materializing in the space between them, a heavy fabric of change that made Raymond scared for his voice, scared that his words might be lost in its thickness. By the time Raymond grasped Owen's hand, it was in place and Raymond feared that only a departure could bring it down again.

Owen had a firm shake. "Where've you been all these years? Africa?"

"Here and there in the States," said Raymond. "I thought I might try to write about kitschy tourist stops for a while."

"You get anything published lately?"

The question jarred Raymond. "Nothing lately. Are you getting coffee?"

"Right, right. I brought these books for you to look at – give me a minute, and then I can't wait to hear what you've been reading." He put the books in Raymond's hands and went to the counter.

Raymond hadn't choreographed that version of a conversation. He tried to think of a way to bridge from books to poverty. The novels on the table were all matte-finish paperbacks with aesthetic photographs: either pastels or black and white, ever so slightly out of focus, blended with creative typography. Raymond stared at them and felt his sinuses tingle with a warning of tears. He'd bought books like that by the dozen for college courses but had not set foot in a bookstore since.

Owen brought back a coffee extravaganza, a cup full of chocolate swirls and steamed milk. The café tables were small and when Owen sat down, Raymond felt as if they were too close together.

"Fancy tastes these days," said Raymond, suddenly feeling desperate. "Did tenure make you sell out on practicality?"

Owen assumed it was a joke. "What do you mean? You got me started on these things." He took a sip, pushed the mug aside and tapped the books. "So have you read any of these?"

"None of those." Raymond hesitated. "Ever read *The Hobbit*?"

"Not a genre man, myself. Don't you remember your lessons? No genre in the English Department. Plotless things only. God, how you used to bitch about that." He laughed, but it seemed to catch in the curtain between them. "No luck with the literary journals, then?"

"Not yet. I haven't had a lot of time to write. With all the traveling, you know."

"Really, where?"

Raymond cleared his throat. "In the Deep South." He looked at Owen's face for the reaction. The Bible Belt was boring stuff to people who spent summers in Milan. But there must have been some memory of comfort between the two of them, because Owen's smile faded in a sympathetic way. Raymond felt as if he had almost brought the conversation to where it needed to be. "Actually, I lived there for a long while. Worked."

"Anything interesting?"

Raymond saw his chance to bridge. "Roofing." He had forgotten to clear his throat. The word came out mangled. "Seventeen months. I got sick. That's why I'm back."

The curtain between them stirred but held. Owen propped his elbows on the table and gave a little shrug.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. You need to get experience, test your bounds, that sort of thing."

The tingling in his sinuses returned. Raymond rubbed the bridge of his nose, hoping to draw attention to its new angle.

"Yes but I'm feeling it a big rough right now. A little. You know? I guess I just want to hear somebody say they remember me."

The couple at the next table got up and put on their coats. As they left, Raymond felt that he'd just been given some much-needed privacy. He leaned over Owen's books and gave the other man his best non-confrontational smile.

"My mother left town. I went to my old house and some guy with an oxygen tank lived there. The whole place smelled like arthritis creme." His elbows were on the table; his knee was bouncing up and down but he couldn't stop it. "Do you have a few dollars to lend? Just enough for a down-payment on an apartment, nothing fancy, so I can have a permanent address. I swear I'll pay it back before Christmas."

The thing about Owen's smile was that when it disappeared, it went in a big way.

"You don't know where she went?"

"No. The bitch left me." Raymond cursed. "I didn't mean that. I love my mother. Both of my parents, actually, but really her." Raymond knew what he looked like, clamped around the edge of the table like a binder clip. "It's my fault, you know. I didn't call her while I was gone. Not once. I wanted to be alone, you know? Now I'm sick, and poor as hell, and I know I smell like bus upholstery. Sorry for that."

Owen pulled his books into a stack on his side of the table.

"First, relax." He pushed his mocha over to Raymond. "Then we'll see."

*

Owen's car smelled like Old Spice air-freshener and cigarette smoke. Raymond had never figured him for a smoker, but the smell took him back to his mother's living room and those first evenings after his father was gone. It was not nearly as thick in

Owen's car, but enough to take his memory backwards and hold it there. She had stopped wearing the Vanna White heels after two months, but she kept on smoking. "You could pave a road with the tar in your lungs," his Aunt Carrie told her on the phone. Raymond kept the mouthpiece of his bedroom phone unscrewed so that he could listen to incoming calls without being heard. Most of the time it was just Aunt Carrie checking in from Philadelphia, but once in a while his father would call. On those nights, so rare, Raymond would hunch beside his bed and crush the phone to his ear, listening for some cloud of old memories to drift through his mother's voice. Sometimes he would smoke a cigarette while his parents talked to each other, as if a taste of his mother's habit could uncover something hidden.

On the way out of the Underworld Café, another hacking fit had sent Raymond back to his sandwich bag of roots, and they were now barely keeping his from another spectacle in the car. His breathing sounded wet. He rolled down the window for air.

"Hospital?" asked Owen.

"Only after I find my mother and her insurance plan again."

He looked over from the wheel. "St. Benedict's takes charity cases."

"I don't think I fit their stereotype of charity." Raymond stuck his head out the window. The rush of air around his face made him laugh. "A shower first! And a meal!" He laughed harder.

When they got back to Owen's house, the windows were dark. The whole neighborhood was on the small side of rich – little yards that cost a lot, little cars with model numbers instead of names, all parked on the street in front of little houses that rented for $2000 a month or more. Raymond and his friends had made fun of compacted cash two years ago, but now the street felt like fairyland.

"You still live alone?" Raymond asked.

Owen pulled the keys from the ignition. "Yeah. Women are expensive roommates."

Owen climbed the steps to his front door. The sound of his keys in the lock made Raymond smile; they seemed to play a little jingle about home. The door opened into a living room that was bright even in the darkness. It was driftwood-colored, spiced by Chinese wall hangings and statues of Hindu gods whose foreignness made the room more welcoming. Owen turned on a small lamp by the couch, and Raymond almost started to cry right there. For years of sitting in Owen's office, trying to piece together a story of his life from the pictures and candlesticks on his shelves, and finally it was all here in front of him, a whole environment saturated with personality.

"Get a shower?" asked Owen.

He accepted a clean shirt and a towel from Owen and let himself be led to the bathroom. For all his desire to act as normal as he used to be, Raymond still felt like a lumbering animal in this fine place.

*

It was only after Raymond emerged from his shower, clean and pink from water and steam, that he began to cough again. The small bathroom couldn't accommodate the noise. It rattled off the tiled floor and bounced against the mirror. Raymond bent double over the tub's edge, on a whim that he could somehow make the sound and phlegm both go down the drain.

Owen knocked on the door. Raymond was dimly aware that he was supposed to say he was going to be all right. Instead of words, however, mucus filled his mouth. He spit in the tub. There was a thread of blood. Raymond laid his cheek against the damp porcelain and closed his eyes. Come in, he thought, and please, please help. The last time he felt this way was when he came home during finals week, senior year, to spend two days vomiting in the white wastebasket his mother saved for sickness. This was after she had started working funerals, and she had enough money to stay home with him most every day. He had laid shirtless in bed, his stomach full of nausea and not much else. "My beautiful boy looks so sad," his mother told him, and pulled the wastebasket out from under his chin. "You'll be better soon."

Through his coughs Raymond heard the door open. Owen knelt on the floor beside him. Raymond kept coughing hard, then he was gagging himself until he pitched over to the toilet and threw up. He saw blood and food, and before he could stop himself, tears were falling into the water, too. He clung to the toilet seat and shook.

His mind fled from the mess that was his body and went roaming. He couldn't imagine where his mother was in the world, or even in she might still don a black dress for strangers' funerals. That was the most desperate thought he'd had in weeks, the scrape for an image, something to turn into yet another destination. He could get by so long as he knew where the bus was going. There was pressure on his back that drew him in; it was Owen's hand. His thoughts tried to scrabble away.

He was on the bus again, headed north through Tennessee. A book was propped against his leg. He'd forgotten how to let a story take him away. Trees swept past the window; he stared at the blur. All this time, the wish to be sheltered in his own home had grown so strong that he could taste it in the back of his mouth – it was stronger even than the adventurer in him. When he arrived at last, and stood at the side door where he used to prop his bike, the house's face had changed enough to make him feel unwelcome. The smell of arthritis creme wafted out with the baseball game on TV, around the old bald man with the oxygen tank. "Who?" he demanded. "Who you looking for?" And Raymond shouted his mother's name at the man who was nearly deaf, over and over he repeated it to someone just as clueless and bewildered as he. "Who you looking for? Who?"

Owen pressed harder on Raymond's back. The mess was flushed clean. His throat hurt from coughing and vomiting and crying, and his whole body felt sucked dry like a raisin. The hand on his back rested there, as if to keep Raymond's thoughts pinned in one safe place for now. He lifted his face from the toilet. He saw Owen's face as it could have been twenty years ago; he imagined it covered in stubble and dirt. But the image did not easily remain. If it had ever been that way, the things between then and now had washed the grit away. A fresh journey brimmed inside of Raymond and warmed his naked skin, and all the while the hand on his back lent its weight to a new push.

WINGS FOR A LONELY WOMAN

The absence of finality is the reign of necessity. Things have causes and not ends.
— Simone Weil

It was the summer of dying children. Five in four weeks – it made all the local newspapers and one of the major papers downtown. The obituaries ran as usual, but after the fifth death an editor at a city desk decided to run them all again, five of them side-by-side on the front page of the paper, below the children's photographs. None of the deaths were related. One toddler drowned in the river; another died mysteriously in the night. A seven-year-old boy was caught in a burning apartment; a nine-year-old boy died of asthma. An eleven-year-old girl was crushed along the road when a semi lost its load of steel coils. The news story sensationalized the events: underneath each photograph was printed in block letters, "DEAD." Beneath it the subtitle read, "A Grieving Small Town Asks, 'Why?'"

Everyone knew why. Give a tragedy to a town of a thousand people, and expect every one of them to know why. The question is insidious. You'll hear from neighbors stories of irresponsible parents, from doctors about asthma, from residents that trucks drive too quickly on small country roads. An old evangelist might see the last days at hand, and on weekends sell one-dollar rosary beads from a box, a last chance for salvation in the Lord's Prayer. But no one is wrong. They will argue their point without mercy, as if more was at stake than just an idea.

One such woman lived in a green and white Tudor house at the end of Merson Road.

Her name was Josie Hauser. She was digging in her butterfly garden when she first saw the newspaper story. The paperboy tossed it into the grass next to her and kept on riding up the street, past Alicia Miller's house, and over the hill towards town. Josie watched him ride, wishing that he would come back and talk to her, but the bicycle crested the hill and disappeared. She put down her trowel, carried the paper to the patio, and opened it up wide on the picnic table.

Alicia Miller had lost her daughter in the truck accident two weeks ago, and sometimes at night Josie looked out from the attic of her house where she slept to Alicia's house, and saw lights long after the other neighborhood families had gone to sleep. During these times Josie was filled with a private longing to help the other woman in her grief, and often she passed hours at the window imagining ways that she could step into a life and improve it. For when she was twelve she had prayed to God to make her into somebody's guardian angel.

She believed very much in miracles and kept a Bible at the breakfast table for as long as she was married, even though she was not a Jesus woman. (God and His host angels in Heaven were far more concrete than any preacher that died on earth two thousand years ago.) And ever since she was a child she wondered if perhaps God had made a slight mistake – that when He had gone to Create himself an angel, He had gotten distracted and ended up giving her a human body with all its human shortcomings, the very least of which were hiccups and menopause. So her prayer went for years, "Dear God in Heaven, please fix Your mistake. I want very much to be returned to who You meant me to Be." The "Be" was especially important to her; in her fifty years on earth she believed that something beyond her power hindered her from living her life to its potential, that at any moment a furious rush of God's glory might sweep into her limbs and she could carry on as planned.

She waited a long time for an answer, and then the children began to die.

Josie got up from her patio and went inside to the kitchen. Like the rest of her house, its spare shelves accommodated gaudy, lacquered angels that she and her husband had collected together. The house was littered with unfolded cardboard boxes of every size, which her husband had bought just before his death, into which he had hoped to pack their unnecessaries and move into a smaller home. But then he was dead, and Josie decided that she liked the house as it was. She inhabited only small corners of it: her bedroom was in the attic, her hairdryer in one small bathroom on the second floor, and of course, her very important sewing things, which were kept in disorder throughout the kitchen. She opened cabinets looking for food – any kind of delicacy to give to Alicia. There were no cookies or boxes of candy or special breads, but in the freezer was a discus of pie dough that Josie had been saving. She wrapped it up with a jar of maraschino cherries and set out to properly introduce herself to Alicia.

The country outside the town was spread-out farmland, and Josie walked for a quarter mile past a fenced pasture until she came to the Miller's driveway. She pulled a few yellow flowers out of the grass alongside the road and tied them to the handle of her gift bag. The driveway was long; to either side were rows of petunias that had not been weeded since the daughter died. Both garage doors were closed and on the house, so were the windows. Josie rang the doorbell and waited under the eaves.

A television turned off upstairs, and a moment later she heard footsteps. The bolt clicked and the front door opened, and Josie looked at Alicia through the screen door.

"Who are you?" Alicia asked. She had a long, square face and drab hair. Behind her, a child ran across the hallway into another room.

Josie held out the gift bag. "We're neighbors. Sometimes your daughter and her friends played at my house."

"What do you want about Bridget?"

"Actually I came about you. This is for you – pie stuff."

Alicia took the bag and looked her up and down. Josie was in her new tapered jeans, clean white sneakers and a beige windbreaker. Her hair was styled and sprayed in place.

"I don't need food," said Alicia. "This house is nothing but food these days."

"Is there something else? I think I've got other things at home – a few cigarettes, some blankets, maybe an extra thing of laundry detergent..."

"No, thank you. I do appreciate your sympathy." Alicia reached to the side of the door and set down the bag. She seemed tired, and spoke in a rehearsed way. "Mom?" The child Josie had seen returned the hallway, now accompanied by his twin brother. Even when they and their older sister visited her backyard to play Josie could never tell them apart.

"I can take care of the boys if you ever need me to," said Josie. "Or if you need anything from town I was just on my way–"

"Really, no, everything is fine here." The other woman smiled unhappily and added, "Maybe not 'fine.' Anyway, goodbye."

"Goodbye—"

Alicia began to close the door.

"—but you know, I had over fifteen years of child care experience in my day, and I just adore your little boys, and can even let out their hems 'cause I bet they grow fast—"

"My husband and I are all set, thanks."

"—and it's real lonely sometimes now that my husband is gone—"

"I'm sorry about that," said Alicia, and shut the door.

Josie felt herself standing alone. She had not given her name to Alicia. On the other side of the door she heard her talking to the boys – Sam and Sean? Sean and Scott? – and walking up the stairs again. Josie waited until the television came on again, searched the upstairs windows for a face, and seeing none, turned back down the driveway. When she reached the road she picked a few more yellow flowers for herself and headed for town. She did not know what she needed, but she had informed Alicia that the town was her next stop and wanted to give a consistent impression in case someone was watching.

It was a mile from Alicia's house to the town, and Josie always took her time walking.

She picked apart her bouquet of yellow flowers and dwelled on her discomfort, which felt more like impatience. There was nothing in her head but good intentions. She asked herself, if Alicia couldn't see that, where were her eyes? On either side of the road the grass was full of loud insects and many of the smaller ones flew out to inspect Josie's hair. She swatted her hands around but could not chase them away – in fact some of them landed and crawled in – and very soon she felt sorry for herself because she did not deserve to be harassed.

"Dear Lord, damn it," she prayed, "here is what I mean: I feel like I should be able to help Mrs. Miller, just by wanting her to be helped. Real humans don't feel this way, I'm quite sure of it. I am very certain that I am meant to Be an angel of Yours. Will You please notice soon?"

In matters of faith, Josie liked to think of herself as a giant child and believed that the Lord paid more attention to prayers that sounded young, even if they contained an occasional obscenity.

Placed on this path, her mind was fixed here for the rest of her journey, and it tacked on several more prayers: first for her butterfly garden, which had beetles. Second for the blister on her toe, and then for the angel figurine she had dropped and broken last week. She began to feel better. Care for inanimate things came easily. If hurt or broken they could be prayed for once and then be all right; and even if they stayed broken forever Josie was still sure that the Lord had heard and was sympathetic. Inanimate things absorbed prayers – not like people.

She prayed anyway. Aside from her prayers she had other stock sets of words that she felt were adequate to describe herself in the world, and as she put it, God made her to mend things. Regarding the parents of other dead children, Josie knew what could be done:

There was Rea Jackson, whose son had died of asthma, and she had stapled pictures of him onto a hundred telephone poles and sent a dozen letters to the *New York Times* requesting a place for his obituary. She ended all conversations, "Don't forget about my boy." This case was easy. Somebody obviously needed the throw the woman a parade. And there was John Delarma, whose girl had drowned. Flowers made him mad and he shot arrangements off of a 2x4 in his backyard until there was nothing left but shredded petals in the grass, and if you brought more to his door, he'd turn the gun on you. Anybody with half a brain could see, it was the empty sympathy he objected to. To show up to his door in the dead of night crying would convey a more sincere bereavement. And in the apartment over the bakery lived Velma, who had been far too old to have children anyway, and in the weeks after her son's mysterious death in the night she became ridden with guilt and stabbed herself in the shoulder with a ten-inch hand punch, and then refused medical attention. The town had been too critical for too long, and it was too late to make amends. This woman needed a one-way ticket to the eastern seaboard and a salt-bitten house at the end of the journey.

Finally there was the Taglateglia family, the churchy ones who had lost both a boy and an apartment in the fire. They blamed themselves, not God, for leaving matches by the grill. People who offered condolences agreed later that while the Taglateglias were very kindly on the surface, there was something beneath the kindness that left an ugly imprint on the conversation. It was not long before they were avoided. Josie did not love them either. Their relationship with their rosaries was only a skeleton of the incomprehensible exclusivity of their belief in God, and the one time she tried to explain that her beliefs were different, they only said, "We'll pray for you." This was at the church the day her husband was buried.

But Alicia – Josie felt this grief in a different place. It sheared off sections of her mind that had given her comfort until now. It had an edge so sharp that its cuts might throb for years before they bled, inflicted so close that she couldn't imagine where the repairs should begin, if repairs were needed. No, Alicia was a different story altogether, this strange woman that had dropped from the newspapers into Josie's recursively looping thoughts. With each pass through her mind Alicia acquired more, just *more*, like a woman swooping through a dressing room – and who is to say where she began her circuit? By now Alicia Miller had all the bangles of a true diva, earrings of lost memories and bracelets of sharp thoughts. She was a stranger, and she could hold all the accessories a wandering mind could heap upon her. Josie had never truly seen the plain face beneath, and would not as long as she loved Alicia for her pain.

"Lord," Josie prayed on the road, "understand that I know her, I just know her." She passed the bend where Alicia's daughter had been killed, and knew it was the place because the multi-ton steel coils had left divots in the grass. They were dark and ragged as claw marks, and Josie could feel that nearby a soul had recently torn loose and risen. She whispered, "Bless the dead, and the dead's mom, too."

Insects harried her for the rest of her walk, and she was happy when she came to the hill that took her into the town. Its boundaries began tentatively, first with the community center and its ragged volleyball field, and then a few hundred yards farther down the hill, two more buildings sat together: the gas station and an air conditioner shop. The town began in earnest after that. White clapboard apartment buildings piled atop one another up the side of the hill facing the river, and among them steep green yards displayed bird feeders and plastic lawn ornaments. At street level two young men washed their trucks. The road was wet for several feet around them, and younger children stayed close wearing swimming trunks, waiting for one of the boys to turn the hose in their direction. A girl leaned in the doorway with her telephone, and two more girls stayed closer to the trucks, being at the age when the attention of older boys was important. But this was not a town of children. Farther up the road a circle of adults stood outside of the rectory talking to the priest who sat in the shadows of his porch. These adults were almost as insistent as the girls, except it was the priest's attention that was important to them. He drank his Coca-Cola and felt eager for them to mind their own business.

Josie decided that she would go to the craft store and buy some glue to repair her broken angel. She crossed the street to avoid the circle of adults. It bothered her that they would be so social about their religion, and if they recognized her from the church they would want to pull her into their gossip ring – and since the childrens' deaths the gossip had been bolder than she could stomach. The things they said about Alicia were untrue. They said she was dealing with tragedy so well because she favored her boys, that if she had lost the twins she would have gone as crazy as the other parents in the town. Their permanent social hour repulsed the sensible streak in her that her husband had nourished so tenderly for so many years. She felt silly even waving hello to the gossipers.

She did look at the church. Red brick, white steeple – it was very quaint. A backlit message board on its front lawn said, God Also Lost a Son. Josie had been inside this church before, and knew that when the schoolchildren were not flocked inside for the mandatory Friday Mass, its silence was voluminous and unnatural. She rarely attended. She had the car as an excuse – she didn't drive, the walk was far, and no, she did not want anyone to drive out and fetch her. Religion took up very subtle and broad portions of her mind, yet the church did not feel like the house of God because it was too flawless; and only once, when her husband was first dead, was Josie able to sit down on a pew and acknowledge that the architecture and stained glass windows took on more meaning when you were unhappy. But she preferred to stay away. She would get her craft things and go home, before any of the gossipers could catch her.

The craft store was called Camerlo's and it shared the building with a scuba shop. In one half of the front window were naked tailor's mannequins, and in the other half they all wore oxygen tanks. No one in the town, including Josie, really noticed.

As she walked into the craft store her first thought was that the dirty floor was peaceful and honest. The man at the register needed a shower, but he had worked there for years and by now Josie assumed that he didn't get any cleaner. There stood only one other customer in the store – a regular, a woman turning the button rack by the door. She had been old and angry for as long as Josie had known her, but she made beautiful wedding dresses. Josie navigated through the racks of thread and fabric to the art supplies on the back wall, and found her glue.

"Making curtains again, Miz Hauser?" the man asked.

She put the glue and two short stacks of quarters on the counter. "Something along those lines, maybe. Just thought I'd come in and see what's fresh in here."

The man rang up the glue. "Sorry Miz Hauser. The only new thing I have is that bit of indoor-outdoor carpeting. The church group women say it's super for scrubbing pots."

She picked up a spool of blue thread and when she realized it was in her hand, she picked up another. "Oh, I'm so happy they cook," she said, suddenly. She put the two spools next to each other on the counter, and took a sharper look at the reds. "Cooking is such an underestimated act of creation. You know, I'll take some of that too."

"This?" The man put his hand on the roll of carpeting.

"Sure, why not."

After a half-dozen spools, Josie noticed the dress patterns. It had been so long since she made a whole dress – or as she put it to herself, so long since the last construction of a graceful, swaying assemblage of fabric. She selected four and laid them on the counter: the models' colored-pencil bodies wore the designs well, even on the faded envelopes.

"Four yards of that one and six of the baby blue calico," said Josie. "Oh, and buttons, how could I almost have forgotten the buttons?" The old woman, Mrs. Mann, stepped back to make way for Josie. "What do you think of these buttons?" Josie asked. Brown buttons – anchor buttons – buttons hand painted with chickadees. The idea of buttons really appealed to her.

"Don't those patterns take zippers?" Mrs. Mann asked knowledgeably.

"Zippers, buttons, snaps..." Josie slid a row of button cards off of its spindle and caught them in her other hand. "I suppose it depends on your mood."

She paid for the lot. Packed up, there were six bags at a few pounds each. The man, the nice man, called his friend on Main to give Miz Hauser a ride out of town. She had become excited about her purchases in the same way that people were excited about babies, all charm in the potential. Josie thanked him and left, and as she walked past the outside display window, she saw Mrs. Mann glance up at her from behind the glass.

Returned to her home, her focus returned. It came like a soft swell of air bringing her earthbound again, down through other gusts of wind until she was deposited in a ring of paper bags next to her attic bed, feet tied into her sneakers once more. There was the Singer and its little wooden cabinet, and there, her potted violet on the sill. The breeze coming in smelled like grass clippings that mingled with the deeper smell of the woods nearby. The attic was silent under its dust. Josie sat down on the bed. A bag was between her feet and she looked into it.

"Dear, dear Lord," she said, and bent over to get the fabric. She rifled around for the dress patterns next. No, none of them would do. They had been a bad idea. She looked out the window and up the road. Maybe Alice could use a dress. Who knew what size she really wore? These women these days, Josie thought – forever stuffing themselves into girdles and control tops. She dropped the patterns into the bag again. "I didn't mean to reject you, God bless," she said to the colored-pencil woman on the topmost envelope, and then picked her up again and set her gently on the bed.

The broken ceramic angel sat in pieces on the dresser. At the bottom of the farthest bag was Josie's glue, and she set about repairing it. Looking at the angel, her sadness came upon her again. She even began to weep a little. She pulled one of her husband's hankies out of her purse and rubbed it back and forth under her nose. It was the big blue one, the one he used to tie around his head when he cut grass, and thoroughly softened by years of laundering. It smelled like a dryer sheet. Sometimes Josie wished she could work half as hard as he had – but there was a time when she was a child, and then years later after he died, where this regret hung back, dwarfed by the expectation that God would finally sweep her out of this wrong life and let her begin with the real work.

The real work: it must be harder than lawn mowing and window washing. It could call her at any hour light or dark, and she must be willing to listen although it would show her only people in pain – but it would not be awkward; it would be dynamic and beautiful because she was not a helpless human, she was a guardian angel, inheritor of the power of Michael and Gabriel, and to touch would be to repair. Even in cases where a mother's mind could not move from her daughter's death, where the imagination paints a moment when massive steel coils topple end-over-end until they meet with a frightened, soft body by the roadside, and ruin it, even here would a guardian angel's concern be felt and accepted.

She wrapped a rubber band around the angel to hold her wings on while the glue dried, and then went outside again.

On the other side of her flower bed, a path led into the woods – she and her late husband used to mow it so that it was wide enough for them to walk side by side, and even two years after his death it was overgrown but not impossible to navigate. It led a little ways back through some crabapple trees. On the other side of the crabapple trees was a broken foundation where she liked to sit and think when she was upset.

"Dear Lord Up There," she said, and cast around for words. An ant hurried out from between the rocks, and then disappeared into a patch of mayapples. "I'm still waiting, you know. Just FYI. I feel this little tingly feeling in my shoulders, and I wonder if that is where my wings would go if you decided to give them to me. Or, actually, hold the wings – I just need the power. I know where it goes, it's just not there."

When she decided that the prayer was finished she stared hard at the sky. Typically Pennsylvanian: gray, depthless, bright. If you looked closely you might find a patch of washed-out blue. A bird landed in the branches, then flew away. Josie waited; she felt more than ever that if she waited today, listened very hard, something would happen. That if she went back to Alicia's, a solution from Above would dawn on her. That if she went back to Alicia's—

Yes, she would go back. Josie stepped over the mayapples and trudged back to the road.

In the two hours that she had been gone, the television noise had been replaced with the chaotic, unharmonious song of two six-year-olds at a piano keyboard and a vacuum cleaner in the basement. Alicia must be a good mother, if she doesn't shout at those boys for making such a racket. When the music started she must have gotten out the sweeper to cover up the noise, so that she wouldn't have to be angry with the twins. She is probably downstairs in her sneakers, thinking, thinking, tugging and shoving the old Hoover back and forth over the floor...

Josie continued along this line of thought without being aware of it – in the last two weeks she had thought about the woman so much that she could never be sure when she was thinking about her directly. By the time she touched finger to doorbell, the storyline had progressed to a scene where Josie found Alicia sobbing to herself behind the furnace, and then she smoothed the other woman's hair and sent a current of healing energy that glowed pink and faint in the shadows between the furnace vent and the wall.

The doorbell did not interrupt the noise.

On the assumption that Alicia really was crying by the furnace, Josie felt an urgency to enter the house. She opened the screen door and found the door behind it unlocked; she pushed it open and stepped into the Miller's foyer.

It was very air-conditioned. It felt like a florist's cooler. Elaborate funeral arrangements decorated every flat space and corner in the room, and also in the dining room and living room to either side of the entrance. Josie also noticed her gift bag by the door where Alicia had left it. In spite of the cool air the yellow flowers had begun to wilt over the edges of the bag.

She proceeded through the hallway, past the main staircase to the kitchen, found the basement door and went downstairs. One side was a railing, the other was a wall with pictures. At least one out of every three pictures (and there were more than thirty) was of the dead child, Bridget, and in every one of these she was smiling and outdoors. To Josie the photographs were accurate; when Bridget and the boys came to play in her backyard, she remembered her in exactly the same way: tousled, grass-stained, lively bordering on rambunctious. In the last frame at the bottom of the stairs, Bridget hung upside down from her knees on a tree limb, arms stretched almost all the way to the grass, hair hanging down between them.

The vacuum cleaner switched off.

Josie waited, absolutely still, at the bottom of the steps, wanting to speak but afraid of startling the other woman. Her pause felt like an expansive moment, so big she could get lost in it. She had time enough to notice everything about Alicia Miller's basement – that she had a second refrigerator beside which sat a 30-gallon garbage can full of dirty catering trays, and that the open boxes lined up against the wall were charity donations in progress, full of Bridget's clothes and toys. There was a transparent orange phone in one of the boxes and a stack of blue jeans in another. Is this life after a child's death? When Josie's husband died, mourning was a fit of accounting and long-lost family; there had been so much to *organize*. No time at all to think, and when she finally settled down after he was burned and scattered, the last thing she wanted to do was throw away his clothes. They still hung next to hers. His absence was more present than she was willing to admit – sometimes at night she would wake and begin to speak of a dream, see that he was not in bed, and then drift off to sleep again without fully registering that he was dead.

But what of Alicia? The basement was quiet; no sound of sobbing, no cowering figure by the furnace. (Josie could see the whole contraption from where she stood, and it was as well-lit and modern looking as the rest of the house.) When she heard noise, it was Alicia's sigh and the clatter of Legos. More toys to get rid of. Josie edged to the doorway and peered into the childrens' playroom. Alicia was bent over at the waist, hard at work, pulling apart a Lego Hollywood mansion block by block and tossing the pieces into a shoebox.

Josie felt that she could not, in good conscience, say a word. Something brushed her leg and she looked down at the flap of a box that had touched her knee, and inside were some of Bridget's clothes. A jacket on top. It was a pink jacket with a cotton collar, and a metal zipper that dangled a keychain – a miniature license plate that said BRIDGET. Josie saw it, and saw it a second time as something else; it had to do with the silent, private woman in the next room and Josie's unwelcome presence, and also with the desire to know Alicia in her grief. Because in the face of this chance to speak, staying silent proved as much to Josie as she needed to know: that she was a stranger in the house, and the only action she could take, the only one that made any sense in her mind, was to take the jacket.

She laid her hands on it and lifted it out of the box, and felt her old impatience withdraw. Up the stairs she went with it. The twins still banged on the piano. When Josie was halfway out of the basement, Alicia yelled, "Boys, that's enough!" Josie bolted to the top of the steps and out the front door, and when she reached the end of the driveway she looked back at the windows and saw that no one had seen her go.

When she unlocked her house and went inside, she felt the need to relock the door behind her. Gone was the open exchange between Josie and the rest of the world; her usually loose, broad thoughts had shrunk in on themselves and narrowed to the size of a tiny vein that ran between her and the Miller house, and when she stood at her attic window and looked up the road, she felt that she was reaching through that vein to seize a new kind of exchange, one in which she could speak and be answered. "Dear God," she said against the windowpane, out of breath, "this is the only thing I've ever prayed for." The attic was heavy with dust and quiet and did not answer her. She had never expected one because God was not that way, but suddenly the lack felt like an insult and she was angry.

The doorbell startled her. She flinched back from the window and froze.

It rang again. Josie released the jacket slowly; her fingers had been snagged tight around the folds like fishing hooks. She laid it on the bed and set a pillow on top of it, then went downstairs quietly in case she decided to pretend she was not at home.

The twins had come to visit. Through the peephole, their heads were distended like caricatures on her front doorstep. Josie slid the bolt open and stuck her head outside.

"Hello, boys."

The one on the left answered her. "Mom said we needed to come over here." He had his thumbs hooked into his pockets and his elbows locked, pulling his jeans down; Josie could see the elastic of his briefs.

"Why's that, honey?"

"Guess we were bad."

Josie remembered the awful piano duet, and opened the door wider. "Are you going to be here for a while?"

The one on the right shrugged. The other one nodded.

"Do you want to help me?"

"Help do what?" he asked.

Josie looked down the hallway to the kitchen, searching for inspiration. For years parts of her house had been dusty and hollow-feeling as a mouse hole. It certainly wouldn't do for guests. She turned away and stepped outside with the boys.

"We can play the weed-hunting game. My butterfly garden is home base."

"Mom says we can't play outside."

"And why not?"

The twin on the left looked at her seriously. "Because of Bridget."

Josie felt the presence of the jacket, and lurched to a quiet halt. "Oh." She stood looking at the twins in hopes that they would suggest something, but she was the overweight and wrinkled one; obviously she was in charge. A starling landed on the edge of the picnic table, cocked its head at the boys, and then flew up to the gutter. Of all places, Josie did not want to be in the house.

"Well, what do you boys like to do?"

"Build stuff, I guess—"

"Oh, creative! How wonderful!" She squeezed his shoulder and was surprised how small it was – smaller than the palm of her hand. "I know what we can do. My husband has a workbench in the basement that you boys will have a ball with."

Inspired, she found the key and unlocked the doors on the side of the house for the first time in two years. The smell of wet cement and mold rose with the open doors, and it made her lungs feel suddenly too small, but she said, "Just takes a minute for the nose to adjust," and proceeded down the stairs.

A naked bulb hung at the bottom, so low it was almost at eye-level. Josie pulled the cord, was surprised to have light, and then observed the decay. Cobwebs full of egg sacs and spiders softened the edges of all the corners. Surfaces were gray instead of brown. Mouse droppings lay everywhere, and her husband's band saw and drill press were draped with leaf-littered clumps of fuzz – perhaps a mixture of cobweb and mouse nest and damp dust. The same clumps were draped more delicately through the antlers mounted on the back wall. Josie recognized her old broom, and seized it. Earwigs dropped out of the bristles and skittered for the shadows behind the wooden staircase.

"Well, look at all this," said Josie. She poked the broom into a cobweb and swept it away. "This'll be great." A spider fell down from the ceiling, and she jabbed it until it curled into itself.

One of the twins found a twig and stirred it around inside some more webs until he reached the workbench. (No longer seeing them stationary on her doorstep, Josie could no longer differentiate the boys.) He made a handprint in the dust and called his brother over – "Come here, pussycat." The other one emerged from behind Josie and walked in a very straight line to the workbench.

"Hold this for me." He gave his brother a crescent wrench the size of his thigh, and picked up a tool bag with both of his hands. When Josie saw it she remembered that it was her husband's from Vietnam. It was the only canvas stitched tight enough not to tear when the weight of metal was inside of it. The twin had a difficult time, but he carried it to the jigsaw in the corner and set it on the ground. His brother looked into one of the empty plastic planters stored next to the machine, stared for a moment, and then returned his attention in a more focused way to his brother.

"Let's fix this," said the brother, and searched in the bag for an interesting tool.

Josie swabbed broom into arbitrary spaces. She tried to sweep the floor but it stirred up too much debris and sent her into a coughing fit, so she propped the broom on the workbench and left it there. On the other side of the bench she saw another tool bag, and more items that had been clean the last time they were familiar: a socket set, a tackle box, a tower of small plastic drawers filled with odds and ends, and a flannel shirt. It was tossed over the edge of a cardboard box.

Josie checked for obvious spiders, and then pulled out the shirt. Fine, spongy dust fell out of the folds. It was moth-eaten around the collar and breast pocket. A half-pack of Merits were tucked inside yellowing cellophane. Josie drew them out and held them close to her face. She sensed pain in herself that recalled days where autumn was ripe in a heavy wind that chased brittle leaves from forest branches and brought them pelting down into the grass, where a pair of rakes scraped to collect them into piles. She felt the chill as if it was present, and grew afraid.

"Here, you take that one," said the brother to his twin. "I'll file here." The rasp of metal on metal followed.

The fear sharpened its edges. And then he would break the silence of a weekend afternoon with the turn of a tractor engine and cut in diagonal sweeps until dusk, passing farther into the backyard until the military drone of the blades beneath the deck faded to humming, and she hummed in harmony, plucking out roots from soil on the beat. How empty the bucket sounded at first, when a new weed struck bottom and scattered dirt across the pale plastic with a sound like earth on a casket lid.

"Dear God," she said, and did not know what more to say.

"Now look what you did!" The brother's voice hurt her, dragging her back.

"Boys, it's time to go upstairs right now—"

"But look what he did on the blade," said the brother. He grabbed the twin's hand and held it up for Josie to see. The thumb dripped blood. The sight startled Josie right down to the heart of her fear, and she flung the shirt onto the ground. She never wanted to see it again.

"Come upstairs, up, now." She had both the boys by their small shoulders and pushed them up the stairs ahead of her, and when she reached the fresh air – thank God, fresh air – she closed the basement doors and locked them and then her old knees felt weak and she sat down hard in the grass, pulling the injured twin down with her.

"I was trying to clean it," he said in a voice much softer than his brother's.

Josie pulled his hand under her face. It was pale and smelled metallic, and in her aging hands it felt damp and soft. Poor thing. The cut was not deep but it bled a great deal. She wiped the blood on her sleeve and cupped his hand against her face. She felt all the pity in the world for his cut finger, and knew she ought to be able to do something about it. Just a little cut; it couldn't be hard.

"Dear Lord," she prayed, "help me repair this skin."

The overgrown grass poked out around the boys' bare feet as they waited for Josie to move. She just sat there. The twin felt his hand begin to sweat inside of hers, and it stung his cut. He pulled away.

"It's around dinner time," his brother said.

Josie felt shocked. "How do you know?"

"Mom," said the twin. All three of them turned and looked toward the road. Alicia was there. She was cutting through the front yard and across the driveway. Josie made a sound like a hiccup and leaned forward in the grass. Inside of her, she felt the energy of her prayer snap outward and hinge to the other woman, and it created in her a heavy sensation of loss. Outwardly, her cheeks turned red.

"Hi there," Josie said.

Alicia came around the corner of the house. She now wore a long yellow sweater that made her skin look jaundiced. When she saw her son her face dropped its color. "What happened?" It was not a question; Alicia descended like a giant canary on her son, pick him up by his waist (a surprise, because she was so thin) and set him on his feet. She grabbed his thumb and inspected it for less than an instant. Then she seized both boys' wrists and looked at Josie. If she had something to say, she, like Josie, was too full of words to speak, and the two women stared intensely at one another for several seconds until at last Alicia turned around and dragged her twins home for supper. Behind her, she left the smell of the onions that she had fried.

She also left behind a long image of her eyes beneath her eyebrows; the irises were gray like the back of an old spoon, and they left their mark. Josie rose from the grass and carried the mark and locked it inside the house with her, and climbed the attic steps with it, and let it burn her only after she had sat down on the bed and unfolded Bridget's jacket across her lap. She imagined the perspective from these eyes as clearly as if they belonged to her, and she saw herself sitting in the grass looking shocked and scared. Scared – why again?

Through the window Josie watched the late afternoon shadows on the Millers' house. Time passed and Mr. Miller pulled into the driveway and into the garage, and the dining room lights turned on and off again after the meal was over, and then the bedroom lights turned on, and the sun set, and Josie watched the nighttime darken. Presumably all cuts were mended. And yet the memory of the bleeding thumb made her afraid. Like so many other people in the town, her mind circled what it did not wish to touch. The death of five children could not find such deep purchase in the heart of any but the parents and

Josie, so deep that Josie herself might have lost a child. It was someone else though, someone whose closet had always smelled of shoe leather, and the memory that would not be constructed left blank space that asked to be filled, and so Josie filled it with all the creation she could afford. Her pincushion was beneath her hand, and she held on to it.

None of her attic lamps were lit, and she felt the room crouching behind her, waiting to see what she would do next. The dread held her at the window for a long time after she wanted to leave it, and finally, when she could wait no longer, she turned around and faced the room. A lamp stood within reach, and she pulled the cord.

Bridget's jacket lay on her lap, and offered no sudden ideas. On the other side of the bed was a nightstand, and beyond the nightstand was the jumble of attic junk – garbage bags, boxes, suitcases and holiday wreaths. At her feet were the craft store bags. She inspected them again, pulled out some of the calico fabric, and let herself think through an idea. The thinking took several minutes, as she usually was indifferent to whether or not she pondered something thoroughly. But now, after careful consideration, she decided that she would sew wings.

"It's so silly," she said. "This is stupid, Lord. Is this your idea?" But Josie's hands worked against the hesitations of her mind, and she turned on the combination of lights by which she usually sewed.

"Who's idea is this? Will somebody please tell me?" But she plugged in the Singer, tested the petal, and threaded it with blue thread. She took several coat hangers from the rack next to her bed and bent them into straight pieces of wire. This was not enough, so she went and dug around in the coat closet downstairs, and pushed aside several of her husband's old jackets and hunting vests in order to find the bundle of hangers in the back, at the bottom of a box of hats. She took the hangers upstairs and straightened them like the rest, and then began to twine them end-to-end until she had a pair of wire frames shaped like massive wings.

"Oh Good Father," she prayed, "do you think I might be tired? This is the most ridiculous idea ever—" She stopped because she didn't feel as though there was enough of her to spare to put behind the words. Her feet dragged on the floor, and she unlaced her tennis shoes. She wanted to cease the work, to release herself into familiar, erasing sleep; but something moved her on. It did not feel like God nor did it feel like herself. She feared that she had lost her mind, and so she turned up her clock radio as loud as it would go because this seemed like a sane thing to do if you were sewing at night.

The wings lay next to each other on the bed, stretched out identically like two lovers. The sight caught Josie's imagination, and she felt her anger rise up again without explanation. She lifted one from the bed, and looked at the other alone. They needed to be in a pair to make sense. The distance between the two of them seemed somehow profound, but this was a wide thought that Josie could not reason her way across. She laid the wing next to its partner and pulled yards of fabric off of the floor, took up her shears, and cut into them. The scissor blades held her attention completely.

And when she was done she took the pieces and held them against the wings to check the size, made adjustments, and then covered the two frames with the fabric and held it in place with craft glue. Next came the feathers. She cut hundreds of them: blue ones, calico ones, pink ones, indoor/outdoor carpeting green ones. Since the eighties she had been buying spools of thread and never using them, and now she used them all. The sewing took so much thread.

In the dim light of her attic she attended to her work for many hours. She pierced each feather with her needle and pulled the thread through so that they hung in a neat row. Every ten feathers, Josie held the row to the fabric and sewed the two surfaces together. Sometimes she stretched her legs at the window and watched for Alicia's light to come on, and when they did not, she returned to her place on the sagging mattress, laid a blanket over her knees, and continued to sew. Behind her in her shadow, a pair of bright wings began to emerge that looked real. She was almost finished and did not think of stopping. Her hands worked on their own, and she kept herself awake watching them.

Down the road, Alicia eventually did turn on her living room lamp and lighted a cigarette, but Josie failed to notice. And Alicia did in fact pause in her smoking to consider the neighbor who had hurt her son, but as it was, Alicia concluded that the visitor was just another guilty well-wisher who cared nothing about children, and then stubbed her cigarette out against the inside of the wastebasket. She left the lamp on and lay down on the couch.

These were only two women awake in the neighborhood.

The wings were finished at half past four in the morning. Josie lifted them high in the air so that their primary feathers did not brush the ground, and examined her work. The wings were lightweight and grand. Their peaks were high, and the outer feathers curved elaborately and protectively forward, as though the bearer could fold them about her body and disappear.

They were the most beautiful thing Josie had ever created.

No, they fell short. There must be more to do. Something must fill her or she would never sleep.

She first propped the wings upside-down on the foot board of her bed, and folded the dead girl's jacket next to them. She went to the window and checked the Miller's house. The living room light was on.

She gathered up the jacket and the wings and a hanger, and struggled with the load down to the first floor of the house, took them outside without turning on any lights to guide her way, stopped in the garage long enough to tuck a shovel and some binder twine under one arm. It felt like the shadows swelled out of the rooms and chased her. The wings could not stay on her property. She carried the whole lot a quarter mile to Alicia's backyard. She had never been there before. The Millers had an unfinished concrete porch on the back of their house, and had planted a row of hemlock trees against the siding to break up its flat white face. They had no gardens or flowerbeds, but a few hundred yards from the house there was a metal swing set anchored into a rectangle of sand. It had been there long enough to collect rust. On its other side, the lawn was not mowed or watered, and the grass grew tall and tangled with milkweed plants and briars.

"Dear Lord," she muttered, "help me."

Josie spiked the shovel into the yard halfway between the swing set and the house. From where she stood she could see one corner of the lighted living room. The blind was open but she could not distinguish Alicia, or any other sign of life. She took out her shears and cut a long piece of twine, tied the hanger to the handle and then dressed the hanger in Bridget's jacket and lashed the wings behind it.

In the darkness the figure looked like an angelic Bridget standing in the yard.

Josie picked up a handful of sand and threw it at the window, and then retreated into the weeds. She was frantic for something to happen, and ran out again and threw more sand at the window, and a wet clod thumped against the pane.

From inside Alicia said, "What the Christ," and went to the window. Josie fled into the weeds and crouched down behind a clump of milkweed plants. Briars clung to her sweatshirt. She raised her head above the grass, and saw the other woman lift the blinds. Alicia pressed both hands against the pane – she did not see right away. She went to the lamp and shut it off and came back to the window and saw the dim winged figure in the backyard. The blind fell down and she disappeared from the living room. The outdoor floodlights came up a second later and Alicia ran out onto the lawn to meet the ghost of her daughter.

Josie wanted to leap up and tell her to stop. In the bright lights the shovel was plainly wooden and rigid, not at all like a girl. It was all very flat and the jacket sagged from a coat hanger. It threw an awkward shadow across the grass. The wings were impressive but out of place. They looked as if they had been chopped off of a living creature and mounted on something dead. Alicia stopped on her own when she saw that it was a fake. She shuffled up to the shovel. After a hesitation, she touched the jacket collar and then the keychain on the zipper. She pulled it aside and stared at the handle. She tapped the hanger with a fingernail , and then wound up and punched it. The shovel sagged backward in the soil.

"Fuck it, you fucking pranksters, fucking go to hell!"

She hit it again, and kicked it over. The wings made a scraping sound against the grass and a few of their feathers tore. The whole assemblage was not heavy, and so

Alicia picked it up and threw it against the swing set. Then she seemed to lose her balance, and sat on the lawn. She tore once at the grass, and then laid down facing the sky. She made a sound that Josie had never heard before.

Josie could not hear what she said after that, and her whole body trembled. She did not move or make a sound, but she felt a horrible remorse climb through her chest and face. She wanted to remember a time when she felt differently, but the only instance she could call to mind was the day she and her husband, Rich, spent all day mowing the lawn and in the evening made gin and tonics and sat on the patio drinking them. Their highball glasses were cold and slick, and the lime at the bottom made the upper rim reflect green. The air smelled as it did now, but it was a more humid summer that year and their clothes were damp and smelled clean. She did not remember anything important that the two of them had said to each other at the time, and now, crouched in sharp grass, that seemed to be the most beautiful part of their marriage.

HERITAGE

My mother would have been ashamed of me.

It took a very long while to get my bearings sometimes, but I remember now, after the fact – six tequila sunrises kept my consciousness underwater while I floated in a stranger's swimming pool. We were trespassing of course. The humid heat in the city had gathered up to a point where I needed to get out of the apartment and into water, and who gives a damn if it's already two in the morning and I don't own a pool. So we drove to the suburbs and climbed someone's fence. I dove into the pool to chill out, and flipped over on my back to stare at the stars. Water filled up my ears and drowned out the heat and the background whoosh of traffic. It was in these soundless moments that I tended to think deeply.

My mother had passed away almost two years ago, an awkward number – too recent to gloss over and too distant for grieving in the open. If others asked about my family, I implied that we had quarreled and no longer spoke to one another. I was careful here not to say too much. People assumed the worst when I went quiet; whatever the worst was to them, but as far as I knew they didn't have the imagination to figure out she had breathed her last breath into a shuddering body on a hospital bed two Julys ago, and then died.

Out of habit I still worried she'd discover my petty drunken felonies, and be ashamed of me. The moments when the truth hit home were always a surprise.

"She's a bitch," I said that night to Vaughn, whose mother was Indian and her blood was everywhere in him. His brown lips floated just on the surface of the water.

"Really? What happened?"

"Nothing, she's just a bitch. I can't stand talking to her, so I don't."

I swam to the pool's edge and rested my face on the tile.

I kept an eye to the house, lest somebody bring up the lights and call the cops. They say criminals want to be caught. True, but only half so: I wanted the flashing banners of lights and policemen to surround me, to try to catch me in the act of misbehaving, to watch as I escaped. Vaughn felt differently, but did these kinds of things with me because we were obsessed with each other's company. His car sat two blocks away in front of the police station. I stared at the house. Go ahead, wake up. Call the cops.

"Lydia, I'm telling you this because I care about you. Let's dry off and go home." His whisper carried.

I laughed and grabbed his hand underwater. In the house, I thought I saw a curtain stir. Vaughn levered himself out and tried to drag me up behind him, but I wiggled my fingers out of his grasp and returned the water. I tapped the bottom of the pool and came up for air, then dove down to the bottom again and frog-paddled along to the deepest part, where the pressure buoyed me slowly back to the surface. I bounced my head to the side to clear my ears, sending a rivulet of warmth down the side of my face. When I was sure the pool's owner was watching me from behind one of the dark windows, I got out of the water, bowed, and led myself to Vaughn's car.

*

Vaughn was upset. Trespassing was a crime, he said.

"Is this me holding a gun to your head?" I asked. "Is this me threatening to shoot your dog if you stayed at home?"

He leaned his head against his window and drove faster.

We did not yet have the knowledge of each other's moods to go mad with wordless arguments; we did not yet enter arguments with foregone conclusions. I unbuckled my seat belt and put my head on his leg.

"I can't watch your back if you keep up with your stunts," he said, burying his free hand in my hair. "Didn't your mother teach you how to behave?"

"Mothers teach a lot of things," I said.

"Such as?"

The question annoyed me. "Makeup."

"And?"

"Dressing for the weather."

"And?"

"Manners."

Vaughn wanted to know about my life, about my parents, as if the information would make us more intimate. He considered himself an expert on mothers because he had such a good relationship with his, and when I told him I was feuding with mine, he made it his project to help. It is enough to say that Vaughn knew who he was, and that his questions were always too bold. I figured I'd ignore that tendency for a while, but he made it hard. The first week of our relationship, he dialed all the listings under my last name in the Greater Pittsburgh Area yellow pages, trying to get her side of the story. I lied later and said my mother still used her maiden name.

"Can we just get ice cream?" I asked.

"No place is open now. It's after three in the morning."

"I have a key to my friend Laura's apartment. We can take some of hers and replace it tomorrow."

Vaughn cradled the back of my head against his palm. I felt like an egg, or a crystal ball. Something smooth, seamless.

"No, honey. That's breaking and entering."

"Just entering if we have the key."

"No."

I watched streetlights shuttle across the sunroof. Car rides were passively comforting, but not when we were almost home. I suggested that we turn around and drive north again. "Out onto the highway, where everyone is like us – just driving, going somewhere but in no immediate danger of getting there. Maybe it will be a few degrees cooler away from the city."

Vaughn obliged, happy to be making me happy.

*

Neither Vaughn nor I had yet acquired feet of clay. When I woke next to him, my face still sought the skin of his shoulder. We still shared love that was not tempered, not committed to anything, not subtle at all. Sometimes I visited him in the library. Among so many books, I felt giddy enough to strike back the silence by drawing Vaughn upstairs to the reading room, and making love to him on the couch, or alternately, stealing a stack of books for my collection at home.

"No one should lose touch with one's mother," he said over dinner one night in my apartment.

"We weren't meant to get along," I replied over the broccoli bowl.

"I'm sure she would forgive whatever you did."

"Why does it have to be something I did?"

Conflicts become larger when they're kept a mystery, but Vaughn already knew the basics: my mother had raised me alone because my father was married to another woman, and I reported to my Aunt Carol when I needed money or a place to stay. I waitressed on weekends and booked vacations for rich families Monday through Friday. The only vacations I took for myself were to Carol's house, and so infrequently that my last visit had been two months before I met Vaughn.

"Why does it have to be my fault?" I asked again. I didn't understand epic arguments for the simple reason that my mother and I had also had a good relationship. When Vaughn criticized, misled but ever righteous, I could not help thinking that he spied on my faults, assumed the supposed argument with my mother was entirely caused by immaturity. But he was wrong. A few weeks before her sudden illness my mother visited me in my apartment, slept beside me in my bed. Her body had been warm and close, a comfort in that tiny bedroom, and when I woke in the middle of the night and looked over at her, she too was awake. I put my forehead on her shoulder and fell back to sleep. The room's empty quiet and the smell of her laundered nightdress were so peaceful that I dreamed of milk, a wide sea of it that carried ocean birds to shore.

Vaughn should know that.

*

My mother was Lee Ellen McGinnis and she never married anyone. She liked jet skis and fishing same as everybody at home, and nobody thought sporting was unfeminine. She drank beers with the other women at the riverside, and I grew up thinking America lived on lawn chairs.

Lee had owned a deli across the street from the drugstore. I worked the counter on Sundays under the shelves of glassware and plates, where I nursed a heated resentment of the place – Lee donated all her heart to the deli, and after a while, objects from our home. Looking only at the first shelf I spotted our blue-rimmed water glasses and twin red coffee mugs. It burned to see a stranger's stubbly lips touch our private cups, and what I had expected to recognize as my own was public property.

When I moved to Pittsburgh at age twenty I did not immediately feel comfortable with myself, lacking familiarities, and in those first weeks I wanted to go home. But Lee had died – my reason for leaving – and her sister Carol mourned and talked to everyone in town until they felt ownership over my grief and me. All the quiet places were gone. On the riverside, Freeport celebrated summer and Independence Day, and left no room for me. My mother had bequeathed the deli to Carol, and Carol sold it for a lot of money to a tax lawyer, who turned it into an office. The first time I saw the remodeled storefront the whole street was changed for me. Maybe the whole town. The difference nudged me outward, and I found less to come home for and spent more time in Pittsburgh. When I met Vaughn at the bus stop one day, I stopped coming home altogether.

*

This is what I've been trying to arrive at, perhaps avoiding. The next thing I realized, for I had fallen asleep on Vaughn's leg, was that he had driven me to my hometown.

"Show me where your mother lives. It's time to put the argument to rest."

I rubbed my eyes and said I didn't remember where she lived.

"Come on, Lydia. Nobody forgets their way home."

I could have told him to stop at the cemetery, but those words could not yet form in mouth. I looked around. The road bent between the football field and the Rainbow Bar, the town's worst dive with the best chicken wings. Left onto High Street, up the hill to the only traffic light. Someone had replaced the hardware store with a daycare center. On one side of the street were apartments; on the other side were bars and pizza parlors. For as long as I could remember, everyone in this place was fat.

"Stop it," I said. "Please let's go back."

"Where does she live?"

"She moved."

"No she didn't."

I propped my feet on the dashboard, knees drawn up to my chest, and thought of the people who chained themselves to things – cars, buildings, trees – to make their point.

Until now I'd found them a few sticks short of a bundle, but all of a sudden I wanted some chains. Any streetlamp would do for an anchor, and maybe I'd drawn a crowd. Maybe someone would hold a sign: Leave Lydia Alone.

"This is none of your business," I said. "This isn't a joke."

He shrugged and smiled at me.

"I want you to drive me home." I saw my face in the side mirror, and did not recognize its mild expression, its willingness to play along.

That, more than Vaughn, sparked what happened next. My hand trembled in my lap, and then I cut loose with the screaming. I don't recall what I said; I'm sure it was obscene, but the anger that drove them was the tantrum I remember. The words felt like paper balls to the rock's weight behind them – anger, but more. It was solid. I could stand on it, the way Vaughn stood on his righteousness. The polarity made me lose my breath, and I threw open the door and jumped out onto the road.

The night air shocked me, humid but noiseless.

Vaughn stood on the brakes and down went the window. "What the hell."

I sat down on the curb; the cement was surprisingly cold on the backs of my legs.

"You're not following me anywhere," I said. "I'm sitting right here till you promise to take me home."

He parked the car and got out. Standing over me, he was the same dull boy that had tried to drag me out of the swimming pool.

"I'm not taking you anywhere but to your mother's house. This is for you, all right? I love you. I want to see you happy." Vaughn squatted down in front of me and put his hands on my knees. His dark hair – his mother's hair – fell across his face and obscured the look of sympathy that resided there. It had never completely gone away since the day we first met. "Please?"

Disgust rattled through me and I stood up.

"Go through the light and when you see the river, make a right." The directions to my old house were lyric, like a riddle from fairy tales. I wanted to add to the verse, make it truer to the form so that I'd find a pot of gold or the gates to faerieland, but the fact of the matter was, Vaughn and I were about to pay a visit to my fat Aunt Carol's house. She and her cat were both cross-eyed. Vaughn deserved to feel like an idiot.

He drove up, parked in the gravel and rang the doorbell; I stood behind him, observing his excitement. He reached back and touched my hand.

"Can't say I never did anything for you."

I couldn't think of an appropriate reply. The porch light came on. A moth fluttered drunkenly up to it, and I watched as if it could tell me something useful, something distracting. I had grown up in this house. The terra-cotta flowerpots I had made in school were collecting leaves and spider webs on the other side of the porch. They held dirt from my mother's herb garden, but without her care the plants had rotted into the soil. The day of their planting, I fixed my bicycle in the garage, its handlebars propped on the bags of vermiculite my mother was using with the seedlings. She wore a flannel-lined denim shirt to keep out the spring chill, and around us, the air smelled of gasoline and topsoil.

So near the river, the smell of vegetable life was heavy and I wanted to vomit. Maybe the mucus and stomach acid could accomplish something words could not.

I looked elsewhere. The shutters had needed a coat of paint for as long as I could remember. I wished I could file a complaint to someone less lazy than Carol, someone who would replant the herbs and whitewash the shutters.

I heard her coming down the stairs on the other side of the door. Vaughn drew me next to him. The bolt clacked and slid aside, and a moment later, Carol opened the door. She looked first at Vaughn, then at me. Her face was pale and puffy from sleep.

Vaughn stuck out his hand. "I'm Lydia's boyfriend. Sorry to wake you, but I thought it was time for you guys to talk."

Carol stepped out onto the porch. She was a hulking woman, tall and wide, wrapped in a gray and blue flannel robe. At its neck I saw only a tee-shirt, probably the extra large Delta Airlines one I got from the travel agency. Her fingernails, as always, were an impeccable powder pink.

We had always had a terse relationship.

"Tell Vaughn where we can find my mother."

Vaughn caught my eye and smiled. Carol stiffened, caught my chin in her hand and examined my face. I was afraid of what she would say if she smelled tequila on me.

"Why is your hair wet?" she asked. "Do I need to call a doctor?"

"No. Vaughn's just a little confused about my mother."

"Wait, who are you?" Vaughn asked, suddenly confused.

"Aunt Carol. Who else?"

I saw his face apprehending.

*

I made us all go inside.

Carol had retained my mother's pastel wallpaper and brown shag carpet, adding only curtains and the smell of burnt pierogies. Out of habit, I sat down on the couch and drew my mother's crocheted afghan over my legs. Carol pushed her magazines into a pile on the coffee table.

Vaughn watched us both from the doorway. His shirtfront was still damp from the swimming pool. The expression on his face was nothing I had seen on him before: soured hope, turned into suspicion. Maybe he was angry with me. I knew how anger could transform the familiar, that now I seemed ugly to Vaughn. But in his eyes I had never seen myself, always alterations of me. Suddenly I wanted to take his face and push it into the truth until he cried out, or apologized, or realized that I was too much for him to understand, and ran away.

Carol put her fists on her hips and looked at him. "Can I get you a cup of tea, hon?"

"I don't—"

"Oh, no, please." Carol guided him into a chair and shuffled off to heat the teakettle. In the first months after her sister's death, she had talked about her grief so much that it purged itself of all meaning. I never found comfort in her presence, and even on the day of the funeral, I did not seek it out.

"Will you just tell me," he said.

I stared at him and felt my coldness hit him – felt it reflect between us.

"My mother is dead."

I worked my fingers into the holes of my mother's afghan. Nothing in the room suggested that she had been dead for two years, not a framed picture, not a funeral card, not a single knickknack changed since my childhood. The grandfather clock ticked toward 4 a.m. I had never visited after dark, not since the burial service. All the people with their candles and black suits had haunted me like ghosts behind my eyelids as I tried to fall asleep, and at last I fled the house, headed for the empty deli where I curled up on a booth seat until morning. That next day, and every day afterward, my visits to the house were clinical and restricted always to the afternoons.

Here at night, the room felt surreal. I think my mother could have walked in, wiped her feet on the doormat and plunked down onto the couch next to me without causing a commotion.

I was unprepared for the magnitude of my vision. If I imagined my mother entering the room, then I also imagined her locking the door, stopping by the television to pry off her navy-striped boat shoes, and then, still supporting her weight on the television cabinet, looking up at me with eyes that had aged since we'd last met. I reeled. I stared around the room trying to find something that didn't remind me of something else.

Vaughn approached and tangled his fingers in my hair. The gesture felt unnatural, a nervous question that asked if he could go back to the place where he used to be. "Get your hands off me." I pulled my head away and sank down farther under the afghan. We were in an unpleasant country, a land of odd hours and circular time, where a person could look forward and see the ground she had just tread. I threw off the blanket and went to the window, touched my face against the glass. I heard Aunt Carol bring tea into the living room; by the sound of the clatter, she used my mother's teapot, an unglazed Pfalzcraft, bone white with blue flowers, nearly indestructible. In the kitchen cupboards were the matching dishes, bowls and cups. I saw them all without looking.

They, too, had graced the deli's shelves in my mother's day, and I would not drink from them.

Beyond the window our yard was familiar and discomforting, but so much more to look at than Vaughn's face, or even my own. I remembered walking with uncertain steps behind my mother to the river's edge – our backyard – to turn over stones in shallow water and toss weeds into the current; using my thumbnail to shear off basil leaves from her terra-cotta garden, and carrying the herbs into the kitchen; and falling asleep with my head in her lap as we watched the evenings sitcoms, even when I was far too old to admit such a thing to friends.

Carol had visited only in need, always to borrow something that belonged to my mother. I believed, and still do, that my mother had possessed nothing of her own. I wondered where that left me standing now, and which memories from the barrage were safe to pack up and take along with me, which ones weren't going to bang on my door some night two years down the line.

"Now why don't we find out what in God's glory is going on?" Carol said.

Her voice was the same as ever. I hated the sound it. She and Vaughn were speaking on the couch, but their voices, which I did not listen to, carried neither the importance nor the seriousness of a real conversation. Maybe I heard an apology when Vaughn spoke. So be it.

Dust and paint flakes crowed the sill beneath my fingers. My forehead rested against the glass, warming it, and my breath made a cloud on the pane in front of my eyes. The driveway was gone, and the porch, and the damp leaves overhead. Only the suggestion of darkness impressed itself on me from beyond the window. Through the partial obscurity of a fogged pane, I imagined my mother on the riverside now, casting out rocks into the water that fluttered, sinking, as they found their own depths on the dark bottom.

THE JAMBOREE PEOPLE

Some people have a different sense of fun. They let anything amuse them. They own guns and loud cars, and not all of them are men. Anyplace can be a jamboree, from a gas station parking lot, to the piles of scrap metal by the river at night, to lunch breaks at a friend's cousin's buddy's bar in town. Beers are often free. And they are free today at a broken down farmhouse in the country, and all the grownups are drunk, and the children are bored because they may not swim in the neighbor's pool.

Oh, these neighbors are mortified. Their lawn is perfect in the early summer evening, and the empty water of their swimming pool glitters. They never liked the jamborees next door; they are a husband and wife, and their guest, the husband's old college friend who is from Bombay. He has traveled very far to visit them. The evening would be peaceful without the blaring Johnny Cash and the television. Somebody's dirty six-year-old hangs around the patio and will not go home. Her name is Angie, but to these neighbors she is only Little Girl.

The husband fears that his guest will think he and his wife are as common as the jamboree people next door. The wife has less fear, but that is because her husband's guest is tiresome and really too rich to make her feel comfortable talking to him, and if her husband was not so edgy around his old friend, she would walk the little girl across the lawn and take her home, and maybe share a beer with the neighbors. When she was a teenager, she and her family were poor like the neighbors. They had bonfires by the creek and wore their flannel shirts and stole beers from parents' refrigerators, and during family reunions, they sneaked away from the crowd because adults were indeed boring. And the wife could see that the little girl had no friends to play with. All the adults were watching NASCAR and the only other kids, some little boys, poked a fire with sticks and sometimes pulled out plastic guns and pointed them at the garage. But the wife could see how uncomfortable the little girl made her husband – he had been anxious for weeks about his guest's visit. Would it be so much trouble for the little girl to cross the lawn and go home? She really was sort of a nuisance. Her hands were so dirty and she kept touching the patio table, and the chairs, and the hem of the guest's trousers. And she walked through the tulip planter more than once. She interrupted the conversation at least three times in a minute to ask the wife questions, but her speech slurred, and the wife considered the possibility that the little girl was slow in the head.

The husband was furious. He apologized to the guest, and the guest replied with the polite nonchalance that had been familiar to the husband since college, She doesn't know better; we can go out again if you like. But they had been out all day – for drinks, for a baseball game, for dinner – spending so much money. The husband knew they could not afford to go out again. That was the only reason they had come back to the house; there was a bottle of gin in the cupboard, and it was the only entertainment he could still manage. But it was so important to him that his guest should be pleased, because in their last year of college together the husband had stolen a woman from him. No, this was not the wife – not the wife who was a natural blonde and wearing her new shoes over there in her patio chair, God bless her; no, this was another woman. Like the guest she had been from Bombay. She was petite and had an accent like warm sherry. When the husband had met her he had become so passionately obsessed by her presence that his attention drew her away from his college friend, who let her go because he did not understand that women could be fought over. Yet the stolen woman was not as captivating as the husband had expected, and when the relationship ended it felt over. Her face degraded in his mind over the years; the husband married, shared his secrets with his wife, held a grudge against his college friend because he knew he had done him a bad turn, and in the deeper regions of his mind held on to a taught wire of pride that he had once loved a woman from abroad.

"Here's a dilemma," his wife had said to him, shaking a sheet over the guest's mattress. "What if this girl had been brown but said 'yinz'?" The husband stood in the doorway with his beer in a glass. He had not looked into the guest room for a long time, and the overhead light made it look stark and poor like a hostel. When the house was new he'd once imagined that it would be a room for children, but for their reasons the husband and wife decided not to have any. The sheet settled across the bed.

"I love *you*, don't I?" He leaned against the jamb and felt anxious in more ways than he understood. That night and during the trip to the airport the next day, he was cross with the wife. He said things like, "Stop," and "Is that necessary?" when she made sincerely harmless jokes about the city's poor neighborhoods and the Korean family that they paid to trim the hedges. When the two of them went to the airport, the guest had genuinely put all conflicts behind him, but at the baseball game the wife asked too many questions about India, and the husband felt something in him coil up and shake till it hurt.

And the jamboree people had blindsided him. Their television was so loud that he could hear its every word, and they laughed and argued crudely, and their damn little girl would not stop touching the guest. The husband glared at the girl and tried to stare her down the way he'd stare down a dog, but she looked back at him and smiled.

He looked across the lawn and through their rose bushes, grapevine arbor, and property line of hemlock trees to the awful neighbors next door. The girl's mother was only a live-in girlfriend – and she had another baby already, and she stood on the porch drinking beer and watching the races with the men. She held her baby but did not look at it. The husband saw her glance over the property line once or twice to check on her little girl Angie. This fueled in him a righteous anger. Did the jamboree people think he looked like a babysitter? He waited for the girl's mother to look again, but the race on television must have grown suspenseful because all of a sudden the jamboree people started a ruckus of cheering, and one of them cried, "That's the way you sonofabitch!"

The little girl found the garden hose and pulled it from its coil. Before the wife could stop her, she turned the knob and water sprayed across the patio. The stream knocked over two empty watering cans, and rolling on concrete, they made a clatter. The husband sprang up and swiped the hose out of the girl's hands and said close to her face, "You can't be here. You need to go back to your mother now, or I will, I'll—" He couldn't say anything that sounded reasonable, because he did not believe that children should be struck.

"It's all right," said the guest.

"I'll walk her over," said the wife, but realized she had never before spoken to the neighbors.

"No. That is strictly not our responsibility." The neighbor men always seemed blunt and masculine, and reminded the husband that he made a living by sitting at a desk and had not ever been anybody's drinking buddy. "We can go over to Jeff's place for a while and when we get back maybe things will have quieted down."

The husband herded them into his big red Bonneville and gave the little girl a last look as they pulled out of the driveway. The neighbors did not notice their departure, or that Angie was bored and unwanted by the little boys at the fire, or her exploration of the yard beyond the patio. For eight years the husband and wife had worked to cultivate a small heaven in the backyard and around their in-ground swimming pool. Through this elaborate vegetation Angie wandered unobserved, and so when she reached the pool's edge and lost her balance, no one noticed as she stumbled, pitched forward and drowned in the water where she could not swim.

The half hour between her death and her discovery did not pass quietly. Next door the jamboree carried on as it had throughout the afternoon, cars hurried past on the road, birds sang themselves down to roost, and at the deep aqua bottom of the swimming pool, currents rippled around the dead girl's limbs and face. At intervals along the pool's liner, small lights and tile-sized mirrors had been installed to give luster to the water; she floated in front of one of these mirrors. Her face was blank and wise-seeming, and had given up all the overbearing and anxious emotions a living observer would recognize.

At Jeff's the evening carried on. The guest always hit hard on the liquor when he knew he was among friends, and now he had drunk himself down into Jeff's leather chair, propped his feet against the sliding glass doors and talked about his twenties. The wife knew how to be comfortable anywhere and especially at Jeff's, since they had been friends since high school, and she tried to ignore that her husband had a CD case on his lap and was quietly flipping through Jeff's music. She turned her head to her friend and the guest as the husband inspected the collection, expecting perhaps to find an old CD that he had lent out and forgotten about. He did not want to converse. He told himself that he was happy to see proof that the guest was not on his guard, but forty minutes later when the wife suggested they drive home, he did not feel happy at all. He wished that he could have just enjoyed himself. He saw this as a fault in himself and criticized it, which only made him more anxious. He began to have a headache. There were the jamboree people that could always enjoy themselves. It was in their blood, he thought. It could be read on their faces that they were born to be poor and find camaraderie among themselves. A person could trace their lines back to the settlers, to a burdened class of criminals who rambled onto boats to avoid prison sentences, and who were even further descended from the long-ago peasant laborers. After all, their faces were peasants' faces. How else to describe them? Those grandfathers of grandfathers were blacksmiths, builders, and farmers, and every memory of their poverty was rough-cut across the brows and cheekbones and wide mouths of their sons. The husband felt wistful for such a long heritage.

Meanwhile, the wife gathered Jeff's drink glasses and washed them out, searched for the keys, helped the guest into the backseat of the Bonneville and left him to finish his conversation with Jeff in the driveway. She returned for her husband.

"Are you camping in that chair?"

He put the CD case on the floor. "I was getting my head on straight, is all." His mood had indeed picked up, and he held the sliding door open for the wife as they stepped outside to the porch. It had a metal roof, and there hung several birdhouses made of lacquered red gourds. He stopped her.

"Do you think he's having a good time?"

"Everybody is but you," she said.

He saw that she was not hearing him, so he added, "I wanted him to be really impressed. I mean, don't you want him to really have a great time?"

She started down the few wooden steps to the grass. "He's already is."

"This afternoon he didn't seem like it."

"He'd just got off a plane!" The wife found the path in the grass and walked away from him. He followed her to the car. Jeff and the guest were still talking, and it was true that he looked happy and comfortable. The husband touched the wife's arm and whispered, "But sometimes I think we're no better than those people next door. Like everything's always the same."

She let the keys hang in the driver's side door. "What are you talking about?"

"Are we getting like that?" He pulled the keys out of the door and squeezed them in his hand. Something was creeping around inside of him that left dark prints on what were usually unremarkable thoughts; and he felt anxious again. "I feel like we haven't been very smart about things. If we worked harder we'd have been visiting him in India, instead of him coming here."

The wife stared at him. "Can we go home?"

"But don't you think so?"

"You're driving me crazy today." She finished unlocking her door and turned a friendlier face to Jeff and wished him goodnight. The guest stretched his legs across the back seat, which to the husband was not enough. He wanted to invite him to take off his shoes and socks, roll down the window, unbuckle his belt, get another drink, sing, draw on the seats with marker, have the time of his life. But on the drive home the guest simply fell asleep, and the husband endured the wife's irritation by leaning his head on the window and watching his breath fog up the roadside.

They had been gone for two hours. The guest showered and went into his room, and after the husband heard him stop moving around, he undressed to his boxers and crawled into bed next to the wife. She was asleep, or pretended to be asleep.

The girl remained in the pool. Next door the mother's other child had gotten sick from the heat and ashtray smell of the neighbor's back porch, and she had spent most of the two hours sitting in the bedroom with the baby. The boys were somewhere in the woods with their plastic guns, and she assumed Angie was with them. After dark she came downstairs and searched the kitchen for a can of ginger ale to settle her stomach, and then went out to the porch. Her brother had gone home; now it was just her fiancé and his two friends from work. In the backyard the children emerged from the woods. It was nighttime and they were far away, but the mother knew in a moment that her daughter was not with them.

When she panicked for her missing child she made such a fuss that the three men took off from the porch and searched immediately in the pool. She shrieked and stomped her feet as the men dove, crashing, into the water. The husband and wife and guest awoke and hurried outside – someone called 911 for the police – and in a matter of minutes a crowd of twenty flocked at the pool's edge. There was splashing and sloshing, and the water's broken surface reflected nothing but distortions as one of the men got hold of the body and hauled it out of the water. In all the racket some people huddled next to each other overwhelmed, and some others just shook. She was a child, just a child – and they all imagined that her last emotions were terror and helplessness and blind anguish, because this is what they felt in themselves.

The wife was the first person to leave. She took the mother next door and they sat in the bedroom, where the mother would not let go of her other child. In a short while the ambulance drove across the lawn and took her to the hospital, and the wife went with her.

The guest sat on the neighbor's back porch fixing a broken nose, because he was a doctor and the fiancé had injured himself when he dove into the water. The other two men stayed with him, and they opened a beer for their nerves. The other neighbors on the street eventually walked home clutching bathrobes closed. The police finished their work at the pool a few minutes before midnight, and when they drove away in their cars, the yard and driveway were empty. The husband watched them go from his backyard; then he turned his eyes to the house and thought of a cold shower and a drink— but he was stuck at the pool. When the commotion had begun he'd thrown on his white work shirt, and now it hung unbuttoned and reflecting the aqua light. He stood with his toes over the tile staring at the water with morose confusion. He could not leave the pool.

His anxiety had grown beyond nameable proportions and it slammed against a door in his mind. His back was against this door and he pushed hard to keep it shut. But still he had an idea. There were whispers that a different guest had come into his house clothed in dark colors, and it went tore the rooms ripping apart the furniture and leaving its prints along the walls until it reached his bedroom, where it had then curled up and slept for years. Did his wife know? She was the best person he had ever met, and as the husband stared into the water he imagined she was close. He peered into the shrubs and around the yard, and called for her, but then remembered she had gone.

He entered the pool and stood on the first shallow step. Shadows spasmed across the bottom, and he felt the door behind him rattle and push. He took off his shirt and threw it into the grass, and stepped down again. The hairs on his legs clung to his skin. He thought, a child drowned in this water. He looked at it. It was empty except for his pale calves. All the muscles in his body hurt, and thinking this thought, the door grew heavy and splintered. His legs trembled and he stepped all the way into the pool and sank down until he knelt on the bottom. The water was only as high as his chest, and his arms floated straight out to either side of him. He thought about the empty water and the child and his wife, and with the door hanging wide open behind his head, the night seemed very wide and he had never felt so much pain in his life.

DISUNITED STATES

When I took the teaching position, I knew going into it that I was an ugly, stupid-looking woman, and that I would resent my job. I did not like children – if I was to convince myself that they deserved affection, I would need to make excuses for their egoizing, and for their selfishness. I didn't have this kind of spirit in me. The first day I moved into the town, I sat across the street from the school with the car air conditioner blasting, and thought, I hate this country.

I saw a Disunited States of America, where the current Constitution promoted a culture of mindless possessiveness. Families took vacations on public lands but complained about the tourists. In neighborhoods, eyesores and loud noises were outrageously offensive because they intruded. And time, a person could say, belonged to them. I saw my future, at least as far as September; I expected complaints about my teaching, inevitably defended by the argument, "My taxes pay your salary." No, I was not a teacher, but I had these certain understandings about the government in my head for a long time, and the desire to say them out loud was stronger than anything.

I was coming from the West. My habit had been to sit in a library at the back table, reading, thinking how it would be possible to do something significant, and here was my idea: I would find a way to legislate kindness. It was the only idea I ever had. But all the time I felt a growing hurt, a turbulent silence, whenever I thought about what I should be doing instead of sitting with all my big ideas on a shelf in my mind. I was too ugly for politics. But yet there was another voice in my mind that was breezy about the facts, and it would say, Hey, recent polls have shown, if you can't do, teach. Make a tiny government – a congress of children with me as prime minister – and then lay down the law as I wanted it to be. One day I sat boredly, book open underneath the bright table lamp for several hours, but read only a little. And the second day I read less, and the third day, none at all. And at the end of the week I found a subletter, and packed my car, and moved to the other side of the country.

The heat in my first-day classroom made me sweat and feel slow. My room was at the far end of the second story in the school, on the fire escape. I could open the door to let air run through, but that air was not really fresh because on the other side of the alley beneath my door lived a old man that looked like Phil Donahue and he sometimes burned tires in the afternoon. The first day of class I had to shut the door to keep out the smoke, and so the twenty students and the single, solitary me were boarded up in a small wooden room to talk about politics. Children in a group are not individual people – they are just a collection of jaded, smallish faces. When they are hot they are distractible, and when I am hot I feel uglier. I imagined that they talked about me.

"Tom Ferris," I said, reading from a list.

"Here."

"Walker Hetty."

Silence, and I looked out into the children. "Walker?" A striding name, I thought, and kept waiting. A map on the side wall drooped and got ready to fall. Most of the children turned around to look at it, because the longer they stared in expectation of its collapse, the longer they could put me off. I didn't blame them. All of a sudden, I didn't know who wanted to be there less, them or me. Ten minutes ago I had walked into the classroom thinking, Hello class, let's talk about what it means to be a citizen of America. And then we'll vote on a congress and get things rolling. But now I felt a gap – how to get from here to there?

Still no one was speaking up.

"Walker Hetty!" The map crinkled, rattled, and folded down off of the wall. In the middle row of seats a boy made himself apparent by paying attention me; his mouth was a smirk but by the time the expression traveled up to his eyes I got a different message, one that said, Please notice by my obvious face that I disapprove of you. I thought, just back off, hellion.

"You're Walker?"

Same face.

I tried to sound authoritative, and said, "Pick up the map, you're closest." It sounded more like anger. Some of the other children woke up and started looking back and forth between the boy and me. Children feel tension more intuitively than adults and of course they felt something from me. I hoped it was toughness, not fear.

Walker stood up. He might have looked like a nice boy if I had seen him a few weeks ago during my first day in the town – he was bony around the face and wore too short jeans above bare feet and sandals, the kind you buy in superstore bins. He wore a little twine necklace that half disappeared under his t-shirt. He was smiling now, a big smile for an audience, as he picked up the map and hung it on the bulletin board completely upside down.

Italy kicked up out of Europe like a Broadway chorus-liner.

"Cute, real cute," I said, and he looked back at me and said with his eyes, Don't I know it. Seeing Italy and thinking politics, I remembered a line from *The Prince* where Machiavelli says people love of their own free will but fear at the will of their rulers. I had to be a ruler here, some kind of prime minister, and right now Walker looked like somebody who could use a little fear in his heart.

"Are you really that dumb? Class, is Walker really that dumb?" I wanted it to sound like a harsh joke but it fell out crookedly – tired and old. What a hideous thing to say.

As it turned out it was worse than I imagined, because excitement, glittering excitement, shined out of everybody's faces like streetlights and Walker changed somehow: he was filled up by the attention, seemed that he could jump with it, swing himself around the room with it, yelling.

"My dad's a cop and we'll drag your ass to court," he said.

"Just turn the map around."

"Shut up."

I felt myself trying to ignore him. My hand shook and I pressed it down on the lectern. Between two of my fingers I saw his name and others on the roll. "Tom Ferris, will you help Walker turn the map around so we can get started?" Wrong again, I realized. The two of them had a popularity competition between them. Tension like that, you can feel. Tom Ferris hopped up out of his seat and poked Walked in the ribs with a pencil.

"What's up homey?"

This should have been funny because everyone in Warren and a hundred-mile radius was white. But now I wanted to step in and grab their shoulders and then push them back into their seats – no good, though, because Walker's little threat about the cops made me feel too watery to move. This fear was an old, common one, the fear of being tattled on. Even Aristotle said that revolutions were based on fear of dishonor. I wanted to run or fight; anything but learn how my big ideas for this little government might be easier said than done.

Walker slapped the pencil away and tried to twist Tom's nipple. Kids laughed. Tom laughed too but when he pushed Walker back, he pushed too hard and Walker did a gainer over a chair, hopped back up and shoved Tom into the blackboard. There was a huge shuffling of chairs, and then an impenetrable circle of people around the two boys. Swear words got loud, and I heard fists smacking. This was both a nightmare and a relief – now I could do something. I went to the ring and started pulling bodies back. I felt my feet tripping over legs, and children pushing against me, and growing wet patches on my new white blouse under my arms. I couldn't move forward. I heard one of the boys choke, and cough, and then we all smelled vomit. I felt nauseated.

Somewhere in the midst of all this, Mr. Hetty, the principle, arrived. You read that correctly – last name Hetty, Walker's grandfather. His office was below my classroom and surely the noise had brought him up. The room went quiet. The ring of people dissolved, and suddenly my class was again sitting in their seats. Tom was kneeling in his sickness. Walker was bloodied, and when Mr. Hetty stepped up to him and spanked him in front of the whole class, he took it very stoically.

"Why don't you take a break," Mr. Hetty said to me.

I backed up until I felt my desk against the back of my thighs. My teeth chattered a little. Behind Mr. Hetty's gray-haired head, the map still hung firmly upside-down. Now that I looked at it, maybe Italy was dead on her back.

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There was the matter of curriculum. I did not want to teach the textbook, a twenty-year-old falling-apart rag from the Patriot Press that expounded the disadvantages of communism. It sported illustrations of nuclear fallout and talked about the Berlin Wall. It had pictures of bureaucrats, and they were wearing polyester bellbottoms. The students would no doubt regard the text as my fault. I left the books in the metal cabinet by my desk, and bought copies of Aristotle's *Politics* with my own money. I had replaced the old map above the chalkboard with one that denoted nations in the U.N., the EU, NATO and the WTO. I made a workbook that explained alliances and multilateralism. It also defined the word "grassroots," highlighted the Constitution, and supplied photographs of current local legislators. There was a chapter for education, and one for the justice system. In the classroom, I would spend two weeks explaining the structure of the U.S. government, two weeks on state government, and one month each on the economy, the military, public vs. private sectors, internationalism, and an overview of the other systems of government that were out there – including ones that no one practiced, like feudal monarchies and anarchism. I sat in the middle of my unfurnished living room with a glass of milk, and figured all of this out in one evening. Even after the first day's incident, I felt better about the class. I had thirty-six weeks of material prepared, and I was excited to teach it. I would teach it, and in a perfect world, somebody might notice that I knew what I was talking about. Somebody might nominate me for a real office – with the real power to write real laws.

I had only one other experience with middle-schoolers, and this was when I was thirteen. In America, it has never been all right to be ugly – even if you are smart, or genuine. Cedar Rapids was not an exception. I always wore my hair in a ponytail tied at the base of my head, which in unfortunate combination with my long neck, large ears and elongated skull gave my whole head the appearance of being thrust forward from my body like a pigeon's. I had flat breasts that stayed that way forever. My toenails were opaque and yellow, and everyone saw them every week in swimming class – earning myself the nickname, "Dog." I suppose this came from dogs whose toenails were discolored from walking in mud, or clicked on kitchen linoleum.

I could name any one of a hundred times when I felt total humiliation. After a point it was almost a friendly feeling, because it was so familiar. There was a period in my life, around age thirteen, when my only defense was to vomit on people who made fun of me. I would jam my finger down my throat and retch until my stomach was empty.

I assume and accept that young adults can be awful, and that the people who called me Dog all grew up to be decent, hardworking Americans. So it was with open eyes that I believed, sincerely I think, that people should be jailed for unkindness.

The evening after that first day at the school, I saw Walker with his friends in the grocery store. He made a performance out of ignoring me, but when I turned around once to pick out a few cans of soup I saw him watching me from the other end of the aisle.

"Hi there," I said.

He looked over his shoulder. It was just him and me in the aisle – most everyone had cleared out to take their food home and cook it for dinner.

"Hey." He didn't come any closer. I saw a cut above his eye from the fight.

"You okay?"

He nodded, and stuck a hand in his pocket. "It really doesn't hurt, you know."

"You sure? It looks bad."

Just then his friends came back to him, loaded with liters of Pepsi and bags of potato chips. Walker looked embarrassed and took a few steps back until he was among them. I recognized two of his friends. They all looked sidelong at me. I smiled at them, asked them if they were having a party. They faded back even farther, seemed like they were sharing a joke with each other, and left me standing in the aisle with a can of soup in each hand. I heard Walker's voice say something in the next aisle, and all the boys laughed.

That's what I'm talking about. Make mean children do community service with adults; let them learn to be kind to one another. And if the adults were mean, or petty, embarrass the hell out of them. Make every bad intention a taboo. In a while we would fear unkindness. We would put it down in our hearts and keep it out of sight – if there was no way to destroy it totally, at least we could keep it silent.

Days two and three at the school were also hellish. Walker and Tom Ferris beat at each other when they thought I couldn't see, and a girl in the front row picked her hair out. She'd just sit there looking at me, picking, picking, until on the third day she had a quarter-sized bald spot on the front of her head.

I had us build a voting booth out of a refrigerator box and paste it with American flags. There was a congressional election – there was a president, who got to teach some of my lessons, a secretary who photocopied the homework, and a treasurer to raise money for class parties. I thought I was doing a good job, until the end of the election when Walker found that no one voted for him, and kicked over the booth and tore off the flags.

"Stop treating us like we're six." He balled up a flag and threw it at the window.

"I see somebody's close to nap time."

I didn't mean to be sarcastic, but anyway, he stopped complaining. Later, as he left for the cafeteria I tried to apologize, but he just looked at me. Later that day I found a death threat on my desk, but knowing who it came from and why, I threw it in the garbage.

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On Thursday Mr. Hetty invited me out for dinner. He was an old man, fat and solid-looking. Even for school, he dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt with a crushed cardboard box of cigars in his shirt pocket, and he wore those clothes in such a way I could imagine him hanging them on the bedpost at night, and dressing slowly in them again the next morning. His face was as pale as cheese but his nose and the tips of his ears, where they stuck out to either side of his yellow Caterpillar baseball cap, were bright red.

"Place called the Tin Nickel," he said, "usually has a roast beef special on Thursdays. Damn good, if you like meat."

I realized I might look like a vegetarian, with my scarecrow face and city suit. We stood next to my car in the lot between the school and the administration building, and in the late August humidity, my pantyhose might have been melting to the insides of my shoes. I felt most ugly when I was sweating, and I tried to think of an excuse not to go. I didn't want to talk about my students, or about Walker.

"Who's paying?"

"Taxes. Thought maybe you'd have some questions, now that you're in the fray."

"Can I meet you there?"

He pulled a wristwatch out of his pocket and looked at it. "Reservation's in forty minutes – it takes thirty to get there."

Oh, well then. I drove us according to his directions. The road took me past two trailer parks, an elk farm, and the entrance to Lock 12 on the river; but that was the way of the country outside cities – there was no such thing as a likely road to anywhere. All the leaves and branches of all the vegetation hung in the hot, steady summer air like women leaning on broomsticks, ready to collapse with exhaustion from cloudless days in the sun. Leaves withered over the roads – the extra heat from the asphalt was too much to live with and not slump. The road I drove now was a two-lane, pot-holed highway with no traffic, and it reminded me of the ragged roads of my youth on which you could drive or walk for ten miles, twenty miles, and never find another pair of human eyes to look back at you. That was the way of it, going and going until you're out of breath until you realize there's no place to go. Even if you stop there's still more road in front of you.

Even if you fall down on your hands and knees, and claw a last few more inches ahead, and die with your face in the tar, your last living vision will still be of the vanishing point.

"Your class is just what we expected, and trust me, it's going fine," Mr. Hetty said at the restaurant. It was liberally decorated with copper kettles and I saw our roast beef and beer distorted in many of them. He knew the bartender, the manager and most of the waitresses.

I thanked him, and waited for a second before saying anything more. We looked at each other across the table, and I perceived very clearly how he saw me – to him I was beating myself up and needed that encouragement. Maybe he saw a bruised look around my eyes.

"I don't know what you mean by 'fine,' Mr. Hetty, but where I come from my class seems more like the death penalty." I dipped a french fry in gravy. "Unfair, but it'll kill ya."

Mr. Hetty scratched his hair, which was clean but messy under his baseball cap, which like a gentleman he had removed when we entered the restaurant. "Guess so. None of the teachers like that class. But they're yours till May."

"What am I supposed to do until then? Tie them to their chairs?"

He laughed a smoker's laugh. "Don't think so. I'm serious – you've got damage to repair. You gotta make them respect you. Kids expect you to be a certain way, if you're teaching."

"Should I win them over them with my charm and intelligence?"

He gave me a confused, irritated look. "You have to teach them so they understand – make it fun. You need more confidence when you're in the front of the room." He tore off a piece of his cardboard cigar box and wrote down a phone number. He said I could call the last U.S. Government teacher and find out how he taught the class.

"But he's not teaching here anymore," I said. "You fired him."

He frowned, and the hairs of his eyebrows bushed out over his eyes like antennae. "We're teaching these kids to be responsible adults."

"Really? You might have more luck with shock therapy."

"They grow up to be hardworking, family-oriented, voting Americans! And it's your job to get them there. I didn't bring you out to say you're making a fool of yourself, but I'll tell you now, teaching a snobby book to these kids isn't what I call pure genius. Neither is this government business of yours." He chewed twice on a piece of bread. "Fact, it's actually kind of hopeless."

"Cheers," I said. The word was just a metallic noise to me, not much different from the copper kettles over the table. I wanted to throw one of them around, or at Mr. Hetty. I wanted it to strike his face.

I loved the book, Aristotle's *Politics*. When I held it in my hands, I could say, more than for any other book in the world, that this one here was knowledge itself in a binding. Mr. Hetty's assault evoked an animal response in me to clutch the book against myself in a dark corner and growl. So I was different; so I had no friends. I read about politics because it accepted and adapted to human ugliness, the soul-deep kind. Aristotle believed in a "good life," a happy and comfortable one, and he held that we could achieve it even in the face of greed and laziness – he knew it was possible, if only the government was just. And me, even knowing that every person in my country was selfish, I could still watch a tire commercial and be interested in its fine-tuned capitalism. But we had to evolve. There were places to go. There had to be new laws. I was here, this was my time. I could give a speech if I had to. Aristotle is venerable, I would say, but we can teach ourselves to do better.

You have to believe in these things, or you'll go crazy.

*

When I was younger I thought to write children's books aimed at awakening compassion at an earlier age , but I found that I preferred reading books to writing them, and that I didn't like children. I wanted to be good at something – maybe like a lot of middle-class Americans, I suffered from a fear of nonproductivity, but underneath the fear was a genuine desire to do something good.

I should explain about the town because it is unique.

It smelled of oil. The day of my interview was my first day in the state since I was a teenager, and to drive on its roads, it reminded me of a denser, more crunched-up Iowa, but when I got out of my car my first real impression was of the crude oil fumes. The middle-of-town streets converged into a point at the Blair building, which was architectured in the shape of an arrowhead. It pointed across a wide intersection to the gas station, and at first I thought the fumes originated from there. This was plausible, because it was the town center in every other respect. Unclean boys hunkered on the cement curb between the convenience store and the fuel pumps. The pump housings were rusted out, as was all the metal around the station – window frames, hubcaps, some car bodies, and the state inspection sign that hung, squeaking, above the boys' shoulders. Turns out that three of them were cousins and their family owned the station. This family member was a woman my age and three times my weight; but I wasn't holding it against her. I was ugly too.

"I'm looking for the school," I said, and she gave me directions. When ugly people meet each other it's not like we commiserate about our looks, but neither is it the same as when two beautiful people meet each other. (I don't think there is anything competitive about having been doled out a face from the sludge at the bottom of God's beauty barrel.) But sometimes there is a connection. You know there's at least one person looking at you who knows better than to be judging.

No one was behind me in line so I asked about the oil smell.

The woman settled onto a red plastic stool at the register. She pointed out the front window; around the edges of a cigarette ad taped to the glass, and I saw old architecture and Victorian mansions that were real estate offices and banks. I had noticed these when I first drove in and wondered about them also. Well, this woman explains that under all its trees Warren was an oil field. Most of the houses in the town were built by the rich in the early 1900s, and even though their family's wells still pumped oil, the industry moved elsewhere in the 1960s, and in recent memory the only noteworthy money in the town came from a plastic-cup factory across the railroad tracks.

The woman opened some Marlboros and placed one between her lips. "Hard to believe that's what it was, when you see how it is now." She struck a match. "You get used to the smell. But it don't keep you from worrying that someday it's all gonna explode." A sad note traveled out with her smoke and curled up against the ceiling, which years of cigarettes had stained yellow.

"What does everyone do for fun?" I asked.

The woman pinched a piece of tobacco off of her tongue and wiped it on her pants. "Oh, things. We all got family. Thank God for family."

"But I mean for themselves. What do you do by yourself when you're not working?"

She shrugged like she didn't understand. No – the idea never occurred to her, and obviously it wasn't important. These people stuck together. Social animals, and so forth. If you were a loner God help you, because it meant that at some point you had gotten too many ideas in your head. And that was your fault. It must be. I looked out the glass door. The boys still sat on the curb, backs to me. One of them pitched pebbles at a coffee can; every few seconds I heard a clink and a rattle. The other boys just watched. I felt myself being drawn in, and looked away.

"Doesn't anyone leave this place?"

The woman sat with her hands on her plump knees and watched through the door. She squinted up her eyes like she was trying to think, like maybe there was a thought on the matter— Smoke hung around her face. She shook her head, and the cigarette wagged back and forth between her lips, No, No…

I bought a candy bar and left. Outside I had to step between the boys to get off of the curb. A couple of them looked up at me and smirked. "Enjoy your gas, lady." I felt a hard edge in my eyes when I looked back at them.

*

Of all the days in that week Friday may have been the worst. The problem was that it began well, but that should have been the clue: all good mornings are suspect.

I brought the textbook to school. The reason for the delay was my worrying that the barbarians in the class would rip the covers or write bad words on the pages, and Aristotle did not deserve that. So I had left the books for five days on my kitchen counter at home, in a box, where I could take them out one by one and deliberate on whether or not today was the day to pass them out at school.

Mr. Hetty had convinced me that no one believed in me. Or at least in my class. There was no point to teaching thirteen-year-olds how to vote, or why they should respect the Constitution. My job was to teach obedience. As Mr. Hetty and I parted after dinner, he had leaned back into my car and stared at me. An unlit cigar hung out of his lips. "What?" I said, and he frowned. "We hired you because you look strict." He kept giving me that shrewd, heavy-handed stare, then finally he shut the door and walked away. I pulled the rearview mirror down to see my face. Ugly and strict. To these people, I was what an American educator looked like.

I brought the books to school an hour early. I don't know why. I guess it felt good to be in that room and have no one bombard me. It was another hot day, but Phil Donahue was out of tires, and I could leave the fire escape door open and get the breeze. It smelled good, like trees and dirt with a whiff of somebody's breakfast from one of the windows across the alley. I went to the door. The alley was gravel with grass growing in the middle track. I took the fire escape down to the ground and walked away from the school. I passed a gray clapboard house with an open window, where I heard a radio show in the background and sizzling food, and farther down the alley I looked into a cement block garage and saw a rusting bicycle. The alley took me around a bend into some trees, which I could look through and see all the backyards, and just a little ways on the alley terminated in a bench that overlooked a small, gravelly hill that sloped down into the river. In effect the whole town was behind me.

It was an old bench, just scarred wood and rusting metal, but it was pretty. There was a moment here, I almost don't know how to explain – it was not love, or peace. I was frantically trying to pull this place inside myself. The effort hurt me. But I kept gathering and pulling, trying to stuff it all in as quick as I could see it. And the more I stuffed, the more I found to crush in on top of it. I breathed out, and in, and felt that place pierce my heart like a railroad spike.

Then the children came. I heard them in the school.

I took off back down the alley and raced up the fire escape to my classroom. They had found the books on each of their desks. The novelty dazzled them at first; they pawed the shiny covers, thumbed the pages, and turned their copies over to eye the back. I grabbed on to the door jamb. I didn't know what else to do with myself.

Walker was the first to check out the words. He held the book up, read from it like a speech. "'Everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think is good.' What the fuck does that mean?" He climbed onto the desk and fast-balled it right onto the floor. Some of its pages creased. Walker hopped down onto it and kicked it under the desk. I tried to see the humor but felt it flutter. Kid needed some Ritalin, for real – even Aristotle would say, if he were here, that sometimes you just have to medicate if it's for the greater good. But the other kids found similar passages – on every page, really – and started to laugh at them. I recognized every sentence. I heard and understood the words. But the kids read through them like a string of foreign cusswords – singing them out, stumbling over them, having not a single God-given clue what they were saying. For all they knew they might have been calling their mothers a shitball in French.

A book skidded up to the front of the room. I could not tell where in the commotion it came from. As I stood there staring at it a feeling rose from that place in my chest where the bench at the end of the alley had stuffed itself. It was as if all that strange pain had decided to hurt again, and this time I started to cry. So I just sat down at my desk and let the crying happen. It hiccupped in and out of me. It had been quite some time. It was as refreshing as long laugher – I had forgotten that. My lesson plan was open by my coffee mug and I saw that I had planned to teach all about the President of the United States. I wondered what was so unforgivable about that and kept crying. I bunched up my knuckles against my eyes. My lips peeled back from my teeth like a big gorilla snarl, and I thought, Let them see that. I rocked side to side in my chair. One unremarkable day in my life when I was on my way out of my teens I thought I'd never stop crying once I started, and wondered what would be the thing that got me going, but here I was losing it over a book on the floor.

The pain that had triggered it all still rung out inside my chest like a small gong, and as I cried I would think of the bench and the river, and the gong would sound, and I'd cry some more – but mostly it stayed quiet, and I looked at my crying as something rather surprising, like a car sinking in a pond.

Maybe I hammed it up. Because after a while I noticed that some of the girls in the class had left in a hurry, probably to fetch Mr. Hetty, and all the boys but Walker had returned to their seats and were awkwardly watching anything but me – and still I kept crying. I didn't mean it. The small gong was done.

I let out a howl of a sob, and then another one. There was nothing behind them but my desire to make the noise.

"Oh, you horrible people..."

I beat my knees with my fists and thumped my forehead against the desk. I felt all kinds of theatrics leaping around inside me. My coffee mug was in front of my nose, and I reached out and pushed it until it fell off the far side of my desk. Coffee splattered onto a girl's jeans. She shrunk back in her seat. They were all staring now. I grabbed a handful of pencils and threw them on the floor. Some bounced end-over-end into the hallway. The classroom door hung open – and I slammed it shut, and then slammed myself into it. I kicked a desk. It and the seated student skidded backwards a few inches. I saw the textbooks and started scooping them up, clutching them, dumping them back into the box beside my desk.

I snatched at Walker's book. The kid was still standing up in the middle of the room. Tom Ferris started to stand up out of his seat – maybe he thought Walker and I would pick up the fight where the two of them had left off.

"Give me that." I grabbed the top half of the book and tugged. Walker tugged back. "Oh, so you want it now?" I asked. "Here you go." I let go of the book. He stumbled backward and fell. I stood over him, teary but satisfied to see him floundering around on the floor like an upside-down beetle. The students were really eating this up.

He gathered himself off the floor. The book slid off of his chest. He actually looked me in the face.

"Jesus, lady..."

"Know what?" I said. "You've got to be the ugliest boy I ever met. Underneath that face you'd even make Mahatma Ghandi want to puke." I reached down and grabbed his ear. I had never actually seen this done in real life, or had it done to me, but when Walker sat up and ducked against my hand to keep me from pulling, I knew it hurt. "Yeah you, come with me."

I headed for the fire escape and he scuffled along behind me. His ear was warm. I felt his hair against my knuckles. I was crying again and this time I realized it was for real. I closed the door. We were locked outside. Children pressed their faces against the windows but I stood in the way with my back to them, hiding Walker. In a way we had our privacy.

I let go of his ear, and he quickly covered it up with his hand – gently, not touching it. We looked at each other. He was in pain and so was I. Whatever anger our faces showed to each other, there was a more tender undercurrent that showed something else, the eyes rolling behind the mask. *Are you crazy? Am I? I don't really want to be here, how about you?*

"Who you callin' ugly," Walker asked sullenly.

"Keep trying, I've heard it all," I said. "There's nothing you can say to me."

"Roadkill."

I wiped my face on the cuff of my shirt.

He uncovered his ear. It was swelling. "Shit stain."

"Shut up, Walker."

"Dog food."

I cuffed the swelling ear. He shoved me against the railing, hard. We looked at each other again, and this time I felt heavyhearted. "So this is how it goes," I said, and left him standing on the fire escape. I walked down the stairs and stood in the road.

"Hey, where you goin'?"

When I didn't turn around he called again.

"What's the matter?" I heard him step down onto the stairs. "I'm sorry."

I took a few steps on the road, paused, and then continued to walk.

Movement stirred in one of the yards – maybe there were more tires to burn. From the house that had smelled of breakfast I now heard running water and dishes in the sink. The radio was louder, and through the sound of the water and music a woman hummed along, stopped, and called upstairs for her mother. I tried to see in the window but the sun shined against the screen and blocked everything behind it.

How everything hurt. How everything suddenly caused so much pain. I was at the bench again. Nobody followed me. Nobody here but me. I grabbed the back of the bench and squeezed it, hard. It had a worn-out hollow feel. It could have been planted here for years, and I tried to steady myself on it. I needed to think. There were some troubles I needed to put in perspective. Anything could be prevented. We only needed a, we had to, we should—

I had to sit down.

STONE-KICKER

The only mail that still came to Wake City, Texas was from the U.S. Government – quarter-slips of newsprint that encouraged everyone to support the war. The writing was hackneyed and cheerful and unfailingly patriotic, but sometimes sterner ones arrived that said, "The American G.I. in Mexico asks, 'Did my brothers and sisters desert me??' Enlist!!" which meant there would be another draft.

Justine Davies, whom everyone in the town called Jay for short, was returning with a kerosene ration for her half-sister when she found one of these in her mother's mailbox. She usually did not stop at her home because no one had lived there for six weeks, not since her mother went to look for work in Houston, but hers was the only house in Wake City that had a ceiling fan, and Jay kept the rest of her lead soldier collection there. She stood under the porch's tin roof and sorted through her pockets for the key, but realized she must have forgotten it at her half-sister's house, and therefore would have to satisfy herself with checking the mail and then continuing her walk along the hot, bright road toward María's.

She pulled the slip out of the mailbox and read it closely. (She did not read well; no one did.) On the paper was printed a blobby picture of a soldier in a mudhole in the jungle. He stretched his hand toward the reader looking desperate. Jay looked back at him. He did not remind her of her half-brother or father – he was not skinny enough, or dark enough, or old enough, and was altogether too Midwestern – but Jay imagined herself in the Mexican jungle anyway. Creepers, wet leaves, bird calls, the smell of black dirt, these all crowded into her mind so densely that she forgot that the road burned her feet, and she worked it out in her head for the drafting age to be fifteen. Then she could fight, too. She was good with a gun but better in her imagination, and when she thought about war she was more than simply Jay; she was First Lieutenant Davies. She liked this thought, and walked faster along the road.

She glanced up from the dirt and squinted. The road was an awful place to walk because it had no shade, and with the morning heating up toward afternoon, Jay wished she had not wasted time at her mother's house. At the far end of the road she saw downtown Wake City – a collection of cottonwood trees on the horizon that cast scant shade across a few hundred corrugated-metal roofs. On days like this she and her parents used to go swimming in the reservoir, but now there was no reservoir, and no parents. She and her half-sister María, her father's other daughter, were the last.

Far away in the south, on the edge of Jay's hearing, a round of missiles exploded. She thought at first that it was Fort Duncan again, the poor thing – but no, the last of it had been blasted to smithereens last Sunday. And besides, this was the second explosion Jay had heard this morning, and the Mexicans never volleyed more than once in a day.

There was another person on the road. She watched his progress for a long time before she could make sense of the mirage. He was one of Wake City's two television repairmen, and several minutes before she spotted him he had spotted her – that strange, gangly girl that shared a house with María Alvarez. He shook his head. A Mexican and a blond under the same roof. The wheelbarrow held a television wrapped in towels for padding, and when it hit a pothole, the wheel rattled once and got stuck.

Jay stuffed the propaganda into her shorts pocket and walked up to him. "What happened to your pickup?"

"Feds finally took it, the assholes. Knew it would happen. And I gotta get this to Howard's Furnace by noon." He pushed at it and continued grumbling. "You know what? Any non-gov auto is getting crunched for our troops. It'd make my job easier if those damn spics would bury the hatchet and cough up the oil again, no offense to your sister," he tacked on to the end. He put his weight against the wheelbarrow and shoved it. It stayed stuck.

Jay put down the kerosene ration on the side of the road and went to the man's aid. He was no different from anyone else in the rest of the nation – after all, they said, the Mexicans had started it. They were selfish and miserly with the oil fields; they wanted the U.S. to keep out. And any dark-skinned Americans that had been on the American side of the border when the first ICBMs landed on the capitol suddenly found themselves without jobs, and after a few months, without friends. This was four years ago. Anybody much younger than Jay accepted the adults' resentment as the natural attitude to have toward Mexicans, and there were even some of her classmates in school who couldn't remember the springtimes when the whole town celebrated Cinco de Mayo. They couldn't remember the parades, or the music, or the colored paper decorations on all the houses, or the food – oh, the food. She remembered this very well. Her father and mother baked cheesecake cookies and bought five pounds of saltwater taffy which they gave to anyone who visited during the holiday; and her father's ex-wife Beatrice would bring her children Vincente and María, and montepata and pork and figs for dinner. Her father's two families dined together happily this one time every year.

After a great deal of effort, Jay helped the man free his wheelbarrow.

"Did you hear that explosion before?" she asked.

"Of course I did. Do I look deaf to you?"

Jay didn't answer rhetorical questions, because María asked them all the time and they annoyed her. "Do you know what's going on?"

"How the hell would I know? I had to sell my radio to pay for this damn wheelbarrow." He wiped the sweat off of his chin with the collar of his t-shirt. "Goddamn roads, we even have the money to fix 'em but the Feds don't want us driving on 'em, did you know that? Anything to choke the need for oil."

If you were white you could gripe about the war as much as you wanted to, and the television repairman made good use of his freedom. To him the "Feds" were congressmen, the IRS, police officers, the water authority, absent bus drivers, the national cable company – anyone who made his life inconvenient. On one occasion he'd been known to call his neighbor a Fed when her cat urinated on his garage. He stood back from the wheelbarrow and rubbed dirt out of his eye with his thumb. "Don't ever listen to a goddamn word from the Feds, girl. Here, you want to walk out with me? I could use the company."

Jay retrieved the soup can of kerosene from the side of the road and gestured toward the town. "Nah, I'm hungry. I've been thinking about food all morning."

"All right. Bye now. And if you're hungry don't expect the Feds to feed you. They're making themselves fat on the food stamps we all deserved last spring when the drought killed Iowa, not a single seed planted, no sir—"

Jay left him to grumble alone because he would carry on whether or not anyone else was present to listen. There are grumblers and there are flag-wavers, she thought, walking again toward town. I'm not either. Neither is María. We're the only two in all Texas. She found a stone on the road and kicked it the rest of the way to the town with her bare feet. Sometimes, if she thought too much about María, or her absent mother, or dead Beatrice, or her father and Vincente all the way down at the bottom of Mexico fighting the Mexicans and South Americans, the only thing to do was kick stones. It did not need to be thought about, or imagined. You kicked, and the stone rolled, and you kicked again. Motion, rest. That's all there was to it.

At last the stone struck the front of María's metal house; Jay was home.

"Did you spend forty days in the desert or what?" María banged the dustpan around in the garbage can until it was empty, and then found the aloe and tossed it at Jay. "Put some of that on before you peel like a banana. Why were you out in the sun so long?"

"I stopped at my parents' house. No one was there."

"Well, what did you expect?" She gave the dustpan one more good knock and hung it next to the broom. María was pretty and brown and had no accent except the flat Midwestern one – this surprised some people, in the same way they were surprised to hear that her father was white and from Boston. Although she was talkative – always chatted with the neighbors, the teachers at Jay's school, and the other parents – the fact remained that her American-ness always surprised these people, and in its course it had soured her. She did not complain except rarely to Jay, and never about the war.

"There's gonna be another draft," said Jay.

"How would you know a thing like that?" María stood back and looked at Jay, and because the back wall of the house was behind her with its shelves of canned tomatoes and chili peppers, she looked like the Mexican woman that used to run the old-fashioned grocery on the corner of Main and Angeles. Jay told her so.

"There's only one child in this whole town selfish enough to think about food in the middle of a conversation about conscription, and that's you. You're as bad as Vincente was when he was your age." She took down a jar of tomatoes and dumped it into a pan on the gas range. Then she grabbed the soup can of kerosene and got the range working and lit, and pushed the tomatoes around in the bottom of the pan. She never spent much time talking about Vincente. The things she did not talk about she wrote in a hardcover notebook that Jay was forbidden to read, and when María was gruff like this, Jay knew she was thinking about what she should write next.

Jay hung in the doorway, waiting to be asked about the draft. She pulled the newsprint slip out of her pocket.

"Do you think I'll get drafted someday?"

"You'd better pray you don't. They'll suck you dry."

"I wouldn't let them. I'm better than boys."

"Tell that to your brother and father." María dug in one of the egg crates for a not-so-rotten onion and cut into the bad spots with a paring knife. Jay knew by the way she jabbed at it that she was angry. Jay was angry, too, and embarrassed, and she did not mean to insult Vincente and her father that way. Yes, María was at her best in the afternoon – after whatever hope she held for day had faded with the heat, and it was time to begin cooking the meal – and when this happened, she liked to point things out. The day before, she pointed out to Jay that it wasn't a good idea to drink from the hose because so much water was wasted, and that it hadn't rained for eight weeks. And the day before that, she pointed out that Jay's toes were always bloody because she would not break herself of that unattractive, ornery, unfeminine habit of kicking rocks around. Nothing María said was ever untrue. She was never cynical. But underneath the banality of her observations was one more observation, one that she never said out loud and doubtfully ever would, and it was that Vincente and their father had been gone for three years without a single letter, or phone call, or leave of absence.

"What were the explosions for this morning?" Jay asked.

"God knows. I don't want to. The radio is off and can stay off for the rest of the war, and I won't miss a bit of it. All that squawking and explaining and rah-rah America makes me want to kill myself."

Jay watched María cook until the heat in the metal-walled kitchen made her feel sick, and then she retreated to the bedroom. It was the only other room in the house, and it was separated from the kitchen by a tropical shower curtain that used to hang in Jay's bathroom in the other house. María had built this house – this shack? – when Jay's mother left for Houston, suddenly and without explanation. Some people just crack. It was a terrible pain on them all. María especially, even though she had no relation to the woman. Jay's mother had given María the back room in the old house for a place to write and think in peace during the time when all the other brown people were being driven out; but when she left to look for work, the police came the next day and said that a Mexican could not live in a white woman's house. And no Mexican could live in a building with a lock, unless it was a jail – so said the law – and would the pretty Mexican like to spend the night with the Homeland Security Volunteer Police Force, Precinct 0127? This frightened María a great deal, and when she moved into central Wake City, Jay moved in with her to keep her safe.

No word had come from Jay's mother in all that time. María made note of her suspicions in her notebook. Jay kicked stones. They did little else: survival in a time of heat and persecution was its own work, and every hour's effort was spent to that end. It was as rough as field labor and as mind-tiring as too much schoolwork. People's talk, fear of the police, sunburn, dust clouds, no food – it wore them down. At the end of the day nothing was left over. They shared a twin bed, and in it every night they slept the sleep of the exhausted, and did not dream of memories or the future.

The walls in the shack were too thin for there to be a windowsill, but María had situated a bookshelf under the window and crowded the top of it with plants – an amaryllis, a few spider plants, and some African violets – and although sometimes a person would reach through the window at night and steal a plant, most of them had stayed put. On the next shelf down were their toiletries (which had to be carried to the public toilet down the street, and this was the only real gripe Jay had about living here), and on the bottom shelf was a small part of Jay's lead soldier collection, and six jelly jars of paint.

Jay removed ten of them and set them among the plants. Soldiers in a jungle. She was too old to actively play with them, but they were necessary to her in the peripherally important way that a toothbrush or a coffee mug was necessary. When she would begin to observe that she missed her family, or that most of the trees in Wake City were dead, or that she once had a dog that had lived in a nicer house than this one, she took out her soldiers and thought about when she could fight in the war.

Jay had this picture in her mind that she never could really explain or drive out; when she thought about the world she imagined an old painting of war. In the middle of this painting was a general on a horse, all dressed up. Riding boots, white trousers, brass buttons, all of that. And his horse was pretty. He was busy giving directions to the other officers, and everyone else was on foot around him because he was so important. But he was brave and responsible, too, because the people around him were hard at work fighting – they were out of ammunition and were fighting with bayonets, and the enemy was almost on them, and they all looked very tired and scared, not like the general of course. And it was glorious, just glorious. It was like the artist had found the speck of himself that belonged to the universe, and with it he had covered a whole canvas. Most people searched a lifetime for this speck in themselves, but never found it. Jay did not doubt that the general was the artist's self-portrait. That was why the painting was so important. It was all there in one place, if you knew how to take it.

She wished she could remember where she had seen it before. Maybe it was Dutch. She had seen a book about art museums once, but it was a long time ago and the only libraries were the small, unhelpful ones in some of the larger towns north of Texas.

María pulled aside the shower curtain. "Put those away."

"Nobody can see—"

"Those should be bullets by now, and if anybody finds them here all squirreled away, *I'm* the one going to get it." She plucked each one of them out of the plant leaves and tossed them like a handful of dice on the bottom bookshelf. "Do you ever stop and think?"

"I'd protect you if they came."

"Oh my yes, and you're big and strong as any man, aren't you?"

María stood up straight and stepped away from the window, out of plain sight. People had been known to throw rocks sometimes. This instinct for survival made Jay think of the other soldiers in the painting, how they fought so hard even when they knew they were going to die, and she thought she saw María's face among them.

"A mother will fight twice as hard as a two-hundred-pound man if somebody tries to take her baby," said Jay. "You just have to mean it. Women can fight; I can fight."

María laughed and stroked Jay's hair, and went back into the kitchen. Four steps took her from the bedside to the stove. "Go outside, Jay. Go outside and take a walk. You're nobody's mother." She poked at the tomatoes again, and added more salt.

Angry and bored, Jay left the house and found a street to investigate that she had never walked before. Wake City was small – she knew all the streets and alleys, old stores and bars – and she knew of this one, too, but the reason she had never explored it was that it was quite dull. You could see that from a distance. It was one of the new streets, the ones that had formed after the cars were taken away, and when everyone needed to live within walking distance of the Howard's Furnace ration depot. The only buildings along it were squalid residential shacks strung together by laundry lines. Jay had no friends here.

People were out in force, but there was something unusual about their mood. Radios were plugged into shacks that had electricity and set on the ground outside – and almost everyone, even the children, had set aside their chores and gathered around them in circles. No one listened to music; the radios were tuned to the pub-serv station and for the first time that Jay could remember, no one was mocking it. She approached a woman in the nearest circle and asked her what had happened.

"The explosions this morning came from us," said the woman. "We're cutting off Mexico."

The woman had a nervous way of speaking, as though the other people were listening and judging. The words she had chosen made Jay think of crude surgery. She continued, and told Jay that since Fort Duncan fell, the U.S. had no security headquarters left to keep Mexican and South American ground troops from crossing the border on foot, and the only logical solution was to drop a chain of missiles into the Rio Grande until the oceans filled the new channel and blocked the route. The government worked out a deal with Canada to borrow a few hundred thousand missiles in exchange for five seats in the Senate.

"Is that constitutional?" asked Jay.

"It's the new order of things," said the woman, opening her eyes wide. "Mexico did it for the South American Alliance, so we'd better keep up or lose out."

Jay heard the news story on the radio cut away to one of the station's endless jingles. *Keep up or lose out, chin up and hang Old Glory out!* People began to break away from the circles and return to their houses. Some of the adults talked seriously about the severing, but most of them fell toward the more sociable custom of doomsaying. "That's it," said a shirtless man to Jay, "this is America, Canada's biggest province!" She looked over her shoulder at him and continued down the street. A few more recognized her as the girl that lived with María Alvarez.

The street took her into the middle of town. It was once was a public square and a park, but the grass there was dead and the large cottonwood tree was covered with caterpillar webs that made its leaves look gray. People were gathered here, too. This was once the best place in town to watch the Cinco de Mayo parade, but the families Jay saw now would seem out of place in the celebration – even the ones who were smiling looked remote and foreign, and she could not imagine her father or her mother coming back to a place inhabited by such unwelcoming people. Some of them still had jobs, but ration coupons did not require it. School had ended early that year and the children playing under the tree had been there every afternoon since April. Once a week the government paid for a truck to come through with a movie screen and a projector because there was no longer enough electricity to support home theater, or to power computers, or to heat water. A generator chugged loudly just outside of the square. A television sat next to it on a card table, and next to that, two window fans. The children took turns in front of them.

Jay watched everyone from one of the park gardens. Of course it was a dead garden, but the stone edge of it was there, and it was a good place to sit. She was thinking about Cinco de Mayo again. When had it become so distant, so difficult to remember? There was the last parade four years ago, and then the first big draft; and then at some forgotten point the days had begun to be longer and more lonely, and harder. Memories before the war suddenly existed on the other side of a chasm. María had begun to keep a journal. Jay had begun with the stones. Then her mother left, and Jay ceased to paint her lead soldiers. She couldn't remember what pleasure she once derived from the act. Only that the soldiers helped her to imagine her father in the war – but not what his face looked like, or how his voiced sounded. And there were other mysteries: what Vincente had done for a living, the sound of a piano. Please, Jay thought, let María have it written down in that notebook of hers. Let her have a catalogue of the way everything used to be.

The heat of the day beat down on her head and made her thoughts seem bulkier than they actually were; and when she turned them toward the current Mexico, a great dread made her put her forehead between her knees and stare helplessly at the ground. A fight broke out between the children over the fans. Jay listened to them cuss and carry on. Her dread filled her with energy, and she shouted at them, "Shut up, will ya?"

Two inspectors from the HSVPF were sure to catch up with her later in the afternoon to ask her why she had yelled. The USG was really cracking down on restlessness these days, said one of them, and if she had a formal complaint about America, she could file it with the notary in Howard's Furnace. The turnaround was about four weeks, but the assistant to the Undersecretary of Administration would be sure to respond. What, no? The inspector produced a pad of yellow slips and wrote out a citation.

"What the hell's this?" Jay looked around the square. People were interested – no fault of theirs, lacking entertainment.

"Noncompliance to complain," said the inspector. "Report to the Bureau of Administration by next Tuesday for mandatory volunteer duty – Uncle Sam needs assistance filing the official complaints, so you can see how it's done." He gave her a long wink, and left her in the square. Both inspectors walked stiffly and joked with one another as they went. Jay added the citation in her shorts pocket next to the enlistment flyer she'd picked up that morning. A few minutes later the UV buzzer went off, even louder than the generator, and people flocked to get out of the sun. Jay stood up and walked home without hurry. When she was out of earshot from the generator, she heard that the explosions had picked up speed and now maintained a steady grumble in the south. A brown cloud rose high on the horizon. Jay found a stone and kicked it along the street.

María had broken her oath. When Jay came in the door the shower curtain was drawn aside, and her sister sat on the bed with the radio on her lap.

"It's horrifying," she said.

Jay looked out the window at the cloud. In the middle of town, the buzzer cut out suddenly. She studied the sky. The sun was getting dimmer. The radio static filled up the room and made the heat seem thinner, sharper. "*If you see a Mexican lock your door – A friendly face? – You can't be sure.*" The radio signal wobbled in and out and at last seemed to steady itself in time for the evening news. The USG's hit single, "Anthem for my Brothers," topped the music charts this weekend – a sound bite from the artist's interview allowed him to express his gratitude to the National Sound Laboratory in Ann Arbor. It had discovered the science behind inspiring music, and anybody who bought the license could write the perfect song. Beetles in the Pacific Northwest cleared eight hundred acres of forest today; the government applauded their effort, as it provided a metaphor for the war effort against Mexico and the SAA. "We will wipe out the enemy with a few simple sweeps of the pesticide plane. Stand strong, Oregonians." In Hong Kong, country-western music was all the rage. The British Prime Minister was observed to laugh behind his hand as he read the business section of his morning newsmagazine, and negotiations in Belfast fell to blows, again. The prince of Saudi Arabia came on for his weekly fireside chat. He promised the American people that small United States flag stickers had been pasted on the windows of petrol stations to remind the Saudis of the oil shortage abroad. There was something about the legalization of hand grenades among HSVPF precincts around the country, and in Philadelphia, two of eight students were put to death for the vigilante murder of a political science professor. Prison inmates across the country acted in unanimous protest against the Criminal Conscription Act by going on hunger strike, but so far, ten percent of the nation's criminals had already been pushed through basic training and shipped to the front lines in Nicaragua. The radio signal lost its balance again, and the batteries were almost dead, but before the static washed over the announcers' voices it seemed that they were about to report on the bombings in southern Texas.

The kerosene ration was already used up, and the stove had been off since three o'clock. Jay and María ate their dinner cold, and after a sepia-colored twilight darkened into night on the other side of the door, they got into bed and tried to sleep. They both lay awake for a half an hour before Jay decided that she couldn't keep quiet another second.

"You can't keep people like this, you can't expect them to, to—just *wait* here like a loaf of bread stuck in the oven..."

"You still want to fight in the war? For this country?"

"Yes! I'd give anything."

María gave Jay a soft, cynical laugh. "Rather than be here to take your orders from the USG, you can go to a war zone and take them. It's really rotten, you know."

Jay put her face in the pillow and stared at bookshelf. "People are rotten everywhere. I don't see what difference it would make."

"Here is home."

"No, not even close."

María turned over in bed, an undertaking that required both of them to switch positions so that neither fell onto the floor. Jay found herself turned at an awkward angle because it was the only arrangement by which the least amount of her body touched María's. Any other way would overheat them both.

"I hate this."

"Then imagine how I feel," said María, and afterwards would not answer any more of Jay's comments.

*

The next day was Monday, and though no one could find the sun, the heat was punctual. Jay walked to her mother's house to sit under the ceiling fan. Before she had climbed the porch steps, however, she saw the mailbox hanging open. Inside was a letter – a letter in an envelope. It was addressed to María.

Jay held it in her hand for a long time. She slipped her thumb under the flap, and then withdrew it. It was not her letter. But she missed the feel of the paper in her hands. She had not even realized how badly. After a short moral skirmish, Jay creased it in thirds with her fingernail and put it in her hip pocket with the citation and flyer where it would not get dusty, and headed back toward the other house. She wanted to run but the dust was thick in the air and she did not want to breathe more of it than was absolutely necessary.

"María, look."

María had not gotten out of bed yet – she had lain awake most of the night and only after Jay left the house had she fallen deeply asleep – but when Jay came in with the letter she sat up and was wide awake again. She took the letter and held it to the window, but the light was too thin to reveal anything. She tore it open.

"It's from the police," she said, reading the letterhead, and then read the letter.

Jay was terrified that her citation had drawn the HSVPF's attention to her sister.

"There's a new law." María folded the letter and returned it to the envelope. "I knew there would be, eventually. Not a surprise, really." There was something in the way that she spoke that told a different story altogether. The law said that anyone having one grandparent of Hispanic descent was to report to the police for internment, or be collected as soon as possible by force. The letter said it was for safety, but for whose, it did not say. María put the envelope on the sheet beside her and patted it like it was a dog, roughly and with spirit. "Come on. Let's eat and talk about this."

María dished out last night's leftovers and Jay put bites of it in her mouth but did not want to eat. The letter was dated a few days ago – it wasn't her fault after all but that didn't matter. Jay felt the moment bearing down on her, and she thought of her lead soldiers and of war.

"You gotta run, María. I'll lie for you."

"What do you keep in that head of yours?" María put more salt on her pasta and stirred it on the plate. "If there was someplace to go, the police wouldn't have sent warning."

"Then we should fight. This is wrong."

"Who's to remember what's right and wrong anymore? We're nobodies."

"But they're gonna put you in a camp!" Jay's fork speared a piece of pasta, but when it was halfway to her mouth she forgot she was eating. *Gonna put you in a camp.* The words, when they were out in the air, sounded ugly and dirty. They brought with them pictures of metal fence and bare muddy bodies.

María also stopped eating. "Grow up."

"I'm sorry—"

"Bring the nails to the funeral. Throw some ash on the burning house. I can't even put up with you sometimes."

The letter did not indicate how long the police would wait before they came for María. It was so formal that it emptied itself of meaning. María Alvarez: In order to meet the compliance standard of the State of Texas, this notice is to inform you that local representatives of the Homeland Security Volunteer Police Force will make themselves present at your current domicile with intent to invite you to be escorted to an alternative place of residence.... When Jay read it she realized that María had translated most of it on her own; nowhere did it say the words internment or "by force."

After the meal, Jay did not need María to tell her to go for a walk. For once she wished María would tell her to return, or better, come with her. María had not been out of the house in weeks. It was all so wrong, thought Jay, and kicked a stone. It made her foot hurt. Her toenail split and there was blood between her toes.

She walked the four streets to the public square. It did not feel like home. People had produce carts and boxes of their clothes. They spoke only a little. Most sat facing south. Jay had never come to the square at night or on a cloudy day, and for as long as she could remember, she had not seen the town without the shadows of bright sun. Today the town was flat and brown.

The television repairman was back. He sat at the garden's edge blowing his nose into a gray handkerchief.

"What's going on now?"

He looked up from the folds of his handkerchief. "Hey kiddo, how the hell ya been? Just watchin' the show."

Jay sat down and pulled her foot up onto her knee. The dirt had stopped the bleeding. She asked him what show. "The Canadians," he said. "Today's the day they fire the big guns into the trench. Cutting the last nerves, so to speak." He patted an umbrella next to his leg. "Hear we might need these."

He talked about his son in the war. Jay asked the only polite questions she knew – what's his name? what's his sign? – because she did not want to insult the repairman as she had insulted María. He answered the questions as politely as she had asked them and didn't even swear, but talking was a burden and when there was a lull, Jay stared south. She thought of the soldiers in— where was it, Nicaragua? She suddenly felt bad for them. The envy was there, too, but the heavy "Yes" that used to accompany it had gone. Mexico seemed far away; hell, even Oklahoma seemed like a foreign place. Jay had never been farther than Houston.

Twenty minutes later the missiles landed in the trench formerly occupied by the Rio Grande River. They buzzed and shrieked so that even Wake City, three hundred miles north, could hear them fly, and the ground trembled when they struck. The southern horizon turned black all at once like a screen going up.

Jay wanted to run to María but the sight held her in the garden. "Hoo-whee!" cried the repairman, and opened his umbrella.

In a few minutes specks of dirt began to fall from the sky. Jay covered her head with her hands but she could feel it sifting into her hair. Surprised people started to move in the square. They pushed their produce carts of clothing and possessions back toward their houses, shocked, as if they'd expected to watch the show and then be on their way north to Canada, no problem. The square emptied. Jay edged toward the repairman's umbrella. The dirt specks became smaller, and in a short while, the two of them were left alone in the square taking shelter from dust as fine as cocoa powder.

"I wonder what it'd be like to be closer," said Jay over the rumbling.

The repairman shrugged, and the movement dislodged a sheet of dust from the umbrella. "Couldn't say. Hope they evacuated it. Know what I think?" After four years of war that was the most banal question to ask a person. Jay waited. "Well, here's what I think. I think the war's been over for years. I think we lost at the get-go. We keep sending our folks south and south, just to keep up the image of a war. Never lost one on home turf yet, so the Feds won't let us break our streak. But I think we're done for."

The black southern sky settled back to brown. The rumbling moved into the southwest, and then faded. She tried to let the whole situation move into her, to make it hurt, but her mind had taken over and she watched the fallout without experiencing much. Here came the dust, there it fell. She wiggled her feet and the dust shook loose. When she looked again at the horizon she pictured her father and Vincente on the other side of the chasm, cut off for good and taken prisoner and starved – the thought seemed like it should be painful, but no, now, the observation only bored her. Too many times she had thought of it, and it was worn down to familiarity.

María would need some company. Or what if the police had come while she was gone? Jay said thank you to the man and hurried away, leaving him standing there, the pessimist under the umbrella.

María was still alive and present, and did not recognize her half-sister right away. The figure that came through the door was so brown all over that it looked contrived – hair, arms, clothes, lips, completely the same color of brown – and when it leaned in the doorway to the bedroom and coughed, María was startled.

"Are you okay?" said Jay's voice.

María had been curled around a pillow in bed, and now she sat up and felt as though she had just waked from a dream. She reached the radio and turned it on. The signal was dead. She played with the antenna, adjusted the tuner. The whole range of frequencies had been lost to a sea of uniform static. She turned it off and rubbed her eyes.

"I hate this place," she said. "I don't care if they take me away."

"Oh God take that back please, don't say that, María—" Jay felt herself almost begin to cry, and she thought viciously, soldiers don't weep. Not a tear.

María got a towel and wiped at Jay's face, and told her to settle down. They would go somewhere else for a little while, wouldn't that make her feel better? The last thing Jay wanted was to be patronized, but she felt herself being pulled along as María packed two pans, the journal, and some clothes and guided them both to the old house up the road. The bombing had cleared the streets – no one harassed them and now that the sky had darkened, the day cooled off. Jay could not recall a day as cool as this one.

The door swung wide and Jay did not recognize it straightaway.

The inside of the house was bigger than either María or Jay remembered it. The furniture was a luxury. A couch for sitting! Jay thought. A bed for sleeping! There are two couches! Aware that her feet were muddy, Jay walked carefully to the edge of each room and peered inside. When she got to the bathroom she did indeed get weepy – the bathroom was what she missed the most. The shower drizzled cold water. Apparently no one had canceled the water service. It was enough to wash most of the dirt from herself, and when she was finished María took one, too. Jay went to the kitchen. She never had felt that she was squatting in her own home, but with her mother gone for so long, the kitchen felt especially generic. The meals from a long time ago had lost their taste in Jay's memory, and she could not quite imagine what the house sounded like during dinner. Had there used to be traffic outside the house? Yes, she thought so. Her father had complained that silence was hard to come by. Or did he? Jay pressed her face against the refrigerator door. Cool metal. It was all new to her.

She became frightened. She went to María's bag and listened for the shower – and then removed the journal. Please, please, she thought, remind me of something. Remind me what was normal. Her fingers were clumsy. She freed the book from its rubber band. She opened the cover and flipped to a page, any old page, and read what was written there:

I had pasta	I hate this
I hate this	I had pasta
It is late	We are poor
I am hot	I am tired

Goodnight, goodnight goodnight.

These phrases were the only phrases in the journal and were written alternately across every page, a chronicle of an eternal present tense. Jay began to weep in earnest.

The shower had lost its pressure halfway through. María emerged from the bathroom with wet hair but a dirt-streaked face. She stopped in the door. She and Jay looked at one another. It felt like nightmare.

"What is this for?" Jay asked.

María didn't say anything.

"I thought you had something to say. All those times you told me what to do, like you were my mother, I listened to you because I thought you were keeping track of things for me, or you, or I don't know—"

"I am." Outside was dark, and María began to search the kitchen drawers until she found candles, and then pressed them against the countertop, sink, windowsills and telephone desk until they stayed put. She lit them, and Jay saw a great bitterness rise in

María's face. "I listen to my thoughts, and that is what I hear. Every sound turns into those words. The world sounds like that, and nothing else."

Jay wiped her face with her hands and closed the journal.

"They're taking me away," continued María, "and I can't imagine what it will be like. I literally can't imagine. I'm no more scared than a sheep taken out of its barnyard."

The dread returned to Jay. "I can't remember anything either," she said in a high, frightened voice. "I can't remember what it was like before. The smell of shampoo—"

"You're absolutely right."

"Or what a sweater feels like—"

"Nope, me neither."

Jay clamped onto the sides of her knees with two hands. The candlelight and darkness cast an eerie feeling through the afternoon house, and Jay felt the facelessness of her former memories gathering around her like a crowd, reaching, attempting to seize her and be gone. She wept harder.

All of María's good sense had not left her and when she realized that Jay was working herself into a tizzy, she pulled her own dread up short. "You stop it. No, don't look at me like that. You're the one staying here and you'd better not forget everything. Right? There, that's better."

There was applesauce and canned nectarines in the pantry beneath the sink – a great find, because the stove did not work and sugary food was so rare anyhow. María rationed out the contents of these three jars onto plates. She carried the plates to the living room and sat next to Jay on the couch. The fruit was tender, cold. Jay did not know what to say, or how to proceed. She saw the approach of a parting. The parting was so large it could not be explained.

"This is good fruit," said María. "Best in Texas." She moved closer to Jay on the couch, and touched her hair. It felt clean; she had gotten the benefit of the water pressure in the shower. "Now try again to remember something. Think hard." When Jay was finished María set their plates aside and drew Jay against her body.

Jay put her face against María's shoulder. The bones were hard and not well padded under the sleeveless shirt. Everyone was so thin. Jay felt much younger than fifteen. Almost as she had felt when, when— She thought hard. There was a time. Yes. Porch sitting. The day of a celebration; it was then, on a day of a parade but the parade was too foggy to recall. Dinner after – after dark. On the porch, Jay's mother and María's mother. Jay on the steps listening after much food, so much food that the greediness of the day of celebration was gone, and she was happy to just sit on the steps listening. Cars drove past with their windows down, faces hanging out tipsy on wine, and locusts buzzed in the cottonwood trees downtown. The night had weight like ripe fruit. One memory.

On the porch steps and on the couch, Jay drifted toward sleep and she could not tell the difference between the two. She felt a body nearby in both places. She decided that it was her mother's; the face was not clear, but the presence was smooth and it put her to sleep. María's comfort was more wakeful. She was no longer hungry, and she figured that if she was stuck in the present, then she might as well have Jay sleeping on her – and she did not complain even when her arm lost all its feeling.

The sun set at eight-thirty even though no one saw it go. Shortly after, Jay woke up. She and María decided that they should not stay in the house. If the HSVPF arrived, there was no need to get them both into more trouble. They walked home in the dark, and then both fell sound asleep on their small mattress with handkerchiefs tied around their faces to keep the dust out of their noses.

*

The next day was Tuesday, the day that Jay was to report to the Bureau of Administration in Howard's Furnace. She awoke early and put on a clean shirt without disturbing María, and left the house with the citation in her back pocket. The bombing was over and the morning was mostly quiet – as she left Wake City she heard a family on the next street bidding their neighbors goodbye. They were loud and expressive, the way Jay imagined an Italian family would be if she ever ran into one. She caught a glimpse of them. All hugs and handshakes and good lucks.

The road to Howard's Furnace was covered with dust, and when she arrived at the Bureau three hours later, she was a sorry looking visitor. The receptionist gazed over her stack of TRV-11439 forms and considered calling security. Homeless were always wandering in wanting to use the toilet. It was really a nuisance, but on the hunch that the girl was a mandatory volunteer and not homeless – you never could tell, but this receptionist prided herself on the dated notion of having a woman's intuition – she asked, "You need a '39?"

"What?"

"A '39. Mandatory volunteerism."

Jay rooted in her shorts and produced the citation. The receptionist twisted it around to face her with a pencil eraser. "Yep. Fill this out," she said and took a packet from the stack. "Oh, I suppose there's the '41 and '66 too." She bent over and sorted through a drawer and gave all the papers to Jay along with a clipboard and a stubby pencil that said Green Links Golf Course. Jay needed an hour to complete them. The questions were mysterious and repetitive, and when she returned them, she felt that she had made many mistakes. But the receptionist flipped through them, seemed satisfied, and sent her up to the fourth floor. The fourth floor was a warehouse of filing cabinets and no windows, and in one corner of the room was an enormous chute that spat mail into wire bins. A chubby man in a flannel shirt and tie hurried up to her and gave her frantic instructions regarding the chutes, and the files, and the mail, of which Jay understood little. She tried to ask him questions, but he became agitated and exclaimed, "Just file them anywhere!" and hurried away. No one told her how long to stay in the warehouse, and no one came to check on her progress. The files were sloppy and unlabeled. Jay took up armfuls of mail and searched for empty drawers, and loaded the letters into them more or less in the same direction. None of the envelopes had been opened. Around three o'clock the lights flickered and Jay's feet began to hurt – she suspected that her cracked toenail had picked up an infection – and when her bladder became unbearably full fifteen minutes later, she simply left. The receptionist pointed her toward the bathroom and didn't notice when Jay failed to return.

The walk home passed quickly. Jay found a good round stone that occupied her attention for almost three miles, until she got bored of it and then wailed it as far as she could. Some stones traveled so far outward that you could not know where they landed.

Jay passed her old house at seven o'clock. Today there was less dust in the sky, and there was enough light on the road to see Wake City. There were the cottonwood trees, and there, the metal roofs. She hoped that María had cooked; her stomach had been empty since yesterday's fruit. When the familiar shack came into view, Jay found her second wind and jogged the rest of the way home.

María was gone. Jay called her name twice and looked up and down the street, and walked back to her old house. The door was locked as they had left it last night. Back to the shack. Daylight had almost gone, but Jay saw that the house was certainly empty. The portable stove was overturned and in the bedroom potting soil had spilled across the floor. Jay's metal soldiers were missing.

The house was smaller when empty, when the life had been dragged away from it. It was someone else' house now. Jay pulled a sheet off of the bed and folded it around her extra clothes, toiletries, the two remaining jars of tomatoes, and a pair of sandals that she hadn't worn since school. She carried these up to the old house, let herself in, and went to her bedroom. Under the bed were her backpack and a box with her lead soldier collection. These were unpainted and very heavy, so she chose only the largest of them and transferred them into the backpack with the rest of her possessions. She would get as far as she could with these things and would pawn the soldiers as necessary. She wouldn't need much money where she was going.

María's journal still lay in the middle of the living room, closed. Jay sat down in front of it and watched it for a while as if it was speaking to her. Her family was all gone from Wake City, and the matter of when they would return was not open for debate. The answer, in truth, was probably never. But Jay speculated anyway, because the need to talk to the future was overwhelming her. Speculation was still possible – at least for the young. And so she arrived at her decision, and it was this:

They say traveling conditions in the southern states are not so bad these days – everybody's doing it. And Jay could certainly take care of herself. She would walk toward ground zero until all of Texas was behind her, and when she arrived the dirt would be settled by then. And she would watch the water fill the cut, and then she would swim in that muddy river until the ocean flooded in and through and over with great volumes of salt and cold water, until she was washed clean.