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WILD AND DOMESTIC: SHORT STORIES

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1996

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

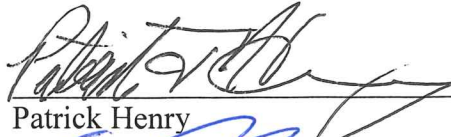
Doctor of Philosophy

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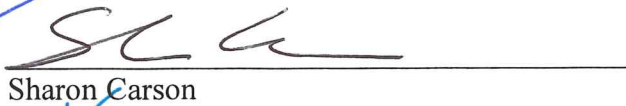
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This dissertation, submitted by Sara Dupree in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.


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This dissertation is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

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Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

Date

PERMISSION

Title Wild and Domestic: Short Stories

Department English

Degree Doctor of Philosophy

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Sara Dupree
July 17, 2018

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ABSTRACT

Wild and Domestic is a collection of short stories set in rural northwestern Minnesota that center around themes of parenting, family, and the desire for stability and security. This desire for domestic harmony often comes into conflict with the characters' strong desire for personal freedom, self-expression, sexual gratification, and a deeper connection to the natural world—desires that are linked to the concept of wild. The collection also invites readers to reflect on its animal characters. In many of the stories, animal characters, both wild and domestic, play a role in setting up the crisis or climax of the story by bringing the characters' competing desires into focus.

In this collection I use minimalist style to explore themes that have often been associated with sentimental writing. The minimalist techniques of bare-bones language and close attention to images allow me to create round, complex humans and animals characters without resorting to sentimental manipulation of the readers' emotional. These characters complicate the domestic-wild binary and invite the reader to reimagine their own relationship with both.

Many of these stories have been published in literary journals and I anticipate its publication as a collection as well. I believe that at this time of rapidly vanishing species and social isolation due to our increased dependence on technology, humans crave a connection with animals more than ever. *Wild and Domestic* exposes multiple reasons behind our need to connect with our animal kin and emphasizes the importance of the connection.

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INTRODUCTION

Many of the characters from *Wild and Domestic* rode shotgun and kept me company on the hour-long drive over the stretch of isolated prairie and farmland when I commuted from Grand Forks, North Dakota to my home town of Thief River Falls, Minnesota to work at my family's small business. This part of the process is vital for me. This is the point where I fall a little bit in love with my characters, both humans and animals—even the ones who make bad decisions, even the ones who have hurt others or would seem to most people to be unlovable—and writing the story becomes an act of deeply empathizing with the particular character—human or animal—in order to understand how his or her specific circumstances have impacted his or her life.

In *Bird by Bird*, poet and fiction writer Anne Lamott discusses how she evokes empathy in order to create character. Lamott believes that one's conscious mind tends to block the feeling of oneness with others. This blocking, she claims, is our conscious mind's method of allowing us to “function efficiently, maneuver in the world, get our taxes done on time” (98). It's only when one quiets this part of the conscious mind that we can pay the kind of attention that allows us to really see others and create an empathic bond with them. I've found Lamott's description of the creative process a helpful starting point in creating characters. Over time I've developed a process to help me build empathy for my characters so that my stories are populated by round, realistic characters with whom readers can form their own connection.

Most of my stories start as a series of questions I ask myself to better understand how a person or animal might behave in a specific set of circumstances. The questions often revolve

around some emotionally difficult event; sometimes it's an event I've experienced in my own life, sometimes it's happened to someone I know and care about, and, occasionally it's an event I've only heard or read about. Some of the questions I've written about in *Wild and Domestic* are: What causes a parent to become estranged from his or her child? How does a first marriage affect a second marriage? How does someone live with the knowledge she caused great physical harm to her child? What happened to that beautiful, intelligent Shepherd-mix dog at the barn who disappeared during coyote hunting season? How does an act of sexual violence change the way a woman relates to men? What happens when only one person in a couple wants children?

Not every question I ask myself leads to a story. Sometimes they just roll around inside my head like tumbleweeds and eventually roll off and away (I like to imagine them snagged on the barbwire fence of some other writer's imagination, someone who can do justice to them). But sometimes those questions lead to deeper, more specific questions: Under what circumstances did the parent leave the child? Where did he go? Did he try to stay in touch? Did the child want to see him? Did the other parent prevent him from seeing the child? What kind of relationship did this parent have with his own parents? These questions begin to lead me away from the situation that sparked my initial question, often in unexpected directions.

These same questions I used to create characters, after several stories, also began to create patterns in my writing which shaped the title of the collection, *Wild and Domestic*. Many of the questions I used to understand my characters center around themes of parenting, family, and the desire for stability and security. This desire for domestic harmony often comes into conflict with the characters' strong desire for personal freedom, self-expression, sexual gratification, and a deeper connection to the natural world—desires that are often linked to the concept of wild. I selected "Sanctuary" as the final story of the collection because the ending

scene best illustrates these competing desires. In that scene the main character sits half-inside her husband's car with her legs in the parking lot and notices the heat, the sensation of strength of in her legs, and the smudge of dirt on them as her imagination pans out into the distance. The character's focus on the far distance and her body position, which is poised to run but also inside her husband's car, illustrate the anchor of the domestic and the competing pull of the wild.

The title of the collection is also an invitation to reflect on its animal characters. In many of the stories, animal characters, both wild and domestic, play a role in setting up the crisis or climax of the story by bringing the characters' competing desires into focus. The turtle in both "Lake Independence" and "The Weight of Things Unsaid," the dogs in "Sanctuary" and "Signs," the horse in "Vacancy," and the seagull in "Signs" all play this role. As I revised the stories to develop animals into rounder characters, I also looked for places where I could call into question the assumption that word "domestic" correlates with human characters and "wild" correlates with animal characters. For example, in "Lake Independence" the snapping turtle, who Molly's father warns her is a dangerous wild animal, is, like Molly, dealing with the impact of a broken home. In contrast to Molly's parents' divorce, it the turtle's physical home, his shell, that is broken.

The short story writer Ron Carlson, when asked about the origins of his stories, answers that he "writes from personal experiences whether he's had them or not" (10). He goes on to explain that "[h]aving a feeling for my material means sending myself on each journey, whether I've actually been there or not, and it involves the powerful act of good writing: empathy" (10). Although Carlson is emphasizing the journey aspect, or plot, of a story, he still acknowledges that empathy is a vital part of the process. In saying that each of his stories are written from "personal experience" Carlson is implying that he empathizes with his characters to the point that

the character's experience becomes his own. His develops empathy for his character by placing himself in specific situations on the character's journey. This is similar to my questioning technique because many of the questions I use to understand and build empathy for my characters involve specific situations that will direct the plot of the story. Carlson's process is slightly more focused on plot, whereas I invent details about a character's life and personality before I predict what the character would think and feel in the plot of the story. Whether a writer creates characters by placing them in a difficult situation or by asking them questions about the situation, both rely on empathy.

Empathy: The Key to Characters

When my second set of questions begin to demand answers that can only be provided by an individual, I know I've discovered a character and a story. Before I can begin to write that story, I need to create a deeper a connection with the character. This part of the writing process hinges on me having a bit of solitude to able to listen to characters by creating backstory, the details of a character's life that influence their actions but don't necessarily become part of the story. Because stories all hinge on some type of conflict, I imagine most of my characters in the midst difficult of situations and with an urgent need to tell someone about it.

In *On Moral Fiction* John Gardner contends that this type of connection with one's characters is necessary for fiction to be considered art.

Without will—the artist's conscious determination to take his characters and their problems seriously—no artist can achieve real compassion. And without compassion—without real and deep love for his “subjects” (the people he writes about and, by extension, all human beings)—no artist can summon the will to make true art; he will be

satisfied instead, with clever language or with cynical jokes and too easy, dire solution like those common in contemporary fiction (85).

I agree with Gardner that it is necessary for writers to take their character's problems seriously. The work of writers who have had the most influence on my writing—such as Anton Chekhov, Alice Munroe, and Annie Proulx—certainly all have this in common. However, rather than using compassion, which emphasizes negative emotions and can imply a power imbalance between the one feeling compassion and the one receiving compassion, I believe these writers use empathy to create characters.

Empathy, defined by Suzan Keen as “a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, [that] can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading” (208). Keen explains that empathy happens when we mirror what we expect another to feel in a specific situation and is “other focused” (208). Empathy can lead to altruistic behavior rather than feelings of “personal distress” which lead to avoidance (208). Considering Keen's definition, I believe it is empathy that allows writers to make the shift in perspective necessary to clearly render the specifics of a character and her situation without passing judgment. If a writer fails to withhold judgment on his or her character, it prevents readers from creating their own empathic bond with the character and demotes short fiction to morality tales that simplify rather than complicate and explore lived experience. A writer's empathy for a character is what allows the reader walk in the shoes of an overburdened, sleep-deprived thirteen-year-old servant girl in Chekhov's “Sleepy” and an aged former cattle rancher lost in the Wyoming backcountry as he searches for family ranch where his brother's funeral is being held in Proulx's “The Half-Skinned Steer.” In my own writing empathy allows me to imagine how the character I'm creating would answer the set of questions that trigger each story, moves me to tell

my character's stories, and motivates me to continue revising until I'm satisfied I've gotten the story right.

In addition to empathizing with my human characters, it is also important to me to do the same for my animal characters. Marc Bekoff, a cognitive ethologist whose work focuses on emotions in animals argues that we have ample scientific proof that animals have rich inner lives and that stems back to Charles Darwin's theory of evolutionary continuity, which asserts that "differences among species are differences in degree rather than kind, argue strongly for the presence of animal emotions, empathy, and moral behavior" (xxi). Because scientific evidence indicates humans have underestimated the emotional complexity of animals, Bekoff believes we owe it to animals to take their emotional needs seriously. "Our relationship with other animals is a complex, ambiguous, challenging, and frustrating affair, and," Bekhoff notes, "we must continually reassess how we should interact with our nonhuman kin. Part of the reassessment involves asking difficult questions and making sure our actions match our understandings and beliefs" (xx-xxi).

Workshop Era Fiction: Representing Wild and Domestic

Despite scientific evidence supporting the complexity of animals' psyches, fiction writers have largely ignored the experiences of animal characters. With the rise of the writers workshop in the 1930s, it became common wisdom that animals should be treated as props rather than as characters. One of the canonical workshop texts, E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, is dismissive of the idea that animals can be fully "round" characters. Forster uses Pug, Lady Bertram's dog in *Mansfield Park* as an example of how aspiring writers should use animals in their work "Pug is flat, like most animals in fiction. He is once represented as straying into a

rose-bed in a cardboard kind of way” (73). Although Forster qualifies that only “most” animals in are flat characters, he still fails to provide any guidance for writers who want to create round animal characters. Additionally, he provides ample advice on how to create round human characters, which normalizes the human-animal dichotomy in fiction.

Attempting to portray both humans and animals as round characters with emotional depth has at times been difficult in the workshop setting. In fact, I was once told that if I was going to introduce an animal character, it was usually necessary for him or her to die in the story to avoid sentimentality, one of the biggest taboos in workshop era fiction. While, I am not advocating for writing that is self-indulgent or relies on stereotypes to manipulate the reader’s emotions, it is important to question why empathizing with human characters is encouraged and using an animal as a metaphor is acceptable, while empathizing with animal characters is considered resorting to sentimentality. This double-standard seems to stem from a fear of anthropomorphizing, which is strongly associated with children’s literature, and taboo in most academic fields.

Although the dynamics of the workshop are evolving, many workshops participants (including myself) have been quick to label and writing that focuses on themes of animals and domesticity or writing that deals with strong emotions as sentimental. In my experience this happens as the result of not reading closely enough to discern whether or not the writing is actually self-indulgent or manipulative. At times I attempted to avoid the label of sentimentality by holding my human and animal characters at an arm’s length and keeping some of their stronger emotional reactions to their situation off the page, however, this prevented me from deeply empathizing with them. Ultimately these stories were less successful because they failed to set up the right conditions for the reader to shift perspective and empathize with the

characters. I believe deeply empathizing with characters is so vital to the writing process that it's worth risking sentimentality. When I empathize deeply with my characters, I take their problems seriously. I care about them and want good things for them, and they even become a bit precious to me. If writers fail to achieve this type of connection with their characters, how can we expect the reader to pay enough attention to see the world from the character's point of view?

Because my focus on animals and domesticity and my use of deep empathy to develop characters can lead my writing to risk sentimentality, I temper this risk by writing in a minimalist style. Although critics of minimalist aesthetics such as Madison Smart Bell accuse the style of having "a tendency to ignore or eliminate distinctions among the people it renders," I have found that when combined with a deep sense of empathy, minimalism can be a powerful tool in creating complex human and animal characters.

Minimalism: Seeing Characters Through Objects

Despite my opinion that workshop era fiction needs to move past the aversion to sentimentality, and the adherence to aesthetics which seem stuck in Hemingway's "masculine" style and a limited interpretation of minimalism, I have to acknowledge the strong influence of minimalist style on my work. Ever since I began reading Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver, I've been in awe of their skilled use of what Janet Burroway calls "concrete, significant details" in their work (22). This focus on significant details are one of the major aesthetic features that allow minimalist writers to use scene rather than exposition to depict character's emotions. According to Carver, these specific details are one of the keys to writing powerful short fiction "It's possible in a poem or short story to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window,

a curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring—with immense, even startling power” (1525).

Carver doesn't discuss exactly how he endows these objects with their power, but a glimpse into his work shows us that objects are powerful both because they create sensory images that immerse the reader in the world of the story, and because these images resonate on an emotional level by creating a window into the interior life of the characters.

The ashtray in Carver's story “A Serious Talk” is a particularly rich example of the power of objects. In this story the main character returns to the home of his soon-to-be ex-wife Vera after attempting to burn it down on Christmas to punish her for having an affair. As the main character sits in the kitchen he pays attention to an ashtray that became just another part of the background while he lived in the house: “He studied the butts in it. Some of them were Vera's brand, and some of them weren't. Some were even lavender-colored” (109). The ashtray filled with unfamiliar cigarette butts becomes a powerful image because it is tangible evidence of Vera's affair.

Similar to Carver's ashtray, in my story “Sanctuary” I use the imagery of a defrosting chicken and an empty fast-food bag to illustrate the state of a couple's relationship. The wife, who is the main character in this story, prepares to cook a meal for her husband and her before they leave town for a long weekend but when he arrives at home he throws a fast food bag in the trash and tells her they have to leave right away. The image of the defrosting chicken shows the reader how the wife is attempting to connect with and nurture her relationship with her husband by preparing a meal for both of them before their trip. The crumpled fast food bag shows the reader that her attempt to connect with and nurture the relationship isn't noticed or reciprocated because her husband only got dinner for himself without asking if she wanted or needed dinner.

My images of the fast food bag and defrosting chicken are brief, but Carver, however, opts to use the ashtray image to do more emotional work in the story by having the main character continue to focus on it. “The ashtray was not really an ashtray,” Carver writes. “It was a big dish of stoneware they’d bought from a bearded potter on the mall in Santa Clara. He rinsed it out and dried it. He put it back on the table. And then he ground out his cigarette in it” (110). By specifying that “the ashtray was not really an ashtray,” a move that would likely garner criticism in a contemporary workshop, Carver is both telling us something specific about the object and alerting us that we are moving into a metaphor. In connecting the ashtray to a memory of happier times in the couple’s relationship Carver gives us a glimpse of the main character’s feelings of nostalgia—if not longing—for good times with Vera. And by the way the main character interacts with the ashtray (washing it, putting it back and grinding out his cigarette in it) Carver makes the ashtray even more powerful because it communicates, in the form of an image, that this character wants to wipe clean the evidence of Vera’s affair and reclaim his former place as the only one in her life. This image is further complicated because of the sexual undertones, or subtext, in the image of the bowl and cigarette, and because Carver has his character notice that some of the unfamiliar cigarette butts are lavender, possibly suggesting Vera’s lover is a woman.

In order to “endow” this ashtray with “immense, even startling power,” Carver had to have a deep understanding of the emotional state of his main character and the particulars of this character’s situation. He had to understand how his main character is grappling with the loss of his relationship and tie that emotional state to the ashtray. Without deep empathy for my characters, my deeply held desire to understand their situation, I would be unable to select the right “commonplace object” for them to notice and interact with to create powerful images. In

the stories from *Wild and Domestic* I use this type of imagery to show the reader the objects, sights, and sounds the character notices and reacts to. The reader is already getting this character's thoughts, or at least some of them, but often characters (as real-life humans) will want to avoid painful topics, especially larger, chronic problems and will instead focus on their current situation. In my story *Bird in Hand*, for instance, the first-person narrator observes her aging husband's hands as he drives:

I glanced over at Tom's big hands resting at ten and two on the truck's steering wheel. His hands were what I noticed first about him. I was twelve years old and Tom's family had just moved to town. My big brother Ritchie invited the new kid home for dinner. All I could do was stare at his hands and giggle. My father jokingly offered him a job milking cows. Tom blushed and chuckled, but I thought his hands looked too soft for working--like a retriever puppy's oversized feet. They seemed friendly, but twitchy and not entirely under his control. Now the only thing puppyish is the hair covering them. The hair on his head and everywhere else on his body has gone gray, but the tufts sprouting from wrist to knuckles are still reddish-brown.

Although it is a bit odd to think of a body part in Carver's terms as a "commonplace object," the way she's contemplating her husband's hands on the wheel objectifies his hands. The language I selected for this description was "commonplace but precise" because I wanted the reader to have a clear image of Tom's hands but also because I have developed empathy for the narrator who is observing her husband's hands by selecting commonplace words particular to this character in this exact situation. I made choices about language in hopes that my empathy for this character as a writer will give my readers the chance to see Tom's hands through the eyes of his wife and develop their own empathy for her.

Imagery in fiction becomes even more powerful when we view it in the light of a particular character's life events/backstory. Ewing Campbell describes both the effect of selecting the right details and introducing them to the reader at the right moment in the story, "present[ing] significant details arranged in a way that causes the brain to supply missing information—to extend the lines, so to speak" (17). This combination of imagery and timing Ewing describes is what I use to create subtext in my stories. Subtext makes its way into the stories in my dissertation as a result of the time I spent understanding my characters and building empathy for them and the situations in which they find themselves.

In my story "Lake Independence," written in the close third-person, readers are getting a version of Molly, the main character's thoughts through the narrator. Because readers aren't getting Molly's thoughts directly, I provided a brief bit of backstory in the form of exposition to help the reader "extend the lines":

In January her father had moved out of their house and into an apartment with a woman named Jeanie. Since then Molly was the only one who talked to him much. She'd tried convincing Jason to come on the camping trip, but he decided to go to baseball camp instead.

Now that the reader is aware of Molly's parents' recent separation, the new woman her father is living with, and her brother's refusal to accompany Molly on the trip with her father, the reader will read the scent images differently in the scene where Molly remembers former camping trips when her whole family was together.

Inside the tent smelled like plastic, with the musty smell of the sleeping bags stored in the garage and wood smoke from the campfire, but under those two scents was another smell, the smell of her family — sort of like laundry soap, toast and a little bit of sour milk. The

way all their bodies together in the tent smelled made Molly feel safe even though bears could be outside the tent. When she closed her eyes, she knew her brother and her parents were still there by breathing in the smell.

In scene is the language is definitely commonplace, and because its third-person point of view close to Molly's sensibilities, I opted to use language and syntax that is a bit childlike in order to echo the language a younger child would have used to describe the scene. I used this language and selected the specific details, so the imagery would immerse the reader in the world of the story, and more importantly, provide the reader with a glimpse into Molly's painful situation. In an earlier draft, I structured the story differently; namely, the scene inside the tent came before the paragraph about Molly's parents' breakup. Unlike the reader, I'd already spent time empathizing with Molly as I built her character and understood how this particular camping trip was a radical departure from the previous trips with her whole family. Instead of creating empathy for Molly in her current situation, when the tent scene appeared before the exposition about her parents' breakup, the scene read sentimental because it was simply positive and lacked emotional complexity. However, presenting these details at the right time to allows the reader to extend the lines of the story and read the tent scene as Molly's longing to return to the time prior to her parents' divorce.

This scene is also an example of risking sentimentality in my writing. In this scene I use childlike diction, and nostalgia, two writing techniques that are associated with sentimental writing. The story focuses on the domestic through the lens of a child's experiences, topics and themes that are often used to manipulate the reader's emotions in sentimental writing. In taking these risks I'm opting to rely imagery and on the order in which I present information to create

cues about the subtext of the story, and I am trusting the reader to follow those cues so that they understand the complexity of Molly's situation.

As the story continues to follow Molly and her father on the ride home from camping, they encounter a snapping turtle on the side of the road that had been hit by a car. Her father stops to show her the turtle but orders her not to move it to safety. As Molly and the turtle closely observe each other, Molly, on some deep level, recognizes the similarity of their situations. She empathizes with the turtle's physical pain and desire to return to a safe environment, while her father, who is unwilling or unable to experience the turtle's perspective, sees the turtle only as a danger. Ultimately, Molly disobeys her father by picking the turtle up and throwing it off the road and into its pond. This is another place where I risk sentimentality in this story. The connection between children and animals is a well-established sentimental trope. In this story, however, the power dynamic between Molly and her father set up a situation in which Molly's empathy for the turtle and the action are acts of resistance to her father's control.

Although the turtle can be read as metaphorical, it's also important, (as I will discuss further in the Empathy for Animal Characters section) that it is also a character rather than an object. Both Molly and the turtle operate as both symbolic and round characters. Each has a storyline that mirrors the other in that both characters are dealing with the aftermath of a traumatic experience—for Molly, her parent's divorce, for the turtle its broken shell—and both characters ask the reader to consider how one lives with a broken home. This difference between Carver's bowl-turned-ashtray and the turtle is subtle but important: the turtle's situation has a specific impact on its well-being while the bowl's situation does not.

Research: Building Empathy through Understanding Context

Because empathizing with my characters means understanding the specifics of their situation, it's been necessary for me to research elements of my characters' lives when their experiences, histories, or situations differ from my own. In "The Swing," for example, the question that triggered the story came when my father told me about his best friend from high school who was killed in the Vietnam War, while my father received a college deferment and then, later, a medical deferment. Although my father told me the story fairly matter-of-factly I suspected there were some strong emotions he was avoiding expressing and I was left wondering *how does it feel to know your friend was killed fighting in a war you narrowly avoided?* This question felt especially important when I considered other men of my father's generation who had similar experiences as well as later generations of people impacted by the loss of friends or family in the seemingly endless cycle of wars. When I started trying to generate follow-up questions that would help me find a character to empathize with, I realized that, while I was familiar with the Vietnam-era protests and counter-culture, I needed to learn more about the draft process and the actual war to be able to create relevant questions.

I started my research by casting a wide and shallow net, with Google searches and Wikipedia, but this led me to Youtube videos of Vietnam-era news footage and articles in popular culture magazines. These sources proved extremely helpful in crafting the story's opening scene, when the main character's mother is waving a copy of *Time* magazine in his face. Although this research was satisfying and helped create some empathy for my character, I knew I needed more depth. Reading Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* helped me to imagine the emotional impact of Vietnam war. Although none of my characters were actually involved in fighting the war, O'Brien's work influenced the tone of my story because I imagined the types of

situations O'Brien wrote about were drifting back with returning soldiers and becoming part of the background tapestry of life in the U.S. at that time.

In addition to reading O'Brien's stories I also read and watched several interviews in which he discusses his belief that he has an obligation to "do justice" to the senselessness and savagery of what he'd witnessed during the Vietnam war, as well as to both Vietnamese and American people who were killed in the war and their surviving families. O'Brien's idea of obligation is similar to Gardner's idea of taking one's characters' problems seriously but extends past the obligation to characters and extends into the obligation to selecting the right details to depict one particular moment in history. In the story that I ultimately wrote based on this research, in addition to taking the characters' problems seriously, I used imagery and details to link their problems to the wider political and social moment.

Empathy for Animal Characters

In addition to research as a method to increase my empathy for and understanding of my human characters, I have also conducted research to do the same for animal characters. Often the research takes the form of observing an animal or animals. I've taken a notebook into my horses' pasture to record their interactions, I've crouched in the underbrush watching a painted turtle lay her clutch of eggs, and once I sat in my car in the Wal-Mart parking lot for nearly an hour watching a seagull with one leg. In the attempt to make sense of the things I've observed, I stumbled across the field of cognitive ethology, especially the work of Marc Bekoff.

As I alluded to earlier, the most significant way in which my writing has changed during my Ph. D. coursework and reading for my comprehensive exams is how I represent animal characters in my work. Although I've always been attentive to animals in real life, in some of my

earlier stories, I neglected to empathize with them in the same way I empathized with my human characters. Critical animal theory, particularly the work of Josephine Donovan, has influenced the way in which I consider animal characters in my work and the work of other writers. As Bekoff calls for humans to reassess our relationship with animals in the larger world, in *The Aesthetics of Care: On the Literary Treatment of Animals*, Donovan advocates for us to reassess our relationship with animals in art. She proposes a new aesthetic theory based on the “ethics of care,” branch of feminist ethics, one which places a high value on the emotional significance of a piece of art. Donovan argues that most fiction writers treat animal characters as objects rather than subjects by failing to acknowledge animals are “individuals with stories/biographies of their own, not undifferentiated masses; that they dislike pain; enjoy pleasure; that they want to live and thrive; that in short they have identifiable desires and needs, many of which we human animals share with them” (99). This is precisely the type of “flat” animal characters that Forster holds up as a model for new writers learning the craft. Donovan also argues that for many writers animals only serve as metaphors for the human character’s emotional state; most often the suffering of an animal character represents the suffering of a human character (46). Donovan’s suggested antidote to the objectification of animals in fiction is deceptively simple: emotional attentiveness. She believes “it is this caring, aesthetic attentiveness to the emotional qualia that awakes one’s ethical concern” (86). In many ways Donovan’s assessment of contemporary fiction is correct—even writers who clearly have empathy for their human characters often fail to empathize with their animal characters. And writers who may want to create round animal characters are often discouraged from doing so in writing workshops.

The short story writer and novelist George Saunders is often recognized for his ability to deeply empathize with his human characters. In an interview with Aiden Ryan of the *White*

Review Saunders explains his approach to characterization in a way that echoes Donovan's suggested solution to the objectification of animals in writing: "I guess I believe in the idea that love equals attention and vice versa—so if we pay enough attention to a fictional character, even if he's a total shmuck, the resulting piece of prose will be an act of love (in its highest and best sense) toward him" (Interview with George Saunders). However, in Saunders's short story "Puppy," although he clearly pays close attention to his human characters, he fails to pay attention to the suffering of the title character of the story. Because of this the puppy only serves as a metaphor for the pain experienced by his human characters.

"Puppy" revolves around two main human characters, both mothers who are parenting their children to the best of their limited capabilities. The first mother, Marie, was raised by neglectful, emotionally distant parents, but she is now financially well off and happily married. Marie is bringing her children to the house of the second mother to get a puppy that was advertised. The second mother, Callie, is poor and has a son with some type of unnamed disability that causes him to run away. When Marie arrives to pick up the puppy she sees Callie's son chained to the backyard—the solution Callie devised to keep her son from running across a nearby highway but still allowing him to play outside—which leads her to remember her lonely childhood and angrily refuse to take the puppy. This leads Callie to abandon the puppy in a cornfield to spare her husband the emotional trauma of needing to drown it when he returns home, which portrays the abandonment of the puppy as an act of benevolent self-sacrifice.

Saunders renders the complexities of childhood trauma and poverty that influence each character's decisions leading up to the death of the puppy with great empathy. His prose illuminates areas of common experience for the two women, but also reveals their inability to

communicate, and therefore empathize with each other. In portraying the women as victims of situations beyond their control readers witness the failure of empathy in which the puppy becomes, naturally, collateral damage as well as a metaphor for suffering. The title character, however, doesn't receive Saunders's empathy, or even merit much of his attention. In the entire story Saunders only dedicates two moments to the puppy. The first is a very brief physical description: "It was a nice pup. White, with brown around one eye. Cute" (36). The second is the moment when Callie abandons the puppy in the cornfield: "It was so small it didn't move when she set it down, just sniffed and tumped over" (42). Because of this lack of attention, the puppy feels more like a prop to help the reader understand the desperate situation in which the human characters find themselves than an animal character capable of emotions, with identifiable wants and needs. In other words, an object rather than a subject.

In a story about mothering in difficult circumstances, the puppy's mother is only nominally present in a brief description meant for a moment of comic relief, "the glum mother dog...dragging her rear over the pile of clothing in the corner, in a sitting position, splay-legged, moronic look of pleasure on her face" (37). Saunders not only fails to develop her as a character, but portrays her as, literally, the butt of a joke and certainly not a complex character worthy of the reader's empathy. If Saunders were taking the dog's problems as seriously as he does with the humans in the story, he would have to acknowledge it is highly likely the mother dog was behaving this way was due to an underlying medical issue causing her discomfort or pain. In fact, rather than the lighthearted tone with which Saunders portrays it, the mother dog's behavior illustrates she's as much victim of circumstances that impact her health, well-being and the safety of her child as the human characters. Given the theme of mothering in the story, there is certainly space for Saunders to extend some empathy to the animal characters as mother and

child, especially when the mother dog experiences the loss of her puppy, which would certainly be distressing for her. This lack of empathy for animal characters stems from the same reflexive avoidance of work that might be labeled sentimental and limits much workshop fiction.

In my own writing I aim to create animal characters who are more than just stand-ins or metaphors for human characters. In order to do this I need to attempt to empathize with them in the same way I do with my human characters. It's my goal in this collection to create animal characters whose emotions, needs, and pain resonate with the readers for the animal's own sake rather than only to emphasize the human characters' experience. Ultimately, I want to portray animals in a way that causes readers to empathize with them. In my story "Signs" the main character, Tucker, agrees to take a woman's dog to the vet after woman and dog were involved in an accident. In this scene I portray the black lab as a character with his own emotions, fears and wants. I also allow the human character, Tucker, to pay attention to the black lab he volunteered to help and respond to the dog's emotions.

At the vet's office, Tucker coaxed the panting dog inside the office with bites of cheeseburger leftover from yesterday's lunch. He handed the leash to a stocky tech, but the dog lowered his head and refused to follow her.

"Think he's gonna be okay?" Tucker asked. "His owner-lady thought he had some broken bones." The lab turned toward the sound of Tucker's voice and wagged the tip of his tail. "You won't have to put him down or anything?" Tucker ran his callused fingertips over the groove between the lab's eyes and along the top of his head, awed by the thin layer of skin and smooth fur covering his skull. The dog leaned against Tucker's leg. Tucker could feel the dog's ribs expand and contract with each quick, shallow breath. He took the leash back from the tech and led the dog into the exam room.

Tucker winced as she wrestled the dog up on to the exam table. The dog's toenails scraped along the metal top, searching for a foothold. His gray-flecked muzzle turned towards the wall and tail tucked between his legs.

The vet tech shrugged. "He looks fine to me, but you never can tell with internal injuries and stuff." She scooped petroleum jelly onto the end of a thermometer and grabbed the dog's tail. Tucker squeezed down a dry heave and slid sideways out of the room.

Although Tucker doesn't stay to offer the dog further comfort, this action demonstrates Tucker's tendency to flee when he feels emotionally uncomfortable, which also led to his estrangement from his daughter. His leaving despite his connection to the dog serves to highlight Tucker's character flaw while still portraying the dog as a complex, emotional being—a subject rather than an object.

In order to create a round dog character, I spent time thinking about Gracie, a black lab who lived with my family for nearly fifteen years. I remembered her polite but insistent refusal to enter the vet office, and the fear evident in her tucked tail and crinkled eyebrows when I carried her inside. Because the story is written in second person close to Tucker and the reader sees the dog through Tucker's observations and actions, I needed him to pay attention and respond to the dog's emotions. I accomplished this by having Tucker lure the dog into the vet's office with food rather than physically overpowering him, by Tucker not just dropping the dog off and leaving as planned but coaxing the dog into the exam room, and by wincing when the vet tech lifts the dog onto the exam table. I also made Tucker attend to the dog's emotions by using the sensory details of him consciously petting the dog's head and noticing how he could feel the dog's breathing when he leaned against Tucker's leg.

Writing the scene without these details—as I did in an earlier draft—sped the scene up and demonstrated Tucker’s inclination to leave in stressful situations. However, when the scene is written attentively to both Tucker and the dog, instead of just demonstrating an aspect of Tucker’s personality, it became an interaction between two emotionally complex characters who are both confused and frightened. Although I revised this scene after I had completed all my workshop courses, I suspect that if it had gone through another workshop the participants would have called out the scene for being overly sentimental.

Cautious Optimism: The Power and Limits of Empathy

Even though I believe that empathy is vital in creating human and animal characters, it isn’t a foolproof technique. On occasion I feel that I’m bumping up against the limits of empathy as I strain to make the shift in perspective necessary to really understand how a human or animal character experiences the world. This returns me to another series of questions. How can I *really* know for certain how it feels to be a turtle, a seagull, or even a dog? This usually leads me to research the animal’s behavior, cognition, and emotions. While this research is certainly helpful, as much as I want to be able to empathize with everyone—human and animal—I have to admit there are limits to what empathy can accomplish.

When writing about animals or groups of humans who have been silenced the stakes are especially high because it’s more difficult, or even impossible, for them to correct misrepresentations. It’s even possible for a writer’s attempt at empathy to cause harm to actual humans or animals by spreading misinformation to the reader. What if, for example, in empathizing with a pig I mis-read a gestation crated sow’s learned helplessness and depression for contentment? What if readers of this story who empathize with my pig character now feel

they have a deeper appreciation for factory farming? This could potentially cause harm to real life animals. The same can be said for empathizing with human characters. What if a writer takes too big of a leap and gets it wrong? What if a writer thinks he or she is empathizing but instead is relying on subconscious stereotypes? Obviously, this is even more fraught when writers create characters of a different culture, gender, age, or species than themselves.

In writing about animals there is the danger of projecting one's own emotions, thoughts, and wants onto an animal and mistaking it for empathy. However, there is also a danger in the belief that animals are so fundamentally different from us that they are alien and unknowable. Both types of thinking have caused harm to animals, but the latter has a long history of being used to rationalize humans' decision to inflict pain and suffering on animals. As Marc Bekoff points out, until we have evidence that proves contrary, we do far less harm to animals when we treat them as though they experience an emotional range similar to humans (12). And given the evidence that continues to accrue about the emotional complexity of animals, it seems likely that much writing that was criticized as anthropomorphic might actually be closer to the truth of that animal's experience.

Even given the limits of empathy, it is still the most powerful tool we have to create characters. Because readers and critics will approach a story with their own unique experiences and worldview, ultimately, the most a writer can do is create characters who invite readers to step into their shoes. By using empathy to create characters in fiction we create the potential for people to practice empathizing with characters who are different than themselves and discover moments of commonality.

ADVICE

You should not have been charmed by the run-down farmhouse after your divorce, because January cold from the prairie sod will seep through your wood floor and freeze your feet each night when you check on the sleeping children. Never mind that it's the only place you can afford after the attorney's fees slashed your savings.

You should not stop on the highway when you see a dog the color of a coyote—a lean adolescent cringing in the ditch—even when your children plead, because on a January night she'll steal into the deserted side of your bed and her weight on the blanket will keep you from pacing.

You should not agree to let her stay for a few days because you will have to add dog food to your grocery list, and the time you forget the dog will look at you with eyes full of hope and forgiveness, and you will bundle the exhausted children up and drive the forty-five minutes back to the store on a stretch of highway so deserted it reminds you of the moon.

You should not keep such a dog because she will chase your neighbor's cattle with intense joy that you can only imagine, just to watch them bunch together—to watch them become one thing with vast, steaming sides—except one stray calf.

You should not cruise down that neighbor's long driveway with a plate of brownies and an apology for your uncontrollable dog. When you find him tightening drooping wires of an electric fence you'll see how the pregnant cows risked that muscle clenching jolt for one last nuzzle of last year's calves. When he shrugs and tells you the calves will be gone next month anyway, you'll mutter your apology and drive away with the brownies forgotten on your hood.

You should not own that dog because one Saturday morning you will let her out, just a minute, while you pour a cup of coffee. She'll run grinning, tail-high to your neighbor's corral and he will shoot her. She'll crawl home and hide under your table, panting and bleeding, and leave a stain on the floorboards that, even when you cover it with a rug, you'll never forget.

You should not let your sobs wake the children, because they will crawl under your table and howl with the shot dog.

You should not send your children outside, so you can clear your head and tend to the dog, because they will hike the half-mile to hurl ice chunks and insults at your neighbor's stoic sons.

You should not hope when you hear pat, pat, pat from under the table, because it's not the dog wagging her tail, but blood dripping from her nose.

You should not call the vet, because he'll tell you he only comes on Saturdays for livestock—animals that have value. And because you'll remember the last time you saw him, he was drinking Grain Belts at the VFW with your neighbor.

You should never make a warm spot in your bed for a coyote-dog and marvel at the coarseness of her coat's guard hairs and the soft hairs hidden beneath them, because there is no place, or sympathy, for the domestic masquerading as wild.

THE WEIGHT OF THINGS UNSAID

The turtle was the size of a quarter and nearly weightless in my hand. Its miniature claws raked my palm in a pantomime of swimming. It carried the smell of damp soil into my in-laws' warm kitchen.

“Do you want that one to be yours, Mom?” Katie asked.

I nodded and closed my fingers softly to keep the turtle from swimming out of my hand.

“What are you going to name him?” She plucks my sweater sleeve and snatches her hand back.

The turtle's head, smaller than my pinky, poked out from between my fingers. Its tiny black eyes blinked at the florescent light. He belonged curled in the dark comfort of his egg, not in this bright kitchen.

“Benjamin,” I said without thinking, and then wished I could take it back.

Daniel looked up at me from the kitchen floor where he sat hunched over an orange shoebox. His eyebrows scrunched together when he heard me say the name. I'd picked the scab of our shared wound. Benjamin was our Boy Name for the baby my body refused to carry. “We'll call him Benny,” we'd laughed, as we listed potential names for our potential baby on a napkin and stuffed ourselves at a pizza buffet. Benjamin felt real to me at that moment. I could picture his pink body curled and suspended inside me. But that was almost six months ago.

My insensitivity toward Daniel washed me with guilt. “What kind of mother,” I imagined him wondering, “gives our never-to-be-born son's name to a turtle?” I walked over and put my empty hand on his shoulder. His sweatshirt was chilly from the damp fall air, but he smelled

warm from the work of digging up the turtle eggs. Caged in my hand the turtle paddled harder struggling to escape.

In the box below us, the turtle's five siblings scritch across the smooth cardboard. The sound made me shiver. It reminded me that ice was already forming along the river's edge where we would free the turtles after Katie's educational "encounter with nature" had ended.

"Who wants tea?" Susan, my mother-in-law, called as she filled the teapot, knowing with mother's intuition that I'd hurt her son.

"No thanks," Daniel said. "I'm not thirsty."

She opened the fridge and stepped away from the door hopeful that its contents would trigger a need she was able to meet.

"Can I have hot chocolate?" Katie asked.

Humming a John Denver song, Susan rummaged through the cabinets.

Daniel shrugged to tell me I'd pressed too much weight on him. Hurt, I crossed the kitchen and scooted a chair close to Katie.

"Take your hands out of those sleeve-cages," I told her, but she was fixated on Susan, anticipating the hot chocolate. Katie had recently been diagnosed with Sensory Integration Dysfunction. Her brain processed information from her senses differently from "normal people," her psychologist explained. Her skin was extremely sensitive, and she kept her hands hidden inside her sleeves to avoid the discomfort of touch. Her occupational therapist told me the muscles in her hands would atrophy if she didn't start using them soon. When I dropped her off at kindergarten, she grimaced at the sensation of my arms on her shoulders when I hugged her goodbye.

"Do you want marshmallows?" Susan called, still digging through the cupboard.

Katie nodded vigorously. Food, sweets particularly, seemed more important than affection.

“You have to actually *drink it*,” I told her. “Not eat it from the spoon like soup.”

“I know.” Her attention remained fixed on Susan, like a dog waiting for someone to throw its ball.

I glanced out the window. Outside, on his four-wheeler my father-in-law was returning the shovels to the shed. A few yards away was the pile of dirt where we’d dug up the turtle eggs. We’d marked the spot with a stick tied with neon orange tape when the mother turtle laid her eggs in July. With Katie’s help, we’d counted the days on the calendar and marked the week the eggs would hatch. Today was two weeks past the week we’d marked. We thought raccoons had eaten the eggs, but Daniel and my father-in-law decided to dig them up just in case. Six inches under the cold soil they found the batch of baby turtles escaping their eggs with tiny slow movements.

The neat pile of dirt reminded me of a grave, and of my OB’s promise to call when the “tissue” returned from the lab. He’d tried to discuss “options” with me that day at the hospital. Cremation, perhaps? I remember feeling angry when he’d mentioned burial as an option. I was angry at his implication: that the object my body refused to carry was somehow equal in emotional weight to a life—someone who had been here and been seen, touched and loved. But I was too lost in the haze of medication and guilt to answer.

It had been nearly three months since the D&C. I hadn’t received a call from the doctor. I’d skipped my follow-up appointment without even calling to cancel. Maybe Daniel made arrangements. It would be like him to think I needed shielding from the details. I looked down at the turtle in my hand, trying not to wonder about tissue or location or wasted potential.

And the mother turtle, where was she now? After fattening on minnow and tadpoles in the late summer and early fall, she probably sank downstream and quilted herself in mud at the bottom of the river. Did she wonder where her children were?

It shocks and angers me, those instances when nature is counter-intuitive or illogical. A therapist once told me I have “an especially strong sense of *should*.” It’s just plain wrong that a mother turtle goes through the heat and hardship of laying eggs in the hottest summer, only to have them hatch when the weather turns cold. You *should* lay the eggs in the mud of May, mother turtle, when the soil gives way to your claws much easier than the baked clay of July and your children have a long warm summer ahead after hatching. Mothers *should* nurture no matter what.

And what about the father turtle? If fish can feel paternal, couldn’t reptiles? I fell in love with Daniel the day he told me he kept a tank of convict cichlids in his dorm. He was taking ichthyology and wanted to watch firsthand the male fish carrying their babies around in the safety of their mouths. This is a man destined to be a father, I thought. Even though I didn’t want any more children after Katie, I wanted her to have a good father. He cried when the ultra sound technician admitted she couldn’t find a heartbeat.

Everyone seemed to think of the miscarriage as a death. The OB handed me a stuffed lamb with a halo and wings. Sewn-shut eyes with appliquéd lashes. He recommended a D&C to “get the process over,” then left Daniel and me alone in the tiny exam room. Of course he meant the miscarriage. The process I wanted over—this hazy bubble of not-quite-grief—can’t be fixed by surgery.

In pre-op, Daniel squeezed my hand hard when the nurse started the IV. He looked confused when she asked me if I remembered her. Later he jokingly called her the “Angel of Death.”

“I was your parents’ next-door neighbor when you moved back to town,” the nurse said. “I was there that day in March. I called the police.”

I looked down at the stuffed lamb in my hand and marveled at the serendipity of our small town, where it was this woman’s lot to bear witness to my worst moments. Five years earlier, I was a newly divorced, single mother living in my parents’ basement. Relieved by an early March thaw, I was walking along the river with Baby Katie and my two border collies. The younger dog, in a moment of pure exuberance, jumped into a hole in the ice for a swim. I locked eyes with him a moment before the current sucked him under the ice and away.

The nurse heard me screaming and called the police. I wanted rescue divers in wetsuits but all I got was a young female officer who studied my footprints on the thin river ice and wrote in a notebook.

“Do you have somebody that can stay with you?” she asked me, but her eyes were on Katie who slept in my arms.

I looked away from the hole in the ice to the officer. The metallic taste of grief was sharp against my tongue. When I tried to answer I was met with my own distorted face mirrored in her sunglasses.

“She just moved back, and her parents are out of town,” the nurse answered for me.

Someone called a matronly pastor from the church I belonged to when I was a kid. I watched out the window as the pastor and the police officer spoke to each other in the driveway, heads bobbing sympathetically. The pastor came in without knocking. She made me weak

Lutheran coffee and told me to nurse Katie, who was fussing at my feet. “It will make you both feel better.”

Later, when Katie was sleeping on my lap, the pastor assured me dogs have their own heaven, separate from humans.

Separate, I thought, what kind of cruel joke is that? “I’m leaning toward Buddhism,” I told her.

From the safety of my in-laws kitchen I allowed myself a moment of self-pity. Next to me, Katie slurped hot chocolate and marshmallows from a soup spoon. A brown puddle ringed her mug and soaked her sleeve-covered hands. Like the nurse, she’d been present on both my worst days, and I worried how the events may have scarred her. I’d read stress hormones are passed through mother’s milk. I patted her arm, but she pulled away from my touch. At that moment, I craved the feel of my missing dog’s soft coat. I remembered the times I let him sleep on the bed, how he’d lay his head on the pillow and snore like an old man through his black nose. How simple, loving an animal.

Across the kitchen Daniel cupped a turtle in each hand and looked down at the others remaining in the box. He said something too quiet for me to understand.

I walked over and looked with him. The turtles inside had drawn into their shells. He opened his hands to show me two turtles reaching and kicking across his palms. “It’s body heat,” he said. “If you set them down eventually they crawl up inside their shells and go to sleep. Watch.” He set the one in his left hand in the box. Its motions slowed then stopped. Head and legs retreated leaving only shell, a tiny box of potential.

Daniel wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me close. I leaned into him. What I still hadn't told him was after the D&C I woke in the recovery room dreaming I was trapped under the ice and sobbing for my lost dog. The nurse asked if I was in pain.

"Yes," I lied. While he was signing my release papers in the clinic office, I begged the nurse for a prescription of something strong to help the pain.

"Tylenol and time." She patted my hand.

What I still hadn't told him was the day my dog was swept away I left Katie on the riverbank. I set her by the skinny trees and crawled across the ice on all fours to the hole where Cody disappeared. Reaching down into the river up to my shoulder, I felt the rush of current. It would have been nothing at that moment to slide the rest of the way in. When I glanced back at the bank the nurse was holding Katie in one arm and dialing the phone. They looked smaller and farther away than they really were.

What I still hadn't told him about were the moments when the death of my dog felt sadder to me than the loss of our potential child.

We watched the turtles in our hands still struggling to swim. After a while, Daniel set his in the box with the others. My father-in-law opened the front door and stepped inside. Cold fall air drifted into the kitchen. "If you're bringing them turtles to the river you better do it," he said. "It's getting dark."

Daniel nodded and picked up the box. "Come on, kiddo," he called to Katie. "Time to let these guys go."

My palm was raw from the strokes of the turtle's tiny claws and I knew it would be a relief to set him free. I also knew it was unlikely he'd survive the winter under the ice—he'd

starve or freeze or get eaten. But as long as I held him in my hand and felt him scratching against my palm he was real. I followed Daniel and Katie out into the cold air and down the steep bank to the edge of the river.

SIGNS

When Tucker Greenleaf first saw the heap of black on the shoulder of Highway Fifty-nine, he thought it was a bag of garbage. He looked away into the frantically gesturing stalks of corn in the fields surrounding the road. Damn wind probably blew out of someone's pickup on the way to the dump, he thought. Glancing back to the heap, something about its movement snared his gaze and his foot jerked from the gas pedal.

Coasting closer, he studied the pile through his bug-spattered windshield. It wasn't garbage, but clothes. "Christ," he muttered as a hand extended from the pile thumb up. A girl raised her head and scowled at him with the half of her face that wasn't masked by the hood of her sweatshirt. He stomped on the gas.

His rusty Civic buzzed along towards Steve's Auto Body and Wrecker in Otter Rapids. As a tow truck driver, it was his job to stop for people stranded on the road. But what would he do with her? Take her to work with him? He thought about what Steve would say and stomped down harder on the gas.

He glanced at the girl in his rearview mirror. No, he thought, she was someone else's problem. He squinted in to the drainage ditch to check for ducks. The pintail he was carving was almost complete, but he was bothered by the notion he'd left out an important marking in the wing.

He mashed the heel of his hand against his bruised-feeling eyelids. Sleep had frustrated him lately, like untangling slippery, knotted rope. Last night he'd dreamed Lisa was a little kid again and she'd misbehaved so terribly his only option was to spank her. He raised his hand—it

felt impossibly heavy—and, as he tried to bring it down across her backside, she dissolved into mist. His hand passed through her. The Mist-Lisa looked back over her shoulder, dark curls floating out in every direction, and shot him a mocking grin.

He woke with his head buzzing and spinning and 3:12 am glaring from the clock. He'd gotten up to work on the pintail but fell back asleep resting his head on the table. He jolted awake when he'd nicked his ear with the awl clenched in his fist.

Limping back to the bedroom on knees that grumbled like bad wheel bearings, he found he had less than thirty minutes to make the forty-minute drive from Circle Grove to Steve's in Otter Rapids. His body ached to crawl back in bed. He pulled on a pair of jeans from the floor and walked out of his apartment squeezing a clot of toilet paper to his ear.

At least the pintail was turning out mostly right, he thought, pulling into his parking spot. If he could just sort out that spot with the wing feathers, he might make a pattern for it and sell it to *Wood Carving Magazine*. Felt satisfying to be making things with his hands again. But the thought of hands reminded him of the girl crouching on the side of the road. Her hands were small and white. He kicked a chunk of limestone through the gravel parking lot and launched it into the dusty weeds alongside the shop.

"I think there's something wrong with the clock," he frowned at the smeared red 8:16 am punched on his time sheet.

Steve was leaning over the exposed engine of a Nissan. He squinted up at Tucker and shrugged.

"Anyone call for a wrecker on Fifty-nine this morning? There was this girl sitting there," Tucker asked over the sound of pounding metal.

“Hmmp.” Steve stood up and chunked his wedding ring in a Styrofoam cup with his watch. “You get the spare off that trailer yet?”

“She was hitchhiking. Think I should have picked her up?”

“Nope.”

“No?”

“She was waiting for me. Last night she told me, ‘Baby, I never had it so good before. Let’s run away.’ I said, ‘Sure. Meet me on the highway.’ But you can have her now.” Steve hiked his pants over his belly, “Got what I needed.”

Tucker picked up a tire iron and stalked over to a flatbed trailer. The lug nuts on the wheel had rusted to the screws. Yesterday he and Steve butted heads about how to solve it. Steve was in favor of shearing the screws off and replacing the whole wheel.

“Let’s just try some stuff first,” Tucker argued. He didn’t have anything specific in mind, but the finality of Steve’s solution depressed him. He’d drenched them with spray lubricant before going home last night hoping something would give this morning.

“God, look at you monkeying with that, Tinkler,” Steve said shaking his head.

Tucker seethed at the nickname. He was determined to give an equally galling one to Steve. He’d been weighing his options for weeks, searching for the perfect weakness to spotlight. He’d considered “piggy” because of Steve’s habit of ordering him around with his mouth full, but suspected it wouldn’t deliver the sock in the gut he was aiming for.

Before he could try the lug nuts the phone rang. “Probably the guy that brought in the trailer. You better explain things to him,” Steve said.

Tucker picked up the phone. A hung-over sounding voice gave Tucker an address near Viking Community College and asked if someone could jump start her car. Tucker grabbed the wrecker keys and headed out the door.

On his way back, he wondered if he should check on the hitchhiking girl. What the hell was she doing out there, anyway? She looked to be about Lisa's age—fifteen, maybe. Someone should really try to help her. He glanced at the clock on the wrecker's dash and continued on to the shop.

When he got back, Steve handed him an address scribbled on a Post-It and told him, "This guy's beater needs hauling in for an alternator."

The third call came in twenty minutes before Tucker's lunch break. "Take this one, Tinkler" Steve called, his mouth full of chocolate cupcake.

Tucker backed the wrecker up to a Subaru wagon with a busted front axle blocking the intersection. A tall woman about his age with a bleeding hand stood on the curb arguing with an ambulance driver. "I need a Band Aid, not a doctor," Tucker heard her say.

His stomach went watery looking at her cut. The back of his knees sweated and threatened to buckle. He crunched over chunks of safety glass and squatted down. Bracing himself against the contorted bumper he searched for a secure hold for the tow hook.

"I can't just abandon Earl!" Tucker heard the pitch of hysteria in the woman's voice. "He broke his ribs when he hit the windshield."

He stood stiffly and looked at the black lab sitting behind the steering wheel. The dog looked back at him and thumped his tail against the door.

“No one’s talking about abandoning anybody here,” the baby-faced ambulance driver said patting the air.

Poor kid, Tucker thought, he hasn’t figured out that women are at their toughest when they’re in pain. He remembered Carol’s hard eyes glinting in her tear-bloated face after he’d confessed to sleeping with Maggie. Carol has roared around their apartment throwing things in boxes that she saved because, she said, she knew this day would come. Six-year-old Lisa trailed after her mother glancing at him with wide-open eyes. Her mouth clamped shut. Tucker stamped his foot counting on the jolt of pain in his arthritic knee to erase the images.

Tucker walked over and stood in the street next to the woman and the driver. “I can run your dog by the vet when I bring your car in, ma’am,” he said, looking up at her face. She stood on the curb and towered an easy six inches over him. He looked up at her face and watched the crinkles on her forehead melt.

Leaning over him, she threw her arms around his shoulders.

“My god! Thank you so much!” she shrieked in his ear. Trying to distance his ear from her voice, he turned his face toward her, realizing too late she was swooping in to plant a peck on his cheek. Her lips missed and squished against the tip of his nose. Her breath smelled like coffee. He sniffed and pulled back, waiting until she turned to write down the vet’s address to wipe his nose. The driver grinned and flashed him thumbs up.

At the vet’s office, Tucker coaxed the panting dog inside the office with bites of cheeseburger leftover from yesterday’s lunch. He handed the leash to a stocky tech, but the dog lowered his head and refused to follow her.

“Think he’s gonna be okay?” Tucker asked. “His owner-lady thought he had some broken bones.” The lab turned toward the sound of Tucker’s voice and wagged the tip of his tail. “You won’t have to put him down or anything?” Tucker ran his callused fingertips over the groove between the lab’s eyes to the base of his skull. The dog leaned against Tucker’s leg. Tucker could feel the dog’s ribs moving with each quick, shallow breath. He took the leash back from the tech and led the dog into the exam room.

Tucker winced as she wrestled the dog up on to the exam table. The dog’s toenails scraped along the metal top, searching for a foothold. His gray-flecked muzzle turned towards the wall and tail tucked between his legs.

The vet tech shrugged. “He looks fine to me, but you never can tell with internal injuries and stuff.” She scooped petroleum jelly onto the end of a thermometer and grabbed the dog’s tail. A cat yowled from behind a closed door. Tucker squeezed down a dry heave and slid sideways out of the room.

After dropping the dog off, Tucker had less than fifteen minutes for lunch. He thought about driving out to look for the girl, but there wasn’t enough time. Steve was still pissed off about the stupid OSHA fine. Tucker refused to wear work boots--they made his damn knees sore. Taking a long lunch break might be the final straw.

He drove down the block to Randy’s Diner and ordered a grilled cheese and lemon pie without bothering to flirt with the young new waitress. The hitchhiking girl was still on his mind. As he opened his billfold to pay for his lunch, an old grade-school picture of Lisa fluttered out from behind a stack of ones and landed on the counter.

“What a cutie,” smiled the woman at the till. “She your daughter?”

He nodded and stuffed the photo back in his wallet. How long had it been since he had talked to Lisa, he wondered? Six months? No, closer to a year. And at least two since he'd last seen her. At first, he'd called every day or two and made the five-hour haul to St. Cloud every court-appointed weekend, but hotel, gas and restaurant bills drained his money. Maggie, who he was living with, alternately praised him for being a dedicated father and complained that he was never around.

Driving home one weekend in October, after Lisa pouted because he couldn't afford a motel with a swimming pool, he nodded off and woke to the sight of ditch weeds rushing the car on both sides. He swerved back onto the road shaken, but not hurt and decided it was a warning.

The following week he moved out of Maggie's house. When it was time for the next visit he lied and told Lisa he had a flat tire. He needed time to think.

After a while even his phone calls to Lisa drifted to once a month. He tried to be helpful, quizzing her on her spelling words and giving her softball pointers, but she wasn't interested. She'd gush for a few minutes about the latest horse book she was reading and make up some excuse to get off the phone. When Carol answered she jabbed at him with comments about how they couldn't afford piano lessons. Last time he called someone named Ed answered the phone and assured him that he had the right number, but Lisa was at piano lessons and could she call him back in half an hour? He'd hung up without leaving a message.

The sandwich and pie sat in Tucker's gut like a dull knife. He toyed with the idea of cutting work for the afternoon; he'd swing back by the shop and tell Steve he was sick with the flu. But when he slunk back in ten minutes late, Steve stood by the door jangling his car keys.

"You're on your own til closing time," Steve said. "I got to pick Brittany up at daycare."

The phone didn't ring and Tucker spent the rest of the afternoon puttering with the lug nuts, thinking about the girl and his pintail. He imagined rescuing her and then meeting her again years in the future. She would invite him to her house for Sunday dinner, telling him how he saved her life by picking her up from the side of the road, as her clean-cut husband grilled steaks and two happy blond children played at their feet. He'd show her a carving magazine with a picture of his pintail on the cover and give tiny ponies he'd carved to the children.

He looked at the clock, almost five fifteen. He doubted she would still be there now. The thought both worried him and washed him with relief.

She was leaning on the cement leg of a feed store billboard, smoking. Above her a wide-eyed piglet on the billboard pleaded at Tucker. He pulled over and backed the car along the shoulder. A spray of gravel pinged against his front bumper. The girl stood up straight and flicked out her cigarette but stayed where she was. He leaned over the seat and cracked the passenger door. A gust of wind grabbed the door and flung it open.

"You ok?" he yelled into the wind.

She shrugged.

"Need a ride?" he called.

Squinting into his eyes, she pushed her dyed black hair back from face and nodded. She slopped through the muddy ditch between them. Globbs of mud stuck out from the bottoms of her boots. Tucker tried not to grimace as she plopped down on the seat and swung her legs in without scraping off the mud. She was heavier than he expected; her chest and belly merged into one solid lump inside her black sweatshirt. The smell of cigarette smoke and something vaguely fishy filled his car. Probably the mud, he told himself.

“You have somewhere to go?” he asked.

She shrugged and scratched a scabby pimple on her cheek.

He wanted to tell her to leave it alone; picking at it will leave a scar. Instead, he craned his neck over his shoulder to check for cars, relieved to look away from her.

What now, he wondered, pulling on to the highway. He thought about taking her to his place. She obviously needed a shower and some clean clothes, but the idea of her sitting at his kitchen table surrounded by stacks of *Carving Today*, messing around with his awls and files made him nervous. There’s no place for her to sit, he told himself, and she might think I’m some kind of weirdo.

A slow-moving stock trailer spackled with rust rocked along in the lane ahead of them. As he passed the trailer, he read the faded “RED THUNDER” stenciled in gold. He glanced up to see a massive red-brown head. The bull rolled its eyes and licked its nose with its obscene blue tongue. As they passed the truck’s cab the driver nodded at Tucker, a nod amplified by the wide brim of his dirty cowboy hat. Then, looking at the girl, he tipped the hat back on his head exposing a pale strip of forehead.

Tucker pulled ahead of the truck. He reached down to shift into fifth gear but ground into third instead. The car lurched forward, and Tucker’s arm shot out between the girl and the dashboard.

“Sorry,” he mumbled into the steering wheel. He planted his hand back on the stick and felt his way into fifth, fishing for something to say. “So, were you,” he eyed the ditch, “out there all day?” he asked.

She nodded and tipped her head back against the headrest. Her eyelids lowered halfway, and she focused on something in the distance that Tucker couldn’t see.

They coasted past a sunflower field. The over-ripe heads drooped on their brown stems. A red-winged blackbird darted from the ditch daring Tucker to hit it. He flinched as the bird sailed by inches from his windshield, but his foot stayed steady on the gas.

Tucker's hometown of Circle Grove began hesitantly. Buildings were spaced by weed-infested lots and stitched together by a washboard frontage road. He wondered if the town was familiar to the girl. He gauged her face for hints of comfort or disgust as they passed See's Funeral Home, Tunseth Ford, and the new Wal-Mart, but she wore the same bland expression as when she first stepped into his car. Makes sense, he thought. She didn't look like the girls he'd seen around town.

Tucker turned left on Second Avenue and crossed the bridge over the Cannon River. Downtown was nosy with traffic and people enjoying one of the last warm evenings of summer. A white pickup rumbled around the crowded lot at the VFW searching for a spot. The sign outside announced, "Smelt Fry Tonight." He looked at the sign and realized he was famished. He'd begun to regret his decision to help this sullen girl.

He wished he knew someone whose job was helping runaway kids, but he wasn't even sure she was a runaway. He glanced over at her again. Her eyes were closed now, and her mouth hung open. He chewed the inside of his cheek.

Unable to come up with a better option, he cut a sharp right on to Whitetail Drive, speeding past blocks of tightly spaced ranch houses until he jerked to a stop in front of his mother's weathered house.

"Hey!" he reached over to poke the girl's shoulder but recoiled. "You better wake up now!" The girl's eyes popped open and she gasped.

Scolding himself for his lack of patience, he jumped out and trotted around toward the passenger side. He wanted to open the girl's door for her, wanted her to see how hard he was trying to help, but the toe of his sneaker caught the curb. He staggered, and his hand flew out, clutching the hot hood of his car. By the time he reached her side, she'd already opened her door. He wondered if he should offer her his hand, but quickly decided not to touch her.

His conscience needled him as he led the girl across his mother's overgrown lawn and knocked on the peeling front door. He'd intended to work on the house last weekend, but he lost an entire afternoon to the pintail.

Arlene Greenleaf eyed them through the screen door.

"Hi, Ma."

Her eyes wandered past him to the girl and opened wide in recognition. "Lisa-honey come in!" She flung the door open against the side of the house, showering turquoise paint on the half-dead azaleas.

Before he could explain that this girl could not possibly be Lisa, *his Lisa*, his mother had swooped the girl up in a hug, crooning, "Oh, it's been so long, Honey!"

He looked at his shoes, and then glanced up at the girl in his mother's arms. She scowled for a moment and then to his surprise, her face went soft. The smell of coffee percolated from the house and his stomach tightened, remembering the woman with the dog.

He cleared his throat getting ready to tell his mother this was not Lisa, to explain that he had brought this girl to her because she needed help. But seeing how eagerly his mother led the girl inside he hesitated, unwilling to snatch back what he'd handed to her. She'd probably figure it out in a second or two, he told himself. No need to rub it in her face.

Tucker slipped off his shoes and trailed them through the house into the cabbage-smelling kitchen, avoiding chunks of mud the girl shed on the carpet. He joined the girl at the table next while his mother dished up plates of sausage and kraut.

“My horoscope in the paper this morning said to expect company, but I never thought...” Arlene sat at the table, her chin resting in her plump hand, “Look how tall she’s gotten.”

The girl ate fast and without talking. He wondered why she didn’t set his mother right. Her passiveness aggravated him. Studying her face as she ate, he was relieved to see nothing familiar in her messy eyebrows or pale, irritated-looking skin. His mother’s confusion raised an ugly welt of doubt in him. Is it possible he wouldn’t recognize his own daughter?

The heavy scrape of his mother’s slippers against the linoleum made Tucker wince. He watched her heaping more food onto the girl’s plate, impatient for her to realize this wasn’t Lisa. He pricked rows of holes in the sausage on his plate pondering what to say to soften his mother’s humiliation.

Noticing the girl’s plate was empty for a second time, Tucker jumped up from the table and rinsed it in the sink, then scraped his uneaten food into the garbage. What if Lisa had gained a lot of weight and come looking for him? “Well, Ma...” he started, not sure what he was going to say.

Arlene ignored him and nodded at the microwave clock blinking 12:00. “Time for *Jeopardy*,” she said.

“Can I use your bathroom?” the girl asked.

“Second door on the right,” Arlene said over her shoulder as she went into the living room.

He heard his mother belch softly as she settled into her recliner. There was a pop as the TV came to life then the cheerful music of a car commercial. He glanced around the kitchen and noticed she'd left the milk out on the counter next to the stove. He opened the carton and, bracing himself, sniffed. It smelled faintly sour. What if Lisa had come looking for him because she was pregnant? He carried the carton to the sink turned the hot tap and poured the contents down the drain, rinsing the carton twice before setting it in the garbage. No, it's *impossible* that the girl in the other room is Lisa, he thought. Even if Lisa were pregnant, would she come looking for him? He'd been out of her life awfully long to be a refuge. He went back to the sink and used the spray nozzle and a squirt of dish soap to clean the sink.

Tucker joined his mother in the living room, perching on the edge of the couch. He wondered if he should wait in the hallway and explain things to the girl. She must think his mom is crazy. He looked at his mother's profile. Her long gray hair looked oily and the terracotta-beaded barrette that held the side back was rusty and missing beads. In the flickering light of the TV he could see a handful of whiskers sprouting from her chin and nose. He was overwhelmed but the sudden desire to slap her for being so easily fooled. That is not Lisa, he fumed at her, and your darling granddaughter won't even talk to me. He felt sick and wished he was at home sitting at his scarred carving table working on the pintail.

The corners of his mother's mouth curved upwards at the sound of the toilet flushing. The bathroom door sprung opened and the guilt he felt over his urge to hit his mother hung around his neck like an old tire.

Pausing to look at an old photo collage in the hallway, the girl made her way back to them. She studied one of Tucker and Lisa holding up a line of sunfish then squinted up at him. She exhaled slowly, shoulders rounding than crossed the living room. Slumping into a chair, she

examined her muddy shoes. Her eyebrows arched, and her eyes wandered over the carpet towards the front door. He felt a stab of pity for her as she realized her blunder.

His pity mixed with another feeling he couldn't name. The muddy footprints erased any doubt that the girl was Lisa; Carol would have taught her better than to track mud into the house. Whatever the issues with their marriage, he had to admit that she was a good mother, great even. Oftentimes he'd felt unnecessary when the three of them were together.

"What is Anchorage, Alaska!" Tucker startled as the girl and his mother shouted simultaneously at the TV. He watched as his mother glanced shyly at the girl. Seeing them both happy lifted the weight of the tire from him and his chest was light and full at the same time. He wished he had a camera to take a snapshot of the two of them to give to his mother.

"Can I use your phone?" the girl asked during a commercial.

"In the kitchen," Arlene nodded, her eyes half-closed.

The living room felt surprisingly empty without the girl. She returned a few seconds later and sat quietly shifting in her chair for the rest of the show. As soon as the closing theme music sounded she jumped up and stuffed her hands in her pockets. "I better get going now."

Tucker glanced up at the girl. It was too late to explain to his mother that this was not her granddaughter. There was no doubt in his mind now, the best option was to let the situation run its course and never talk about it again. He rose from the couch and crossed the room. He squatted down and kissed his mother's cheek. "Be back tomorrow to help you out with the yard work," he promised. "Tomorrow morning."

She shrugged and turned the volume on the TV louder.

The girl followed Tucker to his mother's recliner, offered her an awkward hug and walked out the door. Unsure what to do, Tucker followed her. She turned and waited for him at

the end of the sidewalk, twisting a ring around on her finger. There was a cloud of silence and then they both spoke at the same time.

“Thanks for picking me...” she said.

“Thanks for putting up with...” he said shrugging toward his mother’s house.

He nodded and craned his neck to look at her hand. The ring was familiar to him—a small green stone squashed between two big pearls. He was sure he remembered it on his mother’s hand. He vaguely recalled seeing it on her dresser recently. Suddenly his mouth felt dry. He licked his lips, struggling for the right words to say. The idea of the girl stealing from his mother enraged him. But what if he was wrong? What if it only looked like the same ring?

Before he could speak, a beat-up midnight blue Cadillac rumbled from the alley and jerked to a stop in front of them. Tucker watched through the rear window as the dark outline of the driver reached across the seat and opened the door. He saw the flash of a meaty hand push the door open wide. The girl grinned at the driver and climbed inside. The car peeled away. Tucker glanced over his shoulder in a panic towards his mother’s front window, but the blinds were shut.

He got in his car and slumped down on the seat. His sweaty back itched for a shower and his hands craved the smooth wood of the pintail, but the ring flashed in his mind. He drove back to the outskirts of town and pulled into the Wal-Mart parking lot. Inside he wandered back and forth along the jewelry counter eyeing rows of rings. An older woman with dyed red hair jingled the keys to the big glass case and asked three times if she could show him something.

“Just looking,” he said. Nothing came close to the ring the girl had stolen. Disheartened, he pushed a groaning cart around the store. At the exit he stopped to look at the missing

children's posters on a bulletin board. He'd only glanced at them before, but this time he studied each one.

Leaning in, he marveled at how many children were suspected to be "traveling with biological father." Were there hordes of father-child pairs living in secret colonies somewhere? He imagined a tropical island populated by sets of fathers and daughters—fathers and daughters building giant sandcastle on the beach, splashing in the waves, eating ice cream and playing softball. At the time of the divorce he hadn't considered taking custody of Lisa.

For a moment he panicked, convinced he'd made a mistake by letting her go. It was too late now. He hadn't even known he wanted it, but he felt that he'd been deprived of something vital. Worse, that he'd deprived Lisa. And his mother.

The flood of disappointment and remorse left Tucker disoriented and unable to find his car in the parking lot. As he wandered around pushing the cart and wishing he could re-live his last fifteen years, a seagull swooped down and skidded to a stop in front of him. He could tell by the way it eyed the asphalt, it felt cheated landing in this littered parking lot instead of the welcoming ocean. It hopped over a condom wrapper to stab at a greasy paper bag of popcorn.

He wished he could tell the gull he knew how it felt. As it hopped a few paces he noticed one of its legs was missing and its wing feathers stuck out at odd angles. He watched the gull for a long time. He saw the look in its eyes change from anger to resignation to what he thought must have been a stubborn pride as it surveyed the parking lot. It wasn't the ocean, but the bird eyed every yellow line and scrap of garbage, claiming it as its own.

Back at his apartment, Tucker put the pintail aside and took out a fresh piece of birch wood for the seagull. He would send it to Lisa when he was finished, he decided. As he worked, he talked to her as if she were standing next to him, telling her about his day: the hitchhiking girl,

the woman with the injured hand and her dog as he carved the ruffled feathers, the stolen ring and missing children as he worked on the bird's angry-proud eyes and his mother as he carved its one leg. He was only aware of time passing as his fingers cramped around the knife handle.

After Tucker had told her everything, he ran hot water over his aching hands and went to bed. He slept the deep, simple sleep of someone who has been heard and forgiven.

ON THE WAGON

Last week Anne told me her doctor intends to replace half her brain with a chimpanzee's. Her version of schizophrenia, according to her chart, mainly involves hallucinations about medical procedures and animals. This sounds like hell to me, but in the few weeks I've known her, she's accepted each event her brain inflicts on her with resignation, mild curiosity, and even humor.

"At least I'll be good at climbing trees," she told me. I want to believe she winked when she said it, that some part of her appreciates the absurdity of this situation she's trapped in, but the director of the group home where I work informed me it's a facial tic from her high dose of anti-psychotics.

Northern Lights Treatment Center for Mentally Ill Adults is a sprawling, cheaply-built imitation of a house that—despite petitions and heated city council meetings—is wedged into an established neighborhood in my tiny Northern Minnesota hometown. From the window of the commons area I watch Anne perch on a patio chair in the backyard. Her rigid profile and the deep lines around her downturned mouth hint at her emotional strain. She stares through the chain-link fence intent on her conversation with the empty backyard. With a cigarette between her slender fingers, she traces circles in the air in front of her stomach. A headache begins to squeeze my temples.

I unlock the door to the dim office at the center of the home and sift through stacks of charts and empty med bottles until I find the schedule: ice cream wagon with Anne, noon until five pm. I plop down in a chair and spin around and around until I feel sick, then play with my

chipping nail polish to avoid looking at the two-way mirror hanging over the desk that allows the staff to monitor the group home's dining room. I could go out on the floor, gossip with the other counselors, get a feel for who's having a good day and whose voices are active, but I'm too off-kilter to get out of this chair. I want my shift to be over. My whole day to be over. I moved back to my home town and my parents' house to get my life together and maybe stop drinking.

My parents mean well. My mom circled the job listing for this place ("Mental Health Tech at local group home for mentally ill adults") in purple pen in *The Northern Pioneer*, and drove me to the interview, telling me how proud she was to see me using my education. I haven't told her that the main parts of my education I use here are third grade math, when I help the resident's count out their pills and put them into weekly organizers. She wants to be proud of me for moving away and going to college, despite of all of the ways I've screwed everything up.

Every day, when my shift ends, I'm forced to decide between going to my parents' for turkey hotdish and *Cheers* re-runs as we try to pretend everything is fine or going to the Rusty Nail until I stumble home ashamed and aching for my ex-husband Brandon and our three-year-old, Becca.

From the Northern Lights dining room, the two-way mirror looks just like an especially dull mirror bordered by a bronze frame more suited for a funeral home than the group home's clinical decor. The glass is shatter proof as a precaution; even though the residents are rarely violent. It's supposed to allow us to keep an eye on things without them knowing. To me, this seems like a cruel joke, especially on those who tend toward paranoia. Some of the long-term residents know what the mirror is for, but when they tell visiting family members I doubt anyone believes them.

Despite my objections sometimes I can't help looking. Today I see Martin sitting at the long dining table, one hand binding his long curls in a ponytail, the other flipping cards in his game of solitaire. He stares the top card from the draw pile for a long time before he turns it over. He believes the cards' order is controlled by magnetic waves and he's very close to figuring out the pattern. Sometimes, after a few drinks, I worry he's right and he's just stuck here because the world is too dumb to understand.

On the days he can focus, Martin is a brilliant mechanic. He made the ice cream wagon by welding a chest freezer to a small flatbed trailer. That was last summer, and the home had a young director then—fresh out of college in Oregon, or somewhere west coast—who was big on work therapy and increasing community engagement. The residents called him “Dr. Dan” and still smile when they talk about him. He only lasted a year. He's been gone three months now, but the staff complains about him like he only left last week. Sandy, the current director, is all about the rules. She'd never allow Martin near welding equipment. His ice cream wagon works pretty well though. We can pull the freezer trailer around with a golf cart for about six hours before the ice cream gets soft and we need to haul it back to the home to plug it in. I think Sandy hasn't shut the wagon down mostly because it gets one of the residents out of her hair for a chunk of each day. I seem to get scheduled for the ice cream wagon more often than the rest of the staff.

Sometimes I ask Sandy questions about Dr. Dan. I roll my eyes and cluck sympathetically when she bitches about all his “hippy dippy ideas.” I'd lose my job if I told them Dr. Dan was who I wanted to be if I would have finished school before I had Becca. And before the accident.

Becca and Brandon are still in Sioux Falls, where we were living before. Three months ago, after the judge granted Brandon full custody of Becca, he helped my parents move me back here. He's going to bring Becca to visit soon, he says. He just wants to give me some time to get everything set up, get everything together. What if she doesn't remember me? What if she's calling Brandon's new girlfriend "mommy"? She's eating healthy, he promises me, and taking her meds. He sent pictures last week. She got little pink glasses with butterflies on the frames. I can still see the scars from where they opened her skull to relieve the pressure in her brain. *The accident wasn't your fault*, he reminds me, *it just happened*. But we both know he's full of shit. I was the one who backed the car into her in our driveway.

I was rushing to the grocery store for the second time that day. Friends were on their way for a barbeque and I was pissed that Brandon expected me to cook. I had a midterm in forensic psychology the next day and was scrambling to finishing the last fourteen credits of my degree while taking care of two-year-old Becca who was getting her molars and only slept for three hours at a time. All that afternoon as I shaped raw hamburger into patties and chopped onions, I sipped sweet white zinfandel and scolded myself for not finishing my degree before she was born. Brandon had put the burgers on the grill when I noticed we were out of plastic forks. When Becca saw me grab my keys and walk toward she clung to my leg and whined to come with. *No*, I snapped, *I'm not taking you*. When I slammed the screen door part of me knew it would bounce back open, but I figured Brandon would hear Becca fussing and know I'd left. He might even feel guilty, I thought, because I should have been studying instead.

It's a miracle she's alive, her doctor told me. *Focus on the fact she's still with us*, Brandon told me. I'd rather he screamed at me, said all the things we both were thinking. Then I could hate him instead of hating myself.

I leave the office and head to the backyard. “Looks like we have ice cream wagon today,” I say pulling up a chair beside Anne. I try to sound cheerful and soothing at the same time, like someone who could handle this job. Anne looks at me but gets distracted by something I can’t see. “Yes,” she says, “of course.” I’m not sure if she’s talking to me or one of her hallucinations. I lean in and inhale the smoke from her burning Camel Light. I only smoke at the Rusty Nail and sometimes a whiff of smoke tricks my brain into a feeling a little buzzed. I might start carrying a little flask of something to work with me. It’s been chilly this summer and the fleece sweatshirt I wear has big pockets. If Brandon knew what I was thinking he’d tell me to call my sponsor.

“We can’t be out late,” Anne says. Now her eyes focus on me. “My daughter’s coming today. At supper time.”

Summer, Anne’s daughter, was a year ahead of me in school but was so tiny and shy I thought of her as younger. We all knew she got sent to live with her scowling grandmother because her mom was crazy. There were different stories about the scar that covered Summer’s right hand like a lace glove and curled her fingers into claws—her crazy mother doused her with lighter fluid and struck a match, her crazy mother forced her to make a bomb, her crazy mother tried to feed her to sharks. Summer never contradicted any of them. I read in Anne’s chart that she lost custody when Summer was five. Now Summer lives six hours south, in Minneapolis and rarely comes back. This visit is the biggest thing that’s happened for Anne in over a year.

“Don’t worry.” Impulsively, I touch Anne’s arm. She jerks it away, but it could have been a muscle spasm from her Risperdal.

“Let’s go set up the wagon,” I say. She crushes her cigarette butt and follows me to the fence.

In the garage I hand Anne a clipboard with the checklist. We inventory the ice cream, restock the freezer with fudgesicles, rocket pops, and Eskimo Pies. Anne slouches into the golf cart's passenger side. I hand her the cow bell and drumstick from the floor. Sandy insists we beat on that fucking bell as we drive around the neighborhoods, so people hear us coming. It increases sales, she claims. Rumor is she calls friends along the route to check on us, to make sure we're doing what we're told. It might have been a resident that started that bit of gossip, but that doesn't automatically make it wrong.

Anne holds the cowbell far from herself and looks at me sheepish. "It scares the kitten."
"Kitten?" I say.

"Doctor implanted it." She smiles down at her belly. "It's a girl."

If I were a good group home employee I would challenge her, remind her of her illness, tell her there is no kitten, but all I can do is touch my own belly and remember how it felt with Becca there. Back when I thought I could keep her safe from everything, even from me. Sometimes, even now, when I feel a flutter of gas I forget and think she's still in there sloshing around. I take the bell and the stick from Anne and set them on the floor.

Driving with one hand on the wheel, the other in my sweatshirt pocket, we work our way through Burglar Creek's small downtown at the humiliating pace of a brisk walk, giving us plenty of time to feel the occasional confused or suspicious stare. We stop at the hardware store that's always on the brink of closing, then Ben Franklin with its dusty aisles of knickknacks, and *The Northern Pioneer*, our town's newspaper, which mostly prints auction notices, invitations to 50th anniversary parties, obituaries, and the police report—heavy on DUI's. Anne goes into each business to take orders. People know her and ask how she is. A couple of middle-aged women with giant purses walk out of an insurance agency and come up to the wagon. They're good

people, these women. They probably go to church with my mom and prayed for Becca after the accident.

“Summer’s coming,” Anne tells them without context. They glance up at the cold gray sky, puzzled, then give her exaggerated smiles and nods.

“She means her daughter,” I explain before ushering Anne back into the cart. Even with the pedal floored it takes forever to drive away.

We leave downtown on Third Street and cross the railroad tracks toward the residential areas. The golf cart hums louder and feels sluggish. The trailer’s tires are worn and go flat every couple of trips. Martin will put new ones on as soon as he adjusts to his new meds, Sandy says, as soon as he’s ready to use tools again. I pull into 7-Eleven and park near the air hose. Mike, the guy I’ve hooked up with at the Rusty Nail, is working at the liquor store across the street. He has beautiful soft pink lips—almost girly—that feel so nice when he slides them along my neck, but I don’t have much to say to him when I’m sober. I drag the air hose behind the cart and glance at Anne, her long hair pinned with a barrette and her skinny shoulders hidden beneath puffs of red nylon.

I sit beside Anne and drive to the next assigned neighborhood—street after street of little 1960’s ranch-style houses with day lilies and azalea bushes in front. If normal, happy families exist, this is where they live. The neighborhood is deserted. I should have Anne beat the cowbell to drum up some customers, but I don’t want to upset her. And neither of us really gives a shit about selling ice cream.

From a daycare on the corner I can hear kids, safe inside the fenced backyard, laughing, and playing on a swing set. Becca went to a perfect daycare just down the block from our house

in Sioux Falls. It was run by Marlene, an older hippy with long braided hair and batik print skirts, who Becca called Grandma. Marlene came to visit Becca in the hospital after the accident while she was still unconscious. She brought a foil balloon shaped like a flower. She held Becca's hand and sang "The Wheels on the Bus" and "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," but she couldn't meet my eyes. Last week Brandon told me Becca started a new daycare. One that can give her more help. I offered to send money, but he told me I should take care of myself, that they were doing ok. I bet Becca misses Marlene.

At the end of Gladys Avenue, we turn on a gravel side street into Countryside Estates Trailer Park. It might have been in the countryside at one point, but all that's left of the country now is a muddy field across the road that the trailers look out on. Somewhere at the center of each lot is a mobile home, but most are covered over with plywood and rusty sheet metal additions—decks that tilt to one side, saggy entries, and porches with flapping screens. Two young boys in cut-offs and bare chests stand at the end of a driveway throwing rocks into the field.

"Hey!" the smaller one in crooked glasses calls. "We want ice cream!"

I pull over and look at Anne. She's rubbing her belly and humming softly. She looks tired.

"What would you like?" I say getting out.

The bigger boy with a shaved head elbows Crooked Glasses, who looks down and digs his grubby toes into the gravel. I open the freezer and they run over, grip the edge and peer inside. Their eyes widen at our stockpile of frozen treats, they squint up at me, waiting.

"Can't leave this open all day," I tell them.

Shaved Head looks past me into the empty lot. "We don't have money."

Go ask your mom, I want to say, but I can picture her sleeping hard wrapped in a cheap scratchy blanket, maybe exhausted from working the night shift at Gold Star Turkey Processing. Instead I hand each of them a Patriot Pop— red, white, and blue striped popsicles so huge they melt down your arm before you can eat the whole thing—and put fifty cents from my purse into the tackle box where we keep the money.

In the empty lot a female Killdeer cries and stumbles through tufts of dead grass. She drags her wing to lure us away from her nest. I get out of the wagon and step into the field hoping for a glimpse of her chicks. Cold, fishy-smelling mud sucks against my flip flops. Behind me there's a loud CRACK from the golf cart.

“I'm sorry, lady, sorry!” one of the boys cries.

The mother killdeer launches herself into the air and flies away, her charade and babies forgotten. Leaving one shoe in the mud, I run back to the wagon. Anne hunches on the seat with her hands covering her face. Crooked Glasses is squatting in the driveway sobbing into his skinny arms, his Patriot Pop melting on the ground beside him next to a chunk of broken cinder block.

I walk to the front of the golf cart—there's another piece of cinder block on the ground and a fresh impact mark in the fiberglass hood. I sit beside Ann. Her breathing is ragged and there's the kind of red blotch on her cheek that will turn into a bruise.

“He didn't mean to hit her.” Shaved Head faces the wagon. “He was aiming for that bird.” He gestures with his Patriot Pop toward the lot then bends down and wraps his arm around Crooked Glasses.

I toss the piece of cinder block into the field where it lands hard in the mud near my shoe. When the mother killdeer comes back she'll wonder how the landscape of her home changed while she was gone and if the new objects are a threat to her chicks.

"You're okay," I say patting Anne's back. "You're safe." I push the hair away from her hurt cheek with trembling fingers and re-pin her barrette.

"She's wiggling today," Anne sits up and rubs her gaunt belly furiously. "Gonna be a wild kitten. Doctor says she can come out now any day."

Stress triggers delusions. They told me that when they trained me for this job. I slide my hand inside my sweatshirt pocket where the bottle would go. We leave the trailer park with the boys still in the driveway and cross the bridge over the river by Elk's Park, a big stretch of green lawn and petunia beds winding along the Thief River. Anne looks out at the park and laughs.

"Gary rode my horse here."

Gary is her former husband. She's probably remembering one of her hallucinations, but the image of the mother killdeer takes up all the space in my head and I don't challenge her.

"He wanted to be Prince Charming." She snorts. "Got my black mare from the ranch and hauled her here." She shook her head. "That mare was Trouble. She shied at the picnic blanket, he fell—blam—and she ran away!"

I imagine a black horse tearing across the bridge. "But you married him, right?"

She frowns. "You need a Dad to have a baby."

We park the wagon in the garage and plug in the freezer. Walking back inside the home, I notice the clouds have thinned and the late afternoon sun is breaking through. Anne and I cast a single, distorted shadow against the glowing lawn.

On my break, I sit in a patch of sun next to the “Northern Lights Residential Treatment Center” sign and light a cigarette. Maybe if Dr. Dan was still here I’d have someone to talk to. I want a drink, but even more, I want to tell someone about my day, about the boys, and the killdeer, and Anne. Maybe even about Becca—how right after she was born the top of her head smelled like Nilla Wafers, how I cried so hard after I pushed her out of my body because, I’d never been that tired and unsure of everything.

Summer pulls up in a little silver Honda. She doesn’t get out of the car right away, just sits there gripping the steering wheel. When she finally gets out she slams the door harder than she needs to. I haven’t seen her since high school, over ten years ago. She looks good. I didn’t remember her being tall, but she is, and thin, wearing clean white jeans with big sunglasses.

“Hi, Summer,” I say too loudly and reach to shake her hand. I want to say something I learned in school, something that makes it clear I deserve to work here, but I can’t think of anything.

“Oh,” she holds out her hand. “Hi.” I try not to wince when I feel the lumpy scar tissue. She looks hard at my cigarette; the corners of her mouth twitch a little. “You want one?” I reach for my purse.

“I promised Mom I’d quit.” She takes it and pulls a lighter from her pocket.

We lean against the low brick wall that edges the flowerbed surrounding the group home sign.

“I rode on the wagon with your mom today,” I say to remind her I’m staff. Then cringe at how ridiculous it sounds.

She turns her head away from me to exhale as if we weren’t breathing in the same smoke. “I thought you moved to South Dakota?”

“I moved back.” I can’t help staring at her scarred hand.

“How’s your little girl doing?”

“Good.” She must know about the accident. She’s probably wondering, why the hell would they let someone who ran into her own kid take care of my mother? To change the subject I ask, “Did your mom ever have a horse?”

Summer rolls her eyes and nods. “When my grandma couldn’t handle having Mom around she sent her to her aunt’s ranch and they gave her a horse. Thought it would teach her to be normal.” She exhales through her nose and shakes her head. “I hear about that stupid horse all the time. She obsesses.”

“It sucks,” I nod. “Having your mind stuck on something.”

“Sucks being around someone like that,” she says looking toward the house. “I don’t know how you can stand it.”

“Nobody wants this,” I say, nodding at the front door of Northern Lights, “But it’s surprising what you can get used to.”

I want to ask her more questions, make her life into a case study from my applied methods textbook—understandable and with a clear treatment plan—but Summer drops her still-burning cigarette into the flowerbed and walks to the door.

I drop my cigarette beside hers and crush them both with my heel then follow her inside. As I pass the dining room on the way to the office, Anne is sitting at the table looking down and tracing the scratches on its surface with the tip of her finger. There’s a bandage on her cheek covering the scrape from the cinder block. Summer is standing with her back to the door, but I can tell her arms are crossed over her chest. I wish I could tell Summer, to be kind, Anne doesn’t deserve to be hurt anymore. But neither does Summer. I go into the office to fill out a vulnerable

adult incident report form about Anne's scrape. When I get to the blank lines where I'm instructed to "describe the facts of the incident in detail" I stop. My hands are damp and restless.

I dim the office lights and stand by the two-way mirror looking into the dining room. Summer is leaning down hugging Anne. Anne's frown melts for a moment as she pats Summer's back with one hand while her other hand continues tracing the scarred tabletop. If either of them looked up at the strange mirror right at this moment, they might catch the flicker of my movement behind their own reflections.

THE SWING

It's nearly 10 pm and Mom hasn't taken her Valium yet. She's pacing the kitchen in a short yellow nightgown, running her fingers through her hair, and lecturing me on the Vietnam conflict. Her nightgown is too thin. When she squares her shoulders in outrage, two pinky-brown spots on her chest peek through the layers of flimsy fabric. I'm starting med school next year and body parts—even private ones—shouldn't bother me, but I wish she'd wear something else.

"It says right here, Paul." She shoves a copy of *Time* at me. "They've got no exit strategy! How the hell they going to bring all them boys home?"

I swallow a mouthful of rhubarb pie. "I don't know." I look down the hall at my closed bedroom door then fake a yawn to set up my escape. The problem is she knows I got up at noon and spent the whole day sitting at the kitchen table eating Oreos and playing game after game of solitaire. It's not that I want to be in my bedroom either, where my open suitcase waits in the middle of my bedroom floor like a giant hungry mouth I'm too tired to feed.

Classes at the University started last week. I should be there. I should be studying and working on my med school applications. Missing a week of class is tanking my GPA, and if I drop out I'm eligible for the draft. I should call Karen, the girl I was dating, to find out what I've missed, but talking to her sounds like more work than packing. She's probably wondering what the hell happened to me. Or maybe she's not. Maybe she's sitting in a dark movie theater right now smoking pot with some hippy English major. Maybe right now his hand is sliding between her thighs. I should have written to her more this summer.

Mom slaps the magazine down on the table and reaches for the vase of zinnias that occupy what used to be my father's spot. She picks off a rotting leaf and looks hard at my face. We rarely talk about my father since his death, but lately she's been dropping hints—like the flowers—that she wants to say something about him, pushing against our mutually agreed on silence. I feel sick when I imagine what might come spilling out of her mouth if I relent so I pretend not to notice.

Each summer I come back from the U, she gets thinner and younger-seeming. And angrier. She goes to work wearing embroidered bellbottoms and sandals, and she reads every scrap of information about Vietnam she can get her hands on. The other night when we were watching TV she farted during President Nixon's speech then cackled and said, "Take that you lying son-of-a-bitch!"

I get up and set my sticky plate in the sink. When I turn back to the table I'm careful to keep my gaze above her neck. When she looks up at me, with her thin face and wide, wild eyes, she reminds me of a feral cat or a fox—something that needs to escape or fight.

"You should go see Ray's family," she said. Ray was my best friend growing up. Last February Mom called me at school to say Ray had been blow up in a rice field outside of Saigon. She told me the specifics of his death, even though we'd never discussed the details of my father's suicide in the garage fifty feet from our house. Probably she wanted me to get angry at the government like her—join the protests at the U.

"To have your child stolen from you by a government run by murders and thieves..." She shook her head, baiting me. Daring me to allow death into our conversation. She'd set out the honey just to watch me circle the trap.

“Stop,” I said. “You know he wasn’t drafted.” No matter how many times I tell her that Ray enlisted, she comes back those same lines. Not just about Ray either, but every time she reads something about Vietnam in the paper, or we see soldiers unloading flag draped caskets from aircraft on the news.

Ray had been my best friend since fourth grade when I showed him how to make the picture of George Washington in our history book into a zombie by scrubbing out the eyes with an eraser. He laughed so hard that he fell out of his desk and had to stay after school. That moment set the tone for our friendship. Ray was a goody two-shoes and every time I nudged him toward rebellion I won. Every time he kept me from doing something stupid, he won. After my dad shot himself, Ray was the only one who didn’t treat me like a bomb ready to go off.

Except for the occasional letter, Ray and I didn’t stay in touch after high school. Maybe this sounds shitty, but his death hasn’t really affected me much. When I got the news, I’d just started dating Karen. I was working really hard to keep my grades up and looking into med schools.

The rhubarb pie leaves a greasy feeling in my mouth. Mom’s still talking. “At least go see Annie.” Nobody’s called Ray’s sister by her nickname since junior high. “She’s been running around with that Gary Pulrabek from the Cenex station.”

“It’s a free country, right? She can see whoever she wants.” I look down at Mom’s bare feet—they’re dirty and the top of each one has a heart-shaped tan spot from the cut-outs on her sandals. I try to name all the bones of the foot. I know exactly what Ray would tell Anne about that Pulrabek son-of-a-bitch.

After a while I stand and kiss the top of Mom’s head and breathe the familiar scent of Breck shampoo. “Okay, I’ll talk to Anne.”

On the way to my room, I steal into the bathroom. My hands shake as I open the medicine chest and take two blue pills out of Mom's bottle of Valium. In my room I step around my suitcase and set the pills inside the drawer of my nightstand next to the yellowed scrap of paper with Dr. Kessler's home phone number, which he'd given me afterward my father's funeral, when Mom was going nuts.

"No wonder I can't stand it here," I mutter and sink onto my bed. There's a cluster of fruit flies zigzagging around the headboard. Despite the box fan whirling in my bedroom window, the air feels stagnant and smells cidery, like fruit is fermenting under my bed. I've checked a million times, thinking I must have dropped an apple core or something. The flies scatter when I swat at them, but in a second they're back again.

On the shelf across from my bed is the model '64 GTO Tempest that Ray and I built. I was putting the final coat of paint on it while Ray sat beside me and listened to the triumphant newscaster on the radio tell us the American troops had landed in Vietnam. Ray finally saved up enough to buy an actual Tempest the summer before our senior year. He spent six months rebuilding the engine and barely got to drive it before he got sent to basic training.

Next to the model is a set of old-fashioned-looking hardcover books—*Treasure Island*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *Swiss Family Robinson*—that my father gave me for my tenth birthday. He told me they were books every boy should read. I never did, mostly because he wanted me to so badly. Sometimes I feel guilty about it and think I should try reading them now. Maybe he was right. Maybe if I read them, things would make sense to me. But why should I take any advice from a guy who ended up killing himself? Everything he told me just a bunch of fucking words and nothing else.

I glance back at the model. Its black paint is covered with dust. Ray would be pissed if he could see it. All last semester at the U, I'd tell myself that there was nothing to feel bad about so I could study. I'd make up lies—that the stupid Army people screwed up and Ray was really back home at his parents' house in Battle River, sitting on the couch and sharing a bowl of popcorn with Anne. They were laughing together and watching *The Honeymooners* or some dumb, old-fashioned show like that. Sometimes I'd sit in the study carrel adding so many details to Ray's life that I'd lose track of anatomy or chemistry or whatever brought me to the library in the first place.

I felt better picturing Ray with Anne. He was crazy about her. I would never have admitted it when we were kids, but I was jealous. She was strange. I don't think she had any friends her own age, but she and Ray were crazy about each other. One time I got up to go to the bathroom in the middle of a Monopoly game. When I came back the air was thick with secrets and she was laughing into her hands. It was clear I was on the outside of whatever was going on. From then on I made a point to hold it when Anne was around and got revenge by pissing on the rhubarb growing behind their garage when I left the house.

If I drop out of school, I'll be eligible for the draft. Every morning I wake up and think, *Today's the day. Pack up the car and drive back to the U.* I spend a little time playing solitaire or shuffling through my old baseball cards and before I realize it Mom's home from working at the florist shop and asking what I want for dinner. If I wasn't here, she'd probably eat dinner alone in front of the TV and start talking to herself. She's just on the edge of crazy with me around. If I leave, who knows?

Besides, I'm worn-out from these damn nightmares—every night I dream I'm slogging through this swamp. The place is dark and slippery, and I can hear Ray crying for help. I have to gather up all the parts of his body and piece them back together, but the parts are slimy and heavy. I pick up his leg but it slips from my hands and sinks back under the murky water. The place reeks like the cadaver lab at school and I'm begging Ray, be patient with me, for christsake, I haven't even learned the right way to suture.

At 10:40 Mom mumbles goodnight through my door. I hear the door to her room click shut. Her bedsprings grunt as she lies down, like she weighs four hundred pounds, though she probably weighs less than a hundred. It's more likely the springs are complaining because her mattress is old—the same one she and dad bought the day after their wedding. They'd told me the story when I was a kid about how they came home from their wedding reception, exhausted and ready for bed and Mom walked into the bedroom to discover that the mattress wasn't included with the bedroom set she'd had delivered that morning. My father would roll his eyes. To him the story was proof of how Mom was flakey and a little dumb. But, she told me, it looked perfect displayed at the store. How was I supposed to know they'd leave out the most important part?

I hate the way my father's death makes me turn each memory over and over looking for clues about why he did it. And the way it casts a shadow over every moment of my past and leaves me with no way to know if that moment was actually shadowed.

I carry my shoes through the kitchen and leave from the back door, easing the spring-loaded screen door so it doesn't slam, even though it would take someone firing a gun in her room to wake Mom after she's swallowed her pills. I cross our over-grown backyard, avoiding the cement slab where the garage used to be, and turn west in the alley. The sun's already down,

but there's an orange end-of-summer glow in the sky. Tomorrow is garbage day and trashcans are lined up like little metal soldiers along both sides of the alley. The air is rotten and fishy.

Ray and I used to sneak out and meet on summer nights when we were kids. We crept around alleys, ducking behind dumpsters at the sight of cops, feeling like secret agents on a mission. I wonder if that was how Ray felt stealing around Vietnam with a gun, all decked out in camouflage. I hope like hell he did.

I hope his death was immediate, like Dr. Kessler told me my father's was. "He was gone before he even felt any pain," Dr. Kessler said at my father's funeral, bending down to look me straight in the eye. Even at the time I knew he was lying, but hearing him say it in his low, serious voice made me believe him just enough to be comforted.

Like some stupid homing pigeon, I follow the same route through town that I used to take to meet Ray—left on Schoolcraft, right on Whitetail Drive, stay in the alleys so the cops don't catch you breaking curfew. Once, a hollow metal crash echoes behind me and makes me catch my breath, makes inside of my mouth feel like cotton, but it's probably just some stray cat knocking over a garbage can. I have to remember nobody cares if I'm out past curfew anymore.

After a few blocks I'm standing in the alley next to Ray's garage, the drooping rhubarb patch at my feet. The interior light is on as usual. I press up against the side. The garage feels warm, like the body of a recently killed animal. Maybe I should go knock on Anne's window. I could lead her through the alleys and tell her about what Ray and I used to do. Instead I lean forward to look through the dusty garage window.

Ray's father is in the prayer portion of his bedtime ritual. He slumps over the workbench facing the back of the garage, hands folded, head resting on his forearms. I have to look away

from the sunburned scalp between the strands of his comb over. I wish I could wrap his head in gauze to cover his raw skin.

After a few minutes his head comes up and he walks around to the driver's side of Ray's Tempest. He unbuttons his shirt and reaches over his head for the hanger dangling from the garage door track. He slides his shirt onto the hanger, puts it back, slides out of his pants and then, careful to keep the crease good, hangs them over the track.

Wearing just his undershirt and boxers, he opens the car door, adjusts Ray's blue sleeping bag. The light clicks off. I imagine the faint swish of his skin against the sleeping bag as he slides in for the night. Leaning back against the garage, I hear the clunk of the closing car door. Sweet dreams, I think.

Now I should go to the house and knock on the door. I should see Anne like I promised. But just walking up the steps to Ray's house knowing he'll never walk up them again makes the three cement steps feel like Mount Everest and my legs feel heavy and weak. Instead turn toward the dam.

All summer I've been craving the crash of water bursting through the cement chutes of the dam. Ray and I used to fish there, stringing up lines of catfish and sheepsheads, feeling the powerful surge of water churning in our chests. But this summer the chutes are almost closed, and the water is slowed to a trickle.

I stand on the gravel path on top of the dam. On my right is a pool of murky water waiting to move downriver. On my left is a thin stream snaking down the center of the wide riverbed. I don't know when they closed the dam. I wonder if the people downstream are mad about the dried-up river. Maybe it's been this way for so long now that they don't even notice it anymore.

I cross the dam into the alley behind Piggly Wiggly. The summer we were twelve I stole a box of Egkivst donuts here just to piss Ray off. “Ummmm,” I taunted with my mouth full, “they’re so much better *hot*.” I gave one to Anne. She blew on it like it was going to burn her tongue. Snickering, I elbowed Ray in the side. He was too principled to eat stolen donuts, but I knew he wanted them. He watched me eat every bite, swallowing every time I did.

Lately I’ve wondered if it would be easier or harder to be like Ray. We never talked about heavy stuff, so I don’t know if he followed rules because he didn’t bother to question them or out of an inherent sense of morality. I wish I’d asked him.

Part of me was jealous. His life looked effortless to me—teachers loved him, his parents trusted him, and his kid sister worshipped him. I guess in the end his rules got him killed leaving me, the screwed up one, to piece things together. Maybe it doesn’t even matter anyway, I tell myself, looking up at the weird shaped clouds against the last glow of sunset, maybe the Russians will nuke us all to hell tomorrow and none of this crap will matter.

I cut across the empty parking lot and stop at a waist-high wooden fence. This is where I usually turn back but tonight I’m not ready to go home. I hop over the fence into Eagle’s Park and walk along a line of oaks toward the river. On the opposite side of the river I can just make out the tops of a few limestone crosses in the cemetery where both my dad and Ray are buried.

The last oak in the park grows out over the river. It looks ready to topple over any moment, but its exposed roots grip the bank. The summer before Ray and I started tenth grade, Gary Pulrabek and some other seniors tied a rope to this tree, so they could swing out over the river and jump into the drop-off—the kind of thing you could break your neck doing. I couldn’t wait to try it. Even though I mostly knew it was ridiculous, it felt like my dad would be able to

see me from across the river. I wanted to show him I wasn't broken. That his death hadn't broken me and I'd become brave and adventurous, like the characters in his books.

I waited until we sat, hot and restless, on Ray's front steps a few days after the Fourth of July before I brought up the swing. Ray stunned me by agreeing to go. Maybe I wanted a bigger reaction from Ray, I don't know, but I told Anne she could come with us. She grinned down at her shoes, and then ran off to change into her swimsuit.

The week before Ray's mother had made us take Anne to a *Sound of Music* matinee. On the way home I'd had to piss like a racehorse, so I started belting out, "I am seventeen, going on eighteen..." to distract myself, and twirling Anne around like in the movie. She turned red and couldn't look at me the rest of the way home. Since then I'd been wondering how to use her crush on me to my advantage.

Ray didn't tell Anne to stay home when I invited her to the swing, but the look of frustration he shot me made me wish I could steal the invitation back—I only wanted the upper hand if Ray was close behind. He would probably even forgive me if I stole his girlfriend, but if I toyed too much with Anne that would be the end of the line.

On the way to the swing, I decided to step back and give Ray some room. Anne had to walk her bike across the gravel path over the dam because, she said, the noise from the water was too loud and her brakes didn't work. Ray kept glancing at me, waiting for me to mock her, but I just watched her marching over the path and stiff-arming her bike away from her body so the pedals wouldn't catch her ankles.

At the park Ray hung back to mess with Anne's brakes. Anne and I walked to a picnic table. I was taking off my shirt when Ray ran past us toward the riverbank. He grabbed the

knotted end of the swing, backed up for a running start and flew out over the river hooting like Tarzan, then plunged under the muddy water and disappeared. Waiting for him to surface, I listened to Anne's ragged breathing. She'd frozen in the middle of taking off her cut-offs—bent over at the waist, eyes lapping the river's surface.

“He'll be alright...” I started, but Ray burst to the surface flailing and spraying water before I could finish. Anne grinned and let her shorts slide down her legs.

“You've gotta try it, Annie,” he called.

Her grin faded. She nodded but her jaw worked like she was chewing a hunk of gristly meat. “Yep, okay, Ray,” she said, walking with quick, jerky steps to the bank where Ray climbed out to meet her.

“Hey, Bonehead!” I yelled, “I should go next!”

Ray glanced up, cocked his head at me and shrugged. I hocked up a wad of gunk from my throat and spat into the grass. Ray's unexpected grab for my troublemaker crown left me edgy, especially when it included Anne.

I kicked my shoes under the picnic table and hurried toward them, watching him thread the knotted rope between her thighs. The hair on my arms rose like metal shavings meeting a magnet as he pushed her over the bank. I looked away.

When I reached Ray, we stood together squinting at Anne through the thick morning light as she skimmed the river's surface. Damp tangles of white-blond hair slid from her ponytail and hung between her straining shoulders. We watched the swing carry her near the high point of its arc and the deepest, safest part of the drop-off.

“Now!” we yelled. But she didn't let go.

“No, wait!” we called, as she sailed past the deep spot. The rope reached its limit and started back toward us.

“Okaaaay, now!” we yelled when she reached the drop -off again. She clung tighter to the rope. As she sailed toward us, Ray leaned out over the bank to grab her, but she swung just outside his reach. The swing’s arc grew shorter and slower with each pass until she dangled over the river. I could see her arms and legs trembling. The rope creaked where it stretched across the tree limb.

Two fat drops of sweat rolled down Ray’s head. He chewed like crazy on his bottom lip. “Hang on, Annie,” he called. He looked at the oak then shimmied up its trunk.

“You gotta catch her,” he said.

“Sure,” I told him, keeping my voice calm.

He straddled the limb just behind where the rope was tied, grabbed it and swung it back and forth, building momentum. I could hear Anne whispering and sobbing each time she swung closer.

“Get ready,” Ray called as she reached the top of the arc over the river. “Now!”

I grabbed her around the waist. For a moment I lost my balance and we nearly toppled over the edge of the bank, but I held tight and leaned back. Anne stopped clutching the rope and went limp. My legs buckled, and we fell into the grass. The back of her head pressed against my face, smelling like hair warmed by the sun. I could feel the wet spot where she’d pissed her swimsuit pressed against my thigh. I untangled our legs and stood as Ray walked over to us. A long scrape decorated his chest. A flash of hatred for him exploded in the back of my throat. I wanted to tackle him and pound the shit out of him, but I was shaking too hard to land a punch.

What the hell gives you the right to play with us like that? I wanted to yell. Don’t you

know that it's possible to fuck things up so bad they can never be right again? Of course he didn't know, but I'd known it since the day my dad gave up.

Ray pulled Anne to her feet. She teetered for a moment and sunk back down. He crouched on the ground with her, forehead to forehead, telling her things too soft for me to hear. Walking back to the picnic table, I knew Ray had set Anne and me up on purpose, so he could be the hero. I looked back at them crouched together, her shoulders pumping up and down with sobs and Ray patting her back. I had to look away.

I took my time putting on my shoes and shirt, willing Anne to get up and be okay. After waiting what felt like too long, I grabbed Anne's towel from the picnic table and walked back to them. I wrapped her towel around her like a cape. One side slid off her shoulder and down her back. I still couldn't look at Ray.

The last time I saw either of them was right before Ray was deployed. Anne had just graduated from high school, but looked younger, with her ponytail and short, uneven bangs. She sat on the couch, her toes curling into the green shag carpet.

I look out at the humped shapes of silt-covered rocks. I usually try not to look at the cemetery, but tonight my gaze bridges the riverbed and tries to pick out which headstone belongs to my father. Then I look at the identical rows in the veteran's section trying to remember where they laid Ray. "You two are not so different," I tell the headstones.

Mosquitoes cluster around my ankles. I smash a greedy one full of blood and wipe my hand in the grass, the same spot where I caught Anne. I let myself imagine stealing into her house right in the middle of the night and running away with her. I'd take her to another swing—

not over this dried- up river across from this crowded cemetery— but over a deep and quiet pond where she and I would swing together, holding tight until, at just the right moment, we let go.

I know I have to see her. My heart pumps hard as I walk and when I reach her house I stand to the side of the garage to catch my breath, but confident I'm finally doing something important and right. A brown Ford F-150 idles in the driveway. The headlights are off, but I can faintly hear country music coming from the cab. I step closer so that I'm standing in the floodlight hanging from the garage. Gary Pulrabek is sitting in the driver's seat. His head is thrown back against the seat. His eyes are closed, and his mouth is slightly open as if he's fallen asleep. Just as I'd decided to go pound on the window to wake him up and tell him to leave Anne the hell alone, he grimaces and then lets out a whoop. Anne appears from where she'd been hidden behind the dashboard. She wipes her chin and adjusts her bra beneath her shirt. I can't breathe and for a moment I think I'm going to vomit. I stare at the gravel in the driveway and try to think about how it's made up of tiny fragments of some huge rock. When I look back, Gary has his arm around her and her head is resting on his shoulder. There's nothing for me to do now but go home.

My bedroom door is open when I get there, and the light is on. The suitcase sits open on my bed. With her back to me, Mom moves slowly and deliberately between my bed and dresser—like she's on the moon. My arms and legs feel heavy and useless. I lean against the doorframe and watch as she carries a rumpled stack of clothes from my dresser and puts them into the suitcase. I see her shoulder blades move beneath the yellow gauze of her nightgown and watch them stretch apart as she reaches into the drawer again and come together as hugs my shirts tight against her chest.

LAKE INDEPENDENCE

Molly looked out the window of her father's pickup as the pines, birch, and poplars of East Ottertail County blurred past. She crossed her eyes and imagined a picture was hidden in the green fog of leaves. Please, show me the day Dad will move back home, she whispered. After a few minutes her eyes hurt. She blinked and looked over at her father. They were heading home from their annual Labor Day camping trip at Lake Independence. Her family had taken the trip every year for as long as she could remember. In past years it had been Molly, her mom and dad and her older brother Jason. This year it was just Molly and Dad.

In January her father had moved out of their house and into an apartment with a woman named Jeanie. Since then Molly was the only one who talked to him much. She'd tried convincing Jason to come on the camping trip, but he decided to go to baseball camp instead.

She blinked again and studied Dad. He hunched forward with his hands slack at the bottom of the steering wheel. His green polo shirt stretched tight across his belly, which seemed to get bigger every time Molly saw him. Jean must have bought the shirt, she thought. Her mother never bought anything green. She said it was a sick-looking color.

Molly felt a pinch in her stomach. She didn't mind Jean, but the clothes she picked for Dad looked like they belonged on the vice-principal at her school whose job was to yell at the trouble-makes.

Looking back out the window, she picked a tall poplar, like the trees that flanked their campsite, and tried to keep it in sight as long as possible. At the campsite, the wind shivered

through their leaves and made her sleepy. She remembered how cozy she used to feel zipped into her sleeping bag when her whole family lay packed side by side in the blue tent.

Inside the tent smelled like plastic, with the musty smell of the sleeping bags stored in the garage and wood smoke from the campfire, but under those two scents was another smell, the smell of her family—sort of like laundry soap, toast, and a little bit of sour milk. The smell of all their bodies together in the tent made Molly feel safe even though bears could be outside the tent. When she closed her eyes, she knew her brother and her parents were still there by breathing.

When she woke up in the tent this morning with just her father, there was the familiar plastic-musty smell. For a moment, before she opened her eyes she thought she smelled the Family Smell, but it was the people in the next campsite cooking breakfast.

Her father turned on the truck's radio and started flipping stations. "Anything sound good to you?" he asked.

Molly shook her head. He settled on the station playing a Jimmy Buffet song and started singing along, "She's a real cutie. A Mexican Beauty, but how she got here I haven't a cluuuue..."

He sat up tall, steering the truck with his left hand. His right hand rested on his thigh. She willed him to reach over and squeeze her knee like he did when she was a little kid. She pictured herself squealing and shoving his hand away. His fingers twitched, but his hand stayed on his leg.

She looked over at his sunburned face covered with two days' of stubble. Mirrored sunglasses shielded his eyes from the sunset piercing between the trees. The sunglasses and

stubble made him look like the kidnapper in a detective show she and Jason watched when mom was working late. Yeah, she thought, he looks like a Bad Guy.

The truck rounded a curve heading directly west. The glare of the sunset hurt her eyes and she had to turn away from her father. She squirmed to find a comfortable position and leaned her head against the truck window.

“Sleepy?” Dad asked

She nodded. She wasn’t sleepy, but she didn’t want to talk to the kidnapper posing as her father. She closed her eyes, but they kept popping back open. Outside her window, the truck’s side mirror reflected her face back at her. Her cheeks and forehead were sunburned, and the side of her mouth was smudged with ash from a toasted marshmallow. Her hair was stringy and unwashed. ‘Help, I’m being kidnapped!’ She mouthed to her reflection.

“What’d you say, Mol?” Dad asked.

“Nothing,” she said.

Ahead on the left side of the highway was a driveway with a peeling wooden sign announcing: “The Wigwam—Gas, Grocery, Souvenirs and On/Off Sale Liquor.”

“I have to get gas. You want anything?” He steered into the driveway and pulled up to a gas pump.

She shook her head, then changed her mind, “Yeah, can I have some pop?”

He nodded and got out to pump gas.

If Mom were offering the choice would have been orange juice or water. Her parents had loud arguments over Dad allowing Molly and Jason to drink pop.

“I don’t know what you’re worried about,” Dad said. “The kids got my strong teeth. They didn’t end up with your rotten ones. Anyway, who pays the damn dentist bills!”

Molly barred her teeth and studied them in the truck's side mirror. She couldn't tell if they looked strong or not. She glanced around to see if Dad had noticed and then caught her nervous expression when she looked back to the mirror. She remembered when the Bad Guy on the show hid the girl he kidnapped in a cave in Mexico. Widening her eyes with fear she whispered, "Please, don't hurt me. My parents' will pay a million dollars if you return me unharmed." The Bad Guy shook his head and grinned crookedly.

Her father got back in with two cans of Coke. He handed her one and pulled back onto the highway. They rode and drank in silence until Dad belched.

"Daaad," she giggled.

He slowed the truck and turned onto county road 115. Molly's favorite road—a hilly strip of gravel slicing between rows of tall jack pines. She liked it when her dad drove fast. It felt like they were on the log ride at Valley Fair. "Remember that time you drove really fast down that steep hill and Jason started crying."

Her father grinned and nodded.

She winced remembering Jason's puffy eyes and her mother saying, "Gary, slow down! Are you trying to kill us?"

Her father had muttered, "Jesus Christ," and Molly waited to feel the car slow down, but it didn't. Her mother turned around and made both her and Jason put on their seatbelts.

She was wondering what would happen if Dad drove fast this time, when he swerved hard on to the shoulder of the road. She rubbed her head where it smacked against the window, but he didn't ask if she was ok.

"Snapper!" he said, pulling off his sunglasses.

"What?"

“Snapping turtle!” He pointed to a green-gray lump in the middle of the road. “Let’s take a look,” he raised his eyebrows at Molly.

Molly flung open the truck door and jumped out. A few steps away from the truck, a sharp pebble bruised her heel. She hesitated, expecting her dad to tell her to go back to the truck and put shoes on, but he was already squatting beside the turtle. She pushed her sweaty bangs off her forehead and limped the rest of the way to where he was crouched over the turtle.

“Suckers’ are dangerous.” He nodded toward the turtle. “They clamp on to a guy and lock their jaws.”

Molly looked down at the turtle and the turtle met her gaze with a dark eye, glinting like the deepest part of the lake. A narrow crack ran between the squares on the turtle’s shell. “What happened to him?” she asked.

“Probably got hit by a car.”

“We better move him somewhere safe.”

“He’ll bite us, Mol.” He slapped a mosquito on his arm.

“He’ll die if we don’t.”

“That’s not our problem.”

“But, Dad...”

He stood, put his sunglasses on and headed toward the truck.

Molly limped after him. She glanced around and saw a long branch just off the road. She dragged it over and knelt down close to the turtle. It smelled like lake water and rotten leaves. A fishhook partially covered in new skin was embedded in its front leg.

“I said, get in the car, Molly!”

She waved the end of the branch in front of the turtle's face. If he latches on I can drag him off the road, she thought. The turtle hissed softly and jerked its head inside its shell.

"Now!" her father said.

Her heart punched against her chest. She squeezed her eyes shut and flashed on an image of Mom's face—her eyes big and scared and mouth wide open but silent. When she opened her eyes, she saw the ditch across the road filled with swampy water and cattails. That's where you belong, she thought. She reached down and grabbed the sides of its shell, one hand beside each front foot and braced for its terrible bite, but it stayed inside its shell watching her with its shiny eye.

The turtle was heavier than she expected, heavy as the tool box Dad never came back for, heavy as her backpack on days she carried her math book home to the empty house. She ran across the road on her bruised feet and tossed the turtle into water with all her strength. It landed with a solid sounding SPLUNK and sunk out of sight.

Later, in the truck, while she pretended to sleep, she thought about how it would feel to be tossed through the air by some strong force and land in a murky pond where cold water seeped into the crack in your shell. The pond was the turtle's home, she reminded herself. He was safe. But the kidnapped girl in her story was still imprisoned in Mexico. The Bad Guy had tied the girl's hands behind her back, but she was using a fishhook she found on the floor of the cave to cut through the rope. She might escape.

HIGH POINT

At bedtime when I was a kid, Dad would lean against my doorframe, scrape his calloused fingers across the peeling paint, and in his low quiet voice tell me the Norwegian fairytale, “The Trolls and the Pussycat.” His eyes narrowed, and his mouth twisted as he described the band of marauding trolls that ravaged the same farmhouse every Christmas Eve. The trolls, he told me, with their open, slobbering mouths, yellow teeth, and bristly hair were so scary the farmer ran away to Denmark at the sight of them, leaving his wife and kids to spend the night huddled in a cave in the woods. The more he could frighten me, the better. I’d squint out the dark windows of our farmhouse, heart pounding, but unable to tear myself away from his story. In the window I watched an even more distorted version of Dad reflected against the night, but when I pressed my nose to the cold glass I could just make out the form of Big Gus, our billy goat, standing guard in front of the shed. Not even trolls could get past Gus.

Like the farmer in the story, my dad ran off—not away from trolls, but with Dawn, the checkout girl from Piggly Wiggly. I was only nine at the time and heartbroken he’d chosen Dawn over Mom and me. It was a big scandal in Battle Creek, our tiny Minnesota town. Teachers hissed to each other behind their hands when I walk past them at school. I had to promise my friend Amanda that I wouldn’t punch her before she’d tell me what “cradle robber” meant. Later, when I did the math, I understood why. Dawn was seventeen then, less than half my father’s age, and three years younger than I am today.

After Dad left with Dawn, Mom and I moved from the farmhouse into a gray rambler in town. At first Mom sat at the kitchen table in her ratty green bathrobe, surrounded by wads of

crumpled tissues. After a while, a legal pad and a calculator replaced the tissues. She applied for and was awarded a grant to create Battle Creek Quilts, a non-profit that hired underprivileged farmwomen to sew quilts in their homes, which Mom sold to rich city people hungry for a slice of Americana.

Now, as I drape quilts over the display bed in Mom's tiny showroom, at the High Point Home Furnishings and Accessories Show, I think about the trolls. Twice a year I accompany Mom here, to North Carolina, where she sells the quilts to store owners and merchandise buyers. For a week every spring and fall Mom and I, and hundreds of thousands of other vendors and buyers, invade the little town. I imagined the citizens of High Point huddled in caves in the surrounding foothills while their town is ransacked by vendors seducing buyers with chandeliers, Persian rugs, or leather sofas, and the carnival of others who make their living feeding, boozing, and entertaining the crowds. Everyone here expects to be dazzled by the merchandise. Everyone expects a party.

I'd only been in High Point for two days and already my face ached from fake smiling. I was sick of squeezing into a showroom the size of my dorm, hidden deep inside a cement building—a hive of other tiny showrooms. Enjoy the show, Mom always told me. You never know what can happen.

I'd missed the fall show last year. It was my first semester at the University and I thought I'd finally escaped stupid, backwards Battle Creek for good. I was surrounded by people who didn't think I was weird because the sight of deer corpses in the back of trucks made me cry. And they'd never heard the story of my father and Dawn. We went to Amnesty International meetings and started Students for Peace. Mom loved to hear about my friends. She mailed donations for Amnesty International and sent us flowers on the day of our Iraq War protest.

The first time I met Kyle was at a Students for Peace meeting. I thought he looked like Jesus. He was sprawled across a couch in the Student Union talking about how he wanted to go to Baghdad, so he could take photos to document the war crimes the U.S. was committing. My cheeks burned like I'd been slapped when I overheard him tell a girl with long braided that he had to break up with his girlfriend over the summer because she was a real psycho.

I stood at our showroom door and plumped the pillows on front display bed. A cluster of young muscular men, their green Buyer's badges swinging across their black shirts, strode past the showroom without glancing toward me. An image of Kyle pulling up his pants flashed through my mind. I blinked hard to escape it. When I opened my eyes, a big sweating man in a tuxedo and top hat grinned at me as he pushed his drink cart past our showroom and down the hall. He had the waxed moustache of a cartoon villain. The wine glasses hanging upside down by their stems on top of his cart clanked so violently against each other I knew they were going to shatter.

He stopped a few showrooms down. "Ladies' hour!" he called. Vendors celebrating successful business deals poured from nearby showrooms. "Two-for-one margaritas!" he called out. "For the ladies!" I glanced at Mom, trying to catch her eye. She hated the word "ladies."

"We're *women*," Mom would correct anyone who used what she called "the L-word."

After Dad moved away we were the odd ducks of Battle Creek. My parents had moved to Minnesota from upstate New York when I was two. Fifteen years later, we were still not "from Battle Creek." Despite the fact that I agreed with Mom's convictions, she was a constant source of humiliation in a place where people expressed outrage with a mild cluck of their tongue and shake of their head. My sophomore year of high school Mom overheard Leroy LeFave call his

buddy a “pussy-whipped little bitch” when they were behind us at the checkout counter of Florian Drugs.

“Young man,” Mom snapped. “Those disrespectful and degrading words will never leave your mouth again!” She was still scolding LeRoy when I dragged her from the store. I was afraid of Leroy. His pointy-toed cowboy boots left black marks in the linoleum when he strutted and stomped down the school halls. I wanted Mom to be afraid of him too. I wanted her to keep me safe from Leroy, but instead she threw me in the line of fire.

For weeks, each time I walked by the locker where Leroy and his friends hunkered, they bleated, “Biii-aaaach,” as I scurried past.

Angela, a furniture designer who had taken my mother under her wing, breezed into the showroom. “Have time for a margarita?” She smiled at my mother with her perfectly white teeth.

“Oh, of *course*, Angela!” Mom’s voice sounded too high. “Kristen can keep an eye on things.” Her neck and chest flushed bright pink.

Angela was from New York. She was tiny with perfect blond hair. She always whispered to Mom and me the brand name of the handbag or shoes she had and made us guess the “amazing bargain price” she paid for them. Part of me was grateful to Angela; she didn’t write Mom off as a hick like most of the buyers, but the way Mom acted around her reminded me of how she’d been around Dad.

Even though Mom talked like a feminist, she was a puddle around my father. For at least two years after he left, she called him a couple of times a week crying, begging him to leave Dawn and come home. “Don’t you understand,” she’d say over and over, “this is where you

belong.” I knew I should have been extra sweet and kind, but instead I’d lock the door to my room and imagined slapping her red, swollen face just hard enough to snap her out of it. To make her act the way a mom should act.

As I watched Mom follow Angela to the drink cart, I imagined what my impression would be if I’d never met her. Her salt and pepper hair was cut very short but chic. Her skirt, rich brown velvet, was too long to be fashionable, and her shoes were unapologetically practical. Until recently the only scent I’d ever smelled on her was homemade bread and patchouli. I watched her stride down the hall with Angela until she was swallowed up by the booze-seeking crowd.

After Mom left, I grabbed a handful of tasteless rice crackers and a couple cubes of waxy looking cheese we served to buyers, crept into the closet-sized back room and shoved them into my mouth. Tacked up on the bulletin board in the back room were photos of the four years Mom and I had been coming to the High Point Show. I unpinned one of the two of us taken last spring. Her arm is around my waist and she’s smiling at whoever was taking the photo. I’m looking the other direction and laughing a big open mouth laugh. I can’t even remember what I was laughing at now. You don’t fucking know shit, I told the me in the photo before I replaced it, sticking the thumbtack through my forehead.

Now I wish I could tell mom the truth about why I missed the fall show, tell her about Kyle. About what he did to me when he walked me back to my dorm after the meeting. I think about telling her sometimes, but I stop when I remember how she looked on those late-night phone calls to my father as she pleaded with him to come home.

“This stuff is so *authentic!*” a woman said from the front of the showroom.

I peeked through the curtain, chewing furiously. She was young with a Buyer's Badge and beautiful auburn hair—the color that only comes from a good salon—and was leading her client, a grey-haired guy in an expensive suit, into the showroom. The guy looked at his watch and sipped from a plastic cup. I knew I should go out and give them the spiel about how our quilts are handmade by displaced rural farm women to help supplement their family income, blah, and blah, blah. Make it sound like our quilts were made by little apple cheeked grannies or some earthy woman with her hair held back with a bandana who'd just come from the barn, where she'd bottle-fed spotless, shitless adorable baby lambs. I knew how to sell us. Of course I never mentioned how we had to pack the quilts Delores stitched in pine scented potpourri for three days to kill the cigarette smell, or when that didn't work, spray them with Lysol, or that Marjorie, another sewer, used her earnings to buy cheap vodka and almost didn't have the quilts ready for market because she spent last Sunday in jail for a DUI.

The auburn-haired woman cleared her throat and walked to a display bed. She looked longingly at the quilt—a Jacob's Ladder design in purples and deep blues. She picked up the corner and examined the stitching then asked over her shoulder, "How's that bourbon, Charles?"

The guy frowned and swirled the liquid in the plastic cup. "Tastes like cough syrup." He plunked it on a table by the crib display and turned away like the drink was a waste of his time.

The woman laughed. I could tell it was fake, but the guy looked smug as if he'd said something really witty. "Tell you what the beds make me think of, though," he said in a low voice and grabbed her forearm.

I brushed the crumbs off my lips and stepped out of the back room before I realized what I was doing. "Can I help you?" My voice trembled but I looked the guy right in his round red face.

He dropped her arm and made a big show of looking at his giant gold watch. “If we’re going to catch up with Charlie,” he said.

“The stuff is really lovely.” Auburn Hair smiled apologetically, “Very authentic.” She smiled down at my feet. “And I love those shoes!”

“Wal-Mart.” I gave her my best authentic smile. “On clearance for six dollars.”

“Oh-h.” She walked toward the door.

I grabbed the asshole’s cup from the nightstand and gulped the contents. The taste made my stomach lurch. I crushed the cup with shaking hands and tossed it in the trash, then walked around the stuffy showroom fidgeting with tags on the pillows, wishing Mom and Angela would return. Every so often loud bursts of laughter from the direction of the drink cart made me jump. Two more days, then back to school. At least my philosophy class was okay. I could drop the two others I was failing, and maybe, the Housing Director had told me, I’d be able to move to a different dorm. Though it’s rare to allow a student to move, he’d added, without a good reason.

As I leaned down to tuck in the sheet on the baby crib a pair of meaty hands covered my eyes. I froze. I smelled Kyle’s skunky, suffocating cologne. The back of my throat tightened and the inside of my mouth taste like metal—the taste I’d learned was fear.

“Guess who!”

I knew I should say something but couldn’t catch my breath. The hands slid down my arms and rested on my hips. I wheeled around. It was just Steve. I’d been a nanny for his son and daughter in Long Island two summers ago, after my junior year of high school. He was a fabric salesman and Mom’s friend—the only one to ever come up to Battle Creek to sell his fabric in person. The only Jew to ever set foot in that forgotten part of the world, he liked to joke.

Steve reached his arms back around my waist and hugged me. Could he smell the bourbon on my breath? The wool from his tweed coat scratched my cheek. Too tight, too long. I pulled away, surprised he'd missed me. My time as his nanny was somewhat of a disaster. I'd backed their car into their neighbor's parked Lexus. I won't tell them, Steve had said glancing out the window, and neither will you. And I'd walked in on him and his wife, Rose, having sex on the couch after a Grateful Dead concert. Even though I'd seen plenty of naked men in Amanda's sister's *Playgirl*, actually seeing two people I knew in the act was startling and unreal—like the first time I saw Mickey, my sweet tabby catch a squirrel. I could never think about him the same way again.

“So how are you, Kiddo?” Steve looked around. “Where's Mom?”

“With Angela.” I nodded to the hall.

“So she's going big time.” He raised his eyebrows knowingly. “Pretty soon you two'll have to move to New York.”

“How are the kids?” I asked, not really caring. Zachary, the younger one was pleasant enough—a sunny, chubby kid—but Rachel could be moody and always seemed suspicious of me.

He plopped down on the display bed, totally verboten in Mom's book, saying something about ballet and soccer. I smiled and pretended to listen. That summer Steve and Rose had often taken me and the kids to Jones Beach. I loved the tattooed and pierced freak show on the boardwalk and the smell of the grimy ocean washing up globs of seaweed and shells. Nothing like it existed in Minnesota and I knew it made me cooler than anyone in Battle Creek just to have seen it. The last time I went with them we met up with a couple of Steve and Rose's closest friends. I forgot the woman's name, but the husband was also named Steve.

“If you get us mixed up,” the other Steve told me, “just remember he’s the skinny Jew and I’m,”—he flexed his pecks—“the Italian stallion.”

I was wearing a new tie-dyed bikini that Rose had picked out for me at a funky little boutique in the city. I’d never worn a bikini before. It’s perfect for you, Rose had assured me. I splashed around with the kids and scanned the beach for boys my age, sucked my stomach in and tugged at the bikini straps. The sun and wind on my back and belly—parts that had never been exposed in public before—felt good. Powerful, I thought. I felt like a different person than the Kristen from Battle Creek whose father ran away with a high school senior. When I headed back to my towel to warm up, the two Steves were sitting together on beach chairs and chuckling.

“Leave the girl alone already,” Rose handed each of them a Corona. “You’ll give her a complex.” She punched her Steve on the arm and picked at the label on her beer.

“Now Rosie-Honey,” the other Steve said, “your darling husband here was just repeating something his mother told him. Right, Steve-o?” He took a swig of beer. “She told him the only way you can tell if a woman is truly beautiful is to get her wet,” He chuckled again. “If she looks good getting out of the water, she’s a true beauty.” He held up his beer, winked at me, then leaned back toward Steve.

Later that night was when I walked in on Rose and Steve. I was making my way to the kitchen for a late snack, not expecting them back from the concert for at least an hour. Halfway down the stairs I saw them; Rose was lying down with one leg thrown over the back of the couch and the other stretched wide. Steve’s face was buried between them. The corners of her mouth were turned up in a little smile. Rose’s eyes met mine, but she didn’t see me. She was someplace wonderful and far away. The rest of the night I tossed and turned and pressed against my pillow. I tried to picture the man who could transport me to the place Steve transported Rose.

Mom's face was still flushed when she returned to the showroom. Steve stood up from the bed and kissed her once on each cheek. The flush spread down the front of her neck.

"What's the news?" Steve asked, putting his hands in his pockets.

"Angela says we'll be on all the Lane Furniture beds for the fall show!" She fanned her flushed neck.

He hugged her and twirled her around in a mock waltz. "I know someone who needs to buy fabric!"

While Mom and Steve planned his next trip to Battle Creek, I walked to the front of the showroom and watched the people streaming past. Everyone wore a bright green buyer's, or a red and white Vendor's Badge. Vendors were allowed only in their own showroom, but buyers could enter any showroom they wanted. Then the vendors would hand them a drink and try to entice them with whatever they were selling. I was sick of being a vendor, sick of being someone who had to let everyone in.

This, I whispered to the crowded hallway, is my last High Point Market. But what would I do if I didn't come here? Flock to Panama City or Daytona Beach with the other student hordes getting drunk and sunburned? My Students for Peace friends had organized a trip to New Orleans to build Habitat for Humanity homes. I wanted to go, but Kyle would be there. He was probably hammering away on a beam right now, thinking he was a good person. A nice guy who'd never plead, and shame, and finally force someone to have sex when all she wanted was kissing and maybe a just a little more. But not that.

"Hon?" Mom put her hand on my shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yep, fine." I tried to sound chipper.

“She looks done in,” Steve said. “Why don’t I get her something to eat and bring her back to the hotel.”

“Thanks.” Mom tucked a strand of hair behind my ear.

I got my purse and walked out with Steve. On the escalator ride down, I felt weariness wash over me and was grateful to Steve for stepping in. I thought about how good it would feel to lie down in the quiet room. We stopped at a little deli in the food court on the first floor. I wolfed my pastrami sandwich without tasting it, but Steve complained that his sandwich was stale.

“I can’t even chew this thing!” He gestured toward the man in a red apron behind the counter. “What does he think we are? Animals?”

We walked into the muggy North Carolina evening. On the corner by the shuttle bus stop, two men painted head to toe in metallic gold and wearing only Speedos were passing out free drink coupons and posing for photos with the crowd.

“Go stand with them!” Steve shoved my shoulder.

I walked up and stood between the men. They both leaned toward me and put their arms around my shoulders. They smelled like Vaseline. Sweat ran down my lower back sticking my dress to my skin. For an instant I felt the plastic-covered dorm mattress against my back and Kyle’s weight pressing me down. While Steve rummaged through his shoulder bag and took out a camera, I laughed loudly and pretended I thought mostly naked gold men were hilarious. All part of High Point fun.

I climbed on the shuttle and sat near a window in the back. Steve slid next to me. I leaned my head on the window and looked up at the building as we headed toward High Point’s small downtown. A children’s furniture company had set up a petting zoo in front of their show space

to lure in buyers with potbellied pigs and miniature donkeys. For a moment I had the crazy idea that maybe Big Gus got sold to a petting zoo and was here in one of the pens, but I looked carefully and there weren't any goats. The bus stopped at a red light.

“There are sharpshooters on all the roofs.” Steve squinted up at the roof of a bank.

“What?”

“The government hires a big anti-terrorist squad every market.” He squinted up at the roof of a bank. “So many people here all at once—High Point's a security risk.”

I looked at his face thinking he'd laugh at me for being gullible, but he didn't smile. For the rest of the trip I watched the rooftops trying to get a glimpse of a sniper, but I didn't see a trace. They must have been camouflaged or hidden behind things. I could picture them, though, scanning the crowds through their scopes. I wondered if all the buyers and vendors walking along the sidewalk in the shadows of the tall brick buildings, chatting and laughing, knew about the snipers. Maybe a sniper had me in his crosshairs through the bus window at that very moment.

When we got to the hotel, Steve asked if I wanted to get a drink at the bar. Even though I wanted to be by myself in my room, the idea of walking into it alone made my stomach do a weird flip-flop and I could start to taste that metal in my mouth again. “Sure,” I told him, trying to sound casual.

I wasn't quite twenty-one but nobody seemed to care in High Point. The bar was crowded and noisy. A guy with a flushed face and rumpled suit was singing a terrible Karaoke version of “Love Shack.” Steve steered us to a back table, away from the chaos. I ordered a gin and tonic because that's what the adults in this story I read drank. I liked the way the words looked together on the page, and tonic sounded like something that could make you feel better.

At that moment, I just wanted something to make me feel better. The gin and tonic was pleasantly bitter, like a little bit of punishment for drinking something I wasn't supposed to have.

Steve got a cardboard basket of peanuts and set it between us. He drank whiskey Cokes and talked about the cities and towns he'd visited for work as I half-listened. I thought about school, spring break and my friends and how far away I felt right now. Like I'd just skipped those years and became an adult. Steve stood and waved toward the door. Mom stood fussing with the hem of a short black dress she must have borrowed from Angela. She waved back and walked over to us. Her eyes were shiny. I waited for her to scold me for being in a bar, but she didn't.

"Isn't High Point fun, Krissy!" She put her arm around me like I was a friend. "Isn't it a *hoot!*" She giggled. "Angela and I are going *dancing!*" She leaned in close. "Don't worry, honey. It's a gay bar. They're so sweet!" She stepped away from me and turned to Steve and whispered something into his ear. His eyebrows arched, and his mouth dropped open in surprise. Then he shook his head.

"I'll be late." She turned and wove through the crowded bar, wobbling in pair of high heels.

After she left I drank two more gin and tonics very quickly. Steve kept talking, eating peanuts, ordering us drinks. Time seemed both sped up and stretched out. Men and women came in and left the bar. At some point Steve moved his chair near mine. The heavy feeling I'd had on the escalator returned.

"Let's get you to bed." His mouth brushed my ear.

I shivered and nodded.

Steve stood close to me in the elevator even though there was only one other couple—a large woman in a sequined dress nibbling on a man’s ear. The woman had hairy muscular arms and a cleft chin. I watched them in the elevator’s mirrors, pretending not to notice how close I was to Steve, unsure if I was swaying a little or if it was them.

“Good night, y’all,” she whispered to us in a low voice and winked at me as she and the man stepped out of the elevator a few floors below mine.

Steve followed me to the door of my room. I fumbled in my purse for the key. My heart pumped harder. It might have been fear, but it didn’t matter because my heart felt far away, part of some other body. When I looked up, Steve was looking at me. He touched my arm. For a second, I felt Kyle’s weight. No, I thought, and stepped closer to Steve.

My heart was beating terribly hard now, but it was okay. I could feel every artery like a pulsing rope tying me to that distant place outside my body. I shouldn’t be upset, I thought, this is no big deal. Walking alone into the room would feel worse. I squeezed my eyes shut, put my arms around Steve and pulled him the rest of the way to me, resting my head on his chest like I was in a romantic movie. After a moment I let go and opened the door. We stepped inside.

In the dark room we kissed again. His mouth tasted like whiskey and I wondered if my mouth tasted like metal. His hand slid down my back and rested on my ass. It’s no big deal, I told myself again, pressing my hips against him. I tried to conjure up the look of deep concentration on Rose’s face when I found them on the couch. If I remembered it clearly maybe I could feel that way. He patted my ass softly like the head of a friendly dog. My nose was running, and I kept snuffling. We stood together like that for a long time and then he turned on the light.

I sat down on the bed beside Mom's open suitcase. Steve walked to the bathroom. I could hear him peeing and running the faucet. When he came back he handed me a box of tissues and sat beside me.

"Kristen." He looked sad and tired. There was a fleck of peanut skin stuck to his bottom lip. "It's late," he said, "and we're both a little drunk."

I nodded.

"You'll be okay?"

I nodded again.

He went to the door, stopped with his hand on the knob and looked over his shoulder at me. "Good night," he said gently. For a moment he opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something more, then shrugged and walked out.

Mom's skirt was flung over the back of a chair, a hand-woven purple scarf trailed out of her suitcase and her brown clunky shoes waited beside it. The room seemed to ring with her absence. I wished she was back with me now, even if she was crying on the phone to my father, asking him to please, honey, come home. Please. I turned the lights back off and looked out the window down at the street. So this is how it is now, I thought, I'm alone and waiting for someone to make me feel safe. And this is how it will be for the rest of my life. But even at that moment, I didn't truly believe it.

Far away a police siren wailed, and I could see its faint red light swirling in the distance. I could see the muted shapes of people walking below me on the street, all the vendors and the buyers. I could feel the pane vibrate with the rumble of traffic and the murmur of people talking and laughing. The young, muscular men, the auburn-haired designer, the men spray painted gold, the drink cart man, even Mom and Angela at the club, dancing and high—they were all out there.

And on the rooftop the sharpshooter squats peering through the scope of his rifle, alert and ready to respond to any hidden danger.

BIRD IN HAND

The afternoon before Tom's accident I looked out the kitchen window and saw a great horned owl perched in a pine beside the shed, blinking at the dull orange sun. Forest fires smoldering in Canada wrapped everything in haze that the owl had mistaken for dusk. The owl had unsettled a flock of crows that took turns sitting next to him in groups of twos or threes cawing with all their might while the owl sat petrified. It reminded me of a funeral visitation—the way people approach the casket in little clusters, leaning on each other for comfort. Except for the spouse of the deceased who visits the casket alone. I've observed what I suspected were the tenderest words of a couple's marriage whispered over coffins. I've also witnessed pinched lips and bitter silences. I wondered which way it will be for Tom and me.

“Quit looking out that window!” Tom banged down his glass of milk “You're making me jittery.”

He was angry because his hands were shaking. They shake all the time now. I wanted to tell him about the owl and the crows because he got so much pleasure watching birds. The first year he retired, he'd installed three bird feeders in the backyard and nailed up greasy chunks of suet to our pines. He'd hammered together wood duck houses in his shed and hoisted swallow apartment complexes on tall poles beside the driveway. But I was too ashamed of the cascade of speculation the owl and crows had triggered and didn't trust myself not to blurt out my thoughts. Tom was slipping. We both knew, but pretended it wasn't happening.

To cover for the lapses, Tom spent his days at farm auctions. He never bid on things we needed like a new lawnmower or nice deck furniture, just the boxes of junk they save for the

very end. He called it treasure hunting. I went with him a few times, but he ditched me for his auction cronies, a cluster of thick-knuckled old men in seed caps clutching their Styrofoam cups of coffee.

A few months ago, he bid on a box at some widow's estate sale and came home with a bunch of baseball card and a rusted Howdy Doody lunchbox. He hauled them to the antique store in town thinking his ship had come in. But the cards weren't worth anything because they were all dog-eared and mildewed and nobody cared about a rusty lunchbox. I could have told him the same thing and saved him a trip to town, but he didn't bother to ask.

Last week, I was weeding the garden and I heard him in the shed chuckling low and dirty. I walked over and peeked in the door—it was open, so I wasn't spying. His back was to the door and he was lifting a stack of magazines from a junk box. He picked one, opened it wide and chuckled again. I had to squint to see what he was looking at and even when my eyes took it in, my brain couldn't make sense of it. It was three naked women in big bed all touching each other.

I went back to weeding and tried to pretend I hadn't seen it, but I kept thinking how those women didn't have a single strand of hair anywhere on their bodies, except on their heads, and how it made their bodies look fragile, like a nest of newborn mice. I was trying so hard not to think about those mice-women, I pulled out the whole row of carrots instead of just thinning them like I meant to.

He stayed in the shed through lunch that afternoon. I didn't bother to call him in. If he'd rather spend his day with pictures of women than his own flesh and blood wife, even when we both know he doesn't have many days left, so be it. I had plenty of housework to do. Up until he retired last year, his job as an engineer for Burlington Northern kept him gone for days at a time. I was no stranger to being alone.

The day of his accident he poured himself three cups of coffee. But abandoned each, side by side on the kitchen table after only a sip. He was in a foul mood, pacing and fingering the buttons on his shirt that he'd fastened wrong. Even though he doesn't let me drive, when he picked up the keys, I poured my fresh cup of coffee back into the pot and followed him out the door.

It was viciously windy that day. The wind knocked a whole flock of tiny yellow birds out of the pines alongside our driveway. Exhausted from trying to fly, the birds twitched and pecked in the overgrown lawn.

"Goldfinches," Tom said waving one of his big paws toward the birds. The truck swerved toward the mailbox. The metal-on-metal of the mailbox handle scraping along the driver's side door screeched at us that he'd veered too far.

"No, Hon," I ignored the scraped paint. "Goldfinches don't live around here. They're only pets like in ..."

"Bullshit! We seen them at the feeders a thousand times."

It's not like him to swear, but he had to say something drastic, so I wouldn't remind him that we saw goldfinches at Martin Luther Manor, the old folks home we toured last week. There were three finches in the corner of the community area behind a sheet of Plexiglas, almost like they were right in the room with you. Tom sat and watched the finches as the thick nail of his index finger worried a frayed patch on his trousers. My daughter Julie and I listened politely to the social worker chatter about activities and flexible meal times.

After the tour, Julie turned to Tom. "Pretty nice, huh?"

"Smells like a hospital." He frowned. "Where you put people to die."

Julie patted my hand. "You know this is best for him," she whispered.

I nodded and imagined walking into our house alone, eating dinner alone, and sleeping without him snoring beside me. Tom is almost eight years older than me, so this shouldn't have been a surprise. Still, it seems like in our forty-three years of marriage, I was always waiting for something that never quite started. I just can't wrap my mind around time passing quickly. Now, him moving into a home feels like a terrible practical joke and I was just waiting for someone to pop out from behind the couch and yell, "Ha-ha! I gotcha good!"

I glanced over at Tom's big hands resting at ten and two on the truck's steering wheel. His hands were what I noticed first about him. I was twelve years old and Tom's family had just moved to town. My big brother Ritchie invited the new kid home for dinner. All I could do was stare at his hands and giggle. My father jokingly offered him a job milking cows. Tom blushed and chuckled, but I thought his hands looked too soft for working—like a retriever puppy's oversized feet. They seemed friendly, but twitchy and not entirely under his control. Now the only thing puppyish is the hair covering them. The hair on his head and everywhere else on his body has gone gray, but the tufts sprouting from wrist to knuckles are still reddish-brown.

It wasn't until our wedding night, that I realized the full implication of those hands. I came out of the bathroom and saw him in the hotel bed, sheet up to his armpits, his pale naked arms ending in those giant hands. When he pressed his against the gold bedspread, his wedding ring straining across his potato-thick finger, I thought about what he had the right to do with them now. Blackness crept in from the sides of my vision and I got so dizzy I was sure I'd faint if I didn't lie down. The only place to lie was beside him.

Turned out he was gentle enough. I should have known that about him. I felt so guilty for letting myself be put off by my new husband's body, especially when he was the one who should

have been troubled by the condition of mine, that as soon as I recovered from feeling dizzy I threw myself all over him.

“Are you sure it’s ok?” he asked tracing a finger across my cheek. “I mean will it hurt anything?” That was the closest he came to acknowledging Julie wasn’t his child. He left the next morning for Vietnam.

When he got back from his tour of duty, his hands trembled. Some days he sat on the porch and stared at them like they belonged to an enemy. It was hard for me to imagine those hands shooting a gun or pulling the pin on a grenade. Even harder to imagine them shooting heroin into his own body the way the lines on his arms told me he did. We never talked about it, like they say couples should in all those magazines Julie’s given me lately.

I didn’t know what to say, so I stayed busy getting Julie fed and dressed; potty trained and finally on the school bus to kindergarten. I cooked the hamburger hotdish he liked with tomatoes from the garden and I let him cry without calling attention to it after he climbed on top of me at night. We didn’t need to pick the scabs off old wounds by talking about them. Better to let things alone to heal up on their own, I thought.

That summer had been lush, and my garden had grown like a jungle. I had buckets of tomatoes rotting on the back porch I should have been canning when I followed Tom out the door. He should have known I didn’t have time to waste following him to town around like a stray puppy. If he’d been himself, he’d have shooed me back to the house, but he barely noticed me sitting next to him. He muttered to himself and gestured the whole trip to town. Instead of dropping me off at Julie’s front door like usual, he pulled into the alley behind her house. I waited a moment to see if he planned to pull around front.

“Be sure you tell her about them finches we saw,” he said nodding at Julie’s house. I wondered if he’d remember to pick me up on the way home.

Julie’s husband Rich answered the door. “C’mon in, Arlene,” he smiled. He’s always so friendly to me that I can’t help but be suspicious. What kind of man would be happy to see his mother-in-law on his doorstep at 7:45 am on Saturday morning? If he lies about being happy to see me what else is he lying about?

I peeked around his big belly at Julie. She was perched at the bar stool in the kitchen wearing the blue fleece bathrobe I gave her. I knew things were bad between Rich and her by her face. It looked like a carp gone belly up. She’s always been a nervous eater. She got the habit from Tom but doesn’t have his metabolism to support the extra calories.

“Mom,” she said glancing at the clock on the stove, “you’re here early.” At least she was honest with me.

I nodded and helped myself to a cup of coffee. “He had to come into town.”

“You know you can’t keep this up.”

“Pffft,” I wave my hand, but it felt like I had fistful of gravel.

“Did you make that appointment?” Three weeks ago, she gave me the name and phone number for a counselor. In a weak moment, I’d agreed to call this man. I can see now that it would be ridiculous to sit and whine to a stranger about being lonely. Tom and I had been married over forty years, why should it bother me now—after he’s half lost his marbles—that he ignores me?

“Do you have that rhubarb crisp recipe?” I asked.

“Don’t change the subject.” She squinted at my forehead like it was a window.

“I told him you were going to show me those purple potatoes you grew.”

“Why does the counselor care about my garden?”

Sometimes for a bright young woman, my Julie can be such a ninny. She had croup as a baby and sometimes I wonder if her poor little brain starved for oxygen.

“Well,” I hesitated. Setting her straight seemed like more trouble than letting her think what she wanted to hear. “He said it was important for us to have a good, uhm, connection.” God, why did I say that? It makes us sound like batteries. “And we should spend quality time together doing things we enjoy.”

“I’m shocked, Mom.” She cocked her head and smiled at me. “I honestly didn’t think you’d go.”

I smiled back. “Can I see the potatoes?”

When Tom picked me up at four, it made me sick to look at the truck sitting low on its tires, bed filled with boxes of god-knows-what. He seemed steadier, though, whistling and tapping his hand against his knee.

“Think I’m gonna get lucky with this round.” He tilted his head toward the back. I didn’t say anything, but if I did go to that headshrinker here’s what I’d ask: Why does my husband choose to spend his last days collecting the junk other people want to rid themselves of? Why can’t he spend them with me? What’s so wrong with me?

During the back home, my eyes settle on the thin, neat line where the brown gravel on the shoulder of the highway meets the bright green ditch grass. Everything growing in the ditch is lush from fertilizer running off the soybean and sugar beet fields. I feel a twinge of guilt for lying to Julie about seeing that counselor, but I’m trying to protect her. It’s not her fault that I was such an idiot when I was young.

The things I remember now are just little snippets of the whole story. Sometimes I turn them over in my mind and feel like I'm remembering a movie: the way Martin opened his mouth wide when he laughed, the way he brushed back his shiny black hair that he was growing long, and the way he left the car running when we parked so he could listen to *American Top 40*. The story is supposed to be that the boy pressures the girl, that boys are slaves to their hormones. That might be the case for some, but when I was eighteen I couldn't wait to hop into the backseat of Martin's Rambler.

When I told him I was pregnant he just sat with his mouth open and a twirled a little piece of hair on the side of his head. Three weeks later he left for San Francisco.

A few days after Martin left, I was eating a Saulsberry steak TV dinner and watching the news with my father and brother, when Walter Cronkite talked about Roe V. Wade and how abortion was legal now. I'd been trying not to think about what I was going to do eight months down the road, but this seemed like my best option. I got the name of a lady doctor in Minneapolis from Lucille Gunderson and started saving my money. That's when Tom started coming around the house more often, taking me ice skating and out for hot chocolate. Sometimes, gliding around and holding his mittened hand, I wondered if it would be good or bad if I took a hard tumble on the ice. I still don't know if it was my brother that told Tom I was pregnant. Tom never mentioned it until our wedding night, but he'd let me know he knew in little ways, saying he couldn't wait to start a family while looking down at my belly. I don't think he knew I had a bus ticket to Minneapolis.

That box is closed now. Could be, though, that a counselor might know some way of figuring it out, even if I didn't come right out with it.

At home I watched through the kitchen window as Tom sweated over box after box, heaving them into the shed. I paced around the kitchen and tried to think of what to make for dinner. The afternoon had turned hot. Tom hated air conditioners. He never seemed to notice how miserable I was, though. He said sweat cleans the body. If that was true he must be immaculate from carrying all those boxes.

I imagined him keeling over of a heart attack right now. I thought about what I'd dress him in, what songs I'd pick and who would come to the service. It felt almost soothing until I pictured the little weasel-sharp face of Phyllis Hertz.

You can hardly begrudge a man one affair in forty-three years of marriage—one that I knew of anyway—but I certainly would have expected a better selection on his part. She's got that shrill, insincere laugh that men can't tell from the real thing. I wonder if Tom would still be obsessed with those junk-filled boxes if he had left me for her. I wonder if he thought of her when he was looking at the pictures those mice-women.

A blue-black fly jittered up the windowpane and entangled its fat body in the eyelet curtains. Tom must have unloaded his last box. He disappeared into the shed and stayed there. As I surveyed the yard littered with branches, I heard what I thought was the edger starting. Good, I thought, the yard needs some work. A few seconds later he was hollering.

I couldn't make out his words, but the sound of his voice skipped through my brain and went straight into my body. I was out the back door and through the garage before I thought. I knew it was going to be bad even before I got there. Inside the shed was dark and filled with the gut-twisting smell of blood and gasoline.

Tom was slumped against the wall with a blood-soaked rag over his right hand. "Get the hell out of here! There's a rattlesnake loose!"

My eyes darted across the dead leaf-covered floor. What caught my eye was not a snake. At first, I thought it was a piece of raw pork. Then I saw the chainsaw on his workbench.

“Son of a bitch popped out of that box, bit my thumb,” he nodded at the stack. Blood seeped from the rag and dripped into the leaves. I yanked a bungee cord from a nail on the wall and went to him.

“I said get out!” His face flared then paled. His eyes closed as I twisted the bungee cord tight about three inches above his wrist. “Don’t let the poison spread,” he murmured.

That’s when I should have called the ambulance.

But when I stood to run for the phone, a gust of wind blew through the shed door and the whole building seemed to shift backwards. A dry sound shuddered in the far corner. I didn’t know if it was the wind shuffling around the dead leaves or a real snake, but I couldn’t leave Tom in there alone.

“Let’s get you inside, Hon.” I squatted down, wrapped his good arm around my shoulders and half-dragged, half-carried him to the truck. We collapsed against the open tailgate. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against my shoulder. His breathing was ragged, and wet sounding.

“Always liked that one,” Tom whispered. I thought he was hallucinating until I realized I was swaying a little and humming “You Are my Sunshine,” like I did when Julie was a baby and sick with the croup.

If we stayed on the truck too long I wouldn’t have the energy to get him in the house. My legs shook as I stood and braced for Tom’s weight, but he supported himself. He wobbled, and I steadied him. “You always held your booze better’n me,” he slurred. “’Spose you should get me into bed.” he winked.

The couch was as far as we could manage. He was shivering, and his face was gray by the time we made it that far. I covered him with the blue afghan. Red-orange blood dripped slow but steady from the tip of the rag into the carpet. I propped his arm up on a stack of pillows. Higher than his heart, I seemed to remember someone telling me.

“I’m going to get the first aid kit,” I said.

He grabbed my arm with his left hand. “Hurry back.” Then he faded back against the cushions.

I wrapped what was left of his hand up tight in a huge wad of cotton and gauze, and then slid the bungee cord down toward his wrist. It was hard to tell if he was sleeping or passed out. I sat down on the couch next to him, pulled the afghan around us and hugged him real tight.

“Ar-lene?” He stumbled over my name like I was someone he’d just met. “Promise you won’t leave me?”

“I haven’t yet, have I?”

“But promise?” His eyes were closed, and he clenched and unclenched the afghan tassels in his fist. I put my hand over his good one.

“Honey.” He squeezed my hand tight. Then he slowly slid our hands under the afghan and up the thigh of his jeans to his crotch.

I felt drunk as I gently stroked and kneaded. It sounds terrible now, I know, but at that moment he was *with* me, maybe for the only time since our wedding night. I thought about Phyllis Hertz and those hairless girls in the magazine and rubbed harder until he gasped, and I felt dizzy with triumph.

Tom was breathing softly, and his cheeks were flushed. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. I looked out the sliding door that leads to the deck and beyond into the yard. A

cluster of goldfinches twitched around Tom's birdfeeder. Up in the pines a crow cawed quietly and farther away another answered. Past the pines I could see just the corner of Tom's shed. From down the driveway I can heard the crush of tires on gravel and Julie's car came to a stop beside Tom's truck. She'll know the right thing to do.

VACANCY

The bull chugged straight for Bethany. Tiny and helpless, she had stared up at its saggy testicles swinging with each stride. Her feet had been rooted in the pasture weeds like a dream. At the last second Pat, their Irish Setter, flattened herself under the barbed wire and snapped at the bull's heels, steering him off course and reminding Bethany to run. At least that's how she remembered it.

Bethany glanced at the clock. Her father would be there in fifteen minutes and he was rarely late. She rushed around the house and stacked newspapers into neat piles, tossed her briefcase and her daughter Hailey's riding boots in the front closet. It was only when he visited that she noticed how had dust had accumulated on top of the television, or the greenish crud around the base of the toilet—all the dirt and ragged edges of her life that she was able to ignore until they were in his sight. As she cleaned she dredged up as many details of the bull incident possible: she could picture her father as he held up the lowest strand of barbed wire in his gloved hand for her to wriggle under, then he strode over the top strand himself. Why had he led her through that pasture in the first place and why had he left her behind?

When the bull had come after her he had been far ahead, half-hidden in a stand of skinny birch. She'd stopped to look at an anthill, marveling at all the tiny bodies crowding in and out of the sand. She was wearing her brother David's hand-me-down red plaid shirt—mortifying for a girl. Doubly so because he handed it to her unwashed, full of boy smells—burning leaves, sweat, and her father's pilfered after-shave.

Of course, her father claims it never happened.

Last summer at a Bettendorf family reunion he'd humiliated her in front of a cluster of her gray-haired cousins after she told the story. He flat-out denied it. "Never happened." He thumped his beer can down on the picnic table. "Bethy has always had a flare for the dramatic." He elbowed a big-bellied male cousin. "Got it from her mother." Invoking Bethany's mother, who had recently died, trumped any argument.

Since then she has tried to make it vivid, but lately she wondered if her father might be right. Maybe she made it up as a child and convinced herself it was true. But then again, she'd loved going grouse hunting with him until one day when she hated it. Grouse hunting would explain her mother's absence—being charged by a bull never would have happened if her mother had been there. Back then undeveloped land surrounded the city and farmers didn't mind occasional hunters in their fields. Today that same land was buried under a cheap housing development. Most of the houses stood empty.

She and her husband Joe were both realtors. The market was slow, and the thought of the empty houses made her nervous. She shooed Bartleby the basset hound off the couch, set Hailey's backpack in the entry and wished she had time to vacuum. Her father's condo in Maple Grove was only forty minutes from where they lived in St. Paul. Since her mother's death four years ago, she mostly saw her father at holiday dinners, though she made a point of calling him Sunday nights because she had promised her mother she'd look after him.

Her father had retired from his job as a high school history teacher two years ago and Bethany assumed he spent his days watching TV and golfing with buddies. He rarely answered his phone during the day, so it seemed he was busy enough. She'd invited him over to ask to borrow money to buy a horse for Haley. Quite a bit of money. Bethany had promised Haley if she stuck with lessons and kept her grades up, she would buy her a horse. Haley was a

sophomore now and her interest in boys was beginning to eclipse her interest in riding. Bethany knew she needed to act quickly. A promising young gelding was for sale at the barn where Haley took lessons. A dream horse, Haley's riding instructor told Bethany, perfect breeding and confirmation.

With the stagnant housing market, Joe would never agree to spend the fifteen thousand it took to own this dream horse. The large renovated Victorian they lived in had an apartment on the third floor and they depended on rental income for spending money. Last month Maggie, the nurse who'd rented from them for three years, gave notice. She'd been hired by Doctors Without Borders and was moving to Africa. Bethany and Joe were nice about it, even donated to her cause, but it had been more difficult than they'd anticipated finding a reliable new renter. The apartment was still empty.

Last weekend when she and Joe had gone out to dinner with friends, and Bethany suggested they split a bottle of mid-priced Cabernet instead of the cheap Shiraz, he'd joked, "Give to our cause, Bethy. We're Realtors Without Boarders."

She'd laughed, of course—such a witty thing for him to say, but that night, when Joe lay snoring beside her, she remembered the gelding's tender muzzle searching her empty palm for treats and decided to call her father.

He arrived before she could vacuum. She watched him park his sporty Honda across the street. He'd gotten a new car since she'd seen him on Easter, a good sign. They'd never talked specifically about finances, but she knew he'd received a substantial insurance payment after her mother died. He lived comfortably in a pristine two-bedroom, two-bathroom condo with an on-site pool and gym. She estimated was in the \$300,000-\$400,000 range before the market turned.

She watched from the front window as her father crossed the slushy street, stooped and hesitant. It was a sunny but brisk April afternoon. She shivered. The change of seasons made her anxious. Horses, she'd noticed, reacted the same way. This shared sensitivity gave her a feeling of sympathy and comradery at the barn. She thought about the warm whoosh of breath from the gelding's nostrils and his huge fawn-like eyes. A tightness in her stomach released.

She opened the door before her father could knock. They hugged stiffly without touching torsos. He knelt at the couch and stroked Bartleby's long ears. "It's rough on us old dogs, eh buddy?" The dog's tail thumped against the cushions. "At least you have a soft place to land." The dog lowered his eyes and turned his head, overwhelmed by the unaccustomed attention.

"Coffee's ready." Bethany reached to take her father's coat.

He braced himself on the arm of the couch to stand and followed her to the kitchen. She handed him a mug and he wrapped his hands around it to warm them and sipped quietly, almost shyly. She told him again about Maggie's moving out and the empty apartment, wishing she'd baked something to offer him.

"The good news is Haley's riding lessons are going well," she said.

"Do you remember that last time we went riding?" he asked. "You were just a little thing. The mare I was riding bolted and your pony was tied to it?" He stared at her through thick, smudged glasses giving Bethany the impression she was looking at him through deep, murky water. Then he looked down into his mug leaving her to wonder which one of them was submerged and which one was on the surface.

No, she shook her head. She remembered the day, but she imagined how her brother, David would handle her father. David would advise her to refuse to let her father take over the conversation and her steer away from the subject of Haley's horse.

“She never let me take you riding again.” He nodded at the small ruby ring on Bethany’s finger, her mother’s engagement ring.

Bethany twisted the ring. She’d seen her father eye it. She tried to imagine him picking it out—a nervous, broke kid in his early twenties—and presenting it to her mother. He’d been so shy, her mother had told her, that when he gave her the ring, for weeks she hadn’t been quite sure it was an engagement ring. Eventually she had to ask him directly

Even though her mother had died only a few years earlier, it was difficult for Bethany to imagine her parents as a married couple. Her father referred to her mother as Barbara instead of “your mother,” off-handed, as though her mother had been a casual acquaintance. When her father selected her mother’s headstone, he hadn’t considered having his name carved next to hers. She complained to Joe, after a few glasses of wine, about her father using her mother’s insurance money to buy a new car just a week after the funeral.

“Haley’s riding instructor says she’s ready to show third level dressage.” Bethany tried to meet her father’s eye, but he looked into his mug. “I’d love to see what she could accomplish with a good horse instead of those old plodders at the riding school.” Bethany plunged ahead directing her words to the pink circle of scalp on top of her father’s head. “But we can’t really afford that, not without a new renter.”

“Do you mind?” Her father set down his mug and stretched theatrically. “Is it okay if I have a look?”

She explained Haley’s next riding lesson wasn’t until Thursday.

No, he said. He wanted to see the apartment.

Bewildered, she led him up the back staircase and unlocked the door. Dealing with the apartment had always been Joe’s job. Bethany hadn’t been inside the apartment in months. She

always pitied Maggie and the previous renters for living in such a tiny place, but emptied of furniture and clutter, it felt more spacious than she remembered. The ceiling was high, and sunlight filtered through the sheer curtains making a dappling the wood floor. It was quieter here, too. All the usual noises from the house, Bartleby's whine and low bark at pedestrians, the dishwasher's reverberating hum, were audible, but buffered.

Behind her, her father hesitated and leaned against the arched doorway to the living room as if waiting for an invitation. Irritated with his awkward formality, Bethany clenched her jaw and walked down the hall to the bedroom. Maggie had painted it a deep red. Most renters had gotten their permission before painting and Joe had limited their options to lighter colors that he could easily paint over when the renter moved. Joe laughed and said it must be a color Nurse Maggie was drawn to.

As Bethany watched tattered a white moth climb the black velvet curtain and flit against the window, she remembered Maggie stopping by to drop off the final rent check. Her eyes had been red and puffy. She'd asked for Joe; when Bethany told her he'd gone for a run, Maggie thrust the check inside an envelope, handed it to Bethan and hurried out. Bethany had hung the envelope on the bulletin board in the kitchen. In the morning it was gone.

The shuffle of her father's footsteps as he crossed the living room floor set her teeth on edge. She leaned out the bedroom doorway and watched. He parted the curtains letting in a stab of light, and then squinted around as if calculating rows of invisible numbers. He turned facing her; a dark shadow silhouetted against the light. "Are you sure she can't remember that runaway horse?" he asked.

He had been sure Bethany would ask him to move in to the apartment. Why else would she have told him about the renter moving out three times? Why else would she have invited him over for coffee? He'd have to say yes, of course. What choice did he have? The bank would foreclose on his condo in a month tops, unless he could win some of the money back.

Bethany had no idea he'd lost the money, and he'd never tell her. He hovered in the doorway of the dark apartment, as she stood looking into the bedroom. But why hadn't she just come out and asked him? He opened the curtains hoping to jar her out of her thoughts and remind her simultaneously of his presence and the empty space that surrounded them.

There was always the chance he could win some of the money back, pay the bank enough to get them off his back. He hadn't completely given up on that yet. He'd won more than that in a month before. The trouble now was he didn't have enough to place any big bets. No big bets, no big winnings.

Jack had passed Canterbury Downs with Barbara going to and from chemo. He'd joked about taking her to the track when she was better, but she just fussed with her red wig—askew from the car's headrest—and rolled her eyes. At the time he thought her eye rolling was about the track, but now he wonders if it was because she already knew there would be no "better." He'd started going to the track a few months after Barbara died just to watch the horses. Something about the way their muscles bunched and stretched, bunched and stretched when they ran soothed him. The first time he put money down at the track he felt a teenage rush of rebelliousness when she thought about how Barbara would've disapproved of the way he was spending her money.

He'd won money that time—a straight trifecta. He'd had big plans for what he would do with Barbara's insurance money: pay for Haley's college and leave a fat inheritance for Bethany

and David. At the time he thought it was more than he could spend in three lifetimes and he was already an old widower. It was boggling how quickly he'd burned through it at the track. Wins were much easier to remember than losses.

It felt right to Jack that Haley loved horses, as though his long days at the track connected him to his granddaughter. *We can't help it; it's in our blood*, he'd tell himself after a losing day. *We're just crazy for horses.*

He turned from the window to ask Bethany again about that day the mare bolted on them. She must have been a second, maybe third grader at the time. That riding stable kid—*wranglers*, they wanted to be called—gave him a red mare. He remembered that clearly. And the place he remembered, too, a rickety wooden barn where he took the kids on weekends to ride rented horses. Sunlight snuck between gaps in the barn's siding. It looked like one hard shake would collapse the whole thing. *Seedy*, Barbara had called it. She was right, but that was why he liked it. Anyway, out of the twenty-five or so horses, the kid gave him that red mare. She was new. Just got her last week, kid said, but she hadn't given anyone any trouble.

The kid looked Bethany up and down in a way that made Jack slide closer to her. "How much's she weigh?" the kid asked.

"About sixty." He had no idea. She was on the chunky side then and he subtracted five pounds from his lowest guess.

The kid braced his boot against the ribs of an old dun pony to tighten the cinch. The pony staggered and exhaled hard.

"Dad!" Bethany called out, "I get to ride Lucky!"

As the kid stepped toward the red mare and tethered the pony's reins to the saddle horn, she jiggled away from him and rolled her eyes. *That's when I should have demanded another*

horse, he thought, but the kid's swagger made it hard to question his authority. Of course Jack knew now that he was just some city kid playing John Wayne at a run-down horse barn on the edge of town. The kid was probably only five or six years older than the sixth graders Jack taught, but he spit and looked hard at Jack from under his cowboy hat.

Jack took the reins. The mare danced around as he got on. He could feel the tension in her body where his legs hugged her sides. "Ho there, girl," the kid soothed. Once they moved out the mare seemed okay. The kid waved to them from the front of the barn as they rode off. *That's the way it was back then*, Jack thought, *no trail guide, no liability waiver to sign*. Nothing like when he watched Haley ride in shows now. Bethany had her suited up in a giant helmet and what looked like a bulletproof vest. He thought smugly about how much better off people were from his generation, who were always at peace with risk compared with Bethany's who aren't okay with a smidgen.

He steered the mare and pony out on a trail through the woods that ended up down by the river. It was about a mile long. Bethany chattered like a blue jay the whole ride. When they got to the river, the pony's left front leg looked off, so Jack turned the horses around. The moment he turned her toward the barn, the mare bolted. Like she was being chased by a pack of wolves. Dragging tethered pony and Bethany along behind her. He yanked the reins, but the mare tucked her head and crow-hopped, threatening to toss him out of the saddle. It took all his strength just to stay on.

Jack had dreamed about that moment lately. Only in his dream he was able to control the mare. Sometimes she got a few strides on him, but he always pulled her back down to a jog, looked over his shoulder and got a glimpse of the relieved and grateful expression on Bethany's pale moon face.

But that wasn't how it really happened. Somehow Jack had clung to the saddle. A branch whipped his eyes, leaving him no choice but to squeeze them shut. *Hold on*, he'd called to Bethany over the pounding hooves. The pony groaned behind him.

At the hitching post by the barn the mare stopped fast. Jack collapsed over her shoulder rubbing his eyes. The pony stood on three legs beside him, sides heaving and saddle empty.

"Help me find my girl, goddamn it!" he screamed at the kid.

The kid shrugged and followed him down the trail on horseback. They found Bethany crouched on the side of the trail, the sleeve of her plaid shirt tangled in a strand of barbed wire.

"I couldn't hold on," she said.

Shaking, he shut Bethany safe in the car then climbed in beside her. The last he saw of that place was the red mare lathered with sweat, the kid lashing her with a long whip, running her in tight circles over and over again.

"You really can't remember?" He looked out at the empty street. He'd never told Barbara about that day and he'd told Bethany not to either—a secret, just between the two of them. She stepped closer behind him. He heard her jagged breath. Somewhere in that memory, he sensed, was both an apology and an explanation for how things were between them, but unless she remembered it was worthless. Jack fiddled with the curtains, when he looked out the window he saw that small empty saddle reflected back at him. He gestured at it, but she'd already stepped away.

SANCTUARY

The bank entrance feels like a sauna. Sweat rolls down my chest as I punch my PIN into the ATM. I glance out the door and force a smile at Dave and Caitlin who are waiting in the car. Behind the wheel of his silver Mazda, Dave looks like the guy in the razor commercial with aviator sunglasses and a chiseled chin—the man women can't keep their hands off. He's tapping his fingers against the steering wheel, impatient to leave. Only the top of Caitlin's head is visible as she slouches behind my empty seat. My dog Millie's grizzled nose pokes out from around Caitlin. She's panting and alarmed—I've strayed from the pack.

Heat rises from the parking lot and the car shimmers like a mirage, like the whole thing could disappear in an instant. I glance outside at the bank's time and temperature sign—5:57 pm and 93 degrees. The machine spits out my account balance—negative twelve dollars and sixty-eight cents. The numbers verify it: I am late, overheated, and irresponsible.

I glance back at the car to see if Dave is watching. He has no idea about my bank account balance. We've been married for almost a year and I haven't told him how much the wedding set me back. When we planned the wedding I told him I had a savings account. My wedding to Keith, Caitlin's father, was a crappy Justice-of-the-Peace quickie with a keg reception. Marrying Dave was my only shot at a nice wedding, so I did it up big. My dress had a train a mile long with fancy embroidery and pearl embellishments. I carried a bouquet of roses bigger than my head, served a five-layer red velvet cake that was so good I got tears in my eyes every time I tasted it. Caitlin was my nine-year old maiden of honor, my princess in burgundy taffeta. I didn't even care that most of the guests were Dave's work buddies from the car

dealership. They're a nice-looking group of guys and only a few of them got drunk. Still, I wish my mom could have been there.

But I didn't have as much in savings as I implied to Dave. Just two hundred and fifty bucks. I put the rest of the wedding expenses on three different credit cards at twenty-four-point nine percent interest. By the time I pay the minimums each month I don't have much paycheck left. Pretty soon, I keep telling myself, I'll tell Dave, but not yet. He makes better money at the dealership than I do as a CNA at Martin Luther Manor, and he'd probably help me pay for our wedding.

Dave beeps the horn—just one tiny little tap—to let me know he's in a hurry. I crumple up the receipt and toss it in the trash then pretend to slide some money into my purse in case Dave is watching. Sometimes I picture us sitting on an old-fashioned balance scale. His side is always more substantial. I try to remind myself that's why I liked him in the first place. Dave is rock solid. If it were Keith and me on the scale it would be tipped to my side, not that I'm that responsible. Keith was always floating away on ideas, music, beer. At the end it was mostly beer.

“All set!” I say sliding into the Mazda's passenger seat. I wink at Caitlin. She flinches and stuffs her hands between her knees so I can't see them. I reach back and pull her hands up. She doesn't resist. She's wrapped a rubber band tight like a tourniquet around her thumb cutting off the circulation. She stares at her purple skin and pokes it with her index finger.

“Quit!” I say giving her hand a little smack. She grins and waggles her swollen thumb at me.

“Give it here.” I hold out my hand. She untwists the rubber band and shoots it at my head. “I'm sick of this...” Before I can launch into my usual lecture Millie—who hates

arguments—jumps into my lap and licks my nose. Her breath smells like decay and I know Dave is wincing.

“I know, Mil,” I say shoving her into the back. “But you can’t always have things your way.” I want Dave to hear me denying Millie. She was a gift from Keith for my nineteenth birthday. I’m pretty sure he just found her on some gravel road on his way home from the bar, a tiny dark blob in the headlight of his Harley.

Dave shakes his head. “You’ve got to remember, Hon,” he says. “The Skilletts are not dog people.”

Caitlin giggles; I shoot her a glare and nod seriously. Tom Skillett owns the car dealership and just promoted Dave to manager. He and Dave go fishing every year, but this is the first time Caitlin and I have been asked to visit their cabin.

As soon as we hit I-94, Caitlin’s knees poke into my back through the seat. It’s her way of protesting being packed into a two-door car. She tells me she feels like she’s suffocating in the back. I suggested we take my minivan, but Dave doesn’t trust my transmission.

I stretch Caitlin’s rubber band between my fingers. It’s brittle and threatens to snap.

“Let’s stop for ice cream,” I say. The smell of fries lingers in the car and reminds me I haven’t eaten dinner. I made Caitlin mac and cheese before we left and had some chicken defrosting for Dave and me. But when he got home from work he tossed an Arby’s bag in the trashcan and said we had to hurry.

Dave cranks the air conditioning and glances at the gas gage. “I’ll have to stop in an hour. We can get some then.”

“Sure.” The last thing I ate was a Pop Tart at ten-thirty this morning.

I glance back at Caitlin. She's pretending to be asleep. Her bangs hang over her eyelids. She needs a haircut but won't let me give her one and I can't afford to take her to a salon. Her budding breasts poke through her T-shirt. One of my credit cards isn't maxed; I'll have to buy her some bras.

Even though her eyes are closed, she must feel me watching her. She squirms, stretches and sets her hand palm up in her lap. On her wrist is the small heart-shaped scar from last summer. She was late coming home and I went looking for her at the park. I caught her inside the tube slide with Hunter Blajek. He was giving her a tattoo by piercing her skin over and over with a ballpoint pen.

"Didn't that hurt, Sweetheart?" the ER doctor had asked her.

She shook her head and stared out the door. "Not when we were inside the slide."

After an hour and a half, we turn off the interstate onto a narrow curvy road. The rows of skinny pines on each side remind me of prison bars. Dave lives for this kind of drive. He leans over the steering wheel like he's urging on a sluggish horse. Maybe it's just my empty stomach, but I'm queasy and wonder what was wrong with the men who built this road. Why did they have to take something that should have been a simple straight line and turn it into a bucking, twisting carnival ride?

I lean my head back and close my eyes. It's stuffy in the car but I manage to drift off. I dream that Caitlin and Millie are too heavy for Dave's car and he shows me a button inside the glove compartment that makes the back seat fall out through the floor. I push it and without them, we zip along so lightly we float off the road, up and over the tops of the pines. When I

look down I see Caitlin waiting and Millie looking up wagging her butt and I know I'm going to vomit.

Jolting awake, I grab my purse—Dave's just had the car detailed—but the nausea passes. Dave chuckles and pats my knee. "God, do you snore!"

"I was dreaming your car could fly," I say because he likes when I talk about his car. I leave out the part about the back seat and Caitlin and Millie.

Up ahead is an old-fashioned white church in the middle of a clearing—tiny with a sagging roof and taped-up windows. Caitlin leans forward, punches my shoulder and points at the church.

"It looks like Our Church Home," she whispers.

We used to drive past a place like it in the middle of nowhere on the way to Keith's mom's place. I made him stop there the first time I saw it. Maybe all the water-into-wine stories from my childhood seeped into my bones, but I loved the rose and cross stained glass and the heavy carved doors. Something about the place felt important, maybe even holy. A few years ago there was a "For Sale" sign taped to it. I don't understand how you can sell a church.

Around that time Keith started drinking hard. When I couldn't sleep, I'd take Caitlin into my bed, stroke her hair and tell her how some day we'd buy that church for our house. I'd tease her about how I'd ring the bell in the steeple to call her for supper and how we'd play hide and seek in the sanctuary.

I look back at Caitlin, her long skinny legs folded to fit into the backseat. For Mother's Day the year Keith and I split up she gave me a church-shaped bank. "To save for Our Church Home," she told me. She shook it so I heard her savings rattling inside.

Guilt punches my gut when I think about the times I raided it for cigarette and babysitter money. How can I blame her for being angry when we moved into Dave's sub-division ranch house? It's a poor substitute for Our Church Home.

The sun is setting. Red-orange shafts of light glare between the black pine trunks. Dave must have forgotten about ice cream. Looking back, I watch the stripes of shadow move over Caitlin's face and Millie's copper coat. I'm still groggy from my nap and disoriented. I know we haven't driven for long, but it feels like we're far from home and I'm overwhelmed by the urge to apologize to them. Reaching back, I stroke Millie's head, but she noses my hand away.

For miles we're the only car on the road. After what feels like days there's a vehicle ahead of us: a new truck hauling a rusty little trailer with three or four horses crammed inside. Their progress is too slow for Dave, so he speeds up to pass. As he steers the Mazda a long side the trailer a red horse stretches her neck out of the window and watches our car. Her eyes are wide and her nostrils flare and contract taking in the wind. Millie jumps up and barks once—because she knows that's all she can get away with—then presses her nose against the window growling softly, warning the horse to stay where she belongs.

The last of the sunset melts away and Dave flicks on the headlights. Up ahead a green sign reads, "Welcome to White Earth Reservation." Glancing at Dave, I open my mouth to ask if we're lost, but he looks so confident that I shut it without saying anything.

We reach another sign, Bijou 7 miles. My empty stomach feels like it's collapsing in on itself. "Wake up, sleepy head," I whisper to Caitlin. "We're almost at Dairy Queen."

In the distance, the dark sky reflects Bijou's light. We pass a clearing in the pines and a head of us is a small but brilliantly lit casino with a nearly empty parking lot. "You can drop me off here," I joke, imagining cheap all-night buffets.

Dave frowns. “Caitlin, they teaching you percentages in fifth grade?”

“A little.”

“What percentage of a chance does your mom have at walking out of a casino with more money that she had going in?”

“Fifty?”

“No, Darlin’ it’s way less than that.” He glances over his shoulder at her. “More like negative one percent.”

Caitlin crosses her arms across her chest and looks hard through her bangs gaging my face before she answers. “You can’t have neg...”

But I cut her off. “I don’t see how going to a casino is much different than selling cars—gambling that someone’s gonna buy them so you make commission—and you seem to do okay.” I’ve never picked an argument with Dave in front of Caitlin, but I’m hungry and we’re speeding away from everything that feels comfortable and familiar to me.

“I work my ass off, Michelle.” His foot goes down; I feel the car accelerate. “Seven. It takes an average of seven contacts for one sale. That sound like gambling?”

My heart hammers. Even though I’m facing forward I can feel Caitlin’s eyes on the back of my neck. “Irregardless,” I say hating the squeaky sound in my voice. “It’s Tom Skillet’s money you’re risking. At least gamblers risk their own money.”

“If Tom cans me for poor performance, I’ll remind you how I’m not risking anything.” He switches the radio on to an 80’s station and Bon Jovi fills the silence. I wanted the fight—wanted Caitlin to see me stand up to him. I haven’t smoked for over two years, but, I’d kill for a cigarette. Instead I say nothing and dig my fingernails into my palm, leaving four crescent-shaped welts.

A few miles ahead the rest of Bijou: two bars and an empty grocery store with a shaggy teddy bear propped against a broken chair in the display window. The only building that looks new is a bland brick post office.

Dave pulls into T-Bear's Gas and Bait. There's no pay at the pump, so he goes inside. Through the window I watch him chatting and laughing with the guy at the till. You can take the car salesman off the lot. I used to admire how he could strike up a conversation with strangers. I was proud of how comfortable he was inside his own skin and I thought maybe I could learn how to feel that way from him, but now I wonder if it's an act.

Across the street is a little building with yellow neon sign that says "Dairy Hut." It's an old-fashioned walk up, not even a real Dairy Queen. The sign might as well say "Cheap Imposter," but under these circumstances what choice do I have?

"There's our ice cream," I tell Caitlin. She nods without bothering to look up then shifts her legs. Through the seat her knees jab a new tender spot in my back.

When Dave returns to the car I call out and point to Dairy Hut. He nods, grabs the squeegee and goes to work on the windshield.

"I'll get us something." I tell Caitlin. There's about three dollars' worth of change in my purse.

"Make sure you get extra napkins," Dave calls after me.

Warm air drapes against my bare legs as I step out of the car. A group of teenagers cluster around Dairy Hut and they laugh together at the same joke. A few of them glance over at me. A tall skinny boy pantomimes washing a car window and the girls all laugh.

Across the street a small dark mass is pressed against the curb. In the dim light it's hard to tell and at first I think it's an animal that's been run over. Squinting I cross the street and walk

closer. It's a pair of denim shorts, long and baggy like a boy would wear; could belong to any of them at the ice cream place. The edge of something black pokes out of a back pocket. A wallet.

I nudge the shorts with my foot and look around. The kids are too busy laughing to notice. Dave's squeegeeing the rear window, but Caitlin and Millie are both watching me. I stoop and wiggle the wallet out—it's swollen with bills. My heart feels like it's beating inside my empty stomach. I slip the wallet into my purse feeling its heft as the straps strain against my tense shoulder. God knows how much money is in there. I should tell someone, of course I should. I'm lightheaded and my knees buckle when I try to stand. I plunk down hard against the curb. I'll feel better after I eat.

I stand, slip my hand inside my purse and open the wallet without taking it out. The bills look to be all twenties at first but it's too dark to be sure. I count twelve and then see what looks like fifties.

The teenagers at Dairy Hut watch me walk up. "Hey Lady, order me a steak! Medium rare!" One of the boys calls. The rest laugh and a few parrot. "Yeah, me too!" I smile back wondering if it's his wallet.

"Not me," a tall girl wearing a red sports uniform says. "I'll take caviar and champagne."

They make room for me at the order window.

"Three large hot fudge sundaes." I grin at the girl inside the tiny shack like I'm in on the joke and slip a twenty out from the wallet hidden inside my purse. She wipes sweat from her temple, slides her hand across her apron and takes the money. My hands shake as I walk back to the car. Sticky melted ice cream trickles over my fingers. I forgot napkins. Dave is back in the driver's seat and ready to go. I hand him a sundae and set my purse on the floor. My breathing is loud and raspy.

“What was that?” Caitlin asks as I hand her the sundae. “The thing you picked up?”

Dave rubs his fingers together and looks around.

“Honey, I forgot napkins.” I tell Caitlin.

The muscles of Dave’s jaw tense. “Hurry, go get some Caitlin,” he says without looking at her.

I feel her eyes on me. She wants an answer. She slips out of the backseat carefully balancing her ice cream. Millie hops into her empty seat and looks wistfully after her but stays. Even though I’ve set down my purse and the wallet I still feel its weight on my shoulder as I sag into the seat.

Caitlin crosses the street and approaches the group in front of Dairy Hut. A boy with a braid asks her a question and she shakes her head no first, and then nods and waves her arm toward us. My hands tremble and I drip ice cream on my shirt. She looks over her shoulder at me in the car and shrugs. I pick up my purse and set it in my lap twisting the strap around my wrist.

I’m aware of how closely I’m sitting to Dave. Closer than I want. I turn away and stretch my legs out the door and into the parking lot where the gravel grudgingly releases heat from the day. My legs are more muscular than I remember, like they belong to someone else. There’s a streak of oil or mud across my shin. Past Caitlin and the teenagers, on the hill behind Dairy Hut slumps a row of junky little pastel houses. Past the houses are the two bars, and then the casino, and the rows of pines along the empty highway. What’s beyond that, I don’t know.

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