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TRACKERS

by

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B.A. University of Minnesota, Morris, 2000

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ABSTRACT

Trackers is a collection of short stories that attest to the oddities and complexities found even in the non-exotic middle-class American suburbs. The characters in these stories experience disappointments that result from the physical and emotional distancing of families. In “Tokens,” a woman’s attempts at revenge on her cheating husband are unsatisfying because she ends up feeling more alone than before. In “Trackers,” eleven-year old Richard hunts for Bigfoot as he and his family cope with the emotional aftermath of his sister’s suicide attempt.

In these stories people struggle to maintain normalcy in their lives – sometimes through inappropriate means. When their expectations are destroyed, they are forced to deal not only with specific abandonment, but also the reality that the world around them has no knowledge – let alone appreciation – of their personal struggles or fears.

Occasionally, however, some good can come from this realization. In “Camilla,” a ten-year-old girl learns that she can depend on her own experiences for strength rather than knowledge borrowed from fantasies inspired by a collection of obituaries. A woman recovering from the loss of a romantic relationship strengthens her bond with her young niece in “Cattywampus,” and

they are both strengthened by the world they share as women in different stages of self-discovery.

For my family

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TRACKERS

“We’ll get him with these, Richard.” Dad smiled at me as he filled in the order form. I smiled back and licked a stamp for the envelope addressed to MasterMind SpyWare. We sat at the kitchen table, which barely fit between the doorway and the refrigerator. Around us colorful roosters and round piglets looked down from the “Country Friends” wallpaper.

The kitchen was dark and the only light came from the hallway lamp behind my father’s back. Mom was out – she left after a fight about some of the credit card bills – and so Dad had pulled out the SpyWare catalogue. We’d considered every item on every page, the recording devices and the tiny cameras, but decided on the night vision binoculars.

See without being seen, the description promised.

Mom came home an hour later, holding two heavy bags from William Sonoma behind her skirt. Her sandals clacked against her heels as she moved into the kitchen. She set something heavy on the counter. The bags crunched as she folded them into the trashcan.

“We don’t need any more fancy waffle-makers, hon,” Dad said. He handed me the can of root beer we were sharing. I drank it in huge gulps. I

planned to hand it back to him with only a small drop left. This was one of my favorite jokes when I was eleven.

Mom slammed the cabinets. This was her way of letting us know that she'd heard us and was ignoring us. Dad winked at me.

Our little secret.

We had completed the first step of our ultimate plan.

We were going after a Bigfoot.

During that year Mom set a large plate of cinnamon pancakes in front of me almost every morning. She cooked a lot after my sister, Carrie, went into the hospital.

We'd had chicken with garlic, rosemary, basil, curry, ginger, onions, peppers – anything that involved multiple steps to occupy Mom through the evening, enough heat and flavor to put some life into the kitchen, and enough meat to feed Dad leftovers when he came down for a midnight snack. During what must have been only a matter of weeks, we had everything from firehouse chili to pad thai. Years later, in college, I amazed my first girlfriend with dishes that required lemongrass and cilantro, but she never asked me to explain.

Mom made spicy and fragrant foods to overpower the smell that was left from the night of Carrie's accident.

Carrie had taken a bunch of pills. She'd drunk something she shouldn't have. I never figured out what, and no one told me, even after I got older. We all heard her fall against the bathroom door. (The one thing she did eventually tell me was how surprised she'd been when her legs gave out underneath her. "I guess that's why people always do that sort of thing in a soft bed or a warm bath," she said.)

The paramedics made us wait in the hallway. Mom wrapped her arms around me, holding me tight against her hip. Watching with one eye, I saw them cut away Carrie's sweatshirt. I looked away. Suddenly there was a loud cough, and as Carrie threw up, someone said, "Thank God."

Mom went to the hospital and Dad stayed home with me. We sat in the hallway for an hour before finally cleaning up the bathroom. I watched the minutes change on my dad's digital watch. It was designed for runners and had a stopwatch function. Dad often timed odd things; the duration of an escalator ride, a pheasant's waddle across the lawn.

I was tired and wanted to go back to bed. Dad went down to get the bucket of cleaning supplies. The stench in the bathroom frightened me. I felt it could harm me; maybe it wasn't done yet.

We watched our hands to avoid the other sights. Our hands wiped up the poison that came out of my big sister as she was forced back to life.

I did some research.

The Ojibwe are experts at tracking Bigfoot, only they call him Bug-way'-jinini, the wildman. And Bigfoot stinks, like sour milk. In some places they call him Swamp Ape. There have been 32 reported sightings in the oak and jack pine forests of Minnesota and Wisconsin. Bigfoots are drawn to bananas and apples. They make a soft whinnying noise as they forage.

Maybe I could catch a baby one alive and give it to Carrie. She liked cute things. Or at least she used to.

No one has ever seen a baby Bigfoot.

My dad took me out for ice cream and I told him all the things I had learned. The old-fashioned parlor didn't have much seating, and a few newly arrived patrons pressed close together waiting for a seat. They scowled at us as I munched up my banana split so it would last twice as long.

"What would you do if you tracked down a Bigfoot?" Dad asked. His hair stuck out over his ears in thin clumps, like pine needles. He let it grow long over the summer when he wasn't teaching.

"I'd shoot him," I said, imagining a vicious blur of fangs and red eyes charging at me. "I'd shoot him with a shotgun. Ten times. And then I'd put him on the hood of the car." I'd seen dozens of hunters drive through town like that on the opening day of deer season when we visited Nana and Grandpa in Otter

Tail County, and I had no doubt about being allowed to drive after such an impressive feat of manliness.

“What would you do?” I asked, doodling a gap-toothed bear trap on my placemat.

“I guess I’d ask him what it’s like to be alone out there,” he said, “And why he keeps himself such a mystery.”

The day after Carrie’s accident we all stayed home, but it felt like we were all in different places. The overhead bulbs had burned out and the sun coming through the window caught my Dad at eye-level, leaving the small wooden table in semi-darkness. I watched my Mom scrape the dishes while she made some phone calls. The bacon, eggs, and biscuits had all burned in their respective pieces of hardware, leaving dark smells and heavy crusts. The eggs – the only part of the meal I looked forward to – had been unrecoverable. Mom wasn’t used to cooking yet. Before, we’d all just eat cereal in the morning, and whoever got home first would dig around in the freezer for dinner. I squeezed my chest against the table and rocked my chair forward to let Dad into the fridge for a Coke.

Mom had long, straight hair that she let hang loose over her shoulders. Carrie’s hair was the same, although she braided her hair at night so it would be wavy and had been denied permission to bleach it. When Mom leaned in to

attack the dishes her arm muscles quivered. Her arms were strong. I had never questioned that. It seemed like a given of motherhood, like her ragged fingernails and the lotion-scent of her skin.

Over the phone to neighbors and grandparents, struggling to keep the small cell phone between her ear and shoulder, she said, "Carrie had an allergic reaction to her acne medication... yes, she's going to be fine."

She turned the phone off. It sat on the counter in a puddle of greasy dishwater. With a clamor she dropped the dishes into the trashcan. As she left, she knocked over one of the colonial-style chairs she had so proudly brought into the house six years ago.

Alone in the kitchen, I continued to pick at the crispy black bacon and the singed biscuits on my plate. When Carrie had permission to cook at the stove by herself she prepared eggs every way she knew how until we found the kind I liked. Soft boiled. But Mom made scrambled.

As I rubbed the burnt side of the biscuit with the tines of my fork, I studied the animals that decorated the kitchen. They had always seemed like lively barnyard cartoon characters, but now the rooster looked like a collection of spiny feathers to be ripped out to get to the fibers of meat underneath. The pig no longer smiled; it waited in fear to be dragged, squealing and snorting, through the mud of its pen to be chopped into hams and stripped into bacon. I didn't know where bacon specifically came from, but its thinness and raw, red

color reminded me of the time I'd scraped the length of my forearm on the asphalt.

I imagined skinless bacon-pigs.

I imagined Carrie at the hospital, with needles in her arm, getting her stomach pumped. I didn't know of anything in a hospital that didn't require a scalpel. I wanted her to be anywhere but in a hospital.

The next day at school I told my friends that Carrie dropped out of school to become an artist and was hitchhiking to New York all by herself. They all agreed that was pretty cool.

Dad first told me about Bigfoot while we were sitting in Carrie's room. The doctors had recommended she stay at a recovery center for a while. Mom had been on the phone with Hazeldon all morning. Our job was to pack up a few of Carrie's things.

"I thought Bigfoot was in Montana. Or Alaska." I grabbed a pink and black striped sweater out of the closet and stuffed it into the duffel bag.

"No no no. Bigfoots live all over the place. There's a bunch of them. They've been pushed in toward civilization because of urban sprawl. Any of these copses around here could be prime locations for a bigfoot struggling to survive." He said *prime location* like a real estate agent.

“Do you think she’ll want any of this stuff?” I poked around on her desk. Half-used make-up and little barrettes cluttered it from corner to corner.

“I don’t know what she’ll want,” Dad said. “Just grab a few.”

I thought maybe she’d rather have some of her nice things instead of the plastic bracelets and mismatched earrings. I opened the monogrammed silver jewelry box she’d gotten from Nana for her birthday. Inside was a folded piece of notebook paper. I undid the first fold.

Dear Mom and Dad, please don’t hate me for doing this. I’m confused about a lot of things, but I know that things will be better if—

“Don’t go digging through all her stuff, Richard, just put a few of her knickknacks in the bag. Let’s get out of here.”

I stuffed the note into my pocket. I hid it in my room, in a copy of *Between Planets* Grandpa had given to me. I read it late at night, when my parents were reduced to muffled voices two rooms away.

The morning the spy glasses arrived Dad was still asleep, and Mom had left for the grocery store. When I opened the door to check the weather, the mailman was coming up the walk. He handed me a package wrapped in brown paper. “Give that to your Dad, buddy.”

I ran, trying to take the stairs two at a time. I tripped and used the box to catch my fall. On the top step I lost my balance, and the small weight of the

parcel was just enough to tip me backward. I only dropped a few steps, but the package went back the whole way and crashed on the tiled floor. Dad came out from the bedroom and looked down at me.

“It’s here,” I said softly.

Dad put on his bifocals. He helped me up and we walked slowly down the stairs. “Well, open it up then,” he said. Together we ripped through the paper and tape. The night vision binoculars were still held tightly in the Styrofoam packing, but when Dad picked up the binoculars something rattled inside.

“Sorry,” I said. I didn’t want to cry, but the loss of this expensive tool, in my mind worth a million dollars if it was worth one, was too much. I expected my Dad to lecture and yell about responsibility and how to handle nice things, but instead he just patted the top of my head and told me it was okay. He put the binoculars on top of the mantelpiece—right where I planned to hang the mounted hairy, seventeen-inch foot—and didn’t talk about, even when my Mom raised an eyebrow at him when she came home and saw them.

I wondered if he’d ever been serious about going after Bigfoot at all.

“What do you think of this one?” Dad asked us, pointing to a small chow mix that had run to the front of its cage, tail wagging.

Mom shrugged and pulled at her t-shirt, as if to ward off the heat and stink of the kennels. "I don't know, those little dogs always bark so much."

"I just thought Carrie might like his fluffy tail. What do you think, Richard?"

"Carrie doesn't need a dog," Mom interrupted. Dad ignored her and waited for my reply.

I considered the line-up. Two pit-bull puppies wrestled in one of the upper cages. An old German shepherd below them stuck his nose up to sniff my hand, but showed no enthusiasm. In the next cage a white husky jumped around, spilling water and upsetting her neighbor – a moody cat with a shaved rear leg.

"What about this one?" I stuck my fingers in to touch the lolling tongue of the husky.

The Humane Society worker opened the door and let the dog out on a leash. "This poor girl was starved by her owners, but a Good Samaritan brought her in here just in time. She's one of my favorites."

I ran my hand through her thick coat as she licked my ear.

"She'll be perfect," Dad said.

"Can we name her Yeti?" I took the leash and leaned all of my weight against her pull toward the lobby.

My parents exchanged a look. Mom lowered her eyes first.

“No, buddy,” Dad said, “we’ll let Carrie name her when she gets home.”

Mom cooked Carrie’s favorite meal, chicken and vegetable kabobs. Now it was an aromatic cumin version. Carrie wore her striped sweater and gray sweatpants, but none of the small things I’d picked out for her. She looked like she’d just come in from a tough workout.

She ate everything in sight. Mom hadn’t been prepared for that. We’d expected that for our first meal together no one would have an appetite. Roosevelt hadn’t impressed Carrie – Dad named the dog after Carrie declined – so after dinner Mom and Dad took her out for a walk.

Carrie went straight to her room. I followed. I followed her around a lot back then, hovering in doorways, watching her through windows. I settled down with my Gameboy outside her door.

“Chard? Are you out there?”

She used to call me “Chard the Tard.” A few years earlier she had even convinced me I would have to take special classes.

“Maybe.”

“Well, you can come in if you want to hang out.”

I walked into the room holding the Gameboy in front of my face and sat down on the floor. Carrie lay on the bed, reading *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* through lens-less glasses she’d picked up at a thrift store. She left books

about mental illness out for our parents to see. Maybe it gave her some kind of power.

She held the book tightly, pressing her nails into the paper cover. After a few minutes she put it down.

“Richard. Did you take my note?”

I nodded slowly.

“Turn that off for a minute.”

I did. I fully expected that she would punch me for looking in her stuff. I couldn't look directly at her. Her eyes seemed darker than I remembered. They made me realize that punching was not the worst thing she could do.

“Did you read it?” Her hands lay in front of her. The tension from holding the book was gone from her fingers.

I nodded again. She waited. I remembered when I was small enough to hide under her bed. The new Army-camouflage comforter looked like it was eating the old lavender dust ruffle below it. The silence got the better of me.

“Did it hurt when they made you throw up?” I turned the Gameboy over in my hands, examining the pieces that held it together.

“Yes.” She answered without hesitation.

I dug at the corner of the Gameboy with my fingernail to undo one of the panels. The section came off and the batteries fell out.

“Did you mean it in the note when you said you wished you never been born? Because it would be easier than having to die?” I had memorized the whole thing a long time ago.

Downstairs, the front door opened. Roosevelt ran up the stairs. Carrie got up and slammed the door before the wet nose could barge in on us.

“Kids, I’m going to make some brownies,” Mom hollered.

Carrie pressed her forehead to the door. “That bitch just doesn’t fucking get it, does she?”

“Are you asking me?” I said. I’d never heard her talk like that. I wasn’t sure what she meant.

“What would you say if I was?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Take the brownies.”

“You’ve got a pretty positive outlook.”

“I love Mom’s brownies.”

“They’re pretty good,” she agreed unenthusiastically.

“Do you wish I had never been born, too?” I asked.

“Why?” She moved down to the floor. “What does that have to do with it?”

She picked up the batteries and handed them to me.

“I don’t know. Why should it be a good thing for me to be born and not for you to be born?”

While we thought about that for a moment, I shoved the batteries back into place.

“You have me on that one,” she said. “I guess you’ve ruined my entire argument. Next time I write a suicide note I’ll call you in as a consultant.”

The thought had already occurred to me. I knew all the ways people died in movies: car wrecks, gunshots, drowning. The images did not frighten me until I imagined Carrie going to them willingly. My throat got tight—the now familiar first sign of tears.

“Do you still have the note?” she asked. She placed her cool hand on the back of my neck the same way she used to when I felt carsick on vacation. The memory reminded me that she was my sister, not just a stranger who moved silently through our house.

Without looking up, I removed the tattered piece of paper from the back pocket of my jeans. It had come apart down the middle seam.

“Here’s an idea,” she said. “Why don’t you give me that half, and we’ll see who can rip it into the tiniest pieces.”

In the end it was a tie.

Even without the benefit of night vision or the firepower of a real gun, my Dad and I finally made it out on our hunting trip. Armed with my barely functional BB gun, a Polaroid camera, and half a pack of hot dogs, we camped in

the back yard. We set up the huge family-size tent at the top of the slope where our neatly mowed yard slowly gave way to prairie weeds.

The small cluster of trees between our house and the next neighborhood was less than a quarter of a mile across, but the thick summer foliage gave an illusion of total wilderness that could swallow a boy. The leaves could not stop the occasional rush of noise from the highway, so I imagined a wild river just out of sight.

Dad untangled one of the hotdogs from its plastic-wrap cocoon. Mom had heated them up and packaged them for our journey.

“You better eat one of these before they get cold.”

“Can’t we make a fire?” I pulled my hands out from the warmth of my sleeping bag to take my share of the provisions. *Eat what you can when you can*, I thought. *This must be how the real trackers eat – astronauts, too, maybe.*

“Well, we wouldn’t want to scare Bigfoot. Or have the Beiswengers call the fire department on us again.”

“It wasn’t my fault that Tommy’s mom let him have a lighter.”

Mosquitoes landed on my arms and neck in spite of all the bug spray Mom had sprayed on me. I quickly finished off my hot dog with one painful, half-chewed swallow. The meat moved down my throat like a wet stone. I put a hand over my mouth to keep from coughing it back up.

Back in the house Mom watched a cooking show on cable and Carrie sat in her room staring at the ceiling. I couldn't figure out what kept them so far apart. I tightened my grip on the BB gun. The gun felt colder than the temperature gave it any right to be – a reminder that winter never really leaves the air in Minnesota. I wanted to shoot something. I wanted there to be a bad guy.

"Mom's a bitch," I said. I said it deliberately but without real conviction. Dad turned to face me and put the camera down. He looked at his watch.

"No, Richard," he said. "No, she's not. Don't say that, okay?"

I was relieved to hear that.

"Is Carrie the bitch then?"

Dad laughed. I wondered if he'd been thinking the same thing.

"I think I can see how this got in your head." He glanced back at the house. "But it doesn't work that way."

He picked up the camera with an overly dramatic flourish. "Did you hear that?"

The snapping of small sticks echoed off the surrounding houses, preventing us from determining which direction the noise came from. I watched the woods and my Dad watched me. A flock of waxwings scared up by a neighbor's cat scattered through the air above us.

Nothing was out there. Bigfoot wasn't coming. There was nothing for us to go after. I aimed my gun at the bushes as the birds returned to them, one by one. I fired at whatever was out there. The shots, propelled by not much more than my anger, didn't go far. When the canister emptied, I dropped the gun. I thought I would feel better, but nothing had changed. All the things I wanted to get rid of were still inside of me. *Please don't hate me*, Carrie had asked. It was the only thing she'd asked for, but I couldn't stop myself.

I sat down on the damp ground and rubbed my eyes. The bug spray burned, so I left my eyes closed. I spread my arms out as wide as I could, feeling out the shape of the ground. Behind me the camera clicked once. My ears tickled from the tiny bugs moving around me in the grass. I held my breath until I could feel the movement of the Earth beneath me. I thought this would take me somewhere else, that I could break from gravity, but I stayed right where I was, listening to the buzz of air conditioners and the river that wasn't there.

CUL DE SAC

They moved into the tan one-story house in early November. There was no brick in front, no porch in back. The former occupants had moved out carelessly, leaving a pile of pennies in the laundry room and a Mickey Mouse clock on the kitchen wall. A trash bag ghost sat stuffed behind the empty bushes. Joni hoped that the first snow would cover it.

Kids would not go well with the house. The neighbors were elderly and would probably complain about tricycles and soccer balls being left about. The mailboxes were all located in a metallic structure at the end of the block. Signs posted in the gas station claimed that a sex offender lived nearby

The neighborhood, deceptively named Quiet Pine Rounds, had only one cul de sac, selfishly occupied by the two-story, all brick, three-car garage, basketball hoop (in the cement, not just rolled up the driveway), dog-on-electric-leash homes.

Joni packed a lunch for Barry and occasionally picked out his clothes. He threw out the ham sandwich and carrot sticks on all Fridays and most Mondays to have a liquid lunch with his buddies. Joni knew this.

After a dinner of chicken and french fries, Joni and Barry would go for a walk. They turned their backs on the trash bag ghost – which was more visible

than ever now that the leaves had fallen from the bushes. They walked down the block to look at the big houses. They would smile and chat about the sunset as they made their way around the loop.

Joni couldn't believe that she felt trapped in a place that had three entrances, a newsletter, and a fourth of July parade. She wanted to spit on the driveways and slash the tires of any car newer than hers. It was the frequency and distraction of these thoughts that muted her surprise when Barry said he didn't love her anymore.

When they returned home after the walk they watched syndicated sitcoms. The TV had been a great deal. They bought it from a man Barry worked with who moved away in a hurry. The man had beaten his wife in front of the TV during *Friends*. (Joni had a friend who gossiped about such things.) The autopsy revealed that she had aspirated small bits of her jaw.

Joni knew about the blood inside the speaker; she'd pried off the front panel on the TV with her metal nail file. She didn't clean it up. If anyone had asked, she would have said she left it there as a reminder that things could be worse.

When she did the dishes she looked out at the horizon of brown grass and pavement. In the spring the whole neighborhood would smell of new asphalt sealant in a race for the smoothest, blackest, newest driveway. Directly under her window she could see the crinkly top of the white plastic head and its hat of

dead leaves. She wondered when the hell it would snow and cover up the trash bag ghost.

She started watching true-crime documentaries. She searched newspapers for information on the unsolved case. She wondered if by keeping the TV she was helping Barry's coworker get away with murder.

At night, in the dark, she touched her husband's body and pretended he was somebody else, somebody strong – a thief, a killer. She pretended she was no more than an accomplice, and that she could leave whenever she wanted.

RUNNY

Not all the rain-streaked signs stapled to posts around the fairgrounds were for cheap caricatures and pig shows. Some were requests for roommates or drummers. One even advertised a would-be husband; he wanted a woman who would agree to marry at the fair in 2006.

Ruby pulled one of the rain-streaked signs from the old wooden pole. "Lost: Basset Hound," it read. A blurry picture of a slack-eyed dog had been photocopied, but the words were handwritten in red marker that ran down the page like wept-off mascara. The paper was dry and crisp now. There'd been an unusual drought since the first day of the fair. Every object under the sun was parched and shrunken.

"Hey girl, don't wander off, damn it," Joe yelled over to her.

Ruby nodded. She'd taken down the dog sign because she felt sorry for the basset hound. The fairgrounds were the worst place to get lost, but one of the best places to lose someone. She scanned the crowd for dogs. If she found him, she'd return him personally to a nice elderly couple that she imagined had owned this dog for a decade. They'd invite her in for dinner among their potted plants and area rugs. "It's the least we can do," they'd say, "to thank you for returning our precious pet."

Ruby had moved down to Florida after her mom kicked her out of the house. Her uncle Joe had agreed to give her a place to stay if she worked with him at the fairgrounds, selling fried onion rings.

Ruby came back into the muggy tent. She pulled on the pair of old gardening gloves that protected her hands from the hot oil that spit up out of the fryer. A man with four young boys jumping up around him handed her a ten-dollar bill and told her to keep the change. She smiled at him, and he looked away to hand out the greasy bowls to his charges. Ruby sat down in the back of the tent. She knew she made men uncomfortable. She was thin, with dark eyes and an unattractive attitude. She was twenty years old, had dropped out of high school because she had trouble reading, and had paid rent to live on her mom's couch until the day her mom told her she was too old and too lazy to live at home anymore.

"Hey Runny, don't hide back here." Joe reached out and ran a glistening finger across her collarbone. "A tasty thing like you should be out front, drawing in the crowds."

"I don't think this is what my mom had in mind when she sent me down here," Ruby said. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand. She'd had the sniffles constantly since she was six.

"Your mom knew exactly what she was doing." He handed her a tissue. "She's been living off that easy money for so long that she can't teach you the

value of a real day's work." The "easy money" was insurance money her mom had been collecting from an injury at the warehouse three years ago. It was barely enough to get by on.

Ruby hadn't known her uncle before she moved. She'd only met him a few times when she was young. She'd thought of carnivals as happy places, and imagined him as a boisterous man with white hair, almost clown like. During her bus ride into town she imagined work at the fairgrounds to be something like joining the circus or working at Disney World.

At the bus station she looked for the cheerful man of her daydreams. He wasn't there. She sat down on a concrete bench between a woman with a cast on her arm and a man with a "Bikini Inspector" hat pulled over his eyes. He wore jeans and a windbreaker with several buttons pinned to it. Ruby leaned over to read a button that said, "No Tits, No Ass, No Service." He seemed to be covered with a layer of dust and dirt, and he smelled like Tequila. She sneezed. He pulled off the hat.

"You must be Runny," he said.

Ruby shook her head to say no, but she didn't have enough money to get back on the bus.

"You look just like your Ma," he said. He kissed her right on the lips, then picked up her suitcase and headed for the truck. Ruby followed, still looking for the white-haired man.

The crowds had been thin all week because the band for the main stage had cancelled, but the local high school baseball teams were in town for some sort of charity game. A steady pulse of people moved between the rides, the games, and the refreshment tents. The light cloud-cover from the morning had burnt away, and the air thickened from a cool mist to an invasive humidity; heavy air rolled over the corrugated awnings of the livestock pens, sweetened by smells of cotton candy and burnt funnel cake. Joe pushed aside the canvas flap at the back of the tent and disappeared to smoke a cigarette. Ruby dragged her short stool up front, right into the dirt road.

Seated and slouched, she combed her long bangs over her eyes, and through the strands she watched hips and clasped hands stream past her. She liked this middle view. If she looked down she saw fire ants swarming over pieces of French fries, and if she looked up she saw the unattractive faces of people who'd forgotten their sunglasses, squinting so hard that their upper lips seemed about to touch their eyebrows.

Across the wide road, a young woman with a blond ponytail held back by lavender ribbons paced back and forth between the cotton candy booth and the lemonade stand. Ruby pushed aside her screen of hair and watched the other girl move about. Pace, pace, stop, glance, frown, pace. Ruby looked from side to side, too. What was this girl looking for? The stands she moved between both

had plenty of business; the baseball players had a large food budget and matching appetites. Several of these hungry boys were impatiently lined up for onion rings, so Ruby reluctantly left her perch.

The boys were younger than her, but when she thought of them hitting home runs, taking the SATs, and working part time as waiters, she felt intimidated by the things they knew. She handed an over-full container to a boy with dark, curly hair. He was talking to his friend, not even looking at her. He reached out his hand toward her, and instantly she imagined that tan hand against the light skin over her ribs. She let out a little squeak and dropped the rings. They bounced off his wrist and down the front of his t-shirt. He swore at her. His friend swore at her. She sniffled. Joe came around the side of the tent.

“Oh damn, Runny. What’s this?” he said.

“Nothing. An accident.” She dabbed at the boy’s arm with a thin brown napkin. He moved away.

“Those things probably aren’t safe to eat, anyway.” His friends laughed. Encouraged, he added, “Look at her, she’s probably got roaches in her hair. Even in this dump I bet we could get you guys shut down.”

“Let me straighten this out, sweetheart.” Joe patted her hip and shooed her away. He joked with the boys and made a deal: he would buy beer for them later if they forgot about it. This seemed to appease them and they lit cigarettes and moved on without paying.

“Listen, Ruby.” Joe came over to her side and placed a heavy hand on the back of her neck. She felt like she was sinking into the ground under the weight. “With the way things have been this summer, I can’t afford to have losses, even little ones. Especially now that I’ve got you eating away at what I *do* have.” Behind him, the poster-covered pole was beginning to smoke. Ruby gazed at it over Joe’s shoulder, and he turned to look, too. Small flames lapped at the papers on the side nearest to them.

“God damn it!” Joe ran into the tent. He came out with the fire extinguisher and sprayed the pole. “Shit-head kids.”

The passing crowd had stopped to witness the excitement and now applauded lightly. The girl with the ponytail was among them. Through the carbon dioxide fog slowly spreading out between them, Ruby made eye contact with the girl. The girl winked and raised a hand to wave. Ruby smiled and started to wave back when Joe barked out, “What the hell is everybody gawking at?”

“Can I have a break now?” Ruby asked.

“From what? You can run out and buy me some more cigarettes.”

As she crossed the road, Ruby craned her neck to catch a glimpse of the girl with the ponytail, but she was nowhere in sight. A woman selling flowers asked if she could help her find something, and Ruby blushed. She felt giddy, as

if she'd been caught peeping through a bedroom window. And angry at the same time, angry that Joe had scared this girl away.

After watching all the boys walk by, daydreaming that one of them would notice her and take her away, it was this long-haired blond that she'd made a connection with. Worried that everyone in the fairgrounds could see her thoughts, Ruby walked quickly, staring down at her feet.

When Ruby returned, the afternoon rush was long over. The loudspeaker squealed to life. "Ladies and Gentlemen, a reminder--you've just got five more minutes before the 4-H auction at the bandstand."

The hot afternoon had slowed the pace of the fairgoers; there was less laughter and excited chatter. People dragged their feet as they made their way to the well-shaded stages and partially air-conditioned showrooms. Lemonade and ice cream were the only things selling. Ruby picked up a brown napkin from the table and blew her nose.

"Damn, where've you been, Runny?" Joe came up behind her, working his belt together as he returned from the port-a-potty.

"I had trouble finding a place that sold Pall Malls." Ruby handed him the pack.

“Thanks, honey.” He patted her on her cheek. “I’m goin’ out back for a bit. Keep an eye on that pole over there, it’s still hot.” He tapped the fire extinguisher with his boot.

Ruby skipped the hot metal stool and sat directly on the ground. The shade covered her face and shoulders, but her legs stretched out into the sun. She stared at her bony knees, trying to see the exact moment when they would stop tanning and start burning. Suddenly a shadow fell over her. The shadow connected to linen pants, and above that a white T-shirt and blond hair with lavender ribbons.

“Hi.” She applied gloss to her thin lips. “My name is Acorn.”

“I saw you,” Ruby blurted out.

Acorn sat down next to her in the dirt. “That’s why I came over here.”

“Oh.” Ruby could smell the vanilla lip gloss. She wondered if it tasted like vanilla, too. “Is Acorn your real name?”

“Yeah. My parents were hippies or something.” She stared at Ruby. She moved her head closer, her chin in the lead, as if trying to figure something out.

“I’m Ruby. My family calls me Runny, though.”

Acorn smiled. “So I guess we both have stupid names. Thanks, Mom. Right?”

Ruby smiled. She’d found a sister, a best friend, a roommate. This was the reason fate had forced her to this stuffy, sweaty place.

“Here, lean over.” Acorn said. She removed one of the ribbons that held back her ponytail. Ruby did as she was told. Acorn pushed aside Ruby’s unruly bangs and tied them back. “You know, you’ve got a nice face.” She lightly touched Ruby’s chin.

“Really?” She wanted to give something to Acorn, but when she looked around she realized that all she had was the dirt on her hands and a half-empty fire extinguisher. She could take a few bucks from the moneybox and go win a unicorn for her at the Frog Launch game.

“Sure. You just need to start using a good moisturizer and wearing a little blush.”

Ruby was taken aback. “I don’t think so.”

“Sure.” Acorn said. “I’ve got some free samples – powder, lipstick, you know. And then I can give you a color card and a catalogue. Since it’s so slow today I can probably even give you a free makeover if you come over to our tent.” She pointed across the road to the place where Ruby had noticed her earlier. She now noticed two other women dressed the same and a banner that read “Kelly Lea Cosmetics” in cursive lavender letters. Ruby wiped her hand across her face, leaving a small streak of dirt under her nose. “No thanks.”

A slight crackle from behind them and a collective gasp from a few passersby saved Ruby from having to say any more about it. The fire in the pole had found its way out again and was eating up a torn poster.

“Should we do something?” Acorn asked.

“Why bother.” Ruby sat down on the stool.

Acorn picked up the extinguisher just as Joe returned.

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” he said. He grabbed the extinguisher from her, knocking her off-balance. She hit the ground with a grunt. The tube of lip gloss fell from her pocket. The chemical fog came between them once again.

The next day the drought broke. A low, multicolored ceiling of umbrellas and tarps moved around the onion ring booth. Ruby pulled the vanilla lip gloss from the pocket of her raincoat and dabbed a little on her lower lip. An arts and crafts tent had appeared in the place of the Kelly Lea tent. Ruby figured they had moved on to air-conditioned malls, or that the skills of the representatives were needed at weddings and photo shoots around the state.

Ruby fried the onions and handled the money without saying a word. Between customers she stared after the people that walked away, always trying to stretch her vision a little bit further. One by one, they disappeared into the warm rain.

JUMPER

Diana's collection started with a small stone buffalo. It was on sale at the museum gift shop because of a chipped horn, and she used her employee discount. It sat alone on her desk for a month. Then, a series of South Dakota postcards with black and white photos of stately buffalo joined it. She bought a horned pencil holder and a watercolor painting of a herd moving at sunset. Eventually the collection became too much for her desk alone, and it spread out over the entire apartment.

Brock had pushed the menagerie into the closet to store it out of sight, but as the items became larger – including a bull buffalo skull and a cast iron garden sculpture of a cartoonish prancing calf – the collection became a force of its own.

Diana had always liked the way these things added weight to the formerly under-furnished living space, but now that she was pregnant she felt the presence of her possessions differently. She'd always arranged her knick-knacks to be viewed, as if their importance could only be enhanced when people saw them.

Now she placed the tiny stone buffalo inside the couch. Not simply under the couch, or even within a cushion, but actually *inside* of it.

She hid things to make them safe. The couch had a wooden frame and a sagging felt bottom that currently supported a dozen coins from Europe, a framed picture of her parents, two issues of *National Geographic*, and a snow emergency pamphlet with one side in English, the other side in Spanish and Somali.

She smoothed the bottom corner of the velvety blue upholstery into place and stapled it down. The staples caught the morning light coming through the window.

Diana would be the first to admit she had too much free time on her hands. The museum had laid her off after they introduced the new virtual tour guide and online classroom. Shortly afterward, she found out she was pregnant. She used pregnancy as an excuse to adopt eccentric behavior for her own amusement. Frequent nausea prevented her from indulging most food cravings, so she'd found other ways to enjoy her condition. The things in the couch were an inside joke between the baby and herself.

"You're a little buffalo," she said to the baby.

She pulled herself up from the floor. Her curly hair, thick and unwashed, had a memory for hairstyles and held a braid on its own. The elastic band instead served as a spacer for her jeans. Looped through the buttonhole and hooked to the button, it stretched enough to give her unzipped jeans an extra three inches. But even this was getting tight.

She had gained weight rapidly over the last few weeks. In the mornings she checked the progress of the bulge over her waistband and examined her face in the mirror. It was a bit rounder, she thought, and she worried that a double chin was on the way.

Brock had not made things better. After buying the requisite informative books and bouquets of flowers, he had all but disappeared from the apartment. Everyday he left earlier for work and stayed away longer on errands. When Diana wanted a magazine or ran out of vitamins, he would volunteer to go out, but would spend hours away. She wondered where he went.

Shortly after Diana finished a lunch of cheese and crackers, footsteps thudded down the hallway and then the front door of the apartment opened. Brock came in with a newspaper and a stale, musty breeze. He stumbled around the front room, winding around filing cabinets, a mountain bike without a seat, and a few moving boxes that sat untouched after three years.

Diana turned on the TV.

“Ew. What is that smell? Is that you?”

“It’s the phonebooks on the landing. They’re moldy.” Brock tossed the mail onto the coffee table. Diana picked up one of the mail order catalogues: *Authentic Gifts from Poland*. It was still cold from sitting in the outdoor mailbox. She got at least two catalogues a day, some of them from maternity stores, some

for designer shoes or gourmet kitchen tools. All of them promoted things she either couldn't afford or didn't need.

"Why don't you order some new clothes?" Brock asked.

"It's not like I have anywhere to go." She dropped the catalogue to the floor. Brock struggled with the lock on the sliding glass door. He was thin and pale and had soft hands that never used tools. Even though he was tall enough so that his pants barely touched the tops of his shoes, Diana still had trouble finding him in a crowd.

"What are you doing?" Diana asked.

"There's a guy." Brock jiggled the door until it came free of the ice holding it to the track. "Out there, right above us on the fifth floor. I think he's going to jump."

He stepped out onto the balcony and closed the door. On the Minneapolis Community Access channel, Viva and Jerry showed pictures of their new RV and introduced the next country video. Diana tried to watch the TV, but she kept looking out at the balcony. Brock brushed a couple inches of snow off a chair and sat down. Small chunks of ice stuck to the back of his thin sweater. Every once in awhile he would lean out over the railing and crane his neck to look at something above him. Diana was curious, but also stubborn.

A week ago she had decided to give Brock something of the silent treatment. Although he showed no sign of noticing — they were hardly ever in

the same room for more than ten minutes except when they were sleeping— Diana worried that any direct confrontation would be bad for the baby’s developing emotions. She wanted Brock to talk excitedly to his coworkers about fatherhood; she wanted him to cook a dinner high in folic acid and calcium; she wanted him to start a college fund. At the very least, she wanted a foot rub.

She wrapped an old wool blanket around her shoulders and joined Brock outside.

“Is he really up there?”

“Yep. If you lean out far enough you can see the toes of his boots sticking out. He’s right by the ‘I.’”

The antique building, all brick and concrete, had been renovated in the eighties. The new look had included a multi-colored wooden sign proclaiming “Best Place In Town.” The reds and oranges had been soaked by rain and sun-bleached to common streaks of brown, and many of the letters were lost to the tornadoes, blizzards, and other scavengers of the last decade. “Pl ce I Tow” remained.

Diana couldn’t see anything. She moved closer to Brock.

“What’s he doing?”

“Waiting for the right moment, I guess.”

“Is he wearing a coat?” Snow melted into her socks.

“Of course not. You don’t wear a coat if you just plan on dying anyway.”

Diana tickled his side. "Strange thing for a guy without a coat to say," she said, trying to sound flippant.

Brock shifted in the chair without looking up at her. Near his feet lay a bird that had hit their window on a calm day earlier that week. Diana rested her hand on the railing. The icy metal hurt her bare skin. Even though the street below was frozen, the air still smelled of asphalt.

She looked down at the curbs crowned with bottles and broken taillights turned over by the plows. Could this height be deadly? The thought was dizzying.

She pulled her hand up under the blanket and pressed it into the space between her breasts and her belly. She'd stopped wearing her bras and enjoyed the new ability to find comfort in her own body. It was as if that simple garment had prevented her skin from interacting with the world. Without the obstacles of underwire and padding she could circle her arms around herself and be warmed.

"Are you going to stay out here?" she asked.

Brock stuffed his hands into the tight pockets of his jeans. His teeth clacked together as he shivered. "You should go back in," he said.

Diana nodded, but stayed where she was. Below them, a group of boys came around the corner. They looked up at the building. Diana peeked a hand out from under her blanket to wave hello, then realized they probably were more interested in the man on the ledge.

The street was a crowded one-way between cheap apartment buildings and old houses. There were rows of parked cars, but because most people preferred to stay in all day and keep their spots in case of a snow emergency, there was very little traffic. There was an occasional laugh or shriek as the kids threw snowballs and wrestled each other to the ground. There were no sirens.

Diana ran her tongue over her chapped lips. "We should call someone."

"I don't think that is a good idea," Brock said. "This guy probably wouldn't want the extra attention."

"We've never called 911 before. It might be exciting. And maybe he wants someone to care that he's up there."

"Let's just leave him alone."

It surprised Diana that Brock had become so selfish. He'd made a great first impression on her with his generosity.

They had met at their college graduation. She sat next to him. Schultz next to Shumaker. She'd lost her cap to a strong prairie wind, and couldn't stop looking back at the row of relatives with cameras ready. When he'd asked her what was wrong she'd almost cried. With a smile and words of reassurance, he'd given his cap to her. She'd watched him hurry hatlessly across the stage to get his diploma, and when she walked across she kept her eyes on him, forgetting to look out at her waving mom.

Now the group of boys stopped playing and stared up at the man on the ledge. A woman in a fur hood pointed a mitten at them. She took out a cell phone. The boys resumed the snowball fight, looking up occasionally.

“He’s not going to jump.” Diana said. She felt like she was ruining the end of a movie for him.

“He’s probably got a magnificent note in a sealed envelope.” Brock’s words came sluggishly from his cold lips. “In a safe deposit box. Ten pages about the irony of life or something. Maybe even handwritten.”

“Don’t romanticize it. There’s nothing noble about him. He’s probably waiting for a social worker to come help him because he can’t deal with his problems.”

Brock stood and pushed past her into the apartment. She followed him closely. She didn’t close the door.

“Would you jump?” she asked. She ran a hand over her belly. She found its width and lovely heat reassuring.

He dropped down on the couch. The items inside knocked against each other.

“What’s that noise?” he asked.

Diana sat next to him, easing herself down so as to not disturb her collection.

“No. Of course I wouldn’t,” Brock said.

They sat together in the cold draft from the open door, listening as the sirens drew closer, and the children played in the shadow of the best place in town.

CAMILLA

Camilla Horton, age ten, slowly closed the mouth of her dull safety scissors around the obituary of Jacques Otis Webb, USAF, Ret. The scrap of thin paper fell into her lap.

“So glad you can join us, Mr. Webb.” She held the obituary up to her eye-level. Cocking her head to one side as if making polite conversation at a cocktail party, she added, “Or is it Captain?”

Mr. Webb, who Camilla decided had never achieved the rank of captain, had died Saturday due to complications following surgery for colon cancer. Camilla, unfamiliar with this type of cancer, looked to her bookshelves for help. The outdated, partial set of Encyclopedia Britannica sat between matching teddy bear bookends. *Br – Cy* was missing.

“Breakfast!” Bea yelled from downstairs.

Sighing, Camilla folded the life of Jacques Webb into a triangle – the pattern the other girls used to pass notes in class. She pulled a white shoebox out from under her unmade bed. Pokemon stickers covered the lid. She had no interest in the cartoon, but she had accepted the stickers without comment when her mother, Bea, handed them to her one day after school. Obituaries of 53 people who had passed away in the last year lined the bottom of the box.

Missing from among them was the two-year-old scrap describing Camilla's father as "a loving husband and dedicated surgeon." Bea had that one.

"Who can help with my spelling test?" Camilla asked. She carefully searched through the lot until she found Mrs. Corrine Aldo Everson, *70, retired librarian, occasional poet. Mourned by hundreds of former Newbury Elementary students.* She placed Mrs. Everson in the deep breast pocket of her oversized shirt. The first time she had clipped a minor history from the paper she was supposed to be checking the birth announcements for a cousin's arrival, but was drawn to the obituaries. The babies had nothing but pounds and ounces; those who had passed away had accomplishments and, as Camilla saw it, advice to offer.

Camilla joined Bea at the kitchen table. Bea reminded her to drink all of her milk. Camilla did, although she worried that she would grow to be as tall as her mother unless she could get her classmate David to trade his coffee – with its growth-stunting properties – for her cookies at lunchtime. He was the only non-adult she'd ever seen drink coffee.

Without complaint Camilla placed her dishes in the sink and went out to meet the school bus. She imagined that Bea often bragged to her coworkers about how well behaved her daughter was, charming them with fabricated tales of mother-child bonding.

Camilla's stop was the first on the route. She climbed on, holding her backpack up under her arm, and sat on the driver's side, three seats from the front. This was the best seat for seeing the driver's eyes as he glanced in the mirror to observe what stretched out behind him. Little by little the bus filled up, heavy in the back, with the quiet children pushing up against the windows at the front. At the last stop, less than a mile from school, Sally Perkins got on. She was supposed to walk, but her mother had visited the principal every morning until the bus stopped for Sally, too. She wore a yellow sundress with a matching purse.

"Today is my birthday," she said to the bus driver, without making eye contact. She walked slowly down the aisle, smiling from side to side. Birthdays in Mrs. Bradley's fifth grade class meant ice cream and ten minutes of "fun time." Camilla thought of Amy Ella Meikeson, *18, car accident, survived by her family and hundreds of friends*. Amy Ella had been a cheerleader and was known for her ability to get along with everyone.

It took Sally as long to walk to her seat as it took to walk to school. The driver's eyes followed her progress and he tapped his thumbs impatiently on the steering wheel. Camilla knew that he'd been a guard at the prison at the outskirts of town. Sometimes he mumbled incomplete stories of what the men there had done to girls their age. He took his eyes off the mirror and accelerated the bus with a jerk, throwing Sally off balance and into the nearest seat.

Mrs. Bradley had announced her fondness of order to her students on the first day of class. She was young and shy. She dyed her hair dark brown and wore pale lipstick. The result was an appearance stark enough to fool ten-year-olds. By inspiring old-fashioned fear into the fifth graders, she had managed to maintain that order. The desks remained in straight lines, pencil shavings were promptly deposited in the trash, and no one ever asked to use the bathroom in the middle of a lesson.

Earlier in the year the class had inherited a guinea pig when the fourth graders were found to be incompetent. Mrs. Bradley's class voted to name him Jaws. The students took turns staying after school to clean and feed the extremely good-natured pet. One afternoon, Camilla sat in front of the cage watching the little nose twitch and the whiskers shake. Unnerved by the blank eyes, she took out Dr. Frederick Liebe, 59, heart attack. *Won best of breed with his beloved Dalmatian, Hans Dieter, in 1984.*

Carefully smoothing out the crinkled piece of newspaper brought just for this reason, she took a deep breath. She opened the cage door and removed the water dish. While she had her back turned, Jaws carried Dr. Liebe into his nest and began nibbling away at the "in lieu of flowers" request. Returning from the sink, Camilla dropped the water dish and let out a cry that interrupted Mrs. Bradley's grading.

Camilla let Mrs. Bradley draw the conclusion that Jaws had become too much like his namesake. The class never saw Jaws again, and when the goldfish arrived they christened him Goldie, a name Camilla had voted against.

Camilla sat with her head down, her left ear pressed against the cool plastic of the desk, watching Goldie stick his face in the corner of the small aquarium. "Goldie Fish, drowned at home, will be missed by the fifth grade," she whispered into the angle of her elbow. "Most of the fifth grade."

The morning bell rang. The class quieted down abruptly just as the words "training bra" stammered from Sally's lips. A twitter of laughter swelled up from the class, particularly the boys. Sally blushed brightly.

"Sally Rickets, age eleven. Died of embarrassment on her birthday. Poor thing." Camilla hardly realized she'd spoken out loud until Sally glared at her.

The sharp tap of a ruler on the blackboard instructed the class to prepare for the spelling quiz.

"Conscience."

"Fragile."

"Guitar."

"Sophisticated."

"For extra credit, transubstantiation."

Camilla pulled Mrs. Everson from her pocket and set her on the corner of her desk. *Transubstantiation, Mrs. Everson?* Not getting an answer, she quickly scribbled down “transsupstation.”

Camilla passed her paper forward. Mrs. Everson lost her balance and plummeted to the floor.

“Camilla, please pick that up and come to the front. We all know the rules.”

Camilla picked Mrs. Everson up and held a sharp corner to her lips as she walked forward to face the class.

“Class, was she about to disrupt our learning environment?”

Twenty-four greedy pairs of eyes ate up the sight of the weakest among them facing this trial.

“She was passing a note!”

“She was cheating on the quiz!”

They leaned forward in their seats to learn which it was. Mrs. Bradley hushed them. “Please read your note to the class.”

Camilla held Mrs. Everson in her hand. The ink from the paper, drawn out by the sweat of her palms, stained her skin. Directly in front of her David put his hands to his face to hide a smile. His fingernails shone with a special nail polish his mother had applied to stop him from sucking his thumb. He noticed Camilla staring at his fingers, so, using one hand to hide his actions from the

teacher he mined a small booger from his nose and flicked it. The aim was true, but the projectile fell short and landed near her shoe. Wide-eyed, she looked at Mrs. Bradley.

She was afraid that Mrs. Bradley would call her mom. Last month Bea had discovered what she deemed a morbid collection and, disturbed, had made her daughter promise to throw them out.

“I never should have let her go to the funeral,” she had said into the phone as Camilla listened from the stairs. “She was just eight. Too young.”

Since then had been careful not to give her mom any reason to worry.

“Go on,” Mrs. Bradley said, “Don’t make us wait all day.” It had been over a week since anyone had been caught passing a note, and her disciplinary overtones did not conceal her excitement.

Camilla cradled Mrs. Everson in her palm. She shut her eyes and pictured the tiny American flag next to Mr. Webb’s name. *Extreme bravery in the face of adversity.* Camilla looked out at her peers and spoke quickly.

“Dear Virginia, thank you for the offer, but I can’t run away today. I have studied too hard for the quiz. Good luck. Yours, Cammie.” She gave the paper one quick extra fold and popped her into the dry cavern of her mouth.

Newspaper ink smeared across her lips.

“Is that what they’re publishing in the classifieds these days?” Mrs. Bradley said. “Very *Mission Impossible*, especially since there isn’t a Virginia in the entire grade.”

Camilla sat down in her seat. Her hands shook. As discreetly as possible she returned Mrs. Everson to her pocket.

“It’s common for people with no real friends to invent imaginary ones,” Sally informed those around her.

At lunchtime Camilla asked to be excused to the bathroom. She rubbed at the ink around her mouth. The smudge lightened but spread into a shadow over the power half of her face.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Everson.” She unfolded the paper on the edge of the sink. “You were there to help me and I got us into trouble. You aren’t mad, are you?”

A few drops of water soaked into the paper, replacing the old librarian’s picture with a translucent ad for reduced finance rates on new cars.

“No, wait,” Camilla begged. She snatched up the paper and shook it in an attempt to restore it. “Please don’t leave me. I said I’m sorry.”

A hole formed in the damp center. Camilla rubbed her face with her dirty fingers. The ink mixed with her tears and left a wet veil around her eyes.

"I'm sorry." She ripped the obituary into unrecognizable pieces and dropped them into the sink.

During the afternoon lesson on long division Camilla refused to raise her head even to take notes.

"Class, what important lesson have we learned from Camilla today?" Mrs. Bradley said. "Sally, if I hear that gum snap one more time you'll be wearing it in your pretty little ponytail."

Camilla raised her head slightly. Mrs. Bradley stepped away from the chalkboard to get a better look. "You look horrible. Why don't you run to the nurse? Be sure to come back and get your homework before you go home."

The nurse's office was actually the large custodial closet with a cot and a telephone added, and the "nurse" was a secretary who kept a large file on which students had permission to take Tylenol and which were allergic to peanuts. As the secretary led the way from the front office to the closet, Camilla imagined that she was first in line behind Amy Ella's funeral procession, and that the secretary's large swaying behind was the hearse, rocking from side to side from all the sadness inside. Camilla rocked from side to side when she was sad, and she imagined that the amount of grief at Amy Ella's funeral had been enough to move a big car all over the road.

The secretary dialed and handed the phone to Camilla.

“Accounts payable, this is Bea.”

“Mom.”

“Oh, Camilla. Are you sick again?”

“Mrs. Bradley told me to call you—”

“Fine. I’ll be there in twenty minutes, but don’t make me come in and get you this time; we have to hurry so I can get back for a meeting. Are you throwing up?”

Camilla shook her head at the receiver and hung up.

In the classroom Mrs. Bradley pulled a small cooler from the coat closet.

“Sally, why don’t you start passing these out to everyone?”

“I thought the party was at the end of the day.” Sally moved cautiously forward.

Camilla watched from the doorway as Sally slammed the soggy ice cream bars roughly onto each desk, rolling her eyes.

“You don’t want Camilla to miss out on your special day, do you?” Mrs. Bradley crossed her arms over her stomach. “Invite her in to your party, don’t make her wait out there. Camilla, it’s rude not to pass along best wishes to someone on their birthday.” She shoed away a small boy seeking help with his

ice cream wrapper. She turned the radio on to the oldies station. "Get dancing, kids. David, ask Camilla to dance."

Camilla took small steps into the center of the room. She whispered "Happy Birthday" as David approached her. She held the ice cream bar up under her chin like a shield. David looked down at his feet and the class fell silent. Mrs. Bradley tapped a beat on the desk to the Donovan song "Mellow Yellow."

Ice cream dripped down Camilla's wrists and arms; the long rivulets clung to her skin and refused to drop to the floor. She handed the melting bar to David and began to dance. Slowly at first, bobbing her head and shifting her weight around over her feet, then, as her classmates hesitated between laughter and awe, she broke into a wild, polka-like dance, independent of the music and immune to Sally's gum-snapping.

She thought of her shoebox – Amy Ella, Mrs. Ruth Piper, Joe Santos, Jr., and all the others. None of them had been where she was at this moment. None of them knew how to be Camilla in fifth grade.

"My mom said that some kids go crazy," Sally said. "If they don't have stability."

Mrs. Bradley turned off the radio, but Camilla kept moving. Eyes closed, she spun around, hitting her knuckles on the desks. She collapsed to a crouched position and opened her eyes to see her mother's feet.

"Let's go, silly girl," Bea said. She smiled and held out her hand.

She got up and wiped her sticky fingers on the front of her shirt. She grabbed her mother's hand and held it tightly as they walked down the hallway, past the indifferent secretary/nurse.

ARRANGEMENTS

William straightened the wood-mounted barometer that hung where a cross had been when he'd inherited the office. The thick cushions of his chair showed the first signs of forming to his body. Breakfast bagel receipts and a few candy-bar wrappers sat on top of his bookshelf. He had been a pastor at First United Methodist for more than a year, and his surroundings were familiar to him by now, but something kept him from feeling entirely at home. The sight of the large, leather-bound Bible on his desk made him uncomfortable. It was a gift from his parents, inscribed simply, *We're so proud.*

A gust of wind blew the steady rain against the window. William stopped tidying and watched a young woman let a large dog out from the back of her dented blue Grand Am. She ignored the winding sidewalk that led from the parking lot to the church and instead hiked directly up the hill. The dog veered off toward one of the thin trees, but in response to a tug on the leash returned to her side. The woman took long, slow strides, and with every step the heels of her pink, pointed dress shoes sank into the wet grass and came up coated in mud.

William moved his nameplate to the left, then back to the center, and placed the small vase of silk marigolds to the right of his oversized desk

calendar. Women didn't usually make him nervous. He'd gone out on several dates since he finished school. People were always setting him up with their cousins or roommates, but those rarely led to a second date. Even though Maggie was planning her wedding, he felt like he was trying to impress her.

Maggie did not have an appointment. In fact, William had not planned to see her again until she and her fiancée came in for the wedding rehearsal in two weeks. He slid a pile of papers into the top drawer. He checked his reflection in the dark glass of his computer. He smoothed down his dark hair, but his eyebrows remained unruly, like those of a Sesame Street puppet. He swapped the Bible with the stack of papers.

Maggie lowered the hood of her rain jacket. Her hair was darkened by the rainwater and hung in thick strands over her shoulders. The German Shepherd shook itself dry and barked. She tugged the leash.

"Desi! Quiet!" The dog whined and sat down. "Sorry. She thinks the whole world is her playground." The dog gave a half-hearted growl. "Shh. If you growl at the priest, you'll go to hell."

"Actually, I'm not—" William began, but thought better of correcting her. With a rehearsed wave of his hand he motioned her to enter the office. She shrugged off her jacket and smoothed her skirt.

William had met Maggie only a few days ago.

They'd been sitting at the bar at Restaurant New Cancun, a bizarre place that opened when the town council had set out to create a "downtown" area for the overextended suburb. A four-story parking garage waited for the commuters that arrived at the bus station every morning, but the area failed to hold anyone in the late evening hours. Plans for a movie theatre and ice-rink had fallen through. So far, only a rotating assortment of theme restaurants had been able to open their doors.

Nick, her fiancé, had family that lived in the area. His parents made most of the wedding arrangements for the couple. Nick's mother had insisted that they go out for lunch. She requested a round of beers. No one had ever taken William out like this, and he felt obligated to accept whatever she ordered for him.

They sat in a row at the bar: Mrs. Gleaney, William, Nick, Maggie. They all sat awkwardly on the saddle shaped stools, except for Mrs. Gleaney. She sat sideways, gracefully lifting a chip full of salsa to her mouth over the generous expanse of her white blouse. A flimsy brooch shaped like some sort of strange owl was pinned high on her chest, almost to her shoulder. When she moved it's eyes bobbed around.

"I thought it would be nice if they could use the same vows my husband and I took 30 years ago," Mrs. Gleaney said. She spoke to William almost as a

co-conspirator, lowering her voice a bit and often winking as she made “suggestions.”

The bartender stacked their open beer bottles into a pyramid. He wore a red bandanna around his throat and an eye patch. William wasn't sure if he was supposed to be a bandit or a pirate.

“I can't express how bad that idea is,” Maggie said. She smashed a chip against the image of Pancho Villa engraved into the bar counter.

“Opa!” The bartender yelled as he lifted the bottle pyramid. The top bottle wavered, stalled, and then plummeted.

“Shit!” He returned the bottles to their starting point. He took off the eye patch and threw it to the ground. Maggie reached over the bar to grab a beer.

“I think we should read the poems your sister sent me,” Nick said. He scratched the back of his neck. His hair still had the sharp angles and faint comb lines of a new haircut.

“Don't you feel better without all that extra hair?” Mrs. Gleaney asked. “You were starting to look like a girl.”

William shifted around. Not only was he physically discomforted, but the waiters were making him uneasy as well. The man taking an order at the table nearest to them was dressed as a doctor and trying to get his stethoscope under the shirt of a businesswoman holding a Happy Birthday balloon. On the other

side of the room a foul-mouthed child wearing a large black mustache threatened the crowded tables with a water gun.

“Should we order some food?” Mrs. Gleaney waved a hand at a sombrero-wearing waitress. The owl-eyes went crazy. William slouched down as much as he could. He wanted a glass of water, but was afraid of what he would have to go through to get one.

“No poetry,” Maggie said.

“Nachos, maybe?” Mrs. Gleaney tried the bartender. “More salsa?”

“I’ll write something original,” Nick said.

Mrs. Gleaney shook her head. “You need something old, something tested.”

The kid with the water gun came closer. William saw that he was not a child at all, but a midget who looked old enough to be retired. The bartender dropped a dish of salsa in front of William. The salsa spilled out and onto his shirt. Maggie leaned over Nick and offered William a napkin. He noticed that she wasn’t wearing an engagement ring.

Maybe this was one of those horrible reality TV shows with the complicated set-up. Soon the doctor-waiter would point to a camera, and the midget would shout, “You’ve been *Befuddled!*” There would be a release form and the actors would leave, but Maggie would stay. She would say that she’d

thought the whole thing was cruel, and that she would make it up to William by spending the night with him.

But the food arrived, and then the check, and nothing unexpected happened. The argument over the vows continued until William finally informed them that he had a standard set of vows that at the very least would not upset anyone.

And now she was in front of him. Alone.

She sat in a chair facing William, and the dog stretched out on the floor near her feet. She toyed with a string unraveling from the pocket of her linen skirt. She wrapped it around her finger and held it like the ripcord on a parachute.

“What happened to your shoes?” he asked. She ran her bare feet across the carpet in a slow cadence, leaving a faint trail of dirty water.

“They fell off.”

William looked out the window. Next to the home made rain gauge that patiently collected what he hoped to be a record setting rainfall, the shoes stuck out from the grass. They looked like tiny triangular gravestones set up for a child’s deceased pet.

Maggie yanked at the string and it came free. As she unwound the string from her purpling fingertip she stared at William. Her eyes were a liquid hazel

and energized by a sort of sad accusation that William could not understand. He didn't know why, but he wanted to make her happy.

"If you're here to talk about the vows, I was just about to get to work on them. I've been really busy lately." The calendar in front of him had only a few notes written on it. He glanced at it. "Lots of off-site business. Cremations. Um."

Maggie combed her fingers through her wet hair. Large drops fell onto the front of her blouse. The translucent circles hinted at her tan chest and light pink bra. William wondered if she had any birthmarks.

"It's humid and nasty out there," she said. "Nick's mother set the date. But it looks like August weddings are a horrible idea, even this far north."

William leaned back in his chair. "Yes. A warm front came in last night. Unusual patterns for the Midwest." He smiled. He found greater mystery and satisfaction in the study of atmospheric trends than in prayer.

"Well whatever it is, I don't think I trust that guy on Channel Six anymore," she said. William imagined how she would look on her wedding day – hair done up, holding roses, moving elegantly down the aisle toward him. Maybe she would begin attending services weekly. She would drop by to see him, confide in him, depend upon his wisdom.

"There was a halo around the moon last night," he said. "That's a sign of rain."

“All the potholes on Prairie Drive are going to fill up with water,” she said. She pinched her lower lip with her teeth.

“So. Your vows?”

Maggie spread her hands on the desk. For a moment they both studied her engagement ring. It was a thin band of diamonds set in such a way that only gold visible was the tips of the thin prongs. Several rings of an identical design had passed through the church. It must have been a best seller at the jewelry stores in the mall. She raised her hands to push her hair back again.

“Whatever you’ve got is fine. I trust your judgment.” She made light gestures with her hands as she spoke, ordering the space around her like a conductor in front of an orchestra. “I’d really like to keep it as short as possible.” The ring was loose on her thin finger and it spun as she moved. William worried that it might fall off.

“I’ll probably be thinking about something else anyway,” she added.

“The honeymoon?” He meant it as a joke, but it fell flat.

“We’ll be going up to a B&B on Lake Superior. You know, lighthouses and sunsets and all that.” She blushed a little bit. “Actually there was something that I wanted to talk to you about. I don’t know how to start.” She hiccupped.

“Excuse me.”

“Take your time.” William picked up a pen and tapped it on the calendar. Could she fire him? Did she have pre-wedding jitters, cold feet? Hopefully she

wasn't going to confess to premarital sex and ask if she could still wear a white dress. William didn't feel that was his business, but many people developed a sudden guilt about their sexual past close to the wedding day. Maggie reached into the deep pocket of her jacket and pulled out an envelope.

"After the ceremony, when we sign the marriage license and everything, you have to file that with someone, right?" She kept her eyes down on the envelope, crimping its corners.

William nodded. His thoughts paralyzed. He watched the white envelope turn over in her hands.

"I was hoping." She stalled and took a deep breath. "I was hoping that you could not take care of that. The final part."

"But your marriage won't be official until that's done." William could husband-and-wife them twenty times, but until the paperwork got through it wouldn't be legal.

"I know." She placed the envelope in front of him. She hiccupped again.

"I'll get you some water." He walked over to the small refrigerator next to his bookshelf. The dog sat up and looked around, as if to make sure she hadn't missed anything important. William breathed in the oily, chemical, smell of wet-dog, which he had ignored until then. He twisted the cap off the bottle of water and handed it to Maggie.

He sat down in his chair carefully, as if it might give way. He pulled one of the deep-toned marigolds from the vase and bent the wire stem back and forth. So, Maggie didn't want to be married.

"You're canceling?" He hadn't felt this sort of nervous delight since his senior prom.

"No!" She gripped the water bottle. "I don't want anyone else to know; everything else should be normal. The wedding is already paid for. The relatives are so excited. I just don't want it to be" –hiccup– "binding."

William fidgeted with the stem. A thin brown ribbon covered it and held it together even though he could feel the wire breaking into pieces between his fingers.

"Does Nick know about this?"

"His mother is bullying him to the altar. He can't even think straight."

William picked up the envelope. He wasn't sure, but he thought he felt Maggie hold her breath. He unfolded the tab. Inside were four twenty-dollar bills.

"Is that all?" He hadn't meant to say it out loud, but he'd felt a bit insulted that he didn't find a stack of crisp hundreds.

"Do you want more?"

"No." He handed the envelope to her but she refused to take it.

"Then you'll do it?"

“I think people get arrested for this kind of thing.” William felt like a fool. He swiveled his chair around and read the barometer. Down to 29.9 inches. *For every fog in August there’s a blizzard in February*, he thought. He’d never understood the reasoning behind the old adage. Maybe it wasn’t about weather at all.

He now saw two images of Maggie walking down the aisle: one in which she smiled at him with gratitude, and one in which she glared at him with contempt. He’d often told himself that it was his job to help people, but he’d never thought of all the ways help could be defined.

Maggie stood in front of him and placed a hand on his arm. His eyes followed the trail of buttons on her blouse from her waist to her collarbone. She crouched down so that they looked at each other evenly.

“I can’t go through with this marriage,” she said. “We’d be divorced in a year, anyway. I figure this is easier.” Her fingers were shaking. The engagement ring slid up above her knuckle. She took it off and placed it on her index finger where it was more secure.

William leaned toward her, bringing his cheek close to hers. He could feel the heat of her skin. Her damp hair smelled like citrus. She had a small tattoo on the top of her neck, just behind her earlobe: a pale red heart the size of a dime with a ‘B’ inside of it. William wanted that tattoo. He wanted it in the envelope on his desk. He wanted her to cast it off as easily as she was casting off

her life with Nick. He ran his finger over it, as if it were a drop of water that refused to evaporate. Maggie turned her head away, but he put his hand on her chin and kissed her.

She stood up and backed away, hitting the barometer with her shoulder and setting it off balance.

“I’m sorry,” he said, but it sounded like a question.

“I have to go.” Her voice was calm, but her hands still shook. She picked up her jacket and roused the dog. She reached for the envelope.

“Leave it,” William said. He didn’t really know what he was agreeing to, but he wanted to do something for her. He didn’t feel guilty about touching her. He wanted her to think he was a good person.

“See you in two weeks.” She clipped the leash to the dog’s collar and walked out of his office.

William went to the window and watched as she collected her shoes. Water dripped into the rain gauge steadily, but the level did not rise, and the rain could not fall fast enough or get close enough to satisfy him.

William did his shopping late at night at the 24-hour grocery store on Fern Avenue. He moved slowly past the frozen foods. A trio of college guys leaned into one of the freezers. William couldn’t see their faces through the fogged glass of the open door, but he could hear them discuss the merits of each brand of

frozen pizza. He wanted to join in and voice support for the thin crust with pineapple. He wasn't much older than them, but people his own age – at least those he met outside of church – had an instinct for avoiding anyone too closely associated with organized religion. Young men avoided him like he was a spy, or a recruiter for a cult.

He searched through what few cuts of meat were available at 2 a.m. One unevenly cut sirloin bled off its Styrofoam tray onto a bed of plastic grass. He added it to his basket, leaving a respectable distance between it and the bag of frozen peas. A few feet away, a woman in a heavy nightgown checked the prices on chicken thighs. Her husband, in a cowboy hat and faded Harley Davidson shirt, stroked the hair of a child sleeping within the metal cage of the shopping cart.

The man had often attended the services William performed on Wednesday nights at the Methodist church, but he'd never seen him with his family before. He turned and walked away. He came to the store at night so that he could be anonymous; so he wouldn't have to greet the man, shake his hand; so he wouldn't have to meet his family, offer to pay for the chicken. He felt an obligation to that kind of helpful, caring pastor during the day. But at this hour, and with his back turned, he ignored them. He had to take care of himself. He had basic survival to consider. He was a hunter of Oreos, a gatherer of tater tots.

The rehearsal dinner was held at The Saucy Serpent. The Saucy Serpent was next to New Cancun, and had also taken a bold approach to dining. Menus covered with chain mail sat on tables made of large, crest-bearing shields. The waitresses wore ill-fitting, knee-length velvet dresses and headbands made of plastic pearls. William shook his umbrella and left it by the door. He stopped by the bathrooms and watched the wedding party arrange themselves at the back of the restaurant. Maggie was not with them. He usually looked forward to the dinners. He liked witnessing the lengthy toasts, the gifts exchanged, the unchecked emotion after the second glass of wine.

The rehearsal itself had not gone smoothly. The maid of honor missed her flight and wouldn't arrive with the veil until early the next morning. The ring bearer threw up on the satin pillow strapped to his hand. Mrs. Gleaney changed the order of the readings twice, even though the programs had been printed days ago.

The bathroom door opened and Maggie emerged. She held the still greenish ring bearer propped against her hip. He rested his head on her shoulder and sucked his thumb. She had her hair tied back. A pink, round bandage concealed the tattoo.

"I need to talk to you," William said, addressing the boy as much as the woman.

“Me, too.” Maggie said. She took something from her pocket and handed it to William. It was a fifty-dollar bill. “I figure the least I could do was give you an even hundred.”

“You want change?”

“I need at least twenty back for gas.”

William couldn't believe what he was hearing.

“My wallet's in the car,” he said.

From the table, Mrs. Gleaney yelled for mead.

“You'll help me, right?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah.” William picked up his umbrella. “I'll be right back.” He ignored the court jester that held the door for him. His feet sunk into the shredded tire that stood in for mulch around the landscaping. He walked through the parking lot and past his car. He stepped over the hedges that separated the row of restaurants from the shiny new bus station with its digital schedule board and ergonomic benches. The express to the city left every fifteen minutes.

He would leave for the rest of the weekend and skip all the services. Do some shopping downtown; maybe track down his college roommate. He'd sneak back to the office Monday to collect his things. Maggie could try to explain why he wasn't there on Saturday afternoon. Maybe the wedding would be cancelled and Maggie could move on. William hoped Mrs. Gleaney would find someone else to conduct the ceremony.

William sat down in the middle of the bench. He spread his arms out across the top of the bench, as if daring anyone to join him.

TOKENS

Deb had been telling fortunes at the county carnival for three years. There wasn't much to it. Either tell people what they want to hear, or tell them the opposite--both work. For one week each spring she attributed her dark eyelashes and bony fingers to a fictional, yet extremely troubled, Romanian heritage. She wore a light-as-crepe-paper peasant skirt and moonstone earrings. At first she'd worn a red shawl to complete the look, but she'd lost that, so she wore her red tank top. Red seemed to her the color of psychics.

Deb had worked out a way to tilt her head to the side and stare into the distance. With a shake of the tiny bells she wore around her ankle, she touched a cloudy piece of rose quartz to the customer's hand.

"I see you visiting a city soon," she said. Really, she was trying to look at a piece of hair that had fallen in front of her face. It was blonde, and this was unusual; she'd just gotten highlights in an attempt to catch her husband Sean's wandering attention.

"You don't even have a crystal ball," one customer said. "So where do you see that?"

“My ancestors roamed the Carpathian countryside with no place to call home. The gift of sight has been passed on from generation to generation. All our profits go to the American Lung Association. Put five bucks in the jar.”

And he did, because he was from a farm not that far away and knew what to expect. The college students were trickier. They drove their hatchbacks and sports cars in to town every fall. They pulled ten chairs around a table designed for four at the diner. They drank vodka tonics at the Legion. When they came into Deb’s tent, they expected a love match, a light show, or a séance.

A young girl sat down in front of Deb. The chairs were plastic and covered with a kid’s solar system bed sheet. The inside of the plastic tent was decorated with cardboard stars covered with tinfoil. Deb hadn’t made the stars. She’d inherited them when she took over the “gypsy psychic” gig from Mrs. Cannon.

“Do you really want to know what your future holds?” Deb grabbed the girl’s hand. She wore a gold class ring engraved with the current year, a pair of ballet shoes, and “JMHS.” Deb flattened her hand, palm up. Her fingers, like the rest of her body, were thick. She was almost twice as big as Deb, and she had the shoulders of a factory worker. But her clothing and hair were that of a suburban teen: everything ironed and bleached, then given a few points of sparkle or color placed to match the uniform of the season.

“I want to *know* if my boyfriend loves me,” the girl said. Her voice was high and delicate. She spoke too carefully, reforming her midwestern vowels into valley girl. She wore so much mascara that her eyes looked like they might stick shut every time she blinked, and her cheekbones were bright pink with blush—burning from the inside out. Deb decided to think of her as Tammy.

Deb picked up the crystal from the lumpy velvet pillow and placed it on Tammy’s hand. Even if he loves you now, she wanted to say, it’ll get screwed up before you know it. Sean still helped with the dishes and held doors open for Deb, but at night he kept one arm over his dog, Spotty, who usually slept between them.

“He misses you. He’ll tell you he loves you when you visit at Thanksgiving.”

Tammy laughed. Her lipstick extended to the corner of her mouth, carefully filling in every crease. “He’s not at *home*, he’s with me tonight.”

“Well, either way, he loves you, it’s just hard for him to say. Guys are like that. Especially at your age.”

“Well, he’s not my age. He’s *old*, like 27 or something.”

Deb returned the crystal to its pillow. “I’m 27. And I predict that high school was the best time of your life.”

“This sucks.”

“All our profits go to the Hose County Humane Society. Put five bucks in the jar.”

The girl pulled a wad of paper out of her purse and dropped it in the jar. She ran out of the tent. Deb tried to get out of the chair, but her skirt was pinned down under the chair. She pulled the skirt out and got up to check the jar. A shiny gum wrapper sat on top of the ones and fives.

“Bitch!” Deb pulled aside the chenille blanket that served as a door. Bare-legged Tammy joined the river of teenagers heading toward the games.

Sean stood in front of the ring toss, pulling money from the pockets of his jeans. He offered the bald man operating the booth twenty bucks for a stuffed animal. “It’s for my girlfriend,” he shouted. His rings – his wedding band and a replica of an NFL Championship ring – sparkled under the orange lights.

The bald man shrugged and took the money. He handed over a stiff green elephant – which went right into Tammy’s waiting hands.

The fairgrounds reeked of grease and manure. The smell covered the town for most of the summer. Some years it lingered until the first sticky snow buried it. Deb stepped carefully over the remnants of corn stalks and discarded beer cups. She twisted her toes into her worn sandals to keep them from sliding off into the loose dirt. Sean and Tammy moved slowly through the crowd. Deb hid behind a woman in an oversized sweater. She peeked over the woman’s

shoulder pads. Sean hooked his thumb through a belt loop on Tammy's jean skirt. This was too much. She knew he'd been seeing someone, but bringing this young girl to the local carnival was the kind of thing she'd thought only extremely rich or extremely drunk men would do. They stopped at the mini doughnut booth. Deb ducked behind a large sign announcing that The Pretty Nixons would take the main stage at sunset. A few of the spotlights were already on, ready for the sun to drop behind the trees.

Deb had seen enough. She walked away from them, not caring if they saw her now, but knowing that they were too focused on each other to notice anything else. What could she do? Start a fight? Sean would laugh and lower her tiny fist from his face. The large sorority hopeful would jump at the chance to knock Deb to the knotty ground, kneeling on to her stomach with her muscular legs, leaving the year of her graduation again and again on Deb's cheek.

She walked out to a dark, quiet spot past the portable blockades. The Ferris wheel cast a rainbow of colored light just strong enough for Deb to recognize the young man sitting on the bench as a local high school student. He'd come to the fairgrounds every night that week trying to sell caricatures of celebrities.

"Can I join you?" Deb asked. Her voice squeaked. She cleared her throat. The kid coughed and dropped his cigarette.

“Sure,” he said. He slouched into the bench and offered her a cigarette from his pack.

“I’m Deb.” She took one and put it to her mouth. It stuck to her dry lips. She left it unlit.

“You’re the psychic lady, right? My name’s Bjorn. I draw.” He had a lopsided crew cut. He looked soft and small in the gray sweatshirt. The sleeves were pushed up to his elbows. His forearms were tan and covered with dark hair. Deb moved closer to him. She saw the pulse of his neck, hinting at the tensing muscles of his back and shoulders. Behind them, the band took the stage to the screams of teenage girls.

“I needed a break,” she said. She gathered the bottom of her skirt up onto her knees. The night air gave her goose bumps over her calves.

“There’s no one here I know tonight,” he said. He dropped his unfinished cigarette to the ground and let it burn.

“I like the people I don’t know.” Deb wondered what Sean said to the girls he met. Was it all in the eyes? Did he touch them? She wondered how many of them walked away and how many of them didn’t. If he ran his tongue over their ears, did they shiver and feel small later, thinking about it? Deb wanted to make someone feel that way.

Bjorn drummed a rhythm on the sides of his thighs. Deb imagined straddling him, pinning his hands over his head, turning away when he tried to

kiss her, laughing later when he referred to it as making love. She moved her hand along the back of the bench; she touched the hood where it bunched up behind his neck. He moved away.

“I gotta go Mrs., uh, Deb.” He pulled the hood up over his head and stood to leave.

“Do you need a ride? I could give you a ride home,” Deb said. She heard the desperation in her voice. She felt it waving around her like a white flag.

Deb and Sean had bought the small white house shortly before they married. They’d put up a chain-link fence, battled with the rabbits and gophers for the yard, and bought two gallons of green paint for the garage door. Deb hit the button to close the door. It shook the house as it shimmied down.

Spotty ran out from wherever he’d been napping and stood by his food dish. He was an old Dalmatian, but still skinny, hyper, and, Deb thought, inconsiderate. He was a talker. He asked for his dinner with a wobbling Oooo. She walked past him and stood at the window. She’d replayed the incident with Bjorn over in her head on the drive home. She’d practically thrown herself at him. He must be the only teenager in the country either too picky or too timid to take on a fraught older woman eager to transfer her fears into lust.

She imagined this scene: Tammy sits in Sean’s lap, blinks her encrusted eyelids, and says, “I guess the *psychic* didn’t see this coming.” Sean smiles, and

says, "Who's my sexy baby?" He seduces her with the same warbling baby-talk voice he uses with Spotty. They touch each other with everything they can, taking handfuls and mouthfuls of skin, uncovering every mystery so thoroughly that they expose Deb as well.

Spotty whined again. He prodded Deb's leg with his wet nose and looked up at her with glassy, selfish eyes. She opened the pantry door. The bag of dog food was nearly empty.

"Shit," Deb said in the cheerful tone that made Spotty's tail wag.

Dinner would have to be improvised. She took what was left of last night's hamburgers out of the fridge and dropped them into the food dish. She unwrapped a bar of milk chocolate, took a small piece for herself, and broke the rest up over the burger. Spotty sat obediently in his usual spot below the counter, keeping his eyes and nose on his doggie-casserole.

She walked out to the garage and came back with a large spoonful of diazinon. The tiny flakes looked like dry, brown oregano. She poured half a jar of gravy on top of it all like a seven-year-old declaring lunch finished.

Spotty ate with his usual breathless rush. Deb couldn't believe he ate all of it. He sneezed, and then went to the door. She removed his collar and let him out. It fit around her neck loosely. The tags felt warm against her collarbone. Spotty coughed as he sniffed around the bushes. His legs shook beneath him.

He collapsed between the pine tree and the pale square of grass that once nourished daffodils.

Deb returned to the fair. The predictable ebb and flow of the crowd was soothing. The gypsy station had been taken over by Bjorn. He'd rolled up the front panels of the tent to allow for a better view of his "art," but the money jar still sat on its place on the table. Deb stepped in front of a buck-toothed man and his pregnant wife. She wondered why people with large teeth would subject themselves to caricature art. She reached into the jar and took what she could — excluding the gum wrapper. Bjorn opened his mouth to object.

"All our profits go to The Adult Literacy Fund." She folded the money once, placed the square in her bra, and rejoined the crowd. She saw the people in front of her as if they were visions. A small girl wearing cowboy boots dropped a funnel cake. A seeing eye dog led its owner safely to a row of port-a-potties. A couple shared a hot dog, smudging their faces with mustard. Sean stood in line and rubbed the shoulder of a college girl.

They boarded the teacups. Deb pushed her way through the line. She barged between a pair of preteen boys and sat with them, directly across from Sean.

"Hi, honey," she said.

"Hi, Deb," Sean said.

Tammy's jaw dropped. The space between Tammy and Sean was slight, but significant. She'd served her purpose. She was a Dear John letter with teeth. She smacked her gum once, and then spit it out over the side of the teacup. Sean leaned forward.

"Why are you wearing Spotty's collar?"

Deb tugged at the tags around her neck. The leather smelled of flea shampoo.

"He had the most terrible, delicious dinner ever," she said.

"What?"

The ride began to spin clockwise. The car holding them spun the opposite way as the boys steered the wheel in the center.

"Dog's delicious deadly dinner," she said, "with gravy!"

She was dizzy from speed and giddy with guilt. Deb tried to focus on Sean's face. His eyes were bright and translucent, independent of any facial expression, as if he could not see her. They were spinning away from each other. She wanted to hold him to her chest and take him in. She wanted to knead their flesh together, keep him with her, above her heart, in her lungs, pressed against her stomach. She didn't want all of him—not even most of him. She needed the extra pressure, the extra heat that he provided.

The ride accelerated; the bodies of strangers pressed against her. Outside of the teacup played a continuous scene of people in line for games, rides, and food. They all patiently waited for someone else to get out of the way.

CATTYWAMPUS

I ask him if he thinks the people at the gas station across the street can see us. He says no. We're sitting on the narrow, half-rotted balcony, and even though there are no lights on, I feel like we're on a stage, as if the patrons of Gas-N-Go have been hanging on our every word. They'll drive out to the suburbs and spread the news of the dissolution of our relationship.

A couple in identical tracksuits jog under the streetlights. I have seen them go past before. They always run at night. The woman's ponytail bounces steadily, keeping time behind them. Maybe this couple will run all the way to the country to tell my parents that I'm single again. They cross the street, matching each other's stride, dodging the shattered glass of multiple accidents at our dark, unguarded intersection.

It's late, and we still have to make it through one more night together.

He tucks the sheets in on his side and leaves them out on my side so I can poke my feet out when I feel trapped. After we turn out the lights I scratch behind his ears and down his spine. This is how we take care of each other.

"These are bad for you," Nora says to me a few days later. She throws my cigarettes out the car's open window. She has destroyed property for which I

have no defense. I'm merging into traffic. I'm helpless to stop her investigation. Nora is my nine-year-old niece, and I'm proud of her instincts. She continues to dig through my purse. She pulls a picture from my wallet.

"Where's *he* been?" She's pouting. Last time I gave her a ride home from school, the two of them teamed up and badgered me into buying ice cream.

"He left," I say. I stop for a red light. I've become part of the parade of parents picking their kids up from school. We move into the streets like an invading force.

"Did he join the army?" She's holding the picture in her cupped hands as if it's a baby bird fallen from the nest.

She's been watching too much CNN. Her mother warned me about that.

"No. He's fine." We're driving past the liquor store. A few ladybugs have caught up with us. I roll up the window.

"Did you get divorced?" she asks. She may have gotten that from TV, or she may have heard it at home.

"We weren't married." This doesn't seem to make her feel better. He was going to teach her how to play hockey this winter when Lake Wakomet froze over.

"Are you an old maid?" She tries to turn around in the seat without unfastening her seatbelt. She makes it halfway through her turn and almost

knocks over the open purse. The threat to the purse stops her short, and she returns to her starting position.

“No, I’m not an old maid. There’s no such thing.” I run a stop sign, but no one honks at me. We’re on Seventh Street. Once we get home I can distract her with coloring books and whatever toys are left over in my closet.

“Are you a spinster?”

“Where did you get that from?” Her mother has obviously coached her.

“It’s a word,” she says.

“Fair enough.”

She pulls a huge pair of sunglasses from my purse and puts them on. They are gigantic on her little face. She’s got a little gap-toothed overbite. It runs in the family, but I know that hers will be the first to be fixed with braces. She pushes the glasses up her flat nose and smiles.

She is my co-pilot. She could spell *spinster* in a heartbeat.

That night, Nora and I finish a large, greasy, sausage and cheese pizza, and I eat a party-size bag of M&Ms. She got at least a handful. We must have eaten the same percentage of our body weight, because now we seem to have the same size tummy ache. She’s sprawled out on the floor and Hooper, my mutt, licks her face. She piled up all the pillows she could find and set herself stomach-down on them, so that her butt sticks up.

Her arms flop away from her sides and then she is still. Every limb has found a different direction, as if she's trying to cover the four corners of the Earth. Her long, weedy hair, slightly green from swimming lessons, launches out from her head in every direction. There's so much hair that I'm not sure where her face is. When Hooper gets too close to her ear, she emits a tiny growl from somewhere within the pillows. When he licks her nose, she squeaks.

He's uncovered her air supply. Strands of hair fly when she exhales.

"You're all cattywampus," I say to the blowhole.

"Go away," the blowhole snorts. I don't know if she means Hooper or me, but neither of us move away. I'm on the couch, and even though I know no good can come from it, I reach for the last of the M&Ms.

People say that chocolate is a substitute for sex. I know that people do many things to cope with ending a long relationship, but I find it hard to believe that eating junk food until I puke is one of them.

Certain historical facts support the *chocolate equals sex* theory. According to a confection catalogue I get every year around Thanksgiving, the Brigittine monks cook up some of the best fudge ever made. And when chocolate was introduced to Europe—I can't even imagine how long ago that must have been—the nuns spent all their time making and eating the candy. They became so

distracted that the Vatican had to ban chocolate. I saw it on TV, late at night, but I believe it.

Sex isn't the most important thing anyway. What really matters is having someone who cares about your nighttime neuroses. I sometimes wake up in the middle of the night with a feeling like tiny creatures running up and down my legs. It happened so often that we had an unspoken routine. I'd squirm and rub my hands over my skin, but they wouldn't go away. So I'd tap him on the shoulder to bring him out of sleep so slowly that he thought it was his idea. I'd tell him about the spiders. He'd grunt something that sounded like a muffled military phrase, like "affirmative red leader," then scoot down in the bed a little and start on my feet. His thumb searched between my toes without tickling. He ran his open hand over my ankle. I felt the calluses on his palm and the ridges of tiny cuts on his fingertips. I'd be asleep before he reached my knees. When I woke up in the morning, his hand was on my stomach. I miss that most.

After the Great Pizza Sickness of Friday Night, Nora requested to spend the rest of the weekend with me. We've got plans to watch *The Lost Boys*, but there are errands to do first. We're at Sud's Laundromat. I let her hold the quarters and push the buttons. She's probably never even gone into the laundry room at her own house, but these appliances are old and rusty, and seem to appeal to her.

She plunks a few quarters into an empty machine while I fold sweaters.

“You’ll owe me a dollar if I don’t see you throw some pillowcases in there.”

She climbs up on top of the washing machine. “I don’t have any pillowcases,” she says, matter of factly.

A young woman dressed in black from head to toe walks in. She has a basket of white socks and a Physics textbook under her arm

“You should sit on one of these,” Nora says to the woman. She has a way with people. She kicks her heels against the machine.

The woman smiles and asks why.

“It’s supposed to feel sexy,” Nora says.

I freeze. This is not what my niece should be saying. Our history together is brief, but I know her. She was born during a blizzard. She weighed seven pounds and three ounces. She has chocolate cake on her face for every single birthday picture I have ever taken with her. She does not say provocative things to strangers.

“I saw it on TV.” She has not stopped talking. She has more to say. “Baby baby,” she says in a high-pitched voice. I wonder if her mother has heard this voice.

“Baby baby!” She shakes her head around wildly and slams her hands against the unmoving machine.

The stranger chuckles. I want to laugh, too, but I suddenly feel responsible for the moral upbringing of this kid.

“Nora Alison Simon!” I yell, because I don’t know what to do. I hope that there is some expectation on her part of what her mother would say, and that she will interpret my meaning accordingly.

“My middle name in *Andrea*.” She hops off her ride and runs out the door. A small cloud of ladybugs swarms around her. They land on her shoulders.

Five miles away is the Ethanol plant. Everyday it eats up corn, ferments it, and releases an acrid odor. I have learned to ignore it, but Nora brings it to my attention whenever she visits.

“We’ve all been exposed! There is no cure!” She yells to the empty street. She spins around and clutches her throat as if she’s been poisoned.

She falls down on the sidewalk. The ladybugs flit around her. She holds one on her fingertip. She looks like she’d talking to it, but I can’t hear. Then she laughs loudly. Through the glass her laughter sounds heavy, as if it’s been synthesized to mimic how she’ll sound when she’s older.

I trade crayons with Nora – the blue for the green. She’s staying in the lines of a Scooby-Doo scene, and I’m drawing a landscape I saw a year ago on a flight over the east coast.

Between Charleston and Myrtle Beach, about 700 miles south of JFK, two river legs join together to form the thick fresh-water hips of a topographical woman. The northern hip is wide and green from the islands that slow its progression. The southern hip is slender, straight, and fast-moving.

I don't know the names of these rivers. White crested waves surge to the woman's chest, crash against the beaches of her arms, and come together again at her slender neck. The waves fan out into the ocean, forming her ever-changing face and hair.

Her expression changes every second. She never rests, and she never sleeps. She looks like she could move out over the sea at any time, but she stays. There are people that move with her. I am too far away to see them, but I know they are there. They sit on the fringes, surf on the curls, and swim in her currents.

I draw a picture of this scene on construction paper and give it to Nora. She hangs it on the lampshade, next to her bed. She doesn't see the waterways or the dancing woman. To her it's a kaleidoscope, a stained glass window, or the curtain for a shadow play.

She traces over the waxy curves on the paper with her finger. I made this map for her, and she loves it.