

SOCIAL SECURITY

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SOCIAL SECURITY

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## PLAYING TERROR

Kilpatrick Elementary, which rests on a hill north of Main, offers recess. At ten o'clock, when the third graders play, Amil and Jacob chase Shelby. They dart under, around the rusted metal bars that make up the line of towering swings. Shelby slaps Amil, who likes being slapped ("She likes me," he frequently says to Jacob) and nods when she threatens to slap again. Jacob, in turn, slaps Shelby (he hasn't yet learned proper etiquette around ladies). Together, the three children pretend to be superheroes; this role-play is an excuse to chase each other until the end of recess. Two hours later, the third graders of Kilpatrick eat lunch at picnic tables outside. Jacob, Amil and Shelby occupy one of these tables.

Amil is an only child, an accident. His clothes, toys, his plastic Ninja Turtles lunchbox are hand-me-downs from cousins. Only his blond, bowl haircut and green eyes are his. Thirty-two years from now, Amil will die in a head-on car collision. He will be survived by his mother, who will regret never buying him his own lunchbox.

"I think my superhero should have a knife," Amil says, unwrapping the foil around his ham and cheese sandwich.

"Mutants don't need weapons," Shelby says.

"Batman uses them," Jacob says, pounding his sandwich to flatten it.

"Batman isn't a mutant," Shelby says. "And we play mutants, not people."

"Maybe I'll use foil to make one," Amil says, folding the wrapper and sliding it

under his box.

“You do kinda need it,” Jacob says, “in case the mafia comes looking for your dad.”

Amil rests his face in his hands. Two months ago, his father left town because of a gambling debt. Amil remembers the police sirens, which sounded soon after his mother called to report his father’s disappearance. Jacob, not noticing that he has offended Amil, waves his sandwich in Shelby’s face.

“I’ll slap you so hard,” she says, eating her raisins one-at-a-time from the small plastic container she carries in her lunch box. Already approaching five feet tall, Shelby can see the tops of her friends’ heads. This advantage, coupled with the early onset of puberty (the earliest her doctor has seen) plagues Shelby, who wants to be considered one of the boys. This plight will not stop her, however, from losing her virginity to Amil two days after her sixteenth birthday. Nor does it stop her now from eating her raisins as a lady should.

“Not even terrorists need knives,” Shelby says, steering the conversation from Amil’s father.

“They never used knives,” Jacob says. “Don’t you watch TV?”

Shelby snaps the lid on her raisin container. “They’re trickier now than ever.”

“They’re going to use elephants next,” Jacob says, then nods. “I was watching this show one night, and the person on TV said that elephants are getting wilder and angrier and people are training them to become killing monsters. This one elephant killed twenty-five people.”

“Why would they use elephants?” Amil says.

“They don’t,” Shelby says. “Do you go to church?”

Both Jacob and Amil say no, but Jacob is lying. Black-haired and black-freckled, Jacob, despite his violent tendencies, attends church each Wednesday and Sunday.

Though raised Presbyterian, his parents gave him a Hebrew version of the Old Testament, which he keeps under his bed along with two Biblical Hebrew textbooks. He makes his younger sister recite the Hebrew alphabet. Years from now, as a seminarian, Jacob will have his scholarship revoked when two of his peers catch him masturbating to a picture of a nude Brad Pitt, who isn’t really Brad Pitt, but a model from North Carolina who happens to resemble Brad Pitt from sixty feet away.

“Well, churches smell,” Shelby says. “They smell the same. It’s a church scent. The secretary sprays before services.”

“That’s crap,” Jacob says, working his soda tab until it snaps off like a grenade pin.

“Haven’t you been with your parents to one of those fancy car washes?” Shelby continues. “When the people clean the inside of your car, they ask what scent you want sprayed. Raspberry, chocolate, lavender. They even have ‘new car’ spray.”

“What’s your point, giant?” Jacob says.

Shelby shuts her lunchbox. She finishes first. “My point is that churches buy church scent. Except nobody really knows who makes it. Well, I do. The terrorists.”

“Are they raising money for bombs?” Amil says.

“No, the scent is poison that slowly turns church people into Muslims. Once the Christians turn into Muslims, they’ll kill everyone.”

“The Gentiles,” Jacob says. “Amil’s name sounds like those terrorist names on TV,” he says. “I bet your dad named you.”

By now, many of the third graders at Kilpatrick have finished their lunches. They play four-square, ride the rustic merry-go-round, or use basketballs to play soccer. A boy named Gary joins Amil, Jacob, and Shelby. Born two months prematurely to a seventeen-year-old mother, Gary compensates for his frailty by stringing foul words together. On his next birthday, he will introduce Amil and Jacob to pornography. In high school, he will grow a thin mustache and finger his prom date. Thirty years from now, Gary will buy a billiards shop, run for town Treasurer, and win by default because few people run for town Treasurer.

“What the fuckingshithell are you guys talking about?” he says, scooting closer to Shelby, who elbows him.

“Like I was saying,” Jacob says, “groups are raising elephants, beating them with American flags, poking them with tiny, metal bald eagles—”

“—surrounding them with burning Bibles,” Amil says.

Jacob says, “They might do that, too. I don’t know, but as soon as the elephants grow up, they’ll march in a long line and destroy towns and houses and stab babies with their horns.”

“Tusks,” Shelby says.

Amil closes his lunchbox, folds the foil into a long strip. “Why are we talking about this?”

The four children savor the final tastes of lunch. The only sound comes from Gary, who stifles a laugh and mumbles, “fuckdamnhellpussyshitbitch.”

“We have to know what the terrorists are going to do,” Shelby says.

“Yeah, Amil, you aren’t used to talking about adult things,” Jacob says.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” Gary says. “You know that shitfuck Army base outside town? Well, one of the generals there discovered a box that would blow up Iraq if someone opened it.”

“You don’t know,” Jacob says.

“Blow me, Freckles,” Gary says, translucent skin reddening. “Anyway, so this general had a problem. If he opened the box, all the terrorists in Iraq would die. That’s good, right, but if he opened it, all of our damnshithell soldiers there would die.”

Ringling a hand bell, Ms. Toadson calls the third graders to line up.

“So what did the general do?” Amil says, standing.

“He buried it,” Gary says. “At this school, under the merry-go-round.”

Shelby slaps Gary on the back of the head. She always has the final say.

\*\*\*

As Amil and Jacob walk home after school, they talk about Gary.

“Why do we believe what Gary says?” Jacob asks.

“He’s full of crap,” Amil says.

“We could have killed ourselves this afternoon crawling under that merry-go-round while the stupid first graders were playing on it.”

The fresh scratch on Amil’s back burns a little, so he shifts his backpack. “We should’ve listened to Shelby. She told us we were stupid.”

“She’s not smarter than us, no matter how fast she does her multiplication. Besides, she probably knew she wouldn’t fit under it. Her long legs would have stuck out and tripped all those kids.”

“Both of us were too big.” Amil says this clamping his teeth together because his shirt keeps rubbing the scratch he got while trying to dig his way under.

“I don’t know why I believed that sucker,” Jacob says.

“When we were under there, I stared at the kids playing. Do you think that in Iraq, kids play on those merry-go-rounds, too, because if they do, what if we had found that box and opened it? Those kids would have disappeared. The last thing they’d remember would be laughing at someone like Freddie, the mute. Then BAM!”

The two boys pass a mail truck and turn a corner onto their street.

“I know Freddie can’t talk, but at least he could’ve helped us,” Jacob says. “He just sat there watching. There wasn’t a box anyway.”

“Would you have opened it?” Amil says.

“What if God sent that box for a reason?”

“I’m sure God doesn’t put things in boxes.”

“Ark of the Covenant,” Jacob says.

Amil frowns and doesn’t know at all what Jacob’s talking about. Then Jacob puts a finger to his mouth and squats behind one of the neighbor’s hedges. Amil joins him.

“The mailman pulled out his mace spray the last time I scared him,” Jacob says. Amil opens his mouth but Jacob waves at him to shut up. In front of Amil, bees move around a flowering vine that has grown in the hedge branches. Sweat drips from his armpits and down his side. *The bees don’t have to worry about sweating. Their wings are*

*like little air conditioners.* Amil wants to wave his hands to cool off but Jacob's stare keeps him from moving until Jacob jumps and screams. The mailman jumps back, drops his cigarette.

"God damn," he says before stepping on his cigarette. Jacob laughs and runs to climb the nearest tree. Amil sits hunched behind the bushes, but the mailman spots him.

"Trying to get your friends into your little game?" he says. "Next time I'm bringing the police. You'll go to jail. I work for the government, for Christ sake."

Amil doesn't move as the man walks away. Jacob calls out to him from a low branch.

"Fatty McMailman." Then he jumps to the ground. "Are you always going to be a pussy?" he says to Amil. "Besides, he doesn't mean anything. I don't mean anything. He respects me because I scare him."

"I'll see you tomorrow," Amil says, walking toward his house. Passing the hedges, he can't help but think that if he had scared the bees, they would have stung him without respect.

\*\*\*

When Amil reaches his house, a dead dog lies on the porch. Amil stares at it and it's clearly dead, and he says this to his momma, who's standing in the yard, but all she does is walk up to it, bend down, touch its fur, and kiss it.

"What are you doing kissing that dead dog?" Amil says, taking off his backpack. She doesn't seem to hear him.

Turning around, he looks at the other porches. Besides the dog, his porch doesn't have a thing on it. His father took all of the patio chairs. That's how rushed he was to

escape the collection men. Forgot his toothbrush but grabbed the chairs. *Maybe he'll be going outside a lot.* Ms. Baker's porch across the street has five chairs. Her porch even has an oval rug, and Amil thinks his momma helped make that rug, but somehow it ended up on her porch.

The bumps on Momma's spine make small hills up the back of her new dress, which, Amil remembers, she had insisted on buying *and* wearing out of the store. The face of the lady manager crinkled like it was a grocery store plastic bag Momma puts tomatoes in. Amil stared at those folds of almost-see-through skin.

"Aren't you a quiet boy?" the lady had said when she saw him watching her.

"I'm assuming you'll take a temporary check," Momma said.

The lady's lips twisted like worms struggling on dirt, and when she closed her eyes, Amil glimpsed the mole on her eyelid that looked like another eye.

"I've never seen a woman wanting to wear a dress straight out of the store," the lady finally said.

"Feel free to take a nice, long look."

The lady cut the tags off and made Momma pay for it right there.

"You are in an awful hurry for a Saturday," the lady said as she put Momma's old clothes in a bag. "You have big plans for today?"

Amil knew his mother never talked about home things with anyone she didn't know, and so she didn't say another thing until they were about out of the store, and then she said, "Thank you." Amil looked back, mostly because he wanted to see the lady blink. He wanted to see that mole.

Now, on the porch, Momma isn't in any hurry. She's still on her knees in her new dress and doesn't say anything as Amil walks up the porch stairs. He wipes his nose. The air is suffocating.

Momma shifts her weight until she's almost lying on her side like the dog, whose head is tilted like those fossils of dinosaurs Amil sees in books, fossils where the heads and necks are all turned up. The dog's head tilts like it hadn't wanted its last breath to leave.

"What are we going to do with—" Amil starts saying, But he stops because he isn't finished looking at its crusted left eye and mouth, at the bits of mud around the cheek as if it had tried to eat its way into the earth. Its black hair lies matted, sweaty, pressed against its body. Amil turns toward the street just about the time Jacob rides by on his bike. He waves and looks at Amil weird, and Amil shoos him.

"What are we going to do with it?" Amil says.

"Go around the back and get the shovel from the shed."

"Why did you bend down and kiss that dog?"

Momma touches the dog's head. A few of its hairs stick to her lipstick; the ends of the hairs move a little as she exhales. "Get the shovel and wait for me in the backyard."

When Amil jumps off the stairs, he makes sure to land as loud as he can. A blackbird flies over the house to the sidewalk. As it starts pecking, Amil notices another bird's droppings have stained its tail feathers, and its neck is bare as if something has bitten it.

“Be off!” Momma says, waving her hands at the blackbird, which doesn’t respond. Its small steps across the path continue making ticks of noise. The bottom of Momma’s blue-dotted dress waves in the light hot breeze; it’s the only thing moving except for the strands of her hair and the neck of the pecking blackbird. “I told you to get the shovel and wait for me.”

“I still don’t know why you kissed it,” Amil says, pushing on the gate handle.

His eyes follow the tops of the warped fence boards—a spine, like Momma’s, except the fence is long and dry. A cicada screams in the tree, and when Amil opens the door the paint on the hinges pop. Fibers of wood sticking down from the door scratch across the concrete step. Walking inside, he smells paint, cardboard, and plastic toys. He shuts the door and stands still. Listening to the scraping of twigs against the roof, he counts the color spots that grow and shrink in the fuzzy black, and as he counts he becomes nothing but numbers he’s saying. He tries tensing his hands, but he can’t feel them. Suddenly blinking, Amil kicks open the door and searches for the shovel, which he finds propped against the far right corner. He grabs the handle, and the spider webs clinging to it make a quick fizzing-out noise.

Momma is waiting for him when he walks out. She stands at the other end of the yard. Her feet are parted like she’s having a hard time balancing. Her eyes are like holes. Amil doesn’t stop looking at her as he shuts the shed door.

“I thought you could start digging in the corner,” she says, pointing.

“Why do we have to bury that dog here?”

“The grass never grows in the corner,” Momma says as Amil props the shovel against the fence and starts moving a pile of terra cotta pots. Sickly yellow flower weeds have grown beneath them.

“That should be enough room,” Momma finally says, and Amil sees that her right hand has remained spread behind her as if she’s afraid something’s going to come and surprise her from behind. Stepping back, she leans against a fence post. Amil sighs and takes the shovel and stabs the ground.

“That dog—did it scare you? Have you seen that dog before, Momma? It could’ve died from germs. You could become a mutant.”

The ground easily breaks for the shovel.

“Sometimes I see you act like your father,” she says, “and I have to stop myself from hating you.”

Amil grips the shovel handle. When he exhales, a high-pitched whine escapes. Not looking at his mother, he nods and continues digging. His hands burn. He pushes the shovel harder into the growing hole. Finally he stops digging and rubs his eyes with the back of his hand.

“I think that hole will do fine,” his mother says. “Keep the shovel back here. I need you to help me carry the dog.”

Amil drops the shovel and follows her to the stairs of the porch.

“Grab the front legs and I’ll grab the back,” she says.

Amil touches one of the dog’s curled legs; it hardly moves, and he immediately raises the back of his right hand to his nose. Momma bends, closes her eyes, and then grabs its two back legs.

The dog's head falls limp as they lift it. Its mouth opens. Urine trickles down its hair and drips on the porch, Momma's shoes. Her arms tighten. Amil feels the skin of the dog's legs stretch as they carry it down the steps. His hands grip moist hair. Amil barely breathes. He looks down at the whites of the dog's eyes. Adjusting his hold, he notices how the grass and dirt and street have stained its claws, which scratch his wrists.

"Okay," Momma says when they reach the hole. "Gently."

The dog's head touches the bottom of the hole first. It tilts upwards, then over to the right. Amil lets go and the legs fold toward its belly. Stepping back, Amil watches as Momma slowly lets go of one leg, then the other. The cicada continues to scream.

"Now that we put it in this hole," he says, "can you say why you kissed it?"

"No."

As he fills the hole, he listens to his mother's breathing. After he finishes, he wipes the snot from his nose and lets the shovel fall. The tip of a paw still pokes out. He kicks some soil over it and glances at Momma and the sweat stains on her dress. She's staring down at the loose dirt as if waiting on something to come crawling back out of it.

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Later that night Amil sits on his bed and thinks about the box Gary had talked about during lunch. Why did Amil and Jacob want to uncover a weapon that was obviously a figment of Gary's imagination? Amil looks down at the dirt caked under his fingernails. He can't distinguish the playground's soil from the dirt from the dog's grave.

Amil walks into the restroom. He scrubs his hands and nails until most of the dirt has spackled the sink. Then he dries them and finds Momma sitting on her bed and looking at a clothes catalogue.

“Off to bed?” she says, looking up. Already, Amil senses a change in her. Having buried the dog, she seems relaxed. Now she’s smiling at him, which makes him a little uncomfortable, but he sits on her large bed and together they look at the catalogue and circle the summer clothes each of them want. Amil, feeling like he can finally talk to Momma, begins telling her about school, about the box. When he’s finished, she’s rubbing his neck.

“Jacob wanted the box,” she says, “to feel in control.”

“Is that why we buried that dog?”

“In life, if you’re not uncovering something, you’re covering something. Wisdom is knowing when to do which.”

“A lot of people in town blame us for what Dad did, don’t they?”

“He was a coward,” she says, closing the catalogue. “But it doesn’t mean we have to wear that word, too.”

Amil kisses Momma goodnight and closes her door behind him. From his closet he grabs a black shoebox that contains a hot-glue gun and seashells. Momma had always intended to make Christmas ornaments. He dumps the shells into the wastebasket. Also from his closet he finds an old AM radio his dad had made as a science-fair project. Using a tool set given to him by his cousin, he dissects the radio into its parts: output transformer, speaker, receiver and output valves, tuning spindle. He hot-glues the parts, and then sits against his bed. The box nearly beeps. *Too clean for a bomb.* He takes the shoebox into the backyard. He walks to the corner, where loose soil covers the dog, and smears dirt on the sides of the box. Then he inspects it. Though it isn’t filled with explosives, it’s filled with fear. Fear makes respect. He isn’t his father’s shadow.

\*\*\*

Amil wakes up at 7am. He can still smell the hot glue stuck to his fingers. Even though Momma, who'd kissed a dead dog, would probably approve of his plan, he lies, saying he has to go to tutoring. But really, he sneaks to the playground, takes the box out of his backpack and stuffs it under the merry-go-round. Then in the gym he finds Freddie, the mute, and enlists him in the plan. Finally, Amil sits in class, pretending to be the person he was yesterday.

During lunch, Amil sits across from Jacob. Next to him, Shelby takes apart her sandwich and picks at the ham and doesn't once mention yesterday's talk.

"If you stuck a pole through Wolverine and you kept it there so he couldn't heal, would he eventually die?"

"He's had worse things happen to him," Jacob says. "He's been around for hundreds of years."

"I wonder how he felt when he realized he was a mutant," Amil says, looking past Jacob toward the playground.

"But I kicked your ass today at recess."

Shelby pulls her hair back into a ponytail. Crumbs stick in her hair.

"Well, Jacob, you did keep changing super powers," she says.

"But that's my superpower! I can change powers." Jacob wipes his mouth and pops the tab on his drink.

"I'm going to slam dunk this Coke," he says before lifting it to his mouth. "Ten seconds."

Amil doesn't count. He doesn't pay attention. From the merry-go-round comes Freddie, with the box.

"What's Freddie got in his hands?" Amil says, and Jacob coughs and squints.

"Damn," he says, and then looks. "What's he doing?"

"Where did you find that?" Shelby says as Freddie slides the box on the table. He points to the playground.

"You were watching Jacob and me dig under the merry-go-round," Amil says, keeping to the script. "Have you been snooping around there?"

"Freddie found—" Jacob says, but Amil keeps talking. Freddie, mute, continues to nod.

"This is important," Amil says. "Did you open it yet? Nod yes or no."

Freddie shakes his head "no."

"That looks like a shoebox," Shelby says.

Jacob touches the box for less than a second before stuffing his hands back under the table.

"What if they made the box look like that so someone would open it, thinking it was just a shoebox?" he says.

"Who are *they*, Jacob?" Shelby says.

Amil picks up the box. "It's heavy."

"Careful," Jacob says, scooting down.

"There's definitely something in it," Amil says.

"Don't open it!" Jacob says.

Amil puts the box down. "When I asked you yesterday what would happen if we found it, you acted like you would open it."

"Yeah, but it wasn't sitting right there."

"This has to be a trick," Shelby says, touching the box.

In his original plan, Amil thought he'd open the box right away, just in case Jacob lunged to open it first. But Jacob is too afraid. "Why don't we see if it's a trick or not," he says, pushing the box toward Jacob.

"You're being pushy," he says and looks at Shelby.

"Open it," Amil says. "If nothing happens, Gary's playing a joke on us. If Iraq blows up, you're a hero. Yesterday you were saying that maybe God sent this box."

Jacob finishes his Coke and taps the can on the table.

"If God wants to open it, let him."

"Fine," Amil says. "I'll open it."

Shelby slaps Amil's shoulder. "Are you serious? We should give it to a teacher."

Amil runs his fingers on every side of the box. He feels where the playground sand has mixed with the dirt.

"Wait," Jacob says. "What about those kids in Iraq? After I went home I thought about it all night. Screw the terrorists. My dad told me they aren't using elephants. He said they're just hiding. If you open it, you'll feel so bad you'll want to die."

"Well, Momma told me the terrorists could attack at any time," Amil says.

"Are you sure she wasn't talking about your dad?"

Amil looks at Freddie. "If I were you I'd get as far from this box as possible."

Then Amil pops his knuckles like a man, stands up and reaches for the lid. Before he even touches the box, Shelby screams.

“Don’t look, Shelby,” Amil says, but Jacob yells and takes the box from Amil, only to knock the lid off. Inside the box, the various radio parts glisten. Amil doesn’t look at the box. Jacob’s hands cover his face. Amil senses the third graders of Kilpatrick glancing at their table before resuming their eating and playing.

“Children, what is going on?” Ms. Toadson says, stopping next to Amil. “What is this?” she says, pointing to the box.

“I don’t know,” Amil says.

“Well if you’re working on a science project, you’ll have to wait until science class. Finish your lunches, now.”

Across from Shelby, Jacob covers his head with the box lid and cries. Amil flicks one of the glued valves. He ignores the signs his body is making—heavy breathing, heart palpitations, a sudden nauseous knot in his stomach—that urge him to laugh and admit that he had made the box, that there was no way these few glass tubes and glue could ruin a whole nation. Instead, he looks at Shelby and listens for the sound of sirens.

## SOCIAL SECURITY

Seabert's mother drove past the pink neon sign of a lounging woman kicking one leg toward the bar's tinted entrance. Seabert watched the woman's nipples blink. He inquired about it, but his mother recited the Biblical account of Peter and his denial of Christ.

"Stealing money," she added. "Throwing away our social security cards. And you, just eleven years old. I thought sending you to private school would teach you about guilt."

Seabert winced and continued staring out the window. Soon, the Social Security Administration office loomed, its steel pillars framing dark windows.

"Waiting an hour in line should teach you about consequence," his mother said as she parked the car. "Maybe you'll grow up."

Though they had come during non-peak hours, the assistant at the door estimated their wait time to be two hours. His mother led Seabert to two empty metal chairs and sat. Seabert stared at her red nails bobbing on her knees like berries. She held their call ticket with two fingers. He watched her cheek muscles throb.

Across from him sat an old woman. Next to him, a mother holding a newborn. Seabert looked at these people and wondered why they were there. Had these people been paying attention to him, would they have guessed why he and his mother had come? Seabert hoped they couldn't tell that everything was his fault.

A week ago, he had combed the house for extra money. His classmate Derek needed money so he wouldn't tell others that Seabert had talked inappropriately about girls, had referenced "titties" and "pussy." Derek had given Seabert a day to find the money; that's what had hurt Seabert. The time frame. He had panicked, searched places he wouldn't have searched: his father's wallet, his brother's sock drawer, the freezer, where his family stored a jar filled with important documents. "The freezer is fire-proof," his father always said. If Seabert had been given more time, he would have pulled the dollar bills from the jar instead of pouring the contents onto the kitchen counter, where his sweaty, trembling fingers sifted through birth certificates, social security cards, his father's list of important numbers and passwords. He almost backed out, thinking his parents' punishment would be far greater than any punishment Derek could inflict. But he continued. He stuffed the money in his right pocket and moved to replace the rest in the jar, but he heard the hall light switch snap, meaning his mother had finished showering early. Without thinking, Seabert shoved the documents inside the weekly coupon pages that sat at the counter's end. Then he tucked the empty jar in the freezer.

"What are you looking for?" his mother said, walking in. Her wet hair clung to her face and neck.

"A fudge bar," Seabert said.

"Not so soon before lunch." She ran a hand through his hair. "You haven't even showered."

When Seabert returned to the kitchen after showering, the coupon pages were gone. His mother had taken the trash to the dumpster. Later, he checked the jar just in case his mother had found the documents. The jar sat empty. A week passed before

anyone noticed, during which Seabert experienced a recurring dream of being buried under falling trash. He tried convincing himself that Mother had actually been the one who threw away the cards—not him—but he knew better.

Now, Seabert sat beside his mother, who checked her phone. The noise in the administration office, which sounded like an enormous, hungry stomach, came from every row and booth. His legs bounced.

“Stop fidgeting,” his mother said. “Walk down and get us magazines from the rack.”

Seabert stood. His mother raised her eyebrow, and he interpreted this to mean she’d be watching him. He stared at his feet as he walked toward the magazine stand, located beside the restroom. He scanned the titles and once-glossy covers now caked with filmy grime. A copy of *Cosmopolitan* peeked behind a *National Geographic*. He glanced at his mother, who was staring at the red-lighted ticker hanging from the ceiling. Then he selected the *Cosmo*, a magazine his mother had blamed for the moral corruption of girls. He read one of the cover’s teasers: “Sexual position of the month!” He quickly flipped to the article.

“Sensual Spoon.” He angled the magazine from his mother. He stared at the illustration, which featured two human outlines, both identical-looking except for the woman’s lengthened hair and circle breasts. He couldn’t imagine how the couple could enjoy such a position without being more finely illustrated. They looked like a kitchen gadget, nothing like the ten-second porno previews he’d been downloading and deleting after watching.

Seabert felt his face blush as he mentally added nipples, hair, closed eyes, open mouths. He added motion, slow motion so that the lines didn't blur. The man's stubby hands grew fingers that left sweat streaks down the woman's back. The woman's feet grew toes that straightened and trembled. Her body filled with color. Shadows shrank and expanded under her breasts and neck. The man pulled the woman's hair, which split into a thousand threads and fell across her forehead. The man called her "Lizzie."

"Excuse me, boy."

Seabert closed the magazine and looked up. The old woman who had sat across from him said, "You're blocking the restroom." Seabert stepped aside, and the woman passed, leaving in her wake a stale smell that reminded Seabert of his grandmother's pantyhose.

He didn't breathe until he sat next to his mother. He gave her a copy of *Newsweek*. He opened his *National Geographic* and scanned it for pictures of naked aboriginal women, but he couldn't stop thinking about Sensual Spoon. Lizzie. He felt a trigger inside him that needed to be pulled. The old woman who smelled like pantyhose shuffled back to her seat across from Seabert and sat. Curly white wisps poked out from her otherwise matted hair. She wiped her large nose with dry, cracking fingers. Seabert thought she could pass as a man. He inspected the other old women in the room. They could all pass as men. He eyed his mother and couldn't remember her age, but at least she still looked like a woman. Then he closed his eyes and tried blocking the inevitable insertion of his mother's face onto Lizzie's. *Come back Lizzie.*

"This is just a phase," his mother said.

“What?” Seabert said, worried he’d spoken his thoughts. His mother closed her magazine. She checked her phone. “Soon, you’ll put away your childish ways.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. He’d apologized several times before. He wished one day his mother would offer forgiveness that wouldn’t involve more apologizing.

“Peter!” The old woman across from Seabert yelled and waved until finally a knobby, swollen man walked down the aisle and fell into the seat next to her. “It’s about time you finished smoking. They’re about to call our number.”

Seabert glanced at Peter, who rolled his eyes and stuffed a cigar case in the pocket of his thin, white shirt.

“You spend your life caring for your husband,” the woman said, looking at Seabert’s mother. “You worry about accidents. But then you live so long that you can’t wait for him to die. But no, every morning his ugly mug is smiling at you.”

“Don’t nag that woman,” Peter said, poking his wife.

“I’ve got this one on a tight leash,” Seabert’s mother said, nodding toward Seabert, who noticed Peter scowling at his wife and flicking his hands as if to negate everyone’s comments. “I just hope to pass the leash on to some nice woman one of these days,” Seabert’s mother added.

“I don’t need a leash,” Seabert said.

His mother patted his head. The last tap hurt. He rubbed his neck, suddenly feeling as if there *were* a chain around his neck. And what if his mother kept it on? How rabid would his hunger grow unabashed?

“Our granddaughter Rachel refuses to sit with us,” the woman said, pointing down the aisle toward a skinny girl wearing black and blue stockings. Finally, a girl

Seabert's age, blossoming, not close to losing that which defined her femininity. Her face resembled that of a white porcelain kitten. Her black hair glistened and looked like thick curls of smoke atop her head. Seabert's gaze lowered to her twig neck and perky chest. He felt the trigger in his abdomen and clenched his teeth. He wanted to skip Sensual Spoon and head straight to Sexual.

"She's in my class," Seabert said, lying. "Can I go talk with her?"

"Coming here is your punishment," his mother said.

"I need to ask her a homework question," Seabert continued. He never knew he'd lie to get a closer look at a girl, but he compared it his mother always being outside when her roses flowered. "They bloom so little, I don't want to miss a second," she'd say.

His mother checked the ticker, looked at their ticket number, and nodded. "Five minutes."

Seabert controlled his facial expressions as he stood. His mouth puckered in earnest. He mumbled, "English assignment," as if he were forming his question.

He stopped in front of Rachel. Seabert almost said, "Hey," like he knew her, but he panicked because Rachel didn't attend his school. He hadn't planned this far. Her slender legs distracted him. "Legs," he said.

Rachel looked up from her book. "Two of them," she said. "Do I know you from school?"

"Yeah," Seabert said, glancing toward his mother. "I mean I used to go to your school." He turned back to Rachel, but the softened lie didn't sit well with him either. "You looked familiar," he added. "I thought maybe I knew you." He watched Rachel cross her legs.

“What do you want?” she said.

Seabert wanted to leave. He scratched his neck and arms. His skin tingled, like new skin tingles after a cast is cut off. Rachel’s four-word question seemed so easy to answer, but Seabert had no words. He opened his mouth, rocked on his heels.

“Your hair is smoky,” he said.

Rachel touched her hair.

“It’s not on fire, though,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

“I know,” she said. For two seconds—Seabert counted them—she smiled, revealing several white, stainless teeth. Then Seabert heard his mother calling his name.

“Interesting name,” Rachel said, and returned to reading her book.

Seabert turned and walked back to his mother. He sat.

“Thanks,” he said. His mother pinched his leg. Seabert winced.

“I don’t like your tone,” she said.

Seabert turned from her. Rachel had entranced him. His gratitude toward his mother was genuine. Any more time with Rachel would have confused him entirely. Rachel had pressed the trigger. Seabert didn’t realize the gun was pointed to his heart.

## THE GHOST OF DEVIL'S BACKBONE

Lafayette parked his '91 black Volvo along a country road. Unfastening his seatbelt, he looked at his nine-year-old brother Bobby, who, during the drive, had only talked about the pig-ghost.

"This is supposed to be a fun trip," Lafayette said, and pointed out the direction of Devil's Backbone, a series of steep ridges slicing through the hill country. A half-mile hike would lead them to Crabapple Creek, where Lafayette would pitch their tent. "If you stop freaking out about the ghost, maybe I can teach you something out here about the woods and camping."

Lafayette opened the car door, letting in the noon heat. He grabbed his bag.

Bobby clicked his compass shut. "That ghost better not find us," he said.

Lafayette helped Bobby with his pack and then they walked down the road until they found a section of barbwire fence that had slackened.

"Don't let the wire scratch you," Lafayette said, slowly climbing over it. "You'll get Tetanus."

Bobby handed Lafayette his pack and quickly jumped the wire. Then they worked through the thick brush that had consumed the forest.

"These bushes are as knotted as Grandma's hair," Bobby said.

Lafayette laughed. "A bit of a hyperbole."

"Hyper belly?"

“Never mind.”

“Why did you pick tonight to go camping? I told you the pig-ghost comes out during a new moon.”

“I figure we’ve been through a lot since Grandpa died,” Lafayette said. “His was your first funeral. I thought it’d be a good idea if we came here and relaxed.”

“Did you bring your knife?” Bobby said.

Lafayette tapped the knife strapped to his belt and pushed Bobby’s shoulder, partly out of love, partly in an attempt to make Bobby’s brain skip to the next topic.

July winds had whipped the forest pines. Lafayette and Bobby struggled through the wood. Bobby snapped a branch he had wrestled from a tree. Two deer ran across their path. One of the deer’s antlers scratched tree limbs as they darted out of view. Bobby clutched the stick’s two halves.

“Are you afraid of deer, too?” Lafayette said.

“Startled me is all,” Bobby said.

Ahead of them, the terrain sloped. Lafayette listened to the creek. It sounded like pouring water into a monstrous science beaker. He used the trees and roots to steady his descent.

“You can almost make out the different strata,” Lafayette said, gliding his hands across patches of clay and topsoil. “The river’s been eroding this hill for hundreds of years.”

“It’s like the layers of dirt in Grandpa’s grave,” Bobby said. “Remember you pointed to them and Mom slapped your hand?”

“I don’t remember,” Lafayette said, adjusting his pack. Then he helped Bobby down.

“Why did Grandpa hate me?” Bobby said.

“Why do you say that?”

“He could never remember my name. Once, he told me to leave his room or else he’d kill me.”

“He had dementia.”

“You don’t think he’d really kill me? Was it wrong to be scared of him?”

“He’s gone now.”

Lafayette handed Bobby a water bottle. “Let’s rest for a minute.”

Tossing his hiking pack, Lafayette stared at Crabapple creek. The clear water tumbled just above the riverbed of brown stones. A tall ridge composed the opposite bank. Its carved face cast a shadow over the river and Lafayette and Bobby, who took off their shoes and clothes and kicked in the shallows. Lafayette tried to point out the minnows, tried to tell Bobby that they’re called different names in different countries: in England they’re called sticklebacks; in Asia they’re called Danionins. Bobby nodded his head, but then splashed Lafayette and ran off.

“I’m going to take a nap,” Lafayette said, lying on the bank’s rough, dry stones.

“Thanks for taking me out here,” Bobby said, lying next to Lafayette.

“See, there’s nothing to worry about. Now you can obsess over something important like girls.”

The two boys slept until the cliff’s shadows lengthened over them. The water grayed. Lafayette pitched their tent. Then he and Bobby followed the creek bank and

searched for kindling. Lafayette used Bobby's arms as a carry-all; twigs lay stacked across them. Orange and blue hues streaked the trees and ground.

"I smell something cooking," Bobby said.

"There might be other campers," Lafayette said, but when he looked up, he saw a shack made of roughly hewn logs. If it hadn't been for the potted flowers and the two black windows staring at him, Lafayette would have mistaken the home for an abandoned pile of lumber. Also, a fenced pen of chickens and pigs sat next to the cabin. The pigs silently sniffed the earth. Suddenly a piglet ran between the boys. Bobby dropped the sticks, screamed for Lafayette to kill it. Lafayette reached for his knife, but stopped short of drawing it.

"It's only a piglet," he said.

"Is it the ghost?"

"It escaped its pen." Then Lafayette chased the pig, which squealed and struggled when Lafayette grabbed its hind feet. Before Lafayette could drop it over the fence, Bobby hit it with a stick.

"Stop it," Lafayette said, and the pig landed in the pen and ran to the opposite corner.

"That pig's always getting out."

Lafayette turned. A middle-aged woman stood near the shack and wielded a wooden baseball bat.

"We're campers," Lafayette said. "We were just collecting some fire wood. We didn't mean to intrude."

The woman laughed. “This bat’s for the pig unless you give me another reason to use it.”

“Our tent is a quarter-mile upriver,” Lafayette said.

The woman wore a tan button-up shirt and jeans. She was barefoot. Her peppered hair swung in a low braid down her back.

“Have you ever seen the pig-ghost?” Bobby said.

The woman walked toward them.

“I sometimes think that little one walks through walls. My name’s Estee, and I don’t know much about pig ghosts, but I’ll eat the little one if it gets out again.”

“You live here?” Bobby said.

“I made this place,” Estee said.

“I wouldn’t want to live here,” Bobby said.

“Have you ever chopped wood?” she said as Bobby collected the twigs he had dropped. “Have you ever felt the power of striking wood with an axe, felt it vibrate in your hands as if you couldn’t control it, but then you do, and you never realized you could cause so much destruction?”

Lafayette watched Bobby shake his head. Lafayette thought Estee was crazy. The thought of using such an axe to comfort herself disturbed him.

“One of these days you won’t think about ghosts,” Estee said. “You’ll be too busy wielding your own axe.”

“Knowledge is the best weapon against fear,” Lafayette said. “We’d better get back to camp.”

“Is all this land yours?” Bobby said.

“Squatter’s rights. I have a pot of beans and bacon cooking inside. If you’re tired, you’re welcome to stay. We could enjoy the evening.”

“Thanks,” Lafayette said, “but we’re on a schedule.”

“I guess the longer I’m out here the more I look like a wild animal.”

“I’m hungry,” Bobby said.

The cliff’s shadow had nearly blackened over them, leaving only a sliver of light running through the tall grass bordering the cliff’s edge. The light was sharp like neon tubing around a funhouse, below which lay only dark pockets housing possums, rats, or snakes. Lafayette watched Bobby stick his hands through the pig pen and call for the pigs to come nearer. Lafayette reconsidered. If they stayed for dinner, he could ask Estee about living on Devil’s Backbone. Together, she and Lafayette might drive away Bobby’s fixation with the damn ghost.

Lafayette started a fire and Estee carried three bowls of steaming beans from her cabin. When they were seated, Estee, whose eyes shined silver in the firelight, told the boys how she domesticated the land.

“The two wolves were the main problem, but they didn’t even make to run. They just stared at my gun, as if they knew.”

“Wolves are protected,” Lafayette said. “They’re not used to being hunted.”

“I figure I was more endangered than they were.”

Bobby licked his spoon. “You’re not afraid of more wolves coming?”

“I shot two, didn’t I?”

“And you’ve never seen a ghost?” Lafayette said, hoping Estee’s pragmatism would continue.

“I don’t let myself see ghosts. I think the only people who see them are those who need to. I don’t need anything from anyone.”

Later, as the constellations mapped themselves in sharp pings of light, Bobby told Estee about the pig-ghost.

“It’s actually only half-ghost,” he started. “Its owner was a sorcerer. He did spells on the pig hoping to transform it into a woman.”

“Turning a pig into a woman, eh?” Estee said, and tossed another log onto the fire, which dimmed before its flames licked up.

Bobby stood and started gesturing with his hands. “This happened way before you moved here. And everyone was afraid. But the pig didn’t turn into a woman. It started glowing and collecting souls. Some of my friends say that everyone who dies in Crabapple gets sent inside the pig. That’s a lot of spirits, so the pig has grown as big as an elephant. After the sorcerer died, the pig started running through Devil’s Backbone looking for someone to kill it.”

“I’d want to kill myself if I were a monster,” Estee said.

“But whenever someone tries to kill it,” Bobby continued, “the spirits inside the pig get angry and the pig eats the killer.”

Estee collected their bowls and walked toward the shack.

“I’d trap it,” she said over her back. “Then shoot it.”

“I don’t think I’d be brave enough,” Bobby said. “Lafayette doesn’t think he’s real.”

“When I was your age, I chose not to believe every story told on the playground,” Lafayette said.

When Estee returned, she jumped and caught one of the many lightning bugs around the fire.

“The best way to stop being afraid,” she said, “is to do *this*.” She crushed the insect between her palms and rubbed the glowing entrails on her face. The smears quickly faded. Bobby clapped and suddenly ran around the yard grabbing as many bugs as he could.

“If you kill them all, how are we going to enjoy them?” Lafayette said, but Bobby had already crushed a handful and now showed his faintly glowing hand to his brother.

“He’s having fun,” Estee said. Her comments angered Lafayette. She didn’t know Bobby, and she sat there giving advice. She acted like a long-lost aunt.

Suddenly, Bobby ran up to Lafayette.

“Did grandpa forget you too? Did he ever say he’d kill you?”

Lafayette stretched. “At a certain age our brains start weakening.”

“I think he really would have. And the pig-ghost. Is Grandpa trapped inside it?”

“He’s buried.”

Bobby wiped the sweat from his forehead. ““His soul?””

“Both of my parents are dead,” Estee said. “If I thought I’d see their spirits here...hell, if I thought I’d see anyone from Crabapple, I wouldn’t have come.”

Lafayette liked Estee’s disdain for his fellow townspeople, who clung to legends instead to science. Maybe he’d misjudged her. His bladder tightened. “Do you have a restroom?” he said.

“The creek’s just past the house,” she said.

Lafayette walked around the shack, which looked like a blot on black canvas. He turned down a narrow foot-worn path leading to the water. He thought about *his* eventual escape from town, and how he planned to go somewhere more civilized, New York or Chicago, where they at least had toilets.

As Lafayette finished relieving himself, he heard a whoop and an animal squeal. “Lafayette!”

Lafayette started in the direction of the high-pitch whine. His thoughts immediately went to Estee. She had gone mad and attacked Bobby. He called Bobby’s name and scrambled toward the fire, where he saw Estee standing behind his brother. He held a struggling piglet.

“What are you doing?” Lafayette yelled. Estee gave Bobby a large knife. Bobby’s mouth opened and his eyes widened and without hesitation, he jammed it into the pig’s neck. Estee clapped her hands, then patted Bobby’s head. Blood flowed ridiculously onto Bobby’s arms, the ground. He grinned when he saw Lafayette, who didn’t know such a small creature could have so much blood.

“You’ll thank me,” Estee said. She dragged the lifeless animal toward her cabin. Blood drained from its neck. “And I thank you, Bobby, for giving me breakfast. Well, goodnight, boys. It’s been a pleasure.”

Blood glistened on Bobby’s arms and chest. His smile faded. “It’s cold and sticking.”

Lafayette helped Bobby stand, and then they began walking back to their tent.

“Are memories in our blood?” Bobby said.

“Memories are stored in the brain like files saved to a computer. That’s why when Grandpa’s brain started dying, his memories got deleted.”

“Okay,” Bobby said.

Lafayette held back a branch so Bobby could pass. In the darkness, Lafayette couldn’t distinguish the pig blood from Bobby’s skin, but he recognized something pre-historic about the way they moved single-file through the forest. If they had been born millennia ago, what explanation would Lafayette had given to Bobby about the mind? He remembered reading about an Australian tribe who buried their dead in trees. The old would be placed near the base of a tree. The young would be propped on the top branches in hopes that their souls would be reincarnated quickly. Lafayette wondered what people would say in the next era, if they would laugh at the twenty-first century. Would they consider Lafayette’s thoughts mystical?

“I don’t feel bad about killing that pig,” Bobby said. “Should I? Do pigs have memories?”

Lafayette wanted to tell him that pigs were known to be great pets, which would save their owners from house fires. But his thoughts turned again to the tree burials, how they gave hope to those who feared loss, how, without hope, they would have become no more advanced than the animals.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said as they arrived at their tent.

Bobby undressed in the glow of their flashlight, which exposed his wild, spindly frame. Lafayette touched his knife, which he’d never used, and stripped to his underwear. Tonight, Lafayette had witnessed the first pains of what would be the feral birth of a man who’d kill the ground. Hunt the lightning. Lafayette crawled into the tent and lay beside

his brother. Then he closed his eyes and wondered when he'd step away in fear of being struck.

## THE WAITING MOTH

Before tonight, Walter Geese hadn't given much thought to the house across the street. Usually, he would sit on his apartment steps, light a cigarette and stare at the blue, three-story house, at the dying mimosa leaning low and dry against the backyard fence. But he would think about his looming graduate piano recital, about how in the act of memorizing pieces, his fingers seemed most content holding cigarettes.

Tonight, however, after practicing Lutoslawski, he walked outside. The blue house sat shrouded in the dark of a new moon, except for one ground-floor window, which looked open. An orange glow filled the room. Behind the window, an old woman stood and waved.

"Come here!" she said, and "yes, you," when Walter looked around. "I have a favor to ask."

He jogged across the street and started toward the front door, but she beckoned him to the window.

"Crawl in," she said. "I need your help with this piano."

Horror movies flooded Walter's mind, but he stepped through the large, low-set window. A scratched, black upright stood against the far wall. The woman, who wore a yellow silk gown, walked to it. Her hair sat in curlers and her lipstick compensated for the lips that had disappeared with old age.

“I’ve listened to you play,” she said, unraveling her curlers and dropping them on the floor. “I wanted to know if this piano plays correctly. I’m giving it to my niece, and I want it in tune.”

“I don’t know how to tune a piano,” Walter said.

“At least play a few notes, see which keys need tuning.” Then the woman left the room and closed the door behind her.

“Crazy,” Walter mumbled, and approached the piano. He touched the keyboard and the holes where keys should have been but for some reason had jumped ship. Red lipstick smeared one key, as if the woman had been playing, wiped her mouth, then touched the key as she continued without pause. He pressed it and the piano groaned. He looked at the door, expecting the woman to return, but the ceiling creaked under the weight of someone’s steps, presumably hers.

It would be cheaper, Walter guessed, for the woman to buy her niece an electronic keyboard than to repair this one. As he waited, he pressed a few keys, then a few more, and then fell into a piece by Tchaikovsky. The music sounded gravely off pitch, as if the room were underwater. Moths quivered as they clung to the ceiling. A roach crawled from a missing B key. Walter flicked it and continued playing. He closed his eyes. A flutter tickled his ear. His skin crawled with the thought of the room coming to life and consuming him. His fingers violently pressed the keys. Smiling, Walter leaned his head back. Above him, the sound of the creaking floorboards quickened until finally he heard a sharp wail and thud coming from outside. He stopped. The music still pulsated in his ears. He ran to the open window. The old woman writhed on the grass. Her right arm lay pinned underneath her. A glimmering bone protruded from her right calf.

Walter stumbled onto the lawn and rushed beside the woman. He glanced up at the open second-floor window. Sounds bubbled from her mouth. Walter searched for his phone, which, he remembered, was in his apartment.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

“Don’t,” she said, and pointed toward the piano room. “Music to make the moths fly. But not me.”

## IN THE FOREST

A yellow leaf hits my knuckles. I grip the tree. The old man behind me breathes on my scalp. I hear cars driving over the hill, past this picnic area, toward small-town Crabapple. I dig into his thrusts. He calls me “son,” “his boy,” even though I’ve just turned nineteen. He says I feel good, says he’s going to fuck me, and there’s a line of ants crawling up the tree. They’re spiraling the tree, and my forearm almost disturbs them as it rubs against the bark. If I move my hand I will send them falling. My knees bore into the soil. So this is how I fall.

The man comes. I grind my teeth and hope I don’t shit on him.

“Did I hurt you?” he says.

I wipe the bits of bark stuck to my skin. I hear the man slap off his condom.

“No.”

I pull up my pants. The ants continue to crawl. I need toilet paper. There is no bathroom here. There is the man I called “daddy” because he liked it. His wet fingers feel my back, now. I stumble a little. I’m lightheaded. His hands tighten around me, caress me. I reach and touch his naked hips.

“You wanted to do this, right?” he says. “After you didn’t show up yesterday, I thought you’d changed your mind.”

“Yesterday I was on South Padre with my parents.”

Truth: I beat off all afternoon while surfing the net. I must have looked at the

pictures of over thirty men. Today I imagined each man standing behind me. This man had messaged me for a month. He never sent a picture, so I imagined his messages coming from the other pictures I've seen online, coming from the closed, inviting lips of a ripped lumberjack, maybe. Yesterday I used a soapy end of a marker to stimulate myself, but it hurt, and I hurriedly washed it and turned off my computer and watched PBS until my parents came back from Austin. My mother asked if I had found a job yet. I shook my head.

“I haven't had sex in almost nine years,” the old man says, blinking at the afternoon glare filtering through the thinning trees. “Forest makes me nervous.” He doesn't seem hurried, though.

He lets go of me. The only man like me in small-town Crabapple, I think. I had hoped for someone younger. The lumberjack. I turn and look at the man's stooped shoulders, bulbous nose and veiny neck skin. I feel guilty having imagined other men during sex, when the man was probably thinking only about my smooth back.

“You don't have your pants on,” I say and step on the condom.

I watch him dress: first his thin white briefs, then his khakis. He tucks in his blue plaid short-sleeve shirt.

“When you message me,” I say, “you sign your name with an ‘A.’ What does it stand for?”

“Abe,” he says, patting his back pockets. I touch my stomach, try to press out the feeling that he's still moving in me.

“Why don't you just sign your name?”

When Abe licks his wrinkled lips, the moisture turns the dried, dead skin a see-through white.

“Nobody can be knowing we’re doing what we’re doing,” he says.

I say, “I don’t tell.” I hope my words come together to make Abe forget how he strained to fit himself in my ass, and how my panting sounded too much like pain. I hope the words sound like a man used to being fucked. Not that it matters: he just said I was his first in nine years. We’re two chupacabras roaming the wilderness. Two beasts wanting not to be alone. Maybe that’s love, but not exactly.

“I like you,” he says. He looks younger when he says this. His eyes are blue like the water in our above-ground pool. A leaf strikes his splotched cheek. The ants on the tree continue to crawl, which is natural, I think, as I follow him up the rocky slope toward the picnic area. The ants looked as if they had always climbed the tree, never stopped climbing, and the tree—well, it was natural for it to let them. I touch my ass through my pants. Is this pulse natural, and the sticking of my underwear to the blood I imagine drying there?

When we reach the top, a gray-haired woman is riding my bicycle on the grass. Her path makes a figure-eight around two concrete picnic tables. I stop walking. Abe sits at one of the tables.

“Hello boys,” the woman says, stopping a few feet from me. I smile and look at Abe, who’s also smiling. The woman isn’t smiling and *she knows*, I think.

“I’m going to guess this is your bike,” she says to me. Her hair lies clumped on her head. The pins holding it all together reflect the sunlight, making it appear like there’s a crown hiding in that mess.

“Yep, that’s his bike, there,” Abe says, pointing to it. He licks his teeth. I hold out a hand like I want to grab the handlebars, but she’s still sitting on the seat. Her wrinkly skin looks blue, and she’s playing with her big white-beaded necklace, touching each bead.

“It’s a very nice bike,” the woman says, stepping off it. “And it’s nice seeing boys like you still riding instead of driving. Good exercise.”

My hand still hangs in the air. “Thanks,” I say.

“You and your grandpa—or uncle—or—” her lips close as her eyes open a little bigger.

Abe says, “Grandpa—that there’s my grandson Jason.”

I bite my bottom lip. Now she thinks my grandfather fucked me, and she isn’t giving me my bike because the police are coming. My muscles tighten.

But the woman smiles, revealing fake white teeth. “It is nice to meet you, Jason. My name is Margo. You and your grandpa enjoy a little nature walk?” She sighs loudly, but in a happy way, and she looks at the sky and opens her arms to it. “Such a wonderful afternoon. And the leaves, finally falling, and autumn is my favorite season. I decided I’d drive down here today to look for a pair of shoes I lost. I won’t bother you with details, but I lost some red high-heeled shoes the other day. Well, I actually threw them. I wasn’t thinking, and, oops, I just tossed those shoes down the hill.”

Margo hands me my bike, which I hold close between me and her. She points toward the street where Abe’s truck is parked.

“I found one shoe over there by the curb,” she says. “I imagine a squirrel or opossum didn’t take too much to it. It has little teeth marks on it.”

“I guess an animal don’t like fancy shoes just as much as a man don’t,” Abe says.

Margo claps her hands. I notice she has long nails, and they click together. I press and press the brakes on my handlebars. I look at Abe. Both he and Margo are laughing.

I have the urge to say, *My grandfather fucked me today*. This way, the game will be over, and the woman will say, “I knew it!” The police haven’t come, and the woman is acting a little crazy, and my cries weren’t so loud, maybe. Besides, Abe isn’t my grandfather, and now I clench my teeth because I want the old woman to know that Abe fucked me, and fuck you bitch for riding my bike, and fuck you Abe for making a joke and laughing, and you aren’t even looking at me. And still the woman’s hairpins sparkle.

Abe and Margo shake hands. He does have a strong arm, and tanned, only a little spotted from the sun. The hair on his hands is still black. My hair and skin are white except for one black hair growing on my right arm. I try to keep it trimmed.

“Your grandpa is a very funny man,” Margo says. “And two nice boys such as yourselves are lucky to get out of those woods without seeing anything that would make Jesus die again if he could. If you knew what kinds of sounds I hear coming from behind that wall of trees. But just you look at this shoe.” She turns her back and walks toward the curb. Abe looks at me. His mouth makes a kissing shape and his hands rub against his pants. I stare back, wondering what sounds the woman has heard, wondering whether Abe and I weren’t the only ones coupling in the woods, or whether Abe is a liar and has been here before. No, he and I are the same. Abe shifts his attention to Margo, who is holding the shoe in her hand and pointing to the marks on it.

“Why look at that,” Abe says, squinting.

“Maybe you bit your own shoe,” I say. Margo lets out a wheeze of a laugh and drops the shoe.

“Apple doesn’t fall far from the old tree,” she says. “You’re just as funny as your grandpa. I’m sure your grandma has a tough job with both you two.”

“Well, there’s no grandma anymore,” Abe says, crossing his arms. “Passed away years ago, God bless her.”

“Well, I am sorry,” Margo says. “My husband is gone, too, and it gets lonely, doesn’t it? Yes, I do get lonely. Richard—that was my husband’s name—bought me these very shoes so long ago I can’t even remember when, and now one of them is chewed and the other—why I don’t know where it is. Over in the trees, probably. I guess I wanted to forget him. That’s why I threw the shoes out. You’d think a woman my age would know better.”

Abe wipes his nose.

I glance behind me. “I didn’t see a shoe when we were walking,” I say.

“Well, I think it must be down there right on the top of everything. And, son, I do mean everything that is a disgrace to nature and decent behavior. I would go and look for that shoe myself, but my knees are already hurting from riding your bike. That’s what I get for thinking it was abandoned. But, look at you. Maybe your grandpa wouldn’t mind if you went down and looked for me. You don’t have to look long, and the woods are silent now, so I don’t think there’s need to worry about coming across—”

Abe waves a hand. “You can go look, boy. We’re in no hurry to leave just yet.”

I let my bike drop, and Margo says, “Oops, now, be careful. I bet your grandpa spent some money on that bike, and honey, you look for just that shoe. Don’t set your eyes on anything else that may be lying on the ground.”

I walk down the hill and enter the trees. The air feels cooler now and makes the trees and ground look bluer. The shoe isn’t anywhere. I kick the leaves. The woman couldn’t have heard us, I decide. I pass the tree with the ants and stop. Dirt specks the unraveled condom. I hear the woman’s laugh.

I pick up the condom. The dirt sticks to it. I stuff it in my pocket. Then I look for the woman’s shoe. After fifteen minutes, though, the sun begins to set, and the shadows seem to bubble from the ground. Maybe the other shoe doesn’t exist. This could have been the woman’s game. She traps men like Abe, and wants to send me away so she can kiss him with her licorice-thin lips. Walking up the slope, now, away from the trees, I feel the condom. Even if she knows, Abe made the face at me when she was walking away. He wanted to kiss me. When I tell the woman her other shoe is gone, she will give up and leave, and Abe will take me to his truck and he will kiss me.

The concrete picnic tables look grey and cold when I top the hill, and the woman is sitting next to Abe now. She looks at me and says, “Oh, and your hands are empty, unless you’re hiding it behind you.”

“I couldn’t find it.”

Margo continues her conversation with Abe. I sit at the second table, where I find a daddy longlegs. I pretend to be fascinated with its bouncing walk along the concrete bench. I listen to the woman talk about the types of trees. “I’ve named them,” she says. “I name lots of things.”

The spider climbs my leg, then up my arm. The woman sits quiet for several minutes. Then she says, “Tell me, Abe, because I ask myself every day. Sometimes I drive here and sit at this table and listen to the noises coming from the forest. And tell me, Abe, because you’re a man, but why do men turn to men, and surely you know what I mean?”

Abe says nothing.

“I sit here and listen to them,” she continues, “and every day my breasts sink lower. My hair grows more brittle, but I can give, Abe. I sit here and almost yell out to those hiding down there that I can still give and my giving is natural, but nobody wants to take from me anymore.”

The daddy longlegs drops to the ground.

Abe clears his throat and motions with his hand. “Well, I don’t know, but I think you have very fine breasts.”

*Liar!* But he lies well—and boldly—and I like it because I know he must be thinking about how he pushed his penis inside my ass, how he said, “You’re smooth, so very smooth.” He called my nipples “buttons, ones I want to undo.”

I glance again at Margo, whose face is red in the dim light, and she’s smart because she says, “Now you’re lying.”

But Abe says, “No. And your hair is shiny, too.”

*Another lie!* Her crown of pins grows dull.

“I’m getting it cut soon,” she says.

“And don’t be thinking about those noises,” he says, “because I bet you still have a heck of a lot to give.”

I hold my breath. But he called me “his boy,” and it sounded true, like it was carved on some big rock.

I pick a leaf that is stuck in a cobweb underneath the table. Somewhere, I think, there must be a leaf in a bubble, and that leaf is *the* leaf. And it’s not made of gold, but it’s made of the purest leaf. The same goes for the ants on the tree. Somewhere there is *the* ant that all ants are trying to be. I drop the leaf and touch the condom that has warmed in my pocket. Maybe in the moment when he called me “his boy,” we became, for a second, the purest of lovers. And we’re keeping that secret.

I cough. Margo looks at me and waves her sharp fingers. “And you, Jason. Yes, you will be a great man.”

“Sorry again about your shoe,” I say.

“There’s no need to find it now,” she says. “You’ll find plenty of women’s shoes in your time, and it’s getting late, isn’t it? Too late to be here.”

Margo stretches and slowly stands. Her nipples make two small spikes in her blouse.

“I’m hungry now for the first time in a week,” she says. “There’s a buffet down the street, and we seniors get a discount after six o’clock.”

I stand. “Grandpa is having dinner at our house tonight.”

Abe bites at the dead skin on his lips.

“Is that right?” Margo says.

Abe sighs heavily, stands and hikes his pants. He doesn’t look at me when he says, “The family won’t care one iota if I miss dinner.”

“And will Jason’s parents mind if he comes too?”

Abe finally looks at me. Even in the dark, I see his eyes open wide, then shut.

“They won’t mind,” I say. I enjoy this little game.

“We’ll call them and let them know,” he says and winks.

“I just love new friends,” Margo says and walks to her car.

I walk my bike to Abe’s truck and lift it into the back. Abe unlocks the doors.

Margo pulls next to us and rolls down her window. “You know the buffet I’m talking about, Abe? Mr. Treat’s?”

“We’ll be right behind you,” he says.

I slide into the passenger seat as Abe slowly hoists himself into the driver’s seat. I watch Margo’s car turn right out of the rest stop.

“We don’t have to go,” I say. “We could just go back to your place. I bet your sisters are asleep.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” he says.

“The noises Margo talked about. Have you been here before?”

Abe shifts gears and exits the rest stop. Cars pass us going the opposite way.

Their headlights cast a glow on the telephone poles and trees next to us, and the light reflects off the metal fences and the eyes of deer standing just behind the chain links. I touch Abe’s thigh. My hand stays there, but Abe doesn’t touch it.

We pass under the stoplight entering downtown Crabapple. The trees lining Main conceal the fact that most of the buildings downtown sit vacant. Ahead, a pink neon sign advertises Mr. Treat’s. Abe steers clear from a deep pothole as we pull into the parking lot. Margo is standing at the entrance and waves.

“What if we see people we know?” I say.

“Crabapple might be tiny, and everyone might say they know everyone. But really, nobody remembers shit.”

Abe jerks the key from the ignition. I can tell he’s nervous.

When Abe and I step from the truck, the neon sign bathes us all in a pink glow.

Margo walks up. “I’m craving some okra.”

“If I’m not mistaken,” Abe says, “some people call okra ‘Lady’s Fingers.’”

Margo waves her right fingers before opening the glass buffet door. The hostess, a middle-aged voluptuous woman who looks like she could also teach Sunday School, recognizes Margo, calls her “Ms. Margaret,” and says, “Three?” Then she sits us. Abe and Margo sit on one side. I sit across from Abe. The hostess brings us three plates and iced tea.

“I didn’t know you had family,” the woman says.

“Oh, well,” Margo says. When the hostess leaves she apologizes. “I just hate telling people they’re wrong. And I guess everyone on earth is part of one big family.”

“No need to apologize,” Abe says.

Margo sighs. “Well, Jason, you and your grandpa go ahead and get yourself something to eat. I’ll stay here and look after my purse.”

“Ladies first,” Abe says.

“Such a model of manners,” she says, standing. “I saw some okra.” Then she presses her plate to her breasts and walks toward the five steaming buffet tables in the middle of the dining room. I suddenly feel pressure on my crotch. I look down and Abe’s foot is tickling it. I look at him and he’s smiling and the yellow light above us creates a labyrinth of shadows down his face.

“She could see us,” I say.

“Are you still my little boy?” he says.

I shove his foot off my chair. I hear the thud of his heel on the carpet. Still, my pants tighten; a terrible twitch presses against my zipper.

“I’m going to the restroom and wash up,” I say.

Nobody is in the two-stall bathroom. I stand in front of the cracked mirror and turn, looking for dirt stains, cum stains, any evidence. Nothing. The door behind me opens, and Abe walks through. He looks at the stalls.

“It’s empty,” I say. I notice his fly is open. I turn on the water and pump soap in my hands.

“It locks,” he says, and I watch his reflection. He turns the bolt, locking us in the restroom. I see him walk toward me. He touches my ass. He leans into me until the sink digs into my crotch. He kisses my neck. I turn around. His lips taste salty.

“You tried the okra,” I say.

Abe’s hands unbutton my pants. My wet hands hold his arms. His eyes remain fixed as if he’s staring at the air freshener in the corner. Abe’s dry thrusts quicken. He breathes as if he’s clearing his throat.

“Why aren’t you hard?” he says suddenly and steps away.

“Anybody could knock on the door.”

Abe enters a stall and shuts the door.

“You didn’t hold my hand in the truck,” I say. “And now you’re acting like this.”

“At my age, a man feels dead if there isn’t a little danger.”

“Is that the only reason you let me tag along tonight? How many times have you been down to that spot?”

“In the forest it’s different,” Abe says. “I don’t hold any man’s hand, but I’ll hold yours.”

I unlock the door and step out.

“Are the restrooms clean?” Margo says when I get back to the table.

“They don’t have paper towels,” I say and wipe my hands on my cloth napkin.

At the buffet table, I pile some macaroni on my plate and glance at Margo, who isn’t eating, has her hands on her lap. Her attention seems focused toward the restroom, waiting, perhaps, for Abe to remerge so she can remerge from whatever quiet spell she has cast for herself. I stab a log of meatloaf. Something about her wait seems natural. Her interest, natural. The macaroni on my plate slides as I fork a slab of loaf on it. Where are the men Abe has fucked? Will I ever bump into them? Will we not recognize ourselves as monsters wanted by men who are scared of monsters but can’t help wanting the fear of there being one? The pain in my abdomen doesn’t feel monstrous, the reason for meeting him today, the touching, at night under the bed sheets, of that silent hardness, not so monstrous. Beasts don’t dream as I do.

I return to the dinner table and sit. After Abe comes out and loads his plate, we eat.

“I was at a coffee shop recently,” Margo says, “and a young man with one of those spiky hairstyles sat beside me. He offered to give me a Tarot reading for free. He said he just loved helping people.”

“The devil comes to you wearing a robe of white,” Abe says. Margo nods and swallows a bite of chicken parmesan.

“I was a little scared at first because I don’t believe in those dark forces, but it was also exciting. When I told him my birthday, he said I was an Aquarius.”

“I’m a Libra myself, though don’t tell anyone I know that,” Abe says.

“I don’t know about that one,” Margo says. Abe puts down his fork, reaches and grabs Margo’s hands. My focus shakes a little. I watch as Abe cups her hands and lifts them.

“According to astrologers, a Libra is represented by the scales.” Then he guides Margo’s right hand until it’s slightly higher than her left. “We love balance.”

Margo’s face blushes. I drop my fork and stand. “I’m heading home,” I say, and leave.

I lift my bike from Abe’s truck bed and set it on the ground. It’s a red bike—one that I’ve had for six years—but the paint looks pink. My friends go through a bike every year, it seems, as they try jumping the narrow parts of Crabapple creek, risk crashing them into each other. I run my fingers over the still-smooth paint. I’m not them, and I’m not Abe. I respect the creek, my bike, my nature.

I ride down Main toward my parents’ house. Our residential neighborhood is still except for deer huddled on the front lawns. The moon reflects in their eyes, and I imagine them bowing as they silently wait for me to pass.

## THERAPY

Kelly unlatched the baby-changing table and lowered it. Water dripped off. She wiped her fingers on her skirt and asked if they really needed it.

“Don’t you want to be my baby?” Lyle said. Kelly rolled her eyes, covered her nose when she turned toward the flogged toilet. He dropped the toilet lid.

“Now you’re going to wash your hands, right?” she said.

“Yes.”

“Use warm water. I don’t want cold hands touching me.”

Lyle stared at Kelly’s reflection in the spotted mirror. Graffiti made east-side wallpaper behind her. Someone had painted the anarchy symbol on the empty paper-towel dispenser.

“Just wipe your hands on your jeans,” Kelly said. “Are you sure this table will support me? It’s plastic.”

“Thick plastic.”

Kelly tested her weight. The table creaked, but held.

“Okay hurry,” she said. “I’m not wearing underwear.”

“Nobody’s in the restaurant. Let’s enjoy this. Besides, LeeAnne said doing this would help.”

“Dr. Jackson. She’s our therapist, not a friend.”

Lyle lowered his pants, leaned against the table, which was cold, and he said this as he touched her thighs.

“Someone tagged the table,” Kelly said, referring to a red scribble partially covered by her left thigh. “Maybe the kid who did it was changed on this very table. Maybe he wanted people to know he’d been innocent, once.”

“That’s not something a teenager would admit to anyone.”

“You’re a nihilist.” Kelly grabbed Lyle’s back, pressed him against her.

“You like that?” he asked.

“No.”

Lyle worked his flaccid penis. Every time he shifted his weight, the grime on the floor smacked under his shoes.

“I feel like I’m going to piss on you,” he said.

“I bet Dr. Jackson hasn’t had sex in a bathroom. She probably projects her fantasies on hopeless couples.”

Lyle squinted. Perhaps he had consumed too many glasses of water, but regardless, he began urinating on Kelly’s legs, the table, his pants. Kelly covered her face, kicked Lyle away from her. The bathroom door rattled; someone knocked.

“I’m sorry,” Lyle said, pulling up his pants.

Kelly slid off the table, folded and latched it. Urine dripped from the hinges.

“I’ve never been peed on,” she said.

“Do you think we’re hopeless?”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to admit that.”

“But you said it.”

With one hand she covered the wet, almost-sweet smelling patch of her skirt and with the other she unbolted the door.

“Maybe one day,” he said, “we’ll bring our child here to write his name on the table.”

“Your signature is enough,” she said, opening the door.

## FÜR LOUISE

Jeremy Wilks survives a layoff. He trades his plastic stapler for a red metal one, his two-tier file shelf for a four-tier one, his stained mouse-pad for one with sea creatures printed on it. He scavenges the vacant cubicles and steals two gel pens, a marked-up calendar. August has just ended—such luck! An un-marked September through December. The rain bleeds down the tinted windows as he skulks to the back of the row where his cubicle overlooks the company’s walking trail. He organizes his treasures. Those who visit him will know who previously owned the red stapler, and he will revel in this symbol of survival, just as he reveled with the few coworkers at lunch who hadn’t been axed in the company-wide twenty percent reduction of force. Even so, he couldn’t finish his lunch. When the server collected his plate, still piled with soy-soaked noodles, she asked if there was something wrong.

“It’s Friday,” she said. “You should be happy.”

After transferring his papers onto a new shelf, he assesses his situation. Louise, the former red stapler owner, will be living off her severance pay for three months. She’s young, with a body that trumped budget questions. Jeremy considers himself competent with numbers, but when Louise was near he could only count breasts. One. Two. But the equation never includes his two hands, one mouth, one tongue. She, too young, too obvious a target for elimination, is enjoying her severance pay, sipping strawberry margaritas and knowing her figure can easily get her another job while Jeremy sits,

sipping cold coffee, knowing that if he were laid off, *his* figure wouldn't get him a new job. Jeremy listens to the murmur of the copier. Voices modulate, and he half-heartedly attempts to transcribe the sounds into musical notes.

Meanwhile, he thinks how easy it is to touch the stapler, to take it and other supplies, how easy to sigh when his manager told him he wouldn't be cleaning out his own desk this morning. "Thank you for the opportunity to continue here," Jeremy had said, trying to mask the reality that this job was supposed to have ended two years ago with his acceptance into a graduate music-composition program. Here he is, because, as he puts it, being accepted is almost impossible now that nearly every program is oversaturated with applicants. Besides, he told his father, having a job is experience. The sheets of music that he keeps hidden in his drawer taunt him.

"You're still here, Jeremy."

Fernando, a perma-temp, leans against the windowsill. His black muscle shirt is spotted with rain. In his hands, a box.

"So are you, Fernando."

"I found an injured toad outside."

"Is that what's in the box?"

"I don't know the first thing about taking care of a toad."

"Why didn't you leave it outside? You shouldn't have brought it into the building."

"Look at it."

Fernando opens the box. A brown toad sits on a layer of wet grass. “My dog would go nuts if she saw it,” Fernando says. Jeremy touches its rough back. The toad puffs in defense. Fernando closes the box and puts it on a stack of spreadsheets. “If you throw it out to be picked on by the birds and coyotes, humor me when I ask how it’s doing.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“When I picked it up I saw a little blood.”

Jeremy looks at the toad, which hasn’t moved, but doesn’t look as if it’s about to die. Its eyes blink and one leg quivers, as if calculating its next step.

“Looks like he’s fine. Either way, I don’t care if he lives or dies.”

“You should work on your bedside manner,” Fernando says, walking away.

Jeremy taps the toad box with a pencil. He pretends his pencil is a baton and conducts the box’s silence, the constant hiss of the AC vent above him, the man in the next cubicle who loosens his phlegm every two and a half minutes, the rain, which has thinned. This orchestra lasts for thirty minutes, until 5:15, at which point Jeremy gathers his work into his canvas shoulder bag. With the box under one arm, he steps from his cubicle. A security officer stands at the end of his row. A woman’s head peers from a brown cubicle.

“Jeremy, hi.”

Louise steps out, carrying a small box. Jeremy freezes. The AC vent blows strands of her hair across her face. Several hairs stick to her lipstick. She tries puffing the hair from her face. The box she’s holding tilts because of her breasts.

“I didn’t expect to see you here,” he says.

“I’m just collecting some personal things.” She opens her box, pulls out a mug.  
“Wouldn’t be able to live without this.”

“I saw someone take your red stapler.” Jeremy shifts his box, feels the weight of the toad slide to the front.

“You too?” She points to his box.

“Me? No. There’s an injured toad in here. Fernando found it outside.”

Louise “oohs” and touches her tanned, slender neck.

“I used to take care of animals when I was little,” she says.

“Want this one?”

“I’m visiting my parents this weekend.”

Louise walks into her cubicle, then re-emerges with a marker.

“I guess nobody wanted this marker. Amazing how quickly people swarm to the cubicles of the departed.”

“I’ll trade the toad for the marker,” Jeremy says. Louise laughs, pops the cap off and writes on the box. Jeremy watches the marker move, watches her fingers grasp the marker.

“There. My number. I’ll be back in town on Monday. If you still want me to take it, call me.” Louise tosses the marker in her box. “If it dies, call me and I’ll attend the funeral. I’ll have nothing better to do.”

“I’m sorry about today.” Jeremy glances at the security officer, who is fidgeting with his walkie talkie. Louise follows Jeremy’s gaze, then looks back at him.

“It’s not your fault. Anyway, call me on Monday and tell me how the patient is. I don’t trust men playing nurse.”

Jeremy waves, mumbles an answer, then walks back to his desk on impulse. He puts Louise's red stapler in the drawer, along with his sheet music, pauses, takes out the music and puts it in his bag. Then he locks the drawer and walks past Louise, who waves as if nothing has happened to her, as if she's merely staying late. He walks down the stairs and out the building, all the while staring at her number, hoping the rain won't smear the ink.

Had Jeremy released the toad before leaving work, he would have driven home, taken a shower, then eaten leftovers while watching "MacGyver." He would have fallen asleep at 9pm, risen at 9am. He would have sat on his apartment patio and thought about writing music, would have tried to remember Advanced Counterpoint or the exact wording of the professors' assessment after his senior recital. He would've thought about the resignation letter he had drafted two days after being hired by his current employer, how it sits in his kitchen drawer with old credit card bills. He would've flipped through an old planner in which he had written the deadlines for graduate school applications, would've scanned where he had crossed off each day in anticipation. He would've stumbled upon the day where he stopped.

Instead, Jeremy, pressured to keep the toad, drives home, takes a shower, and eats leftovers while watching the toad, which hasn't moved, and would be considered dead if it didn't blink. After washing dishes, Jeremy puts a bottle cap filled with water inside the box. He touches the toad, grabs it, turns it upside down. The toad kicks, splays its legs, revealing a scabbed gash. Piss drips from Jeremy's hand. He drops the toad in the box, wipes his hand on his pants, and walks outside.

Jeremy lifts the welcome mat at his front door. Tiny spiders crawl. Roly-polies ball up against each other. Jeremy picks the balls and drops them in a jar. He hasn't done this since he was nine or ten. One time, years ago, he had a box of roly-polies, and one night a female gave birth. The next morning, tiny, translucent babies squirmed on his nightstand. Now, leaning against the shared balcony railing, he watches the bugs in the jar. He shakes it and hundreds of legs flail against each other. Jeremy looks to see whether a neighbor is spying, then continues staring at the insects. No aspirations, no disappointments. No eulogies.

Later, he opens the toad's box and drops four roly-polies on the grass nearest the toad's mouth. He waits. It shifts slightly.

"Eat." Then he kneels until his mouth is mere inches from the toad's back and whispers for it to eat. The smell of dirt clogs his nose. He whistles, blows. The toad blinks. Jeremy crosses, uncrosses his eyes, making the spots on its back merge, separate. If the spots had stems, they'd be music notes.

Inspired, Jeremy slowly draws musical notes on the toad's back with a black marker. As earlier, the skin around its eyes expands in defense. Jeremy continues until all the toad's spots are transposed into whole, quarter, eighth notes. He converts two spots into rests. Imagining an invisible staff overlaid on the toad's back, he sounds out the various pitches. Then he pulls his sheet music from his bag, an untitled project he has been working on since the last round of graduate-school rejection letters. Jeremy crosses out "Untitled" and writes "The Toad Lunges in G#." He dedicates the piece to Fernando, but, after remembering the phone number on the box, erases Fernando's name and writes, "Louise."

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Saturday morning, Jeremy wakes before his alarm. Six pages of new music sit on the floor, all written the night before. He tips the toad box open. How big the toad looks today, like it's expanding to fit the box.

Jeremy gets out of bed to pour the last of the insects into the box. His cell rings. Hearing Louise on the other end makes his voice constrict, and he becomes acutely aware of how bad his breath smells.

"How did you find me?" he says.

"An old e-mail I had printed out with the numbers of all the accountants."

"Someone gave out my cell number?"

"Did you kill the toad?"

"It's still alive. But it isn't moving very much, either."

"I can come over."

"I thought you were visiting your parents."

"Long story. It can wait. I can't stand the thought of you torturing the poor thing."

Jeremy tells Louise his address. She can be there in thirty minutes. He agrees, though he hasn't taken a shower. He blows a kiss to the toad.

Reality hits him in the shower. Louise is coming over. But she's coming for the toad. Not him. Then again, she wouldn't have given him her number had she felt uncomfortable.

Jeremy lathers his washrag. Maybe she likes classical music. He imagines his new music, imagines humming each note while she stares. Then he remembers his senior recital, how only a handful of people attended. Half of them left at intermission. Maybe it

would be better if Louise doesn't listen to classical. Then she couldn't distinguish good music from bad. No matter. He had written from his heart. He scrubs his armpits. How easy it is for his mind finally to break free from work. The toad. He can't forget she's coming for it. He'll convince her to let him keep it. Besides, would she take it by force? It's only been a day. He has to protect it a little longer, has to let it heal a little longer. Perhaps he and Louise will fall in love, and the toad will be their glue and Jeremy's muse. He giggles at the thought.

Jeremy dries off. He quickly shaves and irons a shirt. He throws his dirty clothes in the closet, then looks at the box. The door bell rings. The toad kicks free and hops across the carpet. The door bell rings again.

He opens the door, which creaks, as if some force is countering his own, as if Louise's aura is a vortex drawing all objects toward her. Jeremy stares at her low-cut jeans and tight, black shirt.

"I've never seen you in jeans," he says.

"I've never been to your apartment."

Jeremy swings the door until it's fully open.

"Hopefully the creaking isn't too spooky."

"I'm terrified."

Jeremy mentally slaps himself. He feels a thud on his right foot and looks down to see the toad hop out the door.

"You didn't kill it," she says, kneeling. The toad freezes on the doormat. "Are these musical notes on its back?"

"It gives him personality."

“Hopefully not poisoning.”

“The marker’s non-toxic.”

“I didn’t know you wrote music.”

Jeremy smiles. If she thinks seven notes on a toad are music, then she’ll swoon when she hears the rest. He tells Louise about his recent inspiration. He doesn’t notice until he’s finished that the toad is gone.

“Your symphony just hopped away.”

“You were probably looking forward to taking it,” he says, trying to mask the urge to find it, the panic that, without the toad, apathy will return.

Louise sighs. “We’ll find another helpless animal to save. A grackle with a missing leg, maybe.”

Jeremy pats his pants pocket. Perhaps he will feign an impromptu conference call. Louise would leave. Jeremy could still find the toad. It can’t have traveled far. “Maybe we’ll find another toad. There must be thousands of them.”

“I think composition paper is easier to find,” she says.

“But more expensive.” Jeremy stares at Louise. She has freckles. He’s never noticed. He resists the impulse to draw on them. He laughs, but it sounds too high-pitched. Louise adjusts her ponytail.

“Is it rude to ask to use your restroom?”

Jeremy shows her the way. After she closes the bathroom door, he runs outside and searches a few nearby bushes. Nothing. He runs back inside and wipes his face with a kitchen towel. He breathes deeply. Louise is still using the restroom. She’s still in his apartment. If she wanted to leave, she would have. He doesn’t need the toad.

“I hope a hawk flies down and eats you,” he whispers.

“It’s odd to see a man talk to himself,” Louise says, entering the kitchen.

“Towels are difficult pets,” he says, and folds the one he used. “But easily replaced.”

“That sounds a lot like what Human Resources told me.”

Jeremy squeezes the towel.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

Louise waves her hands as if to stop his apology.

“I’ve actually been offered a job in New York.”

Jeremy digs his nails into the towel.

“That’s fast.”

“I’ve been planning the move for a while,” she says.

Of course she’s been planning it. Departures. First the toad, and now Louise, who’ll be walking the same streets that Steve Reich and Philip Glass and Gershwin walked. Jeremy should have ended up in New York, but Louise’s going, and he senses that when she leaves, she’ll be rolling up the carpet behind her. Desperate, he kisses her. Jeremy swallows his remaining breath and maybe some of Louise’s. When their lips part, Louise licks hers.

“I have to make a mental note about accountants,” she says. Her subsequent smile morphs into sympathy. Jeremy apologizes. Louise checks her watch.

“You have to go,” Jeremy says, trying to maintain some inflection, as if there’s still a chance she’ll stay. Louise nods. Jeremy shows her out.

“When you said we would find another hurt animal,” he says, but then his voice trails.

“Oh,” she says. “I guess I was being hypothetical. But I better not hear reports of a crazy man searching the river for toads.” She gives him a brief hug. “Millions of toads, but not another like the one you cared for. You marked it, and it’s changed forever. That should be a little comforting, right?”

Jeremy waves goodbye as Louise walks down the sidewalk toward the parking lot. He returns to his living room. On Monday, the shock of the layoffs will have worn off. His coworkers will high-five each other. They’ll feel alive. Jeremy will sit in his cubicle and click his computer mouse as if he’s playing the single note of a triangle. Now he stares at the carpet leading to this door and wishes the toad had at least left a dotted trail a blood before it left. Then he could have seen a different score.

## POST-SEX AT THE END OF THE WORLD

Standing on a fifth-floor balcony overlooking a row of lighted trees illuminating a deserted Third Street, Forrest lit a cigarette and watched Ellie eat an eighty-cent peppermint patty that he had been keeping in his pantry for a year before this night, the night he brought Ellie to his apartment and slept with her.

“What was that back there?” Forrest said.

Ellie, who leaned against the balcony railing, glanced at Forrest. She tore at the wrapping of the peppermint patty.

“What would you consider it?” he continued. “Did I lay you, bed you, fuck you?”

Forrest tapped his cigarette, and the ashes upon hitting the balcony floor rolled like tumbleweeds toward Ellie’s bare feet, one of which she lifted off the floor as she peered over the railing.

“Do you hear that?” she said. “Do you think that sound is the leaves falling or the white string lights clicking against the branches?”

“The leaves falling,” Forrest said.

Turning around and leaning against the railing, Ellie fingered the wrapper. “I’m reading a book that says that here in America the trees and woods waited almost fifty million years before humans arrived.”

“That’s a long time,” Forrest said, inadvertently flicking the cherry of his cigarette onto the floor.

“Can you imagine how silent the woods were then, before us?”

“Must’ve been quiet,” he said, and tossed the cigarette off the balcony. “Maybe we’ll make the world loud again after you finish eating.”

Ellie wiped the corners of her mouth. Stepping to her side, Forrest ran his hands along the railing. He watched as Ellie, staring up the side of the building, placed the crumpled wrapper in the pocket of the work shirt she had put on. She sighed and rubbed her eyes.

“I think you’re wrong about that sound,” she said. “It’s definitely the string lights hitting the branches. It’s too clangy to be the sound trees made for fifty million years.”

“You know,” Forrest said, “I wouldn’t have fucked you, but you’re the first woman I’ve seen since the end of the world, and tonight, seeing you, I got a little excited.”

“I know,” Ellie said. “It’s been a while. I felt like we were starving lab rats being watched by someone.”

“Maybe it was Jesus,” Forrest said and then looked above him. “Didn’t you like that, Jesus?”

A cool, wet wind unrolled down Third Street and, catching slightly on the metal bars of the balcony railing, it lingered and whistled in a steady, hollow minor key.

“It’s unnatural,” Forrest said after several minutes had passed, “those lights still hanging on the trees almost a whole year now. It’s August for Christ’s sake.”

Ellie tilted her head and Forrest looked at her, unsure of whether she was listening to the wind, to the string lights and falling leaves below them, to the slow creaking of the concrete balcony.

“Not Jesus,” Ellie finally said, walking to the door. “We’re alone here.”

## THE LAST ROUTINE

Brenard knelt on the flat roof of the four-unit apartment building and tried looking into his apartment through the quarter-sized hole someone—most likely his neighbor Stuart—had drilled the previous night. Then he glanced at the fake satellite dish that had covered the hole. It had seemed real from the ground, but now the satellite was nothing more than a metal bowl glued to a metal box. Attached to the dish's base hung a black, plastic tube and what appeared to be a tiny wireless camera. Brenard stood and rubbed his aged knees. His fingers moved to adjust the hair that hadn't grown on his head for twenty years.

He surveyed the horizon. A radio tower stood a hundred feet from the apartment building, the exterior of which, once white-washed, now resembled the nearby canal—gray and mossy. Water pipes ran down the side of the apartment building like veins still connecting segments of muscle. In the distance, the city towered, its skyscrapers shrouded in brown haze. Brenard had moved here—a half-developed patch abandoned by developers—two months ago, after his aunt and only living relative died. After paying for the funeral arrangements, he had no choice but to take her purple recliner and cat Tituba to a place Brenard and his social security check could afford. He'd imagined starting his last routine: morning walks in the canal, microwavable Mexican dinners, sleep. He hadn't expected to be spied upon. Biting the dead skin on his lips, Brenard weighed his options. What Stuart had done was surely illegal. However, he doubted the city police had time to

respond to calls made from this neighborhood. He had neither seen nor heard a cop car here.

A rusted hatchback sedan pulled into the parking lot. Brenard watched as a large woman with cropped red hair struggled out of the driver's side. She pulled down her orange shirt. The car trunk popped open, and from it she pulled a tall metal lamp. Brenard climbed down the ladder he had found propped against the building's back wall. He walked around to the front.

"A new resident?" he said as the woman mounted the stairs ahead of him. She turned and waved.

"Kimberly," she said, waiting for Brenard to reach the top of the stairs. "Are you the manager?"

Brenard pointed at his apartment. "No, just live here."

"Well nice to meet you, neighbor. Don't worry—I'm usually quiet."

"Usually," Brenard mumbled as he unlocked his door and entered. Inside, he found the drilled hole in his closet. A ping of light shown through. Brenard massaged his scalp.

Someone knocked on the door. When Brenard answered, Stuart was leaning against the metal porch railing. He looked about five feet tall. His facial features seemed to point to his wide, flaring nostrils. The sunlight reflected off his greasy, parted black hair.

"Before you say anything," he began, "let me explain."

“I could have you thrown in jail,” Brenard said, stepping outside and closing the door.

Stuart lit a cigarette. Smoke curled from his nose and mouth. “But it was for your protection.”

“From what?”

“I needed to monitor your cat.”

“Well she doesn’t go in the closet very often.”

Stuart inhaled and looked over the rail. “My measurements were a bit off. Until today, you were the only other person living in this building. I was being overly cautious.”

“You about nailed my coffin last night. I woke up, heard shuffling and drilling. I thought someone was aiming to kill me. I couldn’t see outside because my porch light’s out. And now I’m going to have to patch that hole. And why do you feel the need to be cautious?”

“I can help fix the hole, and to keep it simple, let me just say that when someone moves here with pets, curious things happen.”

“Are you going to be spying on that woman next to me, too?”

“Kimberly,” he said, “and no. She doesn’t have pets.”

“Don’t think I won’t call the police if you try anything like this again.”

Stuart flicked his half-smoked cigarette and nodded. He walked down the stairs, and then turned to Brenard.

“What’s your cat’s name again?” he said.

“Tituba, and she was my aunt’s cat.”

“Keep an eye on her,” he said. “A new environment plays on a cat’s personality. Wouldn’t want her to escape and fall into the canal. All sorts of strange trash end there. Curious animals eating curious things. Nothing curious about why they die.”

“Don’t think you can scare me,” Brenard said, and watched Stuart enter the apartment just below Brenard’s.

When Brenard re-entered his living room, Tituba yawned and clawed at the recliner.

“All this nonsense, and because of you,” he said, pointing. It wasn’t until he sat in the recliner that he calmed. It smelled like his aunt. He wedged his hands between the cushion. He felt bits of food, felt where the purple velvet turned into a cheaper fabric stapled to the chair’s wooden frame. Nearby, a fly buzzed, trapped, perhaps, in the space between the window and the blinds.

He freed a hand and held it near his nose. He ran his fingers from his nostrils up the stubbled wrinkles to his slick brow. Did something in him stop working when he first noticed that his body had grown old? Had all sense of adventure died? He stared at Tituba, who struggled to keep her eyes open. He had spent his adult life watching family members die and attending to their last needs. He never complained when first his father’s dementia and then his mother’s erased all recognition of their son. He deserved a little attention. So what if it came from a crazy neighbor?

Brenard sat in the chair until nightfall. Then he stood and walked outside. The radio tower’s red lights pulsed. Restlessness drove him downstairs to the canal, where drainage pipes jutted like popped stitches. He wandered further than before. Finally, he came to the end: a large concrete wall with four pipes connecting it to the greenbelt on

the other side. Cars drove above the wall. A single street lamp shined a thin sheet of yellow on the concrete floor, illuminating cans, a spoon, a shopping car. Two lumps huddled beside it. Brenard turned back, but heard, “Gretchy!”

He turned toward the lumps, which pushed their cart toward him.

“Thought you were Gretchy,” an old woman said, then introduced herself as Agatha. Her stocking-covered feet never stopped moving. She wore a tattered black skirt and a yellow smiley-face shirt. A flowered hat covered her long, matted hair. She motioned to the second woman who shuffled beside her.

“My sister’s name is Cherry,” Agatha said.

“Because I’m the sweetest.”

“Watch her,” Agatha said, “that cherry’s got a pit in the middle.”

Despite the humid night, Cherry wore a long, brown overcoat and a hat with feathers. She looked taller than Agatha.

“Gretchy?” Brenard said. “Are you looking for someone? A pet?”

Agatha giggled. “Heavens, no.”

Cherry looked at Agatha and yelped. “Gretchy a dog—yes, that might explain it.”

“What?” Brenard said.

“Why we can’t find her.”

“Gretchy!” Cherry said. Agatha started barking.

“Oh goodness, no!” Cherry said, hopping. “You’re absolutely awful, really. Poor Gretchy.”

“Our sister,” Agatha said.

“When did she disappear?” Brenard said.

Agatha counted on her fingers, then smiled at Cherry. Her teeth seemed to hang from her gums on invisible threads.

“Forty years!”

“Only forty?” Cherry said. “My dear, that’s a relief.”

“Oh yes, I thought it would be much longer. If we were betting, I would have said sixty.”

“I would have said fifty. Fifty years missing. But there’s hope.”

Agatha shook her hips. Cherry clapped and blew at one of the feathers on her hat.

“Your sister’s been missing forty years?” Brenard said. He looked in their shopping cart and counted one small box, a checker board, and two ponchos. He reached for his wallet. If he handed them money, perhaps he could leave.

“Ah, he’s here for a blessing,” Cherry said, outstretching her hand. Brenard handed her two dollars.

“Doesn’t pay as much as the others do,” she said to Agatha.

“Bless him, Cherry. Quick. I need to potty. I’ve danced too much.”

“Squat inside one of the pipes; the deer do.”

Agatha disappeared into the pipes. Brenard heard her giggle.

Cherry said, “She always tinkles after she’s woken up.”

“I should be heading back.”

“But I haven’t given you my blessing. How do you expect to be protected from *them*?”

“I don’t understand,” Brenard said.

“Poor Gretchy, taken under mysterious circumstances, you know. We were always together, my sisters and me. We grew up not far from here. Dreadful, cursed part of the city. *They* love to come here. Nobody sees them.”

Agatha, still lifting her skirt, walked out of the pipe. “I thought we weren’t supposed to talk about them,” she said.

Cherry put a finger to her lips. “Yes, I forgot. But they stole her.”

“Do you live here?” Agatha asked Brenard.

“I live in the building near the radio tower.”

“You should ask the boy who lives there what happened to Gretchy.”

“Stuart?”

“He sends people to us,” Cherry said. “For blessings.”

“Come, Cherry, it’s late,” Agatha said. Then she turned the shopping cart around and pushed it toward their corner. Cherry slowly stepped backward, never taking her eyes off Brenard. He turned and walked home.

When Brenard arrived at his apartment building, five cars sat in the parking lot. People seemed to visit Stuart at all hours. He walked up to Stuart’s door. Surely the two sisters were nuts. Brenard poised his hand to knock but stepped back when he heard a shriek from inside the apartment. He leaned toward the door. He heard mumblings followed by clapping. He heard people moving. Silhouettes sharpened on the window blinds, and Brenard backed away, then hurried up the stairs toward his apartment. He heard Stuart’s door open and then the click of cigarette lighters. Smoke rose, then disappeared around Brenard, who stood still and dark on his entry mat. He inserted his key into the door lock and eased it until the bolt unlocked. He held his breath until he had

closed the door behind him. Then, turning on the living room light, Brenard exhaled. Tituba squinted.

“A cult,” he said. “No wonder he wanted to watch you. If I’m not careful, you’ll end up on their altar.” Brenard knelt and stroked Tituba’s neck. She purred and arched her neck. He stared at her yellow eyes, which didn’t blink. Brenard looked for some explanation in them, but finally closed his eyes and dismissed the thought.

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For the next month, Brenard tolerated similar shouts and squeals coming from Stuart’s apartment. Several times, he thought he heard his and Tituba’s names being called. On five occasions, Brenard heard Kimberly’s heavy feet walk down the apartment stairs, followed by muffled knocks on Stuart’s door. Then the wailing would begin. Nobody asked Brenard to attend the meetings, so he spent the days sitting, rereading the three old newspapers that had printed an obituary of one of his relatives. He mumbled the words as he read, could almost recite the pages.

One morning, Brenard stepped out of his shower onto the faded linoleum and heard Kimberly’s voice just behind the cracked square mirror above his sink. Her words were muffled, but sounded like, “Is he still in there?”

“Is this one of those trick mirrors?” he said. “Are you watching me from the other side?”

Brenard wiped the condensation from the mirror and was surprised by the reflection of his flushed, smiling face. His tongue found the gap where his right incisor had fallen out a year ago.

“My cat’s been doing some peculiar things,” he said to her through the mirror.

“You should’ve seen it.”

Then his smile faded. *Crazy fool*. He looked down at his jutting collarbone, the gray hairs curling around his nipples. He quickly dressed for his daily walk and stepped outside. Kimberly was heading toward him.

“There you are,” she said. “I almost never see you. We never shook hands.”

Her hair dangled along her sharp jaw-line. Brenard thought her many freckles looked nice against her spotted blouse and turquoise jeans. She held out a pudgy hand. Brenard shook it and watched her stubby fingers wiggle.

“So you like singing in the shower,” she said.

“I don’t think I sing.”

“Well, don’t let the thin walls stop you. It’s cute.”

Brenard followed her until they reached the parking lot.

“What are those meetings Stuart is always having?” Brenard said. “I’ve seen you go down to them.”

Kimberly pulled her keys from her pocket.

“I have so many key chains and hardly any keys,” she said and unlocked her sedan. “Don’t worry yourself. They’re meetings. I moved here to be closer to them.”

“Who said I was worried?” Brenard said.

“I wonder how many cat owners are so curious. It’s ironic.” She giggled and then plopped into her car. She waved goodbye. Brenard nodded and watched her drive away. He scowled. He’d never told Kimberly about Tituba. Had she heard the cat meowing?

Brenard thought about the muted voices he'd heard coming from Stuart's meetings. Stuart *had* mentioned Tituba by name. Brenard hadn't been making it up.

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Later that night, Brenard approached Stuart's apartment. He wasn't wearing shoes, to be sneaky. Cars filled the parking lot. He'd watched Kimberly go down a half-hour ago. In his hands he held a drinking glass to use as a hearing aid against the door. It had worked when he was a child when he wanted to spy on his parents' conversations, which usually revealed nothing but talk about potential layoffs at the oil refinery.

He tiptoed to the door. He leaned his ear against the glass, which he held firmly to the door. He looked at his feet, tried to decipher what was being said. He thought this method had worked better years ago. He wiggled his big toe. It popped every time he moved it. It hadn't always.

He heard running. He turned from the glass and saw a man sprinting across the parking lot.

"They're gone," the man said, and pushed Brenard aside. The man opened Stuart's door and repeated his statement. Brenard set the glass down and stood just outside the apartment. Inside, chairs and floor cushions were arranged in a circle, around which approximately a dozen people sat. Kimberly, who was wearing all black, sat on an ottoman. Her eyes and cheeks were splotched. Stuart stood.

"The sisters are missing," the man said, and rubbed the large bandage on his left forearm.

"You mean those crazy women in the canal?" Brenard said, stepping into the living room. "I ran into them some time ago."

“You shouldn’t have talked to them,” Stuart said to Brenard.

“Did they talk about their sister?” Kimberly said.

“Gretchen was taken,” Stuart said. “The sisters have been gifted with long life; Gretchen was one of the first abductees.”

“Who kidnapped her?” Brenard said.

“I’m going to run to the canal,” Stuart said. “Kimberly, tell your story to Brenard. Maybe he’ll understand. I’ll be back soon.”

As he passed Brenard, Stuart whispered, “Remember when I said I was being cautious?” Then he shut the door behind him. Brenard turned toward the group. Kimberly had closed her eyes.

“I never believed it could happen,” she said, eyes still shut. “Not to me. But they took me while I was sleeping.” She tugged on her cheap beaded necklace. “They touched me.” Then she pushed on her stomach and cried out.

Brenard rubbed his forehead. “I’m a little confused,” he said. “I’m a little old for kinky stories.”

“There’s nothing very kinky about alien abduction,” the man with the arm bandage said.

“I think I have to go,” Brenard said.

“Please, sit,” Kimberly said.

“So this has happened to all of you?” Brenard said. “Aliens?”

The bandaged man opened his hand and revealed a small speck of metal.

“Taken from my arm yesterday,” he said. “Now you tell me how a piece of metal gets in someone’s arm.”

“What does this have to do with my cat?”

“The night before I was taken,” Kimberly said, “I came home and there was a cat sitting in front of my door. I never saw it before; I never saw it again. It was an alien.”

“And now the sisters have been taken,” someone said. “Where’s your cat?”

“Upstairs asleep. You are a bunch of kooks. And here I was thinking there was something interesting going on down here.”

“I saw a bluebird the evening I was taken,” said the woman sitting closest to Kimberly. Brenard opened the front door and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” he said. “but birds aren’t unusual.” Then, without saying goodbye, he returned to his apartment. He heated a microwavable enchilada dinner, and when he sat on his recliner, Tituba jumped on his lap. He stroked her head and tried feeling for any unnatural bump or indication that she was alien. He never noticed how many ridges ran down her skull. His hand jerked when she suddenly tilted her head. Brenard sighed.

He remembered waking one night forty some-odd years ago, afraid of the window in his room. An outside light twisted the shadows of limbs, leaves and metal bars across his bedroom wall; he remembered shutting his eyes, sweating, half hoping that when his eyes reopened he would see the outline of a metal ship hovering like a large white egg beneath the canopy of the trees, riding on a heavy high-tone wind, gazing at the reflection of night, of itself against the glass, and finding comfort in the illusion that there was another just like it staring back.

Brenard rubbed his flushed cheeks and stared at Tituba. “You must’ve been laughing at me these last couple months,” he said to her. “Getting excited over such nonsense.”

Someone knocked on his door. Tituba jumped to the carpet. Brenard answered. Kimberly stood in front of him.

“Is that her?” she said, pointing.

“She’s just a cat.”

“A lot of people don’t think so.”

“That little speech you made earlier. How many times have you given it? I don’t think you were taken.”

Kimberly hadn’t stopped looking at Tituba. “I tell my story when I think someone needs to hear it.”

“You seem like that’s what gets you going.” Brenard glanced away from her. The pace of his breath matched the slight twitch in his pants, an almost burning sensation, one he hadn’t felt for decades.

“Can I come in? Stuart wouldn’t like it if he saw me outside your apartment. He’d see it as betrayal.”

Brenard let her in and shut the door.

Kimberly walked to his recliner. “I can see you’ve set up your little shrine.”

“I was just about to eat,” Brenard said.

“I can tell she’s thinking,” she said, kneeling in front of Tituba. “I won’t lie. I’ve been waiting to meet her.”

“I won’t have my aunt’s cat sacrificed. We’re all that’s left of my family.”

Kimberly laughed and stood.

“What is it you want?” Brenard said.

“Stuart and the others have it wrong. They’re terrified of your cat. They don’t want to go anywhere near it.” She reached and grabbed a belt loop on Brenard’s pants. He tried stepping back, but her firm hold kept him. “I figure anyone close to the cat’s master won’t be taken.”

“Have you been drinking?”

Kimberly releases her grip. Then she walks into his bedroom.

“I thought modern women were a little more elusive,” Brenard said. He heard the closet door shut. He looked at Tituba, who was licking herself. Then he heard Kimberly knocking from behind the closet door. “Come here!” she said. Brenard shivered. His dinner had congealed in the cardboard pan. He took a few bites but couldn’t concentrate. He pressed himself into the recliner, as if he could become it. Finally, Brenard stood and walked to the closet. He opened it. In the dark he could barely make out Kimberly, who was huddled in the back. The shape reminded him of several stacked tires.

He entered and closed the door. The air inside the closet was humid. He grabbed a t-shirt and stuffed the hole Stuart had drilled.

“Sit beside me,” Kimberly said, and he did.

Then he let her guide his hands to her soft neck, her moist breasts. Brenard hesitated, not knowing whether to hold them, pinch them, press his fingers into the folds of her cleavage.

“Why do you want to do this with me?” he said, pulling his hands free.

“It takes a man for me to forget an alien.”

“I don’t believe in aliens,” he said, but his words fell flat. “I don’t think I do, anyway.”

He felt for her face. He kissed her. He unbuttoned his pants. His body surprised him.

After he came, he collapsed onto Kimberly. Her blouse, which she had kept on, smelled tangy. Brenard listened to their breathing.

“You’ve never seen anything supernatural?” she said.

Brenard thought about the recliner, the smell of his aunt—how it seemed to be more than a smell to him.

“Can we do this again some other night?” she said. Brenard wanted to say “yes,” but he was scared that if he did, he’d open the closet to find a changed world, one in which cats abducted people, and ageless women roamed the canals protecting a neighborhood from otherworldly probing. His silence froze the closet.

Brenard heard Kimberly sigh. He couldn’t see anything until she opened the door and even then, only her outline. Tituba whined and ran into the closet. Kimberly stepped out and shut the door, leaving Brenard and his cat alone. He listened for the front door and finally heard her close it.

“You and me until the end,” he said, wondering whether he meant Kimberly or the cat.

## ELEPHANT

I sit next to a large man on the metra line heading just east of downtown. He sucks back the snot in his nose and swallows. He snorts. To keep him from covering me in spittle, I try engaging him in conversation. I say, “This afternoon I watched a bird pick at a cookie the shape of an elephant.”

The man nods and shifts his weight toward me. He clears his throat. “That reminds me of an elephant in India that went on a killing spree,” he says. “Killed, what, 25 people—trampled them to death. It was hunted down last week. You can’t beat living here in America.”

“Zoo animals can escape,” I say. The man picks something off his tongue.

Seven stops later, I step off the train into the weak glow of high-rise condos. I see a flock of geese searching, perhaps, for a resting field, and I blow the chill from my knuckles and stare at the sidewalk, pock-marked with thin, long-dried circles of gum.

“Evening,” I say as a woman passes, and as my focus shifts from her to the street sign ahead, I hear the chaotic clacking of sheets of paper spurting down the next street. At the curb, I look at one of the sheets caught around a wooden telephone pole; printed on the page is a diagram of a kidney. The pages at my feet are diagrams, too, but of different organs—the liver, colon, some mass that looks like the stomach but could be an oversized gallbladder.

Looking down the side street, I see the source of the papers: a torn, black leather satchel, the strap of which is draped over the bloodied face of a man lying against the iron fence of condominium. Standing over the man, a scrawny, bearded fellow waves at me and starts talking, but I can't make out what he's saying.

"Is that man dead?" I say, jogging to them.

"He kills again, and this time some med student," the thin man says. He moves his hands above his head as if caressing invisible horns.

"People call him the Feline," he continues. "He wears a cat mask—has killed almost a dozen people in the city so far. Possibly more. Saw the whole thing from my house across the street. The police will be here soon."

I stare at the dead med student, noticing that the leather satchel is nicely textured, ostrich perhaps.

"That's unfortunate," I finally say, turning around.

"You should wait," the man says, but I wave at him, not completely worried because after all, the suspect isn't an elephant. Those beasts, I've heard, can be viscous killers.

## NORTHING

Kathy spends the morning watering the row of prairie fleabanes and pinching off the dead leaves and shriveled blooms of her indian mallows and brown bitterweeds. Then she sits on her front steps and ties and reties her new running shoes. Dirt cakes the shoelaces, her fingers, her graying curls, the knees of her sweats, which she decides not to replace with cleaner ones on account that the man she's been jogging with never seems to wear anything clean.

"Keeping up the perfect garden?" Donald Koon says after waving from his side of the yard. His thin frame, topped with his gray fishing hat reminds Kathy of a mushroom struggling for sunlight.

"We've been neighbors for twenty years," Kathy says. "There's no need standing over there waiting for an invitation to cross. At our age you could die waiting for permission."

Koon tips his hat to her and walks toward Kathy's front porch stoop.

"Going running with that old loony again?" he says.

"Have you looked in the mirror lately? You're no spring chicken."

Koon cradles a large, white bloom from one of Kathy's *Viburnum opulus* bushes.

"I've always admired these," he says. "The flowers look like snowballs."

"We need some illusion of seasons around here. Living becomes a downright bore. Sometimes I wish I'd wake up to a calamity. My garden destroyed. It'd give me

reason to create a new one. Seems all I do now is maintain. Maintain or die.”

“You should start fishing,” Koon says. A few petals drop to the mulch ground when he lets go of the bloom. “I could teach you.”

Finally, Kathy sees her jogging partner turn the corner onto her street. She always worries he’s in pain. She stares at the man’s strained gait, his familiar attire, at the matted, full-bodied hair in a ponytail.

Kathy sighs. “Donald Koon, what would your wife think inviting me out onto that small boat of yours?”

“Virginia? Why, you know she’s been dead years now.”

“Don’t you think she’s not watching over you with those beady eyes.” She studies Koon’s posture, which still rivals any young man’s, despite his two back surgeries. She can smell need, though. For a decade he’s been after her. Kathy guesses he doesn’t want to spend the rest of his days alone.

“Miss Fite, I don’t know how no man ever caught *you*.”

Kathy stands. “If you don’t mind, I have some running to attend to.” Then she walks to the end of her yard. The grizzled man passes, and Kathy jogs to catch up.

Kathy guesses that the man doesn’t even remember the year he was born. She imagines Crabapple’s residents would agree. If asked when they first remember seeing him jogging down the town’s thirty-six streets, the residents might reply that they couldn’t remember a time when he wasn’t, and they couldn’t remember a time when he was young and his bones were straight and he wasn’t wearing blue, pleated chinos and a

crisp light-brown button-up, tucked in so tightly that one imagines his shirt tail stapled to the inside of his pants.

“Isn’t it a wonderful day?” she says when she is next to him. “I know I’ve asked this before, but is it true what the residents say?”

The man’s cavernous eyes dart.

“They say you are always jogging because if you ever stopped, even for one second, your joints would freeze.”

She doesn’t expect an answer. He’s never answered her questions. Turning the corner onto Chelsea St., Kathy responds to his silence by commenting on the closing of the town theater. Panting, she talks about the passing of a city ordinance banning the tossing of confetti, also the selling of Thad Kaye’s house for \$58,000.

“I see the children mock you,” she says suddenly. “They see you never stopping or talking, and they wonder how you go to the restroom, whether you bathe or sleep.”

The veins in Kathy’s neck throb from jogging. Though she and the man move slowly down the streets of her neighborhood, her shirt clings to her chest and back.

“Not that you should be concerned with what the kids are saying. They’re small-fry.”

The man’s breathing comes heavy, fragmented. Then he swallows and says, “My grandfather caught fish that could have swallowed a child.” Blood rushes Kathy’s cheeks. Her ears register his voice, which is rough, his words, which seem to move slower than his lips, as if she’s hearing the sound of waves after they’ve crashed onto rocks. She and the man turn another corner onto Primrose Ave.

“Some fish can grow quite big, can’t they?” she says.

“As big as a human, or bigger. He would wrestle them fish out of any water. They would have fear in their black eyes. My grandfather conquered them. In their water.”

Kathy feels the sweat collect on the arches of her feet. So many words! One word for every silent year she’s watched him jog.

“Taught me the hooks,” he continues, “the O’Shaughnessy, tone circle, wide gap, central draught, double and treble; taught me how to tie the knots, 5-turn grinner, uni, clinch, blood; taught me to fish, to love the horizon more than you love your mother, to pursue the catch as if there’s an end coming for fish or fisher.”

Kathy stares at the man, his thin, almost non-existent lips, the wandering vein pressing against the leathered skin of his forehead, the pea-sized pock on his cheek. *After years of jogging, how does he talk so easily? He barely strains.*

“But there’s no ocean here,” she says. “Just a lake, and it’s man-made.”

The old man says nothing. They have circled half a dozen blocks and once again turn onto her street. *A sea captain living in a dried-up oil town, and on top of it, he’s a gentleman. Jogging in a circle.*

“Do you remember the first time I called out to you?” she says. “Do you remember my name? I’m Kathryn, but my momma is the only one who ever called me that.”

Again the man’s lips only quiver as he breathes; his eyes barely blink, and when they reach Kathy’s yellow house, his pace doesn’t ease up, his head doesn’t turn. Kathy calls goodbye. She waves until he disappears behind a mover’s van.

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Before Kathy met the sea captain, she didn't know the difference between Albacore and Karasick tuna, couldn't distinguish between coracle and kite fishing, and didn't care about the difference between a seine, a stake, and a drift net. She would have dismissed any mention of sea fishing and talked about how the anigozanthos flower requires protection from snails. Since asking about fishing was the only way to get the sea captain to speak, however, she's learned many facts.

"The fishermen on the banks of the Strait of Gibraltar follow migratory movements of bluefin tuna," the sea captain says one late afternoon.

Kathy readjusts the sweatband on her forehead.

"They wait for the tuna," he continues. "The fishermen cast a series of nets, a maze, an ambush that forces the tuna to the shallows, where they pour into pools of shallow water. Thousands of tuna, swimming against each other. There is nowhere for them to go."

"I had no idea," Kathy says as she kicks a fallen tree branch to the curb.

"'Almadraba.' These men call it 'Almadraba.'"

Kathy nods. He has slowly started guiding her in larger circles. Whereas before they explored only her neighborhood, Kathy and the captain now turn onto Main Street.

"How ponderous," she says. *Poor fishes caught in pools. Fishes piling upon fishes.*

"My grandfather once told me a story about a man who had been fishing off the coast of Spain before he was thrown off his boat by a hundred-pound barracuda," the captain says as they pass bricked, downtown storefronts. "The man floated in the ocean for two days, drinking only fog. One night he heard a sound like a flock of birds flapping

in water, but a line of the tuna, a mile-long swept the man into its current. For two more nights, the tuna swam without stopping until finally they hit the Strait. The Almadraba waited. The nets guided the fish and the man toward shore. At first the man thought he was saved. He blessed the fish, but when they entered the pools, so did the man, and he died there. The man couldn't move, couldn't breathe, and the tuna—their fins and tails—beat him down until he slowly sank beneath them. A thousand pounds of tuna.”

Kathy coughs as she dodges the dinner crowd exiting Mr. Treat's.

“I hope you are making that up,” she says.

The captain continues jogging down the sidewalk. As Kathy passes another store, she glances in the window and sees a small group of children gawking. One boy's hands and mouth press against the glass.

“Does it hurt?” Kathy says, catching up to the captain. “The way you jog—are you in pain? Why can't we stop here?” Kathy waves her hands toward the Tearoom. “Have some tea, and you can rest your legs.”

The two continue down Main before turning onto Hillcrest, where, under the deepening shade of a row of maples, shadows and patches of dying light fall on the captain's face and tan shirt. She imagines how the shadows look as they pass across her face, darkening, then highlighting the new lipstick. She imagines the captain as a marlin cutting the sea, independent, unlike Koon, who's dependent on the catch. Perhaps Kathy is a marlin, too, and with the captain they'll find a current to Panama or Tahiti. *Two fish*, she thinks, *in a town of cattle and dust*.

“I think about your stories,” she finally says. “I sometimes feel as if I'm losing myself in them.”

She hears the sound of air siphoning into the sea captain's mouth. She continues.

"I find myself staring at a glass of water and wondering if that glass were an ocean, what kind of creatures would you say lived there."

Kathy's heart beats heavily. At the end of the street, the neighborhood ends.

Kathy and the captain turn left toward the oil refinery plant, which glows in the darkening sky. He has never taken her this far, but Kathy has driven down this street and knows it only leads further out of town. There are no more side streets that will loop them back.

"Do we turn around?" she says as they pass a sharply lit gas station. "It'll be night soon."

Heavy rock music plays through the station's outside speakers. The sea captain points toward the refinery. "The lights, like jellyfish hanging on a beached whale."

Kathy stares at the white and red blinking lights, imagines a whale's last breath. The smoke curling from its stacks bends the night sky, reminding Kathy of black calla lilies. Her garden will be dark soon. Still, they jog closer to the refinery. Kathy feels her movements tighten. She coughs; her lips crack a little.

"I can't keep going," she says, slowing down to a stop. The sea captain continues jogging away. Kathy squats on the roadside and regains her breath. Now she can't distinguish the sea captain's legs from the road, as if he has suddenly climbed onto a rowboat, which is taking him closer to that beast he imagines lying on the horizon.

Kathy's thighs suddenly cramp. She moans and rubs out the tightness. She turns toward the music that still plays at the gas station, which, in the morning, is Crabapple's most popular place, given it's the last chance to fill up and buy bait before heading out to Lake Meridith. Only one car—presumably that of the attendant—now sits in the lot. The

cramps in Kathy's thighs throb as she walks past the car and into the store, where Sam Dirkens, a lanky teenager Kathy recognizes from her neighborhood, stands behind the counter and nods to her.

"Evening, Ms. Fite," he says. His skin shines a translucent green under the fluorescents. Kathy looks at her sweat-stained clothes and, embarrassed, quickly buys a bottle of water.

"Are you okay?" Sam says, scanning the bottle. "I didn't see you pull up."

"It's kind of you to ask," Kathy says, pulling four quarters from the change purse she carries in her left sweat-pants pocket. "I was just doing a bit of jogging."

"Be careful, Ms. Fite. There's a lot of kooky people out here at night. Just last week there was a knife fight just outside here. The police had to come and everything. I had to mop blood from the concrete. That's why I keep the lights blaring and the music cranked. I get the spooks, working here."

"I remember reading about that fight in the paper," Kathy says and drinks from her water bottle. She strains to see anything beyond the lighted station, but night has completely smothered the flat Texas plains into submission.

"I'd drive you home, but I have another hour before I can shut this place down. I could call my dad, though."

"It's alright, Samuel. I do thank you for looking out for me."

Then she steps out into the parking lot. The hair on her arms tingle as the darkness morphs into foreboding shapes, into escaped convicts, hungry wolves, deranged truckers. It'll take her an hour to walk back, and Kathy doesn't know how much longer her legs

can last. She hesitates, but then steps in front of a pay phone next to the door. She calls her neighbor.

Donald Koon answers.

“Don’t you start making fun of me, Donald,” she says.

“Get lost in your own flower bed, Kathy?”

“I knew you wouldn’t understand,” she says, but doesn’t hang up. Instead, she tells him her situation.

“Wait there,” he says.

Kathy hangs up and sits on the curb. Where had her sea captain gone? Had he made it to the refinery? Did he continue toward the lake? Maybe she should have pushed herself, been braver.

Minutes pass, and finally Donald’s yellow pick-up turns into the station and parks next to Kathy.

“Always available to rescue maidens,” he says when Kathy steps in.

“Don’t sound so desperate.” Kathy buckles her seat belt. Donald shifts gears and exits the station.

“Were you out running with that man again?”

“That man,” she says, “has stories in his head. At my age, a good story is worth more than looks or people’s opinions.”

“And he left you out here to fend for yourself?”

“I’m a grown woman,” she says and leans her head against the window. “If I could just get him to stop.”

“I don’t think you really want him to stop,” Donald says as they re-enter town.

Kathy slaps her thigh. “Of course I do. You don’t know what I think.”

“We’ve known each other since we were in diapers,” he says.

“Hardly knowing someone.”

Donald stops the truck in front of Kathy’s house.

“What would you do if he ever did stop running?”

“You could have pulled up in your own driveway,” Kathy says. “I’m not so tired that I can’t walk thirty feet.”

Donald smiles, and for the first time since he picked her up, she looks at him. His teeth shine even in the dark. She quickly looks away and opens the door.

“Thank you for fulfilling your neighborly duty,” she says and steps out.

“I don’t consider it a duty,” he says. “I’ll send a bill to your address.”

Kathy shuts the door and walks down the path leading to her front porch. She passes the moonflower vine that has all but consumed one of her oak trees. Its blooms radiate a white glow that has always made Kathy think that somehow the flowers invite it. She caresses several of the petals, softly touching the filaments, as delicate as jellyfish tentacles.

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The next morning, Kathy watches as Lafayette Dirkins, younger cousin of Sam Dirkins, finishes mowing her front lawn. She wipes raw grass blades from her shins and bare feet. She twirls several blades together until they feel like one blade.

Lafayette stops the mower. Kathy reaches for her change purse.

“Only ten dollars this week, Ms. Fite,” Lafayette says, and adjusts his stained baseball cap. “You gave me too much last time.”

“You earned it,” Kathy says, handing Lafayette a twenty.

“My cousin said Mr. Koon had to pick you up from gas station last night.”

Kathy snaps her purse. “I was running and didn’t even notice it was getting dark.”

“You were running with that weird guy, weren’t you?”

Kathy stands and brushes the pleats in her red flower-print dress.

“People must be talking,” she says.

“Ms. Fite, that man doesn’t stop running.”

Kathy turns. Donald Koon walks across her lawn. He’s wearing his black-and-yellow flannel shirt and carries a small ice-chest.

“Is this boy causing you trouble, ma’am?” he says, patting Lafayette’s back. Then Donald opens the ice-chest and picks up a small perch.

“I suppose you would be able to eat that pitiful thing,” she says. “You are rather thin.”

Donald grins and wiggles the fish.

“You can see where the hooks go in,” Lafayette says and points.

“They can’t feel it,” Koon says. “And even if they can, a fish can’t help but want the bait. They’ll follow the hook every time.”

“Until the fish dies,” Kathy says, and then excuses herself. Once inside her house, she can still hear Koon talking as Lafayette presumably pushes the mower to his yard. She runs her fingers along the living room’s blue-striped wallpaper. Then she sits on her sofa and runs her hands along the grey velvet cushion until her fingers tingle. On her

coffee table sits a glass vase of dried bridal veil. Her bridal veil bushes bloom twice a year, and every time Kathy sits beside the bushes and listens to the bees and insects humming.

*A fisher may catch the perch, but a flower lures the insect in more subtle ways.*

She remembers Lafayette's comment. The sea captain doesn't stop running. *I've treated him like an ordinary perch. Have I been the fisher, thinking that by running with him I'll catch him? Flowers hardly move. They attract.*

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Kathy kicks a beach ball to a little girl and mother playing in a yard. The sea captain breathes on. For days after her conversation with Lafayette and Koon, she has recited a plan that would root the sea captain down.

"Have I ever told you that life-jackets used to be filled with sunflower stems?" she says. "Imagine being overboard and relying on bits of compost to keep you floating."

"On the coast of Ireland, sons of fishermen never learn to swim," the sea captain says. "They wear family sweaters so their mothers can identify their bodies if they drown. They think the waters are too rough to learn. They think the water claims those meant to be claimed."

"If they only had lifejackets," Kathy says.

"A true fisherman owns the sea," he says.

Kathy continues with her plan.

"Yesterday I was talking to my friend Donald Koon, who knows the town's lake. He said that the lake level has dropped so much during the drought that mysterious creatures have started revealing themselves, quite forcibly, to the fishermen."

Kathy looks at the captain. “Mysterious creatures have no business in lakes. Mr. Koon said he has received several reports of a giant squid with tentacles like telephone wire. Eyes, the color of hibiscus. Donna Herber even reported spotting a tentacle flopping in a puddle.”

Their pace, along with the captain’s breath, quickens.

“The squid will eat the town’s children if somebody doesn’t catch it,” she says.

Beside them, an air-conditioner clicks on. The sea captain’s eyes, which normally look yellow, seem clearer, though perhaps it is the light.

“It’s said to be most visible during a full moon,” Kathy says. “Like tonight.”

For the remainder of their jog, the sea captain’s musings sound as if his words are trapped beneath water. Kathy strains for meaning, and she thinks about what dress she will wear to the lake, and whether to bring a cheese or meat platter.

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That evening, Kathy drives past the oil refinery. In the passenger seat sits a plate filled with four types of cheese and two types of crackers. Beside it, two wine coolers. The sun has set just low enough to require the car lights. Kathy scans the roadside for him. She pulls into a dirt driveway overlooking the lake. She frowns as she recognizes Koon’s truck nestled between two other vehicles. She opens the car door and feels the day’s last gust of warm wind. When she steps out, the air is still. Sitting on the car hood, she stares at the smooth lake water. Koon and his friends must be night fishing. Her attention turns to the drought-burned prairies on the opposite side, turning the color of charcoal as the sun sets behind the hills. She shivers at the thought of a giant squid lurking in the lake. Then she dismisses the thought, surprised at how easy it was to

believe her own stories. She turns, facing the parking lot entrance. *Maybe I should have bought wine, not wine coolers. Hopefully the sea captain won't blame me for tricking him.* Then Kathy wonders whether the sea captain is afraid. *Are bees afraid of the flower? The sea captain will come.* She will watch as he jogs to the ramp leading to the water. She will wait until he stops at the water's edge. He will see no squid. He will stop, after which she will offer herself and the cheese.

Kathy walks to the darkening shore, where a line of ducks suddenly sound their call.

"I didn't know you liked to fish."

Kathy balls her fists as she turns toward Donald Koon, who emerges from a line of boulders that make up the dam.

"I'm not fishing," Kathy says.

"I just finished casting out by the dam," Koon says and shakes his fishing rod.

"Didn't catch a thing."

She nods, barely paying attention.

"Got a feel for nature after being stranded the other night?"

"Just keep on fishing, Donald Koon," Kathy says, and when she turns, she sees the sea captain limping into the parking lot.

"You're up to something," Koon says and sets down his pole.

Kathy watches the sea captain walk down the boat launch ramp. *He's going to stop.*

"The moon is full, beast!" the sea captain says. Then he stops at the water's edge. Kathy's heartbeat quickens. *He stopped!*

“What beast?” Koon says.

Kathy trots toward the sea captain, who looks like a thin anchor teetering over the side of a boat.

She grabs his arm. “You’ve stopped running.” The sea captain pushes Kathy to the ground. Her breath escapes. She hears Koon calling. She hears water splashing and feels Koon’s hands on her shoulders.

“Are you alright?” he says.

“Save the sea captain,” Kathy says. “He’s jumped in the water.” She sits up. In front of her the sea captain is standing waist deep. His arms flail, disturbing the black waters of Lake Meredith.

“There isn’t a giant squid,” Kathy says. The captain’s gaze suddenly fixes on some location behind Kathy, and he walks up the ramp and past her.

“Where are you going?” she says. Then she imagines he’ll continue through fields of steel oil pumps and dust devils spinning days into nights, where only the sound of cattle will accompany him. He’ll taste the blowing grit, will kick clumps of dried manure until he finds his fatal shore, where the dream he follows will drown him as the tuna drowns the man in the Almadraba.

Koon helps Kathy to stand. His rough hands snag her silky blouse.

“I’ve never seen a woman trying so hard to fish for a man,” Koon says.

“I wasn’t,” Kathy says. “I was a flower attracting bees.”

“A bee lands on a flower because he loves it. And sure, the fish can’t resist the bait, but it fears the hook. That old man is like a catfish that can’t be caught. He wants the bait, but he has no sense for flowers.”

*No sense, Kathy thinks. And I'm to blame. Now, the captain seems far away. Even if the captain circles back, he'll always be far away.*

“You must think I’m insane,” she says as they walk to their vehicles. “I brought a cheese plate.”

“Some fish like cheese bait,” Koon says.

“Take it,” she says, opening her car door.

“You know, Ms. Fite, I have an extra pole in the back of my truck if you’d like to join. But of course, when you’re night fishing, you’d be certain to see some monsters.”

He winks.

“Not tonight, I’m afraid. Ask me again some other day.”

Koon smiles and says goodnight, after which Kathy watches him collect his pole from where he dropped it. Then he walks toward the shore, where Kathy sees him stop to prepare his line.

## SEEDS

In return for fifty cents, the homeless man gave Brenard a plastic grocery bag filled with ten cigarette butts, a receipt, and a match. Sitting next to the man in a damp, narrow alley, Brenard began breaking apart the cigarette butts and piling the stale tobacco remnants on the receipt.

“You can roll yourself a nice one, there,” the homeless man said. “Could have charged you a dollar.”

Brenard nodded, licked his lips.

“Shouldn’t be smacking your lips in the cold night,” the man said. “Just makes them drier.”

Brenard glanced at the man, who was slumped against several black garbage bags. The man appeared to be grinding his teeth; his jaw stretched the skin of his face. His front teeth, yellowed, frayed outwards and rested on his lower lip when he closed his mouth. Air whistled through the gaps as he breathed, and he stared ahead at a dumpster on which Brenard recognized a spray-painted skyline of the city.

“You born and raised here?” the man said.

“Whole life,” Brenard said.

“Whole life takes on new meaning when you get to be as old as we are.”

Striking the match against the wall behind him, Brenard lit the rolled cigarette.

“Seen the prettiest little girl today,” the man said. “Long, black hair, little dress,

and the thing was alone, walking down the sidewalk, stopping every time there was a drain. I thought maybe she lost something, so my brain says, ‘You need to go, Ed, you need to help that girl, Ed, because she’s so pretty and look at the way she bends to look in those drains, Ed.’”

Brenard tapped the quickly burning cigarette. “What did she lose?”

Ed shifted his weight against the trash surrounding him. “That’s what I wanted to know, so I walk up to the girl and ask her, and my brain is talking again, saying this girl is just going to run away, but she turns around and looks at my eyes and says that she’s planting seeds in the drains. Says she was trying to make the city be living, like it wasn’t living, was dead.”

Brenard spit. Then he motioned toward the painted skyline on the dumpster. “Death only takes the living. She makes this city living, and we’re all liable to fall over.”

“That’s what I told her,” Ed said.

Above their heads, an orange light buzzed, and Brenard shivered. He looked at Ed, who was staring down at one of the trash bags, out of which protruded a blue, swollen leg of a girl.

Ed touched the leg, the black, scuffed shoe. “That’s what I told her over and over.”

## THE WAKING PROPHET

When Effie awoke, the morning glare from the lake reflected off several dozen framed pictures on the wall opposite the bed. Effie couldn't remember which ones of her son Chuck she had hung where. She blinked away the white rectangles that lingered in her vision and listened for any indication that Chuck and his new wife Melissa had already stirred. They were staying a few days for Floyd's seventieth birthday.

Reassured that she hadn't overslept, she turned to Floyd, whose mouth gaped like an open oven, as if reminding her to make breakfast. She would prefer to sleep in separate beds, but Floyd would think such a decision typical, given he had spent many years sleeping alone while Effie drank and gambled away Floyd's money and Chuck's childhood. Remembering her failures kept Effie from buying two beds and compelled her to hang as many pictures of Chuck as she could find.

Floyd licked his thin lips. He exhaled. Effie smelled tobacco on his breath and turned away to clear her nostrils. She pushed off her gray comforter and was about to get up, but Floyd coughed and started speaking.

"The coupons," he said. "Forget them."

"I never forget coupons," Effie said and leaned close to his face. His eyes remained closed.

"Are you awake?"

The loose, white strands of hair from Effie's bun tickled her neck. Goosebumps tightened the skin on her arms. She had been married to Floyd for almost forty years, and Effie had never heard him talk in his sleep.

"Why are you spouting off about coupons?" she said.

"She'll give them to you. Poor old farmer died. Dead and nobody to bury him."

Effie held her breath. First coupons and now death. Floyd snorted and opened his eyes.

"You look like you wet the bed," he said, and rubbed his nose.

"You talked in your sleep," Effie said.

"It's my birthday," he said. "I can do what I want."

A faint hiss from the guest toilet signaled the children were awake. Effie struggled with her slippers.

"It was like you were some psychic," she said, and stood. "You talked about somebody dying."

"People die all the time," he said. "I probably dreamed it. You know me. I never remember my dreams."

"The children are awake," Effie said, and then walked down the hall into the kitchen, where Chuck stood scooping coffee into the maker. His brown, tussled hair matched the dark-stained wooden cabinets.

"I'll make it," Effie said, hugging Chuck from behind before pushing him away from the coffee maker. Coffee grinds spilled in a trail across the tan countertop.

"I've got it," he said. "I've made coffee before."

Effie moistened a paper towel and wiped away the grinds.

“Your father has started talking in his sleep,” she said.

“How do you know he hasn’t done that all along? I remember him sleeping on the couch more than in his room.”

“Our room,” Effie said, “but, anyway, a wife just knows.”

“Did he say anything interesting?”

Effie clicked on the coffee maker. The water inside started bubbling.

“He said something about coupons and a farmer dying,” she said. “He was asleep, but his words were clear.”

Melissa walked into the kitchen. She wore pajama pants and one of Chuck’s T-shirts. Her bare feet smacked on the green tile.

“I was just telling my Chuck that a wife knows her husband,” Effie said.

“Sometimes too well,” Melissa said, peeling a banana that she grabbed from atop the kitchen island.

“Those might not be ripe enough yet,” Effie said. “I bought those for pancakes.”

“You never cooked breakfast before,” Chuck said.

“And I’m sorry for that,” Effie said.

“Dating is bliss,” Melissa said, “but when you get married, all the bad habits surface.”

“You’re not smoking again, are you, Chuck?”

Chuck walked to stand behind Melissa. She offered her banana and he bent to take a bite. After he swallowed, he said, “I think I’m going to change my name to Charles.”

Effie opened the refrigerator door, then closed it.

“I thought you liked Chuck.”

“Charles sounds more professional,” Melissa said. “If we want him to do well at his company, then he needs a strong name.”

“Chuck is short for Charles, you know?” Chuck said to Effie.

“A man is strong because of his actions, not his name,” Effie said. Then she turned from her son and turned on a stove burner. She took several eggs from the fridge and emptied their contents into a bowl. She glanced at Melissa, who, Effie thought, could have at least changed clothes before shambling into the kitchen and ruining the mood.

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Floyd came into the kitchen as Effie finished cooking eggs. He wore his blue trousers and red-plaid shirt. He shuffled past Effie and sat at the table nestled in their bright breakfast nook, which overlooked the back yard and the lake. Effie knew he hadn't showered. It would have taken too much effort. She turned off the stove. So many things took too much effort. Her hair, which she used to keep dyed and trimmed, now sat upon her head in a perpetual gray bun.

“Chuck just told me he's changing his name to Charles,” Effie said.

“Good for him,” Floyd said. “I always thought Chuck was a nickname.”

Effie took down four plates and wiped the dust from them.

“I just don't know if I can call him Charles,” she said.

“You birthed him. Call him what you want, but a man should be able to choose his own name.”

“Did you choose yours?” Melissa said, accepting her plate of eggs from Effie.

“Of course I did.”

“He’s lying,” Effie said, pouring her and Floyd’s coffee. After everyone was seated at the table, Melissa peppered her eggs.

“So what was your original name?” Melissa said to Floyd.

“I’m not telling,” he said, opening the morning paper.

“I bet fifty dollars your parents named you Robert,” Effie said, winking.

Chuck glanced at Melissa and then at Floyd, who continued to read. Melissa pursed her lips and looked down.

Effie swallowed a bite. “It’s okay,” she said. “It’s not like I’m going to run off and start betting again. You don’t have to tiptoe around here. Floyd won’t even take me to play BINGO, he’s so nervous.”

“I’m just following the doctor’s advice,” he said. “And you’ve been okay for almost a year, now.”

“And he’s never changed his name,” Effie said.

“John Watkins died yesterday,” Floyd said, folding his newspaper and placing it on the table. Effie looked at him.

“Did you know him?” Chuck said.

“Just some farmer outside of town. Heart failure. The poor man did everything himself. Too stingy to hire help.”

“But you talked about that in your sleep this morning,” Effie said. “You didn’t mention his name, but you talked about him dying. I sat right next to you and you said a farmer died.”

“I probably saw it last night on the news,” Floyd said. “I just turned seventy. I forget most everything now.”

“You told the future,” Melissa said, and laughed.

“Death isn’t funny, dear,” Effie said.

“I told the past,” Floyd said. “The paper said he’d been dead for days. He has no family. If I had told the future, I could have helped the old man.”

“Now you think you can stop death,” Effie said.

“I didn’t say I could stop it, but hell, if I’m a psychic, I can do anything, like eat these eggs before you notice it!” He stuffed his mouth. Small clumps of scrambled eggs dropped onto his plate.

“Now you’re just being vulgar,” Effie said, standing. “I have to go to the grocery store.”

She walked into their bedroom and sat on the bed. She listened to Floyd’s low grumble. Had his voice always been that menacing? And can a person wake up one day with a special power? Maybe Floyd had seen a news story about John’s death last night. There was only one way to test it. She would purposefully leave the coupons today and see if some woman would give her some.

The sun had risen enough so she could see the pictures mounted on the wall. She stood and touched one of Chuck riding his skateboard. She couldn’t remember who had taken the photo. And now he wanted to change his name. She had missed out on so much life. She hardly knew her Chuck, and now she wouldn’t know this new Charles at all.

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Effie grabbed a gallon of milk with the latest expiration date. Then she counted her items and proceeded to the express counter, where she unloaded the groceries and

stood quietly as a young man scanned them. Perhaps Floyd was wrong. He'd said a woman, not a man. Still, she decided to act out a scene.

"I have coupons," she said. She opened her purse and pretended to search. The man waited.

"I never forget my coupons," she said, and then felt someone touch her left elbow. It took her several seconds to recognize the woman's face.

"Jill," Effie said.

"I thought it was you," Jill said, "but I try never to look at people in the supermarket. It makes me nervous."

Jill, a widow, had always lived near Effie and Floyd's ranch. Effie lied and complimented her cheaply dyed brown hair and baby-blue eye shadow. "Your hair and makeup look so nice," she said.

"Don't let me stop you," Jill said. "I'll be late for a tanning session."

Effie closed her purse.

"Couldn't find them?" the cashier said.

Jill interrupted. "I brought the circular with me, but I didn't pick any of the sale items. Use these for her." Then she handed the pages to the cashier, who quickly scanned the appropriate bar codes.

"You didn't have to do that," Effie said, and shivered.

After Effie paid, she waited for Jill, and as they pushed their buggies out of the market, Effie told her about Floyd's prediction.

"The thing is," she said, "I forgot my coupons on purpose. He said a woman would give them to me, and you did."

The two women stopped at Effie's car.

"Maybe it's just nerves," Effie said. "Chuck is staying with us. It's Floyd's seventieth birthday."

"I've always liked your son," Jill said. "I haven't seen him in years."

"He's married now," Effie said.

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That night, after Chuck and Melissa retired to the guest room, Effie cleaned the dinner table and told Floyd about what had happened at the market.

"People bring coupons to a supermarket," he said. "There's nothing scary about that. What's scary is that sugar-free pudding you made."

"Do you think Chuck hated it?"

"I'm seventy. I should be enjoying food. I should be eating lots of chocolate and bacon and steak."

Effie folded her dishrag and walked to the kitchen sink.

"Did I ever make Chuck a birthday cake?" she said.

She felt Floyd's hand on her shoulder.

"Stop trying so hard, Effie."

"You were a different man when I met you." Effie dried her hands on a towel. "I was jealous."

"Paranoid." Floyd walked to the breakfast nook and sat. "You followed me to my poker games. You drank if I drank. It was only when I stopped doing those things that you left me alone, but then you were drinking and betting everything but the damn house."

“I got a little lost.”

“To your credit, the men loved to play with you.”

Effie touched her pickled fingers. “What made you change?” she said. “You haven’t touched a drop or a chip in years. How was it so easy for you?”

“It wasn’t, but I did it for Chuck.”

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The next morning, Effie awakened early but lingered in bed. She needed to know if Floyd would speak again. She nibbled on her fingernails and waited.

Floyd coughed. “Cheating so and so,” he said. “Poor Chuck.”

Effie clenched her fists.

“Is Melissa going to cheat on my boy?”

Floyd mumbled. Effie leaned closer, and when she still couldn’t understand him, she grabbed his shoulders and shook them. Floyd opened his eyes and snapped, “You trying to kill me?”

“Keep going,” she said. “You were talking about Melissa cheating on our Chuck.”

“You’re going nuts on me,” he said.

Effie let go and turned from him. He had been right about the farmer’s death and the coupons. She had to tell Chuck. Maybe these prophecies could help her be a better mother.

She waited to approach him until Melissa started the shower. Chuck was rinsing his mug in the kitchen sink. Effie brushed muffin crumbs from the counter.

“Your father and I think Melissa might be cheating on you,” she said, immediately regretting how blunt she sounded. Chuck turned off the faucet.

“What are you talking about?”

“Your father said—”

“Is this more of Dad’s psychic nonsense?”

“Are you and Melissa really happy? You hardly talk to me about her.”

“People don’t wake up one day and start predicting the future. Don’t use Dad to start a crusade.”

“I’m not,” Effie said, and watched Chuck turn and walk toward his room. Effie rubbed her face. The air seemed to press her; she needed to breathe, so she grabbed a wicker basket from the garage and, in the back yard, tended her tomato garden, ignored for a week. Several tomatoes that had ripened now oozed when she touched them. A warm lake breeze rustled the tomato plants and muffled Melissa’s approach. Effie had seen her enter the yard but had chosen to ignore her.

“I spoke with Chuck,” she said. “This cheating crap—you should be ashamed.”

The noon sun amplified her splotched cheeks. Her wet hair had been pulled into a ponytail.

“I’m afraid there are more ruined tomatoes than ripe ones,” Effie said.

Melissa knelt. “I’ve never cheated on Chuck. I never will.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Because Floyd can tell the future? You upset Chuck. He actually asked me if I’d done anything wrong. We’re practically newlyweds. He shouldn’t have to question my loyalty.”

Effie watched Melissa’s hair blowing to the rhythm of the swaying tomato plants. The color of her eyes and hair mirrored the ruined tomatoes. She was spoiling, too, and

Effie had started it, but Effie had good reason. Floyd's prediction, and he hadn't been wrong yet.

Effie stood and lifted her basket.

"You never liked me," Melissa said. "You think I'm taking Chuck away from you."

Effie left Melissa sitting in the garden and returned to the house. Melissa couldn't understand that Effie had given Chuck away years ago.

Inside, Chuck sat on the kitchen counter.

"I'll make you a sandwich," Effie said. "I have fresh tomatoes."

"I've made my own lunch since I was ten. Don't feel pressured."

"I'm not," she said, and sat, tired.

"We'll probably head out early tomorrow."

Effie cried. She hadn't seen Chuck in months, and even though now she was sober and had stopped gambling, she had still managed to drive him away. She cried for his lost childhood. She cried for the ruined tomatoes, and for Melissa, who still hadn't come inside. Finally, she stopped and wiped her nose on a cloth napkin. Chuck sat quietly on the counter.

"I'm going to see if your father wants a sandwich," she said, but when she walked into the bedroom, Floyd was napping. She sat on the bed.

"Yesterday, I didn't take coupons to the store, and Jill gave some to me."

Effie heard the back door open and close.

"This morning, you said Melissa will cheat on our son, and I took action because that's a mother's job."

The room darkened. The photos of Chuck stared at her.

“And I appreciate your not saying anything about how I just hung those pictures. God knows I’d been meaning to hang them, and, well, I just wanted Chuck to see that I remembered him. But now they’re leaving. I don’t know who or what is talking through you, and I don’t know if it’s helping.”

Floyd shifted and started whispering.

“You’ve always wanted to play those scratch offs,” he said. “You win, too.”

Effie’s stomach tightened. Her hands pressed it.

“You’re asking me to gamble,” she said. “Now you’re just being mean.”

Floyd roused and touched Effie’s knee.

“I’m almost seventy-one,” he said, “but I’m beginning to think I won’t be around that long. What’s Charles doing?”

“How was saying ‘Charles’ so easy for you?” she said, still clutching her stomach. “And you talked again. You told me to play the lottery. You said I’d win.”

“Why would I have said that? I wouldn’t say that.”

Effie stood. “Well, I’m finished listening to your fortunes. More like temptations. If Melissa and Chuck have problems, I can’t be poking in their business.”

Floyd wiped drool from his chin and pulled at his groin. “I have to pee about seventy times a day.”

Effie walked out of the room. Chuck and Melissa were sitting in the breakfast nook, eating sandwiches.

“I’m sorry,” Effie said. “When I think back on all the mistakes I’ve made, most of them are because I’ve thought too much about myself. I shouldn’t have meddled.”

Effie sat across from them. Her fingers played with a stack of cloth napkins at the middle of the table.

“Melissa, I don’t want to cause pain. I’ve caused enough as it is.”

Effie looked at Chuck. “I have to go to the gas station to fuel the car and pick up some items I forgot to buy yesterday. Maybe Melissa could come with me. We could have some girl time. Make amends.”

“She’s upset,” Chuck said. “Plus, don’t talk like she’s not here.”

“No,” Melissa said, looking at Effie. “I’ll go with you.”

Effie reached for her boy’s hands, but he slid them into his lap and stared at his sandwich crusts.

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Later that afternoon, Melissa and Effie walked into the gas station. Neither had mentioned what had transpired. Instead, Melissa seemed overly interested in the 50’s-style café nestled in one corner next to the collectible items. Effie scanned the porcelain horse statues and the Oktoberfest plates while Melissa ordered a milkshake. Effie glanced at the rolls of lottery tickets on the front counter. Then she picked up a glass ashtray. She hadn’t gambled in eleven months, and she whispered this fact, almost to the ashtray, almost as if Floyd were standing next to her.

“These horses are cute,” Melissa said, walking up.

“Yes,” Effie said. “We need to buy some whipped cream.”

“Already got it.” Melissa held up a tub.

“Thank you, dear,” Effie said, and grabbed a few more items. Then they stood in line to check out.

“Would you mind going outside and starting the car? I don’t want the heat to spoil the dairy.”

Melissa had a mouthful of shake, but nodded and left as Effie unloaded the items. She looked at the lottery tickets.

“Nobody won last night,” the clerk said. “Lottery’s up to two million.”

“I’m too old to have use for that sort of money.”

“You seem like the type who has lucky fingers.”

Effie touched her rough fingers to her mouth.

“Not very,” she said, and then scratched the frost from the whipped cream. She picked at the ice caught under her fingernail. Floyd’s words haunted her. If she played today, she would win. The tickets were so small. A dollar bet wouldn’t be so bad. She’d give the winnings to Chuck. It would be small compensation for the lunch money and allowances she’d stolen from him. Winning would also mean Floyd was right about the “cheating so and so,” but Effie was determined not to dwell upon it.

The clerk bagged the groceries.

“One of the dollar tickets,” she said.

“Playing safe?”

“A two-dollar one, then.”

The clerk ripped a ticket from the roll and gave it to her. Effie paid the man and reached in her pocket for a quarter. She stared at the ticket’s aluminum foil. She heard the door open beside her.

“We forgot to get gas.”

Effie turned to Melissa.

“Oh,” Melissa said.

Effie slid her hand over the lottery ticket to hide it, but she had been too slow.

Melissa squinted as if she were trying to understand.

“We can get gas later,” Melissa said, and walked back out.

When Effie raised her hand, the scratch-off stuck to her sweaty fingers.

“I need to hurry,” she said. “The dairy.”

“You don’t have to scratch it off now if you’re too nervous.” the clerk said.

Effie gave the clerk her ticket.

“I can’t do it,” she said. “It’s yours.”

Then Effie watched as the clerk scratched the aluminum foil.

“Did you win?” she said.

“Fifty bucks,” he said. “Are you sure you want me to have it?”

“Enjoy it!” she said and joined Melissa in the car.

“That clerk won fifty dollars playing the lottery,” she said.

“You weren’t the one playing?”

Melissa pulled out of the parking lot.

“No,” Effie said. “I mean, I looked at it, but I didn’t play.”

“That’ll be a good story to tell tonight, then,” she said. “It seems like nobody wins big on scratch-offs.”

Effie looked at Melissa.

“We can’t tell,” she said. “They won’t believe I was just watching. I can’t let them worry.”

“Okay.”

The drive back to Floyd and Effie's ranch was marked only by the wind rattling against the car side. Effie looked in her purse. No, that was absurd. She didn't have the ticket. Then again, now she wouldn't be able to repay Chuck for the years she'd gambled away her son's allowance money.

Melissa pulled into the driveway. Floyd and Chuck were walking around the front yard. They weren't alone. Jill, who had given Effie coupons, trailed the two men. She was wearing a pink shirt and denim overalls. The wind blew her curls. Several caught on a branch like spiderwebs. When Effie stepped from the car, Floyd was pointing to a squirrel.

"Already storing up for winter," Jill said.

Effie waved at Jill and introduced her to Melissa.

"I just knew Charles would find a beautiful woman. There was a time when I could wrestle down a few men." She winked.

The squirrel hopped a few feet.

"It'll be able to smell that nut even in a foot of snow," Jill said.

"Have you been eating silly beans?" Floyd asked Jill. "We never get much snow."

"A fact is a fact," she said. "And even when a squirrel is eating, it never looks at its food." Then Jill crouched and stretched out her arms. "It's looking for the enemy."

"You've always been a laugh," Effie said.

"I'm glad to see Charles. Today I woke up and decided I'd have a little walk, and, I have to tell you I've always thought Charles was more natural-sounding than Chuck."

Effie pointed to her bag of groceries and headed to the kitchen. Would he remember to actually change his name? Would his marriage last? Had he forgiven her?

She hoped Floyd would never prophesize again. Foresight was dangerous, too addicting. As she unloaded the whipped cream tub into the refrigerator, she smiled. She had given the lottery ticket back. She'd stood firm. She'd made progress.

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That night, Floyd turned off the bedroom light and crawled into bed.

“Sure was nice for Jill to come over,” he said. “Maybe you two should be friends.”

“That’s a big commitment,” Effie said. “She’s lonely.”

Floyd rubbed his chest and fell asleep. Effie mentally prepared for Chuck and Melissa to leave the next morning. Chuck had seemed less angry when she and Melissa returned from the store, but he was quiet. She'd even tried joking about how he'd made his own bike and lost his two front teeth when he tried to ride it the first time. “The handlebars came right off!” she'd said. Chuck still didn't smile.

“Old Father tree,” Floyd now said, interrupting Effie's thoughts. She turned to Floyd, whose wrinkles looked deeper by moonlight.

“I won't hear any more of your fortunes,” Effie said. The first—the coupons—she had made come true. The second—the farmer's death—already had been true, not a prophesy. The third, the “cheating so and so,” turned out to be not true, as far as she could tell. What about this fourth?

“The box under Old Father tree,” he said.

“What box?” she said, but stopped herself. “Wait, I don't want to know.”

Floyd started snoring. Effie stared. Old Father was a massive tree that had fallen a year before Effie gave birth to Chuck. It was too heavy to chop into firewood, and

hauling it away was too expensive. Chuck loved it, though. Two of its limbs jutted over the lake's shallows. He and Floyd had nailed climbing boards to the trunk, converting the old tree into a makeshift fort. Had Chuck buried something out there and forgotten? A time capsule, perhaps. The prospect of uncovering a box of old stamps and toys and coins was tempting. It could help her reconstruct some of Chuck's childhood. She would know what items he cared enough about to hide away, and for the first time she would feel as if she were peering into his soul. *I'm a gambling woman*, she thought, *and I'm not passing up buried treasure.*

The next morning, when Effie asked Chuck about the box, he couldn't remember.

"Our middle school made a time capsule," he said. "They dug it up recently, but mold had eaten all our notes."

"But you didn't bury one by Old Father?"

Chuck shut and locked his luggage.

"I lost a lot of toys there, but usually in the lake."

Effie grabbed his hands. Then she looked at Melissa, who was still packing her suitcase.

"I'm an old woman," Effie said. "Humor me."

Chuck went to the garage to get a shovel, and then he, Effie and Melissa walked outside toward Old Father.

"I wonder what you put in the box?" Melissa said.

Old Father stood before them, gray and mossy. The climbing boards looked brittle. Some had fallen, leaving only a dash of rusted nails. Its roots still clung to the earth, which in areas had eroded, creating dark voids whiskered with feeler roots.

“Did Dad say where I buried it?” Chuck said, wedging his shovel in the dirt. Effie felt like they were a team.

“No,” she said, but pointed toward the spot beneath the first climbing board. “Try there.”

The moist soil stuck to the shovelhead as Chuck dug.

“I still smoke,” Chuck said. “I didn’t want you to find out, but I just had to say.”

Effie smiled, disturbed, yet relieved to know he cared enough to hide things from her.

After the first hole uncovered nothing, she pointed to a different spot, then another. “Try there,” she said. The familiar rush that came with betting made her feverish. She threw moss balls, told stories, continued pointing to new spots. Finally, Chuck struck something that sounded hollow.

“Shit,” he said when he uncovered a metal box the size of a shoebox. Duct tape made a ribbon around it.

“This isn’t mine,” he said, looking at Effie.

“Maybe it’s gold,” Melissa said, clapping, then dismissing the notion as a joke.

Effie watched as Chuck tore the tape and opened the lid. Two stacks of yellowed letters lay bundled inside. They were addressed to Floyd, from Jill. Chuck handed the stack to Effie.

“What are they?” Melissa said.

Effie opened the first envelope. She slid out the brittle, lily-print stationary and unfolded the letter. She read the first sentence: *It was nice seeing you again. Poor Effie’s gone on another binge. Until she recovers, I’ll be here for you and Chuck.*

A sharp pain in Effie's hands prompted her to close and replace the letter in the envelope. She handed it back to Chuck and massaged her hands.

"I suppose you considered Jill a second mother," Effie said to Chuck.

"No, but she came to see us a lot."

"We don't know they're love letters," Melissa said.

"Put the letters back," Effie said. "Bury the box."

Chuck nodded. If anyone needed to find the box, it was Floyd. She thought about Floyd's prediction about the "cheating so and so," about how he never said Melissa's name. He wasn't telling the future. Maybe nobody but his own demons spoke through him. Maybe, when one grew old, demons leaked out like juice from rotting tomatoes.

That afternoon, Chuck and Melissa left. That night, Effie cooked French toast, and a silence covered everything like bandages. After dinner, Effie followed Floyd to the back porch, where they sat. In front of them the lake looked dark and empty, a hole or a patch concealing some dark monstrosity sleeping in the depths.

Floyd popped a few sunflower seeds.

"Before you got up this morning, the children and I walked down to Old Father," she began.

But Floyd interrupted her. "Sometimes I get sad when I look at it," he said, and spit a seed shell into a glass cup. "When I helped Chuck build the fort on that tree, I wasn't thinking at all about what it would look like after he was grown and gone. I didn't think about the day the boards would rot and pop off. At the time I didn't know the sight of it would make me sad."

Effie rocked in her chair and reached to pat Floyd's hand. He held it. He'd been the cheating so and so, but he was a decent man.

"Remember our wedding?" he said. "We had the ceremony right there in the backyard."

Effie couldn't remember the last time she had thought about it.

"That memory still makes me happy, though," he said. "You smelled like strawberries dipped in sugar."

Effie looked at Floyd. Sunflower bits clung to his lips. She was glad she hadn't read any more of the letters. He must have had a reason to bury them. Now it was Effie's turn.

"Lick your lips," she said. "That's not sugar."

Then she laughed, disturbing several birds, which flew across the yard as dots until they bled into the lake.

## VITA

Benjamin Engel was born in Amarillo, Texas, on April 4, 1982, the son of Debbie Engel and Michael Engel. After completing his work at New Braunfels Christian Academy, New Braunfels, Texas, in 2000, he entered Baylor University. He received the degree of Bachelor of Liberal Arts, Psychology, in December 2004. During the following years he was employed as an assistant editor for Harcourt Educational Measurement. In August 2006, he entered the Graduate College of Texas State University-San Marcos to earn his MFA in Creative Writing-Fiction. In August 2007, he became a Teaching Assistant (Teacher of Record) for the Department of English. In March 2008, he became managing editor of *Front Porch Journal* ([www.frontporchjournal.com](http://www.frontporchjournal.com)). In August 2008, he became Assistant to the Director of Lower-Division Studies for the Department of English.

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