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The University of Southern Mississippi

THE HOLINESS AND OTHER STORIES

by

Leslie Michelle Nichols

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2010

ABSTRACT

THE HOLINESS AND OTHER STORIES

by Leslie Michelle Nichols

August 2010

This dissertation is a collection of an introductory essay and ten original short stories written and submitted to fiction workshops in the PhD program at The University of Southern Mississippi's Center for Writers.

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2010

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But most of all, this dissertation could not have been written without the love and support of a special group of people: my mother, who continues to influence me from beyond the grave, my father, whose strength and love are limitless, my Aunt Laura who probably disapproves of much of my behavior but who still loves me, my friends April, Beth, Brandee, Courtney, Ginger, and Maura, who despite my best efforts, refuse to be shaken loose.

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“Descension” appeared in *Product* and is forthcoming in *Bitter Oleander*.

“Gums” is forthcoming in *Pank*.

“The Leif Year,” and “Wild Ballerinas” appeared in *Product*.

“The Desk Clerk and the Tattooed Maiden” is forthcoming in *Zahir*.

“The Lament of the Fire Baton Twirler” appeared in *Squid Quarterly*.

“Pumpjack” appeared in *Juked*.

“The Resurrection of Hens” appeared in *Thirty-First Bird Review*.

“Spirit Run” appeared in *Babel Fruit*.

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INTRODUCTION

In Andrew Wyeth's 1979 painting "Farm Road," the artist's subject, Helga Testorf, faces away from the viewer, gazing instead at a stark, skewed horizon broken by a clump of trees. Though conventional gothic symbolism is not present in the image, the work is frightening nonetheless. The dark landscape slashes diagonally across the canvas, and Testorf's long hair is braided into two severe plaits. Only a few loose strands catch the sunlight against a dark jacket that refuses to reveal flesh or vulnerability. Yet the intensity of the painting is mitigated by a thick purse strap slung over Helga's left shoulder, a hint revealing her comfort in the environment. She does not flee this scene, nor is she intimidated by it. Instead she regards this pastoral hostility with a measured look as she walks to a store where farm road and blacktop meet. The rural gothicism is merely the backdrop of an errand.

The conflicting elements of Wyeth's work—the sinister and the routine—have frightened me since my childhood, particularly since 1986, the year the Helga paintings were revealed to the public. I was nine years old, watching "Good Morning, America" as I was getting ready for school. My mother was braiding my own long, blonde hair with a comb and a cup of water, pulling so hard that the skin at my eyes was stretched taut. And then "Farm Road" appeared on the screen. I wasn't scared because of the forced perspective or the darkness; rather I recognized home in the painting. The stark farm road, the meager trees, the big sky were all familiar images, and as I realized, potentially threatening. It was a confusing moment as I simultaneously registered fear and comfort; however, I wouldn't call the instant an epiphany. It wasn't the deciding factor in my decision to write, nor did it change any of my perceptions. In fact, I promptly forgot the

incident until I found a thumbnail of “Farm Road” recently and realized that my approach to fiction is an attempt to capture in prose what Wyeth so beautifully renders in tempera: a lyrical darkness that soothes as much as it terrorizes.

In the dark landscape of my West Texas childhood, oil pumpjacks broke the flat horizon, and at least once every spring, the sky and ground met in tornados so violent that oil tanks were thrown across fields and into family yards. In the fall, northers swept across the plains, pushing trees parallel to the ground and forcing anything not tied down through windows and doors. Coyotes left evidence of their nightly foraging outside the house light perimeter, and sometimes our dogs claimed bits of coyote fur or the scraps of other invaders for their outdoor hutches. In this environment, women like my mother handled firearms with confidence and accuracy. They didn’t suffer crying or fools, and they said as much without provocation. They kept their houses and kitchens well, but they could easily drive any piece of heavy equipment or kill a snake by popping it like a whip. They encouraged their sons *and* daughters to take up sports—basketball in particular—and they decorated households and wardrobes around athletic teams. But they had no absolutely no tolerance for illicit sexuality, and they monitored their daughters’ chastity with the force of the region’s weather. When I saw the body of a raped and murdered nine-year old girl dumped in a ditch a mile from our house, my mother taught me how to use the .38 she carried in her Good Times van. I was also nine, and for a while until I was too big to lift onto the kitchen counter anymore, Mother would ask me vaguely about the boys and men I had encountered during the day. She braided my hair every morning and warned me against boys tangling or pulling strands of it free of my scalp. She was concerned with knots forming in my hair that couldn’t be

unraveled, and though her concern was practical rather than Calvinistic, I think of women's hair as intrinsically linked to feminine sexuality—the forbidden kind that mothers warn against.

It was also in this landscape that my father was attacked by one of the family dogs while he was trying to administer a rabies shot. The index finger on his left hand was almost completely severed, and I was so frightened by the experience that I had to ride in his lap on the way to the hospital while my mother drove us the thirty miles into town. My father's hand was covered in gauze and a clean handkerchief, and while I was scared of the glimpse I had of the finger—puckered flesh and a square nail black from the blood beneath it—I was more upset by the idea of the thing, the dismembered finger as a separate entity to itself. My father held me in his lap and patted my back with the heel of the wounded hand until we arrived at the emergency room. He was careful not to touch me with the portion of the handkerchief that shrouded the injury, and he told me *everything was going to be ok because it was just a little ol' finger*. Everything was ok. The finger remained with its fellows—thick fingers all scarred from previous farming accidents—and became the butt of numerous family jokes directed at my father's capacity to weather damage well. By the time he was fifty, he was a collection of scars: hare lip correction, numerous inner ear reconstructions, and stomach surgery to deal with an ulcer, the most obvious indication that the hardness of the landscape was indeed getting to him. But my father made light of the marks he bore. As he put on weight after the stomach surgery, he made the nine-inch scar dance by jiggling his belly fat. When the pressure gauge of an anyhydrous ammonia tank broke and rendered third-degree burns on his chest and arms, he joked that he would never need a tattoo.

Just as my father comforted me during his accident, my mother softened particularly horrific moments. When my mother and I saw the body of our former postal carrier, laid out for visitation by an inept mortician who made up for his inability to cover face lacerations with an overabundance of bright blue eye shadow, Mother distracted me by pointing out how her toes, swathed in the thick nylon stocking seams of the early 1980s, reached over the edge of her sandals and flopped when she walked. She asked me to especially consider how inadequately her shoes supported her big toes. She also reduced the distress I experienced when viewing my distorted image in a mirror. At a formative time in my childhood, my reflection was defined by a large gash in my forehead from my brow bone to my hairline. While jumping on an old mattress set out for the family's watch dogs, a pack of large German Shepherds, I lost my balance and hit my head on the side of the house. The wound required stitches, and though I remember brief moments of the hospital, the most intact memory of that period is my mirror image. This was the first time I was able to perform this particular task on my own, without being placed on a stool or chair. I lifted up on tiptoe to gaze at myself over the dressing table and saw the very pink skin held together with what in mind remains as thick black thread of yarn-like quality. Of course, it was standard medical material, but the sight of it on my forehead entwined with my flesh, was upsetting. I remember hearing a woman friend of my mother's remark that at least I wouldn't learn vanity. My mother responded that the scar made me prettier and *certainly* more interesting.

My childhood landscape combined with my parents' endeavors to lessen the unsympathetic environment is crucial to my fiction. It is why I look, at least now, to my native land when I write. It is my attempt to explore the beauty in the horrific—

physically and emotionally— and perhaps it is my way of reconciling with trauma. Despite my parents’ best efforts, ugliness seeped in. My family, considered too educated for the region and tainted somehow by my maternal grandmother’s bouts with epilepsy, were considered outsiders. I was bullied by several older boys and girls throughout school, a twelve-year stint in a rural community; and though my parents knew about some of the abuse, I did not admit the whole of it for shame. My parents advocated toughness, Mother especially, and I was encouraged to fight. But I wasn’t wired that way. I was a soft thing. I preferred dresses and dolls and silence to conflict, and I was too worried about disappointing my mother should I confess the reality of my situation. I did my best to ignore my peers by creating an incandescent inner life, and undoubtedly my mother and father made the home sphere safe. There were always games, books, art, and activities. I grew up riding cotton strippers, and taking harvests to gins, grain elevators, and even wineries while my parents told stories. Mother’s tales—completely original to her imagination—were about clever animals who outsmarted predators; Daddy’s were about his childhood spent below the poverty line when he thwarted “Grandma,” pronounced *grandmaul* in his thick West Texas accent, his volatile paternal grandmother. Thematically both parents confronted meanness and formidable adversarial figures in the stories they chose to tell, figures that used deceit and intimidation to accomplish their goals. But these stories, at least as far as the adult me can discern now, were focused on survival. For my parents, survival did not entail submitting to the bully even as a minion. In their opinions, sacrificing identity was a far worse offense than taking a beating; self surrender was never an option. One’s body might be disfigured—like that of the young boy in my father’s stories—a hare lip, cleft palette, and speech

impediment that encouraged ridicule—but the spirit—the part of the boy who climbed the only tree on the horizon to escape Grandma’s derision—must remain intact.

The experiences of my past have shown that ugliness manifests like dirt in a sandstorm. No matter how many wet towels one forces into the crevices around doors and windows, the grit always gets into the house. The goal then is to make what one can out of it. In this way, my fiction possesses an affinity with writers Flannery O’Connor and Eudora Welty, two artists who align landscape with trauma. For this reason—the link to regional setting—both women are categorized as “Southern,” a term that I don’t apply to my work. Technically, my regional alliances are more Southwestern; and though I somewhat rely on what critics, and even O’Connor, term “the Southern grotesque” I find the term too limiting. My work explores the darkness of a physical landscape that is both Southern and Western, traditional and unconventional, and in many ways, more unpredictable. Racial anxiety does not bear as much of a burden, but the weather and land does. My childhood terrain produces much more cotton than most regions in the south, but crops are threatened by more extreme weather, USDA regulations, and the incessant search for oil. In addition to these tangible differences in aesthetic landscape, I diverge from O’Connor and Welty in my journeys into emotional, psychic, and sexual territories where need and loyalty are pitted against one another. I position vulnerability at the core of my fiction; rather than religion or corruption. It is helpful, however, to understand the influences that O’Connor and Welty exercise on my fiction.

In *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* (2000), Patricia Yaeger terms experiences like I have described as “regional trauma,” a

stylistic unrest particular to the work of southern women writers. She explains, “place is never simply „place. in southern writing, but always a site where trauma has been absorbed into the landscape” (13). For Yaeger, the relationship between women writers and their native land is a dysfunctional one, marked by social anxiety, family legacy, dangerous agricultural labor, limitation, and loss (12). She argues that the southern penchant for the grotesque is an attempt to render the horrors of the Southern system in real time, in a way that the reader cannot ignore—as a drama performed on the human body. As a result, the monsters in the fiction of O’Connor and Welty limp and posture across the page, beseeching the audience to pay careful attention to the sources of their disfigurement. The scarred body then testifies to the trauma without actually giving a voice to suffering; the damaged corporeal presence simply literalizes distress.

Strangely, O’Connor, considered by many critics to be the high-priestess of the southern grotesque body, cautioned against the use of it in the fiction of other writers. In “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction” (1961), she remarked, “Of course, I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic” (40). For a writer who employs the grotesque so seamlessly into her prose, the warning against it is surprising and important. O’Connor was aware that her stylistic tics were attributed to her Southernness rather than her aesthetic. In consequence, her work has not been studied too far outside the regional context. The irony of the situation is that the creation of a trope that embodies limitation also relegates the text to a limited variety of critical responses. Yaeger contributes to this idea by addressing other view points. She discusses Mab Segres’ argument that the grotesque severs individual consciousness and

“persuades us that it is reality” in the south (qtd. in Yaeger 25). Additionally Segrest views the attraction to the grotesque as a neurotic urge, a desire to self-punish. In “Southern Women Writing: Toward a Literature of Wholeness,” Segrest clarifies her opinion of the grotesque: “It fastens the creative imagination on images of deformity and despair causing divisions within the self so that the individual is cut off from her deepest parts, from those oracles and visions that could tell of a different reality, of the possibility of wholeness” (25). For Segrest, the grotesque refuses change and healing and depicts characters wallowing in their own melancholy. This point is interesting when considered beside my descriptions of my own work.

I admit to a conscious use of grotesque elements in my fiction, but my first stories presented bizarre elements before I discovered O’Connor and Welty. These earliest attempts at prose depicted disfigured characters, most often bearing physical scars. By the time I was fifteen, when a thyroid surgery left a very distinctive blemish across my throat, I associated disfigurement with my appearance. Every time I looked in a mirror, the scar was there; and in the year after the surgery, people looked to my throat first before they looked into my face. So while this particular trope wasn’t necessarily influenced by O’Connor or Welty, it was later nurtured along by a relationship to similar landscape and society. Of course, I do not pretend to a unique brand of the grotesque—or to a unique fiction for that matter—but I feel that my predilection toward a particular way of writing was established very early in my evolution as a writer. When I discovered O’Connor for the first time in the short story “Good Country People,” I felt validated by the strange collision course her grotesques followed, right into each other in a confrontation over a prosthetic leg. O’Connor wrote,

Very gently he began to roll the slack leg up. The artificial limb, in a white sock and brown flat shoe, was bound in a heavy material like canvas and ended in an ugly jointure where it was attached to the stump.

The boy's face and his voice were entirely reverent as he uncovered it and said, "Now show me how to take it off and on. (192)

In this scene, a young academic who calls herself Hulga rendezvous with a young Bible salesman in her family's barn. Hulga, a Ph.D. unable to secure a teaching position, lives with her mother and finds pleasure in ridiculing and exploiting rural people, people she assumes to be simple. The young man, however, is far from simplicity. He is a con artist who tricks his victims out of prized possessions. He makes an easy meal of Hulga, stealing her prosthesis and leaving her incapacitated.

When I read this section of "Good Country People" (1955), I felt I had been punched. Here was a writer—a woman—who took a risk in exploring the weird, uncanny, and unsavory elements in so comedic a way and who wasn't afraid to go there. I won't say I was in familiar territory since O'Connor's place is all her own, but I felt a definite kinship. She wasn't hesitant to reveal the things that I had censored in my writing—the personal and the very ugly. She got her hands dirty, and she wasn't above showing them to her reader. I am aware that many writers have shared this reaction to O'Connor's work, but the moment for me was significant because it pointed me to other writers, writers who took risks like Marquez, Kafka, Woolf, Joyce, Cather, Dinesen, Porter, Robinson, and especially Welty. The characters in Welty's fiction feel like people I know. They react in the same ways, say bad things, and create more damage than they are willing to admit. In the story, "The Wide Net," William Wallace believes his wife

has committed suicide, so he arranges to drag the river. He doesn't find his wife, who has tricked him, but when he dives into the water, he finds everything else—including community fellowship. It is only during a period of tragedy that his neighbors show him real respect or affection, emotions that cease when his wife's deception is discovered. For me, Welty's use of the situational grotesque destabilizes the story's social structure to find what is beautiful and raw in absolute emotion. William's grief is enhanced by his exploration of the river and the revelation of uncanny treasure, and while Welty challenges the limits of reality, her creation of fantasy strengthens the protagonist's changed perception of his marriage. Compared to the magical objects of the river, his relationship no longer reflects the brilliance he had once imagined.

Though this ability to find splendor in trauma was encouraged by my parents, it was Welty who showed me how to stretch reality and play with ugliness. I found in her work a method for treating traumatic experience. In *One Writer's Beginnings* (1983), Welty delves into the core of her creativity and finds parental love and duty as key to dealing with early pain. In many ways, this autobiographical work is Welty's way of working through illness and loss. She explores her childhood and the deaths of both parents, and she positions familial relationships as the medium through which she was initially exposed to craft. Welty's parents encouraged writing and storytelling as important family activities. They also endowed her with the means—professionally and financially—to establish a literary lifestyle. As a teenager, she was allowed to take the master bedroom in the family's home, a room overlooking a park and garden, and she inherited the house when both parents died. *One Writer's Beginnings* reveals the importance of the family domain as instrumental in the formation of a writer and as a

means to make order out of chaotic experience. Welty cannot extricate her discussion of craft from talk of her family. Their stories and their influence are intimately connected to her creative process, and in many ways the autobiography serves to canonize them. When her parents died, Welty was traumatized, and understandably so; their devotion to her was tangible. Like the Weltys, my parents allocated space and story time in my upbringing, and though I wandered into a disastrous marriage and the professional world as a young adult, their belief in my writing as instrumental to my survival has never been shaken. My mother's sudden, unexpected death five years ago made this devotion and her confidence in my abilities more obvious. Even though she told me these things as often as she could, discovering her own writing with these same messages somehow drove the point home more solidly. She is the reason that I returned to writing and to school, and by consequence the reason why I explore darkness in my fiction. It is the way of working through past traumas in a manner more securely than autobiography, a form that while cathartic, strips the writer bare. For this reason, I don't want to write autobiography to reveal all my secrets or step into a spotlight. The wounds are still too painful to set out on display. Welty's decision to offer non-fiction was a courageous step, and one that she made after her most prolific years working out chaos as a fiction writer. She had time and distance to consider past hurts and to surround them by a softened perspective.

I am not there yet. Fiction allows me to keep some tricks up my sleeve, lets me play and revise and conjure different aspects of the past so that, by the time a story is done, only a grain of the actual remains. I can hide in plain sight; a concept that is not original but one that is comforting nonetheless. My focus on ugliness then is a method

for working through the past and through craft. It is a stage in my development as a writer and as a functional adult, and one that I feel has already evolved. In considering my story “Gums,” a story obviously rife with scars and grotesque people and situations, the darkness is loud. My characters are not nice people; they wound each other physically and emotionally because they are driven by their desires. Melissa must be adored, Gums realizes identity only by protecting her sister, and the narrator wants to be noticed and considered in the same way that people observe both Melissa and Gums. She wants to be different, a favor Gums grants in disfiguring her and allowing her to enjoy an audience. All the elements of my developing aesthetic are present: scars, hostility, violence, sexuality, the rural community, and survival. In “The Holiness” story written during the middle of my doctoral candidacy, need and ugliness play significant roles, but they aren’t as obvious. Angelina needs to return money her mother conned from her congregation, but she is thwarted by the devoutness of the followers and a woman who has risen to command the church. Despite her guilt, Angelina plays along with the rival, yet she refuses to disclose the reason why her mother was never caught: a wounded man rejected her help. The new preacher’s failure to recognize the limits of the con game result in arrest and Angelina’s partial redemption.

In my most recent story, “Cube Land,” the disfigurement factor is reduced even more. The landscape is not a rural environment, but an office building with its own bizarre components—“misshapen cubicles” and frightening art. All the employees in Cube Land have acclimated to their environment, a fact that disturbs the protagonist Alice. Alice, like most rural transplants, has imagined that urban life is vastly different from the ugliness to which she is accustomed. She wants to don the emblems of

sophistication and the urban world, but she finds herself enmeshed in an environment more peculiar than her rural gothic. Creepy people with emotional scars and penchants for weird sex slink into her consciousness, attempting to invade her private life and make her one of their own. Though Alice escapes, she lands in a situation that has even more potential for ugliness and more opportunity for personal damage. By considering “Cube Land” last, my purpose is to show how I feel my use of the grotesque has changed in the last three years. In this particular story, I try to tone down the obvious gothic symbolism and darkness without abandoning it altogether. The grotesque is a part of my craft, part of where I came from, and it will appear in varied forms throughout my work. For Alice in “Cube Land,” the encounter with a piece of avant-garde art outside her boss’s office is her decisive moment. She cannot find any beauty in the grotesque object, at least beauty that she understands, and she leaves her job to work in a Dollar Store. This story also reflects my efforts at branching out from my native setting. Though I do draw on autobiographical material—the rural innocent in an urban center—I aim to show that the grotesque does not have to be relegated to regional fiction. In my opinion it is an effective tool for establishing a relationship with a reader, even if the relationship is based on disgust. I do not expect my reader to feel the same comfort I do in witnessing the uncanny or bizarre, but I do want the beauty of it to be noticed.

I know that my relationship with my landscape—on various literal and metaphorical levels—is an ambivalent one. Though I my parents strove to supply a loving, encouraging home, much of my childhood was marred by the frightening territory outside of the family house. And while the scars I bear have formed me as a writer, I do worry that some of them may never heal—a situation that is in many ways ideal for an

artist but disastrous for psychological well-being. In many ways, I am still a terrorized child who does not know how to react to the ugliness of this world, and who at this stage, may never learn how to effectively cope with it. I can, however, take comfort in the fact that as I sieve through my past and use it for material, I can create some sort of loveliness that despite its peculiar nature, is lovely all the same. I also understand that my abilities, as revealed in the following work, are still under development, and will continue to evolve. The stories do not show the mastery I would like, but I feel that they do establish a foundation for later work, work I hope would serve as a complement to Wyeth's sinister and gorgeous "Farm Road."

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Descension

Because the only thing she inherited from her mother was motion sickness and because the white trash woman across the aisle had lucked into a couple of plane tickets to Jackson so she could bring the wiggling child on a trip and sit him away from her while she closed her eyes and bumped her neck against the head rest, Tasha pinched the boy on the shoulder and said “Do you see that?”

The child, with teeth growing like a shark’s smile had tried to look out the window where she tapped her finger, but he was too small, his feet not even touching the floor. He blinked at his seat belt as he ran a scabbed finger over the buckle, and then he looked back at her.

“Go ahead, unbuckle your seatbelt,” Tasha said. She didn’t smile, and she knew she looked gray, mouth puckered from holding back the nausea. The boy giggled with the sudden freedom, pulled his knees beneath him and leaned over, his torso balanced across her lap.

At first, he didn’t see anything. Tasha watched his eyes scan the cloud horizon where a single beam of sunlight jutted upward. He looked at his own eye reflected in the glass as his lashes brushed the window, and then his breath clouded his vision and he turned to her with a frown.

“It’s just clouds,” he said.

Tasha grasped the boy by the crown of his head, and forced him back to the window. “Look right under us,” she said, and he inhaled so that he started to cough.

The sunlight had created a reflection off one of the engines that was an unbroken prism ring. The colors were almost neon they were so bright, and the circle’s center

flashed red every other second. It looked like a target, a bull's eye that blinked and shifted and wavered as cloud towers pierced its center and its boundary. When the cloud cover thinned and shone in iridescent white, the shadows of gas fumes radiated from the rainbow edge and muddied the glimmer. The child flattened his nose against the glass.

“What is it?” he said.

“It’s a door to a different place.”

The boy jerked his head to look at her. He was sitting in her lap now, tennis shoes folded under his knees. He placed his hands on each of her shoulders and glared into her face as most children do when they think they are being ridiculed but not really sure.

She scowled back at him. “If we pass through it when we land, it’ll change everything. The world will be different, and we’ll be the only ones who know it because we’re the only ones who see it.”

“What do you mean?” he whispered, his nose touching hers.

“Your mother won’t be your mother. Sure, she’ll look like your mother, but she won’t be. Your friends, too, and your father. Even your house. It’ll look the same, but it will be different.”

“Different?”

“Evil,” Tasha said. She said this with a glance at the other adults who slept, the window shades pulled down.

“How do you know?” The boy was breathless now. His eyes were wide and his hands had grown sweaty.

“Because I’ve already lived through it once,” she said. “It’s already happened to me.”

He uttered a little cry and farted quietly into her skirt as he looked back to the eye. It was growing nearer as the plane descended.

“Can we stop it?”

Tasha shook her head, and the boy’s eyes filled with tears. The seatbelt sign came back on, and the stewardess told the boy to return to his seat. He lingered, placing his head on Tasha’s shoulder before she partially stood and dumped him back into the chair. The pilot’s voice cautioned turbulence, and the plane dipped suddenly so that it coasted just above the clouds. They were so close that the child could see doorway without stretching. It was larger now, seemingly as large as the plane, and the flashing light cast the boy’s face in red. They hovered above the clouds, inching down every second, and then the craft plunged suddenly and broke the cloud tops.

“Here we go,” Tasha said. The wings tipped up and down and the light vanished from the window. They dropped and rose, shimmying so that one of the overhead compartments popped open and a backpack fell into the aisle. This woke the white trash mother, and she turned back to regard the child. He screamed when a peal of thunder gripped the plane, and she put her finger to her lips and motioned for him to be quiet. But his screams increased in intensity. Tasha saw that he was staring at his mother’s face without blinking. Long shadows had formed beneath her eyes and nose, and as she grimaced, she looked frenzied and demonic. The other passengers turned to stare as well, the darkness painting their faces in similar ways. Some people whispered, and the sounds of their voices, shaking from the motion buzzed and sounded electric.

“Don’t let them know that you know,” Tasha said. She patted the boy’s back, and he stopped screaming as they reemerged into half-light, the ground visible and

patchworked beneath them. She motioned to the earth, and he watched it, his pupils dilating, growing large and black and full. One tooth jutted from behind his lips, sharp and yellow, and he took in the trees, the buildings, and the small cars that were gray and wet from the rain. A hawk ascended and floated on the wind close enough so that Tasha could see its head feathers expand into a crown.

“That’s it,” Tasha said, and the boy followed her fingers as she pointed to the new world. “That’s it.”

Gums

Gums moved to town with her gorgeous mother and sister to live with a grandmother, an unattractive woman of Gums' type though with prominent features all her own. The old woman's problem was the opposite of Gums'—she had large yellowed teeth that bucked over her lips even when she wasn't smiling—but she was decent and allowed her daughter's family to encroach on her widowhood so that she relocated to the garage apartment with her old divan. The comely creatures of the family filled the house with cheap perfume and the jewelry they bragged had been given as gifts by very old men. And perhaps some of them had been affectionate tokens, but I had seen Melissa, the pretty sister, palm a marcosite broach at the mall and drop it into her purse.

It wasn't Melissa the sales clerks were watching, though. It was Gums with her gums shining pink over the scant ridge of her teeth as she looked at dollar jewelry. Few people stared at Melissa after they labeled her beautiful. She had robin egg eyes and black hair that hung to her waist, but onlookers were transfixed by Gum's mouth and the way she couldn't quite close her lips. She wasn't even aware of the attention, and she walked always slightly behind Melissa at school, content to gaze at the back of her sister's shining head.

She was proud of her pretty relative, so proud that she tore my cheek with the jagged lid of a snack pack can when I accused her sister of theft. My watch had gone missing during track practice, and I saw it a day later on Melissa's lovely wrist. Had I confronted Melissa directly, I might have had a chance. Gums would have pulled me aside and given me back the watch, but I told the principal, and Melissa was pulled out of class without her sister. So Gums followed me into the girls' restroom and slashed me

easily with a flick of her wrist. We stared at each other in the mirror, Gums showing her gums, and I said, “People call you Gums, you know.”

“Really?” she said. She looked at herself, and her nose reddened as if she were about to cry. “Do they really?”

I held my face with one hand. The cut was deep, and I could feel a flap of broken flesh against my palm. It didn’t hurt, though blood squeezed between my fingers.

“Yeah, they do.”

“That’s so mean,” she said. Her nose started to run, and she let it. “Do you know who started it—started calling me that?”

I shrugged, and Gums pressed her face against the mirror so that she fogged the glass. She explored her gums with her index finger, measuring the distance between her jaws and teeth. When she tilted her head back to gauge the length, she cried.

We stood there until the bell rang. By that time, my face had stopped bleeding, but it had dried in my hair and down my neck. The first group of girls to enter the bathroom ignored us and went into the toilets. I listened to them pee and flush and wash. They didn’t look up until a teacher walked in and grabbed Gums by the wrist, forcing her to drop the can lid.

Her mother wouldn’t ride in the sheriff’s car with her, but her grandmother did. The old woman’s drew Gums into an embrace and rested her chin on her granddaughter’s head.

I only saw Gums one more time several years later. By then, I was used to my scar. It stretched across my cheek almost to my ear so that people stared, and I accentuated it with sparkling blusher that made the puckered flesh shimmer. I enjoyed the

way honky tonk cowboys traced it with their thick fingers and bought me beers and asked me to dance. I never had to worry about what I wore because all they saw was my scar. It was my scar they two-stepped across sawdust floors and my scar they asked to take home. I was leaving a honky tonk with one of those cowboys, walking cheek to cheek, when I noticed Gums. She was surrounded by a group of roughnecks, and Melissa, still beautiful still perfect, still lifting wallets when she was sure no one was looking. But the men weren't interested in her. They gazed at Gums, trying to make her laugh so that she would pull back her lips and reveal those gums almost iridescent under the black lights.

Mother's Cat

There was a tremble in the old woman's voice that made her safely feeble when she told me that her grandson had found Mother's cat from my flyers. *My sick grandson*, she said in a way that made us both pause.

"A white cat," I said finally. "With black lips and a blue eye?"

"Yes," the old woman said. "This is your cat."

The cat had been the only thing of Mother's I had inherited after Aunt Cyndi backed a U-Haul up the driveway. I had been at the funeral when she did it. The whole family had been, and though Cyndi left the rock collection and an oil painting of flamingos, the cat was the only thing left that Mother had actually cared about. She let the cat eat from her plate and drink buttermilk even though it was lactose intolerant and would vomit in the dark corner of a coat closet. In my possession the cat had lost a lot of weight and the skin on its stomach was loose and jiggled when it ran. Now, the cat vomited in my dress shoes or on the pile of dirty laundry out of pure hatred.

I did not tell the old woman that the cat may have run away. Instead I asked if it answered to Bella.

"Mmhhh." The voice sighed over the static and then broke into a yell. "Bella!" she said, not bothering to move the phone from her mouth. "Ah, here we are. What a pretty kitty you are, Bella." I could hear the woman's smile because her mouth made a moist clicking sound when she stretched her lips.

I gave directions to the abandoned Lion's Choice off Mamie and the 49 Frontage. She told me she knew it, and when I arrived, she was there already in a large grey Cadillac with key marks down both sides in a coiling, grape vine pattern.

She and the boy sat on the hood. The child's head was large and bald and translucent. He held a bundle in a wool blanket that he pulled tightly to his chest and spoke to as if it were a baby.

"The flyer said there would be a reward," the old woman said. Her voice was breathy, more Marilyn Monroe-like than elderly now, and one of her legs was bent so that she could rest a hand of rings on her knee. She looked at the point where the sole of my shoe came loose from the upper and flapped over a crack in the concrete.

"Sure," I said. "Let me see my cat."

The old woman and the child did not move. "It's a real nice cat," the boy said. "It slept with me last night."

"That's right," the old woman said. "A real sweetie."

"It was Mother's cat," I said.

"Oh, that's nice." I saw her eyes drop again to my shoes. My big toe was sticking out.

"It used to sleep with her. She trained it to sleep on its back with its head on a pillow. It was sort of cute."

"That's really something," the old woman said. "Trained it, huh?"

I nodded. "I don't know how you train a cat, but she did."

The child smiled at me and began to stroke the bundle. "I bet she did it with fish. Kitties love fish."

"You think so?" the old woman asked and made a goofy, fish face for the child. He laughed.

“Can I see my cat?” I said. Though I was standing a good ten feet away, I raised both arms as if to take the animal from the boy.

The old woman and the child stopped laughing.

“Well, sure,” she said, and she jerked her head at the child. “You can certainly see your cat.”

The boy slid off the car and freed one of his hands to hold, palm upward between us. He frowned hard at my pocket and then glared into my face. “My reward.”

“He’s saving up for a trip to Disney World,” the old woman called. She shifted her position on the car so that both of her feet were dangling over the fender. “He picks up cans from the side of the road to recycle, you know. Between treatments.”

“My cat,” I said. I tried to take the bundle from him while he held it awkwardly with one arm, but he had a grip around a leg.

“The reward,” he said again. The bundle shifted between us, the boy with his hands on what seemed to be the front legs, and me with an arm around the torso. The kid was stronger than I anticipated, and I could only grasp the blanket and pull. The cat yowled and hissed and freed itself, and I saw that instead of Bella, it was a long-haired calico with a missing ear. It floated for a minute as it looked between the boy and me and then ran up my neck, using my chin as a springboard. It arced over the child’s naked scalp and bounded over the parking lot in three great leaps—its tail stiff and abnormally long—before it vanished beneath a fence. The old woman, the child, and I stared at the place where the cat disappeared, and on the other side of the fence a dog barked once and fell silent as dogs farther down the street started barking as well.

The child was the first to move. He bent and began to fold the blanket into a perfect square. "I saw your cat," he said without looking at me. With his head bent, I could trace the path of a single, large vein as it looped around his ears. "It was smashed flat in the highway. You should have taken better care of it."

"Michael," the old woman said. She was on her feet now with her hand held out to him. When the boy clasped her fingers into his, she turned his little fist over and kissed it. Then she led him around the Cadillac and helped him in.

"He doesn't realize what he's saying," she said to me as she produced a pair of sunglasses from her pocket. They were large and stylish and covered most of her face. Her voice shook again, and she tried to smile. "I hope you find your mother's cat."

"Did he really see my cat?" I said.

She opened the car door as if she hadn't heard me.

"Did he see my cat?"

The old woman was sitting now. She looked up at me in the space between the door and the car's roof. "Probably not. He's a kid, you know. And he's on medicine."

"Where might he have seen it?" I said. I put my hand on her door so she wouldn't close it.

The old woman frowned and looked at the interstate. "Over there," she said. "If it was anywhere, it was over there."

I looked to I-49 as cars flashed past, and I imagined the cat, its tail spinning like a rudder as it decided to just go for it, to just get back to Mother. I envisioned a car driven by a housewife doing her makeup in the rearview mirror bounce once so that the driver stabbed herself in the eye with her mascara brush.

“Ok then,” the old woman said. She smiled at my hand still clasping her door. “I think we’re done here.”

“Wait.” I reached into my pocket and pulled out the sweaty five dollar bill I had brought as a reward. I tried to straighten it, but it was too old and moist. “Here,” I said.

The old woman glared at me, and when I looked back at her, all I could see was my reflection in her glasses. She took the bill with a jeweled hand. “Well, bless your heart,” she said. She handed it to the child who grabbed it and sniffed it and then put it in an envelope so thick with other bills that the flap wouldn’t close.

“Thank you,” the old woman said as she closed the door and started the engine. She didn’t look at me as she skidded out of the parking lot.

I watched them as they merged onto the highway and coasted through an intersection and then I walked after them onto 49, squinting against the sunlight for a glimpse of white fur. I walked past the light at Hardy and then back down toward the hospital and Wal-Mart, but I didn’t see anything that looked like Bella. At least she had made it across.

The Resurrection of Hens

In Tara's imagination, the headless chicken shot from her mother's hand and into the sky at the exact moment the sun turned red on the horizon. A crimson sunbeam merged with the bird's body as it stretched its white, clipped wings wide and hovered in the space above the child's head. Tara's mother was frozen in that moment. The flesh of one palm was already puckered, but it was not bleeding yet. In her other hand she held the ax, and her lips were opened and set to form the words "god damnit."

Tara believed the hen's blood fountained from the body solely to target her. More powerful than it had ever been in life, the chicken rose without even curling a single feather, ascending through the twilight.

When Tara screamed, she broke the spell. The chicken fell to the ground in front of her, thrashed upright for several seconds before it flopped onto its side, jerked one horrible talon, and then curled both feet into tight fists. An eye winked from a clump of dandelions by her mother's foot.

"What have I told you about screaming?" the woman said. She dropped the ax to her side and examined her injured hand, stretching her fingers one by one. "What did I say?"

"Screaming doesn't help anybody."

Her mother shifted her weight. She wore a faded softball jersey, with the numbers flaking off. "That's right." She looked at Tara without blinking.

To hide her embarrassment, the child kneeled and retrieved the chicken's head. She held it up to her mother so that the winking eye stared skyward.

Her mother nodded. “Throw it in the burn barrel.” She leaned the ax against the cinder blocks rigged as a chopping station, and grasped the hen’s body by the feet. She dangled it upside down to let the blood drip onto the grass. “Tonight the coyotes will come up to yard,” she said. “We’ll hear them chirp.”

Tara nodded, tried to look brave. The chicken’s head was bright against the blackened trash in the barrel.

“And tonight, we’ll have fresh chicken.” Her mother held the hen up and smiled. She gestured for Tara to follow her to the house and inadvertently touched her wounded hand against her shorts. She left a crimson print across her hip.

Though she would wash the cut with water and peroxide, rare bacteria would spread from her hand, all the way through her body. The wound would swell and ooze before she would consent to go to the doctor, and the scar would forever be raised and pink and raw. Tara’s mother would claim she could feel a thunderstorm coming from the way the scar pounded, and when Tara had a fever, the marked hand that clasped her forehead was hot. But her mother bloated as well, and large boils grew along her spine that had to be opened and cleaned by a doctor. She demanded that Tara be present for each procedure so she could see how fearless she was of lancets and needles. She spoke to her daughter, chastising her when she looked away and encouraged her to avoid anesthesia and painkillers, and though doctors said the infection was gone, she was never as thin or as energetic again. The skin around her eyes turned sallow and loose and rings of fat crept down her legs.

When she tried to kill another chicken, the wound was too sensitive to get a strong grip, and the hen escaped easily before it was placed on the cinder blocks. It bounced

around the yard, clucking and trying to fly with its clipped wings, as Tara pursued, never catching it because she was afraid of getting clawed. Her mother ran too, but she was winded within a minute and grabbing at her side and the hen vanished outside the tree line.

Tara would remember her mother swinging the bloodied dead hen, as her real mother while the panting woman with sweat on her top lip was something else that she would never know. This woman choosing a frozen pullet from the freezer case at United, squinting at the nutritional information and hefting it to ensure its weight was a different creature altogether. She caught her daughter's face between her hands and pressed her lips to her forehead in lingering kisses, and when an ancient bull snake found its way into the hen house and swallowed the old rooster whole, she didn't kill it. She took it down into the field and flung it so that it spun in the air, its stomach swollen tight with chicken. Then she opened the gate and let the hens go, waving her arms so that they scattered.

Wild Ballerinas

Before we knew we were being watched, the ballerinas fell on the camp in great crinolined hoards, the ribbons of their *pointe* shoes frazzled and stained with mud. Our flashlights made their shadowed *grand jetés* seem impossible as we watched them through the canvas. They waved their arms and brushed against the tent in graceful swoops, and somehow they found enough traction against the forest floor to *pirouette* with three and four full revolutions.

Jonah, lank and pale, shuffled through his backpack for his camera. It had been his idea to view the ballerinas in the natural habitat, and he had led us out of the National Park and into unmapped woods, following a lone, spangled ballerina he claimed to have seen through the trees. At night, he performed clumsy *port de bras* and *adagios* to lure her out into the open, and though he would beg one of us to come out to impromptu *pas de deux*, we were much too embarrassed by his uncontrolled *battements* to accept the invitations. It was Jonah who loved ballerinas, who thought the forest service negligent in the preservation of them. He wanted to capture their movements on film. He wanted to watch their natural *fouettés*.

But before he could find his camera, we saw that two ballerinas had him by the ankles, and though we grasped his arms and pulled, he vanished beneath the canvas still clutching his flashlight. We watched the silhouettes as they twirled and lifted him into the air, his bony figure fragile and inflexible, but we huddled into our sleeping bags and did not try to scare them away.

We heard Jonah's yells for an hour after they had gone, and long after his voice had merged with the night sounds, his flashlight bore its beam into the side of the trees like a spotlight

Spirit Run

I stay on the couch and watch as Coach Anderson gets ready for her day. There is not much she has to do, she is dead after all, but she goes through the motions of fixing coffee and oatmeal and planning workouts for the track team. In death, she wears a starched polo shirt and running shorts to show off her very tan muscular legs. Several stud earrings shimmer from her ears—even from the cartilage—and her short hair is newly frosted and spiked. She performs walking lunges as she drinks the coffee and ignores me.

She is distinct this morning, her image clear. She has chosen to manifest, but even when she doesn't, her presence is always felt in some form. Her perfume emanates from the walls and at night, she is a dark, storming vapor cloud. She bumps against walls, instead of going through them, and sometimes I wake up with her sitting on my chest, crushing me so that I breathe just like I did when I ran a fast quarter.

When she first began to haunt me, I dreamt about Quarter Mondays when the team had to run quarter mile sprints under time. Playing hooky on Quarter Monday resulted in making up the workout the next day after that day's run, most often a distance workout. In the dreams, the quarters never end, and Coach Anderson shows me my times on a stopwatch that has a long, coiling chain wrapped around her wrist. The times are worse after each quarter mile, and though I vomit every session, she pushes me back to the line.

So I moved to the couch to stop the dreams, and Coach Anderson took over my bedroom. She even frightened little spirit Victoria away, little Victoria raped and strangled and discarded in a ditch down the road from my childhood home. She was the

first dead body I had ever seen, and she was a kid—nine-years old—the same as me. My father was driving me to school, and I glimpsed the glitter of her nail polish, each finger a different color. He said it looked like a car accident, though there wasn't a car, not even an ambulance yet, and I knew it wasn't an accident. Victoria's been with me ever since though she's never been strong enough to manifest. She is forever nine and hiding in closets and under beds.

But Coach Anderson banished her from my room, and now I share the couch with Victoria. It doesn't matter if I pull out the sleeper; she is huddled next to me, clawing at me like a drowning swimmer until she can finally sleep. When Coach Anderson emerges, Victoria crouches under a desk and sometimes behind the TV. She cannot be comforted, a point that Coach Anderson uses to her advantage. She sneaks up behind her and tries to make Victoria shriek, but the little girl can't make noise. Instead, there's a sudden whirlwind in the room as she searches for a safe corner.

On this morning, Victoria is particularly terrified as Coach Anderson has appeared to be almost real. The child cowers beneath the blankets at my feet, and I decide that I have had enough. I stand up and Coach Anderson is immediately before me, sneering, her perfume seeping into my skin. And though the things I think to say sound very clever in my head, I say, "I've run a marathon, you know."

Coach Anderson laughs, shakes her head.

"I finished it. I ran the whole thing."

"Yeah, in five hours." She takes a sip of coffee, swishes it around her mouth.

One of her earrings catches the sun and shines into my eyes. "You did no interval training, no speed training. What do you expect?"

I have nothing else to say, so I sit down. She stands over me, and I am eye level with the v of her crotch. I imagine her dressed in a skirt and heels, hostessing for five years at an El Chico's after she lost her coaching job, after I got her fired. I had told my mother I had seen her kissing one my teammates, the anchor on the sprint relay, and the school board thought it explained the multiple earrings and the short punk hair, and she was gone before the year was out. It wasn't true, of course. I had made it up from rumors that were already circulating, knowing that she made the parents nervous with how she made us sprint in hundred-degree heat, how she wouldn't let a dropped time trial go, how she followed us on distance runs in her car and revved the engine if we fell off pace.

I imagine Coach Anderson when she was just Cheryl again as she steps out of her dress shoes and climbs onto the salad bar ledge to fasten a belt to one of the ceiling crossbeams. She steps off the edge, dangling by her neck. Her strong legs twitch, the muscles contracting, and then she is running again so that bears down on me.

"I'm sorry," I say as I look up at her.

She bends so that she can jab a finger into my stomach. "Look at all this extra weight," she says. She pokes harder, all the time looking into my eyes without blinking. "How do you expect to win anything," she says. "We're going to work on it." And from her pocket she uncoils the stopwatch and dangles it in front of my face.

The Desk Clerk and the Tattooed Maiden

It was impossible for the desk clerk to recognize the maiden. She had waited so long for this girl, working at the DPS, taking pictures of women who removed thick glasses, stretched the skin at their eyes, and tried to smile so that they looked eighteen again—at least on their driver’s licenses. When there was still a little sparkle to her, the desk clerk advised her subjects when there was lipstick on teeth or when collars needed straightening. She allowed retakes for blinking, taking the extra time to delete flawed images from the computer and start again.

But lines of angry drivers have descended on her and the word “bitch” has been thrown at her so many times that her glamour crumbled. She has spent too many smoke breaks with co-workers who complained about their husbands and kids and the DPS Patrol officers they have kissed at Christmas parties. She has huddled in the cold, puffing on bummed cigarettes, and checking out sixteen-year-old boys taking their driving tests. She has learned how to shape her face into complete passivity when her supervisor yells at her about being gone from her post too long.

Now the desk clerk’s lips have grown thin from biting them so she won’t cuss or talk about a time when she consorted with maidens and princes and magic gourds. Now, she snaps the camera when least expected, in the moment when a woman is folding her glasses against a hip, one eye cast downward and the other inexplicably wandering up and to the right.

So when the maiden appears, the desk clerk is wiping her nose with a wadded up tissue that she keeps in the pocket of her sweater. She glances at the girl long enough to take in the purple-dyed hair, the skin of her bare arms covered in vining tattoos, the

metal of her piercings shimmering under the fluorescent lights. She drops her tissue back into her pocket with a sigh. Everyone in the office is staring at the girl and by association the desk clerk. This makes the clerk angry. She directs the girl through her eye test and paper work, and when she pulls out too few wadded bills from the pocket of her jeans, the clerk announces in a loud voice that the license renewal amount is posted on the front door.

“We say it up front so that this won’t happen,” she says. “You’re holding up the line.” The people behind the girl grumble and make pointed comments to one another about freaks.

The girl lifts one leg and balances against the desk as she unties her boot. Her finger nails are painted to match her hair, and they work slowly, pulling the laces through holes and uncrossing them. She retrieves another five dollar bill from beneath her foot and lays it onto the desk. The clerk’s nostrils quiver. She stares at the money, wet with a piece of lint stuck to it.

“It’s still not enough,” she says.

The maiden brushes away a strand of hair that has coiled around her eyebrow hoop. Her fingers lightly touch the diamond nose stud. “Please,” she says and smiles widely so that her straight perfect teeth glow. “Please,” she says again more softly. “I have to drive my father to radiation.”

But the desk clerk can’t see that beneath the sleeveless shirt, the girl’s arm tattoos swirl into an image that covers her entire back—a firebird at the point of ascension. The feathers are rendered in such detail that they can rise from the girl’s soft skin and tremble aloft before she steps into a shower. The wings drip when they are wet, and a flea huddles

deep in the silky down to escape the shampoo. The red eyes wink and move and weep, and the crown is a pure flame that smolders at the base of the girl's neck. It steams in the shower, but it always burns, especially when she is happy, like when her father's doctor has good news. No boy has seen the firebird, though a couple have snaked thick arms up and under her shirt to undo her bra. They have been bitten. Males allow the maiden wide berth, especially because once they draw back bloodied fingers from beneath her clothing, she punches them hard enough to bruise.

On the girl's hip is a lone feather that curls and undulates as she moves. It can be plucked by a beloved or a fairy godmother who has forgotten how to shine. To hold the feather is to rise off the ground and hover, unburdened.

But the desk clerk doesn't recognize the maiden. She doesn't see the edge of the feather in the gap between the girl's shirt and the low waist of her jeans. The desk clerk crosses her arms over her chest. "This isn't charity," she says. She smiles as the girl retrieves the bills and crams them back into her pocket. She then watches her exit the building and unlock a 70s model sedan, lowering herself into the driver's seat beside an old man. The man leans forward, checks his wallet, and the girl shakes her head. When she starts the car, the desk clerk motions for one of the DPS Traffic Officers. She points at the girl and tells him that she is driving without a valid license. The officer shrugs, starts out the door to stop the maiden with his ticket pad. The desk clerk gestures for the next person in line.

The Lament of the Fire Baton Twirler

No one had to tell me how to twirl fire. I didn't have one of those specialty batons with a switch that controlled flames, and I didn't wear spangled costumes or tights or majorette boots with tassles like Charlene Stettleman who liked the way skimpy twirling outfits took attention away from her large teeth. I wore nothing that could catch—and except for my plain black leotard, I was naked on that football field, nothing between my boobs and the night but black spandex. I didn't even curl my hair or paint my lips, though I am certain I would have kept them from flaming. I just dipped the ends of my batons in Tiki torch fluid and sent them spinning into the sky. I only wanted fire.

And fire I had, fire not only on one baton, but four, fire that crowned my head when I flourished and snapped, fire spun around me like a cocoon, fire that pierced the air between the stadium lights and showed glimpses of something else peeking through the other side. I saluted that divinity, not with my head bowed and hands clasped, but standing on one leg with the other pointed heavenward.

The crowd looked at Charlene though. Buck-toothed and sequined, she wound one baton in slow figure eights before dropping it to bounce end over end down the twenty-five yard line. She chased it off the field, the thick heels of her boots leaving holes in the grass, and when she tried to reenter the chorus she couldn't set the baton whirling. Instead she shrugged and winked and shimmied so that her teeth reflected the sparkle of her breast sequins. The crowd laughed and missed my four fire batons poised between Orion's Belt and the Polar Star. It was Charlene they applauded.

I left the field with my batons still lit, and I walked outside the ring of stadium lights where the flames danced yellow and blue and pink before they sputtered and

dwindled and gave up their sparks. I should have stayed even after the band had marched onto the sideline and the football players had returned. Those flames should have gone out on the field, and if the band director or the superintendent or my mother had tried to remove me, I should have swiped at the grass until it ignited. But I didn't. I don't even have scars on my fingers. I was that good.

The Leif Year

The year my Aunt Christi stalked Leif Garrett, I took the Polaroid photographs she included in the thick packages she sent to his official fan club. She never sent threats—she was never that kind of stalker. She focused on the amorous parts of her fantasy, a teenaged boy with long, feathered hair.

I squinted at her posing in halter-tops, hot pants, and swimsuits, and did the best job I could though I was ten and nervous. She moved easily, turning her pear-shaped butt and thick thighs away from the camera in such a way that they appeared slender and pulling her arms in tight to make what little cleavage she had pop at her throat. Her bleached hair glistened under the guestroom lights, and she manipulated foundation and powder to downplay a wart below her right eye. In the photographs, the wart looked like a lone dimple or a beauty mark, depending on which way the shadows fell.

I enjoyed shaking the images out, getting my aunt's compliments when a light created halos around her breasts, or I had captured an expression that made her look like a teenager. She was twenty-three then and blew kisses and giggled at the camera.

I even tried to follow her instructions and shoot her *Playboy* style, but I was too embarrassed at her naked breasts and the triangle of hair between her legs. She laughed, shaking her head at my modesty. She took the nude pictures herself, balancing the camera in one hand and shaking the film until her tilted image materialized: one blue eye, her chin and a breast.

“If this doesn't get his attention, I don't know what will,” she said. She looked at her portrait, smiled, and pushed it into an envelope with at least a dozen other similar images.

*

That year Aunt Christi was going through a divorce, living with my family at the farm, her two young daughters, Kimmy and Missy, in the care of her parents. Her reputation still smarted from a nasty piece of gossip, though I would find out later that the gossip had been true. Christi had a thing for sixteen and seventeen-year-old boys, and she had been spotted in a compromising position with a high-school quarterback on Farm-to-Market Road 1094. Actually, they were fucking. I didn't know this information at the time. I was ten, after all, and didn't technically know what fucking was, though, as Aunt Christi's obsession with Leif grew, I would learn quite a bit about male genitalia in specific detail.

I caught the bits and pieces of the story as an adult from my mother. Strangely, I was older than Christi had been at the time. From the way my aunt lounged half-naked around our house, legs propped on whatever furniture was convenient, my imagination constructed an image of Christi in that car, with that boy, her skirt hiked up over her waist, one foot propped on the headrest of the passenger seat.

For some reason, the gossip mill glossed over the extremity of Aunt Christi's indiscretion. Perhaps the grapevine shied from the truth out of respect for Christi's husband, an ex-quarterback himself, selling insurance policies to his former fans, but of course, loyalty doesn't normally figure into gossip spreading. In all likelihood, someone at the sheriff's office had transmitted the story incorrectly. An officer had seen them, had looked away when Christi pulled her skirt down, and had mentioned a doctored version of the event to night dispatch. Idalou housewives told the tale as nothing more than

necking and petting, but those details were enough to inflame an already unstable situation.

Christi and Richie married right out of high school and had two children within five years. Christi got a job as a secretary at Mrs. Baird's Corporation in Lubbock and commuted into the city from Idalou every morning. They got free bread out of the deal, enough to share with my parents and Richie's brothers, but the bread was always a little stale and didn't keep long. At my house we ate it fast, sometimes wasting the last few slices because the mold sprang up quick on the crusts.

But something happened. My mother thought Christi had been reprimanded for keeping the reception area too messy. Maybe someone had complained about the stacks of paper, the coffee stains splashed on the carpet around her desk, the twisted, knotted phone cord. My father thought she had been taking long lunch breaks, shopping instead of eating and returning with bags of clothes and shoes. Whatever the reason, she walked out—no warning or notice—and returned that night with two cartons of eggs. She threw them, one-by-one, at the white, brick building with the Mrs. Baird's logo painted in blue, crooked letters two stories high. The night guard saw her and called the police. She used her one phone call to call my mother, crying, begging for her to wait to call Richie, but he had already called my parents and my grandparents as well when she didn't come home. When my mother told Christi that her parents were driving in from Comanche, she hung up.

She spent the night in jail, and my grandparents posted bail the next morning—driving her to our house instead of back to Richie. We lived on a rural mail route between Idalou and New Deal, still in Lubbock County, but unmapped unless one pulled out old

land surveys or knew to check with county cotton gins. My grandmother reasoned that it was ideal location with no neighbors to witness my aunt's disgrace. And the trio of German Shepherds that roamed the place was a deterrent to the curious.

Theft insurance is what my father called them. We lived so far out that we rarely had unexpected guests. Visitors had to show determination to get to the farm, so even family visits were occasional. The rest of the prospective guests—salesmen or migrants—were dissuaded by the sight of animals that seemingly materialized from shrubs or the garden without warning. At the sight of three angry dogs, scratching and slobbering on a vehicle, the newcomers chose to conduct their business by phone or not at all. Since few people stayed, a car horn made my parents anxious. If the sound came after dark, my father stepped to the door with a twelve gauge.

At our house, Christi was safe, but she was shaking, more afraid of her mother than of the vandalism charge. My grandmother was a cancer survivor with prosthetic breasts that filled the large, pre-surgical bras she refused to give up. Her silk blouses, shantung suits, and Estée Lauder fragrance didn't hide her thick arms; white gloves didn't hide her large hands. She was a big woman, almost comically so, but we didn't laugh when a clumsy movement forced a prosthesis out of a bra. We didn't see the slight facial tremors that followed her treatments as a sign of weakness or her grey hair as a sign of old age. My grandmother had been one of the old town dragons before my grandfather retired and moved to his ranch in Comanche, before the cancer. The sight of this old woman girdled into suits, eyebrows neatly plucked, was still an occasion for fear. She lorded over other women, criticized housekeeping with pursed lips and tense sighs, and indicated various points of interest that could be made common knowledge.

When she scrutinized Christi that morning, her gaze inevitably fell on the wart, her dirty face and hair. She shook her head. My grandmother still wore white gloves, even then, her pocketbook clutched beneath an arm, and her hair arranged in a tight bouffant, not one hair able to escape the glue of Spray Net. Christi cried out once, when she laid one large hand on her shoulder and pulled her to the bathroom. The shower started and steam curled from beneath the door. My grandmother called for scissors, a dress, fresh undergarments, and stockings, all which my mother provided. She stood in the hallway, listening to the water hit the porcelain tub, the sound of a towel rubbed over wet skin, and then the snip of scissors over Christi's hair. My mother tried to look through the hole in the door, asked me if I could see anything, but my grandmother's thick rump and the flowered material of her dress completely obscured Christi as she sat at the dressing table. I did catch a glimpse of Christi's feet as she pointed the toes of her right foot and eased them into my mother's pantyhose. The old woman leaned over her, hands firm on her shoulders.

My mother squirmed when I told her that her mother had a strong hold on Aunt Christi. She open the door, eased her head into the space, but one look from my grandmother forced her back. When the door finally opened, Christi tottered on a pair of my mother's heels, a run bunched at a stocking knee. My mother's dress was too big around the bust and my grandmother had pinned the material beneath her armpits. Christi's hair was four inches shorter and forced into a helmet of curls similar to my grandmother's. She smiled, revealed fresh lipstick, one tooth smeared with pink, and cheeks red not from blusher but from hot water and vigorous scrubbing.

“There, we feel much better, don’t we?” my grandmother said, one hand clamped on the back of Christi’s neck.

Christi nodded. Her blue eyes searched out my face, then my mother’s. “I’m ready to go home.”

“Well, I think we can arrange that,” my grandmother said. She wiped at the lipstick on Christi’s tooth with a finger. “I imagine there are two little girls who would be very happy to see their mommy.”

*

For a while, all was well. After a visit from my grandmother, Christi’s boss at Mrs. Baird’s intervened with the owner and persuaded them to drop the charges. Richie made jokes in town about the Mrs. Baird’s incident, told his friends “the bastards had it coming,” and Christi’s friends came around in the afternoons to watch soap operas and keep her company. She started to venture out, and though people whispered at her, she got cheers and “thumbs up” signs from the teenagers she saw at Thriftway and Dairy Queen. One of these encounters sparked the affair with her teenaged lover, and a couple of months after her arrest, she was in trouble again. Richie moved the three blocks to his parents’ home, and though there was some back and forth about what to do with the girls, my grandmother settled the plans with a visit to Richie’s mother. She left with the two girls in tow, packing them into her Buick and leaving for Comanche until custody could be officially determined.

My grandparents left my parents to move Aunt Christi and “let her rest her nerves for a bit.” She slept for fourteen and fifteen hours at a time, only wandering out to eat a bowl of my sugar cereal or to get a soda out of the refrigerator. She ordered Dr. Peppers

from the grocery store and complained until my mother set a six-pack in the icebox. When she emerged, she appeared half dressed, not bothering to cover her panties or to comb her hair. She began to stink.

My mother lured her into baths with bubbles, poured Dr. Pepper into iced mugs so she could drink while she soaked, and she left magazines on the edge of the tub that she thought Christi would find interesting. She washed her sister's hair in the sink, rubbing the tips of her fingers into her scalp and smoothing tangles from her hair. When her roots grew out, my mother put on plastic gloves and brushed peroxide along the new hair. She plucked stray hairs from Christi's brow line, rubbed her feet and back when she had her period, and slept with Christi when she had bad dreams, spooning and rocking her as if she were a small child.

When my grandmother called, my mother lied, and told her that Christi was in town or outside or sleeping or with a girlfriend. I have no idea why my grandmother accepted her stories. My mother wasn't a good liar. She hesitated, stumbled too often. "Oh, yeah...well...Christi isn't here...she's with...uh...Janice, I think. They went into town. Shopping or...uh...something."

If my father complained about her sleeping patterns or the increased cost of groceries—Dr. Pepper purchases especially—my mother snapped at him, told him that she would do the same for any of his family when they had a hard time. "Besides, it's not forever."

But Christi didn't leave. She didn't make plans. She didn't wash her clothes or clean her room. My mother sneaked in when she was asleep to get her laundry. And on the nights that Christi was up, my mother stayed up with her. She started to get dark

circles under her eyes and drink coffee more often. She was short tempered with me, spanking me, though I hadn't been spanked in years, and she fought more with my father. If he needed her help to move irrigation pipes or a tractor, she sighed, complained. During cotton season, he hired someone to pack the cotton in trailers and pull them to the gin, normally my mother's job. In the evenings, he stared at Christi as he ate, but he didn't speak to her, and when she appeared half dressed, he looked away or left the room.

To me, Christi seemed more like an older sister or a girlfriend than an aunt. I didn't question her habits. She was an adult, my elder. When she was awake, she discussed fashion and movies with me. We gossiped over singers and movie stars, and she started talking to me about boys, asking me if I had ever kissed a boy or held a boy's hand, and I shook my head, looked at the ground. She encouraged me to practicing kissing with a pillow and showed me how to give myself hickeys. Purple bruises dotted my arms, and she examined them, critiquing my efforts and judging the best. My mother was angry about the hickeys, and the first cross thing she said to Christi was that I was too young to learn about such things.

We watched more television when Christi lived with us, and sometimes we went whole evenings without talking. My mother sat on the couch, rubbing Christi's feet, my father rocked in his La-Z-Boy, and I sat on the floor, my chin perched on my knees. Aunt Christi saw Leif Garrett for the first time during one of these nights. He was guest starring on *Family*, and was trying to get into Kristy McNichol's pants. My father snickered at it, shook his head at my mother, but Christi protested when he stood to change the channel.

"Wait a minute, I like this show," she said.

“It isn’t that good,” my father said.

“Sure it is. C’mon, I hardly watch TV anyway.”

My father considered the point and left the room. Christi rose from the couch, turned up the volume, and moved from my mother and onto the floor. As the blue light of the television shone across her face, I remember exchanging a look with my mother. She raised her eyebrows, bit her bottom lip, and we watched Christi instead of the show. She didn’t seem to blink when Leif was on screen. He was tall, skinny with wide eyes and dark blonde hair that seemed in perpetual motion. When the program was over, she watched to see the teaser, and then every Wednesday night after that she took up her spot on the floor and watched *Family*, not even moving during the commercials. Even if the show was a rerun, she watched, and if Leif was not on, she sulked, but watched for the entire half hour.

When she went in to Lubbock to buy groceries with my mother, Christi started buying the teen magazines that I was forbidden to get—mostly *Bravo* and *Tiger Beat*. At first she pretended they were for me, telling my mother that I was old enough to read them. My mother knew what was going on, but she went along, glad that her sister was finally interested in something. Christi played along, too. She set the early issues on my bed so I would find them after school, and she even sat me at the bathroom dressing table to feather my hair like Farrah Fawcett’s. The magazines always ended up missing before I had a chance to finish them, and I would inevitably find them among the dirty clothes and disheveled sheets on Christi’s bed. She read them until the pages curled and the covers were creased, and she never threw them away.

Aunt Christi's favorite sections of the magazines were the pin-ups and foldout images of Leif Garrett. She pulled them carefully from the staples so the edges wouldn't tear and hung them around my mother's framed paintings of barns and flowers and cats. She had a particularly large portrait of Garrett hanging on the inside of the closet door—one that had been folded into quarters and stapled into the center of a *Tiger Beat* digest devoted to the young actor's career, his role on *Family*, his record. In the poster, he smiled at the camera, his hands on his hips, the ever-present breeze blowing his flowing blonde hair around his shoulders.

When she wrote her fan letters, Aunt Christi glanced at this poster, scrawling love notes in childish loops and arches. I was allowed to sit in her room after school if I brought her a cold Dr. Pepper from the refrigerator. She wrote and sipped her sodas. Sometimes she used an empty can as an ashtray when she started smoking filtered Capris. If she spoke, she spoke only of Leif, not even caring what I thought.

Personally, I wasn't impressed. His eyes were too big, too far apart, but the one time I expressed my opinion, she flashed her eyes at me and shook her head. "You don't know what you're talking about." So after that, I emulated her vocabulary of admiration for Leif. His eyes weren't large; they were soulful. His lips weren't big; they were sensual, kissable. His body was sleek and suave, a runner's body—all long limbs and grace. He had the kind of arms that were gentle when wrapped around a girl's waist or strong when supporting his weight over her body. Aunt Christi explained this last bit to me, the mechanics of the missionary position, the gentlemanly attitude toward lovemaking.

Leif was sexy. And Aunt Christi imagined having sex with him. She talked to me about it as if I were her age, contemplating endurance and penis size. She told me what she did in the bath with the teen magazines, how she thought about Leif and touched herself. She was accurate and didn't use nicknames. She said clitoris and giggled when she described an orgasm.

She did have the sense to not speak too loudly, though. My mother, banished from activities with Christi, hovered on the periphery, just out of earshot, but she frowned more often, the circles under her eyes were darker. She asked me what we talked about, and though I didn't understand most of what my aunt said, I was too embarrassed to say anything. The conversations frightened me. I didn't feel compelled or even curious about the place between my legs, and I felt ashamed even when I washed or saw myself naked in the mirror after a bath or shower.

My mother commented on my silence. She said I didn't look people in the eye anymore and that I always crossed my arms over my chest. She started scowling at Aunt Christi. She stopped drawing bubble baths, and she started talking under her breath about unwelcome houseguests.

*

The photography sessions started soon after my mother refused to let Christi buy Leif's remake of "The Wanderer." We were standing in line at Albertsons, Lubbock's only grocery store that carried records and magazines, when Christi laid the album on the counter. As she rummaged in her purse searching among Capris packets and lighters for wadded up bills and change, my mother picked the album up to put it back on the rack.

“What are doing?” Christi said. She walked over to my mother and tried to take the album from her. “I’m getting this for Leslie.”

“No you’re not.” My mother maintained her hold on the record.

“Of course I am. You love Leif, don’t you?” Christi smiled at me and winked. I looked at the toe of my shoe, put my hands in my pocket. Christi reached out and tugged at my ponytail to get my attention. Her smile was fixed on her face in a frightening way—eyes too wide, lips stiff, breath caught in her throat.

My mother didn’t even glance at me. Instead she stepped between us, brushed Christi’s hand away with her hip. “It’s for you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s for you.” This time my mother shouted and the customers started staring at us. I could tell that she wanted to say more, but her tongue just bumped around in her mouth, pushing at her cheeks and lips.

“Jesus,” Christi said. “Would you lower you voice?” She brushed a limp blond hair out of her face and glanced at teenaged baggers and female customers. The manager moved from the customer service desk.

“Everything all right, ladies?”

“Yes,” my mother said. “We’re just going.”

“I want the record,” Christi hissed. “I have my own money.”

My mother slammed the record back onto the rack, and jerked her head at me.

“Come on.”

We left the groceries and sat in the truck for fifteen minutes before Aunt Christi joined us. She climbed up beside me, empty handed except for a Dr. Pepper and a new

pack of Capris. She rolled down the window, not even looking at us, and lit a cigarette poised between her lips.

That night, she pinched my shoulder hard and pulled me into her room, made me promise not to tell my mother. She gave me the Polaroid camera, even taking a few pictures of me in some of her party dresses. Aunt Christi practiced other kinds of art in our guest room, too. Drawings and paintings followed, the supplies coming from my mother's old art class equipment. Her art didn't fare much better than her photographs. Leif's head always came out too big for the rest of his body, his eyes lopsided and fringed with impossible lashes. She sent portraits to the fan club address and had even received two responses as a result, presumably from the sixteen-year old Garrett himself. Other letters she received had been typed and signed with what looked like an inked stamp of his signature, but the handwriting of those two letters was messy and ran crooked across the page. The "thank yous" were readable and encouraged Aunt Christi to double her efforts. She started spending most of her time in the guest room, painting all night. Her work didn't improve but grew worse. She created portraits of Leif with wings of fire and halos, riding tigers and zebras and unicorns and terrorizing a group of coiffed, stockinged women with a lightning sword.

My mother saw the packages going out, asked what Christi was sending. I didn't lie. I told her about the paintings and the letters from Leif, and though my mother frowned, she didn't question me further. Maybe I should have said something when I saw her paint the naked pictures of him. She didn't cover my eyes when she showed me how she had rendered his penis, large and smiling, in psychedelic purples and greens. But the truth was that I didn't know how to describe it. The last portraits she did were

purely pornographic, and I didn't possess the vocabulary to tell my mother what Christi's artistic persona was doing to Leif. I couldn't even tell my mother why the paintings scared me and made me nervous to speak to boys my own age. In dreams, I saw Christi as she painted herself, astride a sixteen-year old boy, flames rising from her mouth and stars twinkling in her hair.

I watched my aunt, my mother's baby sister who shadowed my earliest memories as a pony-tailed girl telling me stories and playing peek-a-boo, paint herself into impressionistic sexual acts. I didn't say anything for the same reason that my mother didn't say anything when my grandmother called and we all heard her voice demanding to know how Christine was doing. We didn't know what to say.

When I woke from my bad dreams those last months of Aunt Christi's stay, I discovered my mother pacing in the dark. With her robe pulled tightly around her, she walked the hallway outside Christi's room, pausing to listen to her sister puff on cigarettes and jab at canvas. Sometimes our eyes met, and she sat with me, holding my hand. Sometimes, I pretended to sleep, and she continued on her path outside Christi's door.

*

Leif's people in Los Angeles finally retained a local attorney to serve a cease-and-desist order to my parents' house. Christi's letters to Leif displayed our rural route address, she had never thought of cloaking her efforts, but the route was difficult to find, even for a Lubbock county lawyer so he enlisted the aid of the county sheriff. The notice was delayed and more packages, much worse than previous installments, were barraging Leif's fan club. My aunt never threatened to kill Leif or the president or anything like

that, but Leif's staff was disturbed by her graphic images. There weren't stalking laws around at that time and restraining orders were reserved for battered wives, but the volume of her letters and packages, over 200 in six months, was enough to make some people nervous.

The notice found its way to our place on a July afternoon when Aunt Christi was still in bed and my father had come in for lunch. He had this ritual, especially during irrigating season, of coming in right at 12:30 to eat his lunch while *Days of Our Lives* was on. For some reason he found Roman and Marlena's relationship oddly gripping, and he stared transfixed at the screen while he chewed on Beanie Weenies, Vienna Sausages or tuna fish sandwiches my mother had made.

That day it was tuna and potato chips when the dogs started barking. A car horn sounded, and my parents looked at one another before they moved into the front room. My father opened the inner door then and peered out at two men sitting in a sheriff's car. "It's the sheriff," he said, and opened the storm door.

"The sheriff?" My mother watched him walk across the yard waving the dogs off. They didn't go far, though, but hovered around my father's legs, crouched and growling, hackles bristled. We watched as my father bent into the open driver's side window, his large hands on the roof of the vehicle. He nodded, looked at the man sitting in the passenger's seat and then glanced back at my mother.

"What's the matter?" I asked. I tugged on the back of her shirt. She was careful to keep herself between the door and me.

"I don't know," she said, frowning and pushing me back further with her butt.

We watched the sheriff gesture at the passenger and hand my father an envelope. My father opened it, and the other man opened his mouth, shook his head. There was some more head nodding, gesturing. The sheriff's companion waved his hands and adjusted his tie. He was wearing a suit. His hair was neatly trimmed and parted to the right; a ring glittered from his right pinky finger. He began to shake his head vehemently and raised his voice, an action that prompted a German Shepherd to leap against the passenger side of the car and push its snout against the glass.

My father's lips barely moved as he handed the envelope back to the sheriff and stared at the man in the suit. The man's head almost rested on the sheriff's shoulder as he leaned away from the dog. My father clapped his hands together, and the animals retreated to the porch ahead of him. He walked with his head down, and when he reached the front door he wouldn't look at my mother.

“What it is?”

“Wake your sister.”

“What?”

“Wake Christi up. They want to talk to her.”

“To Christi? Why?”

My father looked at me. “Go wake up your aunt.”

“But...”

“And make sure she's dressed,” my mother said. “Completely dressed.”

I heard her sharp intake of breath as my father whispered, heard her begin to cuss softly wondering what she would tell her mother. I didn't bother knocking. I knew Christi wouldn't respond, would ignore the sound. So I walked in. The comforter and

sheets were tangled around her waist, her legs and arms extended so her body formed an “X.” She wore a sleeping mask even though she had recently hung a blanket over the window. Magazines and empty Dr. Pepper cans littered the periphery of the bed. Dark stains had seeped into the carpet where soda had been spilled.

I poked Aunt Christi’s shoulder. She groaned, turned over and pulled the pillow over her head.

“Aunt Christi, someone’s here to see you.”

“What?” She moved the pillow aside, adjusted the mask. “Who?”

I opened my mouth to explain about the sheriff, but then I shrugged. “I don’t know. Some guy.”

“A guy?” She removed her mask and sat up. “Do you recognize the guy?”

“No.”

“Is he good looking?”

I shrugged again.

She pulled on a pair of shorts, put on a bra, and ran her fingers through her hair. She hadn’t bothered to touch up her roots and an inch of dark brown stabbed through her blonde tresses. She walked out barefoot, and when she saw my parents and the sheriff’s car, she stopped, started to turn back to the room. My mother grabbed her by the shoulders and steered her out the door. They walked out together just like that, my mother’s knuckles pale as she bore down on Christi. The sheriff handed her the envelope, made her sign a piece of paper as the dogs churned at her feet.

By 5:00 my grandparents were there. They left Missy and Kimmy with a neighbor and said nothing as my father loaded the Buick with Christi’s things, and

escorted Christi, one on each side, to the car. They drove her to the Baptist Sanitarium in Cisco. Aunt Christi stayed for two years.

The Polaroid image my grandmother sent shortly after her admission showed Christi in stockings and a flowered dress. She smiled without showing teeth, the wart looking more like a dimple, and her hair was dark and fashioned around her forehead in my grandmother's style.

"We are all feeling much improved already," my grandmother wrote on the white label of the Polaroid. My mother fixed the image to the freezer with a rainbow magnet and whenever she opened the lower refrigerator door, she stared at Christi's portrait without blinking. "She looks good, doesn't she?" And no matter how many times my father and I agreed, she continued to ask, her nose only inches from her sister's portrait.

*

The gossip spread in Idalou—and this time the sheriff got it right. Aunt Christi was a criminal and a pornographer. Richie filed for full custody of the girls and won, truckloads of teenagers drove past the house, and someone threw bread drenched in antifreeze into the yard, killing two of the German Shepherds.

We left for a while, staying with my father's relatives, and when we returned, we returned to piles of letters and packages returned from Leif Garret's fan club. My mother shuffled through the mail, burning all Christi's paintings and Polaroid images. She didn't even look at most of them as she threw them into the burn barrel. She just watched the flames catch and crack the canvases

There was also a large manila envelope from Aunt Christi. A sealed and stamped letter was inside with an attached note instructing my mother not to open the letter but to

mail it to Leif's fan club for her, using her own name and a fake return address. She tried to tear the letter in two, but it was so thick that she could only crease and twist the paper. She used a pair of kitchen scissors to cut the envelope into four almost equal squares before she threw it in the trash unread.

She piled broken eggshells on top of the letter, scraped the nights' leftovers into the trashcan, threw the rest of Aunt Christi's unused Dr. Pepper cans into the bag, and even cleaned out the refrigerator, discarding whole Tupperware containers of mashed potatoes and green bean casserole. When the bin became too full, she balanced on one foot in order to compact the overflow with the heel of her house shoe. She stomped until the lids popped off the containers and congealed grease and butter oozed over the contents and stained her shoe, but she didn't take the can out to empty in the burn barrel. She forced the trashcan back under the sink, slamming the cabinet door behind her.

When I came to get the letter that night, the stench gave me goose bumps as I searched through layers of spoiled food and old newspapers. I dug through the entire can, even emptying the trash into another bag to sift through the items one by one, covered to the elbows in mashed potatoes. But I didn't find any part of the letter.

When I stood up, I saw my mother standing in the doorway. "You better wash up."

She held a piece of paper and a letter in her hands. As I scrubbed my arms with dish soap and hot water, she lifted the piece of thick stationery that had been torn and taped back together. She began to read.

Dear Leif,

I know that I have not right to address you on such a personal or casual level, but if I may call you by your first name this time, I guarantee that it will be the last. Over a year ago, I saw you on television, and developed an emotional attachment to you that I know now was the result of a psychological breakdown. I am told the breakdown was brought on by a border line personality disorder and certain factors such as a stressful work conditions and a bad marriage. I am also told that children inherit this disorder most often from their mothers, and I guess that makes sense. When I was five, my mother had her portrait painted as a Christmas gift to my grandfather, but she kept returning to pose for this artist, sometimes naked. She gave me milk and cookies and told me to wait in his living room, but sometimes I saw her walk from this man's bathroom without a stitch of clothing on. When my father found out about the affair, he sent Mother to a real old fashioned booby-hatch in Big Spring, a real bad State-funded place. She won't admit it now of course, and when I mentioned it to my doctor in front of my parents, they left without saying a word. But the good news is that I am painting again. Hooray! I hope you think that I have some talent. I've always felt I did: I just never had the chance, you know, to do anything with it.

Anyway, I hope that you will accept my sincere apologies, though I doubt that my actions deserve forgiveness. I am writing this letter to express my hope for your continued success in your career. You are a beautiful young man who deserves the best in life, and I know that only

good things will come to you. You are going to be a great star, probably one of the best. I am certain of it. Once again, I am truly sorry for all the problems that I caused.

Sincerely ☺,

Christine (Christi) Hutchinson

When she was done, my mother crumpled the letter and placed it back into the trashcan. “I recopied it and readdressed it. You can mail it tomorrow if you want.” She handed the clean sealed envelope to me and turned to go to bed.

I held onto it for several weeks. I even placed it in the mailbox, but retrieved it a couple of times. By the time I finally let go of it, it was dirty, the edges bent, but I sent it with extra postage to make sure it arrived.

Pumpjack

Andrew and Laura are thirty feet up. They are cousins and in love, or at least Laura is. She insists on Thursday afternoon sex, and so every week they climb a rusted ladder to the maintenance deck of the family's pumpjack, the only one still bobbing over a live oil well and the only place she thinks they are safe. From the ground, the pumpjack looks like a giant cartoon grasshopper with a painted face and twin rotors thick as jumper's thighs. The swaying body blocks the entangled couple from the road, though Andrew claims that they don't need to hide. He thinks that most people know, but he still parks his pickup truck at the base of the collection tanks so no one will see it.

Other pumpjacks are rusted in arthritic poses across the four-acre section, and sometimes they shudder in the wind. There are twenty of them—all dead, but Laura can still remember when the air around the entire field wavered with natural gas fumes. She can remember seeing the first derrick light from the home place right after her daddy and Andrew's father plowed under their cotton right after her mother died. She remembers spending all the time with her father, Andrew, and Andrew's father Silas when the oil companies came in. But Andrew can't remember.

"Well?" he clears his throat and makes an act of fumbling with the blanket. He keeps it in his pick-up cab and always brings it to lay over the deck. Laura ignores it. She also ignores him because he laughed at her when one of the ladder rungs broke and she fell back to the ground. The seat of her Levis is coated in mud and crude oil, and the smell makes her eyes water. When they were ten, she would've punched Andrew so hard he would've vomited, and then she would have told her father and they would have had a good laugh. Now, she sees very little of her father Lyndon, though she still lives in his

house. He is more secretive than she is, and he glares at her if she is home on Wednesday afternoons. Laura is certain that he doesn't know about her and Andrew, but she knows without any doubt that Andrew's father has found them out. Silas is in the High Plains nursing home after a stroke. But even then his face is still supple enough to register disgust when he sees his niece. For Andrew he attempts smiles, jerking his head in the direction of a pretty nurse named Mandy, who flirts with Andrew. He flirts back.

“You know,” Andrew says after clearing his throat again, “if I lit a match, those would be some real hot pants.”

“You don't say.” Laura kicks the platform with the toe of her work boot. When she turns, the wind nudges her dark hair from its ponytail. Her hair is thick, and she knows that it's Andrew's favorite thing about her. When they were thirteen, he was fascinated to discover that she washed it with Mane and Tail, a shampoo used for horses, though the family never owned livestock. He was watching her shower when he told her that he liked her hair best. This knowledge causes Laura to wear it long even though she is well over thirty.

Andrew reaches out and takes a handful of her hair in his fist and pulls her head back. At first Laura resists, tightening her grip on the rail, but then she allows herself to be pulled. She stomps her feet on the platform and the sound echoes. “I wish your hands were clean,” she says. She keeps her face turned straight ahead.

“They are,” Andrew says. “I have hand sanitizer in the truck. I scrubbed before I climbed.”

“Yeah, but then you climbed.”

Andrew smirks and pulls on the waist of her jeans. An oil splatter has run down the inseam of her right leg. “Your pants are ruined.”

“I can use them as rags.”

“I wonder about your underwear.” He slips his hand into the back of her pants into her panties. He grabs one cheek and squeezes.

“I can smell the rust on your hands,” Laura says as she tries to wiggle away from him. “Now, you’re getting rust all over my ass.”

“And such a pure-as-driven-snow ass it is.” Though his movement is restrained by her waistband, he attempts to spank her. Lane suddenly drives an elbow in his rib cage and frees herself from his grip.

Once when they were sixteen and goofing on Boone’s Strawberry Hill on another maintenance deck of another pumpjack, Andrew bet an entire bottle that she couldn’t hurt him. He was in training for football then, and sometimes Silas made him roughneck on the weekends. He had rolled up one sleeve and showed it to Laura, flexing and kissing his bicep.

“Go ahead,” he said, “show me what you got.”

Laura hit him so hard Andrew grabbed his arm.

“Is that all?” he said, and without warning, she socked him again, only harder. His entire body shifted on the platform and his cap fell off. He laughed and Laura punched him so that his nose ran.

“You’re gonna hurt yourself,” he said. He wasn’t smiling any more, and he asked to see her fist.

“No,” she said. She had had it poised and ready to strike again, but she saw Andrew’s cheeks begin to flush. She had watched the blush grow to claim his entire face, and she discovered the thing she loved most about him: those red cheeks. They were like Cupid’s on a Valentine’s Day card he had once given her in elementary school, a pristine candy-apple red that only appeared on Valentine’s Day. Everyone else gave her cards with Looney Tunes characters, but Andrew had given her an actual card with embossed letters and a real envelope. The other kids had seen the flashing red foil of the envelope’s liner, and they tried to make up songs where most of the words rhymed with cousin. Then one of the girls told one of the boys that Andrew and Laura took baths together and another sort of kidding began that the teacher had to break up. Both Laura and Andrew had blushed, and Laura had to own up to the fact that she had told Beth Grier she had painted Andrew’s penis green with a Marks-a-Lot a few years before.

As an adult, Andrew still looked cherubic when hurt or embarrassed. Laura knew it was the real reason he had never lasted on any rig crews. He claimed that the family’s position had made him into somewhat of a target and that he really didn’t like rough necking as a life’s choice anyway. Silas and her father had bought a few of their own rigs after so many of the early wells came in, and had started their own small business. Though it would never compete with the larger outfits, it was something, and Laura could imagine how a boss’s son might find himself the butt of jokes. Her father had sympathized, putting Andrew to work in the business trailer with Laura instead, even when Silas protested. He wanted Andrew to work his way up, learn the ropes, and think up different ways of drilling. He wanted the family’s name attached to something more than second-hand equipment. He wanted Andrew to use his degree. Andrew spent his

time in the office, leaning back in one of the swivel chairs and looking out the field side of the trailer, away from the rig. He wore clean pressed shirts and threw paper clips at Laura as she looked over the books or wrote out checks.

Laura knew Andrew simply couldn't bluff, even though he could fight well enough to win more than he lost. He fought all the time, a habit he picked up first in elementary school and then later when their classmates made kissing sounds and obscene gestures with their fingers. Laura had been the better fighter, even in high school when only a few of the boys reached her 6'3 height, but she let Andrew take the black eyes for both of them. The fights didn't change anything for Laura. She never had any friends in school: the stories about her and Andrew were shocking enough to keep potential friends away. She spent most of her time with her father and with Andrew when he was home. He always seemed to find someone to pal with—even if it was the twenty-one year old red neck still in high school. He even dated a couple of girls before Laura found out and beat him up herself. Andrew was just too sensitive.

Lately, the punches and jabs she means to be playful are fierce. Not only has Andrew been flirting with Nurse Mandy, but Laura suspects that he has stepped out with Jody Maines, a candidate for the High Plains Oil Queen title, and ex-rodeo queen who used to ride around an arena, the American flag in one hand, the Texas in another, the horse's reins in her mouth. As the Vice President of the High Plains Oilfield Association, Andrew is in a strategic position to help Jody win the crown. She has seen Jody—a hundred-and-forty pounds of boobs and stomach—caress her cousin's belt buckle as she flashes sparkling blue eyelids at him. She cannot be sure, though. Jody has cooed at Lyndon, the Association's president, leaning forward in low-cut tops. Laura has

shaken her finger at her father—in a mock warning manner, but to Andrew she has balled up a fist. “Don’t you even think about it,” she says and hits him as hard as she can on the shoulder.

It is Laura who finally spreads the blanket onto the deck. She has watched the red face, and she feels guilty. They undress side by side, and Andrew does not blink as she removes her breasts from each cup. He grasps one, squeezing until she slaps his hand away, and leaves a rust red hand print. He licks a thumb in an attempt to remove it, but he has not clipped the nail in a while and the edge leaves a broken circle as he traces over the puckered gooseflesh of her nipple. Laura shivers.

“Does that feel good?” Andrew says, applying more pressure.

“Not really.”

“Then why’d you get all shivery?”

“Because it’s my nipple. It’s sort of sensitive.”

“I should think you would enjoy it, then.” Andrew folds his thumb back into his palm and traces Laura’s breast with his index finger. When more goose bumps appear, he blows on her skin.

“I enjoy that.” Laura closes her eyes, but just as suddenly Andrew stops and starts unfastening his jeans. His eyes are focused on Laura’s breast where a pink welt has risen, and he doesn’t look at what he’s doing. He grabs his jeans and the elastic of his boxer shorts in both fists and jerks them down. His gesture is so forced that he rocks the platform, and Laura grabs a rail, avoiding his feet as he tugs the denim over his knees. With her other hand, she keeps the pile of clothes she has folded from falling.

“Easy,” she says. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Andrew has not removed his boots, and they get caught in his jeans. Laura notices the problem first and laughs. She tickles the flesh of his exposed thigh and then runs a fingernail beneath his boxers. “Payback’s a bitch, isn’t it,” she says.

“Just help me.”

“Maybe I will, and maybe I won’t.” Laura twirls a lock of pubic hair around a finger and pulls.

“Okay, Okay,” Andrew says. “I’m sorry.”

“Sure you are.” She works the pants far back enough so that she grips the sole of one shoe, but the denim curls in a tight ring at his ankles. Andrew does nothing to help. As she tries another angle, she thinks of Mandy who had to strip Silas when he got tangled in his wind suit. She cut him out with a pair of shears. Andrew and her father left the room, but Laura had held her uncle so he wouldn’t tip forward onto the floor. She had been embarrassed of his old man’s underwear that gapped over his thin legs, his balls visible from all sides. Silas grew agitated when he caught Laura staring. He struggled against her, and Mandy had asked Andrew into the room to take Laura’s place. Andrew’s hand had found its way onto Mandy’s ass. Laura’s father had snickered and said “That’s Andrew for you” and Laura had snapped at him, telling him to not be so crude and her father got mad and had followed her down the hallway and out into the parking lot. But when he caught up with her—she had been stretching her stride, almost running—he didn’t say anything. He told her to let Andrew be.

It occurs to Laura that Andrew has fucked Mandy by now, just as she figured he fucked Jody. Laura’s threats haven’t worked, and the thought makes her sick to her stomach, a sensation she has rarely felt. She was only slightly nauseated the first time

with Andrew in the family's deserted migrant barracks. They were fifteen, and though Andrew hadn't followed her into the old building for that purpose, Laura had suggested it for the very reason. She had laid out old feed sacks beforehand in a corner, and grabbed his crotch, the way she had seen a woman do it on a satellite channel. Andrew hadn't wanted to, even though he enjoyed watching her shower and play with herself. He even enjoyed kissing her, but he had initially been shy about his own nudity. When she pulled his pants down that first time, he locked his hands over his penis and turned his legs inward so that he stood before her pigeon-toed. She laughed and punched him in the stomach so he would grab his stomach instead.

The first time hadn't lasted long, of course. He had barely pushed into her before he was done and vomiting into a corner. She hadn't had time to think *This is my cousin* while it was going on. It had hurt too bad, and when she dabbed at the blood on her thigh, she was sick to her stomach more because she heard Andrew throwing up, not because she thought of him as a close relative. She couldn't get her mind around it when she tried to hug him, and he turned to her crying and shouting that she was his cousin. He had this look on his face like when he had seen a dog carcass left by a wildcat. The dog had been ripped open, throat to groin, and its organs were bloated and pink on the dirt. The wildcat had not eaten very much before it had been scared off. The coyotes hadn't eaten either, though their tracks said they had circled a couple of times. Not even the buzzards dipped down to the body, and Andrew had been terrified that the dog was still a dog and not skin and scattered bones. He had wanted to bury it, but he couldn't look at it long enough to grab its legs and lower it into a hole. Laura burned the dog when Andrew went to the truck and laid his head into his arms.

When she can't get Andrew out of his pants, Laura pushes him back. He says nothing, but he grabs her hips. Her hair comes out of the ponytail and hangs in his face. He doesn't brush her hair away, and he inhales so that a little of it is sucked into his nostrils and then out again. Laura's hair coils over his head so that he is covered completely. She tips forward-- rotating her hip—and bites him hard on the shoulder until he complains. She tries for blood, but he pinches her hip with equal pressure to make her stop. And she does, lifting her head to see sunlight glinting off the pump. She is so close that she can't focus, but she watches the blurred rivets anyway, her eyes crossing involuntarily.

She stays like that for a while, looking and not looking at the pump, moving enough to chafe her knees where the blanket has slipped when Andrew tries to lift her.

“Hey,” he says and slaps her ass when she doesn't respond.

“What?” She grabs her hair with both hands.

“There's someone coming,” Andrew says. He smiles.

“Uh, yeah,” Laura says. She giggles, but Andrew shakes his head.

“See for yourself.” He gestures out to the pumpjack field, and Laura sees a red pick-up turn off the caliche road onto their land.

“Shit,” Laura whispers. She covers her chest with one arm and pulls at Andrew's pants with the other.

Andrew doesn't move. He smiles up at her. “What's the rush?”

“It might be Dad,” she says. She struggles with the denim until it rips.

“So, I guess I've ruined a pair of jeans today, too,” Andrew says. He laughs, tries to catch Laura's eye, but she reaches for her clothes.

“Get dressed,” she says, struggling with her bra. She turns it so that the hook is in front, fastens it, and then twists it around. It’s looped, though, and she can’t get her arms in the shoulder straps. She twists the elastic until her bra makes two complete circles around her ribcage as she looks for the problem. Andrew unfastens it, straightens it for her, and holds the shoulder straps so she can fit one arm in at a time.

“Why don’t you ever put your underwear on first?” he says. He pulls his pants up to his waist very slowly and examines the tear.

Laura exhales as an answer, shakes her head.

“Seriously. Why not?”

“Do you really want to talk about this now?” Laura says. She is about to put her t-shirt on over her head, but she stops and grabs her panties. She stands, thinks better of it, afraid the pickup’s driver will see her, and she sits on a corner of the blanket.

“I just noticed. It seems like you would be more concerned about that,” he says and gestures in the direction of her crotch with a smile.

“Should I be concerned?”

“No.”

“Then what?” Laura lies down to pull her jeans on. “Why does it matter?”

“Well, the whole getting caught with your pants down thing.” Andrew buttons his jeans without looking and then zips the fly. “It just seems that you’d be more embarrassed to be that kind of naked.”

“And what about boobs? Boobs don’t matter.”

“They matter, but you can see them on TV, you know.” Andrew speaks as he pulls his t-shirt over his head, so his voice is muffled. “In magazines.”

Laura, dressed, except for her shoes, helps Andrew straighten his t-shirt so that it covers the rip. She looks back over her shoulder for the pickup. It fishtails down the turnrow in a large figure eight around two old pumpjacks. There hasn't been a rain in several months, so the dust cloud is solid and opaque red when the brake lights flash.

"Don't worry," Andrew says. He glances at the vehicle and back at Laura. "They can't see us."

"Yeah, but what are they doing here?" She starts to whisper. "Who is it?"

Andrew shrugs and speaks more loudly than normal. "Probably people wanting to get laid." He kicks her in the side until she turns to look at him. "You know."

"Yes, I know," Laura says, still whispering. The truck slows as it approaches their pumpjack. The headlights are on, so it's difficult to make out the driver, but Laura can hear the faint sound of music. "Just be quiet," she says.

"What?" Andrew cups a hand around his mouth, pretends to yell.

"Stop," Laura says. She forces a hand over his mouth.

Beneath her hand, Andrew mumbles. "It's not a big deal. Everyone knows."

"Shut up."

The truck's engine shuts off, and the driver opens the door slowly so there is a long, drawn out whine. Jody Maines steps out. Her blonde hair is rolled in large barrel curls, and she is wearing a rodeo queen outfit: black Wranglers and a snap-front western shirt with red sequined roses curling across her chest. Her torso is ample, but she has tucked her stomach into her jeans, fastened with a silver conch belt. Jody puts her hands in her back pocket and rocks back and forth. She glares up at the pumpjack, but she doesn't act as if she sees Andrew or Laura.

“It doesn’t look that high to me,” she says. She turns to the passenger seat. “It doesn’t look like that high to me at all.”

Laura’s father opens the passenger door and steps down from his seat. He is wearing a shirt similar to Jody’s except that the red sequins form flames instead of roses. The thin flap of hair over his scalp is hardened with Brylcreem, and he wears a large turquoise-studded belt buckle. He slams the door behind him, placing his free hand on his stomach.

Laura can tell he is holding his gut in. She turns to Andrew, who refuses to look at her, and then back to her father. His boots are polished, his pants freshly pressed so that the crease is straight and white all the way down to the hem.

“You’ll change your mind once you get up there,” Lyndon says. He looks at Jody instead of the pumpjack.

“I doubt it.”

“Get with it then.” Lyndon says.

Jody makes a show of prancing to the pumpjack ladder, wiggling her hips, and when Lyndon whistles, she runs to him and kisses him on his bare forehead.

“What are you looking at, old man,” she says, tracing a finger along his belt buckle.

Lyndon looks at the ground and clears his throat. “I don’t know,” he says finally, and then reaches back into the pickup bed to lift out a blanket. The gesture is clumsy. He bumps Jody so that she stumbles and brushes up against the truck’s side. Laura is certain that he is blushing, though she is not close enough to tell. She taps Andrew on the shoulder, but his eyes are closed.

“Did you know about this?” she whispers. Andrew doesn’t act like he hears, and the skin at the corner of his eyes crinkles as he clamps his eyelids tighter together.

Lyndon drops the blanket into the dirt, and when he and Jody both bend to retrieve it, they bump heads.

“I’m sorry,” Lyndon says. He opens the truck door, blanket now unfolded, and climbs back in.

“You do this every time,” Jody says. She puts her hand on the door so that if he closes it, he will crush her hand. “It’s ok.”

Lyndon says something that Laura can’t understand, and then she sees him shake his head in silhouette from inside the cab.

“Oh, no you don’t.” Jody plants her feet in the dirt and tugs on his arm. She is successful in dragging him partially out of the truck. Lyndon is laughing now, allowing himself to be pulled, and when Jody jerks her head at the blanket, he grabs it in one hand.

“There you go,” Jody says speaking calmly as if to a horse. “Easy now.” She pretends to pull him toward the pumpjack. “Easy.”

“Andrew,” Laura says. She smacks his forehead with an open palm, not loud enough to make a sound, but hard enough to make him open his eyes.

Andrew looks at her and cringes. “Yes,” he says. “I knew about it.”

Laura opens her mouth, then closes it. Andrew shrugs.

Lyndon is following Jody, towing the blanket in the dirt. When she gets to the ladder, Jody turns, and Lyndon moves his hand to her hip. “Now you keep it right there,” she says.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Laura stands as Jody puts a foot onto the first rung. “What are you doing?” she yells.

Jody freezes with one foot poised on the ladder and her hands gripping the rail. Lyndon’s hand stays where it is, but he doesn’t look up.

“What are you doing?” Laura says again. She hovers over the ladder so that her hair droops into masses on either side of her neck.

“Hey, Jody,” Andrew says. He stands beside and little behind Laura.

“Hey, Andy.” Jody lowers her foot back to the ground and drops her hands. She looks at Laura. “How are you?”

“Good. And you?”

“Never better.” Jody smiles without showing teeth or blinking. “Laura.”

“Jody,” Laura says.

Lyndon removes his hand from Jody’s ass and starts to fold the blanket. Laura can tell now that he’s blushing.

“What are y’all doing out here?” Jody says moving her hands to her hips. Lyndon clears his throat again.

Laura doesn’t answer. She looks back at Andrew who speaks for her, “Pumpjack riding.”

Jody laughs too loud. Laura notices that her eye teeth are very white as compared to the rest of her smile. “Oh. Pumpjack riding.” She looks to Lyndon, but the scowl on his face forces her to stop laughing so she turns back to Andrew and Laura. “Pumpjack riding.”

“Yeah,” Laura says. She flips her hair behind her shoulders, but it falls back.

“Why didn’t you ever take me pumpjack riding, Andy?” Jody says. She raises an eyebrow, purses her lips.

Lyndon grips her upper arm. “We’re leaving,” he says.

Jody shakes Lyndon off. “Why not, Andy?”

Andrew laughs and pretends to scratch his head. “Well…”

Lyndon finally looks up and meets Laura’s eyes. He isn’t frowning anymore, and the corner of his lips jerk in a brief smile as he glances at Andrew and then to her. She feels sick to her stomach.

“Laura, why does Andy only take you pumpjack riding?” Jody says. She is almost purring now.

“Jesus, Jody,” Laura says. She moves so suddenly that one of her shoes falls from the platform and onto the ground by Jody. “It’s just pumpjack riding.” She climbs easily onto the pump from the platform. Her long arms and legs wrap around the neck of the machine and she slides from side to side trying to maintain her balance. The gears stall, then work to support the extra weight, moving faster than before. Laura crosses her ankles and wrists, and lays the side of her face against the metal top. Her cheeks are smudged with grease, her mouth is slack.

“Laura,” Andrew yells. He reaches out to touch her, but he is too hesitant and only brushes a boot. Laura doesn’t answer. She doesn’t even blink. The metal is cold on her face and the world bounces in her vision. She knows she should close her eyes so she won’t be sick but she can’t. She can make out Jody’s spangles and her father’s flames. She can see one of Andrew’s red cheeks.

She remembers when Silas and her father plowed over the last cotton crop and disked the field flat so that a series of semis could transport the derrick in in pieces. The tower was up within twenty-four hours, splitting the horizon. She and Andrew came every day after school to stare up at it and the men climbing the ladders. She held his hand when a roughneck wiggled thick eyebrows at her and climbed onto a platform with a lit cigarette hanging from his mouth. He turned to her every minute or so to wave and tip the ashes as he climbed higher and higher. When the well finally came in, there were only a few spurts of liquid and Uncle Silas said, "Is that all?" A pumpjack replaced the derrick and lasted ten years.

Laura is not immediately aware that Andrew straddles the pumps and clasps her jeans. He is trying to pull her back onto the platform, but he can't get a good grip. He reaches for her waist and belt, but her legs are too long even as they are folded around the machine. Lyndon shouts up at them, pacing on the ground.

Andrew finally grabs a belt loop, but Laura gags and slips. She dangles on the pump by her thick arms, her eyes closed and her mouth held in a thin slash across her face. Andrew calls to her, but she falls to the ground just out of the way of the pump's trajectory. She is disoriented, shaking and kicking, not sure where to move, and Andrew is airborne.

He breaks his ankle when he lands, but he doesn't know it because as soon as he hits the ground he is pulling Laura away. Jody and Lyndon rush to help, each lifting a corner of her body and transferring her to Jody's truck. Andrew rubs at a speck of oil on her face, but smears it instead. When he tries to kiss her, she pushes him away, looking at her father.

“Are you sick?” she says. She balls up a fist and hits him as hard as she can in the gut. He bends over, almost to his knees. “I’m your cousin,” she yells. “Your cousin.” When Andrew looks at her again, his face is white. Jody puts an arm around his shoulders, and he rests his weight on her as he turns and limps away.

“It’s okay, Laura,” Lyndon whispers. He covers her in the blankets, tucking it up around her chin. “I knew,” he says. “We’ve all known.” He pats her shoulder, feeling for broken bones, and then follows Laura’s gaze as she watches Andrew and Jody vanish around the pumpjack and the collection tanks to his truck. As he drives away, the fumes from his exhaust pipe thicken, distorting the horizon. The motionless pumpjacks clench and unfurl beyond the exhaust cloud, seemingly in motion to Laura. She thinks they look like flowers straining open to the sky.

Slice

Cass cut her hand with the jagged edge of an aluminum can. She was at her father's house, checking on his cats, and she had confronted the pantry of Fancy Feast cans with an old-fashioned opener, the scary kind with the two handles. He had at least three electric can openers, their cords wrapped tightly around them, sitting on the upright deep freezer, but none of them worked. She tried each one, climbing onto a kitchen chair to retrieve them and wash them, but the only response she received was the single hissing spark of oldest model when it was plugged into the outlet.

She imagined her father, Jake, had arranged this particular cat feeding event as a joke, retrieving each dud device from the back of the pantry where her late mother, an unrepentant pack rat, had disposed of them. She saw her father, his gelled, grey hair unmovable beneath the ceiling fan, as he arranged the can openers in a precise line. He would have held his breath as if any premature laughter would have foiled the prank, his thin lips pulled back to reveal a missing tooth. He had probably also driven to Sam's Club to buy wholesale pallets of canned cat food just so that the task would seem more intimidating and ridiculous.

He did things like that, but normally Cass was in on the fun. Jake's new woman, Bea, had changed things, though. Bea, with her snorting laugh and discount card to Wally's Wacky Joke World, had fascinated Jake. They played jokes together, and Bea left anatomically-correct troll dolls as her calling card. Cass had found one nestled in the cardboard center of a toilet paper roll, and the panty drawer in her apartment. She had also found one in her purse when she hadn't seen Bea all day, and her father had shaken his head and said with a smile, "That Bea."

It wasn't that Bea was the first woman since Cass's mother, Bonnie, to serve as a buddy. Jake and Bonnie had never been buddies. When Jake had played one of his jokes on his late wife, her eyes had grown wider than they already were behind her thick glasses, as if she couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry. She would grip the material of one of the wind suits she donned in later life and look between husband and daughter for some sign of the sort of reaction she should present, a gesture itself that was hilarious to Jake and Cass. Bonnie would move her neck so that it seemed to stretch from her bulky wind suit collar like the neck of startled turtle. To Jake and Cass, this move was called the "nervous turtle."

No, Cass's problem with Bea was that Cass had always held the buddy role. She had been the sidekick since she was old enough to ride Jake's routes with him, delivering experimental cotton seed to farm supply stores. Later as she grew up, she played on the same bowling league with her father, and Jake would correct Cass's stance, advise her how to line up, and poke fun of the senior bowlers as they zigzagged across the lanes. Father and daughter alternated buying each round of beer during the night, a favor they didn't extend to the other members of their team.

So normally, Jake would have gone to Inn of the Mountain Gods to gamble with Cass. The yearly trip had become a custom after Bonnie's sudden death, but this year, Jake had invited Bea instead. He hadn't even told Cass until a few days before he left, and then he had made a joke about it so that Bea laughed in her great snorting way that was surprising because Bea didn't look like a jokester. She wore long calico dresses and dainty heels, and she played the pipe organ in one of the big Baptist churches in town, but Cass thought that Bea would probably be naked at some point during the trip. She figured

that she looked much the same way her troll dolls did—very round with very correct genitalia.

Cass had said she was too busy to go to New Mexico anyway. She said she had to work through the weekend and that she could only stop by in the evenings. It was a very obvious lie. She had asked off six months in advance from the Falwell Seed Distribution Company where she answered phones and still rode the routes with Jake. But she promised to drop by the house and watch Jake’s satellite television. She was alone, except for the cats—when she lost her grip on the Fancy Feast can, and the lid sliced across her empty palm.

Cass stared at her left hand. The blood didn’t immediately appear. She wasn’t sure exactly what to call the period that followed when she regarded her pierced flesh and felt the pain as a tingle in the nail bed of her big toe. Those moments seemed like full minutes, but she was sure they were seconds. Her first instinct in her father’s house, her childhood home, was to call her mother, and she did, yelling “Mommy,” so that her voiced echoed. The cats—three large, half feral males—looked at her from various pieces of furniture, ears turned backwards. Jake had simply opened the door to let them in, and then had given them the run of the house. They clawed up her mother’s good upholstery without fear of punishment, and they peed on her father’s pillow when slighted.

She thought of Bonnie—dead almost five years—and she thought she saw her emerge from a corner, a doll in her hand. Bonnie had seemed to have an endless supply of cheap dolls herself, dolls she produced when Cass was sick or hurt or simply not paying her mother much attention. These bribes had been a distinctive part of their

relationship, and when Cass was very little, she had found comfort in the dolls as if her mother were present. It was soothing, just as it was seeing Bonnie without her thick glasses—seeing her as real and not distorted. Bonnie’s eyes were small and blue. There was a flaw in one of her irises that was somehow not noticeable behind the big lenses, and to Cass it was the loveliest thing about her.

She felt she could conjure her mother right then, but instead she remembered the location of her favorite doll—a knock-off Strawberry Shortcake doll called Raspberry Tart. Bonnie had bought it for her in an Allsup’s outside of Ruidoso after a long stretch of mountain highways without gas stations or trees or even road shoulders for stopping. The doll was a reward for peeing in a very small Styrofoam cup that was thrown out the car window, off the side of a mountain. Jake had refused to even look for a stopping point, and Bonnie had held her hands up to block his eyes as Cass filled the cup. Cass had imagined the cup flying through the brisk air, startling small animals as its contents splashed the ground. She had been ashamed, but Raspberry Tart, despite her cellophane packaging and mismatched eyes, had made up for the scent of urine in the van and Bonnie’s hand against Jake’s face. The doll also had hot pink underpants that glowed in the dark.

Cass carried Raspberry Tart with her for years, longer than any of the others, and she dressed her in various ill-fitting costumes, attempting to balance out her eyes with a marker, and coiffing her rough hair braids that always came undone within an hour. Perhaps most important, though, Raspberry was the holy icon that kept whatever was in the closet from creeping into bed with her. The doll, her arms and body forming an imperfect cross, faced the closet door and watched all night from her place in the crook of

Cass's neck. Raspberry was taken on errands and trips. She was almost abandoned at a Motel 6 in Albuquerque until Cass's crying forced her parents to backtrack, losing two hours of travel time to reclaim her. When they arrived, the cleaning lady's daughter was swinging Raspberry Tart by her pink hair, and a fight between the two girls was avoided by Bonnie taking a crinkled twenty dollar bill from the very bottom of her pocket and pressing it into the maid's hands. The woman frowned when she felt the bill, and she clutched it between two fingernails as she dropped it into a pocket on her apron.

And then a few days before Cass's twelfth birthday, Raspberry vanished. Cass was still in the habit of taking the doll to school and placing her on her desk as a charm against bullies or ridicule. The loss was difficult, and Cass drew pencil crosses on her desk around the place she took up by leaning her head into the cradle of her arms.

She searched through closets and storage bins, and finally, she moved into Bonnie's hope chest. Instead of Raspberry, she found a book under Bonnie's varsity jacket called *God's Special Gift to You: Sex Talk for Teens, the Christian Way*. The book was new, without the wear of something Bonnie would have owned as a teenager, so Cass believed it was for her. On the book's cover a young girl and boy held hands with small hearts floating around their heads like halos. Inside were detailed pencil renderings of sex parts, pages with large print, boldface words and breakaway text boxes with prayers for teens to use in times of such moral crises as the sudden and unavoidable appearance of an erection.

Cass hid the book beneath her mattress, not looking at the drawings of the men but at the women. There were charts that showed the same girl as she progressed through God's plan—her hands on her hips, legs wide and firmly planted on the ground, one

eyebrow cocked as if to say “Get a good look.” Also the girl’s breasts grew so large that, by the last image, she looked like she would snap in half. It was this picture of the woman that made Cass forget Raspberry Tart, at least for a while. She explored the important areas below her underoos, careful to not let her finger stay for too long before she moved back over the material, before she felt as if she had peed her pants, a near sin according to *God’s Special Gift to You*. Cass held the legging elastic of her panties between her thumb and her index finger until the wrong feeling went away, and then she searched her soft skin again, amazed and a little proud that she had flesh so soft it felt like the fake silk of one of Raspberry’s costumes. She dog-eared the page with the girl’s mature picture, and went back to it so much that the book automatically opened right to it.

When *God’s Special Gift to You* also vanished, Cass went back to her mother’s hope chest and looked to the forbidding boxes and old purses covered in lint and crammed together. Cass realized that had she not found the book the first time, she would have found Raspberry. The doll was tucked into a canvas bag with Bonnie’s old girl scout bottle cap projects and an old massage wand with a very long cord. *God’s Special Gift to You* was there as well, its covers wrinkled from being stuffed under the mattress so many times. Bonnie must have found it when she was changing Cass’s sheets, and as the book flopped open to the favorite page, Cass was embarrassed. She put the book back into the bag. She considered taking Raspberry, but the genderless nub between the doll’s legs was not as interesting as what the book girl had, though the thought deepened Cass’s shame. She dropped Raspberry back into the bag, piled her

mother's yearbooks on top and squashed everything down so she could close the lid, and then she forgot until she sliced her hand open.

*

The blood finally rose from between the wound's two edges, and the sliced skin opened to reveal the very pink underlying tissue. Cass walked to the sink, her vision rimmed by stars, not from the pain that now throbbed into her hand, but from the idea that she cut down so far. She closed her eyes again and rolled her head back as she turned on the faucet. The pipes bumped before the water emerged first in a trickle and then with all-out pressure. Cass ran cuss words together as her mother did when angry—all senseless combinations like *fuckdamn* and *shittitty*—and then she prodded the wound wider to allow more water to flow in. Pink water trickled down her wrist and into the sink without a sign of slowing. She considered the lid where it has fallen on the old linoleum and wondered if it looked rusted. She would probably have to get a tetanus shot along with stitches.

Cass groaned and wrapped her left hand in a dishtowel that was immediately stained bright red. She walked to the bathroom to fuss with peroxide and gauze and large Band-Aids and found a troll doll crammed inside the medicine cabinet. Somehow, antibiotic ointment from an old tube had rubbed against the troll so it was glossy and slick. Cass left it on the ground where it fell. She sat on the edge of the bathtub, holding her hand over her wound so that she wouldn't drip on the carpet. She then bent her arm and lifted it above her chest. The pulse in her palm slowly calmed, and she watched a drop of blood travel down her arm, thicken and dry. One of Jake's cats peered around the corner and sniffed, and Cass kicked the wall so that it would go away.

Cass wondered about telling her father, but she thought that detailing the story to him would be too weird. She knew that the conversation would be a statement or two and then silence and she couldn't imagine phrasing a sentence so that Jake would understand about the doll. She envisioned him staring straight ahead, bald forehead wrinkled. "You said a doll?" he would ask in such a way that his mouth would stay open after he spoke. "I don't remember your mother having any dolls." He would listen as Cass tried to explain, but he would pace through the living room and back to the kitchen. She would hear his heavy footfalls on the hard wood floor, and she would say "OK?" suddenly and Jake would be silent for several seconds, and then he would laugh and finally say something like, "Your mother threw a pee cup out the window? Damn."

Bonnie had been the glue figure between them. When the three of them were together, Cass and Jake talked and made fun at Bonnie's expense. Her thick glasses, her pack rattling, her change to track suits to accommodate her weight were things they held for ridicule, even when Bonnie wasn't present. She had put up with it, and sometimes she tried to kid back, but she wasn't good at humor, and most often she made the wrong things funny. The jokes were the only conversations that father and daughter had. Important and trivial everyday matters were passed through Bonnie, so that her sudden death forced Cass and Jake alone together for the first time. The funeral arrangements hadn't been difficult as the mortuary director had been present and had provided opportunities for amusement—a large bust that hung to the waistline of her slacks and a large mole in the middle of her forehead. After the funeral though, they found they could not have conversations about insurance money or Bonnie's things without having an argument that sent Cass back to her apartment.

Jake tried to compensate early on by bringing girlfriends around to Cass. The women, intimidated by Cass's hostility, her resentment that Jake had started dating again so soon, wouldn't talk to her. Cass would fall back into the old joke pattern by pointing out physical flaws. Jake, playing along in the familiar way, lost several female friends. He even started asking Cass about a boyfriend she had once had, asked if she wanted to bring him to Christmas, and she would tell him that they hadn't dated in over five years. The conversation would end.

At Bonnie's funeral, Cass had to be removed from the chapel because she just stared at her mother in the casket during the service. She hadn't been crying, she had just walked up the aisle and stood over Bonnie without blinking. She couldn't connect the woman lying there with her mother. The curves of Bonnie's full face had flattened, looking plastic and shiny under the light. The glasses she had been wearing during the wreck were bent forward from the nose piece, so Jake had found an old pair so she would look like herself. But the frames didn't fit her face. They sat crookedly on her cheekbones, one rim not even touching her skin, and though the makeup had covered most of the deep cut at her hairline, there was an edge of the wound that still visible. The minister had stopped the service until an aunt took Cass by the elbow and led her out a side door. Cass looked over her shoulder one more time before the wind sucked them out into the clear day, their dark dresses flapping.

*

Cass unwrapped the towel and examined her palm. Darkened blood still oozed from it, but the flow had slowed and hardened. When she touched a drop, she was surprised that it didn't smear. She walked back to the kitchen and saw that all three cats

were gathered around the spot of blood, taking turns lapping it up. She stomped the ground, and though the animals sniffed the air in her direction, they crouched more decidedly in place, the very tips of their tails flicking.

Cass picked up the can opener. She tested its weight before dropping it into the sink, and then she opened the knife drawer, pulling each of the specialty knives out of the organizer. At the bottom of the tray was one of Bea's dolls. The plastic had been molded so that the doll had large breasts, horribly pointed nipples, and a cleft between the thick legs. A small note had been taped across the buttocks that read, "J—You are sharp!"

Cass put the troll back where she found it. She ran the index finger of her right hand over the knife blades until she found what she thought to be the sharpest—a new, large filet knife with a grey handle. She eased it into her left hand and, one by one, wrapped each of her fingers around it. She hefted it, twisting her wrist so that the sunlight glinted off the blade and practiced chopping against a wooden cutting board.

When Cass sliced her right hand, the pain didn't creep up her leg from her big toe. The blood appeared immediately from a cut that spanned her entire hand, and she found that she couldn't clasp her fingers into a fist. She closed her eyes, not even bothering to swear, and she waited for Bonnie to arrive again, her blue eyes large behind her glasses. She wanted her mother to give her one of her dolls as she smiled with a quick jerk of her lips. Cass breathed hard and expanded her chest. She tried to decipher her mother among the dark shadows of her eyelids, but she couldn't. Instead, she smelled the sharpness of the blood rushing down her fingers and onto the floor. Cass opened her eyes and saw that her right hand was covered. The wound of her left hand seeped as well, staining the knife handle and throbbing more intensely than before. She dropped the knife onto the floor

and held both palms out in front of her. She was fascinated by how thoroughly the pain coursed through her entire body in a circuit, cumulating in the trickle from beneath the skin flaps, only to start again and with more strength.

Cass stood like that for several minutes to see what would happen. She considered whether she would bleed out, but both wounds staunched, the blood congealing as she stared. Then she coaxed open the dish towel drawer with both pinky fingers. Cass bandaged each hand very carefully so that it looked as if she was wearing boxing gloves, with just part of her fingers sticking out. She nudged her car keys from her purse, a difficult task. The cats moved to the other blood stain.

The Holiness

For the eighteen months before she was arrested, Lydia James stood each Sunday in front of the Light of the Angelic Order Church and read my mother's sermons. Though she added her own flourishes like winking or drawing up on tip toe so that her bulk stretched heavenward, every word and gesture was my mother's, copied from memory or studied from Mother's records. These notes, along with the sermons, were written in a 1980s-style spiral notebook that I had originally chosen for the iridescent kitten on the cover. I was in the second grade when Mother's idea for the Light took hold. She appropriated the spiral, turning the page from my first attempts at cursive to start her own doxology, a catchy Coca-Cola-like jingle that caught on quickly with her first parishioners. Every page of the spiral was filled, and along with the sermons were the lists and columns that denoted the most generous of her believers.

Lydia used the notebook instead of a Bible. She walked it around her pulpit, thumped it with her red knuckles, and slapped it against the podium for effect. The noise echoed in the small Holiday Inn Express conference room and shook the stacks of coffee cups arranged by the hotel staff as part of the room rental fee. Occasionally, Lydia was so intense in her imitation of Mother that the force of her voice pushed creamer containers off the beverage cart, but most of the time her delivery was lacking. She had no instinct for crescendo, and the coffee pot gurgled over her voice. People at the back of the room complained that they couldn't hear. But most people watched her carefully, their palms open on the tops of their thighs as if catching her message.

From the side of the room, where I leaned one hip against the wall, I could watch parishioners watch Lydia. As she led them in the first song, a hymn from the standard

Baptist Hymnal, chosen for its familiarity—something like “Standing on the Promises of God, Number 356”—she shifted her weight from side to side in time with the song’s tempo, half pivoting on her patent leather flats so that the fat on her hips jiggled beneath the thin material of her dresses. She wore the same floral dresses Mother had—cheap polyester pastels—and like Mother, she didn’t wear a slip or girdle. Though some of the old time matrons had been scandalized by my mother’s exclusion, she explained it as a conscious spiritual decision to ply her heft for Godliness. One of her early sermons on femininity had made the point that the more things women put on to be attractive, to contain the girth of their thighs, kept the Light from the skin. Mother had stopped short of promoting nudity as a life choice, but she had encouraged her lady followers to enjoy their flesh and to make it grow. Like Mother, Lydia moved so that her bulk was evident. She wiggled, she hopped, and she stretched her legs so that fabric pressed and pulled around her body. But, the first hymn was just her warm-up. She shuffled slowly, never moving from the makeshift podium, and then she closed her eyes suddenly to end the song.

Lydia kept this position, her eyelids painted bright glitter blue, and started to speak. “One day, a sinner was stranded on the side of the interstate, in the middle of nowhere. It was a hot day, and this sinner, a young mother, worried about the heat and her child, decided to find a phone. This was before cell phones, folks, and since no one with any sense seemed to be driving along the same road as our sinner, she decided to take child in hand and walk.”

At this point, Lydia opened her eyes. They were as blue as her eye shadow. She looked into each face of her congregation without blinking, and then she started walking.

She paced the front of the conference room from wall to wall, jerking her head so that her blonde hair curled and teased around her ears rippled.

“They walked for a long time, y’all. And the child started to cry and demand to be carried, so the sinner carried her, but she was only so strong, and before long the child started to sag and cry again so that the sinner got mad and threatened the child, which only made the situation worse. But they still walked, and they got blisters and the sinner’s feet started to bleed because she was wearing foolish shoes designed for vanity. The child even sat down, refused to go farther. The sinner thought how foolish it was that they should suffer this way—mother and child—and almost as soon as she entertained the thought, she saw a building she hadn’t seen before and she almost ran to it to get out of the sun. It was an old country church, run down and abandoned, the preacher sitting in the doorway. He had lost his congregation and his faith and he offered to sell her the church.

“Most of us would turn tail and run, right?” Lydia spread her arms wide scrunched her eyebrows in a ridiculing way. Some of the grey-haired women snickered, and Lydia inserted one of several jokes she had created for the occasion. “I mean, who of us would accept such an offer, especially from a strange man in the middle of nowhere? In the middle of one of those West Texas summers? I certainly wouldn’t. I don’t even accept the free samples at Wal-Mart, and those are God-fearing, old grandmothers.”

The entire congregation laughed together, some members clapping hands, and one old woman would raise her hand as if to be called on and play along, “Who are you calling old?”

The people in the room usually laughed louder, and Lydia made a gesture at a belly laugh, bending backwards with both hands on her stomach as if she were pregnant.

“Well, Sister Josette, I don’t mean you of course. I mean those grannies at the old Wal-Mart, the one off Quaker and the Loop. The ones that don’t have any teeth. I don’t take food from toothless people. It seems like a trap.”

At this point, the small room echoed with laughter, men and women laughed together, and the children present look at the faces of the adults and imitated the open mouths and closed eyes. Lydia looked at me, her lips spread wide across her face in so violent a smile that her nose turned red and her nostrils quivered. She smoothed her skirt as if brushing out wrinkles and waits. The congregation rocked in their amusement, nodding to one another at the joke. I could hear a few voices repeat Lydia’s punch line incorrectly, and their neighbors try to insert the right words into the equation, but they get it wrong as well. Lydia waited as one by one, her audience sighed and stopped laughing, turning their attention to her or their Bibles. When the only thing she heard was the drip of the coffee machine she cleared her throat.

“But that sinner,” she yelled. “That sinner saw something in that church. She saw that the light hadn’t gone out of it entirely, even though its pastor had lost his light. She saw the Light of the Angelic Order and it was strong, so strong that it started an entire new ministry, brought hundreds of people to Christ, and so strong that the light could not be contained in so small a space. That first church burned and forced the sinner out into the world, forced her to bring the light to other people all over the world until the Light consumed her too.

“But now the Light has come back home,” Lydia said. She raised her right hand, slightly shaking by design, and pointed in my direction. The congregation shifted as a unit and looked at me, their aluminum chairs groaning as they adjusted their weight. I leaned against the wall, arms crossed over my chest. I wore a modified version of the costume I once donned as a child, a long white robe—no emblems or embellishment—that dragged the ground and had to be dry cleaned every Monday. My feet were bare and my dark hair hung in long plaits down my back. The robe hid the hips I inherited from my mother and the breasts that never came in. I most often had a fever blister in the corner of my mouth and or some scab on my hands or arms.

The parishioners looked me over, and I gazed over their heads at a line of cheap Audubon knock-off prints. One showed a heron with mismatched legs and a green, human eye.

“The Holiness,” Lydia announced in a whisper. The first time she introduced me, Lydia said it so quietly that an old man in the back yelled “I’m sorry, what?” But once she mastered the concept of the stage whisper, and though her congregation knew that it was coming, they waited for it. They didn’t acknowledge me until she did, and they didn’t react to my introduction until the word “holiness” floated onto the stale, recycled air, and then everyone present—young as well as old—exhaled a loud breath not quite a sigh or a gasp, but something in between. I lifted the hem of my robe, revealing that both of my second toes were longer than the big ones, as I took my place next to Lydia, who bowed slightly so that her blue eyelids flashed. When I finally spoke, I spoke in an even tone.

“Look,” I said. “My mother made all this up. She took money from the collection to live on. She burned down the old church to collect the insurance money. We moved around a lot, and when she died of cancer last year, I decided to return what was left. That’s it. I can’t pay back everything, but I can give something back.” I hold out the checkbook I also inherited from Mother, the account she opened when she started the Light of the Angelic Order, and I said “I’m sorry.”

There was silence. The old women frowned, their mouths angry slashes across their faces, and the men brushed the hair of their comb-overs first one way and then another. The younger people of my generation –and Lydia’s—narrowed their eyes, tongues clicked against cheeks, and even the children are focused, faces screwed up to mimic the adults. Lydia decided that the silence should last a full minute, no less. She counted the time in her head, her gaze settled on me with the rest of the congregation, then yelled, “What do we say? Were we tricked in our faith? Are we those people?”

The audience roared *no* all together, and Lydia picked up the slack of that long minute. “Of course not. We know the Light. We are the Light. Show the Holiness we are the Light.” At this point there was dancing, spinning, a general speaking in tongues, and I returned to my place against the wall.

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My name is Angelina Roy. I have had many names—names my mother chose as we moved around, and later, names I concocted myself because they sounded interesting: Anabelle, Julie, Lisette, Billie Jean. But my name, the name my mother gave me was Angelina. Some of her parishioners thought I was a child of an immaculate conception in Lubbock County, though of course, this is one rumor Mother didn’t spread. I was born

years before the Light took shape, and Mother was never coy or ashamed of her sexual past. She openly admitted to her affairs, but she never mentioned names. I don't know my father's first name, nor have I ever seen him.

When I was a child, I appeared in services in a white robe that folded onto the stage despite being hemmed. The parishioners formed two lines, approached me to safety pin checks and cash money to the robe. They never kissed my bare feet or met my eyes but a few clutched at my robe as Mother grasped their heads between her hands and spoke over them in tongues, something easy to fake, and a comfortable tactic to fall back on when in trouble. If someone crossed their arms and doubted, Mother rolled her eyes back into her head, swished saliva in her mouth so that it foamed from her lips, and then spat a series of hard consonant sounds into the air. She learned the performance from watching her own mother convulse with very real epileptic seizures in public places. As a young girl, my mother had the responsibility of putting a mouthpiece in my grandmother's mouth and guarding her pocket book from theft. Her purse had been stolen, at the First Baptist Church of all places, and so once Mother was old enough to understand the situation, she placed purse straps over her shoulder and crooked her arm so that the bag couldn't be removed. I imagine her unruly hair coaxed into a hair ribbon with Spray Net and a lot of backcombing, her crinoline slips forming a perfect circle of lycra and netting over her knees.

Nothing in her late 1950s girlhood indicated that my mother would become a self-proclaimed prophetess, though of course, she did borrow heavily from her lax religious training when she created the Light. An only child, she attended church and sat between her parents, who took turns jabbing her in the ribs if she tried to close her eyes or mouth

something to a girlfriend. She did however, look forward to the few Sundays during the year when the preacher's wife would dress up like Minnie Pearl and perform a Grand Ole Opry parody with the signature "Howdee!" Part of the comedy was that the wife was the exact physical opposite of Minnie Pearl—very short and very obese. Mother admired the way that the wife would hold onto her time on the pulpit as long as possible, even when her husband, Brother John, had to take her by the arm to get her to return to the pew. She liked that Sister Nancy almost broke into dance as she was led away, shocking the Baptist anti-dance sensibilities with a hip wiggle. Mother often started her sermons this way—one explosive shout—and in the 70s and 80s it was still possible to appreciate the Pearl allusions. But even though most of the Light congregation of the new century was aware of Minnie Pearl, they no longer found her funny, so Lydia dropped the particular opener from her programs.

Mother also attended Sunday school as a child. She created the usual construction paper arks and nativities, and she won third place in the Baptist Bible Verse Competition when she was twelve. The contest was a rapid fire fight where the parents stood on the sidelines, red faced and slobbering at their children. She was baptized when she was thirteen, and once dowsed her requisite white robe was translucent. Her underclothes were visible to the entire congregation, so when the minister helped her down from the baptismal, the male parishioners sat rigid in their seats and said "Amen" more loudly than the ladies. For Mother, these were the moments that defined her spiritual life—colorful animals and adult attention, and perhaps for this reason, she had no qualms in exploring sin in intimate ways.

She was the easy girl in high school and beyond, the one who was never attractive or especially skilled in sexual matters, but who was generous and discreet. For those reasons she was never called bad names or forced to carry a bad reputation, and she almost single-handedly provided the first sexual encounters for an entire generation of town boys. The messages in her yearbooks pointed to her careful popularity with her male classmates. Their handwriting was neat and graceful, more like girl's cursive with hearts and smiling faces around the letters "b," "p," and "o." From pictures I've seen, she wore tight Rockabilly skirts over her thick hips with saddle shoes and bobby socks because she didn't like high heels. She did like chemistry and algebra and only the second semester of geometry because it involved proofs, and she was voted Most Courteous during her senior year.

My mother had been born in late in my grandparents' lives, at a time when they thought they were beyond children. Her raising was marked by their exhaustion and their evening naps in front of the television, heads resting on arms resting on TV trays. Grandfather Logan worked his own land, witched his own irrigation wells with real divining rods instead of a two pronged stick. In the time I knew him before his death, he told me he no longer needed the rods to find water veins beneath the earth. He claimed the vibrations tickled his nose hair. He had a degree in Agronomy, and his neighbors envied him because he could work out the equations to complicated chemical reactions in a notebook he kept in the back pocket of his Levis.

My grandmother loved music because her seizure medication sharpened her hearing. She had a sound system installed in the house, with speakers in the closets of each bedroom, and during the days, she sat in a rocking chair beside the largest speaker in

the house and listened to Gospel music. Her favorite song was Tennessee Ernie Ford's "Peace in the Valley." She listened to it over and over, her eyes closed, one finger twirling a lock of her grey hair. She hummed the tune to herself, an octave below her normal vocal range, when she prepared ambrosia and chicken and dumplings.

My grandparents accepted my Mother's pregnancy without anger or righteous indignation, but with deep sighs and a general dropping of shoulders. One of my earliest memories is of sitting in my grandmother's lap as she sleep-rocked in her chair, her chin resting on the top of my head. My grandfather sat beside her in his own chair, also asleep, and my mother, sat on the couch, filing her nails and watching "Hee Haw."

Mother's parents had even less of a reaction to her establishment of her own church, and by the time they sat for a sermon, they were so old they didn't realize what Mother was doing. They enjoyed the construction paper activities for all parishioners, Bible verse contests, parody acts, and of course the dancing.

Going to church at the Light of the Angelic Order was fun, and as the Prophetess of the Light, Mother was very convincing. Her eyes were black with yellow iris flaws, so when she fixed her gaze on a church member, she elicited a gasp. She interacted with her flock during services, taking members' hands and running her fingers along scalps so that her long fingernails raised goosebumps. But she was aware of her followers who didn't like to be touched. She watched the church members at social events, and she identified the standoffish and the emotionally scarred by the way they held their bodies upright, stood on the edge of rooms, and shook hands without conviction. She addressed these people in sermons from across the room, a hand shaped to clasp an arm or a finger

crooked as if to move a lock of hair behind an ear, but she kept her distance and never stood close enough to accidentally brush a shoulder.

For the people who slipped up behind their fellow parishioners and forced their bodies together in mock clumsiness, Mother suggested private prayer. She allowed groping of her large hips, her minimal breasts, and on Friday nights, certain male church members were allowed to stay the night at our trailer. There were rules for these encounters, though, rules Mother strictly enforced. The visitors were not allowed to peruse the refrigerator. Mother offered refreshments as a good hostess—water, iced tea, cucumber finger sandwiches and Doritos—and unwarranted foraging was not viewed kindly. Full or half-nudity outside her bedroom was grounds for dismissal, as was medicine cabinet exploration, and my room was strictly out of bounds. A visitor could not engage me in conversation, or sit on the couch while I watched Saturday morning cartoons and ate my cereal. The visitor was not provided his own bowl of cereal. He had to be gone before noon, fully dressed and hair finger combed into some semblance of order. Mother walked him to the door, and then she watched to make sure he left.

She didn't care if the neighbors glimpsed the departure of an overnight male guest. The neighbors didn't care either. They weren't members of the church, and they had their own secrets—they were a married couple who stole full-blood puppies out of town yards. They appeared every few weeks with new dogs so that their trailer and yard were full of shih-tzus, poodles, and malteses—all wearing expensive rhinestone collars. On warm evenings, the husband lounged on a deck chair and watched his wife play with the dogs. She ran from one side of the enclosure to the other, all the little animals chasing and barking after her. She had scratches up and down her legs, and she spent all

of her time washing and grooming each dog while her husband was at work as a short order cook. All their money went to the dogs. That was why Mother never crossed the space between trailers and asked them to the Light. Instead, she nodded to them as she saw her guests off, and when a new puppy showed up, she pretended not to take notice unless the wife brought the new animal over, cradled and swaddled in her arms like a baby. Then Mother cooed over it, invited me to see the puppy, but she didn't say anything else. She didn't even complain about the barking, an important decision since these neighbors didn't tell the police anything after we left. Of all the lessons Mother stressed to me, she felt that selective blindness was the most important. She spanked me only when I failed to use discretion.

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When I first met Lydia James, the only other child at the Light, I saw her eat a petal off one of the pulpit floral decorations. It was a white camellia arrangement, white as my Holiness robe, and it had been donated by a parishioner who was a florist. We had flowers every Sunday—flowers that had been left over from the week and were slightly over ripe. I had not noticed this particular camellia until Lydia peeled the single perfect petal from the bud and laid it on her tongue. She didn't bite down on it immediately. She let it sit in her mouth before she very gently closed her teeth and then her lips. She chewed, moving her jaws carefully, and then she winced. Her face turned red before she swallowed the petal in a loud gulp.

I shouted to Mother as she stood in the receiving line. Service was over, and she was talking to the adults, thanking her congregation for their time and their money. When I called her, she turned, as did everyone else. Her mouth opened, and the people

behind her frowned. My voice had ceased to be holy. It was the high-pitched whine of a child, demanding attention. There were still dollar bills and checks pinned to my robe, but I pointed a finger at Lydia and poked my bottom lip out. Lydia denied everything I said, and she started crying and sniffing and rocking on her feet. I gripped her long blonde braid in my hand, wound it tight, and pulled it so that she stopped. There was a collective shift among the adults as well as a murmur of disapproval.

For the first time since she had become the Prophetess of the Light of the Christ Child, Mother could not smile the situation off. She fidgeted with the sleeve of her floral print dress and looked nervously between the congregation and me. Her followers pursed their lips together, *tsked*, and some even opened their eyes very, very wide. It was to these people that Mother turned, palms open. She closed her eyes, bowed her head, and stretched her neck long, exposing the patch of down that crept down her vertebra. She didn't move. The parishioners watched her, and no one spoke. Lydia's mother retrieved her, and one by one, the others left as Mother held her pose. When we were alone, she took me by one arm, and spanked me with her free hand. I tried to escape, but she had a good hold. I moved in a wide circle around her, straining against her grasp. She had never spanked me before.

"Stay still," she hissed. She hit me on the back of my thighs several times before she stopped and removed the cash and checks from my robe. Then she removed the robe itself. She folded it into a small square—as small as she could get it—and stuffed it into her purse. We drove home in the new red Chevy Silverado she had purchased with offertory funds. She packed a bag for each of us, choosing only the things she had acquired before the church. All of my clothes though were purchased with the Light

money, so Mother selected the cheapest things from my drawers. She forbade me from taking more than one toy, but before we could load the truck, one of her male visitors appeared on the porch. He was a young man named Marcus, an ex-high school football player, who had spent the five years after high school bowling and delivering pizzas in town. He visited Mother often on Friday nights, but he and her other suitors had never chosen to appear on a Sunday, though Mother had never made a rule about it. But Marcus's purpose in the visit was clear. He moved through the living room without looking at me and disappeared into Mother's bedroom. She joined him, closing the door behind her. A little while later, another of her Friday night men opened the screen and knocked on the storm door. I told him Mother had company, and he left.

The visits encouraged Mother to stay. She figured she had overreacted to my tantrum, but while she threatened me privately, our church performances continued except with more lively performances. Mother encouraged more dancing. She used some instrumental rock music—Christian contemporary wasn't then what it is now—and she instituted board games as Sunday night fellowship.

In church, my behavior was more quiet and distant. I didn't speak to anyone, and no one spoke to me. Lydia kept beside her mother. She did not wander beyond the pew line, but that fall we discovered we were in the same class in school. In the world outside of the Light I was no different than her. We had the uncanny ability to wear almost identical outfits on the same day, an event that did not go unnoticed among our classmates. We both struggled in childhood society, our hair always tassled in amusing ways, our facial expressions and gestures off-putting to other kids. When Lydia sneezed, the sound was so loud that everyone including the teacher was startled. I laughed at

things that weren't funny, like when our teacher chastised another student. I laughed loudly and had to be told to stop. Had Lydia and I been good at school work, we might have found some type of escape, or at least a rivalry—the two smart girls who hate each other and find membership in other groups simply because they can help classmates with homework. We weren't smart though. Lydia couldn't read well, and I had trouble with math. Our work was returned with angry, red Ds and Fs scrawled in the margins. If we turned in homework at all, it had to be retrieved from the bottoms of backpacks, wrinkled into pleated paper fans. Our mothers were consulted for after-school meetings, and the threat of being held back was dangled over our heads. Lydia took this news without surprise. She had already been held back once before. But Mother was angry. She cautioned me against drawing that much attention to myself, and she couldn't understand how I could be linked so closely to Lydia. Like me, she found Lydia offensively cow-like. Mother watched her dance in church with a look of astonishment that could barely be masked, and once she told me she believed Lydia was mildly retarded. She thought her mother should have her tested, but then Mother felt she couldn't say anything because I was doing just as poorly in school.

Instead of bonding with Lydia over our difficulties, though, I terrorized her. I beat her up on the playground, and I made her eat a lot of dirt and grass. One time, I stuffed a piece of used bubblegum in her mouth while I made her bow to my holiness. That was my excuse. I was holy, and I wanted the other kids to notice it. But she was the only one informed of my stature. A group of bigger girls picked on me on the playground, and I took it out on Lydia by cracking her head open with a hand shovel.

*

I wasn't surprised that Lydia was the first person I ran into when I returned home to bury Mother. She still had the long braid and the scar, but her eyes had brightened.

"Your mother stole a lot of money," she said.

"Yes," I said, and when I tried to move her hand away, she tightened her grip.

"Where is the money now? Is it gone?"

"Some of it."

"The rest?"

"In a bank account."

"In your name?"

"Yes."

Lydia released me. She stepped back, and ran her hands along her waist. "What are you gonna do with it?"

"I'm returning it."

Lydia didn't blink as she stared at me, so I reached into my purse for my checkbook. She grasped my hand as I started to write. "Spend the afternoon with me. Just a few hours," she said. "Bring the checkbook."

She drove me out into the county, near the old church's location, and she described her own church. Though she had a small following with some of the Light's old crowd, she didn't enjoy the same popularity Mother had. Her voice was too shrill, too artificial when it rose, and she couldn't remember all Mother's sermons. The ones she made up were scattered and unfocused because she didn't really know the Bible, and one time an old woman had questioned her.

"I can't have that," she said. "I need the money."

She didn't give me a chance to speak. I listened with my hand poised on the door handle. She wanted to know how mother had thought up the church, how she prepared for sermons, how she developed *that voice* and that way of pinning grown men to their seats with her eyes.

"Your mother was ugly. If you don't mind me saying so." She looked away from the road to smile at me. "But all those old guys thought she was something else. Joe Reed, Terry Mitchell, hell, even Marcus Brown." She laughed and slapped at the steering wheel. "Whatever happened to Marcus? You ever found him in your travels?"

"No."

"Ah," Lydia said. She scowled and didn't say anything else until she pulled into a dirt driveway at the edge of a sunflower field. The house was an old pre-fab unit, something that farmers bring in for hired help. A few sunflower stalks grew wild in the yard.

"Speaking of blasts from the past," Lydia said. She checked her teeth in the rearview mirror, spritzed breathe freshener into her mouth, and then offered me the small container.

"No," I said.

Lydia shrugged and retrieved a Bible from the back seat.

"Where are we?"

"You'll see."

A slight woman with heavy grey pin curls stepped out to meet us. She paused by one of the sunflowers and hooked her arm around it like it was person. "Hey, Reverend," she said. "Who've you got with you?"

“You don’t recognize her?”

The woman narrowed her eyes at me. Her expression was somber and she looked as if she had a problem focusing on my face. Lydia put one large hand on my back and pushed me forward. The old woman’s eyes widened.

“Oh,” she said.

“That’s right,” Lydia said.

“The Holiness.”

I recognized her then. It was Ms. Lee, my old kindergarten teacher. She took my hand, led me inside, and just looked at my feet.

I took my checkbook from my pocket to break the silence and explained the hoax. Lydia didn’t stop me. She walked around Ms. Lee’s house, looking at knick-knacks and books.

The old woman didn’t seem surprised at the revelation, but her pupils were wide and dilated, and I noticed a line of medicine bottles on her kitchen counter. She watched me set the check on her coffee table and then protested in a slurred voice.

“Now, Honey, I gave that money to the Light, and even though it went to your mother it went to *you* too. And seeing that it helped you grow into the fine young person you are, well I feel partially responsible.”

“Amen,” Lydia said. She perused the medicine bottles, shaking a couple. “She offered me a check as well.”

Ms. Lee pinched the check up between her arching nails and scrutinized the signature and the spelling of her name, though she had to blink to focus. “You know, this puts me in a real awkward position. I loved your mother. I loved what she did. We had

something special out here for a while. We had something good.” And then she fell silent, folded the paper in half, and put it into the pocket of her thin pants. The pants were so worn that even though she pushed the check in deep, it could still clearly be seen through the fabric.

“I’m glad you feel that way,” I said, and we blinked at the floor for a few moments. “I’m glad to get it off my chest.”

“Oh I understand.” Ms. Lee had been a tambourine player in my mother’s choir. She shook the instrument at key moments during sermons, most often when Mother alluded to the Serpent. She never used any of the devil’s aliases, cautioning against invoking the dark one, but she wanted the connection to be clear. So she and Ms. Lee practiced in advance, on Saturday nights before Sunday Meeting, and Mother read through her sermon slowly so that Ms. Lee could catch onto the cues and hold her tambourine at the ready. When Mother really got going, and people started running up and down the aisles, Ms. Lee shook the tambourine so hard that her lips trembled and her hair, coiled like pencil shavings, stood on end.

“I need to go,” I said this to Lydia who was looking in the refrigerator.

“So soon?” Ms. Lee rocked on her feet and ran a hand through her gray curls. “I need the healing.”

“Lydia,” I said, but she didn’t move, so I unlatched the screen door and glanced back at Ms. Lee. During kindergarten naptime, she had taken me into the supply room where we prayed and discussed my holiness, and sometimes she wept and wrapped her arms around me, asking me to save her. I did as my mother had instructed, and I laid my hands on the top of her head as she kneeled in front of me.

“Thank you,” she said, “Oh, thank you.”

Lydia opened a milk carton and sniffed it. “Ms. Lee, you need to go to the grocery store.”

But the old woman didn’t hear. She was staring at my feet so hard that her pupils seemed to tremble. “I need the healing,” she said, never looking into my face.

I stepped back into the room and took her hand. She looked down at where our fingers were clasped and then closed her eyes. I led her to the couch, put one hand on her head, and pressed her hair flat. Her chin sunk down to her chest, and I whispered, “I’m sorry.”

Behind me Lydia was silent. When I looked up, she was mimicking my posture, trying to get it right.

“Thank you,” Ms. Lee said. “Oh, thank you.” She swayed as if moving to music.

Lydia clasped her bible, and threw the milk carton into the trash. “Don’t worry, Ms. Lee,” she said, “I’ll go to the store for you.”

As we drove away, Ms. Lee appeared in the doorway. She pressed a hand against the screen.

“I won’t go to the police if you teach me how to do that,” Lydia said. “And if you help me. I can’t do it alone.”

I stiffened as I fastened the seatbelt. “Mother stopped using that money. We stopped using that money.”

“Your mother made off with what—250,000, 300,000—dollars?”

“415,000.”

Lydia whistled again, shook her head. “A lot of money. You can write out the checks, make a show of it, but it won’t matter. The old ones will just give it back to the church. You saw that.”

“That was my money,” I said. “My personal checking account.”

“Well, ok,” Lydia said. “But the point is that it doesn’t matter. We’ll have a following. You and me. Except this time, I’m the boss.” She punched me on the shoulder and laughed.

The longer I was quiet, the more Lydia said “A lot of money,” and then she started calling me the Holiness. She spoke as my mother did. She spoke in a stage voice, commanding a phantom audience to take me in, to fall to the ground and worship me because I was the new miracle for the new age. I was the Holiness, and I had to be lifted up so that my name reached to the sky.

*

I gave Lydia Mother’s notebook, and I told the story of how we came into the church. She had bought it from an old minister who had lost his congregation. She had seen him, quite by chance, sitting in the doorway of the building, a storefront in a strip mall a mile off the interstate. Most of the stores lacked furniture and fixtures, and all of the windows had been broken except for the one on the end, the church. It had been repainted in bright red with a mural of crosses etched across the cinder block walls. The minister, the Reverend Douglas M. Grant, drank from a can of strawberry Shasta and picked at the burrs that grew by the doorway.

“You wanna buy a church, little lady?” he yelled. Mother, whose car had broken down, was walking us through the abandoned lot. She had squeezed herself into a halter-

top and hot pants, and her arms were dotted with bug bites and welts. She had me by the arm because I kept trying to lie down and rest. It was hot. I complained loudly, wailing, and Mother was so mad she was silent.

“Why on earth, would I want to buy a church?” she yelled back. She tottered on the heels of her espadrilles and looked at the old man. His lips and teeth were stained red with Shasta.

“Because it’s for sale,” he said. He rose, threw the can into a clump of grass and straightened his tie. “It’s not every day a person gets this opportunity, the chance to work in the God business.”

“The God business?” Mother laughed.

The old man stretched his arms wide and called to the sky in words Mother did not recognize. Just then grasshoppers jumped against Mother’s legs, wasps hovered by her head, and a jackrabbit startled by the noise, darted from the tall grass of a neighboring store and into the field across the street.

He stopped directly in front of her, grabbed her shoulders, pushed her onto her knees, and pressed his moistened thumb, smelling of strawberry syrup, onto her forehead.

That was all it took. Mother was a prophetess, and we were in business.

She told me the other story—the story about why she quit the church--at the end after the second breast was taken. She died hard, bald except for one muddy lock growing from a birthmark on the back of her head. She never lost her reason, and she begged me to return the money we had taken. She told me to use the insurance money I would receive.

I buried her in the way she had buried her own mother, in bright clothes with a Baptist minister lisping over her. I had found him in the phone book, and he had met with me five minutes before the graveside service. He sang the hymns loudly even though no one else was there. When it was over, he clasped my hands in his and asked me if I wanted to pray. I said yes of course because it was expected and I knew I made him nervous. He grasped his Bible with both hands, held it close to his chest.

I didn't tell Lydia the second story. Mother had been sitting on the front steps of her Church when she saw a car wreck on the interstate. Though the event happened a half mile away, the sound carried so that she heard the screech and whine of metal as if she too were involved. She didn't do anything. She was too far away. Other people were closer, so she sat on the steps, her notebook opened across her lap. She made notes in margins, reviewed ideas for a sermon, and when she looked up, she saw a man crossing the vacant lot. He was still a good ways from her, but she could see the turquoise in his belt sparkle blue through the Bermuda grass. He was also tall, a fence post bobbing across the horizon.

She rose from the steps when he was close enough that she saw the blood pumping from a head wound. She tried to head him off, but every time she stepped in front of him, he edged around her. She spoke, and when she didn't receive a response, she shouted. The man didn't hear. He walked down a dirt road to a house Mother had never noticed, opened a screen door, and vanished inside. Mother stood in the yard, watched for someone to emerge, but no one ever did.

When she came home that night, she packed our bags quietly, and we left just after midnight.

*

I loved my mother. I loved her for the way she turned an old convenience store into a church. I loved her for the care she took in spreading her parishioners' tithing to things for her own mother, like a room in a nice nursing home and a new wig so red it glistened pink in the artificial lights of the senior rec room. And I loved my mother most perhaps for the way she moved to a new town after she set her church on fire and didn't open a new one. She turned to fast food instead, submerging baskets of frozen, pre-cut French fries into vats of hot grease, and then to auto insurance for people who couldn't get insurance anywhere else.

I loved my mother the most when I ratted out Lydia James to the police. They arrived just as the sermon was over. Parishioners stepped from the artificial light of the Holiday Inn and blinked at the sudden appearance of red and blue lights. Lydia tried to run, but an officer caught her at the knees in a football tackle. She landed on the concrete, her arms spread wide at her sides, insisting that she had been led astray by me, the Holiness. She resorted to tongues. Her eyes rolled back into her head. She convulsed so that two officers had to lift her off the ground and drag her to the police car. Both of her shoes spun off her feet, and when the men tried to stuff her into the car, she caught each side of the doorframe, her toes curled and grasping like hands. Finally, a police officer of high rank, laid his hands on the small of her back and with a single gesture pushed her into the seat.

The Light's parishioners stood around the police car and watched silently as Lydia was driven away. They asked me what had happened, and I explained what Lydia

had done in careful detail. I explained Mother's own deception again. Her followers refused to believe it.

Cube Land

Alice stopped going out to lunch. She brought a sandwich and a piece of fruit in an insulated lunch bag and sat in her cubicle while the rest of the advertising department went to Chino Chino. When she was done eating, she surfed job sites and emailed possible leads to her personal email address. She was also more secretive—never inviting her coworkers into her cube to watch a YouTube video or clips from her favorite movies. She knew the sudden change in her behavior would create some speculation, especially since she broke up with Frank at the same time. Frank was the graphic designer assigned to her by the Creative Director, so he was *her* graphic designer, the only one of the tall, lanky young men that she leaned over to explain price changes and incorrect logos.

She had grown too comfortable with their meetings in the photo-studio sample room where they took coffee breaks amid fleece-lined track suits without getting completely undressed. And actually, it was watching Frank undress in her bedroom for the first time that convinced her it was time for a change. He wore the tight black underpants that had been featured in that week's Sunday circular. His thin frame was broken by a thick paunch from eating too much Chino Chino, but the thick elastic waistband of the underwear served as a girdle to hold his heft in. It was on this occasion that Alice discovered that she also had a stomach bump. Frank ran his hands over it, circling her flesh like she was pregnant, and said, "Wow." The lamplight in Alice's bedroom had cast dark shadows against the wall, and Alice had been appalled by the lumpy silhouette she hadn't noticed before. Her new shadow didn't reflect the image she had of herself as the go-getter career girl of old cigarette commercials who said "You've

come a long way, Baby.” In these commercials, the savvy girl was not so much thin as she was sleek and aerodynamic. Alice’s people weren’t sleek and aerodynamic. They were plump and swollen and malnourished from lifetimes of fried food. They wore sweat pants with elastic waists to work.

Alice had a closet full of corporate dress suits—thick black wool with pinstripes for winter, peplum and linen in shades called coconut milk and honey butter for summer. She had bought each one with money saved up from working in a women’s clothing store where she received a discount and had carefully planned her next move as a corporate one. She had wanted the opportunity to sit. As a shop girl, she stood all day in high heels, cutting small half moon dents in the faux hardwood flooring with her shoes. Her supervisor had reprimanded her for walking so heavily or *clunkily* late in the evening when she was tired, her body heavy. Alice had been told to relearn how to walk in the requisite pumps, and she walked back and forth in front of the store manager, placing her feet on the floor as if walking a tight rope—one foot directly in front of the other in a series of tiny, mincing steps. She also had to learn how to hide her accent, how to properly pronounce “picture” (not picher) and “sale” (not say-el). She formed the words carefully, holding her tongue and cheeks rigid, especially when her manager was listening. She imagined that these lessons would prepare her even more for a corporate job.

After Frank left her apartment that night, Alice discovered she couldn’t fit into the suits any more. She tried on each one, watching herself in the mirror as she struggled to zip and button and smooth out the taut material. She noticed other things, too. The shadows under eyes had grown more blue than purple—and the angles of her face were

sharp and gaunt despite the new fat on her midsection. Her head and her torso didn't seem to belong on the same body, and she realized her underwear had also been in featured in an earlier advertisement.

When she broke up with Frank, she figured the tension would force her to find another job. But she couldn't put all the blame on Frank. She had been unhappy with the job for a while. She worked sixty hours a week. Her lopsided desk stayed level only with the aid of an old phonebook, and no one dressed up. The women had stopped wearing make-up or getting haircuts, and on late nights, when the entire department took a break to play "Murder," the copywriters and designers paired off for lackluster sex under the red Exit lights.

She worked with Frank in the advertising department of the Perryman's Sporting Goods Corporate Headquarters in a ward just south of downtown. The office was surrounded by a cemetery, a gang-tagged apartment building, and a motel building where neighborhood prostitutes took their johns. During Christmas time, the working girls decorated themselves in sequined chaps and tinsel boas and waved to the office workers from the other side of a high fence with barbed wire coiled around the top. The headquarters itself was a warehouse without windows, only one entrance and exit, with the departments arranged haphazardly inside. As the company had grown, the owner saved money by not relocating into downtown. No office was the same size, and VPs settled for spaces not much bigger than cubicles.

The Advertising Department was a collection of misshapen cubes, positioned in the very middle of the building and surrounded by a maze of hallways. At six o'clock every weekday evening, the air conditioning and switch boards were shut off, and the

entire building shook before falling into quiet. The janitors—two separate, rival mother/daughter teams—had the responsibility of turning off all the lights when they were done with their cleaning, no matter if anyone was still working. The light switches were covered in locked wall boxes, and the mothers carried the keys on lanyards around their necks. There was often little warning when the lights went off, the hallways suddenly red from the battery-powered Exit signs, and so “the kids,” as advertising personnel were called, resorted to lamps in their work spaces. The lamps hadn’t been supplied by the company, rather each new copywriter or designer was required to buy his or her own on the first day after the initiation meal at Chino Chino, a front business for a neighborhood mafia family.

The only restaurant in the area, Chino Chino was a Chinese buffet decorated like a steak house with stuffed deer heads on the walls. The restaurant’s owner had exclusive catering rights to Perryman’s late night workers, and a blonde eighteen or nineteen-year-old boy, obviously carrying a gun in his slouching Dicky pants, made the food deliveries. Alice had gained ten pounds in her first month of working in advertising, but her car had never been vandalized when she stayed after midnight. The delivery boy and his friends, who sat in the parking lot and yelled at the prostitutes across the fence, even escorted her to her car, tipping the bills of their ball caps as they held her door open for her. The lamps were also supplied through the Chino Chino Group via the Dollar Store next to the restaurant. The delivery boy worked at the Dollar General, as well, and he had sold Alice a lamp and a small, pink desk fan. When he gave her change, he touched her finger with one of his and smiled. He had braces.

Frank broke the fan when Alice broke up with him. He stood in her cubicle and threw it into his own work space so that the fan blades landed in several places. The motor rolled back across the aisle to his feet. The other advertising cubicle occupants all stood and looked at Alice and Frank, and Alice motioned for them to all sit down. She knew they could hear everything anyway. She picked up the pieces of her fan, and instead of going to Chino Chino, she went to the Dollar Store and bought another one—blue this time, with racing stripes.

“Working late tonight?” the boy asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Alice said.

“Well, I may not see you then,” he said. He smiled widely and pointed at his teeth. “I’m getting my braces off this afternoon.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” The boy ran his fingers across the metal as if he were polishing it. “I may celebrate, you know.”

“That’s great,” Alice said. She took the fan in the plastic bag, made an act of leaving.

“Maybe you can come by,” the boy said. “Have a beer.” He picked up a flyer and scrawled his address on the back. “You know, whenever.” When the boy smiled again, the sun fell on his braces and his entire head shone.

“I’ll think about it,” Alice said.

“You do that.”

Alice laughed, and when she looked at the note, she didn’t see his name.

*

Alice read the small print. She had written it a day before, and now it had to be changed to reflect a shortage of Nike Air Senukas in Tallahassee, particularly in women's sizes 5.5 and men's wide 8. There were also no more wide Columbia Bugaboo women's hiking shoes in Elizabeth, but there was a proliferation of them in all Alabama stores. Alice suspected that a distribution error had mixed up the Bugaboo orders, and the South was now infested with large shoes that no one wanted to buy, shoes that the Women's Outdoor Buyer had announced were too dikey based on the findings of an Atlanta women's focus group.

Alice imagined the women who had been recruited for the market research session with the promises of brand name merchandise. She envisioned coiffed, shantaunged housewives picking at the shoelaces, nostrils flared as they explained that they preferred Prada Active, or at the very least, Gucci Sport. Alice smiled and retyped the week's disclaimers to be inserted at the bottom of the Sunday circular, and she made a note for Frank to create asterisks beside the Senuka and the Bugaboo. She then checked the photo images against the copy and found that Frank had not only shown the wrong art for Senuka; he had used the previous year's shots of both the men's and women's Nike Vanguard. The most recent Vanguards were clearly marked with larger Nike swooshes, and the patented gel heel shock guards^{®™} were visible through plastic pockets attached to the soles. In addition, the women's model came with a pink breast cancer awareness shoe lace holder and a little Susan B. Komen logo[®] below the swoosh, both of which were absent in the photo that Frank had dropped into the ad.

Alice took a deep breath and crossed the aisle. Frank's cubicle was diagonal from hers and the walls were covered with sheets from a roll of bright orange gift wrapping

paper. Beside the entry area was a sign that read “The Lounge” with a little martini glass graphic as the “t” in “the.” The other designers were in Frank’s cubicle, leaning against his drawing table or sitting cross-legged on the floor. Linda, the Senior Copywriter, and Richard, the Junior copywriter, were there as well. Richard was even skinnier than the graphic designers, a fact that had become obvious at Halloween when he wore a custom-made KISS Ace Freely costume, complete with stockings that accentuated the thinness of his legs. Alice guessed that Richard would have probably been nice to her had he not been so concerned about Linda. He worked when Linda worked and slacked when she slacked. Lunch was never a question. He waited at the entrance of his cube for Linda to walk by and ask if he was hungry.

Linda had taken over Frank’s chair and watched a YouTube video of a dog attacking its own leg. She laughed, and Frank, who was standing over her, started the clip again. Linda had been a copywriter for fifteen years, and she had been terrorized by the previous Creative Director who had hated her for many reasons, the least of which was his perception that she was insane, not just weird and creative, but certifiably crazy. He had tried to force her out until a diagnosis of a chemical imbalance and the subsequent brain surgery qualified her as a disabled individual protected by the law. The Senior Copywriter title had been created for her as a means to avoid a lawsuit and the old Creative Director had moved on to direct advertising for PetCo. Linda had also been allowed to upgrade to a slightly larger cubicle, freeing the smallest cube in the entire building for Alice, whose job title was only “Copywriter.”

When Alice stepped into Frank’s cubicle, Richard looked away and Linda turned to her with a frown. She had a scarf tied around the middle of her head to hide the patch

of hair that didn't grow back after the surgery, but the scar was still visible just below her left ear. Linda looked at Alice without speaking. They had been friends until Alice broke with Frank and started spending more time alone in her cube. Linda was involved with her own graphic designer, Sam, the Senior Graphic Designer, and when it was time to play Murder," Alice's conspicuous absence seemed to make Linda hesitant to play as the only girl.

Frank and Sam and the other designer, Richard's designer Kyle, stared at Alice as she stood in the cubicle. She held the advertising proof out in front of her, and shook it, so she wouldn't have to speak. The proof was larger than the advertising insert that would actually appear in the various national Sunday papers, and it held price change tags and colored slips of paper stapled to it by the buying staff, distributors, and the executive board. Frank cleared space for it on his desk, and Alice spread it out.

"Ok," she said, "you're gonna have to switch hard and soft lines."

"I already told him," Linda said.

"Cool." Alice didn't look at Linda. She flipped the page to the shoes and pointed at the Senuka and the Vanguard. "Wrong art."

"Wrong art?" Frank said. He snickered and looked where Alice pointed. "No, it's not."

"It is," Alice said. She took a step back, shrugged.

"Let me see," Linda said. She sighed, examined the proof, and then looked up into Frank's face.

"I double checked the photo before I printed the proof," he said. He made an act of taking his glasses off and cleaning them with the edge of his shirt. Alice had hated

how he kept the glasses on for sex. During their first intimate encounter, she had removed them, careful not to tug at his hair, but he had complained that he couldn't see anything. The glasses had stayed on every time after that. They were thick black, square lens frames. It embarrassed Alice how they bounced on his face, even more so the single time they had sex outside the office, the time with the black Champion Double Dry® active fit men's briefs with extra jock support, package of three, \$12.49. While Frank kissed a trail from her mouth, between her breasts, and around her stomach, Alice couldn't stop thinking that on top of the sale price, Frank had also received his forty percent corporate employee discount on his underwear. She had too.

Linda smiled and placed a hand on Frank's arm. "It's not that big of a deal," she said. "An easy fix."

Frank didn't reply, and Alice went back to her cubicle. She heard Linda ask if anyone was hungry. Everyone agreed that they were. There was talk about which cars to take, and Linda retrieved her purse from her cube. One by one the designers walked past Alice without looking at her. Richard stopped and waved with an index finger. Alice repeated the gesture, and Richard smiled.

Alice started looking at the next proof in the pile. A women's active wear buyer had drawn thick lines in a fuschia marker along the hips of a yoga model. The young woman was positioned in a pose that required her to balance on one leg with the other leg bent across like the number four. The model was shorter than other models, with larger hips. She was what the Page Parker modeling agency sent as "the mainstream look," and she had been specifically requested by Joan Perryman, the owner's daughter, to make the circulars look more realistic. Obviously, the buyer hadn't heard about the request, and

had scrawled a note about putting the model on a Photoshop diet rather than reshooting the products on another girl. Alice started to draw a line through the note in her green pen. There was a color-coded system for ad proofing—green for copywriters, blue for designers, orange for the creative director, red for executives, pink for buyers, and purple for distributors. The system had been instituted to keep fingerpointing to a minimum. So when the proof was pulled for review, the culprit could be more easily identified by the color of the ink. Several months before, the buyer in question had, for no reason that Alice could discern, lowered an advertised price with a green pen. The buyers and copywriters were on friendly terms, and the unauthorized price change only served to hurt the women's apparel department. A retraction letter had to be written on a Sunday, and emailed to the stores to put an end to the sale of the item—a tennis skirt that normally sold at 75.99 was selling off the racks at 9.99. Of course, the copywriters had been confronted, but the vehemence of their denials and the subsequent testing of handwriting, forced the buyer into the open. A written reprimand was put in her file, and she had been cool with the copywriters ever since.

If Alice passed the ad onto Frank—even though she wouldn't have made any marks on the page—he would have to make the adjustment. Buyers outranked advertising staff, and the anti-Joan note was clearly in a buyer's ink and handwriting. It was also not out of the question for a designer to reclip or refinish art at a buyer's request, but the designer had to pass it through the chain of command—the Creative Director. In this regard at least, the art was not under Alice's jurisdiction. If, however, the designer didn't consult his superior—as Frank often did when he wanted to avoid actually working on a late night—he could make the change on his own and pass the ad through to another

proof without any problem—except if an executive caught the mistake. Then the finger pointing began, and the previous proof was pulled, the offending parties chastised, and the required paperwork filed. If the ad was printed without comment, and Joan caught the error herself, the problem was much worse. She always checked the Sunday circulars after printing, never before when a problem could be caught and corrected. If she felt strongly enough about the issue, the guilty party could be fired.

When they had been together, Alice saved Frank the walk to the Creative Director and the questions and approvals. She did it herself, making a note, or simply placing a check beside the change. She looked at the buyer's message. She decided she would walk to the Creative Director's office and see if he had gone to Chino Chino. If he was in, she would ask, if he wasn't, she would simply place the proof on Frank's desk.

Alice carried the proof down the hall to Daniel's office, a space shaped like a trapezoid rather than a precise square or rectangle, and found him playing Red Alert on his iMac. She took a step back and knocked on the half-closed door so he wouldn't think she had seen him. She waited until he yelled for her to come in, and then she slowly pushed the door open, feeling a bit relieved that he was in. She didn't want to think of herself as the type of person who pulled petty office stunts to even scores, but the thought of Frank's face—even paler than normal with a definite purple undertone—was satisfying.

"No Chino Chino for you?" Daniel asked. He wore a pair of faded Levis with a blue button down shirt and a bright red tie. His goatee mustache was overgrown and new hairs were pushing through his skin at the corners of his mouth.

"No. Saving money. Brought my own lunch."

“Good for you.” He leaned back in his roller chair, smiled. “Everything all right in cube land?”

Alice shrugged. “Sure.”

“Anyone giving you problems?”

Alice didn't answer, shaking her head. Daniel made room for her proof without watching what he was doing. He shoved old proofs and stock image catalogues off onto the floor, and kept his eyes on Alice's face. Six months before he had been a graphic designer with his own copywriter, Fay, a prim, Pentecostal woman, who wore floral-print dresses and kept her long red hair in a single braid. During late nights, he serenaded Fay with the violin he left in his cubicle after the Christmas party, sawing out string arrangements of Eagles songs. Fay tried to ignore him, blushing around her freckles and pulling the loose strands of hair off her forehead. She was careful to make their relationship seem cool if Joan or the executives were around. But when it was time to play “Murder,” Fay and Daniel disappeared, without even making the pretense of running around corners and scaring other people. Alice knew they didn't use the photo-studio sample room, or the buyer's break room, territory claimed by Linda and Sam. Frank and Alice had seen them there once. Linda had been illuminated by the light from the Pepsi machine. She very gently untied her scarf so that Sam could trace her bald patch with an index finger. Alice didn't know where Richard and Kyle went.

Fay had left, though, without giving notice. She told the VP of Advertising that she had accepted a job as Lead Copywriter at Academy, Perryman's main rival, and she was gone before noon, but not before she had somehow managed to lift her floral skirt and photocopy her ass covered by thick, old-fashioned underwear, without being caught.

She folded the image, and put it in Daniel's seat while he was in the bathroom. The executives promoted him to replace the old Creative Director rather than having to hire a new copywriter, and when it was Murder time, he closed his door and played Red Alert.

Daniel followed Alice's finger as she pointed out the buyer's fuschia marks on the model. He chuckled, shook his head.

"Photoshop diet?" he said. "Who are these people?"

"I don't know."

"Well, the obvious thing to do is to STET the comment." Daniel reached into his desk, rummaged through graphic pencils and ballpoint pens. His orange proofing marker was behind his left ear, and Alice tapped it, careful to avoid the teeth marks.

"Thanks," Daniel said. He looked up at her chest instead of her face, and then drew zigzagged lines through the fuschia comments. He wrote STET in large letters followed by an exclamation point. "How many version of this ad are there?"

"I don't know. At least three. California. East Coast. And Texas only."

"And this is?"

"Texas."

"All right," Daniel said. He put the marker in his mouth and spoke around it. "Go pull the others, even if they've already been given back to the designers. Make a note for Linda."

"Sure," Alice said. She took the proof back, folded it.

"And another thing."

"Yeah?"

"I'm switching you and Richard. You'll work with Kyle from now on."

“Oh, okay.” Alice turned back to him.

“I’ll tell the boys and Linda when they come back from lunch.” Daniel said with a wink. He watched Alice close the door, but as she walked down the hall she heard Red Alert again.

She went through each of the cubes, found the ads on Richard’s desk and made a note to see Daniel for the official orange STET. Then she wrote a message to Linda, but she imagined Linda’s face when she read an instruction from the copywriter. So she scrunched it up, and walked back down to Daniel’s office. This time, the door was open, and the delivery boy from Chino Chino was there, holding an insulated delivery bag and a sack of plastic ware. They both wore the exact same shirt and bright red tie, but the boy’s shirt was starched and tucked into pants that looked to belong to a uniform. His wallet was connected to a chain that looped out of his pocket and shook when he moved.

“Why didn’t you come to my party?” he said immediately when he saw Alice standing in the doorway. He smiled and his teeth were large and very white. His cheeks were pink. “It was rude.”

Daniel glanced at her and the young man, and then looked away. Alice didn’t know what to say, so she shrugged and forced a laugh.

“And I got my braces off.” the boy smiled even broader and rubbed a canine with an index finger. “You missed the celebration.”

“I’m sorry. I guess I didn’t think you were serious.”

“Whatever,” he said. He handed a styrofoam take-out box to Daniel and pulled the ticket out of his pocket. “Ten dollars even, with gratuity included.”

“Oh it’s included?” Daniel said, rolling a bundle of bills he had laid out on his desk.

“Yes sir,” the boy said dragging out the “sir” as far as possible as he looked back at Alice. He stopped smiling and stared, first at one of her eyes and then the other. “You know,” he said, “I still have to wear a mouth piece on the bottom jaw. I have to wear it forever. ”

“That sucks,” Alice said.

“Yeah, it does.”

Daniel handed the boy a five and six one dollar bills, which the boy counted by laying each one flat in his palm, smoothing the paper. When he unrolled the eleventh bill, he waved it like a flag at Daniel. “No tip necessary.”

“Oh I just thought—”

“No worries. I’m covered.” The boy gave the bill back to Daniel, and then stepped back to let Alice approach the desk. He pantomimed ushering her in, and then he stood behind her and listened to her ask Daniel about the note to Linda. They both glanced back at the young man once, and he rubbed his chin and shook his head, pretending interest in the conversation. Daniel agreed that he would talk to Linda. When Alice turned to go, the boy turned his backward facing cap forward and tipped it between his thumb and index finger of his right hand. The skin beneath the thumbnail was bruised. “So, you working late tonight?” he said.

“You can’t ask her that,” Daniel said. He pushed his chair back, the wheels squeaking, and then he looked as if he were trying to decide whether to stand or not. He

bent his ankles so that his feet were tilted under, his shoe laces rubbing the carpet.

‘That’s...confidential.’

“It’s all right,” the boy said. He held his arms up, palms facing outward. “I don’t mean anything.” He was smiling again and the light shone off his teeth. “I just asked.”

“Well, you can’t ask her that.” Daniel remained sitting. His eyes were very wide, and he had to look up into the boy’s face.

“Ok, I get it.” The young man put his hand out for Daniel to shake, and Daniel took it hesitantly.

“Ok.”

“It’s all good,” the boy said and turned to apologize to Alice. He shifted his cap backwards again, and she saw that his eyes were violet like a girl’s. Then he backed out of the office, bowed once more in the doorway and ran into the Chino Chino crew returning from lunch.

“Jesus, Alice,” Daniel said. “What were you thinking?” He sat down again and gripped the handles of the chair. “You didn’t give him your phone number did you?”

“No, he just invited me to a party.” Alice heard Frank sigh. She didn’t glance at him, but she felt his eyes on her back. “I obviously didn’t go.”

“But still,” Daniel said. He looked at Alice’s midsection and gazed up her body very slowly. When he got to her face, he noticed her noticing his stare. He turned his face away, and then motioned for Linda. “A word, please.”

*

The copywriter/designer switch upset Richard. He wouldn't look at Alice, and when she explained the STET situation to Kyle, he answered with clipped *yeses* and *nos*. Linda pulled Richard, Kyle and Frank into her cube and explained the situation in a low voice. They were silent, and the quiet spread through the advertising cubicles so that the only sounds were keyboards tapping and music filtered through headphones.

Kyle took the entire afternoon to revise the proofs, and when he did, he called Alice on her personal line to come and get them. She discovered though, that he had hardly made any of the corrections, so she returned the entire stack, dropping them onto his lap.

"I'm not going to mark everything again," she said softly. "Please, just make the corrections." When she said "please," she put her hands together as if praying.

Kyle rolled his eyes and jabbed a finger at one of her notes. "Well, how the hell do you expect anyone to read that?" he said loudly. "See. I can't read your handwriting."

Work in the cube land stopped, and Frank stood up. When Alice saw him, she sighed. "Yes, you can, Kyle," Alice said.

"No, really, I can't."

Frank appeared beside Alice. "What is it?" Frank said. He bent over the proof, looked where Kyle pointed, and Kyle cleared his throat.

"It's this part here," Kyle said, looking away.

"This?"

"Uh...yeah."

“It says price change. \$39.49.” Frank didn’t wait for Kyle to respond. He brushed Alice’s arm, and returned to his cubicle.

“Was there anything else?” Alice said, and Kyle shook his head, opening the page file on his screen. When he brought the completed proofs back to her, they were clean enough to pass on to Linda.

Alice spent the evening looking up job leads. She looked over at Frank’s cube a couple of times, but Richard was bent over his desk, discussing a copy change and wrong art. Daniel emerged from his office several times, pausing at the opening to Alice’s cubicle to say hello and to ask her how things were going. She smiled, replied that things were well, and Daniel laid a hand on her shoulder. “Good,” he said.

He said it loud enough so that Linda heard, and rose from her chair. She messed with her head scarf until Daniel left, pretending to stare at Sam. But when Daniel was gone, she leaned on the walls between cubes and looked at Alice.

“What?” Alice said.

Linda didn’t say anything for several seconds, and then she announced that it was time for a break. Sam, Richard, and Kyle stood simultaneously, their chairs creaking. They smiled and ignored Alice as they walked past. When Alice didn’t leave her chair, Linda said in a pinched voice, “It’s Murder time.”

“Ok,” Alice said. She closed the windows on her desktop, stood, and followed Linda down the aisle. Frank didn’t get up as they left, though Linda called over her shoulder to him twice. Alice heard his fingers tapping his keyboard very loudly, and then a Red Alert game started. Linda took her arm when she stopped.

As they passed Daniel's office, Alice saw Sam peer around a corner, and Linda left her to run after him. The edges of her scarf bounced on her head as she moved in a heavy, plodding way, scarcely faster than a walk. Sam watched her approach, his smile frightening under the red "Exit" sign. When Linda reached him, he grabbed her around the waist, pressed his lips into the space between her neck and shoulder and blew a loud raspberry into her skin. Linda giggled, and they disappeared.

Kyle and Richard were already gone, but Alice heard footsteps above her head. She could follow their movements by the shaking of the ceiling and the trickle of dust that showered the floor. Daniel was also gone. The door to his office was open, and he was not in his chair. A pile of proofs was scattered on the floor as if he had left suddenly. Alice looked down the two hallways that split from the advertising department. She didn't see anything under the red lights, so she chose the way Linda had taken—past the sample room and Joan Perryman's office. She knew that the hallway split again at Joan's door and led to the exit. She rose onto her toes, moving quickly, but staying tight against the far wall so she could detect a shadow around the corner. Alice checked behind her too, moving her head from side to side so she wouldn't be surprised.

When she neared the sample room, she heard a cough. She sprinted through the corridor and almost collided with the artistic installation that Joan Perryman had recently purchased and placed outside her office. The objects were a pair of large, very real mummified cats holding kitchen tools—spatulas, a whisk, and a meat tenderizer. One of the cats had an open mouth, and its teeth and pink tongue shone like glass.

Alice had viewed the art pieces with the rest of the advertising department when they had been delivered, and she, like everyone else, had praised Joan's taste. Joan had

looked on with a smile, keeping track of the commentators. She had worn a track suit sold at Perryman's, complete with the new women's Nike Vanguard and Susan B. Komen tag. Frank and Daniel had been the most persistent in their admiration, and later, when Alice had asked Frank what he thought of the installation, he had said he had truly liked it. She lied and said she did too.

Alice veered around the cats and turned down the passage to the exit. She heard the sample room door open and footsteps follow behind her. So she ran flat out, turning sharp corners, and she hit the door with her entire body, rolling out into the night. She didn't stop running until she reached her car.

The delivery boy was sitting on her hood, leaning against the windshield. He was alone. The working girls weren't even out across the fence. The boy looked at her with wide eyes. "What the fuck?" he said.

Alice was panting and her hair was in her eyes. "They were chasing me," she said. She glanced back at the door, but she hadn't been followed. She thought she saw Daniel's dark form in the glass door.

"Chasing you?" he said. He took his cap off, ran his fingers through his hair. "Who was chasing you?"

Alice smiled, shook her head. "Never mind." She lifted herself onto the car beside him.

"I don't understand," the boy said, and moved to make room for her.

"I've got to get a new job," she said.

The boy smiled. "You can work at the Dollar General."

Alice laughed, and then stopped when he frowned and looked away.

“I’m serious,” he said.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok.”

“Sure, I can work at the Dollar General.”

“Yeah?” One corner of the boy’s mouth twitched upward. His eyelids cast long shadows on his fair cheeks.

“When do I start?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Ok.”

The boy kissed Alice and guided her tongue with his across his teeth. She stopped and looked at him with eyebrows raised, and he whispered that he just got his braces off. So she continued to kiss him, her mouth open, his closed with his teeth clenched. He asked her once if his teeth were very straight or just straight and she said very very straight so that he met her tongue briefly with his. She only thought they were just straight. They made out as one by one the advertising personnel walked to their cars and drove away. No one said anything. She did hear Daniel clear his throat before he left, and she put her hand down the front of the boy’s pants.

The boy then walked into the building with Alice, holding her pinky finger with his. When they arrived at the cube land, Frank was still at his desk playing Red Alert.

He looked at her, and then back at his screen. “They took your green pens,” he said.

Alice shrugged. “Is that all?”

“They passed through a proof with a wrong price change on it. They made it look like your handwriting.”

“Who?”

“They.” Frank didn’t look at her, but he grinned. The game was reflected in his glasses.

“Well, I have a new job, anyway. So it doesn’t matter.”

“Where?” Frank looked at her, tilted his head.

Alice didn’t answer, so the boy said with a smile, “At Dollar General.” He grabbed Alice’s hand.

“Really?” Frank looked between the boy and Alice and then ducked his head.

“Well, I just wanted to let you know what they did. I wanted to warn you.”

Frank helped Alice and the boy clear out Alice’s cubicle and carry her things to her car. On the way Frank asked the boy his name.

“Franky.”

“Ah,” Frank said. He put a box in Alice’s trunk, and then got in his car without saying goodbye.

Alice started her new job the next morning. She wore her coconut milk suit and heels, and when Franky saw her, he shook his head and laughed.