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THE NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS:
STORIES

by

GENE ALBAMONTE
M.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
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at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

The Natural Order of Things is a collection of unrelated short stories that focuses on the love, despair, happiness and sorrow prevalent in relationships. Another common thread is how the lack of communication between family, friends and lovers can create burdens that, in some cases, are simply too heavy to lift. Some of the stories have a humorous voice while dealing with those burdens. Many others deal with the complexities of those emotions in a more somber tone. These fictional stories are completely unrelated to each other, and yet they all aim to shine a light on life's conflicts – and on the ramifications of how we deal with those conflicts.

This is dedicated to my parents, Karen and Gene Albamonte, and to my wife, Leslie Albamonte. The former taught me to continually strive to be a better person. The latter makes me that person.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am forever indebted to my wife, Leslie Albamonte, for always believing in everything I do. Without her love, support, and gentle (yet resolute) hand pushing me toward this moment, I would not have finished what I started. Also for her patience, as one needs a lot of that particular virtue to put up with the likes of me.

To my family. More specifically, to my parents, Karen and Gene Albamonte, who taught me the importance of hard work, dedication and perseverance. From the day I decided I wanted to be a writer (somewhere around nine years old) to this very moment, their support has been as heartening as it has been constant. To my sister, Brielle Earley, whose love and support is decidedly immeasurable.

To the teachers and writers whose wisdom has inspired me over the years: Pat Rushin (my incredible thesis director), Jeanne Leiby (a brilliant writer and mentor), Susan Hubbard, Don Stap, and all of the writers I was lucky enough to have in workshops. Also, to my work colleague Tom Woodward, who, along with the aforementioned writers, helped teach me the art – and importance – of revision. Without these people, I wouldn't be half the writer I am today, and I can't thank them enough.

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INTRODUCTION

The Natural Order of Things is a collection of short stories. All of the stories are fictional. The stories are unrelated, meaning that each story stands on its own and has no connection with any of the other stories.

Two of the stories have thus far received accolades from the literary journal *Glimmer Train*. “The Natural Order of Things” was a finalist in *Glimmer Train*’s Family Matters competition in January 2008 and was named one of the top 25 stories in that competition. “Two Lives” won an Honorable Mention in *Glimmer Train*’s Family Matter’s competition in April 2008. The story “In His Absence” was published in the online literary journal *The Menda City Review*.

The following is a brief synopsis of the stories contained within this collection.

In “Two Lives,” we see the bonding of two brothers. The first part of the story is seen through the eyes of the younger brother, Eric, as he witnesses the taut relationship between his older brother and their mother and father. Eric dutifully writes the downfall of that relationship in his journal, trying to make sense of the familial strain. In the second part of the story, we witness the world through the eyes of Eric’s older brother, Bradley, two decades later. Bradley lives in a lower-class suburb outside Paris, France, and it’s here we learn the basis for his strained relationship with his parents. Near the end of the story, the two brothers reunite and discover a bond that may be a little broken, but not irreparable.

In the title story “The Natural Order of Things,” the strains between a father and son are illuminated – how silence, distance and mortality can define the connection

between those two members of the family. Through backstory, we see how the son – the first-person narrator in the story – longs to make his father proud of him, to hear words of encouragement. Those words, however, are never truly spoken, and we see the consequences of that silence within the narrative moment.

“San Sebastiano” takes us to the streets of Venice, Italy (one of three stories that takes place in Europe), where the protagonist, Nick, loses an old friend, Grace, in an apartment fire, a woman he loved, but to whom he never got the nerve to convey his feelings. The woman’s sister, Sarah, flies from America to Venice, where both she and Nick try to work out the suddenness of death.

In “Evidence” we follow a woman named Ayesha to the Canadian Rockies, where she and a team of biologists trek to the Burgess Shale – home to one of the most precious collections of fossils. She is pregnant, but nobody knows, not even her husband, who is the leader of the Burgess Shale expedition. She must deal with that secret, and she must decide when to reveal it. During their trek, she must also deal with the possible loss of one of the biologists named Luca. Luca, at the opening of the story, is discovered missing. During her hike to the Burgess Shale – and during her team’s search for Luca – Ayesha realizes how the smallest of life’s moments can create big impressions, impressions that help us form who we are and who we want to be.

In “A Better Place,” a young advertising professional deals with his aunt’s dementia, an aunt who raised him due to his own parents dying when he was a young boy. The advertising professional also has to deal with the stress of his job and the people that run the show at the agency.

“Contrition” is a letter of apology, a letter in which the narrator states how sorry he is for the childhood crimes he committed to an old acquaintance named Stephen. Stephen had been the butt of so many of the narrator’s jokes while growing up. But Stephen is now a relatively successful, happy adult. During the narrator’s apology to Stephen, he reveals an even deeper crime that turns the letter of apology into a letter of confession.

“Barriere Di Lingua” is one of a few stories that takes a humorous slant on the problems of marriage. The piece opens up with a husband who has lost his wedding ring in Rome, a husband who is already in a slightly strained marriage of sixteen years. He is faced with a choice of infidelity while taking the train to Florence and, while in Florence, he is faced with yet another issue, one of mortality.

In “In His Absence,” we return to the chasm that is formed when a person loses a loved one, how the death leaves an unfillable void. Alan, the protagonist in the story, has just begun a new job, where his supervisor gets into a fight with another employee. After the fight, Alan meets with this supervisor and a bond is formed, something that thinly resembles a father-son relationship. At home, Alan must deal with his mother, who can’t let go of her husband’s loss. In fact, she still sets the dinner table for her deceased spouse.

“Spaniel” and “Everything Must Go, Everything Must Go” are both humorous stories that focus on strained marriages. And, finally, in “Someone Stole Daisy From Me,” we get a terrifying explanation of how a man loses his young niece while fishing at a lake in the woods and how the man copes with such a loss.

TWO LIVES

I

Eric and his Uncle Joseph found the dead deer in a clearing a half-mile from his uncle's house. The deer lay upon nettles, papery maple leaves and twisting vines, thin and black like licorice string. The carcass was discolored to the point that, if seen from afar, it might look like a bump of land. Eric was twelve, so, usually, he was more curious than disgusted by dead animals. But today was different, as the deer reminded him of his older brother Bradley. The deer was, of course, quiet, much like how his brother had become. And with the absence of the deer's life came a deep melancholy, which reminded Eric of Bradley's melancholy. His brother, it seemed, was dying inside.

The dead deer did not bother his uncle, who had lived near the woods his entire life, had once been a hunter, but quit because he "Got a heart."

"Not a very good one," Eric's Aunt Florence had responded once, citing the uncle's arrhythmia. She went on, "Of course, you never were one for choosing," to which Eric's uncle would gesture toward Aunt Florence and say,

"Case in point."

His uncle was a man of rigorous formality, but he also had an edge of humor from which would fall deprecating jokes, usually at Eric's Aunt Florence's expense. His uncle had a soft, round face and a thick, brown mustache that separated his nose and mouth like a fence. He was a man of science and politics. Prior to the expedition that led to the dead deer, Eric had mentioned that Vice President George H. W. Bush was coming to his junior high school – thanks to a letter written by his homeroom teacher, Miss Robertson – and his uncle had made a noise in his throat that was neither approving nor disapproving,

but sounded very thoughtful. His uncle loved talking about Reagan, whose term was now coming to an end, and Iran-Contra and Oliver North. Eric would not, however, tell his uncle how he, Eric, was in love with Brandi Hargraves, a girl in his class; that would only result in a grimace and a furrow of his uncle's bushy eyebrows.

The deer's eyes were as empty as dried cisterns, the fur gone in patches, its body coated in a film of dirt. Eric would describe this encounter in his journal. He decided he might even draw a picture of the deer. He grabbed a fallen branch and shooed flies away from its hulk. His uncle put his hand on his shoulder and gently pulled him back.

"You want people prodding your body?" he said. And so Eric dropped the stick into the nettles.

They left the deer behind, winding through myriad arches of tree limbs, a living arcade that stretched between two different suburban neighborhoods.

"I feel sorry for that deer," Eric told his uncle. But immediately after saying the words, he knew it was Bradley for whom he felt sorry.

"It'll live again," his uncle said. "Parts of him anyway. Differently, of course." His uncle told him that, upon death, the atoms that make up living things disperse and help form other things.

"An atom in me might have been part of a flower, a rabbit, William Shakespeare," his uncle said. "The universe recycles, even if we don't."

Eric stared at his hands, as if he could see the atoms, could place exactly where they came from. In the picture of the dead deer he planned on drawing in his journal, he would also draw tiny arrows emanating from the carcass. The atoms dispersing.

They picked up a worn path, which emptied out into his uncle's large backyard, a green, dewy lawn thick as carpet.

To Eric, his uncle's house always smelled of spaghetti sauce mixed with something sweet baking in the oven. The scent had embedded itself into the wood-paneled wainscoting that surrounded the dining room. The discussions, the voices of his family, were as much a part of the house as the walls themselves; it was as if the entire structure of the house – the wooden beams, the drywall, the popcorn ceiling, the beige-carpeted floor – had been built with those words. Eric, his parents and his older brother Bradley made these visits twice a month, and he liked to think how his own words helped add on to the house's structure.

Eric twirled a nest of linguini onto his fork. From time to time, he watched his big brother. Bradley spun his fork in his own linguini, dragged the strands along the edge of his plate, creating a smeared trail of red sauce along the rim. With his other hand, he pushed his brown hair away from his face, out of his blue eyes.

His parents finished up a conversation concerning the number of school bomb threats in the surrounding cities. His mother said she knew two people whose children had to evacuate the area, and, as she spoke, Eric realized how beautiful his mother was; it was a thought that came to him out of thin air, and he imagined it was the benevolence with which she spoke, as she described her worry over her friends' children, that made him think it. She was, of course, pretty, too. She had retained her youth more so than the other moms Eric had seen at school. She was thin, there were no wrinkles around her blue eyes, and her hair, brown and full, curled lightly around the bottom of her jawline.

“I don’t get it,” his uncle said, referring to the bomb threats, “why someone would do such a thing.”

Eric wondered if his brother had called in the threats. He had seen kids who did such things on the news, how they looked so sullen and sad. How they seemed so desperate. But, no. Bradley was melancholy, but he was not a troublemaker. Eric was sure of that.

Uncle Joseph brought up the deer they had found in the woods earlier.

“Poor thing, you should’ve seen it,” his uncle said, looking at Eric’s father, who, years ago, had roamed the uncle’s woods with Eric. On every excursion, Eric and his father would pick up one rock, something to memorialize the trek. On the day Eric pocketed a brown, tumbled-looking rock, he and his father saw a snake glide under a nest of fallen branches. The day he found a black rock with glittery flecks, his father told him about how he and Eric’s mother met. Soon enough, his father started making up excuses of why he couldn’t take Eric into the woods, most of the excuses having to do with exhaustion from the weekday’s work. With the excuses came the light scent of alcohol, a scent that had become as much a part of his father as the morning cologne he dabbed onto his razor-burned neck. On the very last outing into the woods with his father, Eric found a small, brown and white conglomerate. Every now and then, he would roll the rock in his palm, feel its edges, smooth his fingers over its clasts. He beheld it as if his father were no longer alive.

That night, Eric dreamt of the dead deer. He found it in the same clearing, except, this time, he wasn’t with his uncle but rather Brandi Hargraves, the girl on whom he had

a crush. This time she was the one pointing the stick at the dead deer and Eric was the one pulling her stick-waving arm back. When he awoke, it was not even midnight. A tiny halo of light glowed from the baseball-shaped nightlight. He shut his eyes tight, hoping that he could capture and retain snapshots of his dream. But all he saw was the nebular afterglow of the nightlight, prismatic phosphorescence that eventually seeped out from behind his eyelids, leaving in its trail only complete darkness. He tried to fall back asleep, but couldn't. Minutes passed before his bedroom door cracked open and Bradley slid into Eric's room. His brother looked sunken, empty, as if this weren't Bradley at all, but a reflection of Bradley.

"Can't sleep either," Bradley said.

"You look different," Eric said.

"Everyone does in the dark."

Bradley would speak to Eric only when they were alone, safe from adult ears. His brother's discretion began when Bradley started high school. Once, he heard his mother talking on the phone with a friend, saying how Bradley "had folded into himself, his words slowing to a halt, like a car puttering out of gas." He had never heard his mother talk like that, with metaphor, and so he immediately wrote her words down in his journal. Now, they sat in the dark, Eric assembling a game of checkers as Bradley switched on his flashlight.

"I felt a girl's breast the other night," Bradley said.

"Aren't there two?" Eric asked.

"Yeah, Einstein," he said, "but I only felt one."

"So I'll be hearing from you again, then."

Bradley laughed. Eric laughed with him. What seemed strange to Eric, however, was that he had never seen Bradley with a girl. But he never questioned Bradley's stories because he loved his brother and he wanted his brother to love him, too, and Eric was afraid that he would lose his brother's love with one wrong word.

They played checkers, the flashlight aimed at the board. "Light particles are called photons," Eric's uncle had told him months ago. Eric stared at the flashlight's beam, trying to see the photons even though he knew it was impossible. What did they look like? Specks of dust in a sunbeam? Midnight snow passing a lamppost?

"Best part is," Bradley went on, "I had to drive to the girl's house, so I snuck Mom's car out."

There had been times during their checker games when Eric wished their parents would disappear, despite the fact that he loved them, despite the fact that they tried to break through Bradley's brick wall. Or at least his mom did. If they disappeared, Eric told himself, then Bradley would be happy all the time.

"I wish Mom and Dad would go away," Eric told Bradley.

"Don't ever say that," Bradley said, staring coldly at him. "Don't ever fucking say that. Mom loves us, you know that."

"Sorry," Eric said, and then he quickly changed the subject, asking how he, Bradley, had managed to get out of the house in the middle of the night.

"Snuck through the window," Bradley told him. "Popped the screen and syanora."

"Aren't you afraid of getting into a car accident? Eric asked.

Bradley sniffed. He said, "Sometimes I hope I do."

He wondered what it would be like to kiss Brandi Hargraves. She sat at her desk upright, taking her eyes off the teacher only occasionally and only to glance down at her notes. She had no friends, or at least none that he knew of. Brandi's apparent unpopularity made Eric feel connected with her, because he was unpopular, too. Brandi acted as if she didn't care about her unpopularity, but Eric thought that she did care. Because he could see through his own denial, he thought he could see through the denial of other people: Brandi, like Eric, pretended that she didn't need human interaction, that she was fine enough alone. He thought how people like himself and Brandi dug their way into this belief until they were so deep into a hole that there was no way out. All they had was the hard-packed dirt beneath and around them, the sky above barely a pinhole, and the shovel of their own conceit. He wrote about all of that into his journal. Miss Robertson – eyes wide and bright with excitement – told the class that each of them should write down one question that they wanted to ask Vice President Bush.

Mary, whose son William went to Eric's school, was to drive Eric home as usual. Eric didn't look at William as they sat on the curb at school and waited for Mary to arrive. He hardly ever looked at William's sharp, bug-eyed face because he disliked the boy, disliked the way he bit his bottom lip after saying something, the way the boy's words didn't seem to come out of his mouth, but rather from the middle of his throat.

“I heard Miss Robertson hates spiders,” William said.

Eric remained silent.

“So me and Chris,” William went on, “are going to put a spider in a plastic bag and leave it on her desk.”

After a pause, Eric said, “Why? If she hates spiders?”

“Cause it’ll be funny.”

Mary’s car pulled up, a blue beast. She always insisted Eric sit up front, sticking William in the backseat, where tiny, white pustules of stuffing poked from rips in the upholstery.

“Besides,” William said, continuing his conversation from the backseat. “Miss Robertson is divorced and my dad says only quitters get divorced.”

“William!” his mother scolded, peering into the rearview mirror. But the boy only laughed at his mother’s admonishment.

When Eric got home, Bradley was sitting at the dining room table with their mother and father. Eric’s stomach lurched.

One of Bradley’s cheeks was ballooned up and the color of charcoal. His eye on that side was pinshut. His hair looked greasy, his shirt untucked and ripped on the side, his pants marred with dirt and grass stains. His left earlobe, the one usually pierced with a small hoop earring, was smeared with dried blood, the earring missing.

Nobody said anything when Eric entered the room. His father stared at Bradley with bloodshot eyes, his mother looked up at Eric with a face pale and cold as tundra. Then she walked over to Eric, linked her arm through his arm and walked him out of the room. She explained that Bradley had been in a fight at school during lunch. Eric wanted to cry, but not just yet, not in front of his mother. When he was alone in his bedroom, the urge to cry had passed and, instead, he felt a deep desire to fill in the gaps. He wondered

why it happened and came up with a list: drugs, a girl, money. He couldn't imagine it was any of those things and yet it was all he could imagine.

That night, Eric heard footsteps pass his door. He crawled out of bed and cracked his door open. He saw Bradley's door being closed. He got onto his knees and slid, slowly, quietly, to his brother's door. His brother had taught him that trick, to slide along the wood on his pajama pants.

"Bradley," he heard his mother say from the other side of the door. There was no response, and Eric heard only silence for a long time. Finally he heard his mother say, "Whatever it is, dad doesn't have to know." No answer from Bradley. Only the sound of breathing and the bed creaking. Maybe a sob.

The following night, Eric was woken up at two in the morning. He wiped his eyes and barely made out Bradley's bruised face in the dark. His brother squatted near the bed and Eric heard the zip of a windbreaker rubbing against itself.

"Eric," Bradley whispered. "Let's go."

Eric rolled out of bed, put on clothes and a jacket. He followed him through the dark hallway. They climbed out through Bradley's window. On the way to the driveway, Eric kept looking back at the house, as if this were the last time he'd see it. The hour, the placidity, even the veil of mist made the house appear distant, unfathomable, like how Earth appeared in a satellite photograph.

Bradley opened the passenger's-side door to their parents' Dodge and gestured for Eric to go in. A large suitcase sat on the backseat. Their father's bottle of Stolli's was wedged between the passenger seat and the console.

"Where are you going?" Eric asked.

"Bus," Bradley said, as if that answered that.

They sat there in silence for a long time. The car windows were open and everything appeared paper-thin and surreal in the cold air that, at one time, long ago, reminded Eric of hitting tennis balls with a wiffle-ball bat in their backyard, Bradley pitching with a different, fancy wind-up each time. Of acorn fights in the woods at their uncle's. Of the peal of churchbells on autumn Sundays.

"I just wanted to say a proper good-bye," Bradley said.

"Are people after you?" Eric asked.

Bradley muzzled himself with the Stolli and then nearly spat it out trying to hold back laughter. He held out the bottle of vodka and motioned for Eric to drink.

"No," Eric said.

"Make sure you write this down in your journal," Bradley told him.

"What should I tell Mom and Dad?" Eric asked.

"You never even saw me, Einstein. Play dumb."

"It'll be hard."

"Hey," Bradley said, "I'm not starting the engine till you're back in the house, so don't hang out here."

“Will I see you again?” Eric asked, hating the crack in his voice. Bradley didn’t answer. He stuck the key into the ignition and turned the car to auxiliary. The radio played soft rock.

“Brush up on your checkers, Einstein,” Bradley said. He put the car in neutral and Eric knew that it was his time to get out. The car rolled silently out of the driveway, the tires scraping the street as they turned.

Eric would chew on those words for a long time – brush up on your checkers – as they subtly hinted that Bradley would come back; that, one night, Eric would be awoken by him and they would play checkers and talk about adventures.

Did you ever feel so much love and admiration that you wanted to burst? Did you ever feel it slip away? Did your mother ever tell you how, when you were just a baby, she stared at you in quiet wonder, hating that it had to be quiet, that you would only look at her with frightened incomprehension if she were to shout her love to you? Did you ever feel that for someone? Those were the things Eric wrote in his journal now, as he heard the hushed roar of the car coming to life and idling outside his home. Perhaps, when Bradley came back, Eric would have a story of his own about Brandi Hargraves that he could share. He made one up in his journal until he could no longer keep his eyes open.

Vice President Bush never got a chance to speak at the school. On the day of Bush’s arrival, someone called in a bomb threat. The entire school was evacuated and the children were to go home immediately, as this was the second bomb threat within

weeks. During the evacuation, Miss Robertson never looked anyone in the eye, even when she spoke. As she waited for further instructions from the administrators and authorities, she stared down at her feet. Eric lost Brandi Hargraves in the crowd.

He later learned that the Vice President was en route to the school when the call came in. Authorities alerted the appropriate people and they turned Bush's car around. He also learned that the call was the sixth bomb threat within three months and the police had been tracking incoming calls in area schools. They arrested the person three days later, a middle-aged man with a hard, v-shaped face and hair that looked plastered on. Eric had never seen him before. The man walked as if he were trudging through a marsh, his feet lifting high, his shoulders gently rocking left and right. He looked at the camera long enough for Eric to notice eyes that appeared empty, which made Eric think of the dead deer.

But before he learned any of that, while still standing outside the school and watching Miss Robertson, he thought how intensely she – his homeroom teacher – looked down. It was as if this moment was yet another in a series of failures. He knew that he wouldn't have picked up on that sorrow if Bradley had never left. He had learned how such sorrow could hollow you out. A chasm had suddenly opened within Eric, something that he would never be able to close.

"Everyone, please stand back," a school administrator said, waving his hands into the air, his stern face making it clear that the area was still not safe, even though many children around them were laughing.

II

There's always Pont Neuf, Bradley thought as he always did when he was feeling down, and so he made his way there. When he first arrived in Paris eighteen years ago, he had barely any money and was on the edge of a breakdown. He had woken in the middle of the night, stomach wheezing like an old dog, hair tousled from tossing and turning, the sharp sting of a dream lingering. The same moment when he had snapped out of it back then, when he had decided to at least try to do something, was the same moment he had been standing on Pont Neuf. And so now the place was his refuge.

He took a bridge from Île Saint-Louis, where he liked to pretend he lived, to Île de la Cité. He passed the gargoyled Notre Dame. He crossed streets, bumped shoulders in his haste. He took note of the people he passed because that was what he did now. Bearded, olive-skinned face, bright-red shirt. Long woman's face, eyes hidden behind sunglasses. Wrinkled, pale cheeks, wizened eyes of a man. He tried to see himself in this way. Tall, lanky man, short, brown hair parted to the side, hands in pockets as if cold.

"Meet me at my hotel, otherwise I'll be lost. See you soon." Those words – spoken by his brother last night over the phone – had stayed with Bradley all morning, along with Eric's voice, which sounded so heavy, so gravelly. It was a voice as new as a stranger's.

Well before leaving for Paris, while still in Florida, Bradley knew he had to leave America, that his only escape from everything he had ever known would be across a great expanse of water. He had known someone who dealt in stolen credit cards and Bradley met with this man on a tree-canopied dirt road just outside a national forest. The man's

face had disappeared from memory. Bradley could only remember the man's flannel shirt tucked firmly in faded jeans. He remembered the lake nearby, the chirp of newborn alligators, the trees covered with night. He remembered how much he had hated himself for making the deal, for griming his hands with dirty money. But he knew it was the only way. He bought the card, used it for a plane ticket, then threw the card away.

I should have never told Eric where I was, Bradley thought. It was part of the separation, part of the contract he had made with himself, how he would no longer have to deal with anything he had ties to back home. But he had given in to vulnerability one day, when he had broken things off with a Parisian he had been dating named Adrien. Adrien was the type of man who wanted too much too quickly – a shared apartment, something too close to marriage – and so Bradley ended it and fell into the deep well of depression. He found Eric's address on the Web. He wrote his brother, not ever mentioning Adrien, keeping things limited to small talk. *I live outside Paris*, Bradley had written. He had also written a phone number and return address, mentioning in the letter not to tell anyone where he lived, especially mom and dad. Eric wrote back soon after. Most of Eric's letter explained how their mother had passed away months before. It was a long battle with cancer, Eric explained in the letter, and her death came as a relief to both him and to her. He also learned from Eric's letter that, three years after Bradley had run away, their father had fallen asleep at the wheel while driving home from a business trip, had veered onto the other side of the road. The coroner said he died minutes after the accident. That was as detailed as Eric got concerning their father's death. *Mom was in a state for weeks.*

After reading about his mother and father's deaths, the rest of the letter barely registered. He had to read the latter half of it a second time before understanding that his Aunt Florence was gone, and that Uncle Joseph was in a nursing home, barely alive. Shortly after receiving the first letter, Bradley found another one in the mail, and it became apparent to Bradley that Eric was trying to make a connection again. Then came yesterday's phone call.

Bradley stopped near the bridge, at the Quai de l'Horloge, and stared at the steely chop of the Seine. He never planned on seeing his mother again, blaming her for staying married to his drunk of a father; but now, knowing that he couldn't see her, something collapsed within him. It was as if the door he had shut long ago was locked from the other side.

Bells rang in the distance. On his left was Sainte Chapelle, where, upon first visiting, he had admired the ubiquitous stained glass, the grandness of the rose window. Now a man walked past him as if in a hurry. The man wore a mask that gave him gray, tousled hair, an oversized nose, and a pale, rubbery complexion. He had seen this man before, in front of Notre Dame, where he would playfully sneak up on people and scare them. It always drew a crowd and received laughs from the tourists lining up to climb the stairs to the bell tower.

On the Pont Neuf, Bradley read the Henry VI marker, as he always did, something he had made a tradition of, a kind of firm footing in a world he considered unstable.

A cet endroit.

Jacques de Molay

dernier grand maitre

de l'ordre du temple

A été brlueé le 18 Mars 1314

He heard the words in his head in both French and English. The English was in his own voice, the French in the voice of David. It was David who had taught him French at the language school where Bradley had worked as a janitor back in Florida. He was young then, still caught in the riptide of late-adolescent angst, and had just run away from home, hitching rides from New Jersey. The dusty shoulders of roads. The cloudy cab of a semi driven by a large cigar-smoker. The rickety passenger seat next to the small, quiet, fidgety driver. The teenager wreaking of cloves, blasting a cassette tape of his own rock band, the boy's features glowing in the blacklight overhead lamp. He had been broke, sleeping on benches, periodicals for blankets. He had slept on cramped floors of crowded shelters and on hard, unforgiving church pews. When he had saved enough money for two months' worth of rent, he got an apartment in a part of town that looked as though the seams holding it together were ripping apart. Tops of streetlamps hung limp, as if nearly beheaded; tattered flaps of faded fabric dangled off store awnings; shutters, the ones that remained, were stripped of paint. Bradley bought only necessities and saved everything else. The months rolled by. He signed up for French because it was the only class with seats open for that semester and he didn't want to wait any longer. He knew he had to be as far away from his family as possible, as soon as possible. Florida wasn't far enough.

He thought David beautiful from the first day of class, with his tall, slim figure and thick, brown hair. He had blue eyes that were framed with light crow's feet, and he

always thought how that was what really won him over, of all things – the crow’s feet. The lines made David’s face look wise, like that of an intellectual. He and Bradley started dating almost immediately after the semester was over, Bradley, at twenty, wanting to hide their relationship as much as possible; David, nearing thirty, caring less what people thought. Bradley tried to convince David to go to Europe with him, but David was steadfast about staying in the States. He liked America, had a distaste for his home country and what he called The French Bureaucracy. As much as he said he loved Bradley, David refused to acquiesce. “Then I’m not going,” Bradley had said. “I’m staying here with you.”

Now he left the Pont Neuf, more flustered than before, and boarded the Metro. He would get home and call David. It would be the first time he even dared such a thing since his arrival in Paris. But Bradley needed to hear a familiar voice over the phone, distantly, before he saw someone familiar face-to-face. David, who had once told him, with a chuckle, how W. Somerset Maugham used to sit at the Eiffel Tower, with his back to it, so that he wouldn’t have to see it.

“He disliked it so much, he sat near it,” David had said, shaking his head, smiling.

“If only that worked for me,” Bradley had told him.

When Bradley got to his apartment and called the language center, the secretary told him David no longer worked there. Bradley called David’s home, but the line was no longer in service. He called his cell phone, which rang until a robotic voice told him that the subscriber he was trying to reach was not available, which was not entirely surprising; it had been eighteen years, after all.

He flipped through his book of numbers, a book that was separated into two parts: America, and France. The names were not in alphabetical order, but rather by coteries. There, next to David's name and numbers – scrawled in a hurried hand – was Ian's number.

Bradley had first met Ian at David's apartment. The apartment complex itself was nothing but a small row of one-bedroom suites surrounded by old live oaks, the knotted trunks covered in lichen, the roots bubbling out of the earth, breaking open cobblestone. When David answered the door, Ian stood in the background near the breakfast bar, the smell of breakfast lingering. David hooked an arm around Bradley, brought him inside, introduced him. "I know what you're thinking, and the answer is, Yes, I made you breakfast." And sure enough David plated the last of the eggs, bacon and potatoes. Bradley, who didn't at first think he could eat, found himself ravenous. He ate, as Ian told David and Bradley about an ornithological excursion in Chile. Coming from another person, Ian's story might have been boring, full of jargon and scientific tangents. But Ian's beauty made each word seem as necessary as breathing. At the end of the story, Ian shook Bradley's hand and said it was a pleasure. When he was gone, David immediately held a finger in the air.

"He's a friend, has been for twenty years now," David said.

"Yeah, like anybody can be 'just friends' with an ornithologist," Bradley said. They laughed, but Bradley still felt a sting of something deeper and more regrettable than jealousy; it was the feeling that someone besides himself had discovered the brilliant charm that David possessed. If Ian saw it, others saw it, and it would only be a matter of time before everyone saw it.

Bradley now shut the book, remembering how David and Ian were inseparable, tethered to each other with a bond of friendship that, with time and circumstance, could only evolve into something bigger. He told David as much one day, during a heated argument.

“You’re fucking crazy,” David had said. Bradley had never seen David like that, his face red with anger, his eyes glossy and strained.

“Maybe if he died...” Bradley trailed off.

“What? What if he died?”

“You’d see how much you’d miss him. Realize I’m not crazy,” Bradley said.

Around five, he drove to the metro, boarded, and waited for the train to take him to the seventh arrondissement. The urge to get off before the stop, to board another train headed in the opposite direction, pushed at him like a strong wind. But he fought against it, sometimes even leaning a little forward in his seat, as if there actually were a wind. He was scared to see his brother. To Bradley, Eric embodied the reality of life; Eric was the only person who could expose the façade Bradley himself had created in Paris.

He got off at the École Militaire station, took a right on Avenue Bosquet. Now there was a real wind pushing against him, as he sidled past passersby. Up ahead was the Café de Bosquet, which he’d frequented during his early days in the city, back when he was still residing in the hotel near the place Eric was now staying. He thought of dropping by, ordering a calvados, to ease the tension. Just a drink, he thought as he walked inside and shook hands with the owner, hugged hellos to the employees he had

befriended long ago. He ordered a calvados and sat in the booth, wooden and square like a box pew.

Had David changed his life entirely because of him? Possibly. He, Bradley, would have changed it, too. With each sip of calvados, it became easier to put himself in David's shoes, as he had done numerous times.

He had been at David's when the call came in. They had been sitting on the sofa in darkness, watching a movie, the blueflash of the television reflecting off David's face. They had achieved a comfort that night, a fresh bonding so strong that Bradley could almost feel himself sinking deeper into the essence of their relationship. The phone had jarred Bradley, and, just as he had felt himself sinking, he was suddenly aware of his body rising out of itself, as if he were being startled awake. He listened to David's part of the conversation intently, catching only short, ambiguous responses to whoever was on the other end. "Yes," and, "No," and "When?" David didn't come back into the living room after hanging up. Bradley met him in the bedroom. The long silence was finally filled with the news of Ian's death. His plane had crashed on the outskirts of Queensland, Australia, where he was to meet a group of fellow ornithologists. There had been no survivors. At first, it seemed as if David had forgotten what Bradley had said, what Bradley had wished for. But the connection was eventually made, and, while David understood that Bradley was not at fault for Ian's death, there was a part of David – a bigger part, as it turned out – that couldn't help but blame Bradley. "I don't want to see you again," David had said, quietly, but with such intense sentiment that Bradley was instantly reminded of his father.

Bradley's one calvados turned into three and, as he stood up to say his good-byes, he realized he was buzzed. The world outside had become dark since he had entered the café, the streetlamps spilling their glow onto the sidewalk, leaving puddles of light.

He did not recognize his brother when he first entered the Hotel du Cadran. It took a second look to register that the skinny man with short, dark hair was Eric. Eric was dressed in a white button-down shirt and khakis, and Bradley was amazed at how tall Eric had become, how dark his skin was; he didn't remember Eric being so olive-skinned, much more so than himself.

"That was a long flight," Eric said.

"It's even longer going back."

They found themselves on the streets, their voices mixing with those around them: the waiters taking orders at the Café du Marche, the locals out for a drink, the tourists searching for their destinations. Bradley had hoped that words would come running out of him, but that was not so. Eric had an easier time making conversation, his statements and questions coming out clear and in perfect order. He had become a novelist – as Bradley had already learned from one of Eric's letters – but his income came mainly through teaching creative writing at Rutgers.

"My wife and daughter want to meet you," Eric said. "I told them, 'Next trip'."

"What are their names again?" Bradley asked.

"My wife's Julie. She's pregnant with our second. Madison is five."

"Congratulations," Bradley said.

"How about you? Anyone?"

Bradley said nothing. He felt Eric put his hand on his shoulder. Ahead, not a mile away, stood the Eiffel Tower.

“After dad died, uncle told me he stood up for you,” Eric said. “Against dad.”

“Would you have?” Bradley asked. “Stood up for me?”

Eric nodded and said, “If I had known. I would have done anything for you. You’re my brother.”

Bradley pictured Eric sitting with their uncle on the screened back porch surrounded by their aunt’s collection of towering orchids and glossed jade plants. He didn’t know how much his uncle knew, how much his uncle had told Eric, but, in this fantasy, he pretended his uncle knew and dispelled everything. He imagined his uncle explaining to Eric the fight that he, Bradley, had gotten into at school with a boy named Pete. The earring ripped from Bradley’s lobe, Pete pushing his head into the earth, whispering faggot into his ear as he ground Bradley’s face against the hard dirt. Then his sit-down with mom and dad, and how dad had a glazed, incredulous look on his face, how his dad went from stunned to angry as quickly and as fluently as one goes from sleep to awakedness. “What did the boy say?” his father had asked and Bradley told him for the second time. “Why would he say that?” his father asked and Bradley fell silent, turned inward, pictured himself sitting on the beach, the waves crashing loud enough to block out thoughts. Bradley’s silence – or perhaps his eyes – had said the rest, and his dad had trembled in disbelief, had gone ashen as if sick. “I don’t know who you are,” his father had told him, but Bradley knew that his father longed to utter the words the boy Pete had said. Maybe his father would have said as much if he had had the time, but Bradley remembered his mother suddenly asking, “Is that Mary?,” referring to the

woman who dropped Eric off from school. Yes, it was Mary, and so Bradley's father forced himself to look composed.

“Uncle Joseph tried to calm dad down,” Eric said now. “He tried to tell him that he was being ridiculous, that you were his son. He told me this the same year dad died.” They walked along the Jardin de Champs du Mars, the lawn checkerboarded with blankets, where people sat cross-legged and shared food and wine. They stood under the tower and gazed up at the web of steel, at the impossible construction. They stood there long enough for the sounds around Bradley to fall away, one by one, until there was nothing but the sound of wind. Then they took the slow elevator as high as it could go and crept toward the railing, where, at the edge, it was not only possible to see the city dressed in its sheer gown of electric light, but also to imagine how the city got that way, how history built itself from the ground up. Candles to lamps, dirt to asphalt. Single-story buildings sprouting from the earth in patches, then more filling in the gaps, and then finally rising into the sky, flowering into taller, more ornate structures. If David were here, he'd talk about the specifics of this history, how the city was founded and who had founded it. If Bradley's mother were here, she would marvel at how something as grand as Paris could possibly be; he knew she would, because his mother had told him as much. She had sat in his room one late night, the night before he ran away, and told him her dreams. He knew, even then, that she conveyed her dreams only to get him talking about his own. “I've always wanted to visit Paris,” she said. “If I had one wish, it would be that.” But he had kept quiet. His only dream back then was to leave everything behind, even the frail, submissive woman who was his mother.

Now he and his brother were in the middle of a thousand shining, blinking lights. Below, people applauded and cheered, their voices rising into the air, as the lights lining the tower's beams blinked in unison, then in sections, then in a chasing sequence. Camera flashes winked from the ground, and, from somewhere, something orchestral played, the sound of the music hollowed out by the wind. Eric's face beamed as he looked down at the city below, the lights reflecting off his skin. It was a look of reverence on Eric's face, and it was the first time since this reunion with his brother that Bradley saw the young boy he had left behind so many years ago.

THE NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS

“Look at the zeppelins,” my mother used to say when I was a child, pointing at the anvil clouds in the sky. The clouds reminded her of zeppelins she had told me. I loved those thick, silver continents, the ones that now disappeared under the roof of my accelerating rental car. My father – when he was alive – hated them. He’d peer into the sky and shake his head. He never used the word hate, nor did he curse – at least not in front of me – until I was thirteen, when he said, “Fuck.” Ironically, that would be the last intelligible word he ever said. “Fuck,” he had said, while tripping down the red-brick church steps greased with green moss. He fell to his knees, shook violently, and then suddenly didn’t move at all. My mother – dowdy in every sense of the word, with her pink church hat, her flowery tent of a dress, her thick glasses – held onto one arm. I held his other arm, but I was of no help. My father was a large man, reaching beyond six feet. My mother and I thought he had tripped. I even laughed. In the end, it turned out that he had had a stroke and would never speak a word again.

I pulled into a dive called Flannigan’s and met with Jason – whom I hadn’t seen in nearly a decade – who said he remembered this. He had been at the church with his mother, but only his mother; his father was a drinker who didn’t take the Sabbath off. “I try not to remember,” Jason said. After all these years, he looked the same, perhaps a little heavier. His tight, curly blond hair rose on his head like a plateau, his eyes blue as pen-ink. He wore an untucked red polo shirt that curtailed his waistline.

“My father,” I said. “He always wanted me to marry Adele. ‘Are you going to marry that girl?’”

“Don’t start,” Jason said, waving a hand. He didn’t say, *You and your goddamn crush*, but he might as well have. Adele and I, at the age of twelve, had been the best of friends. If I wasn’t with Jason, I was with her. We used to stick Black Cat firecrackers into naval oranges and hurl them into the sky and watch the rind rain down all around us. We draped red blankets over our bodies during a summer sunshower and danced the Egyptian dance across the back lawn, the blanket dulling the sharp edges of Adele’s thin, angular frame. She loved my Siberian Husky, Mr. Felix, and admired his eyes, one of which was sky-blue, the other brown as tree bark. Little did she know that I admired *her* eyes, almond eyes, often brown, but sometimes, when the light hit just right, a shade of autumn green. I would watch them light up as Mr. Felix ran circles around her, his tongue lolloping out. Mr. Felix, panting, out of breath, would put his paws on Adele and voraciously lick her face as she bent down. On her way out the front door, she brushed the silver fur off her clothes with her hands.

But I could see that reminiscing about my father and Adele was taking its toll on Jason. He put his mug down a little too hard. He lit a cigarette, immediately flicked its ashless orange eye, and stared down into his drink as if he could see his own father’s face in there, staring back at him. Was Flannigan’s one of his father’s old haunts? The bar had been here long enough, one of the few remnants that weathered the storm of regress, a storm that turned our hometown into a place I barely recognized. Spray-painted boards covered store windows, potholes dotted the roads, paper and plastic garbage somersaulted along medians. Street signs were bent and twisted, as if to turn their heads away. The only thriving places seemed to be fast food restaurants, which pimped the littered streets as far as the eye could see, and bars like Flannigan’s, a hole-in-the-wall with few

windows, which kept it dark and smoky, a nebula of cigarette steam. I felt my eyes turning red and watery, unused to bar smoke.

“It’s good to see you again, Jay,” I said, trying to start our conversation over. He stuck out his hand and smiled, which seemed disingenuous, as if some deeper melancholy kept his good humor at bay. The scar on the back of his hand still stood out. He had, at the age of ten, carved off a piece of skin with a Bowie knife in rebellion of his father’s assaults. “Some people dig their fingernails into their palms,” he had told me, “I peel skin.”

“How’s D.C.?” he asked, releasing my hand.

“Good,” I said.

“And that little paper you work for?”

“Little.” I told him I was down here for a convention, mentioned the keynote speaker – an op-ed guy from *The New York Times*, but Jason didn’t seem to recognize the name. The pony-tailed bartender played drums with two ice-blue martini stirrers on a terra cotta planter, and I imagined my father turning toward the barman and saying softly, as if he were family, “Son, it’s time to stop the drumming.” He would say it so fatherly, in such a resolute manner, the bartender would not only stop immediately, but hide the stirrers in a drawer for fear that they might take a life of their own and spitefully start drumming without him.

That was the power my father had.

He was a stern man, my father, of robust Catholic faith, a man who rarely smiled. He wasn’t coarsened, just selective about the times he would let a grin slip loose. Every Sunday he garbed himself in a freshly pressed suit that made this solemnity official, and

he treated himself to a small douse of aftershave, a light cinnamon scent that seemed to stick on everything he passed. He went to his car that sat obediently in the driveway and he started it up, waiting for my mother and me. “You *can* wait in the house,” my mother told him once, patting him on the shoulder. “Getting the car warmed up,” he told her. He said that even in the dogged heat of August. And as soon as he turned the car on, the neighborhood dogs woke up in a frenzy, all of the dogs except our Mr. Felix, who sat in the living room and happily stared out the window spattered with sprinkler water. Sometimes Mr. Felix ran around in circles, chasing his tail, as if the dogs’ barking were music and he a dancer. When my mother told my father that he woke everyone up with his car, my father simply replied, “Well, they should be getting up for church anyway.” He made it sound so obvious that I spent part of my childhood thinking everyone practiced the same faith as my family.

Jason had known my father well. In fact, my father had admired Jason for a reason never explained to me, although, growing up, I assumed it was because Jason was extremely handsome. My father was not the type of man who cared about such shallow things as physical beauty – he was a man of “character” and “principle” – but I couldn’t help but feel that Jason’s charm and looks somehow snuck past my father’s detector and managed to break into his cerebral wiring. When Jason came by, my father would light up with such vigor that you could almost hear the match strike. The conversation would begin in the library, among the rows of books. My father talked to him about his latest interests in physics. My father, the pious physicist, a man so comfortable in his faith that he dared to walk near its edge and gaze at a garden of thought that, according to many of his churchgoing friends, gave home to the serpent that devoured pages of the Bible one

by one. They sat in their leather chairs, my father waving his hand around like a conductor. Jason sat still and silent, surely not understanding a word my father said. I sat on the couch, which felt worlds away from the two brown leather chairs, and flipped through one of my father's books, pretending to read, but really watching them, as if my father were a distant planet, Jason his moon, and I an observer peering through a telescope. Occasionally, when my father glanced down at the book in his lap, Jason stole a glance at me, one of utter bafflement. But when Jason went home, leaving me to my thoughts and reflections, I always remembered seeing something else in that glance: pride.

My parents' old house looked completely alien, the white stucco gone, painted over with a brown that reminded me of driftwood. The result of my mother's green thumb was destroyed. The mix of rhododendrons were gone, replaced by bare, jutting stalks. Weeds metastasized around a mass of slump-shouldered Purple Showers in the bed near the front door, and a tangled, mashed ball that looked like lantana sat in the alcove on the other side of the door. The Tabebuia my father had planted by my window was also gone. The new owners had painted the wooden fence white, and, in the backyard, the curved top of a red shed rose above the fence, a blushing half-circle like a mosquito bite.

The thought of knocking on the door just to glimpse inside crossed my mind, but my cell phone rang. Jason's number came up.

“Jay?”

Nothing, and then the call ended. I had left Jason at the bar, so I wondered if he had drunk himself past the capability of driving. Before I had a chance to put the phone back into my pocket, the phone rang a second time. Jason again. I said his name multiple times, but received no answer. The only sounds were a thin white noise and the sound of the phone being shifted back and forth, like the electric hum of rubbing corduroys.

Jason was the last remnant of my childhood that lived in the city. My mother had moved back to Connecticut after I left for college, having no other family in Orlando. “Friends were great,” she said, “but nothing replaces family.” With my mother, there was always an ulterior motive for statements like that, and that statement was directed toward me, a little something to remember after college graduation. When I graduated from Georgetown, I gave my mother what she called, “her offspring’s last rebellion.” We laughed at this, but I knew my mother truly felt disappointed in my decision to live near the Potomac.

Why wasn’t I surprised that there were ambulances and police cars around the bar? Perhaps it was the sound of Jason’s cell phone being rubbed against clothing; it wasn’t quite “Fuck” – my father’s indication that something was wrong – but it was close enough for a part of my brain to raise a red flag. I also wasn’t surprised at the coincidence that Jason’s fate could have been my own if I had stayed behind. I was numb to the idea of providence. At sixteen, my car stalled at an intersection and, if it had not, I would have been t-boned by a car running a red light. It was useless to let things like that eat your insides.

“You say you’re friends with Mr. Lawrence?” a barrel-chested officer asked me. I don’t think I ever heard Jason referred to as ‘Mr. Lawrence’; it seemed too proper, too restrained for a man who bore tattoos all over his upper arms, red and green and black ink dripping from under shirtsleeves, a tiny yellow sun beaming on his upper back. The officer told me how four men in black ski masks entered Flannigan’s Pub. They held up the bar at gunpoint. One of the men threw a garbage bag at the bartender and told him to empty the register. Two others kept an eye on the patrons. The fourth randomly picked guys to bully. One of the guys was Jason. Eyewitnesses said the armed robber hit Jason across the head with the butt of a sawed-off shotgun. Jason fell to the floor and held his head. He then kicked Jason in the face and stomach repeatedly. When the ski-masked man was done beating on Jason, he shot him in the head.

“Is there someone, a family member...” the officer trailed off.

I didn’t know what to tell the officer. Jason’s mother passed on years ago and his father was in prison serving a life sentence. I eventually remembered Jason’s Uncle Robert, who lived a few towns over and who, as I remembered, was the ‘successful’ one of the family. I gave the name to the officer, but still. The very fact that Jason didn’t have anyone – at least, anyone that I knew other than this uncle – tore me apart.

One day, my father opened up to me a little bit, albeit in a strange way. We had been sitting at the kitchen table, his coffee whipping up smoke that, seconds later, dissipated through a chemical reaction that only God and my father knew. I told my father how a kid at school occasionally bullied me. My father broke from his book and, in his stolid manner, told me about entropy. “Don’t worry. Everything breaks down. It’s

the natural order of things.” He bowed his head on the word ‘things’ to emphasize the importance of his statement. I didn’t ask *Why?* but that question must have been written all over my face, because my father continued, “And it’s the natural order of things because there is only one way to be completely in order and an infinite number of ways of being in *disorder*.” I had been eight. I had no idea what he was talking about, but I immediately grasped on to the word ‘infinite’ and it became my new favorite word. Everything was infinite. I washed the infinite car, I biked to the infinite woods, I hit the baseball ‘an infinite number of ways.’

It was this discourse that I thought of when I met Jason’s Uncle Robert at a nearby Denny’s. Robert had grown an unkempt, short beard that looked like dirty carpet. He limped – the result of a motorcycle accident, he informed me – and he had an incessant behavior of scratching the top of his head. He said he would take care of the funeral arrangements as he ran his fingers through his thinning hair and scratched his scalp. I told him I’d be staying in town for the funeral – I had already put a call into work – and that if he needed me, I’d be nearby.

I never heard from Robert until the day before the funeral.

“It’s tomorrow,” he said in a scratchy, morning voice. A hangover voice. I pictured him flattened against a recliner, the phone hung loosely to his ear, his skin slack from sleeplessness, his lazy mouth agape. He gave me directions and I wrote them down on a hotel notepad.

My friend Adele had died at the age of fifteen, struck by a car, but I didn’t go to her funeral. I couldn’t, and I told my parents – and hers – as much. My father looked at me as if he were trying to see through my skin, my bones. I held on to a plastic Batman

action figure – a toy I had found while rummaging through an old childhood toy box – and twisted his head around nervously, touching his pointy ears. I smoothed the tips of my fingers along Batman’s soft velvet cape to find what solace I could from my embarrassing fear. My father, unable to speak, wrote on a notepad “Jason’s going.” He carried that pocket-sized notepad everywhere, a pen clipped to its edge, his new voice box. I remained silent. “Say a prayer,” he wrote. Then he cupped a hand on my shoulder, a hand that made me feel small and shameful. I had a notion to change my mind, but couldn’t take the step forward. My fear of something so unknown as death stopped me.

There was a handful of people at St. Stephens, none of whom I knew except for Robert. An elderly couple kneeled at a pew in the front row, staring at Jason’s coffin in such quiet wonder that they could have been at the wrong funeral. Two young men dressed in baggy jeans chatted to each other in a corner. The one with the red t-shirt laughed at something and then ruffled his hair nervously, as if he suddenly remembered where he was. A middle-aged man, who looked as though he could be Robert’s friend, stood at the back of the church, staring at Robert and me.

“It’s all I could muster,” Robert said, gesturing to the handful of people. His face looked more sallow than when we had last met. He reeked of alcohol, too, and I noticed that his limp was more pronounced. He limped to Jason’s casket and fumbled to a knee. He kissed the tips of his fingers and placed them into the coffin, onto what was probably Jason’s forehead. Then he wobbled back up, his collection of gold chains chiming as if he were a wind. He limped away, not looking the least bit mournful, but rather

businesslike, as if he had just finished a transaction that, in the long run, would never serve a purpose later in his life.

We're supposed to cry in situations like these. Jason had been my best friend some sixteen years ago and, if this had happened then, I would have been devastated. But distance snapped this bond, like a rubber band pulled too far. So, when I knelt in front of Jason's coffin, I didn't cry. I couldn't. I wanted to feel anguish – I even tried to force tears out by squeezing my eyes and picturing his high-school face – but, in the end, I felt no such thing. I was saddened, but not destroyed. Not only had distance snapped our bond, but so, too, had our different directions in life. We had become such different people over the years. His a life of tattoos, bar-hopping, odd jobs, and mine a life of storytelling, journalism, quietude. And now here was Jason's face, caked in make-up to give him the appearance that he wasn't dead, no, not at all, just sleeping, whiling away the hours and, perhaps during this sleep, he would visit my father, whom I pictured as this giant silhouette, a black cutout at the other end of a long, white, beaming hall. My father would gesture Jason to his new library-in-the-sky and talk about physics – for now my father had his voice back – and pull out Einstein, Feynman, Bohr, Hawking, he would converse about electromagnetism, electrons, protons, neutrinos, photons, atom-smashers, black holes, event horizons, I could see them holding each other's hand in prayer among the pews, raising them up to our Lord as they spoke, Our Feynman who art in Heaven, hollow be thy Maxwell, Thy Quantum come, on Earth as it is in Hawking, and give us this photon, our daily Bohr, and forgive us our neutrinos as we forgive those neutrinos against us, and lead atoms not into gravity, but relativity us from Planck's length, Amen. Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, my father, my father, Amen.

All my life I thought gravity was a strong force. Gravity held everything in place; people, houses, skyscrapers, forests, oceans. But I was wrong. My father could have told me as much, if he had so desired. Perhaps Jason had known the weakness of gravity. All you have to do is lift up your foot and you've defied the force.

I learned that bit of knowledge on the plane ride back to D.C., from a physics book I had picked up at the airport's bookstore. I heard, in my head, every word of the book spoken in my father's voice. Occasionally, I would stop reading and wonder if that was how my father had actually sounded or how I remembered him sounding. My memory of his voice had broken down, disintegrated. There was an infinite number of voices that didn't belong to my father, but only one that did.

I never returned to Florida. I met a woman at work a year after Jason's death named Meghan, and we dated for a while. We lived close enough to each other that we rode the Metro into work together. What seemed like every Thursday, an old man in a shabby suit and weathered, beige trench coat sawed a violin and sang old folk songs in our car. *All The Good Times Are Past And Gone* and *Your Engine's Cold Today*. The man had a light scent of alcohol, his face pockmarked and leathery, like an old catcher's mitt. No matter which car we sat in, he found his way to ours. After a few months of this, he stopped showing up. "Did he find a new car?" Meghan had asked, to which I could only shrug. Judging from his condition, he most likely had died. Perhaps someone walked into a car and found him sitting perfectly upright, his violin on the seat next to him, his obedient child.

I thought that, but I didn't say it to Meghan. That protection, that failure to alert someone of a death, reminded me of Mr. Felix, how my mother buried him one day in the backyard without my knowing Mr. Felix was even dead. The signs of his ending life were, of course, there: the jail of ribs underneath thin, pink skin and matted fur; the rising tea-kettle whimper; the struggle to lift his body to eat or drink. Mr. Felix had lived to be fifteen, much older than the average life expectancy of huskies, and he had lived a good life, something that my mother could have told me or that my father could have written down – for this happened after his stroke – to console me. But neither said a word, preferring to let me discover the dog's mortality on my own.

One night, nearly two years after Jason's death, the phone rang at three in the morning. I was startled awake. Meghan, who was sleeping at my place that night, snored through the rings.

“Hello?”

The person on the other end cleared his throat and, somehow, I knew at once that it was Robert.

“Robert?” I said.

He apologized for calling so late. I said that it was fine, glancing over at Meghan who was still lightly snoring. I wondered how Robert had found my phone number, but figured one could find anything on the Internet. Robert said that he had just woken up from a dream about Jason. In his dream, Jason was still alive, and he had beaten down the armed robbers and saved the day. That was exactly how Robert had put it: Saved the day.

“I don’t want to keep you,” Robert said, phlegm rattling in his throat. “I don’t want to keep you, I just...” He trailed off. He didn’t need to finish the sentence.

After a long pause, he told me he was moving into a new apartment, outside of Orlando. He would have a new phone number and he wanted me to take it down.

“Go ahead,” I said, although I didn’t have paper or a pen anywhere near me. I was afraid to roll out of bed and wake Meghan up. Robert gave me the number and I repeated it after him, promising myself that I would remember it in the morning, knowing I wouldn’t.

We hung up, Robert coughing out a good-bye. Meghan hadn’t stirred during the entire phone call, but now she rolled from her side onto her back and the moonlight illuminated her face. I stopped repeating the numbers that Robert had given me, and I thought, I could marry this woman. I could grow old with her and we could have children. I wanted to wake her and tell her this, to share how I felt. I placed my hand on hers, but knew that I wasn’t really placing my hand on her hand. That simple act of touching was impossible, as I learned from my physics book, something about the negative charge in atoms, the things that make up our bodies, our clothes, our everything. If it were not for this negative charge, matter would pass through matter. My hand would pass through Meghan’s hand, the bed, the floor, the Earth. The fact was, my hand was levitating just above Meghan’s, at a height of what physicists call an angstrom, which, I learned, was one hundred-millionth of a centimeter.

I didn’t fall asleep that night. Robert’s call would mark the beginning of a long bout with insomnia. And every now and again, after twisting and turning, I would rise from my bed. I would find my way to the kitchen, flip open my laptop, the refrigerator

droning behind me, the tiny green digits of time from the appliances glowing in the darkness like stars in a night sky. I would search the Internet for Robert's number, I would search and search and search, but always I came up with nothing. It was as if Robert didn't exist.

SAN SEBASTIANO

“I’ve missed you,” Grace had told Nick the other evening over a cup of espresso at *Piazza San Marco*, when suddenly a mass of pigeons flapped into the air in one single wave, like a giant white sheet caught in a wind. He said he missed her, too. She had been a good friend since their childhood. She was the woman he had fallen for well before she became an expatriate years ago, but he would never admit those feelings to her. He was afraid of ruining the friendship they had kept for such a long time.

He was staying in a hotel room outside *San Marco* during this vacation. She insisted that he stay in her apartment, but he refused. “I don’t want to intrude,” he had told her. “A week is a long time to put up with someone.”

And now her apartment building was on fire, the flames punching out windows, exhaling breaths of black smoke that scorched the brick walls, smearing them in soot and char. Nick stood before it, under a blue morning sky with ribbons of clouds outlined in pink and yellow. He hoped Grace had made it out alive, but he didn’t see her among the mob of people. Plumes of black smoke billowed from the rooftop. One of the large trellises crawling with ivy peeled off the brick wall like a sticker. A white helicopter with a thick rope and large bucket dangling from its bottom flashed in the sky, as the aircraft dipped toward the canal. The helicopter filled the bucket with canalwater, then climbed back up and dumped the water onto the roof. Four fireboats pulled up in front of the building and shot water onto its façade.

“I have a friend,” Nick said to a policeman standing next to him. “*Amico*,” he said pointing toward the building. Nick was of average height, but still the policeman towered over him. With the sun shining directly behind the officer’s head, the man

looked angelic to Nick, like one of the figures in the rich, golden-brown Byzantine paintings he and Grace saw perched on the walls of so many *basilicas*. The officer nodded and, with his bearpaw, squeezed Nick's shoulder.

He had searched for Grace everywhere around the apartment building but couldn't find her. He tried her cellphone. Nothing. On his way back to the hotel, he used his hand as a visor. He couldn't shake the image of Grace waking up to the smell of fire, trying to find the things she couldn't live without, knocking over a lamp or the small glass-top coffee table she had brought with her from America.

At the hotel, he called Sarah, Grace's sister who lived in Boston, and told her what happened.

"I'm leaving now," Sarah said, her voice quivering.

Two days before the fire, Grace said, "My family won't talk to me for becoming an expatriate. Except for my sister." They had been outside the *Basilica di San Sebastiano*, sitting on the edge of a canal, where water clapped against hulls of boats. Between that applause of water came the pops of a soccer ball smacking a nearby stucco wall, as two children played what appeared to be a made-up game. One of the boys kicked the ball, and then, with the tap of his shoe, stopped it from rolling past him on its way back. The boy pointed toward the wall and said something in Italian.

Grace said, "The one boy is explaining that if he kicks the ball against the wall and the other child misses it on its way back, then the kicker gets a point." Nick nodded. He pretended the boys were their children: Just two sons kicking a ball against a building

where, from a balcony, a rainbow-colored flag snapped in the wind. Written on the flag was the word *pace*. “*Pace*,” Grace had told him that day. “Peace.”

The airport bustled, but he felt someone grab his shoulder right away, and when he turned around he saw Grace. She had tousled brown hair and bags under bloodshot eyes. A black carry-on hung from her shoulder, and it finally dawned on him that this wasn't Grace, but rather her sister.

“Sarah,” Nick said.

“Hi.”

She wasn't crying. Grace had told him Sarah never cried. *She's like a jar*, Grace had said, *she holds everything on the inside*.

She hadn't brought any luggage, so they left. They took a watertaxi out of Marco Polo Airport, the boat bumping along the open, rippling water that glowed with a sheen of moonlight. They went under the *Rialto* past the domes of the *Santa Maria della Salute* and the towering *Campanile*, where, from the top, he and Grace had seen the Swiss Alps ghosted back in a cloudy sky.

When they docked at the edge of a canal, Sarah said, “Do you think she's all right? I think she's all right,” and suddenly Nick caught the smell of alcohol on her breath.

They came to what was left of Grace's building, where some authorities still walked about. Nick overheard the words “candle left burning” from somewhere in the crowd. He also heard “electrical fire.” These tiny phrases rose out of the steady murmur

like a swell in an ocean, something that rises above the horizon for one to glimpse at and then levels out evenly again.

“Talk to one of these guys,” Nick said, pointing to a policeman. She did, and before Nick knew it they were back on a water taxi, slipping down the tiny canals.

Her body was red and hard and rough as cobblestone. Nick turned away. He had seen enough already—her mouth partly open as if she were ready to speak, her hair stripped and dry as old straw, fingers curled like gnarled branches. Sarah was silent for the first few seconds before she suddenly sucked in air loudly, like she was suffocating, then began to cough and sob. She left the building.

She died of smoke inhalation, not burns, the coroner said to Nick. The coroner—a short man with a harelip and a grey, stubble beard and a sunken face—did not say whether or not it was a quick death.

On their way back to the hotel, Sarah grabbed Nick’s hand and pulled him past a group of tourists snapping pictures of canals and gondoliers and the tiny dogs that sat obediently by their owners as they ate. They walked over a small bridge and squeezed through a congested street. Storefronts flashed by. In one of the shops’ windows, Carnivale masks stained with teardrops and dressed in feathers and pastel lines stared out at Nick with empty eyes. In another, beaded, lacey lamps hung from the ceiling, the lights glowing in amber. They passed the Bridge of Sighs, an enclosed bridge that connected the rich, ornate Doge’s Palace to a dank, gray prison. “They call it the Bridge of Sighs,” Grace had once told him, “because prisoners sighed as they crossed it, looking

out those small windows, taking a last look at freedom.” She said this as she said all things that were informative: with her eyes looking up and her index finger pointing to nowhere in particular. She reminded him of a schoolteacher.

As Sarah pulled him toward the hotel, everything reminded Nick of Grace and, at the same time, everything seemed on fire: gondolas, marquees, tables and chairs. They rushed past them all, over cobbled paths, pushing their way through pockets of people, over more tiny bridges, through a world that was being consumed by flame.

They tucked themselves into two stools at the far end of the hotel’s bar. To Nick, Sarah looked pale as a ghost, and he wondered if he himself looked as pale. They ordered drinks, and Sarah told Nick how her husband Greg came home late and how, when he was home, he paid no attention to her.

“He comes home and does this,” Sarah said, showing Nick her drink. “Every day. And then he sits in front of the television. Remember how Grace hated the television?”

“I remember,” Nick said. He had only seen Grace watch it once, after a night of jazz and drinks in New York City, back when Grace still lived in a tiny flat in Greenwich Village. They had been to the Blue Note, bewitched by sound and alcohol, as Ramsey Lewis’s fingers danced across the piano. At the end of the night, Grace was too drunk to walk, so Nick hailed a cab and rode with her to her flat. This happened in late fall, and they sat close to each other, garbed in coats and sweaters. Grace wrapped her arm around Nick’s neck as they walked up to her flat, the crisp fall leaves crackling underfoot. Nick had even helped her into bed, and, as he was leaving, Grace asked him to turn on the

television. “The television?” Nick had asked, incredulous. “I just want to listen,” she said, but on his way out, he caught Grace watching it, transfixed.

“How long has Greg been like this?” he asked now, but before Sarah could answer he heard someone yelling in the hotel lobby. Nick and Sarah both turned toward the front of the hotel and saw a man facing the entrance door, screaming. The man shook his fist in the air and then slammed it against the marble wall. There was nobody else in the lobby except for the hotel clerk behind the counter, who, with a half-smile, watched the enraged man. The enraged man marched into the bar and sat as far away from Nick and Sarah as possible. He scowled at Nick and said, “*Andare all’inferno!*” Go to hell. The bartender gave the man a look, then apologized in English to Nick and Sarah.

Waiting for the elevator, Sarah said, “Let’s take the stairs.”

“It’s seven floors and you can barely walk,” Nick said, but she insisted.

They climbed up the stairs slowly, and when they got to the seventh floor, Nick opened the door, but Sarah didn’t move from the landing. She looked down over the edge of the black railing and stayed there.

“Grace was in love with you,” Sarah said. “Do you remember the time you helped her home from that club in the Village? She called me after you left her place. She called and told me that she was in love with you. She started crying because she didn’t think you felt that way.”

In the taxi that night, Grace had rested her head on Nick’s shoulder, her fingers gently running over the map of Manhattan below the plasti-glass in front of them. Her scarf fell off her neck onto Nick’s lap, but when she tried to get it, her arm just fell flat on

his leg, as if she had deflated. “Remember,” Grace had said, staring at the taxi driver, “how we used to say we were like cousins? Under the tree?” Nick said he remembered and he waited for her to finish her thought, but she never did. Instead, she started singing one of their songs, the one about fishing that they had written one sweltering summer at the age of twelve. Now, in the stairwell, he tried to remember the words, but couldn’t.

There was nothing left of Grace but memories. The memories zig-zagged like Venetian streets, with no rhyme or reason, no telling where they would end or where they had even begun. But the basis of those memories was always the same – it was always Grace’s hand holding his as she showed him the way past the churches and squares and bridges. And, in the end, he and Grace always ended up at that canal outside *San Sebastiano*, their feet dangling above the water, the two boys kicking the soccer ball against the wall. Years later, well after Sarah divorced Greg and well after Nick married Sarah, Nick would wonder where those boys were, what they were doing. He never told Sarah about the boys, not even decades later, when, as an old man, he sat beside Sarah’s deathbed, her tired, wrinkled hand in his. As much as he loved Sarah, as much as he cared for her, the boys simply didn’t belong to her.

Sarah said, “I wasted three years of my life with Greg. Three years.” She leaned over the railing so her body was nearly horizontal. She balanced herself like a scale. She tipped forward a little too far and shook her leg to control her balance. Nick quickly walked over to her and pulled her back on the ground. He held her. She shook in his arms violently.

“She’s dead. How could she be dead?” Sarah said. “She was always running around, you know. When we were young, before you knew her, Mom and Dad used her

name as an adjective. If they saw a car going fast, they'd say, 'Look there, that car's going Grace Pace.' But she's so still now." Nick cleaned the tears off her face. She reached and grabbed his hand, and he was shocked by how cold hers felt.

They sat down on the floor. He pushed her hair back behind her ears, and her head tilted with the motion of his hand. Someone was walking up the stairs toward them, the stranger's footsteps booming. They sounded like the echoing footfalls he and Grace had heard while walking through the church in *San Sebastiano*.

EVIDENCE

Ayesha knocked on Luca's door for the second time, but there was still no answer. She and her team had already searched the entire grounds of the lodge. This was the last place. She opened the door and walked into an empty room, Luca's sheets twisted into a cone, his suitcase open with clothes draping over its edge, the mixed scent of wax and lavender from a burnt-out candle on the credenza. The room was smaller than hers, its walls painted pale olive-green, and over the headboard hung a framed black-and-white winter shot of Mt. Wapta rising out of the Canadian Rockies like a white tooth. She didn't think he was serious when, last night, he had told her he wanted to hike the Burgess Shale alone. But now it looked like he was serious as ever.

"Looks like he went on ahead," Ayesha told her husband James, the leader of the group, when she returned to the team. They were all seasoned paleobiologists, some more than others, who had combed for fossils on this side of British Columbia at one time or another to witness how life once was, to observe the evidence of evolution. At seventy-two years old, Luca had hiked to the Walcott Quarry more than a handful of times so he would know the ropes.

"Last night, he mentioned a friend who had hiked to the Shale alone," Ayesha said.

"Well, there you go," James said.

It was just one of Luca's many stories. He was full of tales, able to draw listeners in until they were wrapped taut in the chrysalis of his past – hand-blistering jobs during college days, family and friends, people he had met in places halfway across the world. Luca reminded her of an older version of her father who relished capturing the attention

of adults and children with the net of his experiences. It was her father who convinced her to write her own stories in a journal as a child. It was Luca who got her to continue the journal in adulthood. “No better way to fossilize yourself,” Luca once told her.

She had heard the one about the friend who hiked the shale solo last night, after James went to bed. James had turned in early, so Ayesha and Luca sat on the deck outside the lodge, the moon bright as the eye of a train, and he told her about the time a good friend of his decided to walk to the Shale by himself, barefooted, thinking it was the only way to *feel* the history embedded in the earth. Luca said he wanted to try just the barefoot thing tomorrow, even if just for a little bit, and would she like to join him? Yes, Ayesha said, but she had no intention to. She was too tired for that kind of thing, her insomnia already stripping away the vivid paint of reality. There was too much on her mind. She was six weeks pregnant and nobody knew, not even her husband, who had noticed something wrong with her two weeks prior to leaving for the Burgess Shale.

“Something’s wrong,” James had said, “You’re too quiet.” She told him she was thinking about the new house and she smiled for him and it was enough to shake his concern, at least for that moment. She and James did not plan on ever having children – “I kind of like being selfish,” she had told James once and he agreed – and they usually took the necessary precautions. But that one night there had been dinner with friends and laughs and more wine than they were used to. James had one hand on her leg most of the night, his touch concealed by the skirt of the white tablecloth, and, as the night progressed, Ayesha found herself pushing his hand higher up her thigh, feeding her prurience like coals in a brazier. Then there was the car ride home, weighted with desire, and then the rush to the bed, where their lust was feverishly emptied.

It was hard to shake those thoughts, even now, in the palm of the Canadian Rockies, Ayesha's walking stick stabbing the Iceline Trail with each step as she and her team climbed past the moraine, the abandoned rubble at their feet like old, forgotten toys. She felt so small there, with the earth rising up into a coliseum of hammered peaks in the distance. The ranges were far enough away to open up a panorama of talus-ridden hillocks speckled with tufts of bunchgrass, some of the slopes carved with long cracks like veins. The sky was candleflame blue and seemed higher than normal, and the air snapped at her in short gusts.

James approached her, wrapped an arm around her shoulders. He said, "You're not okay."

"I'm fine."

"Is it Luca?"

No, she wanted to say, it's that I'm pregnant. "Yes," she said. She wanted to think that she would tell him if they were alone, but she knew better. She could be open, but there were times James had to draw her feelings out of her like blood through a needle. He would tie her off in questions and then extract the truth.

"I'm sure he's fine," James said.

"I know."

They approached the eastern flank of Vice President Mountain and, below that, Emerald Glacier. James worked his way back to the head of the group and pointed out the scenery. She tried to listen, but instead she was taken by the conifers rising out of Yoho Valley like a billowing green quilt. She wanted to curl up within those evergreens,

stretch among the mattress of nettles and lose herself in thoughts that would melt into dreams.

James had to put a hand on her shoulder for her to realize the group had started walking again, and so the two of them brought up the rear, both of them lightly kicking the smaller talus as they went. James occasionally turned and smiled at Ayesha to make sure she was okay. She thought about his patience, his ability to be an active listener, his needle-sharp wit. If he couldn't think of something funny to say, he'd toss out a bad joke to lighten a mood. "What happens when two snails fight?" he'd ask, and without waiting for an answer he'd say, "They slug it out." He was, at heart, an entertainer, always trying to draw a smile out of a person. He didn't have to work that hard with Luca, who always wore a smile.

"Do you ever stop smiling?" she had asked Luca on the front porch last night, after he told her about the barefoot hiker.

"Not here," Luca said, and then he launched into a new story. "Once, when I was a child," he said, running his hand through his thin hair, his voice breaking like a stone skipping on water, "it rained in my town for weeks. The streets flooded, the water rising halfway up the entrances of the shops." He paused, as if he needed time to wave his hands in the dim light of memory to find what he was looking for. Then he said, "My father owned a small pastry shop in the center of town, and one day he asked if I wanted to go. By then, everybody was canoeing down streets. It was the only way." He fell silent, groped, found what he was looking for. "My father was a good man, but one of few words, and he rarely invited me anywhere, so I jumped at the chance to go with him. We canoed to the store and saw how the rainwater had found a way inside and how it

floated off the boxes of food on the bottom shelf. He told me the story of Noah and the flood, how the earth was washed clean. But what I really remember of that time was after the flood. My father took me along the streets and he pointed to the things the water had left behind. To most people, it was just trash. There were bloated purses, stripped lamps, candles, artwork, books, chairs. Cooking utensils, even a tricycle. They were all things from different lives. We picked up the objects, did so until it got dark. We walked home, both of us exhausted, but not too tired to talk about the things we found and where they might have come from. When we got close to our house, I looked at my father and I could see that he was proud of me, and it's something I'll never forget."

He paused. Ayesha thought he was finished, but then he picked up again.

"The parallels of that time and this Shale," he said, "how, when the rainwater disappeared, it left behind objects of other lives and how, when the water here disappeared it left behind fossils – that parallel hasn't escaped me. So when I'm here, I think of my father and how proud he was of me that day." He stopped for a second, then said, "If I could see my father just one more time, just once, I would say to him, 'Tell me something I don't know about you, something big.' I never knew any defining moments of my father. Like I said, he was the quiet type."

They called it a night after that story. He told her to get some rest and she told him she'd try, but she was awake the entire night, staring at the ceiling, James curled into a fetal position beside her.

A dusting of fine dirt kicked up with the occasional slap of wind as James pointed out cairns. "That one over there," he said and she followed his finger. By the third cairn,

Ayesha suddenly had a feeling that Luca was dead. She pictured his cadaver on a bed of stone and being pecked by the nose of a mountain goat somewhere within the folds of the hills. It was her lack of sleep that pushed her toward the edge of such a dismal thought, her subconscious peeking above the surface like a sunken ship in receding waters.

She knew they were all thinking about Luca. They should have been thinking about the fossils they were to witness, the evidence of their ancestors.

The team crossed the moraine, passing streams that washed limestone, the sunlight splitting clouds in half, carving shadows out of rocks and trees. She pointed out a giant boulder just off the trail, a rock that a glacier had left behind.

“Discarded earth,” James said.

They found his shoes a kilometer from Yoho Lake. The sneakers lay there like two small, dead animals, the laces like entrails spilling up and out of the cushioned rim. They found nothing else, only the shoes.

“Doesn’t mean anything,” James said. “Just means he’s walking around with no shoes. He’s probably in the lake right now.”

“Why didn’t he take his shoes off at the lake then?” someone said.

“The guy who hiked this solo did it barefooted,” Ayesha told him.

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, Luca does,” Ayesha said. “And I guess that’s all that matters.”

At Yoho Lake, they stopped for a bit, looked for Luca, but he was nowhere in sight. Ayesha sat down near a tall pine tree. She closed her eyes and fell deep into

herself, until there was nothing but the sound of wind bullying leaves and the lakewater lapping, tripping over itself, which reminded her of the dinner party at Luca's house, the two of them on the porch in wicker chairs, the lakewater trembling, the din of guests echoing from inside the house. Luca was deep in one of his stories, the one about how, when he was a drummer in a big-band ensemble a long time ago, he'd put his daughter on his lap while playing concerts. He would swing his arms around and across her, and when things slowed down enough, he'd give her a little kiss on the back of her head. "There was one time we played for Lou Costello's birthday party, if you can believe it. I put Joanne on my lap and Lou Costello is right up front. He isn't dancing, he's just watching us with a smile and nodding along to the beat. We played the best I think we'd ever played that night. Well, Joanne moves her arm and nicks my drumstick enough so that the stick goes flying into the crowd, and who do you think it hits? Costello, right on the head. There was silence and all eyes were on me and Lou. Lou looks stunned, takes a bow, and later on, after our set, he says, 'Let me show you how it's done,' and then plays a little Krupa. And he can play, too." Luca laughed, took a picture out of his wallet: Lou Costello, his daughter and himself hunched into frame. Luca's drumset behind him, the name The D'Prosperos tattooed to the bass.

"Did you know you were going to tell me this story," Ayesha said.

"I never go anywhere without this picture," Luca said. "It's one of those snapshots of memories that won't give up."

"Like the Coelacanth," Ayesha told him. She felt proud to offer up her own story. "My father and I were sitting on the back porch when he told me about the 1938 Coelacanth, how my grandfather actually saw it." Her father showed her a picture of the

fish in one of his books. He had traced his finger along the blue-gray fin jutting out of the giant animal, which, according to the caption, lived 408 to 362 million years ago. It was thought to have died off at the end of the Cretaceous period. Unlike other fish, it gives birth to live young.

“My Gramps just happened to be in South Africa at the time,” Ayesha said, “and he was friends with the Scotsman who was working the trawler that pulled it in. My grandfather was the only biologist that saw it alive. It died minutes later. Dad said it was sheer luck they found one. Even luckier that my grandfather was there.”

They had traded more stories, memories of the people they had known and loved. Luca shared the one in which his wife fell into the water while fishing on the lake near their home, how she spilled in head-first and then stripped in the water, while he watched her slip below and above the surface, mixing with the tiny sundappled crests. And then Ayesha realized that she was no longer listening to the story on Luca’s porch, but rather in his room at the lodge, the pale olive green wall shaking with candlelight, the picture of Mt. Wapta crooked above the bed. “Have you ever climbed Mt. Wapta?” Luca asked, but her answer was stuck in her throat. He said, “Have you ever fished off Mt. Wapta?” and Ayesha was just lucid enough to realize she was in a shallow dream.

She woke up to the sound of twigs snapping, as something pushed its way through the flora. “Elk,” James said, before anything could be seen.

And, as if James had summoned it, there it was, the elk hulking its way across the path, a winter tree of antlers rising out of it into ten points, holding the lake air with their bony fingers. The elk walked slowly, deliberately, and James pointed out a slight limp in its hind right leg, where a thin abrasion was cut out of the matted hair. The elk was no

more than 30 yards away, and it stopped to look at them with its eyes like onyx. A half-minute later, it moved on, disappearing into the verdure.

For whatever reason, the elk got them hiking again.

They found his body curled like a torn fingernail a little ways off their path. They were just outside the Walcott Quarry, which waited in the distance as hallowed as an altar. He lay next to a chunk of phyllite, pale and grained like old driftwood, and his bare feet were white and raw. The horizon above him was cut out of jagged mountains. Not far was the escarpment, which held scree with what seemed like such a delicate touch that the stone appeared ready to tumble at any given moment.

James gently rolled Luca onto his back, and that was when Ayesha could truly feel the void of Luca's death, an emptiness hungry for the remaining life around it. She thought of black holes, how their gravity pulled everything in, even light.

"Most likely a heart attack," James said before taking Ayesha's hand.

She told him on the plane ride back to the States.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he said.

"I was afraid."

"Of what? Did you think I wouldn't be happy?"

The flight was silent for most of the way after that. She knew James was lost in thought by the way his eyes peered down and to the left, as if all the answers lay on the floor below. During the flight's descent, she told him how, if it was a girl, she already had a name, if it was okay by him. Ayesha's father had picked it out for her a long time

ago, saying that if he and her mother had had another girl, they would have named her Alia. She wanted to tell James the story behind Alia, how it was the name in a poem Ayesha's father had written in college, but she was too tired to tell stories.

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Three months after the Burgess Shale, she and James pulled off the Interstate an hour north from their new home. They were going on a short vacation to Savannah, and James had forgotten to fill up before getting on the highway, so they had to take the exit for gas. Ayesha sat in the passenger seat, melting into the sweet silence as James, outside, stared at the meter on the pump. She kept her gaze on James and resisted looking at the empty baby car seat in the back. Why hadn't she taken it out already? It was a stupid thing to do, to put that seat in so soon. James had warned her, but she ignored him, calling him superstitious.

Ayesha's mother had recommended the Savannah trip. "Get away, go eat and sleep in a different city," she had said to her. Ayesha thought, Is that what you did when dad died? She didn't remember her mother doing any such thing. She remembered her mother folding in on herself, not answering the phone or visiting neighbors, two things she did in excess when Ayesha's father was still alive.

Ayesha gazed out the car window, out at the Interstate that lay across the grassy field, and she realized that they were close to Luca's daughter's house. His daughter had two children. Julian and Rosa. Could she remember where it was? She just wanted to pass by, to see a piece of Luca that had been left behind. Sleep had finally come to her since their return from the Shale, and some nights she would dream of him walking along the Yoho Trail barefoot, looking out for cairns, spotting a mountain goat picture-still on

the edge of a mountain. He would jab his walking stick onto the hard earth until he felt something in his chest. Then the world would become dark.

The other dream she had, the one that made her wish for insomnia, took place at the hospital, just before her D&C. Before the actual surgery, the nurse had asked if she and James would like to keep the fetus after removal. “Why would we do that?” she asked. James squeezed her hand. The nurse said that some people like to bury the fetus, sometimes for closure. James nodded to the nurse. Ayesha shut her eyes and shook her head.

“Never mind,” James said to the nurse. “No, thank you,” he said.

But in the dream, she told the nurse, Yes, she’d like to keep the fetus. And then the nurse would leave and go to a back room. When she returned, she had something in her arms, but Ayesha could never quite make it out – it was just a fuzzy blackness, a void.

James shut the door, snapping her out of her thoughts.

“Why did the New Yorker sleep under an oil tank?” he said.

“I don’t know.”

“He wanted to wake up oily.”

“That’s bad,” she said.

“I know. Sorry.” He pulled out of the station.

“Hey, can we do something?” she asked.

The house was only ten minutes out of their way, a tract home with neutral colors and a bright green lawn split by the apron of a driveway. A row of thick, green viburnum

stood tall on each side of the house. James asked her if she wanted to go in and she told him no, so they just sat there and stared until Ayesha broke the silence.

“Tell me something I don’t know about you,” she said. “It has to be something big.”

There was a long pause. Ayesha kept her gaze on the house, at the curtains behind the windows moving slightly, like a gown caught in a wind. A dog popped its head up and looked out, then walked off.

“I went back,” James said. He squirmed in his seat, the leather squeaking under him. He looked at his hands, picked at a fingernail. “You were still in recovery. I told you I had to go to the bathroom, but instead I found the nurse and I asked to see it. I shouldn’t have kept it a secret.”

It took her a few seconds to understand what he was saying. Her stomach wrenched, her eyes welled up. She wanted to hold him and hurt him. She wanted to scream, wanted to cry. She imagined him staring at the dead fetus, not being able to turn away, like the time her hand fell on the hot stovetop and she wasn’t able to remove it immediately. It took time before the signal finally reached the brain.

“What did it look like?” she said.

He asked if she really wanted to know and she said, “Yes, please tell me. What did it look like?”

“Tiny. Three or four inches maybe. Her skin was translucent. Her ears weren’t in the right spot yet, they were too low. Her eyes were closed. Somehow I knew it was going to be a girl. I said her name out loud, just to see what it would feel like. I said, ‘Alia.’”

Outside Luca's daughter's house, the waxy leaves of the viburnum rustled, and then a small child came bolting out of the hedge. Julian. He was laughing as he ran out to the middle of the lawn, and now his sister came screaming from the side of the house, chasing him. They ran through the yard, over the driveway, so that Ayesha had to turn her body to watch them through the rear window.

"We'll try again in Savannah," James had told her prior to leaving for the trip. And they would. We'll keep trying, she thought now, as she watched Luca's grandchildren fall down on each other, laughing, rolling around, while, out of the corner of her eye, the baby's car seat sat empty and pleading, like a beggar's hand.

A BETTER PLACE

And so the date of the meeting was set, and I had high hopes of making my first impression as an account executive at the agency a good one. Those hopes, as always, were held at bay, just a little, by a fluttering fear of failure. Also by the fear of God, which was instilled in me at an early age by my Aunt Maggie with her austere motto of, Aspiration is a muse derived from the devil. My aunt – by whom I was raised, having lost my mother and father early on – was not only brought up in the Bible Belt, but whipped with it by her own parents when she was younger.

The meeting was a new business pitch. I worked at a medium-sized advertising agency and had just been promoted. Since I hadn't been involved in the previous two losing pitches, I was trying to convince myself and the rest of the team that I was the missing link that would lead us to success. We were pitching a failing tire company whose current tagline was the over-promising “We'll get you there.” Within the past two years, they'd had two recalls due to “slight imperfections” in their “unparalleled tires.” Part of our pitch was to write an abstract of a new marketing strategy as well as a new tagline. Two other agencies were competing against us, one of which beat us in the previous new business pitch, the other a struggling new firm.

I was to start preparations for the pitch immediately, as the pitch itself was next Monday, a ridiculous deadline that, if nothing else, foreshadowed more ridiculous deadlines if we were to actually win the business. That deadline certainly added more weight to the already burdened shoulders of our agency. There were no outbursts yet, but I could see the infant's lip trembling. In advertising, everything teetered at the precipice,

where the smallest wrong move with a client, or a potential client, would cause a strong enough wind to push the agency over the edge into oblivion.

My Aunt Maggie turned sixty-three today. If I failed to call – a mistake I had made in the past – there would be a bout of passive-aggressiveness during which she would refuse to talk to me, something that was both bitterly guilt inducing and sweetly desirable.

My parents died when I was four, my sister six. My aunt had been thirty-five, fifteen years older than my mother. “Your grandparents thought they were done with kids after me,” she had told my sister and me one day when we were kids ourselves, “but, then, your mother always was one for surprises.” She had told us that in a light spirit, but the thought of my never knowing exactly *how* my mother was one for surprises had sucked the air out of the room. My aunt, however, was oblivious to how her words had affected me. “For breakfast, I’m thinking eggs,” had been the next sentence out of her mouth.

Now I called her from my cubicle and wished her a happy birthday.

“Thank you, hon. I’m reading,” she told me.

I pictured my aunt – a large woman with short, wooly hair – dropping her body into the puffy leather armchair, a book clenched tightly in her hands. I could not, however, picture her reading the actual content of the book; only the summation on the back cover and inside flap. Maybe the author’s bio.

We talked for only a few minutes before I was ready to hang up. My aunt had a number of annoying habits, one of which was a tendency to smack her lips between sentences, as if her words clung to her mouth like peanut-butter, a habit even more

annoying on the phone. Every time we approached the end of a conversation, she struck up a new one. The string of conversations could add up to the length of an hour, especially since my uncle's death three years ago. She was lonely, my aunt. She traipsed around the house in her muumuus and square eyeglasses and felt slippers. She didn't pick up her feet to walk, but rather slid them across the linoleum and hardwood like a zombie, the television remote control always in her grasp as if her arm ended in a black, button-laden, plastic nub. At night, only dots of nightlights illuminated the rooms like fireflies on the walls, and I would watch her slide out of the kitchen, pass the nook, and glide into the living room, where she succumbed to gravity and plummeted to the couch. She had no friends, no other family (or at least none that kept in touch with her). All she had was myself and my sister Lucy, who had found greener pastures across the Atlantic working for a publishing house in Dublin and who, according to my aunt, "Never calls."

"Can we talk more over dinner, Aunt Mag?" I now asked.

"Cordova, Jim. You know I love that restaurant."

"It's two hours away, Aunt Mag. Can we do it another time?"

"This weekend sounds fine," she told me.

"Fine," I told her, although it was not fine, as I had planned on preparing our new business pitch during the weekend. But I would make time. My veins coursed not only with Irish-Italian blood but also with enough Christian guilt to wonder if my aunt had accepted and spread her faith only to ensure that she'd have company in her golden years.

My weekday meals were eaten in solitude. I ate breakfast in the car during my forty-minute commute, dinner in my one-bedroom apartment, and lunch, typically, in my

cubicle for no other reason than the four chairs in our kitchen were usually taken. Most people ate out, something I absolutely refused to do on the grounds of my being broke.

On the other side of my cubicle wall sat Scott Greeley, a stocky, bombastic man who always dressed for the golf course and whose brows looked furrowed even when he smiled. I could not of course see him from my own desk, but could picture him staring at his papers as he white-knuckled the phone and as he furrowed and as he talked in his belligerent, bass voice. I ate my sandwich and he said, “Looks like you’ve got your work cut out for you.”

“She’s lonely,” I said, thinking he meant my conversation with my aunt.

“What?” he said. “I’m saying we need to win this tire thing. Or else,” and here he made the throaty finger-across-the-neck sound.

“No pressure,” I said.

“What my doc says right before checking my prostate.” I heard him chuckle to himself, and then he cleared his phlegmy throat and swallowed what had loosened. He was a disgusting man, and yet here he was my equal in title.

“Have you had a prostate exam?” he continued.

I wanted to tell Scott that my uncle had died of prostate cancer, just to jar him a little. It would be a lie, but a worthy one. My uncle had been a swimmer all his life, even into his sixties. He had been swimming in his pool one night and was bitten by a mosquito, which infected him with encephalitis, West Nile, an infection that ultimately took his life. My uncle’s affinity for swimming was matched only by his love for jokes. He had been a happy man, his stubbly beard always stretching out with his giant smile. He had a long, sharp nose – which he occasionally made fun of, as he was never above

self-deprecation – a cleft chin, and short brown hair that had turned cotton-white after sixty. As children, my sister and I would fall into his long swimmer’s arms, giggling at whatever silly joke he offered, and we eventually assigned him as ‘our favorite’.

According to my uncle, pepperoni was horsemeat, our hair bled when the barber cut it, and sugar ants were actually made of sugar. My sister and I, after having been tucked in for bedtime, would sometimes sneak into the hallway, where we would catch him and my aunt dancing in the living room to Frank Sinatra, and I always marveled at seeing my aunt that way. She had been loving, yes, but also sterner than my uncle, and to see her doing something as vulnerable as dancing was a shock. My aunt took his death hard at first, but composed herself quickly, assured that she would meet him in a better place. “He’s probably backstroking above us right now,” she had told me one cloudy day.

“You might enjoy it, a prostate exam,” Scott Greeley said, and then boomed with laughter.

Scott Greeley was more the rule than the exception among my contemporaries at the agency. There was Brandon Fredericks, a tall, lanky man with a thin face and tiny mouth from which bullets of profanity shot out at a rapid fire. There was Shane Lawrence, a smallish, bespectacled fellow prone to angry tantrums and who hummed around the halls like a bellicose gnat. Oliver Penney – perhaps still mad at his mother for branding him with such a neonlike name – jumped at any chance to throw a colleague under the bus, preferably the colleague not in the room at the time. I could go on, but these were the three I worked with closely throughout the day. They roamed the halls like bullies and, as much as I disliked them, they still seemed larger than life, as if their auras glowed brighter. The exceptions – that is, the nice people – were the few older men

and women. There was one exception slightly younger than myself with whom I got along, a young woman by the name of Jenna Tomlin. Jenna was from England and therefore possessed an accent that made everything she said sound important. Her demeanor was just as sophisticated, so even when she excused herself to go to the bathroom she seemed an epicure.

She held the title of account coordinator, which meant she was always in the crosshairs, ready to be fired upon by any number of internal departments. I sat in her cubicle reviewing the jobs circulating throughout the agency. China Buffet's menu redesign: in production. Discount Books' *Where Magazine* ad: with copywriter. The list was long and laborious, and the only redeeming thing about the meeting was Jenna's glowing, round face, long eyelashes and her cutting wit.

"Scott has a small penis," she informed me.

"Greeley?" I asked.

"Not that I've seen it." Her eyes opened wide, and she laughed at herself. I laughed with her. To my despair, Jenna was engaged to a strapping firefighter blessed not only with incredible height, a chiseled face and muscles, but also with the ability to rescue small babies from burning buildings. It was hard to imagine her thin frame being enveloped by such a large figure, as if she were the tiniest of rafts and he a giant wave.

"He and my fiancée go to the same gym," she continued, "and he accidentally caught a glimpse in the locker room. Says it's like an aglet."

"An aglet?"

"That piece of plastic at the end of a shoelace."

We continued working to the din of copiers sliding and spitting out papers, colleagues jabbering on a conference call, Shane Lawrence humming past us. The ease with which we could go from a man's penis size to the production status of a tri-fold brochure was astounding, although the former conversation still had an effect on us. We caught each other's eyes in a conspiratorial manner, a smile that didn't require a mouth, and I liked how our eyes locked in for those extra seconds. Who wouldn't?

The week passed with the usual cacophony of hallway arguments and profanity, much of the profanity aimed at nothing other than the proclaimer's computer. Stoicism was not an *ism* practiced at our agency (or any other agency from what I could gather), and sometimes inanimate objects – like computers, desks, cabinets and computer mice – received our stress. We called Brandon Fredericks 'Bam Bam,' as, on occasion, one could hear him clubbing his desk with his mouse.

I worked on my abstract for the tire company (strengths of the company, weaknesses, opportunities, threats). I wrote it out, changed it, trashed it, started over. I shared my thoughts with my team and the general manager of the agency, a colossal, fire-breathing man of Russian descent with salt-and-pepper hair cropped short and swept to the side. At our Christmas parties, we all ingested a shot of Russian vodka in his honor and the nondrinkers of our agency (the minority, indeed) would say how the drink burned going down and then sat in the stomach.

He said he was happy with my abstract. I believed him until, on Friday, he called an agency-wide meeting at five o'clock to get further thoughts on the project. That concerned me for numerous reasons, but mainly because if someone did have a good idea

it would be up to me to elaborate on it over the weekend. This was a general rule in the advertising industry: If the client doesn't give us a bad deadline, we absolutely must give ourselves one.

There is another rule in the advertising industry, this one concerning brainstorming sessions: An idea must go through a series of wind tunnels until it goes from interesting to blasé.

“What if we put up tire swings in neighborhood parks,” said Kim Granger, a copywriter, “and put signs next to them, something like, and this isn't exactly it, but like, ‘You can always trust your kids on our tires.’” A good idea, I thought.

Then Oliver Penney said, “Wait.” And, as if he were talking to himself, he paused for a few seconds before speaking again. “Wait, what if we put up the tire swings in the tire *stores*.”

The wind tunnel would continue until we would no longer put any tire swings up anywhere, but only a poster of a child riding a tire swing in the tire store.

And that's when our secretary, Tammy, a short, bubbly girl who constantly chewed gum, walked into the conference room, her hand wiping one of her eyes. Her face was red and she barely looked up at us, and suddenly I felt as if I were in some kind of play. The music of our voices stopped, our heads turned to the door, and we waited for the utterance of news from this young woman who had just graduated from college, a girl with such high hopes and innocent optimism that delivering any piece of bad news was not only disheartening to her, but actually stole her life force.

Another account executive rushed over to Tammy and wrapped an arm around her. Tammy's broken state made me realize how absurd our conference room looked.

Purple, plush chairs that looked as if their backs had been cut too short. A long, rectangular, birch table composed of three leafs so shoddily put together that the seams didn't butt up perfectly. On the table sat our black conference-room phone, a sad looking thing that was missing some buttons. Even our resin coasters, which migrated here from our kitchen, looked grievous, out-of-place, like refugees seeking a better home and this was the best they could do.

The absurdity was enhanced when Tammy, after finally calming down, told us that an account executive named Maria had been in a car accident. Maria was a young woman often overlooked at the agency. In fact, I noticed a few others searching the room, along with me, just now realizing she was absent from the meeting. Maria lived alone, and she spoke of the dates she had been on only after being prodded by the few women who took an interest. Sometimes I overheard their conversations and caught glimpses into Maria's life. Maria at the grocery store, debating if it was worth cooking a real meal for just herself, or if she should buy frozen. Maria sitting on her couch, leafing through magazines, wondering if she should have a glass of wine, or maybe even go out to a bar or club. Was it worth getting all dressed up for? No, she would decide.

It was bad, Tammy told us. She had talked to Maria's sister and the sister said that they needed to bring in the helicopter. The sister promised to keep us informed, as Maria always told her that the people at the agency were like a second family.

I knocked a third time and my aunt still didn't answer the door. I knew she was home because her purple PT Cruiser sat in the driveway, a silver ichthus attached to the rear of the car. She loved her ichthus, a symbol not only of her faith, but also of her

college days at university. Specifically, a symbol of her youth. She had been the bellwether of the local Fish Mission community after learning how an evangelical group at Sydney University in Australia had taken it upon themselves to reinvigorate the Christian spirit during the Viet Nam War. “I was a real crackerjack back then,” she had told me, her face lighting up. She had been spindly back then, too, weighing a mere hundred-and-ten pounds (she always pointed this out when she told this story) and carried a pocket bible wherever she went. She was determined to spread the word of God to students, faculty, administrators, whoever would listen. While anti-war activists were posting peace signs everywhere, she and her small clique roamed the campus in the middle of the night and used flour glue to silkscreen ichthus symbols on stairs and walkways. Her group grew to twenty people before it dissolved after a member was arrested in an outdoor stairwell, flour glue by his side. That member would end up becoming my uncle. My aunt picked him up at the police station. He told her that he converted two of the officers and that he made them promise to go to church the following Sunday. They had exchanged bible interpretations over coffee throughout their college days, became best of friends and fell deeply in love.

When she didn’t answer on the fourth knock, I knew something was wrong. I used my key to open the door, my hand actually trembling. Just yesterday a work colleague was in a terrible accident, an accident that almost assuredly put her in critical condition, and now my senses were on alert.

The house had a strange, familiar smell, something I couldn’t quite place. All of the lights were off. The only light admitted into the house was the sunlight that slipped

past the cracked-open window blinds and the verticals that shaded the sliding-glass door measled with water spots.

“Aunt Mag?” I said.

The rooms were all tidy. The slipcover was tucked tautly into the sofa, chairs were pushed in, the Christian tchotchkes sat in quiet contemplation on their bookshelves. In the living room, the Bible rested on the side table next to my aunt’s reading chair, the ribbon bookmark sticking out of it like – and my aunt would decidedly reprimand me here – a snake’s tongue. I looked for the book my aunt had told me she was reading, but saw of it no trace. I checked the kitchen, where countertop appliances appeared freshly cleaned and placed just so. All of the maple cabinets and drawers were securely shut – unlike my own kitchen, where at least one was open – and I imagined the things within those cupboards suffocating, aching for air. Everything in the kitchen, the very immaculateness of it, seemed suffocating; even the bowl of fake fruit, which still, to this day, lured me to squeeze its fake grapes and marvel at their plasticity.

“Aunt Mag?” I called out and again received no reply. I walked back out to the living room, where she and my uncle used to sneak dances while I was asleep, and ran my hand along the back of the couch. This house was still the setting of all my dreams, despite the fact that I’d been living on my own for more than ten years now. If I dreamt of taking Jenna Tomlin to bed, it was in my old bed in this house.

A door opened and my aunt came sauntering out of her bedroom at the other end of the hallway. From the room, that strange, familiar scent came pouring out, a candle-like smell, yet different. A nightgown veiled her body like a blanket over a giant

birdcage. I didn't think her hair could ever look messy, as woolly and short as it was, and yet there it stood, like coiled springs gone haywire.

She was a deep sleeper, my aunt. We said our hellos and then she slowly walked into the kitchen to get a drink, and, when she did so, I snuck into her bedroom to find the source of that smell. Citronella. She had been burning it, thinking it was a candle. To her credit, it was in quite a decorative jar for something that was meant to keep mosquitoes away. But still, it reeked of craziness, a person who had been teetering at the soft, rounded edge of senility and was ready to start slipping into its obliviousness.

We would not win the tire company. Nobody would end up winning it. The company, after reviewing the three agency pitches, decided to keep their advertising in-house. Which presented an example of the third rule of advertising: Most things one does in the business are in vain.

But I couldn't help but feel that we would have had a chance if I had only worked harder over the weekend. We had met on Sunday afternoon, the team and I, to tighten the screws on our pitch. However, my mind was on my aunt, on what she had told me. She had talked incessantly in the car, her lips smacking, and, during the first half of the trip, I had longed for it to rain so that we had an excuse to turn around. She had talked about the song playing on the radio, family members, black-and-white movies. She had talked about how St. Augustine was the oldest city in the nation, although I had already known that. Anyone who has ever been to St. Augustine knew that. The point was everywhere: on storefront windows, store awnings, coffee cups, wooden plaques, keychains, tiny indoor fountains (representing the Fountain of Youth), candleholders, picture frames.

The souvenir shops exploited the city's age, turned it into a money-making strategy, covered the hardwood of history with the carpet of marketing.

But, at dinner, she had talked about how, long ago, she and my uncle used to stay at the bed-and-breakfasts in St. Augustine, how they used to walk the quiet, tree-canopied streets alongside the city proper, completely in love with each other, their entire futures ahead of them. It was along those streets that they decided not to have children. They had decided to see the world by car, plane, boat, every means of transportation available. They planned on becoming missionaries. They would visit foreign countries, breathe in the culture around them and breathe out their Christian faith. My aunt had agreed to be my godmother, of course, but what were the chances? They were still young. The future was not only unfathomable, but impossible. Even if they could see into the future, they wouldn't believe what they saw. No way would a mosquito end the life of a man who had labored through sixty-six years of life. Who could possibly believe that my parents, so very young, would both die at the same time in a car accident, that their dreams would be permanently interrupted only to interrupt the dreams of my aunt and uncle?

Two weeks had passed since our agency's pitch to the tire company, where I had blundered numerous times. I paused uncomfortably while trying to remember my words. I had remembered to explain the strengths, weakness and opportunities of the company, but had forgotten the threats. The PowerPoint failed to switch to the next slide when I pressed the button. Perhaps the final blow was when, at the end of the pitch, the creative director informed me that my fly was down.

Jenna tried to comfort me by saying that it was okay, it happened. She was still trying to comfort me now.

“Where’s aglet?” she asked me, sitting in the guest chair of my cubicle, and I told her he was on vacation.

“Timmy and I broke things off,” she said, just as out-of-the-blue as when she called Scott’s penis an aglet. I stared at her in disbelief, secretly elated at the news of her no longer being engaged. Here she was, finally cheering me up from my failure at the pitch and not even knowing it.

We started dating a few weeks after her engagement was broken. She told me she had moved on and, summoning courage I didn’t know I had, I asked her out on a date. She assured me she wasn’t on the rebound, but doubt lingered in the back of my mind, and I kept it there intentionally, as protection. That doubt slowly dissipated the longer we were together, of course. By the time she moved out of the house she was sharing with her now ex-fiancée, the doubt was nothing but the tiniest speck of dust in the air. Soon she was spending the night at my place just as often as she was sleeping at her apartment – this was a few months after the tire pitch – and the doubt was gone completely. I understood that this was a relationship that could end up going somewhere. It was a deep understanding, something that was well below the wavering surface of emotions. If Scott Greeley was still stationed on the other side of my cubicle wall – he had moved to another cubicle a week ago – he surely would have nicknamed me Rebound Boy or something of the like. But distance destroyed his desire to pick on me; he had found a new victim, no doubt.

My office phone rang and, when I answered it, the woman on the other end introduced herself as Katie Brewer. She asked me if I knew the person across the street

from her; my aunt, as it turned out. Then she told me how she, her husband and twin six-year-old children had just moved in across the street from my aunt.

“I got your number from your business card,” she said and, before I could ask how she got my card, she informed me that my aunt had given it to her son.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

The woman named Katie took a deep breath and then explained. She had found my aunt squatting in her yard, my aunt’s hand on her little boy’s shoulder.

“I called him in for dinner. I just wanted him inside,” Katie said. “I’m sorry, I’m sure your aunt is a nice woman and all. But I asked my son what she was saying to him and he told me that she was talking about God, and how he should ‘go covert,’ although I think he meant ‘convert.’ Then she handed him your card and told him it was her own card, that she was part of something called,” and here the neighbor paused before saying, “‘the fishing mission’ or something.”

I corrected the woman and apologized. I told her I would take care of everything.

“She’s getting old,” I said.

“I understand. My husband’s father is getting there, too.” In the background, children sang and clapped. They laughed in a quick, stuttered way, as if they couldn’t catch their breath. “Listen, I can recommend a place,” Katie said. “I mean, if you think you’ll need it. I’m not trying to butt into your business, I just know how it can be.”

“Thank you,” I told her. “I’ll let you know.” I apologized again and hung up. I pictured my aunt, in her muumuu and slippers, bent down, chatting to some poor kid, who probably stared at her in wonderment. I was sure the kid thought her crazy, which filled me with an intense hatred toward the child. I wanted to shake the kid until he

understood what she was going through. I didn't want to hurt him; I just wanted to scare him, make him feel what I felt at that moment. I knew I was being irrational – he was just a kid, and I surely would have felt the same way at six years old. Still, I resented the child for thinking that way about my aunt, my mother.

I ate lunch in my cubicle. It was quiet with Scott Greeley gone, and a part of me missed him, missed his rattle of throat-clearing, his incessant sniffing. A part of me – I hadn't known how big of a part until now – missed his thunderous voice that had covered up the sound of my chewing.

CONTRITION

What surprised me the most wasn't the way you looked – slim, handsome, so different from how you had been – but that you were still alive, that you hadn't killed yourself in the time since I last saw you twenty-three years ago. That first meeting was a quick one – no doubt we were both stunned by each other's presence – but long enough for us to make plans to meet at a café the following day. The next day, you approached the café with a tall, beautiful, olive-skinned woman. She had a soft, chiseled face, brown hair, and she wore a sheer brown scarf that curled loosely around her neck, the ends of the scarf lifting with the breeze. Then you stopped walking, kissed the woman. She walked away, glancing over her shoulder and catching my eye. She entered a store across the street.

Before you reached the café, I saw you – us – as children again. We were at the dirt piles on the far end of our subdivision, and we were with my other friend, Troy. We rode our bikes up the mounds of packed dirt that, at nine years old, seemed mountainous. We tipped our Huffys forward and bumped our way down full speed. You had always been the hesitant one, the one who sat on his bike and looked down at the bottom of the dirt pile. The blood drained out of your face, your hands tapped the rubber handgrips. When you finally tipped forward and got moving, your rear tire fishtailed. Sometimes you'd make it down, other times you'd fall sideways, the bike landing on you like a tipped calf. Troy ridiculed you and, as much as I hated admitting it, I too ridiculed you. You had been the butt of all our jokes. I folded a dead ant into a square of bubble gum and offered it to you, and you had accepted it, oblivious. You believed that the flat tire of your Huffy was of your own doing, when, in fact, Troy and I popped the inner tube with

Troy's rusty switchblade. One time, Troy and I ripped out your parents' mailbox and hid it in the thick of woods near the small brook that swaggered around the oaks we used to climb. Troy told you that the postal service did such things when people didn't pay their postal bills. You had believed that, too.

When you reached the café, you held out your hand and I shook it. You said, "That was Anna."

"The Missus?"

"One day," you told me, looking at me eye-to-eye. You stood up straight. I assumed your Coke-bottle glasses were replaced with contact lenses. Your clothes were no longer too big or too small.

We sat at a table outside, and you told me how you met Anna at church and how wonderful she was. We ordered lunch and the waiter brought out two glasses of ice water. On the other side of the white, vinyl picket fence that separated the street from the café, cars sped by, their exhaust stirring a pool of dead water-oak leaves on the sidewalk into a flurry, the sound of the dry leaves like a light rain.

I remember that day so perfectly, Stephen. I remember things that perhaps you had taken for granted. Anna's scarf, for instance. Or later, when Anna had finished shopping, the way she shielded her eyes from the bright sun, her pinky slightly separated from the rest of her hand.

"A lot's happened," you told me, and then you looked up at the sky, which was mostly clear and bright and blue. The air was autumn crisp, but unseasonable warmth was tiptoeing in. "You remember how I dropped out after my sophomore year?"

"I remember," I said.

“Those were the days,” you said, and rolled your eyes.

Those days, a wooden fence separated your backyard from Troy’s. Your mother screamed from your yard. You yelled back plaintively, sobbing like a toddler. Troy and I hunted for peepholes in the fence to spy on you, to try to catch your mom beating you. But we struggled to get the right angle or else we’d just miss the fight, catching only the double-bang of your shoddy screen door as you and your mother slipped inside.

Helen. That was your mother’s name. She was a short, round woman with balloon cheeks and bushy, bent eyebrows that nearly met in the middle. She didn’t walk – she waddled. Her arms were marred with purple bruises and blemishes that looked like burn marks. Probably cigar burns, Troy had told me, for when she didn’t pay no mind.

Your stepfather was the quiet one. I don’t remember ever hearing him talk, much less scream like your mom. Only a few times did I catch a glimpse of his sallow, cratered face, his brown-gray hair that curdled into sparse patches. One time I remember in particular. Troy and I had been shooting hoops in Troy’s driveway while your dad fiddled with his car. The car’s hood shielded most of his body. Your stepfather poked his head out from behind the hood and stared at us, never saying a word. He studied us for a long time before sliding his head back behind the hood, like a turtle hiding in its shell. The man’s sooty arms and hands poked out from behind the hood every so often. Had those hands hit you? Had they done something worse?

At the café, you told me you had put scissors to your wrist a few times, and then shrugged it off.

“Because of me?” I asked.

“Because of Troy. It was a long time ago,” you told me and then rubbed your forehead. You said that, as a child, you had looked up to me.

“You shouldn’t have,” I said, and you agreed. We laughed, and I thought how this was the first time we ever laughed together. The waiter dropped our lunch off and we chose a bottle of wine. You held your glass out, the sun glinting just below the rim. I tapped it. Then we were covered in cool shade as the sun hid behind one of the few clouds.

“Believe it or not,” you said, “but you were the nicest to me. It was probably pity, but that was fine.”

I *had* pitied you as a child, secretly, in the dark recesses of my bedroom, my face hidden behind the pillow that heaved with each sob – my punishment for my cruel behavior. I had even mumbled prayers into those pillows as penance. Sometimes, I preferred a more corporeal punishment and dragged my fingernails down my cheeks, leaving behind five tears of scratchmarks.

I recited an entire rosary after that one time at the dirt pile, when Troy had slid his shorts down past his dirt-stained knees, revealing his small stub of a penis. Blue smears stained the corners of his smiling mouth, remnants of a raspberry ice pop he had eaten earlier. Off in the distance, a sprinkler sputtered and kids shrieked with laughter. Troy called you over, pointed to his penis and told you to “Kiss it.” You resisted at first. But then Troy threatened to end his friendship with you. You succumbed, and Troy declared you a fairy. And what had I done to stop this? Nothing. I looked away. I looked away and pretended I was one of those happy children who danced with the sprinkler, while Troy called you, “Fairy fairy fairy fairy.”

After we ate, after you insisted on paying, Anna appeared at our table. She held a brown shopping bag and was playfully upset that we had been drinking wine without her. She looked benevolent (so opposite your mother), and she smelled sweet, like vanilla. One side of her face lit up with sunlight, the curve of her cheek painted gold.

You turned to me and said, “What do you say about dinner Friday night? We’re having another couple over, and – .”

“And I’d feel like a fifth wheel,” I said.

“Don’t. Besides, this other couple, I’m not sure about them. Always arguing. By the end of the night, you might not be the only single one there.” Anna smacked you on the shoulder for that remark. Then she tucked one side of her long brown hair behind her ear.

My home was a flat-roofed, stuccoed block house that was built in the fifties. I owned a spare amount of furniture: couch, coffee table, dinette set, TV stand. For a long time, I kept a gun in the thin coffee-table drawer because I had slept on the sofa most nights and there had been a streak of burglaries in the area. I eventually migrated to my bedroom. In my bedroom: a dresser, a desk with a computer, an armoire, an unmade bed with the sheet tangled into a knot, the pillows tumbled on the floor like tossed sacks. I never remembered my dreams and, if not for the pretzel of a sheet, I would have believed I never had any.

Two books sat on my dresser – *Investing in Stocks* and *The Collected Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson* – two books sharing the same space, their personalities as different as those of young siblings. I was trying to decide which to read. Which would

you read? While lunching, you had confessed to reading the Bible three times. You even mentioned that you were, at one point, curious about the priesthood, which made me wonder: When was the last time I attended church? I had told you four years during our lunch, but I think it was even longer. I couldn't tolerate the constant standing and kneeling. I never learned the words to the songs, so I pretended to sing, the *Worship!* songbook lying in my palms like an injured bird, its broken wings splayed open. There were, of course, things I liked about church. For instance, the smells. Cologne, aged wood, ashes. I always believed – still do, as I write this – that that mixture was what faith smelled like.

What did you have faith in, Stephen? What was the thought that stopped you from cutting your wrist with that pair of scissors so long ago?

The movie I had to see was an action thriller, and it proved to be as formulaic as I had expected.

“The explosions were right on cue,” I reported to my sister, Wendy, with whom I had gone to see the movie.

“I liked it,” she told me.

“You would.”

“You *wouuuuuuuuuuld.*”

We talked like this sometimes, like we were still children battling to have the last word. But I usually let her have the last word anyway. She deserved it. She took care of Dad (dead now, as I write this), who had had a stroke. He lost his ability to speak and

had to use a wheelchair to get around. Our mother died of cancer a year before his stroke.

“Formulaic,” I told my sister.

“Is that what you’re going to write in your review?”

“Yes. Maybe.”

“Now *that’s* formulaic.”

We walked outside, the cold air welcoming after sitting in a theater that had been stifling.

“Do you want to go to a party with me?” I asked her. “A dinner one?” She was single, my sister. I had been her ‘date’ before, so she owed me.

“You were invited to a party? *You?*”

“Do you remember Stephen Summerlin?” I said.

“The kid who almost blew himself up?”

You had been twelve when you duct-taped a stick of dynamite to your waist and threatened to light it. Cops blocked off your cul-de-sac. When Troy and I rode our bikes up to the barricade, the officers told us not to worry, to just stay back. Later, when I heard what exactly happened, I laughed about it with Troy. Stephen! Dynamite!

I sent fifty Hail Marys into my pillow that same night.

“Yes,” I told my sister. “Him.”

There were unopened boxes in the foyer and kitchen of your house. Wendy almost tripped over one when you said, “Anna is moving in.”

You directed us to a large, open living room with one wall accented in a blushing red. Your house was big, half of it dark hardwood, the other half beige tile. Framed photos – some in color, others sepia – hung on the textured walls. In one, you and Anna sat on bikes at what looked like a State Park. Shaded under a canopy of live oaks, Anna wore gray cargo capris and a black sleeveless top. She also wore a smile that looked impatient, as if she were caught between her desire to hurry down the trail and the request for her to stop and pose for a picture. I imagined you falling over on your bike, like you had done when you were a child. I imagined her laughing at you.

Wendy and I sat opposite each other, at the end of the table. You and Anna sat opposite each other at the other end. In between us, sat the couple I had never met: Gordon and Kelly. The couple owned a plant nursery – “Largest in the city,” Gordon had told us – and they planned on opening a new one in a nearby city.

“What do you do?” Gordon asked me.

“Journalist.”

“Movie reviewer,” Wendy said.

“That’s a journalist,” I said, faking surprise at Wendy’s remark. In truth, we had this same exchange at other dinner parties, where we had to talk to people we had never met.

“Sure,” Kelly said, agreeing with me.

“I thought you had to get shot at to earn the title ‘Journalist’,” Gordon said with a smile, taking Wendy’s side.

“Gordon,” Kelly said.

You and Anna brought dinner out to the table as if the two of you had practiced all day. You both were so synchronized in your actions. When you finished, Anna filled the wine glasses.

We drank our way into the night, the music lightly playing in the background accentuated with the clinks of forks and knives and glasses. On occasion, Anna circled the table, filling glasses. It was as if my drinking were involuntary, and there were many times when I didn't even realize I had lifted my glass until I had already removed its rim from my lips, the wine halfway down my throat.

"Red for me," I said as Anna hovered above my shoulder. She poured my wine and set the bottle in front of me. She brushed my shoulder as she walked by and that brush stayed with me and carried me away into my own drunken thoughts, about how there are some people in this world whose presence is as grand and beautiful and innocent as the ocean in the morning, and whose presence, at the same time, is as dangerous as an unsuspecting rip tide, where one second you're safely treading water, and the next you're pulled past the outer break of waves, the waving pendulums of sea oats spread across the dunes fading away and then the entire shoreline blinking out of existence until there is nothing but the water forming the horizon, there is nothing but her face. Like I said, Stephen, I was drunk.

And then she sat down and I saw her look at me and I thought I saw something in her look, and then I thought how I was drunk and imagining things.

During the meal, I got sucked into a conversation with Gordon about choosing the right plants based on temperate zones. I asked a question every now and then, feigning interest, but, with each sip of wine, it was getting harder to think of questions.

“So, Jake,” you called from across the table. “Wendy says you’re reading Emerson.”

“Trying to,” I said. I don’t remember telling Wendy that, but I immediately wished I hadn’t. You told me you had read him during high school.

“I really haven’t read much of it,” I said. I had a wild idea of the two of us reading it at the same time and then meeting to discuss the work. Our own little Emerson book club. It was one of those fleeting ideas one gets while drinking and conversing that, one second, seemed absolutely plausible and then, the next second, seemed impossible and ridiculous.

“Transcendentalism,” you said from across the room. Then you mumbled something else.

“I’m sorry?” I said.

“Nature.”

“Oh, well, yeah. I really haven’t read much of it. Time and all.”

“One of the things I liked most had to do with the stars. What was it?”

You stared at the table, trying to remember. I finished the last gulp of my wine for the sole purpose of doing something with my hands – they seemed to have nowhere else to go. I poured myself another glass, although I knew I wouldn’t be able to drink any of it. At the other end of the table, Anna poured herself more white. She was talking with Wendy about something.

“Have you ever seen the dock?” Kelly asked me.

“No.”

“Oh, you should walk down there. By the lake, in the back. Stephen, you should show them.”

“Are there alligators?” my sister asked.

“Wendy’s afraid of alligators,” I told everyone. “Deathly.”

Kelly deferred to Anna, who said, Yes, she and Stephen had seen one a few weeks ago. But she assured Wendy that they didn’t bother anyone.

“Stephen and I’ll take you down there,” Anna said.

“The stars,” you said, grinning, smacking your hand onto the table. “Something about being reverent to the stars because they’re always there and yet always out of reach.”

“Yes, I seem to remember that part,” I lied.

You and Anna walked me out to the dock. Wendy stayed behind, with Gordon and Kelly.

“She really is afraid of them?” Anna said. “Of alligators, I mean.”

“She’s lived in Florida most of her life and still can’t get over them,” I explained.

“I remember a little bit about her, growing up in the neighborhood,” you said.

“She always called me by my last name. ‘Hey, Summerlin!’”

We all laughed. The night was cloudless. The flagstone path to the dock was surrounded by trees, some of which tilted to the side, bent askew from past hurricanes.

When we got to the dock, we took off our shoes and socks, rolled up our pants and dangled our legs over the edge. Tiny fish darted back and forth in the water below. There wasn’t much of a moon, but what little of it was there dotted the tiny peaks of

lakewater silver. You asked me if I had ever heard from Troy after he moved away. No, I said. Then you told Anna a little bit about our childhood, about how you, as a kid, had always looked up to me. But, really, I missed most of the conversation. I focused on the tiny swells of the lake slapping against the dock. It was such a silly idea, you looking up to me. I broke into your first car, spray painted your parents' house. I'm sorry, I thought, sitting there on your dock.

"About what?" you asked me. Apparently, I had said my apology out loud, because both you and Anna were looking at me. Both of you were smiling, watching me, waiting for me to say something, but I was speechless.

"Well, I'm sorry, too," you said. I looked down at the planks of the dock. Here and there, tiny holes were burnt into the wood, like the holes Troy and I had searched for in your fence only to watch you get beaten by your mother. But these holes, the ones in your dock, these I wanted to slip through and disappear.

What was the thought that stopped you from cutting your wrist, Stephen?

"So what's your favorite movie of all time?" Anna asked.

When I looked up, you were no longer sitting next to her – you were approaching the back door of your house. Your silhouette from the back-porch light made you appear smaller, shrunken, like you were still a boy. You were very drunk; I could tell by the way your silhouette walked slowly up the porch steps, how it stood at the top step for a few seconds before opening the back door, as if your silhouette needed to compose itself before returning to its guests.

"You probably get asked that a lot," Anna said. I turned to her, the woman I was not allowed to be with. Her hair was tucked behind her ears, but a few untamable strands

on each side had escaped and were blowing in the breeze. If she was smiling when she had asked her question, the smile was gone now, wiped clean, leaving her lips straightened out into a tight line.

“You look nervous,” she said.

“I do?”

“Like you’re afraid you might fall in.” She gestured to the lake.

“I could use a bath, it’s been weeks.”

She laughed, and I let out a deep breath.

“Stephen says you guys met in church.”

We talked for a while, until we found ourselves sitting side-by-side, lost in conversation, mostly about movies and songs we liked, until we found ourselves playing a game in which one person named a state and the other had to guess its capital. That transition – from a conversation to a game – was like the border between two states: present, but invisible, and only definable later on, after looking at the map of memory, running a finger over the road that had landed you there. This led to this, which then led to that. It was a transition I associated with long friendships, where topics changed like weather. And then Kelly called for us to come back inside, but we didn’t go back in until well past midnight.

We said our good-byes. You told me to give you a call during the week, maybe have a little lunch. I agreed, although I knew I would do no such thing. Perhaps you knew, too, that this would be the last time we’d see each other. There would be no rekindling of a friendship. There had never been a true friendship in the first place.

I opened the car door for my sister. We pulled out of your driveway. Your dock rolled into view, a dark arm jutting out over the lake in your backyard. I stopped the car and pictured what Anna and I must have looked like sitting there, legs dangling off the water-washed boards, our silhouettes looking up at the night sky.

“What’s wrong?” Wendy said. She sounded impatient. I understood. There were still things to do at her home. She had to take care of Dad; she had to help dress him in his pajamas and prepare his bed and read to him, as he liked to be read to sleep, like a child. That was Wendy’s life, the life she had chosen, and if I had to pick out a specific time when she had decided on this course, it would be the time when she had her heart broken by a man named Glen.

During her senior year of college, Wendy had been in love with a man named Glen, who claimed that he loved her. Then, two years later, Wendy found him at the park with another woman. They had been sitting on a park bench, eating ice-cream. She watched Glen use his finger to clean off the girl’s chin. “That’s what I remember most vividly,” she told me later that day, “him using a part of his body to clean off a part of her body.” The next day, when I went to Wendy’s apartment to console her, I found her in the complex’s courtyard, sitting near a small tree. I sat next to her. When she looked up, her mouth was brown. At first, I thought that it was dried blood. I became dizzy, as if I were going to pass out. But then I realized it what it was. In front of her, a small hole had been dug in the mound surrounding the tree. She had been eating dirt.

It was at least a week after the dinner, no more than two weeks, when I ran into Anna downtown, and we said hello as if we were old friends. We shook hands, hers soft

and frail-like, as breakable, it felt, as porcelain. We stood in the middle of the busy sidewalk, suited people brushing by us, no doubt cursing us as they passed. She said she was doing some shopping, was already exhausted from the day, although she carried nothing but her purse, a minimal bag that rested on her tiny shoulder like an ornament. I told her she needed to see a good friend of mine named Juan Valdez, and she laughed, dipping her head for just an instant. I didn't need to say those words. I could have just wished her a good day and kept moving. But something within me couldn't let go of her presence. I had let go of her hand after shaking it, but, there on the sidewalk, that was as far as I wanted to go, as far as I *ever* wanted to go.

We had coffee at the same café you and I had met that one day, but we ate inside, acting as if our seating didn't matter, but it really did; we didn't want to sit outside because neither Anna nor I wanted to be spotted by you, even knowing you were at work in an adjacent town. We talked, not afraid of bringing up your name because – and I knew Anna felt this way, too – because, as counterintuitive as it may sound, every time your name came up you became less real, like a character in a novel we both adored.

“Stephen had a rough childhood,” I said.

“He told me,” she said.

“But he's a good person, a much better person than I.”

“That's not what Stephen says.”

“That's because Stephen's a good person.”

The drive back to my house seemed strange, as if I were in a new, unfamiliar city. Laurel oaks lined the streets, punching their green fists out of the earth and into the thin,

frigid air. My front walk didn't seem mine, but rather a visitor's. Who had cut out this flower bed near the front door? The pansies, with their velvety purple flowers, lining the scalloped edge. Behind them, vibrant, full hydrangea, bloomless and untended, growth straggling as if undecided on which way to grow.

On the drive, and even up the walk, Anna and I had been silent, muted with the numbness of anticipation and self-disgust and excitement of what was to come, of what we were doing, and I knew my actions were wrong, but I couldn't stop myself any more than I'd be able to stop a room from spinning after drinking too much.

When we were finished, we lay in bed, and I was happy that we held each other's hand for quite a while. It was only when she released my hand that awkwardness and shame filled the room like fluorescent light, revealing everything that was wrong, and she left as quietly as she came.

That day I found my sister eating dirt was the same day she asked me something that would stick with me for a long time. She asked me, "Did you ever look at yourself in the mirror in the near-dark?" I said no, and she said that I should try it. "You can still see yourself, but it's like it's not you. There's the shape, but that's all." And so I tried it in the my bathroom. I stared into the mirror. Nothing but my short, brown hair parted to the side, my round face, the subtle line of each of my brows. I stared longer, and then it happened. My face melted away until there were only dark outlines of my features, and those outlines did seem separate from myself. My hair was no longer part of my head, but rather sat on it, like a resting animal. My skin was no longer my skin, but a cloak draped around myself. No. It was as if I were possessed and the image in front of me

was my possessor. The outlines belonged to the face of a different person, someone piercing me with searching, invisible eyes.

I lived with my sin for many months, always waiting for your arrival at my front door (do you know where I live?), always waiting to see your betrayed face. But you never came, and perhaps that was my punishment from you. Or maybe Anna never told you. We spoke only once. She called to tell me that she couldn't stop thinking about me, that she felt like she was falling in love with me. I told her she was alone in her feelings, although she wasn't. But I had done enough to you already.

There were few sounds in the house last night, when I made my decision. The chime of the pole across the street as the belly of its flag took blows from the wind; the clock's passing of time, the tick-tock of the universe's footsteps as it continued its expansion from its once-dense center that had, at one time, held everything together with a tight fist; a car's engine failing to turn over, then coming to life, then puttering out, like a child who can't quite shake off sleep. Everything lost its density – the air, my body, my belongings – everything was hollowed out like beached driftwood, so that any movement seemed ethereal, feverish.

I want you to know, Stephen, that what I'm going to do is not your fault or Anna's fault. We can only blame ourselves for our actions. Say that in your head before you read on. Now say it again. Say it with each bead of your rosary and know this: that you are my priest and this is my last confession. Don't let it bother you that, by the time you read this, I will be long gone, a mere memory, no more present in this world than your sad late mother.

BARRIERE DI LINGUA

At the train station in Rome, Jenny and I run into a man who says he'll help us with our baggage and show us to the train to Florence. He does this by pointing and grunting. The man looks to be in his mid-fifties and is dressed in jeans and a plaid button-down shirt. His hair, a tousled gray mess, is as patchy as his stubble of a beard. Also, he has something on his arm, a green blob, which, at first, I take as a birth defect, but then realize it's a tattoo of an indecipherable picture.

"I don't think this man works for the train station," I tell my wife, but she ignores me, even now in what I consider a dire situation. And so we follow this man who walks quickly through the crowded station as if he were in a footrace. Or on the lam.

My wife of sixteen years is not talking to me because I lost my wedding ring on our second day in Rome. She had asked me why I took it off, and I explained how I didn't want it to get stolen. My father, who had never been to Rome, told me that the city was riddled with thieves. That was my father's way, to give advice on things he had no experience with. One time, he told my mother what it was like to be a woman. This was when she was pregnant with me. He had told her, "To be a woman means to be accepting of other people's failures." No doubt he had just failed at something. Like being compassionate.

"I ignored him," my mother told me when I was older, "mainly because I lacked self-esteem and didn't know how to respond." Later in life, my mother still ignored him, but for a much nobler cause – that is, to reduce my father's self-esteem. After my mother passed away last year, my father joked about how he could still hear our Mom ignoring

him from beyond the grave. He did miss her, though. He never told me that, as my father doesn't open up to me at all, but he told my sister.

Contrary to my father's warnings, however, people in Rome went out of their way to be nice and helpful. Except for my wife, of course, after I lost my wedding ring.

"It's probably somewhere in my suitcase," I say to a cold shoulder, as the man with the tattoo finds us a train leaving for Florence.

We climb up the three steps and the tattooed man jams our belongings into a side compartment. Then he leads us to two empty seats and holds out his hand, gesturing for us to sit down. He heaves each breath like a smoker and clears a phlegmy throat behind closed mouth. He keeps his hand hovering in mid-air, which tells me he's not gesturing at all, but waiting for a tip. I give him five Euro and he walks off the train, mumbling something. Mumbling is a habit that I myself have taken up within the last couple of years. Jenny once told me that I mumbled in my sleep, too. From my sleep mumbings, she learned that I went to Catholic school for eight years, that I cried in the elevator going to the top floor of the Empire State Building, and that my childhood dog, Dick Tracy, died from a gun shot wound after running away and defecating in a crazy person's front yard. "I learn more about you while you're sleeping than any other time," my wife has told me on more than one occasion. Usually, this is followed by, "It's okay, it's chromosomal," by which she means I have a Y chromosome.

For some reason, things became awkward between my wife and me after our fourteenth anniversary, as if we woke up one day and forgot how to walk. We had become distant, like two planets falling out of their ordinary orbits, taking new, separate paths. But why do I have the feeling now that I'm the one being sucked in toward the

sun, while my wife is going with the natural flow of the expanding universe, finding whole new solar systems? So, a month ago, I interrupted my wife's reading with a declaration: "We're going to Sandals Resort." And then, to elaborate, "To get away."

"I was thinking Italy," she responded.

"I'm thinking Sandals."

And so we booked our Italy trip with the help of a travel agent-slash-friend. This was our big idea, our attempt at realigning ourselves with our natural orbit. A trip. Then came the ring incident in Rome, which moved my planet somewhere between Venus and Mercury, and my wife's planet just outside the Kuiper Belt. If the ring goes unfound, we'll never realign. I feel sure of this.

The train jerks and rolls forward, and we leave the station and, probably, my wedding ring behind us. We're going to visit my sister Lisa. She has lived in Florence for a year now, desperate to escape our father's overwhelming concern for her well-being. She is his favorite. My father was so hurt by her move that he started calling her Pat instead of Lisa. It started with Expat, but evolved, as words often do. "Tell Pat. I have a large sum of money for her. If she moves back," my father told me the other day.

Thinking about this now, I shake my head and Jenny asks if I'm okay. Before I can answer, a man and woman walk up to us. The man says something in Italian, his face red with anger. My intuition – not as finely honed as Jenny's, but still in working order – tells me we're in their seats.

"I'm sorry, what?" I say, real ornery-like, and Jenny squeezes my hand. I won't give in easily, not like I usually do, even if these are his seats. He's going to have to fight me for them. My patience has thinned enough to the point that even I, a lover not a

fighter (although Jenny tells people I'm more of a sleeper), am ready to stand up to a stranger like this six-and-a-half-foot, medium-build, perturbed man. I will not move from this seat, period.

The man waves a frustrated hand into the air and snarls something under his breath.

As I help Jenny out of her seat, the perturbed man's wife leaves his side and talks to one of the train's employees, who, after listening to the woman, gets on a Walkie-Talkie. The moment seems to last forever. The perturbed man sits down in my old seat.

"He lost the wedding ring I got him," my wife tells a stranger sitting near the aisle. I look at my wife as if she were a stranger herself. She goes on: "Perhaps it's up his ass."

The man looks perplexed until she says the word "ass," and then smiles.

The train employee guy gets off his Walkie-Talkie and approaches us like a warden.

"You're on the wrong train," he says. "We have two seats, but in different cars." His tone warns us that asking to be seated next to each other is out of the question. He is a very stern man.

I kiss my wife's cheek, tell her good-bye. A movie quote would be perfect right now. My wife and I have been quoting movies since our dating days. When the moment feels right, one of us says a famous line. It has become a competition: Who can think of the most pertinent line first. So, now, I say, "Oh, Jenny, don't let's ask for the moon. We have the stars," and I think I see something resembling a smile. "Something," my father

would say. He would furrow his eyebrows and pause in places to signal that what he was saying was wise, “is better. Than nothing.”

When I turn around, the warden is staring at us, as if I were summoning up the courage to ask for a conjugal visit with my wife. If he knew what had happened in Rome, he’d know that the conjugality of my visit was over.

A woman sits in the empty seat across from me, and so I nod hello to her in a strange, mechanical way, as she is very beautiful. Her brown, curly hair falls past her long, slender neck and drapes around her tiny shoulders. She has blue, almond eyes.

“Buongiorno,” she says.

“Buongiorno.”

“Lei va a Firenze?”

“Si,” I say. I have no idea what she said.

“Me, anche.”

We pass through the landscape as if our train were a loom weaving quilts of green hilly land, rows of olive trees, speckles of crops poking from the ground. I picture my wife and myself living in a yellow, stuccoed bungalow surrounded by all this. What a perfect place. No wonder Italians live so long. They drink, smoke, even eat, and still remain remarkably healthy into old age.

The woman sitting in front of me on the train orders coffee and biscotti from the attendant.

I order the same. “Coffee and biscotti,” I say, and the woman looks delighted.

“You’re American,” she says in an American accent.

“You’re American,” I say.

“I’m from Syracuse.”

The attendant leaves us alone, bumping his way down the aisle.

The woman’s name is Gale. She’s a veterinarian, and I pull the old joke, “Oh, which war?” out of my hat. She laughs – probably out of courtesy – and she asks if I’m here with anyone.

“My wife,” I tell her.

“Oh,” she says. She looks down at her small, white-paper coffee cup and the biscotti crumbs on her napkin, which she has managed to tear into small pieces.

“I lost my ring,” I say, showing her my left hand. *“Back in Rome. I took it off one minute, and the next minute, it was gone.”*

She smiles and says, *“Well, it’s just a ring.”*

The woman and I converse on-and-off for the entire ride. And, despite the fact that I told her I’m married, she’s gives me clues that she finds me interesting. For instance, she’s listening to me. Also, she’s talking to me. Two things most women don’t do in my presence. But the big clue is the phone number scrawled on a bit of napkin that she leaves behind, something I don’t even notice until she’s up and left during deboarding.

The gray, cobbled roads of Florence can be hard on the feet after a long day of walking, especially when barely a word has been spoken between two people – not one word at all if you don’t count such things as “I’ve got to use the bathroom” or “Christ, I’m thirsty.” But the silence will definitely break by tomorrow morning, as this is when

we're supposed to meet my sister. Our rendezvous point is at a place called Giotto's Tower, a tower I've already refused to climb and told my sister as much.

"Are you still afraid of heights?" she asked me over the phone prior to my trip. She acted as if age had something to do with phobias.

"It's weird," I told her. "I mean, I got pubic hair and my voice changed, but it stopped there." Nothing stops a conversation between two siblings like the mention of pubic hair.

We walk past shops, restaurants, apartment buildings. In search of a toilet, we walk down a set of stairs in the middle of the sidewalk, much like the kind that leads to a subway. However, these stairs lead not into a subway station, but rather an underground mall. People stream by like mullet and we weave through them head-on, a couple of foreigners swimming upstream. We find a toilet, just past the flower shop, and pay the attendant standing outside. He then gestures us inside, giving us the authority to go Number One.

When you're fighting with your spouse in a different country, your surroundings seem to mock you. The churches no longer ask you to gaze upon their stunning architecture, but rather demand you to repent. The throngs of people speaking another language seem to be talking about you, conversations that include such words as "Stupid" and "American." Yet, at the same time, the air I breathe – after climbing out of the underground mall – is better than back home, sweeter somehow, and acts as a reminder of how much fun we could be having.

We walk until evening and then go back to the hotel. Jenny obtains our key from the front desk, tells a confused-looking janitor that her husband lost his wedding ring, and

then we head upstairs to take a shower, which is barely larger than one of our kitchen tiles back home, small to the point that I'm not showering as much as pirouetting in a soapy lather.

And then we throw ourselves out into the streets of Florence, where the nighttime air seems even sweeter. Jenny herself seems lighter now, and I think how, just as lights are programmed to shine at night, so, too, do we.

"You mumbled again," Jenny says. Her tone is like an old friend.

"Just now?"

"Last night. About your mom, you were apologizing."

"Apologizing?"

"You asked her why she was sitting under the tree. Maybe you weren't apologizing. Maybe consoling?"

"Sometimes they're the same thing," I tell her, and I can hear my father's version of what I just said: 'Sometimes. They're the same. Thing.'

I was seven years old the day I found my mother – usually stoical when faced with grief – crying under the tree. My friend's mother dropped me off from school in front of my house. My mother's car sat in the driveway with the front door open, as if she had been in too much of a rush to close it. The car was off, but the keys were still in the ignition. I didn't know about the keys from looking inside, but rather because the automated voice was telling me "The door is ajar. The door is ajar." After searching for her in the house, I found her in the backyard. She sat Indian style, back against the live oak. She kept repeating, "I can't do it, I can't do it." I told her about the door, how it was ajar. She told me I was going to have a brother or sister.

Here's what I found out much later in life, while in college: My father wasn't jumping for joy about having another child because of "financial reasons," so he told my mother there was only one thing they could do. He wrote down the number of a clinic. My mother agreed that they weren't quite ready for a second child yet. Until she got to the clinic.

Despite that, Lisa immediately became my father's favorite. He was always there for her more than he was for me. For instance, he couldn't make it to my childbirth due to the Red Sox-Yankees game, but he found time not only to be around during Lisa's birth, but to cut the cord, too. If one were to rummage to the bottom of my father's sock drawer, he or she would find a plastic bag containing the crusty umbilical scab that fell off my sister during bath time.

"This is part. Of what kept your sister. Alive."

Maybe I'll tell Jenny how my sister Lisa almost never was. Not now, though, not the day before we actually see her. That's like telling someone not to look at the giant mole on a person's face right before that person makes an entrance.

We find a restaurant that's bustling called Zsa Zsa's, and so we sit down at a table outside, under a canopy. Our server – a tall, lanky man with a slender face – waltzes between the crammed, white-clothed tables and asks us something. Jenny orders a water, as do I, and before he walks away I grab his elbow and ask for a bottle of his finest house wine.

"So long," I tell him, as I know this will be the last we see of him for a good fifteen minutes. Eating, my wife and I have learned, is an event in Italy. At our first dining experience, back in Rome, we finished off our tiramisu and waited full-bellied for

our check. And we waited. And waited. A couple who had arrived after us stood up, brushed crumbs off of themselves and left. I raised my hand a number of times, catching the attention of our waiter and he smiled, nodded and walked into what I assumed was the kitchen, his hand in his apron pocket. I felt sure that my wave was interpreted correctly, until he popped out of the swinging kitchen door and sat down at the far-end of the bar. “What we’ve got here,” I told my wife, “is failure to communicate.”

We eventually learned that the phrase, “Il conto, per favore” – or, “The bill, please” – was not only recommended, but mandatory for wrapping things up with your waiter. Maybe my sister told me this and I just forgot. My sister was very thorough when she informed me about Italy, at least she sounded thorough. She talked a lot and used big words, but I’ve always had trouble retaining information when it’s given to me over the phone. It’s as if the words are being cut into spaghetti when they pour out of those little holes in the receiver and my brain can’t mold them back together. “Are you writing all this down?” my sister had asked. “Yes,” I told her, as I looked down at a doodle of an elephant I had drawn, except the tusks were little curlicues.

Our waiter still isn’t back and it’s been, by my watch, nearly twenty minutes. My wife is looking at me as if she has asked me a question and is waiting for an answer.

“Well?” she says. So, yes, she has asked me a question.

“Well, you know,” I tell her. This has worked in the past.

She nods and turns to the person at the table next to us.

“My husband,” Jenny says to the stranger, “lost his wedding ring.”

My wife is sleeping, as it is two in the morning. However, someone turned on the movie projector in my brain and I can't find the Off switch. My sister wants me to climb Giotto's tower, but no, there's no way. My childhood dog, Dick Tracy, has been shot by a crazy, old neighbor. We replaced the dog with a Scottish Terrier whom my father named England so as to drive the guy who shot Dick even crazier, as the shooter was Scottish. My father purposely walked England past the shooter's house every weekend. If the shooter was outside, my father would exclaim, "You rule, England" or "England can't do anything wrong!" In fact, the only thing England the dog could do right was tear nearby paper towels into miniscule pieces and consume them. Which reminds me: the napkin with the Lady from Syracuse's phone number is still in my pants pocket.

I roll off the bed as ninjalike as possible. But I am not a ninja, so I stumble onto my face after tripping over a suitcase. My wife stirs for a second and then she's back to sleep, dreaming of the Trevi Fountain or dinner at Zsa Zsa's or, more likely, a more suitable husband. I don't blame her if she is dreaming of a different guy. I'm hardly the perfect man. I can be absentminded about things. Like birthdays. I can be a workaholic. Though I've never been unfaithful, I can be flirtatious. I often respond to her remarks in song lyrics, even after she asks me to stop. In other words, I'm annoying.

I find the pants at the same time I hear the bed creak and, when I turn around, my wife is looking at me as if there were something written on my face in very small letters.

"You're looking for the ring now?" she asks.

I nod and she falls back into bed. I reach into the pants pocket and find the napkin. Tomorrow I'll call her, just to tempt fate, nothing more. I'll tell Jenny and my sister that I want to walk around on my own and then I'll call her.

Italians are not big breakfast eaters. As if to make this point clear, our hotelier leaves on the breakfast bar things like mortadella, provolone and salami. There are pastries as well, but no eggs, bacon or sausage. My father, the good American, would not stand for this. I can picture him striding up to the front desk, hands clasped behind his back, and, leaning forward, saying, “There are no. Eggs. At the breakfast bar.”

Personally, I’m always looking for an occasion to eat mortadella, so I stack my plate. Jenny has chosen an indistinguishable light-brown pastry. She eats it heartily, washes each bit down with the strong coffee. I do the same, relishing her discomfort in watching me chase mortadella with Italian roast – she squints and does a thing with her lips every time I go, “Mmmm.”

“I look forward to seeing Lisa,” she says. Her tone is as light as it had been last night, which I silently thank God for. And yet, as light as her tone is, I can’t help but think of the slip of napkin in my pocket.

“It’s been awhile,” I say, and then I dip a forkful of mortadella into my coffee and stuff it into my mouth.

“That’s disgusting,” she says, to which I reply,

“Soylent Green is people.”

Outside, the sun seems a little brighter than yesterday. We walk the storm-gray cobblestone past stations of hanging sausage, cheese, fish. We pass an outdoor market, where scarves blow in the light breeze and purses are strewn about tables. There are glass statuettes from Murano, vases bursting with flower bouquets, fruit and vegetables, racks of clothes, stacks of books. I buy a leather journal for fifteen Euro, even knowing I

already have one in which I dutifully record my activities and thoughts. Jenny stuffs the journal into the backpack that she insists on carrying, as I will only lose it. And who am I to argue, the man who lost the ring. I touch the napkin in my pocket.

The streets are filling up now. Scarved Italian men pass my wife, giving her a quick once-over, and I can't help but point this fact out.

"I hadn't noticed," she says.

"Of course."

"I see the cathedral there."

I follow her finger.

The reliefs, roman arches, engravings – even the perfect green outlines – make the church look fake, as if it were cut out of a painting, enlarged and placed here on the street for our observance. There is an entryway, sure, but I have a hard time imagining anyone being able to walk through it without hearing the rip of canvas.

"Oh, and there's the tower," Jenny says, pointing to the tall campanile adjacent to the church. My high is immediately eradicated.

"There's no way," I say, "I'm walking up that thing."

As I walk up Giotto's Tower, I curse Lisa under my breath. She's the one who convinced me to do it, and she did it without saying a word. She had stood in front of the Tower's entrance with that smile, the one that always takes me back to my childhood, to when we used to sit in our parents' car and pretend we were driving around town. To when I used to set up haunted houses in my bedroom with Halloween decorations and then lead her inside. "Here, eat this," I'd say, and she'd stuff a skinned grape into her

mouth. “You just ate an eyeball,” I’d tell her in my scariest voice. Her smile reminded me of when we played hide-and-seek and tag and dart-gun wars. My sister and I had been best of friends for a long time and she always had The Smile.

“You’re doing great, Bro,” she tells me as she leads the way. She looks the same – tall and thin and beautiful. My father once told me, “Presence, that’s what your sister has.” When I asked him what I had, he told me, “Potential.”

The campanile’s staircase is narrow and cramped. The stairs, the walls, everything is stone. Slices of light fall into the tower from the occasional window.

“Did Giotto have a fascination with dungeons?” I ask.

“Tough it up,” Lisa says. Jenny, who is behind Lisa, is panting, out of breath. My legs are beginning to cramp. More importantly, my mouth is drying up, a sure sign of anxiety. I’m up too high.

“Lisa, I think I’m done,” I say.

“We’re almost there.”

“That’s what you said two-hundred steps ago. I feel like I’m going to…” I can’t finish my sentence. If I hear myself say the words, I’ll make those words come true.

“How many steps are there?” my wife asks, probably just to stick it to me.

“Four-hundred and fourteen,” Lisa says.

“I hate you both,” I inform them.

But Lisa wasn’t lying earlier. A bright shaft of sunlight cuts through the darkness now. Voices fall into the tower from above. We are at the top.

At first, my anxiety is so strong I feel like vomiting. I do my best to push this feeling aside. I’m in Italy. Atop a tower. Looking at the city of Florence. To my left is

the cathedral's dome, much higher up than this tower, where people walk in circles. And there goes my sister, the woman who almost wasn't, walking to the railing with Jenny. They stand there, talking, for a long time, while I try to summon up the courage to approach the railing. I can't do it, though. I settle for looking at the rooftops from afar.

I nervously stick my hands into my pockets, where I feel something. I take the something out and realize it's the napkin. I could set this up right now, make up a story about how I need a little me-time. Who am I kidding, though. I can't do it. My orbit might be heading in a different direction than Jenny's, but I'd like to at least try to realign it with hers.

"What's that?" Jenny asks. She's approaching me like that warden from the train.

I struggle for an answer, and then say, "My last mint." I then stuff the piece of napkin into my mouth, chew and swallow. Just like Dick Tracy. I don't feel noble about getting rid of the napkin in the slightest. Noble would have been to leave the number sitting on the table on the train.

Jenny gives my shoulder a gentle squeeze and a peck on the lips. She tries to smile, but something holds her back. She find another spot near the railing and stares at the city below.

"Hey, Pat," I say to Lisa. She turns around, her hair falling into her face. Her eyes are squinting against the wind, which seems much stronger up here.

"Yes, Dad," Lisa jokes. She walks over to me.

"Speaking of whom," I say, "he has money for you. Lots of it. If you come back."

"Ah," she says.

I shrug. “You know Dad.”

“Did I have a choice?”

“You’re funny,” I tell her.

“No. I’m coming home anyway. For a little while.”

And then she tells me how she spoke to Dad last night, how he informed her that he is dying of cancer. I’m about to ask her how she found this out before me – I live in the goddamn States, after all, and Dad must have known before yesterday – but I needn’t ask such a silly question. Lisa is his favorite, just as I was my mother’s favorite. Parents will tell you they don’t play favorites, but this is not true. One parent will inevitably spend more time with Child Number One while the other spends time with Child Number Two. Bonds are subsequently formed. Nothing personal, just nature. At least, that’s how it was when Lisa and I were growing up.

“He wanted me to tell you,” Lisa goes on. “Said he didn’t know how. It’s Dad, you know.” Yes, I know. I try to imagine Lisa and me parentless, but this is impossible. Nobody can come to grips with such a thing before it happens. I imagine most can’t even do it after it happens.

Jenny calls us over to the railing. Lisa puts her arm around me and walks with me. We all point at the objects below. At the churches dotted throughout town. At the rust-brown rooftops. At the restaurants, where tall, lanky men with slender faces are being beckoned with the words, *Il conto, per favore*. At the tiny cars and tour buses. Yes, even the buses are tiny. That’s how high up we are. We are very high up.

“Okay,” I say, making my way back toward the doorway, “I’m ready to go back down now.”

IN HIS ABSENCE

On Alan's first day as a copywriter, he called his mother just so he could say that he was calling her from his new office. He knew, however, that his mother wouldn't answer the phone. She'd be too busy fixing breakfast for his father, who had died of a heart attack a week ago. After the sixth ring, Alan hung up. He decided he needed a walk around the office. The gray-white herringbone carpet lining the hallways shimmered under his feet. Machines hummed as information was being printed, copied, transmitted. All of these sounds were new to Alan; they drowned out the thoughts of his mother and how she couldn't let go.

His father had been a businessman, and after long days at work, he enjoyed a glass of wine at home, Alan's mother would pour the wine and sit with him at the kitchen counter. They would talk as Alan studied for college exams. He didn't live to see Alan graduate, something Alan had yet to get over. But he liked to think of his father as watching over him, proud at his success in business school, proud that his son worked in an office where people wore suits and carried briefcases.

Alan turned a corner and saw Gary Flanders, an account supervisor, pinning Burt O'Connor, a creative director, onto the floor. A few people stood around them, pointing, looking for someone else to stop the fight. Burt's face was blushing red and his eyes were clenched tightly. He tried to squirm out from under Gary's force, but Gary proved to be too strong, even with Burt having a good eighty pounds on him. Finally, Gary gave one last shove on Burt's back and stood up.

"Stupid old man," Gary said and raised a bent arm as if he were about to give Burt a flying elbow. Burt slowly got up and brushed himself off. He turned toward Gary and

they stared at each other. More people gathered around them, watching, stunned. Alan couldn't believe what he was seeing. While he didn't know either of these people very well, he supposed that, as a copywriter, he should be on the creative director's side.

Near the end of the day, Alan stopped by Burt's office to make sure he was okay.

"Come in and close the door," Burt said.

Burt's face was as red as his polo shirt. He had a big, round belly and a big round head, all of which balanced on matchstick legs. Alan's father had been the same way. "I'm giving birth to an elephant," Alan's father would say, "and the trunk's already showing." Alan's mother would playfully slap her husband on the arm.

"You okay, sir?" Alan said.

"Never better," Burt said, out of breath. His bushy salt-and-pepper eyebrows rose with each syllable. "I'm out of here, Al. I'm giving them one more week and then that's it."

"Did you get fired?"

"Nope. I quit. Beat them to the punch."

"So what are you going to do?" Alan asked.

Burt didn't say anything right away, which led Alan to believe he had no idea.

"How old are you, Al?"

"Twenty-three, sir."

"Twenty-three," Burt said. He sighed. "I got some advice for you. You got a credit card?"

"Two."

"Use them. Go fly to Europe and take the train all around. Just you, a backpack,

and a bottle of Evian. You know what Evian spells backward, don't you?"

"No, sir."

Burt scratched his head. He looked down at his desk like he'd never seen it before. "You're too young to be cooped up in an office," Burt said. "I should have taken care of Gary ten years ago." He bent down, one hand on his chair to hold himself steady, and pulled out a fresh box from under his desk. He started packing things away in it: notebooks, markers, car keys. Alan wondered if he should say something about the car keys, but decided Burt knew what he was doing.

"You're young and strong, Al," Burt said.

Alan, who was notably skinny, knew this was more set-up than truth.

"How old are you?" Burt said.

"Twenty-three," Alan said again.

"Spring chicken you are not. More like a spring chicken embryo. You mind meeting me up here tonight? Nine-ish? I don't want to be lugging my stuff out the door with everyone here right now, and I don't want to do it by myself later. I still got a week, but I want to finish this stuff up."

Alan said he'd be happy to help. When he walked out of Burt's office, Gary walked by. He raised an eyebrow at Alan and mumbled something that sounded like, "Fool."

His mother was making a salad. Breaded chicken cutlets sizzled in a skillet on the stove next to her. The kitchen smelled like oil and bread crumbs. A half-empty wine glass stood on the counter beside her. Half the walls were white, the other half yellow, a

painting project halted indefinitely because Alan's father had to be rushed to the hospital in the middle of it. Maybe she thinks Dad finished it, Alan thought. Maybe she sees all the walls in yellow.

"Hi," Alan said.

"Hello." She didn't turn around. She was drunk. Since his father's death, Alan's mother drank for two. The night after the death, Alan had a glass of wine with his mother, to mourn with her. The wine tasted bitter, but he drank anyway. After a few glasses, he was drunk. He looked in the mirror and saw his father. His mother cried all night, but his drunkenness only made him mad at her. "Get over it!" he wanted to tell her. Afterward, he promised himself he would never drink again. He never wanted to feel that way about his mother.

"I've got to run out after dinner, if that's okay."

His mother said that would be fine. She asked him to set the table.

Alan poured iced tea into two glasses. His mother never touched hers. Instead, she poured glass after glass of wine. After setting the chicken cutlets and salad down, his mother put a plate, fork, and knife onto the table, where Alan's father used to sit. She pulled his father's chair out and sat in her own. She picked up the wine bottle. Alan turned away. When he looked back at her, red drops of merlot blended into the white tablecloth in front of her. She had spilled while pouring.

"So the first day went pretty well," Alan said.

"That's good," his mother said. She hadn't touched her hair in a week, so it stood on end. She took off from work an extra two weeks, part of that time unpaid vacation. Alan knew that his father would want everyone to go back to their normal

lives, and his mother knew this, too. But her normal life stopped as abruptly as the painting of the kitchen walls.

Alan looked over at the extra place setting. “Do we need to keep pretending Dad’s still alive?”

His mother said nothing. She scooped a forkful of rice into her mouth.

“I miss him, too, you know,” Alan said.

When she finished everything on her plate, Alan’s mother went to the sink. Alan followed her. He put his arm around her and squeezed. She felt cold and stiff. She picked up a sponge, squirted some dish soap onto it and started washing dishes. Alan cleared the rest of the table.

“I’ve got to run,” Alan said. “I’ve got to help my boss--my old boss--clear out his desk. He gave a week’s notice today.” He wanted to tell her more, about how a fight broke out in the hallway, but decided to save his breath.

His mother nodded as she scrubbed a dish under hot water. Steam rose from the sink’s bottom. Before he died, Alan’s father always stood beside his wife after a meal and helped dry and put away the dishes. Alan had sat at the kitchen table, still chomping away, as his parents washed and dried between kisses. “Don’t be a macho man,” Alan’s father had always said. “These men who run around saying dishes and cooking’s for women, they’re all afraid. They lack self-esteem. Don’t be like that.”

Now, Alan kissed his mother on the cheek and walked to the door, pushing in his father’s chair. Even through the closed door, Alan heard his mother washing dishes, the sink’s rushing water like television static.

He took the elevator to the eleventh floor. There was something ominous about the agency's office at night. During the day, people bustled about, talking, yelling, fighting. The sounds of copiers, fax machines, and telephone conversations were now gone.

Burt wasn't in the building yet; his office was dark, the only things visible being the outlines of the posters on the walls and of the boxes sitting on the floor, waiting to be filled. He walked down the dark, empty hallways. It was as if all the people who worked at the agency had instantaneously disappeared. Their not-so-personal belongings--books they were reading, an extra pair of reading glasses, coffee mugs--sat in their offices like artifacts left behind for other civilizations to find. To Alan, the office at night seemed more of a catacomb than anything else.

His curiosity getting the better of him, Alan peered into Peter Camden's office. Peter had left his computer on. Alan shook the mouse around. When the computer woke up, he saw that Peter had left in the middle of writing an e-mail. The e-mail read "Hank, sorry I missed you the other day. Maybe we can get—"

The agency's front door clicked open and shut. Alan walked quickly out of Peter's office, his heart pounding. He felt jittery, as if he had been caught breaking the law. The jangle of keys became louder, and Burt's large outline appeared at the end of the hallway. Burt stopped in front of his office door and turned his head toward Alan.

"You beat me here," Burt said.

"Yes, sir," Alan said. He walked toward Burt. "This place is kind of creepy at night."

Burt turned the light on in his office. "Even creepier during the day."

Alan smiled.

“So,” Burt said. He sat down in his chair and leaned back. “Where do we start?”

“We could start with the walls.”

“We could. You get the Andy Warhol and the Urinals Of Ireland posters, I’ll get the Miles Davis poster and the map of Europe.” Burt stood up. “Europe,” he said. “Now there’s a continent. You got a credit card, Al?”

Alan stood up with Burt. He wondered if Burt knew he just asked the same question he asked earlier that day. He wanted to say something, but Burt had already been through enough; Alan didn’t want to bring up his faulty memory.

“Yes, sir. I’ve got two.”

“Use them. Go to Europe and backpack around. My ex-shrink used to say ‘You’ve got to lose yourself to find yourself.’ But he was a hack anyway. Used to wear these butterfly-collared shirts with polka dots on them. And this was only ten years ago, mind you.”

“I don’t think my mother would like it if I went there,” Alan said.

“Went where?” Burt rolled up his Miles Davis poster and put a rubber band around it.

“You know,” Alan said, “to Europe.”

“Europe,” Burt said. “Now there’s a continent. Europe’s not a bad idea. Maybe I can get a job at Vickers in England. Those guys are always in the showbooks. The Clios, C.A., The One Show. All those damn award shows are fixed, believe you me. You want to know the only award show that isn’t fixed?”

Alan nodded.

“The Westminster Dog Show,” Burt said. “No way that son-of-a-gun is fixed. All those breeds. Seven of them.” Burt counted them with his fingers. “The herding group, the hound group, sporting, non-sporting, toy, terrier, working class. My wife and I watch that show every year.”

Alan laughed. “Every year?”

Burt smiled and said, “You betcha. And I’m being serious when I say they ain’t fixed, too. You’ve got seven different judges, one judge for each breed. Then you’ve got an entirely different judge for Best In Show. And *then* that judge writes down her choice in that little notebook thingy. Do you know how hard it would be to fix that? Nearly impossible. You got a dog, Al?”

Alan shook his head. His father always wanted one, but always said they didn’t have the time or the money. “Never had one.”

Burt looked as if this was the most horrible thing he had ever heard. “My wife,” Burt said, “breeds golden retrievers. I’d say *we* breed them, but really I don’t want anything to do with the breeding part. I just like playing with the little guys. You should call her sometime. At work, she’s always at work. Maybe I can talk her into giving you one for free. Here.” Burt scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it to Alan. “Her name is Eloise, in case you can’t read my writing. Don’t be afraid to call her. She’s a dear. Can’t believe I can still say that after thirty-five years. I always kid her and say, ‘Seems like thirty-five-hundred.’ Ha!”

They worked quietly at first. With each minute of silence—nothing but the rustle of papers being stashed in a box and the occasional grunt as Burt picked up a heavy package—Alan felt closer to him. When Burt looked around the office and let out an

under-the-breath “Hmm,” Alan felt like he was watching his father. He felt like it was only a matter of time before Burt explained how he was giving birth to an elephant and the trunk was already showing.

“So. Why do you want to work here?” Burt asked, breaking the silence.

Alan dropped a notebook into a box. “I’m sorry?” Alan said.

“Yes, you will be, after you work here for a while. I asked you why you wanted to work here.”

To make my father proud, Alan wanted to tell him, but, as much as he liked Burt, he didn’t want to get into that deep of a conversation with him yet. Burt had a week left, and Alan felt that, if the right time should come, he would talk about his father.

“Because most advertising is bad, and I wanted to put my two-cents in to change that. And I like writing the good stuff. It’s fun.”

“Hmm,” Burt said. “That’s a crock. I mean, I’m sure it’s half true, but I wish you’d tell me the other half.”

Alan put the last pile of notebooks into the box and said, “Why did you want to work here? In advertising.”

“Because I sucked at everything else.” They both laughed.

Near eleven ‘o clock, Alan put Burt’s last few trophies into a box. He held the last trophy before him--a short, thick, gold pencil. Alan recognized it as a One Show award, one of the most distinguished in advertising.

“That was a good day,” Burt said, his eyes half shut. “The only time the show wasn’t fixed.” Burt smiled. “Did I ever tell you what show is the only one not fixed?”

Alan put the trophy into the box beside him as Burt talked about the Westminster

Dog Show. This time around, Burt forgot one of the breed types.

“Working class,” Alan said.

“That’s the one,” Burt said, and then packed away the last few things.

The next morning, Alan found his mother in the kitchen washing dishes. He jangled his keys, but she didn’t turn around to acknowledge him.

“You ever think about getting a dog, Ma?”

Still, his mother said nothing.

“Dad always wanted a dog. Remember?”

She kept scrubbing the dishes.

“I’m going to work now. I’ll call you later,” Alan said. “Love you.”

He had an idea to sneak around to the backyard and peek at his mother. He hid behind the live oak not far from the kitchen window. His mother still scrubbed away, her eyes never leaving the sink. She looked to her right and said something as she placed a dish into the dish rack. Her mouth moved. Alan wondered if she ever actually heard him talk back.

At 9:30 in the morning, Burt still hadn’t shown up for work.

Sitting in his office, Alan buzzed Ron, his other creative director, to see if he had heard from Burt this morning, but Ron never picked up the phone. When Alan buzzed the front desk, the receptionist said Ron would be in a meeting all day preparing for a business pitch.

“Have you heard from Burt at all this morning,” Alan said.

“Uh, no,” the receptionist replied.

Alan looked up the Westminster Dog Show on the Internet to kill time. Michael La Fave had been the announcer. Thomas H. Bradley III was the chairman of the Dog Show Committee. A Kerry Blue Terrier won the year’s Best In Show. A picture showed the Terrier with its breeder and a man who looked almost like Burt, except Burt had less hair and a bigger head. Alan logged off the Internet and tried Tom again, but still had no luck.

“Alan,” a deep voice said. Gary stood in the doorway with his hands in his pockets. Usually Gary’s short hair was pushed perfectly forward with a little scoop up front. But now, Gary’s hair was tousled. He had dark bags under each of his eyes.

“Hi, Gary.”

“Alan,” Gary said, “I’m sorry you had to see that the other day.” He put his hand to his head and pat his hair down. When he lifted his hand, the hair immediately sprang back up. “Especially with you so new here,” he continued. “Burt’s a good guy. We worked together for a long time. But he has some problems. I’m sure you know that, though.”

Alan nodded, although he had no idea what Gary meant,.

“How’re you settling in?” Gary said.

“Fine,” Alan said. “Have you seen him at all today?”

Gary cleared his throat and put his hands in his pocket. “I thought you heard,” he said.

Alan shook his head. He dug his thumbnail into the palm of his hand.

“Burt was let go yesterday, Alan.”

He didn't like the way Gary said "Alan" after mentioning this about Burt. It felt patronizing. Even so, Alan wanted to respond to Gary's statement, but he didn't know how.

"Burt's got problems," Gary said. "What happened between us was a *result* of Burt's lay-off, not the cause. He's sick. He has Alzheimer's. He forgets things. He makes things up. And it's only gotten worse."

Gary apologized for having to break the bad news and walked away. Alan walked to his office's door, head bowed. The jagged arrowheads of the herringbone carpet wavered, making him dizzy. The copiers and printers and fax machines drummed and screeched from the hallways. He closed the door, the latticework of window panes on the door thick enough to at least dull the noise. Immediately after sitting back down, his thumbnail dug away at his hand. Eventually, his palm felt raw and dry. As much as he didn't want to believe Gary, he did. It explained Burt's repetition. It made as much sense as Alan's own mother pretending her husband was still alive.

Alan got Burt's home phone number from the staff directory and dialed the seven digits. Nobody picked up. He hung up and dialed again, but still, nobody picked up. He pulled out the slip of paper with Eloise's work phone number on it that Burt had handed him last night and dialed the digits.

"Department of Housing And Family," a young lady's voice said through the receiver.

"May I speak to Mrs. Eloise O' Connor, please?"

A pause. "Uh, honey. Eloise no longer works here," said the lady, her voice almost a whisper now. She had gone from Happy Secretary Woman to Concerned

Woman.

“I’m sorry?” Alan said.

“Honey, Eloise passed on. It was about a year and a half ago now.”

Alan hung up the phone.

The office became darker as the sun set. He closed his eyes in joy each time he heard the front door open and click shut. Some people had to walk by his office to leave, and when they did, Alan smiled and waved. Gary walked by, but instead of slowing down and saying good night, he just kept his steady pace and waved good-bye. Around eight-thirty, Alan walked around the hallways. Everyone was gone.

He sat down in Tiffany Graham’s office and read her upcoming appointments scribbled on her calendar: haircut, 5:30; dinner at Ameretto’s at seven; don’t forget to pick up chocolate mousse for Janie. Alan sat down in Devone Johnson’s office and counted the number of stuffed animals: three Teddy bears, two elephants, a monkey, and a giraffe. He sat in Barry Hogan’s office and threw darts onto the dartboard hung on the opposite wall: a 16, 20, and a 2. Over in Bill Warwick’s office, Alan stared at a picture tacked to a bulletin board of a beautiful woman standing somewhere in some foreign country, maybe Italy. She leaned against the railing of a footbridge, old white buildings covered in relief sculptures in the background. The woman’s brown hair fell onto her olive-skin shoulders. Her eyelashes appeared to be in the middle of a flutter, and her smile made her face glow. Alan sat in Bill’s chair and put his fingers on the keyboard. He wished again that his dad were alive to see him working in an office, becoming somebody. He wished his mother would at least try to move on.

The keyboard's keys felt soothing under Alan's fingers. He pressed the little square buttons with authority: tap tap tap. Alan pretended that the office was bustling again, another day at work. An inconsiderate woman yelled at her intercom from what sounded like a conference call with a client. From around the corner, the printer moaned with activity and the light from the copier splashed against the wall, the result of someone not closing the cover before hitting 'Copy.' Burt walked into his office and handed him a job. "We need this by tomorrow, in the a.m.," he said. He thanked Alan and smiled. Alan kept tap-tapping away on the keyboard. Ghosts of words scrolled across the dark gray monitor, as Gary stopped by to say hi and Alan's father toured his baby boy's first real-job's office, and the woman in the picture waited for Alan to get home so they could plan their next vacation to Europe. The Westminster Dog Show was happening at Madison Square Garden and Eloise had one of her golden retrievers in the running. Everything was perfect again for the few minutes that Alan hit the keys.

SPANIEL

William had buried Ernie, his once high-spirited cocker spaniel, in the backyard only two days ago. His seven-year-old daughter, Lara, helped. And, while he had wanted to put up a headstone for the dog, William knew he'd hear about it from his wife, Bernice. She would think it ridiculous to erect such a monument for what she referred to as "the lower lifeform." Not *a* lower lifeform, but *the* lower lifeform, as if dogs were as low as you could get. She had never grown up with dogs and was, in fact, bitten by her neighbor's papillon when she was twelve years old. So the headstone remained hidden in the garage, between the ride-on lawnmower and the buffet table.

Of course, calling the dog 'high-spirited' was more of a euphemism than anything else. "Evil" is how Bernice put it. For instance, there were times when Ernie was lying on the couch and Bernice would try to stretch her legs around the dog so she could also lie down. Ernie would snip at her toes in a sleepy growl, sometimes actually drawing blood. Also, on numerous occasions, Bernice had tried to put the overspill of Ernie's food back into his food bowl. The dog heard the sound of hard nuggets hit the plastic bottom and came rifling toward Bernice, his choppers ready to bite the hand that fed him.

"He's just protecting his food," William told her.

"Well who's going to protect me?" Bernice asked him.

The amazing thing was, Ernie had been blind. Two cataracts. On the carpet, he was a professional at not running into things. He'd race around the house and turn corners like a Porsche, even after a good vacuuming. But on the kitchen tile, he'd walk headfirst into the cabinets, the pantry, and, most often, the island. A mopped floor seemed to remove all of the familiar scents on which Ernie relied. Perhaps if Bernice

didn't mop every other day, Ernie could have found his way around the kitchen. She had mopped too much!

Two days later and, to the naked eye, only the occasional tumbleweed of fur remained around the house. Yesterday, however, William unearthed a squeaky toy in the shape of a steak from the garage. The steak was last year's Christmas present, which William found quite coincidental, as there was just over a month left before this year's Christmas.

"I just sat on a bone," Bernice now said to him in the kitchen. She pointed a spatula at him. Over-easy eggs for the second morning in a row.

"Let me guess," William said. "In between the sofa cushions. He loved putting his bones there."

Bernice sighed, turned back toward the stove, and flipped the eggs over to cook the yolks. "I'm getting tired," she said, turning back toward William, "of seeing you so mopy. Stop being so mopy. It's been two days. You didn't see me mopy when Roger died."

Roger was a fish! William wanted to scream. Instead, he said, "I wonder if it's true. I wonder if all dogs go to heaven." He had watched *All Dogs Go To Heaven* with Lara numerous times. And while the high-pitched voiceovers and exaggerated sound effects drove Bernice up a wall ("Enough cartoons already! Why do they have to make them so loud!"), William especially enjoyed this particular one. He imagined Ernie with oversized wings to match his oversized ears, gracefully doggy paddling from cloud to cloud.

“See. There,” Bernice said. “If you’re good, maybe you’ll see Ernie again after all. If you’re good and not mopy. There’s nothing worse than a mopy man.” Bernice opened her mouth in a mock surprise and gasped. “Maybe that’s what I should call you from now on: Mopy Man! I. Am. Mopy Man!”

Perhaps I should just leave, he thought. William’s mother, who loved butting into everyone’s affairs, once asked William why he never divorced Bernice. “The way she treats you...” she said. William knew when his mother was deeply concerned by the way she trailed off her sentences. It was as if the sentences were gangrene and she needed to amputate before it spread into something worse.

“If we ever get a divorce,” he had told his mother, “it wouldn’t be until Lara’s at least in junior high.”

“Junior high?” she said. “You’re like matrimonial masochists.”

“Like what?”

“You enjoy each other’s pain. You and Bernice, I mean.”

“We want to wait till Lara understands what’s happening. Right now she’d just be confused.”

“Right now I’m confused,” his mother had said, and got up for more coffee, which meant that the conversation was over. Amputation was not limited to sentences – entire conversations could also get the hacksaw.

But maybe his mother had been right. Maybe he should leave and try to get custody of Lara. He wouldn’t be able to live without his daughter. Or maybe he just needed some release. Yoga, perhaps. He had heard good things about yoga.

Bernice turned around. “Shit,” she said.

The overcooked eggs were hard as coasters.

The next morning, William woke up earlier than usual. He walked out to the porch. In the backyard, morning dew glistened across the lawn, except, it seemed, in the small rectangle of sod under which he and Lara had buried Ernie.

“Why are you up so early?” his wife asked from behind him. He started a little, but easily fell back into his trance.

“What?” he asked

“Why are you up so early?”

“I don’t know. Why is anybody up so early?”

“Don’t weird out on me, Will.”

But William hardly heard her. The neighbor’s sprinkler burped its first shots of water and then spat into full motion, spraying the dewy lawn. The only other pet they had owned together died on a morning similar to this one, that pet being Bernice’s goldfish, Roger, who, shortly after his demise, listlessly followed the whirlpool of toiletwater down into the drain forever.

“I’m sorry about Roger,” William said to Bernice. Maybe all fish go to heaven, too. Maybe their fins turn into wings and they can fly through the clouds, but only through the clouds because clouds hold water.

Bernice sighed. “William,” she said, “Roger was a fish.”

Lara ran a fistful of crayons over the page in her coloring book, creating a rainbow of curlicues. William stopped coloring his own page to watch how she completely ignored all of the lines that formed the pictures.

“That’s beautiful,” he said.

“You should get over Ernie,” Lara said, not taking her eyes off her creation, a world full of spiral galaxies of red, green, blue, orange.

“Your mother told you to say that, didn’t she?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“I’m not ready for a new dog.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, and William realized that he didn’t have an answer, or at least he couldn’t explain his rationale. He thought hard about how to explain it to a seven-year-old, but, really, he needn’t worry about an answer. Lara was already moving on from the conversation.

“I want to dance!” she suddenly exclaimed. She sprung off the floor and ran to the stereo and turned on music. Earth, Wind & Fire sang “September.” Lara clapped her hands and swayed her hips. She spun around and hopped in a circle. She danced and danced and danced, and William wondered what it was like to be that happy.

The following day, Sunday, William met his friends at a sports bar to watch the lineup of football games. Actually, he went to drink away his sorrows – which he started doing every Sunday since Ernie’s death – but he at least pretended to watch.

“Will, what the hell’s wrong with you?” his friend Carl asked during a commercial. Carl had the colors red, black and pewter painted onto his face in an angry way. He looked like a futuristic clown.

“What do you mean?” William asked.

“You look...I don’t know, weird.”

As soon as Carl said this, William actually felt his face drooping, his cheeks being pulled down by some unnaturally heavy force. Sadness caused excess gravity: faces droop, lips frown, eyes look toward the ground.

“Did you ever notice,” William said, “how, in life, everyone thinks they’re invincible? Or maybe it’s just that we’re in denial. That we don’t want to think about how everything could just, one day, stop. And how life goes on regardless if we’re here, even knowing we’re not here to see it. It’s kind of like that whole if-a-tree-falls-in-the-woods-and-no-one’s-around-does-it-make-a-sound-? thing.”

Carl’s eyebrows bunched up in a confused way, causing his red-painted forehead to wrinkle. “I have to take a piss,” he said, then stood up and left. A couple of minutes later, he returned and proceeded to watch the rest of the game in silence.

Four days later, Thanksgiving morning, William found Bernice in the kitchen, basting a turkey. On the Thanksgivings before Ernie had died, he used to call Bernice ‘The Master Baster,’ but those days were over, and now he just mumbled something that sounded like, “Good morning.”

“Hm-hm-hmm to you, too, honey!” his wife said.

Ernie used to stand up on his hind legs and beg desperately for food on mornings like these. He'd look up at William with unseeing eyes, tongue lolling out of his mouth. Amazing how Ernie, though blind, could find food. The dog bumped his head all over the kitchen – one time, he walked right into his water bowl and left little paw prints all over the tile – but he'd always find food. But, oh, how he bumped his head as his plump body meandered through the kitchen. And the island. That Corian-finished kitchen island was so treacherous. Beautiful, yet treacherous, like the Island of Dr. Moreau.

“The Island of what?” Bernice said, startling William. Had he said that out loud?

“Nothing. I was just thinking of a book.” He knew that would end their conversation because Bernice didn't read books. William, however, loved them. In fact, he used to read them while lying on the inflatable lounge chair as he drifted in their swimming pool, a glass of iced tea wedged in the arm's plastic drink-holder. Ernie used to march around the pool's perimeter, making sure William was safe, and the dog never fell into the water. He traced the lip of the pool so deftly, so dexterously, just to make sure nobody bothered William while he was reading. Perhaps even (in his dog's mind) to prevent William from falling into the perilous water. “I think that dog fakes being blind,” his wife said during one of those pool-reading moments. It had been one of Bernice's favorite things to say about Ernie. That, and “That dog needs to go on a diet.” To which William retorted with, “Diet! The dog had his sight stolen from him, and now we're going to steal his food.”

Now, as Bernice put the turkey (much too big for just the three of them) into the oven, she said, “Maybe you should see a psychiatrist.” She walked over to him and

rubbed his arm quickly and mechanically, as if their arms were two sticks and she was trying to start a fire.

“Actually, I was thinking about yoga. It’s the psychiatrist of the 2000’s, you know.”

“That’s a good idea, hon.” Bernice poured orange juice into a glass and took out a bottle of Champagne from the refrigerator. She twisted the cork’s wire, and the loud uncorking of the Champagne bottle woke up Lara, who walked out in her pink pajamas and asked if someone had been shot.

The following Monday, he had to drive Lara to school. “We’re starting to prepare for this big Christmas celebration at church,” Bernice had told him. She was very involved with the House of God, which William found ironic as she seemed less and less concerned about the house of her own family. She never asked how he felt anymore, and she rarely asked Lara if she needed help with a school project, or anything for that matter.

Now, as they pulled up into the school’s drop-off line, he said, “How are you doing in school?”

“Okay,” Lara said. “Oh, before our Thanksgiving break, we had to draw a picture of our favorite animal and I drew Ernie!”

“You did?” William said, proud of his daughter.

“Yeah, and next to him was me and mommy and you, but you were crying though.”

“Oh.”

“Because you knew Ernie was going to die.”

After dropping Lara off, William thought about what she had said and decided crying wasn't such a bad idea after all.

"You stoned?" one of his coworkers asked him when he got to work. "Your eyes are glassy as hell, man."

"No," William said.

The coworker smiled. "Sure," he said. "Sure, sure, sure."

William was off to a bad start during his first yoga class. First, he forgot to buy a mat, so he had to borrow one from Delilah, the class instructor (whom William, to himself, called The Yoga Yoda, for she was indeed a master at her craft – how she could bend!).

"I'm sorry I forgot my mat," William said.

"Don't worry about it," said Delilah.

William wasn't sure if it was because of Delilah's seductive, soothing voice or the room's pleasant, woody aroma of incense, but he had instantly stopped worrying.

Now, as he lay on his back and lifted his legs up in the air, his baggy sweatpants slid down his legs and bunched up near his groin. When the leg-lifting exercise was over, William expected to take a break, but, as he would find out at the end of the class, there were no breaks in yoga.

At the end, Delilah turned off all the lights and asked everyone to lie down on their backs and get comfortable.

"Now close your eyes," Delilah said in the darkness. Chanting music filled the room softly, like a slow leak

William closed his eyes.

“Imagine you are flying,” Delilah said melodically, “over the mountains. Over the forests, the green leaves of large canopy trees rustling from the wind you provide them, as you move in a perfect line.”

William saw himself flying, arms locked forward in front of him like Superman. Was he supposed to fly like Superman? Or was he supposed to fly like Peter Pan, arms by his sides like thrusters. Delilah didn't specify. He imagined his arms by his sides, and then he imagined them like Superman's, and then as Peter Pan's again. Back and forth, back and forth. He was very confused.

Later that evening, he asked Lara how she would fly, with her arms out in front or to her sides.

“I would fly standing straight up,” she said, “like how I'm standing now. Otherwise, how would you see where you're flying to?”

A week later, when William walked into the psychiatrist's office – a Dr. Pepperdine – for the first time, he smelled the distinct scent of peppermint.

“I believe it helps calm my patients,” Dr. Pepperdine said when William asked about the scent. “It helps them release. Plus it kind of goes with my name. *Pepperdine, Peppermint. See?*”

“I see,” William said.

“So your dog died,” Dr. Pepperdine said, as William lay back on the daybed.

“Yes. About two-and-a-half weeks ago. It's pretty sad.”

“It sure is.”

“Granted, he was twelve years old,” William said, “which, to you and me, makes him eighty-four. But he went through so much in the end. First of all, he was blind.”

“Blind? Jeez, I didn’t see that coming.” Dr. Pepperdine laughed. “I’m sorry, go ahead, continue.”

“His ear fur would knot up drastically, too,” William said. “And he had a flea situation.”

“A flea situation?”

“Yes. I always thought the older the dog, the fewer the fleas. But these fleas must’ve liked the old-dog blood or something. I’d sit down, with Ernie in my lap, and pore through his coat looking for them. When I found one, I’d squeeze it to death.”

“Did you know the record for flea-jumping is at four feet right now?”

“No. But that’s very interesting.”

“Yeah. Nike’s looking for a shoe contract, but they can’t find the little sucker.”

Dr. Pepperdine laughed again.

“Doctor. I really miss my dog. I can’t relax anymore.”

“Hm,” said Dr. Pepperdine. “Have you tried yoga?”

Friday ended up being William’s last day with Dr. Pepperdine. He just couldn’t take Dr. Pepperdine’s jokes anymore.

“Something’s different,” William said, when he entered Dr. Pepperdine’s office.

“The peppermint is gone,” Dr. Pepperdine pointed out. “People were complaining that the scent was too much. Some people were getting bloody noses when they got home.”

“Bloody noses?” William said.

“Yep. I guess some people are more sensitive than others.”

“Yes, I guess so,” William said, thinking of Bernice.

William didn't go right home after leaving Dr. Pepperdine's office for the last time. With Dr. Pepperdine's suggestion that some people were more sensitive than others fixed firmly in his mind, William went to a small, old-fashioned pub with brick interior, dim lighting, and moose heads on the wall. He drank three watered-down beers and then splurged on two non-watered-down beers. He then drove home the long way, tracing the route he used to walk with Ernie. There was the pond, where Ernie used to bark at the ducks strutting back and forth. There was the hiking trail he and Lara trekked (“Hiking,” Bernice used to say, “is a sporty way of saying ‘walking’”), where, one time, Ernie had pulled free of Lara's grip and chased a squirrel up a tree. And then there was the stop sign, where Ernie used to lift his leg. Ernie never peed on a fire hydrant in all his days. Only stop signs. Perhaps he was trying to tell me something, William now thought. Perhaps he was saying, “Stop, Dad. Let's just stop for a while.”

If only William had stopped. Or maybe he shouldn't have stopped. Maybe he shouldn't have stopped properly burying Ernie. He should have kept on going with the headstone, despite what Bernice would think. Maybe Ernie's ghost won't go away until William did just that: prop up the headstone. Just like in the movie *Ghost*. Patrick Swayze couldn't move on until there was closure. Of course.

Ernie needs closure, William thought, pulling into his driveway. He was so happy with his decision, he even called his mother.

“You're doing what?” she said.

“I’m putting the headstone up. It’s time for closure.”

“William,” she said, “It’s time to closure the marriage. You can get custody of Lara, you know. I already spoke to a lawyer.”

“You did what? Mom, we can still make things work.”

“No you can’t.”

“Then the divorce thing will have to wait. I already told you.”

He hung up, making sure that, this time, he was the one amputating the conversation.

On December 21, Bernice had to meet with her church group. William took the day off from work, claiming he didn’t feel well.

“I’ll only be gone an hour or so,” Bernice told William, walking out to the car. “Try to cheer yourself up, just for a little bit, while I’m gone. It’s been a month now, for God’s sake.”

“I will.”

“One good thing came out of that dog dying,” Bernice said. “The grass where you buried him is growing wonderfully.”

“Honey.”

“Maybe we should plant something there. An orange tree?”

“Have a great time, hon. Thanks for the beautiful departing words.”

“No, not an orange tree. Then it’d be like we were eating the dog every time we had an orange.”

“Please.”

Bernice laughed and quickly put her arms around him as if the wind had picked up. “You know I’m just trying to make light of the situation. A little cheering up.”

“Well, please,” William said, “Stop trying to cheer me up.”

William and Lara watched Bernice drive away, and as the car turned out of sight, an immense sense of freedom overwhelmed William.

“What are we going to do without Mommy,” Lara said.

“We’re going to say good-bye to Ernie properly,” William said.

“I miss Ernie.”

“I do, too, sweetie.”

He and Lara walked into the garage and pulled out the headstone he had been hiding. It wasn’t much of a headstone really, but just a large piece of flagstone on which he had scrawled some words with a permanent marker.

“Where did you get that?” Lara said.

“I made it, sweetie.”

“What does it say?”

“‘We miss you, Ernie’,” William read aloud, “‘we’ll see you in Heaven’.”

“But Daddy,” Lara said, “Ernie can’t see, remember?”

“He can now,” William said.

Looking down at the headstone, William felt better. Ernie could move on, just as Patrick Swayze had. And now, William could move on, too. Perhaps even Lara, sweet Lara, could move on. William felt like he had ignored Lara too much in the last month-and-a-half. He had been selfish, caught up in his own misery. How could he be so selfish when Ernie had been the epitome of selflessness? Ernie who had walked

diligently around the lip of the pool, guarding his master. Ernie who had fought through this world blindly and still provided himself to others as a stress reliever (simply pet the dog and *blam!* your stress is gone). Ernie who had been so happy to see them when they came home that he peed all over the floor, spraying his joyfulness without shame.

A few moments later, William heard the sound of footsteps getting louder and louder from behind him. Bernice. She stood beside William and looked at him as if he were crazy. But did he care? No.

“It’s the first day of winter,” Lara said to Bernice, “and Daddy said we need kosher.”

“Kosher?” Bernice said and looked at William.

“Closure,” William corrected.

“What should we do *now*?” Lara asked.

“Whatever you want, hon,” William said.

“Why don’t you dance?” Bernice chimed in.

“Yeah!” Lara said, and so she started jumping up and down around Ernie’s grave, happily singing “September” from Earth, Wind & Fire. She mumbled the words until she got to the chorus part, where she sang, “Do you remember! September! Do you remember! September!” She sang and danced and William wished every moment of every day felt to him the way it did just then.

“I still don’t feel better, Mom,” William told his mother. He was on his way to Lara’s school, to pick her up. Bernice had another church thing. “I think you’re cheating

on me with God,” he had told Bernice, to which she responded with “You’re going to hell for that, you know.”

“I put up the headstone and it did nothing for me,” he now said into his cell phone.

“You need to bury your marriage, Wil,” his mother said. “My psychiatrist said the dog was just a diversion from your real feelings about Bernice.”

“You talk about me with your psychiatrist?”

“William, I would never do that,” his mother said. “He heard it from the lawyer I spoke to.”

“You guys have the same shrink?”

“Who do you think recommended the lawyer, William?” She said this as if he should have known that.

He pulled up to the school. Lara sat on the sidewalk, near the main entrance. She spotted his car, ran up to it and hopped in.

“Mom, I’ve got to go,” he said and hung up.

As they drove home Lara told him about her day, how they looked at different leaves strewn across their school. They gathered the leaves, pasted them onto sheets of paper and wrote underneath them the type of tree from which they had fallen. He was half listening to Lara, half thinking about what his mother had said. What her psychiatrist had said. What her lawyer had said.

The car hit his car’s rear quarter panel on the passenger side. He knew this not because he saw the car hit him – he didn’t see the car, period – but because his back end slid to the left. He jerked the steering wheel, trying to correct the direction of the car. He

knew that he needed to get to the shoulder of the road without even thinking about it. When he reached the shoulder, he looked at Lara long enough to see that she was unconscious, that there was blood on the side of her head. Then he passed out.

“Did you know spaniel means something other than a dog?” Lara asked William. This was in her hospital room. She would be fine, her doctor had told William. She had a concussion, but nothing broke, no skull fractures or anything. She just needs rest. He had hugged the doctor when he heard that. Bernice made a wise crack about how he didn’t even hug *her* like that anymore.

“No, I didn’t know that,” William said now to Lara. “What else does it mean?”

Lara looked to her right, at nothing at all, the look of someone trying to remember, searching the mind’s bookshelf and trying to find the spine of a certain memory. Then she said, “It means a submissive person.”

William looked away, out the window, where the sun poked holes in the top of an oak tree. The doctor said that, while nothing was broken, Lara did receive a bad gash on her right leg, from the door on that side crunching into her. That was the word he had used, ‘crunching.’ “It’ll be fine,” the doctor had said, “but it’ll leave a scar.” William imagined how Lara would have to explain the scar to people throughout her life. The first time she swam with other people. The first time she undressed in front of someone she was falling in love with. “I was with my father,” she’d say to this man. “He was worrying over his dead dog and....” He and Bernice would be divorced by then. They would each travel to Lara’s home during the holidays because that would be easier than Lara splitting her time. They would share stories about the old days, none of which

would be about Ernie though, because that would only lead to the accident. Ernie would not only be buried physically, but also topically. As far as William was concerned, Ernie would never serve as a conversation piece again. Not after this.

Bernice slumped in the visitors chair in the corner of the room, lightly snoring. Lara stared at her hands and picked at her fingernails.

“Submissive, huh?” William said. He paused, then said, “Your mother told you to say that, didn’t she?”

“Yeah,” Laura said. “She did.”

EVERYTHING MUST GO, EVERYTHING MUST GO

Francine carries a red and blue racecar-shaped lamp out to her front yard and rests it on the long buffet table in the driveway. She writes "99¢" onto a bright orange sticker and then places the sticker onto the lamp. The lamp is a collector's item and is probably worth much more than ninety-nine cents, but Francine doesn't mind selling it so cheap because sometimes things just have to go.

Next, she brings out a toothbrush, hair comb, shaver (along with a set of five unused blades), bottles of Aqua Velva and Brute cologne, a sticky bottle of hair gel, and the six issues of *Auto Trader* that had been sitting near the toilet for over two months now. She sets all of these things in a nice, neat row on the buffet table and puts a price sticker that reads "All toiletries and magazines: 1¢" next to them. As she puts the sticker on the table, she begins to smile, but catches herself because she doesn't want to reveal just yet. There are still plenty of items that need to be set up for this yard sale.

Like a robe, fishing pole and tackle box, stereo system, a set of VHS movies (many starring John Wayne), a Timex watch, unused nail clippers, deodorant, coffee mugs – one of the mugs reads 'I'd like to buck your bronco' – hair clippers, a shoehorn, shirts imprinted with camels smoking cigarettes, jeans, shorts, jeans amputated into shorts, undershirts, underwear, a mustache comb, three pairs of brown shoes with the insoles missing, and a pair of slippers.

Next, she rolls out a portable coat rack. Hanging from the rack is a selection of her husband's cheap, outdated suits. Some pieces of the suits are older than her husband, like the 1950's Ultrasuede sport coat with quail lining and the 1960's Regency Guild of Henry two-piece polyester.

Then comes the sports memorabilia, none of which Francine had bought for her husband. Francine places basketballs, baseballs, football helmets, trading cards and photos of athletes onto the buffet table. Most of this sports memorabilia is generic enough to be considered valueless. However, there is the Michael Jordan jersey signed by Mr. Jordan himself. And when Francine delicately places this item onto the buffet table, she can't help but smile. Did you hear Michael Jordan got traded? she planned on asking her husband when he got home.

Her husband's name is Bobby. Bobby is a son of a bitch. Bobby is cheating on Francine, and Francine knows this for a fact because she found a rubber in the pocket of his jeans a week ago and Francine can't remember the last time Bobby used a rubber while having sex with her. Actually, Francine can't remember the last time Bobby *had* sex with her. She had been clearing out Bobby's pockets while preparing laundry and she pulled out a square piece of plastic in which, prior to looking at it, she had mistaken for one of those wet napkins they sometimes used after eating at the barbecue place down the street. At first, Francine was confused. Then she tried to make excuses (Bobby was planning a special night with Francine since they hadn't made love in so long), but her denial subsided and the cold, hard truth slapped her across the face: Bobby's poking another woman. The rubber is the telltale sign of his infidelity. The rubber says everything. The rubber says, "Bobby's having sex with another chick." The rubber says, "Francine has had her fill."

Which leads to the final item at Francine's garage sale: a picture frame displaying what, at first glance, resembles some sort of glossy, abstract moon with a thick outer lining. However, on closer inspection, this moon looks conspicuously like the condom

Francine found in Bobby's jeans. Francine places a sticker reading '\$100' onto the picture frame. Obviously, Bobby had felt that his infidelity was a small price to pay for a new piece of ass, but Francine feels this little piece of latex deserves the biggest price tag; it even costs more than the computer, which, along with Bobby's computer desk, Francine had brought out onto the front lawn.

Francine puts the framed rubber onto the buffet table, steps away, looks around at all of Bobby's things strewn across the front yard and smiles again. Her house has received a high colonic; an absolute cleansing of waste. The Poltergeist of her husband's possessions have been transplanted from the house to the front lawn, and in her best Zelda Rubinstein impression, Francine says, "This house is clean."

There's not a cloud in the sky. Birds chirp in nearby oak trees. Nine in the morning is feeling better than ever. And, as Francine allows herself to whistle "Zippity-Do-Da" in celebration of this fine morning, who's the first to browse Francine's garage sale but Terri Barber, the neighbor from three houses down. Terri likes to keep to herself, although Francine has heard that Terri is quite a character. Terri isn't married, someone had once told Francine – she can't remember whom. And when you talk to Terri, said this same person, you'll know why.

"Fine day for a yard sale," Terri says, her southern drawl so thick, she could pour it on hotcakes. Terri wears a bulky, red sweatsuit with white piping. Pink curlers are stuck in her hair. From what Francine has seen of Terri, pink curlers are always stuck in her hair. Her sandals reveal misshapen toenails. She walks with a slight limp, which, according to Terri, is the result of one leg being shorter than the other.

Terri walks to the computer desk, and asks, "Where's the hubby?" One of her hands taps away on the keyboard resting in front of the computer.

"Away," Francine says. "He's at work."

"Hm, men," Terri says, her fingers still dancing on the keyboard. "Always working, always out on business. Makes you wonder what kind of business they're actually doing. Probably nothing good."

Nobody knows about Francine's finding a rubber, so she's a little taken aback by Terri's words.

"I'll tell you one thing," Terri continues. And then, much to Francine's amazement, Terri places her hand between her own legs and says, "I'm glad I ain't got no balls."

Francine's eyes open wide.

"People say money's the root of all evil," continues Terri, "but every woman on the face of this godforsaken earth who's been married knows that men's balls are the root. Or roots, I guess I should say. That sack is just brewing with evil."

Francine laughs, but Terri looks dead serious. As she talks, her head slightly nods, shifting her pink curlers backward and forward, like barrels on a ship.

Terri says, "It's as if all the seven deadly sins are stored in those two dangling sons-of-bitches, just hanging there between their legs."

"Lovely image," Francine says.

"These here computers are something else," says Terri. Terri's sudden change in subject takes Francine off guard. Francine tries to refocus, to shake out the image Terri put into her head. "Why are you getting rid of this?" Terri asks.

"Just takes up space."

Terri scratches her head and says something, but Francine doesn't catch it because another car pulls up to her curb. White lettering on the top of the car's windshield reads '2 Sweet 2 Be.' A young girl who looks like she's in her mid-twenties pops out of the car, flipping her long, electric-blond hair with a flick of her hand. Near the computer desk, Terri rolls her eyes at the blonde, then hunches over and taps away at the keyboard. Six months before the garage sale, a Saturday, Francine had heard loud clicking noises from the den, where she found her husband hunched over that same keyboard.

"What are you doing?" Francine had asked.

"I'm writing a novel," Bobby said, still typing.

"Oh," Francine said.

"It's about a Mafia hitman who falls in love with his to-be victim, and he's caught between the dilemma of killing the woman or loving the woman and I think, and I only think this, I think he's going to kill her and then love her, maybe stash her away in his closet or something, a necrophiliac sort of thing. I don't know."

"But you're a used car salesman," Francine said.

"So? So?"

Whenever Bobby got angry or embarrassed or both, he repeated things. This repetition was Francine's cue to just leave him alone because, one time, when she didn't leave him alone, Bobby screamed at the wall, actually stood in front of a blank wall and yelled at the top of his lungs with a face as red as a cooked lobster. He stood there yelling and pushing his hair up until it stood on end. He never hit Francine, but the screaming had been enough to cue Francine to depart after Bobby repeated things. This

time, however, Bobby's repetition of the word 'so' left her wanting to laugh. Why? Probably because she knew Bobby didn't have a creative bone in his body. But she held back her laughter.

"Never mind," Francine said.

"Honey, can you leave me alone for a little while? The creative juices are really flowing right now, and you're being a big pain in the ass, as usual, and—I don't know—you're kind of disrupting my juices."

She shrugged off her husband's remarks, and said, "Are you hungry for anything? You want any lunch?"

Bobby stopped typing, looked at Francine, and said, "Fuck off."

Two days later, Bobby was back on the computer, playing a racecar video game. He never got past page ten of his debut novel entitled, *Every Hitman Goes To Heaven*. After reading all ten pages, Francine found the words following the title were just as embarrassingly bad as the title itself. Bobby's novel stunk like cow dung. Full of clichés and puns and stale characters. She only asked Bobby once how the novel was going, to which he answered, "Got a case of the writer's block, got a case of the writer's block," and she knew not to ask again.

Francine waves hello to the blonde woman walking up the driveway.

"What a beautiful day for a garage sale," says the blonde, while, at the same time, flicking her long hair back again. "Then again, if you ask me, every day is a beautiful day for a garage sale. I try to hit at least six or seven every week. If you ask me, garage sales are even better than the mall. You can almost always find something unique."

"Well, have a look around," says Francine. "Let me know if you have any questions."

"Totally," says the blonde.

The blonde walks over to one end of the buffet table and rummages through Bobby's toiletries. Finding nothing of interest, she picks up the framed rubber. Francine feels a rush of emotions, but two emotions stand out the most, wrapped together like a double helix—or, perhaps more befitting, like two bodies tangled in lust: anger toward her husband's infidelity and a deep satisfaction from her idea of the garage sale. Underneath these two stronger emotions, Francine feels a subtle excitement because she may be on the verge of selling the telltale rubber. But surely the blonde knows what's centered in the picture frame, Francine thinks. Surely the blonde will find the entire thing disgusting or at least obnoxious.

"Oh my God," the blonde whispers loudly. Francine's stomach drops. All of a sudden Francine's unsure how to explain the thick-rimmed moon behind the framed glass.

"That's—" Francine says, but the blonde interrupts.

"It's beautiful."

"Oh," Francine says.

"I think I've seen this before, in an art magazine or something. What's it called?"

Francine struggles for a name, anything, and says, "One Eye Covered."

"One Eye Covered," the blonde says to herself. She slides her fingers down the glass face of the frame and, for a second, Francine expects the blond girl to open the

thing up. But then the girl sets the frame down, takes a step back and examines the rubber, as if it were a Rembrandt.

“Can I think about it?” the blonde asks.

“Of course,” Francine says, stunned at the blonde’s naiveté. How could this woman not know the thing centered in the picture frame is a condom? Francine thinks.

“Here, I’ll put it off to the side until you’re ready.”

“Thanks,” the blonde says, and walks over to the coat rack to inspect the suits. She pushes the suits over one by one and stops at Bobby's least favorite: a blue ensemble he had received as a present from his parents, the only suit that isn't outdated. The blonde takes the suit off the rack and holds it up.

"There's no price on it," says the blonde.

Francine had thought about leaving this suit for her husband; sell all of his suits except for this one, like leaving a penny tip after getting bad service at a restaurant. In the end, Francine thought it best to get rid of everything, or at least as much as she could before five-thirty, when he was due home from work.

"Two dollars," Francine tells the blonde.

The blonde walks over to Francine, suit in hand.

“Nice price. And if you ask me, a nice suit, too,” says the blonde. “My boyfriend would love this get-up, I just know it.”

“How long have you two been going out?” Francine asks, not entirely interested, but she's on the verge of making a sale so she wants to throw on the charm a bit.

"Well, we're not really going out. Not really, if you know what I mean."

Francine does know what she means. In fact, Francine almost tells the girl, "My husband and I aren't really married. Not really, if you know what I mean." But Francine holds her tongue.

"But I think he'd like this suit," the blonde says. Francine likes the suit, too, which isn't very surprising because, as far as taste goes, she and her husband are at opposite ends of the spectrum. Goodness, how he bitched about that suit, Francine thinks. On the day he first tried the suit on, Bobby had walked out of the bedroom, shoulders slumped, his hands tugging at the pant legs.

"Look at this God-awful thing," Bobby had said. "It looks like stitched-up roadkill."

Francine laughed.

"Look. You're laughing at me. You're laughing at me."

"I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing at your joke about roadkill."

"That's the thing, Fran," Bobby had said, tugging at the pant legs harder now.

"I'm not joking. I'm being serious. This fucking thing looks like roadkill."

"It looks fine," Francine said, although she knew her opinion meant nothing. Bobby didn't like the suit, and that was that.

"I'm going to burn this suit. It's awful, awful."

Not as awful as your ten-page novel, Francine had thought, but didn't dare say aloud. That would be a low blow, and she couldn't administer a low blow. Not at that point, anyhow. This ordeal about the suit happened prior to Francine's finding a rubber. But she knew not to tell Bobby that the suit looked fine again. Because, according to Bobby, the suit looked like roadkill, the suit looked like roadkill.

The blonde asks if Francine could hold on to the suit for her while she continues to browse around. Francine nods and, just as she does so, a big, black pick-up truck—the jacked-up kind—pulls up to the curb behind the blonde's little coupe. A big, burly, hairy guy with a thick, dark beard steps out of the pick-up. He wears faded blue jeans, a cowboy hat and a raggedy tanktop with a picture of a woman in a bikini on it. His tanned, hairy arms jut out of his tanktop's armholes like two elephant trunks.

"Howdy," says the big burly guy in a voice much smaller than Francine expects. "I'm looking for a TV set." The man looks around the yard, rights his hat, and says, "But it looks like I'm out of luck."

Francine nods. The television set is hers, and Francine is only selling her husband's things. But then she remembers the little black-and-white.

"Actually," Francine says, "I do have one small black and white TV on the workbench over there." She points toward the garage. "It's my husband's, but he doesn't need it anymore."

"Well, wouldn't hurt to take a look at."

Francine gets the small black-and-white from her husband's workbench and brings it over to him. The man holds it in his giant paws and, to Francine, the TV looks like it just shrunk to half its size.

"She's not what I'm looking for," says the burly man. "I was hoping to get something for the living room."

"Oh," says Francine. "I—"

"But," the burly man says, "I think this little thing will come in helpful in my own workshop. How much your hubby want for it?"

Francine waves her hand at the burly fellow and says, "It's on the house. As long as you buy something here—anything—I'll give you the TV."

"Well, thank you." He sets the television onto the buffet table and walks over to the suits. Still standing near the computer, Terri waves Francine over.

"I bet you that man's got balls the size of churchbells," Terri whispers to her.

"Terri!" Francine says, and laughs. Francine had planned to move out of the house, some place far-but-not-too-far, to help her escape any lingering memories of her marriage, but damn if Terri wasn't adding to the reasons not to move. She likes Terri's abrupt, flippant attitude more as the day goes on. Terri's outbursts are like emotional ambushes – they pop out of nowhere.

"Shit," Terri goes on, "I bet you he's got seven thousand deadly sins stockpiled in them there sons-of-bitches."

"Terri, stop."

"You could use those things as sandbags."

Francine screeches with laughter and sees the blonde and the burly man look over. The burly man smiles. The blonde looks confused.

Francine catches her breath and says, "So are you looking to buy this computer or are you just looking at it?"

"I'll take it. Don't know what in God's name I'll use it for, but I'll take it. How much?"

Francine points to the price sticker attached to the monitor.

"Twenty dollars?" says Terri. She checks her pockets and says, "All I got is ten."

"That'll work," Francine says.

"Ma'am," says the blonde. "Ma'am, I've got a question over here."

"Just a second, Terri," Francine says, and then walks over to the blonde.

"I can't believe you actually have an autographed Michael Jordan jersey," says the blonde. "I already got my boyfriend one, but I'm sure he'd like another. I'm sure he'd go crazy for another. Probably sell one of them and make money now, and hold on to the other to make money later, you know? How much?"

Ah, yes, the Jordan jersey; the one thing Francine wanted to sell the most, even more than the rubber, and already she has a potential buyer. All her husband ever talks about is Michael Jordan. Jordan did this, did that; the guy's in his own league. Blah, blah, blah. If Francine still had sex with her husband, she suspects he'd call out Michael Jordan's name instead of God's. Oh Michael, oh Michael, oh yeah, oh Michael. Francine chuckles at this thought, and the blonde asks if she's all right.

"Fine," Francine says and thinks how Bobby has had the jersey for only six days—the day after she found the rubber. Francine had been watching television when Bobby flung the front door open.

"I got it, I can't believe it, I got it," he screamed. Francine didn't even look over. She had no idea what Bobby was talking about, and she didn't care. She just sat there on the couch, her hand in her pocket playing with the rubber she had swiped out of his jeans the night before.

Bobby walked over to Francine like a five-year-old with a new toy.

"Look what I got," Bobby had said. He held both shoulders of the jersey and shook it like a puppet. "Do you know how hard I worked at the lot to get this thing? Michael Jordan! Michael fucking Jordan!"

I bet you worked real hard, Francine had thought, and said, "I'm proud of you. I'm very proud of you." She forced a smile, because, although she was pissed beyond reasoning, she didn't want Bobby to know she had found out about his affair. Bobby wouldn't realize the rubber was missing, she knew that. He was too careless to remember such a thing.

"Don't ever wash this jersey, you hear me?" Bobby said. Are you kidding me, Francine had thought, and then realized that Bobby wasn't kidding at all. Bobby had been too consumed with himself and Michael Jordan to kid around about something like washing an autographed jersey. So Francine played dumb.

"Will that ruin it, honey?"

Bobby's eyes lit up. "You're goddamn right it'll ruin it. You're goddamn right it'll ruin it."

Francine put a finger to her lips and said, "Okay, honey. I won't wash it then." Bobby nodded and went to the den where he put all of his sports memorabilia. Francine continued to fumble with the rubber in her pocket. A few minutes later, she came up with the idea of selling the Michael Jordan jersey behind her husband's back. And then she thought of selling the condom. Less than a minute after that, she came up with the idea of selling everything he owned. The following morning, Francine drove to the store and picked up garage sale signs and a bunch of price stickers. She hid the sign and stickers in the far corner of the garage.

The blonde holds the jersey by the shoulders, just as Francine's husband did, and looks ecstatic over her find. She asks, "How much?" again and Francine tells her fifty bucks.

"My boyfriend would go nuts if I got him another one of these," the blonde says.
"And he won't believe I only paid fifty bucks for it either."

"That *is* a good deal, isn't it?"

"You have no idea."

The blonde reaches into her purse and pulls out five ten-dollar bills.

"Fifty dollars," the blonde says, and hands over the money. Right after Francine takes the money, a black pick-up pulls up behind the burly man's truck, even knowing it's too early for the black pick-up to be here. Too early because the black pick-up isn't supposed to be here until five-thirty.

Bobby Harril gets out of the black pick-up. His eyes are the first things Francine notices. His eyes are huge. His face loses color as he walks like a zombie to the bottom of the driveway. Francine can read his mind. Anyone who is looking at Bobby right this instant can read his mind: What in God's name is going on here?

Still looking at her husband, Francine hands the blonde the Jordan jersey, but the blonde isn't looking at the jersey as she takes it. The blonde is looking at Bobby.

"Bobby!" says the blonde, and now Francine has that dumbfounded look—the same one Bobby currently wears. "Bobby!" says the blonde again, and then she runs to Francine's husband, who stands at the far end of the driveway like an upright corpse, and wraps her arms around him.

Now it's Francine's turn to think, What in God's name is going on here? Bobby was supposed to be the one stunned. Bobby was supposed to see Francine selling off his most precious belongings, the things he cared about so much, the things he cared about more than his own wife. But what is happening here? This is the girl he's been having an

affair with? This blonde who drives a coupe with the windshield that reads '2 sweet 2 be'? And what the hell kind of coincidence is this? The world *is* getting smaller, Francine thinks, and I don't like it one bit.

"Why are you here?" says the blonde as she drops the Michael Jordan jersey onto the ground. "How did you know I'd be here?"

Bobby has yet to even look at the blonde. He is completely transfixed on Francine. Francine can't seem to take her eyes off of Bobby, can't seem to rid the thought that keeps circulating in her mind like a breeze that stinks not unlike spoiled milk: He was supposed to be the surprised one, not me.

"You asshole!" Francine hears herself scream. Francine is on autopilot, she is no longer in control of her emotions or her actions or her words, and the five ten-dollar bills explode out of her hand. She runs at Bobby with a fist in the air. The blonde turns toward Francine, screams, walks backwards away from Bobby, trips over the curb and falls on her bottom. Bobby still stands there, but his eyes have opened considerably wider and his mouth is open, but nothing comes out. Although Francine can't see the burly man, she knows he's following her, she can feel him, as if this adrenaline rush has strengthened all of her senses, she knows he's following behind her, and over from the computer desk, Francine hears Terri call out, "Leave her alone, you big bastard! Leave her alone!" and, when Francine reaches her husband, Francine grabs Bobby's balls and squeezes them tight, and Bobby screams in pain, and now Terri is saying "That-a-girl! That-a-girl!" But no. Francine is not a girl right now; she's just a twister of bursting emotion and adrenaline, she's just a fist clasped around her husband's nuts.

Bobby falls to the ground, his arms curled around his stomach, and Francine falls down with him as her hand refuses to release her husband's balls. Her hand is like a vice-grip.

Francine feels two hands grasp her shoulders and, judging by how big these hands feel, she thinks they belong to Mr. Burly-man.

"Ma'am," says the burly man.

"This is none of your business," Francine yells back at him, gripping her husband's balls with one hand and holding back her husband's hands—which are now frantically trying to push Francine away—with her other. "Get out of here," Francine says, but still the burly man ignores her, still his hands are holding her shoulders, tightening in fact, and from behind her, Francine hears someone screaming – squawking – and Francine turns her head long enough to see Terri running straight at the burly man. Terri hops on the burly man's back and wraps her arms around his throat, and yells, "None of your damn business, leave her alone." When Francine turns her head back toward Bobby, her husband's eyes are shut tight. When Bobby's eyes finally open, Francine's clutch suddenly loosens, and her husband breaks free. Bobby gets off the ground, hunches over, and smacks his back against the side of his truck. Terri is still squawking at the top of her lungs. Francine turns to look at her and sees Terri swinging from the burly man's back like a bullrider. The burly man's face is more stunned than angry and finally he shakes his back hard enough to send Terri into the grass.

Francine looks back at her husband. He is still hunched over, moaning, his hands covering his groin. Beyond Bobby's moaning, there is a rattling sound, a clink-clank.

The rattle comes from a car, a brown clunker of a thing, and it's pulling up to the curb. Francine just stands there; she can't move, can't speak, can't even blink an eyelid, and an old man and woman slowly get out of the brown car. Francine looks around and imagines what these two elderly people must be seeing right now: A blonde sitting on the sidewalk, rubbing her backside; a man hunched over in pain, back against a car door, both hands over his groin; Francine herself standing on the sidewalk, eyes glazed over; a big burly man fixing his cowboy hat as he stares down at a woman wearing pink curlers lying on the lawn.

But the elderly couple seem to dismiss all of this. It seems the old man has his sights on something lying on the ground. That something is a red jersey, one with Michael Jordan's autograph scribbled on it. The old man picks up the jersey, shakes it out and takes a good look at the prize.

"Anyone claim this?" asks the old man, but nobody says a word. Francine's front yard is so quiet it's eerie.

SOMEONE STOLE DAISY FROM ME

Someone stole Daisy from me. That's why every time I smoke a cigarette, my lungs fill with water. That's why I'm standing near the bank of a stream right now, smoking a cigarette, flicking ashes onto the ground close to where Daisy sat a year ago, back when she still had breath in her, one of the last places Daisy still had breath in her. I take a drag from my smoke and my lungs fill up with water, and the inside of my mouth tastes like copper, and my gums and tongue become cold. I used to gag and choke at the imaginary water that filled my mouth, but not anymore. I have slowly become numb to this feeling, just as a carpenter's thumb might become numb to a hammer.

Someone stole Daisy from me. That's why I come to this very place at least once a month. To look. To remember, although really I don't want to remember. I suppose something in the back of my mind believes Daisy is still alive and, by re-tracing my steps, I'll eventually find the missing clue. Cops and their German shepherds tracked up and down the bank of this stream and in the forest behind me for what seemed both like months on end and, at the same time, not long enough.

Someone stole Daisy from me. That's why my brother, Brian, no longer talks to me. That's why Brian's wife, Ellen, and other child, Tommy, no longer talk to me. If my mother and father were still alive, they wouldn't talk to me either.

Daisy and I had been fishing. This part of the world is known as Vista Lake, Florida--a rural town if there ever was one. Nothing but trees, one short row of houses, a Handy-Mart convenience store and, of course, a stream.

I took my eyes off Daisy for five minutes and haven't seen her since. Daisy had been six years old the day she was kidnapped.

I pull another drag from my smoke. And, although I'm all alone out here, I can see Daisy sitting on the bank, fishing rod in hand, focused on the point where the line meets the glass surface of the water.

"Why don't we use worms?" Daisy had said not daring to take her eyes off the line for fear that she might miss that all-important tug from a hooked fish.

"Because that's cheating," I told her.

"Why is that cheating?"

I smiled. "Because part of the sport is fooling the fish. Part of fishing is making believe you have a real piece of food on your hook."

"Oh," she said.

We sat in silence. After a few minutes passed, she said she had to go to the bathroom. I nodded, asked her, "One or two?" and she said, "One." I thanked God for that. "Two" would've meant that we'd have to drive to town and stop at the Handy-Mart. But "One" was much easier. I brought toilet tissue for such matters, and so I reached into my backpack on the ground next to me, pulled out the roll and handed it to her.

"Where should I go?" she asked. I pointed toward the edge of the forest behind us and told her not to go any farther. I made sure she understood. She said okay, and then put her pole on the ground, and walked toward the spot. I never saw her again.

If Daisy had said, "Two" instead of "One," who knows where I'd be right now. Probably having dinner over Brian and Ellen's. I'd be anywhere but here, that's for sure.

Let me just set one thing straight right now. Daisy didn't run away. She was a good kid. Hell, people used to ask my brother what he did to get such a good child, and my brother used to just eat that up. "I read the owner's manual," he'd tell people who

asked such ridiculous questions and that usually got everybody laughing.

The forest in Vista Lake is a big one. With the stream to my back, I take a few steps into the part of the forest where I had pointed Daisy to a year ago. Large oak trees surround me. The trees' thick, twisting branches reach out, looking like they're about to grab me. I touch one of the trunks, just as I do every time I'm here. The trunk is hard, it's unforgiving, and I pretend Daisy had touched this trunk before someone had taken her away. She had touched this trunk, yes, ran her hand across it, pictured catching a fish and me helping her unhook it. Maybe she imagined cleaning the fish back at the house while her daddy and I supervised, and then, on Monday, telling her school friends how big the fish was and how good it tasted.

The wind picks up for a second and dead leaves rustle on the ground below me. There came a rustling of branches from behind me the day someone took Daisy away. Right after I had heard that rustling, I turned my head, and Daisy was gone. I stood up, dropped my fishing rod, and ran toward the place I had told her to go. There, at my feet, lay a roll of toilet tissue.

"Daisy!" I had screamed. I took a few steps further into the forest

"Daisy!" Still, there had been no answer. I walked even further into the forest and soon enough, my walk turned into a fast walk, and then a full-out run.

"Daisy!" No answer. I stopped to catch my breath and get my bearings. Trees surrounded me on all sides. Everything looked the same: the plants, the rocks, the trees themselves. I was in a hall of mirrors at a funhouse. Leaves and twigs were strewn all over the ground, yet I didn't hear rustling from any direction. I heard nothing, but I felt panic spreading all throughout my body.

I wanted to find that stranger and kill him. I wanted to kill myself for letting someone steal Daisy from me.

I walk further into the forest and now, when I turn to look back at the stream, there is no stream; it's hidden behind tree trunks and branches. The person who took Daisy probably knew this forest like his or her own backyard. Brian knew it pretty well, had taken Daisy here a few times. But I knew it for shit on the day Daisy was taken away. Now I know it all too well.

Farther on, the trees become less dense, where a small path cuts through the vegetation; it's not much of a path, but it's there all right. An occasional root bends outward from the ground like a tripwire only much thicker. There are two consecutive roots on the far right of the path so if someone misses the first one, the second will most likely trap the foot and send the person falling face-first to the ground. I had tripped on the first root that day, but I didn't feel it, hardly even noticed I fell at all. I got right back up and started running again.

Exactly hundred steps from those two roots, the path begins to narrow and the trees crowd in again. And just when the trees look like they'll have you surrounded, the dwindling path leads to a clearing. I'm at the edge of that clearing now. Through the trees, there is the outline of a cabin. When I first saw the small, wooden structure that day, my panic turned to hope. I had been sure I found the son-of-a-bitch who took Daisy, so I picked up a stick--it's the only weapon I could find--and slowly walked to the cabin's side wall.

This is the part I try to forget every time I come here. The cabin. But of course, this is the part where I remember every detail. The truth is, every time I come here, I'm

afraid that when I look inside I'll see Daisy hanging by a noose tied to the ceiling. Daisy with a ghost-white face and pale, shriveled hands, mouth hanging ajar like an open oven door, blonde hair like straw, eyes empty. I don't want to think of Daisy like that, but ever since the day someone took her, that image comes to mind when I see this godforsaken cabin. But I have to look. What if she's in there? What if, this time, I finally find her?

There is a large square hole on the side wall. On the day someone stole Daisy, I peered inside. I didn't see Daisy, however. Instead, I saw a little dead boy hanging from the ceiling. I turned my head away from the cabin window and vomited. I couldn't bear to look back into that window. Deep down inside, however, I knew that the window was just the beginning. Daisy might be in there, along with that dead boy, and that meant I had to go inside. So I forced myself to walk around to the front.

The cabin doesn't have a front door, and as I walk to the door now, my hands start to shake, and sweat drips down my forehead.

"Daisy," I say, but it's just a whisper. Any softer and it would be only a thought. I can feel tears building up. They're swelling, just as waves swell, and soon the tears will form completely and wash down my cheeks.

"Daisy," I whisper again, not because I think she's alive and well inside this cabin but because hearing her name gives me strength to walk inside. That's how I mustered the courage to walk inside that day I found the dead boy. I kept calling Daisy's name and, when I walked through the doorway, I immediately dropped the stick I held for a weapon just as I had dropped my fishing rod back at the stream. The little boy hung from the ceiling. The boy looked about Daisy's age. I tried not to look at the boy, but he had been hung dead-center of the cabin, so no matter which way I looked, my eyes always

found his body. I tried to call Daisy's name, but couldn't. It didn't take long to find out Daisy wasn't in there. I walked out of the cabin, dry heaved, and took a few deep breaths. I thought how, if I were a father, I'd never let my child out of the house.

“Daisy,” I say a little louder, and now I’m inside the cabin, the dark brown walls on all sides, the sweet, dingy smell of old wood, spider webs stuck in the corners. A pile of crushed beer cans is piled up near the far wall. I don’t go anywhere near the center of the cabin. Instead, I follow the edge of each wall. But there’s nothing here. The cops had taken the dead boy’s body from the ceiling during the search for Daisy. The boy’s mother called me the day the search officially ended. “Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” I said, and then she hung up because I could hear her crying at the other end and my guess is that she was tired of crying to an audience. I only assume this because that’s how I felt after the investigation. I had been interrogated and been a suspect for some time. The sooner the cops took me off the list of suspects, the sooner they could work harder trying to find the guy who really took Daisy.

After seeing the little dead boy, after taking those few deep breaths, I started running again. I had been running to find Daisy and, at the same time, to get away from the dead boy. I don't know how long I ran. What I do know is this: Daisy left me to pee around nine in the morning, and I ran until it got dark. Some people might think that I had been stupid to keep running, that I should have just turned on my heel and found a phone to call the police. And, trust me, I had thought about doing that a hundred times. The entire time I ran, two thoughts kept battling with each other in my head: Keep looking for Daisy, and stop looking for Daisy. I knew that, at some point, I had to stop and call the police. The problem was, I didn't know when that point should come. If I

had stopped pushing my way through the woods, I might have lost the chance to find Daisy. But if I didn't stop running, the police wouldn't know my situation and, therefore, wouldn't be able to search for her themselves.

I screamed her name every couple of minutes; this came as involuntarily as blinking. My voice got scratchy after about six hours of screaming, and by the time the moon came out, my voice gave out entirely.

At some point, I looked up at the sky and then all around me. I'm lost, I thought. I'm fucking lost. I didn't know from which direction I had come from. For a second, I didn't even know which direction I had been running in. I tried to yell, "Fuck," but the only sound I heard was the click of the *K*. I had lost my way and my voice. It was then that I knew I had to find my way back to my truck. I picked a direction and started walking. Every so often, I tried to yell Daisy's name but couldn't. I had done one thing correctly, however. I picked the right direction. After about a half-hour of walking, I saw the outline of the cabin. Because of the dead boy hanging inside, I didn't want to walk past it again. Especially at night. But I also didn't want to chance getting lost again. So I kept walking toward the cabin, leaves crunching underfoot, treetops swaying in what little breeze there was, moon watching me from above.

I knew I shouldn't have walked past that cabin at night. I knew I should have taken my chances and strayed from my path. But what's the old adage? Hindsight is twenty-twenty? I learned that the hard way. I learned that as soon as I passed that cabin and heard that little dead boy's voice calling for me. I would eventually decide that the voice I heard had been my imagination, but at the very moment I first heard the voice, it belonged to the little boy.

"Don't leave me," the boy whispered. "Don't leave me like you left Daisy."

Now, I walk out of the cabin with that little boy's pale face still stuck in my mind. Usually, that face doesn't go away until the cabin can no longer be seen, so I walk deeper into the woods until the cabin is completely out of sight--and the little dead boy's face entirely out of my mind. There is no path on this side of the cabin, just trees closing in from everywhere. I light a cigarette and taste stream water. It's a long way before I reach the point where I had stopped and turned around that day. To keep my mind busy, I think of my childhood, when things were uncomplicated, when the only thing I had to worry about was Dad not getting home from work in time to throw the baseball. When Dad got home from work, Brian and I used to run out to him as fast as we could. My mother used to call Brian and me "Dinos," because each of us looked like Dino running to Fred Flintstone after Fred got home from work in the cartoons. We squeezed Dad tight and followed him into the house. If the light held out a little longer, the three of us would throw the baseball around, and, most times in the summer, the light held out. Dad disappeared into his bedroom, and then reappeared in a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, ball and glove in hand. Brian and I charged for the garage, got our gloves and ran outside, and the three of us formed a triangle and threw the rawhide back and forth, and the light always held up until dinner was ready because, as children, we knew that the stove was synchronized with the sun. One time, at the dinner table, Brian asked my father where the sun went when the moon came out. I laughed, but my father looked at Brian sincerely. "Home," my father had told him. "It's going home."

This is how it always happens: I think about the past during this long part of the walk to try to pass the time and put a smile on my face, all the while looking for any clue

the cops or the German shepherds or my entire family might have missed. And these memories do pass the time along, but they don't put a smile on my face; in fact, the memories make me feel worse. Thinking about the past isn't always healthy. Sometimes, a person is better off shoving the past into a lock box and throwing away the key. Most times, however, the past doesn't want to stay hidden in some lock box, and it comes seeping out of a crack like how maple syrup seeps through a paper plate.

It's hard to tell exactly where I had stopped that day, but I'm sure it's somewhere around where I'm standing right now. There are absolutely no landmarks – bent tree, clearing, nothing – to help me know this is where I stopped; it's just a feeling, something deep inside my gut and in the outfield of my mind.

“Daisy,” I whisper, and then start my way back to the stream.

My truck is parked on a patch of gravel not far from the stream. There's only one more thing I need to do, and that's go to the Handy-Mart convenience store, the store where I would have taken Daisy if she had said, “Two” instead of “One”; it's where I made my phone call to the police. I put my truck into ‘Drive’ and pull out of the gravel patch. The dirt road is bumpy and my truck bounces along, but then dirt turns to pavement and I'm cruising along. After a half-mile heading south, I cross railroad tracks and 1.2 miles later the Handy-Mart is on my left. I pull into the log cabin convenience store and park in the third space from the far right. The phone booth is around the corner. I get out of my truck and walk over to it. Across the street, the forest trees look like shadows in the night.

That night one year ago, I called the police and the police dispatcher contacted an officer by the name of Fredrick Browne. Officer Browne and two other police cars were at the Handy-Mart within ten minutes. Other police cars showed up, but it was Officer Browne whom I talked to mostly.

"Where did you last see her?" Officer Browne had asked me.

"At the stream...where we were fishing," I told him.

"You didn't see her any time after that?"

"No. She...she was gone too long, and when I turned my head...." I couldn't finish.

"Mr. O'Connor," said Officer Browne, getting a little impatient. But I didn't care about Officer Browne's impatience because I was outside a Handy-Mart in the middle of nowhere, and blue and red lights flashed, and the breeze started to pick up. Daisy had become a missing person, and, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Brian and his wife pulling up onto the side of the road. Sirens blared every now and then. Officer Browne had been asking me another question, but I didn't hear him because the little boy hanging in the cabin started talking to me. "Don't leave me," the little boy said, and I told myself over and over that the little boy was not my fault, not the little boy, because I only had a little girl stolen from me. The red and blue lights kept flashing, and my brother got out of his car and my sister-in-law, Ellen, got out of the passenger side and she rushed over to Brian and hugged him, and Ellen cried hysterically, screaming, "Where is Daisy? What happened to my little girl?" and I thought how I couldn't answer either of those questions.

"Mr. O'Connor, are you sure you didn't see anything after she left to go to the bathroom?" Officer Browne had asked me.

"She was gone," I told the officer. "I turned my head and she was gone."

My brother walked up to me, cocked back his fist and punched me in the face. I had expected that. He had every right to hit me.

One of the officers pulled my brother away. Officer Browne pulled me away. Ellen tried to fight her way toward me, but a third officer pulled her away. Everybody started yelling: My brother yelled at the officer who held him, Ellen yelled at me, a fourth officer yelled at somebody behind me. I turned around. I felt dizzy.

"Did you hear anything, Mr. O'Connor?" asked Officer Browne.

I closed my eyes, tried to get my feet back on the ground. Finally, I told him that I had heard something. I had heard something rustle in the trees.

"That's all?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "That's all."

Officer Browne wrote something down on a yellow legal pad.

"There's a dead boy back there," I said. Browne stopped writing and looked at me.

"What do you mean? What happened?"

Near another patrol car, my brother talked to a police officer, but every so often I caught him looking at me.

"In a cabin," I said, no longer looking at Officer Browne. I watched Brian, and kept thinking, I'm sorry, Brian. I'd think that over and over, even at the same time I spoke to Browne. "Back there in the woods. There's a cabin. There's a dead boy."

Officer Browne called over a woman officer, and told her that I had found a body--a different body, not Daisy's--back there in the woods.

"The Foster child?" asked the woman cop.

Officer Browne didn't answer her; he may have shrugged or nodded, but I wouldn't know anything about that because I kept watching my brother. I wished we were running to Dad to give him a great big hug.

Turns out, the boy I had seen that day was 'The Foster child'. The dead boy's full name was Josh Foster. Josh had been stolen from his mother while she paid for gas inside the Handy-Mart. Nobody knows who stole Josh from his mother. He had been missing for four months when I had found him. Until that day the late Josh Foster's Mom called me to say thank you, I never quite understood what people meant when they said they wanted closure. Now I do. Closure is being able to put the past in a lock box and keep it there.

I'm still staring at the payphone when someone taps me on the shoulder. I jump back and see a woman standing beside me.

"Mister," says the woman who looks so much like Brian's wife I begin to feel dizzy. "You all right, mister?"

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah, just thinking. Zoned out, I guess."

The woman smiles. "Looked like you're having one of them internal conversations."

"Sorry?"

"You looked like you were talking to yourself, only not out loud."

"Yeah, I guess you could say that."

"Mind if I make a phone call, or are you waiting for one?"

"Just waiting to meet someone here is all," I lie. Although maybe it isn't a lie.

Why else would I come here every four weeks but to hope to meet up with Daisy? I smile back at the woman. “She’s all yours,” I say, gesturing to the phone.

“Thanks,” she says. I nod and light up a cigarette.

The tall dark trees across the street form a wall of shadows and somewhere beyond those shadows is a stream. People fish that stream all the time: Grown adults, small children, adolescents. I only fished that stream once and I’ll never fish it again. I’ll never even touch the water in that stream, but I taste it constantly. Every time I smoke a cigarette, my lungs fill with water from that stream. The copper taste reminds me of the day someone stole Daisy, the day someone stole my family away from me.

The woman who looks like Ellen hangs up the phone.

“Hope your friend comes soon,” the woman says. “Ed’s closing up the store and it can get pretty lonely out here alone.”

“Should be here any minute. Thanks.”

“Okee-doke,” she says with a smile and walks around the corner. Less than a minute later, a beat-up blue Chevrolet pulls out of the lot and onto the road. Not long after, the lights in Handy-Mart are turned off. I peek around the corner. A man with short curly brown hair and wearing blue overalls walks out of the store. Ed. Ed locks up and climbs into his pickup. He doesn’t see me until he’s backed out of the parking space. He nods a ‘hello’ my way, and then drives off.

The night surrounds me. The sun has gone home, and now it's time for me to go home. I climb into my truck and pull out of the parking lot onto the main road. I have to drive 53.7 miles before I reach my driveway. On my way home, I pray to God my brother called and left a message on my answering machine telling me everything’s okay.

I pray that there'll be an Orlando Sentinel newspaper lying on my doorstep with the headline "Missing Girl Found" on the front page. And in four weeks, if those prayers aren't answered, I'll do everything all over again.

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