

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: Monster talk
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Thesis directed by: Professor Maud Casey, Department of English

The child perspectives in “Monster Talk,” “High Stakes on the Mississippi Racino,” and “Where the Weird Comes From” are narrated through either the close third or first person point of view. These children encounter terribly real events that are beyond their full comprehension and thus narrated through a fantastical lens in an attempt to explain their experiences with adult mental illness, fundamentalism, and addiction. “A Sad Day at the Glitter Factory,” “Worldsick in the Animal Garden,” and “The Company We Keep” focus on how characters are affected by, and interact with, their settings. These pieces explore the narratives that result from direct encounters with their surrounding environment. Situations such as economic depression, homelessness, and large disasters caused by human error occur within these settings. The telling is the characters’ innate response to their existence that is inevitably influenced by these worlds and it is how they compose personal identity and significance.

Monster Talk

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland,
College Park, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts
2015

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2015

Dedication

For my mother

Table of Contents

“Sad Day at the Glitter Factory”	1
“High Stakes on the Mississippi Racino”	7
“Where the Weird Comes From”	36
“Monster Talk”	69
“Worldsick in the Animal Garden”	127
“The Company We Keep”	140

A Sad Day at the Glitter Factory

A sad day at the glitter factory in the town Bearbury after Madame Maxine's Glitter glitter factory shut down due to a burst in the central cooling valve. A hot-water buildup resulted in a frightening sublimation of vapor that projected 1000 pounds of glitter at a frightening rate of speed. Ms. Terry's 4th grade class at McKinlen Elementary was unfortunately visiting during the time of the explosion. After inspecting the injuries sustained by Ms. Terry and her 14 students, Dr. Larson, at St. Mary's Hospital, determined "the majority of the injuries were merely superficial." Luckily only one wayward child suffered direct exposure, due to Ms. Terry's lack of proper vigilance.

The child, little Kasson Banks, while being assisted out by firemen, was quoted saying, as he happily observed himself in the sunlight "I look just like Edward Cullen!" After the explosion all of the fourth graders were immediately tested for potential toxins in their bloodstream. Said results are still pending. The emotions expressed by the other children ranged from generally unaffected to what Madame Maxine described as "exaggerated cries of pain due to ostensible visage mutation."

"It literally hurts to look at my child," Milly Banks, Kasson's mother, she yelled down the hospital halls. "And how am I gonna to get this crap out of his clothes? I'm gonna to speak to a lawyer!"

Litigation of this sort would likely put Madame Maxine's Glitter Company in a state of major financial crisis, as per Madam Maxine. "Millie Banks obviously doesn't have a case, but the lawyer fees alone could force production to overseas, especially with the likely high cost of repairs to the factory," Madame Maxine warned in a press release,

after discovering Milly Banks's intentions. "Even though my company takes no responsibility for Ms. Terry's and this child's carelessness, I have already spoken to my lawyers in regards to setting up a donation fund for the boy."

Fear and anger has permeated this town. The welcome sign was defaced, rendering it to say Welcome to the town of Bearburried. Sherriff Richards is currently searching for suspects. Production at the glitter factory is already estimated to shut down for a minimum of one month, pending a safety inspection to determine the cause. This is upsetting due to the fact that the factory employs 48% of the town. The factory distributes to bottling companies, and major makeup corporations as well. "I don't think she recognizes the urgency. We need to work. I wouldn't be surprised if she did this on purpose to have an excuse to outsource production to the communists," said Ed Brinkley. "This is an American town and we're proud of our work. It's the best goddamn glitter in the world because it's made right here in America." Madame Maxine's Glitter factory is of course the last American production plant to still produce glitter in the United States. "Where do you think people like Lady Gaga gets her glitter? When I see her I think of freedom. We make a superior product that even my wife, hell, and I use often," Brinkley said over his beer at Pete's pub.

Since 2:00 this afternoon Pete's Pub has slowly been filling with dejected factory workers. A number of them bantered over the recent news of a potential move to China now that the factory is shut down and facing high cost of repairs and of course its usual issues with lucrative American wages. "I had no idea about this. Joe Hanford said. "We all need to protest this decision immediately. Workers within range cheered at this suggestion. An unknown person from the crowded bar yelled out: "We should burn the

place to the ground. The crowd roared once more. "I was in the blast radius," said welder Bill Laski. "Now I look like a fairy princess. We should show them what we're capable of," he said. Men around him nodded their heads in an equally threatening way.

When Sherriff Richards learned about the intentions to riot and burn the factory down he reinforced the need for the town of Bearbury to remain calm. "This is a storm that will pass and I don't want to take nobody to jail over it." Deputy Jon Valson was called in on permanent watch at Pete's for the evening, but was quickly subdued as the men made their way to the streets.

One can only speculate the effects such a revolt could create, especially during a one-month hiatus and the consequences this might have on the community, much less a permanent one depending on the potential level of destruction this angry assembly could inflict. With 22 percent of the town consisting of local business owners it is quite obvious the financial, long-term effect this will have on them too.

"We take great pride in this town. There's no need to deface it. Generations have worked for this factory. As many know, my great grandfather Louis Berkhard designed the original factory. This factory, this town, was the first to industrialize glitter in America. This place is not only essential to our town's history but its economy as well. And I will do whatever I can in my power to keep this factory alive in Bearbury," Mayor Berkhard called out to the crowd on his megaphone.

The 'word on the street,' is that Mayor Berkhard is considering using taxpayer dollars to bail the factory out of its current financial situation. "I agree that the factory is important," Dolly Seers said in an emergency meeting to numerous other equally pissed off business owners after hearing this news. "But it will be a cold day in hell before the

taxman bails out big business with my money.” Dolly Seers and a number of other shop owners proposed the need to march down to city hall “this instant” to voice their opinion. “If Mayor Berkhard won’t give us what we want, I’ll move to Riverdale!” Ken Fisher shouted. Many agreed.

After Madam Maxine became informed about the collective small business move, she happily divulged her desire to “expand the business and this would be a great opportunity for me to open my chain of grocery stores and fast food restaurants.”

Tara Medwell, leader of the environmentalist group ODP AEI: Organization for the Decency of all Plants and Animals and Even Insects, replied indignantly in response to this news. Her polemic poems have been well published in her lit magazine Stump; poems such as: “Vanity’s Laboratory” and “Toxic Sparkles.” “We cannot allow her to monopolize this beautiful town of ours. Her factory is already responsible for polluting of the Wannatah River due to the polyethylene naphthalate in the Glitter products.” This sometimes mixes in with the water that’s run through the cooling system and is released back into the river and has supposedly only increased since said explosion. “And now she wants to kill our small businesses? I can promise that we will take to the streets tonight to expose her plans,” she said to her farmer’s market co-op before they took to the streets to expose her plans.

Madame Maxine denied the claims and she declined to make an apology to the mob, from behind the gate of her home, for “accidently improving the aesthetics of the river.” Her products are labeled as non-toxic and organic due to numerous tests performed on mice, fish, and other sorts of small animals. “The explosion should be seen as a blessing rather than a disaster. We’ve discovered a potential new market; glitter that

cannot be easily washed away. Research is all ready being conducted on how this can be done intentionally,” she said. Madame Maxine believes this product will be a huge success especially amongst the German nightclub contingent due to its resistance to sweat and ability to last days and even weeks. This did not placate the crowd. Their booing and threats only became louder.

The Bearburry police force is stretched thin at the moment in its attempt to maintain a level of civil composure. People are rampant in the streets. Business owners, factory workers, environmentalists, police officers, and other citizens are yelling for and against one another, armed with microphones and signs and who knows what else. It will clearly be a long night for the people of Bearburry while the town releases its frustration over these unanswered questions about its direction.

Uncertainty lies all around us. I will continue to raise questions and bring the answers to you as the come. For now, like all good Americans, we need to do what we do best: keep our heads up, and remain proud and faithful in our identity, which lies within the ability to overcome all obstacles—for there is nothing more fundamental to the American quiddity. These kinds of events strengthen and build communities, so please stay together. Regardless, answers will come no matter what kind of devastation occurs. Though this town has never seen such havoc, outside of the occasional drunk driver or lost dog, we will be better for it because our unease will be quelled and we can begin anew tomorrow knowing that the space has been cleared for a new horizon when we rise in the early morning. And through our actions, whether right or wrong, we will be thankful.

This is Ronald Gregory Ericson with the Bearbury newspaper signing out. I wish you all the best in this time of great despondency and please stay safe out there.

N.B. Donations can be made to the Banks family at kassondesparkled.com.

High Stakes on the Mississippi Racino

When news broke that the eye of Hurricane Katrina would be making direct contact with the state of Louisiana, my mother and I had already evacuated ten years prior to northwest Florida. We bunkered down with my grandparents in our Pensacola home, its windows boarded and cupboards stocked apocalyptically full with soup cans and bread and bottled water and candles and batteries and enough alcohol for the three of them. We huddled around the television equipping ourselves with milk shakes and root beer floats, listening for any word about the current state of area and the people we once knew but still cared for.

While our house withstood the less wicked bands the storm casted off like saw blades into the areas peripheral of its eye, inside we watched emboldened meteorologists report on the outside world's heinous whipping winds and sideways rain the length of stair rods, telling us that is if this bad here, "imagine what's it's like in Louisiana." We sat there silently trying our best while ignoring the game of euchre in the center of the coffee table.

In the morning we woke up without electricity and running water. On the outside ubiquitous palm fronds, branches, and leaves concealed the lawns and the roofs of our houses, as if the neighborhood went through the washer, which it basically did. Our recovery simply entailed completing a boring, arduous chore. Grandpa started the generator and turned the television on to see the disastrous alterations the storm made to the areas throughout Louisiana. They ran a list of the cities and towns that experienced

the most severe damage. When news broke out that the town I grew up in—not Gulf Breeze, where I tell friends and classmates I from—Grandpa poured two shot glasses of whiskey. ‘To our precious memories of Donaldson; may they live on for as long as we do.’ He took it in one quick gulp and coughed one of those old-people-mucousy hacks. I drank the face-melting bourbon without qualms from Mom or Grandma because any form of rebuke would risk bringing the real subject of Grandpa’s eulogy to the forefront of conversation. So instead I gulped it down and tried to hide that the burning sensation didn’t bother me in the slightest.

‘Jack, could you go outside to clean the roof off and sweep out the gutters, please?’

I learned a long time ago that you have to get good at the things you don’t want to do the older you get. We separated into the chores Mom delegated for us. She did this, I knew, so that we could all go off to think about the same thing separately, and hopefully, for a long enough time that we wouldn’t feel the need to talk about it after. I climbed the roof into the muggy air and began sweeping the large sticks and fronds from the roof, knowing that if my Dad were still alive we would never know the difference anyway.

My father hung drywall and remodeled houses. Like most fathers in Donaldsville, Louisiana he worked with his hands all day, and like the other carpenters, and like the welders and the roofers and the construction workers and the electricians and the shrimpers and the plumbers and the fishermen, he worked all day knowing he would be heading to the casino later that evening. As a kid I never distinguished a difference between his job and his gambling, because it wasn’t until he came home for dinner that

he was “done with work.” He worked all day to keep the life we had and all evening to give us a better one.

My parents argued about this justification often. Especially when my father lost big, which sometimes resulted in selling vehicles or antique china as recompense. This is when my father’s logic really flowed: “Sometimes you gotta lose big to win big, that’s the way luck works.” And when he did win, Dad did his best to compensate, bringing home gold necklaces and diamond rings always accompanied with a dozen roses. The times would come though when he’d have to reluctantly ask for it back. When he lost the home Mom left that evening in early June for her parents’ house in Gulf Breeze, Florida. I refused to leave in fear that they would split up permanently if I did, and I knew if stayed Mom would come back for me at some point, which she promised to do, at the latest, by the end of the August once she had money and a job.

After her departure Dad committed himself full-time at the casino to win Mom back. And since I was out of school, naturally, I accompanied him on these business trips. I spent so much time there in the summer of 1995 I could rebuild the place myself. But like most memories, the most vivid is the last.

It was early in the afternoon when Dad said we were going to the casino. I was outside playing extinction with my dinosaurs in a mud pit I made with the hose. ‘Come-on, Jack, let’s go!’ Dad yelled. From the moment I woke up the day carried with it a certain clarity of meaninglessness: “what was the point?” I thought. This epiphany left me more than content to stay exactly where I sat in the dirt of our scrubby front yard.

We had been going to the casino for two months in a row now and still nothing had changed: we still lived in the trailer and Mom still lived in Florida. ‘Don’t make me ask again.’ I reached down begrudgingly to rescue the dinos one by one from the earth, rinsed them off, and went inside to put them in my room because they always got lost when the other kids at the casino played with them. Dad, as typical of his morning ritual, had just finished leaving Mom a lengthy voicemail. These were one-way conversations I wasn’t allowed to listen to. I don’t know if he knew that Mom planned to bring me back to Gulf Breeze before the end of summer or not.

‘Let’s go, we’ve got work to do,’ he waved.

Dad didn’t say much in the truck on the way there. The noise from the wound down windows filled the space of the cab. The hot humid air brought by the August month gave further notice to the inevitable closing of summer vacation. Dad reached across the bench seat after cranking the shifter and squeezed my leg just above my knee. It always hurt and tickled so much that, if it hadn’t been for the makeshift-bungee-cord seatbelt Dad helped me install, I worried I might shoot right out of my seat. Dad gave a quick smile at the way I yelped and jumped. I was safe and practical and he liked to tease it out of me. ‘Jack, don’t worry,’ he said breaking the silence, ‘this is the way it goes; sometimes you lose and sometimes often, but today is going to be different because today I can’t afford lose and that’s when fate is on your side. This is a fact, son, it’s how probability works.’ He feigned an attempt to grab my knee again. We both laughed. As usual I was inspired with renewed belief by this speech, no more or less so than the last time I heard it.

‘Here,’ he handed me a half-pack of cigarettes as we pulled into the parking lot; ‘make sure not to lose any today.’ I took the red and white box of Marlboro Reds and placed them in the front pocket of my overalls. My father was the first to do this; then other parents caught on and started giving their children cigarettes for them to smuggle in because of their hiked prices at the casino—like water at a theme park. From the massive play area in the casino we watched the races and bet with their cigarettes. The more I won the longer my Dad got to stay at the tables.

We pulled into the parking lot. The Palais Racino looked like a friendly castle welcoming all potential contenders a chance to bring it down. The building, made of concrete foundation and framed in plaster, was decorated in colors of teal, cream, pink, and purple. A towering yellow neon sign adorned both sides: Palais de la Salle Racino glowing over top between its two pseudo-towers. Few people knew how to pronounce the name. And just as few knew it was named after the founder of Louisiana. Long, tarp covered walkways granted access across the water, at all hours, from both ends, which fluctuated in height depending on the tide. If it weren’t for the Mississippi river behind it, you would have never known that the casino was actually an enormous floating barge (the largest of them along the famous winding river), permanently moored, which is what permitted the Palais to offer its 24hr services. The Palais or “The Castle” never closed and was renowned for its resolute determinedness to stay open regardless of weather conditions. We drove to the Casino once earlier in the summer during a tropical storm. The streets were empty but the casino was buzzing, with all the televisions showing sports games around the country as if there wasn’t a large storm swirling over top of us.

Dad said it was safer than staying in the trailer, which remains his most sound excuse ever.

But on that particular day it was sunny and beautiful without a cloud in sight. We sat in the parking lot staring up at it in silence. Dad reached over, I grabbed my knees to protect them. Instead he held out a heavy checkered, fifty-dollar chip. ‘So no matter what happens, we’ll never lose it all,’ he said still staring off. I held the piece tightly wanting to contemplate longer the idea of a plastic object that contained such a great deal of money, more than I’d ever held, but Dad was done talking and was ready to play. We stepped out and walked in underneath the main castle tower that consisted of nothing but cheap plaster with black paint to make it appear hollow, as if a princess lived inside.

‘Good luck, Dad!’ I called just before the glass door to Cowboy Gary’s funplex closed between us. Holding my thumb up in the air, I waited for him to turn. I wanted to tell him I’d be sure to keep the chip safe. I had all these ideas for things we could purchase, maybe some of Mom’s pawned china. I buzzed like a wind-up toy with excitement, but “Good luck” was all I knew to say before he left me there in the children’s play area.

I don’t think he heard me though, which is what the huge glass wall was intended for: to keep in all the sound we made; to prevent the adults’ concentration from being disrupted while they played on the slot machines with their flashing lights and cavalcade tunes that made it appear like you won before you even sat down, provoking the people to feed the large boxes with quarters to repeat their electric antics; and so others could focus on the battle they were having with the dealer, or the casino, or with the odds, or

fate for that matter, depending on who they blamed when they busted in 21. It's not unlike how I had imagined a carnival looking: the whirl of roulette wheels; grownups huddled around a craps table, shouting at dice like monstrous football fans over a tiny stadium; people with stern faces playing cards as if they were being interrogated; and old grandmothers with supersized cups filled with quarters who simply wanted something to do. There were no clocks and time moved at a different pace, or not at all, which allowed for the Castle to be whatever it wanted. Time was something you went back to after you left. The people looked like they came from all around the world just to play in a building cloaked in mahogany colored carpet, paint and ceiling tile. All their mirth and frustration mystified us children in the funplex by a wall of glass and clouds of cigarette smoke.

Dad nodded as he passed Reginald—a security guard who always dressed in a purple and green suit that looked like the Joker's—to the casino. He looked on from his post between of the velvet entrance rope attached at both ends to naked statues I assume were ancient Greek facsimiles. Throughout the summer I saw him drag a number of people out to the back of the casino for acting out or cheating, being too offensive to the waitresses, or odiously drunk. Many never came back, with exception to the few devoted players, my friend Sadie's dad being one who could take a beating of many forms.

Mr. Mitchell stood talking to the funplex monitor, Jefferson High Senior Ms. Tillie. He leaned so far into her booth I worried he might topple over the counter, which I'd seen him do before. Sadie's mom lived in Arizona. Sadie's dad told her that's she was too far-gone to win back. He came to the casino because he wanted to buy a home in Hollywood and marry an actress to make his wife jealous. He also promised Sadie a horse, which is something every little girl back then seemed to want. She said she would

use “Lily” to travel back and forth between California and Arizona and camp in the desert night, just like a cowboy. I could usually find her on top of the darkly lit rock wall over the foam pit towards the back of the funplex.

I played on the magnet dartboard that faced Reginald and the entrance to the adult area. From there I enjoyed watching all the people walk in wearing their dreams on their faces, as if today was the day the world would smile in their favor. Mr. Blob waddled by with his Burger King cup of quarters who wanted a speedboat and a Corvette. I saw the man with the profoundly long mullet, even for the 1980’s. He hoped to purchase his own NASCAR team. Gator Dave, who sometimes took Dad and me out on his airboat, strutted up to the casino’s entrance with his hands balancing on his Confederate flag belt buckle decked in his alligator skin boots, belt, and hat; he kissed his hand and touched the copy of the Louisiana purchase hanging in the hallway. Dave told us about his dream to one day own a chain of restaurants on the water with airboat tours that also sold his own brand of gator jerky. He flashed his ID and, when acknowledged, tried to give Reginald a fist bump, which went unrequited.

Mrs. Donaldson, our old neighbor, waved to me through the glass like a saddened environmentalist visiting a zoo. Her husband died before I was born. She wanted nothing and therefore, as life’s logic goes, won often. Dad said this was due to the world’s unkindness to Mrs. Donaldson’s early years. Back then I thought her luck came from her husband who’s ghost whispered to her the dealer’s hand because he still loved her, which is the same reason why I thought my Dad played. I waved back to her and smiled.

Mr. Mitchell stepped out and yelled to Mrs. Donaldson. 'Don't steal all my luck today, Agnes. Some of us actually plan on being around in five years.' He laughed at the mean joke like always.

I turned away to face the elaborate maze of multicolored tubing, crisscrossing and overlapping one another, connecting to different rooms and some leading nowhere, to a towering extent only a few of us were able to memorize. It looked like a rainbow put through a dryer that got all knotted up with a bunch of children's toys. Distant screams were heard at times from confused, directionless children. Ms. Tillie often recruited one of us to go find them and usually rewarded us with a dollar for returning with the errant, mucous covered child. She monitored from what looked like ones of those game booths at a county fair with its red and white vertical stripes lining the outside, making it difficult to look at for too long. A television sat fixed behind the overhang of the open wall creating an impression of acute vigilance. I waved to her. She nodded, chomping on her Big Red gum, not bothering to sign me in.

A few kids I didn't know were sitting quietly in the ball pit, occasionally reaching down, like they hoped to find something unexpected, only to carelessly toss aside the ball they discovered from the bottom. This is where all the new kids hung out because it was easy to get to and you could sort of play by yourself. They were what we call spamateurs (spawn of parents who came there for fun,) mostly tourists visiting New Orleans who made the hour drive north.

I looked up to the sound of my friend Hank at the very top banging against the inside of the translucent-yellow-smiley-faced lookout bubble. The dog races were about to start. The fastest way to the top was through the main slide. If you pressed your hands

and sneakers against the sides you could shimmy your way up. I banged on the plastic tube and yelled up it: ‘No one come down!! Here I come!!’ I shimmied up the slide until its curved end met the dark green obstacle course room. Its stationary bop-it clowns smiled maniacally in the opposite direction. I climbed up the ladder to the right into the space shuttle room where Ray slept on a square piece of foam from the climbing room exhausted from arriving at 8:00 in the morning—far too early for summer, but like all our parents, they arrived whenever they believed the tables were the hottest. I shook Ray’s left sneaker. Without needing to say anything he followed me up the rope ladder hanging from the front of the shuttle. Here we reached the core of the tunnel systems.

Many of the tubes steered to dead ends, another a complete circle, and one led to a big hamster wheel. Three rights and a left at the pink tunnel took you to the bouncy house; a left, up the light blue tube, straight, a right, and another left down the tube of darkness brought you to the top of the climbing wall. From there I yelled: ‘Sadie come meet us at the face,’ so I wouldn’t have to crawl through the dark tube. I turned around and crawled to the end of the only solid colored tube that a lot of kids thought was a dead end. Attached to the top was a handle difficult to see from the crawling position, which brought the three of us up to the face of Cowboy Gary, his extra large Stetson cocked to the side. From Cowboy Gary’s, we had the highest vantage in the Castle where the people in the casino across from us whirred about like a miniature Wall Street.

‘Alright boys, what’ll be, what’ll be?’ Hank asked with a pencil in his mouth like a smoke, waiting for us to call out a number.

‘And girl,’ retorted Sadie, pretending to take a cigarette from her mouth.

‘Yeah, yeah, yeah, and gurrlll.’ Hank twisted his face. He and Ray teased Sadie often. She wore jeans with holes in the knees, plain t-shirts, had long knotted blonde hair, and was lightly freckled around her cheeks. She looked like your typical Louisiana tom-girl only prettier. I liked her as well. She made me feel hungry and not hungry all at the same time.

‘Jack... Jack! Are you going to play or not? It’s almost time,’ Ray said. None of us owned watches; when the people started to sit or stand around the indoor dirt track we had a general idea. Time was when our parents ran out of cigarettes. We gathered around inside the face and placed our smokes in the center. Even with its perforations scattered throughout, the face always became a little humid with the four of us. It tended to smell like feet and tobacco.

‘Here they go!’ Sadie pointed. The dogs were being loaded into their gates. I put my smoke in the middle with the others. All our parents smoked Marlboros.

‘I got the silver one,’ yelled Ray. ‘He looks fast.’

‘I’ll take Blitz,’ said Hank, ‘I hope it’s not a girl dog.’

‘Tiny Dancer. I’ll want that one,’ said Sadie. ‘I bet it’s a girl.’

‘Fine, I’ll take Baskerville.’

The dogs sprang from their traps like multicolored bullets. They careered around the track in pursuit of the mechanical rabbit. ‘Go, go, go,’ our voices tightly echoed inside the face as the grey hounds chased after the mechanical rabbit like cheetahs. I won three smokes and Sadie got to keep hers for getting second.

‘Damn. The silver one was slow as tar.’ Ray snapped his fingers. ‘Shoot. Okay, let’s go again.’

‘That girl dog cheated. She bumped mine out of the gate.’ said Hank.

‘You were just upset because you were too stupid to pick it.’

Hank stuck his tongue out and Sadie returned the gesture.

After eight races I was up five smokes. Sadie had lost everything.

‘Dad said he’s gonna buy me a dirt bike,’ Hank told us as we made another round of bets waiting for the dogs to be put in their separate starting cages. We all knew this.

From my vantage I saw Dad hunched over the cards like he had a bad case of osteoporosis. If he was up he’d lean back in his chair, allowing his current winnings to be put on display, regardless he always wore the same solemn face. I figured we’d be leaving early today.

‘Well I’m gonna get a pair of x-ray goggles,’ Ray retorted. We knew this too and I was getting tired of hearing it. How could they still believe these stories?

Hank and Ray bickered back and forth about other cool presents.

I readied to leave. I placed my winnings in the box and, from my pocket, deposited a couple in the reserve pack I kept in my back pocket for when I lost. Times when I lost I withdrew from it so Dad’s pack always looked like I managed to profit marginally. I never told Dad this trick, because I didn’t want him to be disappointed that I used a more reserved method of gambling.

‘Oh dang, there’s Hector!’ Hank said, he opened the cover and climbed down below before he could be spotted—Ray followed him like usual. Hector was walking back to the funplex eating nothing but hotdog wieners he stole with a reserve one in his shirt pocket. If you wanted food he could steal some for you from inside the casino for bartered smokes. Hector never played with us; he was about twelve-years-old and big as

a black bear. No one knew who his parents were. He told us that he lived in the Castle. When Ray or Hank arrived he was there; when Sadie or I left, he was still there, so we didn't disbelieve him. He knew how to sneak all around the Castle, somehow able to avoid Reginald's vigilant gaze. Once while watching the dog races we saw him sitting in the bleachers smoking a cigarette, leaning back with his Nikes propped up on the seat in front of him. He already had an onset of facial hair on his upper lip and our credulity was molded by whatever he told us.

I looked over to Dad who was still cowering over his chips, while Sadie sat there trying to look interested in her shoes equally upset about her losses. 'Sadie,' I said, stating her name bravely. She looked up with shiny wet cheeks. I didn't know how much a horse cost, but wanted to help invest in one with the money Dad gave me. It wasn't going to save my family me, but it could have helped her. 'Here,' I said, holding out the chip.'

She looked up with her puffy blue eyes. 'What's this for?'

'So your Dad won't get upset. Maybe you can put it towards the house... or for your horse Lily.' I handed it to her. She looked it over in the same contemplative way I did.

'Thanks, Jack,' she said, 'you're a real life saver,' or something along those lines. I just know I felt like one when she hugged me. The hungry-not-hungry feeling came back. I thought fifty dollars was worth the money to show I liked her, which, from watching Dad, was the only way I knew how.

'Look,' Sadie said, touching my arm, making me look down. 'Your Dad's coming.'

I said goodbye to Sadie and made my way out. Dad waited by the door with his foot propped up against the wall to buoy himself upright and smoked his cigarette mercilessly. I took a deep breath and continued out. ‘Hey, Dad!’ I called with as much zeal as I could muster, ready to hear his excuse for why the world screwed him today.

‘Hey there, Jackie-boy,’ he said in his gravelly voice, ruffling my hair. He spoke to me like I was a 1920’s baseball player.

‘Here, Dad.’ I handed him the pack.

He peaked at my takings. ‘Whoaaaa. You have the gift, my son. A full pack, you have the gift.’ He rubbed my head once more, not so much a casual expression of affection—more like a ritual. Too much focus and determinedness was involved in the way his hand move in its circular motion, like he was extracting luck from me, as weird as that sounds. ‘The world tilts in your corner, Jackie.’

I smiled up at him.

‘You’ll make a great card player one day. I sure wish I had your ability,’ he said, taking a long pull of his cigarette while looking off into another distance. He half-laughed: ‘Hell, maybe we should switch places. I’ll go burry my head in that ball pit while you go win us some money.’ In these moments I could tell he thought about Mom the most and I’m pretty sure he knew that, but it all went without saying.

‘I don’t think luck exists for a guy like me,’ he cried like a Jehovah’s Witness caught in a sudden sate of disbelief halfway through his neighborhood rounds. Dad regained his balance and began to pace, continuing on with his personal dialogue: ‘You always split aces... I’m missing somethin’. Did I bet the right amount? Do I have the stakes right?’ He walked up to the velvet ropes, muttered something to himself, and then

turned around. 'We should. We should go. We need to go,' he said. I started for the exit, except he already made his way back to Reginald. And then back again. I called his name. 'I can't, I can't.' I called again. He had breakdowns before, but not like this one. 'GOD DAMMITT!!' he screamed.

Reginald grabbed Dad by the arm. 'What the hell you doing, Sam? You know better. Get a hold of yourself or you know I'll toss you out.'

Dad shook him off and debated his choice for a lengthy second. 'I'm fine, Reggie, you don't need to go bouncin' me outta here.' Dad turned to me and genuflected down to my height, as if in prayer. 'Jackie, remember that chip I gave you?'

I shook my head. I should have known he'd do this.

'Well, I need it...I need the chip, Jack.'

'But you said... ' I tried to plea.

'Jack.'

'But...'

'Give me the damn chip, Jack!'

I started tearing up.

'Jesus Christ, son, act like a man.' He shook me, which made the tears spill over. He reached into my pocket and then the other, turning them both out. 'Where's the damn chip?' He spun me around and checked the other pockets.

'What did you do with it? Tell me right now!'

I looked back. Everyone inside watched on while Dad interrogated me.

'Do you want to be the reason why Mom doesn't come back?' He used the only leverage he had.

‘I gave it to Sadie,’ I said beaten.

‘That’s not yours to donate. Get it back now.’

He stared at me with the eyes of a starved predator. Before that moment I thought the desperation behind them was Mom, but she wasn’t there and if she had then it was likely the reflection of my desire. What he wanted had hollowed him out to make room for the growing need. I wasn’t necessarily scared because he was angry. I couldn’t recognize the person glaring at me.

‘Go,’ he pointed.

I walked back inside with my pockets still turned inside out. Sadie leaned against the bridge that connected the space shuttle to the ball pit. She held the chip out over the railing. ‘Am I in trouble?’ she asked me.

‘No, just me.’

‘Tell him to not tell my dad.’ She dropped the chip. I failed to catch it.

‘I’m sorry,’ I told her, but she had already left when I looked up.

There’s no denying the shame I felt, most of it for my father. I wanted him to lose it all, if anything to prove the point that no good fortune can come when you take it from those around you.

‘Heads or tails,’ I said to Dad when I walked back out.

He turned to me and paused.

‘Heads or tails,’ I repeated.

‘No, not today, I can’t risk it.’ He snatched the chip out of my small hand. ‘I’m sorry, Jack, but I need all the luck I can get,’ Dad said, like a man in a cowboy-western-movie. He stood there across from me as if we were the same height.

The memory would be cheesy if I didn't remember him in that moment as a broken man glued together by the hope of that one chip. This was his greatest faculty, the capacity for hope in any situation, which is why I think my mother stayed around as long as she did. If applied in the right way he could have been a great protest singer or an environmental activist or something admirable like that.

'I gotta go back. You understand.'

I did. And because Dad knew I did, he also knew I'd never be like him because I was smart enough not to be. Many people can remember when they started to become, not wiser, but smarter than their parents. I possessed certain qualities Dad did not; reasonable doubt was one of them. Compared to all the other people who played in the Palais Racino Dad carried himself in a way unlike the others. He was not prone to the daily paroxysms or jubilation of winning or losing. He was the quiet cowboy at the end of the bar, who believed in something greater than getting drunk and praying for a brand-new corvette. There had to be something more to lose and gain; a person who didn't see windmills as windmills but as dragons, which is the only way he knew how to be a man because he was raised by a generation of fathers who thought there were still noble wars to be fought.

He stood there waiting for me to say it.

'Good luck, Dad,' I told him. And I meant it.

'Thank you, Jack.' He stuck his hand out, something he had never done before. It felt distant and formal. I shook it feeling completely puzzled. He smiled, a forced upturn of the mouth, the only one I can still picture. He rubbed my head. 'Everything will be okay, I promise. I'll make sure of it.'

He straightened the jean jacket he wore regardless of the temperature and walked on. Reginald nodded him through. Once again I watched my dad disappear into the smoky mixture of people's cigarettes and cigars.

Back inside Hector hung around Ms. Tillie's booth watching television while she talked on the phone with her boyfriend. I bartered a smoke for the hotdog in his shirt pocket. He asked me if I was crying. I gave him another to clear Hank's debt. Lint covered the hotdog; I wiped it off on my pants. It always tasted good and I don't know how.

I stood behind Ray and Hank who both continued with their conversation about what they'll ask their parents for if they win. While they played and bragged I watched the rituals of more arrivals. Like Mr. Marchers who smoked a cigarette while he waited for his watch to reach a specific time before coming in, or the way Ponytail-lady (Mrs. Ford) always skipped three times and hopped twice before reaching Reginald, her long braid bounding along far behind her like an invisible person was taking her out for a walk. People will happily make fools of themselves performing a ritual if it makes their belief more real.

'X-ray goggles don't exist!' I blurted.

'Not for people who live in trailers,' Ray spat.

I shoved him into the glass. He pushed off of it, tackling me to the ground. We rolled around grunting like bear cubs trying to best the other. 'Hey hey!' Ms. Tillie yelled.

'Let the babies fight,' Hector said.

‘Grab one of them,’ she told him. They grabbed us by the collars pulling us apart. We stood there panting. ‘Jack, go somewhere else. You two stay apart for the rest of the day.’

I climbed up through the tunnel system to the face. I could hear the sobbing echoes ringing in my ears. I was tired of failing everyone: Mom for not leaving with her, Sadie for taking away the chip and then embarrassing her, and my father for refusing to give him the chip and making him angry. I hated the Castle and its amalgam of disparate themes: American western, Grecian statues and pillars, and French Colonialism; it didn’t even make sense. Nothing did. I continued to crawl. My palm planted on a small tear puddle and I slammed my face into the hard plastic. Laughter below gushed from Hector, Ray, and Hank.

When I reached the face I looked for Dad, hoping it was almost time to leave. To my surprise, after what must have been a series of gutsy, all-or-nothing bets he managed to collect a significant amount of chips. I watched on, still suspicious. His winnings doubled after a few minutes. People began to gather around him in amazement. Dad fidgeted. He looked to the spectators surrounding him. He continued with his high betting strategy, exposing the towers of chips to the risk of varying probabilities. I knew I needed to get closer, partly because I was still in disbelief and mostly cause I wanted to bring him good luck, which felt real all over again.

I gave Hector three cigarettes to distract Reginald, which he did by pulling his shirt over his head, buzzing around like an airplane. He led Reginald down to the exit, allowing me to stroll in. I weaved my way through the slot machines and found a

secluded place by the Wheel of Fortune themed game no one ever played just twenty feet from where my Dad attempted his greatest win.

The crowd supplied sound effects whenever Dad won or lost, but mostly won. I don't know what his benchmark was. He fidgeted more and more and sunk further and further into his seat. The whole casino quieted around him. People began to shout things like: "What are you going to buy, Sam?!" "Some new Tupperware?" "Hey, how 'bout my wife?" People laughed. The man's wife punched him in the arm.

He lost the next hand. And then another. And more deep groans followed each time: 'Ughhhh, ughhhh, ughhhh.'

'Please shut up,' he said looking around.

He bet an even larger sum. He lost. And then he lost two more hands. Dad ran his fingers repeatedly through his hair while the other one held up his head. His pile dwindled significantly. He sat out the next hand to recuperate. He rubbed his temples, staring up at the ceiling, his lips moving. For a long time I regretted not walking up at that moment to draw attention away from him so he could think.

Dad took one deep breath and slid all of the remaining chips into the center of the felt table. Everyone gasped. The dealer distributed the cards across the table to each player. People played their hands; Dad chose to stay. He must have had twenty. When the dealer revealed his cards he held up his hands apologetically. Whatever the cards my father had the dealer had better. The crowd scattered in displeasure. Dad stood up, grabbed the bottom of the table and heaved it over, sending a rainbow of chips spraying. The pit boss Donny radioed Reginald. Reginald quickly ran over to help Donny restrain my dad who was standing over the dealer shanking him by his purple lapels and shoving

casino chips in his face. Donny grabbed Dad from behind. 'I'm going to burn this place to the ground,' he yelled, 'it's all fixed, it's all fixed.' Reginald walked up and punched him in the face to shut him up. Dad continued shouting, spraying strings of blood from his mouth. Reginald pummeled him again this time in the stomach.

'You fixed it,' he said hoarsely to the ceiling. 'You never wanted me to win.'

And then another five knuckles careened into Dad's bloody face.

I watched Donny, the gorilla-sized pit boss, drag my dad to the back of the building, past where all the Asians were playing mahjong and smoking weird cigarettes. His limp head bobbed from side to side. Dad had always lost valiantly and with the knowledge that things could easily change the next hand. He knew his probabilities, maybe not on a grander scale, but certainly within the game itself. I don't know where it went that day.. I think he wanted an answer similar to when a drug addict purposefully overdoses, let something else make the decision and if you survive it hopefully you'll never need to do it again.

I ran out from behind the game, and as I recall yelling nothing coherent, 'guwwhhhaaaaaa,' like a soldier charging from his hideout. Reginald picked me effortlessly. I beat at his back and my hands seemed to bounce off his muscles. 'Dad, Dad,' I shouted. I moved my feet and squirmed around to no avail. Reginald held me outwards until I tired. His hands still had blood on them. I quickly ran out of breath. I wanted my father to wake up, at the very least to see that I had done something brave and irrational.

‘Shhhh, shhh, shhhh,’ he cooed. I felt like a baby being cuddled by the Joker. ‘Jack. Jack, calm down now.’ I had never heard him say my name before. ‘Your dad will be jes’ fine. He needs to cool off for jes’ a bit. Nothin’ that aint happen befor.’

He carried me back and sat me down. ‘Go back in there now,’ he pointed. ‘When he’s decent he’ll come get ya.’ when I turned he had already reverted back to the motionless statue.

Inside the funplex Hank and Ray playd a game with a spamateur too keen on making new friends for a day in the hamster wheel called Lottery that Hector invented to trick us. The kid ran around in the wheel for a minute with a bunch of barely-visible-numbered balls from the pit to mix them and guesses a numeral one through 10. If he gets it right he can pick someone else to run in the wheel. There were five different colored balls, one number is only on two different colors, and so you just pick one of the other three. ‘Three,’ they kid said.

Hank reached down and handed it to Ray. ‘Ahh, nope, sorry, try again, Teddy,’ Ray snickered. I felt worse for them than the kid, or I do now. He stood a chance to learn from his situation.

Luckily Sadie was nowhere to be seen. I hoped by the next day we could pretend it never happened. I knew where she was, hiding out in the rock wall in Batman-esque, contemplation, and I wondered if she had the same thoughts. While I waited for Dad I played by myself on the extra-large foam chess set next to the door.

The spam-on-the-hamster-wheel’s parents were the first to retrieve him, then Hank, and a couple of other spams. Ray’s parents came next. ‘Ya know yer daddy almost

won it big today. I couldn't believe how much he was up,' Mr. Deco informed. He was smiling too much.

'What's new?' I said, not looking up from my esoteric game of chess.

'Well if there's a man to finally do it, it's him.'

'We should wait to see if he wakes up first.'

'...'

'Come on Ray,' Mr. Deco said filling the void, 'let's get.'

Sadie's father arrived later. He shuffled over to the booth: 'Heyyy, heyyy, heyyy,' he said. The sour smell of his breath made me cringe. 'You wanna see something, Tillie?' She kept her eyes focused on the television. 'Okay, here goes.' He arched his back and leaned his crotch against the countertop. He reached in to his pants and dug around.

'That's enough.'

'Hold on. I've almost got it.'

'Come on Gene, stop it now!'

He slowly pulled his hand out holding a stack of cash and cradled it proudly like the infant messiah. 'What would you say about us having a drink tonight? I'm buyin'.'

'I'd say no. My boyfriend is pickin' me up, and even if he wasn't I'd still say no.'

'Come on, Tillie. Comeoncomeoncomeoncomeon!'

'I'd say you should probably take your daughter out instead.'

Sadie was standing right next to him and I was trying not to notice.

'Alright fine. Come on then darlin.' Let's go eat somewhere. You choose.'

'Bye, Jack,' Sadie said before walking out.

'Bye,' I mumbled.

I stood up quickly realizing what happened. I ran out before she went outside.

‘Sadie!’ I yelled out of the door

She turned around and walked back. ‘What?’

I hadn’t thought this far ahead. ‘Ummm... What do you call an alligator wearing a vest?’

She threw up her hands.

‘An in-ves-tigator.’

She laughed and, like always, the sound of her giggly “haha”s also made me laugh.

Mr. Mitchell yelled for her. ‘I gotta go. I’ll see you tomorrow, Jack.’

I wanted that to be the case. She continuously turned to wave and I waved back, like we were milking the moment for all its worth. I wanted Dad to return more than ever.

He didn’t though. Eventually even Ms. Tillie had to leave for her date.

I had forgotten about Hector who returned from somewhere in the casino. He stood eating a hotdog with one hand, smoking a cigarette, and playing darts with the other. ‘What happened, did your parents leave you in this hell hole forever, too?’ he said.

‘No, I’m waiting for my Dad.’

‘Hah, he aint never comin’ back. He took one good beating. Best I’ve seen.’

‘You want a hotdog?’ Hector asked. ‘I took it right off the rollers.’

My stomach ached, full of nothing but acid, I knew I couldn’t survive here. I didn’t want to wander around the casino every day scrounging for old hamburgers patties and popcorn and smoke cigarettes and pick on kids just because I had nothing better to do.

‘No thanks,’ I said. ‘I’m not hungry,’ I realized.

‘I almost burnt myself,’ he said, pointing the hot dog in my face.

I took it from him. ‘Thanks, Hector.’

I looked down at the ground-up, cylindrical piece of animal parts. It wasn’t my stomach, I realized; that was the victim. The day’s events had left me emotionally emaciated. I wanted to know where my dad had gone and why he still wasn’t back.

I went to the ball pit and lied down. I shoved the hot dog down underneath so the next kid who reached down really would be surprised. I laid back into the large pile of multi-colored balls. Then the unexpected happened. If Achilles’s had chain-smoking grandmother call down Hector down from the walls of Troy for him, this is how it might have sounded. I peeked over. An old woman wheeling an oxygen tank came in yelling—as best she could—Hector’s name. She wore the green and white stripes with the purple lapels all the dealers wore.

He came down the slide. ‘Hey Meme.’

‘Another days work in the bank,’ she told him. ‘We’ll have a college fund for you yet.’

Hector helped his grandmother outside and looked around with keen eyes to see if I was snooping. I never found out what happened to his parents, but Hector clearly had someone who loved him. I’m not sure if this is what embarrassed him or because his grandmother was apart of the working class in the casino who all had boring pragmatic dreams. It made him seem less scary and I felt better knowing he didn’t actually live in the Castle. It made me lonelier than ever.

I finally fell back asleep. I dreamt of floating in the Gulf then somehow drifting into the Bermuda Triangle. From under the water my own name called bubbling up around me. Something raised me up like an alien abduction. It was Reginald again.

‘Here he is, ma’am. I got em’.’

‘Thank God,’ my mom said.

She hugged me and kissed and held me in the air even though I was getting too big for that kind of affection.

‘Did Dad call you?’

‘No, Reginald did.’

‘I found ‘er name and number in my pocket. Your father must of put it there. He’s a tricky guy that one.’

Mom’s hands began to tremble from my weight.

‘I left right away. It only took me three hours—three and a half hours in the Corolla. Not bad huh, the thing is still running can you believe that?’

‘Mom.’

One-hundred-and-eighty-thousand miles. I never expected that piece of junk to last so long. Traffic wasn’t bad at all. I got here as soon as I could.

‘Mom.’

‘Have you been waiting long? Are you feeling okay? Are you hungry? I’m sure you’re tired.’

‘Is Dad coming?’

‘I never should have left you. It was a terrible idea. I’m so sorry.’

I asked her again trying to establish a form of communication.

‘He’s not coming with us, Jack.’ Mom understood Dad’s tirade without seeing it. I didn’t until much later, through his dodging of my letters and calls. I don’t think he lost on purpose but I do think his rampage was a show to inflict consequences that would prevent him from coming to collect me and bring me back ever again. He didn’t give up, I think he just wanted me to.

‘He’s here now. We can go get him. He’s right in the back,’ I explained. ‘I saw it.’

‘No he’s not, Jack. He left a long time ago.’

She looked to Reginald who nodded his head.

Mom drove us back to Pensacola that night. I slept the whole way. Nana and Grand-pop greeted me at the door, seeming way too enthusiastic for old people at that hour. I asked them about the voicemails Dad left; maybe they could provide us with a clue for where he went. They swallowed their breaths.

‘They weren’t clues, Jack. They were only lengthy assurances.’

‘Why was he giving you insurance, Mom?’

‘Because he had nothing else, my darling. Come on, let’s get inside.’

I lay in the stiff musty bed wondering who would manage to sneak in Dad’s extra cigarettes if I’m not there. ‘What about Dad? Who’s gonna help him win?’ I asked.

‘He’ll manage, he always does,’ Mom said, tucking the covers in around me.

‘But I’m supposed to go back tomorrow. Where will he tell Sadie—my friends I went?’

‘Home,’ she said. It sounded like a euphemism for when people die, which is how I felt for a long time, scooped out in an unfamiliar place where families ride bikes

together through neighborhoods with matching helmets and bring food for picnics at the beach.

‘It’s not fair.’ All my friends got to stay with their parents at the Castle to have a chance of getting what they wanted and I knew mine was over. I thought about Sadie; I hoped she wouldn’t be mad at me for leaving and I hoped her Dad could win eventually.

‘Life’s not always fair,’ Mom said. ‘It’s beautiful here. You should be grateful.’

Through the years I had little to no contact with my dad other than the occasional Palais Racino post card. On my sixteenth birthday he sent me a fifty-dollar poker chip from the Castle with a note that said: “So no matter what happens, you’ll never lose it all.” He didn’t even sign it. Nonetheless, I always knew where he was.

After I finished with the roof I went down to search the Internet in my room for Donaldson and the Palais Racino. Like many of the casino barges, it said, the Castle sunk into the Mississippi like a misshapen Titanic. Divers had already investigated the crumpled mass. The Palais de la Salle collapsed in numerous places, making it impossible to search thoroughly. No confirmed deaths were released. However, I am sure there was at least one because I know he wouldn’t have chosen to take shelter in any other place. Where else could he have gone? It gives me an unsettling piece of mind knowing he’s still down there, fighting against the odds—if that makes any sense—the inescapable decay.

Mom opened up my door without knocking. ‘Hey Jack, will you also go rake the yard please. I don’t want the leaves to kill the grass.’

‘Sure Mom,’ I said.

‘You shouldn’t be inside anyway, it’s too nice out.’

I closed out the articles and grabbed the rake from the garage to start on the chore that will likely be followed by another if I finish too quickly. I’m sure I’ll never hear from my dad again and I’ll never know why he caused that scene. And I don’t need too. I do wonder about my old friends though—not if they ever got their horse or dirt bike or x-ray goggles. Because what difference would it have made? I simply wish that if they did not bother, or manage to leave Donaldson, that they are lucky enough to still be there, and hopefully that will be enough for them.

Where the Weird Comes From

After merging onto Highway 45, two hours north of Houston, Officer Conway glances over at his new riding partner. ‘Ya need to be more careful. Ya shouldn’t speak to those kinds of people,’ he yells to the kid over the noise from the rolled-down windows. Conway turns his attention back to the long, straight stretch of road, waving under the high blistering sun as if God were holding a magnifying glass above them. But Conway knows that the movement is only an illusion created by different densities of air. He wipes the sweat beading up on his forehead onto his faded blue jeans. Conway can smell the asphalt melting outside, which is one of his favorites—that and sawdust.

‘People like what kinds?’ Davin musters the nerve to finally ask.

‘Old people, octogenarians; they’re the most desperate for company and they’ll do almost anythin’ to get it, includin’ kidnapin’ children. Ya can’t trust lonely people, kid, especially old, lonely people. Got it?’

‘Got it,’ Davin says. ‘Can we listen to the radio?’ He reaches for the knob.

‘No,’ Conway pushed the kid’s hand away, ‘I got to be able to hear my orders when they come in. It affects my concentration.’

Davin kicks himself for not knowing better. He knows all the lines to Die Hard 1 and 2; he’d seen almost every cop movie there is and they almost never listened to the radio. Davin decides to keep quiet and think about something else while they make their way to Wichita in Officer Conway’s black Ford Bronco.

Earlier that day Davin woke up alone in the back seat of his families' van at a rest stop parking lot somewhere in Texas. Davin's family was headed home to Wichita after seeing a specialist in Houston about his learning habits in school that also involved visiting his grandparents for two days, which he knew was a cover for seeing the specialist. Before getting out he tucked his stuffed dragon Norbert back into the blanket they were sharing. Davin searched the waiting area, the small tex-mex restaurant, the hallway filled with vending machines for his mom and dad and sister, everywhere except for the woman's bathroom. He figured it might be safer to wait by the car. When he got outside it had left without him.

Davin waited for them on a picnic table in the shade of the scraggly pine trees. He pretended to read an old People magazine to appear busy and avoid looking lost or abandoned, so he could avoid talking to strangers. Passerbys made quick glances in his direction coming out from the toilets; luckily no one felt like interrupting his reading.

He figured it was probably a bad mistake to tuck Norbert in underneath the blanket before he got out of the van. His sister Nevada thinks it's stupid to treat Norbert like he's alive, and maybe she's right. Davin waited there for what felt like forever and ever, so long that time stopped, which is how it always feels when you're scared silly or bored. Fun things go by fast, the rest painfully slow. The borerder he got the more scared he became. The sun above him refused to move.

Families like his—but not his—in blue and silver and gold and white vans continued to arrive and depart. He distracted himself by reciting the assembly list to the GE A2 dishwasher he helped his parents pick out at Sears. They parked, stretched, did their business, bought greasy or chocolaty snacks, stretched again, fixed their shirts to

cover up their bellies—some low hanging so small, and then get back in their van and on the highway. “Door spring, keeper latch, leveling.” License plates from Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, New Mexico; white, black, and brown people; moms with perms and or Cozumel shirts, dads mustaches and or mullets, with chubby and or winy boys and girls waddling behind them like those Russian dolls all taken out of each other, and sometimes even fat dogs who took poops that their people didn’t bother cleaning up. “Insulation tub, tub gasket, clamp hose.” His butt got sore from sitting and he now felt scared, hungry, and angry. It was a continuous cycle of different people who looked the same and acted the same and didn’t even know it or try to, like the puffy clouds passing by, just one big repetition. Nothing really changed at all: he still waited for his parents who still weren’t there. “Flood switch, funnel fill, special housing.”

Davin waited and waited and grew hungrier and hungrier. He tried to eat an acorn from a tree. It was impossible to chew and tasted like grass only more bitterer. An old woman and her husband wearing shirts with twelve buttons each and matching cotton ball haircuts caught him with his arm halfway up a vending machine. They bought Davin the snickers; they asked where his parents were; they asked his name; they said he looked like one of their grandchildren; they asked if he wanted to ride with them to Wichita—luckily enough, they said, that’s where they were going to see their grandchildren for the week.

Davin told them he’d rather wait here for his parents to come back.

They said they had more snacks in the car and he could have as much as he could eat; they said it would be gangbusters.

He didn't know what that world meant but it sounded bad. He didn't know if these old people were telling the truth or fibbing through their teeth, but they smelled funny, like Fig Newtons and musty books and he imagined their car did too. Davin told them 'thank you, but no thank you,' just as his mom instructed, cautious yet polite.

The old man grabbed him by the shoulder ushering him towards the burgundy Oldsmobile, saying 'it's too dangerous for a child to be by itself nowadays in public.' Davin tried to wriggle away, except the old man had a hold on him like a hogtied baby steer. 'Let me gooooo!' he yelled and that old man grabbed him ever tighter. 'Stop yelling like I'm hurting you. We only want to make sure you don't get picked up by some lunatic, can't you see that?'

'Hey! Hey!' a voice came. A man sprinted over waving a badge around. Right away Davin knew these old fogies were in trouble. The smelly old man let go of him.

'Is this your child?' The man dressed in black boots, faded blue jeans, and a black t-shirt asked.

'No. My wife and I were...'

'Is this your grandchild?'

'No, we just...'

'Is it within your right to restrain this child against his will?'

'We're trying to help the little fella.'

'Is it within your right to restrain this child against his will?'

'No, but I wasn't—'

The man pulled out a notebook. 'If you wanted to help him, then why didn't you contact the police?' Davin felt stupid for not thinking to do that. He completely forgot

that 911 is free to dial on payphones. Davin never thinks of those kinds of things and that's why Mom says he can't stay home by myself cause his head is always stuck in the clouds.

The old man looked to his wife who shrugged her shoulders.

'Look, I'll take it from here, but I'm gonna need to take down your information first.

'Are you with the police?' the old woman who might be a grandma asked.

'What do you think, Ma'am?' He flashed the badge again. 'Officer Nathan Conway. Now tell me, what are your names?' Officer Conway took down their information and then went over to his truck to speak into his CB radio. He stood there in silence with the two old people who moved three feet away from him. 'Can't do no good in this world anymore,' the old woman said tightening her embroidered purple cardigan.

'Okay,' Officer Conway said walking back, 'it looks like your information checks out. Lucky for you both there aren't any prior offenses on your records, so I'm not going to charge you both with attempted child abduction, but I am going to have to take the kid and return him to his family on my own.'

'What, child abduction?!' the old man yells.

'Yes! CHILD. ABDUCTION. That's. What. I. Said.'

'I heard you. My wife and I weren't in any kinda way...'

'Scram old man, unless you and the misses wanna take a visit to the local pen. I don't know what you're gonna do though when your Depends needs changin' in there. Go on, get in your car and drive off you old creep.'

They shuffled to their car. The couple slowly, very slowly backed up and slowly drove away. Conway and Davin stood there in the middle of the parking lot watching them until they finally to pull out of the rest stop and drive away.

‘I want to be a police officer when I grow up,’ Davin said to him standing there.

‘That’s good,’ he said, ‘you must have an eye for the bullshit in this world of ours.’ Officer Conway pointed at his own eye.

Davin wasn’t sure exactly what Officer Conway meant, but he figured he had a general idea, so Davin bobbed his head.

‘Come on then, let’s haul ass.’

He climbed into his truck with its big tires. Officer Conway spoke into his CB radio about driving the kid back to Wichita. No one responded on the other end. He told Davin some lady named Martha, who worked the desk, must have been getting a coffee, which she did too often for his liking. Davin asked him why his cop car doesn’t have any lights on top. Officer Conway explained that it’s because he’s undercover. Davin told him his truck looked like Walker Texas Ranger’s truck. He asked who that was. He told him. He said he didn’t know of him because he (Conway) is a real cop.

‘You’re gonna be my navigator. Now, which is the way to Wichita?’ Conway asked.

‘You have to go north,’ Davin pointed. He looked for signs that he was joking. He didn’t show any. But Davin sure was happy to help a real cop.

Officer Conway focused his attention straight-ahead seeming to plug himself in. he mumbled to himself: ‘Wich-i-ta way, north or south, up or down?’ and chuckled each

time. Davin tried to understand the humor; after a few minutes of this repetition he coasted off to sleep, thankful to be going home.

‘Television is a bunch of blasphemy for people too lonely to know it’s shit,’ He points to the billboard they pass with a famous lady’s face on it advertising Coke-a-Cola. ‘We live in an age immersed in the propaganda of the machine!’ Davin’s noticed while on this drive that Officer Conway is a man who dislikes a lot of things. ‘You know?’

He doesn’t know, but he nods his head in rhythm with the bouncing Ford Bronco as they continue on down the highway, and Officer Conway keeps talking. He has those kind of nostrils that when they flare up you can see right up into their cavity. Davin bets if he shined a flashlight up there he could watch his brain work.

‘The etymology of hearth is a burning place. Home is where the heart is; get it? Now our heart is a faint blue glow. Tell me, do you watch the TV at your home?’

‘I do! I like to watch—’

‘Well stop, it’ll rot your brain out and replace it with cogs and gears. That way it can send signals to you from afar.’

‘How?’

‘Think of it like a metaphor if you need to. I’m speaking about the masses, about a singular mentality permeating our daily lives—don’t become one of them, Davin.’ He waves his hand around. ‘They want us all the same. I bet your teachers at school pull that kind of shit. Do you like it there?’

‘Sometimes. Other times I get in trouble for drifting off. Mrs. Scarborough says I have OCD, which is why I saw a specialist to get medicine so that I can pay attention better.’

‘Jesus, what the hell is that?’

‘She said it’s something people have who are always in “lala land” where only their thoughts are.’

‘Whatever you do, do not take their pills. The pharmaceutical companies are taking over this country and their doing it by creating a bunch of medicated zombies; believe me. There’s nothing wrong with “lala land.” They don’t like it because they have no control over what goes on there, okay?’

‘Okay,’ Davin says. ‘Mom said if I work hard I won’t have to take it because the specialist said I’m not as artistic as Mrs. Scarborough thought I was, only mild artism.’

‘I guess artists have OCD. That reminds, by the way, to take my own medicine. Look here Davin.’ He holds out a cigarette. ‘This is the only kind of medicine you need...when you’re old enough of course. God bless the grass.’

‘Why? Because it gives us oxygen?’

‘No, kid, *this* is grass.’ He holds it up to Davin’s nose. It smells like the cigarettes his grandpa smokes for his glaucoma.

Davin knows that stuff’s illegal. Officer Conway is nothing like the police officers who come to his school to talk about drugs. Davin knows drugs are bad, he also knows that no one likes a tattletale or a know-it-all, so he says nothing. Some cops have to break the law to do their job better; for instance like in *Die Hard*, or *Die Hard 2*—his two favorite movies, or *The Rookie*, or *The Hard Way*, or *Out for Justice*, or *Lethal*

Weapon 1, 2, and 3. Officer Conway reminds Davin of the veteran cop who shows his new partner the ropes—that's it's not all by the books, so he tries to stay out of lala land and pay attention.

‘How old are you anyways, son?’

‘I’m seven—but I’m almost eight-years-old.’

‘When I was about your age my parents had me killing our chickens for every Sunday dinner. I called myself the butcher. Do you have a job?’

He shakes his head. Sometimes Davin loads the dishwasher after dinner and feeds their cat Agnes, but he doesn't think that's the same thing, probably the opposite actually.

‘That’s a shame. My chores sure made killing a man a lot easier when I started going undercover,’ he says matter-of-factly and lights his marijuana cigarette. None of the cops Davin ever met had even fired their guns in the line of duty, which might be why Officer Conway needs the medicine. Grandpa says when you’ve seen a thing or two you’re entitled to things you’re not supposed to have, “like marijuana and strip clubs.” Then Grandma slaps him in the arm. ‘Have you ever seen an animal without its head?’ Officer asks.

Davin shake his head “no” and waits for Conway to go on. His neon blue eyes constantly dart up in the direction of the rearview mirror while they drive. Even though he’s driving him home he guesses he still can’t help being an officer of the law, so he makes sure not to interrupt him.

One thing Davin has noticed about cops is that they like telling stories. You don’t even have to ask, they just start talking about their experiences on the job. His dad says Davin doesn’t actually want to be a cop; he just likes the idea of being a cop cause of the

stories. He wouldn't like the day-to-day; those are the things they don't show in the movies his dad tells him. Davin told him this isn't like the time he wanted to be a Brachiosaurus.

'Tell me something about Wichita,' Conway says.

'Umm...like what?'

'Come on now, it can't be that difficult. I wanna know about our destination so I can picture it in my head so it feels more...more physical—like if we were going to a theme park you'd wanna know what kindsa rides they got.'

It's really hard to think about something when someone asks you to. Davin knows lots about Wichita because they learn about it all the time in my school, but that doesn't make him a human encyclopedia, which is what kids call him just because he used the word mitigate during their history lesson.

'There are 16 high risers in downtown.'

'Okay great, what else?'

'It's the air capital of the world,' he tells him. He's seen it written on a bunch of things around the city, banners and stuff, so he figures it must be true.

'I see,' he smiles. 'So they make a lot of airplanes in this town of yours?'

'Oh yeah,' he says, 'a bunch.'

'What kinds do they got?'

'You know, all the big ones that fly lots of people in them.' Davin waits hoping this answer works for him. He doesn't want to be a bad partner.

'Right... right... I see you, you son-of-a-bitch,' Officer Conway says, staring into the rearview mirror like he's having a conversation with it. He scratches at his

stubbly beard. He seems distracted again. Maybe Conway has OCD, too. He grabs the CB radio off the hook. ‘Martha, I need you to run a plate for me XCV N78.’ He checks the right side mirror and out of nowhere swerves off the main road onto the exit ramp. Davin hits his head against the window. ‘Hold on there, little buddy.’ When they merge off the exit he pulls over in the dirt and stops to a halt that makes their heads jerk forward and the truck gets covered in a cloud of dust. He turns around and waits for it to settle. Davin wants to ask him what’s going on. He watches him survey their surroundings, so he does the same thing. Davin doesn’t see anything, only trees and dirt and grass and road.

‘Being a detective requires seeing things others cannot, Davin. We were being followed, so it was necessary to get off the road for a bit.’

‘Hmm.’ he nods his head. ‘Right right.’ He wished he paid more attention to important things.

‘So you saw it too, did ya?’

‘Of course.’ He says to seem completely oblivious. ‘But who’s following us?’ He can’t help to feel excited; the way a game of hide and seek can feel when you play with Victor, the neighborhood bully who made him eat a worm the last time he caught Davin—scary but exciting. He looks over the seat.

‘Get down!’ Officer Conway pushes on his head. Officer Conway turns to face the seat and peaks over from different angles. Davin watches from the side view mirror trying to see what he’s looking for, but still sees nothing.

‘Hand me my gun, will ya?’ Conway whispers. He points to the glove box. Davin opens it up slowly to not disturb anything. Inside is a large black handgun. The only gun

he ever shot is his dad's .22, a pea shooting, squirrel gun. He'd seen Dad shoot a handgun like this one once before when a friend of his tried to sell it to him. Davin got to hold it even though he didn't want to. It was heavy and very loud and kicked back really hard and it reminded him of everything that is angry in the world.

'It's not a bomb,' Conway says. 'Hand me the damn thing, please.'

He picks the cold gun up with both hands. 'Where's the holster to your gun?' he asks.

'Undercover cops don't use those. It makes you look like a cop. Just give me the thing.'

Davin feels stupid for asking. He wished he didn't tell him he wanted to be a cop. Davin hands it to him trying to touch it as little as possible, like a butler holding a hors d'oeuvres plate with two hands.

'They may be waiting for us just passed those lines of trees there where it curves off at the end of the exit. We need to get back onto the interstate without them following us.'

Davin nods. He kind of wished Officer Conway wasn't on the job, but he's still kind of excited about telling his friends about this. Dad loves Walker: Texas Ranger they watch cop movies together all the time, even though Mom thinks he's too little for them.

'We may need to scare them off.' Conway scratches at his stubbly blonde beard while his bright eyes point into the corners of his sockets.

He steps out of the truck. 'Stay inside,' Officer Conway instructs. He had no intention to leave, though he responds with a '10-4, Officer Conway' and a brave, serious face. Officer Conway walks to the back of the Bronco, stops for a moment and

then continues on. If a gunfight breaks out Davin hopes it's far away from this truck. He doesn't know if he'd ever stop crying if he got shot. When Charlie Sands sat on a bumblebee at recess he screamed like a banshee and never lived it down. Johnny Caldwell told him his baby sister bawled deeper than that.

Conway stops again. He looks around for something. Then he quickly raises his gun high into the air and fires off what must be at least three rounds—so loud and quick it's impossible to be sure. Davin ducks down onto the floor and prays those bullets don't find their way back down to him. The seat isn't high enough off the floor, so he has to push his head against it for as much cover as possible. This is not the adventure he dreamed it would be. Davin pictured Officer Conway getting in karate fights with men who try to rob convenience stores and, after, him telling Davin what a good job he did when he tripped the robber as he tried to get out the door while they're eating bacon and waffles at the local diner for free cause they're both heroes.

He just has to trust him. He'll keep him safe and protected, which is why he must have fired the gun like that. Bruce Willis's character, John McClane, did crazy stuff like that too in Die Hard. "There are rules for policemen," a man says to him. "That's what my captain keeps telling me," Bruce Willis responds. He's sure Officer Conway knows best like Officer McClane. Everything is fine.

The door opens. 'Sorry about that, kid. We needed to scare 'em off. We'll stop an' get some gas and then we'll get back on the road. You can get off the floor now.'

Davin's tucked in a tight ball smushed against the floor.

Staying put he tell him in a muffled voice, 'I would, but I'm worried about the bullets, Officer Conway.'

‘Hah, the probability of such a thing occurring is very, very unlikely, kid.’ He tugs on the kids shirt collar. ‘Also, I fired the gun at a slightly non-vertical angle,’ he sticks his hand up to demonstrate, ‘directed away from us.’ Conway makes a high arc with his hand. ‘When those bullets land they’ll fall in a five-mile quarter-radius away from here—have you taken geometry yet? Trust me, we’ll be okay and we’re certainly much safer than we were before.’

His eyes are full of water that spills down my cheeks and his nose is all stopped up.

‘Look, son, you gotta stop. I can’t take that kind of stuff. It’s an emotion best avoid all together. We’re safe now, so buck up. Those damn cartel guys have been following me around ever since my last job went awry. I’ll make it up to you, let’s get some snacks.’ Conway speaks into the CB radio again. ‘Martha, I’ve scared off the tail by firing six rounds in their direction. Thanks for confirming my suspicions about the tail. I figured as much.’

How did she confirm his suspicions? Davin didn’t hear a response on the CB. In fact Martha hasn’t responded to anything Conway’s said and he would’ve heard since the car ride has been quiet without the radio on.

They pull up to a faded and dusty Hess gas station. Officer Conway grabs his gun and steps out. While he fills the Bronco up with gas he goes on about his undercover work. ‘I was investigating some dirty cops dealing with a gang from within the cartel as a fake gang member, only they thought I was real.’ Davin tries to follow these levels of espionage, but doesn’t ask questions to avoid sounding stupid. ‘I was so deep I didn’t know which way was up. When you run with a gang you have to dope up with them—

that's how they prove you're not a pig, especially if you're white. The whole damn case was compromised and I skipped town. I bought a Depends and drove through the night. That reminds me. Take the pump out when it's finished, son. I got to get this thing off of me.'

'What's a Depends?' Davin asks.

'It's a grownup diaper. Astronauts use 'em and so do cops—it's not weird,' he says walking away to the bathrooms behind the store.

That's probably not true. He's never heard about cops using diapers. And an astronaut came to school once and then they do their 1s and 2s in bags. It is weird, super weird. John McClane would never pee in a diaper and he was always a cop, not a gang member investigating gangs while also cops spying on other cops. Davin opens the glove box where Officer Conway keeps his badge. Inside the leather fold is the badge. Davin runs his fingers across the "L.A.P.D." imprint and taps on the badge with his nail. It doesn't tink. The sound is deeper, cheep sounding, like plastic, like something fake. 'Ugh-oh.' Davin knows he made a big mistake accepting a ride from Officer—this strange man. This is the kind of guy who pretends to be a cop so he can steal little kids and chop them up into tiny little pieces and feed them to his dog; who thinks the government is in his television and in his brain; who thinks marijuana makes him smarter; who does drugs with gangs; who talks to someone who isn't there; the kind of guy who pees in a diaper.

A really, really pale chubby man, wearing a greasy flannel and a big white beard so big you can't see his mouth walks over from inside the convenience store. He's very

pale and looks too young to have all white hair. Davin gets out of the truck to call for help.

‘Excuse me there, kiddo, whereabouts did you just come from?’

‘Houston.’ He wants to tell the pale man about Conway and the peeing and the drugs and the cartel and the chickens without heads and the government and the gun and fake badge and getting chopped up into dog food.

‘Alrighty, could ya be more specific?’ He pauses.

Davin tries to talk but he doesn’t know how to explain it all yet. ‘He’s got a fake badge,’ he forces out.

‘What? You okay, son? Did you have too much sugar today?’

‘Hey,’ Conway yells. He runs over. ‘What can I do you for?’

‘I was just askin’ your son here where you both came from.’

‘Well, sur, we jes’ got off goin’ south on I-35.’ Conway speaks in a slow drawn out voice with even more twang. ‘Why you askin’ such a philosophical question?’

‘I heard some gunshots, what sounded to be not a mile from here. I’m wondering if you heard or saw anything.’

‘If I saw anythin’ I’m sure I would’ve heard it.’

The man shifts his weight; he somehow manages to spit through his beard. ‘What are you doing all the way out here from California anyways?’ He points to the license plate Davin never noticed on the front of the truck.

‘Our space shuttle landed in Houston and now my partner and I are headed back home. Top-secret mission.’

‘Have it your way, buddy; you Californians are all a strange bunch.’ He says cautiously backing up.

Get in the tuck, Davin,’ Conway says. Davin looks to the pale man. ‘Get in the truck.’ If he ran would Conway shoot him? Conway pulls out his gun grabs the man by the collar and throws him face first up against the truck. ‘Please don’t kill him,’ Davin prays. The pale man’s face squishes against the window; he groans really loud to the force Conway applies to his head. He pulls him off and bangs him against the truck again and again. Inside the truck he looks like a ghost too fat to pass through a wall. Davin scoots as far away as possible against the door. The man’s terrified, squished eyeball rotates around and makes contact with me. Conway leans in and whispers something in his ear. The man shakes his head.

‘Now tell the boy you’re sorry for scaring him... Tell him you’re sorry.’ He pushes him harder.

Like a walrus on Novocain he says ‘Sooooorry’ through the glass, leaving a smear of brown tobacco spit trickling down the window.

Conway pulls him off and pushes the fat, pale man away. Conway gets in the truck. ‘Sorry you had to see that,’ he says. The man quickly staggers back to his store and returns with a handful of honeybuns that he passes through the window to Davin. ‘Here you go,’ he says shakily.

‘Thank you very much,’ Davin tells him, hoping he understands by the tone how sorry he feels for him. The man turns and run-waddles back to his store.

Conway pulls the truck around skidding out and makes a U-turn with a great twisting motion of the wheel that he throws his back into.

‘You can’t let people compromise your mission. Sometimes you have to do things you don’t want to do to be good and stay safe. You gotta cover your tracks. This is what cops have to do sometimes, okay?’

‘Okay,’ Davin says just to keep Conway from getting upset. He’ll like be a goner if Conway finds out that Davin knows he’s a fraud. He’s never seen John McClane beat up innocent people before. But John McClane isn’t crazy, or at least not in the same way Conway is.

‘Hand me a honey bun will ya.’ They get on the highway going north again and neither one says anything to the other. Are they really going to Wichita? He doesn’t want to confront this crazed man. Davin’s gonna have to pretend to not know Conway, or whoever he is, isn’t a cop, so he won’t end up dead like José, because it’s the best chance he’s got. The gun is still in Conway’s pants. How did he not even notice the California plates? You’re supposed to ask to see an officer’s badge. If Davin survives this car ride he doubts he could ever grow up to be a good detective. “I was pretty goddamned useless,” as John McClane says.

Davin refuses to sleep. He eats a couple honeybuns for the sugar. I-45 is a straight, boring road, but luckily Conway hasn’t pulled off of it onto some rocky deserted road with tons of space to dump dead bodies. Davin recites the GE body parts schematic diagram to think about something else. “Weight, heating element, sump ring, fill hose, filter sump.” They pass lots of farmland and scrubby forest. “Gasket funne, conduit main, spray arm, link hinge.” They cross over the occasional skinny finger of water connected to a larger, distant lake; dusty drifters in flannels with their thumbs pointed behind them; red and green tractors in the slow lane going really really slow. “Cable pulley, pulley

bracket, junction, inlet valve.” They pass small towns built around the highway, towns so small you can see all there is too them in the seconds it takes to drive through them. They keep on driving for who-knows-how-long, long enough for Conway to wolf down five honey buns.

‘Tell me something else about Wichita, kid.’ Conway pokes him.

‘Our newspaper is called the Wichita Eagle.’

‘Hmm, okay, what else.’

‘There’s the Aransas River that runs through the city.’

‘I know that already. Give me something else.’

‘Barry Sanders is from Wichita.’

‘The running back?’

‘Yeah, he was born there, I’m sure of it.’ Conway looks at Davin and he looks away.

‘I hear people talk about him a lot, a modern day gladiator. They all are. A bunch of ignoramuses watching a football game while their government operates nefariously under their noses,’ he says, looking straight ahead.

Davin wonders if Conway’s even talking to him.

‘Be careful of the entertainment your government officials enjoy. Clinton loves his Razorback football and so should you.’

‘We root for Oklahoma State, cause my Mom went there,’ Davin says, trying his best to understand what this crazed man is talking about.

‘No!’ You’re not getting my point, son. It’s like people trying to get you to believe in polar bears so we’ll think global warming exists.’

This keeps getting worse and worse. Davin would like to argue this point but he thinks better of it. He can't prove him wrong in a truck driving through Texas.

'You know?'

'Absolutely,' Davin says, trying to smile.

Davin can tell they're done talking. He's never ridden in a car for this long without music or noise. Minus the dehydration, he can relate to people stranded in the desert. Your mind starts to work differently when you're lost in silence and boredom and time. The only knowledge of time he has is that it's not 1:43 am like the clock on the dashboard says. He continues to say nothing while they drive through Dallas. The highway moves through the city's skyscrapers and sports stadiums and hotels that hug it closely like organs around a big vein. From above they probably look a little blood cell slowly swimming among all the others. This is the kind of talk he gets flack for. Dad says I'm too corky to be a cop.

Traffic thins when they finally crawl out of downtown and into the rural areas with boring white houses and gray roofs. Dallas reminds him of a larger version of Wichita. They make our way out of the city—with no more buildings in sight—to a horizon that looks to go on and on and on. If he holds his hands out, the sun is about two inches from setting on the scrubby terrain that looks more and more orange by the second. It feels like they've been in this truck forever.

'Give me another fact, kid,' Conway says breaking the silence.

How does this help? He just needs Conway to drop him off at his house. Will knowing all this make it more or less easier to kill him? If Conway believes Wichita exists will he take him there?

‘I can’t think of anything else right now.’

‘Tell me something real about your city.’

‘I don’t know, Officer Conway.’

‘Tell me,’ he says, ‘tell me something else I don’t know about your town.’

‘How much longer do we have?’

‘Do I look like a damn computer? Beep boop bop bop. Do you hear me, boy...?’

Why don’t you tell me another fact first?’

‘...’ The feeling of his brain all stopped up with too many thoughts comes back to him. He wants to answer but all he can think about is the horrible, crazy things that will happen if he doesn’t.

Conway takes off his glasses and stares at Davin without looking at the road. Davin keeps his head pointed forward trying not to acknowledge Conway’s staring. Maybe if he doesn’t treat it like a big deal he’ll go back to driving. Somehow they manage to stay on the road, swaying right and left in and out of the lane. ‘Think of something fast, or else will crash!’ he laughs.

‘Wichita has the largest dishwasher plant in the nation.’

‘Nope, try again, liar.’

They run over the wake-up bumps. Conway corrects the truck and continues to stare at him. Luckily the only cars are the ones behind them. Since the area is flat and mostly scrubby maybe they won’t die if they crash. ‘Die Hard 2 was shot in Wichita.’

‘Haha, nope!’

Conway twitches his nose around, which makes his mustache dance. His mustache looks itchy, as if a bunch of hair migrated out of his nose and took up camp on his upper lip. Mustaches, for some reason, have always been popular for men of the law.

‘Ohh! Wyatt Earp is from in Wichita.’

‘A fellow lawman and a good one too. Are you sure he’s from that town of yours, son?’ He takes his hands off the wheel to quote “from.” They roll over the wake-up bumps. Conway, thankfully, puts his hands back on the wheel.

‘My teacher told us he worked there at least. He once found 500 dollars on a drunk man too drunk to know he had it on him. Wyatt Earp arrested the man and in the morning he returned the 500 dollars.’ Thank God he remembered something.

‘That’s a good story. I like stories that set good examples for people.’ Conway pushes his glasses back up and his neon eyes disappear once again. He turns back to the road in good timing as an oncoming car nears. He passes them by in the side lane to the left and they lay on their horn. He laughs exactly how ‘haha’ sounds and looks over to confirm that Davin also finds the maneuver hilarious. Davin makes sure to laugh. Even though he’d seen John McClane do crazier stuff at least it made more sense.

Tears pour out of his eyes once he realizes the stunt driving is over. What is he can’t remember anything else. What is Conway going to do? Davin starts walling so loud it doesn’t even sound like it’s coming from him.

‘Christ, I can’t hear myself think!’ Conway says and pulls the truck off the road. ‘I’m sorry for scaring you, I’m sorry,’ he says. ‘It’s okay. Let me make it up to you, we’ll pull someone over.’

‘That’s okay,’ Davin tells him. ‘I just want to go home.’

Conway floors it back onto the highway. He jerks behind the first car speeding by in the fast lane, a black Camaro. Grab the siren from the floor. Davin picks it up and hands it to him. Conway flicks the switch as he puts it on the dashboard. He's so close to the Camaro their bumpers almost touch. When the car pulls over Conway gets out his notebook. 'Okay, I'm gonna need you to back me up on this one.'

'Huh? What am I supposed to do?'

'You just need to stand there and make sure he doesn't pull a move.'

He gets out of the car with his gun in the back of his pants. Davin doesn't want to see him pick on another person to make him happy or keep him safe.

'Davin,' he yells. 'Get back here... I'm sorry!'

Davin keeps running across the dried, dusty ground and tries to pretend he's Flash Gordon and can run forever. And if he runs fast enough he can turn back time before he got out of his parents' car. The Camaro speeds off. Conway chases after him panting. Davin tries to run faster but can't, like in a bad dream. His feet are too little and tired. Conway grabs him shoulder and Davin pushes him off, which makes their feet get tangled and they both fall to the ground rolling in the dirt.

They sit up and look at each other waiting for the other to make a move. 'Please don't make me run anymore,' and 'Please don't kill me,' they say simultaneously. Conway pulls out a bent marijuana cigarette and lights it. They look back. The truck is only about 20 yards away; they thought they ran a lot further. Something in Davin's stomach rocks him back and forth. He leans over and hurls up the honeybuns. Out they come, tasting almost the same—just sourer.

‘I’m not going to hurt you. I’m a police officer and I only want to help you. I’m sorry I got angry, it’s just really important that I have this information.’ He looks serious and honest.

‘Okay,’ Davin says hoping he won’t cry again.

‘I bet you get a lot of night mares, don’t you?’

‘How’d you know?’

Conway rubs his beard and stares straight out at the road for a while. ‘I knew a kid like you in school... everyone hated him,’ Conway says with a wave.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Davin thinks.

‘He had nightmares too... and even nightmares in the daytime, but he grew older and he stopped being afraid of them and became a cop to help people like him.’

‘Do you work with this guy?’

‘Good god, son, I’m talkin’ about myself. I’m speaking in the third person.’

‘Oh, I don’t know how to do that.’

‘Anyway, I bet your mom and dad tell you not to be scared because none of it’s any real—not an ounce of reality to it because it’s only a dream. “Go back to sleep, Davin, it’s only a dream, not real life,”’ he squeaks in a voice Mom sounds nothing like.

‘Huh?’

‘More or less,’ Davin shrugs.

‘Well let me tell you, it’s terrible advice. Of course it’s real. It’s just not real to them, which is why they tell you not to be afraid. Your problem is that you gotta face your fears in the day, first, and then you can contend with your demons at night. You gotta wake up and kill your chickens, son. I bet you won’t have nightmares after that.’

They sit there for a bit while Davin tries to think about what his chickens are and if Conway still sees his dreams in the daytime and if so are they the people following him and the government who lives in televisions? He's definitely crazy but Davin can tell that he's crazy enough to believe he's a police officer. Is this how he thinks cops act or is this just how Conway normally is? Either way, if Conway wanted to kill him he would have by now. He may need help but he also wants to help and maybe Davin can help him if he lets Conway drive them to Wichita.

'I'm sorry about what happened, Davin. "I guess you're just the wrong guy in the wrong place in the wrong time."'

"Story of my life," Davin says smiling.

Conway takes long puffs from his smoke. 'Come on, I promised to get you back to Wichita safe and sound. I need your help to finish my mission. Come on, I'll let you shoot my gun if you like. Hell, you can shoot me if it will make us square. Just don't aim for my head.'

He strains not to laugh, but a snort sneaks it's way out.

'There he is.' Conway holds out his hand. 'Friends?' He says like a human making contact with a Martian. It will get dark soon. The other option is to try and hitch a ride with a stranger and at least with Conway he knows who he is now. Davin grabs his hand and they shake. 'And thanks for forgiving me. I'll go retrieve the gun now,' he says jogging to the truck.

'Can we leave instead?'

'Just one shot, how 'bout it?' He says handing me the gun.

It feels less heavy than before. He points it up at him. Davin doesn't care that an ear-splitting noise will erupt from it and the recoil might knock him down.

Conway doesn't close his eyes.

“How about I let you live,” Davin says in a deep voice as much like John McClane's as he can.

Conway lights another cigarette. “Man knows how to bargain,” he responds in a strained voice and snickers, letting all the smoke out. ‘That's one of my favorite lines. You're right, let's get.’

‘Are you coming? Let's go partner.’

By the time they get back on the highway the cab of the truck and everything outside is colored in dark purple, giving them a slightly different view of the long, flat world and its fenced cow pastures that seem to go on forever, but still it makes as little sense as it did before. It just looks different and nothing else.

‘Now it's your turn. Tell me a Wichita fact and say it like you believe in it.’

‘What?’

‘Tell me things about the place, but this time make some of them fibs and look me in the eyes when you say the factoids. We'll make a game out of it. Come on,’ he says smiling. ‘See if you can make me believe you.’ Almost at the same time, the cars around them turn their headlights on right before it gets dark.

‘Those Coleman lamps are from Wichita.’

‘Why do you say it like a mumbly sissy pants?’ He's beginning to sound like one of Davin's classmates. ‘You talk like you're afraid of your own shadow. Tell me another.’

‘Uhh, it’s the 15th largest city.’ I say squintingly.

‘Uhh? You expect me to believe something where you begin with uhh and it’s? State your nouns; be specific. You may not know me, Davin, but I lived right down St. Claire St. where your momma grew up when she was little.’

‘No you didn’t.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Cause I just don’t believe you.’

‘Do you know what street she grew up on?’

‘No.’

‘St. Claire St.’

‘Really?’

‘No, not really, but I’m in possession of the specific noun and you’re not. It’s in my possession and I know it to be true. Believe in you nouns. I don’t know your mother and I ain’t your daddy. You’re not nearly good lookin’ enough.’ He laughs and Davin laughs too, happy that he’s laughing.

They play this game going down the road. Wichita was the first city inhabited by evil witches; Wichita has the most amounts of crop circles; Wichita has the largest Dinosaur exhibit (that one tricked him) and so did when he told Conway that Wichita is where Twislars were invented.

‘You’re a professional shyster! You could lie your way out of a bank robbery. You got me not knowing which way is which. I’m all discombobulated.’ He rotates his head around making robot noises. ‘Give me another.’ It becomes easier and easier to make stuff up for Davin. They continue on laughing and lying.

‘Did you ever try to lie to your parents about killing the chickens?’ Davin asks.

Conway stops smiling and looks over.

‘I’m sorry I asked.’

‘No, it’s fine. I never did because the idea of the act was too real to be ignored.

Doing it and lying about it were no different. They only had to ask me once and then I went out there every Sunday without ever being told again, even when we didn’t feel like chicken. I knew it needed to be done just like I knew about the televisions and the radios with their messages so I destroyed them all. They didn’t understand, which is why I was forced to go to school with lots of rules where I had to live there too. There I decided to become a police officer because no one should be forced to do somethin’ they’re too afraid to do or not do. You can’t push your reality onto someone else.’

Like much of what Conway says, Davin has no idea what to say, so he says nothing, but he thinks he understands this time. Just because he knows almost very dishwasher model there is, doesn’t eat red foods, has to clap twice before sitting in his desk, doesn’t make him a freak because they don’t make sense—they do to him. Who is Davin to tell Conway he’s not a cop.

They drive on through Texas and into Oklahoma. Conway informs Martha. She doesn’t respond, at least not through the radio. Davin tells him more about Wichita and the fun things to do there. He tells him all about the new dishwasher his parents bought and Conway listens without calling him a weirdo. ‘There’s a historical museum there too. We could go there tomorrow if you like.’

‘If I don’t get orders in from Martha, we sure can.’

Blue and red lights flicker in the side view mirror. The lights from the cars behind them turn away as they move for the cop to get by. The car moves through the herd, slowing down behind each one and then speeding by. ‘What do you want bossman?’ Conway asks. The cop moves behind them and stays there. The inside of the truck flashes red, white, and blue like a country music concert. The cop honks its horn but Conway keeps driving. They drive past an exit where another one makes its way behind the black truck.

‘Don’t worry,’ Conway says. ‘I’ll radio in and let them know.’ He speeds up and swerves between the two cars in front of us. Suddenly everything becomes much brighter. A circle of white light surrounds them.

‘They brought the goddamn chopper. They’re just burning away taxpayer dollars tonight aren’t they?’

At 90 miles an hour and with a following of police cars they move through traffic easily. To the chopper it must look like the parting of the red sea. Conway gets on his radio and calls in to the Martha lady. ‘This is Officer Nathan Conway. I’ve got three patrolmen on my tail and I need to call them off. I’m on temporary leave from casework to return Davin Jackson to his family in Wichita, Kansas. I’m about an hour out. Please confirm... Please confirm, over.’

They wait for a response. Conway keeps driving as if nothing is wrong.

‘Has this happened before?’ Davin asks.

‘No, but I know what they’re doing. I’m not the least bit surprised. This probably has something to do with my cartel case when I didn’t come in for debriefing. Don’t worry, Davin, I’ll make sure you get to Wich-i-ta.’

‘Barry Sander, air capital, sixteen high risers, Coleman lamps, historical museum, Wyatt Earp, Arkansas river,’ he says to himself over and over.

‘Maybe you should pull over,’ Davin suggests.

‘They’ll hear the orders don’t worry.’

Far up ahead there is a wall of red and blue, same at the one behind them. They close in on it quickly like a wave of cars speeding to the wall. They’re either going to crash into these cars and die or Conway’s gonna be in huge trouble, which Davin hopes he’ll be able to explain. It didn’t occur to Davin until just now that the cars are probably here for him. His mom must have called the president when she realized he was missing and Conway has managed to get mixed up in it all.

‘We’re going to hit those cars.’

‘They’ll move,’ Conway assures him.’

‘Maybe you should stop. I’m sure they’re here for me. My parents are going to be real grateful for your help. Maybe you’ll get a medal for saving me.’

‘I don’t need no medal. Don’t worry, I’ll get you there no matter what.’ Conway continues on at full speed, now about two football fields away. ‘Barry Sander, air capital, sixteen high risers, Coleman lamps, historical museum, Wyatt Earp, Arkansas river,’ he repeats.

The barricade stays up. Davin can see the cops with their guns pointed at them and the wave of police cars behind them are still at full speed. If Conway keeps driving he’s going to make one huge mess.

‘Conway!!’ Davin yells. ‘Please stop!’

At half a football field away he begins to slow down. The cops behind their barricades have their guns out like they always do on TV. Conway stops 15 yards or so away from them, which makes them have to walk out slowly with their guns still pointed at the truck. The cops behind them do the same. They all look very serious and ready to fire.

‘Unlock the door and put your hands on the steering wheel,’ the fat one with a microphone says.

Conway does it. Not looking at Davin he says, ‘I’m sorry I lied... I can’t take you to Wichita tonight.’

‘It’s okay. You made it a really long ways,’ he says, wishing he could say more.

The cops surround the truck. With two pointing their guns at the driver side window another opens his door. ‘Don’t move,’ they tell him simultaneously like robots.

‘So long, Davin.’

‘Goodbye, Officer Conway.’

They pull him out of the car and swarm. The cops on the other side open up the door. ‘Are you hurt?’ a buzz-cut man asks Davin. He shakes his head. He grabs Davin and picks him up. He looks around for Conway. There are too many cops around him to see.

‘He was taking me back home,’ Davin tells the cop. ‘He saved me and was taking me back home.’

‘It’s okay,’ the cop says. ‘You’re safe now. Your parents are waiting at the station.’ He drives Davin there who asks few questions He tells him that Conway had been arrested before, but for what he doesn’t say. Davin tells the cop about the old people

Conway saved him from and that he may seem crazy but he's harmless. The cop says he'll be arrested and jailed and then back to the nut house if his family doesn't press charges. 'Trust me, kid, people like that shouldn't be allowed out in society. You'll understand eventually.'

Mom and Dad and Nevada are there at the Arkansas City PD. Dad picks Davin up and they surround him in a group hug crying.

'Let's go home,' Mom says wiping her eyes. Dad keeps holding Davin and carries him out to the van like he was rescued from a fire.

'You must have been so terrified,' Mom says looking at him in back where he's sitting next to Arnold again. They pass a sign that shows 40 miles till Wichita. They'd probably be home by now if Conway and him kept driving.

'Were you worried that he'd kill you and turn you into a puppet?' Nevada asks.

'Nevada!! Dad yells.

Davin asks them.

'Davin, you're such a brave boy.' he peers up into the rearview mirror and smiles. 'We're so proud of you.'

'Can you not press the charges on Conway?'

'I can only imagine how horrifying it must have been riding around with that lunatic for so long,' Mom says mostly to Dad. 'People like that,' Mom goes on saying, 'they're where all the weird in this world comes from.'

Dad nods his head. 'What a weirdo.'

It certainly sounds scarier when you use that word, but Davin doesn't know how to explain it to them. The world how Conway sees it may look like a magical, made up

one, but we don't think magic cleans our dishes just because we can't see inside. The problem is that people don't come with assembly manuals even though we're all different brands and models, which makes others think we're broken or can be fixed in the same way they can.

And what does weird even mean? People say it all the time about everything they don't get. Who knows what to do about that—it doesn't change anything at the end of the day for people like Conway. But for good or for bad, Davin got to meet him and, like sometimes after a crazy dream, at least he can look back and say: "I'm glad that happened, whatever it was."

Monster Talk

When Emileen woke up she thought her family had gone back in time. There were no fast food restaurants, no Wal-Mart, no mall... of course, no name brand anything in sight. She could tell this town was filled with ghosts and monsters. Why else did its founders, whoever they were, decided to build Helen in an impenetrable forest up in the mountains where it had a tendency to fog over, just like on the day they moved there with the remnants of their old life stored in the moving trailer hitched to their station wagon? Helen had one of everything a small town needed: one girls school, one boys school, one pharmacy, one bakery, one butcher's shop, one hardware store, one grocery store, one church, etc. She knew places like this are where magical and scary things occurred because people who lived in places like this still believed in them. What other reason was there to live in a place you couldn't even call a city? And Emileen was one of these people who believed in such things even though she was born in Jacksonville, Florida and lived there for the whole nine years of her life until that day on August 15th. All she had to do was look around and feel that feeling that makes you shiver, which was something she wanted to do in order to make the feeling go away.

'Is this Helen?' Emileen asked, rubbing crusties out of her eyes.

'Yep,' Dad said smiling, 'This is where I grew up.' Emileen didn't know exactly why her parents decided to move, because her mom was against it. When grandpa died three months ago her dad went to the funeral alone because Emileen and Gabby were in school. When he came back he "suddenly had all the reasons in the world to leave." Dad thought it would be great to open his own chiropractic practice, since there wasn't one in

Helen; the school was great there; Mom wouldn't need to work and could stay home to raise Emileen and Gabby; and "it would be good for the girls to grow up outside of a city."

'Where is everything?' Gabby asked.

'It's... quaint,' Mom turned around saying to us. Emileen had no idea what she meant by that.

'Hey, if you girls are good maybe we could stop by Mr. Thompson's diner and get you both an ice-cream cone,' Dad said.

'I like any place that has ice cream... especially if I get a double scoop,' Gabby said.

After getting ice cream and meeting Mr. Thompson—a man so old, serving ice cream looked like the only job he could perform—they ran into Molly Higgins. She hugged Dad and introduced herself to Mom.

'How have you been?' Dad asked. 'And thanks again for coming to the funeral, by the way.'

'Of course, your father was a good man. Anyway, I've been okay. Better soon.' Emileen thought it was just Mr. Thompson, but Mrs. Higgins also spoke in a southern draw that sounded like at any moment that she might fall asleep.

'Oh yeah, what's wrong?'

'Yeah, I'm having an exorcism next Saturday in the courtyard of St. Helenus,' she pointed.

Mom coughed.

'Ya'll should come. Father Lawrence likes for the whole congregation to attend.'

Dad promised they would. They knew all about Dad's town even though they had never been there. They went to church in Jacksonville as a family but not like the one in St. Helenus because those don't exist like they used to, "but you shouldn't judge it as weird because people pray and worship in all kinds of different ways." Emileen wanted to ask why she needed an exorcism but she was afraid of the answer, like when Linus's friend in Peanuts got cancer, Emileen was afraid for months that she'd get Leukemia.

'See ya'll on Sunday,' Molly Higgins waved

Dad drove them through Helen and up the hill and continued on a dirt road for at least a few miles until they reached the new house. Dora jumped out and cautiously sniffed around. Bright green grass covered the front and back yard, with tall oak trees and scraggly pines scattered throughout. The two-story house looked similar to the church, as if the same dark, weathered stones had been used. The house looked ancient, like it came from the Paleolithic period, and then slowly added to over time, like the wrap around porch, for instance, held up by four white pillars, tinted with moldy green.

'How many people have lived here?' Emileen asked.

'Lots,' Dad said. 'But they're all dead now or moved away. I bought it from Maggie Peters after her parents died. We went to school together. Let's go in.'

Old mahogany wood covered the inside of the house, mahogany floors, trim around the doors, steps, a mahogany balustrade—such a weird house that it had something called a balustrade. The final say belonged to Mom. She said if they had to move to Helen she wanted a nice ante-bellum home—and you could tell. All the wood looked swollen from the hundreds of years of people living inside; the sounds of their footsteps and the words they once made. You could see it too, in the shapes the grain

made, abstract faces peering out, like looking at Edvard Munch's "The Scream" repeated over and over again. Emileen ran her small hand across the wooden doorframe and shivered. She went back outside to get her stuffed animals. Even though it was sunny and warm she couldn't help but worry that her family had just moved to a ghost house in a ghost town. And she was the only one who seemed to know they were really screwed.

The next day they all went to St. Helenus. They picked up Grandma from her house a mile down the road. They found seats near the front of the small church so Grandma could see and hear more easily. They weren't really seats, they're pews made out of wood that made your butt go numb, which is why Emileen thought the priests made them kneel so many times. They were placed in two rows of ten inside the square building. Multicolored stained glass pictures of saints surrounded them. The sun shined through making the inside look like a disco party. "At The Church of Saint Helenus," Grandma explained that they "always begin by exorcising the devil."

'In the name of Christ one is able to cast out demons and destroy the evil powers.'

They echo what Father Lawrence said in his baggy white robes. Father William, his assistant, sat behind him doing nothing.

'The satanic powers are destroyed through the power of the cross and the name of Christ.'

They repeat after him. Then he started saying a bunch of things in Latin. Emileen looked around, it didn't seem like anyone had a clue what he's talking about, but they nod their heads. It's much different from back home, where at Atlantic Catholic Church they sang top 40 songs from the Christian radio stations because it was called contemporary.

It's difficult to know when you're supposed to kneel. Father Lawrence never told them and Emileen and Gabby were always the last to do it. They knelt.

'Almighty God,' Father Lawrence said, 'we beg you to keep the evil spirit from further molesting this servant of yours, and to keep him far away, never to return. At your command, O Lord, may the goodness and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, take possession of this man May we no longer fear any evil since the Lord is with us; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, forever and ever.'

'Amen.' everyone said. 'Amen' Emileen said quickly, a little too late, because she's still trying to get the hang of the whole thing. It wasn't nearly as weird as she expected. Father Lawrence didn't yell, or wrestle the devil—he didn't even make an appearance, or fling holy water at anything. After a while she forgot it even was an exorcism. Then the priests brought out bread and wine. They get up to leave because Mom and Gabby and Emileen weren't members of the church and therefore weren't allowed. Everyone looked at them while they walk out. Dad smiled and gave slight waves to everyone.

Grandma said she had a surprise for Mom after they drop her off. Behind her house are a bunch of flowers in plastic pots from Mr. Gustafason's gardening store.

'It's good to have hobbies, especially ones that allow you to admire God's beauty.'

Emileen help them put the flowers in the back of the station wagon and when they got home Mom spent the day outside planting them around the front of the house. While Emileen and Gabby ran around the yard playing with Dora ,Dad sat outside reading the

paper. Mom finished in no time and soon they were back inside unpacking the rest of the boxes.

On Saturday Dad told Emileen and Gabby to get in the car because they were going to the Molly Higgins's exorcism. They picked Grandma up on the way. Even though it was clear and sunny you could tell the weather was changing into fall, drier air and slightly cooler, especially if you were in the shade. When they arrived at the courtyard most the town was already there. They stood around with their arms crossed chatting up the people nearest to them while their children ran around playing what looked like a game of tag.

'Hey Ely', Mr. Higgins called from the crowd. They walked through the iron fence and onto the large space of green grass where everyone stood. 'Molly said she invited the Carter family. I'm glad to see you. Ya'll left on Sunday before I could officially welcome each of you to Helen. He shook Mom's hand and then bent down to also shake Emileen's and Gabby's. Molly Higgins stood next to him fidgeting in a white-laced dress like she was having a causal wedding. She looked nervous as she scratched at tape bandaged around her wrists. Mr. Higgins put his arm around her and continued talking about his prediction for an early winter.

Emileen stayed within the safety of her parents and observed the people. It was a large group. There looked to be at least three hundred people, not including the forty kids about her age running around. Mr. Thompson stood talking not too far away, 'There's a reason Helen has no recorded suicides. The pharmaceutical companies make us seem like zealots so they can promote their science.' Mr. Forester who owned the feed store nodded his head. 'Poison for the brain,' he said spitting brown on the ground juice away from the

group. In the middle of the group stood Father Lawrence and Father William wearing more casual short-sleeved black button ups with black trousers with a wooden chair placed in between them where Mrs. Higgins would likely sit. They both carried two large books; in Father Lawrence's other hand he held what looked like a wooden flask; Father William held a very large cross.

'Excuse me everyone, excuse me.' The crowd slowly quieted, turning their attention to Father Lawrence. Children ran back to their parents. 'Molly will you please come to the front?' Mr. Higgins kissed her. 'You'll be great,' he told her. The people parted around Mrs. Higgins. She sat in the chair. Dads picked their sons and daughters up on their shoulders so they could see. Emileen's parents did the same even though Emileen was fine just to listen.

'Now you all know that Molly and Dale have been wantin' children for some time and it's put Molly in a dark place that's only grown darker. We've all been praying. But sometimes the devil keeps our love from getting through. And this can make us sad and we can feel useless or unloved, so today we are here to break down that wall to let our love and God's love in.'

'Amen,' people said.

Emileen's back warmed in the high-noon sun. She looked up in the dark blue sky. Its distant white sun and its swirl of white clouds contrasted nicely. Today would be a good day for a UFO abduction she thought. The whole town was here; who knows when the outside world would notice?

'Please sit, Molly.' Father Lawrence guided her. Father William took her hands and tied them behind her back. 'To the demonic beast inside of Molly Francine Higgins.'

She squinted up at Father Lawrence. ‘I command thee, I adjure you, ancient serpent, by the judge of the living and the dead, by your Creator, by the Creator of the whole universe, by Him who has the power to consign you to hell, to depart forthwith in fear from this servant of God, who seeks spiritual refuge. I shun you not by my weakness but by the power of the Holy Spirit, to depart from this servant of God!’

Molly looked down at herself as if waiting for something to appear. Father Lawrence threw the contents of his flask on her. ‘Ahhh,’ she yelled.

‘Make neither resistance nor delay in departing from this woman, for it has pleased Christ to dwell in man. Do not think of disregarding my command because you know me to be a great sinner; for it is God Himself who commands you...’

Molly began to shake about, side to side.

‘The devout prayers of all holy men and women command you!’

Her face developed a reddish tint. She shook even more.

‘The saving mysteries of our Christian faith command you!’

She was becoming purple now. Emileen thought the monster was due to appear any minute now. She was afraid to see it, and even though it was bad, she hoped for Mrs. Higgins to hold it in. Father William waved his cross in front of her.

‘Therefore, I adjure you, profligate dragon, in the name of the spotless Lamb, to depart from this woman, to depart from the Church of God. For it is not men you are condemning, but rather Him who rules the living and the dead, who is coming to judge both the living and the dead and the world by fire.’

Mrs. Higgins looked up to the sky and screamed. Her head went limp.

‘Dad, Dad,’ Emileen whispered. He looked up. ‘Did she die?’

‘No she passed out from the devil leaving her.’ Oh good. The whole event was far less scary than she anticipated, despite Dad telling her over and over that exorcisms weren’t scary and the demon inside was more of a spirit, not an actual monster with claws and teeth. Seeing this made her happy to know she lived in town that, though had its monsters, at least took the time to acknowledge and destroy them.

‘Let us pray,’ Father Lawrence called. ‘I humbly entreat your glorious majesty, to deliver this servant of yours from the unclean spirits; through Christ our Lord.’

‘Amen,’ they said. ‘A-men,’ Emileen and Gabby said.

Father William untied the unconscious Mrs. Higgins. Father Lawrence poured the remainder of his flask on her head, waking her up. She thankfully wasn’t dead. When she opened her eyes everyone clapped. Her husband helped her up and people moved in to congratulate her.

‘What did you think, Christine?’ Grandma asked in the car.

‘It seemed a bit exaggerated. Specifically Molly Higgins with all her yelling and shaking. It just looked a bit silly, the whole production.’

‘I had one,’ Grandma said and no one asked why, even though Emileen wanted to know and waited for Mom to ask but she didn’t, nor did she say anything else because what can you say after something like that?

At the start of September the weather grew colder—school hadn’t even started yet—to about fifty degrees at night, which was the typical winter in Florida, so they had to turn the heat on for the first time. Emileen heard a monster making noises in the basement that same night. Throughout the house metallic screeches and thumps erupted from somewhere deep within the house, each one making Emileen jump and twitch like a

puppet having a seizure, hoping it wasn't the same one that got Mrs. Higgins's. Emileen couldn't sleep so she went into her parent's bedroom where they let her stay for the night.

Mr. Walters, the local maintenance man, came by the next day to investigate the issue, banging away at the boiler, sending clanging vibrations through the pipes up into the different radiators of our house. Whatever he was doing it sounded like he was trying to scare something away. Emileen hoped it was working because otherwise the thing would probably only get angrier.

Mr. Walters told her parents the boiler looked healthy as a horse and found nothing wrong with it. 'But, if it wasn't the boiler, then what was making those noises?' Emileen asked, listening in on the conversation. Mom said the boiler made those noises, but this was nothing out of the ordinary. They just had to "adjust" to this style of living in northern Georgia. Their home in Florida didn't have this old-fashioned type of heating system and heat isn't even needed in September down there. Mom told Emileen she would get used to the noises.

She couldn't though, not with our radiator knocking through the house rhythmlessly as if a monster is trying to use our pipes to send morose code: knock-knock-knock... knock... knock... knock-knock went the house. She hoped it's a joke, but maybe it's on them for moving here. It knocked and then it screeched: 'Emiileeeenn.... Emiileeeenn....,' as if it knew she was the only one listening. That night Emileen pretended to be too busy sleeping, but it kept going. It knocked and then it screeched and it then it swooshed, like the sound of the ocean, reminding her of the home she missed so much. 'Wooooosshhh, Wooooosshhh, Wooooosshhh'—the house went softly, hushing her off to sleep, but why the change of mood, unless it wanted her asleep and

unprotected? She got up to create some booby traps and obstacles. She locked her door, barged her desk chair against the door, put her standing mirror in front of the door to confuse it, a mat of upside down thumbtacks, and squeaky stuffed animals to sound the alarm, so that way at least she'd know if it's coming to get her.

When Emileen got too scared Mom used to get them two bowls of vanilla ice cream and walk her back upstairs to her room. They'd talk about what distant place in the world they'd live in if they could, or what kind of food they'd eat if they had to forever; or sometimes they would read a few pages of James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small* together and then say her prayers.

But that all stopped when her parents discovered the monster in late September. Emileen heard them arguing one night. Before she reached the stairs she heard her Mom yelling. 'Oww, Oww, It hurts too much!' Dad said 'maybe it's because of the menopause.' 'What do you know about menopause?' So they did know about the monster after all! 'Oh because I'm just a chiropractor I don't know menopause when I see it?' 'You can't just see it!' They bickered back and forth about the monster. Dad wanted to speak with Father Lawrence and have him get rid of it but Mom said she preferred to have a doctor handle the "situation." Emileen tiptoed into her room over to her desk and wrote down "man with paws" to remember the type of monster. She figured man of pause was probably the old way of saying it like how people spoke in the middle ages. Is it like a werewolf, she wondered? Emileen hoped Mom was wrong about it being invisible. But what kind of doctor dealt with monsters?

The next day Dad took them to school because Mom went to go visit a friend in Atlanta, but she knew Mom was getting help to fight the monster. That night she left her

room after Mom and Dad tucked her in to hear what advice the doctor gave to Mom about the man with paws. ‘The doctor said all signs point that it’s early-onset menopause.’ Emileen wrote down “early onset” in her notepad. ‘I’m only forty and not only that, I have to deal with this after we just moved here. Most women see it coming, I didn’t plan for this at all.’ Mom cried while Dad consoled her. ‘I promise you’ll get through this, we all will.’

No doctor came by to the house that week and neither did Father Lawrence. At school Emileen looked up onset in the dictionary. Onset: *the beginning of something, especially something unpleasant: the onset of winter*. It all made sense why Mom was unprepared. It couldn’t have been a coincidence that winter came early this year and so did the man with paws. The more time they spent inside the more they spent with the monster.

That night Emileen tossed and turned thinking about the monster, wondering if the monster knew that she knew what it was. She went into her parents’ room when the clanging started, sounding louder than ever. ‘You’re too old for this,’ they told her. ‘And don’t think about waking up your sister,’ Mom said, because they think she’ll fill her head with monster stories when really Emileen just wanted to be next to someone who’s not in her head. Gabby was brave, she went into the basement all the time. Monsters always prey on the fearful and the believing.

Instead Mom just walked her to her room and lay there next to her and talked with the lights off. ‘Emileen, you’re fine. Nothing is going to hurt you, I promise.’ She sounded like she was out of breath. ‘We’re all adjusting in some way,’ she said. ‘You need to learn to like it here and stop with all this monster talk.’

‘Why did you agree to move us here?’

‘Because marriage is about sacrifices and your father has sacrificed a lot for me.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like when I got pregnant with you, your Dad decided to attend chiropractic school instead of med school so he could make money sooner and so he could be around to help raise his family.’

‘Like a trade?’

‘Hmmm... I guess you could call it that, but it’s a trade without knowing what you’ll receive or have to give later on in the moment when you or your husband makes the initial sacrifice. Okay, get into bed. You ask too many questions for a nine-year-old.’

Then Mom scratched Emileen’s back until she fell asleep, but before she did, she lay there and listened to the noises, knowing that she couldn’t listen to them anymore. And since no one was going to do anything about it she would have to take care of the man with paws herself before it killed her whole family.

The next day was Saturday so Emileen didn’t have to go to school, but she woke up early to assemble a monster safety kit in her room: back-pack, whistle, flashlight, the Swiss Army knife from the junk drawer, uncooked steak for the monster, doggy treats, and her yellow lab Dora. She grabbed her by the collar and walked down the steps to the living room quietly so they wouldn’t wake her parents.

When they reached the basement door she gave Dora a treat. ‘Please don’t let me get eaten,’ She told her.

Emileen hated basements. Monsters have fewer places to hide in Florida because basements don’t exist. She turns on the light before they begin their decent. It’s only a

single exposed bulb in the middle of the basement and it makes a weird buzzing noise. Emileen holds onto Dora with one hand and the knife with the other; every squeaky step made her cringe knowing they acted as alarm bells for the monster. The basement always smelled weird, like a swamp inside of a library. When they got to the bottom she turned on the light to the laundry room. The concrete floor made her feet cold. She shivered. First Emileen looked inside the dryer and the washer, behind them, and in the hamper—nothing there. Then they searched the main room where Mom keeps the treadmill she didn't use that much anymore and her workout tapes. There are very few hiding places.

The last room is in the back where the boiler is and where she hoped to not have to check. She opened up her pack and pulled out the steak. She had never been in this room before. This is where all the noises had been coming from. 'Okay, Dora, get ready.' She opened the door and before she could turn the light on a shadow that looked like a head casts onto the floor and scurries across the room right in front of her like it's attached to spider legs.

She screamed and dropped the steak. Dora barked, Emileen turned and sprinted to the top of the stairs, still screaming. She yelled for Dora to hurry who slowly trots up the stairs with the steak in her mouth, which probably made the monster even more upset.

When Dora makes it out she slammed the door behind her.

Mom and Dad were both there, also out of breath.

'What's going on?' Dad asked.

'I-went-down-to-the-basement-with-Dora-to-find-the-monster...' She inhaled 'and-I-found-a-moving-headless-man-in-the-boiler-room.'

Mom and Dad looked at each other with tired faces for an answer. Dad scratched at his stubbly dark beard that appeared after only a day. Even when he shaves Emileen could always see it through his skin, like a permanent shadow.

‘Okay,’ Dad sighed, ‘let’s go down and check.’ He reached for the door.

‘No!!’ Emileen stood with her arms splayed out to block him. ‘Don’t let it in, Dad!’

‘I’m not dealing with this,’ Mom said running her hands through the black nest of hair on her head. She let her arms fall; her hands made a slapping noise against her thighs. Even though she’s tired her posture is perfect, which is one of the first things Dad said he noticed about her. “An aligned spine is a sign of a healthy ole soul,” he said sometimes, Emileen was pretty sure, to embarrass them. ‘I’m going back to sleep,’ Mom told them.

Dad picked her up with his sturdy arms. He had to be strong because he cracked people’s backs for a living. ‘We are going down there and I will show you that there is no monster in our basement.’ He walked down one step at a time, making it feel like a series of short quick falls. ‘I’m going to show you the truth. That’s what it means to be a big girl, Emileen.’ She didn’t know if the walking head was the monster or its pet and she didn’t want to.

‘Please don’t, Dad.’

He put his hand on the doorknob. She turned her head and shut her eyes. ‘Ready?’ He asked. The door creaked opens and the light switch flicks over. ‘See! Nothing here!’ He bounces her. ‘Look.’

There wasn't a head to be found, just concrete walls and a big metal cylinder. 'What's all those marks?' She pointed. On the back wall, to the left of the boiler, there were small black smear marks speckled all along the wall, about forty of them at least, like cave paintings trying to map the universe.

'Is it a map?' She asked Dad.

'No it's not. They're just marks.' He bent down and picked something up.

'A cigarette butt; it smokes cigarettes?' Maybe the monster didn't own paintbrushes and used cigarettes to draw with, she considered.

'I'm sure it's from Mr. Walters when he was here fixing the boiler.'

'He didn't fix anything, it still makes noises,' she told Dad.

'Well I think we both learned something this morning. There is clearly no monster.'

She stood there trying to count them all, but Dad picked her up before she got to thirty and still counting. The only thing she learned was that she had been wrong about the steak.

'Christine, how are my flowers doing?' Grandma asked on the ride back from church.

'There doing fine, Margaret; although it's getting pretty cold for them.'

'You should put 'em all in pots and bring 'em inside. It'll help to give you something to do through the winter. You need a hobby to keep yourself busy now that you're not workin'.

'I'm still designing the house and I hope to get some work here soon.'

‘I doubt that,’ Grandma says, ‘people around here aren’t into that kind of thing. Besides, the women here are in charge of decorating their own houses. It’s not like chiropractic, Christine.’ She got out of the wagon. ‘Happy Sunday girls.’

‘I guess not,’ Mom says once the door closes. ‘I’ve never seen so many people with back problems.’

When they moved Dad already had bought a space to set up his own office. Out in town Dad often found his way into conversations about the importance of the muskio-something-skeletal system. “It’s often responsible for much of the pain people experience,” he’d say. Word got around. Before he knew it the whole town started bringing their back problems to him.

‘What a coincidence that this fall has set record lows,’ Dad says looking up from his newspaper during brunch. ‘What a coincidence this would happen when we move here.’

‘I guess that’s northern Georgia for you,’ Mom said, leaning back in her old Billy Idol t-shirt and a pair of sweat pants Emileen had become accustomed to seeing her wear. She stayed inside more and more and because she did there was no logical reason to get all dressed up. This was really bad because it meant that she was spending more and more time inside with the (man with) paws monster. She worried for her Mom everytime she went downstairs for the laundry.

‘Christine, please don’t slouch like that. You know it’s horrible for you,’ Dad tells her.

Mom got up and turned on a rerun of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition in the living room. The weather didn’t seem like a coincidence to Emileen. The clues were

adding up. At first it was the house, and then the weather. Neither their home, nor the land, nor the air seemed to want them in Helen.

She finished her cereal. 'I'm going to play outside with Dora,' Emileen told them. No one responded.

In the garage Emileen grabbed Dora's collar and got on her bike and peddled with her to Mr. Tildon's convenience store. It's a long ways to bike but she didn't care because she's sick of living with a noisy monster. She could tell Mom and Dad were also tired, literally. Monsters want to keep you up so you'll think you're just sleep deprived and going crazy. If she could get the cigarettes then maybe she could lure the monster out of the basement and trap it to prove to Mom and Dad that it exists. When she finally got to Mr. Tildon's she walked in and asked for 'one pack of cigarettes, please.'

'Now why would an' nine-year-old need cigarettes?' he asked, scratching his beard.

'They're for my Dad,' she told him.

He leaned over the counter. 'I knew your father growing up and I know him now. And I also know that he doesn't smoke cigarettes. So do you want to tell me the truth?' Damn, she should have known that one.

'I need them for a monster that lives in our house. It likes to smoke them.'

'Ahhh, a monster you say. Well then I'll go into the back and get you the kind they like to smoke. You wait right here,' he told her.

'Okay, thanks.' She waited right there for him.

She waited right here some more until Dad walked in the door. Tildon comes out of the back without cigarettes and she realized right then that that old man duped her pretty good.

Dad took her home and they have a long talk about leaving the house without telling him or Mom and about buying cigarettes and about believing in monsters and about being a big girl because she had a little sister to look out for.

That evening Father Lawrence and Father William came by the house. Mom answered speaking to them in between the front door that she didn't open all of the way. From on top of the stairs Emileen heard her name mentioned a few times.

'The parochial concerns are limitless in Helen,' Father Lawrence said—whatever that means.

'Not compared to a mother's,' Mom told them. 'I'll speak with her.' Then she closed the door. She ran back to her room. Mom walked up the stairs. Emileen pretended to do the homework she finished weeks in advance.

'Emileen?'

'Yes, Mom?'

'We need to talk. Why were you trying to buy cigarettes today?'

Dad had promised not to tell her. She must'a been ratted out by Mr. Tildon

'I was going to use them to trap the monster,' she explained.

Mom huffed. 'Emileen. I don't know how many times I can tell you, there...is...no monster. Get out of this little head of yours.' She grabbed her skull and shook her around. 'There are real things going on outside of it.'

'Like what?'

‘Like....’ She paused with her fingers stretched out, ‘Like tickle monsters!!!’

Then she tickled her. Emileen howled and screamed in delight; Mom didn’t stop until she laughs so hard that she cries. Mom laughed too.

‘Okay.’ Her serious face came back on. ‘No more cigarettes and no more of this monster nonsense, please, pretty please?’

‘Okay.’

Emileen did her best to pretend like she wasn’t scared of the monster even though the noises didn’t stop and her parents still fought about the man with paws that wasn’t going away, and her Mom was looking worse and worse from staying home all day with it.

Sunday night Emileen had a dream where she was walking through thick piney woods with a map, the same one the monster made in the basement, comparing the stars in the sky with the ones on the map to direct her. It led Emileen to a clearing where our house stood. The doors and windows blew open and the air around her rushed towards it as if the stone house was taking a great breath, then it started screaming in a great windy exhale making the map blow away and when it did it turned into the 18 other girls in her grade and the 20 other boys at the other school, and she knew that this man of paws had intentions to hurt more people than just her family, and even though her classmates were unwelcoming and made fun of Emileen for her greenish-blonde hair, which was only that way because of the pool they used to have, she knew she had to save them.

She woke up to a screeching noise thinking it was Mom and Dad but when she walked down the creaky steps to their room it was silent. She even walked into their room just to be sure and accidentally woke them up. ‘What do you want?’ they asked.

‘I heard screeching.’

‘You were probably dreaming,’ Dad said, ‘just like we were.’

‘Go back to bed, Emileen.’ They told her.

She said goodnight to Dora. ‘I wish you liked to sleep in my room. Mom and Dad have each other. I have to sleep by myself.’

‘Emileen!’

She left their room and ran upstairs. She reset the booby traps by the door and got into bed, keeping her eyes open for as long as possible, like always, until she couldn’t stand the weight of them.

When Gabby and Emileen got home from school the next day they had sound machines in their rooms. Mom said it was so she won’t be afraid of the noises. Gabby got one too—even though she never heard a thing—because Emileen got a sound machine. Whenever she heard the clangy sounds or yelling or the muffled screeching she’d turn it on, which was every night.

Mom spent the days packing them lunches, taking them to school and picking them up, cleaning the house, rearranging and decorating the house, making breakfast and dinner, and watching television in the evenings. Emileen and Gabby often asked her to come play, to get her away from the monster, but she said she was too tired and plus it was too cold for her, which was weird because sometimes she’d be watching TV sweating in nothing but a t-shirt and shorts. Emileen figured Mom used that time to fight the monster in the basement while they played outside. She spent a lot of time doing the laundry, but Emileen knew that was a lie because she smelled smoky like the boiler

room. And you couldn't ask Mom if she was okay because she'd only get testy with you, which Emileen saw her get with other people in Helen.

Last week while shopping in the aisle with milk and eggs, Mrs. Jones overheard Mom complain about the cold rainy weather to Emileen. 'It's what happens when the Devil is lonely,' Mrs. Jones told Mom. 'Others call it climate change,' Mom responded, from across the aisle in her sweat pants and a "class of 1988" sweater Emileen didn't even know she owned. She called it her new work uniform but she wore it all the time. 'But most of them are only scientists,' Mom said coolly. The look on Mrs. Jones' face made Emileen wonder if she had just peed herself silly. There was another day when they ran into Mrs. Higgins at school. She was looking much livelier and happy. 'I heard you're not feeling too well these days.' Mom looked at Emileen. 'I can't tell you how great I feel since my—' 'Good for you, Molly, I got to pick up my other child.' And once at Mr. Hadson's garden shop, Mrs. Beadsley cornered Mom by the hydrangeas. She told Mom she didn't look so good. 'I know you're used to workin' a job. Takin' care of a household is great responsibility and is more time consumin' than any man would like to admit.' Mom nodded her head and tried to speak, but Mrs. Beadsely rambled on, 'I've had nervous breakdowns in the past, and both times I had an exorcism that cured 'em. It's a beautiful experience for a community to come together for a single person. A lot of the women around here (me or us) have had them. You should—' 'Debora, I appreciate your concern. If I need help I'll ask for it.' But she didn't and she became a sentence interrupter because she was too tired to care. And Mom eventually stopped going to the garden store and then to the grocery store and soon stopped picking Emileen and Gabby up from school because Mom's sacrifice to the marriage was growing, or the monster

was, or both, and she grew more exhausted, so Dad had to compensate by taking on more chores and he grew more tired as a result.

Dad had been working a whole lot at his chiropractors office, even on Saturdays, so they only got to play with him on Thursday nights while Mom went to visit a friend in Atlanta, which made sense because she still didn't have any in Helen.

By the middle of October all the flowers Mom planted died off and had been replaced by vines that slowly crawled up the front of their house. Mom said it's because the house had bad soil. Dad asked Mom to take care of the vines one evening after dinner since he has to work all day long. Mom said she wished she could work all day, but the town he moved them to has no use for an interior decorator. He told her the chicken parm she cooked was the best she'd ever made.

Mom was always rearranging the house. Sometimes when Emileen and Gabby got back from school the brown leather sofa would be on the opposite side of the living room. The recliner from the library would be in the living room and the futon in the library. The family portrait in the dining room in the living room, switched with the blurry lily painting. Baby photos would be in the library and wedding pictures on the wall by the staircase. And sometimes there would be completely new paintings like the abstract naked woman in the foyer Dad asked her to take down. Mom said it's a Picasso print. Dad said that that didn't make it any less ugly.

From the outside, their house looked like green tentacles were trying to pull it into the earth. Emileen wondered if it's her family and her it wanted and if the man of paws monster was trying to trap them. She started regularly pruning the vines she could reach from her windowsill, before sitting down with her homework, to keep them from getting

in or from covering up the window. Emileen offered Mom her help to remove the vines, but Mom always told her she was too tired or too busy decorating.

On Friday Dad said things needed to change around here. He switched out of his work clothes and went outside. From her window Emileen watched ivy strands slowly get peeled off the house, accompanied by the sounds of Dad's grunting from below. He compiled them into a series of tangled heaps that he navigated underneath of to the end of the driveway, zigzagging like a drunken bush with legs. Emileen couldn't concentrate on her homework because Dora was chasing after Dad each time, barking and nipping at the vines around him, either in fear of him being attacked or that the walking plant-man was someone she didn't recognize. Dad didn't last long; the sun was still up when he quit. Even he wasn't strong enough. He came in with his nose red and runny and sat with them on the couch. 'I think I'll wait for when it gets warmer,' he told them.

'Who knows when that will be,' Mom responded sleepily. She looked exhausted, which made sense cause she had to stay home all day, while Emileen and Gabby went to school and Dad went to work, all alone to battle the man with paws monster without any help, but she did her best to believe Mom could win and wouldn't let it get them all.

On Wednesday nights Mom and Dad drove to consoling dates at church. In Florida they used to go on dates all the time, but in Helen there's only Mr. Thompson's diner. Grandma came over and babysat them. Mom and Dad warned Emileen not to tell Grandma about her monster beliefs. They played board games that she'd bring over. They're like the regular ones only Christian, like Bibleopoly, The Way of Life, Clue: The Search for the Truth, and Scrabble.

She always had to let Gabby win or else she'd get upset, which Emileen was okay with because they aren't the real games anyway and they're a lot more boring cause there's more rules to what you can do, especially in Scrabble.

On that Wednesday Grandma asked about how things were at the house. Emileen told her fine like always.

'Ahh, shit!!' Gabby yelled. She rolled a five and landed on the Go Meditate square. In this version you can also pay 50 dollars to get out of the Meditate space instead of rolling doubles, which Gabby counted out immediately.

'Gabiella, how dare you speak that way. Who uses such nasy words in this house?'

She looks back and forth to us. 'Emileen got in trouble for buying cigarettes,' Gabby says.

'Shut up, Gabby,' she told her. Emileen yanked on her little ponytail.

'Emileen Marie!' Grandma slapped her hand. 'How dare you. Apologize to your sister.' Grandma reached behind her head and readjusted her tightly wrapped gray bun.

She apologized and Gabby smiled a Grinchy little smile.

'There's no reason to act like a wild animal. Besides, I already know anyways. I heard about this from Mr. Gibbens,' Grandma says. 'Why were you trying to buy cigarettes?' she asked me. Helen really was a small town with big mouths.

She thought carefully about how to answer this because she was not supposed to say anything to scare people about things that can't be proven.

'Gabiella, could you get Grandma more wine please?' she asked.

‘Mom and Dad are battling a monster they call the man of paws,’ Emileen whispered in her ear. ‘I hear noises at night, clanks and screechy screams; I saw the man with paws’s pet shadow monster in the basement where likes to smoke; and the soil around the house has gone bad and it’s killed the flowers.’

‘That’s a scary monster indeed. What kindsa cigarettes does it like to smoke?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Emileen shrugged.

‘Well you find out and I’ll get them for you,’ Grandma said.

‘Thanks, Grandma.’ She beckoned Emileen over and pulled her into her squishy body with a big hug that made Emileen feel safe and invisible.

On Friday morning a knock at the door woke her up. She went to see who it was but Dad already answered before she got to the stairs. It was Mr. Gibbons who owned the hardware store. They spoke too softly for her to hear. Although she could see Mr. Gibbon’s mouth say ‘I’m sorry.’ He made the words over and over again. They talked for a bit longer before eventually shaking hands and saying goodbye.

‘Why was Mr. Gibbons here?’ she asked Dad from the steps.

Dad couldn’t look at her. ‘Christine!’ he called. ‘Christine!’

Mom came out in her pajamas into the living room rubbing her eyes.

‘Did you let Dora out this morning?’

Mom shook her head no.

‘Well somebody did.’

Oh no, oh no, oh no. ‘Where’s Dora? What happened to Dora?’ Emileen asked, already crying.

‘Whoever let her out didn’t let her back in. Someone left her outside.’ Dad’s eyes are tearing up too and he can’t stop from running his hands through his black hair that is no longer nice and combed over.

‘What happened, Ely?’ Mom asks.

‘She was out in the road playing when Mr. Gibbons hit her with his truck.’

‘Oh my God.’ Mom covers her mouth and sits down on the couch completely still. Her tangled black hair makes it seem like she’s been electrocuted. ‘Did you forget to let her in while you were getting ready?’

‘No,’ Dad says. ‘I didn’t even let her out. You probably did when you got up in the middle of the night.’

‘She never left my sight! When I laid back down she was there in our room. You probably did it without even noticing, much like everything else around here. All you do is work these days.’

‘Don’t lie, Christine.’

‘I bet it was the monster.’

They both look up at her. ‘Emileen, the last thing we need right now is your monster talk. Please keep it to yourself.’

She kept it to herself while Mom and Dad continued arguing.

‘Did something happen to Dora?’ Gabby asked from behind Emileen.

Mom and Dad looked at one another with scrunched faces like they were continuing their argument telepathically. They still didn’t answer her.

‘She went to go work in Hollywood to become a famous TV-dog,’ Emileen said quickly, not wanting Gabby to know what she knew.

‘Wowwww, Dora’s going to be a movie star?’ She squinted her eyes and moved them into the corners of their sockets imagining Dora on the television. She looked down at Mom and Dad for confirmation.

They shook their heads in agreement, happy to accept the lie Emileen had told.

‘Neato! Do you think she’ll always love us, even when she gets famous?’

‘Of course she’ll always love you,’ Mom and Dad said in unison looking up at them. From that vantage Emileen could see how different they looked. Dad’s streaky black had gone completely gray on the sides, a similar color to Mom’s pale, bony face. They looked much older and skinnier, like something was sucking the life out of them—and confused, like they didn’t even realize it was happening.

Emileen did her best not to be sad in front of Gabby. Mom and Dad didn’t make them go to school. That night, while in bed she allowed herself to cry, feeling lonelier and more unprotected than ever. She heard something new for the first time while she sat up in bed doing the breathing exercises Mom told her to do while focusing on the sounds of the ocean from her sound machine. A loud creak erupted from the stairs and it got closer because the creaks got louder and louder. This must be why the monster got Dora killed, so it could come out of the basement.

She opened out her pocketknife and put the covers over her head and pretended to be sleeping. Luckily she had already set up the booby traps. If the monster tried to eat her it would be in for a surprise. She’d shove the little blade right into its nose and run. Hopefully having enough time to wake her parents up before it got Gabby.

The creaking was so loud that she could tell the monster had reached the top of the staircase. It walked down the hall clumsily. It stopped right outside her door. She held

her breath, trying not to scream, while the doorknob jiggled side to side softly. She of course had locked it. Emileen even locked Gabby's every night too. The monster stayed there by her door waiting for something, maybe to arrive at a decision. Emileen sat there expecting it to break down her door and to swallow her whole, or at least she hoped to be eaten in one bite. Its feet shuffled. What did it want from her? Maybe it wanted to kill her because she was the only one who knew it existed.

Finally it walked down the hall. She heard the door to the guest bedroom open and close shut. Why has it decided to come out of the basement? It's already killed our dog what else does the monster want from my family, she cried out in prayer. Emileen sat up in bed to stay awake, she fell asleep in that position until she woke up and had to pee. She used the coffee can she kept her paintbrushes in and laid back in bed and prayed to God she wouldn't get attacked.

On Monday at the school library Emileen looked up books on saints. Different ones protect different people from different kinds of things, and her family needed all the help they could get. The monster came back on Saturday night and Sunday night, both times going into the guest bedroom. She checked in that morning before school expecting the room to be destroyed, ripped apart by its claws and teeth, but it was the same guest bedroom with its perfectly made pastel green sheets and perfectly placed blue and white throw pillows. This monster must be a professional, she figured, so if she's gonna fight it she'd need help from some other kind of pros. Hopefully she could find some good ones to keep her family safe. Emileen felt her heart drop wishing she had done this earlier and found one for dogs.

She went to the library whenever she had time. No one teased her and asked for cigarettes or called her Hollywood because of the time she came to school with her fingernails painted and got in trouble. Emileen opened up the A-H list of Catholic Saints by Gerald Orinheimer Delmar. This book had an orange sticker on it, which meant she couldn't check it out from the library. The first one she noticed was the school's mascot: St. Agatha. Her name was on the school building and a stained glass picture of her was in the library. St. Agatha gave herself to God and was very pretty. A man named Quintian didn't like that so he sent her to a brothel and then had her tortured. One of the pictures of her show St. Agatha being tied down with men surrounding her while one cut her breast with a scalpel. They cut off both her breasts for her refusal to give herself to any man but God, the book said. Emileen shivered and her face cringed. Even though she didn't have breasts yet it still hurt her to think about it. St. Agatha is the patron saint of single laywomen, wetnurses, volcanic eruptions, bakers, assault victims, and breast cancer. What's a laywoman or a wetnurse?

The bell rang so she had to go back to class. While they were waiting for class to begin she raised her hand to ask Ms. Leer a question.

'Yes Emileen.'

'What's a wetnurse?'

Air shot out of her mouth. 'Why are you asking me that?'

'St. Agatha is the saint for them. Also laywoman. Do you know what a laywoman is?'

Ms. Leer took a deep breath and adjusted the bun of black hair tightly tied up behind her head.

‘A laywoman is an unofficial or non-ordained member of the church. You’ll have to ask your parents about the other one.’

‘Why did St. Agatha give herself only to God and not get married?’

‘Because God was enough.’ She explained.

‘So she didn’t like regular men?’

‘No, I guess not,’ she said

‘Was she a lesbian?’ Emileen asked. The whole class got quiet.

‘Did you just say the “L” word?’ Vicky Normans asked.

‘She totally did,’ Connie Willows said. ‘She totally said lesbian.’

‘Stop it,’ Ms. Leer said.

‘Emileen said lesbian to Ms. Leer?’ Janice Cathers asked.

‘Stop saying that word!!’ Ms. Leer screamed.

‘Emileen said it first,’ Vicky said.

Ms. Leer sent Emileen to the front office where she waited for Father Lawrence to arrive from St. Peter’s where the boys attended. She sat next to Florence Tellings on the bench. Florence was in the seventh grade, three above her. She told Emileen she’s there for her weekly “transition” meeting.

‘Where are you transitioning to?’

‘All the girls in the seventh grade have to, you wouldn’t understand,’ she told her.

The front door opened up. ‘Let’s chat in my office,’ Father Lawrence said to Emileen, pointing to the room.

‘You have an office here?’

‘I have three. It’s important that I can easily go where I am needed. Come in, I promise this won’t take long.’

His office was filled with books from what looked like all different centuries. Some very old leather bounded ones with gold scripted titles that were too tiny to read; paperbacks with big, bold-faced titles like *Proof of God’s Existence: Through the Personal Accounts of Others*; and normal hardbacks with surprising titles like *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. A lot of his books seemed to have subtitles for some reason.

‘It’s important to know your enemy,’ he said, pointing to the book. ‘Faith is something that needs to develop callouses to grow stronger and that comes from the opposition of others.’ He smiled.

Emileen nodded her head and smiled back. The wooden chair she sat in across from his desk was huge and slippy and she couldn’t keep herself from sliding out of it because she wasn’t heavy enough to weigh down the convexed, built-in cushion.

He asked her a bunch of questions like: ‘How are you doing?’ ‘Fine.’ ‘How do you like Helen?’ ‘Just fine.’ ‘What about around your house? All is well?’ ‘Umm... yeah, it’s fine.’

He tilted his head. He reminded her of an old wizard. Father Lawrence had bright green eyes, shaggy combed back white hair, and a trimmed beard instead of a long one. ‘It’s important that you understand Helen as a community, the same way you think of your family. A family needs to know things because they care about you and they want to help.’ He smiled. For an old guy he had impressively white teeth. They were probably not real.

‘What’s going on, Emileen?’

She didn’t want to have a monster in her house and Mom warned her about going on with her monster talk and the last time she told someone about the monster Dora got killed.

‘I can tell there’s something,’ he said smiling. ‘A secret is a great responsibility.’

She nodded her head.

‘Does this have something to do with Dora?’ he asked.

Emileen started crying. Father Lawrence handed her a box of tissues. ‘I’m sorry I said the word lesbian. I had a friend who had two moms.’

‘I’m sure but people take to things differently around here.’

‘I know. I’m from Florida and they call me Hollywood.’

‘Who calls you that?’

‘No one who’s listening to Jesus’s words.’

Father Lawrence laughed. ‘Fair enough.’ She knew he would like that response.

He didn’t look so scary up close, nothing like when speaking in tongues from the podium in church. Maybe he could help her family.

‘Okay.’ Emileen took a deep breath. ‘I think there’s a monster in our house,’ she blurted out quickly, and then waited for him to laugh or threaten to call her parents, or to question her lack of faith for believing in monsters.

He made a deep ‘hmmm’ noise from his chest and leaned back in his chair. ‘A monster?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, it’s who let Dora outside to get killed and makes the map paintings in the basement and...or maybe there are two because one keeps making noises in the basement while another walks up our stairs at night and does stuff in the guest bedroom.’

‘Or maybe they’re just not getting along,’ Father Lawrence interrupted with a smile. She couldn’t tell if he believed her or not.

‘The monsters,’ he said smiling.

She smiled back because he did, not knowing why he was smiling.

‘You’ll be safe. This is our secret. I’ll speak to you parents at their next meeting and I promise not to mention our talk. It’s important to stay faithful and to know that God will protect you, okay? To do so you need to be honest, even if that honesty involves admitting fear, understand?’

‘I understand.’

‘I’m glad you’re learning about St. Agatha, but please don’t call her a lesbian again. You know too much for a nine-year-old. Be careful with your knowledge.’

‘I will,’ she told him.

He smiled at her again and Emileen smiled back, trying her best to sit in the chair.

That very evening Mom sat Emileen down again to discuss her monster talk that wouldn’t stop. She could tell Mom was frustrated because she kept taking deep breaths before every sentence. Mrs. Langley told Mom that her daughter Vicky told her that Emileen got in trouble at school for saying lesbian. She told Mom that she was conducting research. She told Emileen that she was grounded and couldn’t have any friends over. Lucky for her she didn’t have any, besides Gabby and Dad who already lived there. Mom quickly realized this because she turned back after walking out and

added that for every time she said the word monster she'd have to retrieve the laundry from the basement.

Emileen didn't care because Father Lawrence would come by soon enough to perform a monster inspection. After two weeks he still hadn't paid a visit to the house. One Monday in late October, Mr. Gibbons came by with a boy black lab puppy; the exact opposite of Dora. Mom and Dad invited him in. 'You're looking well, Christine,' she heard him say. Emileen knew Mom was in her usual baggy shirt sweatpants combo so Emileen knew he was probably trying to hide how he really felt. Most days she looked like Beetle Juice's long lost sister.

Mom yelled for us to come down.

'I heard your dog left to become a movie star, so I wanted to give you a new friend to offer my condolences,' Mr. Gibbons said. He held out the puppy. The only lights her dog ever saw were from his truck, she wanted to tell him. He handed the puppy to Emileen, asking what she wanted to name him but she couldn't think of a good name for another thing she had to watch out for and protect. She wished he had given them a tiger or a grizzly bear. The puppy could barely walk, its head and paws too big for its body.

'How about Mr. Wiggles cause of how he shakes his body all around?' Gabby mimed out his movements.

'No that's a stupid name.'

'Don't speak that way to your sister,' Mom said quietly but sharply.

'It's the cutest thing I've ever seen!' Gabby screamed. 'Thank you, thank you, Mr. Gibbbbens!' she ran around yelling.

‘That’s okay,’ Mr. Gibbons said to Emileen. ‘Sometimes you got to wait an’ see what kind of dog he becomes first. I’ve found they seem to grow into their names regardless.’

‘My name doesn’t mean anything,’ she told him.

‘Emileen,’ Dad said reproachfully.

‘Well lucky you then, you get to be whoever you want,’ he told her.

‘How about Wezley?’ she suggested. ‘Is that a real name?’

‘Does it matter?’ Mr. Gibbons asked.

‘I think that’s a perfect name,’ Dad said from the couch.

‘He is pretty cute,’ Emileen said bouncing him up and down.

Wezley suckled on her finger like she was its mom. When she put him down he took a moment to examine his surroundings and then peed on the carpet.

‘Oh shit,’ Mom said. ‘He’ll be sleeping in your room, Emileen, since you don’t have carpet.’ Everyone agreed that was a good idea except for Gabby who wanted the puppy to live in her room. Wezley ran around chasing Gabby. This dumb puppy didn’t have a clue what he was getting into by coming to live in their house.

Emileen woke up that night to Wezley barking at the monster trying to open the door again for the first time since the first time and luckily gave up, deciding instead to go do its standard unknown routine in the guest bedroom. She pulled Wezley out of his cage. ‘You’re going to get us both killed,’ she whispered and turned on the sound machine to campfire and let him sleep next to her on the bed. He eventually calmed down, making little huffs until they both fell asleep.

The next day Emileen awoke to a banging at her door. ‘Emileen, unlock this door.’ She pushed Wezley off of her and quickly moved the booby trap and the wedged chair from the handle. She unlocked it and Mom immediately barged in. ‘I need your help with something. Why are you locking your door? What is all this?’ She pointed to the mirror and the upside down thumbtacks glued to construction paper. She walked over to her paintbrush can turned middle-of-the-night-emergency pee can. She looked inside ‘Jesus!’ What the hell are you doing in here?’

‘It’s so I don’t have to leave my room, cause of the...’

‘Do not say that word... How can you be left responsible to teach a puppy to pee properly if you can’t?’ Emileen felt ashamed for being so immature and she felt even more ashamed that she didn’t know how not to be, or how to even explain the feeling itself.

‘I’ve been trying to tell you about the—the thing walking up the steps in the middle of the night.’

‘Maybe you’re dreaming,’ she said. ‘Or maybe the monster can’t sleep because the other monster snores too loud.’

‘That’s kind of what I was thinking, too, because one makes the noises in the basement and the other sneaks into the guest room.’

Mom said she was joking over and over again. ‘The only monster is the one living in this disgusting room. Get out of your head. You’re only dreaming, Emileen. It’s just the house making noises in your sleep.’

Maybe, or maybe the house was trying to warn them of the monsters inside it like if it knew it had termites. Is that possible? Still her Mom battled the monsters everyday

and now that she knew there were two monsters it might get Father Lawrence over to the house. Did most houses in Helen have one? She'd ask her classmates if she weren't worried about being laughed at or told on.

'Take better care of this dog or I'll send it back to Mr. Gibbons...' Wezley looked up at the long skinny finger pointing at him. Mom's hands look like Emileen's, dry and cracked—because the radiator, as she has been told numerous time. For all the warmth it gave them they also received bloody noses and sore skin. 'I'll need your help decorating after church,' Mom informed her. For the first time in a long time Emileen saw her smile.

'Of course,' Emileen said.

It was Halloween. No one in Helen celebrated it, because of its association with devil worshipping. Since they couldn't trick-or-treat Mom decided to turn the house into a Halloween candy scavenger hunt.

Halloween was also Sunday, so Grandma was coming over for dinner that evening after the scavenger hunt. They needed to get everything cleaned up before she arrived. Emileen helped Mom get boxes out of the dusty attic. They both were plagued with sneezing fits while up there. Mom said they could make a band. It wasn't a very funny joke but Emileen laughed because she was just happy Mom made one. They got ready and went to church. Like always they left during communion and Emileen again missed a chance to ask Father Lawrence why he hasn't come by to banish their monsters.

When they got home Mom and Emileen decorated while Dad and Gabby played with Wezley upstairs. In the living room they exchanged the regular lamp bulbs with black lights. They stretched out fake spider web and attached it to corners of the house and to lampshades and all down the balustrade. They hung black and orange streamers.

There was dust everywhere along the tops of picture frames, shelves, and around the lampshades. Nothing's changed for quite some time and Emileen just realized that she couldn't remember when Mom last rearranged the house, probably because she was too busy with the monsters and this made her very upset.

Somewhere in that day Mom managed to carve out the pumpkins. She brought them up from the basement. They put candles in them and placed their wide, maniacally smiling faces in the dining room and in the kitchen where the lights were turned off. Emileen helped Mom put white, blood stained sheets over all the furniture. They had a tape with wolves howling that Mom asked her to put in the stereo. Then they took a bunch of big fake spiders and snakes and stuck them to the windows and placed them partially sticking out of the couches and bookshelves.

'There,' Mom said putting her hands on her hips, 'how does that look?'

'Very spooky,' Emileen said, looking up. And she meant it too. For the first time in a long time she didn't have to imagine something that scared her. She couldn't have been happier to have something real, something she could actually see that scared her, right in front of them, and she got to help make it. 'It's perfect,' she said.

'I know, right?' Mom reached a hand out and Emileen high-fived it.

'I'm going to go change,' Mom said. 'You wanna help me do my makeup?'

'Absolutely!'

Mom went as the same thing for every Halloween. She said her black hair and green eyes made her a witch anyway. Emileen powdered her face to make it look lighter, but honestly Emileen couldn't notice a difference. She struggled to apply her black lipstick while Mom kept puckering out her lips like a fish. They both giggled. She also let

her brush on purple and dark green eye shadow. Mom did the eyeliner herself. She looked back at me from her mirror.

‘How do I look?’

‘Very pretty,’ She told her. And she did. The makeup suited her boney cheeks, prominent jawline, and sunken eyes(does sound like a 9year old), like she was supposed to look this way. She really fitted the part. ‘And very scary,’ Emileen said.

‘A perfect combination, if you ask me. Okay, tell Gabby to get ready. And go change into your costume.’

‘Awesome!’

‘Hey.’

Emileen turned around back into Mom’s bathroom. ‘Yeah?’

‘Come here.’

She came there and gave her a big hug. It’s the first one she’d gotten that had some actual muscle behind it. ‘Happy Halloween,’ Mom said.

Upstairs Gabby was already in her Cinderella costume and she had Wezley squeezed in one of her dolly’s tutus.

‘What are you doing to him?’

‘He’s my fairy godmother. Isn’t he beautiful?’

He walked up to her wagging his tail. The Velcro on the back laid spread apart because his back was far too big for it.

‘He looks like a ballerina who turned into the hulk.’

‘No! He’s my chubby fairy godmother.’

Dad was laying on the floor laughing like a hyena on nitrous oxide. He wasn't dressed up. He still wore his kakis and green dress shirt from work. 'Go get changed,' he said 'I want to get a picture of you three.'

Since they couldn't buy costumes this year Emileen wore the one from last year; pink robes with a pink pointy hat, a standard witch's robes but pink—no stupid wings or nothing. Her wand with its star at the end does not do the costume any justice. There's no way a creature would be intimidated by her with her curly blonde hair and pink attire, it made her look more like a mythical girl scout that waves her wand around to make Thin Mints appear.

Mom yelled for them to come down to start the scavenger hunt. Dad and Mom drank wine while they watched Emileen and Gabby crawl around underneath tables, behind couches and recliners, and on top of countertops. Gabby kept running back to them, yelling "tricks-or-treats!" and Dad would drop a piece of candy in her pillowcase. Mom complained about being cold, so she lit the fireplace in the living room.

'I think that's all of it,' Mom said.

Gabby moaned.

'Now it's time to continue the adventure down in the basement!' she cackled.

This was the meanest thing she could have done.

'I'm done anyway,' Emileen said.

'Don't worry, we'll all go down together.'

In the basement all the lights had also been replaced. Without any candles going down into the basement it's like how you might imagine a dance party in underworld and they were the awkward early arrivals. In the basement Emileen made sure not to go out of

site and stayed far away from the boiler room. After scraping out some Kit-Kats underneath Mom's treadmill she looked up to see fog billowing down the steps and screamed.

'There aren't any ghosts, Emileen,' Dad told her. 'It's just your mother's fog machine.'

'We don't have a fog machine Mom said from the laundry room.' She runs out with Gabby and looks up.

'Oh shit,' she said.

'Ohhh shit,' Gabby repeated.

Dad scoops her up. 'Hurry,' he yelled to Mom. Dad double steps up the stairs. In the living room smoke rolled out the fireplace as if it were puking.

'Did you remember the flume?' Dad asked her when they get outside.

'Of course I did.'

'We need to go put it out.' Dad ran in.

'Be safe, Dad,' Emileen yelled. This must've been another one of the monster's shenanigans and she dearly hoped it wasn't a trap.

Luckily Dad made it back out. 'I opened up all the doors and some of the windows. We'll wait for it to clear out before we go back inside,' he told them. It was a cold, humid evening; the full moon made everything bright, casting a sea of shadows from the trees across the yard that rippled in the gusts of wind. Dad wrapped Gabby and Emileen up in a blanket he brought from the sofa and Emileen prayed this wasn't the scene she dreamt of where the house took a great breath and screamed.

They go back in to investigate the scene after the smoke drains out. The house was cold and reeked of smoky pine, as if the world's largest campfire had been attempted in there.

'I guess you were right, Christine, the flume wasn't closed.' Dad grabbed the metal wood poker thing, laid down on his back and scooted up under the chimney, poking around with his head turned and eyes shut. 'Maybe it didn't open all the way or something. Op, no, I feel something...' He lowered his chin to look at the three of them safely standing far back.

'What is it?' Mom asked.

'Not sure.' Dad pulled his arm back and thrust it upward as hard as he could.

Crumbled bits tumbled down. 'I feel something,' Dad said.

He pulled back and plunged upwards once more. Something broke loose; a black mass plopped down on his face. 'Ahhh! Jesus Christ!!'

They all scream and step backwards. Dad rolls around on the floor reaching at the object trying to wrestle the monster away from his face. It looked scaly and Emileen couldn't tell if it was killing him or not. Mom rolled up a magazine; she ran over to Dad swatting away at it.

'Harder!' Gabby shrieked.

After hitting Dad a couple of times she finally made contact. The monster skittered across the carpet leaving a trail of ashes. They froze in anticipation of the disgusting beast coming back for more.

It didn't move. Was this the man of paws? It was pretty little.

They walked over to the monster and circled around it. Where the ash rubbed off they looked to actually be feathers. Dad prodded the blackened creature. It rolled over and the four of them jumped.

‘Is it an alien?!’ Gabby asked.

Two black marble-looking shapes surrounded by big circles stared upwards. The eyes were foggy and dull. They didn’t seem to reflect any light, the way a burned out universe might look, empty and endless.

‘It’s an owl,’ Dad said. ‘Or it was—don’t touch it.’ He pushed Wezley away with his foot.

‘How do you think it got here?’ Emileen asked.

‘It probably flew in looking for warmth,’ Dad said.

‘We should burry it,’ Mom suggested.

‘Get an ol’ towel and wrap it up.’ Dad said.

The doorbell rang.

‘Oh shit,’ Mom said, looking out the window, ‘it’s your mother.’

‘Quick, grab the damn thing an’ toss it out back,’ Dad yell-whispered, directing with his thumb.

Mom wrapped it up in a towel, hurried to the back door, and tossed the whole thing out the patio door.

‘What do we do about the Halloween decorations?’ Dad asked.

‘How about the fact that there’s ash all over the carpet and that our house smells like a hippie commune?’

‘Should we just not answer?’ They gave him the “are you serious” face. Dad never grew out of the afraid-of-getting-in-trouble phase. He took a deep breath and opened the door to Grandma holding two wrapped boxes. She handed them to Dad.

‘There are my girls. I’ve been waiting for a hug from the both of you all day.’ Emileen closed her eyes and held her breath in anticipation as she pulled them in with each inflated hand: Gabby around her leg and Emileen around her plump waist. She squeezed them in a way that pushed their faces against her soft, pudgy body. Emileen always envisioned an imprint left afterwards like a memory foam pillow. ‘That’s just what I needed today.’ She brushed off her long black skirt before stepping into the house.

She took a look around at the blood stained sheets and the spider webs glowing in the black lights. Mom walked in with a load of light bulbs in her hands.

‘You caught us in the transition process, Maragret.’

Grandma’s ears twitched to the sounds of the howling wolves; she sniffed and wrinkles her face. They stood there in anticipation of reproach. ‘Grandma has presents for you both,’ Gabby jumped up and down, punchy with delight. Emileen learned a long time ago not to get too excited about these kinds of things, instead you should prepare yourself to pretend like you’re excited. She hoped it wasn’t another bible-version of a popular board game. They opened them up. Two identical black polka dot cotton dresses with large white bows tied across the upper middle front hid behind the paper.

‘I hate dresses,’ replied Gabby crossing her arms and scrunching her forehead.

‘You’re wearing a dress right now!?’ ‘And don’t say hate,’ Mom told her.

‘Yeah, but this is a costume. It’s different.’

‘Grandma went out and bought these for you so you can wear them to Sunday service, now isn’t that nice?’ Dad said.

‘That’s why I hate Sundays, because we have to wear dresses.’ Even though Emileen was only nine, she learned a long time ago that you’re not supposed to say certain things even if they’re true. This was almost as awkward as the time Gabby told Grandma her house smelled bad. And by bad she meant like old people, which was true, and was what made those situations so uncomfortable, was that she had to hide her agreement.

‘Look, now you’ve hurt Grandma’s feelings.’ Grandma’s eyebrows scrunched together and her mouth twisted like she just ate a handful of Sour Patch candies. ‘Both of you tell her you’re sorry and thank her for your presents.’

They hugged her once more. A muffled ‘sorry Grandma,’ came from Gabby’s face pressed into the threads of Grandma’s skirt. Emilee said sorry too even though she didn’t do anything, but that’s what happens when you have a younger sibling, their mistakes are often grouped into your own. ‘It’s fine, it’s fine, ya’ll don’t know any better.’ She patted their backs lightly with her fingertips.

During the dinner they talked about the normal boring stuff adults speak about when they have to talk: Dad went on about his business, how well it was doing, how nice it was to be his own boss, and that he bought some new device to help a person’s something-system. They discuss Gabby’s kindergarten class putting on a play of Noah’s Ark, who was busy sucking a grape juice stain from her white shirt.

‘Shit,’ she said holding out the purple blur like an inkblot test she can’t figure out.

‘Don’t speak that nasy language,’ Grandma said. ‘It makes you ugly in God’s eyes.’

‘I’m sure it came from a classmate,’ Dad said.

‘Well, it’s all about discipline, Ely.’

The table got quiet and they all focused on their food for a while.

‘And how are you doing, Christine... with your therapy?’

Mom freezes with a half-chewed mouthful of chicken.

Emilileen didn’t even know Mom saw a therapist. And by the silence in the room she can tell she wasn’t supposed to.

Mom swallowed her food. ‘Therapy is going just fine, Margaret, thank you for your concern.’

Dad exhaled.

‘If you ask me, I’m not sure how I feel about all that psychoanalysis hoopla. I think it’s just a way for a bunch of atheists to try an’ find solutions for other people’s problems. It’s not a mental problem most people have; it’s a spiritual one. You know what I mean?’

Grandma leaned over the small table to Mom. Emilileen pulled her feet in from under in case it collapsed. ‘I pray for you often. I’m just worried about you is all.’ Grandma patted Mom’s hand, smiling. ‘I had an exorcism once; it’s no big deal. Lots of women in Helen have.’

Mom smiled. ‘Okay, Margaret, thanks for telling me. It grew quiet; they all returned to their food—except Mom, who bit her lip and stared at Grandma eating her cheesy mashed potatoes. Dad mimed her to do the same.

‘Is something wrong with you, Mommy?’ Gabby asks.

‘No sweetie, nothing is wrong at all. Grandma just gets tired and confused sometimes and says silly things.’

Grandma glared across the table like a curious old bird. Bits of mashed potatoes cling to the end of her pointed nose. Emileen looked away to keep from laughing. ‘You know there was a similar situation years ago with the Detree family when they moved here. Sara Detree chose electric shock therapy instead. She looked like a walking zombie afterwards. They eventually divorced—not Henry’s decision.’ Grandma shivered and then crosses her chest. She reached to the back of her head to make sure her hair was still tightly wrapped in its gray knot.

Grandma leaned over to look at Emileen who tried to focus on Grandma’s forehead and not her nose. She turned to Gabby, ‘this is why you keep your faith now; you’ll stay protected from the demons and...’

Gabby started snorting and hooting in hysterical laughter like she was possessed.

Grandma lost her concentration. ‘What’s so darn funny, Gabriella? Do I look like someone making jokes?’

Even Mom tried to suppress her amusement.

‘Grandma has mashed potatoes on her nose. Potatoes on her nose, potatoes on her nose’ Gabby sang, clearly unaware of the mood in the room.

Grandma stood up. ‘I’m feelin’ pretty tired,’ she announced. She wiped all around her face with the napkin and walked around the table to kiss Gabby and me on the head. Mom stood up to hug her goodbye. ‘Take care, Christine.’ Dad walked her out. Emileen

saw Grandma saying something to him by the door in a half-hug kind of thing, who shook his head in understanding. Bits of mashed potatoes still clung to her beakish nose.

No one speaks when Dad walks in, except for Gabby who tells me that I smell gross, kind of like Grandma.

‘Well you smell like a baby, a little baby who can’t even do a cartwheel.’ Mom and Dad gave her a look. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘Don’t ask us for forgiveness,’ Mom said.

‘I’m sorry, Gabby’

After they cleaned up Mom and Dad sat them down in the living room on the sofa to talk while Mom and Dad sat to the left and right in opposite armchairs. They told them about the therapist Mom was seeing on Thursdays and the medication she had been prescribed, which she started taking recently. This was almost like the time when they told **Emilen** that she was going to get a baby sister in a few months. They spoke seriously and took turns finishing each other’s sentences. Although this new addition was, they said, supposed to help Mom become less ‘irritable’ and ‘depressed.’ ‘None of this is anyone’s business besides this family’s, okay?’ They said in unison. Mom and Dad smiled while reaching across the table to rub thier knees. ‘Things will be back to normal soon,’ Dad promised.

That Halloween night Emileen had even more trouble sleeping after seeing the barbecued owl and hearing about what the man with paws had done to her. She had a dream where she leaned over to look at it and in its hazy reflection she saw herself grayed and wrinkled and old.

The dead owl made everyone scared cause they stopped using the fireplace. The flume is supposed to always remain closed, Dad instructed Emileen and Gabby.

They have to wear dirty uniforms two days in a row because Mom didn't do the laundry, so now Dad started taking care of it after work probably because Mom lacked the strength to go down to the basement. With all the added free time Mom's decided to pick up knitting. She mostly she just sat there staring at the television while holding the two needles in her hands. Whenever Emileen needed to speak to her she made sure never to approach from behind.

On Sunday they went to church while Mom stayed home to sleep. Now that the cat was out of the bag she guessed Mom no longer had to pretend to be feeling fine. Emileen didn't think it was safe to leave Mom home alone with the monster that was making her sick. Mom said if Emileen said that word one more time she's gonna scream. Grandma asked about her and so did almost everyone at church, even Father Lawrence wanted to know what's going on when the service finally ended.

Mom continued to see her friend/ therapist in Atlanta on Thursdays and slept later and later in the day, which was a side effect from her medication. Sometimes she didn't wake up until Dad dropped them home from school, which he'd been doing every day that week because Mom needed time and rest to fight the monster, but Emileen knew Mom was losing. She got sick of sitting around watching Mom and Dad have the life sucked out of them. While they went to their consoling meeting Grandma said she thought the medication was a bunch of bologna. And Emileen agreed. 'I mean look at her. Your father needs to do something.' She didn't realize that Dad was just as

exhausted. He looked almost as skeletal as Mom. Emileen had Gabby and Wezley to look out for now. Mom was right about her needing to act more grown up.

Grandma tucked them in early, which was the reason she had to wait up for Mom and Dad to get back and go to bed before she could make another booby trap, which was a simple one. With kite string she tied one end to the bottom of a pole on the balustrade and another to the metal bracket supporting the handrail on the other side, creating a diagonal and making sure to double knot both ends. She did her best to stay up, doing pushups and sit-ups to keep from falling asleep, but her arms and belly got tired and sore. When she laid down to rest she immediately drifted off.

She sat up the second she heard the stairs bending underneath the monster and grabbed her whistle, knife, and flashlight. Up it went slowly, *creeeek, creeeeaak, creeeek* the house cried as if in pain, *creeeek, creeeek, creeeek*. And then **BOOM** the monster went against the steps or something of the sort and tumbled down.

Emileen ran out blowing her whistle to the high heavens, so loud it screamed. She shined the light down to the bottom of the stairs. Its nightgown covered its face but revealed its gross hairy, pale, legs that were splayed out wiggling all around.

‘What the hell is going on?’ Dad looks to the monster.

‘Don’t touch it Dad!!’ she cautioned.

‘Christine, Christine,’ he helped it up and fixes its nightgown, ‘are you okay?’

‘Mom?’

She held the back of her head, seething so much that foamy spit shot out of her drool covered mouth. ‘You won’t be satisfied till you kill me, will you?!?!?’ she

screamed, 'will you?!!!' In the light she looked like the rabid raccoon Mr. Dansby caught in the backyard months back.

Gabby opened up her door. 'What's...'

'Get back in your room!' Dad urged her, which she did before she even stepped completely out.

'What happened?' Dad asked Mom still holding her.

'She jerry-rigged the steps with a wire, the little shit.'

'It was kite sting. I wanted to catch the man of paws monster, not you, Mom. I'm sorry.'

'I told you to stop. I told you there's no monster!!'

'Calm down, Christine, she was only trying to help.' Dad let go of her to turn on the light in the foyer.

'I'm going to ring your neck!' Mom got down on all fours and scuttled her way up the stairs before Dad could do anything. She skittered underneath the boob trap, grunting loudly out of her open mouth.

Emileen turned and ran into my room. She shut the door just in time. Mom ran into it with a thump. She locked the door quickly and barged it shut with the chair and set the thumbtack mat in front of it. 'Open the door,' Mom screamed. 'Open the door!!!'

'No,' she called. Mom banged against the door. 'Please go away. You're scaring me.'

Dad called after her, 'Christine, stop this.' Another thud rings out. 'Jesus,' Dad cried, tumbling down the steps.

The door rattled loudly from Mom trying to kick it down. It shook again and the wood frame began to crack. She kicked again and again. Then the door came flying open with a great gust, casting the chair aside.

‘Where in the hell are you?’

From under the bed Emileen saw her hairy leg take one great step right onto the mat. She topples over howling. Emileen jumped out and ran past Mom on the floor clutching her bloody foot. She reached out to grab her but managed to jump over. Dad was right there to pick her up. Emileen pushed her face against his shoulder and wrapped her arms around his neck.

‘It’s okay,’ he told her ‘it’s okay. It’s not your fault.’ He walked her down the steps. ‘I need you to be a big girl and get me some bandages and antiseptic.’ Dad’s shirt was soaked on the side with three large circles from Emileen’s face. ‘We need to help your Mom.’ After Dad bandaged up her foot he placed her in Emileen’s bed and asked her to let them talk. ‘I’ll do it,’ Mom said, ‘but I refuse to make a spectacle of it.’

On Saturday Father Lawrence and Father William came over and Emileen couldn’t have been more excited. She answered the door and let them in. Mom hobbled out of her room wearing a white blouse and dark jeans with her hair curled and freshly washed. She looked better already just knowing she was having an exorcism that day.

Where’s the basement Father Lawrence asked. Emileen pointed. Father Lawrence sent Father William down to the basement with instructions: ‘take the Roman Rituals with you and please be sure to bless the entire basement area.’ He sat down on the sofa and gestured for Mom to do the same. ‘He used to work as a plumber’s assistant before

he took his vows, so I think he's the best for whatever the problem is that you may have down there.' Father Lawrence smiles for the first time.

Mom sat in the small wicker chair. 'I don't want Gabby to present. So Emileen took her upstairs with Wezley and turned on her sound machine to jungle sounds and came back down, happy Mom finally understood she was old enough to help with the monster.

'Ely, could you please tie her hands down for me.' He tossed Dad some leather wraps from his bag.

Father Lawrence yelled for Father William.

'What is it?' His face had smudges on them and his hands were all black, as if he had been wrestling with something greasy and dirty, probably the monster in the basement.

'I need you to hold Christine down for a minute and tie the binds around her.'

'You can't do this. This is illegal.' Mom stood up but she didn't have her crutches.

'Christine, if you can hear me, it is within my rights to overpower you and bind you if I view you as a possible threat to your family and to yourself.'

This wasn't what Emileen expected. She thought maybe he'd bless her and then wave the ball of incense around. Although, how much did an exorcism really hurt anyway?

'Hold her down, William.'

Father William put his weight around Mom forcing her into the armchair between the two facing sofas. He pushed her hands behind her while Dad tied them.

‘Ewww, don’t touch me, William, you’re filthy! This is a Ralph Lauren blouse you idiot.’

Father Lawrence began reciting from the ritual book. ‘I invoke the name of the Father and the Son. I call upon the arch angel Michael to grant me assistance and be my guiding light in banishing this demon that has taken this poor soul hostage!’

Mom sank her teeth into Father William’s neck. ‘Jesus Christ!!!!!!’ Father William screamed—not yelled, he screamed looking upwards in agony. Father William buckled in pain and fell onto the white shag-rug clutching his neck. Dad helped him by folding his handkerchief and tying it around his bleeding neck. Mom tried to stand but quickly falls back down into the heavy wooden chair. Blood surrounded Mom’s mouth and down to her chin. The exorcism seemed to make things worse. Emileen stood there wishing she could leave, but she knew she couldn’t since Mom was partly doing this because of her.

‘To the demonic beast inside of Christine Francis Willows, I command thee, I adjure you, ancient serpent, by the judge of the living and the dead, by your Creator, to depart forthwith in fear from this servant of God. I shun you not by my weakness but by the power of the Holy Spirit!’

Mom shook around with such anger and strength in her chair Emileen thought maybe she’d break free. Her face changed from an intense red to a deep color of purple.

‘There’s nothing for me to fight. Frankly, I’m terrified what you’re going to do to me when nothing happens.’ At this realization she began to cry: ‘Stop, stop this, please.’ Strands of spit hung from her mouth.

Dad and Father William looked to Father Lawrence. His eyes were closed and he was mumbling in prayer. ‘Your trickery will not work in God’s presence,’ he said loudly. ‘Stay with us, Christine.’ Father Lawrence continued his reading, while throwing water from a wooden bottle over her. Emileen prayed for the monster to come out, to show itself and to leave forever. Or for Father Lawrence to learn that nothing was there and that nothing was going to change, just something to happen so it could be over. She squinted her eyes trying to understand if she was seeing something or not. Is this what a demon looked like? A shiver that felt like ghost fingers sliding down her back washed over her. She wondered if Mom was in pain and, if so, did that mean it was working?

‘The longer you delay—’(Mom’s yelling made it difficult to hear) ‘For it is not men you are condemning, but rather Him who rules the living and the dead, who is coming to judge both the living and the dead and the world by fire.’ Suddenly Mom’s head went limp and she stopped screaming. Father Lawrence motioned to the others: ‘Amen,’ they and Emileen said in unison.

‘Let us pray.’ They bowed their heads. It’s fun to open your eyes when people pray in church; it’s like being invisible. Now that Mom stopped yelling Father Lawrence spoke much more quietly. ‘—I humbly entreat your glorious majesty...’ All of a sudden Emileen started to cry, one of those weird silent cries where your body tenses up and you can’t move and your mouth stretches out really wide in a clown-like smile and you can’t do anything, not even move or make a sound. ‘...to deliver this servant of yours from the unclean spirits; through Christ our Lord.’

All: ‘Amen.’

‘Come here, Emileen,’ Father Lawrence says. ‘Come here to see God’s work.’

She was curious to see if her old mom lied in the chair. The one who didn’t yell, or cry, or sleep so much, rather the person who laughed loudly a bazillion times a day and happily taught her cartwheels and tumble rolls.

‘Is she alive?’

‘Yes of course. Come and see.’

The purple and blue disappeared, almost back to its normal color with exception to her cheeks, which were a shade of soft pink. He handed her a pair of scissors and gestured for her to cut the ties. ‘I don’t know,’ she mumbled, worried she might wake up and jump out. ‘It’s okay. The spirit has been banished,’ he told her.

‘Where?’ I ask.

‘To Hell, of course.’

‘Where is that? I hope it’s far away from Helen and my family.’

‘It’s a place in God’s heart. Go on,’ Father Lawrence said. ‘She’s all better now.’

Emileen cut the straps and then walked back to them. They stood like that for a while, watching Mom silently, each breath, in and out, her chest, up and down, and not much else. Dad kissed Emileen’s head, picked her up and carried her up to bed.

The talking became much quieter and after, not too much later, Emileen heard the front door close and the lock on the door slide over. She waited for the house to make its *clink, clink, clink* sounds. It remained still and quiet. She tossed and turned. At three o’clock She woke up again, but she didn’t dream about the noises and the house didn’t scream out its usual *creeeaks*. Still she waited, but there was only the sound of thick, quiet darkness. Emileen shivered because she could tell it was gone.

What would they do now though, now that the monster had left? Is that how all the other families felt when their monsters were banished, like they had been carved out like a pumpkin? Maybe her families' monsters were different, maybe theirs was something from inside all of them, because isn't that what fills a house; the monsters you have to share you home with? Instead of pretending like you weren't sad and everything was okay? Or was that all just part of the sacrifice that things like marriage and God asked of us? Emileen rolled out of bed and wrote these questions down in her notebook, so she could hopefully answer them in case she ever has a daughter someday maybe when she's older and more grown.

'There, how does that look, Emileen?' Dad asked. The vines are gone and a garden stretches all the way around the house, like a rainbow of aster, roses, tulips, and chrysanthemums is hugging it closely. Wezley runs around sniffing at the piles of dead vines. Emileen woke up to sounds of Dad grunting out in the yard working. It's a warm, cloudless afternoon in the middle of November. 'An Indian summer has begun,' he tells her.

'Very pretty,' She says squinting into the sun that hangs above the house.

'Do you think your mom will like it?' Dad asks.

Mom is still in inside sleeping off her exorcism from the night before. 'I hope so.' Emileen says. She wonders what will happen once Mom does wake up. She looks up at her dad; he's sweaty and smiling with pride at all the work he's done to their home, all the changes he's made, so that things can now look just way they used to.

'Me too,' he says.

Worldsick in the Animal Garden

At mid-day this man came by to the Kleiner Tiergarten before most of us had even gotten out of our sleeping bags. He didn't apologize. He brought with him a serious-faced polizei with large arms. We were pretty sure none of us had stolen anything recently. At least mostly sure. The man was the kind of guy you saw only on the outside of the garten: polished shoes, fitted grey suit, shaven, and short-combed hair—clearly with the government. We didn't get up. He cleared his throat and introduced himself as Adler, a Berlin official. He handed us a too-many-paged document.

'Am I getting audited?' Radolf asked.

We snickered.

'Reconstruction; this will be a park for the public again. You must leave the premises within the date stated.' He didn't apologize.

'We are the public!' Tabby cried.

'The public lives indoors and pay taxes. You sleep on the ground in your own filth.' He waved his hand around.

'We stink because the city stinks. We sleep in your filth.' Radolf growled.

'You have a week to vacate or the police will show you out,' he said pointing to the rock-faced Polizei. They left before we could muster an astute counter argument.

The last time the park had been redesigned was in the 1960's by Wilhelm Alverdes, almost twenty years after the second big war—we knew this from spending many rainstormed days in the library. The fountains and benches and lanterns carefully placed by Gustav Meyer, the original designer, were, just as judiciously, blown to smithereens by the British air force. Now, forty years after Wilhelm's reconstruction, the

wooden benches were warped and soggy from shade that never lifted, the lanterns tarnished and lights long blown out from a breath that shattered the glass panes, the fountains sucked dry and speckled in fuzzy green mold we were afraid might grow on us, and the children's playground with rusty slides made for better torturing devices, and the seat-less swing sets looked like gallows with their dangling chains, but we didn't touch anything. It was like that when we got there.

For us it was still too early. We coughed and hacked and rolled out of our sleeping bags. The day needed to be contemplated longer before the sun with its plasma ideas highlighted our thoughts in bright orange. It was too much too early to think about, finding a new place to live.

For most of us the Kleiner Tiergarten had been our home for years. It was a safe place where no one got ripped off or used. There were no bosses. We worked even shifts collecting and depositing bottles from the surrounding chaos of the city. The money went to an "account" in Radolf's backpack where it was used to purchase food and dope, which was then evenly distributed to the group. And we never peddled, because we didn't need saving or judgment from any home dweller.

We knew none of us wanted to leave and we knew the Government screwed us with their impenetrable document too boring to read. They already had the Große Tiergarten right across the Spree River. If you want to see pretty things go get lost there. We lived here. What would we do, where would we go? Much too early to look at life's existential issues, we agreed.

First we needed some help to clear our heads. Normally we weren't supposed to get high this early, but these were special circumstances. We shook Gozzo to see if he

needed some, too, after the bad news. Bile lay on the ground next to him from when he probably got worldsick the night before.

‘I think he took too much,’ Tabby said.

‘It’s the Government Pigs. They want us out so they’re spiking our shit,’ Zinnie cried.

We flipped him over. Gozzo breathed up and down in a direction we needed to turn our heads to see. We watched to make sure the sequence was correct, contemplating if he still lived in tune with the rest of us. Then we observed each other to compare, inhaling and exhaling with shallow breaths. Everyone else seemed okay, so we rummaged through his pockets for his stash.

We asked who needed some. Most of us had our own and some did too but said we didn’t. We gathered like buzzing electrons waiting our turns.

We managed before.

‘Remember when we lived on the other side of the garden?’ asked Otto.

‘No,’ some of us said. He didn’t either.

‘This is more than just crossing Stron Street to the other side of the same place,’ said Radolf.

We agreed. Nothing felt the same. The city of Berlin had no use for us, not when we stunk up the train cars and food markets and petrified tourists who flew to see this country dowsed in a history they once read about in a textbook, devouring it with phone cameras.

After a while we put up signs that said “Not A Zoo,” because the translated name “Little Animal Garden” sometimes persuaded out-of-town families to pay us a visit. We

saw the fear in their darting eyes when they wandered in, the fear that this zoo might cost them more than they anticipated, as if we had set the perfect trap. They'd avoid making contact with our hungry eyes, hoping not to stir us. We didn't need or want anything from them, but they didn't know that. The fremdscham we felt reminded us of who we are now and, for some of us, once were; memories of family trips came bubbling back up into our consciousnesses. Though we kept it to ourselves because some of us were born this way. As the parents conspicuously fled we could see them already preparing themselves to answer their children's questions about the family trip to the zoo that ended up being more informative than they intended.

'These problems didn't exist when the wall was still around,' said Old Coat.

'Didn't everyone have to have jobs?' Agna asked.

'Exactly,' he said.

We booed the old commie and threw bits of grass at him.

'We could protest in the city center,' Ellia suggested.

'No one would join us,' Leo said. 'And the cops would beat us.'

'The cops hate us, the officials hate us, and so does the public,' said Tabby.

Our existence helped unify the middle and upper class. We could tell we were all thinking the same thing: where could we go if no one will have us but us, when we have nothing to offer?

'Maybe not entirely; we do clean up the trash in the city,' Urs consoled us.

'Only the bottles,' Radolf corrected.

Which reminded Tabby, Matilda, and Otto they were scheduled to work their shift.

Leo stood up, too, after removing the hose around his arm. When he came back we thought he forgot his bag for bottles but he continued at his slow pace, occasionally stopping to stare pensively at this object or a crack in the sidewalk. And then he returned again still doing the same stuff.

‘What are you up to, Leo, looking for change?’ Urs asked.

‘Sort of,’ he replied.

‘Have you found anything yet?’

‘I’m trying to but it’s difficult to imagine.’

By this point others were up walking behind Leo, trying to find change.

‘I mean, how’s it going to look,’ Leo asked ‘what do they see that I can’t?’

Urs rose to join him. ‘Maybe they’ll build a whole play monkey bars and tire swings and stuff,’ he said, pointing to the abandoned playground.

‘Maybe, but how will we ever know?’

Like a nature tour we followed the path of the small park hoping to remember, too afraid to stop for too long, our arms crossed, trying to keep whatever might be inside from splitting off into the infinitesimal, the history of life.

Years and years back before we existed, what were the old hunting grounds for the gentry had been minimized to placate the need for housing as the population in Berlin multiplied under the orders of Friedrich Wilhelm II also called Friedrich the Great. Friedrich the Great had no interest in hunting—probably because he wasn’t great at it, so in order to maintain the mask of his moniker, he ordered for the land to be revamped into a large public park, the Große Tiergarten. This way he did something great so people would think he was altruistic and great. As for the rest of the endless amounts of acres he

sold it off as subdivided real estate to fatten the pockets of his fat pants even more so, much of it consisted of land north of the Spree. During the building, to be even more great, Friedrich the Great declared the park needed a counterpark, a little friend, commissioning the conservatory of a tiny plot across the river from the Große Tiergarten, naturally calling it the Kleiner Tiergarten. The little park went unseen and unappreciated, free to disguise itself and anyone else who wished to reside in its shaggy, over-grown world. And for years the Kleiner Tiergarten was left unkempt, allowed to grow on its own without the vigilance of zealous groundskeepers and pigs in suits behind desks.

We walked the garten feeling sorry for it until Ellia collapsed and became worldsick. We turned Ellia on her side so she wouldn't suffocate. People from the street walked by with wondering eyes, concerned we might be hurting her, not enough to stop.

When she finished convulsing, Urs picked her up and carried her back. We placed her in a blanket and spun her up in the cloth on her side to face away from the sky so she couldn't roll over and choke to death from it.

When the rest of us returned from the street we asked what happened to Ellia.

'It must be the Government Pigs,' Radolf howled.

'Maybe they got to the Polish,' said Otto.

'Next time we'll try the Turks.'

'She's much smaller. If she took the same amount she probably overdosed,'

Tabby told us.

'Leo got worldsick from the Turks, remember?' Zinnie said.

Leo did not remember.

'It must be the Government,' Old Coat agreed.

Zinnie suggested that a select number should each buy from different sellers.

We thought that was a great idea. We decided to finish off the stash that night, so the next day we could solve the mystery of who wanted us worldsick.

Otto, Zinnie, Urs, and Agna became team captains by volunteering to visit each seller. We wrote down the names of the dealers on ripped up cardboard and taped it to our jackets so we could remember who was who, like we were attendees of a last-minute, makeshift convention: Turks, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian. We separated into our factions and monitored the administrated amounts. After, we turned to face those outside of our new nationalities.

‘Would you like some borsch?’ Otto asked Zinnie, snickering.

‘Never!’ She yelled. ‘You Polish know nothing about borsch. You come to Ukraine and if we don’t kill you first, we show you how to make borsch.’

We laughed and waited and laughed and waited for something to happen, wondering if we would feel it first or see it upwell in someone else. We stared on; our attention vacillating in and out until we drifted into our separate spaces.

‘But where are we going to live?’ Tabby asked, breaking the silence.

‘Shush, one mystery at a time,’ Gozzo told her.

‘Right now we’re just trying to figure out how to survive, not live,’ said Radolf.

When some of us woke up, we went around to examine one another, prodding each one awake, hoping we were still there, then finding relief but still burdened by the mystery, knowing whole-heartedly that the experiment would have to continue.

The day or days went this way and that. Tabby asked if anyone planned on taking charge of where we should move next.

‘That’s not the more important issue,’ Radolf growled. ‘We still have five more days.’ We agreed.

‘It’s three days. Why can’t we do both things?’

‘Stop thinking about yourself,’ he told her.

She looked to the rest of us. We always sided with Radolf. ‘Fine then, I will figure it out myself.’ We watched Tabby storm off. She entered the city like a wine spill on the dress of a princess.

More of us got worldsick and still no closer to the mystery. We upped our dosage. We asked other users on local street corners what they knew about. The Polish told Radolf if he asked about the Government one more time they’d hurt him. He came back with purple eyes and one less tooth.

We administered our doses. Radolf asked for two, an extra one for the pain. He prepared the other while we lay spread across the weedy landscape breathing out of our mouths, taking the garten in as much as possible, carving the scene with our eyes into the tops of our heads.

No one noticed when Radolf began convulsing. We were still and quiet. Radolf shook around. He sent out waves in the air we were too numb to feel. His body continued that way. He shook about, stirring things up inside. He spewed like a feeble geyser while we struggled for ways to describe the expression the moon gave off. Radolf struggled for breath without knowing—or that’s how we chose to think of it. That his dying was more like waking up after a long nap that may as well have been a lifetime. Agna woke us up late at night to show us what happened.

‘He’s gone!’ ‘He left us!’ ‘He’s never gotten worldsick before!’ ‘They killed him!’

We didn’t have shovels so we zipped Radolf up in his sleeping bag. We put him in a cart. And we wheeled him out of the garten, trying to seem as casual as eight people wheeling a shopping cart can, through the lighted streets, to the Spree River. Like clumsy smugglers, we pushed him to the end of Krefelder Straße. Urs gave the final heave, ramping him and the cart off into the air until he splashed out into the colorless water. As the foam began to settle the red sleeping bag came bobbing up to the surface.

‘Typical Radolf,’ Gozzo laughed.

‘What should we do?’ Agna asked.

We grabbed bits of concrete from the degraded wall that once kept people from dumping trash. By the ledge we did our best to toss and hurl them on top in hopes of weighing him back down. But our aim was poor, or they didn’t weigh enough, and he eventually drifted too far down the Spree. On our way back we sprang for a bottle and passed it around. When we finished it we wrote messages to Radolf on scrap paper and put them inside.

“I’ll never forget the time you gave a tour of the garten to that Korean photographer.” Elise wrote.

“I remember when Agna found the guitar and it turned out you could play and you played it for us and continued to play it until all the strings snapped off and then you sold it because we needed the money.” Urs wrote

“Do you miss us?” Zinnie asked.

“Can you remember when you wrote ‘Free life advice’ on cardboard and made twenty Euros standing outside the park? And you never did it again because you said it wouldn’t be fair to give the same advice more than once.” Gozzo wrote.

“Will I ever win the lottery?” Old Coat had Zinnie write for him because he couldn’t keep his hand straight.

We buried the bottle where he died between the two bent elms. If only we could grow whole forests, bury them underground for the few who wished to live there; maybe that’s now where Radolf was.

The next day Tabby came back with a friend to collect a few of her belongings. She looked different. She wore capris and a white blouse too bright to look at so we kept our heads down. We didn’t tell her about Radolf because she didn’t want to think about us and we didn’t want to give her a reason to.

‘My sister is letting me stay with her if I promise to stop using. I hope you all can do the same and get cleaned up. If you’re ever interested come find me.’

We knew we never could because when she left the garden she faded in with the rest of them walking along the sidewalk.

Zinnie called dibs on her stash.

The Adler man reappeared the next day, again too early.

‘You must all leave,’ he said. ‘Go find some place else to do your drugs. I’ve told you the consequences. The police will enjoy it. You will not like it.’

‘You won’t like when I show you your heart,’ Otto yelled.

‘Is that a death threat?’ Adler asked.

‘It’s a figurative threat. We know you killed Radolf.’

‘You all have mush for brains. Don’t force me to get the police now, it will not be fun for you.’

‘You presume we know what that word means!’ Ellia said.

‘None of you people make sense.’

‘Don’t try to pretend,’ Urs yelled. ‘You stink of death. You’re lucky we don’t bury you right where you stand, pig.’

‘Fine, say goodbye, cause this will be...,’ he tried to yell. ‘This will be...’ he tried to yell over our grunting, but we oinked louder than he could threaten. We circled around him kicking up dirt and bits of grass, oinking as loud as we could. We thought Radolf would be proud.

Adler shook his head all the way back to Stron Straße. His brown trench coat flapped madly in the wind, folding into itself. When he reached the street he disappeared. We hated him for this ability and all the others along the street who had it too. They passed like schools of trout in a river, their silver backs glinting in the sun, in the same way the water’s surface shines, both receiving the light and reflecting it back while we stood out like mud crabs on a white sandy beach.

We burned in these feelings, so we doped again with no other choice but to continue the mystery for Radolf even though we knew we’d never understand who or where the worldsick came from. Why us? We didn’t make the Kleiner Teirgarten this way: overgrown and rundown; a place unused and accepting, where no one had to pretend to ignore us, smelling our smells, even if we did stink, with upturned noses. Here we breathed normally and tried to enjoy the time while it lasted. With nothing left to do,

we waited there in the garten for the slush in our veins to flow through until we were forever ago, not our bodies, but our minds, rendered into a Neolithic state.

That evening we sat in rows watching the glowing tangerine sun fall from the sky, in and out of the trees, doing our best to enjoy the dying moment. Zinnie ran around throwing her hands up, as if in an attempt to juggle it. 'Not yet, not yet!' she yelled. We laughed in fear and cried in amusement, no longer able to keep which one straight; we became dizzy, incapable of maintaining a sense of where the earth had turned so quickly, except that it had grown dark and had been for some time.

We awoke the next day earlier than ever to stomach pains, as if something were trying to get in. So we dreamt harder. When we could no longer stand it we opened our eyes to everything covered in gold light. 'This is what it must be like to be a dictator,' Gozzo thought out loud.

The officer laughed, 'You are not in control of anything.'

We began to rise, scrambling for our belongings as they ushered us with batons to the gray street. Urs swung around like a grizzly bear in the dark. Old Coat put a hand against him, yelling his name to bring him back. The polezei brought them both down with their heavy batons. We ran to help our colleagues. They jabbed and thumped us with a swift ease. Soon they put us all back to the place where the day began. They forced us to crawl through the dirt with nothing for the street.

People with orange vests and boots infiltrated the garten taking our pillows and blankets and radios too cheap to sell and carts and signs and empty bottles to a garbage truck. The polezei kicked us, moving us along like lazy cattle. When our hands touched concrete they told us to stand so they could chase us into various corners of the city, a

few going there and here. Some of us turned looking for one another trying to memorize the streets we went down or the landmarks we passed, hoping we could keep it all in, all the while doing our best to avoid a painful whack. We ran down alleyways, over bridges, and across oncoming traffic until we were no longer followed.

I turned out of an alley back to the busy street. The traffic of pedestrians parted around me like upturned magnets. A bottle sat at the top of a full trashcan on the corner. I put it in my coat and continued the search for more, taking it as a good sign.

The Company We Keep

They called it the lost decade, but it went on for even longer until it doubled. The media and Japanese government continued to call it the lost decade anyway because after ten years of economic fallout who was still counting? Many still waited though, on all sides of the class system, for the longest ten years of their life to be over. Some looked for the signs of recovery each time they sat down in front of their televisions and others, like the woman, rummaged for clues in the newspaper she picked off the ground just before stuffing it into her sleeping bag for insulation.

If we are products of our environment then the woman was hardening like concrete with almost nothing left to differentiate her from the many streets throughout downtown Tokyo. While sleeping in the doorway to the Izumi Garden Tower a businesswoman stepped on her one morning without apology. *Why should people consider the sidewalk they stroll on?* It hurt less than the last time and this scared the woman. She used to feel embarrassed and enraged. The woman needed to leave because she was not willing to trade her soul for more life. Did she not deserve the basic comforts like everyone else because at 57 she was no longer desirable for marriage? No, that was not a fair reason. For the second time in her life she decided to give herself to a man, but this time without him knowing.

The man walked by the woman every day to and from work. She had followed him home, of course, like she did with many different men while conducting her search months ago. This man carried a black leather briefcase and a solemn smile; walked at a brisk pace; wore finely tailored black or gray suits, and had kind eyes open to the world

just enough to reach his destination. He was perfect in every way. He worked five days a week until six o'clock, often traveled on the weekends, and saw the occasional woman, but rarely at his home. He lived alone in a modest one-story house just outside of downtown Tokyo. He looked like the kind of man who would never notice a thing, so long as she remained careful.

The woman managed to save most of the money she peddled by eating one meal a day for two weeks. With it she bought shampoo and soap and a clean outfit that did not smell from a consignment shop. She went to the McDonalds and bought a Juicy Chicken. After, she entered their bathroom and locked the door. She placed her old towel down in front of the sink to avoid making a mess and took off her clothes. In the mirror she appraised the bruises and wrinkles surrounding her body. She ran her hands across them. She had become a diverse landscape of sulking hills, cracked deserts, muddy swamps, and tangled forests, like an emaciated world all compressed together.

Running the faucet until it went hot, she craned her neck to fit her head under the warm water and torqued her body left and right to soak her long black hair. She rubbed it full of lavender shampoo and cherry blossom conditioner, excited by the thought of what the combination might smell like. After rinsing she leaned over the sink and splashed water all over her front. Black water beads dripped down her body and disappeared into the towel. With her hands behind her back she turned and tried the same method, flicking water upwards. She looked like a penguin trying to scratch its back. She laughed at this image and at her silly method. Cupping water and lightly tossing it over her backside worked much better. She took the bar of soap and lathered her body until she was covered in a layer of white film. She shaved under her arms, over her legs, and around

her pubic region, which required all three razors. She rinsed herself, dried off with the new towel, changed into her new outfit, and looked in the mirror. The woman moved forwards, backwards, and spun around, investigating the pruned topography of her body, past the new wrinkles and concaved cheeks, she recognized this person, a person in her life who had been away for a long time. Finally, after two years, she didn't mind looking back.

Three loud knocks rapped against the door.

'Hello. Ms.?'

'One minute please.' Quickly she wiped the towel around the sink and along the floor.

'This is the manager. Our facilities are for customers. They are not motels.

Unlock this door please.'

She took her old clothes and towels and toiletries and stuffed them into the trash. She unlocked the latch and opened up the door to a small man, smaller than she. He wore a red button up with combed over hair that she could see through with an embarrassing ease.

'Oh, excuse me, Ms. I was told by the staff that a... a homeless woman wandered in.'

'I can assure you, sir, that I am not without a home.'

'Yes, yes, I can see. My sincerest apologies.' He bowed slightly and looked up.

'Why is your hair wet?' he asked, pointing like a child.

'One of *your* ketchup packets exploded into my hair.'

'I see. I am sorry for that too. Here,' he handed her a coupon.

‘How kind. You didn’t have to.’

‘You smell like a garden, like spring,’ the manager said to her. ‘What is your name?’

‘Kasumi,’ she said instinctively, as if it were a word she had never stopped using.

‘That makes sense: a flower who smells like flowers. I hope to see you again, Kasumi.’ The manager bowed slightly.

‘Thank you,’ she said smiling. It didn’t matter that he was small and bald. Even at fifty-seven Kasumi hadn’t lost it all.

The man she had followed home numerous times lived in Hiroo, a district of Shibuya. From downtown the trip on the Ginza and Hibiya lines took only thirty-minutes. He was unobservant, but did not feel a need to occupy himself with a mobile phone or a newspaper. He wore an inscrutable face: solemn and unengaged. She estimated his age to be about 38 and found him to be discreetly handsome due to his reserved, shy nature; a person you would not turn your head to in a restaurant or on the street, not until someone introduced you to him and you really looked at him and noticed the complexity in his eyes, a character deeply raveled.

She followed him out of the train car and up the stairs to Hiroo. Such a strange place for a Japanese man to live on his own she often thought. Hiroo was one of the few districts where you could do all your shopping. It was very clean and filled with international restaurants and chain cafes and Nordic embassies and therefore replete with affluent European and American families. Arisugawa Park situated itself as the center of

the district with many walking paths, a soccer field and a baseball field, and an artificial waterfall that poured into a pond filled with koi fish and happy ducks.

While following him she did her best to take all this in. She needed to construct a memory of all the senses Hiroo stimulated in its unique way. Whenever she felt enclosed or trapped she could return back to these: its smell, like that of potent laundry detergent and new shoes; the sounds of many children; and all the happy westerners carrying around iced coffees.

When she entered his home she would stay there. Hiroo was not a place where one could enter and exit a home continuously without being observed by neighbors. It was better to have the comforts of one small place indoors than the entirety of the city outside. Tokyo had its own nature, she learned, not just rats and pigeons, a whole bitter ecosystem. Even though it was only the summer she could not last another winter. The cold was not her concern. She could not stand getting her food, or clothing, or sleeping mat stolen and then having her pilfered belongings offered to her for something she no longer had a desire to give. It was not a place for women and timid men. She did not deserve that kind of life and if the man knew her story maybe he might give her shelter anyway. Although challenging his empathy was not a risk she was willing to take, the thought gave her moral assurance.

She followed him clumsily in a walk-run motion while he glided across the sidewalk through the crowds, taking long, precise steps. Like a mechanical object, she thought, like scissors. He didn't run into or brush against a single person. She could tell he was methodical. He did not care how others saw him—he did not look at himself in shop windows, like many of the men she'd followed—rather, he focused on how

efficiently he operated amongst them. The point A to the point B, not the in-between, which is exactly where she intended to hide.

It was a small, beige, modest, one-story house that sat above a garage with a businessman-black BMW he seldom drove. The house had a simplistic modern design: boxy with a slanted metal roof, a wide front window, an overhanging porch, and a matching natural wood colored front door that stood alongside the garage—the houses were all made in similar design and yet no less devoid of their artistry. He walked in and—as he always did—left the front door unlocked, like many residents in the area.

She stood across the street doing her best to wait inconspicuously. She put her hand up to her head, moved her mouth, and paced around. She had three more hours until he readied himself for bed. She strolled around the neighborhood, nodding to people walking their small dogs, pushing strollers, powerwalking in polyester, jogging with iPods and bouncing ponytails. They often waved.

She walked until she almost understood this walking culture. There was nothing they needed and no place better to go so they walked in a circle in order stay inside the constant beauty and cleanliness. She walked until she wanted a polyester zip-up and pants. She walked until her sandals made her feet blister; she walked until she was desperate enough to spend her last two hundred yen on a small coffee. Some of the people she saw earlier later came in. They waved and she waved back.

At 10:30 she returned to the house. Its lights were off. The others adjacent were also quiet and dark. She surveyed the empty street and crossed. Where would she hide when she entered? She relied on nothing more than her intuition and the lightness of her

small frame. Perhaps a cupboard or shelf would suit her well. How much space did a single man need?

Her heart raced as she got closer to the door. She took deep breaths to try and quiet it. He won't notice a thing, she reassured the nervous organ. She took off her sandals. The knob and the door opened with a quiet ease. The home smelled like a drycleaners. She ascended the carpeted stairs slowly without a sound. She paused four times, every three steps to listen. At the top she peeked around the wall to observe the dark stillness in the house. The kitchen sat to the left, the dining room in front of the kitchen, the living room slightly to the right behind her, behind that what looked to be an office, and the bedroom and bathroom to the far right in the back of the house.

She tiptoed with a fear of every step. Down the hall the bedroom door was thankfully shut. For what reason she did not know. It was so dark, it seemed to deflect the light trying to shine in. Why contain yourself more than necessary? To keep out the outside world is one thing; why the need to hide even further? Some people cannot sleep if the room is light enough to see their own hand held in front of them. She wondered what part of himself he wished to avoid.

She stood there peering about, only moving her neck. 'Where could I fit?' she whispered to the house. She checked the cupboards in the kitchen, top and bottom. Surprisingly they were filled with plates and pans and other cooking accessories like a toaster and coffee grinder and a blender—she despised these devices, their noise drove her crazy. She considered clearing space in the bottom shelf, but that was a stupid idea because he would likely use these devices. She checked the kitchen closet, it was filled with cans; she checked the top shelves, some empty although too flimsy; she desperately

checked the hall closest by the bedroom, but it contained numerous, sweet smelling towels of various sizes; she even looked behind the sofa—a stupid idea. She needed to think more clearly. Where could she find a place to live in this house?

‘Please,’ she prayed. ‘Please let me stay. I am not a monster.’

“If you’ve exhausted all your options, then you must find another vantage from which to see them,” her father often told her as a child. To avoid causing a noise she closed her eyes and envisioned looking through the house. The only place sturdy enough that seemed unused or ignored were the shelves in the office. In the faint light she could see the collection of dust on the photographs and on the few books in his collection. She checked in the sliding bottom closet once more. There were the same stacks of table clothes tightly folded in between. Desperate she took them out, lay on her back and scooted herself over to it. She exhaled the air in her lungs and tried to squeeze herself in. Her bottom half slid in, but her chest could not fit. She shimmied and wiggled, during which she accidentally kicked the inside wall with a loud “thud!”

She stopped breathing. What a humiliating position to be caught in. *Please excuse me, sir, I was only trying to... to what? Fit myself into your house?* She dared not make a move. She lay there crying silently. On her first night in the streets of Tokyo she experienced a similar rejection, but in the opposite way, everything was too large and too open. She wandered around for the entire night unable to trust the alleyways and the benches and the bridges and the stoops. It wasn’t trust that helped her sleep through the following night, rather desperation and she was sick of feeling that way. On the floor she remained looking up into the moonlight shining through the house. Above the shelves between, what she thought was a decorative bamboo fixture, moonlight passed through,

revealing an even gap. She stood up and pulled carefully underneath. Out swung a door revealing an empty shelf. He must have converted a traditional ceiling closet into a bookshelf. She pulled on the other side, it opened as well out from the middle. ‘Thank you,’ she whispered to the house. ‘I promise to take good care of you.’

She placed the tablecloths back into the bottom closet; keeping one for herself she climbed the sturdy shelves without a squeak or a creak. With one leg up she swung herself in. Her body fit easily and comfortably in the ceiling closet. Pulling the doors shut she lay in the small space happily because for the first time in three years, she had complete darkness to sleep in. She had her own space.

She woke up to the sound of a blender. So that’s what he eats after his run. Likely a smoothie, she guessed. She heard him wash it and then put the device back in the cupboard. His steps receded into the bedroom and the shower ran and nothing else, no singing or humming, of the sort. After about thirty minutes he left the house, which would make the time about 8:20. She waited in case he forgot anything, even though he was not that type of man.

She emerged from the ceiling closet after counting to five hundred. Now with the house to herself she meandered about freely while snacking on a fresh nashi pear she found in the organized refrigerator—since there were more of those than the momo peaches or the fuji apples. The last time she had a nashi she did so knowing it would be a long time until she would again. She ate that one while stepping out of her foreclosed home in Aoyama, over two years ago, trying her best to think only about its sweet, juicy flavor and nothing else. Like that day, she ate this one slowly. Her body softened to a

comfort of life's simple pleasures. She felt rinsed like how she imagined an afternoon spent at the spa.

She ate the core. She disposed of the small stem in the trashcan under the sink. Not a crumb existed on his counters and no small kitchen appliances were left out. The sink wiped clean and dry. Wherever he goes, he erases it.

She found herself in his bedroom. His bed looked as if a soldier had made it, the sheets tightly tucked without a crease-fold left. She dared not to lie on top of it. The bathroom was also left spotless. The only water droplets that remained were against the inside of the shower's glass walls.

She touched nothing other than the refrigerator, from where she pulled out a shiozuke pickle. It dripped onto the floor, which she promptly wiped up with the small kitchen towel. She placed it back in the perfect position it had been left in. If she is going to live here, she thought, she would also have to erase herself as she went—she must be more careful. She sniffed the towel. It did not smell like pickles.

She grabbed a rubber band from a kitchen drawer and put her hair up into a tight bun to prevent errant hairs from falling out. The sofa called to her, so she sat down with a sigh and turned on the television. She made note of the channel it had been left on: NHK news. A man named Tomohiro Katō crashed a truck into an electronics store and then stabbed twelve people with a dagger. He killed four and injured eight. It occurred late yesterday in Chiyoda. Chiyoda is far enough from downtown that his work would continue for the day. Still she feared an early arrival home.

She took a handful of cashews and carried them to the closet. She studied the dusty photos on the shelves in his office. A man in a gray suit and a woman in a green

dress stood at what looked to be a wedding. The man looked like the older version of the one who lived here. Another appeared to be the man as a young boy with his sister or a cousin. Another showed him with his mother and father at his graduation from university. The last one she found empty. Why would someone keep out an empty picture frame, especially someone who is so neat and tidy?

If she was going to live here permanently then she should get to know the man who lived in the house, she rationalized, so she riffled through his desk drawers. She found his electric bill. Mr. Mamoru Oshiro. Not the easiest name to shorten. She continued to look through Mamoru's desk. The bottom left drawer she found locked. A man that does not lock his home but does his desk? This is a man, she thought, with secrets even he doesn't want to find. Therefore the key must be kept in the house. She decided to look for it in the coming days. She wondered if the mystery of the empty frame was buried in that drawer. Once a larger life existed in this home, now reduced to the confines of a single drawer.

She prudently went to her space early that evening. Mamoru arrived at his normal hour. He stayed home for the remainder of the day. By the early evening her stomach began to growl. Luckily the television, discussing the stock market, stayed on through the evening while Mamoru made dinner and readied himself for bed. He did not seem to have many hobbies. He ran and he had his job at the Mori Tower. Perhaps he was a banker of sorts or a lawyer or a stock investor. He dressed like those types of people and they seemed to live in their jobs.

When he went to bed she did not dare get out or move. She simply stayed there and tried her best to also go to sleep. Her new home was cool and comfortable and safe. This is what she reminded herself of over and over as the wood pushed against the ridges of her bony spine until sleep finally overcame the discomfort. She had nothing to complain about.

In the middle of the night the man got up and turned on the light in the office. She feared he had discovered her somehow. She heard sounds of drawers opening and the keyboard clicking rapidly. In between intervals he exhaled loudly as if he were wearing a corset. He was a man who did not have a quiet mind, she thought, how sad. They say your emotion can be felt by those around you. She did her best to meditate on the thought of placing a hand on his shoulder or simply sitting next to him smiling while he composed his document the way a lonely artist can be comforted by the presence of a muse. When he sighed, she sighed for him—for whatever woke him up in the night and made him sigh. He continued this cycle at his desk for an hour or two before going back to sleep.

The sound of the blender woke her once more. He went through his morning routine and left for work. She made herself a rice bowl with vegetables and an egg omelet. Before she ate she cleaned, dried, and put the dishes away and then cleaned and dried the sink. She sat down at the dining room table to eat her breakfast. For the first time she felt like a completely normal person again, before her husband died and revealed an empty savings account that he spent on secretaries and vacations. But she chose not to think of that other life. She busied herself by vacuuming the carpet, mopping the floors, and dusting the house. If the picture frames truly went unnoticed then she would dust

them too. Someone should at least pay them attention. Once again the empty frame distracted her. Perhaps an unrequited love ending in divorce or a deceased friend or lover once filled the frame?

She smelled the smell under her arms, signaling a much-needed shower. She applied his “for men” shampoo and his “for men” conditioner and his “for men” soap. Why do some people need to remind themselves of such things? As if ones manhood were so delicate it could be taken away with a single brush of lavender soap. When she finished she used his already wet towel and wiped around the outside of the shower. For as long as she lived here, the woman decided, she would not underappreciate the comforts of the everyday. She smelled herself and she had to admit, it gave off a very manly aroma.

After, she watched television until five o’clock. They spoke mostly about the Beijing Olympics and the concern for the safety of the tourists in August. ‘It’s conjecture to make news,’ she said to the emptiness of the house. Then she made herself an early dinner and when finished went to the closet for the rest of the evening where she occupied herself, again, with thoughts of Mamoru, his secret drawer, and his empty frame. Did the photo live in there? Who else was tucked away in this home of his? She felt uncomfortable not quite knowing the man she shared a home with.

When he returned she did her best to observe him, trying her best to hear his past in the movements he made. When he cooked there was little clanging. Things were grabbed and set down with purpose and focus. He did not wear shoes, so his feet glided against the wooden floor with little strain, as if to avoid the sound of his own footsteps. Even when he cooked or showered the television remained on. It was the first and last

thing he touched when he entered and before going to bed, likely to drown out the house's silent voice. Still, they spoke about the Olympics and the safety of the tourists.

'It's propaganda to make news,' she heard him say. She smiled at how well they got along.

After two weeks she had grown used to the blender the way one stops hearing the alarm clock as a noise, rather something she merely reacted to, which created a schedule they shared. She also began to enjoy his late night intrusions in the office room; his presence comforted her along with the soft clicking sound of the keys.

She kept a tidy house. Not only did she scrupulously clean up after herself, but she vacuumed, dusted, scrubbed, and wiped. It established an intimacy to know and understand every crevice. The house no longer scared her and she began to feel equally apart of it. In the mornings she collected her thoughts and organized her day. When he left for the day she began hers. She worked out by doing a calisthenics routine she created, showered, ate breakfast, and performed the daily cleaning of the house during which she searched for the key to Mamoru's past, watched television, then sat on floor by the front window to receive her outdoors time, which she learned on the television is essential for a sound mind, and then she made herself dinner. Her portions were always small and she used whatever Mamoru stocked the most during that week. By 5:45 she tucked herself away in her space for the rest of the evening. On weekends she knew she had the place to herself if she heard the sounds of a zipper, which meant he packed a suitcase. When he stayed home at times he would answer a call from a woman named

Kin and sometimes he'd visit her, other times he said he was busy and spent the evenings watching the news.

She dared not to go outside. She missed nature, but she enjoyed daily fresh food, warm showers, and a home more. She would rather be trapped like an animal than live like one again. She watched the green summer days pass. In August Japan won nine gold medals, fifteen in total; Tsutomu Miyazaki was hung for the murders he committed years ago; Eri Kawai, the beautiful singer died; and Yasuo Fukuda announced his resignation.

On a Wednesday, while getting her nature time in the warm sun through the window, she noticed a piece of furniture left on the end of a neighbor's driveway across the street. A long mahogany seat with drawers underneath, but overtop it had a thick blue cushion. The sight of it reminded the woman of her aching back and tight shoulders and sore hips. Climbing the shelves was difficult enough, however the long hours inside the closet made her body feel kinked and rearranged.

She sat there and deliberated the consequences of both decisions. It was 12:00. The neighborhood was desolate. If she had the cushion she would finally feel like a person with a real room. She surveyed both ends of the street. It was still and quiet. She walked down and poked her head out to check once more. It took only three steps before the reinstatement to the world permeated her every pore. She shivered in the warm sun. The sense of being touched by so much overwhelmed her. The mild breeze, the grass between her toes, the rays of sun, the sight of an extensive world un-obscured by a layer of glass, and the odors and sounds Tokyo emanated. To see, to hear, to smell, to taste, all in that moment, were, for her, to feel.

A runner in a pink sports bra waved hello. ‘Ohayou gozaimasu,’ she reciprocated. And a good morning it might remain if she could manage to collect herself in time to not draw any more attention. As if on her afternoon walk, she pretended to discover the piece of furniture. While feigning to further inspect the sun worn object, she surveyed her surroundings once more. Then she grabbed the cushion, folded it in half and hurried back inside with all the conviction and purpose in the world. She locked the door and ran upstairs to the living room window. No one came out of his or her house; no one seemed to notice a thing. Her new bed fit perfectly in her space, in her room.

The new comforts of her room allowed her to enjoy other things she had never found pleasure in. When Mamoru worked on the weekends in his office he played Beethoven, or Bach, or Debussy, or Chopin, or Schubert. She knew their names because he spoke to them while he put the records on the stereo. She always felt the affinity many big business men had for such music to be an affectation. For Moshi (as she sometimes called him) it was a love affair. ‘Remember this one?’ he’d ask, as if to the house or to some inner part of himself, and ‘this one will do perfectly,’ he’d say playing Arabesque No.1. And it soon was. She never knew a single instrument could have such emotional range. He’d hum loudly and take breaks moving across the large office, sidestepping about the floor. In the darkness of her room she didn’t have to close her eyes to imagine them dancing. They’d smile and laugh at the irregularity of their situation, a friendship between an old woman and a rich, unsociable younger man. When Mamoru watched television she listened with him, when he ate she snacked on the almonds or the cashews she stored, when he slept she slept too.

When Mamoru left in the mornings she now listened to the records on her own while cleaning or making a meal. Or she'd lie on the long leather couch in the office staring off into the ceiling, projecting images of conversations they'd have. *Yes, Mozart's Violin Sonata No. 32 is best for reading, and don't you find Schubert's Elens Gesang is wonderful to think to. Schuman's piano concertos are unrivaled—yes, except for perhaps Mozart, no, you're right, I forgot about his Concerto No. 5. Yes, I'll certainly have more wine, thank you.* Except they could only converse through the past, the cleaning she did—her presence indented into the house and whatever lay in that drawer of his. She would keep it a secret because good relationships are built on trust.

It wasn't until Sunday that she noticed a change in routine. She saw the beginnings of fall as the leaves began to turn but it had nothing to do with that. The absence of something made its way into her dark room. She listened, trying to figure out what was missing. Mamoru read in the office, likely because he walked in and the computer had not turned on, and the television ran like it usually did throughout the house. His movements today were slow and relaxed, unaccompanied by the usual grunts and sighs. He was not cleaning! That's it, she realized. She couldn't have been happier to play her part, but she laughed at how typical of a man this was; once you take care of them they forget they ever cared for themselves. Her heart smiled knowing somewhere in his subconsciousness (the thought of thoughts) he thought of her.

In the following weeks Mamoru continued to clean up after himself but he no longer vacuumed, dusted, or shined the wooden furniture. Their house remained clean so he never thought to clean it. He went about his Sundays with room for other matters to

occupy his mind. If she could clear more of these distractions perhaps it might allow space for him to open up his character more fully to her.

In early December, on a Sunday, Mamoru invited Kin over for the first time. He made her a salad, grilled chicken, and mashed potatoes. ‘All the way from Idaho, U.S.A.’ he told her. ‘It’s a recipe from a business partner’s wife.’ Kin said she did not like them, too much sour cream and cheese. ‘The chicken is terrific though.’

She liked potatoes. She salivated to the thought of trying them tomorrow. If she sat across that table, she would ask him if he had ever been to Idaho and what it was like. She’d ask about what other American dishes he’d tried and enjoyed. She’d tell him she’s never been but has always wanted to go and suggest that they make cheeseburgers together some night.

‘The last time I was in America I met a client in New York. They’re looking to invest again, bring more commerce. The asset price bubble is deflating and people are taking note overseas.’ She had no idea Kin was so intelligent. And she could tell by the soft yet lucid tone of Kin’s voice she was very pretty. Throughout the evening she spoke a great deal with quick, short inquires here and there from Mamoru. He was diffident but seemed to enjoy the sound of such a beautiful voice from an actual person, the woman could tell because it was the first time he hadn’t turned on the television. He spoke little of himself. And she didn’t seem to notice or pay mind to how much she spoke, which was exactly the type of person who stepped on the sidewalk without ever looking down.

On a Wednesday in October she forgot to put a record away. She found Beethoven’s Sonatas accompanied her nature time best. If she closed her eyes and

focused on the elegiac melodies, the window melted away, she could feel the fall breeze in her hair, and hear the dried leaves scatter across the sidewalks around her. It prevented her from getting distracted by how silly or cliché saying something like *I can feel the wind in my hair* sounded.

When Moshi came home he went straight to his office as if he sensed it. ‘I listened to Beethoven’s 7th last evening, not his Piano Sonatas. Heello!?’ Mamoru said loudly. He walked all through the house; she could hear him crashing about. He checked downstairs; he opened closet doors, the kitchen pantry, cupboards, and searched his room. ‘Hello!?’ he yelled continuously.

She hated herself for the fear she caused him. She made sure not to leave a record out again any time soon; their relationship was not that far along yet.

‘For a while now,’ Mamoru explained to Kin, ‘I’ve been losing my mind.’

She sat on her back listening in.

‘Food is going missing in this house,’ Mamoru said and he told Kin about the record incident two weeks ago.

She stopped chewing on her almonds.

‘It’s probably because you’re busy and don’t notice how much you’re eating,’ Kin reassured him.

She shook her head with clinched eyes concurring with Kin’s theory, hoping a supporting opinion would convince him.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Maybe you’re sleep eating,’ Kin suggested.

‘...’

Yes! Or sleep eating. What a stupid suggestion, but she did her best to agree.

‘I am not sleep-eating, there is never a mess in the morning.’

‘Then I guess your house is haunted,’ Kin told him.

‘You’re right, I must be losing my mind.’

She heard Kin kiss him over and over. ‘There, there, it will be okay,’ Kin cooed.

‘I’ll keep you safe from the food monster.’

If anyone was a monster it was the woman who didn’t bother to know Mamoru.

When he left for work the next day she heard him double check the locks. He performed the same action when he returned and then went to each window and checked their locks as well while muttering. ‘Who’s here when I am not? Do I have the world’s smartest mice living in here, or a hungry home?’

She cut back on her meals, nibbling slowly to the pleasure of taste rather than the pleasure of a sated stomach. Even after six months, the sweet sensation of fresh fruit still mystified her. This seemed to work. He eventually stopped complaining about the state of his mind and began to speak to the house instead. ‘It’s so nice to be back,’ he said after returning home from work. She could feel the cold December breeze rush into the house. ‘Work was crazy like always.’ She thought Kin was with him or he was on the phone, but no one was there. Mamoru woke up on a Saturday, ran, blended fruit, the usual. Except when he showered he hummed so loudly she thought he was crying or yelling at first. The noises lacked harmony and rhythm but she shortly realized it to be Mozart’s Concerto No. 3. After, he walked immediately out of the shower and turned it on without even dressing himself, she heard his wet pats against the floor. When he left for lunch she

emerged to relieve herself, to eat, and to clean up the water puddles he left in the bathroom and on the floor. 'He'll stain the floors,' she scoffed. This disregard became more and more frequent. The next week he started leaving crumbs on the table from the toast he made. And in January she woke in the night without the sounds of tapping keys. Mamoru now to slept through the night. She felt that her presence, though a haunted one, he enjoyed, because, whether Mamoru knew it or not, he was speaking back to it.

She had forgotten about the key until she discovered it. She focused intensely on leaving such a small presence that she forgot about the drawer of his past. Like Mamoru she now saw the pictures but did not see them. She saw fall turn to winter and she saw that the economy was on the incline and that Mamoru became less anxious as a result.

While shining his desk, her cleaning spray fell underneath and it was there that she found the key screwed into the bottom drawer. Inside the drawer was a box of photographs. They were of him and his wife at their wedding, with a new car, celebrating New Years, on exotic beaches, and hiking through beautiful forests. She found a crumpled photo that she assumed belonged to the empty photograph. It was of Moshi and his wife holding a baby boy. She could not find any others of the child in its later life and none of the woman.

Unable to put the photo away she found herself locking the drawer and receding into her room for the rest of the day even though it was only four o'clock. Though she never lost a child per se, she did have two miscarriages before she and Hishahi decided to stop trying, which eventually permeated the rest of their relationship up until his drowning while snorkeling on a "business" trip. She understood Mamoru's actions and

felt ashamed for raiding his privacy, yet she found the photo beautiful and decided to keep it by her bed. The three of them looked too happy to be kept in a shoebox.

Now things were on the up and up, as she knew already because the television had told her earlier that day. In March, just before spring, it spoke on full volume while Mamoru made dinner and took calls all evening from business partners about the improvement of the economy. The old one had filtered her out, removing all of her possessions and eventually even her home. Perhaps she could find a job again, she considered blithely.

‘Yes, yes,’ he told them, ‘thank you, maybe I will finally take my vacation days,’ he said without excitement. ‘Thank you Mr. So-and-so, you too,’ the conversations went. ‘Twenty-fourteen will be a great year,’ he told the house after each call.

Though it wasn’t customary to organize one’s own party, she felt this year there was something worth celebrating. Though a year older, she looked three years younger in the mirror. Her skin regained elasticity, she had color again, and her body no longer ached. Winter had come and she happily watched it recede from inside the house, being replaced by a flowering month of May. Tarō Asō had been elected by the diet as the new Prime Minister and she believed things would change for the better in Japan. Today she didn’t have to focus and pretend to smell the flowers blooming, because the smell of life was everywhere.

She spent the day making a small strawberry shortcake—everything from scratch. By four o’clock she finished baking. After spreading the icing and arranging the sliced

strawberries, she placed a small candle from the coffee table in the middle of her cake. She closed the blinds and turned off the lights. She wished for nothing other than to keep the life she already had.

‘Where is that smell coming from?’ He called to the house when he returned home. She heard him walking through the house sniffing about like a bloodhound. The oven creaked open. She cleaned it thoroughly. ‘Am I imagining this scent, or have I forgotten how sweet you smell?’

She blushed, feeling acknowledged and flattered.

She decided to leave *Debussy: Preludes for Piano* for him to see. On a Sunday morning, when Mamoru returned from a business trip he visited the office room first. ‘This will do just fine for today. What a perfect record for this cool spring day. I don’t even have to choose.’ She breathed out a quiet deep breath, relieved that he appreciated her gesture. She took the liberty to do this every so often and Mamoru seemed to enjoy it. But he still could not stop with the television. It ran even when he worked in the office while playing the records. He needed to confront his past. He had made progress, they had, and she knew him well enough to know that he was ready. For him to know that she knew and it was okay.

On Friday in late May she put the photograph of Mamoru with his wife and child out on the shelf below her. He did not notice it on the shelf that evening. Not until Saturday afternoon. He walked over to the shelf and picked it up. She could hear his shallow breathing, hiccupping as he inhaled: huh-huh-huh-huuuuh like an instrument

conducted by Beethoven's 5th. The picture fell from his hands and shattered across the floor.

Except Mamoru put on Beethoven's Piano Sonatas instead and lay down in the leather office sofa drowning out his crying to the pour of fluttering keys. If Beethoven had intended to tell a story with his Piano Sonatas No. 5 it was Mamoru's, she believed; a story about a man who wished to exist without ever having to live another day in the world again. She lay there in disgust with herself and cried along with him, to the rhythm of his past with her own.

She did not clean up the glass.

On Monday, when Mamoru got to his office, he did not begin work. He sat in his desk chair thinking about the live camera feed he set up weeks ago that he had yet to watch. The purchase had been an impulsive decision, something he was not prone to. Watching required the time of his company and, like always, he had plenty of work to do. Also, to watch and see nothing meant his mind was slipping. It meant his buried past had returned and he was being punished for moving on. He had received a raise. Mr. Hiro said his work was exceptional. Why complicate life with existential and celestial matters? Maybe he *should* go on vacation. He remembered—how could he not? That's what counted, so why must he confront losing his family again, two-years later? He slammed his fist on the table, yelling nothing.

Mamoru took out his phone to watch the video. His skin crawled in reaction to what the cameras showed him. He preferred if he had been losing his mind. He watched a small woman walk out of his office room and into his living room. He watched her

exercise, he watched her shower, and she watched her make breakfast with his food in his kitchen. He spent the first two hours of his day watching this woman go about hers in his home as if she lived there, which, he realized, she did. Mamoru dialed the police. They answered. ‘Sorry,’ he said and immediately hung up. Should he confront her himself? What would he say? What could he say? He watched her look out the living room window. He continued to watch her, now interested to see how long she would sit there for. She turned on the television and made a small lunch. She cleaned up after herself with care and eloquence—completely unlike a frightened mouse or insect—like she belonged. He watched her for the remainder of the day. He didn’t want to tell the police but he didn’t want to go home to a stranger. Or what do you call someone who knows everything about you and you know nothing? An invader, a voyeur, a roommate, a partner, it was actually not unlike his first marriage. But that was over and he wanted none of those things.

When Mamoru returned home he went immediately to the office. His felt his whole body pulse. ‘You cannot stay her any longer. I want you out of my house.’

‘...’

‘What is your name?’

‘...’

‘I will allow you the decency to leave without being forced to encounter me. When I leave I expect you to pack up without any of my belongings and never come back. I will call the cops if you do not.’

He went to the Starbucks on 3-Chome. His hands trembled. He watched from the window, hoping to spot her, to interrogate her on neutral ground. He owed her that much

after all she knew about him. But he could find no one who looked homeless, which made sense. When he returned she was gone. He sat in his office chair and stared at the shelves. The wood shined gracefully in the low sunlight shining through. He ran his finger across the spotless wood. Not a speck of dust. Not only did he have a secret roommate but a secret maid. Mamoru opened the ceiling closet. There was a cushion and one of his ex-wife's table clothes. Something caught his eye in the light, the crumpled photo of him with his wife Asuka and his son Ichirou. On the back she wrote her name, Kasumi. He put it back on her bed and shut the doors.

The house felt hollow. Throughout the evening Mamoru found himself going back to the closet, opening it, staring in, and then closing the doors once more. He tried to sleep and finally gave up. His house had not been haunted and he was not going crazy. A desperate person had lived with him and nothing more. He got out of bed and went back to the closet, bringing a flashlight with him. He climbed the shelves into the small space and lay down, shutting the doors behind him as best he could. It's not that he felt a presence, it's that he now realized that he had felt someone all along and now no longer did. He inhaled the smell of his shampoo mixed with the musty and indescribable aroma of her body, finding it not at all unpleasant. On his back he spent the night turning his flashlight on and off to the picture of his family, taking deep breaths as if to possess the thick scent more. All he hoped for was to sleep through the night. 'Kasumi,' he repeated, as if seeking confirmation of her existence. 'What have you heard' he asked, 'what can you tell me? Where did you go?'

