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Nothing Stranger

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Helen Mary Stead entitled "Nothing Stranger." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Nothing Stranger

A Dissertation Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

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Helen Mary Stead

August 2016

For my Dad,
whose love of reading
helped craft my love of writing

For my Mum,
whose tenacity
showed me how to believe in a God
who performs miracles,
even when He didn't

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ABSTRACT

“Nothing Stranger” is a collection of dystopian short stories concerned with themes of motherhood and violence submitted for consideration as a creative dissertation at the University of Tennessee.

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Nothing Stranger

and the Role of Motherhood in Dystopian Fiction

1. Introduction

The purpose of this critical introduction is to situate my short story collection, *Nothing Stranger*, within a larger context of dystopian works that examine thematic roles of motherhood, reproduction and the control of reproduction in response to contemporary societal shifts in the definition of a traditional family unit, increased technology in reproduction, ectogenesis, cloning and eugenics, but also in an attempt to answer what it means to be a daughter without a mother, and a mother without a mother. *Nothing Stranger* takes its title from a repeated phrase in Elizabeth Bishop's "The Waiting Room," as the speaker in the poem first identifies herself as not only an entity that will have breasts, which horrifies and transfixes her all at once, but also that she is part of something larger, of womanhood, and of potential motherhood—this self-realization is "nothing stranger." It is this poem that I come back to again and again after I have

written a story, in an attempt to make sense of it, and many times realize, in a way, I have been writing about my own mother again.

In the collection, stories like “Jim and the Egg Donation,” “It’s Time to Fix the Porch” and “Notes to Self About Writing,” directly explore who controls reproduction—a question that would have been relatively straightforward 30 years ago, now becomes more complex as reproductive practices as In Vitro Fertilization, surrogacy and terminations are normalized, scientists have the ability to manipulate genes and clone human embryos, and the not-to-far-off technology of ectogenesis, or the use of an artificial womb, is tangible. In “Jim and the Egg Donation,” Jim and Marcy are waiting to be financially stable to start their family, and in the meantime, Marcy is disappointed with Jim quitting his apprenticeship as a high-end furniture carpenter and working in construction, so she sells some of her eggs in an attempt to get back at him, and make some money in the meantime. While “Jim and the Egg Donation” has an intentional use of control over reproduction, in the story “It’s Time to Fix the Porch,” Peter accidentally gets pregnant, after his wife Nancy had been wanting to get pregnant—the story observes how the couple reacts to Peter taking Nancy’s role of motherhood. In a completely different scenario, where no characters want to reproduce in “Notes to Self About Writing,” Sally tries to write past the abstraction of having an abortion and is terrified how her own Southern Baptist mother will respond to Sally explaining that she had the procedure. In “Baby Gets UTD” and “Robby Is Dead,” the stories negotiate the connection between mother and child in a broken world—how does motherhood work when sterile, “safe” practices and/or technologies are routinely used that separate mother from baby, or how can a mother disconnect enough from her son to realize he is a “bad egg”? “Leoni Remembers Her Mother” examines the transition between self and mother and the emotional repercussions of that, while “Bloody Tutu”

explores pregnancy as a way to save a marriage. Most of the stories in *Nothing Stranger*, like the narratives I will use to anchor this discussion, respond to the evolution of the role of motherhood and the encroachment of technology and societal ideologies that threaten and distort that role.

What sets dystopian and apocalyptic fiction apart is that there is some inherent social critique at play, and the role of the social critique is to attempt to understand a disordered world. Elizabeth K. Rosen in *Apocalyptic Transformation*, discusses that “the apocalyptic impulse is, in effect, a sense-making one,” as not only does it push further than conspiracy or chaos theories, but it also “is an organizing structure that can create a moral and physical order while also holding out the possibility of social criticism that might lead to a reorientation in the midst of a bewildering historical moment” (xiii). The same is true for dystopian novels, as they are especially inclined to “world building,” and allow the writer to construct a social commentary, in order to make sense of the world in which we live: for the purposes of this discussion, it is important to evaluate the role of motherhood in contemporary novels and short stories to see how they reflect the change in laws and technology available that alter the definition of what it is to be a family, a mother, a father, a child, and how do we negotiate these loose terms on the page and in real life? And what does it mean to shift responsibility of human reproduction?

2. Reproductive Agency & Control

Adrienne Rich opens *Of Woman Born*, her 1976 Feminist evaluation of motherhood, by the universal truth that “all human life on the planet is born of woman. The one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spent unfolding inside a woman’s body” (Foreword, para. 1). This book has been essential to contemporary feminist theory, especially regarding how motherhood and feminism can co-

exist—this notion that motherhood, including pregnancy, birth and beyond, should not be put into a heteronormative box, should not be controlled by a patriarchal society (Rich), and even though feminism has made progress, when it comes to reproduction, government, medicine and society still dictate what birth, recuperation and motherhood should look like. Even the semantics surrounding the beginning of motherhood are reflective of the continued controlled patriarchal system: while the word *birth* would highlight the woman as the subject of the sentence, doing the work of the verb *to birth*, *the woman births the baby*, this is not the language commonly used in America, *birth* is replaced with the medical word *delivery*, causing the woman to be relegated to an indirect object in the sentence (if in the sentence at all), *the doctor delivers the baby to/for the mother*, which strips women of the agency of birth.

A commentary on reproductive rights under patriarchal rule is most pungent in Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale*, after a post-nuclear incident, the ability to conceive is diminished in the Republic of Gilead, and women, like Offred, are forced to serve as handmaids to produce offspring for the elite. Even though it seems that sterility occurs in both sexes, it is unlawful to suggest a man is sterile (61). The men in Gilead hold sexual agency, for they can have a wife, handmaids, and prostitutes without repercussion, while women are held accountable for the loss of reproduction and are not allowed their own will or choice in the matter. The Commander does not regret the change of society, he says before, when men didn't have to earn sex, they complained of the "inability to feel. Men were turning off on sex, even" (210), but now life is better for men, and he adds that "better never means better for everyone...it always means worse, for some" (211). As a handmaid, Offred belongs to the Commander and has a tattoo on her ankle to prove it—it is "a Braille [the Commander] can read, a cattle brand. It means ownership" (254). Her choices are dismal, either she performs as expected or is sent to the

Colonies or killed, which is no choice at all. As part of the religious ceremony, Offred lays her head on the wife's (Serena Joy's) pelvis, and the wife holds Offred's hands back, while the Commander penetrates Offred. For both Serena Joy and Offred, the act is sterile, and they are clothed. Offred's dress is pulled up, and no sensual contact or enjoyment is permitted. Atwood satirically writes: "this is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty" (95). For Offred, as this transaction is perfunctory, and as she is not able to actively participate in the act, she cannot have her own agency.

The only way that Offred can acquire her own agency is to illicitly perform a sexual act outside of her "duty." Offred often releases this tension with Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, after Serena Joy sets up a one-shot insemination try with him, but Offred risks everything to go to Nick again and again on her own, because "it makes [her] feel more in control, as if there is a choice, a decision that could be made one way or another" (269). Having unlawful sex with Nick regularly solidifies to Offred that she is still her own person, who is able to have her own agency. Here Atwood addresses the idea that women desire sexual agency. When hearing about rape and murder, Offred says, "death makes me hungry. Maybe it's because I've been emptied" (281). The use of the word "emptied" like the emptying of seminal fluid, like the barrenness of the womb, shows how Offred desires to be filled. The handmaids' dress is also significant as "everything except the wings around [their faces] is red; the color of blood, which defines [them]" (8), this image of red represents menstrual blood and birth, but also associates with pain, violence and passion. Ultimately, Offred becomes pregnant at the end of the narrative but can't quite parse out her feelings because of the echoes of memory of her own child against the knowledge that she will have to relinquish the baby inside her to the Commander.

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* investigates what it means to have the freedom of reproduction taken away by a most extreme patriarchy. Dorian Cirrone, in "Millennial Mothers: Reproduction, Race, and Ethnicity in Feminist Dystopian Fiction," explains that discourses about reproduction shape us, and it is "the fear of becoming literally and figuratively imprisoned through control of the female body [that] is at the core" of *The Handmaid's Tale*. This control over of the female body is desired because of what the female body produces, and in an article she wrote for *The Guardian*, Atwood said in writing this novel, she wanted to address universal questions about procreation: "Who shall have babies, who shall claim and raise those babies, who shall be blamed if anything goes wrong with those babies?" These are the same questions I find myself trying to discover in my own fiction now, 30 years later—attempting to unravel these seemingly simple yet elusive questions about agency, control and responsibility over the beginnings of life.

Atwood's novel also addresses control of reproduction within the structure of a man-led dictatorship based on puritanical beliefs. Atwood admits she wanted to investigate what it would take to achieve a complete dictatorship because she was born during WWII and lived the result of one ("Haunted by *The Handmaid's Tale*"). Atwood achieves this discovery as the novel articulates "what would happen if [hegemonic ideological] discourses and practices were taken to extremes in the hands of patriarchal dictators" warning, perhaps of the dangerous proximity Western society is to something like this happening in the name of religion, or medicine, or disease, or terror to incite the people to lay down their rights (Cirrone 5). What is fascinating is that most of the texts examined in this introduction, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Brave New World*, and *Children of Men*, all revolve around "regulation of reproduction and mothering [which] serves [*sic*] to contain cartographical borders between populations of people" (Cirrone 5)—this

delineation works against everything we know to be true about reproduction—that no matter socio-economic status, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and age (within reason), birth can and does happen in our world. It's a universal right to procreate, to decide whether to merge our DNA with another's. This is what makes child-bearing policies, as China has, so difficult to accept, even though China recently loosened the law to a two-child policy this year, based on the “unfolding population crisis,” the government still has total control over its people's reproductive freedoms (Jiang, Armstrong and Cullinane). Envisioning worlds where reproduction is not accessible for all classes, and used as a means of control, is a perfect setting for a dystopian novel, but in real life is downright scary.

In my story “Jim and the Egg Donation,” I wanted to examine this same control over reproduction on a smaller scale, and instead of focusing on a patriarchal view, I wanted Jim's choice to be taken away from him by his wife—in a way pushing against the accepted idea that a woman should have the ultimate decision about children. Jim makes it very clear at the beginning of the story that he doesn't want Marcy to “pimp out [their] kids” by donating her eggs to be matched with “some pervert[’s],” but Marcy becomes more desperate as she sees that her imagined life with Jim isn't going to happen because he quit the job that could take him somewhere, and in his spare time, he is preoccupied with dreaming about racing his huskies in the Iditarod. At the same time, Jim begins to desire children when he notices the fullness of his friend's house because it is loud with kids playing and “love[s] seeing [Marcy] hold her stomach, all maternal-like” (9). But when he finds out that she has taken this decision and opportunity away from him by choosing to harvest her eggs without telling him, ultimately neglecting what he sees as their first-born children, “[he can't] picture Marcy's eggs without him” (18), he is so distraught that he feels sick. And when Marcy tries to console him, he cannot look at her, and

vomits. This story is an attempt to unravel what it feels like for a man to be powerless in reproduction, when the possibility of having his own potential children has been given to someone else without his consent. This is probably my closest answer to *The Handmaid's Tale*, but in contrast, in this world, the woman has full control of her body and is an agent of her own reproduction or termination and has all the power to decide when, how, where she will have offspring and with whom.

3. Motherhood Redefined and Surrogacy

Rich's *Of Woman Born*, originally written in 1976, argues that society needs to evaluate interpretations of motherhood and parenthood in a broader sense, and the technologies and social changes that came out around and after her book have only further complicated the role of motherhood, especially within increasingly broader definitions of family. Some of these include, the Roe v. Wade decision (1973), which legalized abortions up until viability of a fetus, in 1978, the first successful "test tube" baby was born (Markens 3), in the early 2000s, surrogacies rates leveled off at around 1,000 live births per year in the U.S. (4), and in June 2015, the Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples have the right to marry in all 50 states (Chappell). All of these social, medical and legal changes have altered how we conceive of families and modify the value and interpretation of motherhood and fatherhood in varying degrees. According to Rich, the definition of "to father" is to "provid[e] the sperm which fertilizes the ovum," but contrasts this to a biological mother, which "to 'mother' a child implies a continuing presence, lasting at least nine months, more often for years. Motherhood is earned, first through an intense physical and psychic rite of passage—pregnancy and childbirth—then through learning to nurture, which does not come by instinct" (Foreword, para. 4). In these definitions, Rich assumes the biological sense

of fathering, yet pushes the biological mothering definition further through to nurture, which indicates beyond birth. While this attempts to take down the patriarchal view of this lofty standard/expectation of what being a mother means, it is no longer wholly physical, and neglects the fair assessment and possibility of a bio-father also negotiating becoming a parent post-birth. What it does do is make the clear demarcation between the two sexes, as men and women have two separate, and not equal, functions in the process of reproduction, highlighted by the “intense physical and psychic rite of passage” that inescapable fact that people are born of woman, and because only women have this ability, it could be argued that the female potential to birth is sacred.

In my story, “It’s Time to Fix the Porch,” I wanted to investigate the notion of the sacred rite of women to birth, and allow a man to get pregnant. As Octavia Butler said about her story, “Bloodchild,” as being “[her] pregnant man story,” this is mine (30). Peter wasn’t trying to get himself pregnant; he didn’t even know it could happen to him. While Peter and his wife had been attempting to have a baby for a few years, they had given up on Nancy conceiving, and even looked into adoption. Part of writing this story was that I wanted to subvert all of the gender norms to evaluate how my own preconceived notions altered with the switch in sex—Peter is the one who gets pregnant, Nancy has the physical and emotional prowess in the relationship, and the doctor is a female. On the way back from the doctor’s office, Peter is trying to grapple with the fact that there is a weird alien thing in his stomach, and asks, “You in there?” and the baby “spun against his voice—as if she heard him, understood. He caressed his swollen form and cooed to her, ‘It’s okay, honey. Daddy’s here.’” This is a tender moment between Peter and the baby. It is unexpected. It is their first connection—something that wouldn’t be possible if this pregnancy was one in the traditional sense. Does this inversion have the same idea of Rich’s

“physical and psychic rite of passage” of entering motherhood? In the narrative, the doctor and Peter discuss the delivery: “Elective cesareans are popular at the moment, if you feel you can’t handle the delivery. I can book it, and you’ll know exactly when the baby’s coming” (6)—obviously Peter cannot physically birth the baby as he has the same anatomy as any human man, but the doctor presents a c-section as if it is an option, to give Peter a sense of control (and hopefully in doing so, highlights the parallel to the lack of control that women in labor have in conventional American medicine). If Peter does not have the potential to birth the baby on his own, can he have his own agency in birth? And what does it mean when a woman or man cannot birth a baby to claim the “physical and psychic rite of passage”? Lastly, Peter is nervous when he tells his wife about the pregnancy because of her fertility problems, and she responds, “You know how much I wanted one. I wanted one so bad, and you went and did it all on your own self.” Like Jim in “Jim and the Egg Donation,” Nancy feels that her innate “right” to have children has been usurped from her without her consent. She is angry that Peter got pregnant when they hadn’t discussed it. She feels that it was intentional act on his part. While this isn’t resolved at the end of the story, husband and wife begin, metaphorically, to rebuild their life together as they dismantle rotten porch steps, so they can replace the wood and make it new.

How do new social decisions and technologies impact the role of motherhood and how we write about it? Susan Markens in *Surrogate Motherhood and the Politics of Reproduction* explains “because families, and mothers in particular, are believed to play an essential role in creating and socializing future citizens, reproductive issues, practices, and policies are central to

how nations view themselves and their prospects for the future” and in America “nontraditional prospective parents” are encouraged to have children, which has diversified the interpretation of the word *family* (3). Motherhood is an even more confusing term especially when it comes to surrogacy, as the woman who carries the baby to term is not a *mother*, she is the *surrogate*, and if she does not share the same DNA as the child, she has no legal rights to the baby growing inside her (3-4). The term *mother* is reserved for the biological mother, making the surrogate merely a vessel-for-hire—this changes how we approach pregnancy and motherhood. It also affects how the nation is viewed, as pregnancy can be commodified and impersonalized, and is possibly reflective of how consumerism is fully integrated in all aspects of government and medical decisions in the U.S. Surrogacy, as a commercial service, forces the outsider to view surrogates as baby receptacles, or walking wombs, an image women have been trying to get away from for centuries. Surrogacy also allows couples who cannot conceive naturally to have a child with his or her own genetic material, to continue a genetic line that wouldn’t be possible any other way, until anterior technology becomes available. And while it is a lovely option and makes many people happy, it does morph how the carrier/surrogate interacts with the child, and ultimately, our perception of motherhood.

One example of surrogacy in a dystopian story is “Bloodchild” by Octavia Butler. As mentioned before, while it is also a pregnant-man story, it is actually much more about surrogacy, sacrifice and odd love. In this world, Terrans are humans living among an alien race called Tlics. Gan is a human boy, who has just come of age. And T’Gatoi is the alien that lives in their house, and grew up with Gan’s mother. Gan has been promised to T’Gatoi as the human offering that will carry her young. After watching a botched delivery—if the Tlic waits too long to cut the grubs out, they begin to hatch and eat the N’Tlic host—Gan starts to question if he

wants to carry T’Gatoi’s young but doubles back when T’Gatoi suggests Gan’s sister Hoa to become the surrogate instead, because he wants “to keep [T’Gatoi] for [himself]” (28). This idea of possession shows Gan’s fierce feelings for T’Gatoi, and even the act of insemination is somewhat sexual. After a sting to numb Gan, Butler describes the act as “the blind probing of her oviposter. The puncture was painless, easy. So easy going in. She undulated slowly against [him], her muscles forcing the egg from her body into [his]” (27). This sexual description is successful in making the reader slightly uncomfortable as it is not an expected outcome for an alien surrogacy. Surrogates are not supposed to be emotionally involved, so the tender connection is highlighted between the two beings.

Throughout the story, the narrative reinforces the grooming of Gan from birth, how T’Gatoi chose him while he was in his mother’s womb, and he was first “caged within T’Gatoi’s many limbs only three minutes after [his] birth” (8), and they slept in the same room, Gan cuddling up next to T’Gatoi to keep her warm. Gan also has a love for T’Gatoi—he doesn’t mind being “caged” unlike the rest of his family and he likes the way she moves (9). After her egg has been transferred, and Gan is now an N’Tlic (or with-Tlic-child), she says, “I chose you. I believed you had grown to choose me” (28). It is this strange love toward one another that Butler says she wanted to explore, whether “a man [would become] pregnant as an act of love—choosing pregnancy in spite of as well as because of surrounding difficulties” (30). And while this is achieved in some sense, the fact that Gan is picked before he is even born, and then groomed to be with T’Gatoi feels somewhat predatory combined with the sexy description of the insemination makes this relationship murky, almost as if Gan had no choice. However, T’Gatoi does give him a choice, and she doesn’t attempt emotional blackmail or manipulation to force him—he decides after she says she will choose his sister, that he wanted “to keep [T’Gatoi] for

[himself]” (Bollinger). This story reflects a symbiotic relationship, involving the insemination of a fertilized alien egg into a human surrogate, which is both a commercial (a means to pay rent) and emotional act. However, because the surrogate has known the biological mother his whole life, this is not an impersonal transaction, and it further complicates the notion of motherhood because Gan is male. Laurel Bollinger in “Placental Economy: Octavia Butler, Luce Irigaray, and Speculative Subjectivity” quotes Dorothy Allison, who describes how Butler’s work usually focuses on “mothers who are ‘forced so painfully to confront the difference between surrender and adjustment.’” In “Bloodchild,” Gan is the one forced to choose to surrender to the inevitability of insemination or to allow T’Gatoi to put her babies in one of his siblings. Gan has been chosen over Hoa, who as an anatomical female, and “has always expected to carry other lives inside her” (26). In this story, Gan decides to protect Hoa, as a mother might, but as he shares no genes with the offspring and is a surrogate, he can only carry them as part of the economic burden, and cannot actually be a mother. But it is not difficult to see T’Gatoi as not only a biological mother, but one who wants to nurture her offspring when she explains why she would have respected Gan’s decision had he chosen not to be the surrogate: “How could [she] put [her] children into the care of one who hates them?” (28).

4. Motherhood No More

Unlike the fantastic elements in “It’s Time to Fix the Porch” and “Bloodchild,” real life does hinge upon the fact that all people are born of women. But what if human reproduction was not of woman or man born? While Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* was written in the 1930s and cannot be deemed a contemporary text, it did prepare authors like George Orwell and Ray Bradbury to craft their own dystopian utopias, and was in response to the mass sterilization

eugenic programs happening in Europe and the increasing industrialization at the time (Mehler). The novel imagines a world where reproduction happens in labs and fetuses are replicated by cloning and grown in artificial wombs. Natural reproduction has been eradicated for the sake of “stability” and creation of a fixed caste system by the government (42) because the old way of “family, monogamy, romance. Everywhere exclusiveness, a narrow channeling of impulse and energy” bred chaos (40). In the new way, “every one belongs to every one else” and each caste member is tailored to stay within his or her caste with a combination of eugenics, environmental effects, such as a controlled amount of oxygen in the artificial womb, and psychological conditioning including the use of *hypnopaedic proverbs*, hypnotic suggestions played during sleep, among other things (40).

What’s interesting about this novel is that many people can easily dismiss the parallels to our world because the technology isn’t available for us to support babies via ectogenesis, only partially, as when babies are born prematurely they are kept alive in incubators in NICUs to develop as they would in the womb but using medical life support, sometimes preemies even develop out of the womb the same amount of time they did in utero. In Japan, in the mid 1990s, technology was already being used to successfully keep goat fetuses alive in an artificial amniotic fluid for weeks (Warmflash). Sweden has already had successful uterine transplants that have resulted in five live births while the U.S. failed its first attempt this year (Grady), and the ability to clone human cells and groups of human cells has already been performed with wide success, but no one has attempted to clone a full human, yet (Dovey). While this discussion is not focused on cloning, because that opens up a completely different set of ethical concerns, clones could theoretically be grown in artificial wombs and thus adds to this discussion. Let’s pretend that some estimations are correct on developing either an external womb, or a way to

support life outside the female body from conception within the next decade: What are the ramifications of such a technology on motherhood? Fatherhood? How is personhood defined? In the United States, citizens are “born or naturalized” and if not carried in the womb and birthed from a woman, are they still citizens or do they have “personhood” according to the law (Steiger 145)? This is where it gets tricky theoretically and legally, as in order to be protected, a fetus needs to have personhood. As of now, the law dictates that personhood is only given once a fetus can be viable out of the womb, around 22 weeks, but if it was being grown in an artificial womb, it could be technically “viable” from conception (Steiger 146), this would also change the definition of personhood for a naturally-developing baby as they cannot be defined in two separate ways, split by the house in which they develop. This complicates abortion practices, although many see artificial wombs as potentially solving the “abortion problem” as fetuses could be extracted from a woman wanting to terminate and then put in an external womb to finish growing, and could be adopted or relinquished to the state (Hendricks). This could also completely remove the emotional difficulties of surrogacy, the physical limitations and implications of pregnancy, especially to make it easier for non-normative, and gay or lesbian families to have genetically-related offspring. It could also free the biological mother from the physical burden of carrying a baby for nine months and the recuperation after birth, giving both legal parents, regardless of gender, an equal footing from which to start the bonding process. What a world—to have babies without birthing mothers. To have complete equality in reproduction. The world that Huxley offers in response to this idea is dark, and attempts to show what happens when reproduction happens outside the body: women and men are encouraged to have multiple partners, and very quickly, to not linger in relationships enough to form fulfilling friendships, to take pills that help them stay happy, and to stay in their castes and do their jobs.

Babies are raised in orphanage-like hospitals with nurses to raise them under sets of conditioning to turn them into productive but satisfied humans. And women are sterilized so they are prevented from having natural births, every couple of years, they are given a cocktail of goodies to mock a pregnancy so they can get the health benefits of one.

While P.D. James' *The Children of Men*, doesn't directly answer what ectogenesis looks like, it allows a different perspective on reproduction not occurring in humans, as the characters suffer from a loss of fertility. At twenty-five years old, the youngest human on earth dies and hope for the future is lost. While women are not subjected to perform sexual acts or encouraged to have multiple sex partners in this novel, they are infertile and have lost sexual agency: "sex totally divorced from procreation has become almost meaninglessly acrobatic. Women complain increasingly of what they describe as painful orgasms: the spasm achieved but not the pleasure" (116). They carry around dolls in prams and have birthing parties for kittens (114) to fill the biological emptiness, and the men are depicted as unemotional. Even Theo, the protagonist, tries to make himself care: "Feel, he told himself, feel, feel, feel. Even if what you feel is pain, only let yourself feel" (39). It isn't until Theo learns of the miracle of Julian's pregnancy that he actually begins to feel something—he kneels at her feet, ear against her stomach, and is "swept by a tide of emotion which rose, buffeted and engulfed him in a turbulent surge of awe, excitement and terror, and then receded, leaving him spent and weak" (154). It is this proximity to her pregnant belly that allows him to respond emotionally. Later, when Julian is in labor, he listens to the normal sounds of the forest and feels that "the whole physical world [is] held together by pain, the scream in the throat and the scream in the heart" (226). It is only through physicality of birth that he can finally feel. James examines the sacred nature of a birth about to happen, reinforcing this by Theo's reaction in the woods—the moment when the baby is no

longer something elusive and sacred, but real flesh that has entered into the world of pain. The hope that is built around this sacred baby is only momentary as Julian anticipates the baby is a girl, but when she delivers, it is a boy, and while the birth is a miracle in its own right, for reproductive reasons, a male child is not without irony.

5. Mirror, Mirror, Who Do You See?

If women are not able to claim the unique ability to grow children in their wombs, if there were other technologies that made women unnecessary for this part of reproduction, something is lost in their identity. Going back to “In the Waiting Room,” the speaker Elizabeth is repulsed by images of naked tribal women in *National Geographic*, at the same time, she tries to grapple with her identity and role as a female. While Elizabeth and her Aunt Consuelo are given names in the poem, the women with “horrificing” breasts are unnamed and given grotesque physical descriptions (25-31). The women with “awful hanging breasts” (81) have no redeeming qualities and their babies have “pointed heads” (26) like aliens. Elizabeth’s response to the naked, black women is not just repulsion but also a fascination as she says, “their breasts were horrificing. / I read it right straight through. / I was too shy to stop” (31-33). If Elizabeth is appalled by these women and yet cannot stop reading and looking at the images, then there is something enticing that is keeping her on the page. Moglen and Namir discuss this dichotomy in a psychological assessment of the self’s response, which is “shaped by fear of and desire for the potentially dangerous other—who is also a projection of the otherness in the self—the pornographic imagination eroticizes gender, racial, sexual and ethnic differences” (210). Elizabeth has a fear of and desire for the other because of the erotic nature of the photos keeps her focus in-between the “yellow margins,” yet her pungent rejection of the women, is clarified when Elizabeth asks herself “*why* should you be one, too?” (62) because she is beginning to

understand that she too will grow up to be a woman and have the potential to also have “horrifying” breasts.

Elizabeth does not describe the faces or the eyes the women or of the dead man captioned “Long Pig” because she cannot look at them, and she refuses to look above the knees of the people in the waiting room, because acknowledging them would mean having to assess the reality of a third space as an option (Moglen and Namir 211). This third space, Moglen and Namir describe it as “the creation of a psychoanalytic ‘third’...the third area describes a mental space between ‘me’ and ‘not me.’” (212). This third space is only created out of empathy, out of recognition with the other, and it is only when this space is created can the self also see the other as a complex entity (Moglen and Namir 212; Frie 234). Later in the poem, Elizabeth begins to wonder “what similarities” she might acquire from her aunt or if she would end up with the *grotesque* bodies of the tribal women in *National Geographic*. The identification with other is not a pleasant experience for the speaker as “suddenly, from inside, / came an *oh!* of pain” (Bishop 36-37), which could have come from “[her] voice, in [her] mouth” (47). This crisis of self is catalyzed by the events from the world outside Elizabeth, forcing her to reevaluate her association with these “other” groups and ultimately, her own identity. Elizabeth first loses control and tries to focus on logical things like the date “February, 1918” (53), but then becomes lost, and feels like she is “falling off/ the round, turning world/ into cold, blue-black space” (57-59) until she situates herself as the entity, “I.” Once she settles on the person she is within, she has an epiphany when she realizes that “[she] knew that nothing stranger/ had ever happened, that nothing/ stranger could ever happen” (72-74). This is the moment in the poem when her sense of selfhood is challenged, and she goes through the process of knowing that “[she is] an *I*” to realizing that “[she is] one of them” (60-62)—she is not just Elizabeth anymore; she is a part

of a family and a part of a gender. And most importantly, she is a part of womanhood that has “awful hanging breasts”: motherhood. It is this realization of a commonality that “[holds them] all together or [makes them] all just one” this notion of womanhood and motherhood that makes her see the women in the magazine as more than just the other.

And it is in this recognition of a third space, and only here, where the self can truly know and learn more about who he or she is, as “identity always includes what is other” (Frie 233). Elizabeth cannot fully grasp who she is until she realizes that the others are actually “unique, embodied [persons], living in a socio-cultural context and framework of understanding” (Frie 234). Elizabeth absorbs this idea when she says to herself, “you are one of them,” and the fact that she is related to the other, means that the other can no longer be an other because she and the other are the same (62). This line is also telling of her lack of self-identity because after she sees herself as the same as the other, she “scarcely dared to look/ to see what it was I was” (65). Only after she recognizes the other as an entity, can she ask herself who she really is and locate herself in a shifting world. It is this discovery, when a young girl associates herself to a lineage of women, both familial and on the page, psychologically and physically, that she is able to see herself. The identification is concrete. Physical. Painful. And real. If a girl is not able to associate herself within that larger context, then she cannot associate herself with womanhood either—as they are inextricably linked. Not that women have to be mothers, but they are in a group of people, who have the unique attributes that allows them the potential to be mothers. One of the most amazing things about being a woman is if by chance, one gets to be a mother, it is a beautiful and terrifying, physical and psychic rite of passage. And if that role were altered by allowing other people or machines to take that role, something would be lost in our identity as

women. The secrets could be lost that we hold somewhere between our bladder and our intestines that we can't even speak because we don't understand.

Throughout writing *Nothing Stranger*, I come back again and again to "In the Waiting Room" because it has the ability to ground me within the context of the girl I was, the woman I am, and the mother I will become. I find myself connected to a host of invisible mothers with hanging breasts from suckling babies, and I feel that somehow, my mother must be there too, lined up and naked in *The National Geographic*, telling me everything I'm doing wrong, and there is no where else I would rather be than connected to her and those awful breasts. I started *Nothing Stranger* before my mother died, but writing the stories have helped me begin the ongoing process of seeing what it means to be responsible for bringing life into the world with my daughter, and what it means to be a mother without a mother.

Baby gets UTD

The woman held baby tightly against her as she made her way out of the doctor's office at the end of the 23rd light tunnel, not too far from her underapartment. The nurse that had jabbed baby, scrumpled blue gloves into a ball and dropped them inside a circular trash chute built into the nurses' station. The chute was made of clear, centimeter-thick plastic covered graphene tubing, large as medium dinner plates. The chutes were fastened to the ceilings of all the light tunnels by metal clamps. All trash came down these tubes, exposed, nothing unseen. The wad of gloves jutted against pink needle covers through the pneumatic tube, skidding down the light tunnel. A blinding blue spanned the upper half of the tunnels, just the clearest imitation sky the undercity residents could imagine, with the whitest, puffiest clouds. A sticky warmth seemed to emanate from the sun on the screen. The sun was never clouded out, never dark. No comforting stars permeated the ceiling. It was unceasingly light. The tunnels were a web of white connected down in hundreds of yards of wet, thick dirt. Thousands of pounds of pressure were

against the structure of the undercity, which was made of impossible Tungstun, impossibly solid. Attached to the highest level of light tunnels were solar-powered subtrain stations. Underapartments were sprinkled throughout the lowest levels, allowing residents to be far away from foot traffic and trains, and even further away from the dangers of the surface. That was of gloves, like all the other boxes of rehydrated foods, coffee filter foils, sanitizing wipes, and other trash from all the tunnels, ended up in the central waste ejection room, squeezed into their smallest mass and then ejected 60 floors through to the surface. Those gloves careened across the sky, below the abandoned city, cracked storefronts and dust from the absence of people, made it look like a bomb had dirtied the earth.

Baby screamed and screamed all the way out of the waiting room and down the hall, in the subtrain, down the elevator, the mile and a half walk through the light tunnel and into their underapartment, even after food was offered, even after attempted bath time, book time, snuggles and daddy-playtime, baby continued to scream and yell. This was not how baby was after previous vaccinations. Baby had just turned 12 months. She was almost walking wide-legged but only with the woman's or the husband's assistance. The woman often told baby, what yummy fat thighs she had, good enough to eat, baby. Now the woman, clutched baby against her so tight, as if she were absorbing all baby's cries into her connective tissue. Her face was red and wisps of hair matted against her cheeks as if she, too, had been crying, but perhaps she had been. After all, it was her decision to get the jab. She had got baby all the recommended shots, all up-to-date to the very day. She was the one who had seen the advertisements about the FRINTs vaccine on the subtrain and the interweb, had talked about it in mommy groups, and had even asked the doctor about it at the last appointment. The FRINTS' vaccination immunized against fifth disease, rhinitis, indigestion, narcolepsy, tendinitis, and sciatica. The woman had a mommy-friend who

heard about a three-year old who had died of FRINTS last year, said to have laid in its own vomit, gurgling for air for an hour before parents realized the baby had been taken over by the virus. The woman had sworn to protect her baby since she had been fertilized, and this vaccine was the latest, best prevention on the market for some diseases: “Free your baby. Free yourself,” the advertisement said, “from worry and death.” A picture of a three year old with tubes in its face morphed into a purple butterfly, which flapped across the screen. The vaccine was a three-shot series to be given 2 months apart, starting at 12 months. She hadn’t asked the doctor why 12 months at the earliest. Perhaps it was too early seeing as baby was evacuated at 37 weeks by cesarean because the woman’s parents were only able to be in town that weekend, and she didn’t want them to miss out before they left for their 40-year anniversary. Why hadn’t she checked with the doctor to see if baby’s gestational age would have effected the shot schedule? This reaction was more severe than other vaccines. She should have waited a week or two. Baby’s cries started to crescendo. The woman put a dissolvable pill on baby’s tongue for pain. Baby whimpered. The woman slipped another pill into baby’s mouth. “There you go, baby,” she cooed. “Everything is okay, baby.” She pressed her lips against baby’s forehead and ssshhhed, opened mouthed. Her soul connected to baby.

Baby stopped making noises and snuffled against the woman’s shirt. The woman sighed relief. The pain that had been building in her chest dissipated. Everything was right now. In that moment, everything was all right. The woman rocked the baby in the Wonderflux Chair 12,000 to the ticking of the digital clock, made to look like those old grandfather clocks from the 1900s or before, or even before that. The woman wasn’t completely sure, but the cadence allowed her to stop thinking for a moment, as it lulled baby.

Baby was sound asleep before the woman had even put the lid back on the pill bottle. Baby snored sweetly like a pug with asthma. The woman rocked and patted baby's bottom over and over and over, even though baby was already deep in REM. She absent-mindedly put baby down in the SafeSleep 2000, guaranteed to protect against Sudden Infant Death, and felt immediate relief. The woman heated some coffee in the Zapper and got to work on the computer as soon as she felt sure baby would not stir. The husband was working on something on his Multi-Dimension Screen in the basement—she did not expect him to reemerge for several hours.

The RealDigitalWorld windows set the sun on its panes, which meant it was already 9 p.m., and the woman wondered if baby was all right. She tiptoed into baby's room and saw the rhythmic rise and fall of baby's chest. She exhaled and pulled the door almost closed as she left. The woman had lots to think about at her new consulting practice. She had finally figured out a way to work from home so she could stay with baby. The husband worked hard so that the woman could have all of the high-tech safety items that baby needed, but money and time had stretched thin, and the woman had to begin work again. She had tried to work 6 months after baby, but she wasn't able to calculate the dimensions of a room in a snap like she used to. In fact she had trouble concentrating at all. Of course, the woman had other woman-friends with babies but somehow they managed to keep everything together all the time. They seemed to connect effortlessly. All the latest gadgets, babies walking at 10 months, babies talking before 12 months, Holiday décor that would make *Under Home Magazine* weep and up before Turkey Day, pretty

digital impressions of everybody laughing in matchy-matchy outfits, always smiling, always perky. It was a bit much, sometimes, the woman had to admit.

The woman scrolled through violet, taupe and beige curtain swatches with zig-zag leaf patterns on them on her DesignBot. Her client wanted to decorate his living room with “lusciousness,” he had told her as he brought out a vase full of navy-dyed peacock-engineered feathers and set it on her desk, accompanied by a ripped page from an old *National Geographic* of a forest, “luscious and tropical. I want it to say: I own my own island.” He had spread his hands in front of his face like they were the edges of a telescreen advertisement on the undertrain. Even baby stopped chewing on a set of plastic keys to watch him.

The woman had nodded and had felt the client all over her office even though he hadn’t moved. She had tried to show him, with her 3-D Surround Design projector and live swatches, that his unique tastes could be merged with modern furniture and an eclectic design to create something timeless, as long as they didn’t go overboard with the “lusciousness.” When she said this last bit, she avoided eye-contact.

“I just can’t visualize it,” the client said, as they stood in the middle of the 3-D construct of the woman’s office: Her cream curtains morphed into a silky fabric of golds and pinks, a blue Persian rug glowed around their feet, the woman’s corner lamp became a fern, her refinished chez-lounge with scroll feet, now a modern white couch framed by teak slats and pink and blue pillows mathematically placed in the corners to look both elegant and haphazard, in an effort to relax the client, yet provide a sense of cleanliness and calm. Baby began cruising along the couch, trying to catch tassels on pillows that weren’t there. Baby and the woman had played this game often when she didn’t think she’d be going back to work. She tapped her Telliwatch360 quickly and redirected baby to the quiet-play box of toys hidden behind the chez-lounge, and the

room transformed again, her high-gloss white quartz desk, with waterfall sides, became a shiplap table, decorated with navy and white bunting, connected by real rope across the front, and behind it, her ConnectFree wireless hub became a barometer, and a replica of a spoked helm hung next to it on off-white striped walls. She showed him two more designs: the 2020s where the robotic and interweb era met neon colors and skinny pants and then a Victorian piece, using the chez-lounge and other items that were already in the room merged with a roll-top desk, and atop, several wedgwood plates. Baby crawled between the woman and the client and pulled at the woman's trouser legs.

Finally he said, "I'll have to trust your judgement until I see the designs." The woman turned off the 3-d imagery, and the room was dark for a minute while their eyes adjusted. The client plucked a feather out of the glass vase on the woman's desk, squatted next to baby and tickled baby's chin with it.

Baby, of course, gurgled and wapped at it with her hands, attempting to get all or some of it in her mouth. The woman didn't like the way the client was stroking baby's face with the feather. The woman smiled politely. "You'll love it," she said, scooping baby onto her hip and straightened up in one fluid movement.

"I'm sure you're right," the client stood and clasped her hand in his. She hadn't had time to wipe the sweat off before he made this move, and his hands were very hot.

She nodded and said, "My next client will be here shortly." Baby was in dire need of a new diaper and a nap.

"And I thought I was your only client," he said, winking, and let go of her hand, formed a pistol with his and tapped it to his head. "Until next time, Madame." He had left but his cologne

lingered on the desk, the walls, her hands, reminding the woman of her grandfather smoking cigars in her bedroom when she was little.

Now, all the woman could think about was that cigar box—it was a chestnut box with a gold inlay, a paisley pattern on the very top. After the grandfather instructed her to roll and lick-seal the 24 cigars it took to fill the box, the woman, who was then a girl, used to rub her yellowed fingers over the top with her eyes closed and imagine she were blind, imagine that they hadn't had to go underground, that she was still surrounded by green living things.

She tried to think where that box would be after all these years. Grandpa long gone. Mother dead too. She daredn't think too far back in her mind. Couldn't allow herself to picture mother, her soft, wispy curls, her low, unassuming voice, the smell of earth sunned into sheets hanging in the yard. She couldn't begin to think about that world a lifetime ago, so different from the darkness of the dirt that now surrounded their underpod apartments. She scrunched her face and forced herself to imagine if paisley would be better for the curtains.

Should she go with the crystal chandelier as she originally designed? She went back and forth between the sketches she had made on the DesignBot and became more and more frustrated. Her fingers always looked leathered, she was sure she could still see the stain from the cigars, but her husband had always admired her hands, said how amazing it was that someone so beautiful could work so hard. She wasn't sure if he felt the same way since the baby. After he got home most nights, he spent the better half of the evenings in the basement, in the screen room, researching, he said, although the woman knew better. She knew he put on his Simulation

Helmet to go wine-tasting with his virtual friends—they would sit out in a vineyard in Sacramento, back in the 2000s, the sun lapping them in light, the wine warming their stomachs, all of them were tanned and had linen shirts buttoned only halfway like Italian film stars, and white teeth always smiling. He had let her go on a tour for just the two of them, when she was pregnant, and she got a glimpse of that part of him, but couldn't correlate that with how she'd seen him hooked in, immersed in a tour with his friends, talking in a language she didn't understand, laughing so hard that he couldn't catch his breath, and she had almost squeezed his arm to snuggle up next to him but didn't want to frighten him out of the dream. She had begged him to be present, especially towards the end of the pregnancy, and he promised her that he would only go on trips for special occasions and only when baby was sleeping. So after baby, when he said he was researching new products for the company, she chose to believe him, until she didn't.

The woman began researching new polyester-kevlar blends for doors camouflaged as curtains on the DesignBot—perhaps one would sing to her, when she knew that she was just stalling completing the design. This was the first real attempt she had made since baby, and she just didn't know anymore.

“Hi,” the husband said, palming her shoulder and kissing the back of her head.

“You're finished early.” She touched his hand with her fingers.

“Did baby go down?”

“Yes, you can go back to work, if you need to,” the woman sighed.

“That's a terrible color.” The husband was rifling through swatches on her desk. “This one is a bit Space-Age,” he said, thumbing a silvery-blue fabric with a concentric disk pattern on it.

“Do you think so? I was planning on using that for cushions.”

“Well, you know how useless I am at these things.”

“Perhaps velvet is ‘luscious.’”

“Oh, yes, I know about luses,” the husband said and came back to the woman, pressing his lips against her neck, his hand trailing down the opened buttons of her shirt.

“*Luscious* not luses.”

“Baby is sleeping,” the husband said.

“I have to figure this design out,” the woman replied.

“Baby is sleeping,” the husband repeated, sliding his hand across her décolletage.

“Only if you take me on a tour.”

The husband ran his fingers down the arch of her foot and softly twisted each toe until it cracked. The water in the tub was warm and it helped the woman relax. She was apart from herself. It was as if the husband had done this before, but the woman couldn’t remember if *they* had done this before. Her skin tingled as the husband then danced his palm up the inside of her shin. They both had frosted pinot grigios on the side of the tub. Somehow the glasses were always full. The woman noticed her stomach was the same as it was before baby—tight, her abdominals were evident, even the tiny scar from the evacuation missing. She brought her glass to her face and her reflection did not contain the chloasma dispersed under her eyes like fireworks of freckles—the ones that made her even more beautiful, the husband had reassured her when they showed up at 8 months pregnant. It was if baby had never been. The husband’s

hands had made it to her swimsuit bottoms and were tickling her pubis. The woman laughed. The wine began its work. He teetered the bikini off and she bit into his neck, feeling the wet skin of his shoulders against hers.

The woman and the husband giggled as they came back up from the basement, clammy and loose. The woman sensed connection to something outside herself. She sensed herself. She was herself. Her husband was the same charming, safe place as always. Safe for her to be herself, for her to lose herself in climax, not caring who or what or if anyone heard, except baby, but they had made sure the sound machine was on while they went downstairs. Of course, no one else was online. It was just the two of them. The woman still longed to meet his tour friends, but this was a step closer, she told herself.

When they were back in bed, lying side-by-side, she studied the lines creasing the corners of his eyes, his dark hair, the stubble on his pointed chin. She wanted his rough face against her.

“Thank you,” he said.

“I enjoyed it,” she said. The woman ran a hand across her panty, feeling echoes of her climax. It wasn’t quite like she wanted. The climax was good. In fact, as long as they touched the right spots, it always happened on a tour. But it was nothing like what they had done many years ago just after marriage, in the bedroom, illicitly. She wanted to guide his hand. She thought of all the potential microbes he could have picked up on the way back from work, staph infections had been circulating in the city, and reached for him anyway. He pulled away, not noticing her hand stretched for his, and rolled to sit on the side of the bed.

“I know it’s not drinking actual wine, but I always feel the need to get the taste out after. You know?” He got up to brush his teeth.

“It’s just as well,” the woman said.

While he was gone, she wept into her pillow for reasons she couldn’t explain.

The woman woke in silence, as usual. The husband had already left for work, careful not to wake her as he slipped on his dress shirt and pants, zapped his coffee and grabbed a dehydrated lunch from the cupboard. Something felt odd about this quietness, she thought. She realized that she hadn’t checked on baby since about 9 p.m., and she hadn’t heard the familiar chiming of SafeSleep through the night. She pushed out of bed, forgetting to put on her dressing gown, and went into the nursery. Baby was standing staring at the wall. Relief waved through her. “Hi, baby,” she said. “What a good morning it is, baby. What will you do today?”

Baby patted the wall next to the SafeSleep.

“Aren’t you such a good baby,” the woman said. “Look at momma.”

Baby continued patty-cake all down the wall and the sides of the SafeSleep crib. The woman turned baby around and put her on her hip. Usually baby clamped her legs around the woman’s waist but today, baby’s legs were rigid. The woman decided that it was probably residual from the medicine or the trauma of yesterday. Baby seemed fine. Baby was fine. Everything was all right.

As baby ate rehydrated scrambled eggs in her highchair, the woman slurped coffee and giggled thinking of how the husband had carried her out of the tour tub naked, tickled her shoulders with the client’s feather, ran it down the indent of her spine, pressed his thumbs above her hip bones. It was spiritual, almost. Like it was their first time again. Baby had stopped eating and was shaking and not blinking.

“Baby, are you okay,” the woman clicked off the table from baby’s chair. She unbuckled the trembling baby.

Baby’s eyes seemed to say “Mama.”

“Yes, mama,” the woman held baby against her. “That’s right. Mama’s here.”

Baby stopped shivering.

“Are you okay, baby?” The woman felt all over baby for signs of fever. A bit warm but not concerning. Perhaps there was chill in the air? She told the furnace to warm to 74 degrees Fahrenheit. Baby limped into sleep. Poor baby. She videoed the doctor’s office as soon as she laid baby down in the SafeSleep. The automated voice asked what had happened, and the woman detailed everything. The computer told the woman to wait while the nurse read the file. After five minutes, baby’s nurse came on the screen.

“This happens sometimes as babies are making antibodies. Just the body building a healthy immune system.”

“What do I do?”

“Rotate oxycontin and ibuprofen every 4 hours.”

“And that’ll make her better?”

“It’ll make her feel better. If baby gets a fever or seems more sore, we’ll give her antibiotics. There’s a new strain of influenza going around. Can’t be too careful.”

“I’m sorry to be a nuisance,” the woman said, embarrassed.

“I understand how it is when you’re a first-time mother; every twitch makes you think baby has contracted some awful disease. Just thank your lucky stars that you don’t have to worry about the real nasties because you’ve kept her all up to date.”

“Oh, yes,” the woman said, she was nodding. “I feel sorry for mothers who don’t. They really don’t know what they’re doing to their little ones. I couldn’t take it.”

“Anything else?” The nurse was looking at her Telliwatch.

“No, thank you,” the woman said quietly. The woman went to check on sweet baby. She cupped baby’s cheek and kissed her forehead. “There, there, baby. Everything will be better soon.” She slipped an oxycontin into the child’s mouth while she slept.

The woman’s Telliwatch beeped. It was her mommy-friend at the door, clutching fat Bruiser and a little yellow gift bag in the other. She had forgotten that she’d messaged the mommy-friend when the woman and the husband couldn’t calm baby right after the vaccine the day before. The woman pressed a button on her watch and told them that she’d be right there. She quickly kicked toys into a corner and secured breakable items behind a barricade—Bruiser barreled into everything—straightened her shirt, checked the mirror by the front door for makeup smears and opened the door with the perfect smile; the kind she thought she should wear.

“Hiya, thought we’d drop off a gift for Baby,” the mommy-friend said. “And see how everyone is holding up.”

“Thank you, you’re very kind,” the woman said. “Come in.”

“Blimey, it’s nice in here. How do you keep it so sparkly with the little’un running around?” She kissed Bruiser, sweetly on the head.

The woman felt like she should be holding Baby too. She shrugged. “I’ve been seeing clients. Would you like some coffee?”

“Yeah, all right. Had a shitty night with Bruiser teething. You?”

“Baby acted strange this morning. I was worried it was from the shot. I even called the doc’s and the nurse said it was nothing.”

Bruiser was running into Baby’s toy box and hitting it and then running into the mommy-friend and pulling at her twill pants. “Aw, I’m sure she’s fine. Bruiser had it rough after the FRINTS’ last week too.”

“Oh, that’s lovely,” the woman said, peering into the gift bag at a lavender plush bear, with a plastic red heart, glowing on its stomach. “I can’t wait for Baby to tear into it!”

“That’ll cheer her.” The mommy-friend set Bruiser in the middle of the floor with a bottle of milk and a wooden puzzle game from her bag. “Stay there. Don’t you move now,” she warned, pointing at him, while backing up to the counter.

The woman took a mug out of the Zapper and handed it to the mommy-friend.

“Ooohh, I love this brand,” she said, inhaling the steam. “Always got the jingle going through my head: ‘Petey’s makes me right as rain—Petey’s keeps me sane,’” the mommy-friend sang and then snorted.

The woman’s Telliwatch alarmed that SafeSleep had recognized Baby as awake.

“Oh, no. I’m sorry. I’m so used to Bruiser being a hard sleeper.”

“No, don’t. It’s fine. I was worried that she might get off schedule with the meds anyway.” She took her own mug out of the Zapper and set it on the counter. “I’ll go and get her and the two of them can play with her new toy.”

The woman picked baby up from her SafeSleep. “Hi, baby. How are you doing today? Shall we change your diaper?” She asked and smelled baby’s behind in one fluid movement. It was much more for her sake than baby’s. Baby blew bubbles and said, “Ba,” patting her diaper. She unpinned baby’s wet diaper with gloved hands—you could never be too careful—and made

sure to spray baby's bottom with sterile water, use the FastDry fan to dry, and pinned on an autoclaved cotton prefold, snapped on a plastic cover. Disposables were outlawed to reduce unnecessary liquids and waste in the chute system, luckily, the city provided the diaper laundry service for all government sanctioned children.

The woman sat baby down on the floor next to Bruiser, who was already wading in the toy box. "Look, Baby." The woman put the purple bear in front of baby and pressed the heart. The bear lit up and said, *Hi, I'm Bear. I'm your new best friend.*

Baby hit the bear out of the woman's hands and then tried to take her musical bells from Bruiser, who was clanging them against the toy box.

"Ah, presh," the mommy-friend said, over the noise, not seeming to notice that she was now yelling to compensate for Bruiser's raucous activity.

"She'll get into it," the woman said, slightly embarrassed about Baby's dismissal of the new toy. "Always wants what she can't have."

Let's sanitize our hands, the bear was saying. *You look like you could use some medicine.*

"You've heard about our mutual friend, haven't ya?"

"What about her."

"She's gone rogue."

"No! On the surface?"

Doctors are your friends too, the bear sang. Baby was cuddling the bear and Bruiser was screaming and pointing because he wanted it.

"She started some self-defense course up there. In real life! Can you imagine?" The woman friend shook her bald head, a silk-blue flowery scarf tied around it.

"Not even on her Multi-Dimension Screen?"

“Ever since the break in, she said something about being all prepared. She says it’s *so real*.” The mommy friend held her hands out as if holding the biggest box of dehydrated food. “And says it helped dealing with her evacuation, but you know how she goes on about it. A bit self indulgent, if you ask me. I mean, we all went through it.”

That tickles, the bear said. *Let’s send our toys to the sanitizer*.

“Well, I never,” the woman thought about how different things had been since baby.

“What a ponce,” the mommy-friend said. “Can you imagine all that sweaty DNA from all those strangers and risk being on the surface? With her little babe and all. Blows my freaking mind. It’s not like we eradicated Measles by using good hygiene and getting our shots or anything!” She snorted.

“How does she do it without getting caught?”

“She said there’s this dodgy store down by the Storage Pods. Normally, you take the 47th to the train and down to 168th to go in the front door, but she went up through the old city and down through a back door.”

The woman leaned into the mommy-friend and whispered, “What if we catch her up there and snapped a shot of her trying to do all those ridiculous stunts?” She felt immediate guilt.

“And that is why we’re friends,” the mommy-friend said, laughing. “But I can’t risk it with the election coming up next week.”

“No, of course not. I’ll go for the both of us.” The woman almost squeezed the mommy-friend’s shoulder but instead wrapped it tighter around her cup. “What else did she say?”

The next day, the woman lifted baby into her carry harness, and clipped the buckles. “Wearing your baby” was all the rage in the 2010s through the 2020s, and the woman liked the retro feel of wearing rather than baby sitting in a hover-stroller—even though it was hands free, it felt so impersonal and so close to other people, who had who knows what. The woman was particularly careful on days like today when baby could be on the edge of illness, still a little off from her vaccinations two days ago.

“We’re off to see about that course, baby.”

Once baby was secure, they set off down the light tunnel to the old hand-cranked elevator that would take them to the surface, to the abandoned old city. The woman was a little apprehensive about purchasing the survival course. Besides being illegal, her details could be uploaded to the national database and cross-checked against all her medical, financial and police records for the first time: any parking ticket, hours missed from school, every banned foodstuff or drink that she may or may not have consumed could show up and cause her to be examined by an officer of Child Safety Services. Her mommy-friend had explained that this store didn’t always follow the rules for the database for a little extra coin. She was perspiring and baby squirmed in the carrier, arching her back away from the woman. “Shhh,” she told baby. She patted baby’s bottom and bounced baby up and down to the rhythm of her walk.

The streets were dry and hot. It was nothing like she remembered. It had been many years since she had ventured up. The woman and baby wore regulation boot covers to protect the leather from foreign bacteria, ventilators to regulate their oxygen intake and protective light lenses on to shield them from ultraviolet rays, known to cause cancer. Store fronts on the surface in the old city were wooden structures held together loosely like worn-out barns. A sign by an old Mongers “Fresh Fish Cheap” was spray painted with a red X over it—the woman

couldn't remember the last time she purchased whole foods, and they had long been replaced by ready-made meals that you just have to add water to, most kitchens now contained only a zapperoven, sink, trash incinerator and cabinets for dehydrated food, it was all very ecoconscious. When they still bought raw foods, she used to joke that she'd eat fish on the moon before she would in her own town. After all, the nearest ocean was a days travel away. Not exactly the freshest of fish.

Excrement, dog or human, piled up against a brick wall to her left. She tried to cover baby's nose with her hands, as if she could stop microorganisms from traveling up baby's nasal cavity. Baby pushed the woman's fingers away and pointed, gurgling at the wall, saying "ba."

"Those are bricks," the woman said. "They don't use them anymore to make houses. Now, we print them." The woman and mommy-friend had been told in their "baby and me" group to always talk to their babies and explain things. It was supposed to help them talk early. Bruiser was already saying ten words. Baby said only one.

Baby pointed at the ground, "ba."

"That's stone."

At a single leaf sprouting out of the wall, insistently now: "ba."

"That's green," the woman said, not recalling the name of the vine with the pointed-leaf and white tips. "Leaf," she continued. "Pretty amazing, that." She hadn't seen something green in real life in a long time. She couldn't help herself. She plucked it and touched it to her cheek, by the respirator and then breathed deeply. All she smelled was shit, even with the filter. She started to panic.

"Ba," baby said smiling, reaching for the leaf.

“Yes, Baby. Bah.” The woman dropped the leaf onto the dusty street, and rubbed her hands furiously against her pants.

They crossed old tram tracks, dark houses, porches half torn off, and the whole time, the street remained still, silent, devoid of movement. The woman bounced baby, nervous. She thought about turning around but something told her to keep going. The mommy-friend had explained how the course consisted of Krav Maga, weapons training, and a subset of courses that teach how to find food and survive on the surface. The woman researched the course on the interweb, using a fake connection number, and saw other people talking about how this course gave them a sense of calm and control, but it seemed so much more risky than going on a tour in the comfort of one’s own home. They came to a candy-shop store front on the edge of town. Beyond it, the same beautiful green fields and hills she remembered from her childhood. She would give anything to fling off her gear and run unabashedly into the trees. But of course, there were too many risks to stay on the surface too long, even with all the precautions. Still, she couldn’t help but wonder how all the greenery survived despite the registered higher levels of CFCs and UV rays. On the shop sign, faded red stripes and “Candy Shoppe” in cursive were on the sign, and though the outside looked just as worn as the others, there was a pink blinking light flashing through the bottom of the front window. The mommy-friend had told her to push the light with her finger. The woman peered through a hole in the door where glass was in pieces on the ground. She bumped the door open with her foot. It banged against the inside of the store, and splinters of wood fell off as it made contact, like it was infested with termites. She shivered. Baby started crying.

“Shhhhhh.” She pushed a pacifier into baby’s mouth, and turned around without thinking and apologized. Her cheeks flashed hot, and she stepped into the darkness of the shop, making

her way to the tiny beacon. She could make out a counter in the back, though the windows provided some light, her eyes had not yet adjusted. She felt along the wall to her right, her feet crunched over bits of glass. The wall was sticky, and had a slight groove, and she imagined many, many hands had felt along the same lines, wearing away the stone. She came to the counter. It felt cold and slick like metal, but was tacky with soot. At the end of the counter, she walked behind the bar. The blinking light to her left. She put her finger on it and lights flickered beneath her feet, revealing a spiral staircase. She supported baby against her with one hand and palmed the railing with the other. She went down and down and down, for what seemed like hours, at least 40 floors. It had been a long time since she'd exercised this much. She had to stop several times to catch her breath, as the respirator was dingy. Baby was spark out—probably the extra oxygen from her mask, the woman thought. The further down she went, the lighter the walls became and she began to feel the staircase vibrate to a beat, the music was at first a whisper but a couple more 360 degrees turned into the sound level of an old car. By the time she reached the landing, it was so bright, it was like being on a wine tour in Sacramento, with the digital sun so pure, she could forget about the worries of the surface that made everything so hazy that it hurt eyes to focus for too long even with protective lenses. On the landing, there was a gray metal door with a sign saying “utilities” on it. She pressed the steel lever down, and the door swung open surprisingly easily. Whiteness entered her brain and caused her to blink rapidly for a moment, then she took her lenses off, and the store came into focus. She quickly stuffed their ventilators and lenses into her backpack.

Now that her ears had settled, the music was really quite friendly—it reminded her of a rock band her mother used to go on about when she was little. Something about royalty. Ah, well, it didn't matter, she found herself tapping baby's bottom to the beat as she walked through

the hallway and opened another door. Baby was still sleeping in the carrier, and the woman stepped across the shiny white tile floor. It was like skating. Everywhere she looked, felt very sterile, very clean. Not at all what she had imagined as an off-beat hub. She knew her presence had been noted by the monitoring system. A camera drone beeped by her head and whizzed off. She had baby's head covered with the carrier's hood, so it did not recognize baby as a separate entity. The mommy friend had mentioned that it would confuse the system not tracking her here in the tunnels, so it would erase her entry as a NonId. She noticed the rows upon rows of old-style cleaning supplies, brooms, vacuums, mops, and every item on the wall was barrel-length. In the glass counters, jewelry stuck on green velvet. There were even silicone pink orchids (the woman recognized them from researching exotic flowers recently for her client) systematically placed on the counters and down the aisles.

The store was massive, at least the size of an old city block, and filled with customers and salespeople. The salespeople all wore the same navy pants with navy Oxford shirts, bright orange canvas vests and floppy canvas hats with fishing lures threaded through. The woman supposed the store was meant to connect men with their hunting roots. One angry man at the counter asked why his instruction manual didn't come with the broom he had ordered—the short, fat sales clerk with a mustache apologized and tried to explain that every cleaning supply was polished and triple-checked in the box before leaving the store, that any paperwork not in the box, would be the fault of the manufacturer. He wiped hands across his Oxford. The customer would have to call the manufacturer. “Have a good day, sir.”

The customer slammed his fist on the counter, which made several other salesmen twitch and halt their conversations with other clients. The sales clerk helping the man, replied to his

Telliwatch, “No thank you; I’ve got this.” His mustache quivered. “Stand down. Security is not needed at this time.” He tapped a form under his orange vest, and motioned to it with his eyes.

The man with the broom, rumbled that the service was the worst.

“I think you and I both know that you’re not going to get that kind of thing here, sir,” the clerk said quietly, and then loudly, “have a good day now.” He tidied up his area and motioned for the woman to come up to the counter, “Can I help you?” he asked.

“Maybe you can,” she said. The mommy-friend had been very clear: Ask to speak to the clerk who goes by “Shorty.” And then explain to him that you’re looking for a digital radical workout program. “That was all very exciting. Are you Shorty?”

“No, I am not,” the clerk sounded annoyed, and flattened his mustache, “but I can get him for you.”

“Please,” the woman replied.

A tall early-20s salesman with a thin goatee replaced the fat clerk. “How can I help you?” he asked.

“My mommy-friend recommended you.”

“Always a pleasure to serve the ladies.”

“Well,” the woman laughed abruptly. “I’ve never done this before.”

“Always under your man’s control, eh? Never had your hands on something with real power,” he rubbed the shaft of a vacuum.

“Actually, I heard there’s a radical digital workout program available.”

“Oh, that.”

Baby kicked awake and began crying, pumping her hand, the only sign she knew, for milk. It was lunch time, and the woman had forgotten to bring dehydrated food or bottled milk

for baby. The woman felt all hot and tingly. Her mommy-friends wouldn't have forgotten.

"You're going to have to walk me through the process," she said loudly over baby.

"So, we'll go ahead and register you—"

"Shhhh, baby," the woman told baby and kissed her head. "You'll eat in a minute."

"If you'll start with your hand print on the scanner," he said slowly.

She thought she saw him wink but was unsure. She noticed that he had extremely long eyelashes. She had thought that this purchase would be off record but saw no way out of it now without drawing undue attention. She gingerly stretched her hand on the glass. A blue light rolled underneath it. The salesman took a data stick out of the counter. "I'm putting your records in the system for safekeeping. I'm sure you understand." He then put the stick in his pocket and then wiped the data from the system. "User error" he typed in as the code reason for deleting the information.

The woman realized she had been holding her breath. She breathed in and out and smiled as if all of this was normal. She took the wiggling baby out of the carrier and placed her on the counter. Baby stopped crying and waved and flirted with the clerk, "ba," she said.

"How much is the course?"

He nodded towards Baby. "My sister has three kids, all under the age of 4." He tapped his Telliwatch. "It'll be 500."

The woman set her Telliwatch to search for nearby devices. "That's a handful," the woman tried to sound as if she cared.

"Yeah, her ex-husband left her, but I don't blame him for leaving. He was just going to get a drink with his friends one night, and she was fine with it, but he left his Telliwatch in the apartment, went back to get it and she put a knife to his throat. Drew blood. She has bipolar

though and refuses meds. The authorities came and even though he kicked her shin to get her off—I don't blame him—he was the one with blood on him, so they charged her.”

“Wow.” Her Telliwatch located his, and she asked it to move the coin over. “What about the kids—are they okay?”

“She’s cute.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure, they’re kids. Resilient, you know.” His Telliwatch beeped confirmation. “Is she a primordial?”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a type of dwarfism,” he gave her a piece of paper with a barcode on it, and poked Baby in the chest. “I saw a new drug advertised on the news for it.”

“She’s not a dwarf.” The woman folded the piece of paper and slipped it into a hidden pocket of the carrier.

Baby shivered and put her hands where the salesman poked her and said, “uh oh.”

“Yes, uh oh!” The woman beamed. “That’s a new word.”

“Aw, she likes me. Can I hold her?”

“Baby needs to eat,” the woman said, picking up baby. “Thank you for your help.”

“Mmmmm,” baby said, pumping her hand and pulling at the woman’s top.

She tried to squeeze baby into the carrier, but baby kept flapping at her neck. “Mmmm, Mmmmm, Mmmmm,” baby said over and over.

She was going to have to go old fashioned and feed baby from the breast. She didn’t know what else to do. “Do you have somewhere quiet I can feed her?”

“You can sit behind the counter here.”

“I meant somewhere with less going on. It’s a bit bright here.”

“You can use the store room in the back.”

She followed him behind the green curtain and into a darker hallway, through a door that had been propped open by cardboard boxes. He flicked the light on. “You can turn the light off if you want, but it’ll be pitch black.”

“That’s okay. The light can stay on.” She waited.

“I’ll leave you to it,” he said, turning a key in his hand. “Want me to lock you in?”

“No, thank you.”

Baby was shrieking now. She was hungry and it might be the only way the woman was going to get her to latch here. She unbuckled the carrier completely, and pulled her overshirt up over her bra, her undershirt down. She laid baby across her lap, and baby stopped shrieking and was watching the woman’s hands, as this was the position that she prepared baby for bottle. The woman took her breast out of her bra. The nipple fell inches in front of baby’s face. Baby looked at it strangely, then at the woman. Baby poked her nipple and began to wail.

“This is it, baby,” the woman said. “I don’t have any bottles.”

Baby got all red and scrunched her face up, pursed her lips and turned her head away. The woman gave baby the pacifier and waited until she calmed some and took a breath, then she carefully popped out the pacifier and guided her nipple in baby’s mouth.

“There you go.”

Baby bit hard.

“Ow!” the woman cried. It was useless. She was a terrible mother. The woman apologized to baby and couldn’t help but begin to weep.

Baby giggled. Then out of nowhere, baby began to suckle as if she knew all along how to do it. The woman felt the tingling of her let down and milk moving from her breast to baby. She wiped a sleeve across her eyes and looked at baby and felt an overwhelming chemical. Baby focused on the woman's eyes and ate. The woman finally understood something about connection with baby. There she was connected to baby. Connected to herself. Baby swallowed for several minutes, and then as the woman was gazing into baby's eyes, stroking baby's head and telling her softly what a lovely baby she was, baby's eyes rolled back for a second. The woman put a finger to the corner of baby's mouth to release suction. Baby relaxed and looked past the woman. Right through her, as if she wasn't there. The woman shook baby, but baby blinked and blinked and stared and stared, pupils large and black like soot and danger and nothingness. Baby looked like baby, but baby was not all right. Everything was not all right.

It's Time to Fix the Porch

Nancy stood between him and the television and pointed a batter-dripping spoon at him. “How come you so fat?” She licked the drippings from the spoon and wiped spots from her blouse with her index.

“I’m trying to watch *The Princess Bride*,” Peter said, throwing his arms up.

“Don’t you tell me that you sneaking again,” she said. “I’ve told you to watch your sugars.”

“Yeah, I’ll get checked out,” he had said to keep her quiet. “What do you want to watch?” He noticed her shirt stretching over her breasts held by little white buttons, with circles of skin gleaming between—she’d put on some weight herself, he thought, but he knew better than to say anything.

She made him a doctor's appointment the next day, called his boss, Fred, to get him off from the auto shop, and the following Tuesday, she walked hand-in-hand with him the full mile to the bus stop.

"And tell him to get you some of them pills that eat up fat," she said. She laid a palm on his back and helped him up the bus steps.

Peter nodded and watched her leave from the back of the bus. How his mother dropped him to the school bus from the sidewalk on his first day—she had tucked in his shirt and vaselined his hair with rough hands—he ran to the back and cried because she'd already disappeared down the road when he pressed his nose to the window.

At the doctor's, he sat on the edge of a plastic bed covered with a rolled out paper. He lifted his right hip, then his left hip, to relieve the pressure while he waited. The room was covered with drawings of naked women with cut open breasts and names he'd never associated while squeezing and tweaking his wife's nipples. Areolas—lobules—mammary glands. He touched the raised network of lymph nodes and thought about how Nancy's breasts have drooped a bit in the last couple of years. The doctor came in the room while he was tracing the molding down to the nipple.

"Don't worry, everyone does that," she said. Peter jolted. "I always tell patients that it must have been a man that made those posters. Why else show the outside of the breast?" She laughed abruptly.

Peter withdrew his fingers and shoved them in his pockets. He stared at his feet.

"I'm Dr. Yorst," she said, holding out her hand.

"Right then," she said, clearing her throat, and poised pen to clipboard. "What seems to be the problem?" Peter started to wonder if he'd gone to the wrong room.

“My wife thought I should get checked out.” He shrugged his shoulders—Nancy had been coming to this practice for a year or so. “I’ve put on some, and she thinks my sugars are off.”

“Have you had symptoms? How regular are you?”

“I’m regular. But I had stomach flu a couple months back. No dizziness or sweats, nothing like that.” He let his worn hands relax into his lap. “To be honest, it’s been a bad couple of years since Nancy found out about her being sterile and all. It’s been hard on me. And, well, I’ve been eating more than I should.”

“Has your mood affected your work?”

“There’s nothing better than taking an engine apart and putting it back together. It all makes sense.”

“Sure. Go ahead and step on the scales.”

Peter held his belly as he scooted off the bed. He slipped out of his sandals and stepped on the scales. He watched her move the big arrow to 200 lbs and the smaller one up to 245 lbs. The bar rocked a little and then settled as she drew it back to 240 lbs.

“That can’t be right.” Peter scratched his head. “I was 210 a couple of months back.”

“Stress definitely affects weight, but 30 lbs is quite a lot for two months. Lie on the bed—I want to check your abdomen for hernias or cysts.”

Peter grunted and fell back onto the papered bed. She pressed all four quadrants of his abdomen, lightly at first, asking if it hurt, then deeper under his ribs. His tummy rumbled. “Ah, that feels weird,” he said. “Like some food’s going to come up.” He belched long and hard. The doctor scrunched her face and turned away, when she looked back at Peter she held a plastic smile. She measured his stomach, from the top of his Hanes underwear to his sternum. Her light

palpating excited him—icy fingers danced across his underwear line, the measuring tape tickled hairs in his navel—Nancy hadn't touched him since the last perfunctory birthday sex. He took in some deep breaths and pretended the doctor was an old man, with wax bulging out of his ears and a hairy neck instead of the blonde bobbed-cut, thin doctor in a loose white coat. He started to imagine what shape her breasts were, whether they would fit in his hands, how much of them he could hold in his teeth.

“I think we'd better get an ultrasound and do some blood work,” she said. She wrote on a post-it-sized paper and handed it to him. “Go across the hall and give them this prescription. They'll run your tests. Then come back and see me.”

Peter spent the next hour getting stuck with needles—they had trouble finding his veins, he was told. The inside of his elbow throbbed from the three times the lab tech stabbed him with the needle, and he wanted to stab back, instead, he rolled a magazine tight in his fist and tapped it against his leg as he was ushered into the ultrasound room. The tech rubbed cool gel all over his belly and sighed. She pressed the wand hard on his side, sending a sharp pain through him.

“Sorry, I just have to get in there to get a good pic,” she said.

Peter clenched his teeth and nodded.

“Okay, here we go.” The tech squinted at the screen and used a mouse to click in notes. Peter heard a faint whomp whomp whomp of his heart on the monitor. “The Biparietal diameter measures at 80mm, which in conjunction with FL puts the EFW at 2000 grams. You're measuring a little big.”

The whomps sped up, and Peter felt things turn inside. “Is that good?” he asked.

“I just take the ultrasound, the doc interprets them.”

Peter started to panic. If everything was okay, the tech would have said something—she must want the doctor to talk to him one-on-one. They always have to give the bad news. It was cancer, or heart disease, or maybe Nancy was right, maybe the diabetes was finally catching up with him.

“Okay, we’re all done here. I’m printing pictures for you to keep until the next time—they’re cute. You can pick them up from the front desk on your way out.”

Peter couldn’t imagine why his insides would be “cute”—he figured it was a medical thing. He remembered his mother, a nurse, clucking about how intestines looked like pink marshmallows. He started to salivate at the thought of roasted s’mores. He sat in a small, unpadded chair in the doctor’s waiting room and his back ached. He rubbed where the ultrasound lady pressed her wand, and made mental lists of things he needed to do before he died: fix Nancy’s leaky exhaust, convince her to roast a bird for dinner, take her on a cruise—that was her fantasy—and drive his F-150 into the shop at about 80 mph, ‘cause if he’d have to go, he might as well go out big.

“Dr. Yorst will see you now,” the secretary said. Peter shuffled through the door to the examination room and crinkled back onto the paper. The doctor entered, flipping through a chart on a clipboard, and not looking up.

“Because you’re so far along in your pregnancy and haven’t had proper medical care, we’ll have to run some more tests.”

“You bet you will,” Peter said, almost yelling. “You’ve got the wrong patient.”

Dr. Yorst sat beside him and put her clipboard on the counter by the sink. “I know this might be a shock to you.” She rested a cold hand on his warm one. “But you’re at least five months along, and you and the baby need to be as healthy as possible.”

Peter shook his head. “How can I have a baby?” he asked out loud.

“This is a lot to take in. You’re not alone. Many people find themselves in this situation—you’ll work it out. Besides, your wife will be ecstatic, after you trying for so long.”

“No. I mean, how?”

“Elective caesareans are popular at the moment, if you feel you can’t handle the delivery. I can book it, and you’ll know exactly when that baby’s coming. It’s like having your wisdom teeth out.” She handed him the ultrasound pictures. “See, that’s the head. And the fingers.” She pointed in between two hazy blobs, “and those three slits lets us know it’s a girl.”

Peter touched the black and whites gingerly. The alien form in the image looked nothing like a baby. “Are you sure it’s human?”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” she said, palming his stomach. Her hands on his skin now felt wrong. “Everything’s perfectly normal, except the baby’s measuring a little big, so we’ll need for you to come back in next week and measure you again to get accurate blood sugars and—”

Peter stopped listening because he was tracing the form in the image and thinking back over the, now obvious, signs. The tender pulsing in his breasts. The way he’d been scarfing Jelly Beans. He’d even quit smoking cigars a couple of months back because the smell just made him up and puke one day. It was fascinating to Peter, the body, how it all worked for or against you. After all the years of Nancy prepping her body for a baby, the disappointment, the decision to stop trying, the denial for adoption, he was unsure of her reaction.

He rehearsed how he’d tell her on the way to the bus stop, but when he mounted the bus, clutching his belly, waves of memories washed over him. The neighbor dropping him off after preschool, and Peter entering the house with a macaroni picture in hand, seeing mommy on the

floor, glass triangles smattered on the carpet, a picture of daddy all twisted up in the frame on the floor, her finger bleeding. *Daddy had to leave to keep us safe, you understand, don't you baby*, she had said. Peter dreamed of his father in a mask, black camouflage, and an American flag sewn to his shoulders like a cape. His father hugged atomic bombs and flew them into the ocean before detonation and derailed Russian trains with his hands. Peter begged his mommy to tell him about daddy's adventures. *No, Petey, it's too much*, she said. In sixth grade, Peter stole a five-dollar bill from his mother's bag for candy. She swatted him with the dictionary 20 times and made him repent with a new word each time, when he was spent from crying she said, "*Your father was a low-life mooch. He never even served.*" She spat it out like she'd tasted bad eggs. "*He didn't want a family, and we didn't want him.*"

Peter's cheeks were wet with tears. He wiped them away with a corner of his shirt collar. Nancy would have been better fitted for this kind of thing. She was strong and prepared, and her parents held them both when Nancy miscarried, and watched videos about adoption when Nancy and Peter looked at other options. Peter's mother called Nancy unfit when she heard about adoption. Said that it wasn't right, that it must have been God's will if Nancy was barren. Peter started to sweat. He fanned his face with the sonogram pictures and watched the blurs of trees mix with the greys of concrete out the window. He worried Nancy would think he cheated, and even though she drove him crazy, she was all he got. He flipped through the images of the creature inside him and felt his belly move—"You in there?" he said to his stomach and poked it. She spun against his voice—as if she heard him, understood him. He caressed his swollen form and cooed to her, "It's okay, honey. Daddy's here."

Nancy was rocking on their porch when he vacillated up their road. She stood up as he opened the wire gate that held the overgrown lawn in. When they had bought the house, they'd talked about the tile they would lay, how they would sand down the siding and slather it with forest green—Nancy mostly studded out rooms for work, but she'd apprenticed in other specialties at construction sites just for remodeling tips, eventually they wanted to start flipping houses for money—and Peter was going to construct a crib from an old motorcycle frame, but now crooked shingles and water-rotten front steps reminded Peter of all the promises they'd broken.

"How it go?" she asked, ringing her hands. She had beautiful olive skin. She wore a thin cotton dress, which floated out from beneath her cleavage, and she twisted her braided black hair into a pile on her head—she made the hippy-look effortless.

"You should sit," he said, as he tried to visualize putting "I" and "pregnant" together, like fitting an oil pump to an engine. There was a way of squeezing it in between the spaces in an open engine. Sometimes, you just had to get the right angle, especially in those Japanese ones. Nancy's face lost color as she gripped the rocking chair. Peter stood in front of her, and for the first time, he felt like a man.

"Honey, I don't know how this happened—"

"Don't tell me you dying," she said. "Don't you dare, Peter Raymond."

"No baby, it's not like that," he said and paused—then he just said it. "You know how we tried for a long time—"

"You're serious?" She got up from the rocker and started to pace. "You. Pregnant?" She snorted.

"Something's alive inside me, babe. It's amazing."

“You know how much I wanted one. I wanted one so bad, and you went and did it all on your own self.” She went inside and let the screen door slam behind her. Peter followed her into their bedroom, cradling the belly as if he could stop sound entering it.

“I didn’t even know it could happen.”

“How could you do this to me?” She sat on the bed, head in hands. “You make me look like a fool.” She shrugged him off. “It’s not right. I wanted the baby.”

He stood in front of her, his rounded form inches from her face. “Nancy, it’s a girl—a beautiful baby girl.” He took her fingers in his, and put them on his stomach. “Don’t you want to put her in pink dresses. And comb her hair. And show her how you cook?” Nancy tried to pull her hands away, but Peter held her firm against his belly. “Don’t you feel her? She is a part of me and a part of you.”

“Course I want all that,” she said slowly, freeing herself from his grasp. “But you took what I wanted most. You took it from me.”

Peter shook his head. “I’m providing for our family.” He pushed her backwards onto the quilt and pinned her arms down. “Can’t you see that?” He kissed her neck, felt her tense a little.

She turned to him, their noses almost touching—he knew that she was searching for his lips, he did this twitching thing when he was lying, or so she said—her eyes were blacker than normal, pupils large in the dimming light. He loved how her nose bent to the left a little—a roller-skating accident when she was a teen, it’d been the thing that drew him to her in High School—she wore her bruises like a prizefighter. He felt her limbs relax under him. He nuzzled her collarbones, kissed a trail across the open neckline of her dress. Thought about her nipples in his mouth, the way her whole body unleashed guttural groans before orgasms, how her legs clamped his hips. She ran fingers down his back and tapped out—her sign that she wanted to go

on top. She always wanted on top. Peter rolled onto his back and got all the way onto the bed. Nancy straddled him, her white dress splaying on either side.

Her hair fell out of her bun, the braids dangled loose down her back. She unbuttoned her shirtdress and let it hang open against her body. Her breasts dipped slightly outwards, pushing against the cotton.

He reached up to part the dress, to caress her skin.

She flinched and batted his hands away. She pushed off the bed and drew the dress closed, tight fists against herself. “I feel nothing.”

Peter lay alone in the darkened room, deflated. He had a Honda-inspired oil pump once that he tried to fit in a Jeep, but it just threw oil everywhere, all over the engine, the ground, and his jumpsuit. It wasn’t until he found some Kawasaki-made seals that thickened the gap that it kicked up when he turned the ignition. He walked out to the porch in boxers, holding a crowbar. Nancy was smoking rapidly. He wedged the implement underneath the crumbling timber and levered it. The wood cracked as it bent up.

“That’s nice,” he said, passing the crowbar to Nancy. “Here, you give it a go,”

She spat on the cigarette and threw it into the side bushes. She swung the crowbar like an ax into the sunken steps. A thwack cut through the night. She shook out her arms, shoulders and nodded, passed it back. Together they dismantled the rotten steps, until every last splinter detached. Tomorrow, they’d find some treated timber and slowly build it back.

Jim and the Egg Donation

“You sure you want them messing with your giblets?” Jim imagined his wife an open chicken, other hands slopping around places only he should. He dropped his half-licked peanut butter spoon into the jar. Pushed it away on the table.

“It’s good money.”

“I just don’t feel right about it, Marce.” He scratched up and down his beard. “I mean our babies will be out there somewhere.” He rubbed Boo’s fur with his boot. The husky lifted his head and wooed, stretched onto his back, froze for tummy time then sneezed back onto his side.

“Mine and the father’s, you mean.” She always had this way of correcting him.

“Yeah, some pervert.”

“Why not make a couple happy?” She shrugged and munched on celery. “Besides, I don’t see you making enough for a down payment.” She lowered her eyes, but Jim felt the bite of it.

“You’re right. I’m not pimping out our kids.”

“Whatever,” Marcy said. “I’m making pasta.”

Jim kneeled by the table. “Boo, Splat, come.”

Boo came to Jim, and nuzzled into his pit, ears pinned back like wings. Splat wagged her tail but kept her distance until Jim opened up a hand he’d been using to pet Boo. She pressed her side against Jim’s leg and licked his face. Both huskies pushed into Jim, and he fell back onto the blue tile, giggling. Boo slobbered and nibbled his face. Splat pawed his chest with her whole body wagging. Marcy stepped over Jim and shoved the dogs out of the way with her feet. She leaned against the opening to the living room, with a fork dripping spaghetti—he remembered how she used to wear tight, shiny skirts when they were first married, smelling of oranges and cinnamon, and when she leaned like that and plumped her lips, he would taste her skin—she frowned at him, sighed and chewed at the pasta, then at the metal. Olive oil oozed down her chin and plopped on her dress shirt.

Jim got up to the table, miffed, and ripped up a half-eaten sandwich from his lunch tin. “Splat, Boo, sit.” He rolled turkey meat between his fingers. They sat. “Good dogs, gently now,” he said and put the morsels in their mouths. “What’s for dinner, mom?”

“For Pete’s sake, Jim,” Marcy said, and turned from him, leaning into the stove. “I might as well be a friggin wall.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get your din-dins ready. Come on.” He kicked off his boots, and squelched across the hard tile, the dogs panting behind. Marcy set the bowl of spaghetti beside her laptop. Her hair pulled back in a slouchy bun. He could not recall the last time she wore makeup, slinked in black panties, or the feeling of entering her. He squeezed her shoulder. She waved him away, back to writing html code.

“Whatcha think, guys?” Jim swung the fridge door open. Boo howl-talked. “Fish it is. Good boy.” He unwrapped yesterday’s salmon, still pink, and made up two china plates, slicing each cutlet into two-inch squares, adding raw carrots and some spinach, finishing it off with some hand-torn cilantro. “Get a whiff of that, Marcy. Don’t it smell good.”

“Yum,” Marcy said automatically, focusing on the screen.

“My babies love this, don’t you? Now, sit.”

Jim snuggled into Boo on their queen-sized bed—the husky’s black fur blanketed his face. Boo stretched legs, pads pressing Marcy against the wall. Splat lifted her snout from Jim’s ankles, watched Boo, then curled into herself, tucking nose into tail. Jim palmed Boo’s coat, warm and cozy, and the dog stretched out again, arching his back against Jim, pushing Marcy further away. Marcy grimaced, but her form rose and fell in the same tempo of sleep. Jim slipped out of the bed, leaving his babies, leaving Marcy sandwiched between wall and fur. He entered the closet-made-into-office, a 2x6-foot plywood sheet took up the wall length for his desk, the clothing rail became a place to pin pictures and designs. He yanked the light cord and poured over the schematics. The main structure of the dry sled would be two stripped pallets, found free-listed in the newspaper outside the meatpacking warehouse. For the rest of it, a couple of spoked cart-wheels bought off Craigslist, and some cut dowel rod from Home Depot for the shafts. He thought about carving Splat and Boo’s names in the dowel, perhaps edging their faces into the handlebow. He sketched over the blueprint again, trying to memorize the indents of lines and angles with his fingers.

He closed his eyes, imagining hands wrapped in leather, smoothing the edges of the new summer sled. His gloves curled around the handlebow. He straddled the runners of the sled and

the wheels became skis. Other mushers checked tuglines and tack. He zipped his jacket. The official gave him the go ahead. He pulled goggles on. "Hike." The huskies, linked in twos, trotted on, Boo and Splat in double lead. They dug their paws in, chugging the sled across slick ground. The trail curved to the right. "Gee, dogs." The sled cut right, grooved into ice weaving around the corner. Trees and people flashed to his sides. He focused on the dogs. "Haw," he yelled. The dogs cut left and followed the twist of the course. There was a peak 50 meters ahead. He clutched the handlebow tight. "Easy," he told the dogs in his mind, but the words didn't form. They pushed faster and flew, one after another, over the crest of the hill. The sled kicked up off the ground, suspended for a moment, he lost grip, wobbled on toes. The dogs splished into the loose snow beneath, spraying droplets of white everywhere. The sled thudded into the ground and teetered. He leaned forward into the sled, balancing the weight. The dogs floated over ice, legs crisscrossing, becoming one blur of grey. He saw nothing but legs.

"Jim?" Marcy stood behind him. "It's 3 a.m."

"Couldn't sleep."

"You need to tell those dogs to get." She squished her breasts against the back of his neck, purring, and ran hands up his chest.

"I just gotta get these drawings right," he said, leaning back into her. He reached up behind to cup her breast. "Man, your boobs are huge."

"The dogs don't listen to me." She tapped his shoulders, and he felt cool air where her breasts had been. He exhaled violently, knowing that nothing was going to happen that night.

"I'm gonna build this dry sled," he said and swiveled to face her, "and get into a race this winter, maybe even make some money." Then she'd be proud.

“Can’t you make something useful.” She trailed fingers down his arms, puckered her face.

Jim’s arms tingled all over the surface. He thought about slapping her ass. “All the guys on the husky forum want one.”

Marcy twitched and placed hands on hips. “This thing, Jim.” She snatched his schematics from the desk. “This is nothing.” She shoved it in his face. “All you care about is those stupid dogs.”

He grabbed her wrists. He thought about shaking her hard, but he just held her there for a minute, watching her body ripple with anger, pulsing through her muscles. Something about the way she clamped the energy in, lips pressed, jaw tight, felt familiar. He flicked her hands open and caught the paper as it fell. “You’ll see.” He spun back to the desk and took a ruler to the schematics.

“Jimbo, you’re slacking,” Chuck said. He perched on the work-truck tailgate, sipping NA beer, flapping his t-shirt against his belly.

Jim slid the last 2x4 off his shoulder onto the framing stack, smiled and threw hands into the air in a shrug. “You know it.” He wiped a sleeve across his forehead, wet against wet. They wore jeans, tucked in shirts that said “K.C.’s Fixer Uppers,” and steel-toes, even in the mid-July, Kansas City mug. Everyday, Jim baby-powdered his crotch and slipped on those girly Lycra shorts under jeans, and he still chafed. He would get home, striding wide-legged, feeling anything but cowboy.

“Drink?” Chuck asked.

“Hit me,” Jim said.

Chuck opened the cooler and tossed him a Coors. “It’s closing time anyhow.” Chuck sniffed and phlegmed up a goop of snot, spat it into the dry dirt, and toed it into the dust.

“Man, this heat,” Jim said. He pictured Boo and Splat panting on the kitchen floor, hiding from the sun. “Sure wished I lived in Alaska.”

“Yep, my old lady’s parents are from Wisconsin.” Chuck adjusted a ball cap onto his matted hair.

“Snow. Just white, fluffy snow,” Jim said. He felt the sled in his fingers. “And nobody else for miles.”

Chuck popped open his second NA.

“You and Lucy ever think about moving? You, know, out to the country.”

“We take the boys hunting in the Ozarks. But I’d get bored living in nature and shit.”

“Yeah,” Jim said, forced a chuckle, but couldn’t think of anything better.

Just after they were married, Jim and Marcy had big plans to move to the country and buy a couple of acres to start planting their own food. Perhaps a small herb garden. A cow. The simple things. Jim spent some time reading *Gardening for Dummies* and *How to Become a Cow Farmer in Ten Days*, and he accumulated gloves, hoses, trowels, egg cartons, jelly jars. Jim had an apprenticeship with Barley & Bros Antique Carpentry and Marcy was taking computer classes while they looked for the perfect spot. They finally found a worn-out cottage on 2 acres,

with a collapsed small barn and enough fertile soil for a garden. Marcy fell in love with the place. *Imagine the possibilities*, she said, as they skipped over holes in the floor, and ducked beneath hanging insulation. She talked about a foyer, candlelight dinners, adding a third floor. Jim felt a stomach ulcer developing. She had it all planned out; just a couple of months of eating down at the salvation army, bicycling to class and carpooling to work, they could have about a down payment; then Jim was to fix it up after getting off at Barley's and she'd have her mom help her sew curtains and paint between class and homework; within four months, they could be in a spanking new home. *Can't you see it, Jim?*

A month into her plan, Jim and Barley got into it over the design of Mrs. Montgomery's wing-back chairs—Jim had spent all day carving soft scrolls on the feet. They were as good as any he'd ever seen. The perfect depth between creases. He was running his fingers over the scrolls, checking for rough patches when Barley blustered into the shop.

"Show them to me," he said to Jim, clicking impatiently.

Jim set the legs in front of Barley and spread his hands out as if welcoming to a feast. He smiled.

"No. No. No," Barley said in his emphatic Italian accent. "She wants something fit for Elton John," Barley said. "These are too plain."

"They're classic."

Barley examined the curves of a leg, held it against the sunlight coming through the window, blew dust off it, put it up to his face and cocked his head as if looking down a barrel.

"Yes, see. Not straight." He tutted. "Start again. Make it fancy."

For just a moment, Jim wanted to lose it. He wanted to yank the leg away from a recoiling Barley, and wave it like a club about his head, bashing it over and over against the vice until it splintered. Instead, Jim shrugged, mumbling that he quit, and walked out of the shop.

“What about the house?” Marcy asked when he told her what happened. “You’re supposed to provide for us. You are the man, aren’t you?”

“I can get another job, Marce.” Jim waved a hand in front of her.

“You bet your eyeballs you will. You better go back to Barley’s and beg him to take you back.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Or won’t.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Nothing.” She shook her head. “Don’t say anything. Do something.”

It wasn’t long after, they lost the house to some city house flipper, and Marcy started to bring home pamphlets about donating sperm and eggs for cash.

Chuck unwrapped a PB&J from his lunchbox and a crinkled photo tumbled from the aluminum foil. Jim snatched it. It was a picture of Chuck and a kid bicycling together. Chuck on a mountain bike, in a checkered shirt, hair fluffing out from a bright blue helmet, peering back at a boy on a green mini bike with a “Super Trooper” sticker on the bar. The kid’s knees and

elbows were edged with plastic pads. A dimple in his left cheek roughed and scratched like he'd bit the street. His face was open in a smile, eyes focused on Chuck. Jim turned the picture over. "To: daddy" scribbled in the top left corner, followed by "Best day ever." At the bottom it finished with "love you." He handed it to Chuck. "Nice picture."

Chuck traced a finger across the words, and he rubbed his nose. "Little Charles is my writer. He's going to be somebody."

His eyes reminded Jim of how he felt when he taught Boo a new trick, proud with a tinge of sadness—but there was something extra in Chuck's face, something unreadable.

"Pretty good for a seven-year old. My Boo learned how to open doors last week. Fucked up thing is now I got to lock all the doors, even when I'm there." Jim laughed to himself. "Strange how fast they grow."

Chuck's face scrunched up and then he sniffed, relaxed. "You and Marcy should come over for dinner Sunday."

Jim kicked at the dirt with his boots. "Weekends are bad for me, with the dogs and all."

"We can barbeque. The women can gossip. You can meet our boys. And, Lucy makes a killer rub."

"All right then, I'll settle the dogs down, then we'll come over around six. Marcy'll whip up desert," he said this confidently, like a man in control of his wife.

"It means a lot that you're coming, babe," Jim said and unleashed the dogs. He sloshed water into their bowls. He watched Marcy tug at her blue suit dress in front of the mirror. She

had straightened her hair, and it lay flat against her rounded cheeks. Unbuttoned, she covered her stomach with her hands. He loved seeing her hold her stomach, maternal-like. She pulled the jacket together and managed to fasten it, leaving oval-shaped skin holes.

“I don’t have anything to wear,” she said, flapping her arms.

“It’s not fancy,” he said. “Just put on some jeans or something. I’m sure Lucy won’t be dressed up. She’s a mom.” The words fell out awkward-like. Marcy’s face began to contort. “I mean that she don’t have time to look nice with two boys and all.”

“You mean I don’t have an excuse,” she said slowly. “You mean I’m not a mom.”

“You’re beautiful.” He meant it, but somehow he tried too hard to say it.

“I’m going to change.”

Jim pulled the pickup into Chuck’s driveway. The store-bought pie wobbled on Marcy’s knees. The place was a two-story brick house, sandwiched between cinderblock ranches. Telephone wires hung low between the houses, connecting them together in a black web. Jim wondered about yardage, whether plots were shared—he worried about Boo and Splat back at the apartment. He suddenly felt nervous and itched to get back to them.

“Are you sure you got the directions right?” she asked, refusing to move.

“208, he said.” He pointed at the painted numbers by the side of the door. “This is the one.” He stepped out of the truck, and Marcy stayed in the car, arms folded over the pie. He stood at the front of the truck, waiting. Neither of them moved. She scowled. He relented. It was

this thing she did in front of others—she wanted him to be a gentleman, but he never promised her that. He walked to her door and opened it, reluctantly.

She shoved the pie into his stomach. “Thank you,” she said, smiling.

Jim held the dish and cursed. She scooped to the edge of the seat, slid out and straightened blouse over khakis. She linked her arm through his, and squeezed it affectionately.

“Hey,” Chuck said from the door. He held up a palm in a wave, the other tucked in his jeans’ front pocket. He wore an open cotton shirt, wife-beater underneath, and Jim noticed his sleeved arms, smattered in Gaelic crosses, for the first time. He felt overdressed in an ironed polo, belt and jeans. “Come on in.” Chuck waved them in. “We’ll go on to the back.”

He took Jim and Marcy through the front door into the sitting room. G.I. Joes attacked Lego starships on the carpet, between tweed couches. The puppeteer smashed them together, pitchu pitchu bang bang bang ow ow, and the army guy dropped dead. Little Charles had a Mohawk and wore SWAT team gear. “Toys up in your room,” Chuck said to him. “Then wash your hands and help mom.”

“But, but—” he said to his dad.

Chuck raised his brows. “Excuse me?”

“Yes, sir.” Little Charles dropped his shoulders and kneeled to collect his men.

Chuck led them through a tight hallway, into the open kitchen at the back. Lucy had hands in a bowl, flipping greens. She wore a camo-print apron that said “Property of a U.S. Marine” in pink thread. Under that, a frilly blouse with un-tied strings at the neck and worn-jean shorts. She faced them and smiled dimples into her cheeks.

“Hi, guys.” She rinsed her hands and wiped them on the apron. “Marcy, I’m glad I get to meet you.” She hugged Marcy, who patted Lucy’s arms in return. “And, Jim, it’s good to see you.”

Jim swooped in for a side embrace. Lucy smelled like washing and freshly cut grass. He breathed her in for a second, closing his eyes. “Good to see you too.” He held on a little too long and let her go.

“Beer?” she asked. Jim nodded.

“Water, please,” Marcy said.

Chuck kissed Lucy’s face, and Jim felt awkward, like he should love on Marcy. He stepped towards her, and she spun into his mouth. Their lips bumped. Jim’s cheeks warmed.

“Here’s the pie,” he said, putting it on the counter.

Chuck released Lucy. “Thanks, guys.”

“Marcy, that looks delicious.” Lucy ran fingers down through her light brown waves, and bit her pink mouth.

Marcy blushed. Jim wrapped an arm around his wife’s shoulders and squeezed. “Family secret recipe.” He winked at Marcy, and she pinched him softly in return.

“Jimbo, let’s go check on the meat,” Chuck said.

Lucy lifted the pie onto a shelf in the fridge.

“It’s better warm,” Jim heard Marcy say as he followed Chuck.

Christmas lights boxed in the patio on the top and two walls, with a wooden picnic table and benches on either side, two captain’s chairs, and a grill to the left, sizzling and smoking. The smell reminded Jim of camping with his parents. Mom cutting watermelon on a plastic table,

spanking their hands for sneaking chips and threatening the wooden spoon, and dad practicing sales' pitches while turning sausages. They would scamper around the site in the early morning hours, with twigs tied in their hair, pulling stakes and yelling outside tents. Here, the only noises emanated from the grill and Chuck telling him about fishing. Jim thought how strange that his place could be full of stuff yet empty at the same time. Little Charles and Henry tumbled outside from the sliding glass door, scratching and panting.

"I call end," Little Charles said, and they raced over each other to the benches.

"No fair," Henry said, whining, and stuck out his bottom lip. Henry was about a foot shorter than Little Charles and sported scruffy jeans, a red t-shirt, and padded around in socks.

"You'll sit where you're told," Chuck said, pointing tongs at them.

"Where do you want me?" Jim asked.

"You can sit at this end."

Jim slid into the chair facing the house so he could watch the ladies come out. Henry sidled next to him and fiddled with his watch. Little Charles sat by the other head, next to dad's seat.

"Like my watch? See this." Jim pushed a button and the face lit up green.

"Cool. Can I try?"

Henry's face was expectant, like Splat's when Jim was about to throw a stick. "Sure." He let the boy paw the buttons. Henry drummed on the watch, changed the time, reset the alarm. Little Charles hummed and picked at splinters on the table.

"Henry, leave Jim alone."

"It's okay," Jim said. Henry made the watch flash and beep.

"Last warning."

Henry turned red and played with his fingers, kicked his feet together under the bench.

“Yes, sir.”

Lucy and Marcy carried platters outside. Marcy laughed, flinging her head back unabashedly and bellowing, and it reminded Jim of when they first started dating. There was something beautiful about her, even next to Lucy. They set the food on the table. Lucy hopped onto the bench beside Jim and next to Little Charles, and Marcy squeezed between Henry and Chuck.

Jim admired Lucy’s pointed face, her wolf-like eyes tracking Chuck’s every move. Her limbs were muscular yet elegant. He imagined her running alongside Boo and Splat in a field of dandelions, him grabbing her hand, pulling her close, the spores floating around them, falling down her cheeks like soft wisps of snow. Chuck air-kissed Lucy across the table. Jim squeezed the burger into his mouth and tried to rub Marcy’s leg with his foot but got intercepted by Henry, who was kicking his legs to an unmetrical beat.

“Let’s say grace,” Chuck said loudly.

Jim realized he was the only one eating and dropped the burger. Marcy scowled at him.

Lucy held her hand out for Jim to take it. Marcy was already holding Chuck’s, so Jim took Lucy’s roughly. But her hand was so soft, like a finely-sanded pine, that he loosened his grip and squeezed apologetically, resisting caressing her palm with his fingertips. He wondered if all of her skin was that malleable. They all bowed their heads. Jim bit his lip.

“Lord, thank you for loving us despite who we are,” Chuck said in a low voice. “We don’t deserve you. Help me be a better leader for my family. Pray that we enjoy this night and that the food nourishes our bodies, and thank you for our friends.” He said the last word in a higher note, an open invitation.

There was silence. Jim studied the knots in the weathered table.

Lucy cut in, “And thank you, God, for a man that leads me and helps me to become a better wife and mother and follower of You.” She squeezed Jim’s hand. “Wanna add anything?”

“Um.” Jim started to panic. “Thank you, guys, for having us.”

“And for the kids,” said Marcy, and looked up to the heavens after a theatrical pause.

“Yes, that’s right,” Jim cleared his throat. “Thank you, oh Lord above, for Chuck and Lucy’s kids.”

“Amen,” Chuck said.

And they all repeated, “Amen.”

Jim’s forehead was sweaty.

The kids dug in quickly, heads almost touching the paper plates, tongues slurping soda from plastic cups.

“This potato salad is fantastic, Lucy. You’ll have to give Marcy the recipe.” Jim said.

“Thanks. I can’t take credit. It was that cooking show with Flash Robinson—you know the French guy who yells at everyone.”

“Swoon!” Marcy said, fanning her face.

“I know. He’s so take-charge.”

“I’d be a bit scared to be told off by him though.”

“I think he’s an arrogant asshat,” Jim said.

“I kinda like it,” Lucy blushed.

“Sometimes we like to pretend I’m Flash, don’t we Luce?” Chuck winked at her.

“Oh, that’s a bit devious,” Marcy said.

“Doesn’t sound very religious,” Jim mumbled.

Chuck and Lucy laughed.

After the kids licked their plates, they wrestled on the ground, pinning each other down, gnawing ears, nipping wrists and ankles. Chuck stretched back, stomach protruding with meat. “Boys will be boys,” he said, shaking his head.

“I’m dying to know how you guys met,” Marcy asked Chuck.

Jim didn’t like the way Marcy leaned into Chuck and twirled hair around her ear.

“I saw her at the club by the Landing. She was wearing all black—only a slit of skin around her belly button was showing. Her dancing got me mesmerized. I went up right by her and started throwing some of my moves—”

“He thinks he can dance.” Lucy chuckled.

“Anyway, by the end of the night, we were both wasted. There were a lot of guys trying to cut in, but I shouldered them out. When I found her lying on the bathroom floor, hugging the toilet, I picked her up and carried her to my car. I carried her all the way up to my apartment and” he made sure the kids were out of sight, and said, “we made love.”

“Funny thing is we both lied about our age. I was only 17—I had made my own fake id, and he was 28,” Lucy said. “Such an old man, aren’t ya?”

For a second, Jim was relieved that he and Marcy had met in the local supermarket and that they had a normal dinner and move first date and had waited the obligatory month or so before they had sex. “Is that why you don’t drink?” he asked.

Lucy stopped smiling and studied her hands.

Something flickered in Chuck’s eyes. He squeezed the can of his empty NA and stood up, pressed his fingers into the table. “Nah, it’s not that.”

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” Jim said.

“Marcy was telling me inside about the egg donation,” Lucy said abruptly.

Chuck tossed his can against the house and cracked open a fresh one from the cooler beside the barbeque. He offered one to Jim.

“Were you, now.” Jim shook his head, pressed thumbs into his temples.

“Oh, I think it’s wonderful. That family is going to be so blessed.” Lucy clasped Marcy’s hands. Jim rubbed his throat.

“Man, I wouldn’t have the gonads for that,” Chuck said, straddling the armrest, leaning into his leg propped on the chair.

“Well, we haven’t done it yet.” Jim waited for Marcy to help him out. “It’s something we’re discussing, but we’ll probably have our own first.” He looked to his wife.

She rocked back on the bench and chewed an index.

No one spoke.

“I mean we are going to have our own, first?” His voice had become an octave higher, and he coughed to force it down.

Marcy refused to return his gaze and slowly shook her head.

He thought about her bloated skin and full breasts and knew it’d been too long since they’d been together—she’d been taking hormones, and she hadn’t told him, hadn’t even asked him. He pinched his throat between thumb and forefinger, constricting his air.

A high-pitched howl came from the darkness of the backyard.

“I got an owie.” Henry cried and scrambled next to Chuck, nuzzling his arm.

“It wasn’t my fault.” Charles was just behind him, inspecting a scratch on his own elbow.

“Let me take a look.” Chuck pulled Henry onto his lap and examined the scrape on his leg. “Do you think we need to cut it off?” He motioned sawing at the knee.

“No,” Henry said, sniffing, and wiggled to get off Chuck’s lap.

“When Splat got caught in the fence, you wanna know what really helped?” Jim asked both the boy and his own wife. Jim couldn’t picture Marcy’s eggs without him. Henry looked at him, tears dribbling down his face. He blinked slowly and nodded. Chuck drew Henry in tight with his cross-covered forearms, protecting him, and kissed the boy’s face, whispering love into his ears. Henry snuggled deeper into Chuck’s chest, and then looked up into the eyes of his dad.

He clenched his waist with fists. “You hold onto your leg tight.”

Little Henry poked at his wound.

“Don’t touch the cut—just press in at the sides. If you let go it’ll hurt like hell, so just clamp it until you can’t feel it anymore.”

Chuck held his little boy, who pressed on his leg. Chuck kissed Henry softly on his head. Jim stood up and turned away. He surveyed the black exterior of the neighbor’s house, arms folded tight against his stomach. He felt like he was going to be sick.

“Jim?” Marcy questioned. He could feel the air shift behind him. Almost smelled her emptiness.

“Not now, Marce.” He was unsure of his feelings.

Her fingers touched his shoulder. “Will you look at me?” she asked.

“I said, not now.” Jim’s stomach waved and flopped inside him.

“See me.” Her hand now gripped him. “Look at me,” she demanded.

Jim shrugged away, and his stomach spasmed. There was no stopping it now. He grabbed the crumbling cinder of the neighbor’s house, bent in the ready position, and then it came. Wave

after wave washed through him until there was nothing left to give. He rested his head against the house, stomach still twitching, and closed his eyes. Marcy began to stroke his hair.

After a minute the spasms stopped and he felt still enough to open his eyes. There was genuine concern puckered on Marcy's face.

"There you are," she said. "Now you see."

Jim examined the dark strands of grass by his feet.

"We'll be all right, won't we?"

Boo was always chewing on grass when he needed to throw up. Dogs were pretty smart, Jim figured. Problem was, he didn't feel any better. "I don't know, Marce," he said. "I don't know."

Recall

It's dank in the street, and I linger for a moment outside the entryway to Jameson & Sons Containment Specialists. I don't want to be under those looming fluorescents. I contemplate leaving, but I open the door anyways and walk into the offices feeling naked. The room is auditorium-large, divided into grey boxes with blue, commercial grade carpet, a glass meeting room in the right corner, and there's a slight odor of turpentine and grease emanating from the carpet. Heavy ceiling-to-floor blinds smother out the natural light. Employees rearrange pencils, skim forwarded e-mails, ring the weather channel, scribble out tax returns, nibble on biros, hike up wrinkled tights, pick out baby names, roll blue tack between thumbs and fingers, draw on the calendar, twirl loose hair, and are busy pretending not to notice my late arrival. I pretend to ignore them.

Maya poises straight-backed in her wheelie chair, pencil in mouth, and commands the keyboard with both hands. Her almost-black hair curls around her phone headset in a way that

reminds me of a Greek goddess. I tell people that she's Greek even though she's Indian. I try to sneak past her but she has excellent hearing, even with her headset and all those curls. Her chair rotates to face me and her back is still perfectly straight.

"So, you made it, finally," she says.

"Looks like it," I say, hoping that's the end of it. "Thanks for ringing. Did you get a chance to talk to Jameson—"

"I want to know what's going on. Why are you late? Where have you been?"

Her voice makes me shrink a little. I picture mum telling me to choose which wooden spoon I wanted to be hit with for lying about brushing my teeth.

"I guess I overslept." I scrape the carpet with a welly.

"You've been absent a lot recently. I can't keep covering for you. Jameson's getting suspicious and I need my job." Maya's words are controlled and clipped.

"I have been out of it lately. I shouldn't compromise your position like that. Sorry."

She folds her arms across her maroon cashmere top and she lets out a shoosh of air, her back relaxes, and I know I'm forgiven.

"Okay. You just need to come to work and on-time, so I don't have to lie for you." She joggles my hand gently. "And I haven't seen Jameson yet, so you'll have to talk to him when he comes in."

"Hmm...no-can-do, I think I'm coming down with a sore throat, you wouldn't mind covering for me..." I rub my throat, stick my tongue out, and cross my eyes.

"Go-on, get lost." She flaps her date-book at me, and swivels back round, snorting in fake disgust.

“Charlie, wake up.” I feel a hand shaking my shoulders. My eyelids are partially stuck together from goop build-up. “Quick, Jameson is coming.” It’s Maya.

I unglue my eyes and wipe the drool away from the edges of my lips. Have I been dreaming this whole time? My station is up and running and my coffee is lukewarm. Maya sneaks back to her own cubicle before Jameson stalks down the aisle toward our area. I pretend to enter an account into the server.

“Miss. Fawn, I need to see you in my office for a moment.” He leans over me to examine the account and the kippers he had for lunch are fermenting in his breath.

“Sir, shall I finish the account?” I ask, inhaling through my mouth.

“No.” He backs up and waits at the edge of the cubicle. His black silk suit loosely drapes over his boney frame, his head is perched between puffed shoulder pads and his face is hidden behind large squared glasses. His eyes aren’t blinking; one of them is looking at me, and the other toward the aisle. I’m not sure whether or not he’s actually looking at me. For a moment, my mother’s face is sketched in my mind but I push it away. Jameson keeps a smile that is like three sides of a square, with the top missing, and wrinkles encase it. The smile doesn’t move like his eyes do. I follow his robot walk into the glass meeting room.

“Sir, I thought we were going to your office,” I say naively.

“Today, this is my office.” He spreads his arms out as like you would to a feast and he still wears the box. He motions for me to take a chair on his left, facing the workers. I pray that the rumors about the standing on a chair holding a sign aren’t true. He presses the record button on an 80s style tape recorder and scribbles something on a legal pad.

“Tell me, is there a reason why you have been absent?”

“My car had a flat.”

“Where?”

“In the tire, Sir.”

“Who fixed it?”

“I did. I don’t get paid enough for a mechanic.” I muffle a laugh and rub my humid palms on my green velvet skirt. “Sorry, I laugh when I’m nervous sometimes.”

“So you missed six days of work in the last fortnight because you had six flats?” Only one of his eyes is jerking in my direction and his mask-smile is planted on. I think he is joking back. His smile is still there, and I think I hear a chuckle or maybe it’s a snort but I’m already laughing now. It’s a loud bellowing laugh that I’m sure the employees can hear because they are busy pretending not to notice again. I’m the only one laughing. Jameson shakes his wrist around so that his platinum watch faces him, and I see an employee in the nearest cubicle flinch. I stop laughing.

“Miss Fawn, are you aware that company policy only permits three sick days per month and that means notifying the supervisor, me?” He sniffs and scratches something down.

“Yes, sir, I’m aware. But I only had one sick day this month.”

“I have a print-out of the days you did not log on to your computer,” he says. He pulls off his glasses with one arthritic hand and he blinks. I realize he’s serious.

“That’s not possible. I always get onto the server.”

“Which would make it more likely, no?” He pushes the copy over to me and presses his hands together. “You can see how this is a delicate situation. You are a five-year employee; you have produced well up to this point and have good standing with attendance. You are like the River Frome, you are contaminated by the oils and muck that is the excrement of your excesses. You are therefore, unwanted.” He blinks and wipes his forehead with the back of his hand.

“You want to give me a sign?” I hope that I am on the chair now.

“Unwanted.” He repeats the word with the conviction of a dying wish. A couple of heads peer over their cubicles at this louder statement.

“Right, I’ll get my stuff then?” I wait for a signal that the discussion is over but he is still staring at my shirt and at the paper. I start to leave and not one of his whiskers or even his lips stir, only the eye that was on my shirt is now on the table. He is fixed like metal. I stare at the little black letters and digits on the white paper. There has to be something wrong here.

As I am bundling up the memos, a photo of my granny’s old dog, a coffee stained valentines from 2003, emergency tampons, a Far-Side mug, plane ticket stubs that cover 6 of the 7 continents, and raspberry flavoured bubblegum, Maya wheels over to my station.

“You’re fired?” asks Maya.

“Technically, I’m ‘unwanted.’”

“Poor old sod, he’s gone soft.” She grins and elbows me.

“Yeah, and I’m out of a job.” I press my hands into my desk and bow over it.

“What are you going to do?” she asks from behind me. “I mean, without a job, money?”

“I don’t know.” I turn and sit on the desk, arms crossed.

“What about Scrabble? And the loft?”

I shrug. “At least, I’ve got you to keep me in line.” I force out a laugh that sounds more like clearing my throat.

“Look, Char, you’d tell me if something was going on, right?”

It seems mad to tell her what is really happening: that I wake up in different clothes at different times in strange places. Instead I say, “Yeah, of course.” I open the glass door and the wind sweeps into the doorway. The sun is sinking in the sky, creating dark purple clouds against

the beige backdrop. I like the night. I blink the fluorescents out of my eyes and *smuck, smuck* back to my Renault. I am glad to be out of the fake-light, away from Jameson.

The wake laps against the dock as a container chugs down the river. I am on my stomach on the weathered wood in a cream t-shirt and jeans, facing the river. The water is black and gunky. I am the River Frome, he had said. The pale morning sun warms up the wood and my hand half-covers my eyes from its rays. I dip a finger into the water and swirl it around. The texture is slimy. Jameson was right. The river is contaminated. I roll onto my back and absorb the light for a few minutes. I used to love the sun.

I enter my flat loudly, throwing wellies and keys on the floor, and set my handbag on the settee. The post is littered on the raffia welcome mat. I scoop it up and flip through rolodex-style. All, but one, are bills. I pin that letter to the fridge, unopened, and hop over my wellies, jerk my messenger bag from the 70s floral settee, and sift through receipts and empty cigarette packs to look for my diary. I scribble in entries for the recent events. I tear the days into squares and lay them out in front of me like a scrabble-board. I don't see how the pieces fit together or what makes me forget. I shuffle the notepaper blindly and randomly pick one and go crossed-eyed and focus again. Nothing.

I enter the church hall, swinging the blue floral messenger bag against my side. Black and browns smudge the lino from parish-goers' feet and community meetings. Square metal card tables are arranged in rows and orange plastic chairs surround them. I am alone in the room, and drips echo off the commercial sink in the kitchenette to the side. Before every tournament, I get a feeling of the word bank, and it hasn't failed me yet. Last night, it was [RECALL]. Only an hour

before Speed Scrabble begins. I let my bag fall off my shoulder into a chair and sip fresh coffee from beans Maya had given me for luck. “I doubt this will help,” she had said as she twizzled the pink hair of the troll glued to the top of my workstation, “but maybe, the caffeine will wake you up enough to remember the right words.” We had laughed then, but now I am glad to cup my mug as I have always felt awkward in churches; I couldn’t bring myself to go to a service since my mother had been put in a home. She would always say, “God is watching you Charlie, just remember, God is watching,” in the middle of chopping onions at the dining room table, she would point the knife at my reddened hands, my knuckles white from clutching my knees. I tremble as I slurp the coffee and try to warm my insides.

Competitors filter into their seats, and I inspect my opponents. Shay, to my left, has played before, I know her style, and she’s an easy win. Cottrell is opposite me. His auburn hair is slick as if he hasn’t showered recently. He has been picking at his face again. Seymore is to my right; his speckled grey head has been shaved. He looks tired. Besides, he’s Welsh and slow at translating into English. I try not to display a knowing grin. It’ll give it away. The scorekeepers hover over us in blue jumpsuits with notepad and pens in hand. Murmurs trickle throughout the room.

“Contestants ready? 3-2-1. Go,” the announcer says.

I flip my tiles over in unison with the other 50 players in the stuffy hall. Wooden pieces scuffle and scratch against the metal tops. The tiles talk to us in whispers. Think. Think. The letters below are D-U-Q-R-O-N-E not RECALL. My body feels warm as I push them into place. “Quod. Nerd. 19,” I say to the scorekeeper, slam the timer, and draw 7 more tiles from the velvet plush bag in the center. I hear others yelling out words and scores, but I need to focus. The irony of my own *quod* does not escape me. My digits are hot and tingly. Shay hasn’t hit the timer yet,

Cottrell is pulling out a handful of tiles, and Seymore is perched with a finger to the mouth. The letters are B-T-O-I-I-G-N. The plates have become ice-skating figurines as I circle them around and around, trying the infinite possibilities. “Benign. Quit. Robot. Do. 31.” The heat is up my arms now. I hit the timer.

“3 minutes remaining.” The announcer chirps the words.

My mind is electrified and time seems to speed up as I draw 7 more tiles. The letters are S-H-P-L-E-V-A. My brain is blank. The scraping is too loud. Jameson’s voice vibrates in my ear. I close my eyes, a pattern flashes before me and the tiles are doing figure 8s again. “Born. None. Helps. Save. Quiet. Tod. Dig. 50.” The blood has reached my face and I can feel the fever seeping out of my cheeks. I remember her. *Help save her from robot-quod.*

“Time,” says the announcer. “All hands off the tables. Scorekeepers tally up.”

I lift both palms off the metal as if being arrested. Shay drops a tile and curses. Cottrell is perspiring, and he wipes the sweat into his hair. Seymore sits back, coolly, unaffected by the hot air. His lips are straight and relaxed, arms folded across his chest.

“Table 2: Shay-42 points, Cottrel-67, Fawn-100, and Seymore-112.”

A twinge rolls down my throat as I force a smile, teeth clenched.

“Good play” and “well done” are said in clips around the table. I am feeling lightheaded as I stand and yank my bag out from under the chair. “Unwanted” is the only word I remember.

I am in the kitchen, leaning against the cold fridge. A worn letter from *Midfordshire Psychiatric Home* is curled around my fingers. How long have I been here? The rich reds on the walls comfort me as I stuff the letter back into the envelope and pin it back on the fridge. I don’t

want to read it again now. The image of my mother in her red robe is [recalled]. She is rocking back and forth in her wheelchair and her face is chalk.

“Come here Charlie, girl,” she says with her pointer beckoning me.

“I’m scared, mummy.”

“You come here or the devil be with you, child.” She shrieks and pushes her body up with hands clasping the armrests, with frizzed blonde hair forking out from her head like lightning. Men in white shirts flock toward her, snatch her hands up from underneath her, and hold her down into the chair, wheeling her away. “This is your fault,” she says, snorting and twisting against the men. “Just remember, this is your doing, Charlie Fawn.” She screams in a high-pitched crackle.

A woman in blue scrubs is kneeling by me, telling me that mummy isn’t well. That she doesn’t mean to say those things. I shouldn’t remember my mother like that, she says and she is stroking my hair like a dog. My mouth is open and I am making sound come out.

I awake on the floor in the bedroom, knees tucked to chest. I’m in my nightie, somehow. Jameson, Scrabble and the letter are all a blur, a collage of images rushing through my mind. I push my heavy body up from the cold wood floor. I need air. I need the night. I put on a faux suede jacket from the front closet and don my trusty wellies. The night is still and the stars, visible. I am welcomed into the dark. I walk down to the West Bank and take the walkway beside the River Frome, the river on my left and the gothic-like hotels, shops, and businesses on my right. I ignore the city buildings and imagine I am by an ocean somewhere, spreading my toes into the sand, and suspending my body in the salt of the cool ripples. Here, low-energy lampposts that turn the grey cement into a hazy amber sporadically light the walkway. The

leafless trees break up the glow on the pavement with black, slippery fingers and I want to take them with me, but I don't. The water is muddy, full of waste from the containers; excrement. I take the concrete steps down to the edge of the water, holding onto the clammy rusted railing, and pause where the barges pick up passengers who are willing to pay the tourist fee of twenty quid to go to the other side of the bank. I squat and look at my reflection. My curls splay about my shoulders and a couple of spirals reach for the water. My eyes are round and too big for my pinched-face. My mouth is not my own. It is contorted and strange. I am not me. My mother's face is in the water, with her wild hair moving with the current, and she's grimacing at me. I stop breathing for a moment and all the whirring in my ears settles, the river pauses, the lampposts mute, and the atmosphere darkens until I can't see my fingers or my hair. The word [RECALL] is outlined in white over the black background of my mind. To recall is to summon memories. My mother's memories can help me yet. As I inhale, I can hear my mind gearing up to whirl again, the river is rippling and the lampposts are buzzing.

"Do you want me to come in with you?" Maya asked on the bus, on the way to the B&B.

"No, it's okay. You don't understand. She's sick."

"I'm quite aware of that fact. I'm asking if *you* want me there." Maya always has a way of wording things that make a complicated matter sound simple.

I gaze out the window. A blur of green hedges race centimeters away from the panes on both sides of the bus. I miss the country. Things are always easier in the country.

"I don't know. I don't know if I want you there," I say after a five-minute silence.

"Okay, well, think about it. What does her letter say?" Maya taps the envelope I've been fidgeting with for hours.

“She says she’s sorry and that she’s better now. She says she wants to start over and come home to live with me.”

“Do you think that’s feasible?” Common-Sense Maya.

“I’ll find out, I guess. It sounds positive,” I say, forcing the words out of clenched teeth.

Victorian brick houses peep out from behind tall oaks and gravel lanes twist their mouths into the main road. The town is small, dusty and old. *Midfordshire Psychiatric Home* is a Tudor home on 40 acres, which backs up to forests on two sides. Black wooden beams support the front portico with ivy wrapping around them and spraying about the walls. From the outside, the home is welcoming in the early sunlight. We enter into the foyer, which is crammed full of rotting nineteenth-century straight-backed covered chairs. Dust has gathered in the corners of the walls, floors, mantelpieces, and even on the front desk. My pulse is tapping against my neck, and I can feel its echo in my stomach. The waiting room is damp and the wallpaper is a royal blue with little red crests dotted on it. Shadows cast the main light save for a flickering candelabra over the fireplace.

“I’m here to see Mrs. Fawn-Brescott,” I say to the little lady behind the front desk.

“Ms. Fawn? We’ve been expecting you. Follow me, please.” The lady wobbles out of her seat and leans on a cane at incredible speed. I jog to keep up with her.

“Maya, I’ll be back,” I say. She is rummaging for a non-dusty seat.

“She’s in here, Ms. Fawn.” The curly-haired clerk bows as she opens the door and flicks the overhead light on. My mother is in a wheelchair and leaning against a small card table.

“Mummy?” I ask.

“Who’s there?” She raises her golden head.

“Mummy, it’s Charlie.” I try to say it soothingly and tip-toe toward her.

“What do you want?”

“You wrote to me, saying that you were better. I had to see for myself.”

“Oh, yes. Of course dear. Charlie, my girl, come closer so I can see how well you look.” I inch closer and her face is still chalky and wrinkled. She hasn’t aged much in the past 10 years, except for the loose skin flapping against her jowls when she talks. “You look different, dear.”

“How are you doing? Are you feeling better?”

“Oh, yes. My bags are packed, I’m ready to go when you are.” Her lips are pursed, eyes big and shiny, and her head is cocked to the side. She reminds me of a begging dog.

“Mum, I want to ask you a question. When you started getting sick, did you forget things?”

“An elephant never forgets,” she says and nods.

“Did you ever wake up and realize you had missed something?” I ask.

“Time is of the essence. I should get back to my chopping.” She swivels to cut vegetables that aren’t there with an imaginary knife.

I kneel beside her.

“I’m sorry you have to be here, mum.” I stroke the arm that’s supporting the vegetables.

“You’re not going to take me home?” She demands but doesn’t take her eyes off her chopping.

“Well, I think we should wait until you’re a little stronger.”

Her face spins to face mine. “Who the hell are you?” she shouts.

“I’m Charlie,” I say.

“Not my Charlie, my Charlie’s only 8 years old is my Charlie. Nasty little buggar that one is, if you can find her. When I get my hands on her, I’m going to make her wish she’d never been born.” The spite that rolls off her tongue cuts through my skin swifter than a knife. I am 8-year-old Charlie again, kneeling in my corner with palms up ready for the garden stake.

“No, mum, I’m Charlie. I’m older now,” I say.

“Imposter! Help! Nurse! Get out! Get out! Get out!” She is screaming at the top of her scratchy lungs and stabbing and waving the imaginary knife at me.

I back out towards the door slowly. She continues shrieking at the same level even though I am almost out of the room. As I close the door, my hands shake. I am unwanted.

“How did it go?” Maya asks as we exit the building.

“Splendid. My mother didn’t recognize me and told me that I needed to be beaten, again.” I wave off a laugh.

“Char, it’s okay to feel. Your mum was a total bitch while you were growing up and now she’s paying for it in a looney-bin,” she says matter-of-factly. “What goes around comes around.”

“Do me a favour and never use old sayings again?”

“Fine,” she says with a raised eyebrow but doesn’t ask.

I am sitting on the West Banks, again, observing the containers as they pass. The black water swirls behind them and wafts the smell of dead fish. I pull a red-velveteen pouch out of my messenger and empty it upside down in my hand. The tiles clink into my palm. I rub the plates together as I normally would before a tourney. Goodbye mother, goodbye Scrabble, goodbye

mess. I throw the tiles into the river and they float on the surface, glistening in the sun until a small boat powers by and the wake-wave rolls the plates under the water.

Notes to Self About Writing

When you begin, write the words “death” and “hope” followed by a fat question mark. No, scrap that. Etch the paper with dark lines and note on the margin: the fat lady doesn’t sing, and next to that doodle, cliché cliché cliché. Resort to watching *YouTube* videos about Jerry Morningstar, who died of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy when he was 18. Notice Jerry’s lips droop as the note cards that are pressed against his chest tell about the five minutes he technically died, how he didn’t want to come back. He will wince with his eyes when he shows the cards that say the medics revived him, and you will see your face in his face. Each time you watch it, you will think about how he died three days after posting the video. It will make you cry. Go ahead and let it out. Click through other videos of teens responding to Jerry’s story with tales of depression and abortions, and you will sob loudly, and your husky will howl. Judge the teens in the videos with your mother’s adjectives: young, stupid, careless, hormonal, alcoholic—do not think about what you did downtown last month when you missed your period twice. You

will compare the teens' stories to your own: how you have grown up, how your job as a nursing assistant and your moldy apartment is only temporary while you write. You will convince yourself that you are nothing like them. Download "Mad World" because it's the song on the video. Press play ten times while trying to sketch a plot based on Jerry Morningstar. Repeat his name over and over in your head and think how funny that his surname could be a metaphor for his life. Wonder why your parents gave you a dull name like Sally. Reread what you wrote about Jerry—it will be crap. You will want to scrumple it up, stomp on it, twist it into a finger and light your burner with it. Don't trash it. Save it in a notebook entitled, "Working Stories"—you'll be thankful when you use it in a piece that's accepted in a journal later. Pace the apartment for 30 minutes and debate out loud with yourself. You will scold yourself for wasting five hours watching videos online. Tell yourself that you needed the cry, dammit. Reassure yourself that you were getting into character.

When the neighbor, Rick, knocks on your door, pretend you aren't there—he is not the mailman with the *Publishing for Dummies* you ordered during last night's infomercial—when you can't stand the banging anymore, you will answer the door with a red face and puffy lids. Don't fix your messy, frizzy hair. He will lean on your doorframe in holey jeans and snow boots that have been marked black like wingtips. Look disinterested. Cross your arms over your belly so he doesn't see the salsa on your "Class of 2000 Wildcat" tee. He will tell you that he needs a ride to the Liquor Mart because his bi-polar mother hasn't drank all day, and it's his birthday, and you will nod your head. You know about mothers' mood swings. You will notice that some

of his teeth are missing. Remember this image. Don't tell him you understand—he'll take this as a come on and try to hug you. He will grip you against him in a worn pleather coat that itches your neck. The smell of paint thinner will be difficult to scrub off later when you take a dried-out toothbrush and rub the surface of your dermis exactly five times while re-playing the trip in your head. Try not to think about the three times Rick adjusts himself in your truck with grease-covered hands.

Whatever you do, don't let him in your apartment—you will end up getting drunk on pale ale and wake up to him trying to slip some digits, and you won't be able to rid your mind from his grimy hands down there.

Perch on your corduroy garage-sale couch and stop trying to think about Rick and his hands. Poise your fingers over the keyboard and start strumming. Tap the word "loss" and "sad" on the screen. Don't fantasize about slurping a margarita or a glass of white zin from the box inside your fridge. It will not help—think about last weekend in Westport, when you strolled down Main street in stilettos and gym shorts, you peeled your t-shirt off and wiggled your flaccid breasts at cars, saying, "come and get 'em boys." Remember: Daphne, your only friend, calling you up the next day and suggesting you should forget about going to Missy Bee's this weekend—you hanging up on her angry because you recalled when she stuck post-it notes, scribbled with your number, on biker's backs during St. Patty's Day Parade last year. Forget about adding up grievances. You will kick yourself for being so petty when Daphne calls you later. Pay attention to the story. Think about what you read in *Feisty Literary Magazine*: write for catharsis, or something like that. Force yourself back to the computer. Write the sentence: "Loss is sad." You will tell yourself that writing is all muscle memory and that you wrote your last story half asleep after drinking Glenfiddich like Jack Daniels. It is time for you to realize that

wild nights are not needed for good writing. But for now, forget about what makes a good story and zone in on character. Ask yourself what your character looks like, how he moves, does he like Cheetos? Don't take the opportunity to wander in the direction of the kitchen. For goodness sakes, sit down. Sit down and make yourself do it. Just because the dog is looking at you with a cocked head and ears back, does not mean you need to take him for a walk.

Daphne will call you at the exact moment when you've finally started writing a book. Try to ignore your phone ringing. After three chimes, you will pick up because last month in the cold waiting room you called Daphne for a second opinion and she answered. *Do it for you. Do it for your writing. Whatever you decide, I'm here*, she told you. You will pick up the phone.

--Jeff cheated on me, she says slurring.

Now you will understand why you should have put your phone on silent. You will walk circles around your raffia coffee table, thinking about the box wine, saying um and ah and I'm sorry. You will look at your phone now and then, attempting to feel irritation. She will go on and on about how she caught him in the laundromat on 2nd Street with a teenager-looking thing, who clawed at his bottom and hung against him all weird like, with piercings and short pink hair.

--Pink is the new black, you will say.

Mull over the color pink—was it a neon or a baby shade? Baby: would you have named her? Snap out of your thoughts and focus on Daphne. Remember in the haze of last weekend that Daphne recently died her hair onyx. Hear how Daphne starts to wind up. You can almost taste the metal machinery of her mind at work. Try to erase the stupid cliché you gave her.

--But black is always better, you say with a clenched fist against your forehead. You will think of writing the sentence: "loss is black." Force your voice to be smiley. Tell her that she, an

advertising specialist extraordinaire, deserves better than a parrot shop owner. Tell her that you will smash his face so he can have an eye patch and be a real pirate.

--I just don't want to think about him, she'll say.

--How about we not talk about it over wine? you ask her.

She will agree with a sigh, and you'll be happy that she forgot about last weekend, and that you'll forget forget forget tonight.

Suck down three glasses of wine before Daphne comes over—you'll need to be prepared. When she enters your apartment in tight jeans, hair swirled into a bun, and a flashy tank top, don't change out of your sweats. She will always be more put together than you, even in your best moment. You will learn later that this is because of her insecurities—but for now, just accept that she is prettier and smaller than you will ever be. Try not to look enviously at the way her stomach floats seamlessly into her pants even while she sits. Resist looking down at your own belly. For the love of Pete, don't rub it like you did last month when you found out. It is empty.

--I just want to get drunk and do something silly, Daphne will say, waggling her eyebrows. You will giggle with a mind sloshing of pink wine.

--We could go streaking.

You will think about holding up note cards naked in front of your computer. You will think about changing your name to Hope or Love, like Courtney.

--Let's get Rick, she will say.

Force yourself to concentrate. Do not get lost in the idea of doing breaststrokes in the meninges of your brain. Attempt to dissuade her with the images of missing teeth and grimy fingers.

--We need some male interaction, she says. It's already decided.

Huff and sigh and mark your position by folding your arms on the couch.

--I'll go by myself then, she will say. She will flounce in her heels and fall sideways into the steel front door. You will wish you had something smart to say to stop her, but instead sink back into the couch, back into your swirling pink brain. Forget for a moment that you are there in your living room. You will not notice Daphne leaving. Pretend you are on a beach somewhere, floating on a foam mattress on a sea of words. You will suddenly feel like you could write the next *Gravity's Rainbow*—exact verbs and nouns surround your inflatable like piranhas converging around an uneaten hotdog. On the beach, your fans wave and cheer you, flapping your latest novel. Oprah, herself, calls you and asks if you want your novel included in her book club. She gushes over the sex scenes. Indulge this fantasy only for a moment, and then come back to reality. You will start tapping this dream into your computer in incoherent babble. You punch “fame,” “popular” and stop at the word, “hope.” Hope what? Do you really think that you will sell novels writing nonsensical abstractions? Notice how you cannot write while drinking.

--Fancy seeing you again, sweetheart, Rick will mock-sing as he and Daphne collapse back through the door, all over each other. You will smile and make nice, commenting on his brown fedora and twill pants.

Pretend it's not a big deal when Rick and Daphne go straight to your kitchen, and Rick lifts Daphne on your faux-marble counter, opens her legs and stands between them tonguing her face. You will reassure yourself that you didn't want him anyway. You will make yourself sick

watching it. Focus on what detergent you should disinfect the surface with when they're gone, what scrubbing tool, and how many times. Don't notice Daphne's legs curling around him, heels crossed over heels, drawing him to her. Try not to associate them with the speculum that opened you, and the vacuum aspiration that hollowed you out. Think about how the filament under his nails will dirty Daphne's tank top. Don't wish that your baggy t-shirt had fingerprints on it too. Forget about that. Stop twisting your shirt in a bunch like you are still in fourth grade. Go back and sit on the couch and write your story.

Make up the conversation between your mother and you, if you had told her about the baby—your mother would cry and scream and tell you in her noticeably Southern drawl that you had the devil in you, and that no daughter of hers was no baby killer. Shiver as you copy and paste “baby killer, baby killer, baby killer” across four lines of your document. You will be absorbed when Daphne stands in the entryway to your kitchen and jumps up and down to get your attention. You will notice her in your periphery, and she points at you then motions a thumb towards the door. She wants you to get out. You are going to feel the anger in your happy pink brain. You will want to slap her face. Instead, you will tell yourself to think of the beach, take deep breaths, and say something nice like you always do. You pull the headphones around your neck like a noose.

--I'm not going anywhere—this is my house, you will whisper. Your throat will begin to tighten, to sweat.

--Oh, go on. Just for thirty minutes, she will say in a cooing, soft voice.

--After the month I've had, all you care about is yourself.

--What's wrong with you? It's just a little fun.

Rick is snickering behind her, fumbling her butt—Daphne squirming and giggling, and her tank top is pulled down below her underwire. Try not to go all crazy person on them. Understand that they are drunk. You will feel words rush out of your mouth that you cannot lasso back.

--I just had an abortion, Daphne. An abortion.

--Yeah, and? We all need a little maintenance now and then, don't we?

Her words will feel like the instruments inside your womb. You'll visualize slamming Daphne's head into your yellowing fridge, and taking pliers to Rick's teeth. You'll wish that Daphne was your mother, that she would call you the devil. You'll wish that you hadn't felt her words like surgical steel. Make your voice low and powerful, like a growl. Throw your shoulders back like you've seen dog trainers do on *YouTube* and tell them to get the hell out.

--No need to get the panties twisted, Rick will say.

Daphne will frown at you and say you're a buzz kill and that she expects you to make it up to her.

--Don't count on it, you will say.

When you close the door after them, you will sink to the ground trembling. Get up from the floor. You will not regret the lost friendship. She will spend another three weeks with Rick and then, after a rant about your selfishness on *Facebook*, you will delete her from your friends' list, and you will not miss her.

Call your mother. Explain the instruments, your loss. You will be hysterical on the phone as you detail everything that happened over the last month. Beg her to forgive you. Tell her she's

the only person you've got. Brace yourself for the devil-branding and ostracizing. You will wait for a whole minute of silence before you ask if she's still there.

--I wished you'd called sooner, your mother will say.

You will hear her try to catch her words, and you will feel instantly ashamed.

--I know. I'm sorry.

--Come home, she will say. Let us love you.

Instead, you lock yourself in your apartment, drafting the same chapter of your novel. You begin to formulate an equation about writing—you use concrete nouns like “piranhas” and “couch” and “speculum.” You write for five hours daily at five pages per day. You rediscover the Morningstar notes and form a story about a writer struggling to explain pain without abstractions. You will write until your brain aches: Submit, enter, submit. Rejection, reply, enter.

Everything is not lost. You are not lost.

You are still here,

on your couch,

writing.

A Bloody Tutu

How could Eden sign it *with love*, if she wasn't sure if she actually did love Matty? She waived and finally just wrote her name, followed by xoxo, open to interpretation. The note said Eden was going to help Cecily with her mum's death, even though it was last summer that they had found Mrs. Andrews dead among the dog crap on the bed. Eden had pressed up against the bedroom wall. Cecily had dropped her purse and ran to her mother, and not caring where her hands or feet were, she knelt by her mother's head and palmed her face. Mrs. Andrews' hair, a bouquet of aluminum wire, had fanned out from her bony skull, her dentures clenched and her fingers hooked around the rails of the Hospice bed, as if defying turbulence. She had fought to her last lucid moment.

"She's dead," Cecily said over and over. "She's dead. I can't believe she's dead."

The smell of fermenting shit and urine overwhelmed Eden, and she ran out of the flat all the way to the bus stop, leaving Cecily alone with the body of her mother. She tried to unsee it. She couldn't put into words to explain it to Matty, so she began to paint—blacks and reds for emotions and the smells came out in greens and yellows and swirls of grime. She collected feathers and chains and pushed them through her canvases. She called them love and time. She incorporated bendable wire into her own hair.

The note would have to wait. She folded it up and put it in her jeans' pocket. It was Kim and Daniel's yearly couples' fancy-dress picnic, and Eden had made them costumes from scratch. This year's theme was "food couplings"—usually everyone tried to be as crude as possible. Eden had sewn them both aprons (Matty hated costumes and only wore ones that were easily removable)—hers had eggs on the chest, breast-height, and "*Hers*" sewn into the waist, Matty's had bacon popping out of the front pocket, mysteriously coming from the center-regions and pointing up to the right at a 45° angle, "*His*" in bold stitched across the pocket. It was Matty's idea. Eden added some of those American country-chic ruffles to make it less vulgar, but she still felt self-conscious wearing it.

On the way to the picnic, Matty shifted into 5th gear, revving down the car-wide country backroads of Somerset to get to Wells. Eden closed her eyes as usual to avoid squirming in her seat, with her foot firmly planted on an invisible brake. She hummed.

"So, who is going to be there?" Matty asked.

"Kim and Daniel. Seb and Joyce. I think Julie, Brian, Pip and Clive will be there too. I'm not sure—I think the whole gang from school."

"Everyone else better be wearing costumes. I don't want to be the only gay person."

“Seriously, Matty, that’s so early 90’s.” Eden squirmed in her seat at the phrase. He, of all people, shouldn’t use that language.

“Well, here we are then.” He turned into the gravel driveway.

“Behave,” Eden begged.

“Always,” Matty said as they exited the car.

“Hi sweetheart,” Kim called from the front door, holding Nicolas against her. “Matthew.”

Eden rolled her eyes. “Matty brought some home brew for the picnic.”

“Ta, love,” she said to Matty as he lugged the barrel into the house. “Would you look at these costumes—fab. Nice job, Eden.” She giggled, and then studied Eden’s face, “Everything okay?”

“Hi, my love,” she said to Nicolas, avoided eye contact with Kim.

“Why don’t you change him while I greet the other guests?”

“Okay, sure.” Eden took Nicolas awkwardly. He was at least a stone. She put him up to her shoulder and held his bobbing head. He was fat and somewhere between the newborn and sitting stage, whatever that was. But he couldn’t move or talk on his own yet, so that made him pretty darling. She laid him on the dresser-turned-changing table and unsnapped his plastic nappy, unpinned the cloth—Kim insisted on using reusable nappies, even though it meant that anyone else changing him would struggle to get the fit right—he wapped at Eden’s bracelet, giggling.

“Need a hand?” Daniel came into the nursery, sniffing as he wiped his dripping nose with a thumb.

“Pass me a wet cloth?”

He wrung out a washcloth in the sink next door and set it next to the changing pad. He sat in the rocker next to her and crossed his feet on the matching footstool, turning a beer bottle around and around on the armrest. “Why the long face?”

She hadn’t realized she had one. She shrugged.

“I know you, Edie. What is it?”

“Do you think it’s important to have stuff that you do together?”

“Well, Kim’s an estate agent and real book-smart. And me, I like using my hands.” He chuckled, reached and poked Eden’s ribs with his index finger and then his eyebrows scrunched up in his serious look. “But we love each other. That’s the one thing we have in common. And it’s enough.” He rested elbows on armrests, his fingers forming a triangle under his chin, revealing the words “Blood” and “War” tattooed on his forearms.

Was it enough for her? She cared about Matty. She did love him like a brother. She wasn’t sure if she knew what being in love felt like. She pictured telling Matty that she was ready to move on—his body would split open, his throat plucked out where the pain enters, sanding down of lungs and heart, gouging stomach, until all the cavities are emptied, left broken. Eden bunched and pinned the nappy, scraping her finger with the safety pin.

“Shit. That’s a hazard,” she said, half laughing. Moments like that made Eden feel Kim must have chosen to use cloth nappies to spite her. She snapped the cover back on, while Nicolas was trying to pull off her bracelet.

“Every time,” Daniel said, holding up a bruised right index.

“I guess if we love each other that should be enough.”

“You’ll work it out.” He rocked out of the chair and fake punched her on the arm.

“Yep.” Eden lifted Nicolas to him to signal the conversation was over. “Understand that this exchange never happened.”

“It’s golden.” He winked. They both stood for a moment, shaking off tension before heading back through to the patio, where the rest of the party waited.

Back at home, Eden felt a bit sloshy, and thought about Daniel’s advice. *If* they loved each other, it *could* be enough. She rushed up to Matty and patted the bacon on his apron: “Want to see if it still works?”

“You saucy monkey,” he said, pulling her towards him. He held her close for a moment and then removed her from him. “But I’ve got to prep for the shakedown.”

“It’s okay,” she said, sinking into herself.

“Well, maybe just a little bit of fun.” He kicked off his jeans on the way to the bedroom, still wearing the apron. He leaned against the bed. “How do we compare, eh?” He pointed at the bacon and then waved the apron like a flag, flashing his erection, then covered it with bacon.

“No comparison,” Eden said.

“Those eggs are squishable.”

“All yours to squish.”

“Eggs and bacon,” Matty said as he pulled her trousers and pants down and entered her. “You’re so warm. Cozy.”

After getting in the rhythm, Eden moaned, “Make me a baby.”

Matty stopped.

“Not now. Keep going.”

Matty kept going, but Eden could tell he wasn’t into it. “Did you finish already?”

“Yes.”

“Ugh. Get off me.”

Eden sat on the settee and studied the wall above the T.V. while Matty showered, feeling unattached. She couldn't shake this feeling. She didn't know if she really wanted a baby, but she thought it would make the decision easier. She spun her ring around her finger and thought about their wedding—it mirrored Asian culture: they made chopsticks and hung Chinese lanterns, even though neither of them had traveled east. Eden didn't care much for the east; she wanted to go to Scotland.

Eden had applied to the university in Scotland to study acrylics a year after they wed, but Matty refused to move. Her idol, Mansel Sorie, an iron sculptor was on staff. Eden had explored copies of his work in her dad's workshop when she was little—her dad had been able to replicate Sorie's pieces on a smaller scale before his knuckles and joints became hardened from arthritis. When she saw one of Sorie's pieces in person outside the county library, she fell in love with how he presented the human form: a siren, twisted on a rock, the mouth open in pain, skin peeled back to unveil the emotional realm, and a telly forcing its way out of her stomach with tentacles, like an alien—she felt it was talking about the symbiotic relationship between consumerism and the body, and the inseparableness of it all. That's what she had explained in her application letter, and even she didn't believe in being physically deferent in prayer, she got on her knees multiple times before putting it in the post.

“I got in,” she said, waving the letter in front of Matty. “Isn't it fab?”

“I'm glad they like your work, love,” he had said, but followed with, “but I won't get another position like I have at the shop. Besides, you can't make money with art.”

“There are shops and rallies up there,” she said, rubbing his arms. “It’ll be an adventure. And who knows, maybe I could teach.”

“There are plenty of uni’s here,” he said slowly. “I’m not moving.” He had closed fists to end the conversation and went into the shed to tinker with the lawnmower.

They had agreed on an Asian wedding theme because Matty loved Moo Shu Pork from Little Wok down Main Street. Eden held a pink, flowery fan instead of the lilies she secretly wanted; her hair twisted up into a bun, fastened with butterfly sticks, although she had always imagined marrying on the cliffs at Hope Cove with her curls flowing against her back, the wind blowing them wild. She tried to conjure up a foul wedding, where her dress didn’t fit properly or where Matty, in a drunken state, called her father an old sod at the reception, but on the outside, everything flowed smoothly. Eden started to cry. Their wedding was perfect: the dress, nails, hair, the dinner, all a dream of whites, browns and greens.

Matty padded out of the bathroom and peered into the sitting room. Eden sat on the settee, staring at the wall. Her hair frizzy and her face was pale, no makeup covered the bags under her eyes. “How are you, love?” Matty asked and sat next to her, stretching an arm around her waist. He pressed his nose against her clammy cheek. She didn’t move.

“I’m tired.”

“I’m sorry, darling.” He tucked loose strands of her hair behind her ears. “I bought us some red earlier, and I’ll make biscuits—oatmeal chocolate chip. How’s that sound?”

“Thank you,” she said, her face turned toward the blank telly.

“Cheer up. You look like a bus hit you.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” She started to cry.

He held her for a minute, and then searched her face for some indication.

“It’s just everything,” she said, her voice wavering hysterically. “University and exams, and I don’t know. I don’t know about anything anymore.” Her crying became deeper, louder, as if she were trying to wail out her soul.

Matty gulped his own tears down. He felt a deepness between them that had not been there in some time. He cupped a hand to her cheek after a while, and wiped her tears. “Hush now, how about we get you some help? Maybe figure out why you’re so upset.”

“What, like a counselor?” She pushed off the settee and crossed her arms.

“You said you’ve had problems like this before.”

“You think I’m crazy.” She paced.

“I just think a doctor could help sort out your feelings.”

“I’m a woman. I get depressed. That’s what we do.”

“This can’t go on.”

“It’s all about you isn’t it? I’m just having a hard time.”

“Jesus and flipping Mary.” Matty ruffled his hair and shrugged his entire body, then let his hands smack down against the sofa.

“I’ll be okay,” Eden said. Then her face relaxed and looked more like the woman Matty loved. “Tea and Biscuits. Or wine?” she asked.

“I think wine,” Matty said slowly, like he was dream talking.

“Yes, all that crying, and I’ll sleep like a dead woman.” She laughed abruptly, loudly—as if it came from another person. She leaned and kissed Matty’s forehead—her lips brushed his

skin like a rag buffing scuffmarks. He felt her imprint. He followed her to the kitchen. His body was tense—he was unsure if she actually felt better.

“I’ll get the biscuits, you pour the vino,” he said.

“Lovely jubley, my lovely.”

Matty forced a laugh.

After a glass of Merlot, Eden rested a hand on Matty’s and rubbed. “I’m sorry I was so upset earlier. I don’t know what came over me. I’ll try better.”

“Think about my suggestion.”

She nodded, but focused on the telly, or past it. “I know what I have to do.”

Matty was curious but didn’t want to push her, so he said: “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

Eden stuffed the boot of her Rabbit VW with stretch canvases, paintbrushes, oil, acrylic and watercolour paints, pencils and a gym bag of light clothes. She took only two pairs of shoes: Nike trainers and flip-flops. She decided against taking makeup and crammed her wedding ring into her tight, front jean pocket. *Matty won’t even notice I’m gone*, she reasoned, rubbing the ring between her thumb and forefinger and pushing it further down her jeans. She hopped behind the wheel and got on the M4, stopping at a services station to fill up and buy an energy drink. She thought about stopping to see Kim but decided against it. Within fifteen minutes, she was on the motorway absorbed in Vivaldi’s Four Seasons and two hours away from her destination.

She yanked up the emergency brake outside the Cottage Hotel and left the car in gear. During the last half hour of the journey, Eden could taste the salt and smell the ocean, she ran her tongue across her dry upper lip and felt the saltiness zing into her mouth. The hotel resembled a mix between a Tudor style house and a beachfront building from the fifties. It was white walled with a red slate roof held up by fabricated black support beams. She clicked off the engine and opened the door, frowning at the dinging complaints of the Rabbit. The colliding and sucking of the ocean, the yelping of the seagulls and the wind rushing across the surface of the sea aroused Eden's senses, and she stood still for a moment, half in and half out of the car. Her ringlets frizzed as she slung her gym bag across her back and entered the open portico.

"How many's staying, love?" The hostess leaned over the counter, spreading her plump bosoms across it, which were barely contained by a black halter.

"It'll just be me," Eden said and flipped through her wallet to find her bankcard.

"Aw, isn't that grand, a little getaway then?" The host's blonde hair was mangled to the top of her head and affixed with a velvet bow-clip, which bobbed with each vibration of her chin. She examined the card.

"Yeah, something like that," Eden said.

"Aren't you Morrison's girl?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm married now."

"How lovely." She swiped the card in the machine. "And your parents?"

"They're in Morocco, trying to save the lost." Eden shrugged.

"Well, might as well do it there, if anywhere."

Eden nodded. "I guess."

“Let us know if you need anything. Room 403, the stairs are right around the corner here.” She pushed the key and card to Eden’s side of the counter, “Harold!” The hostess placed a hand over her rounded belly to yell for the second time with more emphasis. “Harold! Come give us a hand with the luggage.”

A shining head backed out of the kitchen door and spun to bow, first at Eden and then at the hostess. “Let me take your bags, ma’am.”

She followed him up to the room and tipped him £1 for carrying her gym bag.

The room was exactly how she remembered. The bed was covered in a crisp white duvet and the walls were the same color as the sand outside. The bay window had a blue cushioned seat and overlooked the beach. The sky that was clear, when she had arrived, now turned green with spinning clouds and the rain flicked the panes from the side. Eden held her breath as she felt the heavy atmosphere flush through the open window. She jammed the sill down and latched it tight. *I have brought the rain with me*, she thought.

As soon as he got home from the garage, Matty fell onto the denim settee, crossed his legs and flicked the telly on. Road Runner whizzed across the set, followed by Wile E. Coyote on ACME rocket skates. Matty chuckled and rubbed his hand over his stomach. “Edie, you should watch this.” Road Runner zipped behind a rock, and Coyote blasted over the cliff edge, suspended for a moment until he looked down and fell toward the red earth. Road Runner meep, meeped. “Eden?” Matty said, looking around. He put the television on mute and rolled off the settee onto his hands and knees. He stood and scratched fingernails through his blond, spiky hair.

He went over to the desk and checked the calendar. Nothing had been marked down. Matty shrugged over to the fridge and pulled out a beer. The bottle sent shivers through his fingers. He couldn't understand why Eden put the alcohol in the fridge—he liked it warm. He slammed the door and a piece of paper flapped against the surface, it read:

Matty,

I'm going to visit Cecily in Hope Cove,

her mother just passed away, and she needs a friend.

Back in a couple of days.

Will ring later,

Eden

xoxo

Cecily was Eden's best friend all through secondary school. Matty shuddered when he thought of Cecily's mother—a blob with a fan of starched white hair. She always had this squinty-eyed look about her that made Matty feel uneasy. Last time they saw her, a couple of years ago, she had read Eden's palm in all her gypsy garb and told her *you've confused brokenness for deepness*. Eden was convinced she was talking about Eden's art, but Matty joked that it was Mrs. Andrews' repressed sexual feelings coming out, and they had a right laugh about it on the way home, and now the old bird was dead. *Funny how that works*, he thought.

Matty grumbled to himself. He didn't know why Eden hadn't called him or waited until he got home from work. She had been busy recently on the computer. He knew she had lots of things to do for school, and anyway, he wasn't the kind of bloke to interfere with her work. He sat at the desk and put his beer on a scrap piece of paper. Eden was a fanatic about keeping the

wood free from water stains. He wondered if there had been another reason she spent hours at this desk. Pictures of their wedding rotated on the screen. The phone rang. It was Eden's number. He picked up.

"Hey, did you get my note?" she asked quickly.

"Why didn't you ring me earlier?"

"I left in a hurry. Cecily's in a bad way."

"So, how long do you think she'll need you?"

"Might take a while."

"You should bring C here. It'll do her some good to hang out with normal folk for a change." Matty laughed—Cecily was always hanging around those gypsies. Her mum was a part of a roving circus, but they anchored at Hope Cove, where Cecily lived. Eden was silent on the other end. "I'm just teasing about being normal. But seriously, bring her up, it's been a while."

"Um, she needs to...sort out funeral stuff here. I don't think she wants the company."

"Oh, right." She probably meant his company, Matty thought. "I just thought she'd want to be somewhere with friends, that's all."

"You guys have never hit it off." Eden said.

"I thought C liked me." Matty wondered if Eden had told Cecily about catching him in the shed.

Eden had walked into the shed, hands on hips, sniffing the air. "Are you smoking weed?"

"Thought you'd be in your course," he said. "But it's just a joint that Seb brought over."

“I told you how I hate it.”

“We were just celebrating. Seb and Joyce are having a kid.”

“Just celebrating? And tomorrow will be a party for it being Tuesday, and the next day for Wednesday. I can’t do it, Matty. I can’t be with someone who doesn’t care about things.”

She had started to cry, hair stuck to her face, hands covered her eyes. Matty felt a twinge in his stomach, not from the weed, but watching her cry like that. He brought Eden to his chest and stroked her ringlets, and he swayed side-to-side, rocking her, kissing her head.

“It’s not like that,” Matty said. “I’m not your ex.”

“You stink.” She pushed him away from her, wiped a wet nose onto her sleeve, and ran out of the shed.

He flipped around in the bed that night. The double mattress seemed larger than normal, and he began to sweat. He got up and turned the fan above on high. The air waved over his naked shoulders, and the hair on the nape of his neck bristled. He threw the sheets off and kicked out of the bed, picking up pillows and lobbing them against a wedding picture on the wall. It felt good to exert energy. He wanted to be out in the woods, weaving through trees in his 1995, 205 GTI Peugeot, sliding round hairpins, pulling the handbrake and spinning 180 degrees, while Seb, the co-driver, yelled the numbered turns ahead. The woods were safe, the trees and turns unmovable. But Eden, Eden kept him guessing—it was one of the things that drew him to her in the first place.

The summer of 2002, Eden came to the shop wearing a corduroy skirt and black pleather boots. Girls didn't come to the garage often, and when they did, the men took turns watching them wander through racks of oilcans, wipers and helmets, before offering to help.

Mich, the sales manager, came into service whistling. "Oh, baby, we've got a hot one out there."

Matty sat on a wheelie chair besides an open engine. In his grimy hands, he turned a carburetter over and threaded a thin wire through the needle-sized hole, pulling out gunk.

"Common, Matty," Seb said and smacked his shoulder.

"Nah, I'm good." Matty watched the other mechanics press their noses against the window separating the service area from the shop. "You know she can see you, right?" he asked. They waved him off.

"Quick, she's coming this way," Seb said and licked a palm, matting oily hair behind his ears. Eden opened the door. Matty noticed her wringing her hands. The men looked her up and down, but Matty shook his head, and went back to work.

"You're working on the Renault, right?" she asked him.

Matty nodded, and felt a tingle vibrating through his body. She was pretty to be sure and smelled like coconuts. He was scared to look at her—scared to say anything that might make him look stupid.

"It's my dad's old car. I came to pick it up." She twirled a ringlet around a finger.

"Right, it's not quite ready. The carburetter needs to be cleaned, and put back in, probably a couple of hours."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Perhaps the oil mixture was off. Perhaps the needle was set too rich."

“Can you show me?” Matty had never had a girl ask him so many questions about cars. He blushed and coughed the tickle out of his throat. “Sure, follow me.”

He took her to the cleaning station, showed her the dirty carburetter in comparison with one newly cleaned. “That dirt in there,” he said, pointing to the needle, “is what stops this whole thing from working—it can go into the engine and Ka-boom.” He threw his arms up and realized that large splotches were forming in his pits, so he tucked his hands into them.

“I guess that’s a bad thing.”

“Bob’s your uncle.”

She cradled the clean carburetter in both hands, and ran piano fingers over it. “Thank you.” Her hand rested on his arm and he got goose pimples.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s no problem.”

“So, ring me when it’s ready?”

She swung out of the shop in those shiny boots, and Matty felt lightheaded. He sat back at his bench and fanned his face. Girls didn’t talk to him—he hadn’t dated in three years—but when he thought about how she asked those questions, playing with her hair, with an intensity that he had about cars, he trembled inside.

He still trembled now—when Eden came to his rallies with flasks of tomato soup and hand-cut squares of cheddar, when she stood at a difficult stage with camera in hand, when her hair, still wet from the bath, emanated coconut shampoo, when she touched his hairy arm with her fingertips—it was that light touch that Matty thought about when he fell asleep.

The next morning, Eden took her supplies out of the boot and set up a small easel in her hotel room. She sat on the window seat, facing inwards, letting the natural light bounce onto her canvas. She tucked one foot under the other leg and closed her eyes for a moment. The sound of the ocean sucking in and out drew her into a trance. She dipped a size 4 human-hair brush into the thick acrylic paint marked “blood red” and swirled it into her makeshift palette, a styrofoam container from her fish and chips last night. She swiped lines into an opened carcass in the middle of the canvas: a woman naked from the waist up, a mortician’s slice transversely splayed ribs, cavities emptied like a gutted fish, the figure wore a white tutu and pink point shoes, the background, black, except for a slight opening in a doorway in the upper right, where a greyed face peered around, smiling, wiping a knife with the corpse’s leotard. Eden dirtied the white fabric with splotches of red until the entire tutu dripped in blood. She stood up from the painting and stretched her neck and shoulders, came back to it and shivered.

Before checkout, she put anti-frizz lotion in her hair and carefully placed the new painting on the back seat on a hotel towel—she hoped they wouldn’t notice. She flipped through a stack of photos in her glove box and chose 6 of them that best represented the breadth of her work, yet communicated to each other in a way that made sense. She found *Nouvel Artiste* on the map and calculated the 1.5 miles to get there, through walking pathways to town. She had heard about the gallery through her Spanish professor—he said it was known for showing promising artists, work like hers. It was one of the reasons she came to Hope Cove. The last time she was at the Cottage Hotel, the weekend before she took her A-levels, her parents told them over a five-course dinner that they were selling everything and moving to Morocco to minister to the poor. They gave Eden the choice whether to go with them or stay and finish school. She chose school, and there, in the car park, they had all held onto each other with wet faces before mum and dad

left, before Kim got on a bus to go back to uni, and Eden was totally alone for the first time. The next month, she towed dad's old car to the shop and met Matty. She loved that he fixed things, gave her a sense of stability—they married quickly, being the order of things, after Kim told her parents about them her and Matty living together.

The gallery walls of *Nouvel Artiste* were royal purple, which made the artwork pop. Even the spacing between paintings had been calculated precisely, she thought. It was exactly how her Spanish professor had described it. She sat in a yellow molded chair with chrome legs and flipped through an El Greco book.

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” a suited man said. “Were you looking for something particular?”

“I wanted to speak with the manager.”

“The curator,” he rubbed his chin, his hair slicked back with oil, a dainty mustache quivered over his lips. “Yes, do you have an appointment?”

“No, nothing like that. I’m an artist.”

“So you are, ma’am,” the man pinned his arms behind his back.

She hoped she didn’t have remnants of this morning’s egg on her jeans.

“The curator is a very busy woman. She may not be able to see you. Let me check.”

Eden admired the dark and light contrasts in El Greco’s paintings, especially how he depicted Christ. She hoped her paintings would be in a book some day, or a show, or maybe even displayed at the Tate.

“You are very lucky,” the man said as he returned from the back. “She will be right out.”

“Thank you.” Eden arms tingled with excitement. She felt breathless—it was a good sign to meet with the curator.

“How do you do?” The woman wore black knee-high boots, a tight white shirt, and a grey pencil skirt. Her black hair curled around her ears in the ‘30s style. She held out her hand.

Eden stood and took it, shaking briskly. “I’m Eden.”

“Bethany Pierce. What can I do for you?”

“I brought pictures of my paintings,” Eden said. “I thought you might be interested in showing them.”

“I can’t tell from photos.”

“It’s all I have. Please look at them.” She held out six pictures.

Ms. Pierce took them quickly. “In the future, you should know to bring samples of your work to a gallery.” She walked over to a show light in the corner of the room, shuffled the photos like index cards and came back. “We cannot show these here. My apologies.” She handed the pictures to Eden.

“Why is there something wrong?” Eden felt her cheeks burn.

“I suggest going to the market in town on Saturdays,” Ms. Pierce said. “It’s a great place to get started.”

“I thought this shop backed upcoming artists.”

“Your work is interesting,” she said slowly. “But it is not the quality we show. Thank you for stopping by.” She turned abruptly and walked to the back.

Eden exited the gallery and turned down the street, in the direction of the bus stop. She blinked to clear her eyes. She had to keep it together.

Matty checked the gap in the spark plugs, changed the oil, and pumped brake fluid into the front-disc brakes of his Peugeot. He drove over to pick up Seb and then over to Honiton—by the abandoned airfield, where Seb’s dad, Richard Carney, had taught them how to maneuver on snow—to the Carney’s farm to shakedown the car. Matty grew up watching Richard underneath cars or fists in bonnets. Richard had to get a lift in order to fit under the cars, which made it possible for Matty, at seven or eight, to crawl under the frame while Richard lay on his back, arms scrunched. Seb would get tired of helping his dad and go inside to play on the Atari, but not Matty. There was something beautiful about the way Richard’s large hands maneuvered tight spaces, brought out the discarded part and fitted a shiny one. When a part refused to give, or snapped, Richard would yell, “bollocks,” or “bloody hell,” and then boom out a laugh that shook the chasy, making Matty snicker.

“If the gap’s too large, the firing is slow, or it could misfire,” Richard said. He handled his weight over the bonnet of the car, his beard rubbing against the manifold to unscrew a plug.

“But what if it’s too small?” Matty noticed his dainty 14-year-old hands next to Richard’s bulbous fingers. Matty had wondered what his own father’s hands were like.

“Ah, there she is.” He pulled out the plug—the threads and electrode were coated in black powder. “It’s too rich.” Richard grunted and wiped a sooty hand across his forehead, where sweat congealed against his skin.

“Is that because of the gap?”

“Nah, if it’s too close, it could fire during the compression stroke.” He blew on the spark plug under the dangling light. “Which means, it’ll run crappy.”

“Right,” Matty said.

Richard dropped the spark plug in Matty's hands. He turned it over and noticed black powder under his nails. He didn't see how this little thing could have so much power, so much weight for being so light. "Keep it," Richard said. "It's no use now."

On the Carney's farm, the wheel juddered through Matty's gloves, and the Peugeot's engine whined in high revs.

"Alright, you pillock. Keep it straight, now," Seb said in the intercom. "100, 3 right over crest. Caution: cattle grid."

The trees on either side of the muddy road blurred in the corners of Matty's eyes. The pines, cradling the road, comforted him. Over the hill, Matty pulled the wheel to the right, the turn was more than a four; he tightened right, overcorrected left. He rolled his eyes—Seb should know these turns. At 80 mph, Matty glided sideways through the cattle grid and straightened out.

"Fuck," Seb said. "Keep it straight. All right, pick it up. 50, slight right, hairpin left. Don't cut. Building. Don't cut. Hairpin left. Don't cut, watch the mill."

Matty went into the turn at 60 mph and yanked the handbrake, pulling hard left, coming within a foot of the Carney's grain mill. The car spun 180 through the turn, and it reminded him of when he took Eden to Cornwall last summer.

His aunt had a house on the edge of the cliff. He had clicked into fourth gear, at about 50 mph, and headed for the edge. Eden had braced herself, and he could hear her chanting a prayer.

"Stop the car," she said, screaming. "Let me out."

"Trust me," he said and pushed the accelerator further to the floor. He did a handbrake turn right there on the edge of the cliff. Afterwards, Eden had slapped him and kicked him out of

their bed for a week. That feeling, knowing that the tyres went over the edge, even by inches, made him feel like nothing else mattered in that moment, and he told himself he'd do it again.

“Pay attention. Square right. Don't cut. Bales.”

Matty slid right.

“100, over crest, bump, bump. 50, easy right.”

Matty flipped gears up to fifth, flat fifth. The Peugeot picked up to 90 mph, drifting slightly to the right.

“Slow down, you fuck,” Seb said, his voice high like the engine.

Matty continued at 90 mph over the crest and they struck a bump and caught air. And they were suspended for a moment, flying, over the dirt. Matty wanted to let go of the wheel and let the car lead him down, but he grabbed tight and braced for impact. The car bottomed out against the mud, and snapped up, jolting Matty against his five-point restraints, his helmet flapped against the seat hard. He swerved the car to a handbrake stop.

“What are you thinking? This is just a shakedown.”

“Just making sure we're ready.” Matty shrugged, removed his helmet, and then clicked out of his harness. “That turn before the grid has always been a 4, not a 3.”

“I call it how the notes say it is. It's a 3.”

“You need to practice pace notes, mate. Keep your fucking eyes open so we both stay alive.” Matty spat on the dirt next to him, and Seb played with his gloves, neither spoke for a minute.

Seb sat on the bonnet, and coughed. “I thought we were going to eat the grid, mate. My heart stopped.”

“Yeah, and the bumps were hell.” Matty grinned.

“I used dad’s tractor to build them up a bit.”

“Cripes, you think you could have told me?”

Seb blew snot out one of his nostrils. “I did. Open your fucking ears so we stay alive. We’re a team, mate.”

“All right.” Matty kicked the dirt.

“It’s about her, isn’t it?”

“Cecily’s mum died. She went to help Cecily but—”

“You think she’s lying.” It wasn’t a question.

Matty hadn’t really put it into those words, but that twinge in his stomach told him that Seb was right. He nodded.

“I’m driving,” Seb said. “Give me the keys. Let’s go pay our condolences.” He slid off the bonnet, slicking his hair behind his ears, and tucked his helmet behind the front seat. “And smoke some of this and calm yourself down, for Christ’s sake.” He tossed a bag of weed to Matty.

“I’m okay, thanks.” Matty didn’t want Eden to smell it on him.

“Suit yourself,” Seb said. “But roll me one, will you?”

By the time they reached Exeter, both men fell silent. Matty watched the road twist ahead, with little white shops buzzing by on either side of the street, and hoped they would find Eden. He hoped they would find her sitting down with Cecily, holding her close with tissues in hand. He refused to believe that Eden would cheat on him, but the vision of her spending hours at the computer pressed on his mind. He felt his throat constrict. “Stop the car,” Matty said. “I can’t breathe.”

Seb pulled over beside a sheep field. Brambles edged the paddock and a red rusted gate held the hedges together. Matty leaned against the gate and coughed and took in air. “Okay, I’m good,” he said after a couple of minutes. “That weed.”

“Yeah, it’s the good stuff, all right. You’ve gone soft, haven’t you?”

Matty’s face was pallid even in the afternoon sun. His body forced several more coughs out. He just wanted to lay back in the field, take in all the oxygen, and wait there until the stars lit up the sky, but he had to know about Eden.

“I left him,” Eden said. She paced in the front garden outside Kim’s house in Wells. Mums sprouted in a dry bed. Thistles dappled the grass, which made the lawn look spiky. Kim rolled a ball to Teddy, who was sticking his fingers in the flower patch, and clutched Nicholas to her hip.

“Why would you do that?” Kim asked.

“I don’t know. I just don’t think I can do it anymore.”

“Eden, everyone goes through hard times,” Kim said in a sharp octave, “but we all don’t leave at first fancy. See how Daniel and I have made it.”

Eden knew well enough how they made it. Daniel and Kim yelled at each other from opposite sides of their five-bedroom house, over the noise of Teddy, the three-year-old, banging wooden spoons atop pans on the kitchen floor and Nicholas, the newborn, screaming because he’d thrown the dummy out of his mouth. But somehow, over the screaming and chaos, Kim and

Daniel stared each other down, hands on hips, like a kind of tango, and then one would apologize—usually Daniel—and they’d kiss obnoxiously.

“I know, I know. A marriage takes work, but this is different.”

“Grow up. You always think you’re so fucking special.”

Eden said nothing. She stopped pacing in the garden and surveyed the empty driveway before her. She noticed the tall oaks that edged the road, bending toward her in the June wind. She held her breath. The air was humid and heavy. She felt her skin tingle hot and imagined grabbing Kim’s face and shaking it—*you don’t understand*, Eden would say, *what you have is not what I want*. Instead Eden just said, “Yeah, well maybe, but I’m sad. I’ve been sad for a while.”

“It’ll get better. Maybe you just need some space.”

“That’s why I left. To try and think. I told Matty Cecily’s mum died.”

“She did?” Kim scrunched her eyebrows.

“No, I mean, yes—it’s complicated—a while back she did.”

“You should call him and talk to him.”

“I tried.” Eden watched Teddy pull clumps of dirt off his fingers.

“You’d better come in and have some tea.” Kim swung open the front door and Eden followed. “Come on Teddy, you little rascal.” Teddy scrambled up the steps to the door, his hair bouncing. Kim shoved Nicholas into Eden’s arms and put Teddy down for a nap.

Eden held Nicholas close. “You don’t care if I leave my husband, do you?” She cradled his head with one hand. “No, you don’t do you? That’s why I love you. Yes I do.” Nicholas looked at her cross-eyed, and then scrunched his eyes and wailed at the top of his lungs. “No, no, don’t do that. Shhh.” Eden juggled him up and down.

Kim came out of Teddy's room. "Have you been hitting him again?" she said with a wink and took him from Eden's arms, rocking him back and forth. She put the kettle on for his bottle and for their teas.

"I don't know what to do," Eden said at the table in the yellow kitchen. "Can I stay with you? I only had enough for one night at a hotel."

"Well, have you thought about his feelings? Have you talked about it at all?" Kim tucked Nicholas against her side with one arm and rested the bottle between her chest and chin, while Nicholas sucked feverishly. She clinked her nails against her tea mug with her other hand.

"I can't. How do you tell your husband you're not in love with him?"

"Edie, it's a choice, love is."

"I know." Eden brought her knees up to chest on the dining room chair and hid her face. "But he doesn't love me either, not really—it's the idea of me he loves."

"You know I love you, Eden, and I'll support you—and yes, you can stay." She reached across the table and squeezed Eden's shoulder. "But you're wrong."

Eden looked up at Kim, and saw the disappointment, the lines forming around her mouth, pulling it down into a frown. Kim seemed older, tired—her sandy hair, brittle, even her thin nose seemed lower to the ground, but Kim and Eden were only a year apart.

"I've spent a year thinking about it." Eden poured her unfinished tea down the sink and grabbed her bag.

"Look, stay," Kim reached for her hand. "You can have the attic—it's fine. We won't talk about it anymore."

"Thanks," Eden said.

Remnants of sun had almost disappeared entirely over the horizon. Matty and Seb parked on the street just outside Cecily's flat. At least, it was still her flat at Christmas when Eden had him post off about a hundred holiday cards to people they never see anymore. *It's not about what they can give you*, she had said when he grumbled about the cost of stamps. Christmas wasn't the same for him when he was a kid—his mum and him spent Christmas gorging on Cadbury's chocolates and ice cream, just the two of them—his mum said it was all a sham anyway, in the name of religion. But when Matty spent holiday with the Morrison's, there were 16 of them cramped around a table for 10, multiple courses—champagne and nuts, mint melon balls, gravlax, stuffed turkey and roast potatoes, Christmas pudding, cheese and crackers, wine, oh yes, was there wine, port, coffee and chocolate mints—they left fat and happy. Seb pressed the doorbell, waited about 15 seconds and pushed it again.

"Slow down," Matty sighed. "We actually want her to come to the door."

"Just trying to help." He shrugged and blew into his hands.

Matty looked at his watch—it was already 9 p.m. "She's probably out, mate. This was a long shot anyway."

"We're not leaving." He tapped Matty's forehead hard. "We've got to get that head in the rally."

The curtains rustled and then the door sprung open. "Matty! Hi, I haven't seen you in ages." She drew him into her wide chest. It was musky, and she was wearing a large forest green shirt, and it was obvious that she wasn't wearing a bra. He patted her shoulders. Her hair was in loose dreads, tied back into a bun. Matty had forgotten how she resisted conventional living—but

she was the type of person that made you forget being uncomfortable. Eden said she should have been a vicar, but Matty thought she'd be better fitted to be a professional hugger.

"Sorry about the time."

"I couldn't tell who was causing a racket, until I heard your fat gob," she laughed. "Fancy a cup of tea, then?" She opened the door wide and then wrinkled her nose at Seb.

"Ta, love."

She went to the back of the flat to put the kettle on, motioning to the settee for them to sit.

"It doesn't look like she's here, mate." Seb said in his ear.

"Maybe she went to the shops," Matty whispered back.

Cecily came back with three mugs and set them on the coffee table. She waddled back for milk and sugar. She sat down in the chair out of breath. "You can doctor your own." She plopped a couple of spoons on the table.

"How are you? I'm sorry about your mum. You okay?" Matty poured milk and passed to Seb, who was heaping sugar in his cup.

"Thank you. I've processed it, but I'm in a good place now." Her eyes were shiny.

"I'm glad," Matty said. He felt relief that Eden hadn't lied, and nodded at Seb with a smirk. He thought it strange that Cecily was coping so well so soon, but everyone dealt with these things differently. Cecily was really her own kind of person anyway.

"Is Eden with you?" she asked.

Matty felt suspended. "She's not here?"

"Why would she be?"

"Your mum—"

"Died last year."

“What?” Matty stilled, everything slowed. His body felt the weight of a car.

Seb took the mug out of his hands. “We’ll be heading out love. Thanks for the tea.” He started to rally Matty out the door.

“What about Eden?”

“She’ll ring ya,” Seb said as he shoved Matty out. “Let’s get a drink, mate.”

Eden sat on the bed in the attic of Kim’s house. From the attic, the tops of the 1.5 meter-thick cob walls showed. She rubbed her hand across 17th-century mud, stones and straw that glued the house together, and felt a comfort from the warm hues of beiges and yellows. The roof had holes where the thatch had separated. She could see a single star through a fist-sized opening. Eden smoothed the lime chevron duvet and matching pillows, and told herself that living here was temporary. The lamp, made of tin, coiled up out of the floor—it was something dad had invented ten years ago out of a torch and melted scrap bed-frames. She ran her fingers down the rusted metal and remembered dad showing her how to weld and solder, how to fix things. The torch emanated a circle of light on the ceiling, it was barely enough to read, but Eden made out dancers on pages of a Degas book, and it helped her relax into sleep.

She awoke in wet sheets and flung them off to the side. The room creaked, and the blackness crept into her. Eden reached for the torch lamp. Strange forms of shadows lingered in the corners and projected onto the ceiling. She thought about calling Matty, about telling him that she was lonely, that she cared about him, that all this was silly, that she lied. This place was alien to her.

She picked up her phone to check the time. A missed call from him. It must have been what woke her. The call log showed he rang 2 minutes previous. It was 1:34 a.m. She sighed.

She pressed callback.

Seb was hanging over the bar, humming an unknown tune. “We did good, didn’t we,” he slurred.

“Sure,” Matty said. “Let’s finish up here, then.” His phone vibrated in his pocket, he drew it out fast. “Edie, where are you?”

“I’m at Cecily’s.”

“Try again. We’ve been there.”

The barkeep poured him another Newcastle. He put a finger up to close up.

“We?”

“Seb and me.”

Of course he was with Seb, Eden sighed, and then said, “I’m at Kim and Daniel’s.”

He felt immediate relief. “What are you doing?”

Eden sighed into the phone.

How could she say it? “I’m just getting space.”

“Do you love me?”

“Yes,” she said but something opened inside her.

“If you love me, you’ll live with me in my house.”

Eden didn’t know what to say. How could she explain that she didn’t love him the same way he loved her?

“You’re my wife, Edie,” Matty left 30 quid on the bar and pulled Seb by the collar.

“We’ve got to go, mate.”

“I know.”

Eden imagined Matty splitting open.

“We made a commitment to each other,” he shouted.

“I know.” Kim had said Eden had to choose to love, and even though she didn’t feel it now, maybe she would in time. “It was just a little getaway,” and then “I just think I need to see someone, like you said.”

His voice softened, “Come home, love. We can work it out.”

“Okay,” she said finally, and as she hung up, her body felt the weight of the decision. Tomorrow, she would shed herself. She would go back to the house, and she would be his wife and have his children.

Robby is Dead

Anna pulled the curled edges of the paper toward her, crinkling it in her hands, smearing the words with the oils from her fingertips. *The Billingham Times* displayed her son's mugshot and a headline that read: "Local Man Kills Girlfriend in Front of Child." She let the paper fall out of her hands.

"What are we going to do for Robby?" she asked her husband.

Mike hit the oak kitchen table, which vibrated Anna's elbows. "Dammit, Anna, the boy's done."

"He still has a chance," she said in a whisper.

"Don't you think I want to do something?" Mike said. "It's too late. He's done it now. We knew he would sooner or later. He's not our son anymore." Mike crossed his browned arms against his chest, signaling the end of the conversation.

"There's always hope—"

“No, Anna, God cannot save him.”

Anna sat on the bedroom floor, knees against chest, flipping through Robby’s memory book—she’d made one for each boy as soon as she got a positive pregnancy stick—a grainy photocopy of Robby’s birth certificate, the crusted stump from the umbilical cord, pictures of Robby all fat and squishy in the tub, surrounded by plastic stackable rings, Robby crawling in overalls, three-year old Robby riding a pink trike, several teeth strung together on a twine necklace, a crayon drawing he had made when he was five: A stick house in blue, a pink triangle holding a green blob, a tiny yellow blob on the ground on four legs, and a large rounded green figure drawn off to the side with red circles coming out of it. “Mommy, mommy, look at my picture,” he had said. She said what a pretty painting as she ironed Mike’s denim work shirt. Anna wanted to remember the chubby fingers pointing at the paper, his dusty wild hair, his giggle, but all she could recall was circles of rose crayon in the stomach of the figure. She closed the book and wiped under her eyes with index fingers and sniffed to clear her nose. She had to be strong. This was only the beginning.

She padded into the dark kitchen, flipped the kettle on, and pulled the light cord that was hanging above the table. *The Billingham Times* was as she left it, when they had swallowed the words down in dry throats: the pot roast in the oven forgotten. The picture in the newspaper looked nothing like Robby. The face was shiny and sharp, his shoulders naked, and his dark curly hair greased back onto his head like he had been wearing a cap. Those eyes that reflected the flash were not Robby’s; they were small and his pupils were a dilated-amber. The story was on the second page, his picture enlarged to stretch across the column width, which heightened his pointy nose. The Thacker family name boldened in print while the other text on the page melted

away. The report had been printed in the local newspaper, even though Robby hadn't lived in town for over five years—he hadn't had a stable income since he took up watch repair. The job didn't last more than a couple of months because he could only take apart the cogs and couldn't fit them back together.

For as long as she could remember, Anna had known that Robby was different. It was if he came out of the womb altered from the fall she'd had when six months pregnant. She cursed the doctor for not doing something then but the ultrasound showed nothing abnormal. She blamed herself, she blamed Mike, and in the beginning, she blamed God. Robby was introverted, sickly, and sensitive for a boy.

When Robby was five, on the way to church one Sunday in April, the family piled into the 1976 Chevy Impala: Simon clipped in his carseat in the back, and Robby perched on Anna's knee in the passenger side. Mike paced around the car and shut all the doors. The screaming came out of Robby in high-pitched waves. His fingers wedged in the hinge of the door. Mike yanked the door back open, while Anna rocked him, kissed the boy's head, and held his reddened fingers. Robby squirmed and wailed. "It was an accident," she cooed, "an accident."

"I'm sorry, Rob," Mike said. "I didn't mean to. Let me take a look at those fingers." He bent closer to Robby.

"No." He shrieked, and Mike jerked back up, hitting his head on the frame of the door. Robby said to Anna, "Mummy, he did it on purpose."

"Dad didn't know your fingers were there," Anna said in a sharp low tone.

Mike got in the driver's seat, immediately putting the car in reverse and backed out of the driveway.

“He did it to me.” Robby shook his head, writhing in her arms, refusing to stop screaming even as they entered the church parking lot.

“Take Simon in,” she said to Mike. “I’ll stay here with Robby.”

“Shall I kiss it better?” Mike asked Robby, over his wailing.

“I think it’s better,” Anna said, “that you just go on in.”

“Fine.” Mike carried Simon inside.

Robby quieted when his voice hoarsened and his entire body trembled with pain or anger. He fell asleep on her lap, and she remembered thinking that he seemed so happy when he slept. His breathing slowed, his sandy eyelashes relaxed over puffy skin, and she stroked his face with the back of her hand like she had over the railing of his crib after a fit, and—tummy to mattress, arms in front, bottom up, knees tucked under—he slept.

She folded the paper up and decided to call Simon, it was just past 11:00 p.m. his time. She held her breath as the ringing pulsed through the phone, hoping that he wouldn’t pick up.

“Hello?” His husky voice boomed over chatter, clinking glasses, and Jimmy Hendrix.

“Simon, it’s mom. Is this a bad time?” Please say yes, she thought.

“Hang on a sec.” The background noises faded into murmurs. “Just studying for the GRE.”

“It’s your brother,” Anna said and paused to form the next sentence.

“Just tell me that dad’s okay.” Simon’s response was quick and short.

“He’s fine.” Anna flushed. “Robby is in jail. They think he killed a girlfriend.” How strange it must seem that she didn’t know the girl Robby was living with.

“I’m so sorry. That poor woman. And her family.” He was sucking in air, smoking again, and blowing it into the receiver.

“You know his temper,” she said. “I’m sure it was an accident.”

“I hope he gets put away. It was only a matter of time before he hurt you or dad,” he said and followed with “I’m so sorry mom.”

“I’ll let you know when we know more,” she said, trying not to cry. Simon had always been a compassionate boy, always had a love for the church, a stark contrast to Robby. “Will you pray for him?”

“I’ll pray that he stays away,” he said. “I love you.”

“Love you too.” Anna hung up the phone and the room felt empty.

They had tried to get Robby help as early as second grade because he brought a knife against a teacher when he was ordered to sit down. The school had referred him to Madison County Mental Facility, where he stayed for six months, as they probed his brain for answers: there was no result. Anna had thought he was just a difficult child, until she had walked in on seven-year old Robby smashing three-year old Simon’s head against the coffee table. Anna had only been outside for 10 minutes, while she picked up the mail and chatted with Elise, the neighbor. As she opened the door, he let go of Simon and stared at her, his eyes wide and unblinking.

“What are you doing?” Anna had screamed and scrambled over to Simon, picking up the crying toddler into her arms.

“He played with my car,” said Robby.

“You bad boy. You don’t hurt your brother.”

She kissed Simon's forehead, where the skin was blueing and cracked. Robby knelt and scooped up the car and ran it around the living room making acceleration noises. Robby wasn't left alone with Simon again.

The next morning, Anna woke early and shuffled outside to pick up the paper on the lawn. The plastic casing was slick from dew. She eyed the neighbors' houses for watchers, nobody. She stood for a moment, newspaper in hand, let her head fall back and closed her eyes. Only the trills of birds broke the silence of the morning. She imagined what it would be like if she could empty out all the noise in her head. To cast off everything she was made to carry. She tucked the paper under her arm and lifted her palms up as if receiving a folded flag, the way church members did when really connecting with God, but all she felt was a slight humidity that told her it was going to rain.

"Anna, I've been meaning to find you."

It was Elise. Anna turned to face her. Elise's silver hair was saranwrapped in foam rolls. Her dressing gown, blue with water lilies blooming on it, gaped at the top, like it was trying to cage her.

"Hi, Elise. I'm on my way out," Anna said quickly, drawing the paper against her chest unconsciously. She did not know how long Elise had been watching her.

Elise perched boney fingers on Anna's arm. "I'm sorry about Robby."

"We don't know anything yet," she said, jutting out her jaw. Elise was withdrawing and all Anna could think was how she hated Elise for always watching. She had seen when Robby

ran through the house, chasing them with a knife, when he pulled up with a car full of friends and threw rocks at the house, the multiple times he had been in cuffs on the lawn.

“I’m praying for you all.”

“Feels like rain,” Anna pointed up. “Better get in before you ruin your hair.” She said this kindly, but then smiled, showing teeth.

She opened the front door, and the odor of Colombian Rich wafted through the entryway.

“You’re up early,” she said.

Mike lifted a mug out of the glass paneled white cupboards above the dishwasher. “Had trouble sleeping,” he said.

“Me too.” Anna held up the paper. “Wanted to see if there’s more.”

Mike turned a mug around in his fingers that had “World’s Best Dad” printed across it—Robby had bought it for him to impress a girlfriend a couple of years ago as a late Father’s Day gift—he pushed the mug onto the top shelf at the very back. He sloshed coffee into a simple, black cup and then stood by the sink and stared out the window. He must be looking at the dead birch in the field outside, Anna thought.

Anna scraped a chair out and fell into it, letting her pink fluffy dressing gown flow out to either side. She slipped the paper out of the plastic tube and thumbed through it as Mike slurped coffee. The front page had a teaser with Robby’s photo on it—“Bellingham Man Arrested for Murder, Page 2.” The same story as the day before, word-for-word. Nothing more. Her stomach pressed against her ribs.

“They reprinted it.”

“Figures,” he said, still staring off.

She scanned the paper—the front page pregnant with photos of dogs in t-shirts and bowties, cats with flowers clipped to their fur, a reminder that the city animal shelter was accepting donations, in the inside pages, George Aylan and Rudy Smith had died of natural causes in their homes last week, the church’s annual picnic next Saturday asked for everyone to bring a dish, but cautioned against salt and too much spice. She had been planning on making her famous lasagna and banana bread for weeks. But Robby’s story resonated like a throbbing tooth. How could she explain it to her friends?

“I was wondering if you would like to come to church with me today,” she asked, and moved her eyes over Mike, hopeful.

“I think it would be more productive for me to contact his lawyer,” he replied, his back still turned.

“Right.” The pressure radiated throughout her chest. “Go ahead. You call the lawyer, I’m sure he’s not in church.”

Anna arrived at church at 11:30 a.m. She had timed it so she could slide in the back row at the end of worship, unnoticed, her usual seat in the second row left empty. The pews mimicked the Anglican Church with red velvet cushions, which stretched the length of the seat on top. She tip-toed down the pew, and perched in the corner, where the shadows could cover her face. She held a damp scrunched-up tissue in one hand and her ruffled English Standard Version Bible in the other, even though the preferred church text was the NIV. Her father had given it to her after arguing about it with her agnostic mother over spaghetti. At first, she only opened it out of rebellion, until after her father died, and then she felt compelled to read every word, writing her thoughts next to his, keeping it in her purse, always.

“Let us be seated,” said Pastor Dan. Anna drew back into the shadow of the wall as the crowd scuffled closer together in the pews, scooped up programs, and sat waiting for the sermon. “If you turn to the second page on the program, you’ll see the outline for today’s sermon. This is the next installment on the importance of reaching out to the poor. As Jesus said it is easier for a camel to walk through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven...”

Anna opened her Bible. She’d heard the same sermon three Christmases ago—the pastor’s voice droned like hearing him through water. She picked a random spot in the Bible, pointed a finger on the page, and read the verse that she landed on: Ephesians 2:8-9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not by a result of works, so that no one may boast.” This meant nothing to Anna. While, she understood it to be a truth, she hated the lack of control it suggested. It gave her no answer.

“For God says those who believe in Him will grow weary and not faint, they will stumble and not fall...”

Anna snuck out of the church as they stood to sing the last hymn, right at the close of the talk, clutching her bible and dropped the used Kleenex in the trash outside. She started the car and drove down Sycamore Avenue—the yellows and reds on the trees swooshed past the windows like fire. She swung the car around side-street corners until she screeched into their driveway, yanked the handbrake up, and went into the house. She found Mike in the sitting room, reading an Agatha Christie on the dusty green couch next to the unlit fireplace, his ankles crossed on the coffee table. She tensed the muscles in her fingers. The hair that was neatly tied back in a half ponytail earlier that morning, now frizzy.

“You didn’t even try.” She blurted this out, pointing at him.

Mike lowered his book and peered over bifocals. “What are you talking about?”

“You gave up on him. You pushed him away,” she said, stammering, allowing her entire body to shake.

“He was long gone,” he said. “I just realized that before you.”

“That’s bullcrap,” she spat.

“Whoever Robby is, he’s not our son. He never has been.”

“Of course he is.”

“That boy is not like you or me—there is something inside him that shouldn’t be.” He closed the book. “I did everything I could. I’ve spent thousands of dollars on evaluation. I even prayed to your so-called-god. And what happens? He got worse.” He shrugged, and Anna wondered if he cared about anything.

“So you throw your hands up and turn away from your own flesh.” She made fists and stood over him. “You disgust me.”

“He’s a murderer, Anna.”

“Oh you would say that,” she said and flung her keys at his head.

After a night of rustling back and forth on the couch, Anna made her way up the stairs to the bedroom, holding onto the rail to keep from tripping over her feet. She stepped into some old sweats and padded into the kitchen. Mike had obviously been up for a while; the paper was open

on the table, a half full coffee mug, cold, swelled rings of brown onto recycled news stories. She pushed the mug off the paper and scanned for more information on Robby.

“Don’t bother. There’s nothing there,” Mike said, coming in from the deck and leaned against the rails of the ladder-back chair. “But I spoke to his lawyer. He wants to see us.”

“Robby?”

“The lawyer wants our statements. For the defense.”

“What did you say?”

“I said we’d meet up in an hour. We should discuss what we’re going to say.”

“The truth.” Anna left the statement open like a question.

“That’s the plan.”

As they entered the county jail, a faint smell of urine and bleach floated about the place. Anna thought about seeing Robby again for the first time in six months and wondered if he looked the same as the picture in the paper. Part of her hoped that he didn’t do anything, or that the prosecution had no evidence. Orange plastic seats for Anna and Mike were placed next to each other in the conference room, the lawyer’s spot on the side, and Robby’s at the other end. It was all so grotesque and artificial, having to sit as a unified front with Mike.

They sat down together and unconsciously scooted the seats away from each other. The lawyer sifted through a briefcase, and two armed policemen shouldered Robby in. Robby looked green underneath his skin, unhuman. His hair was still greased back like the photo, but his nose was regular, Robby sized. Anna realized she was turning the cross over and over in her fingers

when the chain pulled at the skin of her neck. The lawyer was a short man in an ill-fitted cream suit, and grey-rimmed glasses that sat on the edge of his nose, with leather strings coming from the sides of the lenses and meeting behind his nape.

“Robby wanted you to be here for his statement first before we proceed to yours.” The lawyer’s voice reminded Anna of a slow-motion recording.

“Why?” asked Anna.

“He wants you to know the truth before you comment on his past.”

Mike squeezed Anna’s hand, but she yanked it away. “Go ahead, Robby,” she said. “We’re listening.”

The lawyer cut in. “Remember Rob, we’re recording your statement. So keep it simple, and we’ll be out of here in no time.”

Robby nodded, his eyes were pale in the dim light. “I didn’t do it I swear,” he said mumbling. “Kim and I been together 3 months when she flipped out on me. She said she was going to leave. She took her kid and tried to run, but before then, she picked a fight. She hit first. I was just protecting myself. Honest, Mom.” He sniffed and rubbed a denim-sleeve across his sweaty face and watched Anna. She nodded and reached out for his hand.

“He’s lying,” Mike said matter-of-factly.

“Mr. Thacker, please, don’t interrupt, we’re low on time,” the lawyer said, slurring his words. Anna wondered if he’d been drinking. “And Rob, just tell them your statement, so we can move along, all right?”

“Robby we don’t care about what you did,” Anna said. “We love you. We just want to know the truth.” She tried to sound convincing to Robby and to herself. She retracted her hand.

“I’m telling you the truth,” he screamed and kneed the conference table off the floor, clinking the cuffs and chains against the laminate. “That bitch tried to leave me,” he said. “So I got mad. She had her bags packed and the kid’s too. I came home, and I saw this, ask her if she’s leaving, and she lies to me. And I knew ‘cause her breath smelled garlic, like a vampire. Says she’s planned a special trip for us and for me to pack my things.” Robby twitched in his seat, his back erect, eyes focused beyond Anna and Mike.

Anna’s shoulders lowered a little as she leaned elbows onto the table. The room was stuffy. The smell of rotten cabbages emanated from Robby’s armpits.

“I kind of believe her now,” he continued. “So I go into the bedroom to grab my clothes, and the door slams. So I run out and chase her down the stairs. They left everything. I warned her. I yell to her to come back or she’s dead. She just runs down the stairs. I catch up with them as she is fiddling with the keys. She never listened to me. I said she should get an electronic button, but no, she said she didn’t need it.” He snorted. His hands animated the story while knitted together by cuffs.

“She punches me, right here.” He pointed to the crook of his nose. “So I punch her back, and she falls to the ground. She’s face down on the curb. And I told her not to push me, but she wouldn’t listen—I swear.” Anna covered her eyes. “She kept screaming, and I was worried someone would come, so I pushed her head into the curb. But she just wouldn’t be quiet, so I smash her face into the concrete with all my strength.” Robby paused and his mouth contorted to a smirk.

Mike hung his head.

“Kim stopped screaming, but the little girl is blubbering. I smack her and tell her to pull yourself together. So I figure I’d better leave before someone calls the police. I ran to Benny’s

house, and they found me anyways.” He shrugged and said, “I guess I’m going to be here for a while, looks like.”

Anna squirmed at the visual of Robby straddling a faceless woman, thrashing her head against the curb. Her stomach turned as she thought of a child seeing her mother get pulverized by a man.

Mike picked cat hair off his suit pants.

“I think we’d better try that again, Robby,” said the lawyer after a minute of silence. He turned off the tape recorder.

“My performance wasn’t good enough for you?”

“That was great. No, just some technical things.” The lawyer backpedaled.

“What evidence do they have?” Anna asked the lawyer.

“They say they can place him at the scene with witnesses, and not just the child’s. They have DNA samples in her head from where they say his nails cut into her—”

“What’s the plan, then?” Anna asked.

“Rob and I are discussing several options. I’m recommending temporary insanity—perhaps suggesting Kim’s previous life, prostitution, resurfaced and caused an insane reaction from Rob.”

“Temporary?” Mike said. “You’ve got to be joking.”

Anna ignored Mike. “A prostitute, Robby, really?”

Robby shrugged.

“We still need to verify that for court,” the lawyer said. “But Rob here is pretty upset about it.”

“I can understand why.” Anna’s pity for Kim dissipated, and she felt Robby had been wronged. “I hope you weren’t sleeping with her—you better pray you didn’t catch a vile disease from that woman.”

Mike banged a fist on the table. “You think that’s the important thing here?”

Anna flinched. “Well, you can see where Robby gets his temper from.” She forced a laugh to the lawyer.

“Mom, the bitch deserved it,” Robby said.

Anna felt herself flush hot. “Hold your tongue,” she said. “You should feel sorry for leaving a little girl without a mother. You should ask for forgiveness from God.”

“I warned her,” Robby said. “She lied to me, and then attacked me, remember? You suffer the consequences of your actions, that’s what you always tell me.”

“What about God?” Anna asked, and at the corner of her vision, Mike shook his head.

“God put me here. He is punishing me for something I didn’t do. They’ll see.”

“We’ve done this before,” Mike said, sighing. “You know it won’t be any different.”

“Keep your opinions to yourself. I’m talking to my son.” Anna straightened the buttons of her jacket. “Robby, you can put this behind you. You can ask for forgiveness.”

“I fucking hate you, bitch. When I get out I’m going to kill you I hate you so much.” Robby was standing and his yelling amplified in the small concrete room. The police came in and dragged him out. The lawyer followed in pursuit. For the first time, Anna felt something other than hope. She let her head fall against the conference table and squeezed it between palms. She looked at her husband and noticed he was clasping his hands together, eyes closed, lips moving. The creases around his eyes and mouth had deepened. Anna still loved him.

“I’m sorry,” Anna said, rubbing Mike’s graying hair. “We’ll get through this.”

Mike wouldn't look at her. "You know *you* can't save him, don't you?"

Anna thought about all the nights she'd stayed up worrying that Robby would end up in jail. She always imagined it would be stealing a car or smoking drugs, never that he'd actually intentionally hurt someone. She always figured he would come to her and ask for help. But that woman, pulverized, and her little girl, alone. Anna felt overwhelmingly lost. "But he needs me."

"It's time to think about us, now, Anna." He cupped her hands in his. "Please, this is the last time I'm going to ask you to do this for me. Put us first."

A part of her that knew he was right. Robby might never come around, and she wanted to keep trying, but most of all, she was tired. She took out the Bible and circled Ephesians 2, and scribbled in the front, underneath her father's writing to her: "Robby, this is my gift to you. Cherish it, love mom." She pressed it into the hands of the guard standing outside the room. "Please give this to my son, Robby Thacker," she said. Mike held out his arm for her, and she leaned into him, the noise in her head emptying as they stepped out of the police station together and into the bright midday sun in the middle of Main Street.

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

FILEBOX 1 FROM CASE 139-KX-7642

Report submitted by A. Thompson
to HQ

5 May, 2012

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

FD-472

Date: 3/1/12

Precedence: High

To: Domestic Surveillance, ELSUR
Attn: 139-KX-7642
From: KX, TN
Drafted by: A. Thompson
Subject: (s) Stikes, Ronald Freddy
Confidential—Read Only

Surveillance Request:

(s) Request permission from HQ for ELSUR (Electronic Surveillance) and for Mr. Stikes' home at East Main Hwy #42, Knoxville, TN 37917, including roving taps and his place of occupation, Papers Inc, in Knox County, TN, as per renewal of PATRIOT Act, 2010.

(s) Witness reports suspicious activity of Mr. Stikes, which suggest involvement in acts of espionage and/or terrorism. Reports claim the collection of high-powered weapons and his involvement with a militia. More investigation needed to ascertain militia's goal and status of weaponry.

(s) Mr. Stikes attended Hillgrove Primary School, where his connections with a Mr. Ellis, convicted of 1st degree espionage in 2001, would have been apparent as a small class of 30 students. Mr. Ellis' report can be found in case [REDACTED].

(s) Mr. Stikes' archived reports and official medical records have been released to the FO and contain evidence that correlates with abrasive lifestyle. Advised to enact section 2 surveillance levels with (SFI) strategic field investigation.

Full NCIS and E-check on all computer systems and hard drives.

Read and clear

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

FD-473

Date: 3/5/12

Precedence: High

To: KX, TN
Attn: A. Thompson
From: (MO) Mobile Field Office
Drafted by: A. Bricks
Suspect (s): Stikes, Ronald Freddy
Confidential—Read Only

Report Summary, Monday March 5th:

0700: Began onsite observation.

0935: Stikes exited his campervan residence at East Main Hwy #42, Knoxville, TN 37917 and mounted a 1998 Vespa scooter. A Mrs. Ann Louise Stikes, mother of the suspect and owner of the camping vehicle, followed Mr. Stikes and gave him a suspicious brown paper sac. Mrs. Stikes wore a knee-length green dressing gown and floral shower cap. Mrs. Stikes is a white female, 53 inches tall, 130 lbs. She has an identifiable marking on her lower left calve, a red tattoo of a flower with "mom" inscribed on it. Mr. Stikes was dressed in khaki pants and a royal blue shirt with a yellow Paper Inc. emblem over his right breast and a nametag on his left breast. Stikes situated a leather "Marines: The Few, The Proud" jacket in the back storage compartment. Suspect failed to comply with helmet safety statute 379a of TN law, and proceeded Northbound on HWY 62. Suggest further investigation by SFI into suspect's family associations and cross-reference nation-wide traffic violations.

1213: At Stikes's place of occupation, the suspect drafted an email that ELSUR A. Bricks intercepted, between Stikes and an (UNSUB) unidentified suspect, which included references to "trial run thrus" and "weapon building session." Later in the email, Stikes said that he "can't wait to make [REDACTED] and blow up some [REDACTED]." Other parts of the conversation included Stikes asking the UNSUB, who calls himself "Kilgore," about his experience with pink mist. Stikes sent the email at 1132 hrs. The UNSUB did not reply. No [REDACTED] force indicated at this time.

1641: Stikes exited the business with no other unusual activity. He mounted his vehicle and drove Southbound on HWY 62 towards Mrs. Stikes' residence. At mile marker 78, Stikes pulled over to answer a call. A. Bricks intercepted the conversation between Stikes and UNSUB, self-identified as "Kilgore." Kilgore asked, "Did you get the supplies?" Stikes responded in the affirmative. "Take it down the hole," Kilgore said. A. Bricks attempted to triangulate call from cell tower B67, but "Kilgore" disconnected after 25 seconds.

1701: A. Bricks maintained 50 yd proximity to Stikes' vehicle as he turned off HWY 62. When Stikes pulled into his mother's residence driveway, A. Bricks parked the government-issued Lincoln Buick, registered number [REDACTED], on the side of the road, initializing hazards, while obtaining visual with field-sight glasses. Stikes dismounted his vehicle, and crouched, making military call signs. A. Bricks proceeded to switch off the government-issued vehicle. Stikes made the halt motion to a cluster of trees 20 yds to his left. A. Bricks exited the vehicle and took cover behind a honeysuckle bush. Stikes motioned the "eyes on" signal to unseen persons. Still crouched by his vehicle, Stikes proceeded to pop the storage compartment. A. Bricks listened for signs of movement—twig snaps, crunches of leaves—the only sound was the hinge of the storage compartment swinging open. Stikes stuffed a brown bag into his jacket. He made the "move out" signal and nodded to his right and to his left. Stikes possibly armed, felt for an object behind his back, in his jacket.

1735: A. Bricks radioed MO for backup. Stikes ran between the trees, flinging his back against the trunks, looking around, nodding at the others. A. Bricks followed Stikes at less than a 25 yd distance up a treed hill. A. Bricks flattened himself against the ground and bellied up the incline. Footsteps decreased. A. Bricks used his field sight glasses to track Stikes over the crest of the hill, but the suspect could not be located.

1900: A. Bricks reported to senior agent [REDACTED] at MO, following backup arrival at [REDACTED].

MO ran checks through governmental files to correlate military experience with Mr. Stikes. [REDACTED]. Suspect likely to have an agency connection. Request for further investigation, according to Espionage Act of 1917, section 567b. Request [REDACTED] staff from KX FO to track unidentified caller number. Recommend SFI cross-reference title records and receipts for the past three years to locate secondary location.

Full NCIS and E-check on all computer systems and hard drives.

Read and clear

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

FD-473

Date: 3/6/12

Precedence: High

To: KX, TN
Attn: A. Thompson
From: FO
Drafted by: A. Bricks
Suspect (s): Stikes, Ronald Freddy
Secret—For Recipient Only

Wiretap Transcription, March 5th:
East Main Hwy #42, Knoxville, TN 37917

1913: Mr. Stikes (S) took incoming call from UNSUB (U)

(S): Hello

(U): Ronny? How are you doing, my man?

(S): [REDACTED] Long time since we've talked. You know how it is. Just working and looking after mom. How's Titus Andronicus?

(U): We've been sold out three weekends in a row. Wanted to know if you'd like to fill in—[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] is out with diarrhea.

(S): What part?

(U): Demetrius

(S): Is the mutilation stage front?

(U): Of course it is. You know me.

(S): I'm in. Just can't do this Thursday.

(U): You got another part?

(S): Something like that. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] townfolk don't want us on stage, so we're going to force our way [REDACTED] and show them what it's all about.

Recommend

Full NCIS and E-check on all computer
systems and hard drives.

Read and clear

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

FD-475

Date: 3/6/12

Precedence: High

To: MO
Attn: A. Bricks
From: KX, TN
Drafted by: A. Thompson
Suspect (s): Stikes, Ronald Freddy
Witness (w): Peatsby, Sharon
Secret—For Recipient Only

Dear A. Bricks,

Thank you for your thorough report on Mr. Stikes. It has been invaluable for our budget allocation meeting. We have granted [REDACTED] access of resources available to you at your request. FD-200, FD-201, and FD-202 are in full situ. Mr. Stikes has no current file under any domestic agency. HQ suspects foreign agencies at play. Below is a copy of the transcript of testimony from the witness, Mrs. Sharon Peatsby, 10:12 a.m. March 6, 2012, at 210 Atlantic Ave., Knoxville, TN 37918:

Questioner: How long have you known Mrs. Stikes?

Peatsby: I grew up around Anne Louise, I did. Not much of a looker is she. Never were much but a good cook. That's why she's so round, reckon. But she makes the best beans. You'd think cooking them beans easy. But you gotta get them just right. She heats them up on the fire like theys nothing.

Q: And Ronald Stikes, how long have you known him?

P: Good old Ronny. Such strange child, not like my Philip. My Philip loves people he does, just like his mama. I suppose I known Ronny all his life. I remember him in the crib. Not the prettiest baby. Not like the red-haired angel in my house.

Q: What was your concern about Mr. Stikes?

P: I don't carry no worries for him, Mr., if that what you's asking.

Q: Why did you come in to see us Mrs. Peatsby?

P: Well, I wish you'd ask that question instead asking if I worry. Lord knows I have no wants for the wicked. I always thought Ronny's a strange boy. He always [REDACTED] acting war and hanging dead things around. Something's not right in his head. Well, he been talking, and I been hearing, that he into something big. When he's down at the General Store in town, see I work the till there, he buys all kind of strange things: wood, glue, nails, rope, lighter fluid, fertilizer—I saw a TV program once about home-made bombs using fertilizer. To think they all in the country like where we are. I asks him what he wants all

this stuff for, and he leans in like he's gonna tell me something big and he say it's for around the house, while he does that he's all looking around and gets his fat face in my face. I say hold up, buddy. Then he shrugs a bit and says it's for his group. For training or something. And he just goes crazy laughing like he's done told me the funniest thing.

Q: What do you know about this Militia? What do they do?

P: They all strut in them army pants, waving [REDACTED] guns. They parade down streets like it's their town. Ronny plays bugle in church before every service—Pastor John say Ronny comes up to him one day and shouts and waves his arms that no one's playing “Taps” or something. So, Pastor John, he's such a God-filled man, let him do it. I mean, blackened mackerels. If he'd ask me, I'd tell him where to put his trumpet. Sometimes we hear crackles up the hill, and we all know it's the army group doing something crazy. All the town knows about them, and we laugh about them silly boys. Until Ronny got himself up on the speaker at the fair last week and tell everyone how they don't understand, how they and everyone else is gonna pay. Then he laughs to himself and pumps his hands up and down against his side. It's no wonder he's all messed in the head. Word is, Anne Louise prostituting herself in the woods. So be it, that's what I say—if you mess with God, you gonna get it.

Q: Are you afraid that Mr. Stikes is capable of committing a crime against you?

P: As a good Christian woman, I aint worried about me, heavens. Thank you, Jesus. I am worried about all them others. What if he builds a bomb and set it off at the school or something? Now, how would that make us look? We don't need no Evil Ellis jokes no more. We are proud of our town. Gotta keep the dirt cleaned up, that's what I say. I tell you, the breeders here are all sinners they are.

End Transcript.

It is clear by Mrs. Peatsby's testimony that Mr. Stikes and his militia are causing mass disruption within the town and have made statements that he wants to hurt people (intention of bodily harm). Under title 543c, you may execute lethal force. However, as you may have already gathered, this source lacks concrete evidence—the General Store is a cash-only business, so the witness' statement cannot be verified. Mrs. Peatsby's testimony, along with other townspeople will help the case, but in order to make this one go to trial, you're going to have [REDACTED] evidence of weapons building or group plans to cause bodily harm to others.

Continue to monitor Stikes until we get a bigger team. We'll equip you with more personnel once briefed. As always, any evidence you can find will make it easier for Washington to see the Bureau as the great department that we are.

Full NCIS and E-check on all computer systems and hard drives.

Read and clear

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

Report from A. Bricks to KX, TN FO on 3.6.12 Missing from File

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

FD-473

Date: 3/7/12

To: KX, TN
Attn: A. Thompson
From: (MO) Mobile Field Office
Drafted by: A. Bricks
Suspect (s): Stikes, Ronald Freddy
Confidential—Read Only

Report Summary, Wednesday March 7th:

1015: Stikes coalesced with three UNSUBs, dressed in military attire, on top of Essry Hill. A. Bricks observed meeting camouflaged in the brush from 15 yds distance. The UNSUBs descriptions as follows: UNSUB 1—White male in his upper 50s, 5 ft 8 in, 240 lbs, black and green fatigues, bear tattoo left upper arm, carries [REDACTED] sawed M-16, left-hand dominant, chews tobacco, UNSUB 2—Black male in his 40s, 6 ft 0 in, 250 lbs, green and brown fatigues, war paint stripped on face, vertical scar down sternum, wheezes, UNSUB 3—White male in his 60s, 5 ft 10 in, 160 lbs, wears ripped fatigues and red bandana, long white hair in a ponytail, bullet strips criss-crossed over his shoulders, cigar smoker, carries a machete. Stikes and UNSUBs formed a circle and all put their dominant hand in the middle. UNSUB 3 said, “Are you ready for blood, boys?”

“Oorah.”

“Betyah.”

“Let’s get some.”

“You bet your assess you are,” UNSUB 3 turned away from the others, fiddling with a radio. “Just like the old days,” he said. Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” streamed out of the radio. Stringed instruments sounded.

“I love the smell of Napalm in the morning,” said UNSUB 2, sniffing into the brown bag.

“The smell,” Stikes took a good whiff, “you know that gasoline smell. The whole hill is going to smell like victory.” He smiled, showing gaps in the backs of his mouth where teeth had rotted out. He passed the bag to UNSUB 1.

“Yeah, Ronny, tell it,” UNSUB 2 said, wiggling his hips with his hands raised. “We’re gonna get them,” he said. “We’ll show them what they’ve been missing.”

Stikes, UNSUB 1, and UNSUB 2 tackled each other to the beats of the horns in the music.

UNSUB 3 maintained his position. He leaned on his machete, watching the men. “Silence!” He blurted in a raspy voice. “We must kill them. We must incinerate them. Pig after Pig. Cow after Cow. Village after Village. Army after army.”

The three men kneeled before UNSUB 3 and offered the brown bag to him. Eyes reflected like television screens, whispers of yeses came out of their mouths.

“This will work something fierce,” UNSUB 3 said.

"The horror," Stikes said after a minute of silence. He held his face in a hand and mock wept.

"Big baby don't like a little blood," UNSUB 2 elbowed Stikes.

"Cut. Cut. Cut! We must practice this right if we want to show the world we mean business," UNSUB 3 said. He scrunched up the bag and set it by the radio.

"Okay, I mapped out our positions of attack," Stikes took tactical command. He crawled over to his knapsack and drew out a white tube. He laid out the roll of paper and set rocks on it. "Tomorrow night at the town hall meeting will be ideal. Plenty of people there and cameras."

"Can I throw the first [REDACTED] bomb?" UNSUB 2 asked.

"Yes, in that case, you'll be situated here in the gallery," Stikes pointed to attack schematics. The men gathered around Stikes. "That way everyone will be looking up there, and you" he poked UNSUB 1 "can come in from stage left, me from stage right, guns blazing."

"Run Charlie," said UNSUB 1.

"Exactly."

"I'll come from the back," said UNSUB 3. "Here. With music."

"Pops, you hunker down by the exit, here, and throw smokes," Stikes said. "Cause you can't run." Stikes laughed. "Everyone set?"

"Oorah," they all said.

Stikes and UNSUBs poured chalk powder to mark out a large stage and proceeded to act out the attack, with the music set on continuous loop. They said bang bang, instead of dry firing the weapons. UNSUB 2 tossed the first [REDACTED] bomb, down onto the stage. UNSUB 1 and Stikes came from left and right [REDACTED] "bang, bang, bang," [REDACTED] machine gun noises. Bombs were thrown by UNSUB 3 at regular one-minute intervals. At the end of the music, they froze, then congregated together [REDACTED]. They scanned the mock theatre, then bowed to each other, shaking hands, patting shoulders, and shouting "Victory."

1545: After having run through the final plan 12 times, the men agreed on the finalization of the plan's synchronization. Stikes knelt and kissed the ground before departing. UNSUB 2 ran a finger down his scar, then crossed it. UNSUB 3 lit a cigar. And UNSUB 1 spat out chew.

Recommend continued investigation at level [REDACTED]. Stikes and UNSUBs appear to [REDACTED] [REDACTED] actual attack. Weapons and bombs have [REDACTED] been fired. Proceed with caution. Request search warrant to verify weapons. Recommend review of *Apocalypse Now* [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

Full NCIS and E-check on all computer systems and hard drives.

Read and clear

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

FD-475

Date: 3/7/12

Precedence: High

To: MO
Attn: A. Bricks
From: KX, TN
Drafted by: A. Thompson
Secret—For Recipient Only

Dear A. Bricks,

Your report summary from March 6th was received. As a reminder of report protocol, and as the Bureau makes decisions based on the accuracy of those reports, refrain from using any creative license in detailing the suspects movements.

All respect,

A. Thompson

Full NCIS and E-check on all computer
systems and hard drives.

Read and clear

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

FD-475

Date: 3/7/12

Precedence: High

To: MO
Attn: A. Bricks
From: KX, TN
Drafted by: A. Thompson
Suspect (s): Stikes, Ronald Freddy
Secret—For Recipient Only

Immediate transmission:

Request for search warrant denied. Judge [REDACTED] has assessed the evidence and deemed full lethal force prudent and necessary. Threat Assessment Center (TAC) has issued this situation elevated to threat level [REDACTED], recommendation to maintain low investigative level denied. Recommendation to review *Apocalypse Now* denied. Tactical force dispatched and will arrive at 0600, Thursday 8 March, 2012 to await FO instructions. Maintain position until tactical team arrive to take command of the site.

As always, the FO appreciates your invaluable work in this matter.

Full NCIS and E-check on all computer
systems and hard drives.

Read and clear

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

Immediate Transmission from A. Bricks to KX, TN FO on 3.7.12 Missing from File

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

FD-470

Date: 3/8/12

To: KX, TN
Attn: A. Thompson
From: Tactical Team 1a
Drafted by: Corp. Benson
Suspect (s): Stikes, Ronald Freddy
Confidential—Read Only

Field Transmission:

Stikes was taken down at 1814 hrs by Pvt. [REDACTED], after pointing a machine gun [REDACTED] at the crowd. UNSUB 2 shot dead from the galley at 1816 by Sgt. [REDACTED], following the showing of a grenade [REDACTED]. UNSUB 2 fell with the object but no explosion ensued. UNSUB 3 was shot in the chest by Corp. [REDACTED] after taking aggressive stance with a machete. UNSUB 3 is in custody of the MO at Tennessee Valley Hospital. Stable condition reported. Stiker, UNSUB 1, and UNSUB 2 successfully stopped and threat eliminated.

End transmission

Full NCIS and E-check on all computer
systems and hard drives.

Read and clear

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

FD-472

Date: 3/9/12

To: HQ
Attn: Filing Center
From: KX, TN FO
Drafted by: A. Thompson
Suspect (s): Stikes, Ronald Freddy
Confidential—Read Only

Details

(s) Bureau PO and KX, TN field officers advised to preserve total media blackout in relation to evidence suggesting Mr. Stikes and other suspects involvement in the incident on Thursday 8 March, 2012. All incident reports to be sealed. All autopsy reports to remain classified.

(s) Those claiming to act on behalf of Mr. Stikes are to be denied access to FBI files detailed the 9-day investigation. DNA and swab samples to be performed on other suspects during routine autopsies.

(s) Recommend closing of case 139-KX-7642 in regards to Mr. Stikes, suspect now deceased.

(w) Recommend file dispute of statement 139-KX-9123 of Mrs. Anne Louise Stikes as unreliable witness. Psychiatric reports submitted by Dr. Mikyum Kim, MD indicate [REDACTED] levels of paranoia, suggesting [REDACTED] as "key factors" in Mrs. Stikes "delusional state." Recommended following statement excerpts to be expunged from case record:

"Ronny and the boys were only play acting. They didn't mean to hurt no one."

"They guns were just painted plastic after all. Bombs were only baking soda in plastic baggies I made for them."

"Agent Bricks told us we had nothing to worry about. He said FBI just want to take a look at Ronny's guns is all."

"Mrs. Peatsby hated me ever since her husband gave me Ronny. She'd say anything to spite me."

"Ronny and the boys loved *Apocalypse Now*. Lord knows why."

“Now, I aint got no one. And I can’t trust you government people any more.”

Full NCIS and E-check on all computer
systems and hard drives.

Read and clear

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

FD-901

Date: 3/9/12

To: HQ
Attn: Human Resources
From: KX, TN FO
Drafted by: A. Thompson
Suspect (s): Stikes, Ronald Freddy
Confidential—Read Only

Recommendation:

Following case 139-KX-7642, A. Bricks appeared erratic and unpredictable. Eye-witness accounts describe A. Bricks shouting and throwing case files at his commanding officer. Suggest temporary suspension and psychiatric evaluation until deemed psychologically sound.

Full NCIS and E-check on all computer
systems and hard drives.

Read and clear

Heavies

I reached the looker room on the cardiac patient care unit 15 minutes past clock-in time. Ahead, two yellow lights flashed above adjoining rooms and alarms began to ping as I went in. Ana was putting lip gloss away on a shelf. I had been up all night microscoping agar mediums of *flavobacterium columnare* and *cytophaga*—observing the ballet of the thin rods, flexing, gliding, trying to decipher what made them infect so elegantly. I wanted to see what it takes to overcome.

“You look tired, baby,” Ana said, laying her head on my shoulder. “I heard it’s been one heck of a night.” She sighed.

I grunted as I tied my scrub pants. “Oh, great. How many ‘heavies’ do we have?”

“Girl, I don’t even know, but they say all they’s been doing is turning and wiping all night. Code brown I tell ya, code brown.” She pumped her arms in the air as if to intensify the meaning of the code. She pushed the door open with her rounded hip. “I got report for you. Let me know when you is ready.” Her non-native words stressed in staccato.

“Thanks.” I straightened my wrinkled scrubs. When I first started working at the hospital, I thought that all hospital floors were white, sterile, like on T.V., but in reality they’re splattered with skid marks from carts and dirty shoe imprints, stains of urine from catheter leaks and blood droplets from IVs. Last summer, I took samples from the hallway, the floor of a recently mopped patient room and “clean” bed sheets and scored them into agar. They all grew forests within hours. If I had to choose between licking the floor of The Burger Joint and the Hospital’s, I’d choose French fry grease any day.

“Help me with a boost?” Ana stood impatiently half in and half out of room 18 with gloved hands in the air, poised as if to scrub in for surgery. I nodded and joined her. The patient inside was flaccid on the bed, arms and legs contorted like tentacles. Ana and I grabbed a side of the chux—a pad that goes on top of the fitted sheet to reposition the patient or to catch bodily fluids—on the count of three, we pulled the chux up, almost hitting his head on the headboard.

Outside his room, she cornered me into the hallway. “He’s got Aids, make sure you glove up next time,” she said, pushing a finger into my chest. “You always glove up.” We’d both been on the unit for five years, although she started a month ahead of me and reminded me of this fact often. She strutted over to the pyxis room, where all the meds and equipment are kept.

“We were only pulling him up.” I shrugged as I followed her.

“I’m just saying you got to protect yourself.” She soaped up her hands, scrubbing them under hot water.

“Aids isn’t skin contact, and I don’t have any cuts on my hands. I’m not going to treat him any different.”

“Girl, you never know.” She sized me down as she dried her hands and left the water on for me. I squelched soap around my fingers, on top of my hands and up my wrists, dried them and turned off the tap with a paper towel.

I rolled a dynamap, the blood-pressure machine, out of the Pyxis room to perform my routine vitals. Every room was the same. “Hi, my name is Jodie,” I would say. “I’m going to be your Patient Care Technician today, and Stacy is going to be your nurse.” I would put on my best toothy smile and chirrup the words as if to engage the most pleasant response. As I got to my fourth room, I flipped through the chart of 07 and smiled. Mr. P. had been on the floor for three weeks, which was a long time for a step-down cardiac unit like ours, and insisted on being called “Roy” even though that wasn’t his real name. Roy was a 47 year old with melanoma, which had metastasized; radiation therapy had failed. Roy wasn’t married and didn’t have kids, but his sister, Maggie, stayed with him, and the pair of them bantered back and forth like sixth graders.

“Last night, I slept perty good, I reckon,” Roy said. The sprinkles of white and grey on his chin waggled as he formed the words. His cheeks were sunken, with wrinkles like gills spreading out from his mouth, making him seem more like a 70-year-old. He winced as he stretched out his fluid-filled arm for me to take his blood pressure.

“I’m glad. You certainly look good today.” I started the dynamap and took his temperature. “Well your blood pressure agrees: 102/65. Excellent!”

“See, I told you he was just pretending,” Maggie said as she patted the bed with her worn hand.

“With all these perty gals around, it’d be damn hard not have a heart attack.” He grinned, squishing the gills around his mouth together.

“All right, all right, we don’t want that heart rate to come up.” I removed the cuff. “Now, don’t have any wild parties in here. At least without inviting me first,” I said, wagging my finger.

“Oh, you know me.” Roy winked, and as I pulled the door behind me, he said to Maggie, “I like her.”

We’d passed out trays and call lights were quiet as patients pushed modular breakfast items around on their tables.

“How many heavies have you got?” I asked Jamie.

“I have the lady in 24,” he whispered, leaning his curly head close to mine. “She’s 398lbs and only 4’9.”

“I had her last week. You know those wounds came from rat bites. They say her family just left her on the floor for weeks. I guess they’ve been using her Medicaid and saying that they’re taking care of her. We hotlined them as soon as she came in.”

“Disgusting.” Jamie’s nose scrunched up. “I can’t believe her own family would do that to her. No wonder she’s so mean. And I have to put a catheter in her.” He laughed.

“Good luck!”

“Can you do it?”

“Only if you buy me a coffee from the POD.”

“I hope she doesn’t have rabies,” Jamie said.

Jamie, Ana and I entered the room like three astronauts tentatively setting their feet on the moon, garbed in bright yellow disposable gowns and armed with a two sets of Foley catheters and extra sterile gloves.

“Alright, Mrs. M, the doctor wants us to put a Foley catheter in you because your bladder isn’t emptying on its own, okay?” Jamie said in his ultra soft voice.

Mrs. M. opened an eye and grunted as her heavy head rotated toward Jamie. “Ain’t nobody puttin’ nothing in me,” she said. She drew in her bottom lip, wheezing in air, accentuating her orangey skin. She reminded me of a ranchu I had once, stubborn and bloated—the Japanese call them the “kings of the goldfish,” but most people think they’re ugly because of their flat, bubbly heads and egg-shaped bellies—my ranchu, named Peter, would never die; I changed the pH of the tank and even introduced seven different types of bacteria to his tank to research the stages of disease, but he just swam in circles at the bottom, eying me as I passed. My controls even floated belly up before Peter would.

“It’ll only take a second,” I said matter-of-factly, winking at Jamie. I hoped it wouldn’t take long.

Silence.

“It’ll make your stomach feel better,” I insisted.

“Fine,” she rasped.

“Okay, let’s get this started. Jamie, Ana, will you guys help me get a good look?” I set the unwrapped catheter box on the side of the bed, using sterile procedure, pulled on the gloves by only touching the insides and unwrapped the sterile paper as I spoke. Ana flipped the fluorescent light down and heaved at Mrs. M’s right leg as Jamie did the same with the other.

“Can you help us out a little, ma’am? That’s right, go ahead and bend your legs. Thank you,” Jamie said.

With both legs spread, the smell of yeast exploded out of her vagina. Ana let out an “Oh God,” as she wafted the air with a gloved hand. The patient rolled her head towards Ana, and watched her. I dropped the tube of the catheter into the lubricant jelly. I used the tongs to grab cotton balls with iodine on them, and wiped around her labia to sterilize the tissue. “Okay, ma’am. Ma’am, look at me for a second.” Her bulging eyes darted in my direction, and I concentrated on breathing through my mouth. “I’m going to need you to take in a deep breath on the count of three, okay?” Mrs. M. couldn’t nod because the rolls under her chin prevented her head from vertical movement, so she grunted. “One, two, three, deep breath.” With my left hand pinning the top of the labia up, my sterile right hand fed the tube into her opening, and I hoped that the catheter would go into her urethra and not her vagina—so we wouldn’t have to do it all over again. Mrs. M grunted. I’d found it. I pushed the tube all the way up until I felt a resistance in the line, urine flashed in the tube. I inflated the balloon and drew the line out a little. We covered her up with a sheet, put her bed back down at safety level and made sure she had the call light. “Job well done, guys,” I sung as we de-gloved, de-gowned and exited the room with an alcohol squirt for each.

“Make sure you bathe her real good, Jamie,” Ana said. She grabbed the freshener from the desk.

“I already bathed her.” He shrugged.

“Make sure you get in real good down there, she smells rank.” Ana edged 24’s door open with her foot and sprayed the inside without actually stepping in and then proceeded to make S’s and Z’s in the hallway air. “I just saying, we can smell her down at 01.” Ana fanned her hands in

front of her face. The gingerbread freshener burned our noses. Jamie and I watched as Ana hipped back toward the desk, shaking her head.

“I did wash her,” Jamie repeated to me, his face red. “I can only do so much.”

“I know.” I squeezed his shoulder. “Sometimes people just stink up again. Using washcloths instead of wipes helps too.”

“Stacy, do you have time to help bathe 07?” I plopped myself in a swivel chair next to her at the mini station.

“No,” she said. “But I do need you to help me change his dressing.” She squinted at me for a moment then went back to her emails.

It was 1215. “He’s not eating lunch, shall we do it now?”

“I just gave him Morphine, go ahead, I’ll be in, in a minute.” She didn’t look away from the computer.

Armed with towels, washcloths, sheets and soap in one arm, I tapped on 07’s door and walked in. Maggie was sitting in the armchair, knitting, and pillows swallowed Roy up in the bed.

“Hey, girly.” Roy’s mouth pulled into a slight smile: his teeth small and rounded like tic-tacs. His arms were drooped by his side.

“You ready to get cleaned up?” I set the towels down on the bedside table.

“I’m going to the cafeteria,” Maggie said. “I can’t stand this bit.” She pointed at the oozing shoulder dressing and then kissed Roy’s forehead. She set her unfinished scarf on the

window ledge and flipped her corduroy purse over her shoulder. “I’ll be back in a little while. I might go and let Jake out and put some laundry on. You’ve got some good helpers here, love you brother.” She lingered in the doorway. Her chestnut wavy hair had become matted to her head and grey wisps sprang up around her ear line.

“Love you too, Maggs. I’ll be fine with all these perties.”

“God, he’s ornery. Jodie’ll keep you in line.” She pointed a finger at me then sniffed and closed the door behind her.

“Hon, I’m just not feeling myself today,” Roy confessed as soon as she had left.

“You’ll feel better once that medicine kicks in,” I said. “Well, we can wait on the bath, but we do need to change your dressing.”

“Okay, doll.”

Stacy came in and changed the settings on his IV. As soon as she had administered the medicine, we were pulling him onto his side. Roy yelped in pain. Stacy peeled back the dressing on his shoulder; tissue stuck to the gauze, and revealed an open mass. The tumor had found the path of least resistance and had split open the skin. I looked away. Necrotic tissue smells like a Tyson’s meat packing plant. There was something about seeing the purpled flesh and smelling the odor at the same time that made it difficult to swallow. But I had to watch. I examined the mass—it was much more intricate than anything I could have imagined. The tumor itself was like a pink-tinged cauliflower, with florets that reached into his tissue like mangled arms. I wanted to feel the edges of it. To figure out what it takes to overcome.

Roy’s back jerked under my hands as Stacy sprayed sterile water on the wound. I closed my eyes. He screamed and cried, “Please, please, please don’t. Please don’t. I just want to die.”

I swallowed hard. “It’s okay, Roy. It’s okay. It’ll be over in a minute.” I gave him my gloved hand to squeeze.

Stacy re-dressed the wound with precision and seemed unfazed by Roy’s pain. “Good,” she said. “That’s done now. Okay, I’ll see you later.” She patted Roy’s leg and exited the room.

“You all right?”

“No, girly, I’m hurtin’. They’ve been puttin pillows round my shoulder.”

“Sure thing.” I stuffed pillows under his back and around the bandage, causing him to sit perched on his left side and bent slightly at the waist.

“That’s better,” he said, his face relaxing a little. “I think I’m gonna get some rest now.”

“Ok, I’ll turn the light out.”

“You notice we’s a nursing home now?” Ana said at lunch.

“I know, tell me about it,” I said. “What’s the deal with all these people who want you to wipe their asses? Your lady in 22 can eat with her hands but can’t wash her own face?” I scoffed. “And how in the hell do they get so fat? I mean literally, you would have to eat all day nonstop to get as big as some of these people are.”

“Girl, I don’t know, but I know one thing, we got to get us some new jobs.” Ana picked at her soggy salad.

“If you’re going to learn on any floor, this one sure gives you the whole scope of things,” I muttered to Jamie, who was relatively new to our department, as I pushed the last bit of cheeseburger into my mouth.

“But you guys all want to leave?”

“Boy, you learn. This floor ain’t nothing but wiping asses and keeping your mouth shut.”

I entered Roy’s room, mid-afternoon, to take his vitals. His breathing was fast, and he was face was tight, his jaw clenched.

“I’m hurtin’ real bad,” he gasped between quick breaths.

“Where’s Maggie?”

“She’s still out. Darlin’ my shoulder’s hurtin’ real bad.”

“I’ll let Stacy know you need something for pain.” I reassured him as I took his vitals, his blood pressure had gone up to 154/82 and respirations were 28 a minute—normal blood pressure should be 120/80 or less and respirations between 16 and 22. “I’ll be right back.” I cursed Stacy as I left the room. She should have made sure he was comfortable. Our floor is a cardiac unit, and we don’t often get cancer patients. She should have known that he would need frequent pain medicine. I speed-walked to the nurses’ station and found Stacy reading a magazine. “The guy in 07 needs something for pain. His respirations and blood pressure are up.”

Stacy peered over her bifocals, her bobbed hair was cut immaculately straight above her shoulders, and her scrubs were clean and pressed. “I gave him Morphine three hours ago, he’ll have to wait,” she said and smugly went back to her *In Style* magazine.

“But he’s a cancer patient. Shouldn’t we make him comfortable?”

“The order says Morphine every 4 hrs.” She put the magazine down and looked over her glasses at me. “My hands are tied.”

“I’m sure.” If I were his nurse, I would have called the doctor to get him something. I tapped the desk with my hands and then remembered the boost that 09 wanted and the coffee that 04 had requested.

Afterwards, I found Ana slurping on oysters she had cooked up at home with a Cajun-style sauce, watching a soap opera in the break-room. Ana always found time to eat.

“Stacy is such a bitch.” I plopped down at the conference table.

“They all like that.” She sucked at a shell. “Want some? It’s good.”

“I’m tired of them treating us like we’re nothing. Like it doesn’t matter that we’re here.”

“You and me, both.” Ana, jiggled in her seat, smiling.

“What’s so funny?”

“You, Jodie. You all in a huff. Forget about them. We know we is good at what we do.”

“We are good at what we do. They need to be put in their place.”

“You crazy,” Ana said. “They ain’t going to change. You and me been here five years. They have always been that a way. Last week, I was here eating my lunch. And they all saying how we’s replacable. How we’s stupid. I was sitting right there.” She pointed to the other end of the table. “I was pissed. I told the boss, and she says, I should talk to them. Like that could help. No, girl, they ain’t never gonna change. Ever. We always going to be dumb techs that don’t know nothing.” She pushed the chair out and scratched her neck. “Sure you don’t want some? I’ve got one left?”

“No, thanks. I’m good.” I looked away as she swallowed the last oyster.

“I’ll see you out there then.” She shoved her plastic container into the fridge and left the break room.

Back out on the floor, Stacy was exiting 07.

“Does he need help?”

“He just passed,” she said, ruffling through his chart and scribbling down the emergency contact numbers.

“But I was just in there. His vitals were high.” I felt the blood draw out of my face.

“Sometimes that happens before you die—your heart pumps faster to fight it.” Stacy took the chart out of the server and went to call the contacts, to call Maggie. I stood for a moment, stunned.

“I didn’t know.”

“He needed to die,” Stacy said.

Even though she didn’t say it right, I knew what she meant. When Flash, my 3.5 year old zebra fish, had fin rot so bad that he was emaciated, and his dorsal was shredded, there was nothing left for me to do but take him out of the water and hold him against me until he stopped flapping. The funeral was unceremonious. I had said some words about him swimming into the afterlife and then dedicated his body to science. It was then, at 11 years old, when I sliced through Flash’s posterior intestine and swim bladders all the way to the spine with dad’s box cutter that I knew I wanted to find and cure fish diseases. His insides were so beautiful—smooth, pearly muscle and organ tissue formed like Grecian statues—I had to preserve them by cataloguing them, like my dad had shown me with his rare coin collection.

I cracked Roy’s door open and peered in. Everything looked normal except there was no sound, no breath, and the room was cold. I shivered and closed the door.

“His sister is still out running errands—can you help get him ready?” I asked Stacy.

“I would help but right now I’m discharging another patient. I might be able to help later though.”

“Okay, but you’ll have to take the central line out.”

“Just let me know when you’re almost finished.”

I imagined Stacy telling Maggie about Roy in her cold, matter-of-fact way, and was relieved that it wasn’t my job.

I gathered some Patient Care Technicians on the floor to help prepare Roy. It is a tradition to clean and tag a body in a group, mostly because no one wants to do that kind of thing alone. No one wants to do it period.

We hushed as we entered the dark room. No whispers, no noise. We huddled around the bed, eyes on the deceased, and a silence fell upon us for a moment and then the PCT’s began to joke about the day. I heard their snickers like you would hear noises bubbling underwater. I stared at Roy’s open mouth and stiff chest. I was surprised that it wasn’t moving, as if it were some kind of practical joke. His grey face looked at me with non-reflective eyes, and with my gloved hands, I pushed his lids closed.

“Okay, let’s get started,” I said. “We’ll have to flatten him out before rigor mortis sets in.” We turned his tepid body and pulled out the pillows one by one. His mouth wouldn’t shut. I tried several times to close it, but it kept popping open, like he was out of water.

“Girl, don’t worry about that,” Ana said. “They’ll sew it shut later.”

“I just want him to look normal for when the family comes in.”

We washed the feces and urine from his body. Stripped off his gown. Bunched the old sheet and chux pad under him. Put a new sheet and chux halfway on the bed, turned him, took the soiled sheet out and pulled the new one over the opposite corners in one coordinated movement. After we turned him onto his back, we changed his gown and smoothed hair behind his ears. Ana began writing his patient information on tags, and I pulled the sheet under him taught and tucked it in, taking away creases, pushed the strings of the gown behind his neck, avoiding the open mass on his shoulder, dabbed drool from his face with a washcloth, peeled paper tape and cotton balls from his arms. He almost looked like he was holding his breath.

It was then that I realized he had died alone.

“Where do you tie the tags?” Jamie asked. He hadn’t spoken since we had entered the room, and I wondered if he had been thinking the same thing.

“You put one on the feet and one on the bag.” Ana tied the string around Roy’s big toe. “We’ll cover him up so the family won’t see it.”

“Okay.”

“You got to make sure it’s real tight, ‘cause no good losing tags.”

“Right.” Jamie paid attention as if he were in class, taking notes.

We flattened a new top sheet and blanket on Roy. We put the white bag—the movies had it all wrong—in the cupboard to bag him after Maggie had seen him.

We single-filed out of the room without sound.

Back out on the floor, techs were back out buzzing from room to room with towels and sheets in hand. The nurses congregated at the desk flirting with doctors, and heart monitors pinged from screens overhead.

Ana tugged at the arm of my scrub top and rolled her eyes. “Them nurses are lazy.”

“Tell me about it.”

“They think they is all something. Sitting there like they queens.” Ana said and shook her head—her hair was oiled back into a pony, with steamed curls perfectly fastened into a loose bun. She rested a hand on my shoulder as we observed a group of nurses giggling and fussing with their scrubs and hair in front of the new residents. “Lisa came all the way down to the station, paging me to dump urine in 17. She could just done it herself if she was in the room.”

“They’re too good to get their hands dirty,” I said.

A call light dinged behind me. It was 05 again. I had already spent a decent amount of time in her room, moving her wash bag to the right a little, making sure her apple juice was 2 inches from the side of her tray. Reheating not “hot enough” food. I looked to Ana and shrugged.

“That’s your patient,” Ana said. “I got to do me some work.”

After she left to do her rounds, I ducked into the unit’s kitchen and peered around the hall. No one was answering the light. I shuffled towards the room, hoping that another tech would beat me there. I reached the door and knocked and entered anyway. “What can I do to help,” I said, in my automated response.

“Oh Lordy, I’ve got to get to the pot. I’ve really got to go.” She was sitting on the bed. Her clavicles and sternum made a “T” imprint on her gown, the skin on her long face stuck to her skull, her back was hunched up, molding her body into a boney question mark.

“Okay, sure, I can help you with that. How do you get on?” It was then I realized that this was the first time I’d helped her out of bed and it was already midafternoon.

“I get around just fine.”

I scraped the commode next to the bed, at a ninety-degree angle.

“Okay, go ahead and scoot to the edge of the bed.” While I was pretty good at guessing weights of patients, you could never really tell how much of that weight you would have to carry.

Mrs. E scooched one hip forward then the other, while grasping the bedrail with knuckley hands. When most of her legs were off the bed I said, “Now push off the bed right here.” I patted the mattress by her hips. I noticed Mrs. E was not wearing the regulation non-slip socks but dismissed the thought. She tried and failed to push up from the bed on her own. I wrapped the gait belt around her waist—she was so little, I could clasp my fingertips together behind her back—and secured it. I reached under both arms in an ergonomically correct hug, felt for the belt behind her back, curled my fingers under, and we both rocked and heaved up together. She was surprisingly dense.

“Okay, now we’re just going to turn to the side. Like dancing,” I said, my arms tensed, and the weight of Mrs. E twinged down my spine. I thought about having to bag Roy.

“I like dancing.”

As we turned, Mrs. E’s feet twisted over mine, and she started to go down. I yanked her all the way around, in prime position for the commode. She fell down to the seat but the toilet slipped back. She rasped her bottom against the edge, and I jerked up to slow her contact with the ground. Mrs. E flopped to the tile-covered cement floor, pulling me on top of her. Luckily, I was able to cradle her head as we fell.

“My sweet Jesus, my legs gave way.”

“Are you hurt?” I asked, pushing myself off her.

"I'm fine, honey, just help me up." She grunted and rolled onto her side. I heaved at the gait belt and got her to her feet, and danced her back to bed. There was urine on the floor, on Mrs. E's gown, and all down my scrubs.

"I'll be right back," I said.

"Sure, honey." Mrs. E said quietly, face down, hands fidgeting in her lap like a disciplined child. She was probably a nursing home patient.

"Don't worry, we won't tell anybody about this, okay?" I said to her and myself.

"That'd be grand." Tears had wetted her cheeks.

I grabbed the towel from the corner of the room, held it folded in front of me to hide the urine on my scrubs, and went to the locker room. Policy dictated that I report the fall to the charge nurse, but I didn't want to hear about it later. Instead, I pulled a pair of green hospital scrubs off the rack and chucked mine in the trash along with the towel. I thought about signing the checkout sheet, but who would notice if one pair of scrubs was missing?

As I mopped up the urine on the floor with towels and cleaning spray, Ana peered in the room, asking for help with a boost in 12. After we boosted the quadriplegic up in the bed, we washed our hands in the pyxis room. Ana looked me up and down. "What happened to you?" she asked.

"Nothing, I just spilled blood on my scrubs when I was drawing blood for the guy in 09."

"Sure you did. I know you, any excuse to wear those scrubs."

"Yeah, you know me. What's with all these heavies?"

"12 is a sweetheart," Ana said. "He ask me to jump in bed with him. Had me in fits." She held her stomach, giggling.

"Wow, he must love you. What is he, eighty-five years old?"

Maggie was coming out of 07's room. I stopped giggling. Her face was drawn and non-responsive. I watched her from around the pyxis room doorway. I didn't want to interact with her. I pretended not to notice her. I didn't stop her as she passed me. She walked to the nurses' station in a trance. A doctor gave his condolences to her, but she didn't react, not even a nod of the head. At the station, Stacy was giving her bags of Roy's things and was asking her if she wanted a pastor or grief counselor.

She shook her head. "He didn't want this," she said.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Stacy said.

"He wanted to die at home."

"At least it's easier here." Stacy was patting for one of her hands.

Maggie nodded half listening. "Was he in pain?"

"No, he just went to sleep."

05's light was going off again. "How are you doing, Mrs. E?" I erased leftover scribbles from last night's shift on the whiteboard at the front of her room. Writing in cursive felt inappropriate for the hospital setting, so I always wrote in block letters.

"Oh, honey, my stomach hurts."

"I'll let the nurse know." I erased bubbly flowers and a heart that had been sketched in the corner of the board, and an extra note that read, "Today is a good day," followed by a smiley-face. It made all my muscles tense—most of the patients couldn't read the board anyway.

"The docs said they want to scan me this afternoon."

“Oh? I thought you’d be going home.”

“I guess my blood was off. And my stomach. They said it’s better to fix it now then to come back once I’ve gone home.” She held her hardened belly.

“Well, the doctors know what they’re doing.” I reassured her.

“Does my hair look a mess? I know it looks awful. Can you pass my makeup bag over here, sweetie?” She pointed an arm to the cubby beneath the television.

“This one it?” I picked up a black zipped bag with red and white roses painted on it and set it in front of her.

She took a plastic pink brush with white bristles out with shaking hands. She took five tries to fully close the zipper. I watched the second hand on the clock on the wall. I still had to finish rounds and get dinner trays served.

“Here, let me do it for you.” I put my hand out.

Mrs. E dropped the brush in it and sighed. “Thank you. I’m a mess.”

“You look beautiful,” I said, brushing through the white, stringy hair. I imagined her in water, wondered whether her skin would puff out from her bones, perhaps she would have glow-in-the dark insides.

“You’re nice, sweetie.” The old lady chuckled and tapped my hand. “You married?”

“Nope,” I replied and began brushing her hair faster.

“Shame,” Mrs. E said. “I met my husband after World War II. We were married 50 years before he passed last summer.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. There was nothing else to say.

“You should find yourself a good man.”

“Well, you’re all done. Hair looks great.”

“Just as well,” she nodded. “Pass me the mirror, please.”

I handed it to her and fastened a child’s blood pressure cuff around her arm. I noticed new bruises that mottled her skin in finger-like shapes. Perhaps from the fall.

Mrs. E looked in the mirror and frowned, and then said, “thank you, sweetie. I’m sure that’s the best you can do.”

I informed Stacy of Mrs. E’s vitals, as the blood pressure was 187/95, at least sixty points higher than this morning. She waved me off. “Not a huge surprise, but thanks, I’ll chart it.” She was smoothing her glossy brown hair. “They think she’s got some kind of bleeding going on, plus she’s already on a high dose of Coumadin. Hemoglobin was low after labs, and she had a bloody stool about an hour ago. Probably on too much blood thinner and bumped herself.”

“Oh, I see,” I said slowly.

“It’s not like it doesn’t happen all the time with these people.”

“What will they do?”

“They’ll take her off blood thinner and give her vitamin K to help coagulate the blood. Don’t they teach you that in Vet school?”

“I just thought maybe there was a different protocol if she had fallen.”

“Did she say she fell?”

“Not that I know of,” I said. The lie trickled out.

Ana followed me into 07's room to finish bagging him. Once again, we were silent as we entered. This time. It was just us two, and we completed the task without sound. We rolled him again—this time he was heavier, colder—and slipped the bag under him.

As we zipped him up, toe to head, I pictured being closed in that bag not able to breathe. I didn't want to go that way. Ana tied the second tag to the bag, and we left silently.

In the locker room, Ana and I gathered our things—I examined my cracked hands; they were bleeding from over-scrubbing and the alcohol wash that the hospital provided. They had hurt each time I put on a fresh pair of gloves, as the rubber irritated the opened skin. “You were right about the gloves,” I said.

“Don't I know it.”

“We've got to protect ourselves,” I said.

She smiled as she exited the locker room. “See you later, Jodes.”

I sat on the bench and stretched my back out. A call light was going off on the floor. I was relieved the shift was over. I clocked out and in the hallway noticed it was 05's light. As I passed her room, the patient called out, she was greying and gasping for air. I swung my bag over a shoulder and stood undecided in the hall. If I stayed to help, it'd be hours until I could get home to the fish. I let my bag flop to the ground, went in and turned the call light off.

“How may I help you?” I asked.

“I'm scared,” she said.

“I know.” I held her hand and fitted an O2 mask over her. I wanted to see what it was to be out of water. I squeezed her hand and waited.

The nurses were clanging down the hall with the crash cart.

Her body begin to cheyne-stoke, pulsing to suck in air. I wanted to see what it takes to overcome. She closed her eyes and gripped my hand, maybe out of reflex. There was something magical about the way the body responds to being overcome—it began to force out her mind. I was a part of something. I was her Maggie. I realized she was going, so I straddled her on the bed, put palm over knuckles and leaned in just above her xyphoid process, compressed 30 to 2. I felt her ribs crack under me, a melody of twigs snapping against my body weight. The nurses pulled the cart in and started sticking AED pads to her body. I slid off her as they took over. I was pushed out as workers flooded in, swarming around her bed, shocking her, drawing blood, opening her up, radiographing, intubating, documenting, cataloguing.

Leoni Remembers Her Mother

Leoni leaned against her cart in line for the register at the Ready-Mart and flipped through mags at the counter. She had been there a good 25 minutes, unaware of customers piling up behind her. Inside the cart, she had *The Ultimate Guide to Pregnancy*, 20 packets of freeze-dried noodles, 15 cans of tomato soup, and ten bottles of apple juice. Mags weren't really her thing. She scanned through to find titles: "7 ways to get over your dead boyfriend" and "I'm pregnant by my dead baby dady" but as expected, came up empty. She'd read the guides like "24 ways to solidify your relationship with Smartlink" scoffing—an image of a man and a woman in swimsuits, wrists intertwined like toasting champagne, suggestions including, "have two Smartlink accounts: one for home, one for play," "set up automatic-buying function for birthdays," and "enable Smartlink health monitoring system to optimize physical activities."

Leoni rubbed the thin part of her wrist, unconsciously, and tried to imagine life without Smartlink. She got it inserted when she started High School. Her dad used to tell stories about

losing his wallet or running low on “cash” before Smartlink but now everything was smoother, faster, streamlined. He said during the trial of the device, news reports of decreased robbery smattered headlines, later, rumors of increased limb severings whispered through the city until Smartlink was redesigned to clamp around the vein, tentacles piercing the walls of the vessel, only working through flowing blood. Leoni’s dad pushed the device hard; he helped write the bill when Leoni’s mom went missing. He was a spokesman for it, said it was a matter of life, not just financial security. He explained how much he wanted her to have the device in the waiting room of the Smartlink lab: “Just think, you’re in a wreck, and you can’t speak—how are doctors going to know how to fix you? What if someone took you without it? You’d be dead like all the others that were taken.”

“Dad, I don’t want it. I hate needles.”

“We could have saved your mother, if she’d had it.” He just had to give Leoni one look over his bifocals, and she played with her fingernails in her lap. *He was right*, she had thought. *They could have saved her*. He had rested his face in his hands, pushing his bushy hair in all directions. Leoni felt the guilt come up her throat. She patted him gingerly on the back.

“Are you expecting?” asked the cashier, an elderly lady shy of five foot in a neon green smock. She pointed a nubby finger at the book on the conveyor belt. Leoni didn’t recognize the woman; she must have been new.

“Oh, that’s for a friend,” Leoni said and crossed arms over her fully pregnant self.

The cashier shook her head at Leoni’s cart. “You’ve got to eat some real food. Have you got a mother or someone who can—”

“My friend smokes and snorts the white stuff. I’m sure this is the healthiest she’s eaten in a while, grandma.”

The old lady started to say something and then pressed her lips, and slid the items through the register. “\$35.47,” she said slowly, and then demanded: “Wrist.”

Leoni held out her right arm, palm up, displaying pale skin and green forks, lightening rods, shooting under the skin from the bend in her elbow. The cashier clasped Leoni’s arm and moved the Smartlink wand to hover over the area between her radius and ulna, pressed a button, and Leoni’s image, (the better version) from two years ago, showed up on the checkout screen. “Looks like you’re short, dear.”

“Just take the book off. My friend’s not that important.”

“Receipt?”

“I know how much I have left.” She tugged the bags off the end of the register. Altogether, the food was distributed into six bags, three for each arm, and the weight of them made her take fast, half steps. When she reached the bus stop across the street, the bags had caused pink divots in her skin where they’d hung and swung against her. She watched the clouds darken and coil above her and started to shiver. She pulled out her touch-phone and checked the weather, tracking splashes of greens and oranges across the radar. Leoni feared those greens could become reds and purples all too easily. She studied the curvatures of the blob on the screen. She was convinced there were hooks in it. As if it could develop into a super-cell or a tornado, even. The sirens had been going off the night her mom went missing. Leoni and her dad were hunkered down in the basement parking lot of tower 10 downtown. The sounds of trains so fierce, deafening, shook the tower above them, surrounding them. Her mother was out picking up fresh chicken, a treat, for dinner because Leoni had graduated to pointe shoes in ballet. When

they ventured up to the street, for a moment there was no movement, buildings flattened as if kicked down, papers falling like leaves, sirens still screaming. They searched for mom among the rubble, but never found her body. Leoni jiggled her knees and tapped fingers against her legs drumming out the beats to Queen's "I Want to Break Free," and took some deep long breaths like they did in yoga infomercials. The bus pulled to the stop, and Leoni exhaled.

Sheila was driving today—she was the kind of person who made any day feel better.

"How you doing, honey?"

"Good," Leoni said. "Worried about the clouds." She heaved the bags up the steps.

Sheila got out of the driver's seat and took some of the bags from Leoni and placed them in the front row behind her. "Ain't nothing but some rain. We'll be okay."

"Radar looks fishy. I don't know."

"All the years I've lived in the valley, we've been just fine. You'll see." Sheila put the bus into drive and talked to her right side, in a half turn. "Storms always split before they reach the Smokeys."

Leoni adjusted the plastic bags on the seat. *That's how it happens*, she thought, *right when you least expect it*. "How are the boys?" Leoni asked half-heartedly. She wanted to forget about the sky, the wind—she wanted to sit with the same kind of apathy as all the other travelers on the bus.

"Bird's doing good. Just won a spelling competition at school." Sheila wore a familiar smile. "I'm proud as a peacock."

"Martin still throwing rocks?"

"Well, you know how boys are."

Leoni thought about Eric's hand stinging her face. "Yeah, I know."

“Well you’d better take care of yourself. You tell your daddy about the baby yet?”

“I’ll catch you later, Sheila. Gotta run.” Leoni dragged the bags down the steps and out of the bus and was on the pavement before Sheila had time to respond. The street was cold and dark, like an underexposed photo. Except for the occasional whoosh of cars, nothing in the street moved, no people, no ruffled cats or rib-protruding dogs. A store sign painted “closed” nailed to the outside of the barbershop door, someone had tagged the left side of the old post office “burn all, burn everything” and “cut out Smartlink,” a half-lit neon open sign, swung in the window of the coffee shop. No light inside, no movement. Leoni shuffled to the crosswalk and went down Rentin Way. The leaves scraped on the sidewalk, being swept this way and that in the wind. Leoni pushed hair out of her face. The further she walked from the main road, the smaller and darker the houses appeared. Sheetrocked houses with fenced yards turned into rotting huts and broken metal swing sets. As Leoni reached her block, her back and feet throbbed so bad that she wanted to sit, but it started to rain, and she felt the familiar chest tightening, the constricted breathing as she looked up at the dark grey, almost green clouds. She picked up her pace. The raindrops plopped down. A gust blew at Leoni from behind. She broke into a hobbled jog, dropping a bag as she went. She left it there, splayed on the ground, juice mixing-in with rain. She tore across the grass patch as the rain pelted her exposed skin. Finally, she was inside and she let the handles slip off her hands. She shook her body like a dog, not caring what got splashed in the shotgun-style wooden house. Out of the other houses on the street, hers was in pretty good shape. Eric had taken to fixing things, even if they didn’t need fixing. And Leoni was glad now for the roof patch he did over the summer. She stripped right there in the front room, kicking her stretchy belly jeans and shirt out of the way. She couldn’t afford to get sick now, not

when she had to work at the plant the next morning. She wrapped a robe around her and tried to cinch the waist.

Leoni pressed her hands against the cool glass of the front window. The rain drizzled outside. Her breath fogged the surface, and she saw murky lines of dark houses beyond the white. She felt unsafe. Not even the basement Eric constructed out of cinder blocks, from a construction site by the railway line, calmed her. He was the only one who had understood her need to feel enclosed. On hands and knees, she ripped open the shopping bags, and added the soup to the stash under the worn corduroy couch. 57 cans in total. Three more for a month's supply of veggies. Leoni's breasts and belly had their own gravity as they swung beneath her, full and sore. She would need more, but she wouldn't have enough for both of them. When Eric was dying, she forgot how much she didn't want the kid—and now that he was gone, there wasn't much else to do but think. She had to figure out how to survive.

The Wednesday before Eric died, he got physical. She knew he hadn't meant it though—he was especially sorry because of the baby. He had pushed her against the wall, and she'd kneed him right in the nuts. Now when she thought about how he wheezed at the end, how it was meant to be peaceful and all that, all she thought about was why the nurses didn't thump his back to get the stuff up, how he struggled, how they said wasn't it sweet that she got to say goodbye. Well it wasn't sweet. She wished she'd never been there. It was not like he was awake or anything—and now, all she had left was darkness and this bulge in her stomach that was as much him as much as her. And she hated it. She remembered the sound of his last rasps until there were no breaths, and the body just pulsed like he had hiccups—like he was drowning or something. How she kissed his forehead and told him, *I love you bastard*. And he never responded. How he just left her there alone. “Well, fuck you, Eric,” she'd sworn when he'd finally gone under. “Fuck you

and all your fucking promises.” The nurses said they’d give her a minute. Called the time of death like on those medical shows and degloved as they went. His skin went from a mustard yellow to an ashy yellow. His mouth hung open. She wanted to kiss him, but she curled up next to him while he was still warm. Didn’t know how many hours she’d been there. When she woke, the body didn’t smell like Eric anymore, just the pukish green stuff that collected behind his bottom lip and flowed out the corner of his mouth and onto her hair.

After that, she started wetting the bed. Blamed it on the hormones. Woke up cold in damp sheets in the middle of the night and refused to wash them because his hairs were on his pillow and the sheets infused with his cologne, so she just slept and slept. When she could no longer sleep, she began inventory of her food. Leoni made sure each label faced outwards organized by color: tomatoes, roasted bell peppers, yams, carrots, corn, green beans, blueberries, red cabbage, eggplant, blackberries. Each night she added to the stockpile whatever she could. She’d planned on etching out the bottom of the cushions with an electric carving knife, a birthday present from Eric, so she could stack in another row, but now she had a whole house to store things.

She rode bus 21 to the Wall. She plodded to the back of the bus, avoiding eye contact. Most of the plant employees were second-generation workers, but Leoni chose to apply there after she got with Eric, so she didn’t always fit in, but she didn’t always want to. The Wall had been constructed fifteen years ago to shield city workers from the plants, and sucking in chemicals. Between the 25-foot cement walls and the city, a half-mile strip of dense woods grew, which they all called no man’s woods. There was only one road in and out from the Wall. At night, teenagers smoked crystal against the edifice, sex workers hypnotized bored city people in the thicket, and occasionally the news reported another missing person in no man’s woods. Last

summer, Eric had run over a body on his way back from dropping Leoni off at the plant. It was dark, so he told her that he couldn't stop. After then, he insisted on driving her, purchasing an unregistered gun, which he taped under the passenger seat.

His car was repossessed three days after he died. Long enough for Leoni to get to the incineration ceremony—all cancer patient bodies were mandated to be destroyed to protect against DNA transfer. The latest studies suggested that cancer mutations were caused by foreign DNA manifesting in the body, which could be “woken up” at any time. These gene mutations could be acquired through vaccines, medications, implants and blood transfusions, or anything grown out of animal or nonhuman tissue. The medical system made vaccines for most forms of cancer for a price, but these were developed after they found out that Eric was already a carrier—she was the only attendee at the ceremony. Her dad called after and said how sorry he was that she was sad, but not that Eric was gone. He asked her to live with him and his new wife in the high rises. Leoni hung up on him.

Even though the Wall rustled with activity at night, during the day, the sun lit up the foliage like a greenway, birds singing, the air remarkably clear, far enough away from city smog and protected from the chemicals of the complex. The bus shook down the well-manicured roadway. Leoni stretched her back, and rubbed a hand all the way down the lower half. Each day now was increasingly difficult. The solid steel gate swung open, and the bus drove into the complex. Inside the Wall, there were the four main plants—utilities, waste, products and medical—and because of air inside the enclosure, the bus was fitted with thick glass and a positive pressure system to keep the good air in and the bad air out. Regulation of the distribution and use of N300 masks in the employee handbook directed each bus “must provide one-time use masks, located above the seat. Each passenger should take a mask and fit to his or her face before

the gates open. Masks are to be discarded in a box under the seat upon return.” Leoni reached to the box above her and pulled out a crusted mask. She cringed as she pressed it against her nose and chin to seal the air around her face. Stepping out of the bus, she breathed in sulfur, chlorine, blood.

Leoni entered the small electronics’ section of the products plant. Employees lined up against the wall to clock in at the red box, scan palms and remove masks. The floors and ceilings were white, separated by rows upon rows of black rubber conveyors. She filed into her seat. The machines began and the hum of the work took over. Her job was to solder transistors inside touch-screen phones to the board. They each had a part number. C378 went first, then T29, GPS tracker would be soldered to that one down the line, HR206, voice signature reader, I54, perspiration meter—along with the old heart rate monitor, these combined were a built-in truth analyzer that the company had been trialing in phones without consumer knowledge. Leoni liked that she didn’t have to talk to anyone at work. She just had to sit and join pieces together. It gave her time to think about things. She placed a finished board into a tub on her right, which the conveyor moved down the line, and she’d get a new tub full of loose parts on her left. It was simple work but she liked the rhythm of it, the whole half-mile-squared room of small electronics clicking and snapping in unison like a heartbeat.

The old man’s seat was empty this morning. He usually sat across from her at the conveyor and wore a baseball cap, unshaven, against company regulations. He was always muttering under his breath. He drove her crazy, chatting away, but Leoni just smirked. Last week he had gripped her arm in the cafeteria and whispered, “They don’t like that I know.”

“What do you know old man?” Leoni laughed. He was entertaining enough. Always some conspiracy about the company.

“About where they disappear to.”

It just made Leoni angry. Being all secretive like that. “I have no idea what you’re going on about.”

“I can’t say here. Sit with me on the bus.”

Employees were allotted 25 minutes for lunch, but that doesn’t account for the two minutes of travel to and from the cafeteria, and he had already taken up 10 of hers. “Look, I don’t give a shit, Garret. It’s all nonsense.”

She had actively avoided getting on the same bus as him, even waiting 15 minutes past clock out time for the bus that picked up those from other divisions in the products plant.

Leoni’s belly felt especially heavy today. What if something had happened to the old man, and she had said that to him? She watched employees on break stand in the designated square of red taped area on the floor; they were smoking inhalation devices, piloted by the company to reduce side effects. Leoni didn’t have to use the inhalation device because she was pregnant. Occasionally, workers would contract a mysterious respiratory disease, but the company always compensated the family heavily if it was a work-related accident. Sometimes employees were transferred to the Islands, for a hot, dry climate to recuperate with their family. The company was always looking out for its employees. She wished she had sat with the old man on the way home, but perhaps he would be back the next day.

She sat cross-legged on the floor of the makeshift closet. Eric had set up two tension shower curtain rods joined at 90 degrees by a four-by-four bolted to the ceiling in the corner of the bedroom. He had borrowed a mirror from a going-out-of-business sale at Missy’s Adult

Video down the street and put it next to the window. She had been looking at her areolas in her reflection—they used to be translucent pink now beige and murky—and the nipples had spread. They were her mother’s breasts. She remembered looking at her mother as a little girl and thinking how disgusting her mother’s nipples hung, how unwomanly, how unlike her own. Leoni noticed one stretch mark in the mirror she hadn’t seen before, it ran up from her pubis, all the way to her belly button, and in, as if prying open the very center of her.

Shouting erupted next door. Leoni reached to tug the curtain closed and noticed the neighbor bang out the screen door, one hand on hip and one scraping through her hair. Smacks and thumps and child-crying came from inside the house and the lady paced on the scruffy porch, smoking a cigarette. Leoni felt the familiar burning in her stomach—the thought, the smell of the smoke, made her gag. Swallow it back, she told herself, breathe through the mouth, dry out the throat (a technique she’d seen Eric do a week before he died). As she held her throat, the front door clicked shut. Leoni felt along the floor for a weighty shoe. The neighbor was inside. She parted the clothes and stepped into Leoni’s makeshift closet. The stench of stale cigarettes made Leoni’s stomach twist. She flinched at the noise going on next door—the five-year-old girl was screaming in between wallops. Leoni pushed the acid back down, gulping air, and stood to face the woman. The woman riffled fingers through the lines of hanging clothes.

The man next door was yelling “Redemption,” like a singer in a heavy metal concert as he hit the child. “Redemption. Redemption. Redemption.”

Leoni held her breath, listening for the little girl.

The woman sniffed and rubbed one of Leoni’s white tops, a chiffon-like material with peacock feathers on the hip and shoulders between her fingers, smiling something far away.

Leoni was embarrassed. She apologized for the mess: “I haven’t cleaned in a while.”

The noises from next door had quieted. The woman nodded, not really looking at Leoni, but past her.

“What are you doing?” Leoni asked, hands covering her breasts.

The woman jerked as if being woken from a dream. “I saw you watching,” she said. The woman held up a wrist, and pulled her sleeve down, it was brown and bubbly as if it had been burned. “I got it cut out. Help us?”

“I have nothing to give,” Leoni stepped towards the woman.

The woman shrugged and turned, exited the closet, and closed the front door behind her. Leoni watched her cross the lawn. She waited a minute then ran to the door and shimmed the deadbolt to lock. She then pushed a box of old plates against the door and sat on the box, breathing heavy and blushing as she realized not that she was half-naked, but that she had done nothing for the little girl.

The Art of Flamenco

“You like to fight?” she asked.

“Not really.” I shrugged.

She watched me wriggle wet scrub pants down over my hips—I let them flop onto the concrete. I faced the lockers, shimmied a “We Care” tee over my shoulders, and then folded arms across my belly. I didn’t want her to see the pinchable flesh under my ribs. Her skin stretched over muscles in between a push-up bra and green lace panties.

“First time then?” she asked. I nodded and turned, hands still clamping my waist. “Huh,” she said, unsnapping her bra. I felt my cheeks hot and forced my face into a locker, looking for something, anything. I picked at the chain bracelet mom gave me and rattled it onto the shelf. “I’ll see you in there,” she said.

I nodded and fanned my face against the August heat. I waited until she left and pulled a sports top on over my bra and stepped into baggy shorts. In the mirror, I slicked flyaways into a

bun and sniffed. It would have to do. I didn't look like she did in her spandex. My black shirt bunched over my stomach, and arm skin swung back and forth as I made fists to myself. "I'll show you," I said, pointing to the reflection.

The gym walls were corrugated iron, with heavy chains that hung from the ceiling, some of them with hooks. In the corner, a desk, made of stacked boxes and plywood, tucked under a wide brick chimney. Blue cows lined the cardboard boxes with "Meat Delivered Direct" scrawled in cursive. Files dribbled over wire racks and a TV, on a laminated dinner tray, had been pushed against the iron wall. On the other side, rows of punching bags had been rigged to the chains. Two-inch thick mats smattered the floor around the bags. It smelled like necrotic tissue. Girls stretched legs in the middle of the gym on a larger, blue mat, in a circle. The girl with the green panties wore red spandex against coffee-colored skin. Her hair was short and spiked with oil. She waved and said, "I'm Nelli."

I chewed my lip and held up a hand. "Trix."

I sat on the outside of the circle with legs spread and flexed my toes, fingers reaching for arches. A forties-something guy in a lycra t-shirt jogged towards us from the men's room, with a timer on string flapping against his chest. He had fluffy hair that sprouted in all directions, and balding spots at the sides of his temples. His gastrocnemius met his soleus muscles with the efficiency of *bailaoras* in *The Art of Flamenco*—mom and I'd watched it at Christmas on her brown-used-to-be-green couch, sucking on milk-plumped Oreos. Dad left us on Christmas day when I was eight, and ever since, mom gets plastered, and we watch competitive dance all day.

"Everyone, this is our newest member. Um, Tracy?" He was squeezing my shoulders. I sat erect—his thumbs measuring my weight.

"Trix," I said into my armpit.

“Tracy’s self-trained,” he said. “But she’s got a hell a knee thrust.” He laughed like an old man who’d smoked too much. He slapped my back. “Get to the bags,” he yelled.

I wrapped tape from my wrist to the base of my fingers, and around my ankles, under my arches. I punched right jab, cross, hook, uppercut, left jab, cross, hook, uppercut. Each impact jolted through the joints in my fingers and echoed up my elbows. I went faster: jab, hook, uppercut, jab, hook, uppercut. Knuckles throbbed—the tape pinked. Jab, hook, uppercut, jab, hook, uppercut. “I want to see kicks, ladies,” Mitch said. I held the bag, and thrust my knee into it. I jumped back and whipped a sidekick into a hook, imagined slapping my heel into a chin. “Tracy, where are your gloves?” Mitch asked. He was beside me, close enough to nibble my ear with his lips.

“I don’t use them.” I squeezed fingers over fingers.

“Break knuckles in the ring,” he said. “Not here.” I felt his breath hot on my cheek.

I nodded. “I just like to feel the impact.”

Mitch stalked in a circle, forearms pressed behind his back. “Did I say stop?” He moved to my right side and held up his hands like a mime. “Again.”

I flicked a right sidekick high, low, high, low. I wobbled on my planted foot as I brought my leg up for another whip. Calf muscles drew up, but my knee turned out. I saw his palms in my periphery and fell away from them. My face made contact with the mat. Mitch was on me, heavy. He clamped my wrist behind my neck, squeezing hard. My arm pressed against my trachea.

“You need to work on your balance,” Mitch said. “Eyes open.”

I tapped the mat.

I perched on the edge of my tub and peeled tape off my hands. Ceefa chased the sticky scraps across the floor, batting them back and forth between his paws. Red zigzags peaked my knuckles like winter hands after a third shift at the hospital, all those alcohol rubs. Last week, I counted how many times I washed my hands in a shift: 67 alcohol squirts, and 15 water soaps in 12 hours. On average my hands were purged seven times an hour, or once every eight or nine minutes. I stroked fingertips over the tops of my hands—they felt like dried leaves hydrating over pools of puffy flesh. Tomorrow, I would have to maneuver butterfly needles into veins with these hands. I would have to rub alcohol into my open skin, a thousand ants stinging the dermis.

The doorbell rang, and then five rapid knocks.

“Yes?” I opened the door to my apartment, pulling sleeves over knuckles. The new neighbor pressed hand to hip outside. Her black hair kinked with hairspray, her pupils constricted. A little girl in corduroy and Mickey Mouse clung to her shirt.

“You got any beer?” she asked. “I can give you money when my boyfriend gets back.”

“Um, I’m not sure.” The little girl’s face was blotched with mud.

“My mom died two weeks ago, you know. And my brother’s in jail.” Last time it had been her dad that had died, and her sister behind bars. She moved in staccatos—her fingers interlaced now and pulsed against a jean miniskirt. I wanted to tell her to grow some and stop with the excuses. The little girl studied her worn sneakers and scrapped them against each other, squeaking a rubber symphony.

“Let me check.” I just wanted her to go away. “Wait here.” Two nights ago, I caught her up on my floor, searching in windows.

“Don’t worry, my apartment’s a mess too,” she said as she squeezed herself in, pulling the kid in after her. My body prickled—I never wanted her in my place. “You got something for her face? She fell.” The girl whimpered. I pulled out tissue from the bathroom and handed it to the neighbor. She wiped the girl’s cheeks with it. “Here you go, baby.”

I opened the fridge, and she was behind me—I imagined pushing her back, shoving her out of my house—I drew out two bottles of Corona I’d been saving for the weekend. “That’s all I’ve got,” I said, hoping she wouldn’t notice the rum on top of the cabinets.

“Thanks, I’ll get you back,” she said.

The child tugged at Ceefa’s tail. His paw curled in mid air, claws protracted, ready to strike.

“Don’t worry about it.” I scooped up the stiff cat, and rubbed his hackles smooth.

“I’ll get you back,” she said again, already clanking down the metal steps outside. The little girl brushed fingers across books. She shook my “Employee of the Month: May 2005” glass paperweight in both hands like a snow globe.

“Do you like books?” I asked, letting Ceefa drop onto the couch. He stretched, ignoring me. The girl shrugged. I scanned the shelf for titles.

“What’s it say?” she asked and held the paperweight to her face, her bangs sweeping across its top.

“I got it because I help people. I help sick people.”

She brought the glass ball into her, tucking it against Mickey.

“Do you want look after it for me?” I reached to touch her hands that encased the paperweight. She withdrew from my fingers and nodded. Her hair covered her eyes. I remembered my dad thrusting the coffee-stained copy of *The Complete Guide to Kickboxing* into

my lap at seven years old. *This 'll help you understand the world*, he had said. He read it to me on the porch on sticky summer nights, turning the eared pages, spelling out words together.

“I think Ceefa likes you,” I said. “Maybe you could play with him, and we could read some books.” I imagined sitting on the outside landing, breathing in the humidity and cicadas, breathing in words.

She shook her head and stuck a fat tongue out.

“Okay, well take care of my globe.” I pressed the door behind her, clicked the deadbolt, and collapsed onto the couch with Ceefa. He nuzzled my chin, purring in anticipation. “You’ll read with me, won’t you boy?” Ceefa licked my hand.

I changed in the bathroom at the gym this time—the girls’ chatter echoed into my stall.

“Nelli, you’re going down tonight,” one said.

“Nu-uh,” she said. “I’ve been eating iron, baby, I’m all metal.” Bubbles of deep laughter floated about the room.

“Whatcha think about that new one?”

“She think she tough,” said Nelli. “But she don’t hit hard.”

My sunglasses slipped out of my fingers onto the concrete. I tried to catch them, but my foot jerked, pushing them across the floor, scraping, to the drain. I bundled my clothes under an arm and exited the stall. “Hi,” I said, not looking up.

“Well, speak of,” Nelli said, padding on the concrete with bare, chestnut feet. “You think you tough?”

I could take you, I said to myself but shook my head.

She bent and scooped the sunglasses from the floor. “Lemme show you how it’s done.”

She flicked the glasses open and slid them onto her face.

“Mitch’s going down, bitches,” a blonde girl said, jumping onto Nelli’s back.

Mitch’s hands were two red pads. He edged the mat, swishing the foam pads back and forth like a *bailaora* swirls the frills of a skirt. Nelli held her ground in the middle, head tipped forward, gloves poised under chin, feet planted. I watched her nostrils expand as she stepped towards him. Her hook split the air. She contacted Mitch’s left pad. He parried with the right, pushing Nelli back, pads thudded forearms, *contra tiempo*. Nelli uppercut. Mitch bobbed to the left. Nelli overcut, swinging her backhand and all her weight into Mitch. He fell back against the ropes, grasping his side.

“Watch it,” he said, wheezing. “Nice hit, Nell.”

Nelli pulled off gloves and took Mitch’s pads under her arm. Her skin shimmered in sweat, tense muscles, body exhaling. She shook out her legs.

“Yo coach, you slipping,” she said and knuckled his wispy hair like a child.

“Alcohol before and after each contact,” I said to the new hire, and stuck my hands under the automatic dispenser, waited for the whir then rubbed palms and fingers, wincing. She copied.

“What’s wrong with your hands?” she asked.

“That’s what happens after a while,” I said. “The wash dries them out.” She examined her smooth hands and wiped them on pressed turquoise scrubs. Her lips shined with gloss and her foundation merged seamlessly into her neck. She nodded. We entered the patient’s room and

gloved up. “Hi, my name’s Trix and this is,” I looked at her employee’s badge, “Katie. We’re here to draw your blood.” The patient swung legs around to sit on the edge of the bed. The hospital gown gaped at the front—he’d put it on backwards—and he wore silky blue pajama pants underneath. His grey hair matted into a mohawk and white stubble scattered his chin.

“What’s this for?” the patient asked. I scanned his wristband.

“Tests the doctor ordered, sorry,” I said, but I wasn’t.

“I guess I don’t have a choice,” the patient said, chuckling. I forced a smile. I already had the tourniquet pulled tight around his arm, twisting his skin. I palpated his antecubital.

“Always go for the AC first, if it doesn’t bounce, then look lower.” Katie bent in close, and started pushing on the inside of his arm.

“I don’t feel anything,” Katie said. She trembled next to me.

“It’s right there,” I said, lightly touching the vein. Katie replaced my finger with hers. “You want to try?” I asked. The patient scrunched his eyebrows and withdrew his arm slightly. I secured his elbow. “Sorry, sir, you’ll have to hold still.” I looked at Katie, and she shook her blond head. I thought of that Christmas dad gave mom a vase from the neighbor’s garage sale—it had purple flowers that curled between green swirls—mom took it, swaying, with a beer in one hand, she flung the vase against the wall with the other. Dad held up his hand as if to smack her, then curled his fingers into a fist, and let it drop against his side. *You’re not worth it*, he had said, and left.

I swabbed the area and my gloved hand with alcohol. I felt the course of the vein—it curved towards the inside of his arm, the sensitive, thin part. “Little stick,” I said. I anchored his forearm with my left thumb and inserted the 22-gauge needle into his skin with my right hand. The patient yelped. “Sorry,” I said, automatically. The tube flashed with blood. The way it

surged into the vacuum made my own blood warm and tingly. I popped off the tube and inverted it, mixing cells with reagents. “Fabulous, you did great,” I told the patient, told myself. I withdrew the needle, snapped off the tourniquet, and labeled tubes, stuffing them into a ziplock, while holding pressure with a cotton ball. I held it a little harder than I should have—so he wouldn’t bruise. I ripped a section of tape and smoothed it over the cotton. We de-gloved and squirted hands with alcohol as we exited. I straightened out my wrinkled scrub top and tucked loose hair behind my ears.

“I hate the thought of hurting someone,” Katie said, explaining why she didn’t stick.

“It helps not to name them.”

Mitch held a mini notepad in his hand and tutted and looked at his watch. We sat in a circle in the portable ring—no one moved. Mitch rubbed his hair and squinted behind my shoulders. “Let’s see what you’ve got, Trace.” I pointed at myself and raised my eyebrows. He smiled. “Who do you want to fight?”

There was only one. “Nelli,” I said. “I’d like to fight Nelli.”

“Yeah, I like that.” He slapped his hands together. “All right, let’s see the newbie get her gloves dirty.”

“Go Nelli,” said the girl with a blond strands in a high pony. The girls scooted off the ring floor. My palms sweated in my new pink gloves—I had asked the sporting goods manager if they had black, or red, but he shrugged and told me it was cancer awareness week, I should be proud, he had said—my pulse tapped against my neck. I pushed off my feet and banged my gloves on tight, fumbling to secure them with velcro. Nelli stood astride in the center of the ring,

gloves up, waiting. I shuffled in front of her and tried to match her stance. Mitch held our mitts together—for a moment, everything stilled, and I considered how Nelli rested slightly forward on her toes, her knees loose, her sterno-cleido-mastoids pronounced, meeting at the sternum in a perfect V, pointing to her orange sports bra. Her body was a machine of pulleys adjusting, readjusting to the tiniest movement. The bell dinged.

We pounded gloves. I jumped back and bounced on the balls of my feet. She punched a right hook. I slipped to the left. She thrust a left uppercut knocking my gloves into my face. She jabbed my ribs three times. My chest felt heavy, tingling—it felt good.

“Push her back,” Mitch yelled at me.

I jammed my elbows down and whipped a roundhouse into her left knee. The snap of contact energized me. Her legs buckled, lips grimaced, her body staggered from exhaustion. She lost step. I wanted to swirl the ruffles of a *falda* around her, swaddling her in soft red. I winked at her and stalled by bobbing.

“Come on, Trace,” Mitch said. “Get in there.”

I kept back.

Nelli came at me with a bolo, I bobbed to the outside. Her feet jittered back and forth on the mat with their own energy. She front kicked—I parried with my leg—something thudded as our shins made contact, made me want more. I shoved her back with my gloves—she came in tight, and I threaded my arms around her shoulders and held her against me in a clinch. She smelled like lemon drops. Her skin slick against mine. She let me hold her. I could tell from her breathing that she didn’t want to go again. So I held her. The bell rang. Mitch pried us apart. Nelli scowled at me and shook her head, breathing hard.

“Jiminey Chrisnuts,” he said to my face. He turned to face the girls, “Nelli won, but she’s a feather and Trace is a heavy—how can Trace improve?”

“She should go to Girls R’ Us if she want pussy,” the blond girl said, snickering, hugging Nelli, who snickered too.

Mitch waved the comment off with a hand. “Where’s the punches I see you practice?”

“I didn’t want to hurt her,” I said. Pressure pulsed behind my eyes.

“What the hell are you doing in my gym, then?” Mitch asked.

Heat welled up from my toes through my veins. I drew in air. Swallowed it back. I looked to Nelli—she crossed arms over her chest and pursed her lips like she’d tasted her own lemony skin. “I don’t know,” I said. I wanted to scream, to hit, to make contact, but I clenched the anger down. With every muscle squeezed, I made it to the locker room. I straightened my shirt in front of the mirror and watched the trembling body. I palmed the glass, nose touching nose, breath fogging the surface, then grabbed my bag and left the gym.

Ceefa rubbed his head against my empty hand. I had forgotten to feed him. I tiptoed to the kitchen on sore feet. I climbed onto the counter, took down the rum and poured it into a glass of ice. Ceefa pawed at my legs and mewed. “Okay, buddy, here’s something to drink.” I fished an ice cube from my glass and let it chink into his bowl. On special occasions, my mom used to dribble Natural Light onto my grilled cheese and say, “that’s a meal.” I can’t stomach a grilled cheese without basting it in beer now. I snapped the cat leash onto Ceefa’s collar and tugged him into the outside hallway with me. He bellied across the concrete, tail swishing, his tags plinking

like muted wind chimes. The neighbor's girl sat cross-legged in my all-weather chair, picking at a knee scab. I clicked the door shut, and she smeared hands across her wet face.

"Everything all right?" I asked. I set my glass on the side-table of the barbeque and scooped up an unhappy Ceefa.

"I did something bad."

I put Ceefa on her lap. "I think he needs a hug." She patted his tabby back like a drum, Ceefa growled. The little girl smiled, revealing holes where her baby teeth had been. She squeezed him until he hissed and darted behind the barbeque. "He's probably not used to you yet," I said, shrugging.

"Come here, kitty-kitty," she commanded in a squat, peering at the space between the wall and the barbeque. "I won't hurt you." Her chubby arm reached into the space and flailed about.

"Starlee," the neighbor called, from the landing below. "Remember what I told you." The girl flinched. She pushed herself from the floor and interlocked her fingers.

"Do you have any cigarettes?" She asked, mumbling, and looked up at me for the first time. Something about her face felt familiar. "Mommy is sick. She needs them to get better."

"Sorry, I don't have any," I said, and tapped the half-pack in my pants. "Why don't you ask your mommy to come up here, and we can work something out." I forced a half smile.

"Mmm Kay." She scrambled down the metal steps in twos. I yanked Ceefa from behind the barbeque, shut him inside and sat in the outside chair, sipping rum.

"You can't do nothing right." It was the woman yelling downstairs. "You stupid girl." Something crashed.

"I'm sorry, mommy." I heard Starlee screech and then a slap.

Stilettos tapped up the stairs. The neighbor smiled. “You got any more of that?” she asked, looking at my rum. She wore a sequined top and skinny jeans, which accentuated her boyish frame. She held out a plastic bag that tinkled like broken glass. “My stupid ass kid left this on the balcony,” she said. “About killed myself tripping over it.”

I took the bag from the woman. Inside, fifty shards of my paperweight reflected my grimace. I wanted to punch her, to grab her ratty hair and slam it against the wall. “Maybe you shouldn’t wear heels on the drink,” I said. “And no, you can’t have any.”

“You look like me without percocet.”

I squinted at the blue feathers dangling from her ears.

“I can tell you where to get some.”

“I could never be like you,” I said. An image of the mother’s boyfriend creeping into Starlee’s room pressed in my mind—Starlee staring at a Bruce Lee poster on her ceiling, keeping absolutely still, invisible. Her face wearing my face.

The neighbor twitched a little, picked at her nails. Ran fingers through her matted hair. “I can call the guy, if you want.”

I wanted to kick her.

“Sometimes he’s a bit rough.”

I remembered dad with raised hand over mom. If only he’d done it, we’d be okay. I’d be okay.

“Do you wanna go now?” she asked me.

I hadn’t realized I was standing with clenched fists. She inched towards the stairs and folded into herself. My hands were on her shirt now, shaking, sequins rained on the ground.

“Why don’t you get it?” I asked and shook her hard. She whimpered. “You’re pathetic.”

I smushed her face between my fingers, kissed her dirty lips—I pushed her into the railing, and she dropped in a ball. My fists made contact with her boney sternum. Her top flashed in the streetlamp. I beat it away, snorting and swishing fists. My blood struck warm under my skin. My knuckles thudded flesh, electricity fizzled up my arms, my hairs stood erect. I saw stars, I was floating, muscles into energy, energy into fire, fire into wind, my breath fire. I beat her until my hands were hot and dripping red, until all the fire exhaled out.

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