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My Wife Alone

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The ocean is wide, the ocean is blue, the ocean doesn't scare me anymore. It rolls in, it rolls out. It lifts up and rains down. It feeds itself to us on a belt. It is slick, cold, plentiful, newly dead, pungent as a boot. It has eaten recently; it has lost its head. Its belly is white. It can be hollowed with a spoon.

This morning, Leila cursed. Then she said, "Hey." The belly slitters are supposed to leave the guts intact for those of us further down the slime line, but even the best knife-hand sometimes slips. "Hey," Leila said again. She is a grandmother, five feet even, with a birdlike laugh and an edge to her humor and a face that reddens as she works. "Look at this." She picked into the fish and then waved her knife, the ring at a tilt on its tip.

"Gold?" someone asked. Someone else said, "Better go back in there for the finger."

Say this was Leila's hundredth fish of the day. She wiped the ring on her sleeve, dropped it into her pocket, and cut fish number 101.

We're jovial on the slime line, convivial and efficient. We learn to consider how many fish per hour. We learn many things, because we want to advance out of slime. All it takes is a lack of disgust, good cheer, and a winning way with knife or spoon—that, and an unacknowledged anticipation. While you're still on the slime line, you don't admit that every other place in the plant is better.

The docks, for instance. You can advance to the docks; you can stay in and sort fish, feed them to the guillotine, grade the flesh, or separate the newly frozen; you can stack pallets; if your hands are small enough and your eyes are good, you might merit the egg house; if you are a man, you might drive a forklift someday.

But not everyone advances. I go on sliming. Some days I slit bellies, some days I work with a spoon, some days a little of both—nothing else. I could blame my occupational stalemate on my bad eye, but in truth, the eye saves me. It allows me to split my attention: fish and all else. I wouldn't last otherwise. And lucky for me, the slime line absorbs certain lapses, because there are times I forget the gray and white bodies, let them go by, let them jiggle and slide, until one of the guys says my name a few times and jostles me. I shake my head. They laugh or grumble.

With the guys, I don't talk much. I don't have much to say. But Leila is the heart of the plant, knows all the jobs, goes where she's needed, and so I think of things I might tell her. Such as, *My wife is owned by a mafia of brothers. A marriage license is nothing beside blood.*

I am newly wed. Before the early morning after the night I married Marie, I'd never been on a Greyhound, though all my childhood I'd watched the silver buses rumble twice a day past our shop window. Buses are like semis; their vibrations sound the strings. As a boy, before I knew anything about harps, back when I still hid under the big, wooden desk in the corner and breathed in the sawdust and listened to my father sing and work, I thought that I would drive a bus some day. I thought that Marie would ride with me, that we'd take turns at the wheel as my parents did on the long drives up to Montreal. I don't remember if I explained it to Marie.

I met my wife on the first day of kindergarten. She was sitting on the orange rug with the other children, looking up at our teacher. The teacher put her hand on my head. "You must be Max." I found a seat next to Marie. We were the only two who hadn't brought crayons. The teacher dug through the toy box and found us some. Marie had long, dark pigtails and a blue, soft-looking dress. I loved her. I asked her to marry me. She took a crayon from our unpromising pile and smoked it like a cigarette.

By the time I brought her home to my father's shop, I'd won her consent. It was still fall, still kindergarten, so I'd only loved her a month or two. I had already been to her house, where later I wouldn't be welcome. Her mother gave us the rest of a bag of Oreos and shooed us outside.

My mother served us apples in the apartment. Then she sent us down to the shop. My father took Marie's hand and gave her a tour. He allowed us each a scrap of wood, a bit of sandpaper. Even then, I suppose, he'd stopped paying taxes. His shoulder was hitched forward in the posture I came to associate with his defeats. He took a phone call and then went back to work, forgetting us. I showed Marie the cave under the desk. I told her that all the strings said words when the trucks came by, but I didn't know which words. We slumped back. A truck came by. She said, "Hmm." After the second truck, she interpreted for me.

The morning of my exile, the Greyhound was in Massachusetts before I could open my eyes or listen to anything besides my heartbeat, the air-conditioning, the rush of the road, and the window's dry squeak. I'd forgotten it was June. My eyes ached with the light and all that green.

The guy behind me was telling a girl about boot camp. "No, really, we tried not to give him shit, but he couldn't even stay in there ten seconds. He got three chances, okay? Three. Jesus, he was a mess. You almost felt sorry for him. Second time they ordered him in, he was choking on sobs. He

wouldn't go."

My stomach growled for wedding cake.

We'd held our reception on the top floor of Marie's family's boathouse. Everyone danced. In the planning, I'd worried about the soundness of the structure, but the crowd, in fact, completed the boathouse, and for the first time it seemed a sturdy, good-hearted place. The tide came in. The band took requests. The air was still.

Toward the end of the night, by mistake, I lost track of Marie. Four of her six brothers set down their drinks and rushed me. They smiled and joked as they lifted me and carried me down to the rowboat they'd retrieved from its shelf. Now that I was a member of the family, I'd have to be willing to float a few seconds, *like a baby in a bathtub,* they said though it would never be that way for me. The waterside doors were open. The tide was all in and would stay for a while. Marie's laugh came up out of the water. Her dress hung arms-down, draped over the cement wall.

The floor creaked above us, the band played a tango, and I wondered how we had enough guests left for the dance floor, because as the brothers handled me down to the rowboat, it seemed everyone I knew was bobbing out there in the water. Neighbors, friends, the brothers' ex-wives, some older people, some younger, aunts and uncles, cousins—maybe three dozen bodies were all swimming naked or in their underwear, splashing around,

some of them hanging on inner tubes or Styrofoam rings or boat seat cushions or the rusted ladder rungs that climbed the cement. Marie's dark hair glinted green. I wanted to blow a whistle and order everyone away. I wanted my wife alone.

I wished we were still as we'd been earlier that night, hidden away in the rowboat on its dry shelf. The rowboat, like everything, had been cleaned for the occasion, and the lemony scent made us giggle until we got caught up in kissing instead. I unpinned her hair. We were desperate together. I worked the skirts of her wedding dress up her thighs, but I couldn't stop worrying about the water beneath us and beneath the motorboat's metal lift dock. Marie knew I was worrying. She always did.

The brothers rowed the boat out past the swimmers. My tongue was heavy in my mouth. The brothers said, *It's not that bad. See? Jesus, you act like you're from Kansas. Like you're from the desert*.

They gave me whiskey. Marie paddled out and circled the boat like a seal. Marie's mother leaned out of the window above, waved her arms, and cheered my name. I breathed through my teeth. I nearly cried with fear, with whiskey, with love for Marie and the baby that was just learning to swim inside her. On the bus the next day, I wondered if Marie wanted as many sons as she had brothers. We'd never talked about that.

I imagined her waking on the boathouse floor in her crumpled, dusty

dress, my jacket tucked around her. She'd roll to her side as her brother Buzz came in through the back door. Marie would groan and hide her face in the jacket, because they always send Buzz with bad news. He would sit by her and tell her they'd talked to me—he was sorry—and together we'd decided it was best I go away.

I slumped against the window and cupped my hands over my eyes to shut out the pretty, white houses we were passing. Behind me, in an excited near-silence, the soldier was kissing his seatmate. A dry pain seared its way from the back of my skull out through my left eye and through my hand.

Later, the bus stopped at McDonald's. I sat up. I dug money from my pockets and understood I could no longer see through the left eye. The lid clicked over the eyeball. On the window glass, there were smudges from my knuckles and a burnt spot the size of a bullet hole.

Leila lives in a lime-green house on the main drag, with her grandchild and her husband. White curtains hang in the windows of one bedroom and pink flower curtains in the other. There are duck-and-hunter curtains in the living room, a green and red apple print in the kitchen. Only the bedroom curtains are ever closed. When I walk by, my pace slows. I can envy anything of Leila's—her chunky television, the cross hanging over it, her end tables and the yellow light of her lamps, her plaid recliner, the tire swing in her

yard. I even envy her the granddaughter, a seven-year-old who plants her feet on the porch in the warmer evenings and belts out torch songs, arms tight at her sides, body swaying, unruly, caramel-color hair just keeping up. You can almost see her audience. The girl will leave, like her mother, as soon as she is old enough. Leila knows.

When we were thirteen, Marie started to bleed. When we were fifteen, her bleeding stopped, her belly grew, her spine ached. Her skin felt like bread dough. I thought it might tear as it stretched. At night, I came in through her bedroom window and held her and wondered how her brothers hadn't noticed. She'd said they wouldn't. Toward morning, when she couldn't fall back to sleep, we planned our escape.

I was afraid for her body, and I was afraid because we were young, and I wanted a way out of my fear. I might have told my mother had she lived. Marie didn't worry. She wore loose dresses and her brothers' old shirts and sweaters, squeezed her feet into loafers that had been loose before. Her hair, she pinned back neat. At school, she laughed easily, half-danced down the halls, said *Hi* to me and waved as if I were any boy. Her brothers, she said, suspected nothing. *Fatty*, they were calling her then.

But then one night Marie was gone, and her brothers were waiting. In the book that the fathers have neglected to write for the sons, the first rule

should be: *Never love a virgin with brothers*.

Not that it would stop anyone.

Our first baby is gone in the world, swallowed up, a five-year-old with someone else as family. When Marie came back, she wouldn't talk about it. I worked my way into her life again, into full privileges that her brothers didn't guess at in time.

The new child, I don't suppose I'll see.

For two weeks running, we work overtime. I walk back to the dorm at night, aged and spent, and I smell fish even in my sleep. They are out in the water, in schools, swimming fast into nets. In the morning, the guts smell not only of fish but of summer, that combination of mowed lawns, Pepsi, tar, and gasoline.

Leila sways. I go on scooping—I've got my favorite spoon—but I am tuned to Leila now, so I don't even have to watch her pick something out of the fish.

Marie's hands are long and quick, as intelligent as a harpist's. She paints her nails in seashell colors. If I could go back to our wedding night, I'd dive into the water and twist around her. We'd turn into seals with identical whiskers, identical eyes, flippers, and spines. Her brothers wouldn't tell us

apart.

But I didn't dive in, and I can't go back. I live here, by the other ocean, in the summer light. After work, Leila waits at the employee door.

"Hold out your hand, Max."

She straightens my fingers against hers and presses the ring into my palm. It is a child's ring, gold, set with three ruby chips in the shape of a heart.

"For your daughter," she says. "You understand?"

"Your granddaughter should have it."

"She got the first one. Go on."

"No, Leila. Keep it. It's too much."

"Hold off. It came out of a gut, Max. Every year there's one like you. Every year. I don't always like them, either, get it? You need the help. Tomorrow I'll bring you a ring box. You send it to her."

She hesitates, steps forward to hug me. Then she steps back. "Never mind what anyone says."

I turn the ring over and over on my palm. I imagine the perfect white bones of a child.

And now—nothing. We have no fish, no work, no dark for days. And if I had Leila's ring box, I would send the ring off to Marie, a private note from

me and the ocean.

I wake up cold in the three a.m. near-sunrise and walk to the gas station with my coins.

The phone rings once. Then Danny answers. I fall to my knees. I beg him to bring her to the phone.

"No way," he says. "Sorry, man."

I choke back sobs. Because he married wrong himself once, I held out hope that he might understand. I take up the handset again. A part of me stands back, wondering how many people have seen me, and how soon everyone will know.

Danny says, "Come on now, buddy. Get a grip. You're crazy to call here. Listen, I'll make you a deal. I won't tell anyone. That's the best I can do. I'll say it was a wrong number. Stop crying, man. Man. It doesn't help. You know that. You're being dishonest. You have some responsibility in all this. We explained everything—I was there. You admitted it, remember? I was right there. You said you knew you'd make a lousy father. Look at yourself. Where are you now? Alaska, right? Christ. We're her brothers. We have to look out for her."

He goes on like that. *Pick up,* I think through the phone line toward Marie's bedroom. *Pick up, pick up, pick up*. The automatic voice breaks in. My

time is up.

I can almost hear Danny shake his head. Then the dial tone. My knees are frozen to the ice, but it is still summer, so I shuffle myself free.

Hour after hour I doze and wake and rehearse how I might tell Leila that her daughter and granddaughter were on my bus, just across the aisle, sleeping and eating, chattering and negotiating and playing car bingo all the way from New York to Seattle.

When we arrived, I used the last of the brothers' money to buy a few candy bars and another ticket so I could follow them here.

At fifteen, Marie and I might have hitchhiked. We might have walked out of town, and then Marie would stand close to the road, and I would stand back, and after they'd pulled over for her, I'd step forward. I bought a pocketknife, which I still carry. I was crazy at the thought of what men might try with her. Over time, I'd stolen sixty dollars from my father. If I'd stolen more, and more quickly, maybe we'd have gotten somewhere.

I wanted an apartment over a shop, red curtains, a Christmas tree though it wasn't the season, a Goodwill kitchen table with a metal rim, Marie and our pink baby in a white rocking chair. But I waited too long. I loved to lie curled around her in the warm twin bed, my hands outside her

nightgown, clasped over her belly or cupped on her breasts. Some part of me thought we could go on that way forever. As if her brothers wouldn't find us out, as if her baby wouldn't drop and her water wouldn't break and I'd never fail that child.

And so they surprised me. I climbed in at the dark window. The air smelled of laundry. Her reading lamp clicked on. Tommy and Chip sat side by side on her bed.

Marie was away for half a year, and I grew old.

On the day I'll go to Leila's, I stop drinking at ten, and I shower and shave and wait. A hundred times I decide not to go, and a hundred times I overrule myself.

Leila's husband is the school principal. Even in summer, he has a routine. Around noon, he can be counted on to take their granddaughter out for a drive. At 12:30, I start walking. And then I am at Leila's kitchen table, my hands spread on the vinyl cloth. She is making coffee and thawing cookies in her microwave.

She says, "Do you want to tell me what happened with your girlfriend?"

"She's not my girlfriend anymore. We're married."

Leila skips a beat. "Right. I should have guessed. Most guys like you are. You get married, you're a daddy, and boom. This is where you are instead.

This is the place. I'd love to know what the statistics are up here."

"Daddies are a pretty bad flight risk."

"I'm not saying you don't love your daughter. Understand?"

"I understand."

She is pouring milk from a gallon jug into a tiny pitcher, a white duck with pursed lips. Milk splashes out of the duck's back. "Damn it."

"I get that you don't think I'm totally heartless. Or you wouldn't give me the ring."

"How old?"

"Who? My wife or my baby?"

"Baby."

I lift my hands to accept my forehead. The left eye's tears drop one beat behind the right: splash, pause, splash. They bead on the tablecloth. Leila touches the coffee cup to my arm, sets the duck pitcher at my elbow. "You don't have to answer that, Max." She goes back for the cookies.

"I bet we all cry, the daddies, when you get us to your table."

She thuds into a chair. "Not really. Not all of you."

I could tell her everything. I have the words. But I don't. I neglect to mention the five-year-old I never met or the one in utero that I've already been tricked out of. I don't tell her about Marie or my mother who took the big opt-out or my father who was left alone in his small-time tax fraud.

Everything floats away. I pour milk and eat a cookie.

In the fall, if the fish ever come back, I might send Marie a ticket. The timing will be bad, but Marie expects bad timing from me, and I want to stay. I'd like to see what she would become here. I'd like her to know that I'm an outcast in town and even so, I'll never again be rid of the smell of fish.

A man with one good eye shouldn't brave New York. This is what I tell Leila. Her coffee is the strongest and the sweetest I've had in Alaska. At the center of each of her sugar cookies is a frozen button of dough.

In New York, a half-blind man waiting for a Greyhound had better become invisible. I huddled in one of the plastic chairs and did not look at the pay phones and thought about setting fire to Marie's house and rescuing only Marie and the breakfast-room cockatiels.

I was a knot of anger in a plastic chair locked into communal metal legs. No one else sat. No one looked at me.

The bus came, and I joined the line. We herded our bags forward and held our tickets outside of the ticket envelopes. In front of me, a woman in a baseball cap kissed her man goodbye. And then he turned to hug the daughter, lift her up and hug her again, pat the back of her pink sweatshirt, whisper something to her, set her on her feet and kiss her forehead, tell her

to be good and tell her mother to call from Pittsburgh. He thought they'd have enough time there.

We boarded. The mother ushered the girl into a seat on the door side, two rows back. She stood in the aisle inching their bags into the overhead bins, and the girl began an elaborate ritual of smiling and crying and waving through the tinted, dust-speckled window at that man who must have been her father.

I had hoped for the door side of the bus, too, but I took the place opposite because I preferred those two to scenery. The mother reclined her seat and pulled the bill of the baseball cap over her eyes.

But Leila is fidgeting as I talk. The air smells of coffee boiling down on a warmer plate.

"Wait a second, Max, with your story. First tell me what you think of those rumors."

"If there's a rumor, I wouldn't be the one to hear it."

"You're smart enough. You could guess."

"No."

"They're saying that jewelry in the fish brings bad luck."

"Leila. That was your daughter I was watching, on the bus."

"I know it was. Just because I live up here doesn't mean I'm stupid. They say rings are worse than bracelets or pendants. People don't lose them so

easily. The ones I've talked to believe it. They have examples."

"She's really pretty, your daughter."

"No, she isn't."

"In her way. And it's obvious she loves you. She kept telling the girl Grandma this and Grandma that."

"Emily."

"What? Oh, right, Emily. I like that name. The thing is, I knew by the time we reached Columbus that Emily's mom was going to leave her with Grandma and get out on the next bus."

"Well, don't congratulate yourself. She's not a subtle woman. I knew what would happen a year and a half ago, soon as she took up with that man again."

"She was tired. I don't think you're listening to me."

"Not everyone will, Max. That's one of the things you daddies don't seem to get."

She pours our next round of coffee. The duck pitcher is empty. I say, "To set the record straight, okay? I'm used to hostility. Little jabs. Little jokes. It's like air to me."

"All right, but I'm not hostile. I'm trying to inform you."

"I like the cookies."

"I'm glad you like them."

"They're good. I should've said something earlier."

"No one's got a stopwatch on you."

"So you're telling me you believe all that, about the bad luck? The curse, whatever it is, on the rings? Because otherwise, I'd just as soon keep mine."

She waves a hand over the tabletop. "We aren't seeing any fish."

"My wife has six brothers, Leila. No way I would just run out on her."

"Brothers don't help out much with babies."

"I'm not talking about help. Okay? Her brothers hate me. They've hated me since we were in second grade. We had kindergarten, first grade, half of second grade together, and then the brothers wanted to kill me. They didn't kill me, for some reason. Maybe they were sparing her feelings. So we grew up. Finally, they let me marry her. I almost couldn't believe it, how lucky I was, how everything had changed, and as it turns out, nothing had changed. It was a trick. We didn't have a wedding night. There was a reception, and then they took me out on a little ride and beat me half-unconscious and stuck me on a bus out of town."

She hasn't stopped stirring her coffee. "Well, Max. I guess you belong here."

"You think I'm making it up."

"No, no. I believe you." She studies me. "All right, I believe you. There was an abduction."

"All right."

"But tell the truth a second. I bet once you had a couple of states between you, it didn't seem so bad to be free of that girl."

"I've loved her since about birth. A honeymoon would have been nice."

"You think she accused you of something?"

"Marie wouldn't do that."

Leila is stirring her coffee again, and for a second, I expect the motion to funnel her in until she's gone.

"Marie is blameless," I say. "I guess it's closer to what you said before. Every state we went through, I was a little lighter. Like the sky was opening up over the bus. I'm not saying I loved the Greyhound. It was something else. Your granddaughter felt it, too. Emily did. I could see that. She tugged the rubber band out of her ponytail, shook her head, and her hair kind of floated up."

"While Joanne, on the other hand."

"True. Your daughter got heavier. Mostly she slept."

"Do you have the ring on you?"

I open my mouth to lie, and Leila raises her eyebrows, so I take the ring from my pocket and set it on the table next to the cookie plate.

"Good," Leila says. "All that's left is I have to talk Emily out of hers."

She pushes up her sleeve and looks at her watch, though there's a clock

on the wall, another on the stove, a third on the microwave. She tells me I better go, they're due back. She'll walk out to get me once she has Emily's ring.

I hide my ring under my tongue. Leila pats my arm.

As I walk out of town, the principal's blue Ford comes up the road. I hardly catch sight of the granddaughter—a mild peach color, sleeping. But I have seen her star act on the front porch. Not even Leila could talk her out of a thing.

We are a town marooned in long days of light, bereft of fish. I wait for Leila. I keep the ring in my mouth except when I eat, and I eat nothing but Snickers, six for a dollar at the gas station. They're stale, and they're going quick. Soon the whole town will be on credit. One by one, at any hour, the plant managers drive up the road to the employee dorms, looking for signs of trouble. They circle slowly as if cruising for drugs or girls.

I can drink for hours, letting the ring bob, pressing it down to swallow.

We don't have contracts as slimers. Nor have we been given notice. In the hall, in the bathroom, in front of the vending machines, the guys talk about money and laundry and towns that still have fish.

Once or twice at lunchtime, I stop by Leila's house. I knock at the front door and I knock at the side. No one appears. I can't blame Emily for being

stubborn. My own ring, after all, is a part of me now, another mouth inside my mouth, feeding me the way a bird feeds another bird.

There comes a time when you switch from child to father. I eat three Snickers while I watch that moment approach. I burn a hole in the top army blanket and wake up with a plan, which is mine though it's beyond me. It's beyond, even, my regard for this town. Its urgency lies outside of local circumstance. Because in the end, truth be told, I don't care all that much about fish.

I know what to do. But it's daytime, and it will be daytime into the night hours, so I drink and relieve myself of the burden of sexual tension and take a shower and wait some more.

"Oh, Max," says Marie's mother. Her tone implies love, but she won't let me talk to Marie.

I hang up on her and go inside for a postcard and print my message at the lottery counter.

At night, the bears come closer in the woods, lured by the scent of our garbage. Men who can't sleep put on their boots and go out to hunt. They are accurate here, the hunters, so you don't have to worry about them when you ramble. You just hear gunfire.

But we have so little dark now; the men don't leave their beds when it comes. The stars are as large as my fingertips. The wind picks up as I walk.

Once you know what to do, infinite divisions are possible and must be monitored. All those nights in Marie's bed, I lay and held her as the cells inside her divided, became specialized, massed together into skin and webbed toes and shut eyes. I didn't think about that. I thought about Marie. I imagined us in an apartment over a store—a bait store, a bakery, children's shoes. Someday, she would no longer be pregnant, and I would lift her onto the kitchen table for sex. I imagined pressing my mouth to every surface of her and then pulling her onto me again. I thought up a world for us. Sunlight would come in around the edges of the curtains. But I didn't dare walk through all those divisions of time to get us there.

Some nights, Marie cursed me in whispers and cried because of the pain in her lower back. Aspirin was all we knew that she could take. Two or three times an hour toward the end, she got up and crept to the bathroom. She was so careful I had to strain to hear the whisper of her urine, the faint percussion of the toilet lid touching down. She never flushed until morning. Tommy had the room next to the bathroom. He was divorcing then, and he slept with the weight of the defeated. She didn't wake him, not once.

Yesterday, Leila didn't answer the door. I turned the knob and gave a slow push. I could have walked in. Tonight, the principal's Ford is on its patch

of gravel. A broom and a toboggan are propped up against the side of the house.

The first thing I see inside is a crucifix nightlight glowing at the far end of the hall. Over it, Richard Nixon's face hovers in a wood frame. The clocks on the stove and the microwave blink. I move toward the dead former president. The principal's door is closed, but the girl's door is open. I pause on the threshold. It's not Nixon after all but a lesser man.

Emily's hands are white against the light blanket, and the air around her smells of strawberry candy. She sleeps on her back with her hair fanned on her pillow. I should have brought her a glass of water. Until this moment, I hadn't considered that she would wake. I go to her bedside anyhow, crouch to make myself shorter, and ease my hand under her right hand, which wears the ring.

Her eyes open. Her hand is feverish. I hold my finger to my lips. She turns her head on the pillow. Her hand starts to slip away. I catch it back.

She whispers, "What if I scream?"

"I'll be killed."

"Let go of my hand, then."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"It's a dream. That's one of the rules."

She closes her eyes and opens them. “Let go.”

“I don’t want the whole hand anyhow, Emily.”

Her breaths are audible. “It’s the ring, isn’t it?”

“Yep. It’s the ring.”

“I know. I dreamed about it. I think if you let go, I’ll give it to you.”

I squeeze harder. “Promise?”

“I saw you before.”

“On the bus.”

“No. Crying.”

I let go of Emily’s hand.

She sits up. “I was looking out the window. You fell down, and you were crying.”

Her shoulders mimic my grief, but I doubt she could see the gas station from here. She yanks at the ring.

“Hey. Be a little more careful, Emily. I think you have a fever. That might be why the ring’s stuck.”

She stops tugging.

“I thought we could go for a walk,” I say. “Get some air. It might bring the fever down. Then the ring will slip right off. I’ll be free.” I hold out my hand, but she shakes her head. I tell her, “Don’t.”

“Could I have a glass of water first?”

"No." I check the floor. "Here. Put on your slippers."

She hesitates.

"What's wrong?"

"They said on Oprah don't ever go with them somewhere."

"That's okay. We're not going anywhere. We're just going down by the water, by the plant."

"You want to give my ring back to the fish. Grandma told me."

"Right. See, we're in the same boat here, you and me. I'm the one with the other ring."

I open my mouth, lift my tongue, and hook the ring on my fingertip. I show it to her and set it back in place. She swings her legs out of bed and puts on the slippers. I press my finger to my lips once more, though it seems only a child would wake in this house in the dark. I glide down the hall, and I know the Nixon look-alike and the plastic, lit-up Jesus are staring, and the girl is following me.

This is a world of mouths, I want to tell her. Mouths like Nixon's, inflated and self-righteous, mouths in the ocean, mouths to kiss, mouths frozen in ovals before the guillotine machine, mouths turned upward in the nests, millions of mouths needing to be fed, mouths slack before televisions, behind every door a mouth or two waiting. Teeth are lost in such a world,

and a person can never improve.

But I don't want to frighten her.

We're not walking up the road. We're walking crosswise to it, up the plant's driveway and across the parking lot. There are no cars. I knew there wouldn't be.

"You should never love a man," I tell her. "Believe me."

She elbows me as a part of the conversation.

Emily is puffy in the starlight. She may be retaining water. Her nightgown is orange, not pink—Tang-orange, imitation flannel. I'm glad she took her grandmother's cardigan from the hook. She hugs it around herself now like a coat.

"Ragamuffin," I say. "Roll the sleeves up."

"Are you going to bait them?"

"What?"

"The rings. Are you going to bait the rings? Tie some worms on them or something? Because they'll just sink if you don't. You have to get the fish interested."

"Give me your hand a second."

She stops, turns. I know she's not afraid anymore, but I can't get the ring free. We're up close to the main building. If the plant had a security system, we'd be playing on their television screens.

All they have is a chainlink fence reaching from the side of the building across the elbow-turn of the dock and down into the water. I lift the gate's latch and usher us through. The water is quiet below us, dark and sluggish, sulky without the sun. The shore is all rocks backed up by trees.

"Look." I point at the rocks, and they seem to stir.

"Seals," Emily says. "You shouldn't point. It wakes them up."

I look again without pointing, and they are just rocks. "Give me your hand."

"No."

"Yes. We're beyond that, Emily."

She rolls her eyes and holds out her hand. I palpate the wrist, work across the palm, test the space between the knuckle and the fingerbone. I pinch a little, and none of these places offers much resistance. I tug at the ring.

"Ow," she says.

"Damn. Damn her. She shouldn't have given it to you."

I yank at her whole hand, her arm. Her elbow or her shoulder makes a pop. She jerks away. She's free for a second, for two jogging steps. Then I catch her. I catch Leila's cardigan and draw the girl back. The slippers are sloppy on her feet. I crouch and hug her to me. Her shoulders shake. I think of the man in the bus station sending her off. I hug her tighter, rub her back,

squeeze my legs at her sides until she's still. I smooth her hair. It springs back again.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I tell her. It is what the worst men say. I say it again.

I'm not thinking of Marie. I've hardly thought of her since I wrote her name and address on the postcard, since I bought the stamp. But I hold this girl against me. I close my eyes. It's clear that my best bet is to cut away the whole finger. In a better world, Emily would have chewed it off by now.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I say into her hair that smells like a mitten.

And for the second time in my life, the second time in one day, if I can still count, I know what to do. I let up, reel the girl out a little, and catch her again.

"I've got it," I say. "You listening? Hold the hand up. Up high. Like you're being sworn in. 'I swear to tell the whole truth.'"

She stares and sniffles. I grab her shoulders and shake until she coughs.

I clasp her with my knees and raise my own hands overhead. "Like this. Right? Like in a police show. Up over your head. Don't worry. Nothing to worry about. We'll be okay. This is going to work."

She lifts her hands in the air, and I count to ten. I pause between the numbers to offer encouragement. I release her from my legs. She sways. I hold out my hand. I pinch the ring in my fingers. I say, "Make a wish," and

she closes her eyes, and I step back, and the ring comes free.

I pop the ring in my mouth. “All right. You’re finished. Go.”

She hesitates.

“Go. Emily. Straight back through the parking lot, up the driveway, up the path through the woods. When you get to the road, you’ll see your house. Go.”

“Can’t I throw my ring in?”

“No.”

“That’s what my wish was.”

“No.”

Her hands have disappeared inside Leila’s sleeves. “Hey. Are you going in the water?”

“No.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No. It’s getting light. You have to go home, or they’ll miss you.”

“I remember you from the bus now.”

“I remember you, too.”

“You think the water’s warm because it’s summer, but you only live fifty-three seconds in it.”

“Go home.” I make a bear noise, part growl and part scream. I wave my arms and run at her. She stumbles back a step and holds her ground.

When I turn away, the ocean is all around, oil-black.

"I hate you," the girl says.

"That's a good sign, Em."

This time she shouts it. "I hate you."

I clasp my hands overhead and run. The end of the dock is farther than I thought. Then, at last, I'm sailing out and dropping. There's time for everything: a prayer for mercy, a vision, sunrise, progeny, a curving of my body, and an opposite sickling of same. The water meets me with a full-body slap. The sting fades to nothing in the cold.

I unclasp my hands and thrash, and still, I don't surface. I want to tell Emily. Minnows gather to nibble at my left eye. In my right eye, the whole show plays like a filmstrip.

The lights are coming on in town to meet the sunrise. The girl closes her eyes, and the dock is her grandmother's porch. She is singing. Like any singer, she doesn't know what else to do. Her words stretch through the water and twist in slipknots. I want to tell her about the purity of hatred. She's seven years old, almost eight, and advanced enough to understand. I want to tell her I'm her father, and fathers always fail, and because she is as brave as anyone, the fish will have their rings.

She opens her eyes and pitches her slippers out after me. One, then the other.

She has a good arm. Who would have known?

Her slippers float.

Jessica Roeder was born in Chicago. Her writing has appeared in magazines including *The Threepenny Review*, *Third Coast*, *Quarterly West*, *Narrative*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and *The American Poetry Review*. She was a 2011 McKnight Artist Fellow, and her fiction has earned a Pushcart Prize. She is at home in Duluth, Minnesota, where she teaches a dance class for people with Parkinson's disease. She also teaches writing online for Lighthouse Writers.