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This thesis contains a collection of three short stories. The first, “The Rise and Fall of Phil Darrow,” is about a man drinking too much alcohol while on an airplane. The second, “Omnipotence,” is about a man who sleeps with his brother’s wife for eight years. The third, “Lovebug,” is about a girl who befriends a fat, smelly boy from a low socioeconomic class.

LOVEBUG AND OTHER STORIES

by

Brandon Haffner

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Brandon Haffner has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
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## THE RISE AND FALL OF PHIL DARROW

The man in the window seat was enormous in a freak-show kind of way, and though his size alone was enough to pique Phil's curiosity, the man's clothes—baggy button-down shirt stained yellow at the armpits, cargo pants torn near the pockets—were what lifted Phil's mood. After his dreadful week in Los Angeles with Amanda, it would have been Phil's luck to find a stiff suit sitting in 17A. Everyone was always so rich and serious on airplanes. That the enormous man appeared neither rich nor serious, and that he seemed, at first glance, to lead a difficult life, provided Phil with a secret, subtle buoyancy.

Already he was planning his approach to meaningful and direct conversation. The kind only comrades in misery could appreciate. Could they talk about money? Their shared need for more of it?

Phil took the aisle seat. He strapped himself in, extended a hand to the enormous man, and introduced himself as Phil Darrow, which of course was not his name. His name was Phil Edgars, but Darrow was edgier, younger, so it was the name he used with strangers.

“Stanley,” the enormous man said. His voice was so low it rattled Phil's chest, and the “a” in “Stanley” was twangy, pinched. Southern.

A flight attendant politely told the men to put their seat belts on.

Phil poked Stanley in his flabby side, since Stanley was now looking out the window and seemed not to have heard the attendant's request.

"She means you, big boy," Phil said.

Stanley picked up the ends of the seat belt. When the attendant left, Stanley set the buckles down at his sides.

"You rebel," Phil said.

"Man of my size," Stanley said, "won't fit anyway." He looked out the window.

"Man of your size," Phil said. "And I don't mean to be insulting. I'm sure you've heard it all before. But a man of your size ought to be a smaller size."

Stanley's chest went up and down with every big breath. His face twitched, his jaw came unhinged a little, mouth open, and a fat tongue moved across the lower teeth, a snake over rocks. Otherwise, Stanley didn't budge. His marshmallow arm consumed the armrest between them.

"Only because it isn't safe, I mean," Phil said. "What if the plane crashes? You'll fly out of your seat. You could die. Or land on top of someone else."

"Crash, we're all dead," Stanley said. "Especially the little ones."

"Like me?" Phil said.

"Yes," Stanley said. His frown was as much a part of him as the scar on his cheek.

"Splat," Phil said. He clapped his hands together. "It could all end, just like that. Amazing, isn't it?"

"Have some faith in the pilots."

The continuous frown and the fact that Stanley had not turned his eyes from the window let Phil know he'd been too direct and not funny at all. So they sat in silence as the plane taxied them around the LAX tarmac. The attendants performed their oxygen mask dance.

It seemed to Phil he hadn't always felt this desperate. That maybe there was a time, long ago, when he could have befriended this enormous man in the window seat in a matter of minutes. But he recognized the degeneration of his social skills. An impossible-to-stop change, like a derailed train. When he became nervous or stressed or bored, Phil now retreated to the safety of his imagination. He began to see things—he called them “controlled hallucinations” when he described them to Amanda. He'd said to her, I see what I want to see—like everything is a painting, and I'm the artist—does that make sense? And she'd said, Sure, sure it does. He explained that with his eyes, he altered his surroundings when it suited his mood. For instance, during his drive to work, his car windows might crack or, on angry days, shatter; paint might drip off billboards in wild-colored rains; co-workers might slip and fall in the parking lot, break their wrists, call for help.

In part, he figured, these visions were therapeutic, a way of avoiding dwelling on his life's shortcomings. And there were many of them: he earned twelve dollars an hour supervising his local grocery's produce section, a job he only had thanks to Bob Boyle, the grocery's meat manager, and also Phil's cubicle mate at a previous job—the grimy, dimly-lit Cooke & Knowles market research call center, which shut down just weeks



after the recession. And before Cooke & Knowles, where Phil made 150 outbound calls per day for nearly six years, he'd tried going to college at UW Milwaukee. But his mother stopped paying the tuition after Phil's GPA slipped below a 3.0, and so he never came back from winter break his sophomore year, leaving his dorm furniture and Red Hot Chili Peppers posters behind, too embarrassed to show himself to his roommate and tear it all down. Then his mother kicked him out of the house, and he found an apartment to share with Jessica, another college dropout and his first love, who dumped him a year later, and she had been his co-signer, so he had to move in with his cousin Grace, who threw his clothes and computer and journal into the front yard after she'd caught him spying on her as she changed. His mother refused to take him back. She'd said once, when he was a kid, after she didn't get him a skateboard for Christmas like he asked for, one of the worst things a mother could say to a son, although she'd meant it as a kind of joke, "You're just not very cool, Phil." And as the decades rolled by, failures stacking up, he began to understand, finally, what she'd meant: he was doomed to be alone.

In his mind, his past took the shape of a fragile little house, and where a more confident man might rip out the rotten insides and replace them with something strong, new, and fresh, Phil spent his energy painting and remodeling the façade, keeping the front door locked and closed.

That is, at least, until Amanda came along and demanded he open it.

This one was a quiet group. No wailing babies, no businessmen bragging about recent transactions and acquisitions, no old ladies gabbing about grandchildren. All one hundred fifty-six of them were unified by feathery, sleepy quiet.

The plane lurched up the runway and Stanley made a wheezing sound. Everything shook. As the plane rose, Phil's stomach fell out of his body, then swooped back in. He sucked on his tongue and formed a pool of saliva in his mouth. Finally the plane settled into the navy blanket of sky above the clouds. Phil retrieved the vomit bag from the seat pocket and spit the saliva into it.

"That was a rough one," Phil said.

Except for a soft grunt of recognition, no reply came from Stanley, who persisted in staring at the wing.

"What do you see out there?" Phil asked.

Stanley said nothing. Phil leaned forward to see if Stanley's eyes were closed, but they were open and brown and reflected the pink sunset hovering above the world.

Stanley's wheezing was louder than the hum of the plane.

"That's a pretty bad wheeze," Phil said.

"Can't be helped," Stanley said. "I'm going to get some thinking time in now."

Stanley had one of those slow, formal versions of rural speech that reminded Phil of his dead grandmother, who spent last year's Fourth of July at the lake consuming nothing but cornbread and buttermilk and beer, and then, after the fireworks, clutched her chest, fell off the dock, and splashed into Lake Papakeechee.

"Thinking does no one any good," Phil said, trying again to make a joke.

“Leave me alone,” Stanley said.

Phil nodded. He was hurt by this direct order, but to show Stanley he was adaptable and agreeable, he shrugged and made an effort: he pulled out a magazine. Instead of reading the articles, he found himself looking at ad pictures. A tan, exotic-looking young woman in a black dress held a bottle of tequila. Phil put his finger on her paper neck and traced the outline of her face. Her eyes held so much mystery that he could hardly bear it. Around him, the plane was full of sleeping people. The woman across the aisle, the two seats next to her both empty, was beautiful. She slept with a pillow against the window, and the straw hat she wore was slipping off her head.

There was always at least one beautiful woman on every airplane, as a rule, and as another rule, that beautiful woman was either with a man or was so aloof and wintry that Phil rarely caught the magic of her glance. It was a dilemma. He yearned for some connection on every flight, even if it was silent. But he knew there would be pain later, since the two never would meet again. A year ago, he'd met the green eyes of a long-haired woman who passed by him as she searched for her seat; he'd seen the beginnings of a smile, but was that what it was? Was it a signal that she recognized him as someone she could know, an invitation to know her more? Phil dreamed about that girl for weeks after, and the pain of not knowing her was almost worse than the pain of losing women he'd loved and known for years. And there were a few of them, all gone their wondrous ways now, doing busy things with their lives like raising children or reporting for local TV stations or running political campaigns, and here he was. Leaving Los Angeles to go back home after his first and probably last visit to California, which was not for an

important business trip or conference, but to meet for the first time in person a woman, Amanda, who'd introduced herself to him in an online chat room eight months ago. He hadn't told anyone about the trip except Amanda; he'd have been reprimanded by his mother or his sister Darla or Bob Boyle at the grocery if they knew he was spending his last savings on this flight. But he was feeling overrun by loneliness. Empty. Now more than ever before. Didn't he want to have children one day? If it wasn't already too late? And so it was time, he knew, to thrust everything he had into what he'd started to believe was his last chance at landing a wife.

After all, he turned forty last month. He was running out of options. Three weeks ago when he asked Amanda over the phone if he should buy the plane tickets, he held a full bottle of sleeping pills, lid open, glass of water standing by, in case she told him to fuck off. The silence on the end of the line was shorter than he expected—she said yes, and excitedly, and they'd done little since but talk about their plans. She would take him to her favorite crab restaurant since he'd never had real fresh crab, they'd walk along the shops by the beach, they'd kick sand. They wouldn't go swimming—Amanda didn't know how to swim, and anyway the ocean's undertow, as she put it, scared her “into turtle mode.” Despite the fact that he'd always wanted to swim in every ocean—who didn't?—he was okay with this. He'd skip it, for her.

And although they did go to her favorite crab restaurant, walk into the beach shops, and make a sandcastle as waves lapped against their knees, it was all wrong. She was subdued, passionless, so unlike how she'd been when they'd spoken on the phone or written in e-mails. Where were those exclamation points now, in conversation? Had his

looks disappointed her? Granted, his hairline had moved back a good half inch or so since that profile photo was taken, and his teeth, which weren't showing at all in the photo, were a little crooked, but was Amanda really so shallow? It's not like she was a prom queen, either. Little chubby in the waist and cheeks. Hair much thinner than he liked. Some serious signs of age on her turkey neck. But still. When he'd seen the middle-aged woman holding the "Phil Darrow" sign at his gate (the absolute-best feeling, seeing a woman holding a sign at an airport gate with your name on it), and when he'd hugged her hello, chubby waist and funny middle-aged-woman smell and all, he'd almost begun to cry as he told himself, in his mind, "Phil—you could love this woman!"

That evening, at dinner, their conversation was clunky, filled with accidental interruptions, awkward dead space, phony laughter. When he told her, as politely as he could over his plate of crab she'd bought him, that apparently he didn't like crab after all, she stared at him over their glasses of pinot grigio as though he'd just posed an unsolvable math problem. She said, That's a little rude, don't you think? And he said, No, no, it's not that I don't appreciate the great dinner—what a pretty room this is, and the wine, too—the crab, it's just not what I expected, from, you know, the hype.

The hype, she repeated.

When they arrived at her home, he slept in the guest bedroom.

Later in the week they spent half an hour in a jewelry store on the beach, one of those tourist traps where the bracelets are linked-together sand dollars and the earrings are teal and orange stones that might or might not be genuine. Laughing, Amanda spread several necklaces against her throat. When she went outside to take a call from her friend,

he bought her the only necklace he could afford. But after she came back inside and he presented the gift, she shook her head. Then she just pocketed the thing, like it might as well have been the wad of cash he'd put on the counter to pay for it. Was it the one you wanted? he asked. It's sweet of you, she said, and he followed her out into the blazing sun.

Thirty thousand feet above Amanda now, Phil turned the page to the next ad. An orange train was moving toward Phil, trees along both sides of the rusty track, blue sky above. He stared at the page, and soon the blue sky turned a sparkly purple, then rainbow. The trees on the sides of the tracks swayed in the wind, and the sky drew in, pregnant with rain, and lightning shot across the page. He moved the train forward on the tracks—it came toward him, and he felt his heart palpitate, until the train fell off the paper and down through the canyon between Phil's legs, a train car here and there bumping against his knees, sparks flying, the smell of smoke and fire, the screams of the conductor for his kids, for his wife, for his mistress. An explosion, down there on the floor, erupted through the darkness. He scanned the fine print to find what the ad was about, but his thoughts drifted to Stanley and his short speech, his rudeness. Phil closed the magazine.

Stanley did indeed appear to be deep in thought. His left hand rested under his chin as he squinted into the sunset. Who, Phil asked himself, was this enormous man, wearing a white T-shirt and jeans? One of those guys who sits on his porch drinking beer until his wife drags him to bed? Someone's cousin's husband's corn-shucking buddy who tells stories of his family tractors breaking down in rainy fields, of feet nearly chopped

off at the ankle when the axe misses the firewood? Everyone was such an alien on an airplane. All this intimate strangeness so close together. Freckles, ingrown hairs, sun spots, cancerous lesions, red streaks in the eyes. They all represented something. Chapped lips, wrinkles, scars. Finger taps and pen twirls. Deep breaths, falling eyelids (Fatigue from what? What wakes you?) lip licking, hair brushing, clenched fists, gritted teeth, sweaty palms.

The beverage service came.

“Bloody Mary,” Stanley said.

“That’ll be eight dollars.”

“Jesus H.”

“Cash or credit.”

“Make it an orange juice.”

“Scratch that,” Phil said. He pulled out a twenty and waved it around. “Bloody Mary is on me. And a gin and tonic.”

The attendant handed them the drinks. A few minutes later, the lights dimmed. The windows were black ovals. He sat up and peered over Stanley’s body, hoping to see the night lights of Earth, but he saw only blackness. They must have been flying over some rural landscape. Often Phil forgot how much of America was farms and farms and farms.

“Thank you,” Stanley said, holding up his drink, and delivered a twisted smile that showed not thanks but constipation or depression or both.

No matter. Phil had him now. Buying the drink put Phil at the helm of this little two-man vessel. And there was nowhere to fly but into the open air of communication, the white clouds of friendship.

“Stanley,” Phil said. Phil glued his eyes to the ceiling of the aircraft. “What do you really want to be doing with your life?”

“That’s a question,” Stanley said.

“I’m good for something.”

“I’m a chemist. For a company that paints cars,” Stanley said. “I’m happy with where I am.”

“Surely you are. Surely you are,” Phil said. “And I, too, am happy supervising my area grocery’s produce section. But let’s say you aren’t happy. And let’s say you’re not painting cars. And you have a billion dollars.”

“I don’t paint cars or anything else. I’m a chemist.”

“You have a billion dollars. What do you do?”

“What are you, some kind of salesman?” Stanley said, and he laughed and looked back out the window, as if some quiet aloofness would discourage Phil from asking anymore questions. When he turned around and found Phil staring at him, he let out a long, heavy blow of air from deep in his chest.

“Magician. I’d be a magician.”

Phil nodded and did his best not to crack a smile at the idea of Stanley on stage in a top hat, a clever grin on his face, a sexy little blonde at his side. Preserving the



seriousness was key right now. Phil said nothing and didn't break his gaze, this to let Stanley know that if there was more, he was welcome to say it.

"When I was younger I wanted to be on TV. My parents bought me a slot on public access. I had some good tricks," Stanley said. Stanley sipped his red drink and because his mouth was so big, half the liquid disappeared from the little airline cup. Phil sipped his gin and tonic to make Stanley feel like he wasn't the only one who needed the buzz.

"What, cards?" Phil asked.

Stanley laughed. His laugh became a cough. Then he said, "If I've got a billion dollars, I'm doing some real tricks."

"Make things disappear?"

"You watch too many movies," Stanley said.

"Can you do one now?"

"It's been years."

Phil took a long sip. The drink tasted like lemon-scented bathroom cleaner.

"You see that lady over there?" Stanley said. Stanley pointed a finger across the aisle to the woman in the straw hat.

Phil nodded.

"Face that direction. Close your eyes and count to ten," Stanley said.

Phil closed his eyes. Ten, nine, eight, seven—the hum of the plane became a fly in his ear, and in the pitch blackness of his eyelids, the fields of what Phil imagined to be Stanley's childhood appeared, rainy and dark, a rusty maroon tractor lying dead in the

center of it, and the corn grew high, the green stalks shuffling in the wind, and behind him someone said, “Knee high by the Fourth of July—”

Phil opened his eyes. The woman was gone. The straw hat occupied the seat.

“You devil,” Phil said.

“What’s that?”

“You made that beautiful woman disappear. And I doubted you.”

“The little lady? She went to the restroom.”

“Oh.”

Stanley reached behind Phil’s ear and revealed to Phil a fifty-cent piece. “Bet you haven’t seen one of these babies in years,” Stanley said, grinning.

While downing the rest of his gin and tonic in gulps, Phil pressed the button to call the attendant back. When she came, he ordered another, and again he paid her in cash. He planned to savor this one drop by drop until the captain told them all to strap in for landing; he rarely drank, and was already beginning to feel the alcohol’s buzz.

Stanley turned on his reading light, brought some science fiction novel up to his eyes, and read silently. The grooves in his face were black shadows between rolling features.

“Do another,” Phil said. “Something I’ve not seen before.”

The woman with the straw hat returned from the bathroom, sat down, and went back to sleep on her pillow.

Stanley shook his head.

“Was your time in California for business or recreation?”

“You’re a nosy bastard,” Stanley said.

“I’m not,” Phil said. He drank too much from his cup and let the bubbles fizzle in his mouth. “I’m just lonely.”

“Aren’t we all.”

“No,” Phil said. Phil lowered his voice to a whisper. “I bet she’s not lonely.” Phil nudged Stanley in his side, and nodded toward the woman in the straw hat.

Stanley did not grin.

“Is California a place of business or pleasure for you, Stan? Stan the Man? Come on. I’m your friend.”

He lowered his book. “I live in Fresno.”

“Wouldn’t have pegged you as a Californian,” Phil said. “Your accent reminds me of my grandma. She was from Mississippi.”

“Awful place,” Stanley said.

“You grew up there?”

“No. Going back to my book now.” Stanley went back to his book.

“What’s in Milwaukee for you?” Milwaukee was the flight’s destination. Phil lived in a small apartment in an undesirable part of downtown.

“I’m reading,” Stanley said.

Phil was just about to give up. He wondered then if he should aim higher. Maybe he should find a way to introduce himself to this woman in row 17. Maybe by the time the plane landed, something would change in him and he would be a new, confident man who knew what to say and when to say it?

It was possible he was better off now without Amanda, without something or someone to hope for. It dawned on him that he had nothing to lose now, so there was no reason to hide behind this pretend barrier that separated him from this woman, the barrier of their being strangers, never having spoken before. What did that matter, really? Say a few words, and she's bound to respond. Even stubborn Stanley admitted his magician secret. And all you did was buy him a drink. So—buy her a drink.

He'd read recently, in an online article entitled "Eight Ways to Win Her Heart," that it was crucial in early contact to be direct, use eye contact, and be complimentary. Maybe he'd start with, Everyone always looks groggy and worn on a plane, but somehow you look radiant—or, That straw hat suits your pretty face perfectly, where'd you get it? One of those beach shops? Where is a gorgeous girl like you from, anyway? Is California a place of business or pleasure for you?

Ice knocked against Phil's teeth when he tried to take another sip. He called the attendant back and asked for two gin and tonics; one for him, and one for the lady across the aisle. He would surprise her with it.

"Sixteen dollars."

Phil went through his wallet and found only six singles. He could have sworn he had more. He pulled out his credit card and handed it to the woman, who swiped it, then returned it.

"Your card has been declined," she said too loudly. The woman in the straw hat woke up.

“Can I give you six dollars in cash, then charge the rest to the card?” Phil asked. The attendant was old, with a nose sharp like flint and crow’s feet at the edges of her eyes, but her smile was genuine and kind, perfect for this kind of job, where she must run declined cards all the time. The smile was telling him: you are not alone. Relax. The woman in the straw hat understands.

“That’s fine,” the attendant said warmly. He gave her the rest of his cash, and his card, which she ran. She shook her head.

“Your card has been declined,” she said again. “Insufficient funds.” The woman across the aisle removed her straw hat and sat up. For a terrible second their eyes met.

“Maybe you ought not to buy the drinks,” Stanley said from behind him.

“I have another card I can use, I just prefer not to,” Phil said. Of course, this was not true. “It’s no trouble. One moment.”

Phil dug into his wallet to search for loose coins. He found three quarters, some dimes, several nickels, and a few pennies, but it still wasn’t enough. Not even for one drink.

Heavy sigh. He could smell the alcohol on his own breath.

He handed the attendant the mess of change and said, quietly, “Please, just one drink. For the lady across the aisle. I’m a bit short, I know.” The attendant counted the coins. She smiled a generous smile, then handed the money back to him.

“I’m sorry sir.”

Then, magically, a perfectly rectangular, shining fifty dollar bill appeared on Phil's tray. He looked at Stanley, who nodded gloomily, as if a demon had reached into Stanley's wallet and placed it on Phil's tray, against Stanley's will.

"I will give you the biggest hug when we land," Phil said. And Phil handed the fifty to the attendant and bought three drinks: two gin and tonics, and one Bloody Mary, for his friend Stanley here. When she handed him back all three drinks, including the second gin and tonic, Phil pointed across the aisle.

"No, for the lady."

The attendant swung the drink around her cart and mumbled something to the woman in the straw hat, who mumbled something back. The attendant set the drink back down on Phil's tray.

"She doesn't want it," the attendant said. Then, "Beverage service will now be closed."

"But that man up there just received a bowl of soup and a glass of wine," Phil said.

"That man is in first class," the attendant said.

"Hardly seems fair."

The attendant left. Phil handed Stanley his Bloody Mary.

"Thank you," Stanley said, holding his hand up, "but I'm done for the evening."

Phil reviewed the three drinks in front of him.

The woman in the straw hat appeared to go back to sleep. Phil wasn't stupid; he knew she was pretending.

"First class," Phil said. "Hardly seems fair, wouldn't you say Stan?"

Stanley's eyes moved back and forth over the pages in front of him.

"Stan, you're not a talkative fellow. Don't get me wrong, I love you. You paid for my drink, I paid for yours, I like that. It was real sweet. Here's your change, by the way."

No response. Phil picked up the Bloody Mary and, eyeing Stanley with a look of vengeance, he downed the whole drink in three swallows. Then, eyeing the beautiful woman with the same look, he downed what was meant to be her gin and tonic. He tipped the glass back to coax the cold little beads of gin out of the icy crevices and into his mouth. The cup felt bigger this time, the cocktail more gin-heavy. The plane bounced a little, and the pilot came onto the PA and said something about wearing seat belts through this "choppy air." What a funny sounding problem, choppy air. There was no such thing closer to Earth. Air was clean or polluted, breezy or still, cold or warm, humid or dry. Never choppy. Really, what the hell was the pilot talking about? Choppy air.

And then there was one—Phil had a stare down with this final drink. Which, indeed, was spilling a bit due to the choppy air. How many drinks was it now? Was it even legal to serve so much booze to one man on a plane? Didn't the airline know about alcoholics?

He closed his eyes, put the cool fizzy liquid to his lips, let it fizz there for a moment, let it feel good, then—chug chug chug.

"You better go to the bathroom if you're going to puke," Stanley said.

Phil hadn't thought about puking until that instant, but now that Stanley mentioned it, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea.

“I’m sorry,” Phil said, and he added, “You’ve been patient with me,” and, realizing how cheesy and strange that must have sounded, said, “My dad was a military man, very strict, hardass, you know the type,” and then he began collecting his thoughts for a long discussion about loneliness and women, and all the pressures women put on men’s lives, and that he, Phil, never did figure out how to save or spend money in a way that made anyone happy, although his dad never did either. Phil just needed to make money *work for him*, not the other way around.

But he lost his grip on his thoughts, and what came out was, “Amanda hates me. I don’t know why.”

“Go to the bathroom.”

“Do a fucking magic trick.”

“I ought to get a refund for this.”

“You magicians. You’re all the same.”

Phil closed his eyes and tried to let his mind wander. Things were spinning now. He hadn’t been drunk in years, and it was both freeing and frightening to be so far from his body. Then he felt someone removing his seat belt. He looked down, expecting to see Stanley’s marshmallow hands, but no. The hands were milky and thin. Thin?

He looked up. It couldn’t be, but it was—it was the blurry, beautiful face of the woman in row 17.

“You,” Phil said.

She helped him to his feet and, with her arms under his, she walked behind him as she nudged him toward the back of the plane. Things were really spinning, faces were



peachy colored blurs with red and brown and yellow tops, and although he thought he could find the bathroom alone, he was so very, very grateful, and he wanted to tell her so, but instead of words, some garbage-smelling air rose up into his mouth.

The woman opened the bathroom door for him and he stepped in.

“Thank you. You’re beautiful,” he managed.

Her eyes were green.

She shut the door. Now he was alone with the silver toilet and the low hum of the airplane bathroom and the mirror where he faced himself. What a mess his hair was, his hair, so wiry on his balding head. No wonder women hated him; he needed his hair back. The hair was leaving him like his thoughts, floating into space, into the choppy air.

He folded his knees under him to fit himself into the small space that was the airplane bathroom floor, and he retched into the metal bowl. Some of it splattered back into his face. The force pushed little tears out of his eyes. His sinuses hurt, his nose dripped with vomit. A knock on the door.

“You okay?” It was the woman in the straw hat. He was sure of it.

“I’m fine,” Phil said before retching again. Was that a piece of his esophagus that just fell in?

“Hang in there,” the woman said. “The attendants have got water for you when you’re done, buddy.”

Even through his drunken haze Phil recognized the tone in that word, “buddy.” Impermanence. Reluctance. Arrogance. The tone his mother used after she’d given up.

When a cashier has reached the end of his shift and is only going through the motions.

When Amanda hugged him goodbye and said, have a good flight.

He wiped his mouth. Slowly, he stood up. The room rotated like a carousel he couldn't leap off of, the dizziness unbearable. Even when he closed his eyes, somehow the spiral continued. The bathroom floor shifted under his feet.

He opened his eyes and washed his hands and face. Maybe the lights flickered. He opened the door and stepped down the aisle, carefully and deliberately, to his seat.

“Buckle up,” Stanley said. “Turbulence.”

A crackle, a deep voice—ladies and gentlemen the captain has turned on the fasten seat belt sign—and Phil could see why, with the plane spinning in circles, the lights shuttering, the air coming down on the plane like a sledgehammer.

Phil buckled up.

Sure enough, just as soon he clasped the buckles together, Phil rose from his seat and found himself suspended, the seat belt cutting into his abdomen. The plane lit up, went dark, then lit up again. When Phil crashed back down, he thought he saw several of the overhead compartments open, and bags of all colors spill into the aisle and on top of the passengers. Or had that woman up there placed her backpack on the floor, by her feet? A high pitch rang out, a low thumping noise came from below the floor. Were those sparks outside the window, or fog lights? Could he smell smoke and fire? He fell forward into his seat belt again, and this time his forehead hit the seat in front of him. He was falling down a roller coaster's first giant hill. He closed his eyes. In his mind, the fallen

bags toppled over one another down toward the cockpit. They bounced and rolled like empty boxes.

This is not really happening and I am drunk, Phil assured himself, calmed by the cold armrest against his left arm—the plane is not crashing. No one is screaming or crying, therefore the plane is not crashing. Simple logic.

But what if it was crashing? What would he do? If these were his last moments, would it matter?

What would he do?

He would think of Amanda. Not because she was most important, but because she was most recent. It couldn't be helped. And he would think of her fondly: her handmade dresses, her bare feet avoiding broken shells on the shore, her habit of chewing on her pinky nail. The phone conversations late into the night, laughing, their questions, "What's something else I don't know about you?" Against gravity he would reach into his pocket and pull out his phone. He'd find Amanda's number, dial it, and it would ring. Each ring would feel several minutes long, because plane crashes always happen in slow motion. As her sweet voice would finally sing into his ear, he'd glimpse through the window the great white face of the moon, and its long dull tail, wavering, hovering in blackness, growing closer and larger. It'd take him until the "beep" at the end of Amanda's request to "Please leave a message" to realize the moon's tail was a reflection. The plane was headed into a huge lake. He'd have so many things to say that he'd say nothing. He'd breathe into the phone, rapid and shallow, knowing that what was to come would not hurt, that things would be evening out soon. And just like that, as in the movies when a

character is about to meet his end, and he knows it, Phil would see a few dashing images—Amanda’s freckled unsmiling face, his mother standing with scissors on the porch before one of his haircuts in summer, the gunshots and military salutes at his dad’s funeral—and there would be no time left for him to hang up.

But soon, of course, the sledgehammer stopped its pounding, and the lights steadied. The captain’s voice, soothing and upbeat, returned—ladies and gentlemen we have cleared the choppy air and have begun our descent; we’ll have you down in Milwaukee in oh about twenty twenty-five minutes—and Phil leaned back in his seat.

“Here,” Stanley said.

He was holding a bottle of water, the cap removed.

Phil took the bottle and drank.

“Thank you,” Phil said. “I have something to say.” He cleared his throat and moved his elbow from the armrest to his lap. “My last name is Edgars, not Darrow.”

“Whatever you like.”

Phil turned to face the woman, who was not sleeping, nor reading, nor looking out the window. She was simply staring straight ahead, at the back of the seat in front of her, paying no attention, it seemed, to anything.

“Don’t do it,” Stanley said.

“What?”

“Trust me,” Stanley raised his eyebrows. “She’s not interested.”

The plane descended and bumped and roared to a halt. It taxied around, gave its passengers a view of the huge glassy building they would soon enter like sheep into the pen, and finally stopped.

The passengers rose and gathered their things. Phil opened the overhead compartment, dug out his green duffle bag, and by the time he slung it on his shoulder, Stanley was nowhere to be found.

In the airport, Phil waited outside the gate for the woman in the straw hat. When she came out, she walked right past him without making eye contact.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” he said.

“Yes,” she said, turning to face him, walking backwards now.

“I wanted to say thank you,” he said. “For helping me to the restroom, earlier.”

“Yes. Hope you’re feeling better.”

“I am,” Phil said, laughing. He took a step toward her, to ensure she stayed within shouting distance. He rummaged through his thoughts, searched for some line that would snatch her attention, make her smile. If only he had more time with her. “Wait,” he said. “Would you, do you think—”

“If you want my advice, you should be careful about that drinking,” she said.

“Stuff’s poison. Killed my uncle. Almost killed my sister, too. Be careful.” Then she turned back around and walked quickly to the left, down a hall as wide and high as a cave, toward other terminals. She was catching a connecting flight. Phil, of course, was headed to the right, down to baggage claim, where Phil would take a taxi back to his one-bedroom apartment on Locust Street.

He stood for a moment, gathering himself, recalling where it was he needed to go next, then he patted his pockets to make sure his keys and wallet and phone were with him. The phone he pulled out. He pressed the power button and, as he waited for the screen to flash on, knowing it would yield no messages from anyone, he drifted toward baggage claim. Everyone was walking fast, a highway of fast-moving bodies. Bodies of all sizes and shapes and colors, faces all serious. Eyes laser-aimed toward destinations. Phones pressed to ears. Phones in front of faces. Phones on speaker. Voices from other countries, other states, other cities rising and falling as Phil passed, like wind.

At the bottom of the escalator his phone vibrated in his hand. He looked down. No text messages, but a missed call, and a voicemail—a voicemail, not from Bob, or his Mom, or Darla, but from Amanda. Amanda had called him, and left him a voicemail.

Someone behind Phil pushed him, slightly, to the side, out of the way of the escalator traffic—“excuse me sir”—interrupting Phil’s amazement, otherwise Phil might have cried right then and there in front of everyone.

A voicemail could only be good, Phil thought. If he’d left something behind—and he was certain he hadn’t; he’d taken great care to be tidy and neat, to keep track of all his belongings in her small but clean little home—a quick, terse text message would have sufficed. Or even no message, simply the action of sending said item in the mail. She must not despise him. Why would she call if she despised him? Even if she stuck to the basics, like, “Let me know when you get in,” or “Thank you for coming out,” whatever it was, it could only mean there was a chance.

Right?

He looked out the glass wall and watched cars stop and go. Buses, taxis, rental cars. Couples young and old embracing, kissing. Ignoring, for short moments, their suitcases and everything in them. The same words, repeated over and over, across generations: welcome home.

Phil touched the voicemail playback button, drew in a long breath, pressed the phone to his ear, and listened.

## OMNIPOTENCE

### I.

Things changed when Aaron's brother Keith returned from his two years in the Peace Corps. Aaron was playfully chasing Jeanie naked around Keith's study, looking for the next desk or table or chair to bend her over, when her phone rang. Jeanie sat on the edge of Keith's desk and turned the phone volume up high enough so Aaron could hear her husband speak.

"I'm at baggage claim," Keith's static-tinged voice said.

With the hand she wasn't using for the phone, Jeanie pulled Aaron's hand to her bare thighs, grabbed his middle finger, and pushed it into her. She did this kind of thing a lot, especially when it was someone like her mother or boss on the phone. This was her sicker way of being playful and sexy, which was fine with him. They were both sick. But this time she looked intently at Aaron as she held the phone for them both to hear, her eyes opening a portal into someplace he'd not yet seen, someplace hard and serious and strange instead of fun.

"Good to hear," she said. "You made it."

Aaron added another finger.

"Where are you?" Keith's voice asked. There was a little chuckle at the end of his question. Maybe a can't-contain-my-giddiness chuckle. At least, it sounded to Aaron like Keith was looking forward to coming home, despite the mess he'd left: Keith throwing a



wine glass against the wall, Jeanie shredding her own college diploma in front of him—“I won’t be needing this anymore, will I?”—a two-hour-long shouting match about Jeanie’s having changed her mind about wanting children, and an anonymous neighbor asking the police to check on the house. A few days later, Keith applied.

“On my way,” Jeanie said. She moved her mouth away from the phone to inhale deeply, then exhale.

A pause on the line.

“Wait. You haven’t left yet?” Keith’s voice responded.

“No, not yet.” She was staring at Aaron as he moved his fingers in and out. A wave of sun came through the big window and washed over her face. Her eyes, two bright blue circles with flecks of green and gold and gray, were mosaic tiles in a pool. Million dollar eyes. “Sorry baby,” she said into the receiver. “I’ll be there soon.”

Then she hung up, dropped the phone on the floor, pulled his fingers out, and they had sex right there on Keith’s desk. It wasn’t the first time they’d done it there, but now, in Aaron’s mind, where Keith’s question, “Where are you?” echoed, the whole thing felt off. A sour feeling grew in his stomach.

They were fervent to the finish. Desperate. Nails and teeth and shouts for more, and harder, and give it to me, louder than usual. On both of them there was pressure to be great, to be memorable.

In the empty house he once shared with his ex-wife Lauren, Aaron waited for dinner. He sat at the piano and pretended to himself he could work. Occasionally he’d

fiddle around with the keys, scratch some notes on staff paper. But he wasn't thinking of anything but Jeanie.

Right now, Jeanie was probably sitting on her bed, feet folded under her, a glass of chardonnay on the night table, and Keith was probably pacing around the room, pacing as he always was, chatting away about his time overseas.

Over the last two years, Jeanie and Keith spoke on Skype once or twice per month. At least, that was the figure Jeanie provided. Aaron had a hunch it was more. Much more. She talked about him with quick and easy disdain—"Oh, he's never coming back, he's much too cool to be an American now," or "He tells me he loves me, and I ask him what took so long!"—but Aaron knew her too well. She enjoyed married life, and she enjoyed Keith.

Sometimes he'd imagine hurting her—not that he would, of course. He had no hot temper, nor was he particularly unsettled by much of anything. But the thought would enter his mind from time to time. Aaron was not sadistic; he knew this much about himself. He was simply stuck in a place of hating and loving Jeanie at the same time. And he thought that despite what the two of them had done, he was not a bad person, though he would acknowledge himself as strange, perhaps even darkly so, because he was quiet, eccentric, and possibly unpleasant. And socially irresponsible. When strangers came up to him on the street asking for directions or dining recommendations or once, even, advice on what to leave in an apology note on a scratched car's windshield—this kind of thing was a common mistake strangers made, one he attributed to his impeccable and authoritative dress, his gray suits, his ironed button-downs, his vests, matching belts and

socks, his fine watches—they were always disappointed when he gave short answers. His sister, his brother, his parents, eventually his teachers and coworkers, these people grew to know him as who he was, and forgave him. But strangers. Well, when a stranger wants to complain about the ungodly hot weather with you in a grocery store when you're busy feeling the cantaloupes for bruises, is it really such a crime to react, not menacingly, but simply and calmly, with an aloof disposition?

Aaron had no good reason to be so aloof, so brooding, as if he were suffering or oppressed. He hadn't suffered any kind of hard life. His and Keith's childhood had been picture-perfect. Parents both attorneys, wealthy enough, well-adjusted. Aaron saw more of the nanny and sitters than he did of either his parents, but when they were home, they took a healthy interest in all three of their lives, usually not too much, not too little, and always equally. And unlike his sister Tara, whose boyfriend blew his head off with his grandpa's shotgun on his seventeenth birthday, he'd not been close to a single person in his life who'd died. He'd never been abused or molested. Rarely bullied in school. He didn't smoke or do drugs, hardly knew anyone who did, except his dad who smoked one or two a day. On paper his life was fulfilling, rich. Ideal, even.

At the piano, he cracked his knuckles, shuffled his notes and music from the stand to the floor by the bench, and played what little he remembered of Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 16 in C major, a piece he'd played in high school. What came out of the black baby grand now, though, were mistake-laden fragments, hardly recognizable.

As he struggled through the piece, he remembered (or at least tried to remember, since sometimes faces and names and thighs and nipples do become blurry in the memory,

like anything else) his favorite moments with various women, going all the way back to his high school and college days—against the brick wall of a movie theater in Ashers Fork in the middle of the night; in his old Volvo station wagon at a rest stop in West Virginia; in her parents’ master bedroom as her extended family counted down the New Year. The remembering never failed to conjure a confidence in him. A quiet comfort. A reminder that he had once been wanted, that he had always been wanted. That there would be more.

“In the village,” Keith said that night, squeezing a lemon wedge over his salmon and then, with his other hand, wafting the smell of the food into his nostrils, “we had no access to fish. I don’t think I saw a single fish, dead or alive, in two years.”

“Aaron,” Jeanie said quietly. Her eyes shot to the bowl of carrot ginger soup at the other end of the table. Aaron passed her the bowl.

Keith continued: “We ate what’s called paloo. Do you know what that is? Paloo?”

“I don’t know,” Aaron said.

“Raisins, garlic, hot peppers, rice. Throw it in a pot. Cook it for a few hours over a fire.” In dramatic fashion Keith smiled, closed his eyes, and nodded in approval at the imaginary flavors in his mouth. Then he sipped his chardonnay. “Really stellar. The Kyrgyz can cook.”

“Do you like your fish?” Jeanie asked.

“Of course,” he said. “I feel a little bit like an asshole, but, of course. I’m only adjusting. It’s like Christmas at our parents, when I came back last year? I told you about this feeling, Aaron. I forget what you were doing.”

“New Years party in Los Angeles,” Aaron said. “With some old musician friends.”

“It’s that I feel like an asshole, now, stuffing my face with this—how much was this?” He pointed to the thick slab of fish in the center of the table, decorated with spices, cilantro leaves, and slices of lemon and orange. “Thirty, forty dollars?”

“We can’t all live in poverty,” Aaron said.

“There’s the cocky kid I grew up with,” Keith said. He raised his glass and smiled, mock-cheerful.

“Don’t make me feel guilty for cooking you a nice dinner,” Aaron said.

“Us,” Jeanie said.

“What?” Aaron said.

“Don’t make *us* feel guilty,” Jeanie said. “We both cooked dinner.”

“Don’t be silly,” Keith said. “I’m appreciative. Of course I’m appreciative. I’m only adjusting.”

“He’s only adjusting,” Aaron said to Jeanie.

“Why do you have to be so sarcastic all the time? You’re a grown man,” Keith said.

“Tell us about something else,” Aaron said. “Was it dangerous?”

Keith surprised Aaron with loud, genuine laughter. “Some other evening, I’ll talk about the political state of things. The upheaval.” Keith looked down at his food. “I’ll just say that Kyrgyzstani PCVs have it especially rough.”

“I’m glad you’re back,” Jeanie said. She’d had four or five glasses of wine. Some pink was starting to show in her cheeks. She reached a hand across the table—she was sitting across from her husband, the salmon between them—and covered one of Keith’s thick hands with both of her small, slender ones.

“We were lucky to find bananas over there,” Keith said. “Lucky to find horse meat.”

“Yes, yes,” Jeanie said, suddenly flustered now, withdrawing her hands to her own lap. “You’ve seen the world. You’re better for it. We’ll have horse meat and cockroaches for dinner tomorrow.”

“Jeanie,” Aaron said.

“I’m only saying,” Keith said. He stared at the mostly eaten fish on his plate. He seemed to be somewhere else for a moment, back in Kyrgyzstan perhaps—listening to old sounds, smelling old smells, tasting old tastes he’d likely never hear or smell or taste again. A long moment passed before he said, “Oh, I don’t know what I’m saying,” then apologized, blamed the booze and jet lag for his rudeness, and stuffed more salmon in his mouth.

At home alone that night, memories that hadn’t come to Aaron in a long, long time surfaced as he tried to fall asleep in his empty house. The memories started off

intentionally, and fondly, and as a way to forget that Jeanie was probably having sex with Keith just then (wouldn't that be the normal thing to do, after all this time—wouldn't desire rush back to them in waves at the touch of each other's warm bodies after so long, everything new again?): Aaron showing Keith how to climb the backyard crab apple tree via the most efficient route. Playing hockey with roller blades on the linoleum-tiled kitchen at 3:00 AM while Tara, their younger sister, refereed. But then darker memories bubbled up as he grew closer to sleep. One summer in the yard, after Keith teased Aaron for pitching the baseball everywhere but over the plate, Aaron crushed Keith's knee with a metal bat, which put Keith in the hospital for a full day and caused permanent bone and nerve damage. Or the time in high school when, as a sort of prank he didn't realize wouldn't be funny until it was too late, Aaron woke up early to eat half the cake that Keith had stayed up late baking for his girlfriend for Valentine's day. And the look on Keith's face after these events, solemn and resigned, almost shocked to experience the kind of betrayal only a brother is capable of.

Aaron cried into the pillow on the left side, the side he never used. In that moment, he wished so much that Jeanie had never kissed him that night last winter, after they'd gotten dinner together and had too much wine and came home to watch a movie at Jeanie's place, some movie he'd never seen that she insisted every other person had seen already, and said, "Let me educate you." He wished she hadn't poured them both even more wine without asking him first if he wanted any, or turned all the lights off in the living room, or left the volume down so low he found himself paying no attention to the screen but to her incredible proximity to him on the couch. He wished her thigh hadn't

crept over his, that her body heat didn't radiate, that the hot of her breath didn't warm up his cheeks as she leaned in to say the most ridiculous line he'd ever heard, "I've wanted this since I first saw you." Yet despite the intensity of his regret, he also wished just as strongly that she was there with him, lying under the covers at that moment, to smile at him, put her warm hands on his cold neck, to laugh, say, "You always need warmed up." And as he'd done when he began to think of his own death, or worse, of Jeanie's or Keith's death, he reached through the darkness into his night table drawer for sleeping pills, which he tossed back with a drink of chardonnay that'd been sitting in a glass from two nights earlier, when Jeanie spent the night.

Both of them worked mostly from home, Aaron as a commercial music writer and Jeanie as an illustrator. It had been several years since either of them worked in an office. Admittedly, as Aaron said to her a few weeks ago when they were swimming naked in Aaron's backyard pool, he missed office life more than he thought he ever would.

"What's to miss?" she'd asked. She unlatched herself from his body to tread water.

"People."

"You hate people."

"I don't hate you."

"So you miss women."

"Okay. Fuck off."



He smiled a little as he cussed to show he was kidding, and Jeanie came back to him to show her accusation wasn't serious. She wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. Aaron pushed the water hard to keep them both afloat.

Of course he didn't just miss women. That was the last thing on his mind at that exact moment; cool water seeped into his mouth as Jeanie's weight slowly sank them both. What he'd meant was, he missed that hum of life that an office had. Even on an office's lowest, most gloomy days, there was always that hum. In the expansive, carpeted quiet of his own house, which often reminded him of Lauren, who'd chosen the place, or worse, in the old hardwood echo of Jeanie's, there was this hollowness. There was no noise, no life in either house, and their yelling, headboard-pounding fucks only made the big houses seem quieter, deader.

In the months leading up to Keith's return, she'd been asking him to spend the night regularly. So regularly, in fact, he'd almost moved into his brother's house. He kept several of his dress shirts, jackets, vests, ties, pairs of shoes, and an overcoat in his brother's closet. He'd even started stocking the fridge. The day before Keith came home, as Aaron put a piece of salmon in the freezer upon arriving—he'd walked straight from the grocery to Jeanie's that afternoon—he said aloud, "Why the hell are we freezing salmon in your house today?"

Jeanie shrugged and said, "The three of us can have dinner tomorrow, after he comes home. He loves salmon."

“Yes. That’s right, he does.” Aaron shut the freezer door. *Welcome back, brother. I’ve been licking and kissing and fucking your wife all over your furniture while you’ve been away.*

*Salmon?*

After the salmon dinner, nearly a week passed without so much as a text message before Jeanie called Aaron to ask if he’d like to go jogging around the neighborhood, as they often used to when the weather was warm.

By the time he arrived at Jeanie’s, it was just before sunset. Keith was away at a university talk, she said.

They took a slow pace. It was fall, and cold. Shriveled rotting pumpkins decorated a few porches. Leaves all shades of brown littered the sidewalks. Aaron’s breath billowed out in front of him like a cloud.

“We should keep this up, at least,” Jeanie said between steady breaths as they rounded the corner from Blackthorn onto Crabtree, where a public-access gazebo and wooden bench adorned the corner. Same route as always.

“What?”

“Keith hates running,” she said. “His knees, you know. And over there they got worse. He moans when he gets into bed. It’s not becoming.”

“He should still exercise,” Aaron said.

“Even your workout clothes look so good on you,” she said. He glanced at her. She was smiling. She added, “I won’t even ask how much those cost. You spend way too much on clothes.”

Mostly, they jogged without speaking. The houses in Jeanie’s part of the neighborhood were larger than in Aaron’s; hulking, unique mini-mansions, every architectural style on display.

Though they were showing affection even in some public places only a week before, they now kept a few inches between their swinging hands as they completed the jog with a warm-down walk. Instead of discussing that evening’s dinner plans, or what movies they hoped to see, or what position they might try next, they walked the last blocks to Jeanie’s in silence. And despite the cold, they walked slowly. They took the time to draw in each other’s smells. They listened to the crunching leaves, the songs of winter-hardy birds. Aaron noticed that his natural walking step was a shorter stride than hers.

Keith had bought the big yellow Spanish-style house nearly a decade before, just two years after Aaron had moved to Chicago himself—and of all things, it was Aaron’s idea that Keith move to the neighborhood, an idea that was nothing but good-natured at the time, based on their shared priority to preserve their childhood bond. And of course back then not a shred of a thought of Jeanie, at least not consciously: “We work in the same city, so we might as well live in the same suburb,” Aaron had said, “we’ll have burger grill-outs and watch Bears games together, yes?”

As they approached the house, Aaron recognized flaws he'd never seen before—yellow paint under the windows fading from its original vibrant shade, one of the second-story gutters bent and stuffed with muddy leaves, some stucco around the porch chipped and gray underneath—and it was possible, in this moment, that he had forgotten why he loved her. Or at least he found himself hoping he would forget. The cold air had made his sweat-soaked underarms frigid, and he thought now of little more than taking a hot shower. He wore a high-end workout polo and custom-fitted training pants. Jeanie wore a skin-tight athletic shirt that rose above her belly button when she lifted her arms.

After they stepped inside the foyer and closed the door behind them, she set her hands around his neck.

“We’re sweaty,” she said.

“I feel awful,” he said. “Clammy and cold, I mean.”

“Me too, baby.”

“I just want to take a quick shower, if that’s all right.” He said it before he realized she’d misunderstand.

“Sure,” she said, and she pulled him into the house. “Keith won’t be home til eight today, he called and said so.”

She shut the front door behind him and pulled off her athletic shirt, then bra, then hair tie; her hair fall around her shoulders as they walked upstairs to the master bathroom, where for much of the past two years she’d kept spare toiletries for him in a bag in the sink cabinet. That bag was sitting on Aaron’s night table at home now, untouched since the moment he set it down.

She turned on the hot water and let it steam the room. She pulled her pants and underwear off, then looked him over as he hesitantly removed his.

“I’ve always wondered something about you,” she said, her head tilting to one side, a thin little smile working its way up her cheeks. Those pool-clear eyes were clearer than ever, her makeup so subtle and perfect he could hardly tell she was wearing any. He could smell her, and if smells had colors, this smell was a faint pink, almost girly, almost pubescent. After a few seconds of letting him wonder what she wondered, she asked, “Why do you dress so fancy when you’ve got nowhere to go?”

## II.

Eight years later, on a snowy January evening the night before their dad’s funeral, Tara and Keith stood at their mother’s white painted upright piano as Aaron played jingles he’d written. The living room was filled with cousins, aunts, uncles, friends of the deceased, standing and chattering and holding wine and martini glasses. Aaron’s glass of cabernet rested atop the piano in much the same way he used to rest his glasses of apple juice on the piano when he was young, an act his mother always reprimanded him for, and one for which she would reprimand him for now, too, if she were in a different state of mind.

On the dining room table was an enormous variety of foods: grilled, barbecued, and smoked meats, cheeses and fruits, fresh and roasted vegetables, several homemade desserts. A bowl of punch made from champagne and gin and grapefruit juice, another lemon and soda punch for the kids. Aaron’s mother had been in the kitchen since before

dawn. She sat, now, in a lounge chair in the corner of the living room, holding a plate of carrots and ranch dressing in one hand, an empty rocks glass in the other. Her white hair frayed out against the green cloth chair. She was struggling to keep her eyes open between the occasional, "I'm so sorry for your loss," each of which the poor lady endured with all the grace she had left.

It was Aaron's father, a terrific piano player in his younger days, who'd pushed Aaron, the oldest, to take lessons in the first place. So it was only fitting, now, to play the piano his father stopped playing for the last decade of his life, to make music again in his childhood house. At least, this is what Tara told him. And he figured if he got his playing duties out of the way now, he'd find an easier time escaping the crowd with Jeanie. She'd been growing distant lately, turning down his invitations to come over or go out to dinner even when both of their houses were empty. They hadn't had sex in months. Earlier tonight, when in the bathroom, he sent her a text message saying, *I want to talk to you tonight*. She replied, while driving, *Focus on your family*. He shoved the phone in his pocket and re-entered the living room noise.

"Your father would be so proud," some older lady said to him between jingles. "He loved music very much."

Aaron couldn't think of anything polite to say to that. So he said:

"Maybe more than anything or anyone else." Which was a funny thing to say, he thought as soon as he said it. His father was perfectly affectionate. Gave hugs every visit, both incoming and outgoing. Asked questions about Aaron's life, even questions he'd lately been thinking must have been difficult questions for a father to ask, like: Do you

feel like you see enough of me and your mom? Or, later: Are you happy in your marriage, Aaron? And then again, as recently as last spring: Are you happy in your second marriage, Aaron?

Then Aaron announced he'd play the one from the paper towel commercial last year, which everyone loved.

When the lady stopped listening and left, Aaron asked Tara who the hell that was.

"One of dad's old law clerks," she said. "I think."

"An old lover?" Aaron asked.

Tara just glared at him.

"Where's Jeanie?" Aaron asked Keith, though of course, through their text updates, he knew she was in the car driving down from Chicago and was only twenty minutes away.

"Almost here," Keith said. "Too bad Beckie couldn't make it for this."

Beckie was Aaron's second wife. He'd met her at the recording studio about a year after Keith came home from the Corps. She was an intern just out of college, but he found her sweetness and honesty usually outweighed her childishness and broader world ignorance. And for the eleven months between the honeymoon in Napa and the day Piper was born, he and Jeanie hardly saw much of each other.

But something in Beckie changed almost instantly after she gave birth. She became a mother in every sense of the word, preoccupied to the smallest detail with Piper's diet, education, musical training. Piper was demanding. The constant crying was only part of it. After a couple months, when the crying didn't stop, he and Beckie started

to blame each other for it. You didn't feed her the mashed peaches like I told you, you didn't turn her over properly, you didn't put her diaper on right. It was a new kind of stress that Aaron felt he couldn't handle without Jeanie around, and he showed up drunk at Jeanie's one night when he knew Keith was visiting their parents after Dad's first heart attack. Aaron had told Beckie he was going for drinks with one of his bosses, which quickly became a common story.

"The girls are quite the handful," Aaron said. He shut the wooden lid over the keys. "And you know, of course, missing school is difficult this time of year. Where'd Zane go?"

"Probably making out with one of Tara's girls in a closet somewhere," Keith said, winking at Tara, who laughed. "And still, A," Keith continued, stroking his beard. "Sticking with each other in the toughest times, like right now. That's what brings couples together."

"Like when you went to the Peace Corps," Aaron said, sliding to the end of the bench and removing his music from the piano. He stood up. "Instead of sticking it out with Jeanie."

"Aaron, you asshole," Tara said.

"I've heard that one before," Aaron said.

"We don't need your shit," Tara said. "Not tonight." Tara left Aaron and Keith alone by the piano. She walked across the room, knelt by their mom, and put her arm on hers to wake her softly. Apparently Mom had fallen asleep and dropped her glass on the floor. There was a dark spot on the carpet where the ice had melted.



“Don’t worry about it,” Keith said, as if Aaron had made an apology. Keith sipped his wine. “You’re right.”

“You’re drunk.”

“I’m not.”

“You always get nice when you’re drunk.”

The two of them stood side by side now and reviewed the room. Aaron was glad for Keith’s maturity, even if he also resented it. If it weren’t for Keith, the family would never have a conversation for more than a few minutes without erupting into a fight. Keith had inherited Dad’s patience, Aaron his arrogance.

“I should never have gone,” Keith said, sipping again from his glass.

“To the corps?”

Keith nodded. He scratched his beard again, and exhaled audibly. Keith had unveiled the beard two Christmases ago—over the last few years, Aaron had made a point to attend the family Christmas in Ashers Fork—and Aaron thought it helped Keith look his age. The man was short, thin, and before the beard, awfully baby-faced. Jeanie used to poke fun at Keith’s appearance when she and Aaron were alone, including some wildly private and inappropriate jokes (“his little dick, I’m not kidding, is like, about as thin and long as this wine stopper”). Eventually Aaron grew accustomed to generating some Keith jokes of his own. In fact, Keith was a frequent target of their frustration about anything, often maliciously. Somehow it felt good to skewer his brother alongside another person without the usual repercussions involved when around more polite

company. For the last year or two, though, Jeanie stopped making those jokes, and Aaron did, too. Jeanie's invites became more about bringing the families together.

"We only live a few streets apart," Jeanie said once after mentioning gathering for dinner. "It's silly you don't see your brother more than you do."

"Silly," Aaron said. "I don't know if that's the word."

The doorbell rang, and Keith went to answer it. It was Jeanie.

It wasn't that she wasn't still pretty; she was, but the type of pretty had changed. She wore glasses now, thick rimmed. "Sophisticated urban," he'd told her when he first saw the glasses, and the line caused her to strike some modeling pose that made him laugh. Long, spiraling silver earrings touched her neck. And her hair, once dark gold, was now lighter, straw-colored, and streaked with new grays. She was forty-two years old, but looked and dressed like she was thirty-five, just as when she was thirty-five she looked in her twenties. Often she reminded Aaron that he'd had similar luck with appearances.

She leaned down slightly from her high heels to meet her husband's embrace. As she did, she located and made eye contact with Aaron from across the room. Aaron smiled; she didn't.

Keith went into the kitchen, probably to fix Jeanie a Campari and soda. This was her new drink. She'd moved on from chardonnay, just like that: one day she decided she simply didn't like the taste. "Too buttery."

Jeanie made her way through the crowded living room, saying hellos and hugging and kissing and fighting through the small talk like a professional, as always, ending up at Aaron's side. She gave him the one-armed hug she always gave him in public.

“Good to see you again,” Aaron nearly whispered. He drew in her smell and felt the instant desire to lie in a cushy bed with her, watch sleepy movies, and share a pot of hot tea.

She stepped away, creating a platonic personal space between them.

He said, “You smell nice.”

“I’m not wearing anything,” she said.

He blinked.

“Any perfume,” she said, and the edges of her mouth went up a little to form the beginning of a smile, then it faded.

Aaron took her wrist and walked backward, into the hallway where the bedrooms were, ignoring her quiet protests. He opened the first door they came to, Keith’s old bedroom. He flipped on the switch and shut the door behind them. The ceiling fan and light came on at the same time.

“We’re not doing this, Aaron,” she said. “Especially not in here.”

“I just want to talk.”

“Talking can wait. It’s so cold in here.”

“Remember when you hung up on that guy, from General Mills, who was responding to my demo tape?”

“What?”

“I was in the middle of fingering you—”

“Yes, I remember.”

“And I didn’t want to get the phone sticky—”

“Stop.”

“So as I was wiping my hands off on the blanket, you hung the phone up, and I was angry with you, but we—”

“I remember. What’s your point?”

“My point is, you owe me.”

She crossed her arms, then sat down on the queen guest bed that had replaced Keith’s twin after he left to Northwestern to study geology.

“What can I say?” Jeanie said.

Snow pattered against the window.

“Do you want to stop?”

She fixed her eyes on Keith’s old dresser. “I’ve wanted to stop for years. Haven’t you?”

A commotion from the living room. He thought he heard his mom’s voice ringing out above the rest. A speech? Wasn’t she passed out drunk just a minute ago?

“Do you realize,” she continued, “that I have no idea, not the slightest idea, how Keith might handle the burden of all my needs?”

“The burden is great.”

“Not funny. I’ve never asked him to carry the load. I’ve never needed him to do it. Because I’ve had you.”

“So everybody wins,” Aaron said. “Beckie would hate me if I had such impossible demands. I’d be a different person. She wouldn’t recognize me. It would drive us both crazy. This works, baby.”

“Never mind.”

A knock on the door. It was Keith—a new, full glass of cabernet in one hand, his wife’s Campari and soda in the other.

“Here you go.”

She accepted the drink and poured half of it into her mouth before dribbling a little on her chin.

“Hello, Keith,” Aaron said.

“Enjoying my old digs?” Before Aaron could answer, he pointed to the wall by the window, where there was a dent and the paint was chipped.

“Remember that?” Keith asked.

“Where you fell and hit your head.”

“Tara and I jumping on the bed, here. And I fell, there. You were doing some puppet show.”

“With those stuffed dinosaurs, remember those? I wonder in what attic those poor things are stuck.”

“And the ambulance came. Tara was crying and asking everyone, ‘Is Keith going to die?’”

“How could I forget?”

“Mom’s talking.”

The three of them left Keith’s room and entered the living room, where their Mom was standing on the coffee table.

“Jack would have loved to see all of you here,” she said, slurring a little. “You might not have seen his soft side. He wasn’t always loving all the time. But who is? To me, he was a great man. He was loving and good, much of the time, which is all you can ask a man to be.”

“She’s awfully drunk,” Jeanie said.

“Aren’t we all?” Keith asked.

“Yes,” Aaron said. He’d rarely seen his mom like this, but of course, it was understandable. Suddenly she was alone in the world. After this room emptied and everyone went to their bedrooms and nearby hotels for sleep, after the funeral and reception and drinks and video screening, the house she returned to would be, for the first time, hers alone. The quiet she was about to suffer Aaron believed he knew something about, and he recalled those many nights, weeks and months of nights, after Keith came home, before he’d met Beckie, how black and hollow and mocking the bedroom walls seemed without Jeanie’s voice in his ear. It was unfortunate his mother was too old, in her seventies now, to find a lover, someone who would make sure she never felt alone again.

“Want to get some air?” Keith said.

Aaron assumed Keith was talking to Jeanie. Then Keith hit him softly on the shoulder.

“A?”

“Keith?”

“Get some air with me?”

Keith's downward-pointing eyebrows indicated this was a serious request.

"Keith, it's what, five degrees outside?"

"Just for a minute. I can't take this room."

"Shouldn't you take Tara along?" Jeanie asked. "She never sees you two."

Keith pointed at Tara, who was clutching their mother's hand at the moment as she pushed through her speech, and shrugged his shoulders.

So they grabbed their coats and hats and left, going down the driveway, around a corner, to a sidewalk that led through the woods and to a pond where, in summer, as kids, they used to swim and throw pebbles at geese when the geese got too close. The pond was frozen over and covered with snow. Some kids had built a kind of snow fort on top of the ice.

On the way, they talked about their dad, his promises to their mom to stop smoking, his failure to keep his promises. Then the conversation shifted to other things. Marriage. The kids. Aaron realized he and Keith rarely spent alone time together, that conversations about their wives was feeling like unexplored territory.

"We don't talk often enough," Aaron said.

"It's my fault."

Aaron laughed. "You're definitely drunk."

"It is," Keith said. "I work too much. Jeanie does all the inviting. You still play racquetball?"

"Not at all. But I would," Aaron said.

"Maybe we could use my university gym."

“Let me know.”

They walked along the pond’s edge. Aaron was freezing. The sky was black save for a glowing gray circle around a dull white half-moon. How are you doing, Keith? He wanted to ask. How is your life going, really? But he didn’t ask, because the more the conversation continued, the more Jeanie might come up.

“Do you remember,” Keith said. “When we were both in high school, and we rode the bus together almost every day one week because that girlfriend of yours—”

“Rebecca.”

“Yeah, Rebecca, was sick with the flu that week. And you told me the definition of the word omnipotence,” he said. He nudged a block off the sidewalk with his foot.

“I don’t remember that.”

“No?”

“I really don’t.” He really didn’t. And although often he liked to demonstrate indifference or forgetfulness as a way of empowering himself in conversations, this time he actually yearned for the memory. He thought Keith’s kindness had earned this moment of recognition, and Aaron wanted badly to provide it, to collaborate, to enjoy the feel-good humor that comes from recalling the old times with another person. But it didn’t come.

“Regardless,” Keith continued, “you told me you felt sometimes like you were capable of anything. That you could do whatever you wanted. And I remember thinking, I could never be this way.”

“What way?”



“So confident.”

“Or delusional. Reckless. Stupid.”

“Yeah, well.”

“Take your pick.”

“At the time, I was impressed even with the idea of that kind of confidence.”

“I was too.”

“And for years that stuck with me. I remember thinking, in school that day, and actually for weeks following, about what true omnipotence would mean.”

“Yes?”

“Yeah. If you could do anything you wanted, what would you do with that power? What would I do with it?”

An owl hooted. They both stopped and glanced around to get a glimpse at it.

When they couldn't find it, they kept walking.

“Just consider that,” Keith kept on. “Absolute power. Move buildings, freeze time, visit foreign planets. Stop every bullet in the world, cure every illness. Or start a plague, tear your enemies into fleshy pieces. The world your plaything. An endless sandbox. Any idea transformed into an action, if you wanted. And everyone's fate would depend on who you are, you the omnipotent, what kind of person you are, if you're a destroyer, or neglectful. You could live life hedonistically, unabashedly. Or you could work hard—you could make the world a place without crime or poverty or even sadness. Do you see?”

Aaron watched his white breath dissolve into the darkness like salt in a pot of water. “I'm not sure I had a firm grasp on the term at the time, D.”

“Of course I understand that.”

“I was a jackass trying to be more than a jackass.”

“And what about now?”

Aaron said nothing. He looked into the cold dark.

“Well,” Keith said. Keith breathed a little heavy, a little fast. “That’s too bad.”

They finished the circle around the pond and headed back down the sidewalk for home. On the way, they passed their old elementary school playground. An old man in a ragged coat was sitting on a swing smoking a cigarette. The little orange light at the end of it was the only colored object in view. They kept walking, and Aaron wondered, if Keith were President of the Universe, how that man’s life might be different. Would he be dancing with naked women in a high rise apartment right now, instead of smoking in this cold, sad place? Carving a roast with a wife and kids? Would Keith outlaw smoking?

“Would you outlaw smoking?”

“What?”

“If you were in charge of the world.”

“Maybe,” Keith said. “I’m sure I’d rid other things first.”

“What’s worse than smoking?”

When Keith didn’t answer, Aaron looked at Keith’s face for a reaction. But the shadow from a wall of trees obscured Keith’s eyes and mouth and Aaron let the quiet consume them.

Their pace slowed as they entered the woods between the pond and the street. The pines cast a remarkable darkness on everything. There were no sounds. Aaron couldn’t

even see his own breath now. There were no lamps to illuminate the sidewalk until they got through the woods, which were several hundred feet deep at least, and for a moment Aaron wondered if Keith had led him here to murder him. Maybe Keith picked up a paring knife and stuffed it in his pants when he went to make Jeanie's drink.

"It was about five years ago," Keith said.

They stopped walking.

"You were stupid, really," Keith said. "I was in the hallway bathroom. I'd finished washing my hands. Sound carries far and wide in that house, you must know. With the hardwood."

There was no itch in his throat, but Aaron coughed to show he was there, listening.

"I heard you call her 'baby.' And then," Keith went on, apparently passing up the chance to hear Aaron's explanation—not that he had one prepared—"a few weeks later, I went into the bedroom while Jeanie was making dinner."

Keith paused for a long time. He spoke softly now, deliberately, as if every word might shatter if spoken too loudly or too quickly.

"And there was Jeanie's phone, on the bed. Just sitting there."

Here it came. The soundlessness between his words meant everything.

"And I stared at it, Aaron, hands in my pockets, for I don't even know how long, before picking it up. And you know, Aaron," Keith sighed. A quivering sigh. Was he crying? It was impossible to see. Aaron eyed the dark figure of his brother, tried to catch a shimmer of wet eyes in the moonlight, but found nothing looking back at him. An owl hoot broke the silence like a chainsaw.

Another a minute or two passed, and after it became clear Keith was done talking before he even began, Aaron let out a long, slow, silent breath. What could be said? Aaron began to shore up a defense, assemble an explanation. He began to point his weapons at Jeanie, to blame her as the aggressor, the one who started it all. The wine, the movie. "Let me educate you." It was her fault, brother. She came between us.

It was the only hand he had to play.

"I almost didn't look," Keith said. A whisper.

Aaron shifted in place. The snow crunched under his feet a little. He felt a strange kind of freedom, the same kind he felt at 26 when he was fired from that phone desk job at Benny's Musical Repair. A job he needed, but a job he hated. The secret joy of his last moments at work, after gathering his things. The heat in his face and behind his ears as he made the long walk out of the building. The embarrassment and sickness and excitement in his stomach, the uncertainty of the future. The glass doors at the end of the hall showing blue sky and bright buildings and sun-lit grass. It all rushed back to him.

He dropped his weapons.

"So," Aaron said. "No racquetball, then."

They walked back under the sound of shifting snow. He thought to explain himself. But Aaron was, indeed, now, more tired and weary than ever, and he decided to think about his crimes instead of divulge them. Obviously it was no use. Didn't matter that in those early days Keith was gone, she hiked her dress up to show Aaron her skin, or that she was the one who tore his clothes off almost every day for months at first, back when he was skeptical, scared, and not yet in love. Didn't matter. Every time he walked

or jogged or biked or drove those seventeen blocks to Jeanie's, every move he made toward that house, he was choosing Jeanie again and again. He was choosing to cut the wrong direction. Every second of every day for the last nine years.

The world was a big place, Aaron knew, and there were many ways to find other lovers, many sad and moping and beautiful women who need more than the simple spouse can give them, which is not shameful, Aaron thought; it's how some people are, and they can relate to him because he shares their sadness, their emptiness. Each person's heart is a compartment that needs to be filled, and it happens that some people's heart compartments are bigger, wider, more complicated than others. And if this was, in fact, what he needed, a woman to love him who wasn't his wife, and if what Jeanie said all the time about him was true, that he was handsome, witty, funny, good in bed, thoughtful, sometimes charming, sometimes sexy, why couldn't he find someone who wasn't his brother's wife? Maybe, though, his happy ending would be his finally knowing he can do it. Surely falling in with Jeanie, given the circumstances, was as difficult a challenge as there was. Perhaps it was his last great conquest. Or perhaps it was only his first.

## LOVEBUG

I'd been huffing model airplane glue for two years before I met Beef Gilbert, but he was the first person who made me feel stupid for it. The few friends I had couldn't be counted on to look out for me; they could hardly look out for themselves. Those poor teachers at Woodland Acres Middle had bigger messes to clean up. And Mama—she was clueless. Too busy watching *Golden Girls* or *The Price is Right* or *The Twilight Zone*—didn't matter what it was as long as it buzzed bright on that box of hers—and I couldn't blame her, because Pops died in a freak accident when I was four, and she was all alone with me. “Emma the Menace” she called me sometimes, and that's when she was in a good mood. This was another thing drew me and Beef together. His pops was dead, too.

By all accounts, Beef Gilbert was a maniac. He showed up at our school in August of 1987, and soon he became known as “the kid who cut that cow open.” Like, if you were to see him for the first time, from afar, you might nudge the person next to you and ask: “Hey—is that the kid who cut that cow open?” Hence the name: Beef.

Around school he roamed the halls alone. Ate lunch by himself at one of those corner tables by the stage where the lighting wasn't very good. He liked to remind people, loudly and half-grinning, that his mom worked at Wal-Mart, and that he lived in some trailer park south of Jacinto City. Word began to spread that you could get him to do almost anything if you paid him enough.

\*

It was my second detention I met him. Early September. The last of the stinky sweltering Texas summer poured in through broken window seals and cracks in concrete; the air conditioning couldn't keep up. During every lesson for those three long years—x and y and z axes, power paragraphs, Ulysses S. Grant—we were burning.

I was 14 and the only girl in detention that day. He was 15—he'd been held back a year at his old Houston school, I'd find out—tall for his age, slick blond hair, sweaty, and fat. We called those things man boobs or man cans or “chesticles.” His natural breath was a gargling wheeze. His too-big Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles t-shirt sagged off him. His square, thick-rimmed glasses were the kind you'd find on a 90-year-old man reading the paper.

He was surrounded by empty seats. The other kids huddled in the corners to sleep or draw or read comics. Beef was flipping through a porno mag. No effort to disguise the very naked woman on the cover. I glanced at our detention monitor Mr. Briggs, who was a young, nervous guy, and my guess is, being fresh fish, he didn't want to bother with this notorious big boy who may or may not have killed cows in his spare time.

If you asked me back then why I, a somewhat self-respecting girl standing on a fragile reputation built from hard-edged coolness and occasional witty jabs, sat next to Beef Gilbert that day, I would have shrugged and said I was bored out of my skull. Which wouldn't have been a lie—I thought, as eighth graders do, that I'd seen the whole world. And Mama was about as exciting as a sick old dog. But of course it was more than boredom. It was like that old cliché: not alone, but still lonely? I went to as many parties as the next girl—probably more than the next girl—but the parties and hallway gossip

and sneak-over sleepovers at Amber's (where we always invited boys over because Amber's parents were never ever home) weren't enough for me.

If Mama was the type of woman to take her daughter to a psychiatrist when things weren't going right, I have no doubt I would have failed all those tests. I may have seemed happy enough back then, especially at school, but on the inside, well; let's just say I never met a happy person to huff glue til they're dizzy and bleeding out the nose.

"Heard you cut up a cow or something, over the summer," I said. "Why'd you do it?"

He put down his porno mag and glared at me. I saw under the desk he had a little hard-on. He wore dirty gray sweatpants.

"Me and that cow had a political disagreement," he said matter-of-fact.

I laughed. Then he laughed.

"Poor cow," I said, joking now. "Was it still alive when you did it?"

"Check this out," he said. He flipped the magazine around so I could see. On the page was a naked Asian woman on all fours.

"I see the appeal," I said.

"I doubt it," he said. "They even got smut in the burbs?"

"The burbs? I'm not some rich girl." I said. "Anyway we're inside city limits." I thought about my bedroom the size of a janitor's closet. Mama's rusty Cavalier I could hear coming three blocks away. Frozen corn dogs, frozen fish sticks, canned noodle soup—our dinner rotation. Bedroom air conditioner that rattled and buzzed all night.



But I was flattered. All any 14-year-old girl stuck wearing off-brand clothes and cheap hand-me-down jewelry can hope for is that their sweet style and perfect makeup fool some kids into thinking she doesn't live in a run-down duplex.

Flatly, quickly, as if he'd said it before, he said: "Yeah, you're not rich, and I'm not a lard ass."

I don't know what it was like at other schools, but at Woodland Acres, teachers used detention on kids the same way I now use duct tape to fix broken stuff around the apartment. Skipped a class? Detention. Late to school? Detention. Broke into a locker, tore down a poster, stole a kid's pack of gum? Detention. Made fun of or disagreed with a teacher? Hit a girl, kissed a boy, spit a spitball, made a paper airplane out of a math test? Brought booze or weed or a the wrong kind of glue to school? Didn't stand up during the Pledge of Allegiance? Detention. Hell, if your parents called enough times to whine about your grades, you could go to detention for getting a D. Which meant some kids, God bless them, got detention just for being dumb.

With Beef and all his strangeness waiting for me, detention became something I looked forward to. Like the bell ringing at 3:15 every day, I could count on him being in that room when I got there. Same porno mag, same circle of empty chairs around him, the other kids keeping clear of his body odor.

"What're you in for?" we started to ask each other, like new cellmates.

And he'd tell me the story, usually something like, "I threw my apple core at Miss Gracie. Kevin Bishop gave me fifty cents to do it."

And when he asked what I was in for, I'd say, "Same as always."

And he'd shake his head and say, "Stuff'll fry your brain," followed by, "Check out these titties."

And I'd say, "You know I see titties every day. In the mirror."

And he'd peer down at my chest, and when Mr. Briggs wasn't looking I'd pull my shirt up to my collarbone, just for half a second, to show them off.

More or less, this became our routine.

One afternoon in detention, I made Crucial Mistake Number 1: I wrote Beef a note. Mr. Briggs had silenced our conversation with an urgent, pleading glance, and in the new silence, all I had was my notebook. Usually I would have drawn some crazy thing—a dragon with broken wings, an upside-down truck on fire—but that afternoon I was feeling communicative.

I wanted to think it was harmless. I wrote down some jokes about Mr. Briggs. Scratched some doodles of Mr. Briggs with various classroom objects up his asshole. I added, as a P.S., a suggestion that if Beef were to wear some clothes that fit him, clothes that maybe had been washed recently, he might look better. Not good, not *handsome*. Just better.

I passed it to him, and he gave me exactly the look I thought he would: anxious, embarrassed, confused. He seemed more shocked by receiving a piece of paper from me

than by my bra flashes. And as he stuffed my neatly folded note into his sweatpants pocket to save for later, he asked, “Are you going to the Halloween dance?”

“No way in hell,” I said, meaning, No way in hell I’m going with you.

“Me neither,” he said.

But I didn’t bother to tell him I was planning to go with a tall boy from my English class named Alfredo, who was from San Antonio, who said corny shit like, “You’ve got a great *Emmagination*,” whose eyes were starry green, whose hands were that perfect blend of soft but firm on my hip in the lingering moment after a goodbye hug in the hall when he didn’t want to let go just yet. In fact, instead of saying anything, I smiled. And I continued to write Beef little notes, and to receive little notes from him. When he started calling me Lovebug—never in person, only on paper—I returned the affection.

“Dear Lovebug,” we’d start off.

His drawings were faceless stick figures with enormous penises, or terribly drawn motorcycles, or symbols of sports teams. Sometimes he’d draw abstractions, lines and curves and dark spots that had me searching for some deeper meaning. His letters were short and disjointed. I still have a few of them, in an old box somewhere.

*Dear Lovebug, one of his letters said. I ate like no food this week and am still fat. The universe is unfair. Please stop sniffing glue. It’s gross. One of these days you got to tell me how your dad died.*

That was it. No sign off.

\*

I was 12 years old when my neighbor and best friend Mia drove me to the hobby store to buy me my first tube. She was in high school. The tube felt weird in my hand, hard like a rock, only I could push the sides in a little. Testors brand. “Works the fastest,” Mia said. That same summer she showed me how to stuff tissues into my bra so it didn’t look lumpy and how to cut little slits into my jeans just below the underwear line. “You bad little tease,” she said when I put the jeans back on.

Even apart from the glue, Mia almost single-handedly accelerated my childhood. I spent so much time with her I lost touch with any other close girl friends I had. After I started using eyeliner and my bra size went up a letter, Mia took me to high school parties and introduced me to boys. A week before my fourteenth birthday was the first night I got drunk and was also the night I lost my virginity to a boy named Luis, about whom I don’t remember much except that his parents were illegals working for a landscaping company, that he seemed just as scared and nervous as I was as we took our clothes off in someone else’s parent’s bedroom, and that he had a jaw line like Harrison Ford’s. I’d see him in the weeks after, here and there, at parties, and then never saw him again.

Parties took over my life. There were at least three or four of them a week. We’d go to all sorts of places. Some kid’s house, an empty barn, the woods, a playground. If we were outside we’d scrape together some junk—fallen branches, someone’s shirt, paper and cardboard and old food from trash bins—and we’d douse the heap in lighter fluid and burn it. We’d dance and talk and take shots of whatever someone brought. Once we roasted marshmallows over a burning bike tire and laughed when no one could eat one

without gagging. And when Mia and I would drive home, usually to my place since Mama never told us to keep the music down or knocked on the door to check on us like her mama did, we'd huff Testors, and draw each other as ice queens or professional tennis players with those mini skirts or demon ladies with horns coming out our ears, and then we'd lie in my bed with the lights off, describing our dreams from the night before and sharing our latest boy stories, hiding some details, exaggerating others, until we'd fall asleep.

It was May of my year of 14, the spring before I met Beef, that Mia's mama came by the house to tell us Mia had gone to Detroit to live with a man named Kevin. "I've never even met him," Mia's Mama said, shaking her head, her eyes scanning every inch of our kitchen table like she was on speed or something.

Mia called me three times that summer: first to tell me all about her new life (she'd been sober for a solid month, she and Kevin were engaged, and she never knew she could be this happy), second to tell me he'd called the engagement off and that she was working at a bike shop, and third to tell me she was never coming back to Texas for as long as she lived.

At school I huffed straight from the tube. But at home I used the bag. To get the best high, as Mia showed me, you squeeze half an inch into the bottom. Place the bag over your mouth and nose. Inhale, exhale. Repeat, repeat, repeat, each breath deeper than the last, and soon you're riding an escalator up a grassy, flowery hill, above the clouds,

and if you're lucky, it'll be sunny up there, and if you're luckier still, you'll meet Jesus Christ. Boredom was never so beautiful.

Beautiful for about twenty good minutes anyway, and then I sometimes found myself in the bathroom wiping my bloody nose with toilet paper. Those bloody noses hit me more and more, and eventually, after I'd make the switch to paint thinner in high school, they'd get so bad it was like my brains were falling out of my nose in bloody chunks.

Woodland Acres knew it had a drug problem. The teachers searched our backpacks two or three times a month, which meant I got caught two or three times a month. Once, I tried storing the tube in a bathroom. But Mrs. Hooper, the vice principal, walked in just as I removed the tube from between two broken wall tiles.

"Okay, Emma," Mrs. Hooper said, faint exhaustion in her voice. "Detention."

After awhile I started looking for Beef in the halls between classes. One time, I stopped by his locker and asked him about the pictures taped to his door. Mostly cutouts of women in bikinis. A few photos of his Rottweiler.

"His name's Ass Wipe," Beef told me.

"That's fitting," I said. "He looks like shit."

"And this one's my dead dad." He pointed to a young-looking, physically fit bald man wearing a collared shirt, clean white dress pants, and shiny dress shoes. He was sitting in a rocking chair, smiling at the camera.

"How'd he die?" I asked.

“Overdose,” Beef said, laughing and wheezing, then coughing. He looked at the photo and pressed his index finger against his dad’s head. “Yeah. He was a dumb bastard.”

My youth—not that it’s over, I’m only 20, working retail at a strip mall between semesters at the University of Houston, so maybe I should say my teens?—my teens contained a variety of approaches to dress. This particular year I’m discussing now, the year of 14, I wore a lot of pink. Pink fingernails, pink t-shirts, pink bobby pins, pink shorts. I even owned a pink watch. I didn’t wear all this at once, of course. Tasteful pink.

I understood Beef’s lines about my dress as failed attempts at flattery. “Your highlighter shorts are blinding me,” he’d say, or “My little cousin has a Barbie in that same outfit.” He’d gurgle and wheeze and laugh at his own joke, and I’d roll my eyes.

But as days and weeks went by, and he wouldn’t shut up about my clothes, I let him know about it. Whenever his jokes weren’t funny, or went too far, or both—“I bet you got a whole dresser full of pretty pink panties,” for instance—I’d make a point, in front of whoever was watching, to demean him.

I’d say, loudly enough for a few bystanders to hear, “Give you two bucks to fall down these stairs,” or “Give you a buck fifty to slap Mr. Briggs in the ass,” or “How about you full-on sprint to each of your classes today, Beef. A quarter per class.”

And he’d do it. Every time. Didn’t matter how many people were around to laugh at him, or how much detention it landed him, or how bad his coughing got afterward. He always took the money up front. Mostly he smiled about it, that dorky sad smile behind those gigantic glasses. The kid was a walking cartoon character and he knew it. A clown

out of a slapstick. Mostly everyone seemed amused by his act, but I was not. I was never amused, even when I gave the orders.

I was ashamed, for one. In retrospect I'm sure other kids were too. And I'm sure they covered their shame by laughing with the rest. But I couldn't do even that.

It's possible, I guess, that in a strange sort of way, I was falling for the guy. But if I was falling for him, why did I participate? Why did I buy tickets to a show I didn't want to watch? Maybe it was simple: I liked my first taste of cruelty. Kids often do. Maybe I liked the sound of my voice bossing someone around for a change. Maybe I found that new power addictive after how I'd lived my life—I'm thinking about Mama so TV-obsessed and cold toward every concern of mine, Mia leading me around teenager-packed houses like I was her little sister, teachers handing me down punishment after punishment for huffing, like I was some toddler who didn't know the difference between smart and stupid decisions—yeah, maybe I was starved for it. And in his eagerness to please me, in his pathetic-seeming, trailer-park existence, he fed me what I was hungry for.

But then again, maybe it wasn't so simple.

Last summer I broke up with this kid, Ryan—athletic and tall and dumb, my usual type, the opposite of Beef in every way—after we'd been through three months of the same old shit: me doing homework on my bed in my dorm, him watching ESPN or playing some shoot-em-up video game (“Is the volume up too loud babe? Oh damn, babe look, I just decapitated this mother fucker”). And when I told him it was over and he



cried, tears streaming down his stubble, and begged me, several times, to change my mind—probably the most endearing he’d been to me—I got these intense feelings of déjà vu. And a night or two later, I realized Ryan had reminded me of Beef, and how pathetic Beef had seemed as I stood at the top of that front staircase at Woodland Acres, watching him reach out his arm to stop his fall at the bottom of the stairs. And how guilty I’d felt knowing I’d paid him to do it. But no, it wasn’t just guilt—I was disgusted with myself, yes, for what I’d done, but also for knowing I cared. For getting that sick, stabbing pain in my own gut—like the one you feel after your crush says he’s not into you—after Beef would tell one of his hurtful jokes: “You look like a cake with skin-colored icing today Lovebug—nobody should ever wear that much makeup.” Disgusted that, after a long day of shit grades and of nasty looks from teachers when I didn’t turn in my homework and of throbbing glue headaches, sometimes all I wanted was detention, his big dorky eyes stuck on me, and that sweaty scribbled note that always made me crack a stubborn smile.

Tuesday after Labor Day, Mama called the front office to tell them she’d be late picking me up. Supposedly she had a job interview, but I figured she was at happy hour with Mia’s mama. They still went out from time to time.

I sat on one of those concrete benches overlooking the school’s brown front lawn to wait. I pulled out my notepad and drew gargoyles and princesses. Thirty minutes later, when detention got out, Beef walked through the glass doors and sat next to me.

“You got any pot?” I asked. “I been thinking about trying pot.”

“You know I don’t do any of that shit,” he said. He shook his head for emphasis. Something wasn’t right; he didn’t look at me, and the sides of his face were red. Maybe he’d been crying.

“What’s wrong, Beef?”

He shook his head again.

We sat. An airplane ripped the sky open. Someone far away pumped some life into a lawnmower.

“When I first heard about you I thought you’d be some tough guy,” I said. “Some brute. With a name like Beef. Killed a cow. But I bet you’ve never even seen a cow in your life.”

No response. An ice cream truck’s jingle. Chirping birds. You could mistake the school behind us for a long-abandoned office building if you passed by in late afternoon, but if you closed your eyes on that bench, you could imagine you were sitting in some cute little park somewhere.

“What’s going on?” I asked again.

“Just some assholes being assholes,” he said. “Like always.”

“You gonna beat them up?”

“Shut up, Emma.”

“I bet you never hurt anything ever.”

“How much?” he asked.

I looked at him.

“How much you want to bet I’ve never hurt a thing?”

This question should have concerned me. Instead, I replied, “How’s a cool million sound?”

“For real,” he said. He was wheezing again.

“You should like, see a doctor about that chest problem you got,” I said. “Because that shit ain’t normal.”

“How much?” he asked.

“A buck,” I said. “Show me what you got.”

We went behind the school and into the woods, down a long hill on a foot-worn pathway, over a rail-less wooden bridge to cross a creek littered with beer cans and cigarette butts and candy wrappers. I’d never been back here before. After twenty minutes, the woods opened up into a green-yellow pasture, a few sun rays spotlighting certain circles of the place, including, in the distance, an old blue farm house and its grey barn, and just beyond the barn was the highway coming into the city.

Beef grabbed ahold of the low wooden fence in front of us. Just a few feet down from us, like a joke, was a “No Trespassing” sign, accompanied by a bigger, hand-written sign that read, “I Will Shoot You.”

“Seems taller than it was before,” Beef said, running his hand along the fence. He lifted a heavy pale leg over the wood, made a grunting noise, and clumsily landed on the other side.

Then I climbed over. He watched me.

“Even I’ve got more grace than you,” he said.

I followed him away from the house and down near an algae-covered pond.  
Mosquitoes swarmed.

“Here it is,” he said, pointing down at our feet.

It was so much a part of the earth it was hardly noticeable. But yes indeed, there was a dead cow, or a pile of dried-up cow parts I should say, and in fact not recognizable as a cow at all, really, except I knew what I was looking for. There were no flies because the flesh was gone. Just a few bones, dead grass, and a big dark-colored spot on the ground where it must have spent its last hours bleeding out.

“Tell me the truth, Beef,” I said. “You did this?”

“Fuck yeah, I did,” he said. “I’m a murderous cow-killing machine.”

“A true psychopath,” I said.

“A raging psychopath,” he corrected.

“Twenty bucks says you found this cow dead of natural causes.”

He kicked the small pile of fragile bones. Dirt and bone fragments everywhere. The mosquitoes were giving us both hell, and he swatted at them wildly, like each bite was a surprise. He looked ridiculous.

Then he grabbed my wrist hard and he pulled me away from the bones, led me back to the fence. My wrist started to hurt and my fingers were going numb so I yanked my arm away. Through the woods we walked without speaking. The crunching leaves. His labored breathing.

When we got back, Mama’s brown station wagon was waiting for me.

“Want Mama to give you a ride home?” I asked him.

But he ignored me. He sat on the bench, took his glasses off, and set his chin in his hands as we drove away and left him there to wait for whoever.

At home, during that year of 14, I spent most of my time in my room. I listened to Blondie and The Clash. I drew two-headed unicorns and tornados uprooting neighborhoods and man-eating plants. I threw darts at an old dartboard I'd found in a Pizza Hut trash bin, back when Mia and me were wandering around town looking for stuff to do.

And I'd talk to Beef on the phone. He was sometimes funny, sometimes stupid, sometimes sweet. But always surprising.

I'd ask, "What are you doing right now?"

And he'd say, "Taking a dump," or "Training for the Olympics," or "Waiting for you to come over one of these days so I don't have to play checkers by myself anymore."

One late night, well after Mama'd gone to bed, I told him how my dad died in a factory fire, and that I hardly had any memory of him, just a flash here or there from some tiny corner of my brain, his image fading as fast as he'd shown himself.

Beef asked, "Was your dad nice to your Mom?" I didn't know the answer, but I lied and said, "No. He beat her. He was a tyrant. How else to explain Mama's zombie-like qualities?" And then I admitted to him that I didn't hate the idea of the Halloween dance, that I was sort of fascinated by the idea of everyone I knew hiding behind strange clothes and wigs and flimsy masks, and that I'd planned on going with Alfredo, but Alfredo had apparently forgotten or changed his mind and asked out this other girl Lara,

and Beef said, “Lara Mullins?” and I said “That’s the one,” and Beef said, “What’s he thinking? She’s got more acne than you and me combined.”

The last week of October, Principal O’Donnell announced over the P.A. that our teachers would now be checking bags daily for drugs and alcohol. And the next morning, I found an orange note on my locker informing me that, as a previous offender, my locker would now be subject to random searches.

So I did the only thing I knew to do. I asked Beef to hide the Testors in his locker for me.

“Only until they cut this out,” I said.

“How much?” he said.

“Man, I’m broke. I don’t make an allowance. Sometimes I steal change from Mama’s change bowl when she’s watching TV. I can’t pay for everything all the time.”

This was a lie, by the way—Mama left me \$20 a week. At the time I had no idea where this money came from, nor did I care. I just cared that it was there. Turns out it came out of Pop’s life insurance.

“You got some kind of rash,” Beef said. He brought his finger within an inch of my cheek, and without touching me, he swept his finger across my upper lip.

Crucial Mistake Number 2 shot out of me suddenly, an impulse:

“I’ll go to the Halloween dance with you,” I said.

“Did you hear me?” he said, pointing at my head and making little circles with his index finger. “You’re screwing with perfection here.”

“Beef, you going to help me or what?”

I remember this exchange well. We stared at each other for a long time. Other kids passed by, nothing but blurry background noise. I could tell he loved me, or the middle school version of loved me. He was helpless to it.

“Okay,” he said. “Hope you break dance. Cause I’m a champ.”

I covertly handed him the tube and elbowed him in the side. “Can’t wait to see that,” I said. I winked. He stopped me as I was about to leave and handed me a sweaty folded-up piece of lined paper.

“Don’t forget your mail,” he said.

This note was different. It started off, in all caps, “THE TRUTH,” and it was a full three paragraphs long. I still have this one, too, though I remember I almost threw it away that same day, repulsed or scared or both:

#### *THE TRUTH*

*Dear Lovebug,*

*I didn’t do it on purpose. I mean kill that cow. It happened the day after fourth of July. After summer school. Nate and Chad and them from the burbs out on Crystalwood were there. First they asked me if I was up for something crazy. I said hell yes. We went to the woods by the creek. I thought we’d steal some elementary school kid’s book bags. Maybe push some kids into the water. Or check for still good fireworks on the ground. I don’t know. But then they pulled out some pills and a container with some liquid. Looked like water but it wasn’t. And a syringe and a towel and shit. I was like what the fuck. They did it to themselves. I should have run away obviously. But they pinned me. They sat on*

*my hands so they could get the needle in my arm. I have no idea what shit they put in my mouth.*

*I don't remember too well what happened after. We all had something sharp in our hands. Nate had a hatchet or some shit. Chad gave me his pocket knife. That one with all those thingies. Screwdriver, nail file, like that. Maybe you've seen it around. He brings it to school all the time. Anyway we were looking for something to stab. We came up on that pond. There were a bunch of cows drinking.*

*They told me I went berserk. They told me I stabbed that cow and sliced inside of it, like slicing a loaf of bread. And they must be right. Because when I woke up in the middle of the night alone I was lying next to it and covered in its cow guts. Which by then were cold and sticky and dry and I was freezing.*

*Fuckin A right? You asked.*

That night on the phone he resisted my questions.

“It's all in the note,” he said.

Instead, he wanted to talk about the dance. He said things like, “I'm going to bring a bag of sugar in case they play Pour Some Sugar on Me,” and “I bet you've slow danced with like a hundred guys.”

“I usually cut out halfway through,” I said. And I told him I'd pictured the two of us talking in a corner, not dancing at all, and leaving early, maybe heading back to my room to listen to music and draw and talk, like Mia and me used to do.

“Your mama won't mind?”



“Have you been listening to anything I’ve ever told you? Mama doesn’t mind anything.”

“Okay, but we gotta slow dance once,” he said. “Number one hundred and one, here I come.”

I don’t think he meant for it to be, but his cow-confession letter was the last one he gave me. That’s because my glue was only in Beef’s locker for a couple days. In Algebra one morning, the P.A. cackled on again, and Principal O’Donnell’s voice informed us that the school was on lockdown for the next hour while drug-sniffing dogs roamed the halls. And so they found my precious glue.

The list of names they called down to Mrs. O’Donnell’s office was thirty-some long. Mine was not on the list.

“Dennis Gilbert,” however, was.

Yesterday, near my campus in downtown Houston, I watched an old man on the other side of the street get mugged in broad daylight. The old man hardly said a word, just a grunt here or there as the stronger, faster, younger man tore the wallet and phone from the old man’s jeans and ran. And this poor old guy, who didn’t appear well-to-do in the least, just slumped against the nearby brick building and cried.

It wasn’t until I walked on to my car, leaving the man alone with his new trauma, that Beef flashed into my head like a dream. That’s not to say I don’t think about Beef regularly—what happened at the Halloween dance became its own kind of legend at the

school, and even since, it's been one of my go-to stories to tell at parties—but this time I got a particular image in my head. As I was walking away from the old man, I remembered a time when Beef and I were waiting for our rides outside Woodland Acres, and they were late as usual, so we decided to walk around the nearby neighborhoods. And we passed one of my old friend's houses, a shabby little one-story, and I said, "This is Amber Pierce's house. I used to come here for sleepovers," and he said, "Really?" and thinking he was incredulous that I was once friends with religious, goodie-goodie Amber Pierce, I said, "This was before I was introduced to the magic of glue, or boys," and he said, "You're so lucky." I looked at him, and he was staring at the house and its yard in the same way I must have stared at Cal's Lexus the first time I saw it. I laughed, and we walked on. I'd thought nothing of it. He was just Beef being Beef, the boy who said and did strange things for no apparent reason. At least no reason I cared to recognize.

Because he hid my glue, Beef was suspended for a week. So: no school-related activities for him, which meant no Halloween dance. And sure, I was mopey about missing the chance to see Beef dancing to "Addicted to Love," and about not having him over to my room. We would have had some healthy fun, drinking Mama's booze and drawing stupid shit and listening to our favorite songs and maybe sleeping in the same bed—nothing more, just friends, you know—why not? Probably he would have had the night of his life.

But regret isn't what I felt first—the *first* feeling was relief. And that's because I wasn't thinking of Beef as someone to admire. Who was smack in the middle of a long, slow climb out of a family of junkies. Who, when he went home to his trailer park, had to

pretend not to be the smartest guy in the room so he didn't get called queer or beat up. Nope, I wasn't thinking about Beef as a lovely man in the making, but instead as the fat smelly kid whose company I inexplicably loved and who I'd soon dispose of, because, well, let's face it. He embarrassed me.

I bet, right now, he's getting a degree in theater. Acting, or maybe directing. And he's the glue who keeps his friend circle together, the guy who makes sharp-witted toasts at those pretentious theater-kid parties where the only thing to drink is wine. And he always says the funniest, truest things.

I bet I wasn't the last. I bet people still can't resist him.

Of course I'd like to say that I insisted he come. I'd like to say I told him, Hey, I'll help sneak you in, you should wear a masked costume to keep the chaperones from recognizing you, I owe you this dance because you took a bullet for me.

But I didn't say any of those things. Instead, over the phone, I said, "Yeah, it's a bummer. It's a real bummer."

When I hung up the phone and went downstairs and sat across the table from Mama, I didn't bother complaining about the cheap food. I was thinking about Beef. I imagined him at home, playing checkers by himself in a dingy, dinky trailer, jerking off to me and then crying a little bit about it.

And I wasn't so upset that I didn't commit I guess what could be considered my final and most Crucial mistake, Mistake Number 3: I went and got a date with this track guy, Cal, who was in my P.E. class, who liked to call me "Em," and who was always

brushing my hair out of my eyes even though I liked it in my eyes, and who drove his new Lexus to school every morning. I dressed up as a fluffy pink Gremlin—yes, fluffy pink Gremlin costumes were available back then, if you knew where to look—and Cal was some kind of police officer.

The dance was in our cafeteria. My fluffy costume was too hot, so after a few minutes, I took the top part off and danced in my white tank. Cal was an awful dancer, but then again I guess he was only a kid. Funny how when I remember Cal's face, it's an adult's face. In my year of 14, sometimes, 14 felt as old as it would get.

Beef showed up wearing a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles costume. I hardly had time to separate my mouth from Cal's during a slow dance once I saw, out of the corner of my eye, that he was there. He was standing by the food table maybe 20 feet away, where there was fruit punch, little pudding cups, cookies, and fruit salad.

It's not like I hadn't envisioned this scenario. But in my head, it always ended peacefully. Beef would cry, or Beef would beg me to dance with him and I would, eventually, concede, or Beef would storm out and never speak to me again.

But instead, Beef started things off by yelling something inaudible over Foreigner's, "I Wanna Know What Love Is." Then he picked up a pudding cup, peeled off the lid, and threw it at us. But it missed, and instead hit Vanessa Collins, who was dressed beautifully as Ariel from "The Little Mermaid" that night, and who was the girlfriend of some gangly kid named Jason, dressed, I think, if I remember right, also as a

police officer. Jason went over to the table and yelled at Beef. Beef seemed to be apologizing.

I let go of Cal.

“Want me to do something?” Cal asked.

I ignored him and walked over to the table.

“Hi, Beef,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. Then he picked up another pudding cup, opened it, and threw it at Cal. This time it hit. The brown explosion covered his blue uniform and badge and parts of his cheeks.

“Fucker,” Beef said.

Cal ran toward the table and splashed some punch onto Beef. This food fight became a fist fight, which became, after what seemed just a few seconds, Cal picking up a fork from the table and sticking it into Beef’s eye. Beef screamed, and so did most everyone else.

“You’re insane,” someone said to Cal.

Mrs. Dawson, my American history teacher and on chaperone duty that night, tackled Cal, dragged him into the principal’s office, and called the police. And of course it was poor Mr. Briggs, new science teacher and detention monitor, also on chaperone duty that night, who knelt by Beef as we waited for the ambulance. Mr. Briggs kept yelling at us to bring him more napkins to help soak up the blood. Some kid was yelling “Take the fork out!” but Mr. Briggs insisted he’d read somewhere that you weren’t

supposed to take the fork out in this kind of situation. I wondered if I should go home or hold Beef's hand, but I did neither. I stood from about 10 feet away and just watched.

After a few minutes, the EMTs showed and swept Beef away.

The next day during lunch I heard someone say, "Lucky the cafeteria carpet's red." But even after they got it all cleaned up, you could still see the dark spot where he'd been, big as a watermelon.

A week later he came back.

"Fat pirate bastard," kids called him.

"Ahoy!" Beef would reply, too loudly.

"Doesn't that thing itch?" kids asked.

"Not as much as my ass crack," he'd say.

"Lemme see it," kids said.

And he'd lift the patch to reveal a mess of purple and black flesh. "Give me a dollar," Beef would say, "and I'll let you touch it."

So Beef lost an eye and gained a brand new freak-show following, which I wondered at the time if he felt was a fair exchange. And now, when I notice some hefty guy wearing an eye patch on the street or in a restaurant or at the mall, and when I do my double-take to check if maybe it's my old friend Beef Gilbert, that's the question I get ready to ask: What was like, having only one eye—you seemed to love it, but did you secretly love it? Meaning, in a way: Did you secretly wish you'd never met me?

He stopped by my locker one day and said, “I got 16 bucks today just for letting everyone put their fingers in my eye socket.” He smiled a wide smile at me. “Some people are just disgusting, don’t you think, Lovebug?”

At that moment, a tube of Testors was strapped to my hip, tucked into the side of my underwear. This underwear method became a habit of mine, something I did for years to avoid the dogs and backpack searches—at first with Testors tubes, then later with little tins of paint thinner—right up until the day my junior year I found myself waking up in the ER with dried-up streams of nose blood caked onto my cheeks, ears, neck.

I didn’t disagree with him. I just turned away.