

CRAZY PEOPLE

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Crazy People, a collection of short stories, presents characters and their various psychological crutches. The preface explores the concept of negative space as it applies to short fiction, manifesting itself in the form of open-ended endings, miscommunication between characters, rhetorical questions, and allusions to unspecified characters. The preface seeks to differentiate “good” space from “bad” space by citing examples from the author’s own work, as well as the works of Raymond Carver, Dan Chaon, and Stanley Fish.

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## WRITING OUTSIDE THE LINES

### Oranges and Grapefruits

By the time I was born, my grandfather had retired and moved to Florida, and I grew up thinking of him only when the crate of oranges and grapefruits came at Christmas. The grapefruit looked like a split sun in the blue cereal bowl, and I watched fascinated as my father worked at its flesh with a spoon. Across the breakfast table, I could picture my grandfather and his third wife, Marion, as they had been the last time they visited. Grandpa was skinny and knobby, like a sapling in plaid pants and white loafers. A toothpick always dangled from the corner of his mouth, bobbing and rolling as he chewed it, filling me with the distinct fear that he would choke on the small wooden spear. I remembered his corny sense of humor, the way he reversed consonants in the names of fast food restaurants, calling them Dc Monalds and Gurger Bing until I corrected him.

The last time I saw my grandfather alive was at my cousin's high school graduation party, an event overshadowed by the fact that she failed a class and did not actually walk as planned that day. A few months later, when Grandpa was eighty-one, Marion left him. She went to live with her daughter in Connecticut, but refused to divorce him so as not to lose his medical benefits. He thought Marion was just on an extended vacation, even when my aunt told him, "She's not coming back, Dad." A year later, Grandpa's neighbor reported him missing after he had driven off to buy the newspaper one morning and hadn't returned by the next day. By the time my father arrived in Florida, my grandfather had been located, sitting in his Buick at the St. Petersburg bus

depot, about three hours away from where he lived. When questioned by police, my grandfather couldn't recall how long he had been there or how he got there.

This place of waiting has always struck me as deeply symbolic. Grandpa had been a New York City bus driver for over thirty years. I imagine him sitting in his car, chewing his toothpick while watching the buses pull in and out of their horizontal spots, destinations displayed above their windshields. Why St. Petersburg? It is St. Peter who guards the gates of heaven as God's welcoming committee. Was Grandpa expecting to die, or for his wife to climb down the steps after the door's hiss? Or did he think he was going back to work, hoping to feel the motion and control of maneuvering such a machine one last time? No one ever found out.

One reason I write fiction is to attempt to capture a moment of contemplation, of inconsequential fulfillment or of ultimate loneliness, and bottle it into an image, such as a Greyhound bus destined for somewhere. I am interested in human motivation, and in how inaction and action are equal and opposite forces, for example, driving to the bus depot, yet lingering there. A part of this process is discovering how no character exists in perfect isolation. If the above anecdote were a work of fiction, I would have to ask myself, what characters can deepen the complexity of my grandfather's situation? What did my father think on the plane down? What memories or experiences shaped his perception of the events? How did the police officers react? Most importantly, what was Grandpa thinking? What would have happened if he'd bought a ticket and gotten on a bus? For me, fiction is exploring this web of experience and discovering which connections create some kind of emotional resonance within the reader. I am not saying that fiction should be autobiographical, but I do believe that writers have met their characters before. Each

character I create reminds me of the Mr. Potato Head of my youth, the unique arrangement of eyes, noses, lips, ears, hats -- all the individual pieces we've seen before somewhere on someone. We discover how they match up only once we start writing about them. The end result is a creation, a person in a place in a situation, experienced by the reader and by the writer him or herself.

### The Missing Tooth : Negative Space in Fiction

One of the most common critiques of contemporary fiction is the open ended ending. Readers often claim that these types of endings leave them feeling unsatisfied because nothing is solved. For example, in Dan Chaon's "I Demand To Know Where You're Taking Me," the reader is unsure whether or not Cheryl will give up her suspicions about her brother-in law, a convicted rapist, to her husband. Likewise, in "Among the Missing," Sean's mother disappears in the end of the story. Although there is evidence that she might have packed up and moved away without telling anyone, she had previously admitted to Sean that she was worried someone had been stalking her. The reader, like Sean, never finds out which possibility is true.

I would argue that this ambiguity is what stories, as well as real life, are about. Critic Stanley Fish views writing as a kinetic art because "it does not lend itself to a static interpretation... it refuses to stay still and doesn't let you stay still either. It forces you to be aware of 'it' as a changing object- and therefore no 'object' at all- and also to be aware of yourself as correspondingly changing (400). Similarly, in an interview with Scott Phillips, Chaon says, "I think the thing I value most is the stuff that shakes us up and makes us question our solid ground...I'd prefer if the reader and I were standing together

on a common ground, both of us puzzling and wondering in the face of these moments that can't be explained" (Chaon 266). I think these type of endings are just one example of how negative space is utilized by fiction writers in order to enhance the reader's personal experience with the text.

We tend to associate the term negative space most directly with the visual arts, that is, the "living" space created around an object or image in the foreground of a work. The Dutch artist M.C. Escher is well known for reversing positive and negative space to create complex illusions. For example, in "Day and Night," we see white birds flying over a field toward a dark river, yet the space between the birds, and the actual patchwork farm below them, blend to create another flock of dark birds heading in the opposite direction toward a light river. Without the use of negative space, Escher could not have achieved this effect. In fact, though many artists take into account the background in which their figures are set, Escher's works are recursive, meaning that both the foreground and background are recognizable forms (Hofstadter 68). Escher seems to treat negative and positive space equally, meaning each creates its own picture. Similar are optical illusions, where two vases become two faces, or even the Rorschach ink blots, personality tests designed to determine whether we are psychotic or well adjusted individuals. Our brains tend to latch onto one image, convinced of its certainty, and thus ignore all other possibilities, until, of course, we are told that other possibilities exist (for example, someone points out the face in the vase). Similarly, our interpretation of the ink blots are directly a result of how the ink interacts with the light paper- or the negative space. Without the paper, we would only see black. According to Cornell University's Art Design and Visual Thinking website, "Our perception of shape and form are affected



by several factors- the position or viewpoint from which we see an object will emphasize or obscure certain features and therefore affect the impression it makes... Training the eye to keep on looking beyond first impressions is a crucial step in developing true visual literacy.”

We can extend this analogy to writing. Our ability to perceive the subtle nuances in the text will allow us to see different facets of a character’s persona and situation. In order to obtain a deeper meaning in the work, a reader must be able to detect the subtext of a story. One Halloween, I decided to be a witch, and along with my pointy black hat, broomstick, and black dress, I needed a few missing teeth. We bought a non-toxic black “paint” and colored in two incisors and one canine. I think negative space in fiction is like these missing teeth. I knew my teeth were still there, but I could see only the spaces the teeth filled, which were in part created by the actual teeth surrounding the “missing” ones. The tension in a story develops with a similar mysteriousness; we don’t have to see it to know it is there.

Along these lines, the most telling moments in our lives are sometimes ones that are emotionally obscure- such as sexual tension arising between a man and woman who have been “friends” for many years. Whether or not they hook up is not the interesting part, but rather the scene when one or the other’s feelings have changed and are not being directly communicated. Think about the language we use to end relationships-- the thousand and one ways we have for simply saying, “It’s not working out,” or “I’m not in love with you anymore,” -- “I need space,” “It’s not you, it’s me,” “You’re my best friend.” We have a hard time being blunt because it is painful to do so. Some prefer to be vague, and hope that others draw the right conclusion. Others don’t know how they feel,

or have a hard time admitting their deficiencies to themselves and others. So why should our characters be any different? Aren't we, as readers, searching for some shadow of our own human likeness?

Jennifer Grow helps us detect negative space in fiction by defining circumstances that create it. In her article, "All that is Seen and Unseen: Negative space in Fiction," Grow points out that "the best fiction creates a subtle absence that evokes an elusive, mysterious sense or feeling about some form of the human condition by describing the space around the condition without actually naming it" (10). This feeling may be evoked by a physical absence in a story, such as a character who is alluded to but who does not actually appear in the action of the story. Raymond Carver presents an absent yet essential character in his short story, "A Serious Talk." Burt visits his ex wife Vera on Christmas day, but we learn that he must leave by six o'clock because "her friend and his children" (105) would be arriving for dinner. It is the presence of this "friend," shown through the "packages wrapped in festive paper (which) lay under the tree waiting for after six o'clock," the table set with "linen napkins and wine glasses" (106) and a single flower in a vase, and even the fire in the fireplace which are intolerable to Burt, and in essence, remind him that he has been replaced in his own house. He impulsively places five more logs in the fireplace and leaves. We do not realize the severity of this action, which takes place so casually in the context of the story, until the next day when Vera accuses Burt of trying "to burn the house down" (107) which he both apologizes for and denies. This contradiction helps define Burt's character as an impulsive hothead who feels remorse, but not enough so to change his own flawed personality.

While Vera is in the bathroom, the phone rings and Burt answers it. When “a voice” asks for “Charlie” (110), the reader, along with Burt, assumes Charlie must be Vera’s friend. He is given a name, but nothing else, and we don’t even know who is calling for him or why. We know very little about Vera’s “Charlie,” whose name, could be interpreted as the name of an unseen “enemy” as used in the Vietnam War era to connote the Viet Cong. Thus, the simple question, “Is Charlie there?” could be heard through Burt’s ears as “Is the enemy there?” The name “Charlie” also represents every man, for example, the expression “Sorry, Charlie” or the cartoon character Charlie Brown, constructed by Charles Shultz to represent a normal, every day, anonymous guy. Thus, I think Carver chose the name Charlie for all the implied associations, all of its inherent ambiguity. All we know- and don’t know- about Charlie creates a negative space in the story. He is the silent cause of tension between the two characters. He could be a perfectly nice guy for all we know, but we can’t help but sympathize with Burt, no matter how idiotically he acts, because he has been replaced, and that is a feeling most can relate to. It is almost as if his life has changed without his consent.

Negative space is not limited only to the physical absence of a character in a story. It also manifests itself through silences, literal and rhetorical questions, leading or suggestive sentences, miscommunication between characters, endings that divert our attention, undefined or analogous situations, and in section breaks or through structure (Grow 14). Carver utilizes questions to underscore the tension within characters as well as between them. For example, Burt asks Vera, “Are you still taking flute?” (109) even though she just stated that she was getting ready for her flute lesson. This question is a way for Burt to express interest in her life as well as assert a kind of “I knew you when”

and try to play on a remembered, shared past. He asks, “When did you start keeping Vodka in the freezer?” (109) though he suspects it has something to do with her friend Charlie. It is a question to which he really doesn’t want to know the answer. When Burt asks, “What about me?.. You think I look forward to the holidays?” (111), he wants Vera to acknowledge that he is causing her pain because he himself feels pain. “The purpose of these questions, written or implied, is to lead the reader into a void; to allow the mind to wander in a way that is complementary to the whole story (Gray 12). Questions allow the reader to step in, and, through the process of reading, construct their own answers.

At the end of the story, Burt cuts the phone line with a knife, symbolically severing Vera’s communication with or about her lover Charlie because he wants to communicate with Vera himself, but can’t. He realizes that “there were important things that needed talking about, important things that needed to be discussed” (113). When he picks up the ashtray, as if it were “a discus,” Vera responds to this threat of physical violence by imploring, “Please... That’s our ashtray” (112). This statement is a form of miscommunication that Grow is talking about. Burt has let us know previously that it is really not an ashtray at all, but “a big dish of stoneware they’d bought from a bearded potter on the mall in Santa Clara” (110). Vera could be communicating through the words “our ashtray” that it is a piece of shared history that is still intact. Or she could be communicating that it is what that she and her lover use to ash in. (Burt observed several different brands of cigarette butts in the ashtray). The reader can only guess at her intentions, and there is no correct answer. Although we detect that Burt wants to shatter the ashtray, he doesn’t, and this seems to be what the serious talk is about. Thus, Carver effectively communicates a dramatic tension without ever naming it. No serious talk, or

at least the kind that Burt anticipates, the kind that brings him to his ex-wife's house in the first place, ever transpires. Yet the space around this serious talk, the miscommunication between the characters, the subtle presence of Vera's lover, and even the symbolic ashtray, all take the place of that talk. The reader is left thinking that Burt has very little insight into his own situation, and that he himself may be responsible for the demise of his own marriage. Though some readers might say, "nothing happened" because the serious talk never happened, I would argue that it can't happen. Burt is not ready for it to happen, and we wonder if he ever will be.

Similarly, in my story "Dusty Blues," the reader witnesses how the relationship between Melissa and Joe spontaneously combusts. I attempt to work negative space into the conversation- or fight- they have about their relationship. According to Jerome Stern, author of Making Shapely Fiction, "Conversations are like icebergs- only the very tops are visible- most of their weight, their mass, their meanings- are under the surface" (14). While on the surface, the argument appears to center around Joe's jealousy, from Melissa's reference to "Brian the Yoga guy," I hope that the reader notices the gestures that tell another story. Melissa "blushes" when Joe confronts her about Two Feather's nickname for her, "Omega Wolf," implying that there is a side to her that she isn't comfortable disclosing to Joe. When she says, "It always smells like rotten fruit in here," the reader understands that maybe she's talking about the relationship as well as the physical condition of the apartment. Critic Laurie Champion concludes that "often it is not direct discourse, words spoken between characters, but characters' inability to communicate that becomes important in developing characters' attitudes, motives, weaknesses, or hopelessness (193).

When Melissa leaves and doesn't return, though Joe expects her to return "with a pint of ice cream," the reader realizes that this has happened before. Instead, he is left with a mysterious message on his answering machine, in which the caller does not speak. Joe can detect someone in the background, but he doesn't know whether this is a person or just the television. The silence of the message is louder than any words that could have possibly been spoken, and symbolizes their inability to fully communicate their needs and feelings to each other.

Next, Joe finds a letter stuck in his door. He knows it is Melissa's distinctive "small" handwriting, and that even the compact physical nature of her writing implies she has something to hide. The words of the letter, which clearly state her need for space, that "she is going away," do not disturb Joe as much as the black feather left inside the note. He is in such denial about the failure of the relationship that he lets himself think that someone put the feather in afterwards, or that someone put her up to writing the letter, namely the Two Feathers character who is her spiritual guru. The feather is something purely physical, plucked from a living creature, that takes on a metaphysical meaning. Feathers are often thought of as an ornament, or as in the expression, "feather in your cap," a very public display of an accomplishment, a prize. What Melissa means by this gesture, if anything, is open to both Joe's and the reader's interpretation. It could represent trust, mistrust, or freedom. It points to the fact that there is more to Melissa than Joe understands. Her interest in the spiritual and the occult may be the ultimate reason that Joe burns the letter, but "stabs the feather into a neglected pot of dirt." In a way, maybe he too is a believer in "something," but is not at a point where he can admit this to anyone, not even himself.

Thus, the scenes between Burt and Vera and Joe and Melissa share a common thread: the reader is present in the conflict, and knows that there is more to both situations than is being spoken about. Both the ashtray and the feather serve to up the ante- to provide a symbolic physical inanimate object that reflects something about Burt and Joe's insecurities and states of denial. According to Jon Powell, "Menace develops as meaning itself becomes elusive... Both character and reader sense that something dangerous or menacing is "imminent" or "submerged" but both character and reader, unable to find the meaning of the given clues, must battle between readings of these clues" (647).

#### Realization: From Character Sketch to Story

Although negative space enhances positive space, writers often begin with the positive space when constructing their stories. Maybe I get an idea from something as simple as an overheard conversation waiting in line at the deli, or a newspaper headline that seems odd, intriguing, and makes me think, why? When I was a freshman in college and school had just started up after winter break, I was drinking my coffee in the Alfalfa room, half watching the fast snow out the window. I remember the distinct feeling of my body thawing, as if I had been skiing instead of on my way to Calculus. I looked down at *The Daily Sun* and read the headline, "*Student Dies in Fraternity Chimney*," and felt chills that had nothing at all to do with my damp body. Who was this student? What were his friends like? His parents? How was everyone coping with this situation? What was he thinking when he crawled into that chimney? Was he drunk? Was it suicide? These

questions allow me to develop a character. To me, what happens is not as important to a story as who it happens to.

I have included a story from my first semester in the program, “Crazy People,” a series of character sketches of the people associated with the psychiatric group home, Baltic Avenue. Although not a finished work, I include it because I think it is an example of positive space- the outlines of characters, what they look like, how they talk, and what their issues are. There is almost too much negative space in this story, which is some sort of larger force or issue that tie all the characters together. Through developing the negative space around these characters, I was able to later create a story with a more focused emotional drive, such as “Threshold.” This story centers around a twenty-something Rehab Counselor, Karen, who splits her time between the comfort of fantasy relationships and the harsh reality of volatile patients. She tries to act happy, yet isn’t sure what she wants out of life and love. The fact that her high school boyfriend has recently appeared on a reality TV show with his fiancé acts as a catalyst for her to reevaluate where she is in life, who her friends are, and what her purpose is. Karen feeds off needy characters, both her group home family and her bar family, yet all seem to take more than they give.

Like Carver does with Charlie in “A Serious Talk,” I attempt to use negative space in the form of two of the narrator’s love interests: Louis from her teenage years and Ted, a recent boyfriend. The reader sees flashbacks of Louis, and realizes there is something about him that Karen hasn’t gotten over. It may be that she hasn’t quite let go of her youth. Also, the reader doesn’t know whether Karen and Ted are broken up, or temporarily apart, because Karen can’t seem to decide this either, which paints her as



unreliable. She tells Alexa, her patient, “He’s on the road right now. He’s a musician, you know,” implying his importance, or slight celebrity, and her role as supportive “band wife.” But later, she clarifies that he disappeared right before he agreed to move in with her, and that he is not playing in a band himself, but following a band around, a groupie much like the Dead Heads. When Karen’s coworker Elsa cuts Ted down, she both concurs and defends him. Thus, Ted’s absence from the story serves to reveal integral parts of the narrator’s behavior, ranging from her self esteem issues to her desire to possess the unattainable, trying to hold a wild bird.

In contrast to the two absent characters, I provide two male characters in the positive space of the text as a foil. There is an ambiguity inherent in Karen’s interaction with both characters, one whom she calls Richard Gere because she can’t remember his name, thus making the reader picture someone he’s not, just someone he resembles, and the other one she calls “Whitey,” which is also not his real name, but “what everyone calls him.” Karen and Richard Gere have a conversation during which he seems to know more about her than she does about him, in which he gives her the attention that she craves but that also repulses her, as she is quick to let her friend “save her” by dragging her to the dance floor. Karen quickly switches her focus to Whitey, the cute young cook she’d had her eye on, and winds up making out with him in a deserted stairwell. Yet, though their conversation, they seem to be dancing around each other, not connecting. One minute she wants to “make him think she was the coolest girl he’s ever met,” and the next, she’s thinking, “his face looked almost albino under the exposed light bulb....didn’t he want to know anything about her?” This question, “both literal and philosophical, (is) aimed at the reader as much as the narrator” (Grow 13). As she is dealing with whether

or not she really wants to be with this guy, her “on-call” group home beeper goes off. The beeper sounds like an “alarm clock” which should symbolically signal Karen that her time with Whitey is over, that someone or something is trying to intervene on her behalf. Yet, it has sinister elements in the fact that it could mean that someone is in grave trouble, in need of help, and while the reader knows this could be a person in the group home, namely Alexa, it could also be Karen herself who needs help.

At the end of the story, the negative space surrounds not only what will become of the narrator, but who is in the ambulance that she spies pulling away from the group home as she hides in the shadows. How is she so sure it is Alexa? Does it matter who it is? Of the neighbors watching from the porch, she thinks, “Go back inside. This isn’t your life!” This statement resonates, I think, through the last few lines of the story. It could point to the narrator’s ultimate desire to let go of Alexa, for she can’t “fix” her; Alexa can only save herself. Or Karen could berating those, herself and the reader included, for taking interest, relief, or sick comfort, in the tragedies of others.

Like “Threshold,” the story “Middle Person” involves a young woman entangled in the demanding and bizarre world of the Cadillac Cafe. I think one of the reasons why I often place my characters in the context of their occupations is to create a sort of action, or movement, inherent in the story. The characters are working, and working hard, yet this juxtaposes their inertia when it comes to their personal relationships. Stern feels that “what people do for a living organizes their lives and influences their personalities... Readers will feel they’re understanding something from the inside--not only the life, but what it actually feels like to live it (29).

In “Middle Person,” Demitra confuses motion with action, that if she thinks about something long and hard enough, it might actually come to fruition. If she wills hard enough her pizza driver boyfriend to leave her, maybe he actually will. If she desires the cook to fall in love with her, he will fall under her spell. I attempt to create positive space though the specific, action oriented details about her job and routine experiences. The negative space surrounds her relationships. One way I create negative space is by naming the supporting characters by their occupations. They become the pizza driver, her cook, and the owner. It creates a kind of close relationship between narrator and reader, such as when a college girl and her friend refer to a crush by a code name, “Library boy” or “Juice Man.” The only time we get her cook’s real name is when I show it written on a note for him.

Midway through the story, negative space is created through a miscommunication between Demitra and her coworker, the cook she is falling in love with (or thinks she is falling in love with. Can the reader be sure she knows what love is?) On their walk home, they stop on a bridge over a gorge to smoke. The cook makes a reflective comment, showing his appreciation for nature and life in general. “This is some ancient shit,” he says. “Before man, before anything, there was this.” Demitra looks down and thinks “Deep,” then realizes she said it, and the cook responds, “Yeah.” The cook could think she is referring to the physical depth of the drop below them, or he could have an inkling that she thinks he’s profound. But the reader does not know what to make of this. Whether or not the cook picked up on the nuances of the conversation is open to the reader’s interpretation. This scene also serves to create sexual tension, as Demitra

expresses her desire to get to know the cook better, and her pleasure at knowing his thoughts.

Sometimes a character recalls a situation for one reason, yet the reader interprets it as something else, realizing the actual reason the memory has arisen. For example, the scene where Demitra recalls finding a diamond ring in the snow while shopping with her pizza driver boyfriend could be interpreted as a way for the reader to get an insight into the boyfriend's character: how he is able to manipulate her and how he has a questionable moral compass. Yet, the image of the diamond ring leaves an imprint on the reader's brain. A diamond ring, assumed to be an engagement ring, is something Demitra has to come upon by accident; she is not in a relationship which would lead to marriage, though subconsciously, she wishes she were, but only with someone else. The ring symbolizes that a long term commitment with her pizza driver is not meant to be.

When the cook's female roommate leaves him a note, Demitra can't help but read part of it: "I love you and wouldn't want to do anything that would ruin our friendship," and concludes that the roommate is also in love with the cook. Yet, those same words can also be interpreted as the roommate letting the cook down easy, or that the cook is in love with the roommate, but Demitra does not see this second possibility until it is too late.

I utilize the owner in the last scene to enhance some of the negative space that I build on throughout the story, and as Grow would say, it is "an ending that diverts our attention" (10). I do this by reintroducing the Café's owner, and the image of the junked Cadillac, at a point when Demitra is feeling hurt and confused about her feelings for the cook and feeling sorry for herself. Demitra sees the owner sitting alone in the cold dark car and wants to reach out to him for mutual comfort after she concludes that the cook is

“with” his roommate. Something about the owner, and his rusty Cadillac remind her of stasis, that some things will stay the same if you just let them sit. She can work the same job for the rest of her life, or be with a person she is not happy with, for a really long time. It takes some sort of motion to disrupt vicious cycles, and maybe she is looking toward him for the strength to exert this motion. The last image of the plump raccoon in the café’s garbage and the owner’s simple observation, “...dinnertime” is an attempt to leave the reader with a image that subtly echoes the story, in the way that Carver’s ashtray does: an image that has nothing to do with the story yet at the same time everything to do with it. Yet, the reader will make what he or she wants of it, for “the place where sense is made or not made is in the reader’s mind rather than the printed page or the space between the covers of a book” (Fish 397).

Negative space is not without drawbacks. The writer must strike a balance between the text and subtext or else risk leaving the reader confused and unsatisfied which will, consequently, make him not care about the character. Although negative space can enhance the mysteriousness of a story, it is far too easy a crutch for writers to claim that any ambiguity or purposeful omission of information is indeed “working” for the story. It can be an excuse for beginning writers who are uncertain how to further develop their stories. Stern explains that “it is as if the writer wants the reader to make up for his own vagueness and lack of energy. Confusion... is the lack of control that results when you omit or leave blurry certain information that your readers need to know” (85). Writers need to give the reader enough information so that the reader feels confident in drawing his or her own conclusions. For example, if a character makes an elusive reference to the Civil War, but the author never reveals the character’s age, or whether he

is a Northerner or Southerner, the reader will find it difficult to make an educated conclusion about the reference, and it will wind up detracting from the character rather than adding to him.

From a young age, I have always been attracted to mystery novels. I systematically read every Nancy Drew mystery Carolyn Keene wrote. I think the negative space reflects the size and shape of the solution to the mystery and makes the reader work to figure it out. A truly great mystery is one in which the reader fails to foresee the outcome of the clues presented. A majority of the time, I find myself figuring out “whodunit” approximately thirty pages before the main character does, which I think, is probably no coincidence. As a writer, this is my ultimate goal: to engage the reader in finding a solution him or herself.

If a reader comes to a “wrong” conclusion, whose fault is it, the reader’s or the writer’s? Fish would argue that if we look at the kinetic art of reading as the experience rather than an act to extract meaning, then it doesn’t really matter whether the reader gets it or not. The point of negative space is that the writer puts several possibilities out there. We can’t turn around and get angry with readers for not seeing what we saw as we wrote it. The informed reader will do his best to read carefully, and once we give up the text to the reader, it becomes a part of his or her own experiences. According to Fish, “all the mistakes, the positing, on the basis of incomplete evidence, of deep structures that failed to materialize, will not be canceled out. They have been experienced; they have existed in the mental life of the reader; they mean” (400).

## Reading, Writing, and Enlightenment

How can a wedge of orange on my tongue cause me to conjure up my grandfather? I am sitting here, eating an orange, yet suddenly I am sitting beside Grandpa in his Buick, polka music wafting softly between us, and he can't see me, but I'm there. I want to ask him these important questions but I can't. I can only imagine. We don't know all the answers, never will, and as some philosophers point out, should not even desire this. One of the basic tenets of Zen Buddhism is that there is no way to characterize what Zen is. No matter what verbal space you try to enclose Zen in, it resists, and spills over.

It might seem that all efforts to study Zen are fruitless, yet millions practice this faith and write about it. For example, Zen koans, stories composed by the monk Mumon in the thirteenth century, are a vital part of Zen study, verbal though they are. Koans are supposed to stimulate the mechanisms inside one's mind that lead one to enlightenment. Causing bewilderment is the exact purpose the koan serves, for when one is in a bewildered state, one's mind begins to operate non-logically to some extent. Only by stepping outside of logic can one make the leap to enlightenment (251). Koans utilize negative space to say something without directly saying it. Take, for example, the following koan: "When a buffalo goes out of his enclosure to the edge of the abyss, his horns and his head and his hoofs all pass through, but why can't his tail also pass" (248). Thus, the author uses a symbol, the buffalo, to talk about Zen without actually mentioning Zen itself. This koan purposely attempts to divert the reader's attention, and is "perhaps meant to show how useless it is to spend one's time in chattering about Zen" (248). Similarly, what a short story may teach us is something never said directly through the words, but instead, something we experience through being in the story.

Buddhist enlightenment is often defined as transcending dualism, or dividing the world into categories or stereotypes. Thus, the enemy of enlightenment is perception. As soon as you perceive an object, you draw a line between it and the rest of the world; you divide the world, artificially, into parts, and thereby miss the Way (251). This is similar to saying once you perceive an image in an optical illusion, you close yourself off to other possibilities. Or once you perceive that there is only one true meaning to a story, you close yourself off to the fact that every reading has as many meanings as there are readers. Though, if a reader embraces the negative space in a story, I believe he will learn to question, rather than answer, and questioning and self reflection are true paths to literary enlightenment.

Although Zen, on the surface, seems to treat words and truth as incompatible, what words lead us to see is that there is no direct way to trap truth. Koans are words, yet inherent is an unanswerable puzzle, a lesson that words solve nothing. And I think this is exactly what negative space points to- nothing is solved. It is interesting that Grow points to silences- pauses in stories where the characters deliberately don't speak- as characteristic of negative space. Buddhists devote time to silent meditation, creating a negative space in their lives that will allow them to open themselves to unseen possibilities. And as we know in life, silence can sometimes bear more weight than the most eloquent of phrases. Zen teaches us to read between the lines; to perceive what is there and not there; what is and what can be, what we know, don't know, and will never know. And this is exactly what a good story should do: make us question ourselves.



If he were my character, I would ask my grandfather certain questions concerning his mysterious trip to the bus station in St. Petersburg, Florida. What were you doing and thinking, and most importantly, what brought you there? Some characters might tell you exactly what their intentions are, and some may withhold information, daring the reader to figure them out. Just because a character tells you something doesn't mean he is telling the truth. I believe a transformation occurs during a story, where the lines between character and reader are blurred. Think about the few moments after you finish reading a story, when you sit there: smiling, frowning, or perplexed. Fish states, "Somehow when we put a book down, we forget that while we were reading, it was moving... and forget that we were moving with it (401). Likewise, the best ending to a story is one in which the readers walk a few more steps with the character, not quite ready to let him or her go, before going on with their own lives.

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## THE OLIVE JAR

My father fears she will burn the house down, so he insists she hold her vigil in the bathroom, the safest room in the house. Grandma's bathroom has a large ceramic counter with twin sinks and yellow tiled walls and floors. She places two tall candles in the bathtub and three on the sink, all Virgin Mary blue, as a part of her twenty-four hour shrine for her son Joe. She even hangs two pairs of rosary beads across the medicine cabinet mirrors. After she goes to bed, I sneak upstairs to look in the bathroom. I like watching the candles reflect on the yellow walls, an eerie vision of daylight trapped in night. Sometimes I go up there out of fear that a candle will fall over, and the flame will leap across the sink and set the toilet paper on fire. Death by fire is one of the worst I can imagine. Worse than murder, I think, because you can't reason with it.

When the firemen come to school, other kids climb over the big shiny truck, but I watch them unroll the large intestine of hose, memorizing the facts they just told us: A fire is started every eighteen seconds. The number one cause of fires is cooking. Number two, candles left unattended.

I obsess about what it's like to be an orphan. I pray every night that my family won't die in a fire. I make my father put Tot Finder stickers on our windows and check the smoke detectors every month. It's my personal crusade to keep tabs on all of the possible fire hazards in the house. The oven, the iron, the coffeepot, hair dryers, Grandma's sewing machines and candles are all fires waiting to happen. Grandma has three factory sewing machines whose motors get extremely hot. They have pieces of cloth tied around their necks to hold straight pins and needles. I can hear the purr of the

sewing machines through my bedroom ceiling. I go upstairs to find that Grandma has left one on. I flip the switch and then inform her of her safety violation.

Yet, something about the vigil in Grandma's bathroom gives me a sense of peace and tranquility. It's all for my Uncle Joe, who is having triple bypass heart surgery. Uncle Joe is overweight and smokes cigarettes, besides being very rich. I don't know if I love Uncle Joe, because I honestly don't know if he loves me, and I am cold like that. I barely ever see him, even though he lives five minutes away and I live with his mother. But I certainly don't want him to die. Mom says that would be the end of Grandma. We all know it.

I feel bad for my mother. She is nothing compared to grandma's sons, and to me, this doesn't seem fair. I don't understand why sons are so special. Maybe it has something to do with a certain body part girls don't have. Maybe it's because Jesus was a boy, the only son of Mary, and this makes all sons seem like gods to their mothers. I am just glad to have a sister and not a brother.

The candles stay lit for one month. "Jo-ey, Jo-ey, Jo-ey," Grandma murmurs in her chair by the phone. She says that every time she uses the toilet, it reminds her to pray. She looks across the room toward the TV. Hanging above it is a framed picture of Jesus Christ, doe eyes cast upward, long wavy brown hair framing his face. Various saint cards from recent funerals are secured under the molding of the wall, last Easter's braided palms pinned above them. She also has two statues, one miniature Saint Anthony, who sits on top of the TV in his dark robe, and a two-foot stone Virgin Mary, with pretty folded hands, who guards the landing of the back staircase. These are her Catholic idols,

though she is by no means a devout woman. She curses, steals, and gambles every week in Atlantic City. She is the best liar I have ever met. But she is humble in this way. She knows how to ask for help. She believes.

Grandma likes to remind us that a long time ago she had three miscarriages and one still birth. The concept of losing a child is not foreign to her. In fact, by the time she was twelve, death had stolen her father and her sister Francine. When Uncle Joe's heart recovers, it is as if she has sealed a deal with God. She wears a triumphant smirk around the house and to Church. She promises that this Christmas will really be something special. She gets it in her head that she wants to buy lil' Sis and me real fur coats for Christmas. I do leaps through the living room. My mother has a full length Fox that she wears when she goes to a fancy dinner, a winter wedding, and to church on Christmas. Most of the time it lives in the closet under a film of plastic. When no one is around, I rub my face on its long whitish silver torso. A fur coat of my own is almost unthinkable.

We go down to Seventh Avenue, the Garment district, on a cold Friday afternoon. This is Grandma's old stomping ground, from the time when she ran her own dress factory on Burke Avenue. Mom drives Grandma's two tone Buick Regal. The seats always smell like rotting melons. They argue most of the drive down.

"You're just flushing money down the toilet. The baby's gonna grow out of it in three months," my mother insists, navigating the skinny one way streets.

"Ahh, I get a good price," Grandma shoots back. "She wears it the next year, you mark my word." Mom lets us out while she circles the block looking for a parking space. We walk up the street, and I realize we are in fur heaven. The air is cold enough to snow, and we duck inside a store on the corner. It is long and narrow and so stuffed with racks

of merchandise that we can barely move. Leather pants, suede skirts, and fur coats of all shapes and sizes hang on hooks all the way to the ceiling. A jacket made of a patchwork of different color furs catches my eye. I point it out to Grandma, who comments, "What, you wanna look like a gypsy?"

I shrug and try on the one she picks out for me, a brown rabbit jacket.

"I don't like this color," I say, feeling the soft hairs between my fingers. The next store has a white hooded rabbit that is just a little too big, so I will not grow out of it too quickly.

Grandma says, "Look how nice! You look beautiful like your Grandmother. When I was a young girl, I was so beautiful the birds used to drop dead from the trees," she adds.

I imagine it snowing blackbirds outside.

We find a miniature pink rabbit that my lil' Sis loses her hands in when they put it on her. Mom is satisfied. Grandma offers the little bearded man \$100 for both and we head back upstate.

My rabbit jacket stays wrapped in plastic, next to my mother's fox in the closet. I am allowed to wear it to plays and recitals, to birthday parties, to the Radio City Christmas Spectacular and to church on Christmas Day. When I wear it, I am living in rabbit skin. It sheds little white hairs on my skirt or pants, just like a cat. No one else in my class has a real fur coat, and when I wear it, everyone wants to touch me. Grandma, though tough on the outside, a woman capable of anything, is as soft on the inside as that white rabbit fur. I know this much is true.

Every Friday Grandma takes the Funaway Tour bus full of senior citizens to Atlantic City for the day. Sometimes she calls my mother in the evening claiming that she missed the bus home, but my mother suspects that she just wants to stay up all night gambling. On these days, I take the opportunity to snoop through Grandma's bedroom. Her old shellacked dresser is carved in waves and swirls. When I open the top drawer I am greeted by the smell of stale perfume. It smells old in the drawer. It is filled with lace girdles and silk slips, underwear and huge bras that remind me of ace bandages. She has trays of rhinestone button covers and strands of smooth glass beads. There are letters and cards with rubber bands across them. They are yellowed and written on in faded Italian words. Under patties of nude colored support hose lies a glass jar the right size and shape to hold olives. It also has a red lid like olive jars do. I pull it out and look inside at what appears to be a three-inch long brownish insect. A praying mantis of sorts. On closer inspection, I notice little fingers and toes, a head like a bulb, and a tiny belly button hole. I realize that this insect must be a fetus. I had heard this word before, when my mother was pregnant with lil' Sis. I shiver, suddenly afraid of something, of what I found. I carefully replace the jar under the nylons. I can't keep this to myself, though. I need further explanation. Later that afternoon I drag my mother upstairs.

"Oh, my," Mom cries when I produce the jar, her mouth forming a little red O. "She still has that thing. He's all dried up now," she says, placing the armload of ironing on the bed.

"Is it a fetus?" I ask.

"Yes," she says. "Grandma had a few miscarriages, which happens when the baby doesn't stay planted inside the mother," she explains. "This is her first one, I think."

"Why'd she keep it?"

"You know how she is about her sons. Your Grandmother is not normal. " She turns the jar around in her hand, squinting inside of it. "My brother," she says and sighs.

I can't quite let this be the end of it, though. I am too overwhelmed with what I know. Fetus' fly through my dreams with papery angel wings. They sleep beside me, cozy and curled. Somehow, this is better than any science project. It is better than anything I have ever seen. I thank God that I hadn't been a miscarriage. I guess if I had been, I would have wanted Mom to keep me too. But life stuck inside an olive jar doesn't seem like too much fun.

I imagine all the aunts and uncles I could have had, and the cousins, all the glorious cousins. My real cousins are of no real use to me because the youngest one is more than twice my age. I imagine all the Christmas's, cousins to play massive games of hide-and-go-seek, cousins to swim with in the summer, to play freeze tag, cousins to be my friends. I want a huge family, the house brimming with people, aunts and uncles to spoil me, buy me presents, bring cakes and cookies and go on vacation with. I name them: Aunt Eloise after my cabbage patch kid, Uncle Dominic, after my grandfather, Uncle Stan, because it sounds uncle-like, and Uncle Chad, because I love that name. Uncle Chad would be the handsome one who winds up staying a bachelor. Of the others, one would live in a house on a lake with a boat. Another would live on the beach in the Hamptons. One would live in a skyscraper, from whose balcony we would watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade every year, Snoopy floating by right in front of my face.



I don't think about the fact that if my mother had more siblings, and my grandmother more grandchildren, they would be competition for Grandma's affection. I think that lil' Sis and I will always be the favorites. I think we can go live in the Bahamas, because Dad's job wants to transfer him there, and there would be someone to look after Grandma while we are frolicking on the beach, the natives braiding cornrows into my sun-streaked hair. It would have been perfect, if only they had lived.

Later that week, my best friend Jessica and I watch TV at my house after school.

"I found something scary in my Grandmother's drawer," I say. Jessica looks up from her homework and stares at me, chewing on the end of one of her long dark braids, like she is determining whether or not I am telling the truth.

"Well," she says. "What did you find?"

"I don't know if I should tell," I say. "It's kind of a family secret."

"You know I'm good at keeping secrets," she says.

"Do you swear never to tell anyone?"

"I swear," she says, placing her hand over her heart like the Pledge of Allegiance.

"My grandmother has a baby in her dresser drawer," I blurt out.

"Yeah, right. How can she have a baby in her drawer?" Her father is a doctor and she thinks she knows everything. I know she will never tell anyone because I am her only friend.

We creep upstairs to my Grandmother's bedroom. Grandma is in her den watching *Donanhue*. I dig my hand to the familiar place under the nylons and produce the jar.

"It's my uncle," I say. Jessica's eyes bulge like a toad's. She looks a little queasy.

"He's called a fetus," I add, as an explanation.

"It looks so... weird. Like an alien," she says.

"I know," I say. "It's what we looked like, I guess."

I hand her the jar, my little dried up uncle light as a leaf shifting across the bottom. She holds it for a second then passes it right back to me. We stare at it, cocking our heads, as if we both momentarily understand something about evolution, sex, or mortality, but can't call it by these names.

"Weird," she says again. I wonder if she will betray me, as I return the jar to its place and we quietly slip past the Virgin Mary statue guarding the stairwell. We watch *Three's Company* until Jessica is called home for dinner. Her mother makes the best chicken wings in town.

## CRAZY PEOPLE

### A.

Everyone sits around the rectangular dining room table smoking and talking while dinner cooks in the next room. I drink my muddy coffee and finish my notes for the day, which are alphabetized, color coded, and neat: capsules of their lives. My hair and skin feel greasy from twenty-four hours of bad air. Maureen talks loudly to no one in particular. She insists on getting her tubes tied, though she is fifty-one years old and anorexic, her body a papery shell that hardly supports its own weight. Wendy, the group home manager, smokes by the window, hunched over binders, budget charts, and Medicaid numbers, listening to Maureen all the while.

"Maybe you should consider using condoms," Wendy says.

"Oh, no, my honey won't do that," Maureen says, giggling behind her yellowed fingers. But I know that her honey, Frank, has a brain injury and can only do it to the magazines under their bed. I jot this conversation under symptom management.

### B.

When it is time for bi-weekly bedroom checks, I get the clipboard and mark down fire hazards: laundry on heating grates, plugged in blow dryers and curling irons. I note smelly clothes, unmade beds, wastepaper baskets overflowing with tissues and candy wrappers. I am lenient, ignoring dust and dirty sheets. I'm glad no one comes home with me and checks my room, though today it happens to be clean. If I can get Bill to put in a load of laundry, and Maureen to put the clothes blanketing her room into the closet, I consider it a fairly successful day. When I went to an AA meeting with Frank, they told

everyone to take things one day at a time, and this is some of the best advice I think I've ever heard.

To Bill, each day is a shadow of the day before. He smokes Newports while flicking his index fingernail with his thumbnail. This sound drives me crazy and I ask him to please stop. His skin has a grayish hue, the color of leftovers, and his body is large and round. He likes going out for ice cream and eating in general. He listens to self-help tapes. He thinks he is in hell and he hears the devil in Beatles songs. He is chronically depressed. He stutters occasionally when talking about something unpleasant and only likes to hang out with staff.

"I'd like a little interaction," Bill says when I am knee deep in paperwork.

"Let's go for a walk to the coffee shop," I say, attempting to get his blood circulating. He could just sit in the same chair all day.

We cross through the park covered by white flecks of seagulls. They caw and flap around us. Today is Bill's day off from Helping Hands, the sheltered workplace where he works in the mailroom. I slow my gait to match his. I am glad to get fresh air, to be walking, something normal.

"What's the answer?" he asks, puffing beside me, the white hair over his bald spot fluffing in the wind.

"What's the question?" I ask back.

"Happiness," he lisps. "How can I be happy like you. You're happy, right?"

"Sure, I'm happy enough," I say. "I have problems like everyone else. You've just got to appreciate the little things in life, you know," I say. We have this conversation about once a week, and this seems to be his favorite answer.

Bill has few friends except for a couple who live out in Freeville, Christian Scientists he goes to church with on Sundays. He used to be Presbyterian, Unitarian and even considered Scientology, but couldn't afford it. He goes through churches like socks on his quest for the answer to the meaning of happiness. He is divorced and his only son is dying of AIDS.

"What are you cooking tonight? I ask.

"Ziti with meat sauce," he says, licking his lips. It his favorite thing to cook, the only thing he cooks.

I treat him to hot chocolate because I just got paid, and we walk back to the white house on the corner of Baltic Avenue and Court Street. The house has a turret at the top, or a cupola, where we store seasonal stuff. The setting sun illuminates the room and the Halloween scarecrow hanging by a noose inside it, someone's idea of a joke.

Bill returns to his chair with whipped cream on his face.

"Did you take a shower today," I ask. With his coat off he smells like a bag of trash.

"Nnaa, nnaa, no," he stutters. "I wa waa was planning on ttttaking one later," he says.

I want to say, get in the shower right now, like Elsa the drill sergeant would, but instead I just look at him and say, "That is a really good idea, Bill."

Bill once suggested to Patti, his old rehab counselor, that their one-on-one outings to Friendly's were the closest thing he'll ever get to going on a date. Three weeks later, she quit. Elsa says his real problem is "good old fashioned laziness." Wendy thinks he is the most disabled person in the whole house.

C.

I call them my "crazy people" when I tell my roommates stories about work at happy hour. Actually, my friend Jimmy's the one that started it; he got me the job three years ago, and he recently transferred to Supported Housing. Don't get me wrong, we both mean it in the best possible way, it's a term of endearment, "our crazies." We often include ourselves and our friends in the category or anybody who has the courage to live in between the lines of normalcy. Sometimes I think that crazy people are the superior minority, that they see and experience things beyond this hum drum life, while the unenlightened majority rule just because of sheer numbers. Maybe they are the chosen ones, I think.

On nights off I drink Cabernet, the house wine that has hints of cranberry. I feel good that the day is over and that I have no one to take care of except myself. I walk home feeling the Cabernet from my feet to my cheeks. Bouncing in my clogs, I'm convinced the sidewalks are filled with air.

D.

We used to call Diane the dog lady. When she worked the overnight shift on Tuesdays, she always left twice to feed and walk her four dogs.

Diane used to be the dog lady because she is homely and lived by herself on the outskirts of town with her two beagles, one retriever, one mutt. Last year she went to Africa for a month through some Peace Corps type program. She came home in love with a man from Ghana, and a month later, picked him up at Kennedy airport and they got

married. Six months later, his six year old daughter, Bintu, joined them. Dikimbe is thirty-two and gorgeous, and I secretly wonder what he sees in her. Somehow, Diane ceased being the dog lady and starting being the African Queen. Funny thing is, she comes up with these names for herself. Her humor gets us all through the dreariest days.

E.

I live three short blocks from work, which suits me fine. I usually walk from Plain Street so that I can come in through the back door. On any given morning the kitchen smells like fried eggs and grease, like the State Street Diner. Eggs are something we always have enough of. Diane, in addition to having four dogs, a mini farm, and an African man and child, raises chickens in her back yard. She brings in cartons of brown and speckled eggs every week, some of them still covered with bits of dirt, straw and small gray feathers.

The kitchen floor is a blue green linoleum, with a huge burn mark where someone laid a hot pot once. There are two frying pans soaking in the kitchen sink. I make a mental note to remind someone to wash them.

"I believe you owe me an apple pie," Ian says to Elsa, slapping his hand against his raggy jeans pocket. He and Elsa are sports freaks. The Giants must have won.

"Here comes trouble," she says about me, as I rest my overnight bag on the table and light a cigarette.

"We know who causes the *real* trouble around these parts, don't we Ian," I say, winking at him.

"Sure do," he says. "I wonder when I'll get my god damn pie".

Elsa laughs. "You know I always pay my debts," she says.

Elsa is fearless, a natural counselor. She has a Greek grandmother she calls YaYa and cooks authentic Mediterranean feasts for the house at least once a week. Her hands are large and pink like a ham hock. She has short woodpecker haircut and can fix anything, whether it be the human spirit or a busted lawn mower. She also lives a few blocks away with her girlfriend, whom she wants to have a baby with.

F.

Frank lights a Winston. His plaid lumberjack flannel is buttoned one button off and his fly hangs open.

"You think we want to see that?" Elsa asks, pointing to his crotch.

"Frank, what are you doing here? Why aren't you at work," I ask as he pulls up his zipper.

"There's no work for me today," he says. Blowing his smoke toward the ceiling fan.

"Bull-crap," says Elsa. "You mean I can call over there right now, and that's what they'd tell me?"

"Yep," says Frank. He hates working at Helping Hands with the retards, he's said on several occasions, and we try our best to help him find other work. Frank can't remember what day it is or why he is in a place, the result of a botched suicide attempt fifteen years earlier. He often searches through his pockets for the answers.

"I got you some flowers, Tracy," he says, holding out a bouquet of red and pink carnations, with flecks of baby's breath and green leafy things that are starting to turn



brown around the edges. He often goes to the Cascade Florist instead of work. It is on his way, and he stops in to say hello to the owner, who is a friend of his mother's and gives him some of their discards.

"Skipping out on work today, and now your giving me flowers to keep me quiet, huh," I say. I am just glad Maureen is not home; she would launch a jealous fit.

"I have a good job down at Breezley's," he says, referring to the seedy bar he used to sweep and mop after a night of drinking.

"No, Frank, you don't work there any more."

"Yeah, I haven't seen you around there in months," Elsa jokes.

Frank doesn't drink anymore, thank God. He takes this medication, Anabuse, that makes you violently ill if you drink alcohol. It gives him bad breath. I often have to remind him to brush his teeth.

## G.

Later, I get Frank to help me clean to the garage. He is wearing his flesh colored back support thing around the outside of his shirt. We wear ski hats and can see our breath in the musty air.

"When are we going to take my boat out?" he asks, sweeping with long strokes. He loves talking about the green canoe that is hooked to the garage ceiling.

"When all the ice melts off the lake," I say, rolling my eyes, crushing cardboard boxes with my feet. Frank likes helping me with little chores around the house, and I like spending time with him, when we can laugh and feel useful, and distract ourselves from the fact that he isn't going to get any better.

We find a bird's nest on a beam in the corner. In it are three speckled eggs that look like Easter candy. We stand there in awe for a real long time, wondering where the mother is.

H.

On Tuesdays Harry is always restless; it is the day he sees the Rabbi. He is devoutly Jewish, and spends most of his time reading his leather bound Torah. Sometimes he flips through the pages quickly, flip flip flip flip. His biggest problem is his sister Sylvia, who sets up these appointments with the Rabbi because she thinks it will heal his spirit. She also stops by the house with Chemistry textbooks for him to read. She is married to a professor and thinks Harry should be finishing his college degree, be doing more with his life than sitting in a group home. We try to talk to her about the principles of rehabilitation, about giving her brother some space to breathe, but she is stupid.

Diane is counting meds as I file some purchase orders. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Harry's face pressed up against the glass, his large fist rapping on the wood. I motion for him to come in.

"My sister is castrating me!" he yells. His voice booms through the small space, and we look at him, then each other, caught off guard. Even Bill looks up from the couch he is glued to.

"I know she can overbearing, Harry," Diane says. "Is she pressuring you to see to Rabbi?"

He is unshaven today, almost looks like that Serbian basketball player, Vlade

Divac. He moves forward, closing us in to a space the size of a walk-in closet.

"I said she's castrating me. I noticed it in the bathroom, and I will not have it!"

"I'll call her and talk with her about it, Harry. We'll get to the bottom of this," I say.

"Thank you," he says gruffly, leaving the office, the glass rattling behind him.

"I'll go check the bathrooms," Diane says. "Just in case."

## I.

When Ian says, "the Indians are coming," we know he is in trouble. Ian's schizophrenia often flares up worse than anyone's in the house because he suffers both auditory and visual hallucinations. He is too volatile to work. He goes to Starlight Social Club five days a week in the morning for groups and sits in the smoking room in the afternoons, wearing his large DJ style headphones, moving his lips to the songs. The music helps drown out his voices.

"Tracy, I'm a little worried," he says to me. We are the only ones in the smoking room on a Thursday afternoon, watching a light snow fall outside the window.

"What's up, Ian?" I ask, putting my butt out in the green ashtray and nervously lighting up another. Harry is upstairs reading the Bible, but everyone else in the house is out.

"The Indians are back, and they're being killed left and right by the white people. They want me to help them fight back," he says. He still has his headphones on; I hear "Can't Buy Me Love." He is rocking slowly now, dragging hard on his Marlboro Red.

"What are they saying to you, Ian?" I ask carefully.

"They are telling me to kill. They are all bloody and want me to help them," he says, pausing to gnawing at what are left of his fingernails.

"Do you feel safe?" I ask.

"No," he says. "No one is safe."

"Why don't you sit here for a minute and close your eyes. You know it helps you when you close your eyes,"

"Yes," he says heavily.

"I'm going in to the office to use the phone. Are you going to be OK for a few minutes?"

He nods his head, eyes closed. I run to the office and call Wendy on her cell.

"The Indians?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say. "Harry's the only person home. I think I should take him up."

"Oh gosh," she says. "I'm at the hardware store getting keys made." She hates not being here when shit goes down. "Do you feel safe with him in the car?"

"Yeah, he seems pretty calm, and you know how he freaks out with ambulances."

"OK, tell Harry that I will be home in five minutes. I'll call the hospital and let them know you're on your way. And be careful."

"Yes, boss," I say, my adrenaline pumping. He has never hurt anyone, I repeat to myself, my mantra.

I get him his tinted sunglasses to help with his visuals. We smoke and I curse the traffic. He's an astronomy freak, so I tell him to picture the stars. He names several constellations on the way.

## J.

We have to justify our services to the Office of Mental Health and Medicaid, who each year try to chip away at our funding like old paint. The justification process has become second nature to me, and that is why my boss likes me. I can write the reports, fill out the paperwork, offer them proof to why we are here. It even goes on in my head on my day off, walking down the street. Like I'll be staring at a menu, and I'll suddenly remember how Kathy had told me that the last time she sold a piece of her silver was the day Princess Diana died. I'll realize that I should have written in the log. Somehow Princess Diana's death was a direct or indirect cause of Kathy's decompensation. It all makes perfect sense to me, but getting it to make sense to the State is the problem. They do not understand that we are dealing with human minds, not broken bones.

## K.

Kathy and her gay friend sit at the table, drinking coffee and comparing medications. Carlos is one of the crazy people living in the "real" world, in a tiny Section Eight apartment in the worst part of town. He visits Kathy on the way home from the place where he washes dishes. He is loony today, gulps down his drink then pours himself another cup, putting a quarter into the coffee fund.

"Prozac makes coffee taste so good," he says.

"When do you get your injection?" Kathy asks. Carlos gets a shot of Prolixin, an anti-psychotic, once a month.

"Tomorrow," he says. "I have to go see Dr. B."

"I hate injections." Kathy rubs her arms like just the thought of one pains her.

Kathy, when she is doing well, is the teacher's pet, the model patient. She is the debutante of the group home. She is socially gracious and entertains a steady stream of gay male callers. She loves reading *People* magazine, and she and Carlos flip through this month's issue, commenting on the best and worst dressed.

"Now look at Sharon Stone," she says. "What on earth was she thinking?"

Kathy has a set of her grandmother's silver which we keep locked up in the file cabinet, at her request. Once a week, she asks to see it, rubs the pieces with silver polish, admiring the miniature espresso spoons. When her symptoms flare, she sells pieces to the pawnshop to buy cigarettes and packages of bacon. There is no reasoning with her then.

After a few months of relative stability, suddenly she'll come downstairs in red spike heels, dark sunglasses and clownish makeup. She'll roll her skirt at the waist so the slits go all the way up her thighs and will ride the bus around all day, reminiscing about her old secretarial job on campus. She'll giggle behind her hand, talking to her dolls. She won't even notice you're there.

## L.

A drive around the lake always cheers everyone up. It's Saturday, rec. day, and we pile into the big green van everyone affectionately calls "The Pickle." It is a three hour drive round trip. At the North end of the lake is a town with a country store that makes homemade ice cream. This excites Bill, the food addict, tremendously, and he even puts on a clean shirt for the event. Unfortunately, he still hasn't showered.

The farms fly by our windows, still brown from winter, with little patches of snow remaining in places. The air is defrosting, we feel it, and we smell the grass coming. Something about the blue of the lake makes us all feel good. We eat our ice cream standing on the bank, feeling like we accomplished something today.

M.

Maureen wears clothes made for teenagers: short shorts, halter tops that show her navel, baby doll dresses and little white Keds. She is obsessive compulsive, like many anorexics, constantly doing laundry, taking showers, and changing clothes.

"I love being clean, you know, Tracy," she says loudly in the smoking room among the others who don't share her views on personal hygiene. "I like smelling good for Frank," she adds. I think this fact usually goes over Frank's head. I think she often adds to his confusion.

"I need to lose some weight," she continues. "I'm up to one-oh-eight."

"Oh, Maureen, you look wonderful, you are very thin," Kathy, who is thirty pounds overweight, says as she burrows into her cardigan sweater.

But Maureen is on hunger strike. She conveniently sleeps through dinner, then buys boxes of Little Debbie cookies at the store, which she puts on the dining room table for everyone to eat. She wants everyone else to get fat.

"Do you think I'm selfish?" Maureen asks.

No, you are passive aggressive, I think, feeling bad for Kathy.

Maureen dyes her hair black and she wears lots of powder on her face. She uses bleach on her teeth and fingertips to remove nicotine stains and we often confiscate the

bottles of Clorox she hides in the room she shares with Frank. They've been together for ten years, and their deficits seem to balance out each other's. Maureen dotes on Frank like his mother. She tries to feed him when he is not hungry. Frank just says, "I love you, babe," because he can't remember anything else.

## N.

I take up needlepoint as a hobby to ease my nerves. I like the colored threads, the pattern that slowly reveals itself. My favorites involve birds, butterflies, and flowers. Sometimes I bring them to the house to show Kathy, who loves this sort of thing. "Little birdies," she says about my robin family. "Aren't they sweet."

The same week that Justin dumps me for his high school girlfriend (of all people), my cat Little Bear is killed by a car. At first, I don't know which to be more upset about, but Little Bear wins. In the mornings, I ice my eyes to ease the swelling. Wendy buys a sympathy card that everyone signs with little messages like, "sorry about your meow," and "he's in kitty heaven." Frank forgets that he is writing about a cat, and his message reads, "I know this person meant a lot to you." I think about the double meaning and I try not to cry.

## O.

Twice a week I lock the large double door at eleven and sleep on the futon in the TV room. When I was dating Justin, I dreaded this shift, spending the evening away from him, but now I almost look forward to it. It's a tonic for my loneliness.

We watch reruns of Seinfeld, eating thick slices of chocolate cake I made for



Diane's birthday. It is the "Soup Nazi" episode we all know so well and Frank and I shout "No soup for you!" at each other periodically throughout the evening for kicks.

I perform my nightly rituals: write the progress notes in the daily log, give out bedtime meds, make sure the coffee pot is off, turn the circuit breaker of the stove off. Often I can't fall asleep, so I sit up and read their permanent files, trying to discover new clues to why we are all here. Sometimes I fall asleep with the lights on or while watching TV. When this happens, Frank knocks lightly on my door, and whispers, "Turn your lights off, Tracy."

My mother does not know I do overnights. She isn't too thrilled with my job in the first place. She cuts out an article about a man that pushed a woman off the subway platform into an oncoming train in New York City, where she lives. "This is not the City, Ma," I say to her. She doesn't understand, and I am tired of explaining.

"Why don't you use your nice degree in Journalism that we spent all that money on?" she asks me in our weekly phone check in.

"I'm fine, Mom. I like what I'm doing."

"I think you just like driving me to an early grave," she says.

P.

In the foyer hangs a painting made by a former resident. It is a monopoly game card, Baltic Avenue, with the purple strip across the top, rent \$4. At least we aren't the cheapest property on the board. Baltic Avenue is our nickname, how we answer the phone, what we call the house. We are on the corner of a quiet residential street of old colonial style houses with neat flower gardens in their front yards. Our house is quaintly dilapidated; it needs a fresh coat of paint and the white picket fence needs to be mended

where some hoodlums bashed it in one night, breaking five planks. Frank and I nurture the garden: big purple cone flowers, red and yellow tulips, irises, daffodils and a bush of red roses. I like snipping a few roses and putting them in jars around the house. It really cheers up the place.

Q.

Over the course of the week, Bill turns the color of pollen. I look up jaundice in the medical encyclopedia we keep in the office, discovering it is a symptom of liver dysfunction.

"I'm not feeling so hot," he says, frozen on the couch. He had suicidal ideation earlier in the week, but says he doesn't even have the energy to do anything about it. He has spaghetti sauce on his T-shirt from last night's dinner. I tell him to put on clean clothes and take him to the doctor.

"We may have to quarantine the house," Elsa says. Bill has Hepatitis C, the kind you get from needles and sex. He doesn't know how he contracted it. The doctor says it is possible that Hep C can lie dormant in your body for years. We all wonder how he got it, and have long discussions about this in staff meeting. Could Bill have some secret sexual life in the bathroom at Helping Hands? You hear about these things from time to time.

R.

Wendy is frantic. Office of Mental Health is doing an audit and wants all our records for the past three years. They are investigating the agency, which they claim was overpaid by two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. With what we earn, we find this hard

to believe. We stack papers on the two desks in the office. There is a breeze coming through the open window. Wendy puts a rock from her special collection on each stack to keep them from blowing away.

#### S.

Men are three times more likely to develop schizophrenia than women are. We see these patterns as people move through our program. Somehow they have linked schizophrenia to a virus, like the flu, that a woman may get during her last trimester of pregnancy and pass on to her baby. Medications are like playing Russian roulette. If any of our residents' medications really worked, they certainly would not be living here. Each med maybe works a little, then stops working, then the psychiatrists switch everything around, and the cycle begins again. We write up new med charts and lock them in the double lock steel cabinet in the office, keep our eyes open for side effects: diarrhea, nausea, dizziness, dry mouth, death.

#### T.

Tim smells like a cigar, those cheap skinny ones that come in a ten pack. He inhales them even though we tell him that you're not supposed to. As a result, he has violent coughing spells a couple times a day. His hobby is playing with wires: cutting the ends off and duct taping them back together. He is blind because his mother beat the sight out of him when he was four years old, and he remains emotionally stunted: a fourteen-year-old trapped in a twenty-six year old's body. His hands are gray from touching everything in his path. He spends all of his food stamps on sodas, which he drinks

continuously during the day.

"Is caffeine a drug?" he asks me.

"Yes, Tim. It's a chemical that affects your metabolism," I answer.

"Wow," he says. "I'm on drugs," he says, laughing, digging his fingers into his eye sockets. It really freaked me out when Elsa found his glass eye in the bathroom next to the soap dish. She told him not to take it out anymore, that it isn't sanitary.

Earlier today, Tim decided to shave his own head in the upstairs bathroom and came downstairs with a wild little smile on his face. He also shaved off his eyebrows while he was at it.

"You look like a skinhead," Elsa says. She takes him into the bathroom to fix him.

Afterwards, he sits on the porch talking to the policeman in his head. We suspect he also has fetal alcohol syndrome. He rocks back and forth, saying, "I know, guns are not toys."

Tim thinks he lives in a world full of punishment. I understand how his life, what he has been exposed to, would make him feel that way. He says he doesn't trust people, only dogs and cats. He sits smack in the middle of the park, and like Francis of Assisi waits for the neighborhood dogs to come to him. "Kiss the dog," he says to Misty, the Retriever from next door. "Kiss the dog," he says, over and over.

UV.

Harry's sister comes over, bearing three packages of Hanes underwear for the whole world to see. He lets her take him to see the Rabbi.

Tim has been huffing vapors. Elsa finds fifty-five cans of butane under his bed

while helping him clean his room. He says he'll never do it again. He worries he'll be sent to jail with the dog abusers.

### WXYZ.

The washing machine breaks and the agency refuses to get it fixed. Wendy stocks up on extras: canned food, toilet paper, yard supplies, Xanax. She doesn't trust them.

But it's no use. We know what is coming down. Wendy attends a board meeting. She breaks the news to us first. They are shutting the house down. Everyone will be divided between apartments and beds in other group homes throughout the region. We will be placed in jobs throughout the agency at their discretion.

I wonder if somewhere along the line we forgot to appreciate what we have. I feel guilty for ever complaining, like these thoughts put a curse on us. I think Kathy and her grandmother's silver will end up in a state hospital; she doesn't handle change well. Frank and Maureen will be separated because Maureen would starve herself in an apartment, and Frank would forget to get help. Tim will move back with his stepmother, and regress another five years. Bill will be placed in an apartment, where he will become a total recluse, disappearing under a mound of dirty laundry. Ian will wind up in a homeless shelter or in jail, if the Indians ask for his help again. Harry will live with the sister who castrates him. Wendy will retire, Diane, her dogs, and her African will move to Africa, and Elsa will go where she is told. I don't know what I'll do.

Frank wouldn't remember if I told him this so I choose to just sit on the front porch with him, smoking cigarettes. We admire our beautiful garden. The sun warms our

faces.

"Tracy, who am I?" Frank asks.

"Who are you?" I ask him back, ready for the punch line.

"I'm a Reily, God damn it," he says, laughing through his nose. He remembers who he is, and sometimes I think this should be enough. According to Frank, Reilys are strong, stick together, and they never let anyone get them down.

We sit there for a long time, watching people and their dogs in the park. Who will live in this little white house, I think. Who will remind me to turn off my light?

## DUSTY BLUES

Joe Sloan felt seasick. He wiped the film of sweat that clung to his forehead like condensation on a beer mug. As he glanced at his body, positioned diagonally across his waterbed, he realized he was still wearing his Calvin Klein jeans, belt undone. He couldn't remember much about the night before except that Melissa wasn't with him. She had gone to one of her meetings, so he started to sneak watered down woo-woos during his bartending shift at McSweeny's Pub. He wound up at an after-hours party at an apartment above the cigar shop, where he vaguely recalls admiring a locked case of antique guns and Samurai swords. He felt like his memory wore a hockey mask, and he could recall only what his hangover filtered through the tiny holes: his loud voice, the word *hemorrhoids*. It was an evil thing, he thought, that would make him reveal to acquaintances that he had been diagnosed with hemorrhoids at the tender age of twenty-five.

He stumbled to the window and slid his finger between the plastic blinds, squinting as a bright strip of sunlight hit him in the face. Sure enough, his crazy neighbor Dusty sat in his motorized cart on the patio, his makeshift café set up for the day. Joe wasn't in the mood for idle chitchat, so he left out the back door. He needed a power smoothie. Banana, protein powder, ginseng, and a little ginkgo for his brain.

What bothered Joe as he walked South on Aurora Street, pausing to light his first cigarette, was the reason he had stayed out so late in the first place. It was the fact that his sweet masseuse girlfriend had joined a "healing circle" run by this dude Two Feathers, a self proclaimed Shaman who lived off the land outside town. She had been going for a

month, and said that he was like a Dalai Lama of the West, whatever that meant. She said that she wanted to channel her energy into things that mattered, and make a spiritual connection between the past the present. He had thought about this and decided it was a stupid thing to think about. The past was over and there was nothing you could do about it.

He knew that Two Feathers sold homemade herbal tinctures at the GreenStar Food Co-op and charged unsuspecting new-agers like his Melissa fifteen dollars a pop to sit in a circle and pass around a "talking stick." Joe didn't believe in that crap. If someone needed to cleanse and purge, all they needed to do was to visit him at the pub and order a couple shots of Angry Hunter, one of his own personal concoctions consisting of tequila, Jim Beam, and two drops of grenadine, iced, shaken, and poured. There was nothing like an Angry Hunter to obliterate that bitter divorce, dead-end job, or repossessed house. Hell, a couple Angry Hunters could even straighten up fags and schizophrenics, even if only temporarily.

Joe had seen Two Feathers around town. Who could miss him? He pulled around this little homemade rickshaw that was covered by a huge canopy. Melissa had proudly told him it was crafted in the likeness of a traditional Hopi temple. But he just saw a turnip decorated with a colorful assortment of rags and feathers, some reminiscent of fabrics Joe might have seen on his grandmother's windows thirty years earlier. It had Maypole-like streamers sewn on a rotating disc on the top, giving it a carnivalesque appearance. Joe often walked past the rickshaw parked smack in the middle of the downtown Commons on his way to the bank. The young transients and crunchy



professors gathered timidly and curiously around Two Feathers, as if he were fucking John Lennon.

Outside GreenStar, Joe sucked down his cold smoothie and felt slightly rejuvenated. He was on his way to the magazine store to get a copy of the latest *Maxim* when he noticed Two Feathers standing in the loading dock stacking groceries inside his rickshaw. He thought this was a strange coincidence, so he lit another cigarette and sauntered over. He had to check this guy out, for Melissa's sake, and hoped he didn't need to beat the shit out of him. He reminded Joe of a crane, with his pointed face and twiggy limbs sticking out of his matching beige hemp shorts and shirt.

Two Feathers had long hair the color of steel wool, threads of silver woven in, and he wore a leather headband with two blue and gray feathers sticking out of the back, which gave him an odd rabbit like appearance.

"Hey man," Joe said. "How's it going?"

"Oh fine, just wonderful," replied Two Feathers, smiling and revealing a silver-plated incisor. "Stocking up for the week." He motioned to the two bags of groceries resting in the box of the rickshaw. His calves were thin, yet perfect, compact muscle strained against his skin.

"Nice contraption you got there," Joe commented.

"Thank-you. I guess you could say it's fuel efficient," Two Feathers chuckled.

"Hey, I was wondering, I know you're into herbs and stuff, and well, this is embarrassing, but do you know of anything," Joe lowered his voice and glanced around. "Well, anything that helps, you know, erectile dysfunction?" He had trouble keeping a straight face.

Two Feathers closed his eyes for a second. "Well, you could try Sasperilla Root, or Devil's Claw. Both help increase circulation to the, the lower body. But it is often ineffective to treat the body without treating the mind as well, and discovering the emotional root of your problem," he said slowly, staring at him with intense blue eyes.

Joe dug his free hand in his pocket and stepped back a couple of inches, grinning. "Sorry man, I was kidding with you. I don't really have a problem with that. Well, maybe some day the ol' juice will run out, but I'm fine, really. I don't know what made me say that."

"It's all right, brother. No need to be embarrassed." Joe detected a hint of sarcasm in Two Feather's voice and he didn't like it one bit.

"No really, man. What I have is migraines. I inherited them from my mother."

"Well, the best remedy for that is to drink more water. Spring water's the best, in this area has traces of Quartz that has the added bonus of increasing clairvoyance. There's a spring out by my farm, out on Rt. 233, right on the corner of Fox Hollow Road."

"Thanks. I'll check it out. And by the way, my girlfriend's been going to your uh, groups." Now he had him, Joe thought.

"Oh?" Two Feathers face brightened, and Joe could see the fine lines etched around his eyes.

"Her name's Mel. Mel Elliott."

"Oh yes, Melissa," he said, as a little suspicious smile twitched on his lips. "My Omega Wolf. She's a very special soul," Two Feathers said.

"What the hell is an Omega Wolf?" Joe asked her after his fourth Heineken. It was his night off and Melissa had come over to watch a movie. She stood at his kitchen counter, looking like a fairy in the flowing lavender skirt that hung low on her tiny hips. She was pouring herself a cup of tea, and looked up, momentarily forgetting about the boiling water, which overflowed the cup.

She placed the kettle back on the stove, and with her back to him said, "It's my animal spirit guide. It's how I relate to others, if you look at the pack as representative of the roles we take on in society." She turned to stare at him, squinting her eyes in that cute way she always did, her hand rooted on her hip. "How did you know about that?"

He suddenly felt his anger rise from deep inside his liver, spreading to the shallow veins of his neck and face. "I ran into Three Leaves today," he said. "What the hell is going on up there? I'm really interested. Really fucking interested. Is there something you want to tell me, Mel?" He didn't know what was really bothering him, except that she seemed less and less his, and more and more someone else's.

"No, not really," she said, dunking her tea bag rapidly. She dropped it in the sink, sniffing at the drain. "It always smells like rotten fruit in here," she said.

He said nothing, just glared at the stain on the carpet that resembled the shape of a bear. "What?" he asked.

"You know what," she said.

"You never told me," he said.

"It's the same old thing," she said. "Like with Brian the yoga guy."

"You're crazy," he said. "Fucking nuts."

"I can't live like this," she said.

“Then don’t,” he said.

“I’m going.”

“Fine, then go,” he said. “Fucking go.”

“Sometimes you make me sick, Joe,” she said, rubbing circles into her temples.

“Fine, then go be sick.”

She firmly placed her teacup and saucer on the counter and walked out the door, slamming it behind her. He watched the wave of tea surge then fall into the bay of the cup. As she drove away in her old blue Volvo, his eyes were glued to the bumper sticker on the far right corner, which read, *My Other Car Is A Broom*. No shit, he thought.

He figured she was on her period or something. He expected her to come back in a little while, after she had cooled off, probably with a pint of Ben and Jerry’s, and talk things over until they wound up naked on his futon. Instead, he woke up in his clothes on the couch, his armpits soaked in sweat, a bottle of beer lying next to him on the floor, and a sharp pain in his neck where the armrest had lodged itself overnight. He had the sinking suspicion he had somehow started it. She did not grow up with a family that screamed at each other at the tops of their lungs like he had.

He got up, stretched, and took a leak, and only when he was at the fridge did he notice the steady red blink of the answering machine. The ringer had been turned off and the volume on the machine down, the way he kept it because he worked at night and slept into the day. He could hear the crackle of the connection and breathing, and the muffled sound of someone talking in the background. He waited for her to say something, but instead, the receiver clicked. He rewound and listened again, trying to make out the mysterious voice in the background, but he couldn’t tell who it was. It could have been

the TV for all he knew. She was playing games again, he thought. She knew he hated games.

He opened the door to check the weather. It was a beautiful day, one he'd been anticipating for months, and he should be out taking a bike ride, he thought, not wasting the day feeling bad. As he opened the screen, a folded piece of paper floated to the floor, a sleek black feather sticking out at both ends. He recognized her tiny handwriting, as if smaller words hid their truth. *Joe, It's not working. I need to do what's good for me. You're a ball of negative energy. We're on different paths. I'm going away for a while. Take care. M.* But it wasn't the words that immediately bothered him; it was the feather. Why the feather? Something about it was final, and he shuddered. It was a vicious gesture, and he wondered if it were her doing, or if someone had slipped the feather in afterwards, while he was asleep. Maybe someone put her up to the letter and the feather. There was only one place she would get such a thing, he knew.

He stepped onto his porch for air. Well, it was more of an area than a porch. He lived in the basement of an old green Victorian house four blocks from the bar. His area consisted of a stone floor with two folding chairs, a citronella bucket, and a couple of struggling plants perched on street level ledge. There was a three-foot stone wall separating his area from his neighbor who lived in the other half of the basement. He lit a cigarette, then took the flame to the letter, dropped it on the floor, and watched it burn. He couldn't believe it. Was Two Feathers going to change the battery of her car in the rain? Better yet, would Two Feathers haul her big ass massage table in his fucking rickshaw? When he realized he was being watched, he quickly kicked the ashes aside with the toe of his flip flop.

Over the wall, Dusty Blue sat in his motorized cart. When Joe caught him staring, he quickly turned the page of his newspaper. He wore a white T-shirt that read *Cattleman's Steakhouse* that had yellow stains down the middle. A piece of plywood with big blue letters announced "Dusty Blue's Kafe." On the dirty plastic table sat the items for sale: a worn bag of peanut M&M's that looked like it'd been tossed around in the dryer; a couple of packs of matches that one could get for free at the Commons Market; old beer coozies with the writing rubbed off; postcards that were tributes to the exotic places of Texas and Lake George; a pair of candle holders shellacked to look like wood; and a couple old canning jars, the metal clasps leaving a ring of rust along the glass. All the items were marked with prices scrawled on scraps of paper, and a cooler filled with beer, cans of coke, and a couple of juice boxes sat in the middle of it all.

"Come on over, Bub, Café's open," Dusty said, motioning with a hand that was permanently stiffened into a "C". Joe usually avoided Dusty since the kitten incident. A couple of months earlier, Dusty had spray painted his kitten blue and locked her in a birdcage set up on the wall. Joe had threatened to call the SPCA on his ass if he didn't clean the cat up. Now, Joe looked at the cat sitting contentedly in the middle of the floor, licking her paws. He noticed a few blue flecks remaining permanently on her fur.

"C'mon, I don't bite," Dusty said, so Joe figured he must have gotten over it.

Joe sat at the table, and focused on the postcard of happy Texas Longhorns nested in bluebonnets while Dusty hoisted himself on the handlebars of his cart, swung his legs over, and hobbled over to the other chair. Joe wondered how he got crippled. Maybe he was a Veteran. Vietnam or Korea? he wondered.

Dusty sighed. His shaggy hair and beard were the color of the ash dangling off his cigarette. "You want a beer?" he asked, happy to finally have a customer. "On the house," he added. "You got to be neighborly these days," he said as he flicked the cap off the Budweiser with his lighter.

"You know this dude Two Feathers?" Joe asked.

"Looks like an Injun?" he asked. "Yeah, I seen him around. Don't know him from my left foot," he said. "He's a healer or something?" he asked, puffing away at his cigarette, squinting as the smoke grazed his eyes.

"Stealer's more like it," Joe said. "My girlfriend ran off with the asshole."

Dusty's eyes bulged. "No shit, Sherlock."

"Part of me wants to go up there and pluck those stupid looking feathers out of his head and teach him a little game called bowling for hippies," he said.

"She's one nice looking lady if you don't mind me saying so. But you got to be smart about it," Dusty said.

Joe stared at him, starting to feel uncomfortable. Why the hell was he telling his shit to this crazy-ass sonofabitch?

"I once had this bud up in Horseheads, you know?" Dusty paused. "Worked for Corning, you know. Well, his little lady one day up and took off with this trucker, and he wasn't about to watch. You ever heard of psychological warfare, boy?" he asked him.

"Yeah," Joe said, oddly soothed by Dusty's scratchy voice.

"Well, when Trucker was on the road, he'd go over to his house and mess around a little. Kids stuff, you know, nothing that could be seen as more than a misdemeanor. You know, leave a dead skunk in his mailbox, or throw dog shit in his pool, break a

window here and there. Even shot the dog, which I don't condone myself, being an animal lover," he said. "But after a while Trucker got sick of it and took off. Didn't take the ex-wife though." Dusty paused for effect. "You gots to go up there and mess around. Let him know you're on to his ass."

Joe nodded and thought about this for a while, while Dusty opened another beer.

"Where'd you get your name," Joe asked.

"My mother. Short for Dustin."

"No, I mean the other part-- Blue," he said.

"Well, Bub, that's kinda personal. But I'll just say I been without a woman for some time now," he said. "The good ones, they always leave you broke."

Blue. The word sunk into his brain like the beer he had pounded. He felt it, like a cold arctic ice, like being stuck on a boat in the middle of nowhere. It scared him to think about it, so instead he opened another beer and chugged half of it. He was pissed he had stayed in this go nowhere college town after he had gotten his degree in marketing from the less prestigious of the two universities. He had started bartending at McSweeny's while he was in school, two nights a week. When a full time shift had opened he decided to stick around, and watched his as buddies packed up their shit in U-Hauls and took off for New York City and Boston to find jobs. It wasn't like he had had any jobs lined up, and bartending at McSweeny's was a good gig. His dream was to open his own bar in the Caribbean someday. He was sick of working in a dark smoky box, and wanted be his own boss. He envisioned a bar under the stars, something right on the beach, serving drinks out of coconut shells with wedges of fresh pineapple, live reggae every night, and mermaids emerging from the ocean to sip on his latest tropical invention. Even Melissa



had thought this was a good idea; she said she'd come with him, give massages to the tourists, that they'd be a team. Great fucking team, he thought. The sad thing was that he had actually believed her.

Joe and Dusty watched the legs of parents and children walk by from the Presbyterian day care center next door, just drinking, not saying a word. Most mornings he and Melissa would wake up to the chattering of children mixed with the squeal of the swing set on the playground a few feet from his window. Sometimes they'd just lay there, their bodies tangled together like his old sheets, listening to the comforting sound of kid screams.

By the time Joe got down to the bar for his shift, he was sporting a nice, steady buzz. It was a good place for him to be, he thought. People liked him there. He had always prided himself on being one of the most popular bartenders in town. He had sprayed himself with some Calvin Klein Obsession, slicked some gel through his dark hair, and thrown back some eyedrops, of course. He didn't want to tell anyone at the bar about Melissa. You tell one person, and it spreads like cancer down the row of drunk, bored, gossip-hungry locals, and then have to deal with their slurs of sympathy, and worse yet, their half-baked advice. He didn't know whether to cry or kick somebody's ass. He had thought about calling in sick, but then felt like a wuss. Why should he lose a hundred bucks because she's decided to have some sort of spiritual crisis?

Joe placed two Buds in front of Sam and Steele, the two disgruntled house painters. It had started to drizzle mid-afternoon and they couldn't finish their job. Joe sliced his fruit carefully, concentrating on not sawing off a finger. *A ball of negative*

*energy?* he thought. Was that really him? Was he really an energy suck like some of these barflies? Like Mike and Mary, the couple who had a screaming match once a week from opposite ends of the bar that he always wound up breaking up? The truth was, she was the best girl he had ever had, and the last year and a half they'd been dating, he had started to understand how simple happiness could be. He loved the way she smelled like exotic massage oils and her skin was so soft it reminded him of the puppy he had gotten for Christmas when he was eight. She was healthy, and it was the love of the physical world which had bonded them-- kayaking in the summer, hiking in the fall, cross country skiing during the long snowy winters. She was the only girl he had ever dated that wasn't afraid to break a sweat, and when he went to kiss her, to mix his sweat with hers, she never pulled away.

He caught sight of himself in the mirror behind the tiers of bottles. He looked bad, he thought, like someone else, his face pale with dark circles the size of quarters under his eyes. It didn't help that he had met Melissa at the very spot he now mopped with a rag, two seats from the end of the bar. She was in massage school then, and the students would come down to happy hour on Thursday nights after their weekly exam. She needed volunteers, guinea pigs, to come up to the school, fill out some paperwork, and let her work on them. "Free massage, you can count me in," he had said.

He had offered to cook her dinner to thank her. Well, he was really hoping for something more, and knew chicks dug his cooking. His Italian mother had taught him a few things. Although he had made Chicken Scaloppini a dozen times before, he got nervous the night before and made a practice meal. He never ate as much chicken as he

did that week, he thought, realizing he had been wiping the same spot on the bar for the past five minutes.

The Madeline's staff, from the upscale French bistro next door, hustled through the door, causing the sunlight to hit the stained glass window across from it.

"Is it time to get happy, Joey? I think it's time to get happy!" Stew the owner yelled as his cooks, dishwashers, and wait people hooted around him. Stew looked at him intently, as if he could read his mood, then asked, "Who are you betting on, Lakers or Sixers?" Stew ordered a round of woo-woos for the bar, and they all held up their little pink shots and cheered, "Drink!" This went on for several rounds, during which Stew insisted that Joe have a woo-woo with them every other round. Despite the festive mood, there was a certain desperation which Joe detected for the first time. It hung behind the cheery tunes of Steve Miller and The Grateful Dead, between the string of lit up chili peppers and floating paper Coronas dangling from the ceiling. Suddenly, "Sweet Melissa" by the Allman Brothers blared out of the jukebox. Stew looked over and gave him a thumbs up, and Joe's stomach ached as he forced a big smile.

After his fifth woo-woo, Joe felt his wounded pride swell inside him like heartburn. He had called Melissa three times, each time leaving a more detailed and apologetic message. If she wasn't home, he knew where she must be.

By the time he kicked everyone out and closed down, Joe felt a little like a maraschino cherry, drowning in his own juice. He stumbled home, concentrating on the cracks in the sidewalk. As he fit the key in his lock, he noticed Dusty sitting in the dark where he had left him hours before. He just wanted some time to think, to try to put

things into perspective, but this feeling wrestled with his drunkenness, the need for human interaction and for his party to continue.

"Hey, Bub," he called over. "Done with work?"

"Yeah," Joe said. The alcohol strengthened the tenuous bond he felt to Dusty, another poor soul in a harsh world of rotten women.

"You need to take some action, boy," Dusty said. "Can't sit around and let it fester inside you. I been thinking about your situation, and I rounded up some supplies here, if you want." Joe could tell he was even drunker than he was by the way his arm leaned heavily on the rests of the chair, as if he was having trouble holding himself up.

"What you got?" Joe asked. Towering over Dusty Blue's shrunken body, he felt a surge in own physical prowess. Dusty pointed to two plastic bags, one containing blue spray paint, a small shovel, a jar of cigarette butts, and a roll of toilet paper, and the other, Dusty stopped him from opening. "Dog shit," he said.

"Up for a ride?" he asked. Dusty nodded and grinned. Joe got a couple of beers for the road and a backpack for the supplies. At that moment, it seemed like the right thing to do.

They rode in silence for the first few minutes. Dusty bobbed up and down in the seat beside him.

"You ever married?" Joe asked him.

"Yeah," Dusty said, lighting a cigarette. "Twice." Joe expected him to launch into one of his long-winded stories, but Dusty just sat there in a cloud of his own smoke, so Joe didn't push it. A doe leapt into the road and he braked instinctively, as they both watched her disappear into the brush on the side of the road.

When he spotted two faded rainbow flags beside a wooden arch with the words Rainbow Ranch cut into the wood, Joe knew they had arrived. He pulled off to the side, and hid the truck behind a cluster of pines, then cut the engine and lights.

"Good luck, Bub," he said. "I see or hear anything suspicious, I'll bark like a dog."

Joe hoped the drunk Dusty wouldn't decide that he needed to have a look around. He grabbed the backpack and headed in, hugging the tree line, making his way by the light of the moon. He thought about a fistfight with Two Feathers, knocking him square in that thin hooked nose. He would go down with one punch, just one punch. Pow, he thought, swinging at the air.

There was a huge rectangle of wildflowers growing in front of this rectangular gazebo with a wooden roof, the floor covered with Indian rugs, vines crawling up trellises on either side. Further on, he came upon a huge fire pit surrounded by large stones in the shape of seats, and from here he gazed upon the cabin sitting on the very edge of the property, the porch covered with hundreds of plants growing in small jars. He could see how all this would impress Melissa, Joe thought, taking it all in. Hell, he didn't have anything beside his crappy apartment, some stereo equipment, and his truck. The cabin was dark except for a small lit window on the top floor, and he could make out the staircase behind it. It was then that he noticed the Volvo parked towards the back of the house. He caught his breath, his heart like a bird trapped inside his chest. He had been right. He imagined his Melissa wrapped up in Two Feather's skinny legs, and it made him want to hurl. He crushed the half-full beer can in his hand, throwing it against a tree, then watched the foaming puddle carve a small river through the dirt.

His head hurt and his mouth tasted sour. What was he going to do? Kill them or something? Somehow, scattering dog shit and papering trees didn't seem satisfying anymore. If he had a gun, he'd shoot the fucking rickshaw to pieces. He imagined the bits of cloth and feathers floating to the ground like satisfying remnants of a duck struck in midair. Or maybe he'd hold his pistol to Two Feather's temple, watch his detoxified hippie sweat creep down his face, his eyes glazed with fear, and ask him Why me? Why Mel? If only she would talk to him, he knew he could convince her. He'd even tell her he'd stop drinking, this time for real, and she'd believe him. She'd have to.

Joe sat with his back to the house, glaring at the hills poking up behind the trees. Melissa had made her choice, and now he had to make his. There were twigs and logs set up along the fire pit, and even some newspaper held down by a rock. He balled up some paper, arranging the sticks in a teepee around it like he had learned in Boy Scouts, fitting a log along the top. He pulled out the pack of McSweeney's matches from his pocket. He lit the last match, cupping his hands over it, and as he watched the flame eat the paper, the wind came and blew it out. He couldn't even light a fucking fire. What kind of asshole was he anyway, he wondered? He leaned back against a rock and closed his eyes. The impression of the stars, yellow circles, spun on the black backdrop of his eyelids. He felt waves moving through his head. The ocean, he thought.

He had a Swiss army knife on his key chain, so he flicked the blade, stroking it softly. He took it to his forearm, then made the cut with a deep, deliberate stroke. He lifted the blade out, then plunged it back in. Keeping his arm stiff, he carved the letters ME, which, as they filled with blood, became unrecognizable. He pressed his T-shirt to his arm, watching the crimson spread across the white, relishing the sting.

He trudged back to the truck. He heard the barking of dogs echoing through the hills and expected to see something move. He had always been a dog person, and Melissa a cat person. She had three, Leo, Pisces, and Capricorn. He preferred dogs because they were always happy, because you could get them to do exactly what you wanted them to do, and cats did whatever the hell they wanted. What it came down to, he figured, was cats and dogs.

He was surprised to see Dusty alert and folding beer labels into origami cranes, frogs, and mice, a whole army of them lined up on the dashboard. He picked up the crane, and held it in his palm, marveling at the tiny triangular wings, wondering where the hell Dusty had learned how to do this. He was touched that someone so fucked up could create something so perfect and delicate.

"Well?" Dusty asked.

"Well, what?"

"You get 'em good?" he asked.

"Yeah," Joe said, because he didn't want to disappoint him. He tucked his bloody arm to his side. When he started the truck, he gunned the engine, the sound like his inner wolf howling through the quiet night. He shifted and the truck jerked forward violently, sending the menagerie of paper animals sliding then spinning the smoky cab, falling wherever they fell.

## MIDDLE PERSON

Demitra washed dishes, plunging and scrubbing to the pulse of techno music, noticing the pruniness of fingers as she touched them to her thumbs. The Cadillac café had an open kitchen, a half wall with wide see-through shelves, so she had a good view of the makeshift movie screen up front. A lion chased an antelope in slow motion, the camera zooming in on the snap of its neck, the bloody gash, the backward velocity of long arched horns. Next, tanks moved like giant turtles in a tornado of swirling sand. Demitra tried to make sense of it all as she flung the suds from her wrists.

The cook sat at the soundboard, large cushioned headphones pressing his shaggy hair to his face, adjusting knobs and monitoring the two record players. He called his multimedia musical experiment *Young People's Death Camp*. Although he played guitar in a punk band, this was the debut of his new act and Demitra was nervous for him. Would people think he was too weird and leave? She hoped not. She thought it was a refreshing deviation from the folk rock duos the cafe usually featured. She liked the way his forehead furrowed with concentration, and the way he wiped the sleeve of his waffle shirt across it. He had the energy of a mad scientist, and she admired this. The music faded into fascist speeches, talk radio snippets and dialogue from old movies. A small voice asked the room, "Oh please, Mommy, can't we keep her?"

Four of the cook's friends sat at a big round table drinking beers; three pierced college students drew on each other's arms; a middle aged hippie couple wearing rubber



boots watched thoughtfully, sipping Caffix; and the local homeless guy, Eric Starchild, sat in the very back, hunched over his chamomile tea.

As Demitra scraped the remnants of tofu and rice into the compost bucket with a knife, she felt energized, her body in an odd trance, moving outside her mind. She drank wine out of a coffee mug, imagining a small flame crawling down her throat.

Afterwards, the cook's friends stood around talking, and she met his roommate, Stacey, who she recognized from the ATI gas station. She was one of those plain country girls, with a broad shiny forehead and limp brown hair, who Demitra imagined could be satisfied working at a gas station for the rest of her life. Stacey handed Demitra a pack of Camel lights.

"Thanks," she said, removing one and handing them back.

"No, keep them. I don't pay for them," Stacey said, and Demitra thought that was nice.

Soon everyone left except for the cook and his friend Dorian, who had a carrot colored ponytail and a gimpy leg he dragged behind him. Demitra tried not to stare at his leg, but it was hard not to. She locked the door and the cook lit a joint and passed it to her first.

"So, what'd ya think?" he asked, looking right at her. She took a drag and blew the smoke toward the ceiling fan. His body reminded her of a sunflower, tall and slightly droopy at the neck.

"It was really cool. What was that speech?" she asked, self conscious of her limited musical vocabulary.

"It's some Rush Limbaugh mixed with Nazi rally recordings I found in the radio station archives. Fucking crazy, right?"

"It had a post apocalyptic feel," Dorian said, his head bobbing like an apple in water.

"Hey, thanks for finishing the dishes," the cook said, touching her arm, and Demitra smiled and shrugged it off. "We're going over to the missile base. You should come, there's a party." She had heard about the missile base -- some kind of artist colony outside of town. She wanted to be social, but something tugged inside her, like she wanted the cook to herself and would make a fool out of herself competing for his attention. And then there was her boyfriend, who wouldn't care if she didn't come home, even though she sometimes wished he did. She didn't want him to suspect her feelings for the cook. They were the only things she had of her own, these secret feelings, glowing pink inside her like the morning after it snowed.

At two a.m., the streets of New Paltz were deserted except for an occasional plow and the town transvestite, Lisa, who went shopping for aluminum cans while everyone slept. A boom box rested in the child seat of his cart playing the theme to *Saturday Night Fever*. Demitra thought he must be freezing in a miniskirt and high-heeled ankle boots, and she felt bad for him as he disappeared down the street. She looked at the cars parallel parked along Plain Street, some with snow icing their tops, others naked in the cold night air, all frozen into spots separated by their own dirty mound of snow. She smelled the sweat imbedded in the scarf wrapped around her neck, mouth and nose; it reminded her of ski trips with her parents long ago.

Long nights at the cafe made her body feel soft like cheese. She remembered that the cook had called her a “sweet kid” when she had said goodbye. She wondered what he meant. She wondered if he thought she was immature or too young for him. Sweet was good, though, she reasoned, as the sub zero wind chill made her eyes tear. Sweet was exactly what she wanted to be to him.

She liked working at the Cadillac Café, a hangout for local eccentrics, professors, and coeds at the State College where she had been a student. She would have been a junior, but had taken the year off to think. She was the salad girl, also known as the middle person, responsible for artistically placing the sprig of parsley on the finished plate, prepping veggies, and ladling the soup into artsy pottery bowls. She guessed it all began when she started hanging out with the pizza driver, this idea that she could just live. Work. Support herself and do whatever she wanted to, instead of cramming for math and psychology tests and worrying about how she would use it all after she graduated. She might have had a better time in college if she had made friends, but it took working at the café for her to realize that people liked her. She discovered the counter culture of young artists working low paying jobs and renting shabby downtown apartments with buckled hardwood floors. They were the kind of people who gave hugs, some holding her tight, others gently as if she were a fragile shell. She had grown so used to those hugs that it didn't matter to her much what happened in between them- a little music, a little conversation. She didn't care if her parents thought she was a loser. A lot of people didn't breeze through college in four years. They would consider her friends losers too, but the losers she knew were smart, had heard of the I Ching, and Tom Waits, and knew the difference between tofu and tempeh.

She stepped onto her dark porch. She had forgotten to turn the lights on that afternoon, and her pizza driver boyfriend would never think that far in advance. Her cat Roogan eyed her from the welcome mat, his body shaped into a furry ball to keep warm. She was relieved by the empty parking space in the gravel driveway. He wasn't home. Their basement apartment was a sauna because the upstairs neighbors controlled the heat. She stripped down to her underwear and thick hiking socks and sat in her old yellow velvet armchair, drinking the mini bottle of Sutter Home Cabernet she had smuggled in her coat. She thought about her cook in peace, conjuring up his face, his smile, the way his incisors rested higher than the rest of his teeth. He was twenty-six, and had small dark eyes surrounded by wire-rimmed glasses. She loved the way her cook could make a stir fry dance off the pan with a deft shake of his hand. He moonlighted as a DJ on WVBR on Monday nights, and she called in requests for ten-minute songs, like *Cowgirl in the Sand*, so he could take a quick smoke break. He was so nice, she thought. He was tall, so tall that he slouched when he talked to her. She wanted to tell him everything.

The problem was her pizza driver boyfriend. They hardly ever had sex anymore, and he was making no attempt to either move out or to talk about their souring relationship. She had noticed the last time they did it, it was painful, like sandpaper rubbing inside her, so she went to Planned Parenthood, thinking she had cervical cancer or an STD from the one night stand she had two years earlier. But the doctor said everything "looked great." She also learned that she had a tilted uterus, which she thought was kind of cool, and it made her picture the earth leaning on its axis. Dr. Wright suggested the pain was the result of emotional stress. And that's when she realized that

the truth was, Charlie bored her. His little blond goatee no longer made her heart cartwheel through her chest. His sketch pads full of the comic strips he had drawn, which once amazed her, now struck her as silly, evidence that his life would be forever trapped like his very own super heroes in a land of ink and paper. He was not interested in the world or in making a difference to anyone but himself.

She realized, drinking alone in her chair, surveying the cramped dark apartment, that the easiest way to fall out of love with someone was by living with him. No more midnight rendezvous, deciding whose house to stay at, feeling like a lusty guest, like she had gone missing. Her parents and high school friends were all curious as to when she would be returning to school or securing a *real* job with *real* benefits. Reality, though, was one of the only things she felt her life never lacked.

Demitra crawled into bed and was imagining the cook's lean body pressed against hers when she heard her pizza driver come in with a friend. She listened to his hoarse laugh, then to exclamations of *dude, shit, motherfucker, right-on*. They were rummaging through the fridge for beers. She might have gotten up and joined them once, but now she rolled more tightly into her blanket's scent of Downey spring. Charlie turned on the stereo, and the music mixed with the loud conversation in perfect cacophony. He was capable of being inconsiderate like that. Lying in bed, Demitra thought about their day off last week when they had driven around doing errands. His car always smelled like pizza grease, the round stain soaked into the cardboard box like sweat on a T-shirt armpit. She had opened the window to air the car out, but he was cold, and they bickered until they got to the supermarket strip center. Then, standing next to the car, she had noticed

something sparkle in the muddy snow by the tire. She wiped the ring off with her glove and they both examined it, turning it around in her hand.

"Do you think it's real?" he had asked.

"It looks real," she said. "Maybe half a carat." They scoped out the half empty lot. There were a couple cars parked next to theirs. She suggested that they take it to the police station. He suggested Joe's pawnshop.

"Just to see how much it's worth," he said.

He told her to go in alone, to be less conspicuous. She told the old man with the long beard it was her grandmother's and she had inherited it, but she needed money for school. He held it up to a glass eye and stared for a minute, turning it slowly, sending speckles of light around the dim room. He lowered the ring, then his head, in a deliberate way she felt insinuated that he doubted her integrity. Did she look like a freaking junkie? she thought, as she glanced at her reflection in the window. She caught her pizza driver's eye instead. He smiled and shrugged, pulling at the brim of his baseball cap.

"What's your name, dear?" the old man asked.

"Sharon," Demitra said. "Sharon McConnell."

"An imperfect diamond," he said. "White gold, 14 karat. Nothing special, no offense, Sharon. Best I can offer is two hundred dollars."

She told her pizza driver the deal as they walked halfway up the block toward the train bellowing through the afternoon.

"That's twenty used CDs, or two cross-country bus tickets."

"I'm not riding cross country in some stinking bus," she said.

"Whatever. We should take it. Some old hag's probably looking down her drain right now."

Well, it was just sitting there waiting to get run over, she thought. So she went back inside and he made out a two hundred dollar check to Sharon McConnell, her friend from high school. She had assumed he would pay cash.

"Stupid," the pizza driver said. "Why the hell did you give him a fake name?"

"I don't know. I thought he might call the cops or something."

"What are we going to do with this check?" he asked, shoving it back to her.

"Maybe I can endorse it with my name underneath it. You know, pay to the order of. Shit. I don't know," she said. She felt low, like she had robbed some married woman of the yellowing lace garter hidden at the bottom of her underwear drawer, the memory of some exact event and emotion, both real and consequential. Sometimes she couldn't believe her own selfishness.

The next day, she went back and told the old man the truth and gave him the check and he gave her the ring back. She brought it to the police station where someone claimed it three days later. Her pizza driver conceded that it was the right thing to do, and made it seem like it was her idea to pawn it off in the first place. And that was the thing she disliked the most about him, she thought as she rolled to the edge of the bed, where his body would be less likely to find hers later when he landed beside her.

She woke before the alarm to Roogan settling on her feet. Her pizza driver snored beside her, lying on top of the comforter in a T-shirt and green striped boxers, his sand colored curls matted in a thin line of sweat along his hairline. Demitra resisted the urge to

touch his sleepy face. Instead, she went straight to the shower, let the water scald her. She swallowed two aspirin for her headache and combed her hair, twisting it into two braids that reached halfway down her back. She admired her pretty white neck in the mirror, elongating it with a seductive twist of her head. She had started to believe that she could make any man want her, even if only for a moment. She shimmied her cargo pants over her thighs and hips, then pinched her midriff and sighed. It was hard to be around food all day and not pick. She rubbed concealer under her eyes, brushed on waterproof mascara, and spread cherry Chapstick over lips. Her cook was working tonight.

When she arrived at the top of the hill, she was out of breath and felt herself sweating under her wool coat. The small parking lot on the right side of the café was empty except for Shirley, the owner's junked '77 butter colored Coupe Deville, which had become a local landmark. She had a hardtop and tan pinstripes, and her diamond shaped taillights reflected the mid morning sunlight. Small patches of rust, like liver spots, covered her hood and doors. On her rear, a green sticker read "Dan Hoffman or Mayo ," the "f" and "r" blackened out after the liberal candidate had failed miserably at the polls. Icicles grew around the tires and dangled off the tailpipe. She heard that several customers had offered to fix Shirley for free, and that the owner couldn't drive because he had lost his license many times due to reckless intoxication. Demitra herself had overheard the owner say that it was simply his boycott of the automobile. He was a proud pedestrian.

The owner was in the kitchen cleaning the chicken. Demitra tried not to look as he sawed off the pale rubbery limbs, causing blood to pool in the well of the cutting board. When he saw her, he raised his hand and dipped his head.



"Help, help, my leg, my leg," he squawked, and Demitra laughed, then covered her mouth, her sound rising above the soft hum of the news on the public radio station. The owner pretended not to notice and went for a wing. "I can't fly, I can't fly, oh momma," he said. The poor owner. At least he tried to make things interesting.

The owner always wore the same makeshift uniform -- an indigo T-shirt, gray corduroys, full apron, and a painter's cap turned inside out. Sleep still creased his cheek. She wondered how old he was. Somewhere in the abyss of his thirties, she assumed. She opened the curtains, put the chairs down, and poured herself a cup of coffee. Three ceiling fans revolved at different speeds above her head. She didn't particularly mind working the morning shift with the owner. He wasn't as bad as other owners were. He worked hard. The café was his wife and child. He had little interest in small talk, unless it was about local politics or obscure music. He was weird like that. She wondered if he looked down on her, like she was just a rich little college kid who was slumming it. She thought he sometimes looked like he had something negative to say to her, but never said it, so it clung to his face like the expression of indigestion.

The Eddydale order came in, consisting of five heaping crates of vegetables. She signed for it and wrote the check, then carried them one by one downstairs to the walk-in. Her cook would have stopped what he was doing to help her carry the heavy cases down, but the owner just kept working. Could she handle it? Everything, she felt, was a silent test.

They worked feverishly to the jazz program, like robots in parallel worlds. She wanted him to think she was a good worker. She wanted to be good at something. She chopped, her knife quick like her heartbeat, daydreaming about her sweet cook. That first

bite of crush was always the most delicious. She figured he respected her relationship too much to ask her out. She thought about something she could ask him to do, something that the pizza driver would automatically say no to, like a poetry reading. She was a procrastinator, a believer in fate. She didn't want to ruin things. Maybe he didn't want to be part of a café couple. If he made the first move, she would leave her apartment. But she couldn't afford to live alone; she'd have to find a roommate. She could answer an ad, or there were always signs posted on the café board: "Cat-loving vegan wanted." She was a good roommate, she thought. She always swept the floor, did the dishes, paid rent on time.

She whipped the salad dressings, Robo-coud the peppers, sorted the beans, washed the dishes. The owner stirred his sauce and asked her to taste.

"Salt?" he asked.

"No, it's perfect."

"Potatoes," he said. He glanced at the small alarm clock above the spices. "When you get a chance."

Wash, spin, chop, reach, lift, up, down. The onions caramelized, sizzled. The tomato sauce simmered and cumin and cinnamon laced the steamy air. She was anxious for the owner to leave and the cook to replace him.

At the end of the night, she wiped down the counters with bleach water. She liked how the bleach felt slippery on her fingertips. Her cook blasted The Pixies and they worked to the pace of the fast electric rhythms. She was exhausted, sweaty, and smelled like a peanut, she thought, wiping her brow with her sleeve.

The owner came back to empty the register. He lived two blocks away and he usually went home for a couple hours. His dark hair frizzed over his bald spot and he wore his blue LL Bean shammy shirt, the indicator to the café world that he was officially off duty. He was usually chatty at this time of night, and sometimes talked about buying out the seedy Laundromat next door and devoting a room to live music. But Demitra knew there was no way the café could afford this.

"My tempura batter was a little off, so I had to make another batch," her cook said while he scrubbed the stove. "It didn't get much air."

"The band do all right?" the owner asked, sipping a beer.

"They cleared one-twenty."

"You in the mood for a little jam session?" The owner and the cook had been in a band together a few years ago.

"No, man, sorry, I'm whipped. Next week."

"Yeah, cool," said the owner, but Demitra could tell that he was disappointed by the way he slunk downstairs.

They both walked the same route home. The night was quiet except for an occasional dog bark answered by another, like lovers communicating across town. They took the scenic route, stopping on the footbridge over the gorge for a smoke. The half-frozen creek below them looked like waves of foil in the moonlight. The trees grew up from the layered cliffs, defying gravity. She stood close to her cook, letting his body shelter her from the wind.

"This is some ancient shit," he said, waving his glowing tip at the gorge. "Before man, before anything, there was this." To her, standing there in the cold in her smelly clothes, this meant everything.

"Deep," she thought, then realized she had spoken.

"Yeah," he said, as if she were talking about the drop below them.

Sunday was the cook's day shift, and Demitra worked the night shift alone with the owner. When she got there, her cook didn't look up to say hi. He was banging dishes together in the sink with such force that she was afraid he was going to break something. She heard him mutter "fuck" under his breath. The owner turned the music up to drown out the noise. She slipped into her station and started slicing onions. What if the cook was mad at her? What if she did something without realizing it? She went over to get a bowl from the shelf beside him and caught his eye. His face softened.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"I'll tell you later. I might have to ask you for a favor," he said as he pulled off his apron and hurried out the back door. A favor, she thought. Of course she would do him a favor. He would realize what a dependable and caring person she was.

A couple minutes later, his roommate Stacey came in looking for him. Her puffy eyes were half hidden underneath the Mets cap she wore.

"He just left," Demitra said.

"If he comes back in, can you give this to him?" she asked, sliding a note that had been carefully folded into a two inch square, *Andy* written in that bubble cursive Demitra always associated with lack of intelligence.

"Sure," she said, and taped the note to the pastry case.

The owner handed her a plate of enchiladas, and she topped them with guacamole, sour cream, handfuls of shredded iceberg and chopped tomatoes.

"Beautiful," he said. "Order up," he called to the wait-trons in the dining room. He took sips out of the beer that was hidden on the shelf beside the stove.

After dinner, she worked the counter at the far end of the kitchen while the singer songwriter serenaded a small audience. When she eyed Stacey's note, Demitra realized she wasn't the only one who loved the cook. She suddenly had the urge to hurt this perfectly sweet girl, to slap her or something. Then self loathing sank in. Why should she care? She wasn't even single. Demitra wanted to read that note. No one was watching so she carefully unfolded it and started to skim it. "... *I love you and don't want to do anything that would ruin our friendship....*" Maybe he didn't like Stacey, had resisted her advances, she thought, relieved. Then the owner glanced over so she slid the paper under a plate of cookies. He sat on a milk crate between his prep counter and the stove, eating a small bowl of food. The music was oddly romantic, and she felt his loneliness on the crate beside him, waiting out the night.

Her pizza driver moved into her peripheral vision, and he sauntered over to her space behind the counter. "I got cut early," he said, pleased. He hugged her in his usual loose one arm around her shoulder way.

"Can you have a cigarette?" he asked. She hadn't taken a break all night. She caught the owner's eye, and held two fingers up, moving them from her mouth into the air. He nodded, staring at her pizza driver.

When her pizza driver left to catch the second set of a band at the Haunt, he asked her to come out when she finished. Demitra was kind of glad he had stopped by. Just that morning, he had brewed a pot of coffee for her, leaving her favorite mug beside it. Maybe they could remain friends after all.

She noticed the cook talking to the owner near the stove and she thought maybe he had come back to hang out. He brushed past her, saying, “Hey kid,” and ducked into the beer fridge; she heard the rattling of bottles. Her eyes scanned the café, looking for tables to bus, when she noticed Stacey standing by the door that connected with the Laundromat. Stacey pushed her hair behind her ears, and glanced back to see where the cook was at, smiling when she caught his eye. He took the beers and left with a quick wave goodbye. Demitra noticed how he had put his hand on Stacey’s shoulder as she pushed the door and they went outside.

Demitra felt her throat tighten. She wanted to hide in the bathroom, but she had a customer, this middle aged guy named Todd with a light brown afro and pock marks dotting his thin face. Todd always liked to talk to her. He smiled, bouncing up and down in his running shoes, asking, “Did you hear the new Donna the Buffalo CD? How’s the tofu cheesecake?” She knew her neck was splotchy; it always happened when she was nervous or upset.

“Are you okay?” Todd asked.

“Yeah, fine. Just tired.”

“Long night, huh.” She realized that he had been flirting with her for weeks, and she must have been flirting back, not that she was in the least bit attracted to him; no, she was just trying to be nice. A year later, she would dance with him at a reggae concert,

bombed out of her mind, and he'd put his hands above her hips, and she'd lean into him for balance. She'd go to his small apartment when he invited her over for tea. He'd be excited about his new car- a used fuel efficient teal hatchback, and later would admit that he was bisexual. She would tell him he was too old for her, at 38, and then three weeks later she would start to date the owner, who was 39, and she'd feel bad when Todd saw them kissing on the sidewalk. By then she'd be working at a different restaurant. By then, she'd be a different person. But for now, she made Todd his soy milk cappuccino, acutely aware of the high pitched shriek the steamer made, a primal sound which felt like it came from within her.

The café had emptied, the last customers and the musician leaving together. She wondered where the owner was. She brought the leftovers to the walk-in. He was not in the kitchen, the compost room, or passed out at his desk. The stereo played the familiar tape of African drumbeats and flutes but it sounded eerie to her in the empty cafe. She opened the register, and the money was still there. She tightened the plastic wrap around the plates of baked goods, wiping the crumbs caught in the grains of the wood counter. She taped Stacey's note back to the case, turned off the stereo and locked the door.

The sidewalks were empty and the streetlights formed yellow halos in the foggy air. As she passed the café, Demitra heard music coming from the Coupe Deville, though the car was not running. The owner sat inside, knees hunched against the steering wheel. With his black hair and black ski jacket, he was almost invisible. She tiptoed toward the car for a better look. She thought he must be freezing, but knew there was a point when your body went numb, and you almost forget about it. She wished she could sit with him.

She imagined the owner would start her up, and Shirley would roar to life in all of her 70s splendor, when engines were made to be loud. He would drive slowly through town, one hand on the wheel, the other draped over the back of her seat, big band jazz floating between them. He'd say, "The cook really likes you, but you blew it," and she'd ask him why he was alone, and he'd turn the question back to her. And they'd both know the answer.

Demitra went over to the passenger door and squeezed the handle. The door separated from the body with a crackle. The owner jerked his hand; she noticed duct tape patches on his old ski glove, the beer cushioned between his legs.

"I locked up," she said. He nodded, gazing out the windshield toward the graffiti covered wall of the cafe. She wondered if he was deciphering a secret code in the twisted strokes, but then noticed something move. A fleshy raccoon removed the lid from the café's garbage can with the precision of a car thief. They stared as he knocked the can over from inside, then emerged clutching a chicken leg.

"Must be dinnertime," said the owner.

Demitra slammed the car door harder than she intended, the satisfying crash of ice and metal echoing behind her as if she had broken through something, a layer of rust.



## VICE CITY

They were quiet the whole way over to his father's, across three towns, two rivers, and the one railroad track that inevitably had its red lights flashing and gate down for the passing freight train.

"Christ," his mother hissed, rubbing her ear as they endured the low pitched wail Carl thought sounded like elephants at a funeral. It was raining, and he knew how the sky felt, gloomy, the shade of fresh cement you carve your initials in with a stick. His sister Beth had her knees against the dashboard and was reading one of her stupid books. His mother fiddled with the radio station, settling on the oldies station he usually hated, but today was grateful for the wall it built between them and him, like the divider in a cop car.

"Too loud?" His mother was completely deaf in her left and had fifty- percent hearing in her right. Carl stared at his mother's right ear, the hole fitted with a small plug the color of silly putty. He felt his mother looking at him in the rearview mirror, but he refused to meet her gaze. Instead, he stared out the window, thinking how the dreary boarded up houses would be the perfect backdrop for a Mortal Kombat match, imagining his opponent falling through the rickety floorboards with a thump.

At the gate of the Edgewater Apartment complex, his mother got the slip of paper out of the ashtray and leaned out the window to enter the code. She never pulled close enough, and had to back up and pull up again. If his father was in the car, Carl could imagine him yelling at her for this.

Standing on the front stoop with the two plastic chairs and the coffee can of

cigarette butts, he could hear the dogs barking inside. He watched his mother back out of the parking space, and could see tears in her eyes, but maybe it was just the rain on the windshield, and she waved and he waved back.

The apartment smelled like hot wings and dog breath, slightly sour and greasy and damp. The blinds were closed, the gray light pushing against them like a shadow. Beth plopped her backpack on the floor, said "Hi, Dad," ignored Dad's roommate Robbie, and their friend James, and headed straight for the bedroom computer. Within minutes, he could the steady click of her typing, as she chatted online with her friends. Beth thought because she was thirteen she could do whatever she wanted, and because he was nine, he mostly just stayed out of her way.

The dogs, two pit bulls, Rox and Rex, jumped up on him, licking his hands. Rex had been Carl's dog before the divorce, but they weren't allowed to have pets in their apartment and his mother was afraid of dogs anyway. Dad had gotten Rox about a year ago, and said he named him that because he had a solid set of balls on him, but Carl just thought the names sounded good together. Darth Vader, the black cat, sat on the top of the carpeted tower, sharpening his claws like knives.

"What took you guys so long? Your mother get lost again? Did I give her the directions in the wrong ear?" his father said laughing, and Carl laughed too, but felt a tingle of guilt. It was true; she had misheard the directions, and that made it funny. His dad had paused the video game in order to give him a quick hug.

"Nice hair." Dad ruffled Carl's bright blond locks he had bleached last weekend to match his own.

"Nice hair," Carl said back. His mother refused to acknowledge that there was

anything different about him, though when Carl had harassed her enough, had said, "I hope that crap doesn't make your hair fall out." Carl made himself comfortable on the bean bag chair, the dogs at his feet, their tails thumping in time to the techno music.

"You ready for some Grand Theft Auto?" Robbie asked.

"You bought it?" Carl asked, his eyes wide. "Vice City?"

Robbie shrugged his shoulders, then stared at the coffee table until Carl followed his eyes and noticed the game case between two ashtrays. Robbie looked like a WWF wrestler. He had a dark beard and a bald spot on top of his head like a shiny glazed donut, his hair long and curly in the back. He wore a white undershirt and his arms were covered with tattoos of snakes and dragons. He had no knuckles, his fingers strangely flat like the prongs of a fork. He reminded Carl of Eight Ball, Auto 3's first contact, an explosives expert who was personable, calm, cool, and a good person to know.

James sat on the couch with his legs crossed, smoking a cigarette. James was thin like a girl, and wore a tight T-shirt and hoop earrings. Carl had asked him once why he wore those big earrings but had forgotten his reply.

"Come give Uncle James a hug," he said, and Carl felt like he was hugging a skeleton.

"Pansies, anyone?" Robbie asked. He was in charge of the drinks and the laundry. His father grunted, concentrating on the video game on the big screen TV, and James said, "Yes please. You're a doll."

"Virgin Pansy or Coke?" Carl had had a Virgin Pansy last time, but he was disappointed that it just tasted like juice, though it was in the same tall glass with a cherry and a lime and he felt grown up drinking what they were drinking.

"Coke" he said. Dad was into his game, furiously shooting at his opponent. Carl thought his father was the best player in the whole world. He suddenly noticed that his dad was a character he had never seen before, the 15<sup>th</sup> player, Smoke. He'd found the code.

"I love this song," James said, standing up with his fresh drink in the air and gyrating his hips. "It makes me want to party." James got bored with video games. He preferred to watch movies.

"Damn queen. You should have seen him last week on E," his father said.

"What's E?" Carl asked.

They all started laughing, Robbie muffling himself with a pillow, and Dad slapping the side of the couch with his free hand.

"Yeah, what's E?" his dad asked. "Why don't you explain it to the kid."

"Well, E stands for Energy. When you really like the music, and you're like dancing like crazy at a club, they say you're on E. It's just an expression," James explained. "Anyway, I'm starving. I could eat a damn horse," he said, lifting up his T-shirt a little and patting his thin, ribby stomach. Carl's ears perked up, and so did the dogs. "You wanna order a pizza or something? Hungry, Carl?"

Carl nodded. He was always hungry.

"Get Rogans," Dad said. "They have a special on meat lovers."

"That's way too much meat," James said.

"Well, get one of those and whatever you want," said Dad. "Too much meat." He mimicked James' high-pitched whine.

Carl looked up to see his sister standing in the doorway of the bedroom, her hands

on her hips, elbows pointing out like a chicken. "Grandma's picking me up in an hour," she said to no one in particular.

"We're ordering pizza," Dad said. "If you're hungry."

She rolled her eyes. "Dad, I'm lactose intolerant," she said. "Duh, I've like been that way almost my whole entire life," she said.

"Oh yeah," he said. "Well, I guess no pizza for you," he said as he lashed a few teleport punches into Shao Kahn, blood spurting out of the powerful and evil sorcerer demigod dictator's chest. Kahn returned the favor with a hammer to Matoro's head.

Carl waited patiently for his father to finish him off. He always played winner.

James returned from the kitchen with the phone on his hip. "It's gonna take them a *whole hour* for delivery. Can somebody pick it up?"

Robbie drove a stick shift Dodge Ram, black with yellow and purple pin stripes and tinted windows. He washed it every week so it always looked shiny and new. It had gray leather seats that were more comfortable than the couch in the living room. From the mirror hung a Tasmanian Devil air-freshener, and a miniature disco ball.

"The engine is the heart of the vehicle. In a standard, or stick, as some people call it, the clutch allows the driver to be the brain, and coordinate the car's joints to make it move. I mean, you have a choice here- do you want to drive the car or do you want the car to drive you?" Robbie asked. He liked comparing car parts to body parts, though sometimes Carl had a hard time picturing it all. Robbie was a retired truck driver, a Teamster, and Carl was in awe of his knowledge.

"It's a piece of cake. Once you get the hang of it, it's no harder than breathing,"

Robbie said. Carl positioned his hand around the shift as if it were a joystick, his hands sweating with anticipation, and at "when," he pulled down, feeling the jerky pause as the engine changed gears.

"Excellent," Robbie said. "You're a natural," and Carl face reddened with the praise, as he caught a glimpse of himself smiling in the side mirror. "Maybe you'll even drive a truck. In a couple years, I'll let you drive by yourself," he said.

"Really? Like how many years?"

"Well, I started driving when I was around thirteen. That's a good age," he said. Carl could barely contain his excitement. He'd be driving three whole years before anyone in his class. And he'd start saving money for a car of his own, a Red Stinger like his favorite car in Vice City. He'd drive far away, where no one could find him.

Carl knew his father was gay, but only because his sister told him, though he was still kind of unsure what being gay actually meant.

"It means he likes men, dumbass," Beth had said when he had worked up the courage to ask her a few months ago. "It means he would rather live with Robbie than with Mom and us." Whatever it meant, he knew it wasn't good. He knew to be called gay was an insult, like if you listened to NSYNC or wore Walmart sneakers or took ballet lessons or wore your shirt tucked in to your pants, though his father wasn't about any of these things. It was like being called a pussy, or a retard, or a lameass, and so the fact that his father was this thing that inspired ridicule he kept to himself. He went to a new school where no one knew his father anyway. He only had one friend, Thomas Hernandez, whom he played video games with after school sometimes. He liked going to Thomas'

house because his mother was Puerto Rican and always made them tacos or fried bananas or chicken and rice. She was young and pretty, wore tight tank tops, and sometimes fed the baby from her chest as he and Thomas ate their snack at the kitchen table. Thomas seemed to think this was no big deal but Carl found it hard not to sneak a look. He couldn't help but think about his own mother, who was short and had calves shaped like upside down bowling pins, skin the color of glue, and red hair short like a man's. If she were as pretty as Mrs. Hernandez, maybe his father would have not decided to be gay.

Carl knew his mom was a nice person, and he loved her even though she was strict compared to his father. It was almost a relief to return to his mother's on Sundays, even if it he had to eat fruit all week. He was glad to sleep in his own comfortable bed in his own room with his own TV instead of the pull out futon in the corner of Dad's living room. At his father's, they went out for Burger King or McDonalds, he didn't have to take a shower, and at night, Robbie and Dad got dressed in jeans and black shirts and went out and left him home to baby-sit the dogs. He played video games ad ate snacks all night long until they got home at four or five in the morning, stumbling over each other. Dad's apartment was always a mess, and the cigarette smoke and dog hair started to make Carl's eyes water by the second day. Mom's apartment always smelled like fabric softener because Beth was obsessed with laundry. But he was torn between the quiet stability of Geneva Street and the strange excitement of the Edgewater apartments, and sometimes he didn't know which he preferred.

When Carl said he wanted to fly on planes like their Uncle Tim, Dad's brother, Beth covered her mouth and squealed, "Oh, no. It's gonna happen to you too."

He didn't know what she was talking about, and she wouldn't tell him until he threatened to tell mom that he saw her smoking a cigarette.

"Your favorite uncle is gay, too."

"What?"

"Uncle Tim is gay." Now this shocked Carl more than his own father, like he should have been able to predict this, like getting to next level of a game without being told how. Uncle Tim was a flight attendant, and always wore a crisp suit with silver wings clipped to his jacket and he had this little suitcase on wheels. Plus, when he was in town, he always took Carl to pawn shops so they could look for games or transistor radios and other cool stuff.

Carl got the chocolate cake out of the refrigerator, and he asked Beth if she wanted a piece and she didn't answer him. He sat down at the table with the last two hunks and she immediately looked up from her homework and said, "You pig, thanks for asking me if I wanted some."

As he held the fork full of chocolate to his mouth, it hit him that Beth was deaf like his mother. He always thought she was ignoring him, or playing her music so loud because that's what teenagers were supposed to do. And if Beth was going deaf like his mother, would he turn out to be gay like his father and Uncle Tim? He didn't exactly like girls, especially snotty ones like his sister, but he was kind of intrigued by the bumps under their T-shirts. The way they smelled like baby powder and candy. Beth locked herself in the bathroom for hours, and sometimes he wondered what she was doing in there, but usually he couldn't wait to find out, so he went to pee off the back porch.



Carl walked across the playground to his bike, thinking about his afternoon spread out in front of him like the whole Realm of Earth. He heard the scratching and clicking of skateboards then noticed them swarming around him in a circle like sharks. The skateboarders wore wide leg baggy pants, big T-shirts, and had matching chains hanging from beltloops to back pockets. Eric Wheeler stood alone, leaning against the bike rack, smoking a cigarette. Carl noticed that he had on the latest pair of Air Jordans though Eric was too short and too fat to even dream of playing basketball.

"Hey Carlos, you got any money you want to give me?" he said. Carl Jr. looked around. Was he talking to him?

"My name's not Carlos," he mumbled, fumbling as he unlocked his bike, trying not to make eye contact. The scratching and clicking got louder, closer, fiercer and he felt trapped.

"Hey Carlos, I heard something interesting about your old man the other day," he said. Carl was holding the lock in his hand, and looked into Eric's small brown rat eyes.

"I heard that your dad's..." Before he could finish, Carl felt his hand tighten into a fist around the lock. In slow motion, as if the playground had been transformed into the Outer World, he pressed the run button and his fist hit Eric in his droopy chin. There was a spurt of blood from his lip and his teeth dripped with it. Eric stumbled backward and put his hand to his mouth, and the skateboards were suddenly quiet. A half a second later, Carl was on his bike, pedaling so hard his legs cramped. He was not on a bike, but a PCJ 500 racing motorcycle, and Trumble was really Vice City. His heart felt like a boxing glove punching against his chest as he turned onto Cleveland Street. He glanced behind him to see a cop car, and he thought it was coming to take him down. He slowed down,

breathing hard, and the cop passed, talking on his radio, without even looking at him.

It was a strange sensation, like his limbs were made of liquid sugar, pumped with a tingly energy. He had never been in a fight before, never hit anyone, not even his sister, and felt like a criminal and a warrior at the same time. He knew his dad would be proud. Dad didn't take any crap.

He stopped at the Caps Corner Deli and leaned his bike against the big oak tree. The front of his T-shirt was covered with sweat, and stuck to the ripples of his stomach. He lifted it away from his skin, letting some air in. He dug into his backpack for his ball of socks where he kept his money hidden. His father gave him ten dollars every weekend, which he wasn't allowed to tell his mother about, and he picked his dirtiest pair of socks to hide it in. As he removed three dollars, he felt comforted by the scent of moldy cheese. None of those kids would even think to look in a smelly pair of socks, he thought, impressed with his own ingenuity.

His eyes carefully surveyed the chip display. Cool Ranch Doritos, Salt and Vinegar Lays, Extra Cheddar Cheetos, so many to choose from in junk food heaven. What was he in the mood for today? he wondered, his mouth watering. Yesterday he had gone for the Fritos and a Snickers bar. He picked up the Doritos then went to the candy display and picked up a supersize Milky Way, and a bottle of cherry Coke and paid the kid behind the counter. He moved his bike to the back of the store and sat on the steps leading to the apartment upstairs, where he always sat to be alone because the old lady who lived there didn't mind. He ate the chips one by one, licking the salty residue that lingered on his fingers, savoring each crunchy bite while he watched the fireman across the street hose off the truck. He had waited all day for this, and when he was finished, he

tipped the bag into his mouth to catch the crumbs, washing it down with some Coke. He felt better about the fight. Eric would be too embarrassed to tell anyone that a fourth grader kicked his ass anyway. Maybe, just maybe, he would get away with it. Carl let out a satisfying belch. For a minute he wondered if there really was a difference between real life and game life, since both depended on survival. All he knew was that he wanted to go home and practice some of his finishing moves on Shao Kahn. His favorite was pulling his spine out of his body and waving it for all of Outer World to see.

He didn't think it was better when his Dad and Mom still lived together, though the only good thing about it was that it felt normal, and no one ever gave him crap about his father then. But his father had hogged the TV and was always angry and talked to his mom in the same mean voice he used when the dog was misbehaving. At first Carl had dreamed about ways to get them back together (failing a couple tests, breaking his leg on purpose) but soon realized his mother could take care of these things alone, and maybe it was for the best, like his parents had both said. His mother seemed happier without his father around, though she worked later and he had more chores to do. He had to cook dinner on Mondays and Wednesdays, which he didn't mind because he got to pick out whatever side dishes he wanted, like Mac n' Cheese or Lipton Chicken noodles. He wasn't allowed to cook when Beth wasn't home, and she was supposed to keep an eye on him, which she never did.

As he sat on the stool hunched over the pork and beans, his mother appeared in the doorway. She kicked off her shoes and he could detect pantyhose sweat as she came up behind him. He didn't want her to see the Band-Aid on his hand where Eric Wheeler's

mouth had left a small gash. She wrapped her arms around him and he felt his body stiffen then relax as she kissed him on the cheek, her face clean like rubbing alcohol and the yellow stuff you put on cuts.

"Smells good, sweetie," she said. "Did you finish your homework?"

"Yeah," he lied.

"Cantaloupes are on sale, two for a dollar," she said. "Maybe we'll go to the Pathmark later."

She always turned her hearing aid down when they ate because it magnified the little noises of the kitchen, the scraping of knives against plates, the swoosh of running water and the hum of the dishwasher. It drove her crazy, she told them, and she was crazy enough. This was the time to ask her important questions. She was pretty good at reading lips, though not when she was tired or when they were talking with food in their mouths.

"Can I go to the movies with Perry?" Beth asked, mixing her green beans and meatloaf together, and this made Carl cringe, the different colors touching each other.

"Oh, sure, Terry, she's a nice girl," Mom said, and Beth shot Carl a secret triumphant glance.

Beth's job was kitchen clean up, and she made a racket with the dishes, simply because she could.

Friday afternoon when she drove them over to their father's was the only time his mother got in a bad mood, snapping at him to put his seatbelt or turn off his gameboy or stop popping his gum and sometimes just crying as they drove. Beth was not going this weekend. He had heard her tell his father over the phone that she had a bat mitzvah to go

to, though he thought she was just making this up so she could go to the movies with Perry Connors.

It wasn't his fault he had visitation with his father. His father had said that the court had ordered it, so it sounded pretty important that he go. He thought about the commercial he had seen last night, a big juicy burger dancing in his head, "two all beef patties special sauce lettuce cheese pickles onions on a sesame seed bun..."

They were drinking their pansies and watching some weird movie about someone named Priscilla, and he had seen it before and didn't get it, so he decided to go for a walk around the complex. Carl liked roaming around the complex by himself, the meat cooking on people's barbecues, the Spanish music coming from Complex C, where his father said all the "nachos" lived. He circled around the kidney shaped pool and stuck his arm in to reach the thermometer hanging by a string off the ladder in the deep end. Seventy-eight. He took the net and skimmed the pool for bugs and leaves, daydreaming about the girls who lounged on the deck on sunny weekends. The girl he knew was Jessica, and she had long blond hair and freckles on her shoulders. She lived two apartments over from his father. He usually watched them from the laundry room as they rubbed lotion on each other, their bodies slick like seals. He wanted to go over and bring Jessica a Coke or something, but didn't have the guts to do this. He worried that she would just think he was some stupid little kid.

He latched the gate and walked over to the laundry room, where he checked the dryers for lint but they had all been cleaned out. There was a snack machine and he dug out some quarters he had transferred from his sock to his pocket and got a bag of chips to walk down to the water with.

On the bottom of the hill behind Complex F ran a small stream that was a greenish color, his father said from all the scum. There was lots of cool garbage clinging to the rocks along the edges, Styrofoam cups, broken glass, tennis balls covered with muck, and the cushion to a chair which he imagined being a great raft for a quick escape. He threw the cushion in and watched it float away with the current until it got caught on a rock downstream. He picked up a stick, poked at a thin deflated balloon with a wide round hole at the top. It looked like the thing that they had found by a bench in the park once, and Thomas had said it was called a rubber, and men put it on their dicks so they wouldn't make babies. He put the stick inside of it and lifted it up and he couldn't imagine what his dick would feel like inside of it. He flicked it in the stream and watched it too float away. He detected the smell of rotting meat, and heard the squawking of birds and followed the sound to three crows flapping around black fur. Darth Vader, he thought, please oh please don't let it be Darth Vader, and he tried to remember if he had seen the cat that afternoon but couldn't remember. He walked slowly toward it, flies buzzing around the gouge in its head that looked red and lumpy, its eyes closed and mouth sewed shut, and saw that his belly was white and sighed because Darth Vader was all black. It was just like something you'd see in the alleys of Vice City, just lying there trying to trip you up, reminding you of the rotten life of crime you'd gotten yourself into, or sometimes possibly, it would be the test of a Good Samaritan. He thought for a second he saw the cat twitch. He had gotten used to the smell, and he poked him with his sick. The body was stiff and heavy like a bag of sand, and the birds screamed at Carl from the trees.

He was glad that it wasn't his cat, but felt bad because he had obviously been somebody's pet, from the looks of the yellow collar around his neck. He wondered what

his name had been and how he'd died: car, animal, gunshot wound. He threw the stick into the river and wiped his hands on his pants because he it had touched something that touched something dead. He would tell his father and Robbie and maybe they would bury him or something, and they could put a rock on his grave.

He could hear the whump whump music coming from behind the door so he knew the movie must be over and he was glad. Inside a woman stood on the coffee table dancing. She had blond poofy hair and gold dress and big long eyelashes and gold shoes and gold glitter on her arms and shoulders and was pretty like Mariah Carey.

"How do I look, boys?" she asked. There were clothes and make up all over the couch, and his father pulled him over and put his arm around him, rocking him back and forth to the music. The room smelled weird, like a musky smoke, and Carl sneezed.

"Carl, it's me, James. Tell me I look marvelous," she said. He stared at her, trying to figure out how that woman was really James and it was enough to make him forget about the poor dead cat. He was annoyed because it was already seven-thirty and they were supposed to be going to McDonalds and then Time Zone afterwards, and it didn't look like they were going anywhere soon, with the mess in the living room, Uncle James a woman, his dad holding a full pansy and Robbie hanging out in his striped boxers and deer skin slippers.

His dad put on a dark haired wig and he looked like a witch, with his meaty face and bulbous nose that was bright red from all the pansies.

"You wanna play? I mean, who says dresses are only for women? Back in Roman times, men wore togas, which are kinda like a dress," Dad told him, and before he could respond, dropped a red silk dress with sequined flowers around the waist and red high

heels into his arms. The outfit looked vaguely familiar to him. It was his mother's, he thought, and he wondered how it had gotten there.

"Oh wait, oh wait, you got to have a bawr too," Dad said, and they all started laughing as he added the woman's underwear to the pile. Carl was uncomfortable and his mouth started to twitch like it did when his teacher called on him in class, earning him the nickname rabbit, and he opened his mouth wide to try to get it to stop. It seemed too weird to dress like a girl; he'd look ridiculous, he thought. Plus, it seemed dirty like that rubber that he had chucked into the stream.

His dad danced with his wig and now had a long pink boa around his neck. He smiled at him, expectant, waiting for him to join into their party, but Carl faltered, like the first time he got the chance to play Grand Theft Auto when he was six. He had been afraid it would be too scary and his mother had forbidden it.

"Cmon, don't be a little pussy, we're having fun," Dad said. "We're celebrating Halloween tonight, and I don't get to see you on Halloween any more, and instead of candy we'll get some burgers afterwards and then some of those sundaes, you know those brownie sundaes they have for a limited time only," he sang.

Carl was starving. He had usually eaten dinner by now and he could feel his stomach grinding like rusty chains on a bike. His hunger traveled throughout his body and made him feel tense and jittery. Still, Carl had to admit that he was a tiny bit curious about this whole charade. "Does it itch?" he asked.

"Naw, it feels good. Feels a vacation in Mexico," Dad said.

Carl looked over to Robbie, who was sitting on the couch smiling and balancing his drink on his knee. Carl tries to make eye contact with him, but Robbie was in his own



world, staring at Mariah Carey.

"Here, I'll help you out, bud. Take your shirt off," Dad ordered. Carl had never dared talk back to his father. He knew if he did this thing, it would make his dad happy with him. And then they would go to eat. He pulled off his shirt and obediently put his arms through the straps of the woman's underwear as Dad hooked it in the back. He kicked off his sneakers but kept his socks on. "Arms up," his Dad said, and it reminded him of when he was real little, and his dad would say that same thing to him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Carl saw a pack of kids on mopeds charging toward him, screaming that word he'd never ever repeat: faggot. He felt like he was suddenly out of bonus lives. There was nothing he could do. He heard his mother sob, "Don't you love me? Why are you doing this?" Though before she was talking to Dad, and now she was talking to him.

Dad dropped the red dress over his head. It was the softest, smoothest thing Carl had ever felt, like those silk flowers his mom had all over the apartment. The fabric was cool like a pillowcase, and for a moment, as it lingered over his head, the whole world was tinted red. Red as the blood in Eric Wheeler's mouth, he thought. Red as the ketchup on the double cheeseburger he would soon get.

## THRESHOLD

"I would tell you to watch it next week, but they got voted off," Stephanie said.  
"Isn't that hilarious?"

"Yeah," Karen said, cradling the phone in the crook of her neck as she sat in the cramped staff quarters of the group home, doodling flowers on the edge of the blotter calendar. She guessed it was sort of funny, and lame, like what kind of weirdoes volunteer for those shows? She couldn't believe she'd missed it.

"I'll call you later," Karen said, suddenly overwhelmed. She felt that she had hit a new low point in her life now that Louis Boffoli, the guy she loved in high school, had appeared on the Reality TV series *Miles to the Altar* with his fiancé, trying to win an all-American wedding.

Karen knew the residents would be trudging in for meds as they returned home from their community jobs, sheltered workshops, and psychiatrist appointments. It was her 22<sup>nd</sup> hour on shift and her throat was raw from chain smoking. If the air in the home had a color, it would be brownish green, like the mucous caught in the throats of those who coughed through the night in their beds; or the cracked linoleum in the upstairs hallway and kitchen, circa 1973; or maybe like the overcooked frozen peas they ate week after week, too soft to stab, scoopable only with the help of your knife.

She twirled a lock of hair around her index finger. It was the first time she had thought about Louis since the last time she'd seen him, five years ago at the Pizzeria Uno in her hometown. She had watched him bring a pizza to a table, holding it high above his head, and wished he would notice her, come up and say, *How have you been? You look*

*really good.*

She shifted to another lock of hair, twisting and twirling, then thought about the latest disease she'd read about, *Trichotillomania*, obsessive hair pulling, and immediately dropped her hand. The truth was she enjoyed flipping through the DSMIV catalogue of mental illnesses, fascinated at just how many ways the mind could go wrong, looking for snippets of herself in those bible thin pages, awed that she had tricked Lake Grove Mental Health into thinking she was stable and sane enough to employ. Although she exhibited random symptoms of all kinds of psychoses, such as bouts of mania and alcohol fueled delusions of grandeur, she learned that unless one fit the whole profile of a disease, one was considered normal. Maybe normal was a menagerie of craziness. She read the thick binders filled with the psychiatric history for each patient as if they were novels, totally engrossed in tangible incidents of psychiatric explosion, trying to determine patterns and triggers, like a detective of the mind. Was she simply interested in people's messed up lives, or was she taking sick comfort in the fact that no matter how down she got, she would never be as bad off as they were?

She looked out the window for the Helping Hands bus that dropped the blind guy off every evening, worried because there was no sign of it. It was twenty minutes late. The sidewalks were slick with ice glittering in the fading light, and she could envision a young Louis Boffoli cruising by in his mother's white Mazda 626, his whole arm extended out the window, like he was reaching for the street. She had thought he was mildly retarded when, at age thirteen, he stood in the back of the Sacred Heart Church with his mother, staring at her as openly and dumbfounded as a child would an amputee. His eyebrows were thick and resembled a mustache hanging low over his dark deep-set

eyes, and the groove between his mouth and nose was too deep. He still wore stonewashed jeans, even though they were "out." She had been fascinated by his attention, though, aware of his eyes on her back, and would open her compact inside her purse to check how well her makeup concealed her acne. She would sneak him a prim smile as she walked down the aisle after communion. She was careful, afraid that her mother or grandmother would notice she had a suitor; she wasn't supposed to be interested in boys.

It wasn't until she joined youth group two years later that she realized that Louis was not only popular, but a ladies' man, a drummer in a heavy metal cover band. Stephanie thought he was cute, and this made Karen look at him in a different way, notice his chocolate eyes, firm biceps, and the way he said, "Hey," like he was about to tell her a secret, touching the inside of her arm. She had always been like this, seeing a guy who liked her as unattractive until someone else pointed him out as good-looking.

Alexa rapped on the glass pane of the office door with her blood red Lee press-on nails. The clicks echoed through the tiny room like dog claws on ceramic tiles. She swooshed in, baggy nylon sweatpants dusting the floor, her body lost in an oversize LA Lakers jersey. At her weigh in that morning she had been ninety-eight pounds, three pounds more than when she moved in. She had beautiful hair for someone who did everything she could to avoid nourishment. It was dyed vampire black and hung down to the base of her spine. She wore cigarette burns on the insides of her arms, glazed pink sores that made Karen's skin crawl. Alexa's threshold of pain equaled that of a firewalker or those S&M people she'd read about, their genitalia speared and pulled by chains. She

was the kind of girl who could make you lose ten years of your life over the course of one shift.

"I decided on a tattoo," Alexa said, exposing her yellow teeth. She held out a magazine and pointed to an elaborate rose with huge thorns and drops of blood trailing away from them.

"How fitting," Karen said. "I think it would be cool if you, like, added a skull and crossbones in the background," and Alexa considered this for a moment, then shot her a whimsical look.

"I'm just kidding," Karen said, and Alexa's lips touched, catlike, pleased. "Where are you gonna put it?"

Alexa dropped her finger down her V-neck, pointing to the middle of her small right breast. "Or my ankle. That would be much more painful, right on the bone," she said, arranging her pills in her palm.

"So, how's your boyfriend?" Alexa asked.

"He's fine. He's on the road right now. He's a musician, you know." Karen had the odd sensation that Alexa was trying to get her to reveal personal details so she could use them against her later. Karen knew her biggest problem was that she had a secret desire to be the favorite staff member. Every student council election she had ever run for, she had lost, but now she could be the crazy people's president.

"Do you miss him?"

"Of course." Karen pretended to concentrate on the med sheets, initialing each one with a sweeping *K*, though her throat tightened, blocking out the tears. She wished she didn't miss him. Ted had left her to follow the band Phish on their winter tour, even

though they had planned to finally get an apartment together. This friend Eric Starchild drove up in his blue VW bus with a sheet of acid and a didgeridoo, and Ted just took off.

"Looks like you'll need a refill on the Zoloft next week," Karen said.

"Oh, goodie. That's the one that makes everything smell like chocolate."

Alexa was in a good mood, and Karen would note this in the daily log. But she was always high now that her Clonopin dosage had been kicked up two weeks ago after her "suicidal ideation." This was different than a suicide attempt; it was just having the idea to do it, but to Karen it made no difference. Wanting to kill oneself was as bad as doing it in her book because she had no way of knowing who could actually go through with it.

It had all started when Alexa, over a cup of coffee and a Newport, admitted that she had had unprotected sex with the brother of a resident, a heroin addict currently on methadone. Poor decision making skills were the hallmark of Borderline Personality Disorder. Karen was about to suggest a pregnancy test, when Alexa pulled a plastic supermarket bag out of her pocket and said she was going into her room to kill herself. Karen thought Alexa was joking until she heard her dragging the dresser in front of the bedroom door. Karen stood there listening to the bottles of cheap perfume clink together. She realized she was holding the portable staff phone as if it were a gun. She dialed on-call and heard it speed dial and waited for the call back.

"People care about you. You're going through a hard time right now. Let's have a cigarette and talk about it," Karen said.

"Fuck you. You're all so full of shit!"

"Do you wanna go to The Grind and talk?" Karen tried to recall those de-

escalation techniques she learned in training, but her head felt like it was slowly being filled with helium. The phone rang and Karen whispered, "*We're out of toilet paper,*" the code for suicide.

"They're gonna put you back into the hospital," she said. "That's the reality. And we'd miss you very much." Karen wrung her hands to keep them from shaking.

By the time Elsa arrived eight minutes later, Alexa had surrendered the plastic bag and they were smoking at the dinning room table watching reruns of Beevis and Butthead. Alexa even laughed for a second as Beevis sputtered "Fire Fire, hehehehe." Karen listened to sneakers thump around in the dryer in the kitchen; they sounded like her heart. She had secretly hoped that Alexa would be carted up to the hospital for a few days, to show her they meant business, and to give everyone a break. Sometimes after she'd been a prisoner of the house for an overnight shift, Karen wished they'd all kill themselves, a mass suicide on Elsa's shift, and she'd be forced to return to restaurant work where she belonged. Yet, her biggest fear was that someone would die on her shift. And sometimes there was no indication that someone was going to snap, like an epileptic going into a seizure. All you could do was move sharp objects, secure their tongues, cradle their heads and watch.

She'd been all gung-ho when she first started three years earlier, like she could help fix people. But she realized there were no miraculous recoveries in revival tents, just the drudgery of waking, meals, meds. She knew she did make a small difference, like teaching Tim how to heat up canned soup. Sometimes she tried to imagine that they were all just a strange group of friends when they went out for ice cream and a drive around the lake, savoring the sunset and soft serve. But, the fact that she took care of people, yet

when she went home, no one took care of her, always left her feeling drained and resentful.

They went on a rec outing to the Salvation Army on Route 13 every Wednesday night to riffle through the discarded clothing and housewares for occasional jewels. Tim sat in the van, while Kathy stood outside smoking cigarettes, occasionally pressing her face to the glass. Frank, Maureen, and Alexa completed slow laps around the empty store as country music simplified love through the ceiling speakers.

Alexa reminded Karen of a shoplifter, specifically her friend Stephanie, who had pilfered her way through adolescence, the way she walked in a grid around the store, pausing in blind spots, checking labels, and considering the items for what seemed not quite long enough before placing them under her arm. Alexa's black head ducked into the jeans aisle and Karen followed her to the register. Alexa pulled two crumpled dollars out of her pocket, and gave them to the cashier, her hands shaking from her medication.

The van stalled twice, but Karen knew how to graze the gas pedal to make it catch and roar to life. She was proud of the way she handled the monster; if she ever made a list of her good points, this would be near the top. She drove to Burger King, the only fast food place that still allowed smoking. She knew she'd be the favorite staff member today for taking them there. The place was empty except for an old couple sitting in the corner, hunched over their burgers. Karen was full from the two helpings of mac and cheese she had for dinner but ordered a coke and small fries. She found herself eating at work for the sheer comfort of consumption. Joe and Kathy started a friendly debate over McDonalds vs. Burger King, which was better? Karen half listened, watching Alexa stir Sweet and Low into her coffee with her finger.



"You want some?" she asked Alexa, motioning toward her fries.

"They're cooked in fucking cow oil," she said, scrunching up her nose. "I'm going outside to smoke." Karen knew it was nothing personal. Alexa loved the cold. She knew she shouldn't have offered her food, but she refused to believe that Alexa couldn't be broken. She wanted to grab her, shake her, and scream, "Cut the shit! You're not fat and nobody feels sorry for you!" The control Alexa exhibited over this aspect of her life maddened Karen, and made her recall own issues with eating in college, how she once counted every calorie, skipping breakfast and lunch, keeping herself full on coffee and soda, and working out at the gym two hours every night. Until it dawned on her that she would never be thin, and would have to be happy being 140 pounds.

"So have you heard from Asshole?" Elsa asked her, dropping her backpack on the floor and hanging her yellow North Face parka on the back of the chair. She always referred to Ted as Asshole, or Fuckhead, or Loser Boy.

"Not since his last message, three weeks ago," Karen said.

"You're giving him permission to fuck your mind," Elsa said, her finger at her temple like a pistol. She enjoyed giving her co-workers advice on their personal lives, and Karen couldn't resist her butch sincerity, the way she always took her side and told her what to feel and do.

"I guess I can't trust him to be here for me," she said. "Sometimes I wish I were like one of those hippie girls who just kind of float around, free as little birds."

Elsa beat her palm into her forehead several times, then brushed her hand through her short mullet.

"I know, I know. I'm an idiot."

"Next time he calls, tell him to get a fucking job."

"I will," she said. But she knew she wouldn't.

The cold air cleared her head as she sloshed alongside the dirty mounds of snow. The reality was that her first crush was getting married and not to her, and she wasn't quite sure why this bothered her so much. Maybe it was that Louis would never look her up, call her and say *I can't believe I lost you. I've loved you all along*. It was a fantasy she applied to all her ex-boyfriends, regardless of whether they deserved it. The realization that she was not "the one" for Louis, or any man for that matter, slipped like the wind chill through the fabric of her peacoat, sweatshirt, and long johns all the way to her heart. She hated being single in the winter.

Karen dug her hand into her purse, feeling around for the beeper. When she was promoted to Rehab Counselor, she was required to take two nights of on-call. Karen was nervous about having this beeper, so she had it only when Elsa worked. Elsa had worked at the home for ten years, and Karen thought she would never call her for backup, even if she needed it. She cleaned the house like a hurricane, watched sports, cooked beef stew, and didn't take any crap. She had quit drinking when she was twenty-two, which Karen thought was too young to quit anything, and she wondered how bad of an alcoholic she had really been. Elsa sometimes beeped Karen just to say hello. She used to do it in the morning when she had been snuggling with Ted, so when Karen called in, she could say, "Put down the dick and get to work." This kind of creeped Karen out, though she liked being viewed as a sexual creature, even if by a lesbian.

Standing in her warm kitchen, she remembered the way Ted always had to duck his head to fit through the six-foot doorframe and how this gesture was somehow so endearing. She loved the way he walked, slightly stooped forward as if he was carrying a child on his shoulders. She wanted to know his burden, feel it press on her own flesh, and thought that this was what love was about: communal pain. He was the type of boyfriend whose benefits eluded one's friends, but how could she explain the way he kissed her, his whole face achieving that fuzzy look? How she felt like she had tamed something wild, or pried open an exotic flower, as evidenced by the curious looks they got as they walked down the street together.

He didn't have a car, eat red meat or wear leather. She was a sucker for brilliance, liked to watch his green eyes flicker as they half focused on an object in the distance, his mind somewhere else.

"I really don't like myself very much," he admitted once as they ate Chinese food out of boxes, dipping his chopsticks as if he were searching for truth. This was the way they revealed themselves to each other, in small bites, in tangled strands of lo mein. They sat cross legged on the floor in front of the coffee table littered with candles, fortune cookies, duck sauce. He pulled out a shrimp, holding the pink curl in the air, making it dance and say, "I thought you'd never find me."

She had envied the way he could just drift from place to place, like a piece of wood in the ocean. She was a perfectly reasonable girlfriend and believed a certain amount of freedom was healthy, but after dating for two years, she realized he would never settle down. She had hid him from her parents. She could just hear her mother. "Now Ted, you should go back to college, become a music teacher, put all that talent to

good use."

Three Saranac Pale Ales hung out in her refrigerator, along with an assortment of fancy cheeses, bag of organic coffee, jar of pesto, and a package of stale pita bread. She started to keep a six pack of beer on hand since Ted left. It was good to be prepared for the occasional late night guest she brought home from the bar.

Karen opened a beer and waited for the Internet to dial up. Her computer was so fucking slow. She stripped out of her clothes and clicked around until she found the photo: Louis and Gina in their wedding best. When she looked closer, she realized Louis had a slight five o'clock shadow completely surrounding his mouth. His face looked the same, though slightly fuller, and he wore a cheesy diamond earring in his left ear. Gina wasn't hideous, but her hair was pulled back in a bun with a couple stupid looking tendrils hanging around her ears like ribbons on a present. Her long nose made her cheeks look like they were caving in on it.

She was glad they had both got voted off. They deserved it, deserved each other. Sure, she watched Reality TV shows like *Bob Billionaire*, *American Pop Star*, and *The Single Guy* sometimes alone in her apartment or during TV time at the home. She looked forward to these shows all day, wondering who would reveal his or her true colors, who would snap. She wondered how they sucked in otherwise fairly intelligent people like herself. Maybe everyone's secret wish was to be a star, to have the camera focused on his or her life for once. Maybe she enjoyed other people's desperation, their narcissistic desire to expose themselves on national TV, when all they really wanted was a date, or love, or someone to think they're beautiful. She loved to hate them, catalog their faults,

vote them off, and hope the show would be a constant reminder to them of how low they would sink for their own egos. It was exactly something that Louis would do. He wanted every woman to see what she was missing.

She remembered when Louis had convinced her to go to the Webb Field Fair. She had schemed to get out of the house, then scouted his whereabouts from the safety of the Ferris Wheel, walking the grass path around the games until she ran into him. When he offered her a ride home, she felt like she had won a big blue hound. As they leaned against the Mazda 626 in her parent's driveway, he kissed her. When she opened her eyes, she noticed the lights on in her house and the cars in the driveway. Her parents were entertaining company just a few feet away. This thrilled her. She kissed him hard, and within seconds, his hand unzipped her shorts and his, and he brazenly fingered her, moaning under his breath.

Later, locked inside her bathroom, she actually wondered if she was still a virgin as she stared at the film in her underwear, searching for traces of blood. It was so dark, so hard, it could have been real, she believed for those few moments, her heart still racing, guilty, scared, triumphant.

Karen printed out the wedding photo of Louis and Gina and propped it up against her lamp. She decided to go downtown for just one drink. She searched through some dirty jeans, finding a twenty-dollar bill. She was vaguely aware that she drank too much, but all her friends drank more than she did. She stared in the bathroom mirror, hating her bangs, the way they made her face look chubby and childish. She grabbed her scissors and trimmed them, trying to imitate the jagged fashionable way her hairdresser did it. She

washed the slivers down the sink, then fluffed them, realizing she cut them way too short. Why couldn't she ever leave well enough alone? She gelled them into five spikes pointing at her face and sighed. What a freak.

Her friends were sitting at one of the big round tables at the front of the bar; most of them had been there since happy hour, and they were loud and loaded, the table littered with two overflowing ashtrays, high ball glasses, and beer bottles.

"Hey it's Florence Nightingale," CJ shouted.

His girlfriend, Fran the baker, said, "We missed you, honey," and ordered Karen a Cabernet from the barmaid. Light filtered through the stained glass chandeliers, giving the bar the soft glow of a small chapel. Everyone seemed to be talking at once. *We can't depend on the city to support the arts- look what they did to the downtown Arts collective. It's that cokehead we have for mayor....You'll never believe what my daughter called me from Florida to tell me. Ma, I got my hood pierced. I said, now Emily, why on earth would you feel the need to tell me that?*

She stared over at the bar, to the seat near the wall where Ted used to sit sipping his Guinness. Nobody really knew him like she did. Why wasn't she important enough to keep him here? She didn't know. She was the kind of girl men left, maybe because they thought she ought to do better, or that she might motivate them to be better men, and that scared them. No one wanted to marry her, and it used to be she didn't care. But as she looked around her, the people paired off like animals on Noah's ark, she felt like an alien species, one that a mate had not yet been designed for.

Ted had tried to convince her of the benefits of an open relationship as they sat in

her car the week before he left. How they both had so much love to give the world, it would be selfish to keep it in a box. Love was all around them like the air.

"Maybe you should write a song about it," she told him. He just smiled and said nothing.

The realization that she wouldn't take him back caused her to sway a little as she got out of her chair. Fuck him, she thought and sauntered over to the bar, working it. Her stomach hung out from underneath her T-shirt, just a little baby fat, a slight pooch. Darts flew past her head like small missiles with a whoosh and thump. Two of the cooks from the tapas bar stared at her as she shimmied into an empty spot next to a gray haired man wearing khakis who looked like a shorter version of Richard Gere. She had talked to him before at happy hour, but couldn't remember his name.

"Karen," he said. "Good to see you."

"How have you been?" she said, maintaining eye contact. Some guys were freaked out by this, by her, she was too serious, too much for them. But he stared right back. Maybe she needed an older man.

"Oh, all right. I'm, well, slowly coming back to life. It's been a hard year," he said, and she felt she should know what he was talking about, but didn't. As the bartender filled her glass, Richard Gere pulled a twenty out of his wallet and pointed to her drink. She liked it when men bought her drinks. It was the least they could do, really. She said thanks and clinked her glass with his. Holding a glass of wine made her feel sophisticated, and she tried not to chug it.

"So, do you still work at the home?" She nodded, but couldn't recall what she had told him about her job. "That's remarkable work you do. I'm glad there are people like

you in this world."

She blushed, waving the compliment away. "Last week, a woman tried to cook the television on the stove in the middle of the night. Luckily we turn the breaker off. Gives new meaning to TV dinner," she said, and he laughed a little longer than necessary. She thought about asking about his job, but instead removed a cigarette from her purse, then checked her beeper. "We have to carry these things," she explained.

"Well, I'm trying to get joint custody of my thirteen year old. My ex wants to take him to Hawaii, and I just can't let her do that." She pictured his son standing on a beach with a surfboard and forgetting about his lonely old dad. She could feel him closing in on her, her back against the bar, his body almost touching hers.

"Excuse me, she promised me a dance," Fran said and pulled her toward the jukebox. Karen looked back, and gave Richard Gere a helpless wave, but he was staring at his beer.

"Thanks," Karen whispered in her friend's ear, feeling her soft hair brush her lips. She danced with the small group, everyone exaggerating their kooky dance moves, fingers pointing, fists punching the air, arms twisting like snake charmers. She noticed the cooks dancing on the outskirts of the circle in their checkered pants, Whitey with hair the color of creamsicles, sneaking her looks.

She had had her eye on Whitey for some time. His real name was Chuck, but nobody called him that. He was the bass player in a local punk band, the JuJu Heads. He sat down and motioned her over to his table. She pointed to herself and he nodded. He ordered her a shot.

"So what did you cook tonight?" she asked.



"Ummm, lots of stuff," he mumbled. "Toasted goat cheese, asparagus in lemon butter cream sauce, blackened Mahi Mahi..."

"Yum," she said, interrupting him. "I have a recipe for goat cheese and asparagus crepes." She brushed her leg against his under the table. He was thin and lanky like a sixteen-year-old boy. She thought about cooking elaborate meals with him, tasting each other's food, reading the Sunday *New York Times* in bed, going to his gigs, standing in the front, Mrs. Whitey. What was his last name? She'd have to find out. What was his sign? He seemed like a Cancer. Yes, a Cancer would do nicely, she thought.

They sat in the stairwell of the apartment building next door, beyond the fourth floor apartments, huddled against the attic door. Whitey didn't live there but had somehow known that the door wouldn't be locked. He smelled like roasted garlic and veal stock. She was getting used to his style of kissing, the way he chewed at her lips as if they were slices of filet mignon. It reminded her of the way Louis kissed, and how she never quite became his girlfriend, only lived for rides home, anticipating his whereabouts with lusty sonar. She wondered why he never called her, why they never went to the movies, to the prom. She figured she wasn't pretty enough, or bad enough, or maybe he was scared of her mother.

The tight space of the stairwell and Whitey's lanky arm around her shoulder made her want to expose herself, make him laugh, make him think she was the coolest girl he'd ever met.

"A guy I liked in high school was on a Reality TV show. Can you believe that shit?" she asked, draping her legs across his lap.

"I'm the type of person who doesn't watch TV. I have a bumper sticker on my car, *Kill Your Television*." He clutched her fingers awkwardly, staring out the tiny porthole window at the snow that had started to fall. "My ex, Brandy, she's a raving lunatic. She's the lead singer of Destination Uranus? She's got an awesome voice," he said a little too wistfully. "I'm the type of person who doesn't trust most people. I think for the most part, people suck."

Did he really think that? She didn't like guys telling her what type of people they were, but maybe he was just up front. He was cute, but his face looked almost albino under the exposed light bulb. He chattered on, comparing his band's music to their classic punk influences, and she was only vaguely aware of the bands he mentioned. Didn't he want to know anything about her?

He must have sensed her impatience because he leaned over, bumping his nose with hers, and kissed her again. She closed her eyes, and concentrated on following the course of his tongue.

The beeper sounded like an alarm inside her purse, and it took her a full moment to realize what it was. It echoed through stairwell with the urgency of a fire alarm in a nursing home. She fiddled with it for a few seconds before she found the switch to quiet it.

"I have to make a phone call," she said, pissed at Elsa. But she couldn't think. Where was she going to find a phone? The bar was too loud. No, not the bar. A pay phone. Or she could go home and call. She could tell Elsa she was out on a walk when she beeped her. Her head was muddy, like there was a pop song playing over her thoughts, and she could only hear the melody.

"I'll be right back," she told Whitey, taking the steps two at a time. On the street, she heard a man say "Karen" and turned to look, embarrassed at being the wrong one.

She walked swiftly, her heels sliding on the ice. She spotted a phone in front of the gas station, but there was a cop car idling next to it. Not here, she thought. She could make it home. Two more blocks. She settled into a long stride, letting the ice carry her, skating. She thought about Burger King that night, how she went to sit outside. Alexa had said, "Imagine all the different ways you can die. Like disease, murder, accidents, suicide."

"Why are you so obsessed with death?" Karen asked, feelers activated.

"I don't know why people make such a big deal about it, cause like it's gonna happen one way or another, you know? Think about it, death by snakebite. Death by injection. Death by flying lamb chop. It happened once at the Rosebud when the oven exploded."

"Did you hear about the preacher who claimed he could walk on water, then drowned in front of his whole congregation?" Karen asked. Alexa's eyes widened.

"You know, in Enfield? Last Fourth of July? These two kids were having a contest to see who could hold a lit firework in his mouth the longest. The winner died."

"I read that a couple of terrorists bit it when their bomb exploded on the way to their destination. It was daylight savings and they forgot to turn their clocks ahead."

"Now that's stupid," Alexa said, and they both laughed, hugging their bodies in the cold. Karen guessed it would be nice to choose your own death. If only you could check off a box and leave it in your mailbox. Heart attack, stroke, poison, bullet. Was that really too much to ask?

One more block. Everything's fine. She needed to think good thoughts. The houses lining the road looked like dollhouses with their scalloped trims. She liked this neighborhood. It was homey. While looking at the houses, she suddenly hated Whitey. She wondered if he was still sitting in the stairwell, alone. His ex-girlfriend was in a band. Big fucking deal. She'd have to avoid him, though she'd be nice about it. She was always nice about it.

When she got to her house, she looked up to the single light burning in her bedroom window, the way it illuminated the quilt hanging on her wall. It looked warm and safe up there, and she wished she were in her bed. She removed her glove and lit a cigarette and it seemed to warm her up. She noticed her blotchy fingers and kept on walking. A Honda with tinted windows and kickers boomed past her, and when it peeled around the corner, the sound startled her.

As she approached the group home from Court Street, she noticed the snow colored blue and red, as if doused with food coloring. She hugged the side of the garage, a separate building at the rear of the house, and hid in its long shadow. She saw a few neighbors across the street, standing on their porches in their bathrobes, and she wanted to shout at them, "Go back inside! This isn't your life!" Then she heard Elsa's gruff voice, though she couldn't make out what she was saying. She imagined Elsa with her sweatshirt sleeves pushed up to her elbows. She felt her senses open up, like she could detect the soft cries of a young girl, the crackle of a walkie-talkie. She saw the nose of the ambulance and heard the back doors slam. She wished she could slip into the vehicle unnoticed, hold Alexia's small hand, and tell her about the Muslim bride who choked on

the ceremonial honey and died. The ambulance slid through the stop sign, the sirens slicing through her eardrums then fading, quiet like the snow in the night.

## BIRDS

At the red light on North Broadway, my mother popped in the tape. On it was the latest conversation with her spiritual advisor, Roseanne, who believed that she had successfully channeled the energy of my grandmother.

Sitting in Christmas traffic, time seemed suspended in the sea of taillights outside the Westchester Mall. My mother gripped the steering wheel, her knuckles turning white, as Roseanne described Grandma as “feisty” and “strong willed.” I wanted to believe that it was more than a good guess, scam, or coincidence.

“She wants you to know she’s okay,” Rosanne earnestly explained in her thick New York accent, heavy on the vowels. Of course she’s okay. She’s dead, I thought, then immediately regretted it.

“Your father’s the passive one, right? I feel him too but she’s telling him to keep quiet,” Roseanne said, and I detected my mother laughing in the background. I was definitely intrigued. I just didn’t understand how an outsider could know.

My mother has gone to psychic fairs once a year for as long as I can remember, but this year I noticed that things had gotten more serious. My grandmother had been dead for nine years, and my mother seemed more and more desperate to communicate with her. This was what happened, I supposed, when the one person who loved you unconditionally, who made you, was no longer around to give you that affirmation.

Grandma has visited my mother as a bird on several occasions, even though my mother fears birds, and has come to both my mother and my sister in their dreams. My mother’s fear of birds is of phobic proportions, one that my grandmother knew well, for it

started when she was three years old. Her father and uncle had killed a pheasant, which they carried inside the house by its feet, its bloody wings spread open like an umbrella. It was the scariest thing she'd ever seen, and in her nightmares, the bloody bird chased after her.

But still, I wondered why Grandma didn't visit me. Was it because she could now see me clearly, and she doesn't approve of my life, married and childless? Maybe she knows there were times I had wished she would die? For my mother's sake, so she could have finally have a life? To wish a person dead must be some sort of special sin, especially because I wished it as a child, when Grandma was strong, sane, and healthy. For the fifteen years she had lived with us, my mother was a dog on an invisible chain, one with sent electrical shocks the minute she strayed too far. The only thing it seemed my mother was allowed to do was work. Grandma wasn't happy sitting home, as I thought most grandmothers should be.

As a child, I secretly yearned for a homemade mother and a normal grandmother. "Homemade" mothers were housewives; they baked cookies and ran the school bake sales, were Girl Scout Troop Leaders, picked up their kids from school and soccer practice and ballet, and spent the day shopping and making chicken for dinner. They also sewed costumes for Halloween, so their kids wouldn't have to wear generic plastic facemasks of princesses that came in a box with those awful vinyl smocks. "Normal" grandmothers had gray hair, were soft spoken, knitted in rocking chairs, and baked banana bread. They also lived on farms.

I also wished I was one of four or five kids, like the McTigues or the O'Connors, who always had someone to play with and blended into the crowd. Along with this, I

desired long, wavy blond hair, the kind that looked good in barrettes and ponytails, and I would walk down the hallway of Our Lady of Fatima school with my eyes clenched shut, dragging my fingertips along the pea colored cinderblock walls, wishing for a true miracle to overcome my physical being. When I got to the girl's bathroom, for a second before opening my eyes in front of the old mirror, I believed that this walk had transformed me into a beautiful person, which is what I had determined, by age eight, was necessary for my happiness. Why should only children in Portugal experience miracles? I did not think that my wish was selfish, or believe my mother when she got fed up and said I was lucky not to be born crippled or deformed like some poor children. No one ever referred to me as cute, or pretty, and I was acutely aware of this, of my dirt colored flyaway hair, of my frog eyes. I thought all that mattered was faith, which I had then, as children do in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, leprechauns and the man on the moon.

Although it wasn't meatloaf and potatoes, Grandma did cook strangely delicious creations she called "spidina" and "sheshedah" made from such things as cauliflower, veal and breadcrumbs, or chickpeas. I remember wonderful smells coming from upstairs, and one in particular, like fried dough at a carnival, I could immediately identify as cauliflower patties, similar to potato pancakes in size but lighter and fluffier, and I ate them by the dozen while watching cartoons.

Grandma had a stiff dome of jet black hair, cursed regularly, her favorite expression "sunofabich," and argued about prices in stores in a loud voice; she thought if she made enough of a fuss, she could get things cheaper. She and my mother fought like



dogs, my mother screaming at the top of her lungs, and my grandmother shouting back in Italian, my mother's bark sharper, like a terrier or a poodle, and my grandmother a gruffer German Shepherd. I always listened to the fights, though only understanding my mother's side, which usually concerned my grandmother caught in a lie or cramping my mother's style, or things that now seem so trivial. As my mother screamed, the vein on the side of her forehead bulged like a purple worm. Sometimes I would feel sorry for my grandmother, when she would finally give up, throw up her hands and say, "Ah, how she treats me, her own mother." Other times, I felt sorry for my mother because I literally thought she would explode, like Yosemite Sam in his own dynamite.

\* \* \*

We credited my Aunt Alice with the brilliant solution to my grandmother's boredom: Atlantic City. Grandma had sold her dress factory when she was in her early seventies, and moved in with us, where she complained that all there was to do was "look at the trees." She started going every Friday to try to turn her monthly social security check into a jackpot. Thursday nights, she would ask me to set her alarm for her. We'd hear her above us at six in the morning, pacing in her thick heels. My father joked that the only time she got up so early was when it was time to gamble, and he told her to keep her shoes off until it was time to leave. On our way to school, we dropped her at the bus stop in the Pathmark strip center. As she said goodbye, she always told us to pray that she hit the "jackpot." This jackpot is what she had been working her whole life for, the real American dream: a belief in luck, in winning big. It was what kept her active so late in

life, what made her look forward to waking up after my grandfather died. She even sent money to an orphanage in Italy named after St. Anthony, her favorite saint. She believed someone up there was pulling for her.

She would never admit to winning much, but regardless, my sister and I hit her up for quarters after every trip. I remember one time my sister and I went upstairs to beg for money. I had my eye on a pair of bubble gum pink Reebok high tops, and since I already had a pair of perfectly good sneakers, I had to save the money to buy them myself. We had already tried when we picked her up at the bus stop, and she proclaimed that she had lost. But we didn't believe her; she always had money. I made my sister do the talking.

"Grandma, can we have some quarters please?" she asked.

"But I don't got any. If I had it, I'd give it to you, *joya mia*," Grandma said, holding out her empty hands as proof.

"Grandma, please," my sister whined.

"Go ask your mother for money," Grandma suggested, focusing her attention back to her soap opera.

"We did and she won't give us any," Sis said.

"Next time I win, I give you some," she said, and we slunk downstairs like the rats we were, only nice and loving grandkids when we wanted something. Ten minutes later, we heard her calling us and we knew from the tone of her voice that we had successfully beat her at her own game: guilt. Somehow, miraculously, she had found a couple rolls of quarters in her purse. We would have gone through her purse ourselves, but she always had it carefully guarded on the doorknob behind her chair.

When I was around nine, mother hissed, “Watch her!” when we were in the Rite Aid pharmacy, as Grandma disappeared down the makeup aisle. This was the first time I was fully aware that Grandma was a kleptomaniac. She always came home with a pocketbook full of trinkets from Atlantic City, things she said she bought on the boardwalk: elastic necklaces, jelly bracelets, t-shirts with beaded fringes, key chains and rainbow shoelaces. I assumed she had payed for them, as any normal grandmother would do. I realized that my first pair of dangly earrings, three little gold streamers with a fake garnet at the end of each one, among everything else, was probably “hot.” I was mildly conflicted. I knew my ten commandments, and was tempted not to accept future gifts on principle, but knew that that would just hurt Grandma’s feelings. I also knew by accepting the gifts, I could possibly go to hell if I died in my sleep. I figured that the gifts were an act of love and reasoned that I could not be punished for her sin. The truth was I adored those trinkets; having cool stuff like fluorescent lace headbands increased my social status among the girls at school. I think Grandma knew I needed all the help I could get.

\* \* \*

When I was old enough to realize that other kids had siblings and I did not, I wished for a baby sister. There were countless opportunities to make wishes, and one just had to be aware of them and use them wisely. For example, when you blew out birthday candles, or a dandelion that had gone to seed, or when you found an eyelash, or threw

pennies in a fountain. I would spend hours in the grass searching through a patch of clovers for a four leaf one.

The fountain at Bear Mountain where I wished for her lay at the bottom of a real waterfall, complete with orange and red goldfish, so I knew it was “the one.” Soon after, my mother started going to see a doctor in the city because she thought she was pregnant. The doctor suspected a tubal pregnancy because the tests were coming out positive, but they couldn’t detect any sign of the fetus on the sonogram. He advised my mother to abort, for the developing embryo, if stuck in the fallopian tube, would cause the tube to rupture and possibly her death. My mother had accepted that her fate was to have one child. Then my grandmother had a dream. The baby would be okay, and she should not abort. Grandma was convinced of this, and aware of the danger my mother was in, and would never gamble the life of her own child. My mother told her doctor she would take her chances. She was put on watch, and went each week into the city for tests. After four weeks, my sister appeared on the sonogram.

I think because my grandmother took responsibility for my sister so early on, and is in essence, the reason she exists, is the reason why she has always been her favorite. She had the curly blond hair I had so desired, and the face of a cherub, her cheeks like a ripe peach. I remember in fits of jealousy, wanting to cut off these very curls. It was easy to love her though; she was just that sweet.

Grandma was always trying to get me to gain weight, reminding me that I was too skinny, and that this “didn’t look nice.” The little dresses she sewed always made me look bony and frail, and she knew this, and believed one day I would come into my own. She loved to say, “When I was young, I was so beautiful, the birds used to drop dead

from the trees.” I was skeptical, though I hadn’t seen any pictures of her when she was very young. I imagined blackbirds, because they seemed to suit her personality, and watched them pause, as if they’d been shot, before spiraling to the ground. From a distance they looked like black snowflakes, and as I got closer, the trees rained avocados. Then I could make out the feathers, and finally, the birds lying stiff at Grandma’s feet. I was enthralled with the concept that beauty, like God, could command nature, that birds could drop dead from trees.

\* \* \*

I went to Christmas mass with mother last year because she asked me to, and it was the least I could do. Afterwards, we got biscotti and coffee from the bakery, and drove over to Gate of Heaven, eating half the box. The tradition was to bring Grandma and Grandpa a wreath to hang on their rectangle of wall. There were cars lined up along the mausoleums as we snaked down the skinny roads, and I noticed a few hearty geese near the pond, though nothing like in the summers, when we used to bring bags of stale bread to feed them. It was too cold to be wearing dresses, and our heels sunk into the layer of packed snow.

“Hi Mom, hi Daddy,” my mother said. My sister and I kissed our fingers, then touched them to their names. Mom struggled to hang the wreath with wire.

“Looks like your Uncle Joe’s been here,” she said, pointing to the bushy poinsettia. Most of the rectangles were covered with wreathes, and miniature Christmas trees, holly bushes and poinsettias sat in plant holders in the walkway. It always amazed

me how people taped Christmas cards to the graves, signed and dated, with messages like “we miss and love you,” as if the dead could read them. Even my mother thought the cards went a bit too far. I wanted to feel Grandma’s presence, but I knew if she were anywhere, it wouldn’t be here. We fidgeted, watching our breath, until my mother’s lower lip quivered, and she said, as always, “Come on. Let’s go.”

\* \* \*

When she kissed you, it was as if she took a bite out of your face. Grandma sandwiched your cheeks between her big hands, holding you in place, as she planted one with a loud smack. But as physically and emotionally overpowering her love was, so equaled the void when she withheld it from you. Grandma could hold a grudge; no one was immune, and you never knew when you would be next. My mother aptly called it “being in the doghouse.”

I remember times when she wouldn’t talk to me for a whole week. I may have not brought the ironing downstairs for her, not answered when she called me, or said something fresh. Whatever it was, it would be a small, deep incision, and there was only one way to stitch it up: an elaborate apology (the more tears, the better). My sister could only do without love for a couple of hours, but between my grandmother and me, it was a battle of wills. If she wanted to give me the silent treatment, I could give it right back. It was difficult, though. No snacks. No presents. No asking for money, or asking her to lower the hem on my uniform, or to drive me to the pool. I knew what it was to become completely invisible. I would always be the first one to break, at my mother’s prodding,

and I wound up kissing her in her chair, telling her that I loved her. What I remember the most was the feeling of relief, like a dark veil was lifted. It was like emerging from the confessional: a halo of light, a new beginning. Maybe this is what I need to do to see her again; let go of my adamant agnosticism, to open my mind like a lotus, and let her in.

My mother claimed that my grandmother moved the Ouija onto winning lottery numbers. She won five hundred dollars, and if she had boxed it, would have won ten thousand. My sister got in a car accident, hit head on by a school bus, yet survived without a scratch. That night, she dreamt about grandma. She was on the beach and had lost her car keys, and grandma had waded into the water to get them. I could see her thick legs, braving the waves as if they were nothing, knowing exactly where to find them.

A bird walked into and out of my mother's garage, which was another manifestation of my grandmother's spirit. "It didn't fly. It strutted," Mom said, jutting her head back and forth.

Once a bird flew around the supermarket as we were shopping. The ceilings were high, but Mom still freaked. She had this thing she did when a bird got too close. She said, Ooooooh,Ooooooh, and lifted arm to her forehead. The cat caught a bird every once in a while, leaving it on our doorstep like UPS. I remember once, my father picked up a dead sparrow and brought it in the house in newspaper, making like he was going to chase her with it.

"Get that dirty thing out of my house!" she screamed, locking herself in the bathroom.

"But it's dead, Mom. It can't hurt you," we cried.

“Did he get rid of it?” she asked through the door, while Dad smiled behind us with the bird.

“Yeah, it’s gone!” we lied. We thought this was hilarious.

She peeked out. “Ahhhhh!Ooooooh,Ooooooh!”

“Ok, that’s enough,” Dad said, and he took the bird outside, threw it in the garbage.

Why would my grandmother come to my mother as a creature she feared and hated? Maybe she is helping my mother to finally get over it, or maybe we just don’t have a choice about what we come back as.

My mother always called me “the doubting Thomas,” because as I got older, I began to require proof for everything. I started thinking that everything I was ever taught about religion was just a good story. I stopped going to church. I ventured far from home to go away to college, then moved halfway across the country. I rationalize that this is why I don’t see her, because her spirit hovers around New York City, that she would have never been happy out West. Or maybe my life isn’t enough drama for her. Maybe she thinks I’m boring. Maybe she thinks I don’t need her help.

The only time I saw her was a couple months after her death, in that house among the trees where I had grown up. I had driven down from college, and as I walked up toward the house, I saw a shadow in the window above the front door where she used to sit. The curtain moved as if someone had let it go. When I stepped inside, I called out her name, forgetting she had died.

Now, the only things I have are her beautiful carved wood wing chairs, with



raised flower and leaf fabric. The chairs sit by my front window, mostly for show, but my cat seems to think they were made just for her. She likes to lounge on them, looking out at the trees, her face to the screen, waiting for me to come home.