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HOW TO SEE IN THE DARK

By

Nancy G. Gold

THESIS

Submitted

to

Northern Michigan

University

In partial fulfillment of the

requirements

For the degree

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

Title of Thesis: How to See in the Dark

This thesis by Nancy G. Gold is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

HOW TO SEE IN THE DARK

By

Nancy G. Gold

I lived for many years in Ann Arbor, where there is a large and visible homeless population. Within the city limits hundreds people, including families and children, live in cars, tent encampments, under bridges, and in the woods. Whether they suffer from mental illness or unfortunate circumstance, these people are seen as separate from normal society. There is also a residential traumatic brain injury facility, The Eisenhower Center, which houses 150 people and whose mission includes active involvement by the clients with the community. Interactions between those seen as the “other” and the “mainstream” residents are common.

I believe that we need to find a more effective and humane way of responding to people who are unable to fit into traditional expectations of society. The stories in my thesis include characters that are often seen as the “other,” including those dealing with dementia, homelessness, and mental illness. I hope these stories will help bring awareness both of the problems people outside societal norms face, and their humanity.

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2013

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my dad, with thanks for all of his love and support.

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This author would like to thank her thesis director, Jennifer A. Howard, for her unwavering dedication and support, without which I could never have grown so much as a writer. I'd like to thank Dr. Beverly Matherne for her many hours of work and instruction in the music of the English language. To Dr. Lisa Eckert go my thanks for her close attention to the way my stories worked, often seeing things I had not noticed myself, and always helping to make my stories better.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

The state trooper relates the details of my son's car accident: how he drifted back and forth across the lanes before he overcorrected, hit the ditch, went airborne, didn't roll but flipped, end over end, three times, finally coming to rest on what was left of the tires. Although I know this happened at 70 miles per hour, in my mind it's a slow ballet—a sashay to the left, plié to the right, a grande jeté into a twirl of limbs and head impacting the steering wheel, dashboard, and side window.

My son will be medevaced to the University of Michigan medical center in Ann Arbor. His injuries are too severe to be treated at the small Grayling hospital where he was transported after the accident. I'm in Marquette, 468 miles away from Ann Arbor, working on a master's degree in creative writing.

Was anyone else in the car, the trooper asks. If someone was with him we haven't been able to find them. When he left my house this morning, I answer, he was alone.

I sit at my computer during the call, frantically scribbling notes. When I hang up I find I'm at the window, looking out at the driveway where my son had been parked a few hours before. I look around. I feel like I've been picked up and set back down in a different spot.

I catch the last flight to Detroit. They let me see my son an hour after I get to the hospital. He's so still. This isn't sleeping. This is something closer to death. The right side of his face is swollen, and five parallel gashes line the jaw. The outside of his ear, sliced into flaps, has been re sewn. Why the right side? I can imagine broken glass on the driver's side window cutting and slashing, but not what might cause this damage on the right. It isn't until two years later, when I peer into the window of the same model car, that I see the vents on the dashboard. The side of his head hit them hard enough to ribbon his ear, to incise their shape into his jaw.

My son is intubated, has a gastric tube run through his nose, IVs in both arms. Every ten minutes a blood pressure cuff squeezes his arm and releases with a whoosh. The ventilator hisses and clicks. His breathing is monitored to see if he or the machine is doing the work. His condition is so critical that he is the sole patient of his nurse. I am learning a new vocabulary. Traumatic brain injury. Diffuse axonal injury. He is taken away for scans to determine if he needs intracranial pressure monitoring—a hole drilled into his skull so a device can be inserted to measure the pressure and shunt away excess fluid.

Our brains did not evolve to cope with high-impact events like car accidents, boxing, football, and other assaults to the head. The brain sloshes back and forth within the skull, moving away from the point of contact, and slamming into the opposite side of the bony casing, causing additional damage. This is called a coup contrecoup injury. Because of the limited space inside the skull, any swelling, any rise in pressure, presents a danger. We're lucky, they tell us. Our son's brain is bleeding, but the pressure hasn't risen to the point of needing surgery. I will come to hate any mention of being lucky.

The Glasgow Coma scale was developed to give a common guide for determining level of consciousness. The scale rates eye, verbal and motor responses. Three is the lowest; fifteen is a normal awake person. At the accident scene my son scores 3: no physical response to painful stimuli, makes no sounds, does not open his eyes to speech or painful stimuli. The scale is a tool to help medical staff assess a patient's progress through levels of responsiveness.

What painful stimuli are used to attempt to elicit a response? I saw doctors and nurses pinch the skin between my son's neck and shoulder, or perform a sternal rub. The sternal rub involves grinding a knuckle against the patient's sternum in an up and down motion. So the first thing my son will feel

as he returns to consciousness, or the last thing he will feel as he slips away to die, is pain.

The next day the doctor compares my son's injury to putting Jell-O in a bowl and giving it a good hard shake. Tears and breaks and ruptures occur throughout. This is what happens with a diffuse axonal injury. Axons, which receive and send messages throughout the brain and nerves, are torn and broken. Tissues slide over one another. The axons, normally elastic, become brittle when rapidly stretched. As with so many cells, they produce chemicals when damaged that lead to cell death. The body reacts to the injury, and this chemical cascade can lead to the death of adjacent cells. Damage continues over hours or days, so the severity of an injury may not be apparent at first. The injury to the brain will continue for about two weeks, they tell me. There's no way short of autopsy to determine the extent of the damage, or where it is located. The damage doesn't appear on scans.

Easier to see, because they do appear on the scans, are the subarachnoid hematoma and what the neurosurgeon calls a "ding" in my son's brainstem. Despite repeated requests, the neurosurgeon will not give a more technical explanation. Is this really how he thinks of it? Or does he think me incapable of understanding it any other way?

It's too early to talk about what deficits son might have, if he survives.

Shaken baby syndrome is a diffuse axonal injury. Years ago a friend of mine created an ad campaign where the University of Michigan football players were photographed holding infants, and vowing never to shake a baby. How many blows to the head had these young men endured to be a part of this elite college team?

An earthquake is the movement of the earth along a fault. One section moves up, or down, or sideways relative to another. The movement is fast and jarring. The energy released by this movement moves in waves that, depending on their intensity, causes tsunamis, cracks to open at the surface, or mild tremors that leave people turning to one another and asking, did you feel that?

The Modified Mercalli Intensity Scale measures the human-centered damage caused by an earthquake. Instead of a logarithmic progression of energy intensity, the scale is based on observations. Did china rattle in cabinets? Books fall off shelves? Foundations crack? Bridges fall? Even if the quake scores high on the Richter scale, if it happens where it doesn't impact people, it might not even register on the Modified Mercalli Intensity Scale.

I picture my son's diffuse axonal injury akin to an earthquake in his brain. The Modified Mercalli Intensity Scale seems most relevant—depending on where the injuries occurred, and to which structures, there will be more or less permanent damage.

Before the rebuilding can begin the wreckage must be cleared. My son needs to be able to respond.

There's a separate waiting room for the trauma/burn unit, where my son is being treated. In addition to a TV which is constantly on, usually sports or HGTV. Every patient in the trauma/burn unit is in bad shape. One man was badly burned when a propane grill exploded. If his mother hadn't been right there, the son told me, watering the garden with a hose, his father wouldn't have survived. Another woman had driven into the back of a semi at 3:00 in the morning. Her blood pressure was so low they couldn't give her pain medication. I passed her room on my way to see my son, and her moans and cries could be heard throughout the unit. "I'm dying. I'm dying," she said, over and over.

We become a temporary community bonded by shared crises. The woman's father tells me his girlfriend is complaining he isn't spending enough time with her. It's hard to understand why someone would respond that way. It's hard to remember our lives were ever any other way.

Although there is an inn inside the hospital complex, the number of rooms is smaller than the people wanting them. Family members living within a two or three-hour drive must commute to the hospital, or find lodging in the city. Not suggested but not forbidden is the use of the chairs and couches available throughout the complex. Every seat large enough to lie down on is staked out. One family kept up a rotation on the single couch in the trauma/burn waiting room. I'm granted a room at the hospital hotel because I'm almost 500 miles from home, and my son's condition is so critical. Aren't you lucky, I'm told.

When I walk back to my room in the evening, through the lobbies and waiting areas, I pass people sleeping on benches and couches and chairs pushed together. They are covered with blankets, bags of clothes and toiletries and food on the floor beside them. Here, with a need to stay close to their loved ones, finding a space to sleep and piling your possessions beside you seems normal.

I sit there for days wanting nothing more than for my son to open his eyes, thinking everything will be okay if he just wakes up. On the third day the doctors say my son is waking up, but clearly we don't use the word "awake" the same way. My son is moving. He looks like he's trying to scoot off the bed or turn over onto his stomach. Despite being restrained at the wrists and ankles, he sometimes manages to get a leg off the bed. His arms stretch out, stiffen, curl

back to his chest. Some sort of message is moving from the brain to his muscles. It doesn't appear to be coherent. He has progressed to a vegetative state.

When a patient responds to his or her environment, the medical staff considers this being awake. My son still doesn't respond to verbal commands. Doctors and nurses lean into his face and shout. "Squeeze my hand. Open your eyes." Nothing. But when they pinch him or do a sternal rub, he moves. They decide he's localizing to pain, though still not responding to verbal commands or opening his eyes. He's given a new Glasgow Coma Scale score of 6 or 7. The diagnosis remains: severe traumatic brain injury.

When he does open his eyes, I wish only for him to close them again. They stare out, unfocused. There is no awareness within. He is physiologically responsive to the environment, but not conscious. It is the first time I truly understand that he might never return to normal.

One way medical staff evaluates awareness is through orientation. Can the patient answer these questions: Where are you? What is the date? What is your name? Do they understand time, place, and person? Or is the compass reset, the map redrawn?

I don't know if a neurologist would agree, but I imagine the billions of neurons in the brain as a vast road system. Signals start out at one point and follow a route through other neurons to get to the correct destination. I know it's more complicated than that. But this gives me a picture that I can grasp.

Perseveration is not uncommon with a brain injury. The person gets stuck on a thought or an action, and can't move on to another. This can happen in schizophrenia, also. I picture it as a neuron sending a signal out. At some point it comes to the damaged area of the brain, which acts like a dead end, or a detour. The signal circles around, looking for a way to get through.

It was once thought that nerve cells did not regenerate. Spinal cord injuries remain irreversible. But they've found that the brain can, to a limited extent, create new pathways. This is done throughout life when we learn something new, and certainly as children it happens a great deal. My son will relearn some things: how to walk, talk, swallow, eat. Many things—the ability to accurately judge situations and people, to see different possibilities for actions and outcomes, how to deal with stressful situations—will remain elusive. These complex behaviors, often called executive functioning, are mostly housed in the frontal lobes. Lots of road damage there. Big potholes, whole roadways out, bridges that end with no warning over the gaps.

My son has injuries throughout his brain. They diagnose the areas and extent of the damage by cataloguing his deficits. What scale best measures this destruction?

The day Michael Jackson died, thirteen days after his accident, my son was in a nursing home, slowly awakening from the coma. The TV in every room was on, and the staff of the nursing home gathered at the screens. When they tended the patients, their faces were detached, professional masks. Now they wept openly, watching scenes from Jackson's life—concerts, Neverland, child abuse charges, clips from his videos, Jackson moonwalking across the stage, thrusting a single gloved hand over his head.

We watched the events unfold thousands of miles away: a 911 call, Jackson en route to the hospital, and the final confirmation that the King of Pop was dead. The staff called family members and passed on the news in anguished voices. "He's dead, yes he is, turn on the news, look at the news." A brief respite and then renewed tears, comforting each other across the phone lines.

My son was still in restraints because even though he wasn't conscious, he was becoming more active. His arms stretched, hung in the air, and then curled back like the fronds of a fern against his chest. His left leg worked its way across the sheets until it found the edge of the mattress and flopped over. I untied the

restraints when I visited, but had to re-secure them before I left. Without them he pulled at his feeding tube, tracheostomy, and assorted IV lines.

Later, when my son had regained enough awareness to understand where he was, he told me that he had, for a time, thought he had been imprisoned for giving Michael Jackson too many drugs and killing him. He'd tried telling people it wasn't him, but they'd kept him shackled in a jail cell.

A confabulation, the doctor said. Not uncommon with a brain injury.

Actually, my son told me, he was in the hospital because he had been shot in the head twelve times. He'd had nothing to do with Michael Jackson's death.

A confabulation is not a lie, because it is not meant to deceive. The confabulations are as authentic to the teller as any independently corroborated memory. They are created, scientists believe, to bridge gaps in our memory. Our brains don't like these gaps. The brain confabulates to maintain an integrated sense of the world.

On day 37 after the accident my son asks me if he'll be able to live a normal life. I say yes. Am I the one confabulating this time?

We are forced to make gaps. We cannot give equal importance to every bit of information that assaults our senses. If we paid attention to every sound, how could we comprehend any of them? If we attended to everything we saw,

how could we focus on what was important? I don't know when we learn to filter—as infants, I suspect. As we mature, most of us become good enough at filtering to fit into society.

But not everyone. Perhaps some people don't filter well, or don't filter the right things. Does autism change your filter? Schizophrenia? Depression? Bipolar disorder? Maybe the process of forming filters is as unique as fingerprints, is what creates our individual identities. What about lack of sleep? Drugs? Alcohol? Do we sometimes seek to change the filters, to create different gaps, as a way to find new perspectives? Do we make a choice to filter things out when looking at reality straight on is too uncomfortable?

I believe we create art to bypass some of these filters and reveal new perspectives on the world. Here, says the artist, this is how *I* see the world. Look at it *this* way. Art can be an expression of joy, a call to action, a request to look at the world a little differently. It's a way bridge the gap between what you know and what someone else can imagine the world to be.

My son, as I knew him for twenty years, no longer exists. The essential elements of his personality are different. It's like someone else is walking around in his skin.

How do I reconcile myself to this? How do I span the distance between the person he was, and the one he is now? The structural and chemical changes caused by traumatic brain injury often induce or exacerbate mental illness. My son now struggles with depression, paranoia and debilitating anxiety. How do I deal with society now viewing him as an outsider, someone who isn't quite right, and may even be dangerous? How does this change the way I respond to similar people? Two years after the accident I'm back in the writing program at NMU, trying to find the words to answer these questions, to bridge the chasm between my old life and the new one.

Four years later, we continue to deal with confabulations.

"One afternoon when I was in the hospital, this guy wheeled me out of my room. He took me to an empty room and beat me," my son says.

Hospital security measures mean there were no unlocked empty rooms. Because of my son's vulnerable state, no one was allowed to take him from his room without permission, including me. He could not shower without assistance, so any new injuries would be noticed. In addition, I was with him all day, every day. "I know that did not happen," I tell him. "I was there." He insists that somehow it must have, because that is his memory. That is his truth. It's not the same for everyone.

My stories include characters dealing with dementia, homelessness, mental illness, and other issues that make it difficult for them to fit into what most people consider normal society. What is the truth for someone suffering from dementia? I watched my mother decline in fits and starts for years, turning into a different person, someone who was actually kinder and more supportive at the end of her life than in any of my childhood memories.

What is the truth for someone living on the streets? Why do they make that choice instead of accessing the services of Ann Arbor's multi-million dollar shelter system? Why does society rally around cancer patients, yet vilify those suffering from mental illness, human beings equally in need of support and assistance?

I titled my thesis "How to See in the Dark" because its stories are an attempt to hold such questions up to the light. My perspective has shifted so that the world sometimes seems more gaps than terra firma. I create stories in an attempt to understand and interpret the world around me. To cross the space between what is real, what seems real, and what could be real. I write to fill in gaps. Call it confabulation. Or call it fiction.

Herman Groome

Herman Groome first heard the sounds as he chipped old paint from around his window frames: the *scrape* of metal dragged across the ground and the *clang* when it fell. A whooshing followed, and sometimes voices, but he did not hear these every time.

He stepped down the ladder to get a better angle on the apron. Casement. Muntin. Stool. Stile. Before he began painting, Herman had looked up the name of each part of the window. The *scrape-clang, scrape-clang* continued, and Herman found himself working in rhythm with it, moving the blade along with the *scrape*, and dropping curls of old paint on the *clang* into a bucket hanging from the back of the ladder. They looked like worms or caterpillars, he thought.

Herman's watch beeped. Every day at 3:45, he jogged around the neighborhood and up to the high school. As he returned the tools and ladder to the garage, he imagined his neighbors admiring his dedication, setting their watches by him. They'd squeeze the roll of fat along their stomachs and feel inspired by his example to start exercising themselves.

Herman changed into a navy track suit with silver stripes down the side. He jogged in place a little, threw a jab at nothing. "Steady, big man," said a voice behind him. Two boys wearing jeans sagging below their hips brushed past on

skateboards. One boy's boxers showed, with what looked like a piece of duct tape holding them together. Herman wanted to see if it really was duct tape, but he didn't want to seem to be staring at the boy's behind.

Herman continued down the sidewalk, admiring the rhythm of his feet slapping the concrete. He'd put in an application to teach at the high school but had not been hired. He might be called to substitute, but hadn't yet. After teaching middle school for several years, Herman had been laid off just before he could get tenure. The students had puzzled him—their limbs sprouting inches overnight, until they didn't know where their bodies began and ended, or knew too well. Some girls had complained that he stared at them, but he only admired the ease with which they moved through the school, navigating the hallways and each other. High school students would give him a change he needed, he had decided.

He barely thought of his own high school days. He had gotten good enough grades, had a few friends to go to the movies and play video games with, and to talk to about girls. None of it amounted to much. On weekends he bagged groceries and ran carts at a local store. He watched his classmates come in as couples, the boy's hand resting on the girl's lower back, and looked away as they stuffed candy or sodas or boxes of condoms into their pockets. When he got

his first box his hand hovered for a moment, and when he went up to the register and paid, it felt like his greatest act of defiance.

Herman hoped the school would call. He hadn't had a steady job in over a year. The headlines said that education was a growing field, with good job prospects, but Herman hadn't found it that way. He'd substituted for two years before his first hiring, and then they had moved him around from building to building, grade to grade, and he never felt settled, never felt like he was given the chance to get the hang of it. Lately, he'd noticed grown men like himself delivering pizzas, stocking shelves, doing what they could to earn money. Even the baggers at the grocery store were older, he thought, as he ran past the Shop and Save.

Three days after he'd finished the windows, he got the call. The phone rang at 5:30 a.m., and Herman answered it with a sleep-sodden voice. Yes, he could sub at the high school that day. He hung up the phone and turned onto his back, waiting for his eyes to focus. He had been awakened earlier by the strange scraping sounds. They would happen for a few minutes, enough to rouse him, and then cease. Sometimes he heard the low voices of men, their words indistinct. After a moment he rolled from the bed, twisted his feet into his slippers, and dressed.

Herman left early. He rode the bus and brought his track suit, planning to jog home at the end of the day. He was a vigorous man, still full of energy after riding herd on bunch of adolescents all day. He'd prove his value. They'd be begging him to sub for them all of the time, but he'd hold out for a permanent job.

The first two classes were study halls, and Herman paced the front of the room, eager to actually interact with students, to let them see what he was made of. He knew he looked soft, with his round face and receding hairline. His fingers were short and pudgy. I'll surprise them, he thought.

The third class was history, and Herman gave them the prepared quiz and began to discuss the answers. He turned his back to write on the board and felt a small tap on his shoulder. All of the students were still in their seats, but a wad of paper lay on the floor at his feet. Saying nothing, Herman returned to writing on the board. Another tap, a larger wad of paper. He scooped it up and tossed it overhand towards the waste basket. The paper bounced off the rim onto the floor. He walked over, bent to pick it up, and another wad hit him. He turned, aware that his face was reddening, that his pulse beat faster, and he forced himself to count to ten. Then he turned and threw the paper at the boy in the second row, the far end, because he had the biggest smirk on his face.

The boy caught the paper in one hand and whipped it at the boy in the next seat. Soon paper was being thrown and batted around the room. Herman watched eagerly for another piece to come his way, and when none did, he crumpled up papers on the desk and added them to the fray. It wasn't until the bell had rung and the students gone that he realized all the quizzes he'd collected were missing, and a few other things that had been there when he arrived. He collected the papers from the floor as the next class filed in, and tried to smooth the crumpled sheets. He found only 17 of the 30 quizzes. Worthless quizzes, he thought, shaking his head. He tipped the remaining papers into the trash.

After school he changed into his track suit in the locker room. He jogged a few laps around the track and tried to see if anyone was watching, hoping no one would notice him looking. He heard a faint *scrape-clang, scrape-clang*. The boys' cross country team ran out from the building, shouting and laughing. They rounded the corner and headed away from the school. It wasn't his way home, but Herman thought he could catch up to them and run with them for a while. The boys would marvel at his stamina, slap him on the back, and hope when they got to his age they might be like him.

They headed out through the schoolyard and into a neighborhood. The houses looked much alike, stood barely a foot apart, and each had a single

spindly maple collared and staked in front. Herman heard only his breathing and the slap of feet on the sidewalk. A few of the boys looked back and saw him and jabbed their neighbors in the side. More heads turned, and Herman could see a ripple of awareness pass through the pack.

The boys paused at an intersection, jogging in place, waiting for the signal to turn, and Herman nearly caught up to them. Herman arrived as the light turned yellow, but he dashed across anyway, ignoring the horns of the waiting cars. The boys looked behind. Herman still followed.

Ten minutes later, head down and breathing hard, Herman missed seeing the boys round a building. As he passed they surrounded him in a swirling, jostling circle. Herman dropped his hands, stopped, and smiled out at them. Wet, crumpled newspapers struck Herman's head and body. The group laughed and ran off again, spiraling away from him.

Still Herman followed. The boys ran through an industrial park, circling buildings and jumping off loading docks, dodging behind graffiti-splattered semis, running up railings and leaping over parking blocks. Always further away. At last Herman came to a stop, panting, and bent over with his hands on his knees. He straightened up slowly, leaning to his left, and then his right, a hand at the small of his back. He wiped a sleeve across his forehead. Herman could no longer see the group.

He hobbled to a picnic bench outside one of the buildings and sat on its crumbling green paint. Small puddles filled the uneven surface, and Herman considered his thirst. He laid his head on his arms in a posture of weariness and confident no one could see him, lapped his tongue across the wet surface. Street lights came on around the buildings, and a group of crows settled into haggard trees dotting the berms. They unsettled Herman with their strange voices and constant discontent, the way they would perch for a moment, and then take to the sky again in big wheeling arcs. And the noises they made, the screeching.

It was full dark when Herman roused himself and started out again. He had hoped the boys would return, that he would hear their happy voices and pounding feet as they came back down the route they had taken out. He would be ready for them, would fall in behind as if he'd never left the group. When he finally believed they wouldn't be back, he set out alone. Herman could hear cars passing on the main road, and headed that way.

Herman found a bus stop and waited. When the bus came he discovered his wallet was gone. He appealed to the driver, and the other riders, but they stared mutely at his short fingers, at his mud-streaked clothes and face. "Pay or get off," the driver said. Herman returned to the curb and watched the bus pull away. He started walking, everything unfamiliar to him.

When the metallic scrapings and tappings rose out of the night, Herman headed towards the sounds. Beneath a streetlight a large man strummed a washboard. A stack of mismatched bibles, their covers creased and worn, waited at his feet. The tips of his yellow gloves were cut off, and silver thimbles topped his fingers. The man's hands stroked the folded metal from the bottom to the top, and then tapped their way back down. Every third or fourth trip the man rattled his fingers against the wooden frame.

Herman staggered up to the man. "I'm lost."

The man pattered his fingers on the washboard, and looked up at Herman. "I believe you are, brother. But you can find your way."

Herman nodded. "Which way do I go?"

"Why, the way of righteousness," the man said, and laughed. The laugh ended in a coughing fit, and when the man spoke again his voice was raspy.

"Now, I hope you don't mind my saying so, but it looks like your path hasn't been easy." He smiled and shook his head. "No sir, the path can be rough. I could tell you, my own path has not been easy." He chose a book from the stack at his feet and offered it to Herman.

Herman's hand trembled as he reached out towards the man. They both watched it approach, and neither could say whether Herman had been reaching

for the bible, or the man's arm, or his throat. It never quite got wherever it was headed; Herman stopped and cocked his head. Faintly, as if whispering to him, Herman heard the *scrape-clang, scrape-clang* that had awoken him that morning.

"Do you hear that?" he asked the man.

"Hear what?"

"That . . . that sound. The scraping. The clanging. The voices. I don't hear the voices now, but I did before."

"Voices." The man shook his head, and thrust the bible at Herman. "God bless you, sir. Take this. I know about them voices."

Herman tucked the bible under his arm and stood with his head cocked, listening in the night. He limped off toward the sound.

The *scrape-clang, scrape-clang* drew him on. He had never felt so alone. Even in his house, by himself, he felt the pressure of his neighbors weighing the cut of his lawn and the lie of his roof shingles and the trim of his shrubbery. Even when they were away, he felt the inevitability of their return. Here the buildings opened out to the distant sky, and he felt adrift, aware of no life but his own. Herman remembered something about sailors navigating by the stars, and he looked up, but street lights obscured the sky above him.

Herman shuffled down the street. Freshly painted lane dividers and arrows and crosswalks shimmered before him. The *scrape-clang, scrape-clang* was very close and loud. He turned the corner and saw a truck in the road, lights flashing, surrounded by people in orange and yellow reflective vests. Paint hissed from the truck in a broken white line. A worker dusted the paint with fine sand, which hung, twinkling, in the air. Another dragged over a metal stencil of an arrow along the ground, and when he dropped it Herman felt the *clang* resonate in his chest.

Somewhere on these streets were the high school and the Shop and Save and Herman's house and the cemetery where he would someday be buried and the park where he might meet a woman to love him, and other places he could not imagine. He turned in a slow circle, unable to understand which way he needed to go. Herman stopped, trembling, and stared at the worker who picked up the stencil and flipped it over, fussed with its alignment.

"For God's sake, man," said Herman. "Paint it. Paint it!"

Trash Dogs

I'll walk through town with a box of my wedding invitations, tossing two or three into every Dumpster I pass. These envelopes have "Harrison" written on the front in an elegant script. I couldn't find him in the directory, and a Dumpster was one of the last places I'd seen him, almost two years ago. That's where I'll begin.

At least I think it was Harrison. From the corner of my eye I'd seen something move by the big green Dumpster I passed Thursday nights on my way home from class. It was just getting dark, and I expected a raccoon or a skunk or dog, some cur to slink by, a glimpse from the corner of my eye. I moved away from the Dumpster, because it was August, another in a string of really hot days, and it smelled really bad. The movement unfolded into a man, and he looked me defiantly in the eyes. I turned away first. Then it clicked in my brain that it was Harrison. My stomach churned. Was it really Harrison? What was he doing in the garbage? Would he want me to see him? Should I pretend I didn't? A sour taste rose into my throat. When I turned to the Dumpster again, all I saw was a man's back as he jumped inside the bin. I hugged my books to my chest, and hurried home.

That night I spread newspapers on the floor and shook out my kitchen trash. A banana peel slid off the pile, and the edge of it flopped onto the tile floor. I knew I had held that peel, with the banana intact, earlier that day. It had not bothered me to lift it from the shelf at the store, to put it on my kitchen counter, to pick it up again and to peel it. But once removed from the fruit, and thrown into the trash can under the sink, I couldn't bring myself to pick it up. I nudged it back onto the newspapers with my shoe.

Just a few minutes before, I'd thrown away a small carton of leftover vegetable fried rice. I'd put the carton into the trash, then pulled the can out from under the sink. I knew the rice was still good; I'd only thrown it away because I was tired of it. But I couldn't pull it out and eat it now, even though I might have had it for dinner, or left it out on the counter for much longer and thought nothing of it. Now it was garbage, joining the bag with three slices of stale bread, paper towels I'd used to wipe the counter, and a filter full of coffee grounds. I tried to see the mound as something that could be artistic, or life-giving, or salvaged, but I couldn't. I felt relief when I wrapped it up in newspaper and threw it away again.

I work at a video store, checking out videos, telling people when they're due, and pretending I enjoyed every movie anyone asks me about. That's where

I'd met Harrison. We started talking about this movie, *Waking Life*, which I'd never seen or even heard of before, and he said you really should watch it and I said okay, and he said I mean with me, tonight, and I said okay again.

Have you ever really looked at Dumpsters? A few of the newer ones are blue or tan, but most are green. Dents and scratches and stains are written across each one, like the unique markings of whale fins or wild dogs. I think if they collected all of the Dumpsters and reshuffled them to different locations I could look at each bin and say, this one, it used to be two blocks over, behind the party store. This one used to be behind the second fraternity on Hill Street. And this one, this is the one where I had seen Harrison. Or at least, might have seen him.

The night after I thought I saw Harrison, I called up his old friend Pete. Pete picked me up after work, and we had some beers and hashed over old times. He had been more Harrison's friend than mine, and I hadn't seen him much since the breakup. Pete said he'd lost touch with Harrison, too. I told him I thought I'd seen Harrison in a Dumpster.

"No, not our Harrison," said Pete. "He was destined for big things."

I took another drink of my beer.

"Skyscrapers," continued Pete. "Whales."

“Mountains,” I countered.

“The Grand Canyon.”

“No, that’s a big hole,” I said, and smiled. “How big can nothing be?”

Pete came over two nights later with *Clueless* and a bottle of Chianti.

Harrison had been a real movie snob. I’d sneak home to watch chick flicks when he wasn’t there. I watched *Legally Blonde* three afternoons in a row.

A pizza box with two slices of pepperoni, curling up at the ends. Two coffee filters full of grounds. A banana peel. Dental floss, Q-tips, six tissues. Someone less picky might still eat the pizza. The coffee grounds, well, I guessed you could use them again, just run more hot water through. I’ve heard some people use them in their gardens, but no one I knew. The other stuff, though, I thought was really done.

As a child, it had been my father’s job to take out the trash, then my brother’s. Even now I dislike doing it, and stand back from the Dumpster and swing the bag into it. One of the good things about Harrison, he would take out the trash for me. In fact, I’d say he enjoyed it, if that were possible.

Once he came back with a box of books he'd found left next to the Dumpster. I made him take them back outside. He sat on my porch, leafing through them, reading parts of each, even *Clinical Periodontology*, so I knew he'd done it just to spite me. I watched *Fifty First Dates* and pretended not to hear him when he came in.

The stem from a bunch of grapes. A Styrofoam tray that held the chicken I made last night, and the plastic wrap from on top of it. Two empty yogurt containers, one strawberry and one blueberry, and their foil lids. Licked clean.

By the end of that September the nights were getting colder. Clean cotton sheets, a plaid flannel blanket, and a down comforter covered my bed. It seemed I couldn't get the combination right. I'd wake up part way through the night, sweating, half-remembering dreams, throwing off covers I'd wake an hour later wanting, searching with my hand on the floor, waving it in an arc that would eventually connect with the covers discarded in my sleep.

When I was a child, I never dared extend any part of my body over the edge of the bed, sure that something—I never knew what—would grab me by the dangling hand or foot and capture me. I piled my bed with books and stuffed animals, so there was always something to cover myself with if I awoke

cold during the night and had tossed my blankets away. Sleeping in a pile of debris, my father called it, but I was too ashamed to tell the reason why.

I wondered where Harrison was sleeping, if he were cold or hanging over an abyss.

Nine cherry pits, an empty bag from frozen peas, two tissues. An organizer from 1994 with every Monday torn out.

I broke it off with Harrison because he cheated on me. I found him watching *Titanic* with some girl. Even though he returned it, I kept the video on record and let the fines build up. He owes \$272.89 now.

I ran into Harrison on the bus a few months after that night at the Dumpster. He wore a clean white oxford shirt and clean blue jeans that were only fashionably ragged. His hair was a bit long, less styled than I remembered from our past, but clean. I kept checking for clean, as if that would be proof that it hadn't been him by the Dumpster, that he had never been in or even near to a Dumpster, except to throw away trash.

"I thought I saw you . . ."

He laughed, confident and easy. "That was me, you mean by that Dumpster last August, right? I've been doing a psychology experiment, seeing how people react to seeing someone digging through the trash. I guess I was a little put off that you came by; I can only count people who don't know me for the study. Gregory and Piles did some work in this area, but I'm trying to expand on their research. It's for my Master's thesis."

"Your Master's thesis?"

"Yes. What did you think I was doing there?"

I invited him for dinner and mentioned I was seeing Pete. He spoke of being caught up in his studies, drifting away from the old crowd, growing older, growing up. He declined when I offered to include Pete in our meal. I declined when he tried to kiss me.

When he fell asleep on my couch, I covered him with the old woolen blanket we used to huddle under when we watched movies. The last one we'd seen together was *Run Lola Run*. In the morning Harrison was gone, along with the blanket.

Once, as a child, I watched a dog pull a bloody haunch from the trash. The dog was gaunt, each rib prominent, hair on its back and sides tufted and scattered. When I reached out to pet the dog, it bit me. The scars look like little

moons scattered across my hand. Pete says they are the reason he wants to marry me.

Lucky

Dad had worked on the house until he was too sick to do any more. Then he sat on his split and paint-splattered couch, staring out at the weedy fields, working for every breath. A small spiral notebook, filled with a list of repairs written in his thick handwriting, still sat on the coffee table. A few items were crossed off: re-tile shower, paint bedroom, fix wiring in the kitchen. I had helped with that last, handing Dad tools and finishing the last outlets myself, Dad wheezing in a chair and talking me through the steps. The house needed work, a lot more than was on that list, more than might fit in that whole notebook, even if you filled up both sides of every page.

When the first mad, fat drops thrummed against the roof, I ran out the side door to put up the truck windows. Earlier that summer they'd been left down, and the inside smelled musty, like rotting grass, especially on humid days. When I turned the key, there came only a faint whirr. I rested my forehead on the steering wheel. I'd counted on the starter to last just a little longer.

There was enough juice left in the battery to get the windows up, but only just. There was no phone in the house, and my cell didn't work out here. I'd have to hike up to the road later when the rain stopped, try to get a signal or a

ride into town. I'd inherited the house just two weeks before, and I hoped it would be a place I could stay, despite it being in the middle of nowhere.

In the few yards from the truck back into the house, the gravel drive coated my bare feet in grey sludge. Rain ran through my hair, down along my arms, and onto the kitchen tile, which was cracked in some places and heaved up in others.

I was watching drops of water moving over the tiles when I heard the front door open. Weighing the work of muddy footprints against a rain soaked-carpet, I paused to wipe my feet with a dishtowel.

A man stood in the living room, between me and the door. For a moment we looked at each other, and then he said, "The rain's coming in. You want I should shut the door?" I nodded and rubbed my wet arms. "I knocked, but you didn't come to answer," he said. "I was hoping to come inside. Just until the rain quits."

A few minutes, I thought. I was only outside a few minutes. Was he out there, too?

The door shut behind him, then blew open again. A crack of thunder made us both jump, and the man laughed. He reached back to close the door, keeping his eyes on me. He spread his hands wide, moved slowly to the couch and sat down. I wouldn't make it past him to the front door. There was the side

door from the kitchen. If I was fast enough I might get outside. But then what? A slow chase through the surrounding muck and high weedy fields, both of us wet and mud-spattered, collapsing to the earth, still struggling for every inch?

“You don’t need to be scared,” he said. “I’m not fixing to hurt you. I just wanted to come out of the rain for a while.”

“You’re dripping on the couch.”

He looked down, and wiped at the couch with his wet hands. “Okay,” he said. “Okay.” He looked around the room, at half-painted walls, cratered drywall, thread-worn carpet. “This place is a mess.”

“If you don’t like it, why don’t you leave?”

He took in a deep breath, let it out slow. “You got coffee? How about I make us some coffee?” He walked into the kitchen, started banging through cupboards. I covered my ears to shut out his tuneless whistling.

When I was growing up, my dad was gone for long stretches. Out of nowhere I’d wake to hear him whistling in the kitchen, cooking up eggs or pancakes. He’d take me on drives sometimes, pointing out vacant houses he said he could fix up, make something of. Some were worse than this one, but not by much. Then one morning it would be quiet, and he’d be gone again for months.

The man brought two cups into the living room, shoved aside papers and books on the coffee table to make room. The notebook fell to the floor. I took a

cup and sat in a chair. He leaned back on the couch and flipped through the TV channels, settling on a football game. I snuck glances at him, not wanting him to think I was looking at him, that I would remember his face. Sitting closer, I could see he was older than I'd thought at first. Crow's feet ran from his eyes, and deep lines from his nose to the corners of his mouth. His hair was a dark blonde or light brown, that in-between color that is neither, and showed some grey. If I had passed him on the street, I wouldn't have remembered him, probably wouldn't have noticed him at all.

The rain continued. During a commercial he turned to me. "Could I trouble you for something to eat? Haven't had much but this coffee today." I looked at him and didn't answer. He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, then back at me. "I'm Joe." He sighed and rubbed his hands across his knees. "You got a name?"

"Katherine," I said, although no one had called me anything but Kate for years.

"Please, Katherine. Please could I have something to eat?"

I carried the empty coffee cups into the kitchen. In the freezer I found an old hot dog and some peas. I microwaved the hot dog, cut it into circle slices, and stirred them and the peas into a pot of macaroni and cheese. I spooned it onto two plates, took them out to the living room along with two bottles of beer.

Joe rested his hand my wrist when I was setting down the plates and smiled at me. Some of the macaroni slopped over the side.

Joe took a bottle, tipped it to me, then took a long drink. He ate quickly and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. The rain beat harder against the windows.

“I haven’t had hot dogs in my macaroni and cheese since I was a kid,” he said, and belched.

A crash came from the kitchen. We both jumped up and I shrank away. Joe sat back down. I edged into the kitchen. The wind had blown a blue glass vase off the windowsill. Dark shards lay scattered across the floor.

When I was 14, I’d won the vase at a carnival. Tossed a ring over it on my second try. It seemed like the luckiest night of my life. My dad had been in town for a change. I’d been so happy to walk the fairway with him, to scream and clutch his arm on the rides. Years later he missed my high school graduation, and we didn’t talk again for a long time after that. When he finally got ahold of me, well into the cancer, I brought the vase to his house.

I collected the larger pieces of glass and put them into a bowl. Joe stood in the doorway, watching me.

“What was that?”

“A vase.”

Joe nudged the glass with his toe.

“I won it at a carnival when I was a kid. Sometimes I think I used up all my luck in that one night, wasted it winning the vase. If I’d known, I would have saved it for something bigger.”

“Now there’s all your luck, broken on the floor,” Joe said. He returned to the living room.

I swept up the rest of the glass, almost tipped it into the trash, but added it to the pieces in the bowl, instead. You could put the glass in someone’s coffee, I thought, and if they were small pieces, they may not notice until it was too late, until they’d already been drunk. What could all those little bits of glass do to you? Would you die coughing and gasping, like my dad?

Joe fell asleep on the couch, his head bent to his chest, light from the TV flickering across his skin. If I didn’t look too closely, just glimpsed him from the corner of my eye, it could have been my dad resting there. The game ended, the evening news came on. I washed up the plates, wiped down the counters, hung the dish rag over the faucet.

By then the rain had stopped and the sky was clearing. I went out on the porch, hugging the bowl filled with the pieces of broken vase. A few minutes later, Joe came out and leaned against the door.

“Why did you just come into the house?” I asked. “This is my dad’s house. He was fixing it up when he died.” I thought of the boards missing from the porch, curling shingles letting rain leak into the attic, the crumbling foundation. Thistle and pigweed bristled in the fields. The truck needed more than just a new starter to keep going.

Joe looked up. “You can really see the stars out here. There’s the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper,” he said, tracing his finger across the sky. “And over there, Cassiopeia.”

When I shook my head, Joe took pieces of glass from the bowl and arranged them on the porch one by one. “Queen Cassiopeia boasted she was more beautiful than the sea nymphs. This angered them, and they asked the sea god, Poseidon, to punish her.” Joe set down another piece of glass. “So he sent a sea monster to attack the kingdom she ruled with her husband Cepheus. They find out they have to sacrifice their daughter Andromeda to the sea monster to save their kingdom. So they chain her, naked, to a rock to await the monster. Some kind of parents, huh?” He smiled at me. “The hero Perseus comes by, kills the sea monster, rescues Andromeda, and marries her.” He looked back to the sky. “They’re all up there if you know what you’re looking for.”

I knelt beside him, smelling the beer and macaroni on his breath, handing him shards until constellations of blue stars covered the porch. Before I handed

him the last piece of glass, I ran my finger along its sharp edge, and wondered what kind of luck it might still hold, what kind of luck I wanted.

Pastimes

June is the season of schools ending, picnics, shorts and t-shirts and summer sports. These kids are about eight or nine, and they play baseball. Their coaches are fathers in their thirties who know, late at night when they can't sleep, that their best is already behind them. They bring their sons to ball fields on Saturday mornings. "Hustle! Hustle! Look sharp! Way to stay with it!" wakes up people living in townhouses bordering the park. It also wakes up the man sleeping on the picnic table. The first thing he sees when he opens his eyes is the port-a-potty. Turning over, he watches parents and kids gathering on the ball field. He levers himself up on an arm, swings his legs down to the bench, and sits hunched on the table, coughing and spitting.

It's a hot day, one of those you get sometimes in June, sun staring straight down and already 86° by noon. Kids play on the playground just back of the ball field, a complicated game involving digging holes in the sand and hurrying up the climber to escape monsters and big brothers. Shoes litter the edge of the playground and socks are slowly swallowed by sand. Mothers sit on tilted metal bleachers and keep watch of the game and the little ones, too. A few trees casting cool shadows, but mostly people keep to the ball field or the playground.

The port-a-potty was put there for the benefit of young players and their

families. At the beginning of June the city hauls it in for baseball, and leaves it there until soccer ends in November. It sits in shade about 10 feet foul of first base, near a barbecue grill and picnic table. It's big and wide, with a green roof, and pine trees embossed on white plastic sides that make it look real nice, but do nothing for the smell. When it rained, the man would take shelter in the port-a-potty. No one else ever wanted to use it then. When storms came through, the walls vibrated with thunder, and lightning flashes pierced the roof vents. Inside, rain sounded like hammer blows, or the drumming of fingernails.

The man sits in the park most days grilling hot dogs and listening to the radio. At night he watches TV by looking into the windows of the apartments. The guys in the third townhouse like sports, especially football. They cheer loudly and drink beer when their team is winning, and curse and groan and drink even more beer when they are losing. The man likes it when they lose; they toss out more empty beer cans he can return for the deposit money.

He takes the cans to a nearby grocery store and puts them one by one into machines that spin them, suck them in and crush them. He worries the machine will mistake his hand for a can. So he lifts each can or bottle with a stick and pokes it in. He hates the smashing, crunching sound the machine uses to destroy each one.

After the last can is consumed, he jabs the red button and carefully takes

the bottle slip. He usually buys hot dogs. They are cheap and easy to cook at the park. All you need are some sticks and matches. Of course, they're better with ketchup and mustard and buns, but you have to collect a lot of cans to get those.

The lady in the end townhouse is old and keeps her TV turned up loud. She watches all kinds of shows, Oprah and cooking shows and oddities on the Discovery channel. She has comfortable chairs on her patio and puts out cans of cat food for the strays. He likes the beef and chicken flavors best. Only hot dog flavor cat food would be better.

Sometimes she sees him watching and turns the TV up a little louder. At first it bothered her, him sitting on the porch looking in her window. Then she realized he only did it when her television was on. Sometimes she puts out an extra can of cat food for him; she figures he's a stray, too. She likes him better than the families that use the park. They always leave trash behind.

In the park ball players wear blue, or red, or green shirts with names like Hornets or Eagles or Tree Frogs on the front, and a number less than 100 on the back. Socks that match their t-shirts meet their pants just below the knee. They run through practice drills, fielding balls the coach hits to them, then throwing them to first base. The air is peppered with the impact of balls on bats and gloves and the coach's "Hey! Let's go! Look sharp!" When the coach calls them

in, each boy tags home plate as he leaves the field.

The coach of the Tree Frogs watches the Hornets warm up and wishes his team had a stronger name, like the Stingers or Eagles. Maybe then they would play better. It was supposed to be a noncompetitive league but, c' mon, everyone kept score. Everyone knew who won and who lost. And his team hadn't won a game yet. When he was a kid, they didn't have all of these leagues and schedules, they just got together somewhere and played. Even a few girls, back then. Now the girls had their own teams, their own league. He still remembers one girl, Hilda. She was really good, better than most of the boys. Better than him. She offered to give him private batting lessons. When he finally said yes, she told him to meet her at the park after dinner.

At first he thought she hadn't showed. He called and called her name. Just when he turned to leave she stepped out from behind a tree, where shadows had hidden her. She told him to put his arms around her, to hold the bat with her, and feel how she swung it. They stood in growing darkness, swinging their bodies together in rhythm with the bat. He leaned into her, smelled dust and sweat on the nape of her neck. A streetlight blinked on at the edge of the park, and they broke apart. He smiled as he ran home. Smiled again now.

He wanted his son to learn from baseball, just as he had. Practice, teamwork, the joy of hearing the bat sing when the ball hit the sweet spot, of

making the catch, the one you see floating towards you, knowing you will move into just the right spot, then meeting the ball, feeling and hearing it smack into your glove, raising it in confirmation and celebration of being in just the right place at the right time.

“Hey coach, you ready to start?”

“Let’s do it.” With this sorry team, he thinks, it’s likely all his son will learn is how to lose.

Waiting for the game to begin, boys posture by the backstop, spitting and scrubbing their cleats in the dirt. Clip boards hanging on the fence hold team rosters, batting orders, reminders to the coaches not to swear.

“Hey, did you see that show about the Bermuda Triangle? All sorts of weird shit happens there.”

“Yeah, like ships and airplanes just disappear.”

“Maybe your batting skills got lost in the Bermuda Triangle.”

“Like your catching skills.”

“Like your face. Oh, yeah, that’s too ugly even for the Bermuda Triangle to make it disappear.”

“Run on anything. If the ball hits the bat you run. Don’t wait.”

The man gathers sticks and branches from the wooded fringe of the park and lights them in the grill. A rummage through the grocery cart exhumes a

package of hot dogs. He holds one up to his left eye, sniffs it, sets it down on the grill. Sits down at the picnic table and watches the game.

The kids sure could pitch. They wind up, lift their left leg, stomp it down with the throw. The ball shoots across the plate, straight and true most of the time. They can't field worth a damn, though. They run up the score on both sides. You could imagine that in a couple of years they'd get some muscle on them and figure out how to work their bodies. Then they could really play the game.

The crowd cheers and groans. Three players in a row from the Tree Frogs strike out. The coach turns around and rolls his eyes, then turns back to his team and offers insincere encouragement. He stands with his weight shifted to one leg, hands on hips, mouth twisted to the left. Everyone's hot and tired. The next three batters for the Hornets pop the ball up, and the Tree Frogs miss each one, have to give chase and bases.

"C'mon. Stay with it!"

The man pokes at his hot dog, rolls it over on the grill. Two innings later the Tree Frogs coach walks over to the shade of the maple trees. Sweat beads in the dust on the back of his neck. He shakes himself, rolls his shoulders, takes a deep breath. He opens his eyes, sees the man eating a hot dog looking straight at him. The coach looks away first, then over to his daughter on the playground.

Carol doesn't like playing with Marcie. All of her friends at school think Marcie is strange. She does have that big mole on her lip—it's hard not to stare at it sometimes. They call her Moley Marcie. But all the rest of the kids here are too little to play with, or boys. She watches Marcie dig in the sand. If she doesn't play the game right, Marcie won't play with her. She bends down, but just as her fingers move the first grains of sand, Marcie runs screaming for the climber. Carol runs too, as fast as she can.

"You got here too late." Marcie smiles and fingers the mole. "The monster has your arm." She reaches out her hand. "Don't worry, I'll get you away from him." Only after several minutes of tugging does Marcie finally declare Carol saved, and allow her to join her on the climber.

"The monster's gone. We can go dig for treasure again."

Carol hates the gritty feeling of sand under her nails and in her hair. She worries that because Marcie touched the mole and then her hand, she'll get a mole, too. Like warts from a toad. She looks at her hand, scrubs at a brown spot. Is it dirt or a mole?

The next batter up for the Tree Frogs hits the ball foul. It lands between the girls, spraying their legs with sand. One of the Hornets comes to get it. Carol digs her toe in the hole left by the ball. It's not as deep as the ones Marcie digs.

“Maybe the monster’s not hungry any more, since it ate my arm.”

Marcie looks around to see who is listening before she whispers, “The monster’s always hungry.”

At the end of the game, after his team congratulates the Hornets for beating them, the coach’s son comes over.

“Hey Dad, I’m going to use the bathroom before we go.”

“Why don’t you wait until we get home?”

The man at the picnic table shifts, starts to rise. Kids spread through the park, sucking on juice boxes and eating doughnuts.

“I really need to go now,” the boy calls, already on his way over to the little white building.

The man reaches the port-a-potty from the front, the boy from the back. They meet at the door. The boy opens it and goes in.

“Hey! Hey!” The man pounds on the door.

“Leave him alone, he’ll be done in a minute,” says the coach.

“I was here first.” He continues to pound on the door, bending the plastic inward with each blow.

“Hey now!” The coach grabs the man’s arm.

The man keeps pounding with his free arm. He glares at the coach,

reclaims his arm with a jerk.

“Don’t touch me.”

“I just don’t want . . .”

“Don’t touch me!”

“ . . . you banging on the door . . .”

“Don’t touch me!”

“ . . . while my son is in there.”

“Don’t touch me!” He spits on the ground. Boys from the team and kids from the playground are drawn to the shouting.

The boy comes out, looks at his Dad, looks at the man. On his way into the port-a-potty the man flips the green ball cap off the boy’s head. He slams the door, locks it.

“What’s going on, Dad?”

“This.” The coach smacks his palm against the port-a-potty. The man inside hits the wall in return.

The coach thumps the door of the port-a-potty three times.

From inside, three thumps come in reply.

The coach pounds on the door with both fists. A flurry of thumps echoes him. One kick, a single slap in reply.

Most of the parents are heading back to their cars. The rest of the ball

players come over, excited their coach is yelling at someone else. Other kids follow the players, though their mothers are calling them. They know they still have time.

The coach shoves the door and the port-a-potty tips back a little, resettles on the ground in a puff of dust. He rolls his shoulders, cracks his knuckles, and allows his second genuine smile of the day before he shoves again. It tilts further, resettles with a thud. A thump comes from inside. The coach puts his head down and shoves, puts his shoulder into it, digs in. His feet scrape through the dirt. Something slides inside the port-a-potty and hits the back wall. The crowd holds its breath, as though the slightest current of air could tip it one way or the other. Finally the port-a-potty tilts backwards and hits the ground. The group exhales together. Ball players high-five each other.

The coach strides to the picnic table and lifts up the end. Hot dogs, buns, mustard, ketchup, plastic wrap and a black garbage bag slide off the edge. The garbage bag splits open and releases a stack of yellowed newspaper, ragged cloth, and a hubcap. The coach kicks at the pile, spreads the detritus around on the grass. A boy comes up and kicks an empty pop can. Another kicks it back to him. Someone throws the hubcap like a Frisbee. Kids kick old newspapers, hot dog buns, a coverless book. They stomp on mustard packets, laughing at each yellow splurt.

The coach stands with his back to them, head down, breathing heavily.

The woman from the end apartment walks through the park. Her cane strikes the ground with a determined thump, announcing her passage. She glares at the boys.

“Clean up your mess!”

Another thump, barely heard above the revelry, comes from the port-a-potty.

The boys look up at their coach, at each other, at the confetti of litter on the ground. One boy picks up some of the newspapers and sets them on the table. They slide off, fan apart on the grass. Without looking back, the coach walks away, back to the ball field, the bats leaning against the back stop, the clipboard he left hanging in the fence, the line of water bottles staggering across the bench. First his son, then another boy, and another, and finally the whole Tree Frog team line up to follow, each tagging the side of the port-a-potty as they go, then jogging to the cars, leaving behind their yellow footprints in the grass.

A Bus Story

I'd been sleeping in a wooded area off the freeway, just past the Park and Ride lot. But the morning they pulled Jake from the ground, his frozen body sticking to the ice and mud until skin and muscle pulled away and hung from him like rags, I knew I needed to find somewhere else to sleep that night.

You have to know where to go. Some days I spend in the library. There's a little spot on the second floor now where you can get a cup of coffee and snacks from the vending machines. I give the machines a little shove, twist and lift with my shoulder, and usually something pops out. My dad taught me that. You can sit at some prissy tables with little glass tops and round stools that you need to be about five years old for your whole ass to fit on. Guess they don't want anyone to get too comfortable. The regular patrons don't like me being there, but if you aren't too loud and don't stink too bad they can't kick you out.

The buses are easier. They let anyone on, drunk or smelly or thinking they're better than everyone else, so long as you have the fare. I got a disability card that lets me ride for free; I won't tell you where cause you might take it the wrong way. I'm sure the guy was able to get another one, anyway. You can't stay on one bus too long, even with a free ride. Some of the drivers don't mind so much. Especially if you sit in the back and don't make any trouble, and their

routes are light and there are about a hundred things they'd rather do than deal with me. Some can't wait to tell you to get off, like that will pay their bills and make their wife spread her legs more than twice a year.

I like the buses because I feel like I'm going somewhere. When we were kids, Dad would pile us all in the car and take us for drives, never going to anywhere, just going. Said we got on Mom's nerves, and we had to get out until she calmed down. Sometimes we drove to this fancy health club and idled in the parking lot, watching people fight for the spots closest to the door. We drove past fried chicken places and banks and dry cleaners and bridges and schools and sometimes out into the country, but we all preferred the city, its factories belching smoke and fumes into the air, so thick we smelled them even with all the car windows rolled up. For years as a little kid I thought factories were a kind of castle, with all the railings and chimneys and odd parts. Not like I'd ever seen a real castle. Now I know better.

I had all sorts of funny ideas as a kid. Like once I heard my Mom tell her sister Jenna that we were all accidents, so for a long time I thought an accident was something you wanted to have happen to you. Then Jenna's husband had a car accident. I thought he'd gotten a new car, and I asked if I could go for a ride in it. My brothers laughed at me for a long time about that, giving me punching accidents and tripping accidents. But some things do happen by accident that

are okay, and falling asleep on the last run of the bus that day was a good accident for me.

The driver is supposed to walk down the bus after they park it in the garage, to make sure it's empty. I've heard them talking about it. The drivers ride the buses from the garage to the station downtown, and they talk about all sorts of shit they really shouldn't in front of passengers, but I guess it's easier for them not to think of us as real people, just cargo that fills up space and drops money in the box at the front. How hung-over they are and can't hardly see straight, but they can't afford to call in sick again. How they find wallets and phones and bags and make sure to go through them good before they turn them in because the supervisors will do it if they don't. Here's something good to know—don't ever leave something on a bus that you want to get back.

Anyhow, I'm on this bus and it's almost empty and I'm drowsy and with sitting by the heater and all I guess I fell asleep. Usually I like to look out the window, but we all got to sleep some time. The driver's this young woman, doesn't look like she could break a toothpick in half, much less roust me out of her bus. I haven't seen her around before. Maybe she forgot I was back there; maybe she thought it would be less trouble to let someone else deal with me.

So I wake up and I don't know where I am. First I check and I still have my coat and pack. There's nothing in them I can't do without, but they make

things easier. I'm warm and dry. It's dark. I can hear someone whistling and to my right there's a bus and some guy moving through it, wiping down the seats and putting trash in a bag. Our eyes meet for a moment, and then he goes back to cleaning the bus.

He opens the door and climbs on my bus next. Does something on the dash and the lights come up. He works his way down the bus, wiping first one side and then the other with a blue rag, sometimes stopping to spray the seat with something from a bottle that hangs from his belt. He doesn't look at me, but he's not whistling anymore, either. He stops at the seat before mine. It's five degrees outside, he says. And I'm guessing if you had anywhere better to be, you would be. He stoops and wipes the seat across from mine. If you're quiet and leave before the drivers come, he says, you can stay here tonight.

I stand up and let him wipe my seat. He turns the lights out but leaves the door open. I try to go back to sleep, but I keep hearing him opening and closing the bus doors and his whistling and I don't think I can actually hear his rag dragging across the seats but it seems like I can and it all keeps me awake. A while passes and then I hear his footsteps cross the garage and a light comes on in another room off to the side.

I get off the bus and start across the garage. The buses seem alien, all dark and silent and lined up in rows, like a museum, or a morgue. The guy is sitting

in what must be a break room, with long laminated wood tables and plastic chairs. Vending machines line the walls, filled with crap, cheese doodles and Kit Kats and coffee that tastes just as bad the first day as the third. But this guy had a paper bag on the table, and a real sandwich with lettuce and tomatoes, and I don't know where he found tomatoes in January, but there they are sticking out of the side of the sandwich. An apple and what look like a real homemade cookie, not something born in a plastic wrapper from the vending machines. That's why I go up and talk to him.

I sit down across the table from him and a few spaces down. I've learned not to sit too close to people, unless I'm doing it because I want them to leave. Then I'll sit as close as I can. I'm a big guy, and I can take up a lot of your personal space if I'm trying. But I leave this guy some room. Thanks for letting me stay, I start. It's colder than a witch's tit outside. He looks at his sandwich while considering this, and I start to worry that I should have just stayed on the bus, asleep or no. He takes another bite and chews it twenty-eight times. I count. Then he says, Have you got a deck of cards?

At first I thought his name was Lou, because that's what his shirt says. But sometimes his shirt says Mark, sometimes Luke, twice Daniel, and we come to call each other buddy, which is fine with me. I never do learn his real name. Turns out he only has to clean out the buses, then in whatever time is left of the

night he acts as a kind of security guard. Sometimes he brings a book to read, or plays solitaire, or watches the little TV in the garage. I would have wiped a few seats and then snoozed the rest of the time. But Buddy is too conscientious; he stays awake for his whole shift. Says about three or four in the morning everything is so quiet, he could believe that he was the last person still in the world. He told me that later. That first night we just played cards.

I learn a lot about Buddy's wife and their little boy. Sometimes they stop by to visit. It might seem late for a little boy to be up and out, but she works until midnight at the hospital and then picks him up from her sister's house and if he wakes up they stop in to see Daddy. The first time she sees me there playing cards with her husband she says she needs to talk to him alone, and I couldn't hear all the conversation but you know how it went. I know how people look at me. She isn't any different.

I go up to the little boy and make a face and I think he'll cry, but he just makes one back at me and I think, okay. His name is Francis. We play hide and seek sometimes, there in that garage with all those buses, and then one time he falls asleep and doesn't hear his momma and daddy calling him and they get scared and she blames it all on me, but I didn't make him go to sleep, it was his being out so late. I know when to clear out. I don't go back for a week.

It's getting on to spring but we have another cold snap, freezing rain, and I

had gotten kicked out of the shelter the night before for drinking. So I knock on the side door of the garage with my clothes already soaked and my teeth rattling. I come inside blowing on my hands and dripping a trail of water across the floor. Francis thinks that's funny. He sits at the table holding a tube and looking through it. What you got, I ask, and he turns it towards me. It's a ka-leid-o-scope, he says. You are all broken up into colors.

Now that made me feel funny when he said that. Back when I was a kid in school there was a prism, just a long clear triangle, and it broke the light into rainbows, and you could see everything, all those colors that hid inside. I loved that prism, and took it out every time the teacher gave us free time until this girl Janelle smashed it and she said she did it to see all the colors come out, but I know she did it because she saw I loved it so much. I started playing with the toys I knew she liked to see if she would break those, too, and she did, and if I saw her today I'd thank her. It helps to learn there's nothing you can't do without.

Francis asks if we can play hide and seek and his mother says okay if he leaves the kaleidoscope on the table because she is not going to climb through all of the buses looking for it. So he does and I tell him to hide first, and wait until we've been playing a while before I slip it into my pocket. When it was time to go they can't find it and they ask if I'd seen it and I just spread my hands out in

front of me, fingers wide open, and shake my head. Buddy promises to look for it and I say I'll help, but you know he went home without it.

It's rainy and cold today, but I'm on the bus and warm and dry. I look through the kaleidoscope when we go by the cemetery where they buried Jake, and everything is broken into bits of brown and white and gray. I'll leave the kaleidoscope on the seat when I go. Then someone else can pick it up and look through it and see everything broken. Everything beautiful.

Some Assembly Required

I found the arm off the side of the road. There's all sorts of weird stuff there—plastic bags and coffee cups and bottles and cans. Broken taillights and CDs and a pair of pants. How do you not notice you've lost your pants? Always just one shoe—where's the other one?

So I was walking along, it wasn't raining any more, but the trucks going by sent sprays of water over me. I should have been on the bus, but it never came, so if I had to walk, I wanted to see if I could pick up some empties on the way. The grass beyond the shoulder kept trying to trip me, wrapping around my ankles. I almost missed the arm, half-buried in old leaves under some raspberry canes. At first I thought it was a real arm – you would have, too. I imagined a body twisted and rotting beneath the leaves. I walked around it at first, then picked up a stick and poked it. I expected it to be soft. Resistance traveled up my arm and seemed more unnatural than the giving way of a rotting thing.

I scraped the arm free with the stick. It was carved from wood, and a leather sleeve cupped the top. A tangle of leather straps twisted around the arm and trailed along the ground. The metal buckles were rusty. I pulled on the straps and the arm bent at the elbow, then released. There was no wrist joint.

The arm ended in a left hand. The fingers were individually jointed but had to be moved manually. I shook hands with the arm and took it home.

It took me about a week to figure out how to wear the arm. My real arm was in the way, of course. But all the straps were hard to figure out. Kind of like that toy, the Jacob's ladder. Everything had to be laid out and attached just right or it wouldn't work. I put on an old baggy sweatshirt. That hid my left arm, if I kept it close to my body. The prosthetic felt heavy, pulling me over to one side, and knocked things over if I wasn't careful.

Even when I wasn't wearing it, I liked having the arm with me. I'd sit it on the couch next to me when I was watching TV. Sometimes I put a beer in the hand, pushing each finger up against the can. Almost felt like someone was sitting there next to me. My friend Bo had been hinting around to move in, but I acted like I didn't get it. Bo's fine to go drinking with, but I don't know about living with him. The arm was cool. Never made a mess. Never ate my food. Never wanted to watch a different channel.

I wore the arm when I took empties to the party store to get the deposit back. You feed cans into this big blue machine, one at a time. The conveyor belt pulls them in, and then a metal piece grabs and crunches them. If that can machine got ahold of your arm it could crush and mangle it, just like the cans.

That's one way you might lose an arm. Giant farm machines, not caring if they're slicing corn or bone. I heard of a girl sitting in the back of a pickup, her arm hanging out the side. It was torn off when the driver swerved and hit a retaining wall.

After the empties I headed to the back of the store. I was getting the hang of bending the elbow and positioning the fingers just right to hold things. I even managed to open the cooler door. I slid out a six-pack of Coors with my right hand, turned, and the arm swung out. It hit a stack of cookies piled at the end of the aisle.

The clerk was yelling even before he got to me. "Hey, you gonna pick those up or what?"

I set down the Coors and bent over, trying to scoop up the boxes with my hands.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I didn't . . ." He wasn't looking me in the eye. "I'll get them. Let's get you rung up and on your way."

I let him open the door for me. You would have, too.

I wore the arm to Jerry's. The bar attracted an office crowd, with most everyone else in jackets and heels. I had on an old flannel jacket, red and black plaid. I sat at the bar with my beer and watched TV. A woman sat by herself at

the other end of the bar. After a while she came up and sat on my left. She wore so much makeup I couldn't tell what she'd look like without it. I turned back to the TV.

"Hey," she said, pointing her beer at me. "What happened to your arm?"

I tried to look brave and sad all at once. "Shark." It just popped out.

"Can I touch it?" I nodded and she stroked the hand. She unbuttoned the cuff and folded back the sleeve. She ran her nails across the wood. "Did the shark get you anywhere else?" She licked her lips. I swallowed and shook my head. Then I stood up and left. That's the bad part. The arm could draw women in, but I couldn't go with them and let them see that it was all fake, that I really had two good arms plus this one.

I woke one morning and the arm had slid down and rested against my crotch. I moved myself more solidly into the palm and wrapped my fingers over wooden ones. The arm was cool and dry, and felt like a stranger's hand. I tightened my grip and thought about a woman I had seen the night before. She'd sat by herself, drinking beer and smoking. Her hair was long, and one time she leaned forward and it dipped into her glass. She drew it out and sucked the alcohol off of the ends.

You would have, too.

A week later I met Bo at the Roadhouse. We got a couple of beers and started to talk about the women there, which ones had fake boobs, and which ones were real. We were arguing pretty good about this one girl wearing a navy blue t-shirt, Bo insisting they were plastic and me saying no. In walks this guy with a prosthetic leg, one of those fancy new ones, all metal and silicon, strapped onto his stump just below the edge of his shorts. The arm pulled at me, the rusty metal buckles scratched at my skin. I shifted my weight and sat up straighter. The guy walked over to that girl in the navy shirt, and I couldn't help staring at his leg, the way the metal knee bent like a real one. He put his arm around the girl, leaned into her.

"Hey, look at the bionic man," Bo snickered, and when he nudged my arm, his elbow knocked on solid wood. "Maybe her boobs are bionic, too."

The man looked over at Bo and me. Our eyes locked for a moment, and I raised my bottle to him. The door opened, and we both turned to look. Two guys came in. One had a prosthetic leg fitted below his knee. If the other guy had a prosthetic, I couldn't see it.

"What, is there a convention tonight?" Bo said. "You should go over and have a drink with them. What with your 'arm' and all."

I finished my beer and stood up. The arm swung out and knocked over Bo's beer.

“Hey, watch it,” Bo said. The three guys and the girl turned our way again.

“Time to go, Bo.” I put some money on the bar.

As we walked out Bo nodded towards the third guy and said, “What do you think he’s got?”

I tried to give them a “What can you do, he’s a drunk idiot?” look. The guy shoved us with his shoulder as we went by. I felt one of the buckles give, and the arm slipped down my sleeve. Just a bit of wooden wrist showed below my cuff. I pushed the arm back up, but it fell again.

“Hey, man,” said the guy. He stepped back, held his arms and hands out in front of him, fingers spread. “I work with these things. Let me see if I can adjust it for you.”

I didn’t turn away fast enough. When he reached for me he felt my other arm, my real arm, nestled inside my shirt. He jerked away, a confused look on his face. I used that chance to get out the door.

I don’t know what happened to Bo. They caught up with me in the parking lot. I tried to slip my good arm out, but the shirt slid up and pinned my arm against my belly. I raised the prosthetic up in front of me like a shield.

It was over quick. One guy held my arms behind my back. The second used his metal leg to kick my knees out from under me, then pushed my face

into the mud. I heard the slide and click of the metal joints close to my ear. I heard the rip of my shirt as they tore it from my back, and the hiss of anger. They pulled the arm off of me, the leather straps burning off the skin as they left. Then the metal leg kicked me, and I didn't hear anything else.

When I woke up the men and the arm were gone. I groped through the mud searching for it. I pushed myself upright, then slowly stood. Blood dripped from my mouth. I spit out part of a tooth, and tried to breathe shallow against the pain. I slipped sideways, caught myself, then staggered over to the Dumpster and looked inside.

For days I listed to the right. My left arm felt puny and foreign but I used it anyway. I spent more time out on the roads looking for stuff to scavenge. Mostly I found junk. But I did find an old cane, inlaid with different woods and topped by a brass hand rest shaped like a lion's head. It was kind of cool; the mouth of the lion was open in a snarl.

The cane fit well in my hand. I walked around with it for a few days but got tired of it. So I went by this second-hand shop where I had been looking at guitars through the window. Racks of shotguns lined one wall. A few handguns sat in a scratched glass case, next to three thin gold chains and a small diamond ring. Golf clubs, a tuba, and a line of guitars leaned against another rack.

A guy came out from the back. He took a bite from his sandwich before putting it down on the counter. Pastrami hung out from the rye bread, and I could smell onions, too. My stomach rumbled. I laid the cane on the counter. "What could you give me for this?"

The man wiped his hands on the front of his shirt and picked up the cane. He tested the weight of it in his hands, sited along its length. He left greasy prints on the wood, and I put my hands in my pockets, so I wouldn't reach out and wipe them off.

"Twenty dollars."

I reached to take back the cane. I could pick twenty in cans in day – in a couple of hours if there was a game in town.

He rested his hand on the cane. "Give you twice that in trade, if you take something from the shop."

I looked around, slowly made my way over to the guitars. I used to play a bit—didn't everyone? I picked up a guitar, shook my head, put it back down. Moved down the row. I'd seen the good one right off: an old Ovation. Scratches and gouges marked the body and two strings were missing. I went by the Ovation, then came back. Cradled it, and tried to pick out a few chords. My fingers were soft, no longer accustomed to the bite of the strings. But it felt at home in my hands. I brought it up to the counter.

The man grunted, took the tag from the guitar, and slid the cane off the counter.

I didn't see the arm until I turned around. It hung in one of the gun racks; the wood and metal made it blend in. I walked over, extended my right hand, and stroked the wood. I lifted it from the rack. The straps caught for a moment, then came free.

"How much?"

The man looked at me. "That's an old one."

I let the guitar slide down and rest against my leg. I turned like I was going to put the arm back, but we both knew I wouldn't.

"Not many left like that. One hundred dollars."

I could already feel the arm strapped against me. "How about instead of the guitar?"

"You already took the guitar. No returns."

"I haven't even left the store yet."

"No returns. One hundred dollars."

I dropped the arm to the floor and walked out with the guitar. When I glanced back, I saw the fingers outstretched, reaching towards me.

I came back real early the next morning with a crowbar, smashed through the window, and climbed in through the curtain of broken and falling glass. The

arm was back on the rack. The buckles were missing, the straps torn and ragged. I'd expected that. I slipped my left arm out of my sleeve and against my chest. I slid the arm into the sleeve and buttoned the cuff. The shirt had a really tight cuff and held the arm inside. I looked around, but there wasn't anything else I really wanted. Not anything else I really needed.

Back home I sat on the couch with the guitar in my lap. I pushed the wooden fingers tight against shiny new strings. It went slow, but I remembered the music.

Showtime

We aren't really made the right way for flight—extend your arms, rotate the top of your hands forward, and flap from your elbows. That's a start. Forget all you've seen about flapping from your shoulders. You'll never get any lift that way.

Cowboy is a wiz at putting things together. Like my wings—he rigged them up so I can open and close them by flexing my wrists. These skinny tubes run down my arms, under my shirt. He offered to run the tubes under my skin. I told him I'd think about it.

Cowboy is smart, but he's goofy, too. I mean, look at his getup. All this cool stuff he does for me, and all he does for himself is stick a couple of horns on his head. Then he wears holsters and chaps and a ten-gallon hat. How cheesy can you get? I tell him, either you're a cow, or you're a cowboy. It's stupid to be both. But you can't tell Cowboy anything.

We have our own street act, a kind of freak show. Don't tell me it's "dehumanizing." Man, getting stared at for money is nothing. Try cutting up chickens all day. Or being a telemarketer. That's the worst. Sometimes we hook up with a carnival. Most of the time we're on our own.

It's a good way to meet girls. We're just a story to them, a way to one-up their friends: I hooked up with this guy, get this—he had wings, like an angel. Or he was a cowboy—you know, he had horns like a cow. That's okay. I used to try to get to know the girls a little bit, talk to them, ask their name, stuff like that. Not one has asked me my real name. So now I just call them all "Angel." Don't bother to ask their name. They're just a soft bed.

Cowboy tells me he moos during sex. I don't know; you can't believe everything Cowboy says. I don't see him getting that much action. And if he really moos, well I don't think he gets it twice. Now a guy with wings—the girls really dig that. You would not believe what they want me to do with these wings. C'mon, they're just hacked off a bird that's getting turned into nuggets, and if they're more than a day or two old they've started losing feathers already. I can open them. I can let them fall closed. That's it. Do they think they're really my wings? Like I can control them? Of course, I never got any action before the wings. Before Cowboy and I started doing the show, we were two lonely dudes.

I have to admit things didn't really happen until Gash joined us. Anyone would look sweet next to him. It looks like someone grabbed him by the jaw and tore off the side of his face. He doesn't have much more than a hole for his mouth, and nothing below that. One side of his nose is gone. He dresses real fancy, a top hat and tails, and wears a mask that covers his face from just below

the eyes. Gash makes a show of not wanting to remove it, of not wanting to scare anyone. And then he takes it off all on the sudden, no warning, and you're looking at this red raw hole. A guy puked on him once. Gash picked a fight with him after the act. The guy wouldn't hit him back, I mean, could you?

Gash never got any love. Until Sarah.

It's mid-July and we've got the show down. Cowboy and I used to do the show just the two of us, back at the start, but it was different. Now it's a whole good versus evil and redemption thing. Cowboy goes on first. He ambles across the stage, hands in his pockets, that ten gallon hat on his head. Then he turns and looks at the audience, like he's surprised to see them there. He bows, and sweeps the hat from his head so that you can see his horns. He moves his head back and forth so everyone can get a good look at them.

Then I come on holding a red cape. This is the trickiest part of the act for me. I've got to keep turned so that the audience doesn't see my back yet. They may get a glimpse of white, but nothing much to draw their attention. I want to wait for the right moment. I shake the cape at Cowboy, and he turns and wriggles his eyebrows at the audience. Then he turns to me, scrapes his foot on the ground, and charges. He charges me a few times and then runs into the audience and charges a girl there. A pretty one of course—why waste this on

one who isn't? He lays his head in her lap, tickles her with the horns. He always gets a big laugh. I guess when you're as smart as Cowboy you don't mind looking stupid.

I go to the edge of the stage to help Cowboy back up. Gash comes on stage behind us. I never know he's there until I hear the audience react. He skulks from side to side. He starts playing with the mask, moving it from side to side, pulling it higher or lower, so that although you can't see it, you know something is really, really wrong with his face.

Cowboy and I edge to the side of the stage, and start whispering together. We keep our eyes on Gash. He knows how to play the crowd, performing a macabre striptease with the mask. Cowboy and I rush him, and he turns to us, tears off the mask, but turns to keep the audience from really seeing. It's not hard to react with disgust and fear, even after all the times I've seen that face. That's when he turns to the audience and shows them the face, too. And then he does the thing that really gives them their money's worth. He laughs at them. It's a distorted hooting sound, with his tongue moving in that hole and spittle flying out.

Cowboy kneels down, folds his hands together, and looks for all the world like he's praying. Really, he tells me, he's making a list of all the girls he's had. I grab the mask from the ground and set it back on Gash's face. He takes a swing

at me, and that's when I back away and open my wings. If I've done it all right it's the first time the audience has seen them. I stand firm before Gash until he stumbles towards me and lays his head on my shoulder and pretends to weep. Man, this still creeps me out, the idea of that face of his touching me. But I put my arm around him and Cowboy gets up and puts his arm around Gash too, and we leave the stage together. We all return to the stage to take our bows before we pass the hat.

It's our second night in town. The crowd and take are even better than last night. After the show we go hit the bar. I get a beer and scan the crowd. I walk over and touch this girl's hair, and say, "Hey Angel." She turns around with that look on her face—you know the one—but then I open my wings, just a little bit. A rustle of feathers, a little shiver running through me. Like I just couldn't not react to her. She gets this smile on her face, and turns around on her stool, leaving her legs just a little too far apart for the black mini she's wearing. And I'm thinking, yeah, here we go. Then I feel my wings spreading apart. Felt eerie, not doing it myself. I turn around slow, because the wings aren't all that tough. So the woman is leaving before I get turned all the way around.

"Hey," I call, but she's still moving away. "Hey, you can't just go pulling on a guy's wings and then walk away."

"They aren't *your* wings," she calls back. She never turns around.

“Hey,” says the girl next to me. “I thought I was your angel.”

I turn back. “You are,” I tell her.

“Just what can you do with those wings?” she asks. She’s a freak fan for sure.

I leave the girl’s apartment early—it’s just getting light—and head back along the lake to the bar, wings tucked under my arm. Cowboy and I tow a trailer behind his old pickup. If the trailer isn’t at the bar, Cowboy will know to come pick me up. Gash stays in the trailer sometimes, too, but never if Cowboy or I are there. I don’t know where he goes then. As I head back along the beach gulls watch my approach, turning first one eye upon me, and then the other.

Further up the beach a woman kneels beside a dead gull, slowly moving its wings out and back, up and down, testing their limits. She grasps the bird’s wing tightly and wrenches it loose in a spray of feathers. The other gulls startle into flight. She holds it along her arm and tests the movement.

She stands and tosses the wing away.

“I’m Sarah.”

I recognize her voice from the bar. “Norman,” I reply. The word feels strange in my mouth. Looking at the dismembered gull, I think of her spreading my wings at the bar.

“Where are your wings?” she asks.

“Where are yours?” I ask, but I’m smiling.

“I lost mine.”

We walk together down the beach. When we get to the bar Cowboy is walking up to the trailer, too. The door swings open and Gash comes out, blinking at the daylight. He’s wearing blue jeans, a dirty t-shirt, and no mask. He sees us and raises his hand to cover his face. Sarah walks up to him and extends her hand.

“I’m Sarah.”

He takes her hand in his own, but doesn’t seem to know what to do with it. You can see his tongue moving around, but he doesn’t say anything.

“That’s . . .”

I don’t know his real name. I never asked, and he never said. He lets go of Sarah’s hand. “Gash. Can’t you see?” He spreads his arms wide and sticks his face close to Sarah’s. I flinch, but Sarah remains still. Gash stomps back into the trailer and slams the door.

Sarah turns to Cowboy. “And you are?”

“Cowboy, at your service ma’am.” He takes off his hat and bows to her.

The horns are still on his head.

Sarah climbs into the truck with me and Cowboy. He looks at me and shrugs. We drive to the next town quiet. When we stop Sarah gets out and pulls a dead butterfly from the truck grill.

“Whatcha lookin’ at?” asks Cowboy.

“The wings.”

“Why are you looking at the wings?”

“An interest of mine.”

“Did you see our show? I made up those ones he wears.” Cowboy jerks his thumb at me. “I could make you a pair. Just need to find a bird. Then I could make you wings and dinner.” He laughs and looks at me. Sarah stares straight ahead.

That night after the show I go to the bar. Gash never showed up for the act. Even when we haven’t seen him all day, Gash has always found us in time for the show. I’m scanning the bar for him, to see if he found a perch there. There are more flies than customers. One buzzes around my head and I wave it off. A big blond with too much makeup waves back and comes over. “Never met a guy with wings before,” she says, and slips off her stool. She sits down again and leans over toward me. The fly settles in her cleavage. “But I guess I already know how to fly.” She lifts her glass to me and drinks. The fly hovers

over her glass. I wait until it lands on the rim. There's a secret to catching flies—they always take off backward. I close my hand around it and feel it darting around, humming against my palm.

"I gotta go," I say.

I find Sarah and Gash leaning over the hood of the truck with an assortment of winged insects spread out before them: flies, crickets, cicadas, fireflies, even a wasp. From behind, with their heads bent together, they could be anyone. I hand Sarah the fly. She holds the wings apart and watches it struggle to escape. "Good for maneuvers," she decides, "but not for every day." She releases it into the night.

"You missed the show," I tell Gash. He grunts and hands Sarah the wasp. He's wearing his mask, but it has slipped a little and reveals the ragged edge of his nose.

"You could check out my wings," I say. My voice sounds too loud outside of the bar, outside of the crowds.

"I already told you I'm not interested in your fake wings," Sarah says without looking up.

She and Gash turn over the wasp. I think about the girl in the bar, leaning over and smiling at me. Three days now, and I've never seen Sarah smile. I lean up against the truck, in line with the bugs. I'm right after the caddis fly.

“Where would my real wings be?” I’ve never thought much of it before; if they looked okay, that was enough for me.

Sarah picks a moth and examines it closely, studies the way the ghostly wings attach to the body. She pulls one wing off and extends it to me. She turns me around and moves her fingers over my back. She isn’t touching me, but I swear I can feel the shadows of her fingers on my skin. She finally alights, near to my neck, maybe the fifth vertebrae. Her fingers mark narrow channels along my spine.

“No,” she says, and turns to look for another wing.

The lines burn on my back, first a small flame and then a conflagration. “Erase them,” I say through gritted teeth. The fire increases, and I can’t hold back the moan. “Erase them.”

Sarah places her palms flat against my back and holds them where she had drawn the lines. The fires slowly settle. She holds her hands to my back until I release the tension across my shoulders.

Later I will look in the mirror. Not the merest mark lines my skin.

Have you ever looked closely at an insect wing? They’re a marvel, really. Different from a bird’s wing, but no less successful. A guy, said he was an engineer, told me it was impossible for insects to fly, to lift their heavy bodies.

Don't believe it. Back before the dinosaurs, insects were huge, the size of pigeons and crows.

The more time Sarah spends with Gash, the more I want her to spend time with me. I catch a couple of dragonflies and take them to Sarah. She's sitting in the trailer with Gash. He isn't wearing his mask, and I can't help staring. Gash stares back, then laughs at me.

"What do you think of these?" I hold the dragonflies out to Sarah. My face burns. I concentrate on Sarah's face to avoid looking at Gash. I watch her face a lot. The expression barely changes. The corners of her mouth don't lift. I've never seen her smile, not even at Gash. She turns the wings over, measures their length with her fingers.

"Here and here." She lightly strokes the inside and outside of my legs, just above the ankles. She hands back the dragonflies and turns to Gash. I stand there for a few minutes more before I leave.

Cowboy sews the dragonfly wings into my skin. He runs them deep, attached down to the muscle. With every step I can feel them pinch and pull.

"They don't add to the act, man," Cowboy says. "Why do you want those little wings down there?"

“That’s where Sarah said they should go.” I don’t tell him that after she marked me, these places on my skin tingled—sometimes with a low hum, sometimes a clamor. They were hungry until I fed them with the wings.

The wings move and flap as I run. I accelerate and a hum rises in the air from the vibration. When I stop the wings continue for a moment more, up and back, rowing through the air. Cowboy sees it. Gash, too. He crouches and gently touches one of the wings. My leg twitches in response, and the wing flutters.

“How did you know where to put it?” Gash’s intensity makes me step back. He looks to Cowboy and back to me.

“Sarah marked the place.”

“You know about Sarah’s wings?”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you seen the scars?”

I look at the scars spanning Gash’s face, and at first I think that’s what he means. He meets my gaze for a moment, then turns away.

We know now where to find Gash before the show—we just have to find Sarah first. The last two nights Cowboy and I have dragged him away from her and the bugs to join the show. His heart isn’t in it. Instead of scary and

dangerous he just seems pathetic. Our take is down. But without him, Cowboy and I will have to change the whole show, and the take would be even worse.

“C’mon, Gash, it’s time.” He doesn’t even turn around. “We think we can get one more show out of this town before we move on.”

When he turns I see the wings, delicate and iridescent, that sprout from his temples. Either the wings are misaligned or his face is; they don’t line up side to side. “I’m quitting the show. Sarah and I have plans here.”

I swallow hard; my pride hurts going down. “You know the show’s no good without you in it.” Sarah comes over and Gash puts his arm around her. “Take your fake chicken wings and leave us alone.”

Cowboy convinces me to talk to Gash one more time before we leave town without him. Clouds of dust rise up even though Cowboy drives the truck slow. We find Gash and Sarah walking toward the lake. Wings bristle from Gash’s shoulders. A double row lines his arms to the wrists. They flock at his knees and along the muscles of his thighs and calves. My legs muscles twitch. I can see that my idea of a pair at each vertebrae was too much, an ostentation, a vanity. Closer, I see a variety of wings—the large brown ones from the Cecropia moth, the long wings of the praying mantis, fly wings at the wrist. Nodules of blood and pus mark every point of entry. Not Cowboy’s work. Gash stumbles,

and Sarah waits while he stands again. Beetle wings flash their iridescence at his hips. Gash shuffles forward.

We follow them out to where the beach turns to rocks, and the rocks into cliffs that fall to the water. The winds are calm. Sarah keeps talking to Gash, low, leading him to the edge.

I climb out of the truck. "Sarah, tell him it can't work." Cowboy shifts the truck into park, leaves the engine running.

"You need lift. Think like a raptor," we hear Sarah instruct Gash. "They can hardly get off the ground, but they can soar from a high tree or a cliff."

"Gash."

He turns from Sarah. "I have a name. Just like you, Norman, I have a name." He spits on the ground.

"What's your name?"

He nods at Sarah. "Ask her. She knows my name." He rolls his shoulders and the wings beat at the air. Sarah leans close and kisses his cheek.

Gash hunches over, and a cicada wing falls from his arm, twirling on its way down. He launches forward, arms extended, and begins flexing his muscles in a giant shivering. The wings flap and row and buzz.

I feel the wings at my ankles flutter, maybe from the truck exhaust, maybe from their own desire. Every spot Sarah has ever touched me comes alive, throbs and burns and urges me forward to the edge. I can feel where those wings should be now, I can feel the muscles pull and tense as they spread the wings. I want Gash to fly, and I want to fly with him.

I don't notice that Cowboy has left the truck until he tackles me. "No," he growls. Gash steps forward. I struggle against Cowboy and spit dirt from my mouth. "Look at her," Cowboy says. "Look at Sarah."

His hand relaxes enough for me to lift my head. Funny; I start thinking about the next show. Cause I can see we'd gotten the old one all wrong.

While Gash hovers there for just a moment, dark against the sky, Sarah smiles.

Keys

I chanced on a small brass key in my husband's desk the day I found out I was pregnant. The cut edge peeked out from under some old stamps and a receipt for dinner and drinks the week before at Luigi's. I've never been to Luigi's.

I rested the key on my tongue, like one of those butter mints you find by the register at a diner. It had the metal tang of a broken filling. I rolled the key around my mouth with my tongue, from one side to the other, pressed it into the roof of my mouth, slid it along between my teeth and cheek like a tiny acrobat. It poised for a moment at the back of my tongue. Hard, warm, and slick, it started to slide towards my throat, and I let it. Two hard swallows and the key was gone.

I'd never really thought much about having children. The neighbor girl, a year younger than me, always wanted to play wedding. If I was sufficiently bored and lonely, I would join her. Her cat took the role of groom, and he frequently left her at the altar to stalk birds. She lined up rows of chairs and filled them with stuffed animals. When your wedding guests include a platypus, three rabbits, a yak, and a dozen bears, what do you serve on the buffet?

The pictures in my wedding album seem to be taken from a TV movie. I flip through them: three gorgeous bridesmaids here, three handsome groomsmen there, a six-tiered cake complete with tiny bride and groom on top.

I stop at a shot of the cake. My hand is wrapped around the little bride.

After a month of morning sickness that lasted all day long, my husband's patience wore out with my heaving and retching. At first he would hold back my hair as I leaned over the toilet, wipe vomit from my mouth when I finished. He bought a special soft rug to cushion my knees.

As the weeks went on, he started to pretend he didn't hear me. Oh, were you sick again? he'd ask when I emerged shaky and snuffling, eyes shot with blood vessels broken from the force of my retching. One evening he walked by the bathroom, looked at me kneeling on the floor before the toilet, and closed the door. When I came out he was talking on his phone, and mouthed something at me I took to be: This phone call is too important to be interrupted by your disgusting puking.

I removed his ring of keys from his jacket pocket. The house key was worn smooth from use, and the head was not too large. But I wanted to keep him in, not out. The locks to his office had recently been replaced, and the edges of the new keys looked silvery and sharp. His car key had a small head, plastic,

about the size of a nickel. I maneuvered it between the double coils of the key ring, slid it free, and put it under the bathroom rug.

When I was eight years old I was given a diary as a gift. The cover was pink and glittery, with a heart-shaped lock. A tiny golden key hung from a pink ribbon inserted between the pages. I never wrote in it. When I was younger, nothing I had to say seemed important enough to record in that fancy book.

The obstetrician leaned over me and moved the cold metal disc of the stethoscope across my looming belly, listening for the baby's heartbeat. He directed the nurse to take a blood sample and left me with my feet in the stirrups. A picture of a waterfall was taped to the ceiling. Where was it taken? The nurse took a needle from a locked cabinet. Was the waterfall hard to get to? The nurse slid the needle into my arm without speaking. Did the photographer hike for hours, or days or years to get to that place? She filled three vials with my blood then pressed a square of gauze to my skin. Did he follow a map, did he know where he was going, or did he just end up there?

It's a girl, the doctor tells me, and places her in my arms. I kiss each tiny finger, trace the tip of each sweet toe. I'll teach you how to walk and read and

swim, I whisper. We'll hold tea parties in the back yard. I'll buy you a different color tutu for each day of the week, and show you how to catch a frog. We'll lie on our backs on summer nights and make up new names for the constellations. I'll give you the plainest notebook I can find and write this on the first page: By the time you have secrets to lock away a key can't hold them inside.

Rough Edges

The trip lasted three days, and I learned each rough plank, splinter, and dark knot of wood inside the box. I slept leaning against the side, and could stand—barely. The cloth of my wool coat snagged against the boards and left little tufts of felt hanging around me like small, soft creatures. The box smelled so strongly of new-sawn wood the stink of my body didn't rise above it until the second day.

I crouched while the rasp of a saw bit through wood. Air holes had been punched in the sides, but I felt as though I hadn't really breathed until the man lifted the top from around my head. I hoped he liked what he saw. I was on the stocky side, broad shoulders and hips, but still more muscle than fat. Brown hair with a slight wave, just long enough to pull out of the way and braid. My profile said I was strong, and a good worker. Surely my ability to work would be more important than beauty on this farm owned by two brothers.

I didn't like the idea of another trip in the box.

I stood upright and stretched my arms. The man shook his head. "Get back." His voice grated. I retreated as far as the box allowed, and held my breath as he brought his palms down along the wood planks forming the sides, and cut them as well. He stepped back and let the front of the box fall on the

floor between us. I ran my fingers over the rough-sawn edge, steeled myself, stepped out of the box.

“Gert” I said, offering my hand.

“Peter,” he replied, and kept his hands stiffly by his sides. He had brown hair, muddy eyes, and stood only an inch or two taller than me. Wrists, knees, and elbows jutted through tears in his clothing. His sandpaper palms made me think of the roughness of my brother’s cheek when I had kissed him good-bye.

We rode directly into town and stood in a small stone chapel to say our words. The priest looked at me closely for a few long minutes, long enough for me to think of the smell of wood, and the dark knots that mapped the planks. I plucked at the hem of my coat. Apparently satisfied, the priest led us through the rites. A few old women sat at the back, ready to bear witness.

After we had a meal. No one stopped to talk to us. Between gulps of food, Peter rubbed his hands back and forth on the seat beside his legs. Despite my days in the box, I had little appetite. When he stood to leave, I saw fresh grooves gouged into the wood of his bench, and what little I had eaten threatened to return.

Peter’s brother waited for us back at the farm. He leaned against the barn. Razor edges showed through the holes at his elbows and knees.

"This is my brother Rand." Peter said. He pointed at me. "My wife, Gert."

Rand clapped his hand on Peter's shoulder with the ring of steel on whetstone. I vomited into the dirt.

"Keep the box," Rand said to Peter, and walked away.

Although I believe now that Peter did his best to be gentle, I crawled from bed the next morning sliced and slashed and never able to bear children. We worked the stony ground for what it would yield, grazed a few cows, and harvested wood. Peter and Rand went out each morning, and I worked in the garden and the house. Rand made himself a place in the barn, and I did what I could to make the house comfortable. I learned to cover chairs with tough hide and sand new gouges from the table each day. The box stayed in the barn.

Peter became gentle, or at least less rough, and I hardened. At my request he made me a dresser to hold our clothes, and did most things I asked, though I was careful not to ask for much. Before I had come to the farm, I thought I was tough. But over time, living with Peter and Rand, I became harder.

Rand seldom spoke to me, but would brush my arm as he passed, and leave a new string of red beads among my scars. When I complained to Peter he said, "Rand is my brother."

I found the gloves in the back of a kitchen cupboard when I was doing spring cleaning. I was fairly certain they hadn't been there before. Holding them, I couldn't remember the last time I had touched anything so soft. I pulled a glove onto my left hand, and it snagged and split along the length of a finger. I tugged it on the rest of the way; it was already ruined with dirt and bloodstains.

I managed to get the other one on too, though they were little more than rags by time I was done. I walked through stone fields to our neighbor, a woman who lived alone and made her small living selling teas and ointments. I had gotten to know her well in the beginning, buying salves for my raw flesh.

The woman looked as squat and weathered as the granite mounds. I showed her my gloved hands. "There was another one before you," the woman said, looking away from me to the stony fields. "A pretty one. Curls and skirts and wide blue eyes. Hands soft as butter. Always wearing gloves. A proper lady, or looked to be. Brought lavender soap with her. Every day that bar got smaller and smaller, but she wrapped what was left in tissue. She showed it to me near the end. Asked if I could make her some more. Not so bad I suppose for some things, but she wasn't much good for this life." She turned back at me. "She didn't last too long."

I found the other box in the barn loft. The wood was smoother, and it had

four small openings on one side, with empty spaces I knew once held the glass panes now fitted into the window of the bedroom I shared with Peter. I examined each plank of wood, trying to read her history by the pattern of knots and the grain. My box, rough though it was, had been made from the best wood my brother could find. Almost no rain had fallen for three years, and our parents and younger brothers and sister had died, one by one, and anything better had been used for their coffins. Knowing there would not be enough food for both of us, I told my brother I wanted a chance to marry. Already I was harder than him. I leaned closer to the box and tried to smell any trace of lavender.

I served Peter and Rand dinner that night wearing the stained, torn gloves. "Where did you get those?" Rand asked, and Peter stood up from the table. They went at each other, using their limbs like hatchets and knives and saws. After a few minutes, Rand held Peter on the floor, kneeling on his legs. He blocked Peter's blows, which fell with soft thuds along Rand's arms and torso. I grabbed Rand's head and pulled him away from Peter. Rand gripped my shoulders and drew his hands down along my arms, squeezing hard. He ripped what was left of the gloves from my hands.

We both looked at the faint red marks he left on my skin. Peter's face and arms and body were covered in bloody lines. I slapped Rand in the face, and was satisfied as much by the bloody wound I left as his surprise. As I took

another step towards him I felt something sharp at my neck.

“My brother,” said Peter, pushing the tip of the knife into my skin.

I am one of those old women now who sit at the back of the church and whisper about the new girls, who continue to arrive in their boxes. Peter survived that night. I saw him in town a few times, though he kept his head turned and pretended not to see me. The neighbor woman sheltered me that first winter. I spent the cold days learning to work with wood, and make my living that way, though I make no boxes, not even for coffins. I learned which trees to tap for syrup, which herbs to grow for medicine, and that men harden women, and women soften men, and those who survive leave nothing in between.

Beauty

She woke one morning from uneasy dreams to find that her beauty was missing. She looked on the floor beneath her mirror, thinking her reflection may have slipped out during the night. Her search revealed nothing but the rug. A small spot marked it, to be sure, but it was only one of those odd spots that develop on carpets, and was much too small besides to be her beauty.

She checked the refrigerator, in case her beauty had been hungry — as her keys sometimes were — to be found sprawled, replete, across a tub of yogurt or cottage cheese. It wasn't there.

A thorough search of her small apartment forced her to conclude that perhaps, instead of missing from her reflection, her beauty had left her face. She rested her fingers lightly upon her features. It reminded her of spiders, and she shuddered under her own touch. Careful examination revealed that the tip of her nose leaned slightly to one side, the right nostril was bigger than the left, and her left eye, instead of being almond-shaped, was now most decidedly square. A comparison in the mirror verified these findings, and added a line of red blotches staggering from her upper lip to the outer corner of her right eye.

She had always known that her beauty would leave some day, but she hadn't thought it would be so soon. Each morning and evening she had

smoothed expensive creams over her face, across her forehead, down the slope of her nose which turned up just the right amount at the end, over the swell of her cheekbones, and down the sides of her face, lingering just a moment at the jaw before anointing the delicate skin of her neck.

She had taken such good care of her beauty—why would it leave?

It was Sunday, and she had planned to stay in, work on her bills, and do a load of laundry. She decided that she would continue her day as planned, and though she had never attempted these tasks without her beauty, they most likely could still be done. She found that they could; and indeed, she even managed to put a few things away, and to vacuum the rug in addition.

In the evening she checked her reflection again, hopeful that things had resumed their normal course sometime during the afternoon. But she found that her left eye, in addition to being a perfect square, had also migrated a bit up her face into her forehead, and that her mouth seemed to be growing wider, and its edges now reached almost as far across her face as the outer corners of her eyes. Still, she went to bed that night confident that her beauty would return by morning.

When she awoke the next day she rose slowly from bed, savoring the thought of greeting her beauty. She avoided the mirror—it wouldn't do to act to

eager to see it again. She filled a bowl with cereal, careful not to look into her spoon. As a child she had looked into a spoon, and had been horrified by the distorted image that appeared. She had never really been fond of spoons since then. She successfully avoided the spoon, but caught her reflection in her coffee—her beauty had not returned. A boil squatted on her forehead, and her right eye seemed to be sliding closer to her hairline. The middle of her lower lip had split, and bulged forth a fleshy redness. Her right nostril had grown so large that it seemed to be pushing the rest of her nose aside. She risked a glance into the spoon, thinking that its distortion might put her reflection right; but it didn't oblige.

She strode to her closet, considered which clothes would best offset the face. Most of her clothes ended strewn on the floor about her. She felt they were being difficult on purpose. She swept her hand along the shelf of her closet, in case something hid from her, and found a dusty old hat with a large brim. She did not usually wear hats, and regarded it with some suspicion. She did not remember how she'd come to have it. But she put it on and regarded herself in the mirror. True, it was not at all stylish, and probably hadn't been even before the brim had been bent, and the bow at the back mashed askew. But it did succeed in covering the boils erupting along her forehead; there were four and a half of them now. That counted for something.

She picked up a black lace skirt and draped it over her face. It looked like her head was covered to take her to a hangman's noose. Sighing, she found a scissors, cut a panel from the skirt, and stapled it along the brim of the hat. It looked awkward. The hat was light blue, the lace deepest black, and her cutting had been uneven, leaving the lace veil to stumble drunkenly along the edge. It came down lower on the left side than the right, but she couldn't be sure that it wasn't her face causing this effect. Still, she could see out, while it was very difficult to see in.

She left her apartment and glanced beneath her windows, to see if her beauty were lying there, waiting for her to find it, ready to come home after its little adventure. She was feeling put out by now; the game had gone on long enough. She peered between the Lexuses and Audis and Saabs that lined the curb to no avail.

She walked on to the grocers. People were not as solicitous as she was accustomed to; nobody offered to let her go before them in line, or to carry out her bags. Still, she managed. People did look at her. Except for a small child who peered up into her face from below, she did not seem to frighten anyone.

On her way home people followed her with their eyes. She was used to attention, but this was of a different kind. A group of graceless young children pointed to her and asked their mother why she kept her face covered. She

turned towards them and tipped her head back slowly, almost but not quite revealing her face, and smiled as they watched with rapt attention.

She noticed other people who wore hats, and wondered if they covered problems worse than her own, misshapen skulls or mangled hair. She laughed to herself, thinking of all of the people she knew who could benefit from wearing hats.

She entered the elevator in her building and was joined by a luscious cream felt hat. Taffeta circled the brim in twists and waves and dipped into a graceful fall over the face. The woman below it must be some neighbor of hers; she hadn't really paid attention before.

"Hello," she said. "Lovely hat."

"Thank you," the woman replied, and drew up her posture even more erect.

"As you can see, I'm rather in need of a new hat," she said. "Do you know where I might find a good one?"

The woman looked her up and down, stepped closer and raised her fingers to the edge of the black veil, then tilted her head. Even though she could not see the woman's face, she knew that the eyebrows were raised, seeking permission to lift the veil. She nodded once, and the other woman's fingers lifted

the fabric slowly. She left it raised for a moment, looked at the face from the left side, the right side, the front. Then she carefully placed the veil back down.

“Sofia’s,” she said, and handed her a card. “Tell her Mrs. Thurber sent you.”

Sofia’s was not in a part of town she knew. But Mrs. Thurber’s hat had been exquisite; exactly along the lines of what she was seeking. It would be worth a trip out of her way. Streets became narrower, the sidewalks uneven. The buildings seemed to be herding her towards the passing cars. A few people were about, but they scurried in and out of the buildings hardly glancing at her. The address marked a pair of doors graced with worn brass handles. They curved outward and slightly away from each other, then came closer again at the bottom. A distorted heart. A small sign on the left said “Sofia’s.” She sniffed. It was hard to imagine Mrs. Thurber’s elegant hat in this neighborhood.

She knocked and walked in. After all, if it were a shop, customers must be welcome to enter. Surrounding her was such a confusion of shapes and colors that at first nothing stood out as a recognizable object. Yellow paisley fabric overlapped a bolt of blue and white polka dots, tangles of ribbon straggled over a rack of animal tails—raccoon and fox and hawk. Thread unspooled across the floor, and blocks of wood in different sizes and shapes formed haphazard piles

wherever a bit of counter was not occupied by something else. She felt disoriented, and lifted her veil to focus more clearly.

“Lost your beauty, eh?”

She dropped the veil and turned, looking for the source of the voice.

What she had thought was a pile of discolored fleece moved, and she saw it was really hair, with a small woman beneath it. All that extended above the counter was the hair, a pair of round, gold rimmed glasses, and a decidedly bulbous nose. The woman made her way through the disarray.

“Happens to all of us, dearie. Why, just look at me!” the woman cackled.

“Are you Sofia?”

“Yes, dearie. What have you come here for?”

“Mrs. Thurber suggested that I come.”

“To get your beauty back?” Sofia asked slyly.

She opened her mouth, then snapped it shut again.

“You look like a fish, dearie. If Mrs. Thurber sent you, I suppose you want a hat. I have done some fine work with her. She was quite stunning, in her day.” Sofia started rummaging through the shop, picking up a bit of ribbon here, lace or velvet there. She took a tape from her pocket and began measuring. “I see you in something made of felt. A basic black and white to start, I think.”

“My beauty. Is it possible?”

“Why, are you having trouble doing without it? I lost my beauty years ago, and I still manage every day.”

“Of course I’m fine.”

“I can see that, dearie. Well, you can come back, or wait next door if you like.”

She walked outside, turned, and opened the right hand door. It appeared to be some kind of club, with tables and chairs scattered around the space. At one end of the room was an elevated stage. She sat at the back, and watched people fill the tables at the front.

The house lights went down and lights came up on the stage, revealing a single wooden bar stool flanked by full length mirrors. A hunched-over woman staggered across the stage, each step a battle to balance the sway of her humped back. She climbed up on the stool and faced the audience, and bared her teeth in a grimace or a smile.

“Welcome, welcome all to Club Pulchritude.”

Several people in the audience clapped, and the woman waved and nodded, her gray hair catching the light like a halo. Music started and a spotlight hit her. She swayed slowly on the stool, revealing a little more of her hump at each turn. Then she climbed up on the stool and untied her robe and turned away from the audience. The back of the garment dipped, an inch, an

inch and a half, then was pulled it up again, each time gaining ground until it seemed there could be no more to see, and then dropped further still. With a final flourish the music ended and she squatted down sideways on the stool. The robe slithered to the floor. The hump arched over her, dominated her, and naked you saw that she could have been formed no other way. The audience clapped wildly. The woman snagged her robe, turned her glorious humped back to the audience, and teasingly recovered herself with the robe, inch by inch. The audience clapped and stomped their feet. Once covered, she cautiously climbed down from the stool and waddled off the stage.

A second woman came on stage. She walked up to one of the mirrors, primped her hair, winked at her reflection. Then she drew down a zipper on the back of her sweater and shrugged it off her right shoulder. A light came on above the mirror opposite, illuminating another small arm growing from the woman's back. She waved at her reflection in the mirror, and the little arm waved back. They wiggled their fingers at each other. The woman moved to the center of the stage and leaned backwards. The tiny arm wiggled its fingers at the audience, which wiggled theirs in return. Then the arm swept towards her back in a bow.

She could watch no more. She stood up, walked backwards out of the room, bile rising in her throat, unable to look away from the stage, feeling her

way in the darkness. She pushed through the first door she found, out to the street and leaned against the wall, bricks rough against her hands and the sky nearly as dark as the place she'd just left. Drawing a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders and moved away.

A few blocks later she heard running footsteps and stepped closer to the buildings. Hands grabbed her from behind, pulled her back into a doorway, ripped her sleeve. Raspy breaths panted in her ear, and hands pulled her arms together behind her back. The man pushed her up against the door, pressed her there with his body, and she wasn't sure if the rank scent she smelled was him, or her own fear, but it filled her, drowning her; he pulled at her coat, at her blouse, spilled buttons onto the ground, pinned her to the wall with his leg.

He tore off her hat and she thrust her face down, away. He grabbed her hair and twisted it back so that her head and her face followed, and she smiled and smiled until it seemed her face would break, and it did. The light was dim, shadowed by his bulk and the doorway but still he could see her enough. He shoved her away and howled and howled as he ran.

She collapsed onto the ground, flailed in the darkness for her hat. She returned it to her head without dusting it off or setting the ribbon aright. She pulled the sides of her coat close around her, and staggered to her feet. She started running, the staccato of her heels echoing off empty storefronts and

cracked sidewalks, a drum beat urging her on until she saw the two doors with the two brass handles. She stopped. The handles arched back like the curve of a baby's ear. The door above one was marked "Sofia's." The other was warm in her hands.

couch \kaʊtʃ\

1. A long piece of furniture covered in fabric, usually with arms and a back, long enough to lie down on, or for two or more people to sit on.

I was brought up with three sisters and an olive green Naugahyde couch. Advertised as a durable and humane alternative to leather, the material was not a bad idea for a family with four active kids. And it certainly endured. The couch never wore out because we never sat on it unless it was the last seat left in the house.

We nicknamed it the Leg-Eating Couch. Hot and sticky in the summer, the Naugahyde reluctantly released its hold on our bare legs. They'd leave its surface with an audible ripping sound. Then we walked around with red marks on our thighs for the next hour. What happened to your legs? Oh, you've been sitting on the couch.

Two long cushions stretched a distance where there should have been three, so whoever sat in the middle had to sit on the ends of both cushions and usually ended up in the crack in between. The frame was a rectangle, the cushions were rectangles, the arms were rectangles. None of our bodies were rectangles, so it really didn't fit us well. Even our Dad wouldn't sit on the couch.

I'm not sure what happened to that couch, but I imagine it's in a landfill somewhere, still abiding.

2. To lie in a hidden place, as for ambush

The first couch we bought after we were married was a sleeper sofa with nubby fabric in a blue, brown and white plaid. It had three cushions and rounded arms. The couch provided a bed for visitors and was reasonably forgiving with stains. When small, my kids liked to pull open the couch and play beneath it. They dragged blankets and sheets from their own beds to hang over the sides, leaned cushions up against the end. The frame cleared the floor by no more than a foot or two. If they were quiet, I didn't know the boys couched inside their den.

3. Slang: couch potato—Someone whom someone else thinks spends too much time sitting on the couch and watching TV.

Picture a row of Mr. Potato Head toys on a long brown couch. Some adorned with spicy red lips and large pink ears, others sporting glasses on their protuberant eyes. I ruined many a good potato as a child, sticking in teeth and arms and noses without much concern for proportion or possibility.

During a recent trip to a national chain toy store, I spotted the modern Mr. Potato Head. Alongside the basic set stood Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head from the movie *Toy Story*, Mr. Potato Head Transformers, Officer Spud, and the trio of Darth Tater, Artoo Potatoo, and Spud Trooper. Included in each set, in addition to ears, eyes, tongues, noses, hats, shoes, and quasi-robotic accessories, was a plastic potato. A plethora of parts could be inserted into that plastic potato—but only into pre-cut openings. You can still stick a tongue on top of the head, but what if you want the arm higher on one side than the other? Or a row of three noses? No go.

Okay, so we are no longer ruining perfectly good potatoes. But I really don't like reaching into the door in Mr. Potato Head's plastic butt for the accessories.

4. A place to rest, lounge, or repose

I left everything from my marriage behind except my two sons and what I could stuff into a Honda Civic. We gradually constructed a new household from thrift stores and castoffs, sleeping in sleeping bags until I could buy beds. Used furniture joined us piece by piece from garage sales and consignment shops: a table and chairs for our kitchen, a bookcase, dressers for our clothes.

Finally I bought a couch. Although second hand, it was in good shape, and more elegant than the rest of the furnishings. Dark gold filigree overlay blue, red and green stripes. Intended for a bay window, the arms bent outward, which made it an awkward shape in a rectangular room. I ended up placing the couch in the middle of one long wall with the arms opening into the room, like someone offering a hug.

The day the couch was delivered, my children spent hours on it, sitting and playing and talking. The next morning I came downstairs to find a pile of blankets on the couch, and my sons curled up under it, asleep.

5. To lay a fresh sheet of handmade paper onto a felt; in this sense \küch

Here's a recipe to create a new piece of paper: tear old paper into bits, about one inch by one inch, and grind them into pulp in a blender. Go through your husband's desk for material: the registration for his Mustang, gym membership card, the receipt for dinner and drinks for two at Gino's. You've never been to Gino's.

Tear everything into small pieces. Grind them into pulp in a blender. Throw in your marriage license, the Polaroid of the two of you on the beach in Costa Rica. Watch his face whirl in the blender. Resist the impulse to rescue it from the spinning blades.

Pour the thick pulp into tubs of water. Stir it with your hand. Feel the pulp move between your fingers. It may stick to your hand, hesitant to leave. Stir the pulp again.

Dip a screen in and swing it down to the bottom of the bowl. Raise the screen up, weightier now, into the air. Pulp looks like a drowned thing, clinging to the screen. Let it rest for a moment. Tilt the screen a little so water drains off, back into the bowl.

Now comes the hard part: You must flip the screen over and put the pulp onto a bed of felt. When the pulp side is down, pat the screen with a sponge to draw out the extra water. Carefully lift the screen away. Take your time. Encourage the pulp with your fingertips, if it is reluctant to let go.

6. To embroider so that a long stitch, or stitches, is fastened at regular intervals by smaller stitches.

The pictures I've seen of couch stitch look like they could form a brick wall, or a path. I learned to—sort of—embroider as a child. Mother taught my sisters and me to work flowers onto pillow cases. I was more of a yelling-running around-playing in the mud sort of child, so this was difficult for both of us. I think my mother felt needlework was something a mother should teach her daughters, and so we spent these lessons in a row on the couch, our feet not quite

reaching the floor, pillowcases cinched into embroidery hoops in our laps, and our needles stuck in our fingers almost as often as into the cloth.

She started by teaching us the back stitch. It's a funny little stitch, because just as the name promises, you work backwards from the end of the stitch to the beginning. I often had trouble finding my way back to the beginning. I wandered to the left or right of it, and occasionally ended up in a different area completely. I also had trouble getting the ending lined up correctly with where I meant it to be.

7. *syn*: SOFA

Riding through the student section of town, I noticed a young woman sitting on a sofa in the middle of a lawn, adrift in the grass. She read with her head bent down, face obscured by her hair. I don't know what she was reading, but she was either engrossed or settled in for a long wait—she paid no attention to the passing traffic. Beside the couch were a few boxes. Was she moving? which gave Waiting there with her book, and her boxes, and her sofa, for someone to come pick her up?

I cannot clearly remember the sofa. Through the years the upholstery changes, sometimes dark, sometimes a robust floral print, sometimes a faded patchwork denim.

8. *Variant of couch grass—Agropyron repens.*

Like many grasses, couch grass grows from rhizomes. It can spread rapidly through an area and is usually considered a weed. Just imagine a field of couches. Organic, free-range couches. Not like the kind you'd find at Art Van or Sears.

On the Boat

I suggest we take the harbor cruise because I'm running out of things to do with Dad, who's in town visiting for the first time since I moved to Marquette. It's only been a day and a half since he got here, and already he's bored. He stares past me while we eat, drums his fingers on the table.

Driving into town from the airport, he recited names of the businesses we passed: "Wal-Mart, Target, Kohl's, Wendy's, Arby's, Applebee's. Applebee's," he repeated. "You have everything here," he said, pleased and relieved. Is that why it took him almost three years to visit? Did he think I lived in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by woods and bears?

Dad seems deflated since Mom died, three years ago now, and I hoped getting out and seeing something new would perk him up. I hoped we would get a chance to get to know each other better before it was too late. I really don't know my dad. When I was a kid, he was hardly ever home. He worked three jobs, and even then we never seemed to have any money. There are conversations I wish I'd had with my mom. Conversations I want to have with him while we still can. But now that my dad is here, I admit I'm somewhat at a loss for how to do this.

At 83 Dad's not doing too bad. He still has most of his hair, and only his sideburns are gray. He's lost some weight, and can still get around, though he can't walk more than a block or two without taking a rest. Seems like Mom had illness enough for the both of them: high cholesterol, high blood pressure, a bad gall bladder, two heart attacks and bypass surgeries, and in her last decade, a creeping dementia that left her aware of everything it stole.

I introduced Dad to my landlady, and the first thing he did was tell her a story about how he used to steal gas for his motorbike. "Never paid for gas," he said. "I'd wait until the stations closed, then lift up the hoses and tilt the nozzles into my tank. There was just a little bit in each, but my motorbike didn't need much." He grinned and stood with his hands on his hips. My landlady is a really straight-laced type, and this isn't the right kind of story to tell her. It's not the impression I wanted him to make. I've heard most of his stories before, and I'd expected him to tell the one where he and my mom had gone skidding down the street on their knees and elbows after he'd taken a turn too sharply on the bike. How Mom's parents didn't like him, and that hadn't helped his case.

We went to lunch at Donckers, a local restaurant that advertises having a real old-fashioned soda fountain. I can't attest to the authenticity of it, but I thought he'd like it. As soon as we got in the door Dad started interrogating the girl behind the counter, asking how she makes the phosphates.

“When do you put the soda in? Before or after the ice cream? How much pressure?” It worried me a little, because Dad can be rude sometimes, even when I don’t think he means to be, and especially, when he does. That seems to be happening more often lately. Does being old give you a free pass? I wanted to ask him.

She’s a young girl, probably not 20 yet, and nice about it, real patient. “Would you like to help me make it?” she asked him, and not in that if-you-think-I’m-such-an-ass-make-it-yourself way, but with what seemed a genuine interest in pleasing him. So he directed her, and he complimented her, but when we walked away and sat down at the table he said to me, “Not as good as I remember.” Nothing is ever as good as he remembers. He can’t find a good hamburger, is his chief complaint. Fifty years ago places made a really good one. I’d like to point out that 50 years ago he had more taste buds, too, but that doesn’t seem nice, and I’m determined, this time, to be nice.

So I suggest we take the harbor cruise. It would eat up most of the afternoon, and I thought he might like it. I was running out of things to do. I had expected he’d want to go back to the hotel each afternoon for a nap, go to bed early each night, and emerge for a late breakfast in mid-morning. When I was a child, the few times I remember him being at home he was leaned back in one of a series of Naugahyde recliners, taking a nap. Now, he kept me up late at

night telling the same old stories long past when I was ready to sleep, and woke me each morning with a phone call, ready for breakfast.

We head over to the boat, and Dad's anxious to get on board. We're just going to cruise out of the harbor and along the shore a little. Hasn't been on a boat in he can't remember how long, he tells me. The day before, we'd come down to take the cruise, and they hadn't sold enough tickets. Needed to have at least ten paying passengers, they said. I had to convince Dad to come back today; he's suspicious of a business that isn't about to turn you away because they're too busy.

The boat is about 80 feet long, cream-colored on top, navy with a maroon stripe on the lower half. An American flag snaps at the stern. It's late in the season, but the water looks calm enough. My dad and I are the first to board. The woman right behind us starts asking when the bar will open as soon as she steps on the boat. Her walking already seems unsteady, a lurch in her gait as she leans towards a seat. In the main deck cabin there are rows of tables with benches running along either side, booths that could seat about eight or ten, depending on how much the people like each other. There are no seats on the upper deck, just an open area where passengers can stand or walk around. We take a seat inside the cabin.

“When’s the bar gonna open?” the lady asks again. Dad and I smile at each other.

“As soon as we get underway,” says one of the crew, a gangly boy probably still in high school. The brochures say the boat can seat 100 people, but I’m looking around and that seems optimistic to me. After we shove off from the dock, the same boy gives a demonstration of how to use the life jackets. I wonder how many there are on board. As soon as he finishes, the woman jumps up and heads to the bar. She comes back and sits across the aisle from us, clutching a can of Diet Coke. She is short, just barely five feet tall. Her hair is brown and wavy and unstyled. She’s probably in her mid-thirties, but I’ve never been good at guessing that kind of thing. She may be with the woman seated across the table from her, but maybe not. Either way, she’s talking away at her.

Dad launches into a story about the time he and his brother went to a gambling boat on the Mississippi at St. Louis, where he grew up. “I started with \$25, which was a lot of money back then. First I won big, got up to \$400 at one point playing black jack. And then I started losing, steady, until it was all gone.” He places his hands flat on the table between us. “My brother sat at the bar, nursing one lousy beer the whole time. He just smirked at me when I asked him to spot me some money. I couldn’t stand him. He was always so prissy. Always

the one who did everything our mother said." He looked out the window. "He wouldn't even give me bus fare to get home. I ended hitching for a ride instead."

This is a new story. Dad doesn't talk about his brother Morris much. "Morris died young; just 30 years old. A sudden coronary, from a heart defect. Fell over in the middle of dinner. We were out at a nice restaurant to celebrate something, I don't remember what. He fell right over into his plate of food." My dad lifts his arm at right angle, then lets it fall to the table.

We motor past the old ore dock, wood pilings, around the break wall. The skies cloud over, the wind picks up, and the boat acquires a gentle sway from side to side. The captain comes on the intercom and starts narrating the cruise. "Look at that island over there." The island looks like a lump in the water, with a little bit of a pointy top. "I'm not going to tell you what the miners used to call it. Don't need to. Just take a look at it." He giggles, and the intercom shuts off abruptly.

"Sounds drunk," Dad says.

"Do you want anything from the bar?"

"Not now," he says. "Let's go up top." I am happy to follow. The stairwell is steep and as Dad climbs, I wonder what I would do if he fell. Try to catch him? Twist out of the way? I lag back another step. What would he do for me? Step aside and laugh, a whisper says in my mind. The upper deck is windy and

empty. The boat isn't moving that fast, but we're heading into the wind, and it staggers us. We can see into the bridge from here, and the captain seems to be . . . dancing? Snapping his fingers and swiveling his hips. We hang onto the railing. After just a few minutes Dad is ready to head back down below.

"I've seen it," he says.

We return to our seats and the woman with the can of Diet Coke comes over. She scoots onto the bench next to Dad, across from me. "I'm Penny," she says, and I'm surprised at how my dad smiles and greets her. She reaches her hand across to me, and I shake the limp fingers gently. "It's quite a ride, isn't it?"

"Yes," Dad agrees, "it's quite a ride."

"It's my first time," she says. When the conversation dies, she waits for a few moments, smiling and nodding, before she leaves our table and heads back to where she started.

The captain's voice comes on again. "Bet no one on board can tell me what they used to call that mountain over there. Not a one of you." He giggles again. Who is steering the ship, I wonder. "I'll buy any a you a drink if you can tell me. Any drink we have. I'm telling you, we have some fine drinks on board ship." The com cuts off again.

The waves are picking up. Dad starts in on another story about his brother. "He always had money, cause he never went out and spent it. As soon

as I had money I spent it. I wanted to have some fun." Well, that explains my parents' financial difficulties, I thought. "I may have been broke all the time, but boy, I had fun!"

I don't remember seeing Dad have fun, not once, ever. He tells me a story about my sister, Carol. "I took her to an arcade and the money went like that," he says, and snaps his fingers. "Twenty dollars gone in as many minutes."

I try to remember ever going anywhere, just him and me, when I was growing up. Carol is four years younger than me and we have never been close. They'd probably diagnose her with some sort of autism now, but no one we knew spoke that word 40 years ago. The teachers complained she talked too much in school, and she had gotten off the bus in second grade with duct tape over her mouth. In junior high she started smoking and skipping school. One weekend I came home from college to find Carol and our mom faced off, fists raised. As I stood between them Carol walked backwards through the door, never taking her eyes from Mom. When the door slammed my mom looked at me, fists still raised, and said "Don't tell your father."

We sit quietly, rocking with the motion of the boat. I look out the window at the waves and the passing landscape. I wasn't an angel, but mostly I had been the child that did what she was told, talked politely, did well in school. We pass the university, and the Superior Dome, and long stretches of beach I walk

listening to the waves and looking for agates. These new stories my dad is telling me aren't the ones I want to hear.

The ship heaves, and Penny, walking down the aisle, is almost knocked from her feet. She steadies herself on our table and moves cautiously on. The wind has kicked up the waves, and the boat rolls from side to side. The young man who demonstrated the life jackets stops at our table. "If we had known it would be this rough at the start, we wouldn't have gone out," he says. Dad and I grasp the edges of the table and say nothing.

The Saving Game

As long as I can remember I've wanted to help people. Let's be honest: I wanted to save someone. I used to go to the zoo and look for little kids who were lost or hurt or in trouble some way. I imagined one of them walking on top of the fence surrounding the lion pit and falling in. Everyone else would scream for help and wave their arms and run back and forth, which only I knew agitated the lions even further. I'd hold up my hand, ask for quiet, then climb over the railing to extend a hand to the frightened child. A little boy, and he'd be real cute, something like my husband, Charles, must have been as a child. With one hand still on the railing, I'd reach down while the lions paced back and forth, twitching their ears and tails. Our hands wouldn't quite reach, so I'd lie flat on the ground and hook my feet over the bottom rail of the fence. The boy and I would grasp each other's wrists. As I pull him back up out of the pit, the biggest lion roars and charges. We make it back over the fence just in time. My picture runs in the paper, and the zoo offers me a job, but I'd just smile and say, "It was nothing."

When I told Charles this story he put his arm around me, hugged me close and whispered in my ear, "I bet you could do it." How can you not love a man like that?

Growing up I thought I'd be a nurse, but I'm not all that good at school, or with blood. That time Charles sliced his hand cutting up a rack of ribs I thought I'd have to walk out the door and leave him there to bleed by himself. He wrapped a towel around his hand and while I drove him to the emergency room I kept saying barbecue sauce barbecue sauce barbecue sauce and somehow we made it. I couldn't look at that hand, or have him touch me with it for a long time. I can't be a nurse.

Then I saw this ad: "Rehabilitation Assistants needed for the Pierce Center, a post-acute, residential rehabilitation center providing services to individuals with traumatic brain injuries." I didn't know much about traumatic brain injury, but I knew it was a chance to help people.

I waited in this big room for them to call me into my job interview. Hallways branched off from it, meeting rooms down one side and offices down another. Large windows looked into rooms labeled "Physical Therapy" and "Occupational Therapy." A large, vertical fish tank with a bench circling all the way around sat in the middle of the room. Fish swam up to the glass and paused for a moment, eyes bulging and mouths opening and closing, then darted away. I'm sure the idea was watching fish would be soothing, give you something to do that would take the edge off while you waited for a meeting or

therapy. Or a job interview. Of course, since the benches ringed the tank, you couldn't actually see the fish when you sat there.

Other chairs were scattered around the room. An older woman sat in one. Her salt and pepper hair was permed and cut short. In her fifties I'd guess, the age my mom would be if she hadn't passed. The woman wore a white short-sleeved blouse and blue capris. A young girl sat next to her, patting her on the arm from time to time, but mostly looking away, out the window.

A woman in a red shirt and khakis came and sat next to her. She started by asking if the older woman remembered her name. The woman leaned forward, looked at her earnestly.

"My name is the same as your sister's," the woman in the red shirt said.

"Ju—Ju—Justine."

"No, that's your name. Mine's Angela."

"Ang—Ang—Ang—"

"Angela. Just like your sister."

"Angela." Justine sat back and nodded. She looked tired by the effort.

"Do you remember we went swimming?" asked Angela.

Justine stared for a moment. "In the pool. In the pool."

"Yes, we went swimming in the pool. Did you like that?"

Justine leaned forward. "Go swimming in the pool."

Angela patted her arm. "We'll go swimming again. But not today. Another day." She rose and said goodbye.

Justine turned to the younger woman and said, "She doesn't swim much, but she will."

"That's right."

"She doesn't swim much but she will." Justine's voice rose and she started crying. "She doesn't swim much but she will. She will."

The younger woman leaned Justine's head on her shoulder. "That's right, she will swim. But not today." Justine continued sobbing. "Hush. Hush. It will be all right."

Maybe I can't be a nurse. But I can sit next to a lady and put her head on my shoulder and shush her tears.

I met Charles at the mall. I'd gone there with my niece, Cecille. She's six years old already, cute as a button, and knows it. My mother was raising her, but now it's my aunt, and she maybe has a drinking problem, so I make sure to spend time with Cecille. She acts like she's all that and a bag of chips, but I figure some attitude will help her get through. We were heading out of Sears and Cecille was whining for one of those mall cookies, the big ones with M&Ms instead of chocolate chips.

“No way,” I told said. “For what they cost you could buy the ingredients for a whole batch of cookies.”

Cecille rolled her eyes. “But you won’t. Just one cookie, please please please?”

Up ahead people were gathering. Wasn’t much down at that end, except for a nail salon and a shoe repair that always seemed to have a sign on the door saying “Back in ten minutes.” A helium balloon floated up, one of those silvery Mylar ones. The ceiling’s really high there, and someone must have tied a really long string to the balloon, because it was going up slow. I followed it up, and saw another balloon stuck up there. The rising balloon bumped up against it, and they were both on the way down. I dragged Cecille over.

“How’d you do that?” someone asked.

A tall, kind of cute guy held the balloons. “Tape. I put tape on the top. Roll it over so the sticky side is up.”

I liked his voice. So when I a mall security guard striding over, I bent down and whispered in Cecille’s ear. “Go get the balloon.” She looked at me and shook her head. “I’ll get you a cookie. Two cookies.”

Cecille walked right over to the guy. “Oh, thank you, thank you,” she said. “I was missing my balloon.” He smiled and handed it right over to her. I liked his smile, too.

The security guard slowed down, but still came over. "What's going on? Who's creating this disturbance?"

A few people drifted off, but the rest of us looked at each other. There were nine, maybe ten of us, quietly watching the guy with the balloons. I stepped forward. "My niece," I said, "lost her balloon, and my boyfriend got it down for her."

"You can't do that," the security guard said. "You aren't allowed to make a public disturbance."

"Public disturbance," I said to him. "The only person I see making a disturbance is you."

Cecille, who's smarter than me sometimes, tugged on my sleeve. "Can we go get our cookies now?"

The balloon guy squatted down by Cecille and asked, "Are you going to get one of the sugar cookies with frosting, or one with M&Ms?"

She looked straight in his eyes and said, "One of each."

People started drifting away. We left, too. "Move along, then," said the security guard. He stood there and watched us walk away, I know he did.

When we were far enough away, the balloon guy turned to me and said, "I'm Charles. Your boyfriend. I like that."

Charles and I play something we call the saving game. We were in the grocery store and Charles started taking things off the shelf and tossing them to me: Ritz crackers, a bag of raisin bagels, cream cheese. Sometimes he acts like a kid that way. I almost dropped the cream cheese. Charles picked up an apple and a pear. He pretended to throw both at me.

“Don’t do that,” I said, laughing. “I can’t catch two at the same time.”

He swung his arms forwards. “Which will it be then? The apple or the pear?” I shook my head. “You gotta choose,” he said “Which one will you catch?”

He tossed the fruit. I fumbled and missed both. They hit the tile floor with a thud. The apple rolled up to Charles’s foot. He picked up the apple and the pear and added them to our cart. “C’mon,” he said. “You could have saved one of them.”

The Pierce Center put me through all kinds of training. When we did the blood borne pathogens prevention session I got a little dizzy for a minute, but said barbecue sauce real quiet under my breath and got through it. I couldn’t figure out all the HIPAA privacy rules. I start to get worried until I decided I just wouldn’t tell anyone anything and that should cover it.

They put me on transport at first. That's okay, I don't mind driving, but I don't know my way around the city so good, Charles always does the driving and sometimes I get confused with all of the one-way streets. I take this one client—that's what we call the people that live at the center—to the doctor. I find the parking structure okay, and park, and even remember to look at the floor we're on. Everything goes fine getting to the appointment, but when we came out I couldn't remember which way to go. I could see three parking structures, and I only remembered what the inside of ours looked like, not the outside.

We're in the second one when the client started to get mad. "Don't you know where you're going, bitch?" she said. They told us in training that clients may have lost their inhibitions, their impulse control, and if they started talking ugly we should just stay calm. Well, that's all right at first, but she got louder, and uglier, and I wanted to get right back in her face. Luckily we turned the next corner, and there was the big white van with its "Report My Driving" sticker. I just walked over and opened the door for her and didn't say anything the whole ride back.

"Which would you save, a dog or a cat?" I asked Charles. "Dog," he answered with no hesitation. "A dog would save me back if he could. A cat

would sit there and lick its paws and watch me go down.”

I buy yarn and needles and start knitting at work during my breaks, and while clients are at appointments. I want to make Christmas presents. It's only September, but with all the aunts and cousins and everyone that's 17 scarves, and I'm not that fast yet. Charles bought me a nice tote with special openings for the yarn, so I can carry it with me and not get the skeins all tangled. I'm thinking I'll make his scarf last, once I'm good at knitting.

One of the OTs comes into the break room and watches me. “We've got a client who used to knit a lot. Would you want to work with her?”

“Sure,” I say, real casual-like, but I'm excited. Driving clients around and sitting with them is fine and all, but I want to be helping more. Turns out the client is Justine, the woman I saw on my first day here, when I was waiting for the job interview. The needles in Justine's hands fly. Orange and green and purple yarns combine in no pattern I can figure out. She drops stitches and doesn't seem to notice the gaps. Sections begin and end in unexpected places, or curl back in on themselves. She seems to do better when she's not really looking at the knitting too much. Like her fingers remember more than her brain does, and if she starts letting her brain do the thinking, she messes up.

Justine's husband comes to visit most evenings. "I'm Earl," he says and offers his hand for me to shake. "Justine made this sweater I'm wearing." He pulls at the fine, cabled knit. "She was an amazing knitter."

It's a beautiful sweater and fits perfectly, as if adjusted every inch or so just for him. I look at Justine's knitting. What appear to be tiny sleeves project from a narrow strip. Slits line one side, plump knots the other. Holes gape in odd places.

"They treat her real good here," he says to me. "I wish I could bring her home, but I can't take care of her. She needs too much help." He pats Justine's shoulder.

She looks up at him and smiles. "Mar—Mar—Marcy's birthday party. When she was five." She spreads her hand across a purple area. "I made a cake." She nods her head and starts knitting again.

"Marcy's our daughter. She's 34 now." Earl clears his throat. "Justine can't remember my visit two days ago, but she can remember when Marcy turned five."

"Would you save your sister or your brother?" Charles asks.

This isn't a fair one for him to ask, and he knows it. I don't get along with my brother. After a few minutes I say, "My brother."

“Really? I’d a thought you’d say your sister.”

“Well. Lots of people like my sister, so I figure someone else would save her. With my brother, if I didn’t save him, likely no one would.”

My knitting’s getting better. When I’m by myself I do pretty well, but it’s harder when I’m with Justine. There’s something off about the sound of her knitting. Instead of a rhythmic clicking, hers is an unpredictable clanking of metal on metal. It pulls at my own rhythm. I notice I’ve dropped a stitch and rip out the row.

I haven’t seen Justine’s husband yet this week. Earl used to come by every other night or so, but his visits are falling off lately. It’s almost the end of my shift when he arrives. A car pulls up to the curb, and Earl gets out of the passenger side. A woman’s in the driver’s seat, and she stays there.

He leans down and kisses the top of Justine’s head. He sits with us for a while, but keeps looking out to the car and fidgeting. “Show Earl what you made,” I prompt Justine.

She drops her knitting and turns to a bag beside her. Stitches slide off the needles. She pulls out an orange and purple wad. “For mail—mailbox. Keep—keep mail warm ‘til you get home—home from work.” She beams up at him. Earl takes the mass of knitting and turns it over in his hands.

“See,” I say, and take it from him. “There are loops on the bottom so you can tie it onto the box.” I lay it over my arm and show him. Earl nods but makes no move to take back the cover. I take it off my arm, put it in his hands, and make sure he takes it with him when he leaves.

It’s my turn to ask Charles. “An adult or a child?”

“Hmm,” he says. “I need to know more about them. How old? Male or female? Good or bad?”

“Both good. There’s a fire, and you only have time to save one of them. A mother and her little boy. If you save the mother she’ll be scarred from the fire. All over her face and hands, but they’ll work okay. If you save the little boy, he’ll be crippled from the ceiling falling on him. He’ll live to be an old man, but never walk again.”

“Jesus,” says Charles. “What’s happening to you, working at that place?”

The next time Earl visits we’re putting Justine’s knitted creations on trees around the center. The odd shapes and random extensions make for a good fit. We stretch the knitted pieces up and around and over branches, tuck the ends under rough bits of bark. A line of knots run from bottom to top, acting like buttons to hold the knitting onto the trees. Multiple circlets wrap the thickest

branches. We even cover one parking meter, arranging the gaps to expose the coin slot, and dial, and little window at the top that tells you how much time you have left.

“Haven’t seen you for a while,” I say.

“I’ve been busy. Work, and . . . and . . .” Earl looks down. “You don’t know how hard it is,” he says. “This isn’t Justine. She made the most beautiful sweaters, and always used good yarn, like angora and cashmere and merino wool. She was so proud of them. She’d never have knit something out of cheap acrylic and hung it on trees.” He looks back at me. “She was a librarian for more than twenty years, and she can’t even read now. I don’t know who she is anymore. It’s like someone else is walking around in her skin.” He took a breath, exhaled loudly. “I’ll still visit. But she’ll never get much better, the doctor says. I have to move forward. Giving up my life won’t save hers.” He straightens up, put his hand on my arm. “I know you don’t understand. I hope you never have to.”

“Me or you,” Charles asks.

“I don’t want to play anymore.”

“I’d save you,” he says.

“But I wouldn’t want to be without you.”

“Then both of us,” he says, and breaks into a wide grin. “I would find a way to save both of us.”

“Love you, baby,” I say and kiss his cheek. I lay my head on his shoulder. I’m glad he doesn’t know how to play the game.

What To Give Someone Who is Dying

Ellie bought the house in January, when trees were bare of leaves and snow hid the backyard. Come spring, she discovered what had seemed like an expanse of grass was actually half-covered by brown slabs of flagstone. It might once have once been a nice patio. Now, heaved and shoved by freezes and thaws, stones lay strewn haphazardly across the space.

Her son Oliver spent that winter in the psychiatric ward at the university hospital, at twenty-four already a veteran of such places. On visiting days, Ellie rode the elevator up to the top floor. She reminded herself not to look at the red slashes along his arms and neck, the purple crescents beneath each eye, the patterns of triangles and crosses he'd cut across his hands and kneecaps.

Seven banks of elevators opened onto the ground floor, but visitors had to go to the second floor to access the only elevator that went up to the ninth. The others stopped at eight. Why put the psychiatric ward on the ninth floor? Ellie wondered. To give the staff more time to catch a patient if one escaped?

Just past the elevator were two doors. The first day of her son's stay, a doctor had led her to the first one, a conference room, to recite what was wrong with Oliver—depression, schizophrenia, anxiety disorder—and how they were going to fix it, and why what they did the last time hadn't worked, but their new

strategy would. The next door had no windows. A small sign read "ECT." Ellie passed it several times before she thought to ask about it.

"Electroconvulsive therapy," said an aide, but she didn't look at Ellie.

Ellie looked it up at home and felt nauseous reading the description of it. Even though every source mentioned anesthesia, and muscle relaxants to prevent broken bones, and low doses of electricity, from then on Ellie imagined a cinematic heaving and seizing of bodies each time she passed the room.

The hospital discharged Oliver to Ellie's new house in April. She made lasagna to welcome him home. He spent his days watching television, and with scars along his wrists and neck still an angry red, she did not discourage him from staying indoors. He drifted through the house in a pharmaceutical lethargy, touching unfamiliar doorknobs and light switches. Sometimes Ellie found him outside smoking, staring at the flagstone patio like it was a puzzle he needed to solve.

Ellie had chosen the house because the backyard was sunny enough for her to garden. There were two bedrooms, a windowless kitchen, cramped bathroom, and a living room with a wide bay window. Ellie lined every sill with trays of seeds which grew into tall, spindly seedlings. She paced the boundary of her new garden, planning rows of tomatoes and cabbage and broccoli and peas

and beans and potatoes. When she picked up clods of earth and squeezed them in her hand, they clung together. Not yet, she thought. When the soil is ready for planting it holds for a moment, and then lets go.

Ellie had watched her neighbors come and go through winter, but did not really meet them until April, when Oliver had been home for nine days. Carol and Joe leaned on the fence between their yards, an old split rail structure wasp-scarred and splintery.

“There’s a block party the end of June, down at the Janson’s,” Carol said. “The red brick house three doors down. It would be a good chance for you to meet everyone.”

“Thank you,” said Ellie.

“And your husband?” Carol asked, raising her eyebrows. “Or someone you’d like to bring?”

Ellie thought of Oliver, sitting in front of the TV with the sound barely audible, watching shows about the infrastructure of foreign cities and the generation of magnetic fields on the sun. “I’ll bring a salad,” she said. Carol pursed her lips. Her husband, Joe, smiled.

After the ECT room, there was an intercom on the wall to the left, and a key swipe pad. A small sign above it read “Please call for entry.” Ellie had

pushed the button and waited until a voice came over the speaker asking who the visitor was, who they wanted to see. When the angry sound erupted from the door, Ellie pulled it open. It clanged shut behind her, and then Ellie was locked in eight feet of hallway between the first set of doors and the next, free to go forward or back only when someone unseen allowed it.

The floor looked much like other wards in the hospital, but not so busy. A few patients in street clothes and slippers shuffled through the hallways. Only doctors and nurses and aides, and the few visitors, wore shoes. Along the length of the hallway, doors to patient rooms stood open. The beds, instead of being the standard movable hospitable kind on wheels, were mattresses on solid platforms. Abstract paintings in muted colors were painted onto the walls. Wire reinforced the glass in unopenable windows. Oliver had sat on his bed, staring at the wall. In the silence, Ellie missed the usual beeps of monitors, whooshes of respirators, and other hospital noises.

Carol, Joe, and Ellie exchanged words about the weather, or waved as they pushed lawn mowers over tender new grass. Carol seemed to be the yard-work person in their family; she trimmed bushes and mowed and planted new seed in bare spots in the lawn. Joe spent long afternoons in a hammock, occasionally rousing himself to campaign against the dandelions. He bent over

each plant, digging around it with a long piece of forked metal and extracting it by hand. He threw the dandelions into a bushel basket he moved with him around the yard. Yellow heads peeked between the slats, taking one last look at the world. When Joe lifted his baseball cap to wipe sweat from his forehead, Ellie could see a stubble of hair creeping across his scalp.

Ellie decided to make a fruit salad for the block party. At the store, produce was stacked in artful arrays, complementary colors next to each other, things that might clash on a separate table. Fruit she had never seen before—rambutan, jaboticaba, and cherimoya, according to the signs—nestled inside bins of grapes, coconuts, and apples. Ellie considered the impression she wanted to make, and decided these exotics would seem like she was trying too hard. She chose comfortable old favorites: watermelon, cantaloupe, honeydew, strawberries, blueberries.

Ellie walked into the next aisle. “You did nothing,” a woman on her cell phone insisted loudly. “That’s right. It was me. It was all me. I’m the one who let you treat me that way, and then I took you back and let you do it again.” She stopped talking, flipped her long blonde braid back and forth like a cat twitching its tail. “No, I’m the stupid one. I didn’t say it was you. It was all me. You did nothing wrong. You did nothing.”

Other shoppers started down the aisle and then turned around. The woman's shopping cart was cantered diagonally across the space, and she continued pulling packages from the shelf and peering at them while she talked. Ellie nosed her cart closer and pretended to be contemplating the peanut butters. Smooth or chunky? Natural, low sugar, full fat? The store brand or Jif?

The first time Oliver had stumbled home drunk, slurring his words and vomiting half the night, her husband, Keith, had assured Ellie it was just a phase. All boys got drunk a few times in high school, he'd said. When it happened again the next weekend, and the next, and then every day, Keith had grounded Oliver, taken away his car keys, withheld his allowance.

Doing the laundry one day, Ellie had noticed small blood stains on the sleeve of Oliver's shirt. Her heart froze; she imagined him palpating his arm for a vein, injecting himself with . . . she didn't even know, she'd realized, what he might using. It hadn't seemed like something she'd ever need to learn. Shaking, she'd shown her husband the red flecks. Keith had roared into Oliver's room and grabbed him, forced his sweatshirt sleeve up past his elbow. At first, they couldn't make sense of what they saw. Instead of needle tracks, Oliver's forearm was lined with small shapes and figures like the petroglyphs they'd seen on a

vacation, many years before. Most were healed and scarred, but a few stood out red against the pale skin. Keith dropped Oliver's arm and left the room.

Ellie had followed him to their bedroom. "One of us is leaving," he'd said.

"He's our son," she'd answered, and reached out her hand. She'd wanted to admit she had fantasized something would happen to put an end to the nights Oliver stumbled home drunk or high or not at all, unable or unwilling to say where he'd been. A car accident maybe, or a drug overdose.

But Keith had turned away, and when he'd left, Ellie felt a brief thrill of relief. She and Oliver had moved through the house, if not friendly, at least under a cease-fire. For five nights in a row he'd come home, not obviously drunk or high, and Ellie found no more blood on his clothing. Then Oliver, 17, disappeared.

Ellie cut the watermelon into a basket with scalloped edges. The cantaloupe and honeydew she scooped into imperfect balls. The strawberries she washed, but did not trim off the stems and sepals. "Do you want to come to the block party?" Ellie asked Oliver as she rolled her scoop through the watermelon.

He stared at the TV and shook his head back and forth, a motion that continued so long it seemed disconnected from her question. Ellie no longer felt

much like going herself, but the idea of explaining why she hadn't shown up seemed even more exhausting. She dumped the last of the blueberries into the watermelon basket and joined Oliver on the couch. A scientist on TV spoke about fetal microchimerism, how carrying a male fetus leaves traces of his DNA in the mother's body and brain, particularly in areas related to memory, perception, and sensation. Ellie tried to feel these traces of Oliver's infant self, and failed. He had been a sweet boy, playful and affectionate. She had already known that without him, she would live in the world differently. Ellie heaved herself off the couch and leaned over to kiss Oliver on the top of his greasy, unwashed head.

Ellie maneuvered the watermelon basket to the neighbor's buffet table, then went back home and returned with a chair and a bottle of water. She sat at the edge of the group. With the exception of Carol and Joe, she had spoken to none of these people. They could be exchanged for the people who lived in the next block, or the next town, and Ellie wouldn't have known the difference.

When Carol and Joe arrived soon after Ellie, the word cancer buzzed behind them. Joe looked deflated. Flesh had melted from his face, and the skin along his jaw line sagged. Carol had gained weight. Rolls of fat spilled over her waistband, pushed from the arms of her blouse, billowed under her chin. As if Carol was gathering his flesh and making it her own. They set up their chairs in front of Ellie. Joe turned and smiled at her.

“That’s Carl, up by the chicken wings. If you ever play golf with him watch out, he’ll lie about his strokes.” Ellie looked at the beefy man with short blonde hair and a sunburned face. “There’s his wife, Anne.” Joe nodded toward a thin woman with blonde hair piled high on her head. A diamond bracelet flashed on her wrist, and Ellie wondered if the woman exaggerated her hand movements to catch the sun. “Next to her is Valerie.” Joe indicated a tall brunette. “She . . . lives in the green house at the end of the street,” Joe finished, with a foolish smile on his face.

Carol stood up. “You need to eat to keep up your strength,” she said to Joe. “I’ll fill a plate for you.”

Joe remained seated while Carol went to the buffet table. When Carol handed it to him, Joe looked at the plate, ringed with slices of ham and potato salad, and then squinted up at her. He rested the plate on his lap and put bites of the pink ham into his mouth when his wife was watching. When she wasn’t, he coughed the bits out of his mouth, and let a neighbor’s dog lick away the evidence.

Ellie sat for a while, sipping from her water bottle. When the line at the buffet table shortened, she joined it. She had almost reached the desserts when Joe came up next to her. They moved along together, alternating stepping and reaching for cake and cookies and Jell-O salad. At the pies Joe reached past Ellie

and brushed his hand along the side of her breast. He scooped peach cobbler onto his plate and moved on, never looking at her. Was it an accident, Ellie wondered, had he even noticed that he'd touched her at all? When Ellie returned to her seat Carol glared at her, but said nothing.

She was finishing a seven-layer bar when conversation quieted. Ellie looked up and saw her son approaching the buffet. A man, Carl she remembered Joe had said his name was, called out to Oliver. "Hey. This is for the neighbors. For people who live here only."

Oliver turned slowly towards the man. Ellie watched him open his mouth and show his teeth. Smile, Ellie thought. Remember how to smile. She sat frozen in her chair. Oliver reached for a hot dog and the man grabbed his wrist. Oliver twisted his arm, revealed scratches and scars and dark, crusted scabs. Carl dropped Oliver's wrist and wiped his hand along his leg.

Oliver smiled, a true smile this time, and stuffed an entire hot dog in his mouth. He walked back to Ellie's house, never looking at her. Ellie watched them all follow his progress, where he went, which house he entered.

Only Joe turned to Ellie. "Your son?"

Sometimes after that, Ellie would come home to find Joe and Oliver sitting in the backyard, gazing at the flagstones together. To her surprise, Joe smoked, too. She remembered when her own mother was dying, how the frail woman

would tap her lips with two fingers to signal her need for a cigarette. Ellie would ring her lips with balm, or give her a nebulizer treatment, but always pretended not to understand what her mother no longer had words to ask for. Ellie asked Oliver and Joe if they wanted snacks, or something to drink, but Joe always declined. Oliver said nothing at all. Later Ellie would find Oliver in front of the TV, alone. But those days Ellie would find fewer red-spotted tissues in the trash, could see no fresh lines incised on Oliver's body.

What can you give someone who is dying? Ellie offered to run errands, mow the lawn, but Carol said they had that all taken care of, thank you. Ellie dropped by with a book she thought Joe might enjoy reading, but Carol returned it with the spine uncreased, the pages still new. Another time she tried a movie. Ellie made cookies, oatmeal raisin chocolate chip, Oliver's favorite. When she rang the bell, it took so long for someone to answer she figured Carol and Joe must not be home. Ellie was trying to decide whether to take the cookies back home, or to just leave them, when Carol opened the door. She had a feeling Carol had been on the other side, waiting for Ellie to go.

"They look lovely," Carol said, and took the plate. "Thank you." They looked at each other for a moment.

“Invite her in,” Joe called. Carol hesitated, but opened the door wider and led Ellie to the back of the house. The TV was on, and Joe sat in a leather recliner, feet up, a blanket covering his legs, though the house felt warm to Ellie. “I can’t eat them,” he said, “but they smell wonderful.” Ellie perched herself on a chair next to him. She could think of nothing to say.

Joe coughed, and said to Carol, “Could you get me some fresh water?” He lifted a glass from the table with a trembling hand. Carol took the glass and walked heavily from the room. Joe placed his hand on Ellie’s arm. “How’s Oliver?” he asked.

Joe stroked his fingers back and forth on her skin, and Ellie stiffened. She moved her arm and Joe let his hand fall to her leg. As he moved it up her thigh, she watched as if it were a spider. When Carol came back with the water, Ellie jumped up. Joe leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, a small smile on his lips.

As she ushered Ellie out the door Carol said, “I know you want to help, but you can’t. I don’t want to be rude. You can’t help.” She handed Ellie back the plate of cookies and shut the door.

Oliver looked up when Ellie walked by with the cookies. “More for you,” she said, and set them next to Oliver on the couch. When she got home from work the next day, Oliver and his old gray backpack were gone.

A self-inflicted gunshot wound was the official cause of Oliver's death, but Ellie could not imagine where he had found a gun, or even more unlikely to her, the determination to use it. After she hung up the phone, she thought of the last time she had visited Oliver in the hospital. The elevator ride to the ninth floor, walking past the door marked ECT therapy. Ellie had pushed the buzzer and waited. "Who are you?" said a voice. "Who have you come to see? Why do you want to see him?" Ellie's voice had stuck in her throat. She wanted to say "Because he is my son, and despite everything that has happened, I still love him." Instead, she had just given their names.

She spent the next days making arrangements for his burial. The day his obituary ran, she drove down the street towards her house at dusk and saw a procession of neighbors walking down the sidewalk with dishes of food. She felt a surge of gratitude that they'd discovered what had happened to Oliver, that they would honor his life and her grief. But they kept going, past her house, and on to Joe and Carol's. A mound of Tupperware and pie pans already filled their porch and steps.

After Oliver's burial Ellie returned home alone. She stood before the steps that led to her small porch and looked at the fresh pile of food waiting at the door of Carol's house. The neighborhood was quiet; no one mowed their lawns

or brought in their mail or drove down the streets. Were they all at Joe's funeral, Ellie wondered, and considered for a moment if she should return to her car and drive to nearby cemeteries and try to join them. She pictured people surrounding Carol at the graveside, supporting her, kind hands on her elbows, helping her to walk. They would be murmuring the same things Ellie had said at those times: how Joe had fought against the disease, how wonderful and brave he had been.

Ellie walked to Carol's house and searched through the stack of food. When she pulled out the tray of lasagna the pile slid to one side, and cornbread muffins rolled across the lawn. Ellie hugged the lasagna to her chest and walked back to her house, not caring if anyone saw her or not.

Anamnesis

Close to mealtime the halls are crowded at my mother's retirement home. The residents hurry with short shuffling steps, or stabs of their walkers, to reach the dining room in time to get a spot at their favorite table. I walk with my mother, holding her arm, and she pinches me to urge me on.

Sometimes I bring my mother homemade food, things she taught me how to make: meat loaf, chicken cutlets, spaghetti sauce from a recipe handed down to her by her own mother. Last week I brought an apple pie, and she poked at it with her finger, pushed it around the plate. "What's this?" Mom asked. She lifted a forkful to her mouth and sniffed it. "Now I'm quite the cook," she said. "I could make a better pie than this. I taught my daughters, too."

"You taught me," I said. She shook her head and pushed the plate away.

After lunch she wants to stop at the lost and found. "What are you looking for?" I ask. "What did you lose?"

She pushes her lips together tightly, but they still quiver. "I lost . . . I lost . . ." Her eyes fill with tears and she doesn't finish. She lets me lead her to her room. I take off her shoes and tuck her into bed. I turn the radio on low and she closes her eyes.

When I began kindergarten I started losing things: hats, gloves, sweaters, books. Things so easy to leave behind. The lost and found was a wonder to me. Somehow, the things that you lost were magically transported to that wooden box. Nailed together in some father's garage from scraps of wood, the box had "Lost and Found" stenciled across each side. My mother and I stopped there almost every day before we left the school. We pawed through hats, single mittens, and jackets.

Once, I fell asleep in the lost and found. My mother was late, and I stopped there as usual to search through the accumulation. For a five-year-old, and not a large one at that, the box was deep. I leaned over the side, trying to reach a gold necklace with a bluebird charm. As I pushed the clothes aside to try to reach it, the necklace worked its way deeper into the box. I leaned over further and tumbled in.

If I was in the lost and found, did that mean that I was lost? I wasn't sure. I knew where I was. But I must be lost, since I was with all of the other lost things. I leaned back in the soft nest of clothes to think. It was warm, and I was tired. My mother would know where to find me, I thought, as I drifted off to sleep. And that day she did.

I sit with my mother until I'm sure she's sleeping. As I'm walking out a woman comes towards me, wheeling a cart down the hallway. Her feet barely leave the floor with each step, and the soles of her slippers make a sound like corduroy against the tiles. A bowl filled with a soapy liquid rests on top of the cart. She stops, and dips a stick with a pink circle the size of a nickel into the bowl. She blows bubbles towards each room—sometimes just one or two, others times a whole stream, her cheeks bulging with the effort. A man follows behind, sweeping a push broom that almost reaches from one side of the hall to the other. Step . . . sweep . . . sweep. Step . . . sweep . . . sweep. I move to the side. He pauses to let me pass.

I was named Therese after my mother's mother. She died when I was seven, so I have few memories of her. I have an impression of a tall woman, with thick brown hair that fell into her face. I see her lifting her arm and using it to brush the hair back, her hands heavy with dough. I ask my sister if this is how she remembers our grandmother, and she laughs at me. That was a picture from a magazine, she says. Ma stuck it on the refrigerator. She wanted the recipe for pot roast on the other side.

What my sister and I do both remember are the green and white tiles that covered my grandmother's kitchen floor. We pretended the green ones were

islands, and the white ones clouds. For each visit, we had to decide to live on the ground or in the clouds, and could only walk on those tiles. Sometimes my sister lived on the ground, and sometimes in the clouds. I always chose the clouds.

It's getting colder. I bring my mother a box with her winter clothes. She still insists on dressing herself, so I make sure she only has clothes for the season. As I hang up the long-sleeved blouses and cotton sweaters my mother talks about her childhood, and her daughters' childhoods. She remembers the neighbors we lived below forty-five years ago, and the store we walked to for milk and bread. She remembers the name of the roses she grew, and the dog that lived next door. On nights I can't sleep, I search my memory for the names of neighbors, teachers at school, the face of my best friend in second grade.

Mornings my mother stands sometimes and stares at her closet, the staff tells me, but finally picks something out and puts it on.

The next time I visit I take my mother to the lost and found. Maybe, I think, if she sees what she lost, she'll remember. The woman at the front desk gives us the key. As we walk down the hall, my mother stops to peer into the rooms, the pictures painted right onto the walls, the residents sitting in wheelchairs pushed barely out of their doorways.

I grope for the lights. A single narrow set of plastic shelves stands in the corner. A mop rests in a bucket of soapy grey water. The long push broom is here, too. Two broken umbrellas lean against the shelves.

“Is any of this yours?” I ask my mother, and gesture to the shelves. She looks at the trinkets and sweaters piled on the shelves, the books and magazines, and a pink and white pacifier. She picks up each item and turns it over. After consideration, she selects a snow globe. She shakes it, watches glitter fall on a pair of girls skating on a pond.

“This,” she says, and looks up at me.

I know the globe is not hers. She disliked this sort of souvenir, a “dust collector” she called them. My sister lives in Florida. If she had sent it to our mother, it would have flamingos dancing on a sandy beach.

“You found it,” I tell her, and she beams.

I have a wild impulse to take my mother ice skating, to bundle her up, go to a pond in the woods, where it would be just the two of us making our way across the ice together. Instead, I take a good look outside her window, to the parking lot it looks out on. I leave the building, and it takes me a few minutes to find the right window. A clump of shrubs crowds beneath it, and a strip of grass, now covered in snow, stretches six or seven feet from the building to the

curb. I knock on the window, and wave at my mother when she appears. I lie down on the snow and move my arms and legs, opening and closing them. Carefully, so that I don't smudge the angel, I stand up. My mother presses her palm to the glass, and I meet it with my own. A light snow is falling, and already the angel starts to fade.

Landing

Every time I visit the nursing home, I untie my dad's restraint. The Posey vest has straps at his waist that they tie to the bedrails. It holds him down to the mattress with enough slack he can turn to his side, but not all the way over. He picks at it, trying to figure out the puzzle of loops and Velcro. I loosen the straps, help him sit up. While he shuffles his feet over the edge of the bed, I sit next to him and hold onto his arm. We take our time.

He rarely goes farther than the chair by the window. An old factory with more windows broken than intact, a parking lot accumulating old tires, and a small patch of sky make up the view. In the beginning, he would say he wanted to check to make sure the stars were still there. Now I reassure him. The stars are still there, Dad. He turns his face and looks at me and has no reply.

When I was five I had a dream: I'm with my friends at a birthday party. When we arrive, we're given helium balloons shaped like animals: tigers, polar bears, giant pandas. Mine is a gray rhinoceros. An adult ties the string to our wrist and gives us a little lift, almost a toss, so we float up into the sky.

At first it's fun, watching people below us grow smaller and smaller, streets and houses and cars shrinking to building-block size. We do flips and

twists, karate moves from cartoons. After a while the air grows cold. We want to go down and eat cake. But we can't. We've floated away from house, neighborhood, away from everything we know. We can't let go of the balloons—we've gone too far, we're up too high. Balloons begin to pop, one after another: polar bear and then bonobo are gone. Kids streak downward. My balloon will be next.

I had this dream shortly after my mom left us. My dad said she told me goodbye, but I don't remember that. I believed she'd floated away. I stopped playing outside under that big, open, nothing-to-stop-you-from-drifting-away-forever sky. I gripped my chair until my knuckles turned white, barely lifted my feet from the ground when I walked. At night, I wrapped a jump rope around my waist and looped the ends around the bedframe after my dad kissed me, and tucked me in. I didn't know how to tie a knot; I still wore Velcro shoes. I wrapped string around my Legos, Matchbox cars, plastic safari animals and dinosaurs, and my books. I wanted to tie down everything: the maple tree in the backyard, robins that nested there, the house, Ellie, who lived across the street and babysat me, my preschool and my friends. And most of all, my dad. I wanted to tie my dad down tight.

I awakened from the dream struggling in the tangle of jump rope. I flopped from the bed and landed on my hands and knees, then flailed and

stomped until I could stand up. I walked down the hall to my parents' room. It was my mother I had always awakened at night, and, for the first time, she wasn't there. I moved around to where my dad slept, on the far side of the bed.

I shook the end of the jump rope at him.

"Tie me down, Dad." He opened one eye, considered me, and turned over. I pushed him. "Tie me down."

"Go back to bed. I'm not going to tie you down."

"Tie me down."

He rolled back to face me. "Why do you want me to tie you down?"

"So I don't float away."

"You can't float away. People don't float away."

"Mom floated away."

My dad blew out his breath; a loud, odd a sound I imagined a wild animal might make. Was he thinking about how his wife had kissed their sleeping son and left with just a bag and a coat slung over her arm? I don't remember them fighting. I don't think he could explain why she had left us, or where she had gone, or come up with a better explanation than mine.

There's a vise clamped to the table next to my dad's bed. It's worn, with a paint-chipped handle and rust on the head. I'm not sure where it came from.

My dad reaches out for it, and the Posey vest lets him move just that far. Tonight he's fretting, turning his head to look around the room, pulling at wisps of hair rising from his head, grunting as he tries to sit up against the restraint. I hand him the vise. He turns it over in trembling hands, fumbles with the screw. He places it on his left wrist, then settles back, exhausted.

Memories of my mother come to me in snapshots. There she is, waving from the driver's seat of the car. In another she's sitting on the bench by the picture window, feet up, knees bent, and a lock of brown hair twisted in her fingers. She's reading a book, but I can't see the cover. Maybe these are just photos I saw somewhere.

My dad worked as a geophysicist. He loved to talk about gravity increases in the Amazon basin with the advent of the rainy season and decreases at the shrinking polar ice sheets. He told us that places with iron-rich ore bands had more gravity, and those with tufas and limestones had less. On clear nights he took his telescope outside, and showed me constellations, and told me that gravity held everything together.

While Dad told us his new findings each night at dinner, my mother looked down at her plate and picked at her food. I could tell she was unhappy about something, but I didn't know what. Dad didn't seem to notice; he reported

the latest numbers each night while she pushed beans around her plate. That's the last image I have of her: head bent, the scrape of her fork against my dad's recitation of numbers.

Sometimes when I read I find myself twisting my hair, so much like hers, my father has told me, between my fingers.

A few days after my dream, we went to Home Depot. Dad normally went to the independent hardware store at the end of town, where every purchase came with a discussion of what just the right part would be, or the right tool, and often included a debate between the men working there before a purchase was allowed. But he wasn't sure exactly what he was looking for, or how to explain his project. How could he say he needed to build a covering over his house, so his son would stop worrying about people floating away, would stop having nightmares, would sleep at night?

We wandered the aisles, through orderly ranks of wrenches and pliers down one side of a row, and lines of hammers, hung at a slant, as though halted in mid-blow, on the other. Crowbars filled boxes on the bottom shelf, bright yellow heads sticking up, like inquisitive animals. Although it was still August, Halloween decorations stood at the end of each checkout lane: scarecrows and witches mounted on stakes, huge inflatable pumpkins, fat rolls of wrapping

paper decorated with black cats.

In the outdoor area we found rolls of netting and landscape cloth sandwiched between gaping bags of fertilizer and grass seeds. The air was sharp with the chemical smells of suburban lawn care. My dad fingered materials and considered their guarantees: ten years, twenty, thirty. How long would it need to cover me before I would believe that no one else would leave? He examined rolls of welded wire screen, clear plastic sheeting, bright orange snow fences.

I ran a hand across each one, poked a finger through those with larger openings. "I think my Lego would fit through here, Dad," I said.

"Keep your Lego in the house then. We need to let sun and rain and insects through." For a long time, my dad considered window screening. It took shape readily and let in the air, he said, and a certain amount of light. He threw a roll into our cart. He picked up a roll marked deer block, light plastic mesh that might, he told me, be barely perceptible at a sufficient distance.

My dad spends most of his days staring at the ceiling. My wife jokes I should put a picture of a waterfall up there, like her gynecologist did. What would my father like? What would I want to look at all day? There's already a TV in the room he doesn't watch. I think of the sky—clouds moving across it, storms brewing, the rare day of clear blue.

I spend one Saturday painting his ceiling. They wheel my dad out of the room, and I spread drop cloths over everything. Although it looks cartoonish in spots, overall, I am pleased. When my dad returns to his bed, he looks at the ceiling for a time. Then he raises his hand, not to touch it, but as if to confirm it really is out of his reach.

The net my dad built wasn't pretty. It looked like the house was being consumed by a mesh carnival tent. He had set long triangles of each material—deer fencing and window screen and landscape fabric—running from the eaves to a low wooden fence staked around our property. The panel above the driveway stopped short, to allow room for the car to drive in and out.

It took all weekend for my dad to build the net. On Sunday wind tapped the panels against the house, like something knocking to come in. "After dinner," he said, "we're going outside to test this."

"I don't want to." I wanted to stay inside with a ceiling and a roof and a net above me.

My dad set down his fork right then, picked me up, carried me outside. I hung limp in his arms. It was too scary to move around; I'd seen videos of astronauts bounding on the moon, and didn't want to chance launching myself. It was just getting dark outside. My dad tried to set me on the ground. I clung to

him.

“Okay, then wrap your arms and legs around me. We’re going to jump.”

“No!” I wailed.

“Together now. One. Two. Three.”

We jumped into the air. I don’t remember our landing, but I do remember this: I wished that for a moment gravity would leave the earth completely, and we could be held together in the sky, like the stars.

How to See in the Dark

John walked down the hallway, brushing his fingertips along the wall to find his way in the darkness. He pushed open the door to his daughter Shawna's room. His wife, Lea, lay with the girl in her small bed, two curves arcing open to each other, the same straight brown hair splayed out behind.

Earlier that day John had tried to convince Lea to get a babysitter, to go out, just the two of them.

"Shawna's expecting us to watch the movie with her," Lea had said.

"We've watched *The Little Mermaid* for the last three Fridays." He'd taken Lea's hands. "We should go out. Eat dinner. Watch a movie for grown-ups." On the web of flesh between her thumb and fingers, John rubbed slow circles. The lines around Lea's mouth relaxed, and John had thought he'd her convinced.

Then Shawna had burst in. "Mama! Look what I found!" Lea had turned around to coo over a broken earring with three concentric silver ovals, each strung with two silver balls.

"Treasure," he'd heard Shawna say, as he walked away. Every day Shawna collected something new: plastic beads, flattened bottle caps, white rocks, pine cones, the exoskeleton of a cicada, a small purple hand made from

rubbery plastic. She lined them up on her windowsill and touched each one and said its name before she went to bed.

What had he been like at six? His mother had left him and his father, when John was four, had kissed him on the forehead, hung her coat over her arm, picked up a small suitcase, and walked out the door. Two months later, when John turned five, his father had given him a blue telescope for his birthday. The first present, he realized later, that his father had selected without the help of his wife. They'd spent long nights that first summer quietly watching the sky.

John carried the telescope down from the attic and set it up in the backyard. He showed Shawna the scope and the eyepiece, told her about objective lens assemblies and alt-azimuth mounts. Lea was silhouetted in the window, washing dishes. Shawna complained about mosquitos, and jumped around flapping her hands until she knocked over the telescope. John listened for the crackle of broken mirrors and cracked lenses as he lifted it upright. When Shawna ran in the house, John did not call her back. He sat in the yard with the telescope and the empty lawn chairs until he fell asleep.

John woke up stiff and cold, under a sky matted with clouds. A flapping and snapping sound came from the other side of the red brick wall that surrounded the yard of their neighbor, who had one of the few pools in the

neighborhood. On summer days John leaned against the wall talking to his neighbor, and pretending not to notice his neighbor's wife sunbathing by the pool, until she raised her hand in a languid wave, and he waved in return.

John looked into their yard. Two chaise lounges still faced the pool. A corner had come loose from the pool cover, and leaves drifted in the water. John imagined living in this house, sitting by the pool with a wife in a red two-piece suit. It had been years since he and Lea had done more than dangle their toes in a kiddie pool.

John boosted himself up on the wall, and then over. He dipped his hand into the water and pulled out a clutch of maple leaves, diminished to brown in the darkness. With his next reach his cuffs got wet, so put his jacket on a lounge chair. He kicked off his shoes and rolled up his cuffs.

He was almost knee-deep in the water when a light came on in the house, and a figure moved across the curtains. John froze, then climbed out and ran in a crouch along the wall until he could slip behind a bush. He went back over the wall, landing in the next yard over. Go a little ways, he thought, work your way down a few yards, and then turn back to the sidewalk. Two houses down, the Willis's dogs started barking. John cut to the yard catty corner, ducking under a swing set. His shoulder bumped the swing, and it moved back and forth, squeaking with each arc. Another dog joined in the barking. Cursing softly,

John broke into a full run. His foot landed on a yellow Tonka dump truck, abandoned on its side with half its load of pine cones still in the back. John rounded the privet hedge that marked the edge of the McGruders's. He stood with his back to it, and unbuttoned his shirt halfway. The night air felt cool on his bare chest.

After a few minutes the dogs gave a last woof. John smiled. His foot was throbbing, muddy, and wet, but seemed to be all right. Hands in his pockets, he walked along the hedge to the sidewalk. He puckered his lips, but decided it would be better not to whistle.

John couldn't remember the last time he'd walked in the middle of the night. When they were first married, he and Lea had strolled through the streets on hot summer evenings, even the thought of being outside cooler than the small stuffy rooms of their first apartment. They knew their neighbors, and their houses and gardens. Now, only a few blocks from home, the streets looked foreign, the houses, unfamiliar. Instead of turning for home, he kept going. Tonight Lea could be the one to turn over in bed and have her arm fall flat on an empty mattress.

When headlights appeared John ducked back into the yards. He traveled from patio set to pergola to jungle gym, crossed monkey bars hand over hand, bent knees skimming the grass. He begrudged the occasional side street, the

globular street lights. He passed through yards strewn with Big Wheels and scooters, yards with tomatoes still struggling in their cages, yards so painfully groomed he could imagine the homeowners checking the cut of the lawn with a level.

John ducked and dodged the strobe of motion-detecting lights blinking on. He loped past patios with barbecues, yards with chimineas and clotheslines, slowed where lush grass soothed his feet, slipped between shrubs and garbage cans. He worked his way deeper into the neighborhood. Once he looked back and saw the trail of his footprints on a sprinkler-slicked lawn, the only sign that anyone had ever walked there.

The last bank of yards abutted the highway, which passed below the houses and beyond a chain link fence. John laced his fingers through diamond-shaped openings and watched cars go by. He pulled on the fence, tested his weight on it, felt the give and sway as submission.

Businesses line the other side of the highway, dark buildings fronted by fields of yellow-striped parking lots, backed by dark stretches of asphalt dotted with Dumpsters and loading docks. John stuck to darkness, but walked more slowly, the ground prickly under his bare feet. He never shopped at these stores.

Up ahead, John watched a woman lean into one of the Dumpsters, her arm up to her shoulder in the bin. She turned to one side to give herself an additional inch or two of reach, and grunted.

“Hello,” John said, so she would know he was there. The woman grunted again, stretched, and came up with a laptop shoulder bag. Scuffs and ink stains marred the brown vinyl, and one end of the strap hung by a loosening line of stitches. The woman ran her hand over the surface, wiping something off. She looked inside, stuck her hand into each pocket. Then she set the bag on the ground, next to a pile of other things: a box of steak knives, a single blue glove, a desk lamp, a tan knit cap, and an opened box of Cheerios. John thought of his shoes and jacket lying next to the neighbor’s pool.

“These are mine,” she said, pointing to the stack on the ground. “But there are still some good things left.”

Her coat was misbuttoned, her grey hair escaping, one strand at a time, from a bun twisted at the base of her neck. She leaned back over the edge of the Dumpster and pointed inside. John leaned too. In one corner he could see an old basketball, scuffed and partially deflated. The woman waved her arm in its direction.

John moved to the corner of the Dumpster and reached his arm inside. The metal edge dug into his chest. His fingers brushed the top of the ball, and it

spun drunkenly under his fingers, flaccid and distorted. He grabbed a pizza box from the bin and used it to scoop up the ball, then handed it to the woman. She loaded the ball and the rest of her pile into a Kohl's shopping bag, then started walking away. Her feet spilled out the back of her sandals. Unbalanced by her load, she lurched from side to side. John remember how, in college, he and his friends would stagger home from parties, as late as this or later, leaning on each other and laughing at nothing.

John followed her to a street where the houses looked much like his. He hung back while she knocked at a door brightly lit by a pair of porch lights. A middle-aged man opened the door and grabbed the woman by her arm. "It's bad enough you go through the trash at night, mother. Do you really have to bring it home?" He emptied the shopping bag on the lawn. "And you," he said, looking at John. "Don't encourage her." The door slammed shut behind them.

John picked up the lamp, ball, computer bag, blue glove, steak knives and hat and returned them to the bag. He could imagine these things lined up on Shawna's window sill, her finger touching each one as she named it. He left the bag by the side of the house, hoping the woman would find it first.

John took the Cheerios with him, and followed the sound of swelling morning traffic back to the highway. While he waited for the way to clear, he ate

handfuls of cereal, and thought about how he would tell Lea and Shawna his story.

There was a mother once, he would begin. Once, there was a child.

Pinks

Carved wooden masks leered from the first gallery window, rough-hewn, angry faces seven or eight feet tall, with bulging eyes and protruding tongues. In the next sat a row of delicate clay bowls, small pink spheres that could nestle in your cupped hands.

“Look,” said Julia, “each pink the smallest possible variation from the one before. Like an awareness of time, the passage of each instant as different from the one before, the one after, and the next.”

Paul admired this about Julia, her ability to see things that didn’t always make sense to him, even after she had explained them. He peered at the bowls, but they all looked the same to him. Paul tried to walk on, but Julia pulled him back.

“You don’t see it, do you?”

Paul wanted to say of course, but he preferred to mark the passage of time by his watch, it was ever so much more convenient than pink clay pots. Instead he said “No,” then felt ashamed at having told the truth.

“I attended the opening of the exhibit,” Julia said, “heard the artist speak about his process. He said it’s like when you first realize you’re in love. One moment everything is as it has been, full of possibilities, but the next—you know

that you're in love; that one moment has separated who you had been from who, from then on, you would be."

Paul looked to the last window, hoping to find inspiration for a response. It contained empty wooden shelves, staggered from the top left to the bottom right of the space. He couldn't tell if they were part of an unfinished display, or the art themselves. He turned to Julia and took her hands. "Coffee?" he asked.

Paul had met Julia on the bus. He noticed her as soon as she boarded. Blonde hair spilled past her shoulders and a knit hat perched high on her head, leaving her ears bright red from the cold. When Paul stood to offer Julia his seat, a short woman with a pinched face slipped by and settled into the spot with a grunt.

Paul had stood in the aisle behind Julia and thought about what it would feel like to cover her ears, to feel them warm beneath his hands.

Months later he still liked riding the bus with Julia, his shoulder pressed against hers, their bodies swaying together as they lurched through the city.

Standing in line at the coffee shop, Paul felt a tug on his sleeve. He looked down at a woman wearing a purple hat inundated with silk flowers, ribbons, and a viciously yellow canary. Paul put his arm around Julia and turned her to face

the elderly woman. "You remember me telling you about my neighbors, don't you?" he said. "Julia, this is Rose. She and her sister, Pearl, live in the apartment below mine. Rose, this is Julia." Rose smiled at Julia and fluttered her false eyelashes at Paul. The bottom row of lashes leaned down at the end, almost brushing her cheek. "Where's Pearl?" asked Paul.

"It's always been hard to get her to come out, and now that she's getting older, it's harder than ever." Julia flashed a smile at Paul when Rose said "older." Silver hair peeked from beneath Rose's hat, and fine wrinkles textured her face. "I think it's on account of her broken heart."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Julia.

"Would you like to join me?" asked Rose. "No, no more coffee for me, thank you. But I recommend the apricot scones. They are very fresh today."

They got their coffee and sat down across from Rose. "How did Pearl's heart get broken?" Julia asked.

"It was so many years ago, but I don't think she's ever gotten over it. Poor Pearl, she never married. My Morty and me, we had a good life together, God rest his soul." Her lower lip trembled. Paul nodded and smiled at Rose.

"Pearl was engaged to be married once. I was pregnant then with my son Monroe. He's a car salesman now, out in Iowa. I hardly see my grandchildren, but Monroe makes sure I get a new car, every other year."

“And Pearl?” Julia asked.

“Oh yes, Pearl. She’s my older sister, actually. She was twenty-three and still unmarried, and there I was with my daughter Lindy a year old and Monroe on the way. Said she couldn’t find anyone who suited her. But when Lawrence came along, she fell hard and she fell fast. He came to town in August, and by the end of September they were planning a spring wedding.

“He brought Pearl flowers every day. So many flowers. Daisies. Lillies. Even roses, one time. My Morty, he wasn’t much for giving flowers. Said there were plenty out in the garden, if I ever wanted any. My Morty was a salesman, and away most of the time, so Pearl moved in to help me with the children. Pearl and Lawrence did most of their courting in my garden. They planted tulip bulbs before he left, dozens and dozens of tulip bulbs. They talked together as they dug in the dirt, leaned their heads together as they scrubbed the soil from under their fingernails. I was glad to see Pearl with a man, and to see her so happy. I cooked briskets and hams and roasted chickens, baked sweet rolls and pies. Every evening I enjoyed her happiness at my table.

“He needed to go back home to settle some business, Lawrence told us, before he could marry Pearl. They would pick out a little house when he came back; until then, she would stay with us. He put a diamond ring on her finger, small but a diamond all the same, and told her he’d be back by the time their

tulips bloomed in the spring. Pearl spent the winter embroidering pillowcases and tablecloths for her trousseau.”

Julia turned a packet of Sweet ‘N Low over in her hands.

“He never returned. The day the first tulip opened its petals Pearl said, ‘Why that flower must be ahead of its time.’ But day by day more of the flowers opened, and then dropped their petals. Still no word came. The tulips bloomed each spring, the children grew older, and so did we. Men tried to court Pearl, good men.” The bird on her hat nodded along with Rose. “But Pearl insisted she was an engaged woman, that she had promised to marry Lawrence, and she would wait for him for as long as it took him to return.

“Monroe and Lindy grew up and moved away. After my Morty passed four years ago, God rest his soul, Pearl and I decided to move into town. So now we live in the apartment below Paul.”

Rose gathered her bags and wrapped the rest of her scone in a napkin.

"For Pearl," she said.

Julia had lined up packets of Sweet ‘N Low across the table. Paul covered Julia’s hand with his own, and she looked up at him.

"Have you ever been in love?" she asked.

Paul thought about the ragged pink construction paper heart he had given his mother for Valentine’s Day when he was five, and that had hung for months,

limp and faded, on the refrigerator. Of Theresa, a girl who lived down the street when they were both twelve, and how he'd thought his heart would beat its way out of his chest when she gave him his first kiss. Paul had cried when his dog died, even though he was seventeen by then and thought he was too old for tears. He hadn't answered when Julia stood up.

"I can't decide if that story about Pearl is romantic, or foolish," she said. As they left the coffee shop Paul tried to take Julia's hand, but she twisted away from him so that he missed, and his hand swung empty through the air.

Weeks passed before Paul saw Julia on the bus a second time. He stood up as she neared, oblivious to the open seats around them. She smiled and took a seat next to the one he'd vacated. After a few blocks she said, "You can sit down." Paul blushed when he noticed the empty spaces around them, but still sat down next to her.

"I'm Julia," she said, and offered him her hand.

"Paul."

She got off at the next stop. Paul spent the rest of his ride wishing he had thought to take his glove off before he shook her hand.

Julia was quiet as Paul walked her home from the coffee shop. At first this

was a relief to Paul, but when he said "See you tomorrow?" Julia simply shrugged and unlocked the door to her apartment building. Paul stood outside until he saw the light go on in her apartment.

The next day he stopped at a little grocery store to pick up flowers for Julia. He held roses to his nose and smelled the greenery, and the plastic wrapping, but no sweetness. He realized they had been bred just for their color. Just for their pink. He looked at the other flowers. Each petal a different shape, a different size, a different color. Like the bowls at the art gallery, realized Paul.

He gathered up as many bunches of the flowers as he could carry, carnations and daisies and mums and tulips and roses and lilies and alstroemeria. Everything the market had in pink. He rode the bus to Julia's apartment, noticing the differences between the things he passed, things he had passed hundreds of times before. He saw how one brick differed from another on the side of the car wash. How each slab of the sidewalk varied in its tracing of cracks and stains. He observed the people sitting around him, how each set of lips and eyes, each nose and ear and hand varied one from the next. Even the back of each head, bobbing and swaying before him, why maybe, Paul thought, even each hair on each of those heads may be different, and he had to check the urge to go and examine each one, and content himself to look a little closer at the head just in front of him. A thinning spot on the crown afforded him a glimpse of

a pink scalp.

Paul called Julia. He would be there in a moment. After several rings she answered.

“Not today, Paul. I’ll call you later.”

“The pinks, Julia. I understand the pinks now.”

“Not now.”

Paul stood and walked to the front of the bus as they neared the stop in front of Julia’s apartment. He looked up. A man’s face appeared in her window, looking down at the bus. Paul swayed, caught a hang strap.

“On or off?” said the driver.

Paul could feel the other riders watching him. Where were they all going? He fell into an empty seat with the flowers. The driver shut the door and drove on.

When he arrived back home, Paul paused before Rose and Pearl’s door. He looked down at the flowers, and then turned and walked up the stairs to his own apartment. He dumped the flowers onto his little balcony, and sat amid the bruised and ragged blooms before he picked up a bunch of carnations and shredded them over the railing. He twisted the heads from roses, tore off each petal, and tossed them away. He pulled apart the tulips and the daisies and the

mums and made a great pile of the petals, which he scooped up in both hands and held over the railing. Bit by bit he allowed the stamens and pistils and petals and leaves to fall from his fingers.

From the apartment below he heard Pearl call out, "Oh Rose, come and see!" She pulled the drapery open and the sisters stood side by side. "All these flowers falling from heaven."

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