

Heard Like a Shout

By

Curtis Coltharp

Honors Thesis
Department of English and Comparative Literature
University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill
2018

Approved:

(signature of advisor)

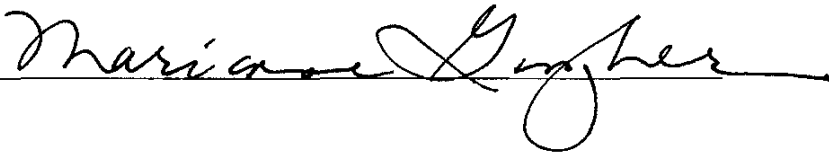


TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECOND WIFE.....3

THE WRITER AND THE FISH.....10

HOME & ABROAD.....12

ITCH.....14

THE HUMANS.....21

FERN OWENS.....31

OYUN.....36

THE WAY THINGS WERE.....38

TWO DEER CROSSING.....49

SECOND WIFE

On the toast, a smear of soft butter, and the eggs over-easy, as he liked. She was trying to be sensitive. From the kitchen she could hear him shuffling through the pages of the newspaper. Jim had said nothing all morning. Like a child, sometimes, he was. Getting up early, slinking around in avoidance of her, then smelling the eggs and coming to the table without a word. The skillet hissed as she ran water over it. Had she really been so terrible? Asking, after dinner, if he might someday marry her? She had said nothing of his first wife.

But he would enjoy this: a Tuesday morning feast. It was a tradition of theirs, the big weekday breakfast, begun soon after she moved in with him. She had come down the stairs on a Thursday and heard the bacon crackling; he was at the stove, wearing a red gingham apron. She had asked the occasion; he shrugged, nonchalant. “Felt like it,” he said. “You want jam on your toast?” He loved indulgence, and she loved to indulge him. Together they were discovering the luxuries of retirement, among them, free time. Their days were endless. If they so desired, they could do nothing but cook and eat. Breakfast, once hasty, had the possibility to become lazy and large; it could last until noon, or beyond. They took turns cooking, and did not prepare such a meal every day, but semi-regularly: once or twice a week. It was a ritual of intimacy more powerful than any that occurred in the bedroom; it carried a warm, unspoken significance.

On this morning, though, the eggs felt obligatory. She situated them on the plate with the toast, then stepped back. The arrangement still seemed lacking; she had forgotten something. Berries. She had fresh strawberries in the refrigerator. She took them out—they were red and full, like they might burst—and began quartering them.

In the other room Jim turned the page. He sighed—or was that still the flutter of the paper? There was silence now, punctuated by the chop of her knife on the cutting board. Before her hung a wall of copper and stainless steel pots and pans, and she thought to bang them against each other, to force the silence from the house. Even if, last night at the dining room table, she had mentioned Ruth, there was no reason for him to become upset. Ruth who had taken his last name, Ruth who had died unexpectedly, from a brain clot caused by a tumble in the shower—yes, she knew that he had planned to spend the rest of his life with this woman, but nine years had passed, and grief could stay fresh for only so long. “I’m a widower,” he told her on their first date. That night, they had eaten in a small Mediterranean restaurant with dim lighting and curving, sensuous murals painted onto the walls. A fireplace glowed in one corner. She had chosen the restaurant, and this mention of his dead wife was disquieting. All around them were insinuations of intimacy; it felt inappropriate. She had expressed her sympathies, with her hands folded conscientiously in her lap, and thought, Maybe this won’t work. She was a divorcée; she had chosen to leave her husband. She did not share in his feeling of loss.

But her discomfort faded. A mutual acquaintance had introduced them, telling her, “I know a guy who can show you a good time,” and for five years he had; he showed her Bermuda, Spain, Italy, Greenland and elsewhere, and while they were not quite limber enough for the adventures they had dreamed of in their youth—rafting in the Colorado River, traversing the Himalayas—they were content. The Italian cathedrals towered gloriously, the Bermudan water was clear to the bottom. In a peninsular town in Greenland they had seen rows of peculiar houses, all painted in bold primary colors, blue and red and yellow. Then, on the nearby smooth-stoned shore, they had spotted a fat

walrus, basking in dim sunlight. “Good for her,” she said to him, “letting it all hang out,” and he laughed in his big, roaring way—she had never known the sense of ease he could bring her. He was nothing like her first husband, so different that she hardly compared the two. He was enthusiastic, grand, occasionally smart; not without faults, of course, but she could not expect a man to be faultless. He wanted to experience the moment, and to experience it with her.

Sometimes, alone on the deck of a cruise ship, or looking out the window of an airplane, she would realize that he had intended to visit these places with another. This was painful to confront. She felt sorry for him, for herself, and for Ruth, this unknown woman whose belongings still cluttered the house (a comb on the dresser, completed crossword books by the bathtub; she could not throw them away, they did not belong to her). Then, in the midst of this feeling so much like grief, she would notice something—an impossibly green patch of earth, or a particular glint of the ocean; something floating in the water, a cluster of foam, even—and the world reopened itself. She could forget.

...

Only in the recent months was Ruth’s presence felt in a persistent way. Although she did not know why, he had become once again a widower. He mentioned Ruth to strangers, among friends. One afternoon, she came back from the supermarket, and while she was unpacking the brown paper bags, placing a gallon of milk in the refrigerator, he said to her, “When Ruth was alive, she used to grow tomatoes. I think I might plant some this spring.” He spoke so offhandedly, so simply; he had been reading a book, and did not look up at her. For him this seemed natural. She felt otherwise. With his declaration, the

bond between them loosened, and something inside of her constricted. She did not mention the feeling to him; she could hardly explain the sensation to herself.

...

At a diner with her eldest daughter and her son-in-law, once, she had seen a young couple arguing two booths over. Back then she had still been married, but her husband was away on work at the time. It was likely that he had been working all along, and never once had an affair, but in either scenario his absence was felt; the three of them sat in a booth, and she was alone on one side. In some ways, the fight was a welcome distraction; they spent most of the meal snatching glances.

It had not occurred to the couple to take their quarrel elsewhere, although they spoke in whispers. Really, it was the sighing and sniffing that attracted attention, combined with the occasional rise in either's voice. "Did you really think..." followed by, "Could you keep your voice down, I..." and so on. The waiter did nothing, although visibly distressed.

Apparently the young woman had been unfaithful. Neither of them wore wedding bands; they appeared sweethearts who only dreamed of spending their lives together. Why the revelation had occurred in that diner, on that night, could not be discerned. It did seem that he had just found out. He was in tears, and kept asking her, "If you were on a bridge, and I were at one end and he was at the other, who would you go towards?" The question was posed loudly, and was repeated for the duration of their argument.

"If you were on a bridge..."

"I don't—"

"...And he was at the other..."

Attempts to ignore this interrogation failed; the room was spinning, and a black hole opening beneath that couple in the middle of a diner, and beneath all the rest of them; the cashier, the cook, the son-in-law; they were each implicated. Even as they paid their check and rushed out, leaving the weepy couple behind, they felt the pull.

“I thought we’d never get out of there,” said her daughter.

“I can’t imagine why they stay together,” her son-in-law said.

She could imagine. A passion that engulfed the room—she could imagine.

Whenever she thought back to that moment, she saw herself in the position of the man. She had felt neglected, and even if her husband had never cheated (he was single now, surrounded himself with work, as far as she knew) she felt betrayed. A friend of hers had experienced the same problem with her retired husband. “He’s always fishing with Frank,” she had said. It was their absence that was troubling; they always had somewhere better to be.

Now, she felt that familiar loneliness. It was unlike that of her first marriage, which was accompanied by a sense of impending dissolution; she did not plan to separate from Jim. And he was physically present. Yet in some way, she felt abandoned. Or perhaps not abandoned; that was the difference. She had not been left, but had been, unknowingly, alone from the beginning.

...

Fingers covered in red juice, she placed the sliced strawberries in the cup at the side of his plate. She set a few for herself in a small bowl as well, and washed her hands. Then she sprinkled a pinch of sugar overtop them.

He looked up at her when she walked in. He wore a navy t-shirt and dark jeans. His grey hair stuck up in stiff spikes. He set the newspaper to the side.

“Good morning,” he said.

She laid the plate in front of him. “Good morning to you too.”

“Thank you. Aren’t you going to eat anything?”

She motioned to her bowl of strawberries, and her single slice of toast.

He nodded, then picked up his fork. She watched him for resentment, taking a cautious bite of her toast. He lifted some egg into his mouth and chewed slowly, looking down, then at the newspaper beside him. The article was about a scandal: *Army Sacks General for Sexting Sergeant’s Wife*. After two more bites, she put the toast down.

“Jim.”

He looked up. “Yep?”

“I wanted to talk about last night.” His face was impassive, unchanged. His fork remained in his hand.

She continued. “I wanted to say that I didn’t mean to upset you. I don’t necessarily want to get married. It was less than a suggestion.”

He began to pick at his egg again. “I’m not upset,” he said.

Not upset? Last night he told her he saw no point in remarriage. He deemed it unnecessary; there was no reason for them, at this stage in life, to participate in such an institution. He called it “frivolous.” She did not understand. Her former husband had once said she expected too much, and she had said that she did not expect enough; they were outside during this argument, on the back patio, their attempt at a dinner date having gone awry. She had told him that she deserved better, to which he replied, “You overestimate

your worth.” He had not raised his voice. This was before their divorce was finalized, but not long before. And now here she sat, across from a man who called her “frivolous,” and said to her, I’m not upset, as though she weren’t worth the trouble.

He set down his fork, and looked around. “Did you make coffee?”

Coffee? “I must have forgotten.” Of course, coffee. The first thing she should have remembered.

“Allow me.” He stood. “You made breakfast, I can make coffee.” And then he left. He did not need her help.

She sat at the table with her bowl of strawberries and listened to him fumble in the kitchen. She could hear the bag of beans rattle; then, the sound of the grinder. Like an engine it roared. The grinder was an old gift from a friend, and would need to be replaced soon; it took much longer than necessary to turn beans to powder. So it ground away, as she sat at the table. The noise was loud and grating, and yet it contained warmth; she imagined the dark kernels being churned by the spinning blades, each experiencing a release as it came apart. As she listened to the toss and shake of the machine, a soothing calm passed over her body, undulating like a wave, and for a moment, she forgot the weight of her lack.

THE WRITER AND THE FISH

In her search for inspiration she had placed the bowl on the sill. On the sill, she thought, the betta's scales might catch the morning light in some particular way. But they did not. All she needed was a single sentence; it would not appear.

She squatted, and looked her fish in the eye. Jer, she had named him. "Why do you insist," she said, "On being so stubborn." He looked past her, into the kitchen.

Perhaps he was uncomfortable. Or worse, unhappy. He had lived the entirety of his life in a FishWorld tank until last week, when he was moved to her upstairs dresser. Now she had uprooted his existence yet again. He drifted in the bowl, gazing out at the backyard, at the dangling lobelia just beside the window. Maybe, she thought, I'm being selfish. A tyrant, even.

Her intention had been to buy a goldfish, not a betta. She wanted the goldfish for its tangerine color, like a little flame floating in the water. A goldfish required less attention than a dog, or a parakeet, and a goldfish could not bark, squawk, or disrupt in any way.

A single goldfish, however, required a twenty-gallon tank. It seemed preposterous; the fish so tiny, the tank so massive. Two hundred and twenty-five pounds filled, that was how much it would weigh. She had researched it. What an undertaking: filling the tank, emptying the tank when the fish died a month later, or buying a new fish to again die so soon—it felt like a scam.

Betta fish did not make such demands; they resided in tanks of much more amicable proportions. They were also unremarkable, and she had reservations. She had believed that, at best, they were the fish of children, gaudy and disposable. Only after

learning (in the midst of her research) that the betta dwells in rice paddies did she feel any interest. She imagined one tickling her ankles as she waded through the water; now and then, a kiss against her heel. She drove to FishWorld and made her purchase: a small, silky betta, the color of blue resolution.

Maybe if I stuck my foot in the bowl, she thought. She stared down at Jer. “I kid,” she said, and of course he said nothing. It was exhausting. He refused to cooperate; he refused her. She rose from her squat, using the sill for support, her knees crackling (she was not so young as she once was). The feeling that had seized her when she woke—that she existed at the brink of inspiration—was gone.

...

As she ate her cereal, she considered bowls. From one bowl, she spooned wet bits of flakey bran; in another lived her fish. What if she were to spoon the fish from his bowl? What if she were to leave the cereal in a clear container, upon the sill, for weeks on end? She looked at her spoon. On the rounded bottom, a droplet of milk had condensed, pulled downward by gravity. It quivered.

She placed the spoon in her mouth and then ran towards the stairs. Her desk was so far, blank paper distant; the image in her mind.

HOME

She hopes to fly Will home for Easter. To have him sleep in his old bed, in his old room. She leaves another voicemail, asking him to call her back, but knows he will not hear this one until he hears the last one. While it is evening in Lansing, it is after midnight in France.

Needing distraction, she turns on the television. A crime show has barely begun. There is a little boy talking to a man on the phone, telling him about outer space. The boy speaks toothily and stammers. He is calling with a landline, while the man is listening on a cell phone. The man is shown on the television screen now. He smiles as he drinks his morning coffee, the image of contentment. Suddenly there is a sound and yelling on the other end of the line. Something has happened to the boy. There is the phone, shuddering on the floor, as the yelling continues. The man shouts, “Danny!”—the boy’s name, she assumes—into the receiver.

The credits begin, and she considers changing the channel. She doubts a child that young would have been unattended, and it seems further unlikely that a home abduction would occur in the morning. She does not want to waste her next hour on bad television. But she supposes the man could be in another part of the world, so that for him it is morning, while for the boy it is night. She wonders what the man will do next. He is a government agent, so he knows; she does not, and if Will were to drop the phone, and she were to hear those noises, she would be helpless. It would take so long to contact the right person, and would she be able to hang up on her son in order to dial another number? What if he called out her name?

At night, she falls asleep alone and then wakes, having not yet stepped out of her dream. In her mind is Will, smiling up at her and tugging the hem of her shirt. In her mind he is seven, and has lost his two front teeth. But he has not lost them forever: the teeth are there, in the palm of her hand.

ABROAD

While I am abroad my mother calls daily. She does not care about phone rates; she says my safety is more important. She says she cannot stop worrying about my safety. According to my mother, France is a dangerous place. She gets her news from Diane Sawyer.

Today, she has called in the morning and in the afternoon, and she says that she would like to call again, in the evening. I do not know why she has been awake for my morning, afternoon, and evening, since they are her evening, midnight, and morning. She says there is something she wants to talk to me about. She is becoming frustrated, but I cannot talk with her now. I must conserve my energy for a later confrontation; I must ask my host mother about my disappearing clothing.

ITCH

From even an arm's distance away, Barbara sees nothing wrong with her daughter. Lucy, silly as always, makes faces at her older brother across the table, and giggles when he returns the gesture. She bounces in her seat and her dark brown pigtails wiggle. You'd think that hair, nearly black, would make the lice easier to spot. You'd think they might look like flecks of rice sprinkled over her head.

Barbara has spent the day sanitizing, as per the school nurse's instructions. Every soft thing scrubbed, laundered, and tied up in white plastic bags. Clothing, cushions, comforter—all thoroughly washed, then cut off. The bags were placed in the guest room. That way no one would open one by accident, and Barbara would not see them unless in passing: the piles of white plastic sacks, like a ghostly landfill. Without blood to feed on, the lice would drop dead. The only infected thing that could not be contained was Lucy.

Lice. The last time Barbara heard of an outbreak at school, her son Dillon had been in the second grade. It had begun with a little girl named Danica. According to another stay-at-home mom, Tracy Sherman, Danica had gotten it at her local youth group before spreading it to the entire class.

"I was volunteering at the Christmas party, or the *holiday* party, since they really do call it that now, and she came up right behind me—this close—and tugged on my sleeve," said Tracy. "It was all I could do not to scream." It wasn't her fault, though, they decided. Poor, dirty Danica. Danica the dirtball, the kids probably called her. Everyone knew that her parents were to blame.

"But that doesn't mean I'll be inviting her over to play any time soon."

Barbara had nodded, omitting the fact that she too had been a carrier, when she was younger. One night, while combing Barbara's hair, her mother had noticed the pale specks wriggling along her hairline. Barbara did not grow up in Kingsbury, though. An itchy child was not news, and her mother was single and working. They had smeared mayonnaise across her scalp and hoped for the best.

Kingsbury was different. A child could not go to school smelling like mayonnaise, nor itching like a flea-ridden mutt. When they discovered the parasites on Danica, during a class inspection—the nurses sifted through each child's hair with prongs like chopsticks—they had pulled her from school for a week. When she came back she had a red rash from the shampoo all along her forehead, marking her. "Ostracized, by the other children," Barbara said to her husband Jonathan after she received the nurse's call about Lucy. She had dialed him immediately afterwards. "Not a single kid would speak to her. And now it's our daughter. Where do you think Lucy got it?"

"Cooties," he replied. "They're obsessed at their age. Lucy will be fine." Besides, she had been checked in the privacy of the nurse's office; her teacher had noticed the scratching, and saved her from immediate public scorn. But Susan Osheka had left a voicemail that afternoon. Her daughter had noticed that Lucy left school early, was everything all right? Would Lucy still be available for a play date that Saturday?

"You should be glad you don't work anymore," Jonathan told her. She agreed, remembering when Dillon caught the flu in pre-K. She had been an office manager for Perkin's Dental then, and when she called to tell them she would need a day or so off to take care of her son, they informed her that they'd deduct it from her allotted vacation time. She had wondered why maternity leave only applied to new mothers; it was as if

they thought a mother's job stopped after six months, the children having become self-reliant.

She had quit soon afterwards. Office management is no career, she thought. Her role as a mother was more important. In Kingsbury you could be just that: a mother.

...

Through dinner she watches. She makes sure that her other children do not touch Lucy, and that Lucy does not scratch. She also watches the family dog, Max, because she is unsure whether or not dogs can pass lice, and if they can how easily, and suddenly she has a vision of Max ripping apart the plastic bags and sending the lice skittering through the house. For the remainder of the meal she clenches her silverware and cannot swallow her food.

Before the children go to bed, she washes Lucy's hair with red chemicals that foam pink. Lucy seems unconcerned, unaware that she harbors dozens, maybe hundreds, of bloodsuckers. That these vermin have invaded her body. Twisting in the bathtub, she tells melodramatic stories of playground antics, who-likes-who. She is a child, what else would she do, Barbara thinks; but somehow this thought, meant to reassure, makes her feel worse.

"Stop fidgeting," she says. She rinses the shampoo, then inspects the bathwater for floaters. She cannot see a thing, until, not in the water, but on the sill of the tub—a single louse. Its body is translucent, colored with a spot of blood in the belly. She looks at Lucy, and imagines the multitudes.

"It isn't your fault," the nurse said. "Lice actually prefer clean hair over dirty." It is not my fault, thinks Barbara. Only the fault of the lice. It could not be helped.

Yet whenever she spies a louse, the impulse seizes her to reach for the trimmer in the bottom drawer under the sink, and to shave every lock of hair from her daughter's head. The lice do not think this; she does.

She scours Lucy's roots one final time. She is reminded of her own mother as she does this, and she feels, for the first time that day, relief. She is doing what a thousand mothers have done before her; she is the grooming mother gorilla, picking nits. If anything, she has been a better mother than necessary. That is why the lice affect her; she cares too much. Barbara thinks of her mother (three years ago she passed; a lifelong smoker, she died of lung cancer) and she wishes she were here.

The other children have come to the door to watch, but Barbara tells them to go to bed and wait for her. She dries Lucy's hair and leads her by the hand out of the bathroom, down the hall to her bare mattress. She pulls a thin white sheet over her.

"It itches," says Lucy.

"It's all we can do," says Barbara, "now go to sleep." Stroking Lucy's hair back with her hand, she kisses her forehead, then turns out the light. She goes to each of her children and performs the same motion, bending and kissing. Then she walks down the stairs. As she passes the kitchen, she thinks of the mayonnaise in the refrigerator. Mayonnaise disgusts her now, but Jonathan uses it on his sandwiches. She wonders if it might relieve Lucy's discomfort.

But she remembers herself at age seven, awake in her dark bedroom, with a strand of hair held just above her nose. She had inhaled deeply, perturbed. Her hair smelled like potato salad. Before she would have slipped from her bed and crept to the neighboring

room, sought comfort in the bed of her mother, but that night she did not. She stayed, her hair clasped between her fingers.

If Barbara is not careful, her daughter will resent her for the handling of the lice. Children remember these things.

Downstairs Jonathan lies asleep on the couch. The living room is lit by the television; a baseball game plays. She presses mute and lowers onto the cushion next to him, mindful not to lean back. He works long hours and it is better not to wake him, but she has so much to say. She closes her eyes and attempts to stifle her thoughts. Instead, her awareness heightens.

Lice. The word scuttles around in her brain, burrowing into the cracks of her cerebrum. In the quiet living room she can almost hear them moving; they are establishing themselves invisibly. They are burrowing into the armchair and the sofa. She listens to the noises of the house, and focuses on the gently humming furnace, then the scratch of a branch against the window. She tries to tell herself that they are in her head, that they are imaginary, but they are on the throw pillows, on the carpet, on the walls, the ceiling. Maybe they are on her own scalp. She can hear them, close to her ear.

And she can hear Lucy. When she opens her eyes, her daughter stands in the doorway, calling softly for her. “Momma?” Barbara wants to lift her into her arms, but Lucy is too heavy, so instead she goes to her and kneels. She places a hand against the side of her head, hushing her.

“It itches.”

Only they are awake in the house; no sounds of restless children come from upstairs, and behind her, Doug snores. If I do this, Barbara thinks, it can be our secret.

She stands, and leads Lucy to the kitchen. They move slowly and quietly, like trespassers. In the dark they reach the refrigerator, guided by the touch of the hand, and Barbara opens the stainless steel doors. A white glow enters the darkness, and she squints.

The container is nearly full. She opens the drawer of silverware, but what for? A knife? Will she spread the mayo like butter on bread? A spoon? Her own mother had applied it with bare hands.

Barbara, though, cannot place her hand inside the jar. She cannot slide her fingers into the gelatinous white substance, and so rather than stand there, in the light of the open refrigerator, while Lucy watches (and remembers, for the rest of her life), Barbara reaches for a spoon.

She does it quickly. Holds her breath and places dollops to Lucy's head. It is easier to touch once it has left the container. She presses it against the hair and strokes it flat. When she does this, touches the mayo, she turns away, toward the window. She feels compelled to close the curtains, but the window looks out on only their back yard, where there is no one to look in. When she finishes, and has rinsed her hands in the sink, she walks Lucy up the stairs and fits her head with a shower cap.

"Don't touch," Barbara instructs.

Then she puts her to bed. She tries to ignore the smell that comes from her daughter, and that lingers on her own hands. Although Lucy seems content, Barbara has failed; to her, it feels like she has unknowingly passed something on, maybe even to all of her children.

In the kitchen, the spoon from before sits on the counter, and she considers tossing it into the garbage. She should not have needed the spoon. Why could she have

not used her hands? But by hurling it into the garbage she would commit a more serious act of waste, so she cleans it and leaves it on the counter to dry. Down the hall, she can see light flickering; the television is still on, and Jonathan has most likely remained asleep. “Of course he has,” she mutters, and it’s better that way. He wouldn’t have the slightest clue how to help with this.

She feels an old resentment rising, and a new one burgeoning, and is surprised at herself. She goes to the front door, and opens it. She steps outside. The air is cool and dry. She wonders if the neighbors can see her, if they are awake. But then, she thinks, who cares? She folds her arms and stares out into the night.

THE HUMANS

In the last hour, an inch of snow had fallen. It collected on parking meters and cars, on awnings and in gutters; it balanced on long metal railings and clung thinly to brick walls, and fell so that the cracked Manhattan sidewalk disappeared. The flowerpots—emptied of flowers, at this time of year—were filled and the fire hydrants were topped with round white caps. I was living out west then, in Phoenix, and had forgotten how New York could be in winter. And it was windy, too; the flurries eddied around us as we walked toward Braddock's, our heads lowered, Kat trailing behind. "Hustle, but don't slip," my mother called to her. We were going to the theater later that night, and they both wore heels.

"If anyone's going to slip, it's you," Kat replied. She held her black skirt tight against her legs as she hurried forward.

Dodging cars, we crossed the street and entered the restaurant.

The hostess greeted us as we shed our damp coats and hats. "We have a reservation," said my mother, and, red-faced from the cold, we were seated by the fireplace. Strands of twinkling lights bordered the windows, and on the windowsills lay fir clippings bound by red velvet ribbons. A small pine tree occupied the corner, draped in popcorn garlands and crowned with a tin star. It was early in the evening and we were the only people there. I looked at my mother, sister, and father. It had been months since I'd seen them. I noticed they had all gotten haircuts.

My mother said, "I ran into Rob Carson sometime last week and told him we were eating here before the play, and he said to order the lamb or the meatloaf," she looked

down at her menu, “but not the beet salad, which is a shame because you know I love beets.”

“Beets taste like dirt,” said Kat. “And salads taste like grass. Of course you shouldn’t order the beet salad.”

My mother laughed. “Well I’ve always liked beets. When I was younger I ate so many that I peed red for three days, and my mother had to call the doctor.” Now all three of us laughed, all of us except my father. Kat said to him, “What’s the matter? Not in the mood?” but he did not respond. He fidgeted in his seat, glancing around the restaurant.

Only when my mother prodded his arm did he react, saying, “Sorry, I was distracted.” Then he said, “I figured we could have a discussion, before we see the rest of the family for dinner this Sunday.” It was Thursday night, but he said this urgently; but my father is generally an impatient person.

He wanted to discuss what had happened to Kat. We all knew the story: on her way home from a party, she had stumbled into a pair of cops. They asked for her license and took her aside (she was barely eighteen) but then called for an ambulance to deliver her to the nearest hospital, where she spent the night. Apparently they felt she was dangerously intoxicated. My mother told me the following morning over the phone. She thought I deserved to know, as Kat’s brother. She said, “Your sister was stopped by some cops last night, two blocks from her apartment, so it couldn’t have been that bad.” She had emphasized the fact that Kat was two blocks away. “It was bad luck,” she said.

I understood. It was her first semester, she had gone to her first party; mistakes were made. I had been out of school for less than a year, and could remember similar mistakes of my own. And we were a family of drinkers; trouble was almost inevitable. I

understood. She had been out late; we were glad that nothing worse had happened. Kat spent the rest of that weekend recovering at my parents' house, near Kingston, about a hundred miles north of the city.

This all occurred two months prior. Now my father said, "We won't mention this to Pap, and you are definitely not to tell Joan." These were relatives on my mother's side—my grandfather and aunt—who we saw regularly and spent all holidays with, and who would be joining us that Sunday. My father's family lived in Illinois, and we rarely visited.

I nodded, having assumed as much. While both my mother and aunt experienced trouble with the law in their youth, my sister and I faced greater scrutiny when it came to bad behaviors. My aunt never had children, and so it was easier for her to judge us. That was, at least, my mother's explanation. A rivalry existed between them, as often exists between two sisters.

"I mean it," my father said. Nothing was to be mentioned, "Even vaguely."

I turned with a sigh and said, "Of course." But I wondered if there was something wrong about this dishonesty. Or maybe I myself felt wronged; had I not been more discreet in my transgressions?

And my father had commanded not once, but twice that I be silent. I asked why he felt the need to repeat himself. "It's because you can't shut up," said Kat.

Well. I suppose she was right, since I am writing about this now. But I had also managed to keep a good number of her secrets safe from my parents, most of my parents' secrets safe from her, and virtually all of my secrets safe from both her and my parents.

Before I could open my mouth to argue, my mother said, “Enough about that.” She began to talk of plans for the upcoming week; she wanted to see the new holiday movies, and to visit a light show like the one she and my father had taken us to as kids. We ordered food, then discussed the demeanor of our waiter (It’s like everything we ordered was a disappointment to him, Kat joked); we pulled warm bits of bread from the loaf in the center of the table, dipping them in olive oil. Our meals arrived—I had the meatloaf—and we ate, the fire warming our necks. I turned to Kat. Every so often, she would touch her hair, her bangs, to make sure everything was intact. Her brown eyes appeared darker than I remembered; she was three years younger than me, but seemed older, although her cheeks were still baby round and pink. We had grown somewhat apart, but as children were best friends. We had scoured the narrow creek behind the house for frogs, and had camped in the backyard in summer, just us two, and when our parents took us into the city we became spies for the day, scouting the Manhattan crowds for danger. Anyone with tinted shades was suspect, but the dodgiest of pedestrians were the businessmen who wore dark suits even in the middle of July.

Sitting across from me in her black skirt, black sweater, and sleek black shoes, she looked like them. Brushing away a stray eyelash, she scowled at no one in particular.

The dispute ignited over my mother’s mention of a local family, the Ditkas. Had we heard about their divorce? It was recent. Apparently they had decided to raise the children—there were three, the youngest being seven and the oldest sixteen—in what was known as a “bird’s nest.” This meant the children lived in one home (the nest) with one parent, while the other parent stayed in an apartment. Then the parents alternated.

“They’re trying to seem logical about it,” said my mother. “But they hate each other, I can tell.”

I asked why she felt the need to pick apart other people’s lives. She said she was making an observation, and asked what had made me so sour.

“Forget about it,” I said, but she did not.

A half-hour later, the plates were cleared and the bill paid, and we had found the center of our conflict. “Kat wasn’t arrested. What is the worst that could happen if someone slipped up? If someone told?” I asked. They shook their heads; I was alone in my opposition. By now other people had gathered in the restaurant, and occasionally they looked in the direction of our table. Thankful they aren’t us, I thought. I was exhausted, but would not relent.

As we walked to the theater, Kat said, “If you open your fat ugly mouth, you’ll regret it.”

...

The Public was staging *the Humans*, a one-act comedy-drama about a family arguing over Thanksgiving dinner. Too apt, I know. The venue was small, meant to accommodate about three hundred people, and our seats were adjacent to the stage, so close we could see the actors spit.

When the emcee introduced the play, he said, “This season, give thanks that your family isn’t as bad as this one.” The audience laughed, and the lights dimmed; and for the next hour, the four of us sat and waited for it to get worse.

...

After a few remarks about the play, we rode the subway in silence, and in the car said nothing. Passing dark forest outlines and small planned communities, we listened to the radio and hoped that we would not encounter traffic. When we arrived at the house we retreated to our separate rooms.

For the following two days I avoided Kat and my parents. We might have been staying in the same house, but I had lived there most of my life, and I knew where to go to avoid them. The guest room, the basement—It wasn't hard to be alone, and I don't think they were eager to speak with me, or with each other. Through the wall I heard my mother. "Why did you bring it up then?" she wanted to know. "We hardly see the kids, it was a special occasion. We almost never ever go to the theater. We could have had a nice dinner..."

And on Sunday night, we would have another dinner. I considered my position; if I told Pap and Joan, an argument would ensue, that was guaranteed, and an argument could lead to one of two outcomes. Either we would become increasingly alienated, or we would be closer than before. My family had argued in the past, and though our arguments were vicious, our bonds were strong. We were honest. To me, families that did not argue seemed detached. I would not have wanted to grow up with a family like that.

By the time Joan's car rolled into the driveway, I had decided. I heard the front door open as my mother greeted them, and heard the clinking of bottles in Pap's cooler—he always made the drinks, and brought his own booze. I walked up the stairs as Kat descended; we arrived in the foyer separately, but at the same moment. I smiled as Pap pulled me in with one arm. He said to me, "Hello, stranger!"

...

Joan had gained weight, and Pap had lost some. When I hugged them, it felt like his gut had transferred to her. But otherwise, they looked well. The same. We went to the living room—it was just down the hall—and sat. Adults on the couches and chairs, kids on the floor cushions, as always. At twenty-two I was considered a kid, and would be indefinitely. No sooner had she sat than my mother stood and disappeared around the corner for appetizers. Pap followed with his cooler. My father, after a brief scan of the room, rose from the couch in search of the remote controller.

“So,” said Joan, “What’s new?”

I told her that I had a new job, with a law firm. I was in charge of their advertising. “Must be a big firm if they produce their own advertising,” she said. She asked if I had thought of becoming a lawyer, and I said, No, but it wasn’t a bad idea. She said she had a friend who went to law school and ended up in another business, but she could give me his number just in case.

Then she turned to Kat, who was ready; she said that she had made plenty of friends in school, and that her classes had gone well. She felt a little overwhelmed, but who wasn’t, in their first year of college?

This would have seemed the perfect moment to say, “I ran into some trouble,” but it was not. The moment was inexplicably wrong. Neither Kat nor I could have said anything without spoiling the evening.

“Have you enjoyed being home?” Joan asked her.

She nodded. My mother emerged with a bowl of pistachios and a cheese plate (she had been listening from the kitchen) and said, “We saw *the Humans* on Friday, at the Public.”

“How was it?”

“I don’t know if you would have liked it. We were pretty close to the stage, though.”

Joan raised her eyebrows and took a handful of pistachios. She cracked them one by one until she had a pile of shells and a pile of kernels, then she picked up the kernels and ate them all. My father, having found the remote, turned on the Knicks game. Pap entered with drinks, and we settled into our old rhythm.

...

Outside it had begun to snow, harder than on Friday. “Typical,” said Joan. She and Pap lived in Albany, an hour away. “I bet the roads will be awful,” she said. The forecast predicted upwards of seven inches before midnight, “But tell me when a weatherman has been right,” quipped my mother. We turned on the porch lights and saw a blaze of white flakes emerge brightly from the darkness, flitting silently to the ground. The steps were covered; my father went out with a broom to clear them. In a moment alone with my mother (we were passing one another in the hallway), she said, “I hope Joan doesn’t plan to stay the night on account of snow. How typical would that be!” And then she left to finish dinner preparations. After two days of silence, I thought, that quick remark, which I imagine was bursting inside of her until spoken aloud, was what prompted her to address me like family again.

She meant it, too. She wanted them gone before the worst of the storm, and she called us to the table with the timer still ringing, the food not yet carried out when she hollered for a second time, “Dinner!” Joan bustled past the table and into the kitchen with the intention of bringing out food, but my mother said, “No, don’t bother with that!” I

wondered if Joan was as eager to leave as my mother was to drive her out. I wondered if Kat and I would become anything like them.

We received each dish—peppered beans, mashed potatoes, slivers of beef — directly from the kitchen, from my mother’s hands, and, having served ourselves, passed to the left. When all were seated and served, we ate. We did not join hands to say prayer, as we were never very religious. Joan complimented the beans and asked if my mother had prepared them in a special way, and my mother said no, unless she had incidentally added too much pepper. “Well, they taste good,” said Joan. They were seated at one end of the table, and at the other end, Pap and my father, who were in the midst of discussing a book about Vietnam. Kat and I were in the center. I looked across at her. She had piled mashed potatoes onto her plate, and no longer appeared sullen, but instead happy, or at least content. Now was the moment, I felt, to discuss with the family what had happened. We would argue until the meal was finished, and then, drowsy and filled, we would embrace and kiss cheeks at the door as we departed—if we did not have the discussion, we would do this as well, but would it mean anything? I raised my chin and prepared to speak.

But I did not. I ate my peppered beans and potatoes and beef and answered questions when asked. At the end of the night, we gathered again in the foyer, and waved goodbye to Pap and Joan as they drove away. They would visit again on Christmas day, in less than a week, but I knew I would not tell them then either. I realized I would never tell them.

When I had raised my face to Kat, at dinner that night, she raised hers in return. She narrowed her eyes, as if to say, *See if I care*. She did not look down, so I did, and

when I looked back up, she had entered the conversation of my mother and aunt. As I listened to them discuss recipes, and as my grandfather related the shifty, sinister tactics of the Viet Cong, I felt our separation. The closeness that had once existed was gone; it had been missing for some time. In an unseen instant, we had drifted, and now grew increasingly distant and unknown to each other, helpless to the change. The table seemed to widen, pressing against my stomach, pushing us further apart, and I watched those around me fade as they continued their polite conversations with people who were once familiar. With every moment they vanished, and soon, they would be gone.

FERN OWENS

In life, she had been a copy editor. It was not ideal, but she liked the quiet of it. She worked for a reputable publishing house, which published the works of several authors both well-known and acclaimed. At school she had dreamt of becoming an author, but this dream never materialized, and once in the business of copy editing, she resolved instead to become a Substantive Editor: one who edits for quality, guides the writer's vision. Well, Fern was only a mechanical editor, charged with grammatical correction and formatting. The chief editor, who revised substantively, often made mechanic jokes when he stopped at her desk; he would present her with a manuscript and say, "The cogs aren't quite turning on this one, Fern, time to tighten the screws," like she worked in an auto shop. Sometimes she indulged him and cranked her arm, feigning the twist of a wrench.

Once, as he gave her a stack of manuscripts, she handed him a manuscript of her own. He was surprised, but agreed to look it over. It was a story she had written in the evenings after work, about a young boy dining with his parents in a French restaurant. Following anxious deliberation, the boy (named Terrence) ordered duck, but was horrified to learn, when the waiter returned with the food, brown and glistening on a blue ceramic plate, that the duck's head was included with the meal.

"I don't want to eat it," he said.

"You have to," said his mother, "It is impolite to leave food on your plate in France." She was trying to be soothing, but as he protested further, she grew impatient. "We don't want to seem like rude foreigners," she told him. "Eat it."

But the boy could not eat the duck's head. It did not seem like something that should be eaten; it reminded him of a shoe horn that belonged to his grandfather, a curved sliver of shiny tortoiseshell that hung in the old man's closet. When his parents were distracted (something was happening outside the restaurant, there was a crowd gathering) he placed the head in the pocket of his overcoat. It remained there, an oily reminder of his shame, until the end of the story.

Fern's inspiration had come from an experience she had had as a young girl. She had not been in France, but in Maryland, and she had not ordered duck, but crab cakes. But she had, after eating one of the two crab cakes on her plate, placed the other in the pocket of her skirt.

She could not explain herself, though, so when writing her story, she made the necessary changes. The head of a duck inspired easy revulsion, and across the Atlantic the choice of whether to eat one's food became less free. The head had nowhere to go but the pocket. She fictionalized, but at its center the story was true, and she sensed, objectively, as an editor, that an essential and natural urgency existed in her story. She titled it *Le Jardin des Sens*, which meant 'Garden of the Senses'; that was the name of the restaurant.

When the chief editor returned a week later, her manuscript sat atop a pile of others, each marked with his blue ink pen. Fern recognized his marks, knew that the ink smudged and forced her hand to hover above the paper so as not to disturb, but seeing these marks on her own story felt strange. She was both bothered, for the marks seemed more offensive on her page, and excited, for there her manuscript sat, with all the rest. He had considered each phrase.

Still holding her story, he said, “I enjoyed it,” but was it necessary that they dined in France? Setting should develop organically, and here it was clunky, as if she had forced her knowledge of French etiquette. And what happened to the rest of the duck? Once the head was in the boy’s pocket, the remaining meat vanished. “But it was promising,” he said, “Otherwise I would not have critiqued it seriously.” And he lowered the pile of work onto her desk, lifting her story from the top and setting it by the side.

As he retreated, she looked out the window to her left. He did not have to be so terse, she thought. They were colleagues, they were friends. He had told her about his vacations, and about his mother’s cancer diagnosis. She had listened; she was glad to hear about his life. But in sharing this one story with him, she was met with dismissal, his interest mild and perfunctory. He had read it as if she were a stranger, wholly detached from and unnecessary to him.

If I wanted to, she thought, I could leave right now. I could leave silently, and he would not know I had gone until later, when he came back for his manuscripts. And then he would see her manuscript, abandoned—no, she would take that with her.

She continued to stare out the window. Just outside grew a Beech, absurdly wide, filling the frame. In summer, when the tree was most full, the round green leaves brushed against the glass pane, like a breeze of summer air; gentle as anything. She would not leave. She was lucky to have an office with a window.

...

When she died, Fern was not thinking of her mistreatment at the hands of the chief editor, but of the duck’s head. She was at home preparing dinner for an old friend who had not yet arrived—the kitchen smelling of baked chicken— and she had just removed a jar of

cherries from the refrigerator. Her cat rubbed up against her ankles. “Gus,” she scolded. “Don’t make me trip.” She walked with the cherries into the living room and, after placing a single cherry in her Old Fashioned, set the jar with a docile clink onto the high glass side table. As she returned to the kitchen, she was surrounded again by the scent of the chicken baking, and she remembered the duck’s head. It had been years since she thought of that story. She had not described in her narrative the smell of the cooked duck, which was an oversight, she thought. But this was how it smelled: tender yet substantial, like it could fill you up. It was a smell so rich and satisfying that it could never last. That was why she had not added it to the story—because she had felt the smell conflicted too sharply with the sight of the duck’s head. But maybe, she thought, the boy could have smelled the duck as the plate hovered above him in the hands of the waiter, and seen the head only when the plate was set, with a thud, on the wooden table in front of him. Where had she placed that manuscript? It had been abandoned, but not thrown out.

She might have then remembered the chief editor’s criticisms, and remembered that afternoon spent staring out the window which she continued to sit by daily, but at that moment her cat leapt high onto the glass table in the neighboring room and knocked the jar of cherries off the table onto the floor, where it shattered. Her heart seized as she mistook the shatter of the jar for a hostile intruder, and, clutching her chest, she fell.

In death Fern Jones was remembered by her family, her few close friends, and her coworkers. The chief editor attended her funeral, but chose not to make remarks, although she had worked with him for thirty years. Briefly, while sitting among the mourners, he thought of her story, the one, he remembered, with the odd French title. What a bizarre story, he thought. With Fern’s death, which came as a surprise (she was

fifty-two, a decade younger than him), her position had become vacant, but he had declined to hire a replacement for her. This was not because she was irreplaceable, but because copy editors were increasingly seen as a luxury in the publishing industry. In her absence, he would be tasked with mechanical edits as well as substantive edits, a great deal of edits for one person. But he would not refuse. The fact was that even he, chief editor, could be seen as expendable, and might soon be without work.

OYUN

His grandmother eyes the bloody tooth by lamplight. No fairies, she says, Feed it to the dog is the way.

He asks her why, and she tells him that in its place will grow a new tooth strong as a hound's. He thinks of Tyco, the family Boxer, then with the tip of his tongue probes the notch in his gums, tingling and fresh. He asks how they will feed it to the dog and she says in a meat pie or with a biscuit.

She pockets the tooth and rises, a hand on the boy's shoulder for balance. There is no light outside her room so they move slowly, reaching: she with her cane, he with outstretched hand. Under his feet the rug feels soft like moss. Down the stairs will be difficult but the hall will be easy. The dog sleeps by the door.

She tells him that before Tyco, there was Oyun and that Oyun swallowed every tooth she ever lost. She says that by the last one (a gnarled molar) she could hold the tooth above and drop it like a coin into Oyun's waiting mouth. That is why she has such a mighty jaw. I have bitten through rope she says and also a piece of leather. She smiles, as if pulling a trick, but the boy knows; her teeth seem fierce and strong and gleaming even in the pitch dark.

His palms are clammy, and his heart feels a swell of anticipation. The smallest sliver of moon shows through the window. Together they move silently, and in that silence hear the sounds of another; on the top step, a silhouette. It is almost midnight, whispers his father, What are you doing out of bed?

She says in reply, Don't you remember? She mutters something else, too, in a language the boy does not fully understand; of her words, he hears "we," and "my son."

The return is solemn. His father offers his arm to her for support but she insists on walking unassisted, and climbing into bed by herself also. She sits on the edge of the mattress and eases her legs up. Her hands tremble as she pulls the cotton sheet over her body. Situated, she turns toward his father, and fixes him with a stare that threatens to swallow the room. He towers above her. Neither moves; the boy does not know who to fear for. Then, as if struck by a sudden realization, she softens, and sinks into the pillow. Her eyes flicker as the light goes out.

When the door is shut his father says your turn. Now there are two, again travelling down the hall, but the boy does not want to go. I'm still bleeding, he says, Can I have a tissue? They take a detour to the bathroom. There are no tissues, so a folded square of toilet paper is used. Within seconds it turns sopping wet. As almost an afterthought, his father kneels beside him and asks, Where is the tooth?

They check the pocket of his pajamas and across the tiled bathroom floor. They search around the top of the stairs and along the stretch of soft hall carpet, all the way back to her door. His father sighs in resignation; he turns the knob.

She sits upright in the bed, smiling as before. A sly mother. Her hands folded on her lap. The curtains flutter, the energy has shifted. There is no question of who to fear for now. His father has not yet asked but the boy knows the answer; he can feel it. The tooth is in a place where it cannot be taken. It travels: down her throat, towards her stomach. She opens her emptied mouth wide, and her own teeth shine. Already the boy can feel the change. The hole in his gums throbs, something is eager to push through. She has taken his tooth and given him something in exchange. He raises a finger to his mouth, and touches.

THE WAY THINGS WERE

Peter Barnes first heard about it from his wife, Linda, who heard about it from Helen Chapman. He had just come in from bagging leaves, and, closing the door behind him, he prayed the coming Massachusetts winter would be his last. His back flinched as he bent down to unlace his boots. He'd suggested they move to warmer climates ever since the kids had left home, but Linda always found an excuse. "What about our friends?" she asked. "Your job? Our house?"

She was right, yet as he dragged pile after pile up the hill to the compost heap each year, Peter wondered if anything was really worth it. A slim man his whole life, he felt himself bending under the weight of the leaves, like a twig bound to snap.

Linda was on the phone, mid-conversation, when Peter walked through the front door. "That's terrible," she said, perched on their beige couch. "I can't even imagine."

The house smelled like lemons. She had been cleaning before the call, her rubber gloves on the table, bottles and rags on the floor. She motioned for Peter to stay put, pointing at the still-wet hardwood.

"Do they know anything else? Are they sure?"

He sat, careful not to extend his limbs farther than the immediate foyer. Leaning against the door, he massaged his fingers, bending and cracking them, working from the knuckles to the nails. It seemed that fall had arrived early, impatient to ruin the comfort of summer and to alert him to all the new aches that accompanied life after fifty.

"Of course, I understand. Well, tell Patty and Dave they have our support. We'll make sure to be there. All right, buh-bye now."

She hung up, and Peter asked where she wanted his shoes. She directed him to the hall closet, then knelt, but did not resume her scrubbing; her hands remained in her lap, the gloves on the table. As Peter lifted his boots into a cubbyhole, she looked up at him. “Remember Ben Lauer? Patty and Dave’s son?”

Peter nodded, still massaging his fingers.

“He died, camping on the grounds off I-90. Apparently he shot himself in his sleeping bag.”

...

The funeral was scheduled for October 10th, a Monday. The Lauers were distant friends, but Linda felt they needed to show support as members of the community. “Besides, he was such a nice boy.”

Peter could neither affirm nor deny this statement. He knew the deceased largely from church gatherings, years ago, when Ben was much younger. The kid had been an acolyte, tasked with lighting the altar candles, and had worn a royal blue robe that was a bit too long; as he walked down the aisle, the long golden stem of the lighter extended before him, he would stumble and trip over the extra fabric. Every week this happened, and Peter watched with pity as his daughters giggled and Linda hushed them. Every week he stumbled, and no one thought to pin the robe. He was so quiet and serious, blushing every time he was summoned to light or extinguish the candles. This was at Mount Pleasant, but the funeral service would be held at the Montgomery Community Church; there had been a dispute between Patty Lauer and the Mount Pleasant pastor, something to do with a luncheon. Peter had only half-listened when Linda told him the details.

As he steered the car into the parking lot, Peter wondered what type of person Ben Lauer had become. Linda told him that he had attended undergrad somewhere out west, but she could not remember if he graduated or what specific university he had gone to. Peter thought of his daughters, one a businesswoman in Arizona and the other a journalist in San Francisco. They had declined to fly in for the funeral. “We barely knew him,” said Jessica. They were adults, grown women. But Peter could only imagine Ben as a child, dressed in oversized clothing.

The clouds, in a show of sympathy, covered the sky in grey, but no rain fell from them. Linda had attempted, in the five minutes before they left, to choose between an umbrella and her black pea coat, finally deciding on the latter. As they waited in the line to extend condolences to the Lauers, she took it off, then put it on, again and again, still unsatisfied.

“We haven’t seen them since the Christmas dinner, the one at the Larson’s, have we?” she asked, folding the jacket over her arm.

“The Lauers? I think so.”

“I wonder if Patty still has her job at the post office. I haven’t seen her there lately, but maybe they have her working in the back, sorting the mail or something.”

Peter nodded, wondering how Patty’s current vocation related to the death of her only son, but keeping the thought to himself. When they finally reached the front of the line, Linda placed her hand on Patty’s shoulder, then pulled her into a hug. “I am so sorry for your loss, and I want you to know we’re here for you, okay? Anything you need.”

Peter watched as Linda held Patty in her arms.

“Peter, it’s so nice to see you.” Patty took his hand in her short little fingers and squeezed. Her face was bare of makeup, either in anticipation of crying or because of it. Even her neck seemed wet with tears.

“Yes, but it’s unfortunate that it has to be under these circumstances.” He looked at her husband, Dave, and placed his free hand firmly on his shoulder. “Sorry for your loss.” The man gave a small smile, and thanked him for his sympathies.

Propped up next to the Patty and Doug was a sizable picture of a boy with tousled hair and a clean white shirt, a teenaged Ben. Then there were the flower arrangements, gathered together almost like a nest. The smell of lilies was overwhelming. And beside the flowers, the casket.

The casket was half open, with the top lid propped up to reveal a white satin lining and, dressed in a black suit and an indigo tie, the body. Linda had told him that the family insisted upon an open casket, but Peter couldn’t picture it. Even now, as he stared directly into the box, he struggled to process what he saw. Yellow paint caked the face, and a faint pink powdered the cheekbones. Across the right temple they had stretched false flesh, a putty almost unnoticeable in its seamless application, but with a waxy composition that betrayed its artificial nature. The hair adjacent to this soft covering gave a similarly near-human impression, with wiry strands applied in patches that imitated the surrounding hair, but lacked the exact texture. The longer Peter looked at it, the more it seemed like carpet, stapled to skull. The rest of his body, Thank God, was covered, with just his hands visible in the suit. They rested together, swollen and veiny, on his stomach. Feeling overheated, Peter stepped to the side and waited for his wife.

They sat in the ninth row, next to the Chapmans, Helen and Linda side by side. The pair shook their heads, whispering, “Too young.” Peter watched as more people shuffled in, neighborhood faces mixed with out-of-town mourners. Many of the younger ones, some of them friends of his daughters, wept openly into tissues pulled from pockets and purses. Other than Kate McAndrews—a former classmate who died in a freak car accident a couple years earlier—they had escaped the reach of death completely. Ben Lauer had, by his own hand, interrupted their invincibility.

The older folks in attendance sensed a disturbance as well, although of a different variety; swiveling in their seats, they said, “It’s just not right. How does a person *do* that?” They speculated, wondering if drugs were involved. “There is a history of drinking in the family, very sad.”

The program was short and tear-stained, beginning with a traditional hymn and ending with ‘In the Garden.’ The pastor provided words of reassurance, but stayed away from anecdotes. For most of the funeral, Peter stared ahead, thinking of the carpet-like hair on the scalp, the putty against the skin, and the hole beneath. Cremation would have seemed like the obvious choice, given the circumstances.

Near the end of the service, Patty walked to the front for some words about her son. She stood on a small wooden box to reach the microphone, her face barely visible over the podium.

“Ben’s favorite holiday was Halloween.” Her voice was a whisper, strained and fragile. “He loved to dress up, become someone new. When he was younger, he’d spend months designing a costume, sometimes two if the school was having an event. For most

of his childhood birthdays, he had costume parties, just to sneak one more day of Halloween into the year.

“As he grew older, of course, his enthusiasm became less pronounced; what teenage boy will admit his love of playing dress up? But he still wore costumes, for parties with friends, hayrides, and pumpkin patch outings.” She smiled, lips trembling. “He just loved it so much. His first Halloween we dressed him up in a baby lion costume, and he wouldn’t stop laughing. He didn’t cry once all night.”

She looked down. “This year, he decided to spend the night on the couch, watch a few scary movies with a bag of jumbo candy. I tried to suggest a haunted house, but he brushed me off. I bought the tickets anyways, and figured Dave and I could go if he wasn’t in the mood.” Shuddering, she squeezed her eyes shut. Her husband leaned forward, as if to whisk her away before the flood of tears was unleashed.

“It’s just a few weeks away now, Halloween. The tickets arrived the other day, in the mail...” She wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “They brought something back. And I can’t seem to throw them away, either. It’s like if I throw them away, I’ll somehow lose my connection to him. And he was such a special son, to me and to Dave. I can’t let him go, not yet. When I look at him, lying there— I can’t accept it. I want to hug him and kiss his cheek, ask him about his day, nag him. But I can’t. There is nothing I can say to express how much I miss him, nothing.” She gripped the edges of the podium, and took a deep breath.

“More than anything, I just wish things would go back to the way they were.”

...

The Chapmans suggested they all go for a drink and Linda agreed, so after the service they headed to the Brushcreek Tavern, Peter and Linda trailing behind Helen and George. The clouds had grown darker, but still withheld rain, their bodies heavy with the accumulating droplets. The steering wheel felt cold under Peter's fingers, and he pulled the sleeves of his jacket down to cover them. "I will never understand why you won't wear gloves," said Linda.

The tavern was nearly empty, and even appeared closed, with its wooden chairs flipped up onto the tables. A woman sat at the end of the bar, stirring a glass of ice, and a man sipped a beer in the corner, but otherwise the place was vacant. The mourners sat at a round table in the center of the room and ordered two pitchers of Budweiser, at George's prompting. The waitress, a curvy woman with sagging Farrah Fawcett hair, took their order without a smile. As she walked away, Peter watched her.

Linda and Helen had begun to talk about the schedule for delivering food to the grieving family, and discussed whether or not the Lauers would prefer a tuna or chicken casserole. Peter and George drank their beers and looked around at the fixtures in the familiar tavern, sprawling landscape paintings and stuffed animal heads hanging on the wall. The two men had nothing but the companionship of their wives in common, and usually found themselves muddling through small talk about work, weather, or the wellbeing of their families. On that day it was George who undertook the task of starting this painful process.

"So, Pete, how's work?" He reclined in his chair, setting his glass on the table.

"It's fine," Peter said, nodding. "Same old, same old."

"Got that promotion yet?"

Peter winced. He had been chasing a promotion for the last ten years, and knew his constant pursuit and failure often found its way into Linda and Helen's conversations.

"Not yet. At this point, I'm thinking I may get my retirement package before I get that promotion."

George laughed at the tired joke, then began to talk about his latest auto deal. He had a slight wheeze that worked its way into his words, like he was running at a brisk pace and trying to talk simultaneously. When he first met George, Peter would imitate the asthmatic rasp to Linda, and she would laugh and tell him he was cruel. He wondered if she remembered that. Signaling the waitress, he asked her to bring another pitcher.

"Looks like you're the designated driver tonight," said Helen, nudging Linda.

"Leave him alone," said George, putting his arm around his wife. "We're getting old, we can do what we want now."

"Don't remind me," Helen said, shrugging him off. She eyed the waitress as she set the pitcher down. When the woman had retreated, she said, "You know, I thought we'd have a bit more time before the funerals started, and even then, I thought they would be our own."

Linda shook her head. "Who ever expected this?"

"I can't stop thinking about our kids, out in the world. What if something were to happen to them? Would I find out a week later, through the news?"

"I know my daughters are capable, but now, with this whole situation... I think I might start calling them more often, just to check in on them, you know?" Linda sat back, crossing her arms.

"I'm with you there," said Helen. "I can't stop thinking about what their last

words were to Ben, if they called, if they suspected anything. I know Patty wishes she could go back and do something different, but...”

Peter stared across the room, through the legs of the upturned chairs, at the waitress. Standing behind the bar, she watched the door, and Peter wondered if she was willing customers in or wishing herself out. Her shirt had slipped to the side, baring her collarbone and a single pink bra strap. Linda had always insisted that anything other than black or beige was a waste of money.

Peter shifted in his seat and, with a swig, finished his beer.

...

They left early, just before the sun had set. Linda placed a tentative hand on her husband’s back as they walked from the bar, guiding him towards the passenger side. The ride home was slow and cautious; the sun disappeared before their eyes. Where had the day gone? Peter watched his wife as she drove, her head pivoting back and forth, her hands darting around the wheel. She’d become hesitant to drive ever since her last trip to the optometrist, and Peter felt guilty about the swish of Budweiser in his stomach. Pulling into the driveway, he watched the beams from the car come closer and closer to the brown doors of the garage, then disappear.

The house no longer smelled like lemons. Linda paused after slipping her black heels off, then pulled two pins from her hair, letting the dyed brown curls fall against her black coat. She slipped this off too, and hung it from a chair. Leaning against the wall, Peter looked at her, his wife, the mother of his children, his life partner.

She stretched her arms. “I think I’m going to pour myself a glass of wine before I go to sleep. Do you want to join me?” Her face seemed bright, and as she tilted her head

to one side, Peter wanted to want her—to feel the need to run, or stumble, to her, and take her in his arms, onto the floor—but he felt only tightness in his brain, the pain of an impending headache.

“I’ve probably had enough to drink,” he said, adding a feeble chuckle to soften the rejection. She didn’t laugh.

“Suit yourself.”

He cleared his throat. “I think I’ll turn in early tonight.”

She turned and walked into the kitchen. “That’s fine.” Peter considered following her, and stood in the foyer light for a moment before turning in the opposite direction and climbing the stairs.

In the dark bedroom, he undressed slowly, grappling with his sleeves and tugging at his belt with clumsy fingers. His pants around his ankles, Peter struggled to maintain balance, and reached out for the bedpost. He felt exhausted, like he could barely hold the parts of his body together, and was tempted to forgo nightly rituals and crawl beneath the linen sheets; instead, he trudged into the bathroom, leaving his suit crumpled on the floor.

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, toothbrush in hand, he studied his features. The congregation of lines around his eyes and mouth must have been developing for years, but they startled him with their depth; even in the most direct light, with his face turned towards the vanity bulbs overhead, the grooves remained, carved permanently into his expression. Even more alarming were the protruding bags beneath his eyes and the dip of his jowls; as he stared at them, he felt his face lowering, pulled by their weight. They seemed artificial, like the covering on Ben’s scalp: prosthetics, affixed to Peter’s face with tacky resin and camouflaged with cheap paint that clung to each pore.

Prodding at them, he almost expected them to slide off in lumps of putty, but they did not move. He turned out the lights.

The bed welcomed him as he collapsed onto it. Rolling to the center of the mattress, he stared at the vibrating blackness of the ceiling. No sound came from the downstairs; perhaps Linda had fallen asleep on the sofa, her wine glass set on a coaster beside her. He pulled the comforter from her side of the bed over his body, surrounding himself.

Once more, Peter thought of Ben. There was no reason for his fixation, but he could not help himself. He imagined Ben crawling into the tent, easing into the sleeping bag with the gun in his hand, tightening the drawstring until no light could enter, dust blowing softly against the side of the tent. Lying in the coffin, decomposing, but only partially; some flesh would remain unchanged, sinking into the fractured skull.

Shivering, Peter pulled the covers tighter, cocooning himself. The king size mattress was vast and empty, yet he felt like something was there, occupying the space beside him. He thought to call for Linda, call until she came running up the stairs, into the bedroom. “What is it?” she would ask as she turned on the bedside lamp. But then, when he told her—what would he tell her? —she would place her hand against his forehead, say, “You are acting so strange, you feel a bit warm,” as if he were a child. She would leave him in search of a thermometer. Then he would be alone.

He rolled over and closed his eyes, willing himself to sleep.

TWO DEER CROSSING

We had taken the boat once around the lake, “And now what?” Our excursion, begun at a quarter ‘til noon, had lasted only an hour; the miles of shoreline passed in a blur. We were back by the docks, where we started.

“I told you to slow down.”

“Well that doesn’t do us any good now, does it.”

With barely a cloud in the pale sky, it seemed a waste to tie up so soon. As the boat continued steadily through the water we considered our options.

“There’s that diner by the marina. Do you want to stop for a bite, then head out again?”

“But the sandwiches... Would we save them for later, before dinner?”

“If that little beach wasn’t so crowded, it might’ve been nice.”

“What about waterskiing? The rental place had a few skis left, I think. If we wanted to do that.”

But we did not want to do that, because of the fee.

“Besides, we don’t know how to ski. Doesn’t that seem dangerous?”

“It was a suggestion, Jeff.”

We had not come to the lake to bicker, but could not stop ourselves. Ordinarily our children would have distracted us, but we had left them at home with relatives. The trip to the lake was intended as a getaway, a time for solitude and romance. Quiet, we peered over the side of the pontoon. The lake was full of Asian carp; they’d been leaping all day, their bodies wriggling through the air.

“I told you we should have packed our rods.”

“Like you said, nothing to do about it now.”

We decided to explore one of the small watering holes off the main lake. It would harbor small fish that we could watch while eating lunch, and we might wade in afterwards. We turned the radio up and settled on the hard boat benches. The wind carried a spray of water; we turned our faces toward the stern. As we moved further from the marina, nature overtook the shore. Trees lined the edge and grew out of the water, their roots unseen. Birds and insects chirred from the forest.

At first we did not notice the deer, up to their necks in lakewater. Under the midday sun, every ripple flickered with light, and they were nearly lost in shifting bright slivers. If not for proximity and chance, we might never have seen them.

“Look! A deer, in the water.”

“Two!”

We turned off the radio, then cut the engine and drifted closer.

“Careful not to hit them.”

“Wouldn’t that be rich. Can’t even get in a boat without running over a couple deer.”

Even though we could not see their submerged bodies, they were young, possibly a small doe and her smaller fawn. We could tell by the size of their skulls. They struggled in the water like children learning to swim, neck strained, limbs floundering. The lake swirled around them. In three minutes, they advanced only a few meters.

At this point, though, we did not see progress as their goal. It was hot, and the water, green from algae and blue from depth, looked cool and tempting.

“They just needed a dip.”

But that was not the case. As we watched, we realized that they swam with intent: toward an island, in the middle of the lake. A spot of land really, too small to call an island. The type of mound that seems to have only by chance remained above water, and through continued good fortune acquired the sparse undergrowth, shrubbery, and trees that greened its surface. The deer swam to this. They did not look in our direction, as if afraid to lose sight of their destination and drown.

Perhaps, if swimming across a river, they might not have seemed so mysterious. Two deer crossing a river, to get to the other side. They would be travelling for food, shelter, family on the far bank. Perhaps if one deer had crossed and not two, we could have diagnosed the deer as mad, possibly infected by a mind-altering disease that ate away at the brain and made animals in the wild misunderstand their own nature. “Rabies could do that,” one of us might have offered.

Instead, there were two, swimming through the water. Madness, we thought, does not travel in packs. It seemed the most unlikely of situations, as if we had caught them behind the scenes, as if they ought to have swum to the island earlier, to stare out at us as nothing more than passing amusements, but somehow they had missed their cue by ten minutes and found themselves in the path of our boat. Now we could see it all. Like God or a nature documentary, we watched them from above. A thin cloud of insects gathered around their heads, causing their ears to flick about and their noses to twitch. They slowed to a lurch, but their eyes remained forward, calm.

They were almost to the shore, so we stayed to watch their arrival, not letting down the anchor but simply waiting, unmoored. It felt meditative, like a trance; the water, the deer, the blue, the hum of the flies that paid no attention to us, only to the vulnerable

animals struggling through the water; the sun seemed to put our senses to sleep, as we swayed in the pontoon boat.

Splashing through the water, they shambled up the embankment, then shook themselves dry. Their legs quivered with exhaustion from the odyssey. We watched as if witnessing aliens newly landed.

After a minute more of shaking and drying, they turned in a circle and returned our stare. Their eyes were glazed and wide, like they had been caught in the middle of the road, or startled while grazing—neck tensed, tail raised in alarm. Motionless, we were separated by a dozen meters, but felt we might reach out and touch their still damp fur; and if we had leaned forward, seen ourselves in their black eyes. The boat, our bodies. We watched them and they watched us, floating in the lake from which they came. We had begun to drift away, but could not drop the anchor now; we could not disturb the silence. Soon, we were sure, they would reveal their purpose.

But they revealed nothing. Perhaps they spared us; in our chests we felt fear, like we might burst into flame if we looked at them any longer. We watched regardless. We had no choice. As they lost shape amidst the bushes; as they faded into green; even as they passed out of sight, hidden by the scraggly trees, we watched with the hope that they would deliver some message. They did not. They were gone from us.

Alone in the boat, we shifted towards one another until our bodies pressed together. We did not speak. The forest and lake were silent too, although leaves fluttered and water rippled. It seemed we had passed into another world. Huddled there we thought, this is all we can have, and all we can know—there will be nothing else.

We might have remained there forever, in that silence, had the roar of a distant jet ski not awakened us. Heard like a shout, it tore through the quiet; it rippled through our minds and reanimated our surroundings. The birds resumed their song; the trees rustled. We were saved. Separating, we returned to our prior positions in the boat.

“You don’t see that everyday.”

“You don’t.”

We resolved to find our lunch spot; we were hungry now. Preparing to leave, we glanced over the edge of the pontoon and saw ourselves in the water. A fish swam across our reflection. By the shore, another leapt up, rising and falling with a splash.

“So many jumping, you could probably catch one midair.”

“Better yet, toss a worm in the boat and wait.”

We laughed. It really was an ideal day. The sun on our backs, our faces soothed by the mild breeze. We started the motor and, jerked upright by the speed of the boat, sped away.