

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Amanda Richter for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 13, 2007.
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This collection of stories spans a range of content: the personal, the domestic, the political, and the downright terrifying. In “Ilka the Flyer,” a young man is faced with his own crisis and that of his veteran uncle. Sister relationships bloom and fade as the entire family deals with changes in “Saving Cynthia.” Unrequited love reaches its breaking point during a visit to the object of affection in “The Fighters.” A dark well unleashes spiders and other secrets in “In Security.” And in “On Top,” a politician finds himself ensnared in the system. Each story attempts to examine human connection and disconnection and the consequences of each.

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On Top

by
Amanda Richter

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Amanda Richter, Author

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
1. Ilka the Flyer.....	1
2. Saving Cynthia.....	15
3. The Fighters.....	33
4. In Security.....	54
5. On Top.....	86

Ilka the Flyer

You hear it all the time now: when they get back, they're never the same. But it was true when Uncle Leonard stayed with us, the summer I was fifteen. For the first six months he was home, he began to adjust to his transtibial prosthesis—peg leg, as I called it. Then one day he snapped. Thought he was back at Chu Lai. My grandmother took care of him until she died, less than a year later. She never wanted him to go in the first place. Her baby boy, three-time state champ in the mile. Charmed the socks off of every girl he met. Didn't have the grades for college, though. And what killed her even more than watching him leave was seeing him return like that, whispered about into phones and at family reunions. He settled for performing the motions of living, little else. By the time he came to live with us in 1973, only tiny traces of Leonard remained.

Evenings at our summer place, my sister Vanny would meet up with her boyfriend while my parents went for walks or drove to one of the towns nearby, leaving me and Leonard alone. I never liked the house much. The glass windows in my room rattled in the afternoon storms, trembling until I thought they'd shatter. So I'd hunker down in the living room with *Ilka the Flyer*, my favorite comic. It had been Leonard's favorite, too, before he left. He'd waded me into his bedroom, a place I was hardly ever allowed, and thrust his collector's first-edition *Ilka* into my hand. "I'm trusting you with this, Jon," he said. "Take good care of it for me. And if I don't come back, it's yours," he said, ruffling my hair. Anything precious to Leonard was gold to me, and in the three and a half years he was away, I wore the pages thin. Ripped a few corners on accident. I worried that Leonard would be angry, but as time passed, I found I couldn't picture what he looked like. Everyone remarked at how much he'd aged in the time he was gone, but to me he looked like any other old man, someone else entirely, even though there was only an eight year gap between us.

Ilka was the thick muscled and beautiful national hero of Planet Preen, a lovely, lush place until it was conquered by the Fume Regime, which exterminated the citizens one by one until Ilka swooped down and defeated Todd, the Regime's interminably evil leader, by hurling him into the darkest alcoves of space. Ilka's solid principles always earned him praise, to which he would respond meekly: "I deed what vas right." You

couldn't help but like him. On the last page, he flew, toothy-grinned, off into space, and you knew you'd seen something truly special.

The first night we were alone, Leonard sat next to me on our musty, crushed velvet couch with his hands on his thighs, reading over my shoulder. The leg made wonderful, metallic sounds. Underneath his loose jeans, I imagined a tiny machine working overtime. And despite warnings that it would be impolite to ask to see it, I was dying to get a good look.

While I read aloud, the sounds heightened at the particularly exciting or tense points: Ilka rescuing a small girl from one of the Fume's lethal gases—creak creak—a run-in with the chief of police—creeeaaaak—the confrontation between Todd and Ilka—creakcreakcreak—and Todd's final, brief snarl of revenge just before he died—creakety creak. Outside, the cicadas' orchestrations chimed in tandem with the noise.

"New issue of Ilka coming out in September," I said when we were done.

"Uh-huh."

"Hear Todd's making a comeback. That'll be swell."

Leonard stared out the window.

"What's your favorite issue?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"I've read all of them."

"Should be studying."

"What's it like over there?" I asked. My heart thumped as his head jerked up from the page. "It's yours, you know," I whispered. "*Ilka*. You gave it to me before you left, and I held onto it all this time just for you. Do you want it back?"

"Keep it," he said. His voice was tiny and distant.

"You sure?"

Leonard's face changed, burdened with the weary, weakening look of someone who knows he can't ever meet you in the present. "I don't want it."

A few evenings later, coming home late from dinner at a pizza parlor in town, we ran into Han, the son of the Korean family next door. He lay on his front lawn on his belly, facing our house, hands tucked under his chin. Mom, Dad, and Vanny hardly

noticed him staring from behind his red glasses as we headed inside. Leonard slowly brought up the rear, one heavy step followed by a lighter one.

“Hey, you got a light?” Han asked. I was surprised to hear him speak. Whenever he wasn’t watching our house (which was most of the time), he was snapping Polaroids of bugs making their way across the grass.

Leonard swung towards Han, almost fell, caught his balance, and produced his lighter with a flourish of hands. The flame leapt and Han clasped his hands together in delight. Leonard took a little bow and deposited the lighter in Han’s shirt pocket.

“Thanks, Mister!” Han called. He struck the flame over and over.

The next day, I bought Leonard a replacement lighter and gave it to him wrapped in a bit of tissue. He tore back the tissue slowly.

“It’s for you,” I explained. “Since you gave yours away.”

Leonard nodded and jammed the lighter in his pocket. Later, I saw him outside smoking. He struck a match and lowered his head toward the flame. “Peg leg,” I muttered to myself and turned away from the window.

Midway through the summer, I decided it was time to end Han’s spying. Technically, he was on his lawn, but that didn’t make it right. So one evening, I went outside to confront him. When he saw me coming, he buried his face in a large book. “What are you doing?” I shouted. He blinked slowly and closed the Encyclopedia of Entomology spread open across his lap. “You can’t violate people’s privacy like this,” I added. “I could call the police and have you arrested.” Around us, the cicadas screamed in the dusky hours. “You’d go to prison where really bad things would happen. Even worse, they might put you in juvie. The other kids would beat you up.” Hoping to drive the point home, I leaned in close and whispered, “Big kids who kill their moms and eat her guts and stuff.”

Yawning, unfazed, Han lifted himself off the grass and started for his house. Completely unfazed. “Don’t let me catch you doing it again,” I called. He kept walking. “Or else.” At this, I thought I saw him throw back his head and laugh a fakey, evil domination laugh. I shuddered a little, remembering Todd.

The next time I saw Han, he was talking to one of the ice cream vendors who circled the neighborhood all afternoon with “Ragtime” or “Camptown Races” blaring from the loudspeakers on their bikes. The vendor sat on the bike, balancing himself on the balls of his feet. His head was buried under a mess of brunette curls that brushed his shoulders. He smiled and clasped Han’s shoulder. Han beamed from behind his glasses, looking like he’d just taken home the top science fair award. Reaching into the cooler, the vendor bestowed Han two Popsicles. Han smelled each one before unwrapping both and shoving them in his mouth.

Although I’d never been a fan of carnival rides, the highlight of those summers was the annual August fair, complete with sour lemonade, dry hot dogs, the whole works. And girls, everywhere, who filled the fairgrounds in their madras shirts tied above the waist. They didn’t walk; they levitated, and the year before I’d gotten to levitate too, spinning among the turning lights. The humidity and the hammering noises from the rides, mixed with the rich smell of beer and the fainter one of urine had given me a headache. But then there was Ellen’s soft, damp hand. We made round after round, circling the perimeter of the fairgrounds until the lights popped away and we trudged home. Every lap Ellen would run into a girl or group of girls she knew from school, and she’d untwine her hand and go talk. I’d stand, flushed and sheepish, off to the side, listening to the peals of laughter. By undertaking this act, Ellen earned a great deal of respect from her peers. I was valuable, and her kiss contained an urgency that I was not too proud to ignore. When everything dimmed for good, she spun away. As July began to wind down, though, I grew anxious for her hand again.

One hot evening, amid dreams of Ellen and rippling giggles, I was awoken by a ticking noise outside. At first I thought it was the click of pistons as they labored under the weight of the Fall of Doom or the Sinner’s Spinner. But the noise persisted. Nothing below my window. I threw on a shirt, hiked past the row of closed bedroom doors, and snuck outside. The grass still held much of the day’s heat as I padded out on front lawn. The cicadas had hushed to a quiet rumble, but the ticking noise was still distinct. I

scanned the dark lawn for evidence. Only shadows. A car drove past and I jumped.

“What am I doing?” I said aloud. Jesus. Ilka was never scared shitless.

“I know,” someone said. I swung around. Han, fully dressed, was standing behind me. He flicked on a flashlight.

“Turn that thing off,” I commanded.

He lowered the beam a little. “You heard it too.”

“Heard what?” It was time for Han to go back to his cave, coffin, or whatever it was that he used for a bed.

“That tsk tsk sound. It’s coming from the woods.” He pointed at the densely gathered trees behind our houses. “I made it to the edge, but then...”

“You were too scared to go in?” I offered. “Amateur.”

“Let’s see you do it then.” In the weak light, Han’s bugged eyes and wiry hair seemed diabolic. He couldn’t have been more than ten and was already a weird kid.

“It’s just some dogs back in there or something,” I declared. “Go back to bed.” I started toward the house. Han plopped down at his surveillance post. “What are you doing?” I asked. “Go back to bed!”

“You’re loony if you think I’m going to sleep with that noise out there.”

I sighed, lifting my hands. “Go on then. Let the dogs eat you.”

He jumped up. “I will,” he said, taking several definitive steps. At the gap between our houses, he stopped. “But do you think you could come with me first? It’s just that I’ve been reading about this species of millipedes which is indigenous to this area. They’re poisonous, you know.”

The last thing I wanted was to go traipsing around the woods at night with Han, but on the other hand, I knew the noise would bring me out there anyway. Might as well let whatever was out there get him instead of me. “Fine,” I said. The ticking continued, now in direct competition with the cicadas. “Let’s go.”

We tramped toward the woods. I hoped the loud snap of sticks breaking underneath our feet would startle the noisemaker. Breathing hard, neither of us said anything. Han scuttled to match my strides. His eyes were narrowed in concentration. I slowed a bit to let him catch up.

At the edge of the trees, a small fire shone. We pushed on, carefully. In the growing light, a lump began to form. It sat on a boulder in front of the fire. Too big for a dog. Almost too big for a person, but it might have been the shadows the fire threw against the trunks of the encircling trees. The sound sped up, steadied, and then stopped.

As we moved closer, the lump turned, its eyes dim points of reflected light. One of its legs was folded over the other, its foot resting on its thigh. The knee wobbled back and forth, a rolling knob. No. No, the leg was *in* its lap, separated from the knee. It sat there like a stick. A bat. Beside me, Han drew in a sharp breath and stiffened.

“Shit,” I said and froze.

The form pushed off the rock. Standing, backlit, it wasn’t much bigger than me, its frame slender underneath a bulky shirt. It hopped near, clutching the leg, bobbing on the other, one hand shoved in a pocket. Leonard.

The flickering light betrayed few details: the blocky foot, the ugly, rounded end of his thigh. How did it fit over his leg? That thin metal rod connected where? This was what I’d been waiting for?

“Do you want to...?” Leonard held it in front of him like an offering.

A landmine. That was all I’d been told. Which didn’t make any sense, seeing the empty pant leg swinging back and forth. I’d gotten sunburned at more than one track meet, waiting all day in the sun for Leonard’s race. And when he finally did, he often gave me the tape that had broken across his chest when he’d crossed the finish line first. Now he gestured for me to take the leg.

I put one hand on the widest part. It was warm, the finish smooth. The other hand began to follow suit, but then something changed for me, and I pushed it away. I didn’t mean to. The leg tumbled to the ground and rolled near the fire. I tried to go after it, but suddenly Han was running, pulling it in just before the first flames made the jump. Cradling it in his arms, he returned it to Leonard.

Han reached for the lighter he’d been given and struck the flame, a bright orange streak. Leonard ran his palm across Han’s head and through his dark hair. For a moment, they stood next to each other, their shoulders touching, resting next to the fire like old

friends. “You’re brave, you know that?” Han asked Leonard. “Even if you don’t think so, you’re still a hero.”

“And old peg leg like me?” Leonard asked. For the first time since he’d been back, I saw him smile. Something turned in my stomach and I stepped away.

“Kid,” Leonard started, turning his glossy eyes toward me.

“Why’d you let them take it?” I said.

Leonard fumbled with the hem of his pant leg. Han watched intently.

“You’ll never run again.”

“I know,” he whispered.

Suddenly, it was the only word I knew: “Never, never, never.”

Never, Leonard mouthed.

And then he said something I wouldn’t ever forget. “I tried to run away.” He began weeping into the sleeve of his shirt. “I thought it was right.” Wiping his eyes suddenly, he glared at me. “Get out of here,” he said.

My feet were threaded to the ground.

“Did you hear me? Get out of here! Get of here!” He threw up his arms to scatter us. “I said, ‘Go!’” he roared, and lunged himself forward.

I ran. Without Han, without seeing where Leonard landed. I ran. Back through the trees, back to the house. Harder than I knew I could, air ballooning out of my lungs, and still I went faster, faster, gasping for breath. The faster I swung my arms, the faster I went. But those damned legs just held me back from flying.

I avoided Leonard after that. Whenever he sat down to dinner or came out of the bathroom, I looked the other way. “What’s gotten into you?” Vanny asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

Nearly a week later, though, as I sat in my room trying to read *Ilka*, an evening storm made its way through town, rattling my windows with the impact. The noise grew until I had to drag myself into the living room. Fifteen tense minutes went by. And then Leonard eased himself onto the couch. Trying to absorb myself in the lines and colors, I sat as still as I could manage, moving only my wrists to turn pages. There was *Ilka* as a

young boy, discovering his strength when he caught his mother as she fell down a flight of stairs. Discovering his telekinetic powers when all of a sudden he caught wind of the devious plots of neighborhood thugs. Discovering his flying ability when a bridge broke under him, all these changes.

The pages began to blur. I was listening for it: the creak. I didn't believe it would come, but I expected it all the same. Every noise pulsed loudly in my ears. I waited. At Ilka's first big rescue—nothing. His kiss with the lovely Anastasia, made bittersweet by the fact that she was betrothed—nothing. Page by page. Silence. I clenched the seat cushions until my hand cramped.

Leonard coughed. Startled, I looked up. For a moment, his face softened, and I took it in: smooth cheeks, no more hair than on my own, clear eyes, thick shank of bangs. But also a misbuttoned shirt, a tear on the pocket, dirty jeans, and the leg, spread at a forty-five degree angle from the floor. He didn't look like Ilka. He hardly looked like himself. I wanted to say, "Are you in there, Leonard?" but then his face changed again, cloudy and distant, and I was afraid. I tossed the comic in his lap and headed for the kitchen.

The night we were to go to the fair, I was edgy as we waited for Vanny's boyfriend so that he could ride to the fairgrounds with us. Vanny wore a low-cut top that showed her shoulders, and she sat proudly displaying herself as we waited. And waited. Forty-five minutes later, "Maple Leaf Rag" blared in our driveway. Vanny jumped. She unlocked the door and the person on the porch grinned from under a head of springing curls—the ice cream vendor I'd seen conspiring with Han. We all stared. Even Leonard looked up from studying his hands.

"You're late," she pouted.

"Sorry, babe." Then, noticing the rest of us, he nodded. "Hey there. I'm Drum."

"As in—beat the?" my mom asked.

"Drum-mond," Vanny corrected. "Drum-mond Ham-il-ton."

"Fine. Let's get a move on, Drummer," my dad said. As we paraded single file out of the house, Han watched from the grass.

“Hey there, buddy,” Drum saluted Han. Han smiled weakly. “We’re going to the fair. See you later!” he called back.

As Leonard passed, he nodded at Han. “Hey,” they said at the same time.

“Hey,” Leonard repeated.

I swallowed. With each step, Leonard hesitated a split second before putting his weight on his right leg.

My eyes met Han’s as I went by, one slow, hard glance, then I hurried past, climbing onto the rear seat. As the car started and we pulled away, I tried not to look back.

During the car ride over, my mind shifted completely to Ellen. I wondered where I’d run into her. I imagined the heavy release of anticipation when we met, she throwing her arms around me and exclaiming, “I’ve been waiting for you!”

But as soon as we made our way past the gates, I spotted her standing at the lemonade stand near the entrance, pulling crumpled dollars from the pocket of her cutoffs. I knew it was her immediately, but something was off. She three inches taller. The rest of her body was much thinner than it had been, and her skin was overrun by red spots. Where was the sweet girl I’d known?

I turned my head, hoping she hadn’t seen me, and searched for my parents, but they’d suddenly disappeared in the crowd. Someone tapped me hard on the shoulder.

“Ow,” I said loudly.

“Hey Jon.” Ellen smiled down at me.

“Hey,” I muttered, toeing the dirt underneath my sneakers.

“How’s your summer been?”

“Boring.”

“Wanna walk around?”

“I can’t.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“I’ve gotta go soon.”

“But you just got here.” She was alone, no gaggle of girls.

“I’ll see you later,” I said. Then, face burning, I ran to catch up with Vanny and Drum.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Vanny asked when I reached them.

“Aw, let him come along, Van,” Drum said. He winked at me. “You okay, little buddy?” He couldn’t have been more than two years older.

“Yeah,” I answered, half grateful. I trailed behind them until Vanny whipped around.

“Not so close,” she warned. Drum’s hand meandered from her waist into her back pocket. He squeezed. She shot me a warning look.

While Drum and Vanny rode the Ragin’ Roller Coaster, The Shaker, and the carousel, I stood off to the side and watched the ebb and flow of people as they moved from ride to ride. I thought I saw Ellen near the Super Slides, but it turned out to be a younger girl, someone I didn’t know.

Finally, after a round of bumper cars, Drum approached me. “I’m gonna hit the john and get a drink. Wanna come?” Vanny had sulked off to the cotton candy stand and my parents and Leonard were nowhere in sight, so I agreed. As we stood in line for the restrooms, Drum told me about his route. “You wouldn’t think so, but you meet tons of babes. And then they all eat in front of you. All sweaty as they bite into the ice cream. Sometimes Popsicles,” he added. “The whole time their tongues are going like crazy.” He sighed, leaning back against the wall. “That’s how I met Vanny.”

“You know Han?” I interrupted.

“Yeah. Good kid.”

“Freak kid,” I corrected. We moved back into the stalls. My cue to shut up. Certain things a man just couldn’t do, and talking while taking a piss was one of them.

“He knows a lot about bugs,” Drum continued once we got back outside. He led me behind one of the booths and pulled a joint from his wallet. “You smoke?” he asked, as if it was the next logical point. I decided that I did and took it from him, wrinkling my nose at the smell.

“Let’s hang here for a minute,” he said. “I need a break. Girls are hard, man. But hey, at least I’m not over there, shooting VC.”

“You’re telling me,” I said.

“Damn,” he said, gesturing to the swarms of girls passing us. “How can we resist?”

I sure as hell didn’t know.

“Hey Mommas!” he called to one group. The girls turned briefly to look, but otherwise ignored him. Drum shrugged. Then, seeing another throng of girls, shouted, “Work it, sisters!”

The pot smell hung in the air, and I was worried we might be caught. “I’m going to go get that drink,” I told Drum. “Be right back.”

“Would you grab me a YooHoo?” he called. I walked around the rides, searching for Leonard and my parents. They weren’t at any of their favorite places: the Dragon Coaster or the Hanging Hammer. They weren’t at the entrance or the hot dog stand, either. Finally, I found them coming out of the Fun House, laughing wildly and clinging to each other like teenagers. One of the straps on my mother’s tank top had slid down her shoulder, and her pink bra was in full view. My father pointed and hooted. Giggling even harder, she tugged the strap back up. I looked away, embarrassed. Leonard wandered out a few steps behind them, head down and hands tucked in his jacket.

“Jonathan,” they yelled and waved.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, the thingamabob. Your father scared the bejeezus out of me, and I couldn’t tell which one was him all the mirrors.” They erupted into laughter again.

“I wanna go home,” Leonard whispered.

“Len,” my mother said. “What’s wrong?”

“Go home.” His eyes darted around.

“Maybe the noises are getting to him,” Dad suggested. “I’ll run him home and come right back.”

“Now!” Leonard cried, and stamped his prosthesis. His shoe came off at the heel.

“Let’s go,” my mother said, slinging her arms around Leonard. “I want to get him out of here. Jon, go get your sister.”

Leonard put his head on her shoulder.

I raced back to tell Drum and Vanny, but Vanny wasn't where we'd left her. I continued onto where I'd left Drum. No Drum. Frustrated, I pushed through the crowd, searching for the mess of curls.

Outside the beer garden, there was Ellen, her lanky arms coiled around someone, her back turned to me. She was wrapped in a deep kiss with one snaky hand working its way into the back pocket of her shorts. My stomach went soft. And then I noticed the sprigs of brown curls. For a moment, my eyes were tricking me, and Vanny would be angry. But then Drum pulled away. "Hey champ," he started.

I barreled into him, knocking him against the beer garden fence. "Stop it Jonathan," Ellen shouted, her face flushing. Drum held me at bay with little effort, giggling as I jerked to free my arms. "Easy, easy," he laughed. "It's okay. Vanny doesn't know." I surged one last time, but Drum rolled me and I thudded into the dust.

"What's wrong with you?" Ellen asked coldly, hovering above me. Her makeup was uneven and too light for her tanned skin. The summer before, she'd looked so fresh. From her hand, so much heat. But she'd known, all along, what she was doing. What she wanted.

A tight fence of bodies surrounded us. A blur of faces, delight mixed with disapproval. They wanted more, and they expected me to give it to them. Drum extended a hand, but I slapped it away and stood up.

"Way to go, man," a kid about my age said, and everyone else laughed. He was wearing a blue ball cap cocked to one side. I tried to break through the crowd to leave. I was done with this place. "Hey where'd you learn to fight like that?" he continued. The mingling sweat made it difficult to breathe. "Hey, you're my hero!" he gushed, and I turned and connected fast, faster than Ilka. Bam. Eye. It sank into the fragile skin over my knuckles and the kid fell hard, skidding along the dirt. The hat flew over the crowd. I turned to watch it fall, several feet away, landing right side up.

Then two pairs of hands grabbed me.

"You're done," one of the security guards said in my ear. "Let's get going."

"Stop showing off," the other one said. They walked me toward the main gates where my parents, Vanny, and Leonard were waiting. Somewhere, it registered that I'd

be in trouble, but I smiled at my family and waved, the blood pumping through my body making me warm. I felt like a celebrity paraded in front of these big, important men. My parents' mouths were open. For a brief moment, I thought they were impressed by my escorts. A new image of me was taking shape, one polished with respect. Then Vanny's expression changed to pity, her eyes wide, followed by my mother's and my father's. Only Leonard's face stayed the same. Flat.

During the ride home, everyone was silent. "Some fair, huh?" I muttered to Vanny from the backseat. She stared out the window. "You liked the Fun House?" I called up to my parents. The car was silent. Leonard turned to look at me, blinked once, and turned away. Defeated, I settled down in the backseat and watched houses blow by.

"What's wrong with you these days, Jon?" my mom asked when we got home. I shrugged.

"You'd better shape up," she said and sent me to my room.

I opened the window to let in a breeze and lay down, tucking my arms under my head. A ribbon of cool air threaded through the room as my breathing gradually slowed. The whole awful night replayed in my head: Ellen, Drum, and Leonard's stony, walled up face. I watched the hat sail into the dust again and felt the mounting shame in my chest. I was no Ilka. But as these images circulated, Han's black head kept popping up out of the grass. Han. His sad, full eyes behind the red glasses. Panting slightly to keep up with my strides as we stole into the woods. I was no Ilka. But he wasn't Todd, either.

He was catching cicadas from the trees and sticking them in glass jars when I cleared my throat. He swung around and stared, accidentally releasing a fat specimen.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said, and scanned the tree closely.

"I really want to know."

"Really?"

"Swear. I want to know," I said, and I did.

"Capturing sound," he whispered.

"How do they do that?" I asked. "It sounds pretty cool, for a bug."

“It’s amazing,” he began, his shoulders hunched in close to his body. “They vibrate their abdominal membranes to attract mates even though it also attracts one of their main predators. But they do it, just the same, for the lives of their children.”

“I guess they think it’s a worthy cause.”

“Guess so.” The cicadas pulsed inside Han’s jar. From the side of the house, a small light caught my eye. Leonard was smoking in the shadows. Han waved, and Leonard, cigarette between his fingers, lifted his hand in return. Leaning on both legs against the siding, Leonard tilted his head back as he blew rings. His eyes closed, and he rubbed his face. For a second, he looked young again. Young and not yet scared.

I turned toward Han. “Do you know any other weird stuff about bugs?”

“Didn’t know you were interested.” The red frame of his glasses caught reflections glinting off the jar.

“Sure,” I said. I knew he didn’t yet believe me, but his shoulders dropped and he beamed.

“Well,” he began, “There’s lots...”

I relaxed, too, and let him tell me.

Saving Cynthia

Her slender legs were tense underneath her skirt, and the wool prickled my ears. Early morning sun filled our room with light and color. We sat on the floor between our beds, my head balanced gently on Cynthia's lap. "Luke, I am your father," I whispered.

"Duh."

"No," I said, "You didn't know that. You're upset."

"Fine. Nooooo!" she whispered in mock dismay. "No!" She stopped. "This is stupid, Katy."

"It's not!"

"Girls, church!" Dad called up the stairs. "Now."

"Coming," we yelled.

"May the force be with you," I said.

Cynthia was already out the door, running downstairs and into to the waiting van. I ran after her, trailing the long, pale blonde ends as of her hair as I tried to put my thick, stubborn brown ones into a ponytail.

"What took you so long?" Mom asked as we slid into the back, glancing at us from her compact mirror. She patted her hair into place.

"We were getting dressed," I said.

"You'd better start getting up earlier then," she said.

"And going to bed earlier," Dad added.

Cynthia interjected, "We were also working on our Bible verses."

"Oh," Mom answered, snapping the compact shut. Cynthia turned up one end of her mouth, a half smile, part conspirator, part smug. I looked away.

I was thirteen that year, and Cynthia had begun to change. Two years older, she'd started high school, and though her bright eyes and wry, disarming smile had always made her popular in middle school, her status was solidified when she became the only girl from her class to be invited to the prom. Her date, Nathan Connell, was also ascending the social ranks as a junior who started on the varsity basketball team. That

spring, he held two parties in the field behind his parent's house, the second of which Cynthia attended by saying she was sleeping over at a friend's.

I watched as she got ready, unearthing a v-neck sweater and short skirt from the back of her dresser. These she stuffed into her overnight bag for later. Up until she started high school, we always went shopping together because we wore the same size and swapped clothes. But with her newfound curves, Cynthia had abandoned the t-shirts and hooded sweatshirts we'd favored and opted for anything as low-cut, slinky, and tight as our parents would allow. What they didn't, she managed to borrow from friends. I was still waiting for my curves. Something other than baby fat. Cynthia was beautiful.

"Do you think you'll be able to sneak out?" I asked.

"Tessie said her parents sleep like rocks."

"You're so brave."

Cynthia smiled. "I know."

"Be careful," I said.

"I know."

She left before dinner that night, and her empty place formed a hole at the table. Since she'd started high school, her absence had become common, though each missed dinner compounded my parents' worries.

"Where'd she say she was going?" Dad asked.

"To spend the night with Tessie McCrady," Mom reminded him.

"The McCradys," he repeated thoughtfully through a mouthful of peas. "Hmmm. They go to Hillside Baptist?"

"I don't know. I could call Joan Millhauser and ask. Her niece goes there." She put her hand on his arm and smiled, exhausted after working all day at the post office. Each morning, before leaving, she wound her hair into a bun, and each night, she unraveled it, letting the curls that formed during the day swing free while she made dinner. Sometimes, while she cooked, she told us stories about herself as a girl. We begged for them. Her impressions of Pastor Rowlin's "Ouw Fathew, who awt in heaven" had caused fits of stifled laughter among her sisters but had also brought the backside of

my grandfather's hand, more than once. She graduated high school early, eager to begin living. "But after I married your father and had you girls, I learned the value of patience," she liked to conclude these stories. "A blessing."

I hardly imagined my father to be a blessing. All indications of the laughing boy in their wedding pictures were gone. And though they both adored her, Cynthia's willfulness had aged my parents considerably. By the time I came along, there was little patience left. After fifteen years at Smith's Lock & Key, most of Dad's work had been replaced by a computer, and in the evenings, he complained that his eyes hurt from staring at the screen all day. Mostly, he lay on the couch until dinner was ready. Barring an emergency, we were instructed to not disturb him.

"No. I'm just wondering...those aren't the same McCradys who wrecked last summer after the father was drunk on gin?"

"Of course not, Phillip. Those were the McCreadys, not the McCradys. I spoke with Marilyn McCrady and she seemed to have everything under control."

"Did you give her the list?"

"Yes, I gave her the list." The list was new. An attempt, as my parents made the transition into Cynthia's teenage years, to keep a hold on her. Cynthia and I committed the list to memory, though I had cause for its use only once. We recited it like spelling drills.

1. No violent or sexual movies or television programs. G or PG, if approved.
2. No phone calls.
3. No clothing exchanges or "makeovers."
4. Non-licentious board games are acceptable. (I imagined tiny bugs.)
5. Bedtime at 9:00 p.m.

I had broken three of the five spending the night with Karen Berg, a friend I'd made the previous summer at Blue Mountain. Karen wasn't saved, she'd said. She just liked going to camp. In fact, she confessed one night in our bunk that she didn't really believe in Jesus or heaven, either. She believed simply that he was a very nice man who did some very nice things, but she doubted she would ever meet him. I took this into consideration. What if I met him and didn't like him? What if we'd already met and I'd

messed it up? What if at the end, there was no one to rescue me? I would be alone. These questions were shelved carefully for another time, though. At Karen's, we watched *Star Wars* with her older brother, who smiled at me every so often during the movie. When the lights were turned out that night, we played *Phone Call*, a board game in which you went on dates with a variety of handsome boys. When my turn came, I dialed the numbers and the play phone rang. "Hello?" the deep and serious voice automated voice answered. I guess I'd broken four of the five, actually, but I'd never had as much fun. I recreated each scene from the movies for Cynthia, who was initially just as fascinated as I'd been. Though I never divulged any of this, my parents seemed to suspect that the Bergs were not exemplary Christians, and I never spent the night with Karen again. Cynthia had managed to talk her way over to Tessie's by claiming that they were working on a biology project together. Her grades had slipped a bit lately. It wasn't an entire lie—they might work on the project a little, at least until they snuck out to the party later.

"Still, I might go over there tonight just to check on her," he announced.

"Dad," I said quickly, "There's a field trip coming up. To see a G rated movie. I need you to sign the permission form."

"What?" He looked over at my half-eaten plate. "That's enough for you, Katy. No more mashed potatoes."

"It's only my second helping," I protested, setting down my fork. Heat rose in my cheeks.

"But those are filled with carbohydrates and starch," he said. "You know what those do to you? They accumulate in your body and make you fat."

"Phillip—" Mom started.

"So you don't want to eat too much of those, because remember 1 Corinthians 3:16-17: 'Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.' See, I just want your temple to be top notch, Katy Kat," he cooed. His pet name for me, given when I was ten and had danced the Cat Dance at my first recital. I hated him for using it.

“Katy, do you want a Popsicle for dessert?” Mom asked.

“Michelle, what did I just tell her?”

“It’s fat-free!”

“‘Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God!’ 2 Corinthians 7:1,” he said.

“But Philip, fat-free!”

His eyebrows went up to his forehead as he gave her the look. We all knew the look, an approximation of the wrathful Moses in our illustrated bible, down from Sinai with the Ten Commandments. The only things spared were his carefully tended gardenias, now returning from winter dormancy. He’d be antsy until they bloomed in full, but he loved them best when they were just buds, not quite in bloom. I knew Mom preferred them at the wild height of their beauty. I closed my eyes.

“Okay, Philip,” I heard her say.

“That could go for you, too,” he added.

My eyes broiled behind the lids.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled after a long pause. “Sorry.” He placed a hand on my back. I tried to shrug it off. “I’m sorry Katy.”

I didn’t look up until his chair scraped back and then, after several minutes, hers. I dumped the rest of my dinner in the trash.

That night, I dreamed Cynthia was chased by a big, hairy boy whom she had to beat off with a shovel, smashing his dark face into little pieces. I tried to protect her, but she barked at me to stay away. Startled, I woke at six the next morning and turned on the light. No long blonde hair trailing off into the folds of Cynthia’s pillow.

Outside, a motor idled quietly in the street. I parted the curtains. A dirty white truck was parked in front of the house. And there was Cynthia, backed up against the large cottonwood on our front lawn, someone’s hips pressed tight against hers. A hand and her hair obscured her face. Another hand moved across her chest.

I did not breathe.

There was a rhythm. They came together, untwined, and came together again. Cynthia pulled away, but his hands covered her face again, forcing open her mouth. She let him put his hands there. They swept over her parted lips, the fingertips worming inside.

I slid down the wall underneath the sill and concentrated on breathing. There was a tiny scab on my left knee. I closed my eyes. Downstairs, a door slammed shut, and then the motor roared off down the street. Suddenly, Cynthia was kneeling in front of me.

“What are you doing up, Katy?”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Oh.” Cynthia crawled into bed and pulled the covers over herself, yawning loudly.

“You’re home early.”

“Tessie had things to do.”

“I saw you,” I whispered.

“What?”

“Just now. What you were doing.”

She sat up. “Tell me exactly what you saw.”

“You and that guy...”

“Me and that guy what?”

“Doing stuff.”

She leaned back against the headboard. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Katy.”

“If you tell me, I won’t tell Mom and Dad.”

Cynthia sprang out of bed. “You wouldn’t dare. Katy, I swear I’ll never talk to you again if you do.” A speck of dirt smudged her left cheek.

“Fine. I just wanted to know.”

“Oh, all right,” she said after a minute of silence. She explained first that she’d had a little beer, then more, then something called a shot—of something. But she hadn’t thrown up.

“And that guy?”

Cynthia sighed. “Don’t you want to know anything else?”

I shook my head, and she sighed again. They’d talked most of the night, then Nathan steered her behind a row of cars about thirty or forty feet from the party. They kissed for several minutes, then he’d unzipped her jeans and—she grinned—“done stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?” I asked.

“I’m not going to tell you.”

“Did you, you know…” Heat flooded my cheeks. In science class, someone had mispronounced organism, sending a pulse of excitement through the room. I knew it was related to what she was telling me. “You know. Have an *orgasm*?” The last word squeaked out, and I immediately looked up, expecting one or both parents to burst in our room waving tape recorders.

“I don’t think so,” she answered in a low voice. “But you have to swear that you won’t tell anyone about this. Got it?”

“Okay.”

“I mean it, Katy. If you tell anyone, I’ll let the seniors hide your clothes after P.E. when you get to high school.”

“Okay! Goddamnit,” I muttered. Goddamnit was a new word I’d picked up during the past year. Once it’d fallen out of my mouth on accident in front of Mom, and my talking privileges were revoked for a week. It was summer then, and in the afternoons, I went out back and spit on the gardenias. I was careful after that, but it still gave me a small rush of excitement to say it.

Cynthia slid back underneath the covers.

“That’s it? Cynthia, what else?” Snoring sounds issued on cue from under her comforter. “Tell me,” I whispered near her ear. Her hands appeared and planted the pillow over her head. The snores escalated. “What else?”

“Go away.”

“What does it feel like?”

Snore.

I knew what I could call her—*slut*—but it wasn’t quite true. “Hussy,” I said. Cynthia giggled and then fell still. I waited several more beats and then went downstairs.

Dad was out back in his pajamas, kneeling by the gardenia bush with a pair of clippers, the knees of his bottoms sinking into the mud. Cynthia had barely avoided him. He cradled the stems in his fingers as he worked his way around the base, inspecting the growing force of the buds. He never stopped fighting to keep them as they were.

The week after the party, Nathan invited Cynthia to the prom. One Friday afternoon, a half day of school and an early weekend for my parents, the four of them sat down in our kitchen and discussed terms. Coming home from ballet, I ran into Nathan as he was leaving the house. “You must be Cyn’s sister,” he said. His face was covered in pock marks. For a moment, I imagined that he might be here for me, my own boyfriend. My hair would gleam in the sun.

Finally, I realized he was waiting for a response. “Yeah,” I said.

He grinned. “Okay then,” he said, and whistled as he got into his truck.

Though still upset with Cynthia, curiosity bested my anger, and I pried the details out of her. Dad had grilled Nathan, and Mom had asked embarrassing questions like whether Nathan knew that Cynthia was a virgin and would remain so until marriage. Although Nathan was a Methodist, he was eventually deemed acceptable. But there were stipulations: Dad would drive them both to the prom and give strict orders to the chaperones to watch them during the dance. Then, he would drive them to the school-sanctioned after party at the city hall, wait for one hour, and drive them home again. Those were the rules.

They immediately regretted their decision. She must have looked so young, nine or eleven or even thirteen, not fifteen, smiling when they said yes, wrapping her thin arms around their necks in a thank-you hug. I heard them fight several times. I imagine Cynthia had to beg them not to change their decision. And though it tore them apart, they still let her go, not because they thought it was right, not because they trusted her, but because she was their baby girl, and they couldn’t say no.

In the following weeks, there were numerous discussions between Cynthia and our parents concerning her conduct during upcoming the dance, what sort of dancing would be allowed, and, of course, what dress she could have. Cynthia nodded in

agreement throughout these sessions, but between nods, her face faded into imagination. She was miles away, spinning over the gym floor. Anytime I was around one of those conversations, I lobbied for Cynthia's privileges, with a slight notion of gaining future ones of my own. "At my last school dance," I said, "kids weren't even dancing close to each other. Everybody danced in a circle."

"That's because it was a middle school dance," Cynthia cut in. "At high school dances, no one dances in a circle."

"Do they do that grinding kind of dancing?" Mom asked. "You know, where the girl puts her hinny near the boy's—"

"—Mom!" we chorused.

"No," Cynthia said firmly.

"I think you should get one of those dresses where the fabric hangs down in the front and the straps cross over in the back. Maybe red. You'd look cute in red," I said.

She shot me a strained smile.

"Maybe," Mom said.

In the next few weeks, Cynthia smuggled stacks of glossy teen magazines home. Forgetting the morning after the party, we lay on our stomachs, shut up in our room, and skimmed through them, poring over the prom wisdom of *Seventeen* and *Cosmo Girl*, which provided such valuable knowledge as hairstyles, which type of dress would flatter Cynthia's figure, and, according to a quiz, which type of prom queen she would be (sassy)—that is, if she were in the running. I would be a classic queen. Maybe it would happen.

According to Cynthia, the other freshmen girls were jealous when Nathan took her to lunch, and they'd sulk as she sped away in Nathan's Ranger only to return magically in forty-five minutes. Her invitation also made me something of a celebrity by default. My friends came to consider me the expert on the rituals of high school life. I regaled them with updates on what dress Cynthia was thinking of selecting and what hairstyles we'd tried out beforehand. I was glad for this unexpected popularity. I'd never been quite popular on my own—never as pretty or quick—and what status I did have came mostly from Cynthia. Once she'd started high school, I'd begun to fade, but with

the prom invitation, I was back on top. I was Cynthia's Sister, Cynthia Who's Going to Prom. If she continued going every year, I'd have no problem once I got to high school. I would be somebody.

During these planning sessions, the room became our secret space once again. Since she no longer attended Roosevelt, we'd lost the strange, shared dialogue of two people intimately involved in the same world. But now, she listened to how I flunked my pre-Algebra test and how Matt had told Sarah that he liked me but then completely ignored me on our trip to the state capitol. She was kind, sympathetic even. The old Cynthia reemerged, the Cynthia I liked and admired (and wanted, desperately, to become), the Cynthia who stuck out her tongue at the girl who laughed when I fell out of a pirouette in dance class and who took the rap for me when Mom wouldn't let me see "X-Men," and I kicked the back door, leaving an angry black scuff mark. Not the Cynthia who said I was too fat to wear her jeans. I hoped the prom would never come.

The weekend before it did, we all piled into the van and drove to the mall in search of the dress. At Miss Formal, she quickly found a purple, glittery number. But Dad said it was too short. The red, floor length dress at Taylor's was too sheer. The pink chiffon at Serenity was cut too low in the back, the white lace at New Looks was cut too low in the front, and the black halter dress at Original Occasions was all three, plus simply too expensive. At Mary's Millinery, Mom, Dad, and I clustered around the dressing room and waited until she emerged from behind the curtain.

"Oh, Cynthia!" I said. The peach-colored bodice fit her perfectly. "It's just right! Isn't it?" Mom and Dad ignored me, circled Cynthia a few times, and pulled at the dress.

"What do you think, Philip?" Mom asked.

"I don't know. It's too—makes her look too—geez, I don't know."

"We're running out of places to look."

"You think I don't know that, Michelle?" He raked his hair with his fingers.

"Let's keep looking."

At the last store, she found a simple dress with modest straps and a high-cut neckline. “I think this may be the one,” she said from inside the dressing room. Then she opened the door and floated out.

“Wow,” I murmured.

Dad dropped the newspaper he had found and cleared his throat. Mom stared.

Cynthia had piled her hair high on top of her head, except for a few tendrils which fell down past her neck and swung lightly in the air conditioning of the dressing room. The fawn colored, knit material clung to her hips and thighs and was especially generous to her chest. She looked thirty. She looked almost naked.

“Well?” she asked. Mom and Dad looked at each other.

“Go change, Cynthia,” Dad said. “We’re wasting time.”

“What’s wrong with this one?”

“It’s too old for you,” Mom said. She glanced sadly at Cynthia.

Cynthia turned to look at herself in the mirror at the end of the dressing room hallway. “It’s perfect,” she declared.

“I think so too,” I said.

“No,” Dad said. “You heard your mother. Go change.”

“But Dad—”

“Go.”

“But this is the last store. If we don’t find one here, I won’t have anything to wear.”

“I really think she should get this one,” I added. “Can I try it on after you?”

“Nobody asked for your input, Katy. Cynthia, now,” he said.

“Dad! Mom?” she asked, trying to drum up sympathy. Mom looked away, busying herself in her purse. “You’re ruining my prom. You don’t want me to go! You don’t want me to have any fun at all,” she wailed, throwing herself to the floor.

They glanced at each other, then Mom looked away. “Listen, little girl.” Dad’s voice rose. “You go change now.”

“Why?” Her squeal filled the dressing room.

“Because,” he thundered, “I won’t have my daughter looking like a, like a whore, that’s why!” No one moved.

A sales lady stuck her head in the dressing room area. “Everything okay in here?” she asked optimistically. Cynthia emitted a shrill noise and stomped back into the dressing room. Dad coughed and went outside.

“Do you need any help?” Mom asked Cynthia. There was no answer from the dressing room.

As we headed toward the exit, Mom spied a small boutique we’d somehow missed on our tour of the mall. “We’ll try that one,” she said tersely.

She and Dad scanned the racks while Cynthia stood rigid and silent near the back of the store. For awhile, I stood next to her. “Do you want me to talk to them?” I asked.

Cynthia ignored me.

“I’m sure we’ll find something.”

“Shut up, Katy.”

Both parents flashed weak smiles at me as they passed by. They didn’t look at Cynthia. Suddenly, it dawned on me as Cynthia slumped against a display of skirts. I was the good one.

To avoid anyone seeing me grinning, I browsed the racks, my hand unsteady with excitement. I flew through a whirl of fabrics and colors, stopping in the yellow section. Cynthia hated yellow. From behind a mustard colored dress, I exhumed a lacey concoction of bows and the puffiest sleeves I’d ever seen. An irresistible thought: I’d turn and flash the dress at Cynthia, quickly, just to torment her a little. I hooked the hanger over my head and smoothed the long folds of the skirt. “Oh, Cindy,” I sang. “Look! It’s perfect for you.”

Cynthia punched the air. “I hate you,” she hissed.

“Nathan won’t be able to keep his hands off you in this dress! Oh, Nathan,” I drawled, squirming up and down the way they’d done on the lawn. “All the girls will be jealous.” Laughing, I swung around, nearly smacking into Dad. His eyes focused on the dress.

“Where’d you get this?” he asked. I pointed at the rack. “Let’s have it here,” he said, peeling it gently from my neck and hurrying over to Mom. She glanced at it, grimaced, and looked down.

Dad ran back to Cynthia. “We found one!” he exclaimed. “Try it on.”

I smirked at her.

Cynthia began to shake and her eyes brimmed with tears, but she swallowed hard and with a resolute toss of her head, snatched the dress from him and marched off to the dressing room, a death row inmate taking her final steps.

When she appeared, twenty minutes later, the color was gone from her face. In the stiff dress, she was a doll—or a cream puff. The neckline ran flush with her collarbone. A giggle rose in my throat, and I didn’t try to push it down. “You look like a little princess. Or Mother Ginger, you know, in *The Nutcracker*,” I said. “You better make sure Nathan doesn’t try to eat you.”

“Oh hush, Katy,” Mom said. “She looks—ravishing.”

“And delicious,” I added.

“Katy!” Dad barked, and I knew better than to go on. “That Nathan Connell will be lucky to have you on his arm,” he said. “What do you say, Cindy Lou?” he asked. His pet name for her.

“It doesn’t matter now,” she whispered.

The planning sessions ended abruptly. Cynthia stayed an extra hour after school every day that week. After dinner, she’d excuse herself to bed. I was allowed to stay up late and watch the ten o’clock news. It felt good to be lodged, warmly, between Mom on the left and Dad on the right until I fell asleep, and Dad carried me up to our room. Just the three of us.

At school, when asked for updates, I’d make up tidbits about how Cynthia had chosen a beautiful, lavender dress that flowed off her shoulders and cascaded to the floor, embellishing the fictional dress with details I remembered from the magazines. My friends seemed satisfied with words like lace overlay, chiffon, and appliqué.

The night of the prom, Cynthia locked herself in the bathroom. She'd been in there nearly an hour when I knocked on the door. We'd been given grape soda and pizza for dinner—we were hardly ever allowed soda. Cynthia either didn't notice or didn't care; she ate one small piece and asked to be excused. I drank four cans, and no one said anything. The sweet, purple liquid bubbled in my mouth. An hour later, however, I had a very full bladder. "I'm going to pee all over myself!" I screamed, after almost twenty knocks and no response.

"Oh all right," she muttered. I heard water sloshing as she got out of the bathtub and opened the door. "Make it speedy." She hurried back in, drawing the shower curtain closed. One hand emerged and deposited the towel she'd wrapped around herself on the tiled floor.

I rushed over to the toilet and dropped my shorts, reeling from the sweet relief. My legs relaxed as the last of it came out, and then a little more. And then a few more drops. But I didn't have to go anymore. I spread my thighs a bit and peered into the bowl, slowly turning dark with elegant bits of crimson flowering out in the water.

"Goddamnit!" I yelled. "I started my period!" The shower curtain yanked back and Cynthia's head popped out.

"What?"

There had been one cursory prep talk at school and plenty of secret handoffs of pads and tampons between the girls who had already started, but I'd thought it still a long way off. Cynthia jumped out of the tub and rushed over to me. I pawed at the toilet paper, spinning the roll several times and thrusting a wad between my legs.

Though we shared a room, I hadn't really seen Cynthia's body in awhile. But as she stood wet and unclothed, I took in her new figure, her nipples that had pooled out to the size of quarters, the dome of her breasts, the delicate inlet of her waist, her hips, and, most fascinatingly, the crosshatch of yellow hair that sprouted above her pelvis. I looked and looked, as I didn't know when I'd ever see it like this again. I tacked it up on my mental corkboard as the blueprint of what I was to become. Later, I'd trace the lines and contours on my own body.

She realized what I was looking at and grabbed her towel off the floor, winding it around herself again. “Gross, Katy,” she said. “You perv.” Reaching into the cabinet under the sink, she produced a slender white tube and flung it at me, hitting me on the side of the face. “Use this.” Then she flicked the drain open on the tub and closed the bathroom door behind her.

I picked the tampon off the floor. The paper was damp from water that had spilled over the sides of the tub. I unwrapped the soggy packaging and pulled out the cardboard column. I had absolutely no idea how to use it. Furious that she’d left me, I started after her. Was this my punishment for the dress? But rivulets ran down my leg. I couldn’t chase after her, demand that she let me look at her, show me what to do, much less forgive me. “Bitch,” I said. I’d never said it before, but saying it then dulled the ache in my groin. I looked at myself in the long mirror above the sink. “Bitch.”

I was still in the bathroom when Nathan knocked. I heard him come inside, pose for a few pictures, and then the front door slammed behind them as they followed Dad to the van. Spying from the bathroom window, I saw him lean over and peck Cynthia on the cheek. Cynthia squirmed inside the dress.

I spent a half hour on the toilet, pushing tampon after tampon through the applicator in order to understand how it functioned, and another twenty minutes gathering the nerve to insert it. When I finally did, another ten minutes later, the pressure felt awful. I left the bathroom feeling filthy, my thighs pressed as close together as I could manage while still walking. I didn’t want it to fall out.

“Oh Katy,” Mom said when I told her and stroked my head. “Your father isn’t going to like that. Cynthia didn’t start until last year.” She glanced absentmindedly out the window at his gardenias. “He thinks you girls are growing too fast. Maybe we can hold off telling him,” she said, for which I was grateful.

That night, the room was vacant and cold. I wondered what Cynthia was doing at the dance. If Nathan called her baby. If she laughed. If he moaned, “Oh Cyn, oh baby,” in her ear as she kissed him and he shifted over her, and if she sighed “baby” as his hands slithered against her. I ran one hand timidly down between my legs and wandered around

the hollow area with my fingers, exploring the viscous dampness. My hand emerged sticky. I examined it closely, feeling sick.

It was midnight when Cynthia slipped into the room. I sat up. The light was off. I couldn't see her face.

"When's the prom?" I asked, sleepily.

"Shh," she answered. "The prom ended a few hours ago." She slipped out of the dress and pulled out a camisole and a skirt.

"What happened?"

She shrugged. "Not much. Nathan and I danced every slow song together. Not too close, though. Thanks to Dad."

"Why are you putting on clothes?"

"I'm going out."

"Do Mom and Dad know?"

"What do you think?"

"You mean you're just going to go out in the middle of the night? Something could happen to you."

"Go back to bed, Katy."

"Cynthia."

"I said go back to bed."

"I hope something does happen to you!" I hissed. "That'll teach you."

Cynthia paused and turned toward me. "I'm sorry, Katy. It's just that Nathan..." Her fingers flexed open and closed at her side. I could hardly hear her. "I'll be safe. We're going to his friend's house. Don't worry. I'll be back in a little bit." Shadows swallowed her small frame. "This means so much to me. I need you—to do this for me. Please?"

"Cynthia," I began. She was poised between the door and hall. "I'm sorry about the dress," I whispered.

She looked surprised. "Thanks."

I nodded, the only thing I could think of. And then she was gone again.

The next morning, Mom shook me awake. The clock flashed five-thirty. Cynthia's bed was still made. Mom was slumped over, her robe untied. Dad stood behind her. His neck was tense and he gripped the cordless phone in his left hand.

"Where's your sister?" he demanded.

"I don't know," I said. My mind raced. "She came home last night."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know."

"Are you sure?" Mom pleaded.

"I don't know." Outside, the sun began breaking the sky. The paperboy rode past and chucked the Sunday *Times* at our door, but these details barely registered with any of us. "I—"

"Katy Kat," Dad choked. "If you don't know where she is, we're going to call the police. She might be dead, she might be..." His voice shuddered off.

Mom's hair was falling out of a clip. Dad fingered the rubbery numbers on the phone. Cynthia's pillowcase lay flat. I thought of her face bent under Nathan's kiss. She'd be furious if I'd told. But she was fragile, and she had disappeared last night, and I was afraid that the Cynthia I used to know might be gone forever. I thought of how much I both hated and wanted to be her. How she'd pushed me away. I thought all of these things at once.

I had to tell.

Dad pushed the talk button on the phone.

"Don't do that," I said.

An hour later, she showed up at home. One side of her face was covered in delicate red lines, her hair tangled. She inched open the front door. Mom walked up to her and struck her hard on her other cheek. Her ring would leave a little moon-shaped scar. As Mom collapsed at the base of the stairs, Cynthia's eyes darted toward mine, and in a second of hurt I knew I could never mend, they went flat. She knew. Dad seized her by the shoulders, and I looked away, down through the floor, anywhere but at Cynthia. I

heard his hand connect with skin, and she gasped in shock. “I’m going to kill that boy,” he said. There was a tumble of feet on the stairs as she was dragged to our room.

After she’d been taken upstairs, I went out back and hid behind the gardenia bush while the noise from upstairs continued. The gardenias were just beginning to wake up. With each crescendo, I focused harder and harder on the delicate, gilded edges of the each white petal. I’d never seen them so beautiful. I prayed that someday, maybe a long time away, it would all even out. I wished I could reverse time and warn her not to trust me; I’d only betray her. She’d be angry, but it would be worth it. Or else that I could rappel down the side of the house, scoop her up, and carry her somewhere safe.

The next year, we transferred to the Christian school—no school dances. I didn’t mind that much. I had less trouble making friends, earning a certain amount of respect for having attended regular school. But Cynthia never adjusted, settling under a calm that belied the vitality she’d once possessed. Mom said our new school was a blessing.

Enough time passed that the sweet redolence of the gardenias made me light headed and eventually, I fell asleep behind the bush, the sun warming my face. Then, finally, it was quiet.

The Fighters

If anyone asks, you deny it. But some days, with his bangs in his eyes, the beard that never trims properly, and the *s* shaped scar on his left knuckle from punching through the window of his car to retrieve the keys he'd left in the ignition, Mark Pate just might be the love of your life. Most days though, and to anyone else, he's the love of Anna Morgan's life. They live together. Any day now, they'll get married, turn out children. Overnight this happened, their falling in love. Four and a half years ago. Something like that.

You talk twice a month, he in Denver and you in Seattle. After graduation, you decided that 1500 miles would surely be enough to make you forget him. Three years later, it still hasn't happened. Nights between the calls, you're antsy. You try to write a little but just erase the lines and then type the same ones again. It's killing your creativity, this Mark Pate business. Pining might have worked for Keats but not for you. You're better off with *Discovery Health* and a bag of rice cakes.

You send him an email, every now and then, just to keep in touch. It takes him a good week or so to respond, and then it's just a few lines. Frustrated, you burn several of his old emails that you've printed out, folded carefully, and stored in a box covered with ornate beads. You're done. The wind blows backward on your balcony, moving smoke into your eyes as you hold the corners of the burning paper. You try to burn the box, too, but the beads release an acrid smell, so you blow it out. And then every two weeks on Thursday night, you call him, or he calls you. This, of course, is not as often as you'd like, but often enough for you to seem breezy.

One night in November, he calls a few minutes early. It's the 312th call. Or is it the 313th? 312th. Definitely. "What's up?" you ask, hoping there's something.

"Not much. Just bored, so I thought I'd give you a ring."

"Oh." At least he thought of you. You ask about his job at the downtown library and joke about the time the two of you crashed the biology faculty's Christmas party. He starts talking about Anna's graduate courses in public policy, but you cut him off to tell him about your job counseling at a non-profit center for teenage runaways.

"My supervisor says I have genuine empathy," you say.

Mark Pate interrupts, one of his both annoying and endearing qualities.

“Have you gone on any dates recently?”

“A few.”

“Well? With whom?”

“No one you know. A guy named Howard.” Howard was your box turtle when you were seven. “But none of them seem to be working out,” you add. “I’m too busy. Not really looking for anything. Neither was he.”

“Forget him. He doesn’t know what he’s missing.”

“Think so?”

“Know so.”

Will Mark Pate ever stop getting to you?

“If you want, I’ll take him out. I’m taking kung fu lessons.”

You imagine Mark Pate in baggy white pajamas, a black belt at his waist. But Mark Pate can hardly drive a stick shift. “You’re taking kung fu lessons? At a studio?”

“No, from someone I know from work.”

“An instructor?”

“No, he just does it. His name’s Diamond.”

“Like—in the rough? As in, a diamond is forever?”

A pause. He doesn’t fill it. You reach for the easy banter again. “God, you’re serious?”

“Absolutely. You know what kung fu means? Achievement through great effort. I’m trying to achieve something great.”

You work a sardonic look onto your face even though he can’t see it. “How do you know this guy’s not a quack?”

“He’s studied it for several years, and he seems to know what he’s doing. Really, he’s brilliant.” Mark Pate sounds genuinely hurt, and for a moment, you’re sorry you said it.

“Well, keep me posted,” you say, but you’re still suspicious.

The next morning, you're up at six, jogging, and at the center by eight. Courtney is waiting, the hood of her yellow *California Terrors* sweatshirt pulled low over her eyes. When she's not there, you check outside every thirty minutes, worried that you've missed her. You're not supposed to scold her, but you'd often like to. This morning, she offers you a Styrofoam cup of watery hot chocolate as you walk in the door. You take stock of the blue welt on her cheek.

"It's nothing," she says, grinning out of one side of her mouth. You've memorized her file. Born in San Diego. Abusive aunt. Picked up twice for shoplifting. Scored a 1560 on her SAT. Last week, you loaned her \$15 for a pregnancy test which came out negative. "Nothing I can tell you about, anyway. You understand. International conspiracies and all. Wouldn't want to involve you."

"Thanks. Might compromise my job."

"And then I'd have to cover *your* ass," she says.

"But at least I'd have some free time."

"And you could come see more of my drawings." She smiles, and her teeth are perfect. You never stop being surprised. The kids you work with want to become neurologists, animal trainers, entrepreneurs of vast video game empires—dreams to which meth and digging change out of payphones are only tiny setbacks. Like Courtney, hunched over her sprawling chalk drawings of deconstructed faces, they're not afraid. And it makes you a little ashamed of the files stored in your computer, your card catalog of sentences, the things you've tucked away so that you can't discover them.

You come home, and your answering machine is blinking, a rare occurrence, one fast, angry, red flash. You press it slowly. "Hey Laura, it's Mark Pate. I was thinking, well, Anna and I were talking, and I got to thinking—why doesn't Laura come and visit? After all, when's the last time you were here?" Graduation. Doesn't he know this? "So think about it and let me know."

Absolutely not. Sure, you'd love to see him, but the thought of Anna presiding over the visit like a hawk, screeching every time you sat too close, laughed a bit too long, lingered in a welcome hug, decides it for you. Before calling him back, you practice your excuses: Anna's busy; their apartment doesn't have enough room; your work schedule is

hectic, a touch of flu, your socks need ironing. You breathe deeply and dial. The line picks up. “Yellow?”

“Howdy, Mark Pate!” you say. That name. Up until he was in sixth grade, he was the only Mark at his school, but then a new Mark enrolled, so he became Mark Pate to distinguish between the two. He responds to nothing else. The extra letters make him more charming, he likes to say.

“Uh—this is Anna.”

Just like that, you hang up.

You splash cold water on your face and stare at the phone, hoping it won’t ring. Great. Just great. Maybe she didn’t recognize your voice. In all this time, you’ve had a half a dozen conversations, tops, each no more than a minute or two. Ah, but they probably have caller I.D. Shit. You grab a napkin and a pen from the kitchen and draw a little picture of a noose with your head in it. The mouth looks like salami—you’re a terrible artist. Finally, you dial again.

“Hello?”

“Anna, it’s Laura.”

“Did you just call?”

“I hung up on accident,” you say. “You know, the button, and my thumb just...”

She clears her throat. “Oh. How are you?”

“Busy, busy. I’ve been busy. You know, with my work and all. Which is why I called, in fact. To say that I’ve been busy and probably can’t come visit.”

“That’s too bad. I know he’d like to see you,” she says. He’d. You can’t gauge her tone. After another pause, she says, “Hang on. I’ll go get him.” Muffled voices that you can’t decode, then the phone is handed off to a wet, smacking sound.

“I hear you’re standing me up,” Mark Pate says.

“I’m busy.”

“Well, maybe another time. Didn’t figure you’d make it anyway.” He’s wrapping his fingers in the phone cord, you’re sure. You’ve seen him do it a million

times. “After I called you, though, I realized that it’s been since graduation since I’ve seen you. It’s a shame. We used to hang out every day.”

He remembers. You try to imagine their apartment. Books, matching dishes, coordinated sofa and rugs, pictures of their family and friends. Little Anna-dictated decorating flourishes everywhere. But maybe Anna will be busy, giving you plenty of time alone. The thought makes your fingertips loose feeling. You’d be the perfect houseguest, knowing how anal Mark Pate is about keeping things clean. All of your clothes folded in your suitcase. No toothpaste on the sink, no water splashes on the mirror.

“I could probably take a little time off,” you admit. “If you’re sure I won’t be a burden?”

“We’d love to have you,” Mark Pate says. There it is: we. An us, a me and a her and not you. We.

“I’ll see what I can do,” you say. *They’d* love to have you.

Several weeks later, you’re on a flight to Denver. As you shoot over the Rockies, the flight attendant scooping ice cubes into drinks begins to look a bit like Anna—the same loosely curled hair—that is, if you’re recalling Anna’s face clearly. The harder you try to picture it, the less detail you remember. You hope she really looks like Janis Joplin. “Know thy enemy,” Courtney said once of the Chola girls who beat her up in high school. At the time, you feared for her, but now her words make you chuckle, and you try to think about something else.

But when the seatbelt sign is turned on again, your attention drifts to how you’ll make your entrance. You decide to shake Anna’s hand first. This is safest. You’ll slap Mark Pate on the back and say—warmly but neutrally—“How are you, old chum?” You hope Anna doesn’t say anything about the dress, though. Once, Mark Pate—pre-Anna—told you that you look lovely in emerald green. If she notices, your eyes will betray the fact that you have dressed up for him. Just in case, you make sure your coat is tightly belted when you make your way out of the terminal. Later, when no one’s looking, you can peel it off.

But it doesn't happen that way at all. After deplaning, you take the train to the terminal and scan the crowd gathered around baggage claim. A cluster of strange faces. And then, without warning, he's there, in your face, kissing your cheek and working his hand around the curve of your elbow. You try to swallow and breathe, both and once, and fail. You admit it; you have a problem. Hello, my name is Laura, and I'm a Mark Pate addict.

Mark Pate is grinning, though it's hard to determine his expression, given that he looks as though he hasn't shaved since graduation.

"Where's Anna?"

"Hello yourself. She's working on a paper for her Ethics class." His eyes flash a sense of mischief, like he knows something you don't. This used to delight you, but now it makes you shift your feet uncomfortably.

"What about?"

"Discursive Hyperreality in Modern Capitalist Cultures." You don't even know what that means. But then, it occurs to you that maybe, neither does he.

"Sounds like she's really working hard."

"She is."

"Must put a strain on things." You once read a post-structuralism theory of disenfranchised consumerism. Or was it post-modernist? A post-modernist theory of consumer disenfranchisement? A structural-modernist disenfranchisement of theory?

"Maybe just a little bit." Mark Pate shrugs.

"I once read this modern disenfranchisement of theory." It's all wrong. But you arch your eyebrows smugly anyway, as though it's Mark Pate's fault if it sounds stupid.

"Interesting," he says. Now you know he doesn't know what it means, either.

"It's really new," you say. "And it probably won't catch on."

"But if it does, I'll remember that I heard it from you first," Mark Pate promises and tenderly arranges your scarf around your neck. His eyes sparkle under the melted flakes of snow in his hair. He opens the door to lead you out of the airport. Your head spins. You would like to bear his children. The thought of little Mark Pates gives you

hope for good in the world—although you have been privately disgusted by the birthing process ever since seventh grade. Mr. Lewis, your intramural basketball coach and sex ed teacher, rather than stammer through all the clinical terms, relied on videos. You can still recall “The Mysterious Miracle of Life,” and the picture of the mottled cervix as bits of flesh emerged from the blood. But that wasn’t even the worst part. The worst parts were the stills at each developmental stage: the puppet mouth, the googley eyes. You rushed out of class, clutching at your stomach, nauseated and embarrassed, amid laughter. Until ninth grade, everyone called you Preggo.

“Mark!” you scream as he releases the door. The glass grazes your nose, narrowly avoiding smashing it. In your broken reverie, you see him reflected; his breath cuts white paths through the air. And for a second, he looks like no one you know.

On second thought, the world is evidently teeming with kung fu fighters. And Mark Pate, Jr. would be a mouthful for any kid.

“Sorry. I thought you were right behind me.”

“Well I wasn’t.”

“Geez Laura.” You hate the way he turns the first *a* into an *o*. A large Greyhound bus slides past.

“Hurry,” he says, pulling you out into the cold. “That’s our ride!”

Anna is, as you feared, disheveled and sexy in sweats slung low on her hips. Her hair is pulled back, and she smiles and gives you a three-fingered wave as you come in the door. Inside, you catch a hint of lavender soap.

“You made it,” she says.

“We’re glad you’re here,” Mark Pate says.

You glance around their apartment. A slip-covered sofa, a few CDs (U2—you hate U2), an old television and even older computer. Green striped wallpaper. A pile of magazines. It’s not quite Mark Pate, but doesn’t exactly seem Anna’s style, either. On top of the stack is *Shaolin Kung fu*. “How is the thing going?” you ask, pointing.

“I’ve never felt so centered and yet powerful in my life,” Mark Pate proclaims. He inhales deep, greedy breaths and slowly flutters his eyes open and shut.

Anna rolls her eyes and looks away. You bite your lip. The apartment is uncomfortably warm, and you begin to take off your coat.

“Hey,” Anna says, “That’s some dress.”

A few hours later, Mark Pate runs to the store for more garlic and insists you stay with Anna while she cooks dinner. Lemon garlic chicken, couscous, and homemade bread. You can barely work a can opener.

“Do you cook?” she asks, chopping up a lemon in quick, even slices.

“Oh, sure. Mostly family recipes. Stuff that’s not very common.”

“Like what?”

“Um—Polish food.”

“Do you know how to make Golabki? That’s one of my favorites.” Her wrist flicks the blade up and down in deft strokes.

“Yeah—how’s grad school?”

“Good but lots of work.”

“What are you taking?”

“Right now, a class on welfare economics and another on international relations. How about you? What do you do, again?”

“Counseling.”

“That’s right. You see a lot of messed up kids?”

You’ve never thought of Courtney that way. She’s certainly not the worst. The worst have searching, vacant eyes, like they don’t know what they’re looking for or even what they’ve lost. “Some.”

“I always think, ‘Sure all this theory is interesting, but I’d love to do something with immediate consequences.’ Something that makes a difference.”

“Well, it’s not for everyone.”

Anna smiles thinly.

“But what you’re doing sounds important too,” you add. “And I’m sure you’re busy.”

“Yes, and unfortunately, about to get busier.” She concentrates on bisecting the lemon rind. “My assistantship hardly pays anything, and we need a new car, so I’m thinking about getting a second job.”

“Why doesn’t Mark Pate get a second job?”

“He says he doesn’t have the time. He does work fifty hours a week at the library, but then there’s the lessons—excuse me, the training.” She sighs and stops chopping for a moment. “And I hate to harp on him about money all the time.”

“But that’s not your fault.”

She starts chopping again, vigorously. The blade is wet with juice, and the pungent smell of lemons makes your mouth water. Anna sets down the knife and turns to face you. “Please don’t tell him I told you this.” Her mouth is a tight line.

“I won’t,” you promise.

After they had started dating, Mark Pate told you he admired Anna’s resolve. “She’s the most determined person I’ve ever met,” he said.

“We’ve been together so long, I don’t really remember what kind of person I was before I met him. He has that magnetism that draws you in, you know?”

“I guess.”

“It’s one of those things you have to experience,” she says, and squeezes the remaining lemons into a pot.

Thing is, you have.

You met Mark Pate at a reading given by a poet whom you didn’t and still don’t particularly admire, but there was free champagne, which you sipped from a plastic Dixie cup while trying to look grown up. Two seats over and one seat up, Mark Pate was trying to do the same thing. After several minutes, he swiveled in his seat and hissed, “Hello there. I’m Mark Pate.”

“Laura Turnwhite,” you said.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Turnwhite.”

“Likewise, Mark.”

“It’s Mark Pate, actually.”

A few faces turned in your direction. *Shhhhhh.*

Over giggles and homemade brownies, it happened: the rush of serotonin, your monoamines frenzied, firing blips wildly through the nexus of synapses in your mind, like a mental illness for which you would never seek treatment, too much to talk about or even think about for too long. He helped you study for microeconomics, laughed at your talking muffin joke, and praised the poems you slaved over for workshop. In American Lit, Brit Lit, Chicana Lit, Irish Lit, Lit of the Middle Ages—you sat next to him and watched him—realizing, strikingly, that he was real, a person, another humanity, space and energy all of his own, and you sucked it in. Until Anna came along, you slept with him almost every night—slept, literally, spoon style, with one of his arms hooked around your waist. You always protested: Did he need to assert his masculinity that badly? His arm was heavy. He would get comfortable so quick. Before sleep finally settled in, he whispered, more than once—four times, but who’s counting?—“You’re too perfect for me.” After he fell asleep, you’d lie awake for hours trying to decipher the meaning of those words.

Sophomore year, there was one tense week during which there was a lot of talk about Mark Pate and the R.A. of the all-women’s floor. He sailed into your room one morning, proclaiming, “She’s amazing! Just amazing!”

“Super,” you said, pulling the covers over your head. But it didn’t turn into anything. For a week, he sulked. Just as it was getting unbearable, his mood improved suddenly, wonderfully. That was Mark Pate. There was no more talk.

By your junior year, you and Mark Pate were inseparable. Before Christmas Break, you invited him to come home with you, promising him prying aunts and uncles, snot-nosed cousins, grumpy grandparents, the whole works. It would be good for his cultural education, you joked. Farm and field. He could show off his sore thumbery. But more importantly, you wanted to introduce him to your parents so they’d stop making queries about your personal life. And you wanted to kiss him on Christmas morning.

Mark Pate said, “I don’t do Christmas.”

“You don’t do Christmas?”

“Never have.”

You mocked, cajoled, and finally, against your better judgment, you pleaded. Finally, you left it at this: “Mark Pate, you’re an idiot.”

When he dropped you off at the airport, he didn’t hug you goodbye.

The three hour flight home, that last exchange weighed heavily on your mind. You called him from a pay phone when the plane landed.

“Hello?” a tiny voice answered.

“It’s Laura. Look, I’m sorry, Mark Pate. I didn’t mean you’re an idiot. It was just that—”

“—Laura. I don’t even remember what was said.”

“But—”

“—It’s fine. I’m not mad.”

“You’re not, even just a little?”

“A little, but I’ll survive.”

“I miss you, Mark Pate.” You didn’t mean to say that, either.

“Miss you too, Lar. I’ll see you soon though.”

As the days without Mark Pate dwindled, you saw him pacing his dorm at night, weak light streaming in from the one, narrow window in each room of Coldwell Hall, unable to sleep, as feverishly awake as you. The day before you flew back, you called to remind him what time your flight got in.

“Can’t wait to see you,” he said.

You couldn’t wait, either.

And then he picked you up at the airport with a beautiful mass of scarves and sweaters clinging to his side. “This is Anna,” he said.

After that, you saw less of Mark Pate.

Sure, you’ve had boyfriends in the past four years: Eddie From Work. A date with Pete, who owned a hot dog stand and gave you free toppings. A fling with a mandolin player. Each time, you tell yourself you’ve moved on. At least until Mark Pate’s name lands in your inbox, making you sweat as you click on the subject line. At least until the next Thursday.

And yet—it comes and goes. Starts out strong, fades a little, then flits back with force. But you've got moves, tricks. You started working at Woodrow. Sign in the window. Stop being so self-pitying, you told yourself. So you filed papers. Changed coffee filters. Watched the trail of wanderers. Talked a little. Then your supervisor noticed that more kids wanted to talk to you. Then Courtney. "Mark Pate who?" you asked yourself some mornings.

And the rain. Drizzling, slashing, dripping, pelting. Not purifying but different. No fierce summer afternoon storms shaking the mountains with thunder. At times, it's been enough to make you feel different, too.

Push and pull. A word from Mark Pate will begin to pull you back. Just a word or a sentence, though, each time, with diminishing force. You push back. Given enough time, a speeding word would eventually putter to a stop. Each time, you lose a little of that worn, old self. Something will give, you've feared and hoped. Question is, *when?*

At dinner, photo albums are unearthed and you pore over pictures of the three of you as undergrads, Mark Pate and Anna—and you. In almost every one, their hands and arms are wedged into the familiar creases of each other's bodies. You're off to one side, a wry smile plastered on your face, one eye darting off to the corner. For being too perfect, this is your reward.

You lie awake nearly all night, huddled on the air mattress in their living room. From the bedroom, there are whispers, of which you catch only the high notes, blankets being pulled up and down. Their headboard moves against the wall. A broken laugh. You hold very still, listening for I-love-yous, bed squeaks, whips, human sacrifice, incantations, moans.

When the noises begin to quiet, you creep to the desk near the door and open the drawers but find only scraps of paper with scrawled dates and phone numbers. You remove the cushions on the couch—lint and a penny—and open each book on their shelves, getting sidetracked by The Great Gatsby. Otherwise, nothing. You lie down again and try not to imagine what their bed looks like, feet tangled at the bottom of the blankets, tufts of hair sticking out from under the comforter.

Look what you've become.

Around 3 a.m., you tiptoe into the kitchen for a drink, the linoleum cold on your bare feet. You search the cabinets for a glass. You find one, fill it, and stand next to the window in their kitchen.

"Hey."

Your throat closes, and you cough, not turning around.

"Easy there," Mark Pate says, rubbing the exposed area between your shoulder blades. "Take it easy." His palm is hot as it brushes the down on the back of your neck. Even his fingers are warm. You turn around.

He's shirtless, his body streaked by narrow panels of light filtering through the window. You try not to look. His nipples are firm dark spots, and you can just make out a few strands of hair that grow thick in the center of his chest.

"I'm okay," you squeak. Your voice is too loud in the night stillness. It echoes, on repeat, in your head. Someone else's voice, flat and hollow. You're suddenly aware of the rhythm of your chest sinking and rising.

Mark Pate sneezes and hitches up the waistband of his purple sweats. Runs his thumb over a scab on his elbow. "Sure?" he asks.

You nod. And swoop in toward his mouth, but he turns to sneeze again, and your nose crushes against his chin. He huffs into your hair.

"Shit," he says, rubbing vigorously.

You put your hands over your face. Shit.

"Laura." He tries to pry them off.

You hold on tighter.

"Look at me."

"No," you say through your fingers.

"No? Why not?"

"Could you just go away, Mark Pate?" you whisper. "Please?"

"You won't look at me at all?"

You shake your head firmly.

"What do you want me to say?"

“I don’t know.” It’s the truth, but with your hands smashed against your mouth, the truth sounds like “turtle flow.”

“Fine. Good night, then.” He pads back into the bedroom and closes the door quietly. You release your face, full of heat.

Though you would have liked it never to begin, the morning of your second day in the Pate-Morgan love nest starts early. You slept on and off, horrified each time you woke to realize that the panicky knot at your core wouldn’t go away. You’re eighteen again, full of jitters. But in the light, everyone looks normal. Anna sets out bowls, pours juice and coffee. You’re feeling remarkably sharp, even with the time change, in comparison your hosts’ bleary eyes. You wonder if Courtney showed up at the center. Is anyone talking with her? Sometimes, it gets busy, but you always make time for Courtney. Cutting the visit a little short might not be such a bad idea for either of you.

“Sleep well?” Anna asks.

“Great,” you say glancing sideways at Mark Pate. He yawns into his coffee. Some sort of signal? Yawn three times if you love me, Mark Pate.

“You writing any poems lately?” he asks.

“Yes. Some. A few.”

He takes a swig of coffee.

“When the timing is right.”

“What about?” Anna asks.

Suddenly, they’re both looking at you. Your mouth flutters open. You wrap your fingers around a ceramic mug, no doubt a holdover from some seventh grade art project. The bumpy irregularities press heat into your hands. Steam gathers under the misshapen lip, then releases in thick plumes. You know that whatever you say will be inadequate. “I can’t really talk about it.”

Mark Pate smirks. “You poetic types.”

Your heart pulses in double time.

Anna cuts in. “You should let us read them. *I’d* like to.”

“I want to read them too,” Mark Pate says, jutting out his lower lip.

“You’re just saying that because I said it first.”

“Anna,” he whines.

“What’s on the schedule for today?” you ask.

“I’m going to my session,” Mark Pate says. Anna stares into her juice. “You could come,” he says to you. The steam lashing your face is uncomfortable, and you push the mug away. His chin is positioned on the heel of his palm, waiting for an answer. Isn’t it obvious what a bad idea it is? And yet, a day in the apartment, the three of you, would be bad, too. Either way, it’s trouble.

“Maybe I should stay here. I don’t want to be in the way.” Too late for that.

“Actually, I was going to go too,” Anna says. Of course. She doesn’t want to be alone with the boyfriend-kissing failed poet.

“Well—” you begin.

“You aren’t going to stay here all day by yourself?” Mark Pate says. A question or a statement, you don’t know. You look at your watch, but it’s still on west coast time. Did they notice that you looked through their stuff? Impossible.

“Um—” Both sets of eyes are trained on you again. You reach for the mug and twirl it between your hands. “Okay.” It gives you an excuse to feel bad. And somehow, bad is a safe place.

Anna tells you the session won’t last long. She’s anxious to finish her paper. When Mark Pate suggests that she stay home to work on it, she raises one eyebrow and cocks her head at him. He cocks his in return. You pretend not to notice. But you’re grateful she won’t let it drag on.

During the car ride over, you stare at their heads from the backseat of their old Ford. The bus doesn’t run to North Denver, but Mark Pate promises that his car will get you there. Eventually. His license is expired, so Anna drives. The leather over the seats is so old, you can feel the springs under your thighs with each bump. The temptation to trace pictures in the fogged windows is strong. As a child, you were always chastised for this.

Mark Pate looks at you in the rearview mirror and tells you that Diamond recently competed in the all-city championships where he proceeded to get sixth place and get “tore up,” he whispers. You wonder what this means, searching his tone for clues. Their elbows brush against each other. His is dry, the skin wrinkling like a raisin. Hers is smooth and clean. They keep them there, touching.

In spite of the sputtering charms of the car, Anna is a careful driver. She looks back quickly before changing lanes, and always signals the appropriate amount of times. Never guns it on yellow.

“What happened?” you ask.

“Diamond says the mind is that which governs the physical self, abdicating physical strength for cerebral power—” You can’t quite hear him from where you’re sitting. Anna’s curls float above the headrest while Mark Pate chatters on. You shiver in the cold air that rushes through the cracks above the windows. Your eyes meet Anna’s. Ashamed, you look away. She’s onto you.

“Did you hear that?” Mark Pate turns around in his seat.

“Hmm?”

“About centering? Are you listening?”

“Sorry.”

“You seem kind of off lately,” he says.

“Yeah, well, I don’t have your Zen-like powers of concentration.” Humor masks insecurity, so they say. And a host of other mental terrors.

“Who does?” Anna adds.

“Seriously,” he insists, a little too loudly. Then, to Anna, “She’s different.”

“People change. They grow up.” Anna pulls her elbow from the console.

Three blocks go by. No one talks. Then, one big bump nearly sends you flying into the front seat. Your hand rams against Mark Pate’s thigh. Seconds, minutes, years fly by with it there, but then Mark Pate lifts it off with his thumb and forefinger.

“Better put on your seatbelt,” he says.

“Thanks, Dad.” It’s too late to take it back, and he doesn’t turn around.

“It’s cold,” Anna says, rubbing both arms. “Why don’t you get the heat fixed?” she asks Mark Pate.

“Not enough money,” he snaps. Then he adds, “That’s enough out of you two,” and shakes his finger around the car. Everyone giggles once, tersely. You reach over to the window and draw one long streak down the glass.

Thirteen minutes later, Anna pulls up at Martin Luther King, Jr. Park and sets the brake. Under a massive cottonwood tree sits a man with his legs crossed, palms turned upward. All limbs, he wears a thin tunic and navy blue spandex leggings. The cords of muscle ripple underneath his skin. “That’s Diamond,” Mark Pate says. “He does that for thirty minutes before he starts.”

“At least he has the time,” Anna mutters.

The hard ground crunches beneath your feet as the three of you trudge toward him from the car.

“It harmonizes him with his surroundings,” Mark Pate continues.

“Looks vicious,” you say.

Mark Pate lowers his eyelids. You offer a smile instead, but he doesn’t return it. Walking next to you, Anna opens up little grooves in the ground with the toe of her sneakers.

“You shouldn’t have agreed to come if you’re just going to mock it,” he says. “It means a lot to me.”

“You really believe all this?”

“It’s something deeper than the grounded self, it’s—something you wouldn’t understand,” he whispers just as you reach the tree. But before anyone has a chance to become angry, Diamond springs to life. His eyes glaze over you, and he blinks. He might be a quack, but he’s an intense quack. You can see all the way through his clear green pupils. You search for something intelligent, or at least witty. You say, “How’s it going?”

“I’m fine, thank you. How are you?” He bows a little at the waist.

“Are we ready to get this show on the road?” Anna asks.

“I’m just going to watch,” you say.

“Me too,” she says.

“Fine,” Mark Pate says, purses his lips, and follows Diamond to a clearing several feet away. No glance backward or an, “Are you sure?”

Anna moves off to the side, just behind you. You catch faint swells of heat from her breath, but you don’t turn around.

Diamond leads Mark Pate in a few warm-up exercises, stretches, and then what might be called the sparring begins. A sharper, harder ballet. Feeling self-consciously like a jaded, nervous cheerleader, you watch Diamond cut through the thin fog in clean, effortless moves. In contrast, Mark Pate tenses to produce kicks and jabs, timid, his limbs almost beyond his control.

“Don’t think. Just react. Your subconscious knows what to do,” Diamond coaches. Mark Pate nods; he’s obviously heard this before. They dance around each other.

Anna clears her throat. “Can you believe this?” Her face is twisted strangely.

You shrug. “I suppose it’s a hobby.”

“It’s ridiculous,” she persists. “Are you watching?”

“Kung fu means—”

“—Achievement through great effort. I know.”

“Certainly seems to be a lot of effort going on.”

Anna scoffs and looks away.

“It makes him happy.”

She digs at the dirt hard with the heel of her sneaker.

“I mean, if it’s what he wants.”

“And we all know, whatever Mark Pate wants, Mark Pate gets.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I just want to know if you’re impressed by this.”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re the one who’s been in love with him forever.” She pauses. “What’s so attractive?”

Good question, you think.

“I mean, I just want to know what I’m missing. I cook his food, pay the bills, listen to him ramble. And to you, he’s—charming? Sexy? How come I don’t get any of that?” She quickly wipes a hand under her eye.

“But he adores you.” It doesn’t hurt much as much as you’d imagined to say this.

“He used to. He’d say ‘You’re perfect’ to me all the time. But now, I leave one sock on the floor and he flips out.” She thumbs a stain on the hem of her coat.

The noise behind you stops. Glancing back, you see Diamond circle in and knock Mark Pate’s feet out from underneath him in one quick slice. He hovers over him for a moment, then extends a hand. Mark Pate lies crumpled over his legs, breathing hard. Embarrassed, you look away.

“What are you trying to say?”

He accepts the hand, rises, and they head toward you and Anna, an energy pulsating between them, between bated breath and an acrid smell that rises in the air. They walk close, like lovers.

“I feel like I’ve been cheated out of something.” She’s a million miles away. You would like to comfort her, but for all of your genuine empathy, you have no idea how to begin.

“What can I do?”

“Just worry about yourself, Laura.”

“Why don’t you try talking to him? I’m sure he’d be willing to change.”

“It won’t work.”

“What then? You’ll leave him? Go on like this?”

“Maybe. I’m not in the habit of abandoning the things I start.” Beneath the halo of curls, she looks very small. Mark Pate sneaks up behind her and kisses her neck. She pushes him off.

“Did you see me?” he asks. Anna turns and starts walking to the car. “Where you going?” he calls after her.

“Why don’t you leave her alone?” you say. “She’s upset.”

“What did you say to her?”

“Me?”

“You didn’t—about—oh god—last night?”

“No,” you hiss, trying not to look at Diamond, who, while stretching, is much closer than you’d prefer him to be.

“Excuse us,” Mark Pate says to Diamond, and leads you away. You watch Anna get in the car and slam the door. “Look, I didn’t make anything of it.”

“What?”

“Just forget about it. It’ll upset her, and she won’t talk to me. She’s so stubborn. Like when I told her about how we used to fall sleep together. She wouldn’t talk to me for a week.”

You’re too perfect. He was wrong about you of course, but in a sense, also right. This strikes you as the most important thing.

“I told her that none of that meant anything. We were stupid kids. We were just having fun. We didn’t know what was going on.” He tugs at his beard nervously. “You weren’t looking for anything.”

What *are* you searching for? For once, it doesn’t seem to matter. Maybe there’s a new story for your poor old brain, shot through with chemicals. Maybe the hunt’s the problem. There’s nothing to find. But for the first time during the visit, you feel calm. “Nothing means as much as her. We were just having fun, playing around. Right? Right Laura?” His voice stretches into a high, thin whine.

“Sure, Mark. Sure.”

* * *

A few days later, back at work, you wait all morning for Courtney, praying she didn’t take off when you were gone. She tumbles in the door just as you’re about to ask anyone if they’ve seen her.

“You’re here,” she says.

“I’m here.”

“I wanted to see if you were back.”

“You’re okay?”

“I’m fine. You don’t have to worry.”

“Bad habit of mine,” you admit.

“I like it,” she says. Her fingers are dusted with blue and green.

That night, you sit at your computer and type. Really type, uninterrupted. What comes out is not spectacular; you don't tell yourself that it is, but it's worth the risk. It's in there, waiting. Something is gaining energy, and your neurotransmitters work overtime to push it through. You don't check your email. The phone rings once, twice. You let it go.

In Security

Like many young men who find themselves unemployed and in need of money, David Dixon took on a variety of odd jobs the summer he arrived in Security to housesit for his parents. But unlike other young men who spend their Junes and Julys sipping lemonade from red and white striped straws while taking a break from lawn mowing, David encountered something strange in this small town on the summer-starved Eastern plains of Colorado. Maybe it was the town itself, which his mother had promised was rustic: three stoplights, a patchy nine-hole golf course, litter gathering against sidewalks overrun by spiky weeds, and fog everywhere from the nearby pickle factory which released wide plumes of black smoke, so unlike the clean, bright suburbs he'd always known, which were now four hours away. Maybe it was the people, whom his father had promised were friendly, always watching him. Skinny, hard faced girls with babies; worn old women in scuffed loafers; men in thin undershirts on porches, trying to escape the heat, and mostly young men, all watching. Maybe it was the spider invasion. Security, dry to its core from nearly a year without precipitation, was no home for its arachnid residents who, fleeing in droves, were everywhere, crawling up this and down that in their hasty escapes. Maybe it was all of these. But whatever it was, it was the spiders that David noticed first.

A shadow caught David's eye. Out of the farthest corner of the well crept the biggest one he had ever seen. The hairs on its massive legs pulsed as it sprawled over the dirt walls, passing by inches from his face. In a dark web hung a translucent shell flocked by even larger, female spiders with swollen bellies. He cried out.

"Whatsamatter?" Couch laughed down into the hole. "See a snake or something?"

David clutched the ladder and tried to make his arms and legs go up. From above, each rung was lit by a wide strip of light, but his limbs wouldn't work.

"Not yet—check the conduit. Something's blocking the water."

A quick look around. In the darkness; the pipe spanning the hole looked intact. What he was supposed to find? "Don't see anything." His mind raced to Ernesto, safe above ground—lucky bastard, he thought.

"You sure?"

“It all looks normal to me.”

“No uh, nothing?” The jowls on Couch’s face suddenly blocked the sunlight as he peered into the well.

David’s heart beat in double time. How was breathing supposed to go?

“Nothing!” he yelled.

“Alright then, you’d better get yourself out of there.”

Throwing himself into gear, David was nearly up the ladder before Couch finished, and he tumbled to the ground, running his fingers through the dirt.

“You’re brave, man,” said Ernesto, shuddering, several feet from the well’s mouth. “Braver than me. I’d shit myself down there.”

“What makes you think I didn’t?”

Couch smirked and shook his head. Then Ernesto began to laugh, almost doubling over. David grinned. He hadn’t heard anyone laugh in weeks, much less caused their laughter. After a few moments, Ernesto wiped his eyelids with the backs of his hands.

Those hands. From a distance, Ernesto looked normal, a little small. Then you noticed the stilted gait. Then the pale skin that burned red in the sun. And, finally, the thick webs between his fingers. When David shook his hand, it was like shaking a firm, strong fist. How Ernesto had ended up at Couch’s was anyone’s guess.

David had taken the first job listed in the classifieds: “Wanted—assistant. Couch’s Carts. No experience necessary.” He’d called, but no one answered. He looked up the address and drove a few minutes out of town to a crumbling white house tucked behind a few large elms. On the scant front lawn, all models of golf carts in various colors and stages of rust were parked in haphazard rows. Couch answered the door in his boxers, his stomach straining the elastic waistband. He looked at David’s short brown hair, sandals, green polo shirt. “You here for the job?” David nodded. “Drive a stick shift?” David nodded again. Couch squinted. “Come back tomorrow morning,” he said, closing the screen.

The first day, David cleaned the grimy floors of Couch’s living room and bedroom, avoiding the corners, where sacs of spider eggs collected in cottony webs. The

second day, he filed invoices; the third, tested batteries, and now, six weeks and five days later, climbed in wells to investigate blocked water pipes.

Just putting in time, David told himself. Once he had enough money, he'd starting looking for his own place; this was temporary, a summer gig. Hell, maybe he'd even save up and apply to other schools.

Everyone knew that as long as you paid, they wouldn't kick you out of State on account of bad grades. Tough break, everyone said. Must've decided to make an example of him. David had seen it coming too late. That spring, he'd watched the city come alive every morning, one less light at a time, building and houses taking shape, the dump truck rattling by, and felt himself fall a little further behind. Though he'd never had much of a problem advancing from one grade to the next, at State, he dropped easily into a routine of parties, road trips, midnight basketball, and the whole year just slipped away. That June, he packed and drove seven hours to his parents' new home in Security, the only place he had left to go. They'd moved there on a lark, drawn to the name. Didn't walk the thickly dusted streets much, David imagined; shop after shop was grimly empty. Or drive the flat, bare road into town. That his parents were spending the summer camping in Manitoba and would be largely unavailable was David's only relief. He wasn't yet prepared to face their questions, lectures, disappointment.

During those first few nights in Security, David sat alone in the guest room and watched television. He knew no one in the area. There was nothing on the walls to remind him that he was home. Most of his old stuff was somewhere in storage, and the few things he'd brought from the dorms were scattered around the bare room—a poster, towel rack, several spiral notebooks—no more than props in a movie. Once, after first arriving, he'd woken with a brown recluse in his hair, and had since taken to burrowing deep beneath his blanket with a bottle of Spider-B-Gone on the nightstand. Mornings, he woke not knowing where he was. And then the voices, his head full of them, would begin demanding answers: What's wrong with you? What are you going to do with your life?

David avoided looking at Ernesto's hands as they headed back to the house. Ahead of them, Couch waddled in short, turned-out steps, sweating freely. He was single,

in his sixties or so. David had never heard him mention a wife or children, and nothing on the filthy walls of his house suggested that there ever had been a family.

“I got someone coming in this afternoon,” Couch said between heavy breaths. “Gonna take a look at that ParCar. The blue one. I need you to hose it off and put a little wax on it. You know how to do that?”

“Yeah,” David and Ernesto chimed.

“But first,” he added, “You two can go to lunch.”

David checked his watch. Lunch already? The time he’d spent in the well had lessened the slow drudge of morning.

“Unless, you want to stay here. I could grill us some hot dogs,” Couch offered, jamming a hand in his pocket.

David felt sick.

“Can’t,” said Ernesto.

“No thanks. I have some things to do around home,” David said.

The morning after his well adventure, David jogged along the dusty canals that ran through miles of dry farmland at the edges of town. His arms and legs were sore, but the strain of running, movement, shedding toxins, was different, and he welcomed it, though it released other things, too. Memories, things he’d tried to keep down. Hoda. “I used you, David.” She’d said that. “I just needed to be touched, and you were there,” she’d continued, circling back to jab at him a second time. Hoda was the only thing that had mattered. He didn’t blame her for his apathy, his failing grades. But he did blame her for not letting him forget.

Breathing shallowly, he neared the end of the canal and turned onto one of the main roads back into town. The music from his small, portable radio was loud in his ears, and he didn’t hear the pickup approaching behind him. David didn’t know how long it’d been driving alongside him before he noticed and stopped, yanking the headphones down. The window slid open.

“Daaavid?” Ernesto’s eyes were full of water. Pot smoke clung to the inside of the truck.

David turned down the volume on his radio, just a little. Ernesto gestured for David to approach the truck, but David remained a few feet away.

“What are you up to, man?”

“Running.” He trained his eyes to look past the steering wheel—past the hands on the steering wheel—and out Ernesto’s passenger side window onto the cornfields, in which only a few gold stalks had managed to push their way above ground. “What are you up to?”

“Ah, you know.” Ernesto leaned out of the truck. “Just checking shit out. Parties and shit.” He looked around. “You wanna go to one? I could get us hooked up.”

David checked his watch. Seven-thirty. Parties? Ernesto idly ran his right hand over the gear shift. “I’d better keep running,” David said.

“You sure?”

David nodded.

“I’ll give you a call sometime, man.”

“I don’t really have a lot of free time.”

“Give me your number anyway. We might hang out later.” He fumbled around the passenger seat for a pen.

“I’m trying to get ahead for next semester. Taking one of those online courses.”

“You gotta take a break sometime.”

“Busy.”

“You mean, whenever you’re not at Couch’s, the only thing you do is homework? Don’t you eat? Sleep? Shit?” Ernesto raised one eyebrow and killed the engine. “I’m extending my friendship. Think about it.”

David looked up and down the road. “Fine. I might have an hour later.” He scrawled the house number on Ernesto’s hand, trying not to focus on the soft swath of skin that connected each finger up to the knuckles.

“Excellent,” Ernesto said and put the truck into first. He stalled, reshifted, and stalled again, until he finally found the right balance between clutch and gas and punched it hard. “See yuh,” he sang.

David watched him fly into town. The cruising hour ended around one a.m. He'd seen the line of cars making their way up and down the half-mile stretch from the fairgrounds to Security's one park, the music shaking the cars windows until the sullen drivers and their passengers forced themselves home. David watched the truck until it was only a red point on the horizon. He wondered where Ernesto was going—to find more pot? Home? Were there others like him, too?

It wasn't long until he had the shape of an answer. That evening, he stopped at the Food Mart for some soap and milk and was putting his small sack of things on the back seat when he noticed Ernesto limping across the parking lot. David hurried to get inside his car.

"Hey David—wait up!" This time it came from a firmer voice as Ernesto scurried to catch up with him, smiling out of one side of his face. "Twice in one day, Dixon. You stalking me?"

"I've got to go," David fumbled.

"Hot date?"

"Food in the oven. Probably burned by now."

"Why don't you come to my house? It's just me and my sister. We'll make you dinner." Ernesto put a hand on David's shoulder.

David weighed his distrust against his boredom, feeling Ernesto's hot palm press into the fabric of his shirt. David rolled his shoulders slightly. Ernesto's grip was firm. Sister? There were two of them. Good lord. "Can't tonight. Thanks anyway."

"Sure?"

"I'm sure." Definitely sure.

"Suit yourself." Ernesto released David's shoulder and steadied himself.

"Where'd Elena go?" he asked, scanning the parking lot.

"Where'd *you* go?" a voice said behind them, causing them both to start.

David noticed the dark skin first, then the even darker hair, inky black, and finally, her mouth, deep red. But when she wiped the corner of her lips with the tip of one finger, the color held.

“Who’s this?” she asked Ernesto.

“This is David.”

“From work,” David added.

“Ah.” She paused, and David was suddenly aware that his shirt had a stain on the chest. “David From Work.”

“And this, David, is Elena, my dear sister,” Ernesto said.

“Nice to meet you.”

She nodded curtly, a delicate strand of hair falling off her shoulder.

“I invited David over for some of your world famous pot roast, but alas, he’s— busy. Too bad, eh?”

“Not *that* busy,” David said.

“Well, maybe sometime when you aren’t, then.”

“But you didn’t mention the pot roast,” David said. They looked wide-eyed at him, and David felt a passing twinge of fear. “That’s my favorite. If I’d have known…”

“Are you saying you would like to reconsider?” Ernesto asked.

“I’d like to. Reconsider, that is. I mean, if you want me to?”

“What about the burned food in the oven?”

“Now that I think about it, maybe I didn’t even turn it on.”

Ernesto glanced at Elena. She shrugged. “We’d love to have you,” Ernesto said. “You could ride with us.”

“I’ll just follow you,” David said.

David trailed Ernesto’s truck from the store until, a few miles out of town, they turned onto a dirt road leading to a small light blue modular. He could see Elena’s hair swing back and forth as the truck bumped over the rocks, and he wondered what she might be saying about him. Maybe, “David isn’t too bad,” or “That David seems nice,” or “Wonder if David has a girlfriend.” He pulled into the driveway behind Ernesto and went to open the truck door for Elena.

“I’ve got it,” she said from inside.

David stepped back from the truck as she climbed down. “Need any help with the groceries?”

“No.” She slammed the door shut. “Ernesto will get it.”

As he followed them inside, a sweet, fragrant odor, almost overripe, flooded his nose. Elena led him through a small hallway into a kitchen, where Ernesto began putting milk and other groceries in the refrigerator.

“Nesto, when you’re done there, chop up some carrots,” she instructed, unwrapping the roast.

The kitchen was wallpapered in a faded yellow print with small flowers running up and down each panel in vertical columns. On the table, a white doily was stretched perfectly flat underneath a vase of more flowers, daisies or something, but the heads had wilted downward, the petals thin and crisp. The four chairs were tucked in all the way. All of the cupboards were closed.

“Lilies,” Ernesto said.

David looked over as Ernesto closed the refrigerator door. “What?”

Ernesto pointed at the table. “Lilies. Our mother loves flowers. If you couldn’t tell by the tea roses on the wallpaper. Go into the living room. Flower decorations everywhere. I guess we kind of let those ones go,” he chuckled, nodding at the lilies.

“Where are your parents?” David asked.

“On vacation,” Elena answered.

“They needed a break from us,” Ernesto explained.

“They needed to get out of Security for awhile,” Elena said. She began pulling pans from a drawer underneath the stove and clanging them down on the counter.

“Ernesto—the carrots?”

“Right.” Ernesto opened the refrigerator again and found the carrots. For several minutes he and Elena were quiet as they cut and peeled and boiled. Ernesto was deft with the knife, gripping it in his palm.

David leaned against the wall separating the kitchen from the living room. In the living room, as Ernesto had promised, were flowers everywhere, lining the walls, the sofa, the frame on the large mirror above the sofa, the rug. Roses, more lilies, tulips, all

varieties and colors. David could name only a few. The windows were shut tightly, and the scent of petals filled the room.

“Elena, do you go to school?” David asked.

“Yep. Just community college, though. Getting my associate’s in business.”

“Did you two graduate the same year?”

“Elena’s a year older. She got out of Maximum Security—high school—before I did. Try this,” Ernesto said balancing a small, green plastic glass on his palm and extending it to David. The carrots lay in a heap on the counter.

“What is it?” David asked.

“Just try it.”

It burned, sweetly, all the way down his throat, and despite the smoothness, David had to swallow hard to get it all down. “Jesus.”

“Something special for our guest,” Ernesto said. Then, to Elena, “Just trying to be hospitable.”

“You’d better lay off that stuff,” warned Elena, pulling spices from a cupboard above the stove. “Mom and Dad will notice if all their Tesoro is gone. Besides, David’s not used to it.”

David cleared his throat. “I can handle it.” He took a larger sip, forced a swallow, and drained the rest, handing the empty cup back to Ernesto. “Give me some more.”

Ernesto looked at Elena. “See, he can handle it. You could use some too.”

Elena narrowed her eyes. Both fell silent again as Ernesto filled David’s glass with gold liquid from the narrow glass bottle. Ernesto poured a smaller glass for himself.

On the refrigerator door was a family snapshot taken, David guessed, when Elena and Ernesto were in middle school. Their parents had the same dark features as their daughter, both with small brown eyes and tight lips. They were about the same height. Could have been twins. But hell, even his parents looked alike. Years of marriage had done it. Ernesto had those eyes too, but they contrasted with his pale skin. He scowled into the camera.

“How about you, David?” Elena asked, following his gaze to the picture. “You in school?”

David nodded.

“What’s your major?”

“Haven’t decided yet.” It wasn’t a complete lie.

“What are you going to do after you get your degree?” David asked Elena, trying not to look at the shirt straps that ran down her shoulders. His head throbbed.

“I’ve always thought about opening a restaurant,” she began. She turned the front knob on the stove.

“Really? That’s great,” David said, his voice loud, filling the kitchen. Ernesto and Elena exchanged glances that he couldn’t read. “What kind of food?” he asked, softer this time.

She shrugged. “Just an eclectic mix. Of course it’d have to be somewhere besides Security.”

“Security loses yet another denizen,” Ernesto interrupted. “We’ll be sorry to see you go.” He raised his palm in a small wave. Elena glared at him.

“Ernesto loves Security so much, he’s going to stay here forever.”

“What else can I do? Remember that class we had to take in high school, Careers? We all researched what sort of job we wanted, and everyone always did something ridiculous, like marine biology or engineering. At least I’m rational. Besides, I have interests here.”

“If that’s what you want to call those loser friends of yours.”

“The lady doth protest too much,” Ernesto said softly.

“Why can’t you just do something good for yourself?”

“Yeah, why can’t you?” David said suddenly, expecting a grateful look from Elena. Instead, she turned toward the sink and flicked on the water, rubbing her hands underneath.

Ernesto pursed his lips. “I have certain—limitations.”

David set down his drink on the counter between them. “Sorry.”

“If I held a grudge against everyone who said stuff like that, I’d have very little energy for anything else.” Ernesto paused and shook his head. “My winning personality would suffer.”

Elena laughed and dried her hands. Patted Ernesto on the back. Her fingers were long and tapered. “Why don’t you ask David to help you get on track? He’s obviously doing things with his life, going to school and all.”

“Oh, I don’t—” David started. “Know how much help I could be. I mean, I’m just starting out.” He cleared his throat several times.

“I’m fine, Elena,” Ernesto said, giving her hand a squeeze. Elena didn’t pull away. “Excuse me,” he said, and headed back down the hallway.

Once Ernesto was out of earshot, Elena sighed. “He’s been depressed lately. It’s like there’s nothing I can do to help him.”

“He’ll be okay,” David said, sliding around the counter to stand beside her at the stove.

“I’m not so sure. If you knew him before, you’d see how bad he’s gotten. I don’t know what to do.”

“Why are you so determined to do something?”

“Because he’s my brother.”

“But you don’t owe him anything.”

She shrank back. “He’s family.”

“But you can’t always take care of him.”

“I know, but God, it’s not his fault.”

“What’s not his fault?” He paused, suspended his breathing, worried that she’d become angry. He felt a little unsteady and put his hand on the counter.

Elena pushed a hair off her face and turned toward him. “He’s fine, cognitively. There’s nothing wrong with him up here,” she said, thumping her forehead and leaving a red spot.

“And the rest?”

“He’s adjusted well, considering. When he was younger, his dexterity was pretty limited.” She stopped, and David was afraid to push her. But a need to know rose out of him, and something small that he’d tucked away in his memory came back.

His first day at work, Couch had said, “Got one other employee besides you. Little guy. Strong, though. Came out almost normal from parents like that.” It hadn’t

registered with David at the time, but now he scanned the snapshot on the refrigerator again. What was it? Behind Mr. and Mrs. Maes's smiles, there seemed to be something else, a touch of shame and defiance.

"And?" David asked, pausing.

"Don't tell me you haven't heard the rumors."

"Elena, I don't know anyone here."

"I thought everyone got a newsletter when they moved to Security. A warning. In the looks, the whispers."

"What?" David said.

"Ernesto and I have tried to rationalize it, you know. We didn't ask for this. But it gets to you, wears you down."

"Wears you down?"

"And the strangest part is, lately, he's managed to make more friends than I ever did. I guess I was always so worried about what people would say. I certainly couldn't invite anyone over. What if they started to ask questions?"

"About what?" David wanted to force it out of her, but he kept his hands at his sides. "What?"

"Just once, I'd like a friend, someone to accept me for myself."

"Why wouldn't they?"

Elena peered closely at his face. Her skin, a shade darker than the freshest, purest dirt, drew him in. "You just want to hear me say it—that it?"

"Say what?"

Elena laughed short and bitterly. "You're something else."

"What?"

"We invited you out of friendship, not so you could gape at us like freaks."

"Elena, I don't know what you're talking about."

"I told him, on the way over here," she continued, "that this was a bad idea."

Suddenly, the drink hit David hard. His legs strained to bear his weight. She was playing games with him. He should have been able to recognize it. After Hoda, he

should've known better. "Listen, Elena," he said as quietly as possible. "Why don't you just tell me what the hell is wrong with your family?"

"Go home, David. Forget you were here."

"What is it?" David yelled. The outburst lightened him as a deluge of heat rushed his head. "Your parents are cousins? You're—what?" He stepped toward Elena, and she moved back against the stove.

"Goddamnit!" she screamed, drawing her hand up to her chest.

"What's going on?" Ernesto asked, running back into the kitchen.

"I burned myself," she moaned.

"Let me see," Ernesto said. Elena shook her head wildly. "Let me see," he said again, tender. Slowly, he peeled her hand away from her body. A layer of skin was missing, and in its place, a white-red bubble of fluid was beginning to form. Something broadsided David's kidneys.

"I'd better go," he mumbled, and headed for the door, knocking a few carrots off the counter as he went.

"David—" Ernesto called, but he kept going. Move. A voice from inside pushed him through the front door. Get out of there. Digging in his pocket, he found his keys and put it in reverse. No lights shone on the dirt road. Thank god. With curtains of sweat on his eyes, he nearly missed the turn onto the road back into town. Behind him, the Maes' house blurred into a bright ball in the darkness.

Ernesto wasn't at work the following Monday morning. Hail had been forecasted, so David drove the working golf carts into the large trailer behind Couch's house. His head throbbed at the temples. David started to back the first cart up the ramp into the trailer, hitting the gas hard to build enough speed, and drove smack into the edge of the frame. Shit. He tried again, giving it a little less gas this time, and narrowly avoided driving off the ramp but made it into the trailer. His head ached. By the time he'd finished loading, he'd scraped at least five carts. These he hastily touched up, but even with new paint, the wounded spots showed. A poor job, he knew, but a only a sharper eye than Couch's would notice.

Ernesto, mumbling a quick apology to Couch, turned up after lunch. He nodded once at David, running his hands through his greasy hair. “You’re late—consider yourself warned,” Couch said. Sighing, he continued, “Got a project for you two.” He pointed to a line of posts fifty feet from the house. “I need a fence there. See those?” He jerked his chin at a pile of sheet metal, panels fifteen feet long. “You put them up with these.” Couch shoved a bag of hooks, little more than reinforced twist ties, into David’s hands. The thick, hairy knuckles swept lightly against David’s palm. David quickly wiped it against his pants. “I’m going into town,” Couch said.

Once Couch was done, Ernesto lit a cigarette and plopped down under a tree, his short leg crossed over the good one. David began dragging the heavy panels over to the first post. “Need a hand?” Ernesto called.

David shook his head, afraid of having Ernesto close. No telling what he might do. He was strong enough. “I’ve got it,” David said.

Ernesto strolled over to David, flicking his cigarette into the grass. He paused to grind it out. “Come on. Let me help.” He grabbed one end and lifted it chest level.

“Thanks,” David said, his own end now light.

“Jesus Christ!” Ernesto yelled suddenly, and dropped the panel. It clattered onto the ground, stirring a cloud of dust. Ernesto hobbled backwards several feet, his eyes fixed on the panel.

“What?”

“Goddamn freaking huge spider. It *looked* at me.” His breath was quick. “Let’s leave that one,” he said, and they did.

For nearly an hour, they worked in silence. Grunting, Ernesto lifted and held the panels while David drilled holes and attached the hooks. They fell into a rhythm—lift, drill, twist. As they neared the end, both sweating, David could feel Ernesto’s heat mingle with his own. He wiped his neck again and again. The metallic noises of the drill worsened his headache. What had Elena told Ernesto?

Ernesto stared angrily at the panels while David drilled them into place. Finally, he spoke. “Some job, huh?”

“Couch can really pick them.”

“Dick. Probably will fire me.”

“Hope not. I’d have to do this shit all by myself.”

Ernesto’s lips twitched into a half smile.

“I’m sorry about last night,” David said.

“Don’t worry about it.” Ernesto spat into the dirt.

“Elena’s hand okay?”

“She’s got a big bandage, but she can use it fine.”

“I guess I don’t handle my liquor too well.”

“Shouldn’t have given it to you.”

“I didn’t mean to scare her. All of a sudden, she was mad at me, and I didn’t know why.”

“Hmmm.”

“I want her to know that I’m sorry.”

Ernesto spat again and watched as David inserted the final hook on the second to last panel.

“Elena was telling me something last night. I’m not sure what it was.” He sat down against the new fence panel and Ernesto lowered himself next to David, folding the shorter leg under.

“She told you, huh?”

“She told me there’s a lot of talk in Security.”

“I know. And she doesn’t need that shit. She’s been taking it for years.”

“Taking—what?”

“Excrement of small minds, David. I’ve come to expect it, maybe even accept it on some level, but Elena never could.”

“It?”

“You never lived in a small town, Dixon?”

“Not really.”

“It’s ugly, what people say.”

David pulled a few strands of grass from a patch near his knee. Without the carts, the dirt, loose and dry, engulfed the yard. He remembered Elena's brown shoulders angling out from underneath her tank top—blue? Green? “What, exactly, do they say?”

Ernesto shrugged. “Weirdo. Freak. Degenerate. Don't think they really know what the last one means, though.”

“Because? What?” Same roundabout. More questions.

“What are you asking me?”

“For the truth.”

“You want the truth?”

“Damn it. Yes.”

“What's it to you?” Ernesto scooted away from David and turned to eye him fully. “What do you want?”

“To—help. Elena. To help Elena.”

“How?”

David halved and quartered the blades of grass, keeping his eyes on the ground. “The restaurant. I know people back where I used to live. They could help her get a job. Might lead to something else.” He swallowed hard, surprised that it felt so easy.

“Like funding?”

“That too. Introduce her to right people, mainly.”

“Like who?”

“The business people they know. Look, I don't know all of the details, but I could talk to them. Help her. I just need to know what her situation is.”

Ernesto pushed aside a long lock of hair and sighed. “They said the important thing was that they really loved each other, those parents of mine. ‘Families do that. Love each other,’ they said.” He snorted a little and reached in his pocket, pulling out another cigarette. “That might be partly true. All relationships are screwy.” He set the cigarette between his lips and stared at the house. “Maybe there's two kinds of love: the kind you see on the surface, the kind that makes beautiful things like Elena, and the kind that gets pushed underneath, the kind that makes—well.” Cupping his hands, he lit the cigarette and inhaled.

Smoke entered David's mouth and swirled thickly over his tongue. There it was. But Elena, God, was gorgeous. And Ernesto? What had gone wrong? "You're—in—" he couldn't finish it. Afraid to finish it. Ernesto's eyes narrowed. "Independent, though. Your family determines only so much."

"Some more than others."

"How did you find out?" His headache was still there, but he was miles beyond it. He leaned toward Ernesto.

"It's some fucked up shit." Ernesto returned the cigarette to his lips. "Over the phone. I was in fifth grade. One afternoon, this woman calls up and says that it's very important that she speak to my mom. Both she and my dad were at work. But she kept insisting that she needed to talk to my mom. She got all worked up. Finally, she screams, 'Stop lying, inbred!'"

David's stomach turned, then growled, and he drew up his knees.

"I kept wondering what bread had to do with anything," Ernesto continued, staring into the distance.

"But you and Elena—"

"God no, never." Ernesto recoiled, pressing one hand to his chest. "What do you take us for?"

David shook his head, then nodded. Neither seemed right.

Ernesto added, "She's fine. It doesn't touch girls. Only the Y chromosome."

"Oh." What else could he say? "Well."

"So now you'll talk to your friends? About getting her set up somewhere?"

David tried to think. His headache was back. "Maybe she doesn't want to see me ever again."

"I think if she knows you want to help, she'll let you." Ernesto's eyes narrowed again. "You promised." He blew a column of smoke into David's face. David tried not to cough.

"Fine. I'll talk to her."

"Fine. Let's finish up."

“What you told me,” David started, reeling from a rush of blood as he stood too quickly. “It’s—” Really true? Wrong? He didn’t know what to say. Didn’t understand.

“It is what it is,” Ernesto said.

In silence, they attached the last panel just as Couch returned. He kicked at one of the posts, jostling the fence, but it held. “Go on home now,” Couch said. “Storm’s coming in.”

David ate a quick dinner that night. Eating generally lasted hours—he had nothing else to do—but the voices were there, loud, telling him his options. He could leave, but he had nowhere to go. Stay here and they’d figure out his lies pretty soon. He could quit, but it might be months before he could find a job in Security. And then he’d be stuck here who knew how long? And in spite of all this, he wanted to go back to the Maes’ house, search for clues he’d missed the first time. Redo the math. And—Elena. For a moment, she’d opened up to him, he was sure. Pure and light and vulnerable. And not just because he was there. In the stillness of his parents’ house, David grew restless. He looked up the Maes’ number, but it wasn’t listed in the phonebook. Outside, rain began pelting the dry ground. David grabbed a coat and headed for the door.

As he drove out of town, a car full of dark faces approached, going the opposite way, bass pulsing at full force. Even with the quarter-sized raindrops exploding against his windshield like gunfire, he could feel it. The two cars neared, and one small middle finger extended out of the passenger side window on the other car. Several pairs of eyes turned to watch David as they passed.

The house was dark when he knocked. He pressed the doorbell, but there was no echo. Knocked again. Maybe she’d already found out? There were no eaves on the Maes’ house, and the rain sloped down onto his coat. After eleven more knocks, soaked, he returned to his car and rummaged through the glove box for a scrap of paper. He found one, and scrawled *Elena—stopped by earlier. David*. He dashed out into the rain again and tried to lodge the paper between the screen and the door to keep it from washing away. Suddenly, the inside door swung open and Elena looked out at him.

“I was trying to...well, I wrote you this note,” he fumbled. Elena crossed her arms in front of her chest. Several layers of gauze were wrapped around her right hand.

“David, what are doing here?”

“I knocked? I mean, I knocked. I came to see you and to apologize for last night.” He couldn’t see her face clearly through the crosshatched screen. Behind her, a light shone from inside. She moved over to block his view.

“There’s nothing to apologize for.”

“Is Ernesto here?”

“No, why?”

“Look, Elena, I just wanted to talk to you.” David pressed his face into the mesh. “I just wanted to make things right.”

“Everything *is* all right. Goodbye now,” she said, closing the door.

“I talked to Ernesto,” David blurted. She paused, and he watched her face, hoping it would change. It didn’t. “We worked things out. Now I just want to work things out with you.”

“Great. Goodbye.” The door closed the rest of the way.

David knocked again, hard. No answer. He ran back to his car, flung open the door, and jumped in. Punched the steering wheel. He couldn’t see more than ten feet in front of him through the rain. Jamming the key in the ignition, he threw the car into gear. The engine revved but wouldn’t catch. He tried again. No catch. He punched the steering wheel again, splitting open a knuckle. On his left, a flash of brown pounded on the window. “Come inside,” Elena yelled.

David threw his wet coat over both of their heads as they darted to the house. Elena’s bare feet sank in the mud of the dirt driveway. She shrieked and kept running. David pulled her inside, and she hopped in on one foot. “I think I cut it,” she winced, hobbling down the hallway, away from the kitchen. David followed her into a bathroom. She flicked on the light. A dark stream of blood flowed from an inch long gash between her big and first toe.

“Here.” David helped her onto the counter and guided her foot into the sink. He rinsed the wound in warm water, sliding his fingers carefully between her toes. Elena

stared at his hands. “Band aid?” She tapped the cabinet under the sink. David dried her foot with a towel and stretched the bandage carefully over the wound.

“Looks like you need one of those too.” She pointed to his open knuckle. “Let me do it,” she said, easing off the counter and taking his hand in her own. She held it for a moment.

David was sure he could kiss her. If he concentrated on her face long enough, he could divine a kiss into being. But Elena looked up at him and said, “David, you can only stay here until the rain stops. Then I’ll drive you back into town. No hard feelings.” She said it tenderly, and David wanted some of that tenderness for himself.

“I’m sorry for last night,” he said.

“You already said that,” she replied. Then, softer, “Me too.”

“Ernesto explained things to me today.”

“We don’t need your pity, David.”

“I’m not giving it to you.”

Elena looked down and tested her weight on the hurt foot. “It’s just—hard.”

David brushed his hand against her shoulder, and seeing that she didn’t flinch, rested it there lightly. He noticed a tiny, darker freckle on her collarbone and traced it with his first two fingers. Something caught his eye. A spider the size of his thumb raced across the counter, inches away.

“Jesus.” David jumped back. His hand fell from Elena’s shoulder, and as it did, he noticed his fingers, and for a moment, he couldn’t move them apart, but it was only a moment, and then he could again. He turned it over and over, but they were the same fingers. Thin and separate.

“What’s wrong?” Elena stared at him, leaning on her good foot.

“When’s Ernesto coming home?”

“Who knows? Why?”

“Where is he?”

“Probably getting high with those people he calls his friends.” She huffed a bitter laugh. “He figures his body’s no good, so he might as well make his brain match it.” She

leaned in toward David, and he could feel and smell her, a scent both light and dense, and it surrounded him. “I try not to care.”

“Elena,” he said, moving his hand down her back, following the line of his fingers with his eyes to make sure they didn’t change. Hoda’s face appeared to him briefly, but then she was gone, he was beyond her, there was only Elena, open and tender, and he wanted her, not just to feel her but mold himself into her, join flesh and heart and mind and be her. “You’re your own person. And you’re fantastic.”

“Really?” She shrank back a little.

“Really.”

She kissed him, a soft kiss at first, then a more insistent one. Her lips were soft, silk soft, no, there had to be a better word, but it didn’t matter anyway, they were kissing, warm, and he closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around her. They kissed for several more seconds, minutes, and then stood twining hands. David felt safe. The sounds of rain began to taper off.

“You aren’t going to take me into town, are you?” he asked.

“No,” she said, moving in for another kiss. “Stay with me.”

Something rustled. David rolled over and pulled up the covers, trying to block the light. The floor creaked. Creaked again. All at once, the blanket was yanked back. His eyes flooded with sun. David opened them all the way and watched Ernesto’s small fist close the distance to his jaw. He bit the inside of his lip, drawing blood. Fell out of bed. Elena screamed, pulling at sheets. “What the hell?” David yelled, searching for his pants. “Calm down!”

“This is your idea of helping her?” Ernesto shouted.

David found his shirt instead and yanked it over his head. Where were his pants? “I came to say I’m sorry!”

“I said you could help her out. I didn’t say you could fuck her!” Ernesto was on him, fist after fist. David lay heaped on the floor. Ernesto’s hands were wet, his knuckles bone hard. Smacking into his eye. A tack in the carpet dug into David’s back. He reached for Ernesto’s red face, but his arms wavered stupidly.

Elena appeared above Ernesto and pulled him off long enough for David to find his pants and tunnel into them. Ernesto pushed Elena down and started for David again, but David twisted out of reach. Ernesto stumbled after him, and David's foot shot sideways, tripping Ernesto's withered leg. Ernesto thudded against the bed, down, and David moved on top of him, trying to pin him with his knees so that he could get a good shot.

"Get off him!" Elena yelled, grabbing a shoe on the floor and flinging it at David. It nicked David's ear, releasing heat into the canal. He sat, stunned, and Ernesto threw him off. David felt his tailbone smash into something sharp. Elena hurried over, lifting Ernesto's arms to help him sit.

"Get the hell out of my house!" Ernesto roared.

David turned and went for the door, the wrong way at first, toward the kitchen, then back and outside. He heard Elena's name in a loud, choking voice, but he kept going. He burst out the screen door and into the heavy mud, tramping to his car. Ten steps. Six. Three. Inside, he jammed his key into the ignition, and the engine turned over and over but refused to start. Come on, come on, his head sang. A curtain on the side of the house moved. David threw the door open and began sloshing down the Maes's driveway. Four, five miles into town. He sped up into a run. His shoes, heavier and heavier. One foot after the next. Attaboy, David. Don't look back. Go as fast as you can. Don't look back. But he did, several times.

That night, David slept fitfully, the whole awful thing on automatic replay. He tried to focus on Elena twirled into the sheets, dark skin on clean white, but it kept jumping ahead to Ernesto's inflamed face, no matter how hard he tried to slow it, and then onto the hour it took to jog home, backward looking the whole time, half expecting Ernesto's truck to come roaring up behind him.

But the next morning, Ernesto wasn't at work. The storm had loosened one of the fence panels and sent it flying into the house, where it remained slanted under one of the bedroom windows. "Goddamn near came inside," Couch said, hands on hips, staring at

David. “You’ll have to stay late and fix it. And I ain’t paying you for this neither. Your own goddamn fault. You and that inbred.”

David winced, gingerly fingering his bruised skin and swollen eye. Before moving the dented panel, he lifted it a few inches and checked for spiders. His hands ached, and the panel seemed even heavier than the day before. He dropped it several times. Each time the panel fell, it slid down his shin, shredding off skin as it went. At the end of the day, he walked slowly back to his parents’ house, head down, utterly sore, smelling the nauseating sweetness of pickles, watching his feet take him there.

Ernesto wasn’t at work the following day, either. Or the day after that. “Lousy son of a bitch,” Couch said. “I’m gonna fire him.”

After the third day of no Ernesto, David was extra restless. He returned home to find the light on his answering machine flashing, and his heart began to race. He pressed the message button. “Hi Davey!” His mother’s voice filled the bare kitchen. “Hope you’re having a good time in Security. Your father says to start hitting the books. School will be here before you know it.” School. The least of his problems now.

He picked up the receiver and realized he still didn’t know the Maes’ number. He slammed the phone in its cradle and looked around. On the walls, there were no flowers, dead or alive, only muted peach paint. One plate in the sink. Empty as the day he’d arrived.

A tap on the glass woke him that night. For a moment, he felt wisps across his face and jerked upright, slapping at spiders, but it was only his hair brushing against his cheek. Another tap. Then, a face outside of his window. A face silhouetted by the moon, bright eyes peering in. Throwing up the window, Elena climbed in.

“I’m fine,” she said, lowering herself onto his bed. He searched her face for cuts or bruises, a mark, a ring around her eye, a fat lip, but her lips were moist and slightly parted. Perfect.

“He hasn’t hurt you?”

“He would never do that.”

“Are you under house arrest?”

“It’s nothing so dramatic.” Her voice rang into the open corners of his room. “I just wanted to see if you’re okay.”

“Stay here. Or come away with me.”

“No, it’s best if I lay low for awhile.”

“Best for whom?”

“For me, for Nesto, for my whole family.” Elena reached for David’s jaw, tracing the large bruise. “You don’t need to protect me. Or help me, for that matter.”

“About that, Elena. I never—”

“I understand. He can be very persuasive.”

“But I didn’t—”

“You had good intentions.”

“I really like you.”

“Let’s not lose our heads. Who knows what he’d do?” She stretched out across the foot of his bed.

“This doesn’t concern him.”

“He’s my brother.”

“But did you hear me? I said I really like you.”

“I heard you.”

“And?”

Elena shrugged.

“What is it with you? You’re into me one moment and the next...” David leaned back against the headboard. “This some sort of elaborate game? You—using—me? You and Ernesto got it out for me?”

Elena blinked slowly. “Excuse me?” She reached to scratch her head.

“Where’s the bandage?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your burn. Where is it?”

“Right here,” she said, shoving her palm into his face. The skin had begun to grow back, a delicate pink. “I heal quickly.” She pulled her hand away and moved to rise, but David caught her wrist and held it tightly. There was something he hadn’t noticed.

Between the pinky and ring finger. Hardly visible. Just a few millimeters higher than normal, but enough to keep the fingers locked in a tight v. She made a fist and wriggled against his grip.

“How’d you get here?” he demanded.

“Drove.”

“Take me to get my car.”

“It’s not a good idea for you to be anywhere near the house at this point.” She pried David’s fingers from her wrist. “Maybe I’ll call you later.”

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“To him?”

She glanced at the window.

“And what else?”

“You’re sick.” She pushed off the bed.

“Elena!” He started after her.

She was at the window, one leg over the sill. The moon on the ends of her hair made him swallow. “I thought you would be different because you weren’t from Security,” she said. “But I guess there’s losers all over. Only you’re getting a college education.”

“But I’m not,” David said. He began to cry.

“Perfect.” She swung the other leg over and disappeared into darkness.

The next day, David was hosing off a row of golf carts when Ernesto sprang out from behind a red ParCar, causing him to lose control and spray water everywhere, including on Ernesto’s shoes. “Couch isn’t here,” David said, backing away. He dropped the hose. “Went into town on a deal.”

“I know,” Ernesto said. “I’ve been here awhile.”

“Look, no harm.” David raised his hands.

“What did Elena tell you?”

“I haven’t seen her since the other night.”

“Bullshit. What’d she tell you?” He took a few steps toward David.

“She just wanted to tell me she was okay.”

“You know how close my family is,” Ernesto said, pausing not far from David. “I won’t let anything drive us apart.”

“Fine.”

“So mind your own business, David Dixon.” He was interrupted by the rattling of tires on dirt as Couch’s truck made its way into the drive. Ernesto peered over his shoulder.

Couch rolled out of the cab and ambled over to Ernesto. “Where the hell have you been?” he demanded.

“I just came to tell you I quit,” Ernesto said, starting for his truck. David hadn’t seen it parked there.

“Fine by me. Get the hell out of here, you freak,” Couch called.

“A pleasure doing business, gents,” Ernesto said. He bowed a little from the waist and scooted around Couch, who tried to kick him and fell backwards. David stood still.

Ernesto wagged his fingers goodbye, all five flapping together like a wing, and began laughing as he crawled into his car. “Au revoir!” As he peeled out of the drive, he pointed one white finger at David, and sped away.

David walked downtown that night to the heart of Security, the few blocks along Main Street that served as the break spot for weary cruisers. Maybe he’d run into Elena, force her to hear him out. He’d apologize. Tell her she was the one good thing for him in this town. Though the image of that ghostly finger suspended mid-air stayed with him, to be frightened by Ernesto, he reasoned, would be to admit defeat. Even if he’d lost Elena, Ernesto hadn’t yet won.

Thursdays were normally busy nights, but the streets were empty, the shop windows dark. Only the lights of marquee on the movie theatre shone brightly, and outside, there was a large crowd waiting for the show. David bought a ticket. As he made his way inside the house, several faces turned to look at him. He found an empty seat near the back and took it quickly. The audience was primarily young men with belts

cinched tightly around their hips, oversized t-shirts, gold chains gleaming from their necks. They shifted and their seats, talking in low voices. No Elena. As the lights dimmed, David thought he heard someone say Ernesto's name.

The movie was about a group of friends who inadvertently killed a crippled boy they had been teasing. The boy, meek in life, returned viciously from death to exact his revenge, hunting down each of his killers. One was thrown off a cliff. Another drowned. Each time another death flashed across the screen, the crowd cheered wildly, throwing popcorn and clapping. After three murders, the crippled boy, made strong by death, trapped one of the nastiest killers inside a coffin and deposited spiders into a hole on the side, each spider leggier and hairier than its predecessor. As the victim's screams intensified, so did a low, steady grinding sound near David. Once the screams stopped, David realized it was his teeth.

The final revenge was reserved for the boy's cruelest tormentor, captain of the basketball team, Homecoming King, Valedictorian, headed for Harvard the following fall. This boy was forced to remain in his small hometown, live with his parents, and take a job at the local hamburger joint, slaving over a massive hot stove. Seemingly satisfied with this punishment, the ghost disappeared. A wave of boos and shouts rolled through the audience and continued as the final credits rolled.

As David made his way toward the exit, he was jostled, and his shoulder made contact with someone else's. A short, stout kid with a hat pulled low over his eyes. "Watch it," the boy said, and David wondered if it was the same person who'd flipped him off in the rain.

"Take it easy," David muttered.

"I said," the boy hissed, "*Watch it.*" Behind him, his friends stacked up, one behind each other, glaring at David.

"Yeah David Dixon," one of them added.

"She ain't here," another chimed in, and the others laughed, sending a rattle through David's chest. Ain't here, ain't here, the voices called. He pushed his way to the exit and hurried out into the light of the marquee.

The next day, Couch asked him to housesit for the evening while he was out of town on a business deal. Hours alone in Couch's cramped, dirty house—David would rather have spent the time in the well.

"Ten bucks," Couch offered.

"Fifty."

"Thirty-five."

"Forty-five."

"Fine. Forty?"

David sighed and nodded his head.

"I might not be back until late. If that happens, you can stay over," Couch added.

"I'll wait up," David said.

As soon as Couch left, storm clouds began to build. Then the wind began. David ran into a nest of spiders behind one of the living room curtains as he tried to pull the window shut. They scurried into the room, and David bolted, leaving the window open.

In the bathroom, a thick stack of magazines rested on top of the toilet tank. David picked one up and turned the pages. There were pictures, plenty of them, high-quality gloss. Men in various stages of undress with their hands on other men, sometimes on themselves as well. Large hands with rough fingers. On their faces, a silly, clownish smile, teeth showing, eyes half-closed. David realized what he was looking at and a twitch of arousal passed over him. He dropped the magazine face down into the bowl, his hand releasing it as though bitten. Couch's hands had been on the magazine. David's stomach lurched and he leaned over and vomited. After several minutes, he wiped his mouth, and stood. He turned and flipped the handle on the sink faucet with his elbow—nothing. He flipped it up and down. Nothing. He ran into the kitchen and tried the sink. The pipes sputtered, but no water. The skin on his hands was loose and wet. He wiped them as hard as he could against his pants.

Frantic, he hurried outside, the wind pushing him along as he headed for the well. Pushing aside the heavy cover, he peered in.

"Lose something, David?"

David wobbled near the edge. Ernesto grinned and steadied him with both hands. David fought to free himself. “What do you want?”

“We never got to finish our conversation the other day.”

“You said enough.”

“Wells are such funny things,” Ernesto said, glancing in. He shuddered. “When they’re closed, they seem so harmless. But once you open them up, you find all sorts of ugly shit underneath.” He faced David. “Consider this your last warning: stay away from Elena.”

“What have you done to her?”

“We’re fine. We belong here.”

A fat raindrop splattered on David’s cheek, and he dried it with his sleeve. “You don’t belong here any more than I do,” he said. “What about all the talk?”

“Good try, college boy. You’re smarter than most people around here.”

David was silent. How much did Ernesto know?

“Oh, that’s *right*,” Ernesto continued. “You’re not, are you?”

“Couch could get here at any time,” David interrupted. “He’ll be pissed if he sees you.”

Ernesto laughed. “Of course he will.”

“He could call the cops.”

“The cops!” Ernesto hooted. “Let’s do that, shall we? Call the cops.” His face flushed deeply.

A pair of headlights swept over the well as a car flew up the driveway. “Look who’s here,” Ernesto said.

Elena kicked open the car door and ran toward Ernesto. The rain began to pick up. “Come on. It’s not worth it,” she called, avoiding David’s stare.

“You’re wrong. We don’t have to put up with this anymore.”

Elena tugged on one of Ernesto’s arms, pulling him toward the car. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Did you hear me? We don’t have to take it anymore, Lena. I’m making a name for myself. People are starting to listen. Respect us.”

Elena cradled his hand against her chest, stroking his fingers. A fin. A doll's hand. "Nobody's listening, Nesto. Only me."

"No," Ernesto began. "They do."

"Baby," she cried.

"Don't call me that!" Ernesto yelled, pulling his hand free. "That's what she calls him." He raised a tightly balled fist.

David felt himself barrel into Ernesto, knocking him onto the ground a few feet from the well. Ernesto swung at David, wet punches that slipped off his face as soon as they landed. But they kept coming, harder and harder and then less hard. David lost himself in the soft mud as he tried to grab for Ernesto's weak leg and missed. Elena hurled herself at Ernesto, and he kicked her away. She fell on her side.

David noticed the spider, lightning fast on eight legs, at the same moment that Ernesto screamed. Thick, pear-shaped, the size of a dinner plate. It raced toward the well, and Ernesto rolled off David.

David seized Ernesto's leg and with all of his strength, twisted it. Crack. Ernesto squealed and rolled off David, grooving a path in the mud as he held his leg and scooted to the other side of the well, his eyes fixed on the spider.

David scrambled for his footing and made his way over to Elena. He tried to lift her, but she shrugged him off.

"Elena, let's go."

"Nesto," she said.

"Elena," David pulled her up, one arm slipping from his hand. He caught it and tugged her to her feet. "C'mon."

"He's hurt," she whimpered in a thin voice.

"Elena, what about us?"

"I did like you, David."

"Did?"

"I can't trust you to care about me. Not the way he does. You made me realize that. You turned ugly."

David wiped his eyes to see through the rain. The enormous spider dropped, legs waving, down into the well. David could still feel the weight of Couch's magazines in his fingers. And then his hand went limp, light. His fingers throbbed and twitched. He reached for Elena, but she was gone, slipping in the mud. "He's my brother," she yelled over her shoulder. As she reached Ernesto, she tripped, catching herself just before she tumbled into the well. "It's okay," she cooed, smoothing Ernesto's forehead with her palm. "I'm here." Her voice faded into the rain.

Ernesto pulled her close and wrapped her in his pale arms, gently rocking her back and forth in the wet dirt. One eye darted back toward David. In the eternity of that glance, her face, flushed against Ernesto's cheek, took on a new beauty. Evenness. A perfect balance of light and dark. Reflected in the gloss of her eyes, David saw himself as she saw him. Looming. A barrier. Divider. Ugly. He called her name: "Elena!" The noise burned in his ears, bounced off his lungs, and thudded into the pit of his stomach. *You made me realize that.* Her face disappeared into Ernesto's chest as a chunk of mud at their feet dislodged and slid into the well.

A tiny voice whispered, David, what are you doing?

From behind, bright headlights swept over David, freezing Elena and Ernesto in a white glare at the well's mouth. David turned as Couch's truck slammed hard into the mud behind him, nearly knocking him over. He fought to keep his balance, but his hands wouldn't work right, and he wove in crooked lines, legs flying out from under him in the slick mud.

Where are you going, David?

"Hey!" Couch yelled.

Foot over foot, David finally steadied himself, ramming his fingers down into his pockets, and began trudging as fast as he could toward the road, a million feet away. Going as fast as he could. Breathing fast and then slow. Run, David. This time he didn't look back. He reached the road. One way was empty; the other a ball of dim lights, the town. A tide of water washed over him as a car went barreling past towards the country. Follow it? No. Nothing there. David turned the other way, pumping his legs hard against the paved road. Go! As he neared the town, the fog grew thicker, darker. He could hardly

see in front of him. And then he hit something, face first, plumb charging into it with his forehead. His forehead split open. Something burned down into his eyes. David squinted hard to keep them open. His eyes focused just enough. There it was. Barely six feet high. He'd missed it all these times.

The sign read, "Welcome to Security."

On Top

It's a banana cream pie that does the trick. Vanilla pudding and Miracle Whip. Lots of it. Real bananas at the center. Of that, Dean is certain. The pie is cold, has been refrigerated, prepared in advance. Someone planned this for a long time. His tongue tastes the tangy filling and he thinks of a simpler time, sixth grade, of making pudding for his mother so that when she got home from St. Therese's around midnight, they could spend an hour talking about their days, sailing down the river with Huck and Jim, drawing pictures—the only hour they had together. Sometimes he worked out the cords that formed in her back after mopping all afternoon. In return, she smoothed his hair with the curve of her leathery palm. If she stroked his hair long enough, he would fall asleep. He loved her touch.

A shocked silence cuts through the crowd of onlookers and reporters. The cameras click click and emit their shrill digital whine. Then someone begins to laugh, a woman's voice, a deep chuckle that begins in the back of the throat. It grows louder, then fades.

Dean holds the flimsy pie tin to his face for a few moments longer, trying not to imagine the evening press. On his left, Marilyn, the mousy, flat-chested Columbia graduate with whom he has been having an affair, hisses "Are you all right?" as though Dean himself willed this. Behind them, Thomas, his press rep, springs to action. He can always count on Thomas to handle things. But is Thomas too late? The crowd, now grasping the spectacle, erupts into laughter, short and screaming, full and deep, bubbly, wide. At last, Dean wipes the whipped cream from his eyes, and takes stock of the gaping mouths, faces drowning in hysteria, and notices the round slice of banana clinging to his cornflower blue dress shirt, the shirt his wife, no, ex-wife, Mina gave him to wear the day he took office, her eyes believing in his promise, the shirt he still wears when he needs to feel confident. The tin clatters to the ground, circling on its edges like a basketball before the shot sinks in. Inside this shirt, Dean is turgid, immobile, and sloughs off the rest of the cream with the sleeve.

"Governor! Governor Canefield!" they start yelling, all at once, shoving microphones and cameras in his face. "How do you feel about this? Do you consider this

a reflection of how your constituents view your past term? Is this a product of your decision not to seek a higher office? How does this make you feel?" Above the drone of voices rises one high, thin whine, belonging to a newcomer to the press junkets, an acne-faced, balding boy with a journalism degree burning a hole in his pocket. Just as Dean remembers himself being at that age, the boy is smart and foolish, armed with a barrage of pointed questions: "Do you regret your decision to appoint a one-time marijuana user to your cabinet? Will your recent head cold hinder your ability to productively review the year-end budget?" His personal mission is to subvert Dean, corner him at every turn, ridicule, mock, flabbergast.

"Governor," he yells, "would you have preferred chocolate?" Laughter erupts from the crowd again, a denser, meaner laughter. The boy emerges, wielding a large, antique tape recorder which he thrusts under Dean's nose. In his excitement, a large pimple on his chin has engorged, flushing crimson. "Governor Canefield, when you said that fixing the state's water conservancy issues would be 'easy as pie,' is this what you had in mind?" Laughter again, this time with a musical, even cadence. Dean's eyes burn white-hot until there's only the pimple, its crusted center curved into a half-wink. How easily it would burst.

The buzz around him recalls his ninth grade production of *Oklahoma*. He remembers the sneer twisted on Benjamin Reed's mouth and his own crippling dismay after discovering that Kelly Blake was not, as Benjamin had promised, in love with him, and one other detail: the muted blathering of lyrics snaking through his head as he assailed Benjamin and, amid titters, met the rosined stage floor in return: "Chicks and ducks and geese better scurry, when I take you out in my surrey, when I take you out in my surrey—with the fringe on top!" A triangle in which he was somehow the furthest point.

Dean's fist tries to connect in the same way, scraping his knuckles along the young reporter's jaw. He was never properly taught how to throw a punch, nor has he needed the skill, but he anticipates the reporter's jaw slackening and the filaments of spittle that will spring from the corners of his mouth as he falls, his knees giving out from underneath him, and of course, the glorious pimple eruption, releasing a tide of viscous

liquid. Dean's fist arcs closer, closer, but the punch falls a few millimeters short of the bull's-eye. Quicker than Dean can think, *he* is being restrained, his arms pulled back. The camera lights explode like heaven.

On every local station and indeed, on broadcasts across the nation that evening, the top story is his. A national joke. For months, people chase him down the street waving bananas, placing bets on what flavor will be next. No attempted assault charges are deemed necessary by the boy, who pens a bestselling memoir: The Governor and I. He appears on Larry King. The incident is featured in *Time*. Dean doesn't issue a public apology. At night, he bolts his door and tries to make himself disappear.

Sometimes, though, he remembers, or tries to make himself remember, that first he had wanted to be something else. An architect. A chemist's assistant. A magician. A writer. Once, when he was thirteen, on a rare weekend off, his mother took him to the reservoir outside of the city, one of the last good natural places, and they skipped rocks into the pristine little waves that broke against miles of clear, warm sand. She was young and healthy and had tied a pretty blue scarf around her head. "Just put your mind to it Dean," she whispered. "You can be whatever you want to be. Believe it and it'll happen."

"I will, Mama. I promise."

It was the only lie he ever told his mother. He was a boy, only that. Large, free-hanging earlobes and a failing grade in pre-Algebra. Though he dreamed big, he never harbored a secret belief that he would become great. However, he understood that *saying* it created a certain effect. In school, in books, and on the news, all the stories of individual achievement stressed the power of positive thinking. Dean learned the necessary words.

In college, he declared an ambitious double major in English and Music. He wrote himself messages on the mirror in his dorm room: "Obstacles are those frightful things that appear when you take your eyes off your goals." "Yesterday is history; tomorrow is a mystery; but today is a gift—that's why it's called the present." "Trouble is only opportunity in work clothes." He resolved to play the system, trick himself and everyone else into thinking he possessed the kind of will that garnered success. Some of

the time it worked: he felt capable, swift, and strong, like he could win a Nobel, write the Great American Novel, solve the Poincare Conjecture, cure the common cold.

Sophomore year, he fell in love, a cruel trick of his unformed heart. He sent cards, helium balloons, poems, and carnations, declarations of his love. For six days, he believed the girl felt the same, but then she broke it off, and he quickly plunged into the tenuous place between heartbreak and loathing, unleashed over copious tequila and karaoke at The Billiard: “Chicks and ducks and geese better scurry, when I take you out in my surrey with the fringe—on top!”

For weeks after, he rode the bus around the city. It felt good to be going somewhere, even nowhere. On every corner, it seemed, the same couple was embracing each other in a mournful goodbye. At 53rd and Western, at the corner of Pike Avenue, and again at Hanover Square. He acknowledged their sorrow as his own, and when the woman smoothed back the man’s long, kinked hair and cupped the sides of his face, pressing a bit of herself into him, Dean felt just as sorry to lose her.

He put away his books and essays, drawings and music, all that nonsense, and changed his major to Political Science. News from home was bad. His mother, diagnosed with a disease he could hardly pronounce, much less save her from, started calling twice a day. Her insurance was not sufficient to secure treatment at the hospital for which she’d scrubbed floors the past eighteen years. The ammonia had thinned her hands to paper. He held them and stroked the fine hairs on her forehead while electrocution-strength tremors overtook her body.

After the funeral, he returned to school, earned his degree, and took an internship with an ancient city councilman, Harry Freedman, eighty-two and prone to soiling himself before the Thursday night meetings. Most of Freedman’s work was done by his assistant—someone Freedman barely knew—a woman in her thirties married to a microbiology professor. Three kids. She enlisted Dean’s help for a brilliant proposal to revive the increasingly polluted reservoir. Their work often ran late into the night, and the closer they got to completion, the more beautiful she became, her hair pulled back into a loose knot, her jackets unbuttoned as she guided Dean through measures and estimates. She told him that as a girl, she’d learned to swim in the reservoir’s fresh waters and often

camped out on its rolling granules of sand. Dean imagined her face underwater, lips parted as she floated in sun-lit strands of blue and green. During one work session, the office was uncomfortably warm, and the microbiologist's wife perspired through the sleeves of her shirt until she finally tore it off, just as they were almost finished, throwing the damp blouse on the ground. Dean stared at the sheer white camisole underneath and the large rust-colored birthmark, nearly the size of his palm, that eclipsed her left breast. He wanted to trace its border, every ridge and crevasse with his fingertips. "Don't look," she commanded in a husky voice. "I hate it."

"I've never seen anything so wonderful," Dean said, and then they were kissing, teeth to teeth, and sat kissing for several minutes before she pulled back. He reached for her shoulder, but she moved away again, blinking several times, focusing. She wiped her lips clean with the inside of her index finger and left the office.

The next day she was gone, but there was a note, asking Dean to promise that he would pitch the proposal. And Dean did, the birthmark swinging in and out of focus on the shadowy backdrop of his mind. He might have loved her. Always, when he thinks of beauty, it is this imperfection he recalls first.

However, the city decided that enticing international business was the top imperative in '82, and though Dean's initiatives on the reservoir were commended, the proposal was reprioritized to minor status and quickly lost within the piles of paperwork. The internship ended. Dean sent the microbiologist's wife six letters, one for each month he'd known her, asking her meet him, call, write. None was answered. Meanwhile, he took a job selling office furniture and supplies while feigning enthusiasm for wire wastepaper baskets and ergonomic, spine stabilizing chairs. The notes on his mirror suffered as a result—"They're not just dreams if you make them your reality." "The hardest part is always the beginning." And finally, glumly—"You can do it."

He quit the furniture store just before the semi-annual sale on paperclip holders. To save gas money, he rode the bus looking for work, each job less promising than the last. The same couple was still everywhere, their passion no weaker, always saying goodbye. One afternoon, a man in a linen suit knocked on his door, begging for signatures to fuel his bid for city mayor. Dean marveled at the simplicity of the man's

answers. Education? Check. Environment? Check. Healthcare? Check. Foreign policy? Check. Check. Checkcheckcheckcheckcheck. The city's reservoir? The man smirked. "Mister, we got bigger issues right now than a little water park."

The competition, not counting the linen suit man, was slim. A few small business owners, a school teacher, a youth center manager, a mailman. None with the finesse for a successful bid. If it hadn't been so easy at first, he often wondered, would he have gotten as far? Dean found a few backers on the strength of his stint with the Freedman camp, and then in Mina, an intelligent, politically active college junior. She directed the campus election office and quickly, prettily, committed herself to Dean, setting up campaign booths around the city to hand out pamphlets, stapling two tone posters with "Dean is Keen" in bold lettering all over downtown. In return, Dean took her on several picnics at the reservoir, each made a little less pleasant by the growing number of Trojans, PBR cans, all sorts of litter on the banks. "It's still romantic," she assured Dean. Her unfailing devotion annoyed him at first, though later, after she was gone, it was this devotion that he missed most.

Still reeling from the microbiologist's wife, Dean threw himself into Mina with enough force to look like desire-rich, real love, though certainly it wasn't, and asked her to marry him. Months later, she started down the aisle in short, firm steps, awash in creamy tulle, so fragile that for a moment, Dean was afraid of breaking her and of being broken in return. At the reception, Earl, her father, a wealthy corporate rancher, announced his intention to make sizeable contribution to Dean's campaign as a good faith testament to his daughter's love. Mina wrapped her arms around both of them, and with some new signs, bumper stickers, a crushing debate with an elderly man over healthcare, and enough artificial energy, Dean landed in office not long after the honeymoon in Acapulco.

Once there, however, everyone had a request tucked into a bit of criticism. The girl pouring his hazelnut latte suggested that he limit tax cuts for new businesses. The cab driver needed better renter's insurance. Earl rode him constantly about wholesale distribution. "For Mina," he was fond of reminding Dean. "Do this for Mina." Dean dug

into his supply of promises, although the more he made, the less sure he felt that he could keep them. But the words were magic.

In what little spare time he had, Dean joined a semi-weekly jogging group to alleviate the pressures. But as the runs lengthened, his interest waned. He enrolled in a knitting class at the Y, but after two mangled, misshapen scarves he abandoned that, too. He tried Tai Chi, flute lessons, horticulture, watercolor painting, anything to give his life balance. Nothing worked. Whenever someone recognized him, he forced a grin, signed napkins, posed for snapshots. “Just trying to connect with the community,” he’d say.

Still, putting on a good face grew tiresome. Every now and then, he cornered someone into sketching a few plans for the reservoir, but these moments were rare, sidestepped in favor of discussion of urban growth. “Determination is often the first chapter in the book of excellence,” Dean reminded himself. “Learn it. Live it. Love it.”

Finally, Dean took up French cooking, enjoying his absolute control over both the creation and the consumption of his efforts. Fondue Bourguignone, especially, and Fricassée de Mer et sa Julienne de legumes. He moved well in the kitchen, and vegetables and cold cuts made excellent constituents. “Why are you so distant?” Mina asked, two years after they’d been married. She edited his speeches, spearheaded the urban planning board, met with the vice mayor weekly, offered her wifely duties every night, and bought six different colors of the same Chanel suit, suitable for a mayor’s wife.

“Distance is determined only by perspective,” Dean said.

There were clammy handshakes, dry kisses dropped on wailing babies’ foreheads. At cabinet meetings, he drew up elaborate menus and made mental notes about which varietals would complement an endive salad. He delivered the six o’clock weather, secured an unprecedented \$1.2 million for city’s zoning committee, did nothing for the reservoir. There was talk of Microsoft building nearby.

Once, driving past the reservoir on the way out of town for a meeting, Dean glimpsed a thin strip of dirty sand through the open car window. He stared and stared at the gray banks as he drove past, nearly running off the road. The window was quickly rolled up. Thank goodness for tinting.

There were more words, and in a few years, the city's youngest mayor, in cornflower blue, won a second term while his even younger wife, in Burgeoning Burgundy, clapped her hands raw as he was sworn in.

Then, an unlikely encounter with the microbiologist's wife at a fundraiser for the March of Dimes. The birthmark lay tantalizing under the low-cut drape of silk, evinced briefly as she spun around the dance floor, the raised edges slipping out from the neckline. He stole many looks at her, through the curtain of bubbles in his champagne, over the mound of brassy curls on the school board president's wife. The entire evening, the microbiologist never let go of her waist, and the band played softly in the background. Even without the words, the melody was etched into his heart—"When I take you out in my surrey with the fringe—on top!"

"You okay?" Mina asked.

"Fine." Dean swallowed hard.

In several interviews, they asked how he'd achieved so much. Though his plan was working, he found little satisfaction in spouting platitudes, and yet, they responded so well to nothing else: "Sheer determination," he said. 110 % every time. Keeping his balls on the eye.

"Excuse me?" the interviewer asked, her nodding head breaking rhythm.

"You know what I mean." He curled the ends of his mouth into a smile, as if he did.

Because of the city's rapid growth and the resulting spike in crime, the council appointed him a personal security guard, Freddie. Freddie's wife, Ruth, was a substitute teacher. She and Mina became close friends. Mina was lonely; she'd told Dean several times. "I'm glad for my work," she assured him, "But I don't get close to anyone." She was too good for politics, Dean knew.

But Ruth, in thin red sundresses, visited Freddie during his shifts, bringing him tuna sandwiches. Sometimes she brought an extra for Dean. He took them from her warm hand, trying not to think of birthmarks or of Mina. He thought of stone buildings instead, of steel and concrete, which made him think of construction, which made him think of long cranes lifting magnificently, slowly at first, extending until they brushed the tip of

the sky. Then, he thought of thin red sundresses. And later, Freddie's wife lost Dean in her freshly baked bread smell, her hands plowing the skin at his hips as she came alive.

Pregnant three weeks later, she confessed to Mina, who told Freddie, who confronted Dean. Freddie scribbled a number on a scrap of paper, folded it, and handed it to Dean, saying it would likely be enough for the procedure and a trip to Puerto Vallarta. "You of all people should know, Dean, that this is the stuff of ruin. Might cost you an office."

Dean nodded and wrote a check.

"Don't worry." Freddie said, smirking. "We can keep this down." He smelled of dough, and Dean felt nauseous. For a week after the procedure, he sent Freddie home with Cabillaud aux Courgettes, Blanquette de veau, and mille-feuille steeped with creme patissiere and garnished with several fifties. Mina moved into the guest bedroom. He cut eleven percent from Medicare for the city's new light rail system and approval ratings soared. He gobbled antacids by the fistful.

Months later, a whisper passed through the Cabinet. Senator. Speculation filtered through the newspapers, heightened by Dean's refusal to confirm. He attended meetings, signed papers, gave speeches. None of it mattered; no one listened. His notes on the reservoir grew, spidering over the walls of his office. He looked for openings. Any mention of it, though, and there was a blank look, restored to life by the old buzzwords—development. Growth. Urban renewal. When he said these words, the papers called him progressive, insightful, a taker of charges, and in the wake of the reviews, the notes grew chiastic to coax his belief: "The pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty." "It's not the size of the dog in the fight but the size of the fight in the dog."

On a slow afternoon, his mind thick with visions of the birthmark, he headed out on a drive. Somehow, steered right toward the reservoir. Opening the car door, the smell of rot flooded his nose and stomach, filling his lungs. He snuck up the embankment and peered over. The water roiled in muck that bled up onto the sand. He moved in for a closer look, and it clung to his loafers. Something clicked inside Dean, and he tore off the shoe and chucked it, as hard as he could, into the sludge. Breathing heavily, he slogged

back to the car. “What’s wrong with you?” Mina asked when he returned to the house. He went into his room and shut the door. That night he dreamed he drowned.

One morning, he found a letter on his pillow written in Mina’s neat, even lines of cursive. She explained, not gently, in several bulleted points, that she was leaving. In six years, he’d remembered their anniversary twice. Her birthday, once. Sex only on Sunday mornings or when it suited him. He called her father a bullish old bag, her sixteen-year-old nephew a devilish prick. Freddie’s wife. This was unacceptable, and it had stupidly taken her this long to realize it, she wrote.

Dean was not surprised, and began making arrangements for lawyers, papers, divvying of assets. For a moment, he considered leaving office, but was seized with fear at the thought of doing anything else. He knew the game. He knew the words. There would be less of Earl’s money, but he’d find a way to cover the difference, even with his monthly payments to Freddie. His secretary suggested, not delicately, that his chances of maintaining his ratings might be improved if he kept his dick in his pants. But as she said it, her eyes went sultry soft, and later, as she rode him until his legs gave out, he briefly imagined her steadily growing gasps as the sound of punching his ticket to freedom.

But the news of the divorce had the reverse effect of drumming up pity. In photo after photo, he was captured alternating between appropriate amounts of depression and brooding—choking, strange sensations that metastasized slowly—scowling into his poppyseed bagel or running his index finger under his eyes. Though she hadn’t been there for quite some time, he felt Mina’s shape in his bed as he tried to sleep, swelled with the missing of her. At events, he avoided looking friendly with other women, and as a result, women he hardly knew approached him on the street and expressed their sympathy, hinted at a single friend or sister, sometimes even themselves. Always, Dean said he needed time. It did the trick. And Freddie, satisfied with the stipend, continued to keep quiet. Desperate for the one thing at which he could succeed, Dean announced his bid for senate. Five months later, the first congratulatory call was from Mina. They hadn’t spoken in almost a year.

“Please come over,” Dean said. He needed something to love and to hate.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Mina said after a terse silence.

The second call was from Lisa, his campaign manager. She was on her way to pick him up for the celebration party. Dean wondered if anyone would notice if he was absent. When Lisa knocked, he answered wearing cornflower blue.

A quick kiss at the corner of his mouth. “Congratulations, Senator Canefield,” Lisa murmured, lifting her skirt as she stepped inside. Full of self-loathing, he moved behind her. Forty-five minutes later, Mina was at the party, knowing what he’d done. He nodded at her and headed for the buffet.

“Speech!” they cried, sloshing champagne.

“There’s a certain project that needs our attention,” Dean began, pausing to sip his water. “Something that means a lot to this area and to me in particular...”

“Tax cuts!” someone yelled.

“Kickbacks!”

“The res—” he began. The faces fell. Success wouldn’t come to him; he would go to it. “A new business district,” Dean said, and the crowd cheered wildly.

The pâté was too thick to swallow.

On the bus ride home, he passed shadows in the dark, kissing their endless goodbyes.

Early in Dean’s first term, Governor Harold “The Hammer” Johnson hinted that Dean would make a good successor. Capitalizing on this favorability, Dean mentioned that the biggest drought in state history was expected in the next five years. The Hammer promised his support for the reservoir if first Dean would help with a variety of projects. A bill lessening the restrictions on firearm permits. Raising taxes on crude oil. Building a large parking garage on small patch of land protected by an even smaller group of environmentalists. “See if you can find a way around it,” The Hammer said. “Just do it.”

“Quitters never win,” Dean told himself, and a few years sped by.

At the third Governor’s Christmas party, Dean finally made his bid: “Hammer, I think I’ve mentioned the reservoir just outside the city?”

“We’ll get the water next year,” The Hammer chuckled, patting Dean on the back. The Hammer’s daughter was a nubile twenty four, twenty five, and her nipples showed

through her sweater. Drunk silly on eggnog, Dean stumbled into the guest bathroom and stared at himself in the gilded mirror. The alcohol deepened the lines on his forehead. There was a smudge on the glass, just above his left eye—a bleary Quasimodo.

“Obstacles are those frightful things that appear when you take your eyes off your goals,” he said to his swimming reflection. Quasimodo sneered.

His New Year’s resolution was to get out. Buy a farm somewhere in Nebraska or Kansas or Oklahoma, marry a farm girl, pitch hay, bake apple pies.

Freddie’s wife left him just after Valentine’s. Freddie put in his two weeks’ notice.

“You’re leaving? It’s over?” Dean asked.

“Dean, Dean, Dean. Is anything really over? Ever?” Dean slipped \$44.70 into Freddie’s pocket to be sure.

The Hammer was also retiring that year, and he reiterated his funds and support if Dean ran for governor. As a special favor. To continue his legacy. Dean said no.

“You’ll think about it,” The Hammer said. “Give me your answer later.”

That night, Dean made salmon with beurre rouge and fell asleep. He woke up to the sound of laughter, his own. The phone rang. “What are you doing?” a smoky voice whispered.

“Excuse me?”

“Doesn’t anything matter to you, Dean Canefield?”

“Who is this?” he demanded.

“The water.” The connection faded and then came back, loud. “You promised.” The line went silent. “Are you alone?”

“Yes.” It sounded like a lie, even though it was the truth.

“I always thought better of you,” the voice murmured.

“Why?”

“Fringe on top,” the voice laughed.

“I’m getting out.”

“Right. We’ll see what becomes of you then. You’re a mess,” the voice said and hung up.

The next morning, The Hammer announced his support for Dean Canefield's bid for governor.

His competition, Greta Kabatik, started slinging the mud, early and often. Ads with babies cradling shiny Uzis bearing his name ran on all the city buses. Every night, three times in an hour, there was the same commercial in which a single blade of grass was bulldozed in preparation for a large statue with Dean's face. The carefully-worded retaliations by his camp were, in contrast, patronizing and dull. The competition sparked something inside Dean. He asked around. Greta was new in town, went to weekly AA meetings.

At a benefit for cerebral palsy, Dean snuck Greta, drunk on Cristal (Dean had made certain there'd be more than enough), past the kitchen staff and into a walk-in freezer where he proceeded to make good use of her second place finish on the balance beam at the Junior Worlds. One of the caterers caught them and yelled angrily in Bulgarian, motioning for Greta to button her blouse. "That's the problem with this country," Greta huffed. "They're letting any-fucking-one in these days." It was gold in the bank.

She cried sexual harassment, but he was the hometown hero, helped along by the lingering memory of his recent, difficult divorce. He issued a concise statement: "Though I'm afraid I don't share Ms. Kabatik's concerns, I wish her all the best," and the election spun into formality, little else.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," The Hammer said at the victory party, "Let us welcome our new governor—Dean Canefield!"

Soon after Dean was sworn in, the climate showed signs of stabilizing and drought predictions faded into minor scares. No one seemed to mind that fishing and swimming were restricted. Without the threat, the few, isolated water concerns dried up. Dean was frightened by how terribly easy it was to let go. Over a mesclun salad and watercress vichyssoise, Dean consoled himself with Billie Holiday and an '82 Bordeaux. "You've done all you could," he told himself. "Remember, you can't set the course for where you're going until you know where you are."

There was an endless parade of press conferences. He delivered the commencement address at three separate graduations that spring, each a variation on the power of self-belief. Rags to riches stories were everywhere. They believed he was just another American success. Dean wanted to point out that they'd gotten it all wrong. It was a series of lucky breaks, and even with those, he'd done so little. But it was simpler to give in, bury the birthmark, drain the reservoir. The Pot-au-feu tasted bland. Sometimes, he rode his bike into traffic with his eyes shut. His left sock often mismatched his right. The sweat began before he even got into bed at night, and by morning, the sheets were dripping.

The reservoir was eventually condemned by the state's water division. As the announcement was made, Dean performed the ribbon cutting on the meat-packing plant opening up less than a mile away.

Once or twice a month, he slept well, dreaming of haystacks, of riding a bus to the edge of the world and getting off at the last stop. "Don't flatter yourself too much," Marilyn told him after the first fuck, reapplying the sheen to her lips. "I know what I'm doing."

"Use passive voice if anyone asks why the Boys and Girls Club lost funding," Thomas coached. "It makes people less nervous. 'Mistakes *were* made.' See the difference? No object equals no blame."

The Hammer called once a week. "You're doing great work. Keep it up." Funding was stripped from schools that failed to meet state standards and insurance rates tripled. Meanwhile, Elton John performed at the state's annual black tie barbeque.

Mina remarried, wearing Collegian Cream. When Dean hugged her at the reception, he noticed how well it went with the cornflower blue. If she noticed, she said nothing. He pulled away, and Mina moved toward the groom.

"Gov-er-nor Canefield," the man drawled, tightening his grip on Mina's shoulder. His fingers paled from the pressure. Dean nodded and a pulse of anger twitched through his limbs. He wanted to reach for Mina, but she was a pillar, looking carefully past him. "I'm surprised you could make time for this—given your tight schedule, I'm sure."

“I did it for Mina,” Dean replied.

The color abandoned the man’s face.

“You didn’t have to show up,” she whispered.

“Shouldn’t have,” the man added.

“And now for all you Broadway fans,” the DJ’s voice boomed across the reception area. “Here’s a little favorite from the heartland. ‘Chicks and ducks and geese better scurry...’”

Dean groped for a response. “Mina?” She’d step in, set this asshole straight. She’d told him once, after a night of kisses under her grandmother’s afghan, that she’d do anything for him. Anything. “Mina?”

Mina looked away. From across the dance floor, her father glared.

Dean avoided the office for several days after the wedding. Quarantined himself at home, subsisting on a tube of frozen hamburger he exhumed from the back of his freezer. Watched QVC and downed Wild Turkey. How damned easy everything had been. But now he wanted out. Really and truly, this time.

He tried praying, but the voice was all wrong. Cruel and clumsy. He meditated, slept, ate a tuna sandwich on white bread. His head was full of jitters.

That night, it was pure good fortune that the lock on the public entrance to the closed-off reservoir was rusted. It broke free with two good tugs. Dean crept past the gates and immediately pulled his sweater over his nose to block the smell of decay. He hurried over to the shrunken pool of waste, a slow-moving, feeble, fetid puddle. But there was a small break in the surface near the edge, and underneath, a ribbon of clear water. It shimmered under the moon. “What are you doing?” Dean asked his reflection. With his shirt hiked up over his nose, he looked like a bandit. “Finish this term. Get out. Forget destiny.” The words were crude, but it was enough to make the Quasimodo turn away. Determined, Dean went back to the office.

At a press conference the following morning, everyone was unusually charged. Reporters and cameramen buzzed underneath the lights, scribbling notes, fixing collars, testing microphones. The same horde of questions was asked, and Dean dispatched them one by one, the old, empty phrases tumbling out. But as they did, something else took

over. The sliver of clear water focused in his mind, releasing bright energy all over. He said *mistake*. He said *promise*. *Reservoir*. He wanted to go out on top.

An older man stood up. "Governor, do you have any plans to seek your party's nomination in the upcoming presidential election?"

Silence settled over the crowd.

"No," Dean said, sending a fuse through the press.

"Had enough of politics, Canefield?" the young reporter called through the murmurs.

"Too much." The room erupted into questions and flashes of light, converging into one beat of sound and color. "Thank you for your time," Dean added, finishing it.

Upon leaving the building, Marilyn, trailing close behind Dean, told Thomas, "I never asked to be a glorified secretary. I have my own career to think about, you know."

"You should go to it then," Dean interrupted, turning suddenly to face her. She barked a short, hard laugh, shooting nervous glances at Thomas. "I mean it," Dean said, and kissed her goodbye.

And he does mean it, because first, first he had wanted to be something else. An architect. A chemist's assistant. A magician. A writer. His mother's leathery palms in his hair. For the first time, he feels true promise. He is kind. Tomorrow holds no dread because there is a future and real possibility. He strides around the next corner full of purpose and pleasure and glorious bliss. In six months, there will be books, articles, television programs, locked doors at night and later still, feeding off of the momentum, the signs will begin to go back up, spiraling a cold, permanent snare, but at this instant, Dean is at peace, a pure tempo of happiness, because he believes he is getting out. Then, before he can duck, a banana crushes against his left nostril, moist, and then the rest of the pie too. Vanilla pudding. Supple. Chilled. Banana cream with whipping on top.

