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Little Deaths

Short Stories

by

Sharma Shields

B.A. University of Washington, Seattle, 2000

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

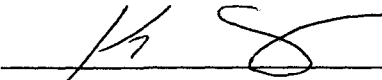
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Approved by:



Kevin Canty, Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

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Little Deaths

Short Stories

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Thanks to:
Dee, Kevin, and my amazing peers for their help on these stories.

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despite my having a long way to go.

J.P., the Brother Man,
for reading story after story over the years,
even the really bad ones I wrote when I was ten.

My soon-to-be-famous Sam Mills.
May we enjoy many more “Little Deaths,”
at least in the Shakespearian sense.

And to my friends here and elsewhere: a truly great-looking bunch of brains.

Antropolis

My hatred for Agnes led directly to our family's appearance on *Oprah*. You'd say, oh, you didn't hate her, she was just your older sister. But she was not my older sister. She looked older, but I was in fact the elder by two years, and ten times as bright. For example, *The Antropolis* was my idea. Everybody credited her, even my parents and Uncle Hayward, but I made it up one night as I read *Kid's Life* with a penlight under my covers. I lifted a corner of the blanket so I could see Agnes where she sat cross-legged on my bedroom floor, braiding her long hair, and I said, "You know what's a good idea, Agnes?" and she said, "What, Hannah?" and I said, "If we made ant farms and sold them for twice as much money," and she said, "Ants are grody." *Grody*. That was her word, direct quote. But the next day she was telling Uncle Hayward all about it. He had arrived recently from the city to settle what he called "rambunctious nerves." He thought the ants were a brilliant idea. He ordered the kits, which included special soil and food, a thin plastic farm, and about twenty-five Western-Harvester ants per purchase. He opened one door of our four-door garage and for days we swept and organized. He read us the directions for taking care of the ants, and even though I understood them from the get-go, stupid Agnes had him repeat everything at least a trillion times.

“But why do they die so fast?” she whined. She didn’t like that the ants only lived a month or so in the farms, and I admit I didn’t like it either, but while I understood this as merely a fact of life, Agnes was practically slitting her wrists over it.

“Without a queen,” Uncle Hayward said, “they just don’t live as long.” I sighed and scratched at my elbow. Hayward was my favorite uncle, but he could be so annoyingly patient with Agnes. “The company that we order the ants from doesn’t permit us to order queens.”

“But why not?” Agnes continued, even though he’d already told us all of this the day before.

“Because, stupid,” I said, “they might run rampant and then cause severe ecological damage.” I was good at quoting pamphlets directly. It was a photographic trait that drove my teachers and peers nuts. “Like fire ants, for example,” I said, “or killer bees in Texas.”

Hayward patted my head in a way that made me feel less smart than I sounded. He said, “Maybe if you girls learn something from these antkits, you can start digging up your own ants and find a queen, yourselves.”

I liked this idea. Huge dollar signs popped up in my eyes. “Don’t order any more ants,” I told Hayward. “I’ll supply the ants from now on.”

“Yeah,” Agnes said, “me, too.” Her enthusiasm momentarily diffused my own.

At first, our parents were skeptical of the whole ant-farm idea. Hayward argued for us.

“It’s a great summer project. The girls will learn a ton.”

Though Dad respected Hayward as a businessman, he questioned his rationality. “I don’t want ants all over my garage,” he growled.

“There *are* ants all over your garage,” Hayward said. “Only these ants will be in tightly-sealed cases.” Dad shook his head. Hayward pressed, “Don’t you want the girls to learn fiscal responsibility? Customer-service relations? Respect for God’s creatures?”

Dad harrumphed. Mom said to him, “What do you care, Brett? You’re never home anyway.”

Dad sold medical equipment to hospitals all over the nation. He was making us, as Mom often said, “rich but unfulfilled.” Mom, herself, believed that parenting consisted of greeting us after school and sitting with us on the couch while she stared glassy-eyed at the television. She wanted us to benefit from the womanly genius of Oprah, the only black person Mom had ever regarded seriously, aside from a kid named Eldridge that I had met at Happy Cheezers a few years earlier and that I had played with in the ball crawl. The whole way home from Happy Cheezers, Mom had applauded herself for not being a racist. “I was *happy* you were playing with that child,” she told me. “I was *estatic*.” She glowed over dinner and told Dad the whole story, too, and he said, “Good for you, Martha, good for you.” This was always the encouragement he gave her when his mind had wandered elsewhere.

But yes, there was Oprah, and Mom would talk to us about the virtues discussed on the show, and then there was Springer, and Mom would tsk-tsk and sigh and tell us how pitiable these lower class people could be (*the poor things have never learned a modicum of morality. I mean, they have no time to think of such things*). Despite her disgust, I don’t think

Agnes bleeding from her ears on the couch would have torn Mom's eyes away from the brutality of that television set. I also thought, at the time, that she believed Springer was a hotty. Once, he had embraced a pear-shaped, middle-aged woman not unlike herself, who was weeping because her husband had cheated on her yet again. With a passionate gasp, Mom sunk her fingers into my forearm. When she let go, there were long white claw marks where the blood used to be. I was hoping that these would turn into bruises so that I could tell the counselor the next day. Maybe I would get invited to the Springer show myself. Or even better, because it would destroy my mother, Oprah would call and ask me to share my dreadful experiences with her. But within minutes my arm was back to normal.

At first, Mom gushed about how Uncle Hayward's appearance in the house would be "Absolutely grand." I think she assumed he would take her side on all things, especially where her husband was concerned. But while Hayward doted on Agnes and me, he gave my parents little attention. "Your concerns are your concerns," he told my mother, and she retorted that the Antropolis idea was "a stupid, horrible sign of how horribly immature" he always had been and still very much was. Uncle Hayward laughed at this and said, "Perhaps." Dad didn't seem to mind Hayward's presence so much, although sometimes he muttered things like, "Hayward seems more than a little off," and "What sort of a man doesn't enjoy beer?" These statements arrived at odd moments, like when he was shaving, or when he was brushing his feet on the welcome mat. They were always said to no one in particular. Mom said that Dad's talking to himself was the surest sign of megalomania.

The week before school ended, Agnes and I went around the hallways taping up hand-scrawled flyers advertising “The Antropolis.” I had come up with the name after rifling through hundreds of variations: Ant-tastic, Ant You Happy, In Your Pants. Agnes had come up with one lousy name, “Antsville,” which Hayward feigned to like until I belted out, *Antropolis!* Agnes started crying. Hayward patted her back and said things like, “She wouldn’t have thought of it if you hadn’t said ‘Antsville,’” which was a total lie, and that “Those who succeed stand upon the shoulders of giants,” which made her a giant and me a total shrimp. I saw an ant glide beneath me on the cool pavement and I put my foot to it and wiped its guts into a sweeping frown. “Is it *Antropolis* or not?” I asked. Hayward nodded at me but also put a finger to his lips. I stomped into the house. Later, prompted by Hayward, Mom visited me in my room and told me not to be upset by his giving Agnes more attention. “She’s younger than you and more sensitive,” Mom said. But what she meant was “She’s stupider than you and more attractive.” I told Mom to stuff it and thus martyred myself out of a fried-chicken dinner. Dad snuck a piece to me later. He knew it was my favorite.

I went to the garage later that night. I carried a wet paper towel from the kitchen and wiped away the ant guts. The unrecognizable smear made me nauseous. I felt really sorry for the ant. What was the use, I thought, of treating something lower than me so crappily? The logic of this sent me reeling, and as I brushed my teeth and readied for bed, a great change spread through me. By the time Mom kissed me goodnight, I had such an aura of benevolence about me that she was compelled to say, “Sorry for earlier. I

was probably too harsh.” She muttered something about not having listened to Oprah. I told her, in my neophyte state of wisdom, that all was forgiven.

The week after school finished, we had a flurry of customers. The neighborhood mothers found Hayward handsome, and they couldn’t wait to sidle up to him, stroking the pearls that grew like tumors from their necks and wrists, and purr about what a “Deliciously adorable thing” he’d done, helping darling Agnes and that (“What’s her name again? Oh yes, of course”) Hannah with such a “cute” project. I ignored these distractions and as every hour passed I grew more and more attached to my ants. A dollop of honey on the driveway lured a herd of them from the Bermuda Triangle of our lawn. Old Popsicle sticks worked well for the transfer into large mason jars. I stabbed holes in the top with needles, and sometimes you could see the little legs poking through. “Ew,” Agnes said whenever she witnessed this, “grody.” Despite her fragile stomach, she seemed more than willing to help me transplant them into their new homes. Occasionally we crushed them between our fingers, or smashed them with the Popsicle sticks, and then we would have a solemn ten seconds of silence for each little death. But for the most part, everything went smoothly.

It was in one of my ant-fueled reveries, wondering what made one ant happy and the next sluggish, that I discovered Custom Ant-farm Creation. I explained this to a boy from my class, a boy named Viktor who had ridden his bike all the way from the valley to see what we were doing.

“What does that mean?” he asked me, picking up a farm and shaking it like an etch-a-sketch.

“Don’t do that, please,” I said. “It agitates them.”

“What does custom creation mean?”

“Well,” I explained, delighted to find an interested patron, “let’s say you don’t want any old antfarm. Let’s say you want one where the ants are happier than regular ants, like a sort of Ant Playground or something, or let’s say you want one where the ants are super hard workers, three times as fast or something. You can place the order with me and within a week I’ll make your ant farm happy, or fast, or jumpy, or whatever.”

Viktor seemed to like this idea. He looked at my sister, who sat beside me at the table fiddling with a pencil and staring up at him like he was made of gold. “What about horny ants,” he said.

“Oh,” I laughed, “don’t say that in front of Agnes.”

Agnes blushed and Viktor smiled. Then he said to me, “It’s not Viktor. It’s Viktor.”

“That’s what I said.”

“No, you didn’t. You say it wrong. I’m Vick-TOR, and you say it ‘Vick-TER.’”

I looked confused. “What’s the difference?”

“The difference,” Agnes said, “is the TOR.”

My knuckles itched.

“It’s Russian,” Viktor said. “I’m a direct descendant of the Tsar.”

“What Tsar?” I asked.

“What, you stupid or something?” Viktor said.

Agnes giggled.

“You her older sister?” he asked her.

“She’s two years younger than me, Vick-TOR.”

He whistled. “Could have fooled me.”

The thing was, I had always liked Viktor. I liked in class that he didn’t speak a lot, and that some of the other kids seemed to find him annoying. They treated him sort of the same way they treated me, as if he had a cow’s head sprouting from his nose. We were both skinny and pale, too. In the right light we looked translucent. I daydreamed about how our children would come out of our mansion squinting into the light, all wormy and bone-white, bitter and smart.

Agnes, of course, had pink cheeks and actual boobs. She had gotten her period a year before I’d had mine. This made her somewhat awkward in her own year, I’d noticed, but had also given her a sort of other-worldly appeal. It had been the disgrace of my life this last spring when, having discovered blood during a routine bathroom break at school, I’d had to ask my little sister for a Maxipad. She’d been friendly enough about it, but I could never shake the feeling that in the race to womanhood, I hadn’t even made the B-squad.

Boys loved Agnes, of course. A few of them, from her class, skidded their bicycles to a stop on our driveway and glanced shyly into the garage. For the next several weeks, they treated our home like the parking lot in front of Penzance Pizza, laughing loudly and exchanging jokes and ultimately pretending not to notice Agnes when any old idiot knew they were thinking of nothing else. Agnes poured soil into the plastic farms and ignored them just as efficiently. One of those short, bratty-looking

boys said, without even trying to conceal his high voice, "They can't be sisters. Hannah's ugly as a horse," and then he blew such a huge snot-rocket onto the pavement that the other boys exclaimed, "Wicked!" Agnes's head snapped toward me and she said, "They suck. Nobody likes them." But I knew this was a lie. They were the most popular kids in her class. The fact that they sought her out like so many heat-seeking missiles meant only one thing: she was the most popular girl in her class. Over the summer, the shame, like the heat, only thickened.

After the first few weeks, the numbers of interested parties grew scarce. Uncle Hayward didn't return the lonely mothers' and housewives' flirtations, so they eventually retreated back into their expensive homes. The boys on their bikes still stopped by, but having less of a people-screen to hide behind, they grew skittish like lambs and stayed for shorter and shorter periods of time. Agnes and I still spent most of our days in the garage or on the driveway. I wore bruises into my knees and palms from foraging the pavement for more ants. There were now mason jars swarming with them. I had yet to find a queen.

Even though I protested, Uncle Hayward forced us to slow production. We could search for queens, he said, but we didn't need more ants. He also suggested we keep the ants in a shadier place. "They'll fry like bacon," he warned. I pinned up signs in the coolest corner of the garage. They read, in alphabetical order, "Eager Farms," "Happy Farms," "Hardworking Farms," "Super Farms," "Wonderful Farms." Hayward asked, "What's the difference, they're all the same," but I knew that was baloney. "Believe me," I told him. "Every ant has its own personality."

Hayward laughed and ruffled my hair. “Don’t take yourself too seriously, kiddo.”

It took all of my newfound benevolence to just grit my teeth and smile.

The good thing, at first, was that Viktor kept stopping by. One day, I showed him the Horny Ant Farm I had made (without, of course, Hayward’s knowing). When he lifted it off of my work station and peered through the plastic walls, he only said, “Nah. There’s no humping.”

I laughed despite feeling hurt. How was I supposed to know there should be humping? I told him, “Take it anyway. It’s a gift.”

For the first time ever, he looked straight at me. “Wow, really? Thanks.” He tucked the farm under his arm and asked, “Where’s Agnes?”

I frowned. “Who cares?”

Viktor clucked his tongue and stared off into the distance. “I’m in love with her,” he said dreamily.

“You’re stupid,” I told him. “She’s stupid and you’re stupider.”

Viktor frowned. “What’s your prob? You jealous? Jealous that your sister’s pretty and you’re just a rat?”

Hayward heard the yelling and came over from the yard, where he had been sunning himself and listening to Public Radio.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“I was just leaving,” Viktor said, and shoved the ant farm at me. I took it from him, about to cry. “I don’t want your stupid farm. They aren’t Horny Ants they’re Stupid Ants. Those are the only ants you can make, Hannah.”

He cycled away and Hayward said, “Horny ants?”

“He hates me,” I wailed. Hayward sat and patted his knee. I perched there and wiped at my face. It was strange sitting on a grown man’s knee. I hadn’t sat on my own father’s knee in years.

“He doesn’t hate you,” Hayward said. “He probably has a crush on you. That’s how boys act.”

I shook my head. “Viktor likes Agnes,” I said. “All the boys do. He said,” I started crying again, “he said I was a rat.”

Hayward hugged me and kissed the back of my head. “Now, now. You don’t believe that, do you? It’s not true.” His breath smelled of Altoids and cigarettes.

“He likes *her*,” I said resolutely. Hayward let me go and I stood up. “He does. Just ask her.”

Hayward looked troubled. “She’s so young,” he said.

“Not to him.”

“The kid’s a screwball.”

“Yup, I know.”

“Maybe I should say something.” Hayward looked at me as though wanting my approval.

“Yes. Definitely. You should.”

I hoped a boy-related conversation with Uncle Hayward would humiliate Agnes. At least a little bit.

Then Agnes appeared on her bike, looping around in the driveway. “What’s wrong?” she called.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Let’s look for a queen.” She dismounted and let the bike crash to the pavement.

I wiped at my face and said okay. Even Hayward helped. I knelt at a small hole in the yard from where I had seen some ants emerge, and I waited. “There’s a queen down there,” I whispered. I was going to find her and capture her and make an ant-farm immortal. Viktor would read about me in the papers, when I had become a famous entomologist, and he would regret. He would call me up and I would laugh and then I would say—but right then I saw a long, strange looking ant with wings. It was moving sluggishly from the small hole and into the light. My heart thudded. I put my hand gingerly over it. “I’ve got one!” I screamed. “I’ve got a queen!”

Agnes was impressed. “That’s so cool,” she said, after we had transferred it to a farm. I was beaming. Uncle Hayward patted me on the back.

“See?” he said. “Life’s not so bad.”

I shrugged. But right then, life did feel pretty great.

Later that night, the phone rang during dinner. Dad hated it when the phone rang. “For the love of Christopher,” he said, standing, “can’t a man enjoy his dinner without being interrupted?”

The thing was, Dad had not been enjoying his dinner. He had actually been complaining to Hayward, just moments before, how Mom’s cooking paled compared to his first-class airline meals.

“You could turn the ringer off,” Mom suggested. She always suggested this.

“It could be Elias.” This was always Dad’s reply. Elias was Dad’s boss.

Moments later, Dad returned from the den. “That was some snotty-sounding kid for Agnes. A Victor or something?”

“Viktor, Dad,” Agnes corrected.

“You’re ten years old,” Dad said. “What’s with the opposite-sex phone calls.”

Agnes looked embarrassed. “I dunno. He’s never called before.” She saw me glowering at her and said over a forkful of peas, “What? I think he’s stupid.”

“Ha,” I said. “So do I. Too bad he loves you.”

Mom said, “Is this the little Russian boy from your class, Hannah? I find the Russians so fascinating.”

“He’s not a Russian, Mom. He’s a liar.”

“Hannah,” she scolded, “it’s not polite to disallow someone their cultural heritage.”

The whole time, Hayward sat there regarding Agnes with his face all scrunched up. His concern gathered when Dad handed her an index card complete with Viktor’s misspelled name and telephone number.

“Is this such a good idea?” Hayward asked the table. “She’s a ten-year-old girl. Perhaps it’s not such a good idea. If this boy is pursuing her, after all.”

I loved Hayward for saying this.

“Oh please, Hayward,” Dad boomed, “what sort of twelve-year-old boy could even recognize his dick in a line-up.”

Mom gasped. “Brett, please!” Then she peered closer at the index card. “Oooh!” she said delightedly, “that’s a downtown number. You should call him, Agnes, and invite him over tomorrow. The poor thing doesn’t breathe a drop of fresh air in that neighborhood.”

Hayward put his hands over his face. I could tell he was on my side.

Later that night, while Dad snored in front of the television and Mom went to take one of her lengthy peach-smelling baths, I went to read comics with my penlight on the old sofa Hayward had dragged into a corner of the garage. I had just been getting to a great scene where Antzilla crushes all those who have ever tried to smash her, when light from the kitchen fell in a yellow rectangle across the hood of Dad’s car. Hayward and Agnes entered, Hayward shutting the door softly behind them. I catapulted over the back of the couch with my comic book, and then sat cross-legged against the couch’s moldy spine. I shut off my penlight. For some reason, Hayward did not switch on the overhead lamp.

On the way to the couch, they bumped into things. Agnes said, “I’m sorta afraid of the dark,” but Uncle Hayward said, “Don’t worry, we’re almost there.” They sat down and I could smell the rising dust.

At first, I was impressed with what Hayward was saying. He told Agnes, “It’s not right, that boy with you. It’s just not.”

“Cause he’s in Hannah’s class?”

“Well, that, and that he wants to take advantage of you.”

I imagined that Agnes was, per usual, confused by Hayward’s remarks.

“Look,” Hayward said, “some boys are nice boys. Some are mean. That Viktor. He’s a bad seed. He does not want to be nice to you, do you see? I think he wants to be mean to you.”

“But Hannah likes him,” Agnes said. After a moment’s pause, she suggested, “Maybe she should date him.”

“Sure, sure. Hannah should date him. But you’re too lovely for those boys.” I heard, then, the sound of one body snuggling closer to the other. Then Hayward grunted as if he were lifting something. I pivoted slowly so I could see what was going on. Crouching behind them now, my eyes growing accustomed to the dark, I saw that their bodies sort of looked like one. A two-headed monster. It took me a moment to figure out that Agnes was now seated squarely on Hayward’s lap, both of them facing away from me. In the dark, her head appeared to be growing from out of his right shoulder.

“I want to be nice to you,” he said.

“Alright.”

“Do you want me to be nice to you?”

“Well, sure.” Agnes’s voice sounded slightly annoyed. Then she said, “Isn’t it cool that Hannah found a queen?”

Hayward’s voice was muffled, in her hair or something. “That wasn’t a queen. I didn’t want to tell her, the poor thing, but that was just a young male ant. You need to dig up a queen, you know. They look almost the same, I guess, but you’re not going to find some queen just randomly roaming around.”

“Oh,” Agnes said. “That’s sucky.”

“Our little secret, though, right?” Hayward whispered this and I could hear his hands groping.

His words sunk into me. The tips of my toes and the tips of ears flushed hot. I thought about the winged ant, something that looks special but really is not. I bit my lip to keep from bawling. I wanted to believe that Hayward was wrong, but some dark part of me knew that he was right.

“You’re the most beautiful girl,” Hayward said, and began kissing the back of her neck. It was not the same way he had kissed the back of my head. It was not with dry, unparted lips. It was puckered and smacking, like when Mom presses a wet sponge onto a plate.

“That tickles,” Agnes said. I could see that she was squirming.

“Just be quiet for a moment and let me be nice to you.” He sighed. “The most beautiful little girl. The most precious thing.”

I hated him so much. I felt so betrayed. *The most beautiful little girl. The most precious thing.* I groped around for something, anything, to hurt him with, and what I came up with was one of my mason jars filled with about three-hundred ants. I unscrewed the jar. The lid made a rasping sound, the air escaping in one soft sigh, smelling sour like pee. Agnes said, “What was that?” but Uncle Hayward panted loudly in her ear, “I should stop. I should really stop,” and she said, sounding bored, “This is sorta weird. I want to go in now, Uncle Hayward.” I squatted behind them and turned over the jar right above the dark heavy line of his shoulders. The next second they were

up on their feet, and he was screaming. The garage flooded with light. Dad stood at the top of the stairs, gaping. When my eyes adjusted, I saw Agnes standing there calmly, blinking, with part of her t-shirt pushed over the top of her right boob. Hayward was shaking himself and tearing off his shirt and begging for help.

“What’s going on here?” Dad roared.

“Hayward was being nice to me,” Agnes said, not without disgust. Dad took one look at my disheveled sister, another look at me holding an almost-empty mason jar in my hand, ants escaping onto my fingers and gliding up my forearm, and then a third and final look at Hayward writhing on the floor, his pants oddly tented and now covered with tiny, swarming masses. He came down the steps and kicked Hayward in the stomach. It was what he deserved, I thought victoriously. Liar, I thought. I was glad to see him writhing in pain. He wasn’t beautiful or precious, either.

That was the last I saw of Hayward. The next day, while Mom continued to panic and make doctor’s appointment after doctor’s appointment for Agnes, Dad tossed out all of our ant farms. I asked if I could keep even one, the one with the winged ant, and he said “No.” Agnes tried to come to my defense. “But the ants were what saved me,” she said. But even her perfect charm failed. Dad would have none of it.

Agnes, of course, was fine. “He only kissed my neck and touched my boob,” Agnes said. I said to her, and also to Mom, “He kissed me, too.” Mom didn’t seem too worried about me. She wrote a letter to Oprah, describing how her brother had molested her littlest daughter without her even realizing it. “And under my own roof, Oprah!” she wrote, underlining and darkening the word ‘roof’ until it shuddered on the

page. Oprah called a couple of weeks later and asked if they'd come on a special show, "Blind Mothers, Molested Daughters." Mom was ecstatic. I asked if I was going to be on the show, too. She said no.

Dad and I flew to Chicago with them, anyway. We watched the show from a really fancy hotel. Dad seemed embarrassed, seeing them on-screen. Mom was so excited that she couldn't stop grinning, even when Agnes told Oprah, "Then he touched my boob and kissed my neck."

Dad said, "Your mother looks psychotic."

When they came back, we all went for a walk on the lake. Mom and Dad sat on a park bench and watched us from afar.

"Did you see the show?" Agnes asked. She seemed sullen.

"Yeah."

"Did you hear what I said about you?"

I shook my head. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe they cut it. I told them you saved me. You and the ants."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

We walked along silently, kicking at stones. "I guess it must kind of suck for you," I said.

"Nah. Nothing happened. One of the girls on the show I felt so sorry for. Some dude stuck his weiner into her!"

"Ick," I said. We kind of laughed.

“I can’t believe they cut that,” she said, “what I said about you.”

I didn’t exactly trust her, but it made me happy. Even if she hadn’t tried to tell Oprah that I was her hero, she had at least admitted it to me. I would always have one-up on her for that.

We stood at the water’s edge and let it lick the tips of our sandals. “This water smells like bird poop,” I said.

“I wish I could lop these things off and toss them into the waves.” She was looking down at her breasts.

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t tell if this was all a performance or not.

We went back to the hotel and ordered chicken-strips up to our room. When we had successfully pigged-out, Agnes and I put on our pajamas and brushed our teeth. Mom and Dad went to the bar downstairs, saying they’d be back soon. “Don’t let anyone in here,” Mom warned.

Alone, we flipped through all of the channels that we weren’t supposed to watch. In the scratchy grayness of one station, the screen swarming with herds of black ants, we could hear moans, and we could see a thigh here, a breast there, slightly unfamiliar game pieces of shuddering bodies.

“Shut it off,” Agnes said. I did so.

I wouldn’t mind taking orders from her sometimes. If I could be her hero, then that meant she was salvageable. It wasn’t too hard to accept surrender then. But there were times, following, when out of either anger or pity I almost admitted, Hey, I saved you for all the wrong reasons.

Reality Broadcasting Systems

1-

I'm a Conflict Manager. For RBS's *Amazon Island*. When there's no conflict, I compose one.

Like what? someone might ask.

Like, for example, when I rufied Perla's drink so that she'd blame it on Lucy. So that the two of them would fistfight on camera. So that Perla would break her tooth on Lucy's elbow. That week, the ratings were huge.

It's a good job. It pays well. My daughter Polly finds it exciting. She wants to be introduced to Perla. "She's the coolest, Mom. The awesoming awesomest."

She dresses like Perla. Last week she even tried to die her hair blonde. It became pink, instead. She bought a shirt that says "Hot Tots" on it, just like one that Perla wears.

At home, I don't create conflict. I smile at the Pink Head. "It's charming," I tell her.

"I don't look like her yet," Polly says, "but one day, just wait."

2-

At work, Lucy stubs her toe. “This set sucks,” she says. “This reality isn’t even real.”

“There’s so much real here,” Perla argues. “There’s nothing but real realism.”

They are the only two left, whittled down from sixty girls, thirty ugly ones and thirty pretty ones. Our requisite bachelor, Chad Henry, has voted two girls off every week since we started twenty-nine weeks ago. There have only been pretty girls left for the last thirteen weeks. Chad Henry axed the fat ones immediately.

I want the girls to keep arguing. It’s good for the show. “But what’s more real? Reality or realism?”

This confuses them. They take different sides. They gnash at one another. The cameras keep rolling.

Chad Henry arrives and says, “Don’t fight over me, ladies.” He has a decent smile and great pecs. He used to be a writer for Hallmark Greeting Cards. On his Private Rendezvous with the girls, he always ends with a poem.

Between the stars and the earth

he might recite

Walks only you and me.

Last week, Lucy corrected him. “Walk only you and *I*.” He frowned. This must be why Hallmark let him go.

At home, Polly says, “Chad Henry’s the dreamiest.” She has photographs of him on her bedroom ceiling.

“Inappropriate for a young girl,” my husband has commented.

“Under this roof,” I tell him, “I just want harmony.”

3-

At work, Chad Henry chooses Perla. We expected as much. Perla’s an underwear model, after all. Lucy, a dental hygienist, has never even made-out with Chad Henry. Somehow, though, she’s surprised. She’s inconsolable. The cameramen grow uncomfortable filming her, with her tearing out her hair and such, but I instruct them to keep going.

This is the kind of emotional conflict that grabs viewers by the nads.

Finally she stands still, eyes blaring, clumps of hair drifting like pillow feathers around her. “I loved him,” she says to no one. “Can you believe that? For as corny as he was, I really loved him.” She picks up the bottom corners of her shirt and brings them to her nose. She blows, hard. “How could he not love me?”

I tell the cameramen to fade out. When they pull away from the eyepieces, they’re teary and slump-shouldered.

My job’s done here. On the drive home, as the miles drop away from where I work, I grow sadder for Lucy. She seemed genuine. It always works this way. At work, who cares. Away from work, it’s all very sad. Even the show’s happinesses are sad.

Polly lies across the couch, her hair dyed silvery blonde. It’s the exact same color as Perla’s. “Wow,” I say. She points to her shiny head. “Baby-sitting money,” she

explains. She's also wearing her Hot Tots shirt. It's creepy, this younger version of Perla in my home.

Polly comes over to me and wraps her arms around my waist. She still smells like my little girl, Dove soap and citrus shampoo. When she pulls away, she has a tremendous, victorious smirk on her face.

"Perla won," she says.

"I know," I say, "but it's funny, on the way home I—"

"Lucy made such an ass of herself," Polly continues, "I could barely stand it. I'm so glad that bitch lost. I'm so glad."

She looks evil and vengeful. There is nothing there but hatred. Hatred and victory.

"Honey," I say, "that's not nice. Don't say the b-word."

"But Perla says it, Mom. She said that exact same thing."

I'm boiling with embarrassment and anger. "Go to your room," I tell her.

Polly looks confused, then hurt. "What's the big deal?"

"Go to your room."

I hear her door close and realize I've made a mistake. She's lying on her bed, staring up at Chad Henry. She's whispering the b-word to him. She's frenching her fist. "Between the stars and the earth," she's panting, "walks only you and me."

It's my second mistake of the day. Earlier, when Perla told the cameras she was glad Lucy had lost, I instructed her to amp it up. "Don't be gentle," I coaxed. I fed her the word.

While playing golf at the age of seventy-five, Phil Anderson decides that he's going to ask his wife, Candace, to marry him again. A fabulous idea, he thinks, because it's such a symbolic gesture, and after forty years of marriage, they could certainly use a change. He chats about it to Herb Piper. Herb listens attentively. Every now and again Phil pauses to take in the sight of a robin flapping overhead, or to pump his ball in the washer beside the tee, or to allow Herb to swing. When Phil swings, however, he keeps chatting, because his best shots happen when he is distracted. If he thinks about the swing too much, the ball slices. And then he feels lonely whacking it out of the woods.

"I think it's a winner of an idea," Herb says. "What wife wouldn't appreciate such a winning gesture? And by the way, my friend, that is a beauty of a shot."

The ball finishes skipping toward the green. It was, Phil admits humbly, a beauty of a shot. Perhaps his best of the day.

"You really think so?" he asks.

"Yeah, a real beaut," says Herb.

"No. I mean, you really think it's a winner? A winning idea? Asking Candace?"

Herb nods, his chin thrusting up and down above the thick column of his neck. Phil smiles at Herb gratefully. "Now, my fine friend," Herb says, "please step aside so that I can try to hit that ball as smoothly as you have done."

Phil steps aside. His heart brims with admiration for Herb, such a great friend, such a supporter, and with ardency and respect he tries to still even his heartbeat, even his eyeballs. He focuses on the flag that flutters, distant, at the end of the hole. Herb always takes several minutes to set up his tee. Whenever Phil waits for very long, he begins to daydream. Right now, for instance, as he gazes out over the fourteenth hole, as wide as an airstrip and lined by shady trees, he imagines a parade. A fabulous parade, marching down the precise aisles of grass, elephants bedecked with jewels and vibrant scarves, women with bare bellies performing acrobatics on top of the beasts, men in jester outfits dancing around the heavy feet. A regal parade on a regal golf course. He can see the cement-gray ankles lifting, then crushing down into the soft earth. Here and there trunks rise, a great trumpeting fills Mammoth Hills. Phil feels so happy, standing in the sun with his friend, waiting, still waiting, for his friend to tee off, and he wishes that he could share his happiness with Candace, who has been oddly depressed since they visited Carol and her new baby in Denver last month. Candace could not stop holding the baby, kept raising her head to Phil to remind him of when Carol was born, could he remember how red and soft her head had been? That he had called her his little dinosaur? Could he remember how the first night of parenting he had drunk so much champagne that she had raged at him in the morning, warning him that he had better pull his own weight? He could hardly remember anything, except fear, and warmth. Fear of being responsible for a new life, warmth at sharing something so important. Repulsion and excitement. Diapers and kisses. He did not tell this to his wife, but listened to her carefully as she careened through recollection after recollection. Beneath

the marshy delight of her voice he thought he heard something similar to the fear that he had felt at Carol's birth, but now the fear was different. Back then, it was the fear of moving forward. Now, the fear of decline.

For this reason, he cannot wait to fly back and pop the question: "Candace, will you marry me, again?" He will buy her yellow roses tied with a red ribbon. He will purchase plane tickets to somewhere exotic, maybe a Safari? Maybe to watch a parade of elephants? Standing on the tee of the fourteenth hole, Phil smiles to himself. Thwack. Herb's ball skips past Phil's, skips onto the green.

"Well, nothing like a little competition to bring out the old beast, eh?"

Phil smiles. "You always shoot well when pressed, Herb."

Herb bends over to pick up his broken tee. "I tell you what, Phil. Sometimes I feel like I'm still in my twenties."

Phil says, and means it, "I envy you your vitality."

Herb guffaws and like weaponry throws his bag of clubs over his right shoulder, striding down the course. With his thick neck and shoulders and non-depleted white hair, he looks like a warrior king leading the way to battle. Phil follows meekly behind, small shouldered and almost bare-scalped, dragging his clubs in their portable cart. It's a lovely day, he thinks, near perfect. He almost wishes Herb would slow down so that they could prolong it. But Herb's already sunk his second put before Phil has a chance to chip it onto the green, which is wrong for Herb to do, the farthest away always goes first, but Phil lets it slide. He two-puts and bogies. Herb's got birdie. When they tally

up the scores after the eighteenth hole, Herbs wins overall. As usual. And Herb's rule is: loser buys drinks.

Herb and Phil fly home that night, buzzed on brandy and scotch. Herb is a loud drunk. Even when he's asking the flight attendant for a pillow he's flirty about it, and talking at a million decibels like he's screaming above a fire. Phil dozes on and off, jerked awake whenever Herb bursts into pontification.

"You know," Herb's saying, "sometimes I imagine sitting on the very edge of the wing. In my recliner. With a blanket, you know? And a TV. And a scotch. Speaking of scotch, you want another? Phil? You awake? HEY! STEWARDESS! FLIGHT ATTENDANT! Jesus, you remember when it was only sexy women who used to do this job? Look at this one! Fucking male! Where's that Alicia person? My third wife, I want my third wife to look like her. Phil, are you asleep?" And Phil listens but keeps his eyes closed tightly, imagining being in bed with his wife, sleeping quietly together, no sound, no movement, their bodies forming small mountain ranges beneath the blankets. Only an hour or so away. Someone hisses at Herb to please be quiet, this is first class after all.

In the taxi, curving up the hill toward the five-bedroom home that Phil and Candace moved into thirty years before, Phil admires the way the city lights glitter in the dark oil of the valley. His head blooming with visions of yellow roses, Phil asks the driver to please stop at the florist's. The florist is a heavysset, pale woman in a short green apron, sitting on a stool and reading a very thick and very pink romance novel. She closes the book when he approaches but doesn't smile.

“I’m looking for yellow roses,” Phil says. “For my wife.”

The florist thumbs over her shoulder at the long fridge behind her. “We’re out. The only roses we have are green.”

“Green,” Phil says.

“Left over from Patty’s Day.” The woman rests a fist against her sizable hip. “Genetically altered.”

“And people buy these green roses?”

“Well,” the woman huffs, waving her hand tellingly at the fridge, “apparently not.”

Phil peers hesitantly at the roses, one hand in his pocket and the other playing with his earlobe. They are not as abysmal as one would expect. In fact, Phil thinks, admiring the consistency of the color, from tip to base, from petal to thorn, they remind him of the brilliant green of Mammoth Hills. Symbolic, he decides, because he was surrounded by green when he first came up with the idea. And, he thinks, their house is green. Always has been. And maybe he could offer to take her to Ireland, on their second honeymoon, and wouldn’t that be fabulous, because there certainly are some stellar courses there, according to Herb, some of the loveliest in the world. And he had a vague recollection of Candace wanting to visit Ireland after his retirement. Maybe he would buy her an emerald ring. More symbolism, he thinks.

“Two dozen,” Phil says, grinning. The woman shrugs unsmilingly.

He shoves back into the cab with them, feeling ungraceful.

“What kind of flowers are those?” the cabbie asks, his eyebrows rising in the rearview mirror.

“Roses. Genetically altered roses.”

“Ha!” the cabbie says. “Sorta like the Incredible Hulk.”

Phil considers this. “Yeah, I guess.”

The house is dark when he arrives, which is normal. Phil balances the heavy weight of the roses in one arm and swings his golf bag and overnight bag onto the opposite shoulder. He stumbles awkwardly up to the door and struggles to find his keys. He realizes with a wince that he has forgotten them on the kitchen countertop. With a sigh, regretting to wake her, Phil presses his pinky into the doorbell.

The light snaps on in the upstairs bedroom. Phil peers through the tall window beside the door. The stairs light up. The light in the foyer. Then Candace bobs toward him, wiping at her eyes and smoothing down the gray wisps of hair that float like rain clouds about her face. She is frowning. Phil grips the roses and grins and his shoulder aches beneath the weight of the two bags. Candace peers out at him, recognizes him, pulls open the door.

“My!” she exclaims, eyeing the roses. Her mouth is still downturned, but in a look of concentration rather than of displeasure. “Here, let me help you.”

She takes the roses from him and glides into the kitchen. Phil deposits his bags in the foyer. He rubs at his shoulder and follows her.

“Roses?” she asks.

“Yes,” Phil says. “For you.”

“They’re green,” she observes, fiddling with a petal.

“Well, yes, let me explain to you this idea I had, an idea about us.” Phil is nervous, his palms sticky and cold. “This idea came to me today at Mammoth Hills while I was on the fourteenth hole, right as I was about to tee off, and I—” Phil looks down as he speaks, surprised at his nervousness, and what he sees when he looks down is a newspaper opened to an article about Mammoth Hills, and circled in bright red ink are several phrases, one of them being the title, which reads “Mammoth Hills: Tradition or Bigotry?”. Phil stops talking and stares at the article blankly, not making sense of the words.

“How did this get here?” he asks, confused.

“Paper boy,” Candace replies. “You should read that article. I wanted to talk about it with you. Maybe tomorrow morning.”

“Well, I don’t—”

“They don’t allow women,” Candace says. “They are the most elite golf club in the country, and they don’t allow women. I find it disturbing.”

“Of course they allow women,” Phil says. “I saw one just recently, she was quite good actually, and Herb, funny guy, was trying to pick her up, which is a funny story because—”

“No, Phil,” Candace interrupts, “women are allowed on the course, they can play, but they are not allowed as members. They are not and will not be. I mean, you should read the comments that your favorite golf pro says. You should read the comment that Herb says!”

“Herb?” Phil asks meekly. He lifts his gaze to her and finds it too penetrating. Her eyes are hard, unfamiliar. Her mouth in a tight line.

“Yes, Herb. He’s quoted there, too. ‘We don’t want babes here,’ I think is verbatim what he said. I find it all very disturbing, Phil, and I want to talk with you about it.”

Phil coughs. He imagines them again, in bed, their bodies small and quiet. “Well, it’s awfully late, and I really wanted to talk with you about something else....”

“Did you know that they didn’t allow women?” Candace asks him.

“Well I had an inkling of it, yes, but I never gave it much thought.”

“Never gave it much thought,” Candace repeats, folding her arms over her chest. “How long have you known about this?”

“When they called me,” Phil says, spreading open his hands. “When they invited me to join. You know, I was so excited, I hardly gave it any thought at all.”

“So now what?”

“So now what?”

“Yeah.”

Phil lowers himself into a kitchen chair, slowly, for his joints are sore from walking all day. The green petals float around his head. He shuts his eyes and imagines that he’s in a rich jungle, his wife bouncing beside him in a jeep, happily aiming binoculars at exotic birds that dip and dive in the trees. He opens his eyes and sees her watching him, waiting, her face slightly obscured by the green. He reshuts them and rubs his brow with one hand. Then in Ireland, standing near the beach, the waves

crashing and the cool wind reddening their cheeks. Phil wants to explain to her what he feels for her, the dreams he's always had for them and the dreams he has now. That she inspires him to dream. But looking at her, he can't figure out what she wants. He picks up the article, scanning it while she watches him.

"Well?" she repeats, when he lowers the paper. "So what now?"

"I don't know," he says, and he can tell by the way she stomps her foot and says "God!" that he has said the wrong thing.

"What do you think I am?" she asks him.

He looks at her helplessly. "My wife?" She snorts. "My wife Candace?" She snorts again, then appears ready to cry. Her face reminds him of their daughter's face, Carol, when she was three and ready for a temper tantrum: chin puckered like the bottom of a grapefruit, eyes tearing, all systems red alert. Eager to act before his wife completely ruins the moment, Phil drops to one knee and lifts his hands to her in entreaty.

"I want to renew our wedding vows," Phil says. He clutches one of her ringed hands and kisses it. "I'm going to buy you another ring and take you on another honeymoon and show you how much I love you being my wife."

Candace pulls her hand away as though she's been burned. She glares down at him and wipes her nose. "I am not just your wife," she says, sniffing. "I am more than that. Much more. I want to be appreciated as a woman, as a person. I've been happy to be your wife but something has to give. We can't go on doing this, the same patterns, no changes, forever."

Phil gapes, baffled. He hears the word ‘change’ and thinks: forty years. He begins to speak, then stops, then begins again. “Renewing our vows could really make things better. For you, I mean. You’ve been so down lately. Romance, you know? Take these roses, for instance. I purchased these roses for you because the green is symbolic. The green is symbolic of a lot of things, like Ireland, for example—”

“Ireland?” Candace says. “Why should anything be symbolic of Ireland?”

“If you just let me finish, if you just let me say my piece and then...Look, now I’m confused too, but what was I saying? Symbolism. Symbolic of a lot of things, green, like the color of a golf course, or the color of Saint Patrick’s day, but the golf course is important because it’s where I came up with this idea, and this idea is perfect for us, this idea—”

Candace raises her palms. He stops. She is not about to cry now, but looks ready to beat his head in with the white-knuckled hands hovering in front of him. “You’re telling me,” she pauses, breathes, “you’re telling me that these crummy, grotesque roses—green roses, might I add—are symbolic of the golf course?”

“Well, yes.”

“And that you had an epiphany about us while playing with your balls on the golf course?”

“Yes, but I don’t appreciate being mocked here, Candace, I—”

“Well let me tell you where you can stick your crummy green roses.” Candace picks them up from the vase, doesn’t even wince when the thorns visibly slice into her fingers, and with the enormous bundle of them rushes into the guest bathroom and

thrusts them into the toilet. She begins flushing, once, twice, while Phil stands helplessly behind her. He is deeply concerned.

“Those won’t flush down the toilet,” he says.

Candace flushes again.

“You’re going to clog the toilet.”

“Good,” Candace says. She turns to him, trembling. Phil looks forlornly at the roses, sticking bottom-side up out of the toilet, a macabre, pristine white planting bed.

“If we go to bed,” he suggests, “things will be better in the morning.”

“I want you to quit that club,” Candace says.

Phil blinks. “What?”

“Quit, Phil. For my sake.”

“I’ve been a member there for nearly twenty years.”

“That’s only half of our marriage. Something needs to give. The world has changed Phil, but we, we have not.”

“But you know how much time I spend there, how much effort I put into my game.” Now Phil feels lachrymose. “It’s truly an honor to be a member there.”

“I’m going to ask you one more time Phil,” Candace says. “And until you give me a firm answer, I’m treating this marriage as finished.”

She pushes past Phil and into the hallway.

“Candace,” he says. She faces him, waiting. “I think after a full night’s rest, you’ll feel much better about all this.”

She turns away, mumbling something inaudibly as she mashes up the stairs. He hears her clattering things in the bathroom and cursing. He cannot remember the last time he heard her clattering, or cursing.

That night, they lie there, quietly, quietly, as Phil imagined. He faces Candace as she sleeps, turned away from him and lumped beneath the covers, snoring lightly. They are older now, he thinks, less attractive, but despite the waning chemistry he knows in his gut that he loves her, and he wonders for the first time in years if she feels the same way toward him. What if she regards him merely as a piece of furniture, an ottoman, say, or maybe, at best, a television set? Something that you turn on occasionally, just to hear the noise.

But there is no doubt in his mind that he loves her. Little things prove this to him. For example, there is a mole, a rather large, furry, ungainly mole that lives like a little animal directly above the crack of her bottom, and when she bends over and her shirt lifts and her pants droop, you can see it, so that when he was at a party at the Smythes a few weeks ago he witnessed this very thing and ended up flooded with the desire to unbuckle her pants and kiss the mole, suck on it until he had practically sucked it off, and he felt so much love just for the tiny part of her, a part of her that he was entirely familiar with and which no one else even cared about most likely, that he had to excuse himself to the bathroom and battle with a rather sizeable erection, especially sizeable for a man his age. Things like this. Proof.

Phil blinks in the dusky light. Forty years, he thinks, and he pictures forty golf balls plopping one after the other into a water hazard. A street lamp pours in through

the window. He has neglected to draw the blinds. He thinks about rising, shutting them so that the morning sun won't melt Candace where she lies, but suddenly he feels very tired, too tired to move or even to really think any longer. His eyes begin to shut. He sees his wife, he doesn't see her, he sees her. And then he sleeps.

In the morning, Phil avoids pointing out that the roses are still entombed in their white sepulcher. Instead, he sits across from his wife, who is eating plain untoasted bread straight from the bag and reading the day's New York Times, and waits for her to ask him, as usual, whether he wants eggs and bacon or eggs and sausage. She doesn't ask. She doesn't even push the bag of bread toward him. He realizes, of course, that he is being stonewalled.

"Well *I* feel better this morning," he states, yawning, then patting his stomach. "Do *you*?"

Candace just chews. Without orange juice, without coffee or even water, the bread would be as dry as a sand trap. Phil gets up, opens the refrigerator, fumbles with the box of eggs. He feels clumsy and unloved.

"There's another article," Candace says suddenly, swallowing. "Would you care to read it?"

Phil turns, holding an egg, and nods. He shuffles to the table and peruses the article, raising his eyebrows at what he believes to be the appropriate sentences. When he lifts his head, however, he sees that Candace is not watching him.

"Herb," she says thoughtfully, as though to herself. "It's no surprise there."

"What?" Phil asks.

She seems to snap out of a trance. In her normal voice, she says, “Just that he doesn’t have a wife.”

“Well,” Phil says, “he’s had two.”

“Yeah, two too many.” Candace clucks her tongue. “Unfortunate man. Unfortunate women.”

Phil feels that Candace is confiding in him again, and this pleases him. Things are normalfying, he thinks, if that is a word. In a couple of months they would be sipping frothy Guinness in Ireland, holed up against a powerful yet romantic rain in a small, dimly lit bar called the Leprechaun, with men in derby hats and women in long skirts. Voices would be coursing around them, speaking alien English. He wonders if he should propose again, despite the egg in his hand. Take advantage of the lull, he thinks. Now, now.

He lowers himself onto one knee behind Candace, thinking how silly but maybe how cute it is that he’ll be offering her an egg instead of an emerald anniversary ring.

“Candace, would you marry me again?” he asks rhapsodically.

She glances down at him with a laugh that shoots barbs straight into his heart. “God, that’s the last thing I’d want to do again.” She stops laughing, gives him a pitying look. More softly, she says, “Well, tell me Phil, have you made up your mind yet?”

Phil looks down at the egg in his hand. He starts to rise, but a pain shoots up his leg and into his hip, so he stays where he is. He looks as though he’s about to be knighted. He sighs. “About the membership?”

Candace nods.

Phil grips the edge of the table and stands, slowly, wincingly. The pain in his joints gets worse and worse. Soon, he thinks distractedly, I'll have to start riding in the golf cart.

"You alright?" Candace asks.

"Yes."

"Good." She stares at him expectantly. "So?"

Phil shrugs. She begins nodding almost imperceptibly, then more and more resolutely until Phil pictures her head rocking off. "Fine," she says. "I'm done. No more housework, no more marriagework for me." Then, rising, "Funny, when I want things to change, you just want them the same."

She throws the remains of her bread into the sink and goes back upstairs. Phil looks about the kitchen. Not even the coffee has been prepared. Still gripping the egg, he walks into the bathroom and glowers at the defiled roses. He is stunned by her rejection, and by her request. It doesn't seem fair that she would ask him to quit something that contributes so greatly to his happiness. He would never do that to her. If she loved anything as much as he loves golf. Which, Phil thinks, squinting at the egg, she clearly doesn't. That's why she doesn't understand. This thought, mingling with the horror and anger at her rejection, incenses Phil to the point of tossing the egg at the bathroom mirror.

While the yolk drips, Phil calls Herb. Emergency, he says, wife problems. You understand. Herb says, of course, my Friend, this one's on me. I'll call the airport immediately, two first class tickets.

Phil packs. His wife watches him from the bed, soundlessly. She hasn't taken off her slippers, or changed out of her pajamas. She burps and he finds the sound ugly and base. Good riddance, he thinks, a short break will do us some good. He trots down the stairs, passes the green roses in the bathroom, grabs his golf bag, and taxis to the airport in achingly bright sunlight. It will be a beautiful day, he thinks, and when he clasps Herb's crushing hand in the airport, Phil feels grounded, manful.

On the golf course, Phil thinks of Candace and shoots perfectly. He always plays well when distracted. Herb whistles after a particularly sweet drive and says, "Holy rollers, are you on today or what?"

Phil blushes, his thoughts of Candace momentarily displaced by Herb's magnanimous flattery. He pockets his tee and replaces a rather sizable divot (not his own), and then shuffles off to the side to allow Herb to hit. While Herb hems and haws around his ball, Phil returns his driver to the bag. He enjoys the sound of the club sliding in with the other clubs, a friendly sort of crowded-bar clatter. Then, silence, aside from a slight breeze and some robins, and Herb's grunts of concentration. It is another beautiful day on Mammoth Hills, and Phil tries to imagine the parade again, but now the elephants are sick and their tusks are rotting and their trunks are honking not majestically but rather pitifully, as though suffering from bad colds, and the women are not performing but just kind of sitting there, drinking beer on the large swaying backs, and the men are just sort of walking, looking confused, trying however sluggishly to avoid the crashing feet. Phil sees the parade diminish until the elephants are the size of ants, and he watches the ant parade crawl up his leg and into the achy hole in his chest. Thwack.

Herb's shot. It skips past Phil's ball. As usual. Despite the ants, despite the hole in his chest, Phil admires Herb's shot. Herb gives him a huge handsome smile, shakes his head.

"Tough one to beat there, buddy. Surprised I could do it."

Phil smiles. "You sure do play well under pressure," and Herb grins again and then strides down the course, warriorlike, the same as always. Phil follows Herb and thinks of Candace and walks faster to catch up to Herb until he is practically running and he says, "Hey, I read what you said in that article."

"Oh, the thing in the Times?" Herb stops and squints at him.

"Yeah." Phil reaches down to rub a swollen knee.

"Funny story, that one. Guy called me, out of the blue, said he was a reporter, wastes my time for maybe twenty minutes and then quotes me with only one measly sentence."

They walk quietly for a moment.

Herb says, somewhat carefully, "I'm surprised your woman got so upset about it."

"Well, she just disagreed was all. She thinks women *should* be allowed as members."

"Look," Herb says, "men have the right to play together without women around. It's a solidarity thing. Like hunting or fishing or women playing bridge or shopping, you know? I mean, that's what I meant. Nothing that would make a woman's libber mad. Nothing like that."

“Candace is not a woman’s libber.”

“No, clearly, clearly not.”

Phil stands in the sunlight, thinking. His armpits are damp. Solidarity. This is symbolic of solidarity. He agrees with Herb entirely. Completely agrees. He nods and Herb nods. They are two septuagenarian men, standing on a golf course in collared shirts and pressed khakis. They are wealthy, still fairly healthy, and enjoying one another’s company. Solidarity. They have the right to do this.

“That makes perfect sense to me,” Phil says, “the solidarity thing. I just see it as being symbolic. Men alone together, women alone together, and then there is this whole other realm where men and women can be together. Two spheres, and then a third sphere. You know?”

“Well,” Herb says, “we’re fucked now, regardless. This changes things royally. Soon women will be playing here and they’ll have to make a woman’s tee, a tee just for the babes. Not that some women can’t hit—I mean some can, some can, maybe better than you, for example, Phil.”

Phil raises an eyebrow at Herb. Herb says, “Or take me, for example. Better than me. For example.”

Phil sighs. He says again, feeling slightly exhausted, “Candace is not a woman’s libber.”

Herb shrugs. “Well, my friend, what’s the problem then? Why’s she want you to quit?”

“I don’t know.” Phil lowers the clubs. He rubs at his sore shoulder. Herb stands before him as straight and thick as a Greek column, looking fifty, not seventy-three. In comparison, Phil sees himself as wrinkled, shrunken, worn-out—a limbless man left in the bathtub. “I’m getting old, Herb.”

Herb presses his lips together. For once, he says nothing. Phil knows what Herb’s thinking; that he feels like he’s twenty still, forty at the most. Phil admires this strength. He trusts in it. He looks at Herb’s knees, they are still strong, his shoulders are wide and his belly full. He admires Herb’s strong column of a neck. This is a man, Phil thinks, a man’s man, constant, Grecian, unhindered. Phil leans forward, placing a friendly hand on Herb’s large shoulder, wanting to say thanks. Wanting to say how proud he is to have such a good friend. He leans forward and thinks momentarily of Candace and then keeps leaning forward until, almost accidentally, he fastens his mouth to Herb’s dry, pressed lips. There is a muffled protest, then a shove, then a very loud breaking sound, and a long, white light that reminds Phil of the painless trail of cloud that an airplane leaves behind, and then he is sitting up, spitting blood. His entire face is numb: one large, skull-shaped bruise. He looks up at Herb, confused.

“What?” and as he says it, he realizes that Herb is waving around his club and hollering about something, and threatening to bash his skull in, his pink fairy skull, if he ever tries anything like that again, and Phil sits there numbly and waits for Herb to calm down. “What happened,” he murmurs to himself, and a chunk of tooth lands on his lap.

Two men waiting behind them shout fore. Herb stops pacing and shouting and gathers his clubs and Phil’s clubs. He pulls Phil by an elbow roughly to his feet.

“Game over,” Herb says. “You’re buying the drinks. On the plane. We’re going back, now.”

Phil obeys. As a muttering Herb guides Phil to the clubhouse, Phil can’t stop himself from reaching up to poke around his face, over and over again, until his hands are caked with blood. He can’t tell if his nose is broken, or if the blood pours from somewhere else. Herb shoves him toward the bathroom and barks at Phil to clean himself up. Herb doesn’t enter the bathroom to piss until Phil vacates it.

On the plane, the flight attendant tries not to glance at Phil’s bloodied shirt, his eerie, broken-toothed smile. She brings them drink after drink. Herb flirts as frantically as possible, eager to repossess his manhood. Phil tries to apologize.

“Listen, Phil,” Herb says, “I’m only going to say this once. You were emasculated by that woman, she wanted you to quit what you loved and you felt like a pansy because of it and so you acted like a pansy and you got what was coming to you but forget about it. I want to forget about it. So make it easy on the both of us and just forget about it. Although, I’m going to suggest that you quit, okay? Just quit Mammoth Hills. Play the public course. For everybody’s sake. Take Candace to Ireland. Fuck her brains out. Play some golf out there, they have some stellar courses...”

And he pontificates. Phil stares into the glossy night. The hole in his chest has widened. His whole body is filling with ants, a rotting log. He imagines lying with Candace in bed as she nurses his broken face. He imagines them whispering in the dark, falling asleep in the middle of soft sentences. Quiet. Quiet in a violent world.

But when Phil returns home, the door to the house is locked. He tries his key and finds that it doesn't work. The locks have been changed. He deposits his bags in the middle of the lawn and begins pressing his finger to the doorbell, over and over again. No response. He walks backwards, nearly trips over his bags, recovers his balance, and commences screaming at the bedroom window.

"You ungrateful bitch!" He finds that he's lisping through his broken tooth, his swollen tongue. "I was going to take you to Ireland! Guinness and derby hats! People riding bikes! Imagine it! No you can't you have no imagination at all, all you do is whine about how maltreated you are! You should have brought this up years ago! Years ago!"

Lights snap on in neighboring houses. Windows scrape open. Phil shrieks louder, he's pouring it all out, all of it, pouring it into her ears, which he suspects are covered by pillows, earplugs, clammy palms, who knows, but that listen regardless, are hearing everything. Suddenly the bedroom window slides open. A meek voice says, "Phil, stop, please, before I call the cops."

The fact that she would call the cops, the fact that this woman whom he had so desperately wanted to marry not once but twice, not because he was some sick twisted old man who was ignorant of her feelings but because he had always loved her and loves her still and has always, unlike Herb with his women, unlike a lot of his friends with their wives, appreciated her, and he would do anything for her, and the fact that she would call the cops, his wife, calling the cops on him, her husband, makes Phil so unrestrainedly angry that he plucks his 3-wood, his favorite driver, his most astute weapon, from his clubs and with it falls upon the tall window beside the front door, smashing and

smashing and smashing until he hears her shrieks, louder than his own, descending the stairs to the foyer. Once inside, he stands before Candace: bloody, panting, younger than he's felt in years.

He can only see the whites of her eyes in the dark. .

“Candace,” he says. “I quit. I quit the club. Are you happy? Are you happy now?”

She turns and walks stiffly up the stairs, her palms falling on her knees, helping her to rise. He hears her sniffing. He can tell that she's afraid. “I've changed,” he says to her back as it slips into the dark bedroom. “You wanted action, well, here it is.”

No response. Phil walks into the guest bathroom. The green roses are gone, the yolk on the mirror, gone. The counters smell like cleaning product. Apparently Candace couldn't ignore her marriagework, after all. Too ingrained. And now it's as though the roses had never existed. But he can still picture them there, perfectly, upside down, uniform in color but bizarrely displaced. He washes his face and the adrenaline begins to subside. His swollen knee throbs again. His broken nose. He feels everything, and it is all so real to him, and he cannot believe that he's lived this long to reach this sort of suffering, to fall down a spiral in his being that he never knew existed. Phil limps up the stairs still dragging the 3-wood. He climbs into bed with it, hugs it to his achy body. He can tell that Candace is awake. He can hear the flutter of her eyelashes in the dark. But the confrontation, for the night, is over. Phil knows they won't feel better in the morning, but for now it is quiet. There is not even a sound from the street. There are

only the sounds made by two bodies, exhausted but awake, lying side by side on an old mattress.

1-

We arrive at seven to drink coffee and chat with Sven. Sven will be an okay boss. He offers us donuts. He asks about our marriage. He says we look healthy. Dewey and I hold hands. Sven sits down on a Sealy and bounces a little, but not too much. Ruins the springs, he says. He instructs us to move as little as possible.

“The key is,” he says, “look happy. Look placated. No big shit-eating grins, but smiles like you’re dreaming of money, or of sex, or of your favorite Grandma. Whatever makes you happy. Your kids. Do you have any kids?”

Dewey shakes his head. “We’ve tried,” he says.

He squeezes my hand. The coffee is very bitter.

Sven strokes his chin. “No kids? I hope the customers don’t sense that.”

“Unless,” I offer, “they are customers who don’t want kids. Then they would want to sense that.”

Sven brightens. “That’s why I hired you. The smarts. The customers don’t need to know. And if ask, wing it. You can pretend you have them. This could be your sort of alternate marriage space, you know?”

“A utopia,” Dewey says. He squeezes my hand again.

This is a good job.

2-

The doors open at eight. Dewey and I select a mattress that massages your spine. It feels so good I want to fall asleep. But we can't look slack-jawed and ugly. We're hired to sell, not to sleep, Sven says. I can hear people walking around in the mall outside. I open one eye and peek at Dewey. He is feigning sleep excellently, with a small smile on his face, all dimples and curly brown hair. He looks cute. I peck him on the cheek. Sven shouts, "Good! Good! Now back to sleep!" Dewey smiles bigger. "Too big!" shouts Sven. Footsteps sound outside of the door, crowds passing, maybe entering the "I Saw it on TV" store across from us, or the electronic store next door, where you can play computer games for free. I think I doze off for a moment, but then the massaging rollers vibrate me awake again.

At eleven, the first couple enters. Sven greets them, his voice high and eager. I turn over and stage a pleasant sigh. The couple notices. They walk up to the bed, chatting.

"Who are they?" asks the man.

"They are a happy couple, sleeping on this fine mattress," Sven replies. "The Reverberator Two-thousand. Vibrating rollers gently caress your muscles while stimulating the metabolism. Leaves you relaxed, burns fat. Excellent for tonage."

"Tonage?" says the woman.

"Muscle tonage."

"They look happy," says the man. I'm so happy, I want to tell him.

“What’s the price?” the woman asks.

Sven tells them. The woman gives a little laugh. “Steep,” she chirps. “Steep, steep.”

“Well, it’s a lotta bed,” Sven says. He’s good at sounding both timid and pushy.

The couple wanders around a little more, finally selects a Dreamcatcher, extra firm.

When they leave, Sven lets us take a break. He claps Dewey on the back. “Excellent work, kids,” he says. “I think you two will be a goldmine for me.”

Dewey’s brow furrows. He leans forward to take another donut. “Yeah,” he says, “but they didn’t buy the one we were sleeping on.”

I speak before Sven does. “I think we inspired them. I think we looked so happy that they thought, wow, let’s get a mattress right now.”

Sven nods. “See, that’s why I hired you. The smarts. Alright, kids, go lie down on the Reverberator Two-thousand. Make it look comfy.”

Dewey and I hold hands all the way to the bed. I am having great fun. Dewey and I stretch and yawn. We make a big show. A woman with lipstick bloodying her teeth comments on how much she likes my silk pajamas. Where did I get them? I tell her in the mall, at the opposite end, borrowed from SleepWare, Etc. I lie down. Dewey and I fall into instant fake sleep. The massagers roll up and down my back. I think I’m actually sore from lying on them all morning, but I smile slightly anyway. I pretend-dream of a big fat baby boy. I pretend-dream that Dewey holds him on his knee in a bright, spic-and-span kitchen. He bounces him up and down, in rhythm to the pounding

of the massagers. I almost fall asleep as Sven discusses prices. The woman ambles around the store. She purchases a Dreamcatcher, extra firm.

No other customers.

Sven will be a good boss. He gives us a fifty-dollar, first-day bonus, and also the box of donuts. Dewey holds the box on his lap during the bus ride home. We eat the donuts for dinner.

3-

On payday, I call Mom. “Long time no word,” she says.

“I’ll call more now,” I wash the silverware while we talk. There are never any dishes to wash. We use paper plates. I tell her, “Dewey and I have a steady income.”

“‘Bout time. Mattresses, eh? Moving out of that dump?”

“No,” I say. I hear screaming in the background. “We’re saving for doctor appointments.”

“For the babies?”

“Mom, what is that screaming?” A piece of dried cereal is stuck to a fork.

“For the babies?”

“Yes, for babies.”

“It’s the TV,” she says. “William’s watching it. TURN IT DOWN!” she shrieks. “Listen,” she says, “could you pick up one of those electric hair removers for me from ‘I Saw it On TV’? I need one...TURN IT DOWN! for the lobes on William’s ears. And

maybe for the part above his nose. Maybe for my legs? How about it? An early Christmas present?"

"Mom, I'm saving money."

"For babies." Mom sighs.

"How are you feeling?"

"Babies would be good. Couple a kids. We could fly up." She shrieks, "TURN IT DOWN FOR CHRIST'S SAKE!" Then, "I'm fine, sweetie, tired. Medicine swells me up. Suffering from lethargia. Doctor's say it's normal, otherwise my ticker's shipshape."

"Alright, Mom," I say, "That's good. I just wanted to say hi. That I love you both. Tell William."

"You like your job?"

"Yeah," I say. "It's easy. But it's getting harder to sleep. I get bored lying down."

"Huh. You'll adjust. Try sleeping propped up in the shower. William does. Or in a Lazy-Boy, he does that too. Or leaning on the rake in the yard, when you're supposed to be raking leaves?"

"Maybe I'll try. Well, I gotta go, Mom. Costing money. Talk to you soon."

"Listen," she says, "is it inspiring?"

"Is what inspiring?"

"Lying side by side all day?"

"I don't know."

She coughs, mumbles something about the TV. “I mean, does it get things going for you two. In bed.”

“Mom, I don’t know.”

But I do know. What I know is that we had sex a couple of weeks ago, after the first day of work, after our donut dinner, but since then, not at all. But it’s been awhile since we’ve worked all day. We’ll break out of it once we adjust, as Mom says.

“Well, babies would be good,” she says now, “good luck with that. Let me know if it happens.”

We hang up. The silverware is clean, so I search the house for Dewey. He’s in the bedroom, hands on hips, doing lunges. His eyes look heavy. We haven’t been sleeping much.

“I’m trying to tire myself out,” he says. “I’m getting fat.”

“We lie around all day,” I point out.

“I know that.”

“I like to be with you,” I say.

“I like you, too.” He smiles and lunges, up and down, up and down.

4-

After the second paycheck, we book an appointment. In the waiting room, a kid with a bad cold sneezes on Dewey. Dewey scowls. He’s anxious about the baby. He hopes, right now, that I am pregnant. He says I’m probably a month gone, he can tell by

the flab around my belly button. I think maybe it's just flab, from eating donuts and lying around all day. But we're making money. We can book appointments.

In the doctor's office, Dewey's happier. He's sure she'll return with a thumbs-up sign. I enjoy his good mood while I can. I will be sad if it's my fault.

But it's not my fault. The doctor says to Dewey, "Mr. Ferver, I'm sorry to tell you that your sperm count is practically nil."

Dewey says, "Nil? As in, a mil?"

"No. Nil, as in nothing."

Dewey spaces out. He stares out the window. "Is there a chance?" I ask. I give her a pleading look. I want her to say something positive, even if it's a lie, just to make Dewey stop spacing out.

"There's always a chance," she says, "about one in a million, but you never know."

"We could have sex a million times," Dewey suggests.

"Yes," she says, but she sounds hesitant.

Dewey says, "I know I have sperm. I've seen it. The white gunk? Where they swim around?"

The doctor says, "Mr. Ferver, don't feel guilty. There's no accounting for these things. You certainly didn't do anything for this to happen. It's just the way life goes."

We are speechless.

"But you can adopt," she suggests. "You can babysit."

I hate this doctor. I stand and take Dewey's hand. We leave without saying another word. I promise a second opinion. We get one, but the second doctor says the same.

"We can't adopt," Dewey says. "We're poor. They'd never give us a baby."

"We'll keep working. Just wait," I say, "it'll be okay. There are other options."

"Those options are expensive." Dewey won't look at me when we speak. Right now, he mechanically rips up his paper plate and folds the pieces into miniature airplanes. Six or seven of them are lined up on the kitchen table, aimed at his chest. Sighing now, he stops folding and says, "We're poor. We're too poor. We're fucked."

Dewey never swears. I lean forward and gather the planes into my hand. "We'll just keep working." I pick up what's left of his plate and throw everything in the trash. I get a fresh plate and ask, "Want a donut?"

Dewey shakes his head. "I need to lie down."

"Okay."

He goes in the bedroom and lies down. He gets up for work in the morning and then lies down. We get home and he lies down. Then he gets up for work and then lies down again. I can't sleep at all anymore, unless it's in the shower, propped up as my mother suggested. But even then it's hard. I'm uncomfortable everywhere.

A few weeks pass. Dewey looks gradually unhappier at work. Sven's confused. Mattresses aren't selling. Dewey won't talk to me, just stares. He thinks I'll leave him. I cuddle up to him at work, smiling slightly. I still dream of a big fat baby boy. On

Dewey's knee. Dewey bounces him. The rollers pound into my spine. I'm used to the pain now, but there is no muscular tonage.

5-

Sven pulls me aside. Dewey refuses to take a break. He remains lying prone on the mattress, his mouth slack like it's not supposed to be. Sven says, "What's going on? Zombie over there is losing us business."

"He lost his manhood," I say. My voice breaks. I cry a little bit. Sven gets a Kleenex for me and pats me on the shoulder. When I blow my nose it honks like a bus braking and he says, "Jeez." He waits for me to explain, and when I do, he offers to help.

"Help how?"

"Well, you could come here after hours, without Dewey," he says. "We can practice lying down on the mattress. Just for a week or so. Problemo solved. Business saved."

I tell him I'll think about it. I go and lie down beside my husband. He mumbles something incoherently. Drool spills down his jaw.

"Listen," I say, "things are going to be okay."

He says, "No. We're fucked."

"Dewey," I tell him, "I had a dream that I was pregnant. And you know, my dreams always come true? A big fat baby boy? And you, bouncing him on your knee?"

I don't tell him that it's a fake dream, one that I imagine when I'm fake-sleeping. Dewey turns toward me, pecks me between the eyes. I feel cross-eyed, looking at him. "Really?" he asks. "Just stick with me," he says, "and maybe things will work out. You're gonna stick with me, right? Even though you really want kids?"

"Like glue," I say. "Don't worry."

I stay extra hours all week. Dewey goes home to pour cereal into our paper bowls. He waits for me to come home before he adds the milk. He doesn't even ask why I stay late.

6-

The end of the week and Sven says to me, "That should do it."

We're lying on the Pegasus Mobile bed. I stuff my arms back into my shirt. There's a little TV that pops up at the foot of the bed, and Sven clicks it on.

"I hope I helped," Sven says.

I don't say anything. I pull on my jeans. A janitor passes by, his huge vacuum cleaner whirring. He spots us through the window. Sven waves him away.

"Want to watch something with me?" Sven asks.

I shake my head. "I'm tired," I say. "Dewey's waiting."

Sven shrugs and looks a little hurt. He's got funny, pinched features, but otherwise, he's not so bad looking.

"I appreciate it, though," I tell him. I don't want him to feel bad.

"I hope it helps," Sven says, brightening. "That should do it, I think."

“Yeah,” I say. “I hope so. I feel bad enough as it is.”

He shuts off the TV and the flickering stops. The fluorescent lights hum.

“I feel bad,” I repeat.

“Don’t,” Sven says. “You’re doing this for Dewey. For your marriage. An alternate marriage space, remember? I mean, you can pretend this never happened.”

Dewey had said *Utopia*. I thank Sven, collect my things, and leave. Sven offers me a ride home but I tell him, the bus is fine, thanks.

7-

At seven, Dewey and I hold our coffee cups. Sven cracks open the box of donuts. He avoids looking Dewey or me in the eye. I reach for Dewey’s hand and he shakes my hand away. I select a chocolate éclair. Dewey eats an éclair, a powdered donut, a jelly-filled donut. He is about to pick up his fourth when Sven tells us, “Customers on deck. Head to the Vetro Elastabed.” We head there. I stretch and yawn, make a big show. My heart is not in it. Out of the corner of my eye I see Dewey sloppily kick off his shoes, violently throw back the sheets. He flops onto the bed like a big, dying porpoise. The customers, a tall woman in pink heels holding the hand of her short, pale daughter, look startled. Sven frowns for only a moment. He raises his eyebrows to me, clasps the tall woman’s elbow, and guides her to the bed. I continue putting on a big production. Sven looks grateful. I blink a few times, pretend that I can hardly keep my eyes open, and then let my lips part just enough so that my teeth don’t

show. Sven has said that my teeth are yellow, like popcorn-flavored jellybeans. So now I'm careful.

Sven charms the woman. He explains the bed. The woman asks questions. He says, "This bed is developed by Nasa." She says that her husband moves around too much at night. He says, "You can set a full glass of wine on one side of this bed and drop a bowling ball on the other. No spillage." She says that she feels stiff in the morning. Sven says, "Sleeping on metal springs? Thought so. Switch to foam. Switch to vetro-elastic memory cells. Any position, no stiffness." The woman goes quiet. She seems to be studying something, carefully. I feel her breath hitting me. I smell her lavender perfume. Cracking one eye open, I see that she is studying my husband. Her breasts heave above my face.

"He looks unhappy," she tells Sven.

"Him? No! He's just been sleeping, at home, on a metal-spring mattress."

"He looks like he's having a nightmare."

"No, no, it's just that the superlative firmness of this mattress is relieving certain pressure points, thereby seeming to create a grimace when actually he's—"

"Come on, Cynthia," the woman says, straightening. Cynthia has her thumb in her mouth. They execute a small half-circle, holding hands, and start for the door.

"Thank you for coming in!" Sven shouts after them. He never burns bridges. I roll over and watch them enter 'I Saw it On TV.' The girl picks up the Stomachkiller, a product that issues small electric shocks to help you lose weight. Instead of attaching the

electrodes to her abdominal muscles, she jams them to her temples. The mother tosses her arms up and shrieks.

“Do you think those work?” Sven asks me, staring as the mother pulls the girl back to her feet.

“The Stomachkillers?”

“Yeah.”

“No,” I say. “But wouldn’t it be easier if they did?”

“Yeah,” he says. He looks at Dewey. Dewey is dead asleep and drooling. He sleeps most of the time now. “Escapist,” Sven mutters. He kicks at the base of the bed.

8-

Today Sven tells us to lie on the Pegasus Mobilebed. This is the one bed I cannot stand lying on. I even like the Reverberator 2000 more. I have a hard time pretending to be asleep when things are vibrating, folding, flattening and flashing. It surprises me that this bed is a bestseller. Sven is very proud of it.

Strangely though, today I manage to fall asleep. I have still not been sleeping at night, although yesterday I did fall asleep while trying to mow the lawn in the dark. Dewey hollered at me through the bedroom window that I was going to kill myself that way. He didn’t bother getting out of bed to tell me so. But today I fall asleep. I have a bad dream. In the dream, Dewey bounces a big fat baby boy on his knee. The baby has whiskers over his upper lip, and a receding hairline. He has crows-feet and pointed ears.

It is Sven's head, screwed onto a baby's body. I look at Dewey. He cries, silently, and when he meets my eyes I see how accusatory his he is.

I wake up, screaming Dewey's name.

Dewey grabs me. The mattress buckles upward, under my knees. It slides like an eel beneath my spine. A customer jumps away from the mattress. He watches, at first confused, then just nosy, as Dewey cradles me and asks me over and over, "What's wrong, sweetums, what's wrong?" In response, I tell him, over and over, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

I think Sven will fire us. But he puts an arm around the customer's shoulders and walks him to another bed, across the store.

"For what?" Dewey asks me.

I am watching Sven. I say, "What?"

"What are you sorry for?"

I turn to Dewey. His eyes are big gooey gumballs, sugary with worry. I realize, suddenly, He has no idea.

"I'm sorry," I say, "I have to go to the bathroom."

I get sick in the bathroom. I puke all over. I start with the garbage can, continue with the sink, finish with the toilet. A little bit gets on my borrowed silk slippers, on the foot of my borrowed silk robe. Sven hears me gasping. He finishes a sale and then cleans up for me. I shudder and cough. I cannot get control of myself. Sven asks me to please calm down. He asks is there anything he can do. I can't even look at him. I want him to take it all back. He asks again. I cry harder. He says, I am ashamed. He wants

to apologize. I cannot accept. I tell him, someone must accept my apology first. He starts to say something else, but Dewey knocks on the door.

I change and go home early. Without Dewey, without donuts.

9-

Sven lays me off. He says he can only afford one of us now, with Christmas coming. He has gifts to buy, he says. But he arranges a new job for me at "I Saw it On TV." Since they are a chain, they have benefits. And I get to walk around all day. My legs slim down some, but my stomach keeps growing. With my new discount, I buy Mom the Nyethair Russian-electrical-hair-removal system. I will send it to her for Christmas.

Dewey saves up some money and buys real dishes. There's more to wash, but I feel special eating cereal beside him at night, in real bowls. I can eat four bowls of Fiber Brain now, and chug six glasses of milk. Dewey watches me, shocked but excited. Sometimes he urges me on. I'll finish and he'll rise and pour me a fresh batch. I haven't told him yet, but he guesses. I'll go to the doctor soon, for vitamins and such. Eventually I'll call Mom.

He's a lot happier, Dewey is. He does his lunges again, and he's slimmer. The other day he lifted my shirt and looked impressed with my larger breasts. He said he felt manly again. I said, yes, you should.

At night, I walk across the orange mall hallway, as large as a four-lane road, to meet him and catch the bus. I wave at Sven through the window. Sometimes I'm a little

early. Tonight I saw Dewey curled up in front of an elderly couple. I could see him pretend-muttering in his fake sleep, a tiny smile on his face. The couple kissed one another, spoke a few words to Sven, produced a credit card. Dewey has truly become a professional at lying. At lying down, that is.

As for me, I like my new job. I like my husband. I like my expanding self. I even like Sven. I just wonder if, when the baby comes, will he be okay? Can negative thoughts retard him somehow? Will he be crippled, after lying for months in that small space, tangled up in my guts? I worry about it a lot. I don't tell Dewey. I keep working. I keep making appointments. Eventually, we'll move out of this dump. We have benefits, and ceramic bowls. Life is improving.

Russian Midgets

Salvador was always playing these awful practical jokes. The Russian Midgets were simply the final straw. At one of my first dinner parties, Salvador taped a glossy photograph of breasts on the bottom lip of my toilet seat, so that every time a man excused himself he would return grinning ear to ear.

“What?” I finally had to ask Edgar, who kept raising his eyebrows at me in a suggestive manner.

“Is it a photograph of you?” he asked, and then accompanied me to the bathroom to show me what, exactly, he was referencing.

I returned and with aplomb told everyone, while Salvador hung his head, that my house was not “a house of ill repute.” Salvador apologized, and I tried to laugh it off, but I warned him that such behavior did not necessarily warrant him a future invitation to my home. The next dinner party, Salvador was so serene and quiet that for the first time in years, I found him attractive. I almost invited him to stay the night, but then when I began to make the suggestion, he was looking at me with such desperate wet eyes that I shuddered and said instead, “Goodnight, Salvador. Thank you for coming.”

The next party, Salvador arrived with a priest. At first, I was delighted to have clergy in my home, but before long the priest was clumsy and drunk and reciting lewd jokes to my guests. When he broke the ceramic swan on my sideboard, I couldn't help but say, “Father, please. Is this good behavior for a priest?” The priest balanced the

ceramic ass of the swan on his head and told me, "I'm not a priest. I'm an actor. I'm performing in the play, 'Young Boys Anonymous'."

When confronted, Salvador said, "Oh, lighten up. Really. It was amusing."

"He broke my ceramic swan," I told him.

Salvador blushed and smiled.

"You should have told me," I said. "You should have told everyone that he was not a real priest."

The priest reentered the room with the ceramic ass like a white bonnet on his head. He pretended to walk a tightrope. The rest of the guests left.

Salvador behaved beautifully for the next handful of parties. I found him attractive again, and considered accepting his advances. One day he phoned and asked if he could bring three friends from work. I approved, pleased with his forethought. But when the three friends arrived, they were gruesomely small. They had round elderly heads and stubby bodies like overweight children. My mother gasped and touched the pearls at her neck. The little man offered his hand to me and introduced himself. I took it politely, and then he introduced the two women. They still wore aprons around their tough little bodies, as though they had come to cook for me.

"And where's Salvador?" I asked them. They pointed. He came in ebulliently, as though nothing were awry. The rest of my guests had gone quiet. You could hear them shifting about on the couches.

"Please," I told the three midgets, "have a seat." To Salvador I hissed, "What is this nonsense."

Salvador looked surprised. “They’re my friends. They laundress across the street from where I wait tables.” Then, as though this helped his case, “They’re the friendliest customers. They have the most amazing stories about Russia.”

“Russia?” I asked him.

Salvador nodded.

“When will the jokes end,” I cried. He looked confused. The conversational lapse in the other room lifted, voices rose and fell softly now. I stepped into the middle of the room and announced, “Salvador has made a fool of me for the last time.” I pointed to the door. “Please. Take your little friends and go.” Salvador blushed and smiled. “You can’t be serious,” he said. I repeated myself. The midgets scowled at me but rose to leave. Salvador apologized to them as they herded toward the door. “Is she your friend?” one of them asked. Salvador shrugged. When I turned back to my dinner party, smiling with relief at everyone, my guests stared at me as though I had spilled something thick and black down my dress.

1

Bea's worked at the Foodbomb for a grillion years. She was thick around the middle and wore purple a lot, and I liked her because she reminded me of Grimace. My mom would laugh and say, "That's not Grimace, that's a lady," which I didn't get back then, because I always supposed Grimace was a boy, but if you think about it, you can't tell, can you? Grimace could go either way. Anyway, I still like Bea, not because of the Grimace memory, but because she's supernice.

Even so, she gets in a lot of trouble. There's new management, run by Mr. Gale. He doesn't like "monkey business." We all have to wear matching vests, and nametags shaped like bananas, and maroon visors like we're working in fast food, and more often than not Bea forgets an accessory or two. Mr. Gale also makes everyone attend a monthly class on how to be a "Superlative Customer Service Representative," which is frankly a joke, because we're all getting paid minimum wage. The meetings are boring and sometimes mean. Mr. Gale bashes people. Bea is his favorite victim. For some reason, he loves me. Always tells me I'm going places. It's funny, because he's so serious all the time, but then he tells me to call him, Please, Alex. Which I won't do. He's too much like a teacher or something. And his hating Bea, I just don't get. At the Superlative Customer Service meetings, whenever Mr. Gale begins cutting people down, I stop listening and gaze out the conference window. It's on the second floor

with the other offices, and the window looks out over the entire store. The store is strange without people. The walls are pink and the carpet red, and it's about the size of a small airport. My favorite part of the store is the magazine racks. Sometimes we can take home magazines for free, but with the covers torn off. My favorite is a fashion magazine—*Pulchritudinous*. I showed it to Simone once and she said, wrinkling her nose, "What's that mean?" I said, "It means beautiful," and she said, "That's an ugly word for beautiful." We shared a candy bar in the sunshine and it melted into our fingers and we left greasy prints on all of the pages, ranking the models by who was the most pulchritudinous, who was the least. My mom saw the magazine and frowned. "Those models look malnourished." Simone and I examined the pages. "But," Simone said, "it's the *fashion* that counts." Mom said she didn't care much for fashion, and then disappeared back inside the house. Simone said, "Maybe that's why your Dad left her for the cigarette lady," and I shrugged. I think it had more to do with his being selfish.

Anyway, I space out, too, I guess. Just like Bea. Maybe that's why she doesn't bother me so much. The only time she ever annoys me is when someone like Simone will come through for a pack of gum and a Gatorade and she'll eye Bea over like she's a beast of the wilderness and raise her eyebrows at me as though to say, "Jeez, who stuck you with the Beast of the Wilderness?" I get uncomfortable because half of me wants to laugh and the other half of me wants to tell Simone to grow up. Or, sometimes, someone like Roger will come through for a pack of cigs and Bea will say something like, "Are you sure he's seventeen?" and I'll say, "Oh yeah, sure, he's a year older than me, I

know him from school,” even though he’s not a year older than me and even though it’s illegal. I always have to look around to make sure management didn’t hear her.

So yeah, she’s spacey. I keep waiting for her to embarrass me in front of Simone, or even worse, Roger, but so far so good. Besides, I would rather be stuck with Bea than with crotchety Mr. Ford, who never forgets to ask paper or plastic but who is also the reincarnation of the old man from *Poltergeists*. Bea’s better than him any day, slow and forgetful as she is.

Bea’s always asking me, “Hey Cindy, mind if I take a break?” I always say, No, please, go ahead. The lines move faster when I do my own bagging, anyway.

2

It’s hot outside and slow inside. In between customers, Bea leans her fatso elbows on the space where people write checks and watches me count bills.

She says, all wistful and teary-eyed, “I wish I was like you.”

I raise my eyebrows at her.

“I mean, I wish that, when I was younger, I was more like you.”

“What are you talking about? My life totally sucks.”

Bea shrugs. I shove the bills into the security bag and tuck it under the register. “Maybe,” she says. “Maybe your life sucks, but you handle it better. Better than me, better than I did.”

“Bea,” I say, “it couldn’t have been that bad.”

Her voice is drippy, sweet like syrup, but sad and slow, too. “Oh, I don’t know. It wasn’t all bad. I got voted ‘Best Smile’ in high school. That was nice.”

I chuck her on the shoulder. “See, I can totally see that. Really.”

Bea nods, brightens for a moment. “Well, it was a small school. Small town. But I was liked alright. At school, anyway.” Her face goes gray again. She has large wet patches growing in the purple armpits of her shirt. She gazes at her hands, plump fingers thrust together on the checkstand, and three chins staircase from her face to her neck. I agree: the nicest thing about her looks is her smile, which lights up her eyes and irons out her wrinkles, but right now she is frowning. Anyone looks better when they’re happier. Mr. Ford walks by with some carts and I say to him, “Hey Hubby,” and Bea smirks at me. He gives me a confused look, adjusts his Foodbomb visor, and then tells me to go eat turds.

“Don’t be fooled,” I say to Bea, who clutches her thick middle and doubles over laughing, “he really loves me. I can’t wait for our wedding night.”

“Better bring...” she says, sputtering, “better bring...”

“What?” I say, giggling.

“The Viagra!” She howls, and I laugh harder because it’s the first time I’ve ever heard her make a joke.

Mr. Gale materializes out of nowhere. He puts his white knuckles against his hips without balling his fists, and opens his eyes wide at us. “You two having a good time?” he asks. We stop laughing. He tells Bea, “Arnold needs help on register five.”

Bea nods and moves off. I wince looking at her, because her Foodbomb vest is tucked into her underwear, and you can see it riding above her wide black sweatpants. Mr. Gale shakes his head.

“Can you believe they hired such a monster?”

I hand him the cash bag. “I counted it all out, Mr. Gale.”

He takes the bag from me and looks at me as though he has never seen me before in his whole stupid life. “Listen, Cindy,” he says, “just between you and me. There’re some changes coming to this store. Big changes. Huge ones. Let me ask you one thing: are you ready for them.”

I shrug. “Sure I am.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” He leans in so that I can smell his sour breath. “Just between you and me, Bea is not ready for those changes.”

“No?”

“No.” He straightens, surveys the store like he’s on top of a mountain. “The woman is not ready for changes. Especially not huge ones. Not even big ones. The woman will not be able to handle them. Not at all.”

“Mr. Gale,” I say, “she’s actually very—”

“Cindy, please,” he says, putting both of his hands together like he’s praying, “please, for the love of Foodbomb, call me Alex.”

A customer shoves her cart up to my register. I gratefully begin running her purchases through.

“I forgot my Foodbomb card. Can I just give you my phone number?”

“Sure,” I say. Mr. Gale stands there, watching me ten-key and nodding like he’s proud of me. I tell the woman, “You save twenty-five cents today. Thank you for shopping Foodbomb.”

Mr. Gale says, patting my arm and turning to leave, “Cindy, you’re like a daughter to me,” which makes me cringe. I haven’t seen my dad since he ditched Mom and me for the woman who sold cigarettes and magazines on the corner of 4th and Pine. That was two years ago. He sent me a postcard from Las Vegas for Christmas last year, saying how big of a heart I have, despite my sarcastic mouth. He used to always say that kind of stuff. It was tacky, sending me a postcard like that, but it made me miss him. Or miss something. But that something certainly isn’t Mr. Gale, with his raunchy breath and squeaky shoes.

Bea returns as I’m running another customer through. Mr. Gale stands there as though waiting for her to make a mistake, but she even remembers to ask paper or plastic, and to be extra delicate with the eggs.

3

Simone asks if I can stay the night. Mom says no, but that Simone’s welcome to stay at our place. I’ve been staying at Simone’s a lot lately, and Mom’s sick of it. But I like Simone’s house. It’s really clean, as though a magic oilcloth descends from the sky once an hour to wipe away every speck of dust. And they’ve got nicer things. Breakable things and leather couches. They also have a dog that doesn’t smell like constant farts all the time. I tell Mom this.

“You love Rufus,” she says, “don’t try to deny it.” And then she says, leaning forward to eat the peas I’ve ignored on my plate, “You shouldn’t compare yourself to Simone all the time. You’ve got great qualities, things she’ll never have.”

“Thank you, oh great seer,” I say.

Mom laughs. “You know what your father used to say about you?”

I know. But I don’t stop her.

“That despite your sarcastic mouth, you’ve got an enormous heart.”

I scoop my peas onto her plate. Rufus comes into the room, drooling and panting and smelling like farts. “That means a lot coming from a man with no heart,” I say. “And no brain, for that matter.”

Mom tells me what she always tells me, that I should learn to forgive, that I should understand that he loves me, that eventually I’ll be ready for him to come back into my life, just in a different form. I nod and twirl my hair and let her eat my peas and blab. Then I go into the other room to read the latest issue of *Pulchritudinous*. Mom comes in and tells me to get my feet off of the coffee table.

“Those women look malnourished,” she repeats.

“I know, Mom,” I say. “They’re on a strict diet of water and peas.”

Mom smirks and squeezes my toes. Rufus wanders into the living room, looking for me as always. He drops his wooly head onto my knee. I massage his ears while I read about weightloss and vagina exercises. I haven’t had sex yet, but even so, it’s interesting.

The doorbell rings. It's Simone. She hugs me as she always does when she sees me (she thinks it's very European) and then says, "What smells like farts?"

"Oh," I say, "I was just petting the dog."

"You should wash your hands," she suggests.

So I do.

4

On Friday, the Foodbomb's packed. I'm running people through as quickly as possible and they keep coming, their loaded carts snaking into aisle seven—Babies/Bathrooms. When I'm waiting for people to finish signing their checks, I can hear Bea huffing and whining at my side.

"Bea," I say, "don't have a heart attack."

"No, I'm fine," she says, trying with her large sweaty fingers to be delicate with the eggs. "I'm fine."

Simone comes through the line. She gives me that look again as I ring up her pack of gum. The "What's With the Beast" look.

"A quarter," I say.

"Hey," she says, "last night was fun."

"Yeah," I say, waiting for the frigging quarter, because the truth is, last night was not fun. In short, it consisted of Simone mooning over Roger, scribbling on the back of an old math assignment her first name coupled with his last name as she asked me question after question about them: do you think I should sleep with him, do you think

we'd have cute babies, could you see us married some day, do you think he looks like a younger version of my dad, blab, blab, blab. What's funny though is that when she finally got up the balls to call him, he asked to talk to me. And when I hung up, grinning and feeling like my cheeks were all hot, she asked, "What did he say about me?" For the first time in my life I felt like spitting on my palm and rubbing it into the perfect round nub of her nose. But of course, I didn't.

And now I say, "Last night was a lotta fun."

"Roger's parents are out of town all day tomorrow," she says. "He wants us to go skinny-dipping."

She holds the quarter in her hand but doesn't hand it over. Bea shuffles and coughs at my side.

"Well," I say, blushing. "I have to work." She's been skinny-dipping with Roger before. When she described it to me, I felt both disgusted with her and murderously envious.

Simone pretend-pouts. "Oh, too bad. I forgot," and hands me the quarter. "It would be fun, though."

She prances off, then turns and shouts, "I'll call you tonight, okay, Cindy?" And I realize that she would never suspect Roger of finding me attractive.

Bea asks me for the next hour if I'm okay. I keep shrugging. Finally, after the umpteenth time, I tell her to please leave me alone, I mean look at all these people for crissakes and Bea would you please just remember to ask them what kind of bag they want Jesus. She settles down and remembers to ask and then I hear her sniffing. I avoid

looking at her, but I feel bad. A woman comes through the line and asks Bea if she's okay.

"Allergies," Bea lies.

I pass her a Kleenex. She blinks at me, grateful. I hand the woman her Foodbomb card and tell her, "You saved nineteen cents today, Miss Evers. Thank you for shopping Foodbomb." Bea stops sniffing. But then, a couple of customers later, she drops the eggs.

The customer stops talking on his cell phone long enough to scream at me, "Do you know how long I've been waiting in line? Do you know my time on this planet is valuable, and that you are robbing me of it?"

Bea goes to collect more eggs, muttering self-deprecating curses as she slinks away. I try to calm the man down.

"I'll give you the eggs for free," I assure him.

"Big fucking deal!" he shrieks, "that's like fifty cents!" He stops shrieking and brings the phone to his ear and says, "Listen, I've got a major situation here. The employees at the Foodbomb are trying to ruin my life."

I wipe up the mess on the counter. I pretend the man is not there. "Why do they hire inept employees?" he asks the person behind him.

Bea lumbers back. She bags the man's goods and he pays and I am just about to tell him that he's saved twelve cents, plus his free eggs, when he leans close to Bea's face and says, "You are a worthless, stupid old cunt."

Bea opens and closes her mouth. The man begins to walk off, but I shout at him, “You forgot your Foodbomb card!” and when he turns back toward me, his face twisting with fresh rage, I flick the card to the floor and say, “Pick it up yourself, asshole.”

The man points at the card. “Pick that up,” he orders.

“No,” I say, and when Bea, frightened, bends to retrieve it, I put my hand on her shoulder and tell her, “No, Bea. Fuck this guy.” My hands are steady as Bea trembles within her vest.

Mr. Ford comes over, and trailing behind him, rising on his tiptoes to see over Mr. Ford’s high shoulder, Mr. Gale. “What is going on here,” Mr. Gale says. “This customer looks displeased.”

Mr. Ford says, “I saw her, she threw the card at him.”

“Bea!” says Mr. Gale. “This woman has been a problem in this establishment and the correct punishment shall be affixed presently. Bea, if you would follow me to the office please, and if you could hand me your Foodbomb visor, oh I see you’ve forgotten that again, no surprise there, well I’ll need your Foodbomb vest and please your Foodbomb nametag...”

Bea begins unbuttoning her vest but Mr. Ford says, “Not Bea. It was the brat. You know: Cindy. Chucked it at his feet.”

Mr. Gale frowns.

“It’s true, sir,” I say, “or almost true, anyway. I didn’t throw it at him. I sorta threw it at the floor.”

“On accident?” Mr. Gale asks, brightening.

“No. Not really. More like on purpose.”

I lean in and repeat it.

“What?”

“Stupid old cunt,” I say.

Mr. Gale stands there, looking confused. For crissakes, I’m wondering, do you really hate Bea this much? And then I’m also thinking about what they tell us at our Superlative Customer Service Meetings, that no matter what, even if someone shits in the bill of your Foodbomb visor and puts it back on your head, you’re supposed to do everything you can to make them happy, and management promises not to take out of your salary the amount for a new Foodbomb visor. So, given that, I can practically guess what Mr. Gale will say next.

“My employee begs your forgiveness, sir. And if you would please follow me to my offices I will gladly make out a Foodbomb gift certificate for the amount of fifteen—no, make that twenty—Foodbomb dollars, to use on whatever purchases you require.”

“Alright,” the man says. His cell phone rings. “Sounds good.” He returns to his cell phone.

They walk away, the man chatting and throwing his hands around, his groceries still sitting on the floor. Mr. Gale turns on his heel and approaches me again. “Why don’t you take the weekend off, Cindy. To cool down. We’ll talk Monday.”

“But I—”

“I don’t want you working here until we sit down and really discuss what happened here today. And right now, well, I’m frankly just too disappointed.”

“Fine,” I say, “see ya.” Once outside, I remember Simone and Roger, and I think, yeah, who cares, tomorrow I’m going swimming.

5

The next morning, I wait for Simone to pick me up. Mom lets Rufus out and he puts his farty smelling head on my leg and I think, Great, now Roger’s going to smell fart all over me, and I am about to get up and change my pants when the bus pulls up across the street. A large purple form stumbles from it and ambles hesitantly toward my house. Toward me.

“Bea,” I say. Great, I think, Simone will never let this die. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, Cindy,” she says, “I had to talk to you.”

I sit back down and Rufus puts his stinking head on my lap again. Bea reaches out to pet him and says, “Nice doggie.” I ask her what’s up.

“I needed to thank you for what you did for me,” Bea says. “What you did yesterday. I mean, nobody, nobody Cindy, has ever done something like that for me before.”

A car cruises down the street. I rise on my heels to see who it is. Thankfully, it’s not them.

“No, Bea, it’s no problem. That guy was a jerk.”

Bea wrings her hands. “Cindy, what if they fire you? It would be all my fault. Terrible, terrible of me.”

“I’m alright if they fire me. Foodbomb sucks. It would be a blessing.”

“But you’d have to find another job! And we’d never get to work together again!”

She’s taking this really hard, nearly crying right there on my freaking porch, and just as I wrap one arm around her shoulders, someone honks and I look up and there is Simone, sitting in the passenger seat of Roger’s car. Someone else sits in the back seat. Alan, Roger’s best friend. I raise my hand to them. “One minute!” I call.

“Bea,” I say, giving her shoulders a quick squeeze before releasing her. “Are you alright?”

Her gasping slows. She wipes at her eyes and squints into the sun. “I’m alright,” she says. “It’s just, you’re my only friend. And maybe I ruined your life.”

I force a laugh. Why won’t she leave? “You didn’t ruin my life. Gale won’t fire me because of this. No way.”

A door pocks shut. Roger walks up to the porch. “Everything okay?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say, “everything’s fine.”

Roger stares at Bea.

“Oh,” I say, “Bea, this is Roger. Roger, this is Bea. I work with her. At the Foodbomb.”

“Cool,” he says. He tugs at my elbow and at the bottom of the steps he asks me how old Bea is.

“Like a grillion years old.”

“Old enough to buy alcohol?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Hey Bea,” he says. She looks at us expectantly, as does Rufus. “How would you like to go swimming?”

Bea looks at me, hesitantly. I look at Roger and he nods. I, in turn, nod at Bea. “Yeah, Bea, come. It’ll be great.” My voice sounds high, unnatural.

Bea doesn’t notice. She breaks into a large, attractive smile. “Sure. I mean, if I’m not intruding. I haven’t been swimming in ages.”

“Cool,” Roger says. He grins at me. “Let’s stop by a drugstore and pick up some beer.”

Bea looks hesitant, but Roger acts all charming, opening the door for her with a flourish, and making Alan crush into the hatchback so that we “ladies” will have ample room. Bea says something about not having a bathing suit and everyone laughs. She looks at me and I smile at her but at the same time I’m thinking, Alright now, you Beast of the Wilderness, now you’re ruining my life. My cheeks are red the whole way and Simone has to point this out to everyone.

“You look sunburnt,” she says.

“No,” Bea says, obviously feeling comfortable despite being two times older and two times heavier than anyone in the car. “She looks like she’s wearing blush. Everyone thinks Cindy is the prettiest employee at the Foodbomb.”

Roger catches my eye in the rearview mirror. Now I really am blushing. “I can see that,” he says. “I can see that, definitely.”

From the hatchback, Alan whines, “My neck is cramping up back here. There’s no space and it’s hot.”

“It’s so great for you guys to have me,” Bea chatters. “I really love being around people, and you guys are all young and nice and smart, it’s really a pleasure for me.”

I press my forehead against the window and feel like I’m dying a slow death from a combination of heat stroke and mortification.

“That’s really nice of you, Bea,” Simone gushes, sounding genuine. I can’t tell if she’s mocking Bea or not.

“Yeah,” Alan says. “Real nice. For the love of Christ, Roger, could crank the air conditioner?”

“No,” Roger says. “It kills the ozone layer.”

He asks Bea if she’s comfortable. “More than ever,” she replies. We’re both being mocked to death. Like birds pecking at us. Bea, though, seems to be loving every second of it.

When we pull away from the drugstore, beer and wine with Alan in the back, Simone says, craning her neck to look at me from the front seat, “Smells like farts again. Forget to wash your hands?”

6

They get drunk. Even Bea. Roger acts all charming with her, and when she gets on the diving board and jumps into the pool, he screams with laughter. As Bea struggles to the surface in the dark tent of her clothes, Alan slaps his thigh and hoots, “Delicious!

Delicious!” They tell her they’re impressed that she’s the first one in. “I always was when I was young, boys!” she says. “I was famous for it!”

I sit at the edge of the pool with my feet in the water and hold a full bottle of wine on my lap. It’s red wine, warm and thick, and after one sip I know I can’t drink anymore. I hold it to me, anyway, for comfort. It makes me look like I’m having fun. The boys strip and jump in at the same time. They leer at Simone and I. It is so hot out that I imagine melting into the pavement. The sun glints off the flakes of water, turning them white like snow as they spin into the air. Bea pulls a bottle of wine and a yellow inner tube into the pool and floats there, drinking and murmuring how happy she is. The boys take turns doing shots and then jumping off of the diving board. They serve shots to Simone and Bea. I refuse, lifting my full bottle of wine and saying, flirtatiously, “Sorry boys, I’m busy,” although I’m not busy, I’m just upset. Simone, after her fourth shot and second beer, speedily sheds her shorts, tank top and fancy black sandals. She executes a nervous little dance over to the edge of the pool, pretending to concentrate on Bea, who is attacking her own bottle of wine and shouting about how she’s never been drunk before, and how wonderful it feels.

“We’re so alive right now,” she shouts. “I’m really still young, if you think about it.”

Every now and then she turns to me and lifts the bottle, saluting. I smile at her, but wish she would drown. Simone swims naked in the water with the boys. They are all too nervous to touch one another or stare for too long. They laugh at me for having my clothes on. Bea, too, suddenly strips. She cannonballs into the water and someone

shouts, "Look at her go!" I try not to look but can't help it. She's huge, torpedoing below the surface with rolls of fat and stringy brown hair wiggling around her, but at the same time, I think she looks placid, happy. Not ugly at all. She even looks agile.

"Hippos can swim, right?" Roger asks me. "I guess there's proof."

"Hush," I say. "She'll hear you."

"Don't get me wrong. I really like her."

I roll my eyes at him.

He says, "I do. Now get in the water."

"No."

"Take off your clothes."

"Not yet."

"Have a beer."

I take a beer. I don't drink it. Bea heaves up and out of the water, lurches toward the pool house. Simone's laughing with the three other boys about something, arms folded over her breasts. Roger keeps swimming around me, humming. I catch a glimpse of his small, flat butt. His tiny pecker. I don't feel all that impressed, but I like that he's drifting around me, instead of around Simone. I close my eyes and lean back. I'm so hot. I'm melting.

"Lesbian lovers!" Simone says. "That's what they looked like, standing on her porch: weirdo lesbian lovers!"

I lift up. The boys are laughing at me. "Fuck off, Simone," I mumble.

"No, it's true! Dontcha think? Roger? Rogey? Dontcha think?"

He cocks his head and looks at me. “Yeah, maybe.” He grins. “Maybe.”

“Jeez,” I say, and stand up and pull my tank top over my head, and then I lower my shorts and underwear and am standing there. I’m not nervous. I don’t dance around like Simone. I think about what my mom said. I have things Simone doesn’t have. I’m sure of it now. I’ve got Roger, for example. And Simone knows it. It’s transparent now, now that she’s drunk. I dive into the water and swim right up to Roger and kiss him on the mouth with my tongue wagging. I turn to Simone, whose mouth has dropped, and say, “A lesbian, huh?” The boys laugh and Simone mutters something. I swim away. From the shade beneath the diving board, I see Roger looking ridiculous, ashamed. All of them, Alan, Roger, Simone, look stupid and young. I’m bored with all of them.

I go to look for Bea in the woman’s changing room. She’s not there. I pee and let the sunspots fade from my vision a little bit. I rinse my mouth out with tap water. I want to find Bea and get her home. Where did she go? I walk outside and hear a lot of noise coming from the other side of the pool house, the men’s changing room.

“Bea?” I ask from the doorway.

“Hey Cindy, come here,” Alan says. “You’ll love this.”

“Look, is Bea in there? I want to go home.”

“Yeah, she’s here,” says Roger. “Come here.”

I enter. We’re all naked. Simone, Alan, Roger, Bea and I. Bea is a large fleshy lump on the floor. She’s on her side, lying in her own puke. She keeps bubbling puke

out of her mouth. I feel so bad that I want to sit beside her on the floor and stroke her head. She issues fountains of puke.

“We should clean her off,” Simone suggests.

“With what?” Roger says. “A hose? A bucket?”

“A hose!” Alan snickers. “Check this out!”

And he yanks on his pecker and aims the thin stream at Bea. Roger starts in, too, and they egg one another on, pissing on her chest and stomach. Simone says, “Ew, gross,” and leaves, but for some reason I can’t. I tell them to stop it, but they are laughing so hard that it feels contagious and suddenly I’m laughing too because Jesus look at her, she’s just lying there taking it. As they laugh, the pee squirts jerkily on and off, which makes us laugh harder.

“Whoa,” Roger says, “I think I got some in her mouth.”

“Raunchy. Watch, I’m gonna spell my name on her belly.”

“That won’t show up dude,” says Roger, but he’s laughing anyway.

Alan tries to spell his name but can’t. “Fuck, I’m all peed out.”

“So am I,” says Roger. “But you know who ain’t?” And he thumbs at me, hitchhiker style.

“Come on, Cindy!” Alan urges, “spell your name on her!”

“It’s like Etch a Sketch,” Roger says.

“No way.” I shake my head, watching Bea for movement.

“She’ll do it,” Roger slurs drunkenly. He gazes at me with pure affection. “She’ll do it. That’s why she’s so much cooler than Simone.” I stand there, hesitating. “Or is Bea your lesbian lover, after all?”

I glare at him, and then at Bea. “Well, I’ll feel bad.”

“Oh, she’s so passed out she’ll never know. Not at all. She’ll still worship you, I promise.”

I crouch over her head. It’s the narrowest part, and I don’t want to spread my legs very far. I piss right onto her nose, accidentally hit one of her lidded eyeballs. My dad said to me, before he left, when I was crying and telling him that I hated him for hurting us, “I can’t be mad at myself for the things that I’ve done. Life is too short. You’ll have to forgive me, too.” But I never did. Not even close.

I stop peeing but am still crouching slightly when I see one of Bea’s eyes squinting up at me.

“Oh no,” I say.

“What?” the boys ask. They are slapping one another on their naked backs, as though they had scored a touchdown.

“She saw me.”

“She did not. I was watching her face the whole time. She didn’t see shit.” Roger comes forward to put his arm around my shoulder.

“One eye opened,” I say. I stare at her face, shrug his arm off of me.

“Hey, what gives?”

Her eyes are certainly closed now. For a moment, I wonder if she’s dead.

“Nah,” Alan says, “she didn’t even blink. We were both watching.”

“I’m calling a cab,” I say. “I’m going home.”

“Wait,” Roger says, “let me give you a ride.”

“No,” I say, “I’m going to be sick.” I sprint outside and puke into the pool. Simone comes up to me, fully dressed now, and holds my hair away from my face. “You okay?” she asks and I tell her no, that I’m leaving. “I’m coming, too,” she says. I cry a little bit while I’m pulling on my clothes. Simone says, “What, Roger doesn’t like you? Big deal. He doesn’t like me, either.”

In the cab, Simone says, “I can’t believe what those boys did to Bea.”

I don’t respond.

“I thought she was pretty cool, you know? I mean, not many adults can party with kids like that. And she was pretty brave, getting naked and all.”

“She wasn’t brave,” I say, “she was drunk.”

“Well, at the very least she was supernice.” She leans her head back on the seat and sighs. “Oh God I feel sick.”

I think of Bea rising hours later, naked and alone, maybe even prodded awake by Roger’s parents. I try to think of what that would feel like, waking up abandoned and naked. Bea trusted me, and I let her down.

When I get home I go straight to my room and lie down. After an hour or so, Mom enters and lays the new issue of *Pulchritudinous* on my bed. She asks me if I’m okay. “Sick,” I say, and she strokes my hair before leaving. Hours later, Rufus noses the door open and flops onto my bed, too. I bury my hand in his fur and fall back asleep.

Bea calls in sick to work for two days. I'm anxious to see her again. I both want and don't want to speak with her. When she does show up, she smiles at me meekly, as usual. I don't bring up the other day. I know that she won't if I don't. And maybe, I think, she doesn't remember anything after all. Maybe I imagined it: the opening eyeball. Guilt, or something.

When I first returned to work, a couple days before, Mr. Gale called me into his office. He said I wouldn't be fired, but that if any other mishap occurred my name would come up in the Superlative Customer Service meetings. I didn't say a word the whole time, because I was thinking about how inconsistent I am, how in between Friday and Saturday I had gone from defending a nice albeit geeky woman to peeing on her face. I mean, sure, I was drunk. But didn't Dad say I had a big heart? And since when was peeing on someone's face the sign of a big heart?

I'm hanging out with Roger and Simone later today. We're going to give Rufus a bath: Simone's idea. I sort of don't want Simone finding out about my peeing on Bea. I think it would give her something else to hold over me. But it's cool that Simone didn't do it. It makes me prouder of her. Less proud of me.

Today, Bea keeps forgetting to ask paper or plastic. It surprises me, because she was getting so much better about it, but once again, I'm asking for her.

"Can I go on break?" Bea asks me.

"Yeah," I say. "Go ahead."

She leaves. Mr. Ford comes up to help me bag. He's in a crotchety mood, as always. "You know," he says, "Bea wasn't really sick."

I tell a woman how much she saved with her Foodbomb card. "Thanks for shopping Foodbomb."

"Not sick at all," Mr. Ford continues. He sucks on his teeth. "Nope, I saw her at Superfood on 4th and Pine when I was waiting at the intersection. She had a cart full of groceries. Not sick at all, and shopping at a competitor."

"People still shop when they're sick," I say.

"Paper or plastic?" he asks the next customer. Then to me, he hisses, "I don't suppose Mr. Gale would be happy, regardless."

"You want her to get fired?" I ask him. I tell the customer, "You saved fifteen cents."

"Paper or plastic?" Mr. Ford asks the next customer.

I ring them through, and I forget to tell them their savings.

I ask to take my break. I walk outside, into sunlight that makes my eyeballs hurt, and find Bea sitting alone, reading a fashion magazine at one of the picnic tables. I sit across from her. She looks up at me, her eyes small and afraid. I take a deep breath.

"Listen," I tell her, trying to sound as distant and adult as my dad did, "I can't be mad at myself for the things that I've done. Life is too short. You'll have to forgive me, too."

Bea puts her sandwich down and glowers at me. Her anger is unfamiliar. I stop talking and struggle to begin fresh. *I want you to like me still*, I could say. But everything

feels unfair and unbalanced, as though words will never be suitable for explaining the goodness in and around things.

I'm afraid of death. I thought of this while I was watching a movie last night, but not because the movie made death seem like a scary thing, rather it seemed like a glorious, glorified thing, and what scares me is that it won't be glorious or glorified at all—just nothing, just death. Maybe this bothers me because I'm a claustrophobic. I don't like the idea of being stuck anywhere. I would rather be in hell. Because even though they all say that hell sucks, that there's nothing decent going on there, I'll bet you a trillion dollars that every once and a while you'll be resting on your pitchfork, taking a slight break while The Whipmaster sips at his coffee, and you'll look out over the valleys and hills of hell and think, hey, fire and brimstone are sort of pretty at this hour, almost like a big, violent sunset. And right before The Whipmaster takes up his whip and starts clobbering your back again, you'll think, hey, even those baby-heads, the one's that have no bodies—just wings where their necks used to be—even those baby-heads floating around biting people can be pretty cute sometimes. That doesn't sound so bad. If you're conscious enough to at least have thoughts, then I'm sure no matter how horrible things get, there would still be some goodness there, and sometimes I'll bet that goodness would almost make everything seem worthwhile. Even if you are damned for eternity.

This is why I took that job as a butcher. I've been looking for mortal answers. There's something terrifying about working with large slabs of meat. I mean, these slabs

used to be alive. In the mornings, brushing my teeth, I'll picture the skin peeling away. I've heard that sheep are stupid animals, not very self-aware. I wouldn't mind coming back as one, for that very reason.

The other day, a woman asks for a lamb shank and I go to carve the meat for her, and as I'm carving I'm thinking about how little Lambert was probably skippidy-dooing just the day before, until he was herded up with the others in a barn and shot smack between the eyes. I got to feeling really sorry for the thing, because now it was going to be sold to some fatso woman in a paisley dress, bustled home to her four blotchy, screaming children, only to be pooped out by the whole miserable family the next day. The lamb was pink and warm in my hands and I almost cried. I turned and told the woman, "We're out of lamb shank."

"You just said you had it."

"No, I'm sorry. We're out."

Her fat mouth twisted up. "Well then what, young lady, were you cutting at just now?"

"I thought it was lamb shank but it's not, it's the lamb's gut, I think."

She rose on her tiptoes and looked over my shoulder. "That's fine," she said, "that's fine, I'll take that."

I looked back at the meat. "It's not lamb," I said, "it's bear."

She grimaced. "Bear?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, it's bear. The butt, I believe. Or the intestines or the spleen or something."

“That,” she said, pointing a sausagey finger, “is not bear. And it’s certainly not intestine or spleen.”

“This isn’t even meat,” I said, “this is like that tofu-ish meat. Tofurkey or Tobear or tolamb or something? It’s not very good for you. They douse it in pig’s blood, to make it look more real.”

“I’m telling the manager,” she said. He asked me later to go home, but his voice wasn’t angry, just tired or something.

I took the meat home with me. I figured, if someone’s going to eat this meat, it should be someone that’s deeply, importantly afraid of her own mortality. It was tasty enough. But after a few bites, the meat began loping about in my stomach. I clutched my gut and went to the toilet and heaved. Each morsel had turned into a little red lamb, complete with a head and legs and hooves and eyeballs and everything. Most of them galloped frantically around the bowl of the toilet, skirting the water’s edge. One of the braver morsels ducked its head and lapped at the water. I felt sorry for the whole lot of them, but there really wasn’t anything to be done. Where would I keep them? In an aquarium? A hamster cage? They were marbled and dripping. Despite their playfulness, they were hideous.

“All things must come to an end,” I intoned.

And then I flushed.

Sunshine and the Predator

Dad said, If you're bored, be like the Blue Collar Kids. Get a frigging job.

Within the week, I was being interviewed by Bill Gibbons, General Manager of Astorville Center Themeparks. He was a burly man. The ball of his nose was red and bumpy like a kneecap.

"How old," he asked.

"I just turned fourteen."

"What grade."

"Freshman. Sophomore in the Fall."

"You some kind of genius or something?"

"No," I said. "I just skipped a grade."

"Eh. No wonder you're so thin."

He motioned for me to follow him. The park was sandblasted with sun, and, except for a handful of confused tourists and two young couples with strollers, very vacant. We walked down a road that someone had painted to look like yellow bricks, and then down a smaller pathway that someone had painted to look like dirt.

"Nice paint," I said. "It looks really real."

"Eh."

"Did you paint this?" I asked.

Gibbons laughed. “Are you kidding?” He loosened the brown tie at his neck and shook his head. Dad had suggested I just keep my mouth shut and smile prettily, so I tried to go ahead and do that.

The fake-dirt pathway led to a big mechanical apparatus. Lights and buzzers were going off, and really loud speakers played Metallica. The floor rotated around a large red column painted with screaming faces, and on the floor, secured by screws the size of my head, were seats that looked like the booths in a pizza joint, except that these booths were missing a table and had seatbelts.

“The Rock ‘N’ Roller,” Gibbons said. “It’s not one of our exciting rides, but it pulls in a decent amount of customers.”

“Wow,” I yelled over the music, “it’s really, really neat.”

Gibbons laughed again and shook his head. “You been to a theme park before, Erin?”

“Of course,” I said, “I’ve been to this one.”

“Then stop pretending everything’s all shits and giggles.”

Even though he had said this with a smile, I frowned. “Alright,” I said, although I wanted to say something snippier back to him. Something like, Hey, I was just trying to be nice, or Hey, what’s your problem?

I was mulling over other come-backs when Gibbons said, “First thing: this machine is not a toy. It’s dangerous. I once found a raccoon pulverized between the rotating floor and the bars underneath. And raccoons, you know, are bigger than some babies.”

I nodded and felt genuinely afraid. “Do people actually take babies on this ride?”

Gibbons turned away from me and hollered, “Hey Joan, come here, I want you to meet Miss Sunshine.”

A girl staring at us from the ticket console licked her lips and approached. She was wearing jean shorts and a bikini top. I recognized her from gym class. We were usually the last selections for team line-ups.

“Hi Joan,” I said.

“Oh,” she blinked. “It’s you. Yeah, hey, what’s up.”

“Great. You two know one another.” Gibbons glanced at his watch and burped. “Listen, Erin here is going to be our new ride operator.”

Joan shrugged. “Alright. Whatever.”

“Joan handles the tickets. Now she won’t have to do both.”

Joan rolled her eyes and snorted. “Yeah,” she said, “I *really* need the help. It’s *so* fricking busy here.”

“Great. I’ll let you two catch up then.” To me Gibbons said, “Come and see me when you’re finished here.” When he hit the fake dirt path, he turned around to shout, “And put on some clothes, young lady!”

Once he was out of earshot, I told Joan, “He’s really nice.”

“Sure,” she said. She snapped a shoulder strap on her bikini. “A real peach.”

“How long have you known him?”

“Ha,” she says, “just my whole life.”

“I don’t—”

“He’s my uncle, nimwit,” Joan said. She stared at me, up and down, long and hard. “What was your last name again? Sunshine?”

“Oh,” I laughed, “no, that was his name for me, not my real name. I’m Erin. Erin Crubbsfield.”

“Your Dad’s on those commercials, right? Crubbsfield Developers or whatever?” When I nodded, she whistled all low and exaggerated. “That’s muy, muy impressive.”

“Muy?”

“It’s Spanish for very.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to sound casual, even though I stood there like I was made of coat hangers, “that’s really cool.”

“Anyway, Sunshine,” Joan said, “this job’s really easy. Kids get stoned, give tickets, get on, get off. No problem. Sometimes you can get free joints.”

“Joints?”

I winced at the fear in my voice and wished that I had kept my mouth shut, but Joan didn’t seem to notice. She just rambled on, scratching at her lip with a blood-red fingernail, “This ride is like sitting in a car. People always bitch about it. But there’s never puke. That’s one major plus. Still, there’s mopping at the end of the night. Dirt from people’s shoes and stuff.” She brightened here, “And since you’re the new girl, the mopping is your job.”

This didn't exactly seem fair, but Dad was always mentioning hierarchies, and so I guessed I'd be what he'd describe as "the-low-girl-on-the-totem-pole." Maybe it would be a good thing. One of Dad's favorite mantras was, Humiliation Begets Dignity.

"Well," I said, growing uncomfortably sweaty in my un-breathable interview clothes, "I suppose I should go and talk to your uncle about times and stuff. You know, work-related stuff."

"Yeah," she nodded. "I guess."

I waved and walked quickly away, too quickly, for I stumbled on a piece of fake dirt. I felt my face go red and was glad Joan couldn't see it when she hollered over the Metallica, "Adios, Sunshine!"

Dad was surprised I got the job. Gibbs must have liked your honest face, he laughed.

When I arrived for the first day of work, a guy dressed in a clown suit and selling balloons and ultra-large plastic glasses was sitting with Joan in one of the Rock N' Roller booths, his white hand creeping up her thigh, his oversized goods resting on the booth behind them. He looked like the reason people are afraid of clowns.

"Hello," I said, waving. Joan saw me, leaned into the clown, and whispered something through his fuzzy red wig. They bent away from one another, giggling. He slapped her thigh gently.

I gulped. "When should I...uh...get started?"

Joan rolled her eyes. “Just hang out, Sunshine. No one shows up until sundown anyway.”

“Hang out?” I asked. The rotating floor wasn’t rotating, the heavy metal wasn’t turned up.

“Yeah,” she said, “Just chill out.”

The clown wouldn’t stop grinning at me through his big, painted frown. I shuddered.

“This is Eli,” Joan shouted. “He’s a clown.” They started laughing again.

I felt awkward, standing there like a ghoul and ogling them, so I went and sat by myself on the stairs, hugging my legs. The sun toasted my arms. I put my head on the warmth and dozed off. The next thing, a big hand was shaking me awake.

“Hey Princess,” Gibbons roared, “what in the name of Lucifer do you think you’re doing, eh? You’re neglecting this machine, and if you neglect you know what happens? People die! Babies die!”

Raccoons die, I thought irrationally, and rose sputtering to my feet. “Oh, I’m sorry, I—” I looked to Joan for help. She lolled in a booth by herself, reading a thick romance novel.

“Aw, leave her alone,” Joan said, without looking up from her book, “I told her to just hang out. There’s no reason to start blasting music before people even *get* here, Uncle William.”

Gibbons pivoted his big, blotchy body toward her. “You want to keep your job, right?”

Joan shut her mouth. She pretended to be reading.

“Answer me.”

She put the book down between her knees and sulked. “Yes, Uncle William.”

Then, to me, he said, “She gives you any trouble, you come and talk to me, alright?”

I nodded, “Yes sir. I will right away, sir.”

He straightened, put his hands on his hips, and gazed at me as if confused. He shifted his gaze to Joan and said, “Behave, young lady.” And then was gone.

“Aw,” she said, coming over and sitting beside me on the stairs, “he’s a pain in the butt. Muy, muy frustrating.”

I bit my lip and tried not to cry.

“What’s the matter?” She frowned.

“I feel awful,” I blubbered, “I don’t want to get fired.”

Joan snorted with laughter. Her blonde hair caught the sun and tossed it back. “Give me a break! Please, please, give me a break!” Then, settling down a bit and wiping at her eyes, “You’re not going to get fired. You know what you have to do around here to get fired?”

I shook my head.

“Kill someone.”

I didn’t find it very funny, but I smiled and relaxed. My acrobatic stomach lost momentum and stopped its somersaulting.

The rest of the day went by fairly smoothly. Joan put me in charge of the CDs, which she said she only did for co-workers she could tolerate.

“It always has to be rock and roll,” she instructed. “Songs about murder and sodomy and date rape. You’ll either be sick of it or love it by the time school starts next Fall.”

I didn’t ask what sodomy meant.

There weren’t very many customers. A few tourists came through, holding up their ticket stubs in a pathetic plea for fun. Joan was right: it didn’t get busy until sundown, and even then we hardly had more than five people on the ride at once. While The Dragon’s Breath and The Tilt and Twirl gleaned nervous laughter and even girlish screams from its patrons, The Rock ‘N’ Roller elicited only the occasional smile, and usually it was the sort of smile that translated to, “This ride blows.” I wore spongy orange earplugs to try and shut out the music, but then it sounded like it was blaring from a single speaker in the middle of my brain. I took them out and set them on the ticket console. Joan was already putting me in charge of both the levers and the tickets. She went behind the ride to sit cross-legged on pavement that had been painted to look like grass. She smoked cigarette after cigarette, returning with a dazed, at-peace expression and the smell of cloves haloing her head. I didn’t mind what she did as long as she stayed nice to me. I fantasized that we’d become friends.

At six PM, three pretty girls from our class came through the line.

“Justin is *so* lame for bringing us here,” Alison said. They hadn’t seen me yet, and I wished the light hanging over the ticket booth weren’t quite so glaring.

“At least we get cotton candy. I oh-my-gawd *love* cotton candy,” said another girl, Carlissa.

The last girl, one whose name I didn’t know but whose face I recognized from the hallways, said, “Why dontcha marry it then.”

Alison said, “Dude, that joke is *so* Grandma.”

The stood at the stairs with their hands in the back pockets of their jeans. Their smooth hair was like freshly combed velvet. They all had purses that swung on thin bands from their wrists. They looked tiny and pretty and precious, like porcelain miniatures, and beside them I felt dumpy and unfashionable and plain, like a cabbage patch kid.

“Hi girls,” I said, when they finally filed up to me. “Tickets, please.”

“Oh, hey,” Alison said, “how’s it going, Erin?”

“Ooh,” Carlissa gushed. “You’ve got a Swissoma.”

“Yeah.” I looked down at my watch and touched it like I’d never seen it before. “My dad gave it to me.”

“I’ve been asking for one for years,” Carlissa continued, grabbing my wrist and twisting it toward her for a better look.

While being examined, I smiled at Alison. She raised her eyebrows at me in response and then checked her fingernail polish. We used to play together when we were girls. Our parents lived in the same neighborhood up on the hills. I wondered, standing there and waiting for Carlissa to release my wrist, if Alison remembered that at all.

Joan materialized at my side, asking, “What time is it, anyway, Sunshine,” but then she saw the three girls and tensed. Carlissa let go of me.

“That’s weird,” the nameless girl said, “you work here too?”

Carlissa said, “Hey, Joan. Let us on for free, wouldja? These tickets were a rip-off.”

At my side, Joan’s usually cool demeanor crumbled. She waved them through.

When she went to sit on the fake grass again, I heard the nameless girl say to Alison and Carlissa, “What’re the chances that the class prude and the class slut would work here together?”

Alison raised her eyes to me. She buckled her seatbelt and said, half-smiling, “Hush, you twit. Everyone can hear you.”

The ride started and their laughter and conversation was shut out by screaming lyrics and guitars. I reapplied the earplugs. I didn’t want to hear anything else.

When it was time to shut down, I went out back and found Joan pacing slowly back and forth. She wore her empty pack of cigarettes like a paper tiara on top of her head.

“I’m not going back to school this Fall,” she said, walking and spinning on her invisible tightrope.

“Why not?” I asked. I was shocked. I had pictured us cruising around the halls together, stopping at our lockers to laugh at teachers and gossip about boys.

“School’s not for me,” she said. “It sucks there. Besides, Eli’s eighteen and he’s starting at Fisher in the Fall. He says there’s a whole rat race out there that he’s made for. And he can be the bread winner, you know? That’s muy perfect with me.”

I leaned against the back of the Rock ‘N’ Roller, next to an ugly thread of cords that twisted like intestines from the machine’s gut to a group of outlets on the green pavement. “I think this job is pretty neat,” I said casually, hoping to keep the conversation light. “I had fun working with you today.”

Joan stopped pacing the tightrope and tilted her chin so that the empty cigarette pack swooped to the ground. “Do you think those girls are pretty?” she asked.

“Alison and them?” I said.

She nodded.

“Yeah, I do.” She looked disappointed. I added quickly, “I used to be good friends with Alison, when we were little.”

Joan ignored this. “What about me. Do you think I’m pretty?”

“I think you’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen,” I said. “Way prettier than any of them.”

And I really believed it. Especially when she smiled, as she did now, and the dimples appeared next to her mouth like tiny pools of light. Her hair was supremely blonde, the sort of albino-blonde usually reserved for small children, and her eyes were wide and almost crossed, giving her a sort of candid innocence. She slouched like an older woman, comfortable with the body she was given, and although you could see that

she was not particularly coordinated, there was a sort of curvy grace to her that the other girls lacked.

“It’d be neat to look like you,” I said, “when I’m older.”

I supposed the word I was groping for was sexy, though even if I had thought of it I would never have uttered it aloud.

Joan said, “Aw, you don’t mean that.”

I remained silent because I knew that she knew that I meant it. I meant it very much.

Joan smiled now and seemed to forget her past melancholia. “Well, let’s close shop. I’m muy famished.”

She set about, humming. With her back turned, I quickly retrieved the abandoned cigarette pack and placed it in the garbage can.

Dad said, Andrew Gunderson told me about your trashy co-worker. Watch that she doesn’t rub off on you.

Andrew Gunderson was Eli Gunderson’s father. He was also Dad’s attorney.

I ignored what he said. Joan seemed to be one of the only girls my age that wanted to talk to me. It didn’t bother me that she called me Sunshine, or that she left me alone, sometimes for hours, to eat cotton candy with Eli on the green pavement behind The Rock ‘N’ Roller. I was happy that I felt comfortable around her, and I admired that she wasn’t such a Daddy’s girl.

I told her this once and she said, “Well, it’s easy when Daddy’s dead.”

I supposed that's why she lived downtown with Gibbons and his frail wife. I felt wretched for bringing it up. When I apologized, Joan said, "No prob," which made me like her even more.

Plus, I really enjoyed the job. Even Dad remarked, It's rare to see you so eager, Erin, with a hint of pride in his voice. The summer days stuttered past, sometimes fast and sometimes languid. Whole nights would pass with maybe three customers. Other nights I would be there late, mopping up dirt and spilled soda, while Joan skipped down the fake dirt and out to freedom. The most exciting time was when some boy lost his baseball cap and instead of sitting still, unbuckled his seatbelt and crawled over to the edge of the rotating floor. I roared at him to hold on with a voice louder than I had ever used in my entire life, and then slowed the floor to a stop. "You could get your fingers caught," I scolded. "This floor is not a toy." The boy gaped at me. His lower lip trembled. I felt bad for frightening him, but it was better to have a frightened boy than a dead one. Joan seemed impressed with me and relayed the event to Gibbons. He gave me my first ten-cent raise. Dad said, Ten-cents doesn't seem like much, but it all adds up.

The best days were the days when Eli didn't show up, when I didn't have to slink away and leave them alone. On those days Joan and I would shut down The Rock 'N' Roller early and in the moonlight pet the goats and llamas and horses in the Happy Ho-Down Livery Stables, where all the workers dressed like they were from the nineteenth century and said things like, "Spectacular night for a stroll, isn't it ma'am?" Joan would make faces at them and try to draw them out of character. Her favorite trick was

pointing at the animals whenever they pooped. Once she even pointed at a poop and said, “Hey! That looks like your face, Sunshine!” which actually made a couple of the workers snigger. When she saw my expression, she punched me on the arm. “Hey, I’m *kidding*. Geesh. It doesn’t look like you at all.” Then she pinched her chin and squinted at the poop and said, “Actually, it looks more like Eli—especially his teeth,” and then I was free to laugh along with her.

When Eli was around, Joan withdrew. She usually wore a pout. Only one night did I go with them, per Eli’s suggestion, for a soda. Joan seemed annoyed. Whenever I tried to be in step with her, she sped up, or slowed down, or moved to Eli’s opposite side so that he would be in between us. I walked a few paces behind them instead.

Eli laughed and said, “Don’t be annoyed Joan, she’s your friend.”

Joan threw me an over-the-shoulder, burning look and said, “What do you know, Eli?”

“Stay friends with her and Mr. Crubbsfield might buy your college education.” Eli slowed and nudged me with his elbow as though to say, just kidding. I shrank away from his touch and stayed quiet.

Joan lifted her chin defiantly and said, “I’m not going to college.”

“Oh you’re not, huh?” Eli seemed amused.

“Or finishing high school, either.”

Eli laughed, stopped laughing, waited for a moment. “You can’t be serious.”

“I most certainly am.” Joan kicked a stone and I watched it bound crookedly across the fake path and onto a fake blue pool of water. “School is for people like you,

and for people like Sunshine. It makes sense for you and you're good at it. Well, I'm not. Big fricking deal."

"Jesus, Joan, you really are stupid."

Joan stopped walking. "What did you say?"

"I said you're really horribly stupid. Grow up."

I kept walking even though they had stopped, but I was walking so slow that I looked crippled. I pretended not to listen, trying to figure out what to do, where to go. Joan was upset: upset with me; upset with Eli; or just plain upset, I wasn't sure.

"Gawd," Joan was bawling, "you're so mean!" She choked on her sobs and Eli tried to comfort her. "I just figured that you would go to Fisher," she said, "and you would take care of me..."

I turned back around here. The journey for soda had definitely ended. I saw Eli's arm unwrap itself from Joan's heaving shoulders. I watched them with sick fascination, like two cars colliding.

"You're totally wrong," Eli said, trying to get her to look him in the eyes. "I've never told you anything like that. We've never even done it!"

"I love you!" Joan screamed, sobbing. A few park customers gazed with curiosity at the spectacle. Eli was, of course, wearing his clown costume with the big, painted-on frown, although this was the first time I'd really seen him frowning in it. Some man joked as he passed, "That clown's sure doing a bad job." My heart went out to Joan.

"I better get back and check on The Rock 'N' Roller," I said stupidly. Joan ignored me, but Eli said, "That's a good idea, Erin. Sorry about this."

I shrugged. "It's nobody's fault," I said, and Joan told me to shove it and Eli just smiled and waved me on.

Joan didn't return the whole day and wouldn't speak to me the next. I wrung blisters into my hands and ached for some way to get back on her good side. The day after that, she seemed back to normal.

Dad said, You won't learn it in this job, Erin, but one day you'll see that being merciless is essential to success.

Not long after Joan's meltdown, we were sitting together in one of the Rock 'N' Roller booths. The machine was set on the lowest speed, so that the floor slowly rotated while Pantera wailed from the speakers.

Joan picked at her the toe of her sneaker and commented, "This job is muy sucky."

"I dunno," I said, "it's not so bad."

Joan grinned. "I think that's the first time you've ever disagreed with me."

She seemed pleased, and so I felt pleased, too.

"Gawd," she said, studying me, "your parents must have done a fricking job on you. What are they like?"

I shrugged. "My Mom's pretty quiet, I guess. Dad's always talking. He's got a big voice. Sometimes I hear it ringing through my head even when he's not around. He likes to say he's a predator."

“A predator?” Joan snorted. “That’s classic.” She pulled some lip-gloss from her pocket and applied it, then offered it to me. “Do you like them?”

“My parents?” I asked. “I love them.”

“No, I know,” Joan said, annoyed. “But do you like them...I mean, do you want to be like them.”

I considered this. “I can’t imagine being like my dad. But I don’t know if that’s because I don’t like him or because I’m afraid of him.”

“The predator,” Joan mouthed thoughtfully. Then she leaned forward and dug her sharp fingers into my knee. “If I tell you something,” she said over the music, “keep it a secret.”

I nodded, enraptured.

“I slept with Eli.” She released me and leaned back with an air of triumph, as though challenging me for a response.

“Oh,” I said. “Wow.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say except, “Good for you.”

Joan scowled at me. “Are you being mean? Or are you being serious?”

“No,” I said quickly. “Good for you. Truly.”

She lifted one shoulder and then dropped it, smiling with one side of her pretty mouth. “It was nothing.”

I waited a moment while she gazed out at the earth revolving past us. “So you’re not mad at him anymore?”

She shook her head. “No. All’s good. I’m pretty sure we’re on the same page now.”

I hesitated. Without meaning to. I tried to smile like the dark cloud hadn’t been there, but she was already sitting up and asking, “What? What was that look for?”

“No,” I said, “it’s nothing. It’s just...I don’t know. What, exactly, is the same page?”

Joan stood and grasped the edge of the booth for balance. “I love him, okay? What’s wrong with that?”

“Don’t be mad at me. I’m happy for you. I’m really, really, really, happy for you.”

I must have sounded insincere. She glowered at me. “I wouldn’t expect such a Rich Prude to understand. You may not be as pretty as Alison, but you’re just as much of a snob.”

She stalked off before I started crying. I’m sure that if she had seen me she would have apologized, per usual, and maybe what happened next would never have happened at all.

When someone approached the ticket console, I wiped at my face and walked tipsily across the floor. I leaped down so that I was next to the column, where the levers were, and then pulled The Rock ‘N’ Roller to a stop. I rearranged my face into fake cheer. The customer was a tall, handsome boy. I didn’t recognize him at first. Eli, without the clown get-up.

“Oh,” I said, surprised. “Joan’s out back, I think.”

But then Joan was behind me. She gave me an angry little pinch. “Hello, lover,” she said to Eli, a greeting that made him squirm. “Geekwad here thinks we’re not on the same page.”

Eli looked confused.

“Please don’t bring me into this,” I said meekly.

“Come here,” she said to him, pulling him by the sleeve. “I want to talk to you.” Then, in my ear she hissed, “About last night.”

Her whole face became reptilian to me, all tense angles and slit eyes. The sun began to set, people milled peacefully about the park, some with their arms around one another’s waists. And then there was Joan, with the lights of the Rock ‘N’ Roller casting her face purple and yellow and red. I wanted her to be pretty again, to convince Eli gently. But she looked like a 3-D version of the faces screaming on the large red column behind her. I visualized her floating up and into them, swallowed forever by rage and fear.

They stood beside one of the booths, somewhat near me although I could only hear what they were saying when they shouted. I wanted to turn down the music, thinking it would help to relieve some of the tension. Eli looked indifferent, kept holding up his hands as she poked and prodded at him.

Their conversation ended abruptly. Joan burst into tears and gave Eli a resolute shove. He tripped backwards, overcorrected his balance, and then fell face forward, instead. Joan ran into the park’s growing crowds and darkness. I shut off the Rock ‘N’

Roller lights and music, telling a couple of kids, waiting impatiently at the ticket console, to come back later. They flipped me the bird as they left.

“Are you okay?” I asked Eli.

“I’m stuck,” he said. “My foot’s stuck.”

He was lying on his stomach, trying to twist his body around. His ankle was bent at an unnatural angle. I wondered if it was broken. I leaned toward it and saw that his shoe was wedged between the layered plates of the rotating floor. “Ouch,” I said. “It’ll come free if you take your shoe off.”

“Well, I can’t very well reach it, now can I?” Eli said. He was too twisted around to sit up straight.

“Sorry,” I said. “You want me to do it for you?”

“Yes,” he grumbled. “Goddamn it.”

I bent to take off the shoe, but then thought about Joan wandering brokenhearted through the park. “Did you two break up?” I asked, hands hovering above his ankle.

“Erin,” he said. “We were never even together. It was just a hook-up thing, you know? I never tried to pretend otherwise.”

I crouched there while he pleaded with me to take off the shoe. “I’m afraid if I let you go,” I said, “you’ll never come back to see her again.”

“Why do you care?” he said. “She’s the one wasting her life. She wants to be trash and stay trash forever.” He wriggled around on the floor and said, “Come on, please! The shoe!”

I stood, arguing, “I don’t think she’s trash. I really like her. You should take that back.”

Eli practically frothed at the mouth. “You’re a goddamn saint, Erin,” he said, “and I don’t get it, because she says the meanest shit about you.”

I stepped off the floor and stood beside the operating panel in the middle of the red column. I wrapped my hand around one of levers and said, “You take it back, or I’ll hit go.”

“Fuck! Just undo the shoe, you psycho.”

“What did you say?” I pressed the lever forward and he began rotating away from me.

“Stop it!” he said. “Stop it! Erin, please, Erin, wait—”

The truth was, I wanted to scare him. I wanted to scare him because I was scared of the grinding gears and because I knew that Joan was scared of losing him. I could feel the fear in him then, when he said “please,” when he said “wait,” and I had already pulled the lever back into the stop position, but the floor was still moving and the thing I had forgotten about was that the panel that stuck out too far from the opposite end of the column, the panel we were always warning the customers about tripping on, happened to be right in the way of Eli’s head. This is the thing I always remember, the thing I could never tell to Dad or to the police or to Gibbons and especially not to Joan, the thing that was too vivid for me to say out loud because it would show them the vastness of my regret: I heard a snap, like when Dad tore the leg off of an overcooked chicken, and then the horror of everything in the world suddenly existed in a pinhole in

my chest, and the pinhole expanded in each following second until it met my toenails and my fingernails and the ends of my hair, until I saw his face and knew it to be true. His neck was snapped, his tongue hung from his mouth like pink toffee. His eyes were wide and still. Everything I dreaded between hearing that sound and seeing those eyes simply was. He was dead.

At the last moment, he must have pulled free of the shoe. His socked foot rested beside his shoed foot. I shook at him for a few moments, still clinging to the hope that the nightmare would end, that he would sit up, grimacing and holding his head, and everything would be innocent and true again. When that last hope died, I grabbed his feet and pulled him with more strength than I knew I had over the Rock 'N' Roller floor, down the metallic steps, and onto the fake green grass. I dropped his legs there and collapsed beside him. I rested my head on his outstretched arm and wept.

“That’s muy shitty,” Joan said. I sat up. “Muy, muy fucked.”

“No,” I said, “it’s not what you think.”

Joan laughed, an evil witch’s laugh. She came forward and said, “You’re taste in women sucks, Eli,” and kicked his socked foot. When he didn’t respond, she kicked harder. “Hey!” she screamed. “Hey, Eli!”

She noticed his unblinking eyes. She peered at him. Maybe she noticed, too, the odd elasticity of his neck. His head flopped around when she kicked him as though his spine had turned to wax.

She turned to me and pointed at him. “What’s up with this?”

“He’s dead,” I told her. For some reason, I had stopped crying. I felt like these were the facts. Joan’s arrival had somehow severed the wires between the facts and my emotions. “He snapped his neck.”

She knelt and poked him in the chest. “Eli,” she whispered. Poke-poke. “Eli.”

When she turned to puke, I went for the mop. I cleaned up after her while she mumbled incoherent, rambling sentences.

Finally, “Where’s his shoe?”

“It’s stuck in The Rock ‘N’ Roller floor.”

“How’d he snap his neck?”

“His foot was stuck. The floor rotated. His head struck that one panel.”

Joan fumbled with her lip. She sat forward, fumbled with Eli’s lips. “He’s so cold,” she said.

“He’s dead.”

Joan nodded, sniffing. She rose and returned with Eli’s shoe. She put it on his foot. “Like Cinderella,” she said. She put her face in her hands and cried again.

I knew Gibbons would come looking for us. He’d wonder why The Rock ‘N’ Roller wasn’t rockin’ and rollin’. I said to her, “This is our fault. We killed him.”

Joan shook her head. “I didn’t kill him.”

“None of this would have happened if his foot--”

“Why did you start it up?”

I sighed. “I needed to. For the customers.”

“There were customers?”

“No, but I thought I’d start it up. You know, to interest them.”

Joan nodded. I had one mean, victorious thought that she wasn’t as smart as I was, and then I retreated back into my fear and guilt. “But the lights,” she continued, “the music. They weren’t on when I showed up.”

For a second I thought I was caught. But then I said, “Well, of course not. I’d found him by then, remember?”

“Oh gawd,” she said. “I’m going to be sick again.”

Gibbons appeared, cursing and huffing. The three boys that had given me the bird followed at his heels, asking for free rides. I started to my feet, about to tell Gibbons everything. I was going to admit that I had lied to Joan out of fear, but even if I didn’t lie it was still a horrible, freakish accident. But when Gibbons saw Eli’s body lying there, he raised one large red hand and the boys scattered like birds. I decided to keep my big mouth shut.

Dad told me, Of course it was an accident. You’re a young girl and you don’t know it yet, but Time takes care of these things. In a couple of years, you’ll barely remember what happened.

Everyone else believed it, too: it was an accident. Gibbons even wondered that first night, gazing down at Eli’s body, if I weren’t covering for Joan. During the hearing, she sat regarding me with those slightly-crossed eyes that no longer gave her a look of innocence but rather a look of dumb fright. When Mr. Gunderson approached my parents and I, hand outstretched in forgiveness, Dad told me, Stand up straight and stop

whining. I accepted the hand and then a hug and wondered how Mr. Gunderson could feign such manliness. I killed your son, I wanted to remind him. That is not something you forgive. Mr. Gunderson did not offer the same warm hand or sweaty armpits to Joan.

I went up to Joan afterwards and she stared at me as though through a fog. She smelled of clove cigarettes. “Hey,” she said. “How are you?”

“I’m okay,” I said. “I feel really guilty.” This was the truth.

“Yaw,” Joan said. “I hear that.” She played with her lip, a nervous habit recently acquired, and said, “There’s just some things that don’t make sense. Why didn’t he scream? Why didn’t he call out to you?”

“The music,” I said. “Or maybe, he was unconscious.”

She glowered at me. “That’s what you said during the hearing. Word by word.”

I swallowed a lump in my throat. I told her, “You’re my only friend.” I wanted to tell her the truth. *I just wanted to scare him. That’s all. Now, let’s just be young. I want to keep being naïve. I want us to be friends.*

“I can’t think about this anymore,” she said. “Maybe I’ll see you when school starts.”

On the way home Dad said, It’s a tragedy when such a young man dies before fulfilling his potential.

Joan, herself, switched schools. I only saw her once more. I was interning for my father’s company the summer after my first year of college. Dad and I walked down a street in one of Astorville’s downtown neighborhoods. He was showing me a building

that he might tear down for new condominiums. Joan was there, sitting on the steps of the building, smoking a cigarette. She gazed up at us with those funny, crisscrossed eyes.

“Hi, Joan,” I said. My stomach somersaulted.

“Oh hey,” she drawled. “It’s you.”

She studied me, and then grimaced. “Sunshine and the Predator.”

Dad took me by the elbow and steered me into the building. “That type of woman is always on drugs,” he said.

I shook my arm free of him. I went back outside. Joan had crossed the street, and I could see the curves of her shoulders bobbing away from me, disappearing around a corner. I started following her, but the light changed and the cars accelerated and I was stuck. It was useless. We were all stuck. Eli in the grave. Joan in the past. And then my father, and myself, in mercilessness.

Letter from Left Side of Bed

It's been six weeks since I stopped getting out of bed. Lane left me the bedroom furniture and his fish, Hermann. On his way out he said, "What's the point of you? Why do you even bother?" I thought, he's right, and I went to the store and that was my last outing. Now I call my sister, Jan, if I need anything. Jan called Doctor Vick to complain. He telephoned me and said, "Extreme mental depression," and "Red alert, Candace." I agreed with him. This frustrated him. He said, "Denial first. You must deny your situation, then accept it." I agreed. He said, "What's the point of you?" He waited for a reply. Then he hung up. So much for red alert.

So I stay in bed. I'm not fat. Not yet. And it's not like I'm pooping in plastic pans or anything. I get up to go to the bathroom and more importantly to eat and change the television channel (I ordered a remote, it's being flown in from Denver). I still pay the bills and cut my nails. Last week I washed my hair. And almost everyday I open the window to scream at the man in the orange shirt and huge blue headphones, "Enough already!" He's cutting down every tree on the property behind my apartment. There are dozens of them. He slaughters one a day, starting at nine. I cannot sleep or hear the TV with the roar of his chainsaw.

I've decided to take over Lane's side of the bed. Years ago, we slammed the right side of the bed up against the wall, and I would sleep on that side since I have a fear of

falling, and Lane has a fear of being trapped. Now, the mess of clothes growing from the floor lessens the acrophobia. It's pretty bad. It's like Value Village exploded in here. Lane had always commented on my general messiness, but I had generally not noticed. Now I notice little else, especially when the chainsaw gets revved and I can't concentrate on anything else. Just Hermann and the clothes. And Kleenexes. And some books, although I gave up reading anything other than the *Reader's Digest*. "Drama in Real Life." Last week, I read a story about a cougar that tore some woman's leg off. Much more resourceful than I would have been, the woman used the limb to clobber the cougar about the head until it whelped off into the forest. She won some courage medal, and they were able to sew her leg back on, except now it's permanently purple or something like that. These stories are supposed to be inspiring and life-affirming, which is what Jan says I need right now. So I keep reading them, even though they don't affirm anything for me except for my envy of other people's inspiring life-affirmation. Anyway, there's some *Reader's Digests* on the floor, too. And is that a Starburst wrapper? Yes, I believe it is.

What's worse than the mess, though, is Hermann. Hermann is, or was, a guppy. He is now dead. I stopped feeding him months ago. You know when he died? Two weeks ago! Fish can live forever without food. Once, when the chainsaw was so ripping loud and I couldn't sleep or concentrate on TV, I watched Hermann take a crap, flutter around for a second, and then eat his floaters. That, I guess, is what survival is all about.

But then, I woke up two weeks ago and Hermann was sitting at the very bottom of the tank, not moving except for those steadily heaving gills. A couple more days went

by and the gills stopped heaving. He began to bloat, and heavily. He rose slowly to the surface and eventually turned over. That's how he's been ever since: bloated, upside down. I feel bad for the little guy. He had always been kind of cute, boringly gray except for a tiny, neon-blue strip that stretched between tail and gill. Prettier than a goldfish. Guppies have a more plantlike form, more delicate. Poor Hermann. Lane never bothered to feed him, either. Why is it that when humans are unhappy, they derive the most pleasure out of destruction? When I was the most miserable with Lane, I was the happiest with starving Hermann. I liked walking past his tank and watching his tiny circular mouth pucker at the surface of the water. It wasn't until he was dead that I thought, I should have stopped feeding Lane. Eventually I'll flush Hermann down the toilet, or toss him out the window at Chainsaw Guy. But for now, from the left side of the bed, I watch him float and bloat. Hermann, the icon of my guilt.

In front of the fish tank, there is a photo of Lane and I, vacationing in San Diego. Now, instead of looking straight at the photo, I look at it from the side. This must have been how Lane saw it. You can't really see my head. Not from this angle. It's dark and blurry, like in that silly painting, "The Scream." It could be anybody. But next to my blurriness is his clarity: his chunky white teeth, his globular cheeks, his dark, uneven shocks of hair. He even looks better from this angle. More light. Less me. I have an uglifying affect on people, or so I've been told. Women are supposed to beautify. I do not. I uglify. Interesting what a slight change of perspective evokes. From my side of the bed, you could see us both just fine. It was even a decent shot of me, my hair

doesn't look too thin, just red and frizzy, and my nose isn't too knotty, just large. But from his side, I'm all fucked up.

So things are uglier from the left side of the bed. But it's closer to seeing things from Lane's perspective, which Jan lauds as a good sign. She's bringing Doctor Vick to the house next week, despite both of our protests. But maybe I don't need him. Maybe I'll drop from the window and march over to the man in the orange shirt and huge blue headphones. I'll scream at him to stop cutting down trees. I'm getting sick of the noise, of the tearing sounds. Entire lives being demolished out there. They have no say, like poor Hermann. It's enough to make you cry.

Unidentified Family Object:

A Fable

1-

The brother went to college in Southern California, then in Washington State. The sister went to college in Maine, then in Florida. He became a doctor. She became a poet. They avoided seeing one another. When the brother took a flight to a neurology conference in Miami, the sister flew to Seattle for a reading from her book, "A Dead Heart." At one moment, their planes were on the exact same latitude, only three miles apart. The brother looked out of his window on the right side of his plane and saw the distant blue of another plane. He wondered, How do they keep these planes from crashing into one another? The sister looked out of the window where she sat on the right side of her plane and saw the blurry blue of a similar hurtling object. She thought, Amazing how many planes there are, like so many birds in the sky. This was the closest they had been to one another in years. They did not know it.

2-

They were twins, but disparate: the brother sprinted, the sister shuffled; the brother shouted, the sister mumbled; the brother cried, the sister glared. From the moment of birth, their mother surrendered to their differences. In the cabinets to the right of the fridge were the brother's likes, and in the cabinets to the left of the fridge

were the sister's likes. The brother liked broccoli, squash, potatoes. The sister liked cucumbers, pears, refried beans. They hated what the other liked and liked what the other hated. In the beginning, the mother fed them both potatoes and pears, and the plates always ended up overturned, side-by-side, on the floor. Eventually, she fed them what they liked and avoided what they hated. "To help them grow," she told the father. The father frowned. The mother served him his coffee the way he liked it, with a tablespoon of sugar and a tablespoon of milk. He shook his head from behind the paper, over the rising steam.

During the earliest years, the brother played tricks on the sister, who was thirty minutes younger. When she waddled down the stairs he would give her bottom a kick and send her flying. "You could kill her," scolded the mother, shaking him. The brother grinned. He offered the sister baking chocolate. He put Tabasco sauce in her hamburger helper. Sometimes he played quietly with her until she smiled, and then he would deliver a stinging slap to her cheek. The sister's brow would darken, and though she never cried, she would snap her baby teeth at him in despair. One afternoon she broke a tooth on the round cap of his knee. The father shook his head all the way to the doctor, where the howling brother received three stitches. The sister waited patiently for the tooth to grow back.

At nights, the siblings hardly slept. They lay awake with their eyes fixed on the ceiling. They trembled, nervous to sleep only one room removed from the other.

When they were teenagers, the father made them work in a vegetable garden outside of town. They taught younger children how to plant and weed. Every now and then the brother would rise, squinting, to hurl a radish at his sister. The sister found her brother across the pumpkin patch and loaded her pockets with brussels sprouts. They faced off this way all day, waiting for the boss to go to lunch so they could resume warfare. At night, they returned home exhausted and bruised, dirt under their nails, not speaking a word to one another. The mother asked them, "What happened?" "Nothing," the brother said. The sister said nothing. The father lowered the paper and with displeasure shook his head.

When they were old enough, they drove the father's old truck to work. They loaded into it one morning, the brother behind the wheel, the sister in the passenger seat. She held their lunches on her lap. The brother, shifting into reverse, noticed his sister's face before glancing in the rearview mirror. They had the same coloring, the same pudginess in their lips, wooly brown hair and earthy eyes. Shifting into first, he looked at her legs. Black hairs jutted from her pale flesh. Porcupinesque, he thought.

He could not resist commenting on how ugly she was. He said it very plainly. "You are really very ugly," he said.

The sister's brow darkened. She kept her eyes on the road. A school bus appeared over the hill, coming slowly at them down the opposite lane. It was loaded with senior citizens; the sister could see thinning, silvery heads bouncing within the green

interior. She wondered if she and her brother would still resemble one another in that distant, white age. She reached over, calmly, for the wheel. She jerked it toward the bus.

The brother shrieked. His hands scrambled. The truck lunged back into the correct lane, but the bus lunged, too. The brother, finding no alternative, drove into a ditch. The truck died there, its nose burrowed deep into the earth. The bus, honking, skidded to a stop several feet down the road. The brother cursed. The sister craned her neck and saw the old ladies poking their cotton-ball heads out of the bus's open windows. The honking ceased.

In this moment, the brother wanted the sister dead, and the sister wanted the brother dead. They did not speak to one another again. Some months after the event, they left for college.

4-

The mother decided to have a get-together for Thanksgiving. She wanted both of the twins to be there. She called the brother and invited him and told him the sister would not be there. She called the sister and invited her and told her the brother would not be there. Both acquiesced, and the mother hung up and told the father the good news. He harrumphed into his cigar and unfolded the sports page. He found, to his disappointment, that his team had lost.

Thanksgiving day, the sister entered through the back door and the brother through the front. They met one another in the kitchen. The mother yipped and clapped her hands between them. She executed tiny, joyful jumps. She kissed each of

them—they were the exact same height—and drew their heads to her breast, so that their widows' peaks rested momentarily against one another. The twins glanced at one another with anger, but did not ask their mother any rude questions.

The mother set a lovely table. Stalks of wheat rose from long crystal vases. Candles glittered from a dangling chandelier. From the head of the table, the father carved the turkey without looking at any of them. The brother and sister did not speak to one another. The father refused to speak to either of them until they spoke to one another. The mother, overwhelmed, remained silent. She scurried about, passing dishes, retrieving wine from the kitchen, snuffing the candles when they began to sputter. Only once did she break the silence, saying tremulously, "I wanted tonight to be special." In reply, the husband shrugged. The brother and sister glanced cursorily at one another and scraped their forks across their plates. The brother ate turkey, no beans. The sister ate beans, no turkey. The mother, caged in silence, turned to the window. She saw lights glittering on and off near the dark outline of the mountains.

After dinner, the father went to read. The mother polished the silver and wiped down the table. The sister shuffled off to her room and the brother took the stairs two at a time up to his room. Both of them left their bags packed. They would leave first thing in the morning.

A few years later, the mother died. The brother and sister flew from opposite ends of the country to attend the funeral with their father. They all declined to speak at the ceremony.

The sister looked into the open casket and studied her mother's face. The familiar lines of anxiety were still there. "She should look peaceful now," muttered the sister, "but she does not." The brother looked also. He felt mortified that his mother was being buried in pink. "Pink of all things," he said to a guest behind him, "I hate that color." The guest, taken aback, replied, "But it was her favorite color." The brother nodded at the guest and felt embarrassed. He was glad that he did not recognize him.

On a bench in the back of the church, the father remained seated, trembling. He sighed with what sounded like relief when they were ushered into a new room for the reception.

At the reception, the brother glanced furtively at his sister and thought, Our parents are the only things we have in common: a father who lives yet, a mother now dead. Also at the reception, the sister, standing beside windowpanes streaked with rain, carefully watched her brother. The only thing we have in common, she thought, is our mutual hatred. Beside the door, the father trembled in his wool jacket. He looked owlishly from child to child, his mouth slightly parted. None of them had spoken to one another for years. Now, they stood in different corners of the room, forgotten by the other members of the funeral party. They formed a sagging triangle. Punch stained their lips a bright red. The punch, too, was something they had in common.

It was a lovely day, the day after the funeral, and the brother and sister went for some exercise. They did not go together. The brother jogged off in one direction and the sister walked off in another, but eventually they doubled back through a cornfield and wound up colliding into one another. They both stopped, the brother panting, the sister breathing easily. They regarded one another with the same large mouth and dark eyes. Familiar in their speechlessness, they both turned toward the house. They could see their father watching them from the porch. His shoulders looked very small.

Overhead, in the clear sky, lights glittered. The lights appeared to be approaching. The father pointed. It was a UFO. The sister thought, it looks like a peacock, the colors and the fins. The brother thought, I saw one like that before, in a film, hovering like a giant donut. A voice boomed down to them, saying, "One of you will stay on earth and one of you will come with us, to be dissected for the benefit of science." The brother and sister looked at one another, startled. "You may choose," the voice boomed.

The brother wrinkled his nose. He thought about his mother in the casket. How strange it was that he had not known her favorite color. She had always worn pink to dinner, he remembered, and how awkward she had always been at those dinners, how frustrated with her family. She had always wished that he and his sister would simply be kind to one another. The brother remembered all of this and felt embarrassed. He looked at his sister, who looked so much like him. He decided to let her live.

The sister furrowed her brow. She remembered when she had tried to kill them both. She remembered the silvery heads of the old women. She remembered the way the truck's front wheels had kept spinning, though there was no earth beneath. She remembered how she had looked reflected in her brother's identical eyes, her eyes within his eyes within hers. His eyes had been full of hate, and so had her own. She had looked terrifying in those eyes, her forehead too wide and her chin too small, like in a carnival mirror. How sad it is, she thought, to be magnified by such hate. Ashamed, the sister would let him live.

But, alas, the brother and sister had not spoken for so many years to one another or even within earshot of one another that they found themselves pitifully tongue-tied. The end result was that the brother pointed at the sister and the sister pointed at the brother. The UFO, confused, decided to take both the brother and the sister with them, to be dissected for the benefit of science. They beamed them up into the spaceship and flew soundlessly away. The cornfield disclosed no proof that spaceship, brother, or sister had ever existed.

The father, watching in disbelief from the porch, shook his head. He wandered back inside to pen answers into the crossword puzzle. The house, as always, was perfectly quiet.

Cupids

Mick was in the third row when the soprano was shot. He lowered his opera glasses. He had been staring at her, hardly breathing, as she gushed out something lamentable in Italian. Mick translated: "I love you, Mick Okerson, I love you I love you." Sometimes he translated, "See me after the show. Take me with you," before returning to the familiar words, "I love you Mick Okerson, I love you, I love you I love you." He had fallen for her a week ago while on a dismally awkward blind date, and had attended every showing since. And now she, the soprano, the woman he was certain was his one true love, writhed on the floor with what appeared to be a hunting arrow affixed to her breast.

Straightening and reapplying the binoculars, Mick wondered if he had missed something in the previous shows. If there had been an arrow before, he would have definitely noted it, for it would have symbolically juxtaposed the arrow shot through his own heart when he had first, through the small circles of his date's tiny brass binoculars, laid eyes upon her. Oh, how that pale breast had sank and risen, how that small waist had, with a sash wrapped around it not once but twice, twisted and grown taut with her acting and singing, how that hair (when his date, while sobbing in the cab, had said it was a wig, the stars in Mick's eyes had dimmed only briefly in protest), oh that hair, how it had bounced on her shoulders as she floated across the stage, loose in some scenes, the passionate ones, and in the others, coiled atop her head like a great black python. She

was everything his blind date wasn't: graceful, long-fingered, poetical, sonorous. And he knew, if he ever spoke to her, the soprano, she would understand him perfectly, that they could communicate by mere glances and he wouldn't have to feel ashamed ever again. She would sing to him with that gorgeous round mouth. That mouth could fit anything into it, Mick thought. Twelve marbles, a coffee mug, a baby, a house, all of my engorged love.

But Mick remembered something about how the soprano was supposed to die of heartsickness or consumption or both, and not of an arrow in the heart. "Murder!" someone screamed, shattering the silence. As the shocked audience began to emote, bodies and voices rising in a panic, women ripping their fine dresses as they attempted to clamber over the chairs and the heads of others, men trying to sound calm but instead sounding clueless, vacuous, the members of the symphony dropping their instruments with a clatter, the dissonance growing, roaring, Mick found himself rising calmly, knowing that his love needed him. He wrestled his way slowly but deliberately through the crowd. There was only one woman he could cater to now. Her voice warbled in his head. "Save me Mick Okerson, save me save me save me." That gorgeous volcanic mouth.

He reached her. Behind her, there was grappling: they had caught the deliverer of the arrow. He appeared to be a stagehand, he wore overalls spattered with paint, a red kerchief wrapped around his head. His brow was dark and heavy and his hands still grasped the bow. Mick watched as he was tackled and dragged away. Then he dropped to the soprano, whose eyes were closed and whose mouth, heavily painted, panted with

pain. For a moment he was taken aback by the amount of make-up she wore, but then believed that underneath it all, she might be even lovelier.

“It’s alright,” he said, taking her hand. Her eyes fluttered open. The arrow, it appeared, was not lodged in her chest, as Mick had hoped, but in fact in her shoulder. This ruined the juxtaposition.

“Do you want me to pull it out?” he asked.

“You a doctor?” she said, grimacing.

“Well, not exactly...”

“Sorry?”

“No, I’m not a doctor.” Mick trembled now, as she trembled.

“Well then?” He was surprised to find an angry snarl misaligning her mouth.

“No, don’t be upset with me,” Mick said. “I, er, I love you.”

He tried to take her into his arms but succeeded only in driving the arrow further into her shoulder. “Oh my God!” he cried, “I’m such a klutz! I’m so so sorry!”

“Get the fuck away from me,” she growled, and proceeded to shut her eyes and emit a long and horribly unattractive groan.

Then hands were lifting Mick, shoving him away. He left the theatre, completely disillusioned, blood soaking his rented tuxedo, now seven days late. He wondered, briefly, if she would die. No, it was only a wounded shoulder. The urge overtook him to race back inside, withdraw the arrow, and then thrust it with one resolute stab into her heart. He tried to reenter but the opera doors were locked. The police arrived. They unrolled acres of yellow tape. They shouted for him to move.

“Come on, asshole,” a policewoman said, “one freak’s good enough for tonight.”

Mick dropped his hands into his trouser pockets and walked away. He thought about the policewoman. Curly bobbed hair, sarcastic lips. When she had spoken to him, she had been rather cute. He should try to talk to her again. He circled the block.

The policewoman noticed his approach and frowned. She lifted her walkie-talkie to her lips. Mick smiled and waved. The walkie-talkie squelched back at her.

“Sir,” she said, “I asked you to leave.”

Mick lifted his palms to her in mock surrender. “I’m a good guy,” he said. “I just wanted to speak with you.”

The policewoman waved him away. “There’s been a shooting.”

Mick loved this matter-of-factness. Such naïveté and honesty, he rhapsodized, such pure, brawling spirit.

“I know,” he said, eyes twinkling, “I saw it.”

She laughed, a lovely trilling sound that made Mick shiver.

“Adios, buddy. I’ve had enough freaks in my time.”

Mick was suddenly desperate to convince her. He lunged, grasping her stubborn shoulders. “I’m not a freak,” he said, and with earnestness shook her. “I’m not a freak.” Another police officer fell on him from behind. Mick squirmed on his belly. Someone planted a knee into his spine. People gathered at the scene. “I’m *lonely*,” he wept. They shackled his wrists. Through the wreckage of arms and legs, he tried to find her.