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The characters who inhabit *Bookeater and Other Love Stories* have little in common with each other. Their stories are not interconnected. However, they do share an almost overwhelming desire to connect, to unite with someone—or something—in order to stave off loneliness. These stories explore the ways in which desire inevitably inspires selfish and destructive behavior. These characters are willing to lie, cheat, steal, and (almost) kill in their desperate attempts to win and keep the people—and objects—they love.

BOOKEATER AND OTHER LOVE STORIES

by

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BELIEVE ME

I don't know why I say some of the stuff I say. A week ago Kenny noticed a thin, red scratch under Pammy's eye, and I heard myself say her teacher at the daycare did it. Now, I know Pammy's teacher. The kids call her Miss Nell, and she's good with them. I knew for a fact she had nothing to do with that scratch because Pammy gave it to herself while she was playing with a plastic fork.

But I said what I said, and Kenny had to storm the daycare on his lunch break the very next day. He brought me with him, and I watched Miss Nell's face twitch while Kenny told her she had better keep her goddamn hands off his baby. Her voice broke when she assured him she would be more careful in the future. When I picked up Pammy later that afternoon, I explained, "He gets these ideas in his head, and no amount of—I'm so sorry. I think he wants me to be a stay-at-home mother, and he just—I'm sorry. Kenny has a history of—" I lowered my voice, "mental instability." But even after I fixed it, I still couldn't look Miss Nell in the eye.

I know better, but I say things without thinking. I started lying to Kenny before things went bad, before he could get angry enough to throw a lamp in my direction. When we were first dating, I told Kenny my birthday was in October. We sat in a deli, and he flipped through his planner, marking the days when he had to work. I touched the back of his hand before he could turn past October. I pointed to the block with the 28 in it. "That's my birthday."

He smiled. “Oh, for real? That’s next week.” He clasped my hand. He didn’t notice the brown and peach-colored pattern our fingers made, but I did. It made my heart race. With his free hand, he scribbled “Tasha’s Birthday” in the box.

My birthday is in August. I couldn’t get mad when he didn’t get me anything.

And I always get caught. He found out about my real birthday two years ago, when our daughter was born. They put all your information on the birth certificate, and he saw my actual birth date right there—August 9, 1974. “That’s funny,” he said. “Yo, look, they made a mistake. Your birthday’s in October.”

I could only say, “What?” He had been giving me gifts in October for three years, and that was the only thing I thought to say.

After that, he started asking me everything twice. “You have one more chance to get your story straight,” he used to say. He tells me all the time I should be ashamed of myself for being a liar. “I wonder what you’re teaching our baby girl,” he says, but he hasn’t tried to get custody. Ever since he moved out six months ago, he calls what we have “baby mama drama.” It tickles me to hear him say it.

Before Kenny, I never heard a white man say anything like “boo” or “shorty.” We met at a club on the bad side of town. I leaned against the bar while my girlfriends ground their hips against the kind of men they called “straight-up niggerish.” I spilled my beer on Kenny’s shoes, and I was telling the truth when I called it an accident. He had the only pale face in the crowd of dark bodies surging up and down to the beat of the music. I thought he was adorable, so I offered to buy him a drink. I asked him, “So, what are you doing here?”

He answered like he was cool, like he didn't know what I meant. "Oh, I came up in here with my folk, you know."

Kenny may spend all his free time playing street ball, but he still sounds like the corny insurance salesman that he is. The first few times he called my apartment, I hung up on him because I thought he was a telemarketer or a slick bill collector. I still hang up on Kenny sometimes, and that's what he's talking about—drama. I was the one who cheated, so I'm not supposed to call him when our baby's asleep or when there's nothing good on television. I'm not supposed to call him if I feel like having sex. That's drama, too, even if he does come over.

I just can't help myself, though. I like to think he can't resist me, that he can't give me up no matter what I do or what I say. He has told me, on more than one occasion, he would have cut me loose a long time ago if it weren't for our daughter. "You don't really love me; you just like to mess with me," he said.

He had two suitcases packed on the night I told him I was pregnant. The way I saw it, he didn't have to stay; I know a lot of men who would have kept right on packing. The way I see it, it's enough for him to stay; that's all I need.

Tonight, he sounds peeved when he recognizes my voice on the phone. "What do you want? It's late."

"It's only 9:30."

"Is Pamela all right?"

"She's fine."

He asks me again what I want. “I’m not coming over, Tasha.” Maybe he means it. I can hear voices and the hum of electronics in the background.

I say, “I bumped my toe at the office today.” And that’s true. I was taking a message to the doctor, and I smacked my foot against the leg of my desk. I flex the toes on my right foot and wonder if I have any gauze in the medicine cabinet. “Yeah, I might have broken it or something. There’s this dark purple thing in my toenail.”

He doesn’t say anything.

“I’ve been hobbling around all day.”

He sighs. “Word, Tasha?” Kenny tickles me. Word.

“My big right toe. Driving home was pretty rough.” That wasn’t a lie either. I really did have a rough drive home. Pammy wouldn’t stop screaming nursery rhymes in the back seat, and I couldn’t find an Advil anywhere in the glove compartment. And then I nearly rear-ended a van.

Kenny says he’s going to come take a look at my toe.

After we hang up, I practice limping around the coffee table. It gets silly, the way I have to lift one hip and let it fall. It doesn’t seem like I’m in pain at all. My hobbling feels like dancing. So, I go into the kitchen and test the heft of one of the skillet. I think that it probably would have been easier to just tell him Pammy had a fever. I squeeze my eyes shut before I drop the skillet on my toe.

The gauze sticks to the blood slipping from behind my toenail. Kenny unwraps it and prods at my feet with damp cotton balls. He won’t look me in the eye, and he won’t

take off his jacket. I lean forward to rub the imitation leather between my fingers.

“When did you get this?”

He shrugs. “Couple weeks ago.” He shudders when he tosses another cotton ball onto the coffee table. He never could stand the sight of blood. He threw up watching Pammy get born, and I remember laughing at the sick splat his vomit made against the linoleum. “How the fuck did you do this, Tasha? This is nasty.”

“I told you.”

He rolls his eyes. “I don’t believe you.”

I want to touch his face. “A dentist’s office is more dangerous than you’d think.” He isn’t a handsome man. The pores on his cheeks stand out like pepper. His eyes are green, and one is smaller than the other. He uses gel in his hair now, and it makes his scalp shine in the places where the hair is thin. He’s been eating fast food; his face looks puffy. And he’s wearing too much cologne.

He wraps the new gauze so tight I can’t really feel my toe anymore. He absently pats my leg and pushes it off his lap. “I’m going to look in on my shorty,” he says.

“Then I’m leaving. Got it?”

“Okay.”

He disappears into Pammy’s room, and I hear him call her his sweet girl, his little soldier. “How you doin’, boo?” She giggles, and I hobble into the kitchen and lean against the counter.

He peers around the corner. “I’m out, Tasha.”

“You hungry?”

He shakes his head. “What did I say?” He has his hands in the pockets of his jacket. “I told you I need to get out of here.”

“Will you please stay?” I tell him I’m going to need some help in the morning, that I can’t move around so quickly. “And I’m sad,” I hear myself say. “My momma called today, and she says my daddy isn’t doing so good.” I don’t even know where that came from.

He crosses his arms over his chest and raises an eyebrow. “Really now? Are you sure that’s what she said?”

“I’ll make you a sandwich.”

“Fine.” He sits at the table and starts fiddling with the napkin holder.

I start pulling meat slices and cheese out of the refrigerator. It doesn’t take me long to get used to the way he smells. He belongs here, even if he doesn’t realize it. When we were trying to live together, I thought it would be funny to see him sitting under the framed pictures of black gospel choirs and preachers. I got ready to explain the way I lived to him—the way I combed my hair, the way I cooked, the way my body looked. But it wasn’t like that. He set his shaving cream next to my oil sheen without even asking what I used it for. I didn’t know then that I wasn’t his first black woman. I didn’t know I would be the one who marveled at his pale naked body, the tan lines fading on his hip bones, curving around his arms, dipping into his chest hair.

It doesn’t matter what I didn’t know then. Now Pammy looks like him. She has the same curly brown hair and green eyes, and she isn’t going to get any darker. I feel

like I could leave her somewhere, and no one would be able to trace her back to me. She makes more sense to me when he's around; she doesn't feel like a mistake.

I open the drawer to take out a knife, and he asks, "So, what's going on with your pops?" I nearly catch my finger as I shut the drawer.

I can't think of what to say. I tear the plastic off the block of cheese. I glance at Kenny, and he looks bored, like he's about to start counting the flowers on the wallpaper. I try, "His—uh—eye sight is going real bad."

Kenny snorts. "Is that right?"

The knife has a serrated edge. "Yes."

"And why's that?" He leans back and props his feet in one of the other chairs.

I only want him to stay. I've said it plainly, but he doesn't listen. He just sits there, looking annoyed and smug.

"Well," I begin. I search the ceiling for the right story. "Might be cataracts. Momma says he'd been acting funny all day, bumping into things and rubbing his eye. She knew he was losing his sight, but she wasn't that worried. And then she heard him screaming in the kitchen, and she ran in there, and you know what he had done?"

He yawns. "I can imagine."

I cut a slice of the cheese and use my thumb to push it away from the block. "Are you going to believe me?"

"Yeah, sure. What happened?" He pushes away from the table.

I lick my lips and dare myself to do this one thing. “He was trying to chop some vegetables, and he couldn’t see his hand. And he accidentally sliced off his finger. The whole thing.”

I hear him suck his teeth, and I know he’s going to leave, that he doesn’t have time for this, for baby mama drama. “Tasha, see, that’s the fucking dumbest story I ever heard—and I’ve listened to every last one of those whoppers you tell me. And I told you—”

He stands up at the exact moment that I push the blade of the knife through the tip of my middle finger, then further, through the block of cheese.

“Are you going to believe me?” I ask again. My voice doesn’t tremble. I lift the knife again, and say, “You have one more chance to get my story—” But he isn’t listening because he’s throwing open drawers. He rushes out of the kitchen and returns with the gauze. He struggles out of his jacket, and I swear his face looks green. When the knife lands on the counter, it sounds a little like bells chiming.

“What the hell is wrong with you tonight?” He pulls me to the table, and I wish I could pay attention to the warmth of his hands and not the trail of swollen red drops on the floor.

I shouldn’t have done that.

The tip of my finger throbs with sharp waves of pain, but the tip isn’t there. I can’t make sense of it, and my head feels like it’s spinning on top of my neck. “You wouldn’t believe me,” I tell him. “And it’s true. My mother called me and said it. It’s

true.” I shouldn’t have done that at all, and I can’t fix this one. I can picture the tip of my finger bouncing helplessly on the countertop, but I don’t mention it to Kenny.

After he wraps my finger, he says we should go to the emergency room. I say I could have done worse with a pair of fingernail clippers and that there’s no point in waking up Pammy. I make a joke about finger sandwiches, but he doesn’t laugh. He lifts his jacket from the floor and drapes it over the back of the chair. “I’m gonna stay for the night.” He says it like it’s his idea.

A TEN-YEAR ENGAGEMENT

Ten years ago Andy proposed to Emma on a rickety hotel balcony overlooking the brown saltwater off the coast of Jekyll Island. She slapped a dragonfly hovering around her neck and accepted.

Right away, Emma bought an empire waist gown with rhinestones dotting the neckline and the hem. Then, she was two sizes too large for it. Now her breasts flattened against her belly, and the dress hung on her body like an old nightgown. The only proof Emma had of Andy's proposal was the engagement ring she now wore on a thin gold chain around her neck. The tiny diamond glittered in the dip of her clavicle. Andy didn't seem to notice.

He didn't treat her like a piece of furniture or complain about the way she didn't bother wearing make-up or a bra anymore. Most days he came home from the dealership so hot he wouldn't let her finish cooking dinner. For the entire week before her 47th birthday, he showered her with perfect gifts—vintage purses and shoes, crystals, and seashells—nothing at all practical or electronic.

But when Emma mentioned wedding plans, he stared at her as if she had turned green. "You've been working all day," he said, "You go on up to bed, and I'll take care of the dishes."

“Well, maybe he forgot, honey,” Toddy suggested. She and Emma worked side by side at the salon. Toddy had been suggesting Andy’s memory loss for nearly seven years.

Emma smoothed a layer of gel on her client’s damp hair. “How do you forget when you’ve proposed to someone?”

Toddy shrugged.

“You forget your keys. Or you forget a doctor’s appointment. You don’t just forget you have a fiancée.” The client tried to nod an agreement, but Emma trapped her head between her hands. “Try to hold still, Sharon.”

“Now, why don’t you leave?” Toddy’s client asked. Her wet dark brown hair hid her eyes.

Toddy raised her eyebrows at Emma then bent to snip the split ends. “Don’t be silly, Sheila. She *loves* him.”

Sharon, Sheila, and Toddy laughed outright at that.

The first time they’d laughed at her, Emma had dropped her scissors and comb and walked out of the shop in her smock. She had been doing Sharon’s hair since before she even met Andy. She remembered when Sharon first urged her to cover the sprinkling of gray strands in her black hair. Now bold silver streaks framed Sharon’s face. “No point in pretending I’m getting any younger,” she decided. “And it probably wouldn’t hurt if you let Andy know you weren’t getting any younger either. No use getting upset with us when it’s him.”

So, Emma didn't get upset with them anymore. Sometimes the jokes they told at her expense were actually funny, and her laughter mingled with theirs. Other times she shrugged and changed the subject, reminded them of some crazy plot point on the soaps. This time she sprayed a cloud of Aquanet until Sharon's chuckles turned into coughs. "Sorry, sorry. Guess you should keep your mouth shut."

When she got home, Andy had dinner ready—pot roast and salad with grocery store pinot noir and candlelight. "You came home early," she observed.

"Well, you deserve it." He still had the apron wrapped around his waist. He looked young when he grinned. Maybe he had gained a little weight since the day they met, but his solid brown hair and deep tanned skin remained the same.

"I'll tell you what I deserve," she began. The smile faded from his face, and she deflated. "Never mind, Andy. I'm going to bed."

"Do you want me to bring any of this up?"

She shook her head. He moved toward her, his lips twitching for a kiss, but she started up the stairs. She didn't even take off her smock.

The next week Toddy took off for Colorado. She had never traveled far enough from Milledgeville to see or touch real snow, and Toddy intended to ski in it. "You don't know how to ski," Emma reminded her. "And what about money? You have two heads to do on Friday. At least."

Toddy hugged Emma. Her bright red lipstick rubbed off on Emma's cheek. "You can take them all. See you in two weeks."

Emma fed Toddy's declawed orange tabby. She watered the three green sprouts peeking from an oversized tub of soil. She separated the bills from the lingerie catalogues. She guided her finger through the layer of dust on Toddy's framed photos.

Toddy had been married twice. She hadn't worn white to either of her weddings. She looked like a grinning daffodil in one of the pictures, and in the other, she wore a purple dress with a long, ruffled skirt. In both pictures, she wore a sunhat with an oversized brim. Toddy said her mother taught her how to protect her skin from the sun. Still, she could do nothing to make the sprinkling of brown freckles disappear from her nose and cheeks.

Toddy told everybody her first husband died in a car accident, but there had been no funeral, and Emma had seen him working at a post office in Savannah. Toddy never talked about her second husband, and no one ever asked about him. She had worn sunglasses and walked with a limp for almost the entire year she was married to him.

On the day Toddy was supposed to return to Milledgeville, the chirpy ring of the telephone echoed throughout the beauty shop. Emma balanced the cordless between her ear and her shoulder while she twirled a curling iron around a lock of hair. "Is that you, Toddy? Are you back?"

Emma could see the other stylists watching her face in the mirror. The more Toddy talked, the more Emma wanted to yell. Toddy wouldn't be back until next week. She had found another husband.

"Husband?" Emma echoed.

“Oh, Emma,” Toddy gushed. “You’re going to just love him. He lives right down the road, in Savannah, and he taught me how to ski.”

“How long have you known—” The smell of scorched hair pricked Emma’s nose. “Oh, no—Toddy, I have to run. Call me later.”

Emma stormed home and slammed the door when she got there. She balled up her smock and her jacket and hurled them into the kitchen. She swore when she walked into an end table. “Are you okay, honey?” Andy called from the bedroom.

She yanked off her shoe and threw it at the ceiling. It landed on the lamp and shattered its base. “You—fuck!”

She heard his rapid footfalls on the stairs. He leaned over the banister and stared at her with his mouth open. “What—? You broke the lamp.”

“Toddy got married in Colorado!”

“That was my mother’s lamp.”

“Her third husband! And only God knows where he came from! She *says* he says Savannah!”

“Don’t cut yourself on the glass, baby—”

“It’s been almost ten years, and you won’t fucking marry me!”

He looked at her as if she had broken another one of his mother’s lamps.

“Everyone says I should leave.” Emma wiped the sweat from her upper lip.

“Stop wasting my time.”

Andy sat down on one of the steps. He looked like a weary prisoner sighing behind the railing. "I guess I should say I'm trying to wait until the right time." He covered his eyes with his hands. "Since you're hollering at me."

"I didn't want to holler at you."

He sighed. "No, I understand. It's not that I'm ignoring you. I want us to be able to afford something really nice. Before, when I worked at the bakery, I barely had enough money to take us on that vacation. And now I've got something good going, and I think we're going to be okay. Just let me save up a little more."

"Fine." She felt tired. She bent to pick her shoe from the shards of glass. She had liked that lamp.

"I'll bet he's no good," Andy offered. She could hear the smile in his voice.

"Who?"

"Toddy's new husband. None of her husbands are ever any good."

Emma picked a sliver of glass from her sole with her fingernails. A timid drop of blood slipped to the surface of the skin. "Get me a Band-Aid or something."

In the morning, Toddy brought Matthew to the salon and presented him with a flourish. "Look what you've won," Sharon deadpanned.

Matthew grinned uneasily at the crowd of women draped in plastic with tin foil strips and cream trapped in their hair. He started with, "Toddy has told me so much about all of you."

"I don't see how she had the time," Emma muttered.

He looked 15 years younger than the age Toddy claimed she was. His washed-out accent made it sound like maybe he had been from Savannah before. He shuffled toward Emma with his arm extended. “You must be Emma.”

The palm of his hand was soft and cold—no sweat. He did his robot walk all over the shop while Toddy swiveled in her chair without letting him out of her sight. He was too tall. He had to bend at the waist to introduce himself to all the ladies. He kissed the older ones’ hands, and they twittered with delight.

Toddy winked at Emma. “He’s really sweet,” she insisted when Emma shook her head. “Come over to our place for dinner tonight. And bring Andy.”

Emma and Andy dressed for a special dinner—skirt and pants with ironed-in creases, clean shirts, hosiery, uncomfortable shoes. The clerk at the grocery store checked his watch while they argued over whether or not to buy a bottle wine for a housewarming gift. “They don’t have a new house,” Emma reminded Andy. “There’s just a new man living in the old one.”

Andy won. “Nonetheless, we’re going to help her celebrate. Don’t be that way, Emma.”

Emma didn’t touch her dinner. She watched the way Toddy brushed her fingers over her new husband’s knuckles. “Matt here used to work at his father’s tackle shop, but now he’s going to start his own business in town,” Toddy said. She almost looked the age she claimed she was when she blushed like that.

“The ocean is hours away,” Emma replied. She arched her eyebrow at Matthew, who shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Andy kicked Emma's foot under the table. "But, honey, remember there is a lake with good fishing. It sounds like a good idea to me."

Emma rolled her eyes, not caring that Toddy was watching her. Matthew cleared his throat and asked if anyone wanted any more pasta.

"You're being mean," Toddy hissed. She slapped a soapy dishrag against one of the dirty dinner plates. Andy and Matthew moved around boxes and furniture in the bedrooms upstairs.

Emma leaned against the counter and absently petted the tabby. "I didn't say anything that wasn't true. Start his own business, Toddy? That's going to take money. Is his daddy going to help with that?"

Toddy glared at her. "You're not funny."

"I'm not trying to be. You don't just marry some guy after less than a week. It's stupid."

"Not as stupid as waiting a decade for someone to marry you." Toddy didn't laugh like she did when they were working together. "You're so jealous—you're so jealous, it's all over your face. And I'm starting to think maybe there's a reason why Andy won't marry you."

The sound of the men's voices, the tabby's purring, and the sloshing of the dishwater clogged Emma's ears. At the end of the evening, Andy and Matthew shook hands, but Emma got into the car without even glancing at Toddy. "He seems nice enough. He's young, but he's a good guy," Andy decided on the way home. He smelled like sweat. "Next time, don't be that way, Emma, okay?"

“Fine.”

She stayed awake all night. She had saved some of the pieces of glass from the broken lamp and tucked them in a towel. She concentrated on putting them together with superglue. The clear liquid stuck to her fingertips and left them hard, even after she washed her hands in the kitchen sink.

She rummaged in her purse to find the little tube of aloe lotion. Her hands dried into painful wrinkles after she washed them. Her nails scraped against gum wrappers and loose change before she found the key to Toddy’s house. She had meant to return it before dinner. She stared at the key and yawned. The clock read 6:00.

She asked Andy to call the salon. “Tell them I’m not feeling too well.” She sat at their kitchen table, clutching a mug of coffee. She imagined her fingers could stick to the glazed ceramic, and she would be stuck forever.

“You didn’t come to bed,” he noted. He buttoned all three buttons on his polo shirt. “Did you fall asleep on the couch?”

She nodded. “I just need to get some rest. My back—or I have a headache. I’m just going to lie down all day.”

Andy promised to check on her when he had a break.

After he left, she pulled on her old sneakers. The laces were gray and frayed at the tips. She parked her car at the convenience store two miles away from Toddy’s house, and she walked the rest of the way. She was careful to stay off the sidewalk and move through the grass and the clumps of trees. She smacked the mosquitoes and chiggers that attacked her bare legs.

Once she reached Toddy's home, she circled the place, ducking behind the azalea bushes and swatting away insects. Toddy's cat scratched at the dirt and stalked imaginary prey in the backyard. Emma checked her watch. It was almost noon. She peered into the living room through a window and watched Matthew flip through a newspaper with a pen in hand. He didn't match Toddy's collection of kitschy memorabilia, but then that didn't seem to bother him at all. He was still wearing his pajama pants. He abruptly tossed aside the paper and left the room. He took the stairs two at a time.

Emma stuck the key in the lock on the back door and turned it slowly. She eased the door open after she heard the lock click. She yanked off her sneakers and walked on her tiptoes through the kitchen and into the living room. Matthew had left a dish of half-eaten scrambled eggs on the same table as Toddy's garden of wedding photos.

Emma tried to think of what she was looking for. She knew she didn't want to talk to Toddy again until she had proof that Matthew was up to no good. Matthew could spend the entire day snorting cocaine or sleeping with other women, but Emma wasn't going to let him get away with it. She imagined telling Toddy the whole truth and watching her face tighten with rage and grief. Emma wanted to be the one to comfort her, the kind of friend who could pretend their argument didn't matter.

But she couldn't just tell Toddy her new husband was messy. Emma tied her shoes together and draped them over her neck. She clicked open one of the suitcases on the couch, but she found nothing but socks and underwear. She picked up the paper. He had

circled the commercial properties for sale—none of the ones for rent. One of his selections cost more than what Emma made in a year and a half.

She heard his quick steps on the stairs, and she shut herself into the coat closet. The cramped space smelled like mothballs. The handle of Toddy's vacuum cleaner poked her hip. Emma held her breath and listened to Matthew's one-sided conversation: "I was just about to go out looking at a few places... no, I'm fine. I just called to say I miss you... I know, but I do... I love you, too. See you tonight."

She heard the front door open and shut, and she cracked the door. He was gone. She checked her watch again. She had an hour and 15 minutes until Andy's lunch break. He said he would call, but he was more likely to come all the way back to their house to surprise her. She raced up the stairs, her eyes darting everywhere in search of evidence.

He left his pajama pants at the top of the stairs, crumpled in a heap with a t-shirt and a pair of dirty socks. He left faucets dripping, dresser drawers thrown open, the bed unmade. Emma frowned at the way Toddy's slip dangled from a lampshade. She accidentally tipped over one of the half-empty wineglasses on the nightstand. She used toilet paper to dab at the stain on the carpet.

Emma was about to stand when she noticed the solitary shoe box under the bed. Most of the time, Toddy wore flip-flops from the drugstore. In the winter, she wore an old pair of steel-toed boots she found at the Salvation Army. She always bragged about how she only paid \$5.00 for them.

Emma fished for the box. It was pink with a French-looking name on the lid. Emma didn't think Toddy could fit her new snowshoes in there. Here it was, the evidence she needed to show Toddy that Matthew was too good to be true.

Instead she found two tight rows of quarter rolls on top of a bed of crisp \$20 bills. Emma's eyes widened. She picked the rolls of quarters out of the box and thumbed through the stacks of cash. She dimly remembered Toddy saying she didn't believe in banks. Emma thought Toddy wasted all the money she earned at the salon. The older Toddy got, the more expensive, useless items she bought—leather pants, lace curtains, ruby earrings, autographed photos of bit players in "Gone with the Wind." She figured Toddy couldn't have saved this much. "Drug money," she whispered. Matthew had to get money for his winter vacations and tackle shop ambitions from some place. Drugs.

Emma had counted over \$2000 when she heard a door slam and the rustle of plastic bags. Toddy's laughter made its way to the bedroom, and Emma hurriedly stuffed the money back into the box and pressed the lid back into place. When she heard them clomping up the stairs, she scrambled under the bed. Her heart raced as she recalled the way Toddy made "newlywed" jokes at every opportunity now. "I could be trapped under here for hours," she muttered. She still gripped the box of money in her hands. She imagined her glue-hardened fingers could stick to the cardboard, and she would be stuck forever.

The smacking noise they made when they kissed grated on Emma's nerves. She waited with her eyes squeezed shut for the bedsprings to bounce above her body.

Instead, she heard the sound of running water, splashing, and Toddy's giggling. They abandoned their clothes at the foot of the bed and shut the bathroom door behind them.

Emma sighed with relief. She almost laughed aloud. She crawled on her belly until she reached the staircase. She used one hand to pull herself up and grip the banister while she rushed down the stairs. She dropped Toddy's house key on the kitchen table and sprinted across the lawn with the box of money pressed to her belly and her sneakers pounding against her breasts.

She counted out all the bills and the coins before Andy came home. Seven thousand dollars. Emma pressed the bills to her nose and inhaled deeply. They smelled clean, like they'd been laundered and pressed.

Andy brought flowers, a bouquet of daisies and tiger lilies. He presented them to her on a tray along with a bowl of chicken noodle soup. "Lunch in bed," he announced.

"Don't you have to go back to work?" Emma had the covers pulled up to her chin.

Andy shook his head. "I'm going to stay here and take care of you."

Emma grinned at him. "You love me, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"No matter what?"

He nodded. "No matter what. Eat up."

Emma apologized to Toddy when she returned to the salon the next day. "I know I was out of line."

Toddy managed to hug her without burning her with her curling iron. “I know you’re just worried about me.” Emma thought she could take that moment to tell Toddy what she knew to be the truth, but Toddy turned back to Sheila’s hair.

No one teased Emma about her ten-year engagement that day. Sheila ribbed Toddy about her new, young husband. “I bet you can’t keep up. I know how old you *really* are,” she laughed.

“Was he old enough to have champagne when y’all celebrated?” Sharon put in. Emma chuckled along with them. She tried to think of a clever joke, but nothing came to mind.

After she had dyed her last head of hair for the day, Emma drove to the bank. She felt for the box of money under her seat, and it was still there, disguised as a pair of overpriced, designer shoes. She backed out of the parking space and headed home. She wondered if something horrible would happen to her if the police caught her with that money. They would know where it came from, and she would become an accomplice, somebody as rotten as Matthew had to be.

She drove around with the money for three days. On the fourth day, a Thursday, Toddy burst into the salon, her face twisted with fury. She swore when one of the other hairdressers asked what her problem was. Emma bit her lip as she watched Toddy slam her combs and instruments on the counter. Toddy met her gaze. “Can we talk later?” she asked abruptly.

Emma nodded.

They ate lunch together at a nearby Mexican restaurant. Toddy called Matthew a weasel and a cheat. She pounded her fist on the table when she could think of nothing worse to call him. “He just wanted to use me to get his stupid tackle shop started.” She crunched on a tortilla chip.

“He stole from you?” Emma felt like she couldn’t control her face. She stared at Toddy with wide eyes, and she could feel them tearing up. “Did he have your credit card or something?”

Toddy rubbed her eyes. A tear slipped from between her fingers, and she sniffed. “No. I had—This is going to sound stupid now, but I don’t like banks, and I had money in the house. I’d been saving it for a while, and he took it.”

Emma cleared her throat. “How much money?”

“I would say about \$7000. That’s a lot of money for me.” Emma jumped when Toddy reached across the table to grip her hand. Toddy went on, “And he says it was burglars. Burglars! That doesn’t even make any sense. They didn’t take anything else; they just went right for the money. *He* went right for the money.”

The waiter set down a glass of tea in front of Emma, and she realized she had been holding her breath. “Well, maybe it’ll turn up.”

Toddy shook her head. “It’s gone.” She asked Emma what she should do. She had already told him to go, but she didn’t know if she should call the police.

“No, don’t do that. I’m sure the money’ll turn up. I don’t think Matthew would just take your money, Toddy. I really don’t.” Emma’s throat felt dry, and she sipped her tea until her cup was empty.

After work, she stopped in front of the bank again. She turned off the ignition. Back when Andy's proposal meant something, she asked Toddy to be one of her bridesmaids. "We'll have to find me the most horrible dress in Georgia," Toddy declared. "Promise?" It surprised Emma to her own voice—clear and strong—asking the teller to deposit \$7000 to her checking account. On the way home, she expected the guilt to tighten her chest, to make her heart pump too fast. Her hands didn't even tremble.

She beat Andy home that evening. She wanted to make him a special dinner, but she only knew how to microwave a family-sized tub of macaroni and cheese. He arrived just as she was slicing a tomato to put on top of the cheese. "Baby, you cooked. That's sweet." Before he could ask about her day, she caught him in a kiss. "What was that for?" he asked.

She clapped her hands once and beamed at him. "Let's get married. This weekend."

He looked ready to bolt from the room. "Emma, we talked—"

She could feel him searching her face for a clue, and she turned to wipe her hands on a dishcloth. "I know you want to be able to afford a nice wedding, but we don't need all of that. I'm 47 years old, Andy. I just want to do this. Now."

He lowered himself into a chair. "All right," he began carefully. "What do you want to do?"

She had imagined so many variations on their wedding over the years. At one point, she had wanted to travel across the country, across the ocean to the Hawaiian islands. All their witnesses would be locals, and a stranger would have given her away.

Now she figured they should keep it subtle so no one would get suspicious. She told him she wanted to go back to Jekyll Island for ten days. “Maybe two whole weeks. We could get married on the way—tomorrow—then honeymoon.”

“The cost—”

She faced him and crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s taken care of.” She hadn’t decided what she would tell him about where the money came from. For now, she said, “I’ve been saving a little myself.”

He stared at his hands.

“Let’s get married, Andy.” She ran her fingers through his hair. A single gray strand grew right out of the center of his head. “We’re not getting any younger.” When he didn’t look at her, she felt her stomach sink to her knees. “Andy?”

“It’s all taken care of?” He squinted at her face, as if he were trying to get her in focus.

“Money is not an issue.”

He smiled at her. “Okay. Let’s do it. Okay.” He stood to hug her. “Finally, right?”

She felt her chest tightening, and her arms trembled when she wrapped them around his waist. “Finally.”

SAM'S UGLY DOG*For SWS*

This, too, made sense, just like every other idea she had. “When we wear holes in our favorite shoes or our favorite socks, we throw them out and buy new ones. Right?”

Sam nodded.

“And when our cars break down, and it costs too much to repair them, we get new cars, don’t we?”

He thought he felt tears stinging his eyes, but when he blinked, none came.

“Right, Sam?”

He nodded again. She bent to unbuckle the collar circling the dog’s neck. Checkers let her do it, too—lift his head, dig her pink nails into the patchy fur on his neck, let his head fall back to the floor with a gentle thud. She swiped at the white dog hairs sticking to her pantyhose. “So, we’ll go. We’ll look for a new dog now, before we put Checkers down. We could get a puppy, something cuter than—something cute. And we can have a new dog for our new life together. Right?”

She was 35, nearly a decade older than Sam. She said “when” and not “if” when she talked about having children. She used to say playing the bass in an experimental jam band was not sensible, even if Sam only did it once or twice a week. And before that, she used to say, “You have to grow up some time.”

This was before Checkers.

Checkers' ashy, black dog-nails cracked at the tips and clattered against the kitchen tiles in those rare moments when he walked to his food bowl. It looked like a tiny fog had crept into his remaining eye, and his teeth were yellow and brown stumps peeking out of his bright pink gums.

Sam found the dog at the park two years ago, standing upright at the bottom of a slide. Checkers was not a puppy. His left eye and some of his hair were already missing, but he was friendly. Right away, he licked Sam's shoes and the hem of his jeans. Sam tied a jump rope around his neck and tugged him to his car and into the house he shared with her. When they argued over Checkers' vomit, Checkers' piss, or Checkers' really-what-is-that, Sam won by declaring, "I can just take my dog and leave. I don't think you ever loved either one of us." She would caress her naked ring finger with her left thumb, and he would stifle a grin.

Now, the tiny, "sensible" diamond on her finger glittered when she pointed at the puppies behind the display windows. "This one is cute," she announced for the tenth time. "Pomeranian. It won't get too big."

"Maybe." This pet store smelled like bleach and grilled steak. The clerks sported crisp, spotless, green aprons. They plastered stiff, unyielding grins on their faces while they watched little girls play with \$1000 puppies. "We could go to the animal shelter," Sam suggested.

She huffed. "I think we can afford a good dog." They could. She became the editor-in-chief of her music news magazine last year.

Sam and a boxer puppy regarded each other for a moment. The puppy blinked slowly. "These dogs look like they're holding their breath. It's creeping me out."

Before he got sick, Checkers liked to play in the garage when Sam's band practiced there. He chased his tail during "Dombey's Waltz" and barked lyrics to "Big Green Blues." Before Checkers got sick, the band changed their name to Sam's Ugly Dog. "I don't think I want a new dog," Sam mumbled.

"What?" She put her hands on her hips. "I'm telling you right now. We're not going to wait 'til the last minute to get rid of Checkers."

"Don't say 'get rid of Checkers,'" he snapped. One of the clerks stared at him, and he lowered his voice. "Maybe he'll get better."

She shook her head. "I don't think so, Sam."

Checkers started throwing up blood the week after Sam proposed to her. She and Sam stayed up late nights with the dog. Sam tried to get Checkers to drink water, while she stroked the dog's head, her ring catching the light of the lamp. She sang to Checkers, and Sam knew she couldn't be as hard as she claimed to be. He had made the right decision. But her newfound tenderness didn't help. After a month, Checkers was sicker than ever. Sometimes Sam had to use a mirror to check his breathing.

She asked to hold a Persian kitten. She made kiss-kiss noises at the cat, but she didn't bring it close to her chest. "Aw, we should get a cat. We could travel more with a cat. Couldn't we?" She smiled at Sam. "Right?"

He nodded. She only looked her age when she smiled. When he played shows, he could see her swaying in a crowd of twenty-somethings, her face blank. Her eyes

followed the college girls, the ones who had to have fake IDs to get into the bar. “What are you thinking when you do that?” he asked her once. She raised an eyebrow.

“Nothing at all.” And he believed her.

He watched her face now, which she could keep blank and cool even when she was petting a kitten, and his heart raced for a moment. He blurted, “You’re poisoning Checkers.”

She raised an eyebrow, and he could see it—she was stifling a grin now. “Don’t be silly.” The kitten purred, and she chuckled. “This one’s cute, right? We really should get a cat. Don’t you think? Right?”

FILTH

Annabelle Guthrie wrote a play about a man named Reuben Gauche, who sells miniature sculptures door to door. In the end Gauche dies off stage when his daughter pushes him down the stairs.

It wasn't a good play. Those of us who enjoyed it were sitting in the front row on opening night, watching Annabelle's husband, Roman Guthrie, shift in his seat. He gripped his armrest during the scene where Reuben's wife threatens to castrate him with a butcher knife. He couldn't stop coughing when Reuben's neighbors gather around him and start hurling his own little statues at him. One of us shushed him. Roman actually turned and watched the audience at the moment when the daughter reports what she's done to the police. We really couldn't help snickering then. The back of the daughter's dress was stuffed in her pantyhose.

After the cast took their bows, Annabelle swept across the stage, her high-heeled boots clicking against the floor. She waved, blew kisses, and thanked all of us for supporting her vision. She could make her voice smoky and sultry at times like this. "But most of all, I'd like to thank my husband, Roman—stand up, darling." We willed him to stand, but he stayed in his seat with his hands folded in his lap. She squinted for a moment, then grinned. "Oh, he's shy. Anyway, this play would not have been possible without my Roman. The male lead—and I'm serious—wore clothing from my husband's wardrobe. Give him a hand!"

The Guthries did art. They had been married since before they came to Halforth ten years ago, and they were allowed to say and do anything they wanted and call it art. If we didn't understand or like their work, Annabelle said it was because we hadn't earned our doctor's degrees. If we pointed out that both Pete Douglas at the grocery store and Old Rita in the knick-knack shop earned their doctor's degrees and still didn't get their work, then Annabelle called us fascists under her breath. We supposed there were worse things to be.

Annabelle wrote and directed two plays a year and cast the same five college students in every one of them. She made up these dramatic dinner scenes where the lead pounds on the table as he delivers his monologues. That was her signature. The college paper called her work "gritty" because of all the swear words. We liked the popcorn at the concession stand and the fact that Annabelle Guthrie plays were cheaper than a trip to the movies.

Roman Guthrie painted all of our portraits with watercolors. He painted a piece of fruit into each one, so some of us had bananas for noses or oranges for eyes or apples for ears. His paintings had been hanging in the basement of the college library, where the students sneaked cigarettes and beer cans. The art reviewer for the *Halforth Gazette* politely called his work "inspired." He brushed away our moles and our wrinkles until none of us looked like ourselves. Even assholes like Eberworth, the toothless maintenance man, seemed warm and important after sitting with Roman Guthrie.

Annabelle looked and behaved the way we thought an artist should. On weekdays she tied paisley scarves over her curly, black hair and wore rose-tinted spectacles. When

she taught, she scrawled all over the blackboard before she moved on to the walls. Eberworth had to paint over the permanent marker dialogue every May. On weekends she dressed up like Vivien Leigh in “A Streetcar Named Desire” or Claudette Colbert in “It Happened One Night.” She posed as if we could see her in soft focus with tears glittering on her cheeks.

Roman looked and behaved like a librarian. He wore sweater vests and tweed jackets. All of his shoes had soft, rubber soles, and he kept his clean brushes in a leather briefcase. He stammered when he talked, and he could never look us in the eye. Back when he taught art courses, he was careful to spell out vocabulary words for his students. These days, though, he spent six hours a day in the college bookstore, sketching townies and students alike while munching on carrot sticks.

We couldn’t figure out why so many rich kids chose to make their way to our home in the middle of West Virginia. They made it, though, and every August we lined up our lawn chairs on the sidewalk and watched the champagne-colored luxury sedans roll through the center of town. The parents of the rich kids lingered for a day or two, buying our homemade jellies and reading the *New York Times* outside Miss Trish’s deli and ice cream shop. They nodded to passers-by.

The Guthries drew a crowd of enthusiastic students who had heard of Annabelle’s plays and seen a few of Roman’s paintings in art shows in New York. When a play like “The Miniature Artist” premiered at the college theater, they showed up in droves, sometimes leaning against the wall because there were no more seats left. We overheard

their chatter afterward. They liked the part where the daughter's dress was tucked into her pantyhose, too.

Now, Roman was the kind of man who made a list of the pros and cons of having an extramarital affair. We watched him use different colored pens and fold the paper in half so he wouldn't have to look at the cons while he jotted down his pros. He worked on his lists right there in the bookstore.

PRO: Melba Woolworth is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

Melba Woolworth taught in the drama department with Roman's wife. Annabelle hated her. The two women argued at faculty luncheons, sometimes so loudly we stopped working the buffet line to watch them go at it. Roman knew he liked to sketch Melba more than anyone else. He used charcoal to create and caress her tiny curls and slim hips. He drew song notes pouring from her lips, even though her snobby accent got on all our nerves.

PRO: Melba Woolworth is kind.

He looked up and covered his list with his hand when he heard the bell above the entrance jingle. Melba waved when she saw him. He lifted two fingers and mouthed "hello," the way he always did. We rolled our eyes when we saw him do that. Women, all women—from old, bald Bertie, who ran the register, to Sasha, her teenaged co-worker—flustered Roman. He turned red when some of us spoke to him, and we could hear him gritting his teeth a little when he could think of nothing to say. Roman

considered the two-finger, silent hello a bold maneuver on his part, and he couldn't stop grinning after Melba left.

PRO: Sometimes I don't love my wife the way I used to.

He blacked out that item on the list. Sometimes, late at night, he peeked around corners to watch Annabelle work. Her ruined drafts circled her feet as she moved her fingers gently over the keyboard. She almost looked like a normal person, chewing on a pencil and sighing when she couldn't find the right words. When he watched her, he felt his heart shove itself against his ribcage, and his feet went numb. That feeling—that panic attack—that had to be love, especially if it hadn't gone away after over ten years.

PRO: Sometimes I don't think my wife loves me the way she used to.

He blacked out that one, too.

PRO: Sometimes I don't think Annabelle ever loved me in the first place.

We watched Roman trudge his way home as we lit the candles in our windows. There was only a handful of streetlights in Halforth, and the sun set earlier now that it was getting cold. He walked with part of his scarf tucked into his belt and his jacket inching up his back. He kept his eyes on his shoes, and he gripped his case of brushes and pencils. Something about Roman made some of us sigh and shake our heads. His coat was never heavy enough, and he always forgot his gloves. We wanted to yank off his glasses and wipe away the grease smears and dust. We wanted to cook him a decent meal.

The Guthries lived in a blue house on the corner of Salisbury Road and College Avenue and kept two dogs. The smaller one liked to chew on the larger one's tail. On

Annabelle's Vivien Leigh days, the Guthries argued about the children they didn't have. She claimed she couldn't hope to feel like a real woman unless she experienced labor pains. Roman didn't want them. His grandparents had left him a collection of delicate tea cups, and he displayed them on the coffee table in their living room. "I have a hard enough time protecting them from you," he reminded her. "No kids. End of story." We were glad at least one of them had good sense. The more staid professors—the ones who didn't write on walls—had a hard enough time controlling their children. We imagined the Guthries could only give rise to the worst kind of spoiled spawn.

When he arrived home, he found Annabelle in their bedroom, heaving her pantsuits into a suitcase. "What are you doing?"

She sat on the suitcase and bounced on it until she could zip it. "I have to go. It's my sister." She blew her hair out of her face. "Her appendix burst." More than anything, Annabelle wanted a disapproving family, a clan of snobby Bostonians who turned up their noses at her eccentric lifestyle. Instead, her rich family supported her when she decided to be a drama major. They sent her money when she lost her way in China. Her mother gave her ideas for plays and proofread some of her drafts. Her sister was her best friend. "She's fine, but I'm still leaving. Are you going to try to stop me?"

Roman shrugged and sat next to her. "When is your flight?"

"Couple hours." She squeezed his thigh. "I wish you would try to stop me. You know I'm freaking out over nothing. She really is fine."

He looked into her face and noticed the gray mascara streaks on her cheeks. She didn't look like any movie star in particular. "Come down off your suitcase. Think this through. Do you really need to go? Can't you just call her?"

She shook her head and moved to his lap. "I have to go to her." She buried her face in his neck, and it tickled his skin when she said, "How dare you try to stop me?"

When he returned from the airport, he pulled his list from his case and scratched out the last item on his column of pros.

CON: Guilt.

The next morning Melba Woolworth slipped into the seat across from Roman's. He had been sketching the newspaper rack next to the used book shelves when he caught a whiff of her scent. Vanilla. He squeezed his eyes shut, so tight he saw rainbow rings behind his eyelids.

"Hey, Roman, are you okay?"

He opened his eyes. "I'm all right." He looked around the store for something to say. "H-how are you?"

"I'm a little bit worried. I had to cover for your wife's 8:00 class. Is she sick?" She cracked open a can of diet cola, and Roman watched her sip from it. When he didn't say anything, she put the can down. "Roman? Are you sure you're okay?"

He snapped out of it. "Oh, Annabelle's out of town. It's her sister. Her sister, I mean, is sick."

Melba leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. She pursed her lips and sighed. “That’s too bad, Roman, but you know what? The rest of us would have at least left a message with the secretary. I respect Annabelle, but she really has to learn to be more reliable.”

Roman stared at her mouth and nodded.

“I’m sorry if I’m offending you. It’s just that I—well, a lot of us feel like tenure shouldn’t be Annabelle’s excuse to do whatever she pleases.”

“No, no, I agree.”

We wouldn’t have believed this if we hadn’t seen it. A few of us stopped what we were doing for a moment, our mouths hanging open, when we heard Roman stammer an invitation to dinner. When she raised her eyebrow, he amended, “We could have dinner, and I could have you sit for me. I think you’re one of the only Halforth people I haven’t painted.”

We could see a tiny smile on her lips. “I had the feeling your wife wouldn’t like the idea of me stepping foot in your house.”

“My wife isn’t here.”

Melba agreed to meet him at 6:00. After they left, we argued about her reasons. Most of us figured she thought she would be attending a supper between colleagues, nothing more than that. “No, that young lady knows exactly what’s going on,” Bertie insisted. “She saw how red he turned. He looked like a lobster. A guilty lobster.”

“Even if she does know what’s going on,” Sasha said, “that’s no guarantee he knows what to do from here.” We all had a good laugh off of that one.

The idea of having Melba Woolworth in his house made Roman's cheeks burn. He stood in front of the bathroom mirror, splashing cold water on his face. He glanced at the wall clock, counting the minutes until Melba would arrive. He spent a few of those minutes trying to see how he looked without his glasses. His features blurred in the glass; wiping the mirror with the back of his hand didn't help.

After he changed his shirt and brushed his hair, he hurried past the bed and out of the bedroom. He decided to focus on the sketches he meant to do. He didn't want to paint her the way he painted us, in dull, pastel colors with pale fruit. He wanted to do her in oil, with lots of textures rising from the canvas. He set up his easel in the den and placed his sketch pad on it. He rummaged in the hall closet until he found the wrinkled tubes of oil paint hidden in shoe boxes and coat pockets.

When he snapped on the lamps in the den, he noticed—with horror—the dingy wallpaper beneath Annabelle's doodles and scrawling. A few of us cleaned the Guthrie house once a week, and we couldn't believe people who made the kind of money they made could live like that. We could only do so much. Newspapers and books were strewn all over the floor, and the dogs left their toys and treats anywhere they pleased. Annabelle had begun knitting a throw but had given up and tossed the thin strip of tangled yarn over the arm of a chair. The little dog rested on a pile of her rough drafts and chewed on the big dog's tail. Roman snapped off two of the lamps and checked his watch. He had twenty minutes.

He used a paring knife to carve the hardened wax out of the candle holders on the end tables. Red and white flecks clung to his sweater, and he only made it worse when

he picked at them with his fingers. He ventured into the basement to find the box of tapers they brought out for Christmas and New Year's Eve. He planned to put them on the dinner table, too—create a mood. The string attached to the light bulb tickled his nose, and he had to grab at it a few times before he could turn on the light in the basement.

When we tell this story to each other now, we say the dangling, naked bulb illuminated Annabelle's handiwork, and he stood there for an hour, shocked and a little scared. We talk about the smell, how it was so strong it brought tears to his eyes. Some of us exaggerate a bit too much, claiming Roman fainted when he found his wife's other work in the basement.

How could we really know? In a town like Halforth, there wasn't any such thing as a secret. If a hinge or a bedspring creaked, someone somewhere in our one-mile stretch of town heard it and told it. Strangers mixed with us every year, and it was nice to know who was who. We made it a point to know.

That evening in the basement, Roman couldn't find the tapers, especially with the bulb swinging this way and that, casting shadows in the places where he needed light. Annabelle's costumes glittered on one wall. She had leaned her framed show posters from college against another wall. When they'd met, she had straight brown hair and could only land small parts in school productions. The university they attended together had nothing in common with Halforth. They could lose themselves in a crowd. The bulb stilled, and he rifled through the posters, remembering the ways she had tried to inject as much emotion into her single lines as she could. She made a terrible actress.

CON: I miss Annabelle when she's gone.

Before he could begin to re-imagine his relationship with his wife, his thumb brushed against a piece of sketch paper. The play posters fell forward onto the cement floor the moment he realized what he had discovered.

Those of us who aren't too prissy called them shit paintings, but Annabelle also used dried out scrambled eggs, spotted banana peels, and tea-stained newsprint to create an image of the provost's daughter. She sealed the material to the paper with glue and Aquanet.

A few years ago, Roman had painted a watercolor of the provost's 13-year-old daughter. The girl squirmed when he sketched her and rolled her eyes at his nervous joking. In Roman's finished painting, she wore a pleasant, pink smile and looked like an 8-year-old in a floppy, blue dress with a ribbon in her hair. Annabelle had used the twist-ties from garbage bags to make a mouth and balled-up bubblegum wrappers for a pair of eyes. And it stank. The brown stains on the back of it came from another painting Roman recognized as an imitation of his own work. The brown smears across Eberworth's cheeks couldn't have been anything except crap.

He found eight more trash images of us behind the stacks of his old books. In Annabelle's paintings, we had dirty cotton swabs and knots of actual hair springing from our heads. We had biscuit dough for noses and crushed hard candy for mouths. He collected them and brought them upstairs; some of the mushier materials came off on his fingers.

PRO: One good turn deserves another.

When Melba arrived, she sniffed the air around her, searching out the aroma of garlic, butter, or something sugary. Roman hadn't even burnt anything in the oven. He had her recline on the couch in the den with one arm draped over her stomach and the other folded behind her head. After ten minutes she sighed impatiently. Roman sat motionless behind his easel. "What are you doing? Shouldn't there be more light in here, Roman? Are you okay?"

He leaned to one side. "I think my wife hates me." He wiped his forehead. "Very, very much."

"Are you going to sketch me?" She sat up. "Isn't that what I'm here for?"

He folded the cover over the blank sheet of paper.

We had only heard of two men and one woman in Halforth who had affairs. They were professors with spouses living on the other side of the country. The woman's husband lived in India, where he studied "food culture." It wasn't that we didn't understand how these things happened. We just did things differently when it came to getting married. Our husbands and wives never left on trips, never had to take jobs in other states. We went to work with our husbands and fell asleep with them at the same time every night. Only the abusive ones got divorced, and we didn't let those kind stick around Halforth for too long.

We saw Melba Woolworth leave the Guthrie house, clutching her coat closed over the clothes she wore the night before. She left a trail of deep footprints in the snow. After she left, we watched Roman pin the shit paintings on the clothesline. He wore a tattered robe, and his boots bunched up his pajama pants around his calves. The dogs

pranced around him and sniffed at the hem of his robe. He didn't walk down to the bookstore to sketch or even get dressed.

Annabelle Guthrie returned that afternoon. The wheels of the cab crunched over Melba's footprints, and Annabelle stepped out of the car as Audrey Hepburn in "Breakfast at Tiffany's." We held our breath, waiting for her to notice the sketch paper on the clothesline, but she swept into the house and left the driver to struggle with her suitcases.

"Roman, I'm home, and all is well!" The dogs bounded from their place on the couch and stood on their hind legs to sniff at her scarf. She scratched behind their ears. He didn't get up from the couch and kiss her cheek, and he didn't ask about her sister. "I said I'm home." The snow on her boots had begun to melt into a puddle beneath her heels. "No hug? No shower?"

"Did you look out in the yard?"

"No. Were you grilling out or something? It's too cold for that, but it's okay because I'm starved." She shrugged off her coat and left it on the floor.

"I found those—paintings in the basement."

She plopped down beside him and nestled closer to him. "What? Some of your old stuff?"

He tried to give her an exasperated look, but he could only see the top of her head. We all knew how long she could keep this up. She once called one of her first-year students an "incorrigible twat" in front of a banquet hall full to capacity with other professors, other students, and a bunch of us. The context wasn't important; those two

words obliterated all other conversation. It happened three years ago, and she still denied it.

“Do you think maybe you could try to build a fire, Roman?”

“Some of those things, it looked like you’d taken a handful of—mess—and why? Just to make fun of me? Don’t you do that enough already?”

He expected her to at least sigh or sniffle, but she went completely quiet before she fished a paperback from between the couch cushions.

“Maybe we should get a divorce,” he suggested to the ceiling.

She turned a page. “Maybe you shouldn’t have snooped around. You never go in the basement. Why were you even in there?”

We thought we understood how much Annabelle Guthrie hated Melba Woolworth. Annabelle vandalized the posters advertising Melba’s plays, and she warned students against Melba’s theory class. Melba wrote letters to the editor about Annabelle’s “insipid” plays. She extended invitations to dinner parties to everyone in the drama department except Annabelle. And we laughed at every snub and every insult without caring who hurled it at whom.

Now Melba had one-upped Annabelle, and Roman had to tell the truth about it. He told her he slept with Melba, but we argue that couldn’t have been true. Making his list of pros and cons was one thing, but having an affair took more gumption than someone like Roman actually had. “You know it’s not true,” some of us said, but it was what he told his wife.

We watched the fall-out from our porches. We didn't even feel cold, and neither did Annabelle, who marched right up to Melba's house with a wooden spoon in hand and her dogs running ahead of her and barking. Roman stood in his doorway, looking petrified. He didn't call after his wife.

"What's going on?" Alicia called the question from across the street. Of all of us, she has the biggest mouth. She was the first one of us to touch one of those shit paintings, and she recoiled after she sniffed the finger she pressed to the sketch paper. "Hey, Roman, what is this? All this stuff is made of trash."

She signaled for the rest of us who lived close by to come check it out while Roman watched us mill around his yard, minding his business. Some of us worried he would shoo us from the yard like vultures, but he just watched. At one point, he grabbed himself a cup of coffee. "Is this supposed to be me?" Alicia asked. It was. She had spaghetti hair and a peanut butter cap. A couple of spiders had frozen onto the canvas.

"Of course it is. I think it looks just like you." That was Eberworth. He liked them all, even the trashy version of himself. "This is more like it. It's more, you know, creative. Like you have to really use your hands to make something like this."

"This is gross." That was Miss Trish. "It looks like a nasty joke to me."

We went back and forth on the shit art for a minute, but we didn't stay out in the Guthries' yard for too much longer. The temperature dropped even lower, and we started to wonder when Annabelle would be back. Melba's neighbor, Bette, later told us Annabelle broke that spoon against Melba's storm door and screamed like Marlon

Brando in “Streetcar.” “I should have called the sheriff, but I figured he could hear it from the station anyway, so I just waited,” Bette said.

The next year Annabelle Guthrie wrote another play about a man named Reynold Gliss, and he played in a band. The actor who played Reynold looked 18 years old, even though Reynold was supposed to be an aging rocker. In the end, Gliss dies off stage when his fans mob him; a reporter gives a gruesome and detailed report about how they used his instrument to bash his head in. It wasn’t a good play, and the concession stand ran out of popcorn in the middle of the intermission.

We all enjoyed it, though. Roman Guthrie sat in the front row, gripping his armrest and shifting in his seat. We supposed this was Annabelle’s answer to the Medusa paintings in the library basement. He made a series of images of Annabelle with snakes or lizards or toads for hair, and now the college kids really liked to smoke down there and get freaked out. We heard them say it seemed like the Medusa eyes followed them in every direction. During the gallery opening, Annabelle and Roman stood side-by-side while amateur photographer flashes bounced off their grins.

They behaved themselves, especially after Melba Woolworth started talking about pressing charges for the damage to her storm door. We didn’t even print up the incident at her house in the local paper. Nothing happened. Annabelle stopped beating on the door after her spoon broke; she didn’t even try to use the handle. Melba never came out. Annabelle and her dogs sat on the porch, bored, until it started to get dark. Most of us forgot she’d gone over there in the first place. We got back to work. We watched

television. We sighed wearily when Melba tried to bring it up again. Her snotty accent got on our nerves.

The Guthries behaved themselves, except for when they did art. Now we waited, along with all the students who came from all over, to see what it would look like when one got back at the other.

SUEÑOS DE ANGELITOS
(A Story in Spanish)
For Epi

The boss always called him Miguel, even though he had carefully written Felipe Ramirez on his application. Sometimes the boss called him stupid, and Felipe only said, “Yes, sir. Of course, sir.” Felipe only knew a handful of English words, most of them profane, but he trained his face to be smooth, blank, content. He thought he would be easier to fire if the boss knew he could understand the insults.

An outreach minister had helped him find the job with the construction company. Felipe had stared at her while she slowly plucked Spanish vocabulary words from her memory. Her tiny office in the basement of the church smelled like stale perfume. All the pencils in the mug on her desk were the same length. He had to visit her once a month, and on his third visit, she’d asked, “Your brother... tells... I—no... he tells me your mother is... being... sick, yes?” Felipe frowned and shook his head. She continued, “I... will assure... work... for you... until... better.” She stood and offered her hand, and he shook it without a word. He never knew where his brother, Esteban, had planted a lie. “It’s hilarious, Felipe,” he’d told him, “when they *know* they understand what we mean.”

Felipe didn’t need the money for his mother. Kira Ramirez was 60 years old and a political activist, storming offices in Mexico City and feeding neighborhood children from her kitchen in the village. She called from a pay phone in town to give Felipe news

about his daughter, Isabel. Isabel was the leader of *Las Mariposas* and wanted in three—maybe four—states for armed robbery and murder. “That girl thinks she’s something out of a book or a movie,” his mother spat into the phone. “She could have honest work like me—or even like you. She just wants to be filthy and dirty like her mother—God rest her. I have to go. I’ll try to get a letter to you soon. I miss you and your brother. Kisses for the family.” She slammed the phone back into its cradle, and the sound of the hard click pricked his ears.

Felipe worked for hours in the hot Georgia sun and cut his skin on blades and nails—and it was worth it. The more cash in his wallet, the more time he could spend with Melinda. For her, he spent an hour every night scraping dried wedges of paint from beneath his fingernails with a needle.

One Friday evening Felipe watched the sun sink behind a cluster of buildings that looked like they were built from glass and starlight. The Doraville train lurched out of the station, and his brother chattered about the drywall, about the paint job, about the tools they used. “The boss says we could be done with that place in about two weeks, but he’s going to use me for the next job,” Esteban said through a yawn.

That afternoon the boss had called Felipe both Miguel and stupid, but it didn’t matter. He and Melinda were going to meet at O’Riley’s, the sports bar across from the Amoco, in a couple of hours. The smell of machinery and gasoline stuck to his skin. “It’s like you can’t ever leave because of the smell,” he said.

Esteban snorted in agreement. “At least we don’t smell like these filthy homeless people. We smell because we have jobs.” He stared pointedly at an old black man with

sticky dreadlocks sitting on the other side of the car. The man smiled at Esteban with yellowing teeth. Esteban grinned.

“You shouldn’t say things like that,” Felipe said quietly. “He might understand you.”

Esteban shrugged. “He doesn’t.”

“You’d deserve it if he came over here and punched you in the face.” Felipe crossed his arms over his chest and frowned at the holes in his shirt.

“Are you a champion now? Are you going to donate all your cash to the common people?” Esteban snickered. “Mama’s boy.”

“You just—you just shouldn’t. He can’t help what he is.” The homeless man shifted in his seat so he could rest his head on the window. His skin left smudges on the glass.

Esteban nudged his brother in the ribs. “Are you meeting that girl tonight?”

Felipe shrugged.

“How old is she anyway? She looks like a teenager. I’ll bet she has a fake ID.” Esteban’s laugh bounced off the dingy walls of the train. “They put you in jail, man, for messing around with little girls.”

Felipe glared at his brother. Esteban pretended not to notice. Felipe ignored him for the rest of the train ride and for the walk home from the station. He started unbuttoning his shirt the moment he crossed into the apartment he shared with Esteban; his cousins, Epi and Norberto; and his older sister’s children, Mateo and Lupe.

The windows were all open, and mosquitoes buzzed around the holes in the screen. The air hung thick with the smell of pepper and burnt bread. His cousins argued over how to fix an old bookshelf while his nephew inched closer to the television, his arm stretched toward the volume knob. Above the noise, Felipe heard water running in the bathroom. “Oh, no,” he groaned. “Is Lupe in the shower?”

No one answered him. Esteban chuckled and tossed his tool belt on the floor before plopping onto the couch and digging his heels into the mattress on the floor. “What are you going to do now?” He rubbed his hands together. “You want to get there before your girlfriend’s bedtime.”

Felipe pounded on the bathroom door with the palm of his hand, hoping his voice carried over his niece’s singing. “Don’t take too long. Please.”

He waited in the bedroom he shared with his nephew. He picked a needle from the card atop the stack of newspaper clippings and letters from his mother and started easing the paint from the prints on the pads of his fingers.

He had been meeting Melinda at the sports bar three times a week for three weeks. Every time he placed his hand on the small of her back, he thought about the first time he’d seen her. She had been sitting at the bar, alone, bobbing her head to the R&B pumping out of the jukebox. She clutched the handle of her beer mug and balanced a half-diminished cigarette with one hand. The smoke lifted from her face like a veil, and Felipe marveled at the deep brown of her skin and the papery red and gold ringlets framing her face. Her eyes followed the tall men who walked across his path, but he

approached her anyway, his shoulders straight, his legs stiff. “Your eyes are like stars,” he told her.

She took a sip of her beer. “What?” She had to shout above the music and the clink of the billiard balls.

He leaned toward her, close enough to smell the alcohol on her breath and the musky scent of her perfume. “I said your eyes are like stars!”

She shook her head. “I... I don’t know Spanish... um, beer... right?” She shrugged and raised the mug between them.

He replied slowly. “I can get you more beer.”

Her Spanish was worse than the minister’s. She could pounce on a few familiar words—beer, chicken, money, Spanish, English, love, I don’t know, what, thank you, please—if he spoke too quickly or for too long. They had their hands and sometimes crude etching on beverage napkins to express all the rest. His forty-sixth birthday coincided with their fourth date, and she had given him a children’s birthday card and a half-empty bottle of cheap cologne. It smelled like cleaning solution, but he sprayed it on his clothes anyway.

That Friday evening, he took his usual place beside her at the bar and ordered two beers. “Felipe, hunger I.” She rubbed her stomach, and he could see the crystal stud twinkling at her navel.

“You can have whatever you want.” He motioned for the bartender, and Melinda smiled sweetly before rattling off her order. After the bartender left them, Melinda kissed him on the cheek and pulled a cigarette from behind her ear.

“You know I don’t like that.” He covered her hand with his.

Melinda nodded and flicked her lighter. “What?” She inhaled and exhaled the smoke, blue in the light of the neon beer signs. When she was full of chicken wings, celery sticks, and Long Island Iced Tea, she let him press her body to his while they slow danced. When she wore high-heeled shoes, she could bend her head to rest atop his while they swayed. He kept his hands on her waist and allowed one finger to test the softness of the skin beneath her shirt.

“You should learn Spanish.” It occurred to him as he walked her back to her apartment. She lived two buildings away from him.

He thought she understood that a little. “English you?”

The outreach minister had tried to teach him, Esteban, and a few other newcomers English on Sunday evenings. She handed them worksheets with pictures of cartoon children at school and their cartoon parents at work. Esteban spent the classes filling in their faces with blue ink. Felipe stared out the window, thinking about Isabel. “I could try to learn English.”

“Girl—uh, a lady—my door, her door—friend, family. Spanish.” She pointed somewhere in the darkness. “3B—she apartment. Teach.” She stumbled and pulled him along, her heels sinking into the grass. She beat on the door with her palm. “Blossom! Blossom!”

The door swung open, and a woman in a purple terry cloth robe tightened her belt. She had bright pink and green curlers in her hair. Her eyes were small, and her skin

looked tawny and washed-out. Felipe wondered if she always frowned like that, if those creases on the side of her mouth were permanent.

She and Melinda spoke rapidly in English, the woman in a sharp near-whisper and Melinda in excited shrieks. Felipe let go of Melinda's hand and checked his watch in the dim rays of a street light. He was glad he didn't have to go to work tomorrow.

"I'm sorry, sir. Your friend is very, very drunk—as usual. It must be a Friday, right?" He blinked and stared into the woman's face as she nodded in Melinda's direction. "I think it's a little late for English lessons, but I'm sure we can discuss this further in the morning. I can take care of Melinda for the rest of the night."

Felipe stared at her mouth. She spoke perfect Castilian Spanish with a stiff, high-pitched voice. The sound of it reminded him of dubbed movies. "Your Spanish—it's very good."

She shrugged. "Some of us did pay attention in high school." She draped her arm over Melinda's shoulder and smirked when Melinda clamped her hand over her mouth. "I suppose we can make it to the toilet next time, right? Have a good night, sir." Felipe turned before his girlfriend retched into the bushes.

The woman's voice aimed at him in the dark. "Keep her away from the hard liquors next time."

When he knocked on Melinda's door the next afternoon, there was no answer. He couldn't peer into her window without getting caught in the bushes, and he could see flecks of her vomit weighing down some of the leaves.

“Hello, it’s you.” The woman in 3B had brought a lawn chair onto the sidewalk along with a wrinkled tabloid. “She’s not there. I’ve sent her to the store.” He could see the large gap between her two front teeth when she smiled. “I think it’s nice for you to check on her. They usually don’t do that.” Without the curlers, her dark brown hair hung in limp waves that didn’t reach beyond her shoulders. She wore glasses with lenses that darkened in the light of the sun.

He stepped toward her with his hand extended. “You and I haven’t been introduced properly.”

She looked at him and opened her paper. “I know.”

“I am Felipe. Melinda’s boyfriend.”

She sniffed and turned a page. “I like your boots. You’re like a cowboy or something. But—no hat.” She tore at the pages and shook her head at the images in black and white. He took his hand back.

“I’m sorry, miss. I didn’t get your name.”

She still didn’t look at him. “I don’t see how you missed it. Last night, she was shouting my name like she’s crazy.” She impatiently tossed the tabloid on the ground. “Blossom. My name is Blossom.” She stretched her legs in front of her, and her flip-flops dangled from her long, thin toes.

“Melinda thinks,” he began, taking a step closer, “you could help me. You see, I don’t know that much English—”

“It’s worth \$15 an hour, and I can only do it on Sundays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays.” She snatched off her glasses and looked at him wearily. “My cousin—your girlfriend—told me all about you already.”

He squinted, trying to find the resemblance. Something in Melinda’s face inspired him, but he didn’t know if he was allowed to look Blossom in the eye. “So, when do you want to start lessons?” he asked.

“I guess tomorrow. Come to my apartment around eight.” She motioned toward her door. “Don’t be late.” She leaned back in her chair and didn’t glance in his direction anymore. He nodded and turned on his heel and shoved his hands in his pockets as he made his way back to his place.

He hated this neighborhood. The cars never stopped zipping past his building, and he couldn’t close the window of his bedroom. It stuck in place and let in the rain and the insects. He wanted to live alone. Here, there were so many people, so many feet wearing the carpet thin, so many fingers leaving gray smudges on the walls. He never asked Melinda to visit him here. His nephew stared at naked women on the computer and couldn’t hear when anybody called him. His niece burned dinner when it was her turn to cook. A tower of pizza boxes leaned against the garbage can in the kitchen. The legs were always coming off the table or the chairs, and no one found the time to re-attach them. However, his family’s lazy Spanish filled every room. No matter how much he wished to move away from all of this, he knew he couldn’t find another place in the city that sounded like this, like home.

His brother lay on the mattress in front of the television. “I opened the letter from Mama that came yesterday.” He pointed to the blue envelope on the coffee table. “There’s more news about Isabel.” Esteban tapped the remote control against his chest before he turned up the volume.

Felipe wondered if Melinda would call. He never could hear the phone ring in all the noise. He took the letter and slipped into his room. It had been his idea to name her Isabel. His wife hated the name. “Things are different now. Don’t remind me of the way they were,” she pleaded. On the night he met her, she told him he could call her anything he wanted for the right price, and he chose Isabel.

She wanted to name their daughter Rosario, after her dead grandmother. They argued about the name until the day the girl was born. The baby was missing the middle finger on her left hand. They fitted her with tiny gloves made of pink lace and mittens as soft as cat fur. They worked so hard to hide what wasn’t there, and now every police officer in Mexico City knew about that missing finger. Terrified clerks gushed to the papers about the “haunting gap” on her hand.

His mother addressed all her letters to the Ramirez family. They all took turns being the first to open them, but the letters themselves always started with “Dear Felipe.” Her handwriting started out small then grew into bold loops and crooked lines that devoured the page. “...It’s like she wants to get caught, and she wants to bring her whole family into this business of stealing and being dirty. She’ll call you. She wants to get caught...” She had torn the article from the newspaper. One of *Las Mariposas*—maybe Isabel’s boyfriend, maybe her husband—died after a cashier in a convenience store shot

him in the stomach. "...She wants to hide here forever, and I can't let her do that. Does she think they won't find her, that..."

He wondered if Melinda would try to call. Esteban would make fun of her if he answered the phone. He pretended she'd dialed the number to a Mexican restaurant. It made the rest of them laugh so hard they cried. Felipe worried. He worried he loved her a little less when they laughed at her.

He decided his English would be perfect in no time at all.

He asked Melinda if she wanted to sit with him during his English lessons. She pulled on a shirt and frowned. "What? Oh. No. I to go O'Riley's. You?"

He shook his head.

"After? O'Riley's?"

He nodded. He struggled into his boots and pecked Melinda on the cheek. Her foundation smelled like pastries, but it tasted bitter.

The night air in Decatur seemed to be made of electricity. He could hear the air conditioners humming and groaning the moment he stepped outside. The streetlights buzzed with the insects that swarmed around the dull glow of their bulbs. He followed the sidewalk from Melinda's apartment to Blossom's door. She opened the door a crack, the chain cutting across her eyes. "Well, there you are."

"I hope I'm not too early."

The door closed, and he heard a series of clicks and clanks before she threw it wide again. "You—both of you—are *loud*." She pushed her glasses up with her middle

finger. “Could you tell her, please, that she doesn’t have to put on a show? If I wanted to listen to her screwing, we would still be living together.” She turned and walked into the kitchen. “Come in. Make yourself comfortable.” She tossed the invitation over her shoulder.

Blossom had no furniture in her apartment, except for a coffee table and a television stand with three wheels. A couple of tattered romance novels kept the 13” from sliding onto the floor. There were stacks of books in every corner. He picked up one and tried to read the title. It was only two words, and he could only understand one: THE. He flipped through the pages, watching the letters march across the page, meaning nothing.

“I can make you some tea, if you like,” she called from the kitchen.

“No, thank you.” He eyed the floor pillows surrounding the coffee table suspiciously. These days sharp pains shot through his knees and his back. He bent uneasily and began to ease off his boots.

He noticed a baby blanket folded neatly and resting on top of one of the cushions. He lifted it and sat down, rubbing the soft material between his fingers. It smelled like baby powder and a little like Melinda’s perfume.

Blossom returned and sat across from him, clutching a mug with a sunflower on it. “Are you sure you don’t want—?” She stared at him, her eyebrows twitching. “What are you doing?”

“I just moved this so I could sit—”

“Put it down. Next time just—” She sighed. “Don’t touch that. What do you want to learn tonight?”

“English.” He folded the blanket again; he could feel her eyes on his hands.

She smiled, and he wondered how a woman could ruin the very smile on her face. Did she care that her face creased in all the wrong places or that her teeth were crooked and coffee-stained? “Very funny. I have books on travel. I have books on school and work. I have books on how to be social and on politics. Where do you want to start?”

He told Blossom he wanted to know how to tell a woman he loved her more than his own life. How did you say her hair shone like rubies, and her lips were soft as rose petals? He needed a way to say he could give her anything she asked because his love was pure. How did you say—?

“You aren’t serious.” She took a sip of her tea.

He straightened his back. “You can laugh if you want. It’s how I feel.”

“I don’t exactly feel like laughing.” She flipped open one of her hardcover books. “We shouldn’t begin with anything too complicated. How about we start with relationship words? Do you know how to talk about your family?”

“How do you say ‘girlfriend’ or ‘beloved’?”

She did laugh now. “Is that all you ever think about? I don’t want to think you’re a fool, but you’re not giving me much of a choice.”

When was the last time he had been angry with a woman? He couldn’t remember. His niece burnt dinner and left make-up-smearred tissues all over the bathroom, but she was young. He remembered throwing a tantrum and stomping on his

mother's toe when he was a child. She was young once too, 21 years old, and he felt ashamed when she started to cry. He had been upset, not angry, when his wife died, carelessly, abruptly, without saying goodbye. Kira tried to convince him his wife ran the car into that tree on purpose. Even when he almost believed it, he still couldn't be angry.

Now, as he watched Blossom scribble the English words for "mother," "father," "sister," "brother," "aunt" on a piece of memo paper, he felt his ears burn. This feeling reminded him of the first time he read about his daughter in the paper. She had her men calling her Doña Vidal, and they wore Mardi Gras masks while they shoved guns in the faces of people who were afraid to die in a bank, of all places. He wasn't angry about any of that, though. He was irritated.

"Are you listening to me?" Blossom demanded. "You can't learn this if you don't listen. This is going to be hard work, and you have to pay attention." She snapped her fingers to make her point.

"I apologize."

For the next month, she invited him into her apartment with an expression on her face that made him wonder if he smelled like rotten cheese. "You will repeat after me," she urged, her thin, brown lips wet with tea. And he tried and tried, but the English seemed to cramp his tongue, and he felt weak after only a few of the strange words escaped from his mouth. "And you will practice," she reminded him contemptuously. She always sipped her tea, always clicked her pen, and always ruined her face with that smile whenever he managed the right words. "Was that so difficult, Felipe?"

At the end of another hour, he paid her in crumpled five-dollar bills. She tucked the money in the waistband of her pants, and he noticed the way the flesh around her waist was loose. Faint stretch marks made a path to her belly button. She didn't thank him. She watched him tug his boots onto his feet then opened her door. "See you next time."

"Next time, yes." He cleared his throat. "Do you think you could do something for me?"

"Might be extra." She put her hands on her hips.

"I understand. You see, I have poems and letters I want to give to Melinda—"

"Let me guess. All of them are about love."

What else could a man write about in the middle of the night, when his passion yanked him out of sleep? "Yes. Do you think you can translate them?"

She told him she was a busy woman. She said she had to visit her son on Saturdays.

"Where does your son live?"

She ignored Felipe's question and continued counting off her obligations on her fingers. She had classes at the community college. She had to take Melinda to traffic court. Coffee didn't order itself, and she had to work a 50-hour week at the café now that her assistant manager was on vacation. "Fifty dollars extra. I know that's expensive, but you love her, right? You would do anything—pay anything—for love, right?"

He left without answering her.

The next day, the boss called him a 'spic, a stupid 'spic, and Felipe felt the anger course through his veins as he brought a hammer down on his thumb. "Are you all right?" Esteban slapped his shoulder. "You should watch what you're doing—stop thinking about girls." Felipe stifled the urge to tell him to go to hell.

After the shift, after the train ride, he stopped at Melinda's apartment and beat on the door, daring her to have another man with her so he could tear him apart. She was alone, her face covered with green dots. "For I pretty," she explained, as she wiped her face. He didn't care. He didn't care if Blossom heard the squeak of the bedsprings or the pounding of his fist against the wall. Melinda's breathing sounded like weeping in his ear, but he didn't care about that either.

On Wednesday evening he knocked on Blossom's door, his letters and poetry tucked under his arm. When was the last time he had really been angry with a woman? He fingered the worn ten-dollar bills in his front pocket. Blossom might know the words for tools, but she didn't understand what it meant to love anyone as much as he loved Melinda.

He knocked again. She was smiling and wearing a dress. "Oh, you," she said with mild surprise. Her eyes widened. "I'm sorry. I forgot." The dress was blue. There had to be something taming the folds of flesh on her belly—or perhaps it was the way the skirt flared out in layers and layers of blue. "I made a date with some friends—a friend," she explained. "You have a free night."

He offered her the folder of love letters. "I can give you the money now, if you want."

He had hoped his voice sounded steely and cold, but she giggled. “Oh, no. I haven’t done the job yet. You come back tomorrow night, and I’ll have the whole folder ready for you. I promise. Do you want me to type the translations?” She opened the door wider. “You can come in for a moment.”

He watched her twirl across her living room and pat the skirt to her thighs. “You look pretty.”

“Thank you.” She placed his folder on top of one of her book towers before she slipped on her shoes. He stood, watching her delight, and he realized how young she had to be. He guessed 25, a little older than Melinda, a little younger than Isabel. He wondered if Isabel spent her twenty-seventh birthday hiding in his mother’s basement or jaunting across Mexico in a stolen car, too tired to make a decision about where she would stop. Maybe she would go to jail.

He found Melinda at O’Riley’s later that night. She danced with anyone who asked her, smiling apologetically at him whenever she noticed him sitting alone with her chicken wings. She smoked her cigarettes, and the memories of his daughter floated with the smoke and disappeared before they reached the ceiling.

Isabel started smoking when she was 12, and she did nothing to hide it. Felipe and his wife were bewildered every time she spoke. She revealed the most shocking things about herself in order to break the silences at dinner: She had a tattoo. She had stolen jewelry from her best friend’s *abuelita*. Her new boyfriend was escaped convict. “I’m pregnant,” she said at last, when she was 15 years old. Felipe thought it would kill

her mother to watch the way Isabel's belly grew lopsided with their stillborn grandchild. But that wasn't what killed his wife at all.

Melinda returned to the bar, her lipstick smeared. She beamed at him before she sipped her drink and took a bite out of a chicken wing. "Fun!" she told him. She waved at a man in a corner. Felipe kissed her hand, then her cheek. He let the quick, rough, black slang of the people around him wash over him, not caring that he didn't understand, that Melinda was already starting to hiccough.

Blossom didn't sweeten her tea. He held the flavorless liquid on his tongue for moment before he swallowed. He pushed the mug away she explained. "Some things just don't translate well. They sound much more beautiful in Spanish." She looked like herself this evening—limp hair, small eyes, and clothes that let her body do as it pleased.

"What do you mean?"

"All right, an example." She rifled through the poems and pointed at a phrase. "This right here, where you wish for the *sueños de los angelitos* for your—friend. Here's how you say that in English." She said it, and he repeated it. The English words got caught in the back of his throat and stuck to his tongue. "Do you see what I mean? It sounds terrible in English. It sounds stupid."

He hoped his poetry didn't sound that way—guttural, clacking, hissing, cheap, and stupid—after she transformed it. A few wrinkles formed on her forehead, and he thought she might be older than Isabel. "I know this isn't any of my business, Felipe, but that's never stopped me before, right?" She handed him his poetry and letters and leaned

forward, her palms pressing against the cheap wood of her coffee table. “First, I’m glad that meeting my cousin prompted you to learn English. Things will be easier for you now.” She paused to clear her throat. “But I think you should know Melinda isn’t a good person. I can say that because she’s family. I’ve taken care of her since we were both in school, even though I can’t bear to look at her sometimes. These poems—these letters—are beautiful, and she won’t understand them, even if they are translated. She isn’t worth these words.”

He wanted to stand up and kick the table over, but the pain in his knees reminded him he couldn’t. “I love Melinda. I want to marry her.”

Blossom rolled her eyes. “I talk for nothing.” Yet, she wouldn’t stop. “And who is Ana? Do you have another girlfriend? It would be exactly what Melinda deserves. You wouldn’t believe how many men she has—”

“I think you’re ugly, and I think you’re cruel!” He finally got to his feet. He had to pull his socks up before he crammed his feet into his boots. “Yes, that’s what I think.” He was breathless. “You’re not like a woman at all,” he sneered.

She looked at him like he was a child having a tantrum. He tossed the money onto the table and slammed the door on his way out. He rustled the typewritten copy in his hands. He picked the ones for Ana out of the stack and left the rest under Melinda’s welcome mat. Her lights were on, but he kept walking toward his apartment.

Felipe liked to believe Ana married him because of the poetry. She used to lean over him, her dark hair grazing his shoulders, as he scribbled furiously. They lived alone in an apartment above a restaurant in Mexico City, ignoring calls from his parents. They

were still young enough then to have something they wanted to be. He made it through the days in the post office by thinking about love, about Ana, who adored him and his words. “I like this one and this one and this one,” she said the moment he stepped past the threshold. “And I like this one. I think when I die, I’ll be the patron saint of poets and whores. You don’t think there’s already a saint like that, do you, Felipe?”

He found a new letter from his mother on the night stand. It had been opened like all the rest, but someone had resealed it with Scotch tape. “I told everyone to go to a movie or something.” Esteban’s somber voice cut through the silence Felipe had only begun to notice. “Give you some time.” Felipe ran his finger over the postmark before he tore open the envelope. This one had taken a week to reach his address in Georgia. The bed sank when Esteban sat down next to him.

Kira convinced Isabel to turn herself in. Felipe’s daughter wore a pink dress with a white collar and black shoes with thick heels. “She looked like a little girl again, with her hair parted down the middle,” his mother wrote. “And I remember thinking, ‘I’m going to miss her.’ You two never really let me hold that baby, and maybe she would have turned out differently if you had. She and I were going up the steps to the police station, and I thought, ‘I’m going to miss her.’ And then everything happened, quick as a flash.” Felipe’s mother almost copied the newspaper clipping word for word after that. One of Isabel’s *Mariposas* planted a kitchen knife deep in her heart. Isabel was dead before her grandmother could stop her from tumbling down the concrete steps, before the police captured her killer.

Felipe folded the letter and stuffed it back in the envelope. His vision blurred when he tried to press the tape back into place. Esteban squeezed his shoulder. He offered to make Felipe something to eat.

Felipe wanted to say he felt like Isabel had been dead all these years. He wanted to say he shouldn't be surprised. Bank robbers didn't retire; they didn't give their fathers grandchildren. But he could only say, "She looked like her mother—just like her." His mouth felt dry. "Why—why didn't Mama call?"

Esteban shrugged. "I don't know. Probably the phone in town was broken. I really don't know."

"We don't need to go back. She's already buried."

Even after his family returned, the apartment remained as quiet as a library. His nephew sat with his back to the computer, his hands folded in his lap. His niece tip-toed around the living room, picking up garbage. They all watched Felipe as he pulled on his boots and walked out the door.

It never got dark outside. Those streetlights cast a harsh, orange glow over the bright yellow lines of the parking lot. Stray cats yowled at each other and knocked over the sturdy, plastic trash bins lining the sidewalk. Teenagers huddled outside of the apartment buildings, laughing into the air.

He found himself outside of Melinda's apartment again, standing on top of his translated love poems and love letters. He wanted to bury his nose in the curve of her neck and take in the scent of her perfume; that wouldn't need to be translated.

He had lifted his hand to knock on her door, when he heard the muffled argument. The lights were only on in Blossom's apartment. Her voice was a sharp and gravelly drawl when she spoke in English. He recognized Melinda's voice, too, but it was shrill and petulant. She had not been drinking. He eased across the patch of grass separating their places, straining to understand their words.

Melinda shoved herself out of Blossom's place without closing the door. She tramped to her own apartment and shoved the door open. She didn't even glance at him, and he felt like a ghost. Blossom called after her cousin and moved to slam her own door when she noticed Felipe. "Go home," she said in English, only it sounded harsher than the way his boss said it.

He didn't move. Blossom swiped at her eyes and cleared her throat. "I hate her." Her Castilian-dub Spanish returned. "Did you forget something?"

Felipe kept his eyes on his feet. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Are you going to yell at me again?"

He shook his head.

"Good. Because Melinda would still be a—" She paused, searching for the word. "Asshole," she said in English. "Do you know what that means?"

He nodded.

She invited him inside. For a while, they sat across from one another, sipping her unsweetened tea in silence. Hers smelled like rum. He rubbed his knee. He could hear Melinda thumping against the walls, shrieking a one-sided conversation. Blossom sighed into her cup. "Your girlfriend says I should mind my own business." She spilled a little

on the table and wiped it with her hand. “I was telling her, ‘Slow down, slow down,’” she said finally. “She goes off with anybody. Did you know that?”

He shook his head.

“She does. And I told her, ‘You’ll get yourself killed.’ At least you’re nice.”

Blossom hiccupped. “And you know what she said? She said, ‘You’re nobody’s mother.’”

Felipe and Ana used to make plans while they watched their daughter splash in the bathtub. Ana wanted her to become a ballerina who would dance her way out of Mexico and all around the world. “She can take us with her, and we’ll always have front row seats at the ballet,” Ana reasoned. Felipe thought Isabel should invent something—a cure for incurable diseases or a time machine. “She could take care of us with the money she’d earn,” he decided. Felipe and Ana made plans, but they knew their lives would remain exactly this way, the three of them crowded into a too-small bathroom above a restaurant.

“My wife is dead,” he heard himself say. It felt like his head was full of cotton. “And my daughter died. A week ago.” The words to explain what happened withered on his tongue. “She was about your age. I think she was about your age.”

“I’m sorry.” Her fingernail touched the back of his hand for a just a moment. “My son was—he got sick.” She looked like a teenager when she shrugged and bit her lip. “His father—my son was just a baby, you know? And he was—he was a good baby. He’s buried in the cemetery on the other side of town. North. Near Dunwoody.”

“It’s nice there.”

“Lots of trees.” They looked every place in the living room except each other’s faces. She cleared her throat again. He pushed himself to his feet, and they both heard his knees pop. “You can stay for a little while,” she said. A small smile almost made it to her lips. “We can watch television. I’ll translate all the commercials for you.”

He plopped down and stretched his legs in front of him. “Thank you.”

BUST

Quentin Vaughn said he would be my boyfriend if I could bust a board with my fist. He sat alone on the steps in front of the gym, leaning on his tuba case. None of his friends were there, so he let me talk to him. He told me about those old kung fu movies his uncle let him watch. “These guys can bust boards and stuff with their heads and their fists like—” He punched his tuba case, and it wobbled. He caught it before it could land on the asphalt. “It’s cool.”

I asked him if he liked girls who could do that kind of thing, and he shrugged.

I asked him if he wanted a girlfriend who could bust a wooden board with her fist, and that’s when Quentin Vaughn said it.

Now, I had asked Quentin Vaughn to be my boyfriend every Friday since third grade, and he had said “no” for four years, even when he didn’t have a girlfriend. Most of the time, he could be really nice about it. I saved up jokes to tell him for those moments after school when we were alone, waiting for our parents. I could make him laugh the kind of laugh that sounds like a cough. One time, without any warning, he unpacked his tuba and played it. He had no skill; he filled his cheeks and blew into the mouthpiece, abusing the notes. I asked him to be my boyfriend then, even though it wasn’t a Friday, and he said, “I’m not that good.”

Sometimes, though, he was mean about it. I've been ignored in homeroom. I've had spaghetti dumped over my head. I've been tripped. And I've been "Piggy" the whole time.

I knew he only said he would be my boyfriend now because he didn't think I could do it. He didn't realize I really *could* bust boards with my fist. In fact, I could bust boards with my head or my foot if I wanted, but I was especially good at doing it with my left hand. I've been able to bust wood for as long as I can remember. I didn't have to practice, and I didn't have to show off like some of the kids who took karate lessons and did demonstrations during assemblies. I only had to draw back my arm and wait for the hot sting of power to snake its way from my shoulder to my fingertips. I could destroy trees and walls, but I kept it a secret. It was enough for me to just know I could do it.

At least, it was enough until Quentin Vaughn said what he said about letting me be his girlfriend if I could bust a piece of wood with my fist.

He had band practice again the next afternoon. I brought a wooden board the size of a shelf from home. It didn't fit in my locker, so I had to tuck it under my arm as I walked the halls. During my classes, I felt all that wood-busting power tingling in the back of my neck. My pencils snapped in two when I tried to write with them.

After the last bell, I raced through the halls, my board banging against my shins. I found him outside the gym, waiting, but not alone. There were friends with him. I didn't care. Goosebumps dotted the skin on my left arm. I took a deep breath and announced, "I can bust this with my fist."

His friends snickered, but I ignored them. I looked Quentin Vaughn in the eye as I offered him the board. “Someone has to hold this.”

He rolled his eyes and leaned his tuba case against the steps. He took the wood without touching my hands. “Okay, Piggy.” He gripped the board with both hands and stretched his arms in front of him. “Do it.”

I didn’t have to concentrate or find my center or anything like that. It was easy. I curled my fingers into a fist and rolled my left shoulder. I noticed the flesh-colored bandage wrapped around Quentin’s index finger. The white-hot power rushed to my elbow, and I imagined shoving my knuckles through that board. The splinters would mingle with my blood, but my fist would keep going, slicing through Quentin Vaughn’s chest, cracking his ribcage, and exploding his heart. I took a step back when I felt the prickling in my fingers.

“It’s Penny,” I said. I took back my board and tucked it under my left arm. I walked away from Quentin Vaughn and his tuba and his friends with that hot sting of wood-busting power pooling, then burning in the palm of my hand.

EVIL TWIN

Ebony was born at midnight on New Year's Eve. Her parents, the doctor, and the nurses cheered. Ebony's sister, Carla, was born five minutes later. One of the nurses almost dropped her.

When they were three years old, their parents dressed them in matching jumpers and drove them to the university for their first twin study session. Women wearing nametags and teddy bear scrubs let them put together puzzles and play with black and white blocks. They ate lunch then played with other sets of twins. Two brothers tugged on Ebony's and Carla's pigtails. Ebony pushed one boy and kicked the other while Carla watched and clutched her ears.

Ebony learned to read and write before she entered kindergarten. Carla did not. In the first grade, Ebony wrote a story about a little girl who likes to feed kittens. Meanwhile, Carla still struggled to understand the large print in her storybooks.

One time Ebony stuck her foot out and tripped the fourth grade teacher. Blood slipped from the corner of the teacher's mouth when she pushed herself to her feet, and all the children laughed. Except Carla.

Ebony started her period in the seventh grade. Carla did not. Ebony could read the letter chart at the optometrist's office from top to bottom. Carla could not; in fact, she couldn't read below the third line from the top.

In high school Ebony and Carla both dated a boy named Doug. He made plans with one of them without really caring which one he actually took to the movies. When it wasn't her turn, Ebony did her homework then watched television until she fell asleep. When it wasn't her turn, Carla sat up in bed, waiting for them with an open book resting on her lap. "He always wants to go Dutch," Ebony complained. She gave Doug to Carla as a graduation present. "Enough is enough. He's all yours."

After high school ended, Ebony decided to work on cars salvaged from the junkyard and not accept any scholarship offers. Carla had no offers because she didn't think to apply to college.

For five years, the twins had been sharing a two-bedroom apartment in Decatur, GA, on a strip of highway lined with car dealerships and gas stations. Ebony paid the rent, and Carla paid for the utilities. Ebony ate at diners and fast food restaurants with the other mechanics, but Carla made salads and pasta for both of them anyway. Most nights, Carla lay on the couch, caught in a tangle of sheets and waiting for Ebony.

If she had to wait too long, she couldn't stop herself from picturing all the ways in which a car accident could mangle her sister's body. She imagined Ebony decapitated, or nearly decapitated, run through by a log, squashed flat beneath the tires of a truck, shredded by the glass of her own windshield.

"You know you shouldn't worry so much," Ebony said the moment she walked through the door.

"Who's worrying?" Carla sat up and sniffed. "Did you drive yourself? You smell like beer—"

Ebony yawned. “It’s gin. It got spilled on my shirt. Yes, I had a drink, but no, I wasn’t too drunk to drive. Okay?” She leaned forward to press a kiss on Carla’s forehead. “You should try sleeping in your bed. I’m pretty sure it’s more comfortable than the couch.”

“I saved you some din—” Ebony shut herself in her bedroom. Carla watched her sister’s shadow cut across the light seeping from beneath the door. She checked her watch. Her shift at the boutique started in three hours. Carla already had her blouse and skirt draped across one of the bar stools. She had hidden her underwear under the skirt and stuffed her pantyhose into the toes of her pumps. She pulled the sheets over her head.

In the morning, Carla carefully opened Ebony’s bedroom door and tip-toed into the bathroom. In the mirror she could see her sister lying on her belly, her hands gripping the sides of the mattress. Ebony grit her teeth and mumbled in her sleep.

After her shower, Carla wiped away the fog on the bathroom mirror. She brought her face close to the glass. Carla thought she looked like Ebony making a sour face, or Ebony recovering from an illness. Carla’s skin seemed ashy, and she had to rub lotion into her lips so they wouldn’t turn white and crack. She and Ebony were only identical when Carla smoothed nut-brown foundation into her forehead and dusted her cheeks with blush. She and Ebony only matched when Carla wore a push-up bra. Carla was the one who had freckles dotting her shoulders and back. When they were little girls, she had Ebony scratch at those freckles. She could have sworn they were chicken pox or

mosquito bites. “Keep itching them,” she would command. Ebony got a spanking when their parents noticed her scratching the skin off Carla’s shoulders.

Ebony sat up abruptly. “Carla, why are you in my bathroom?”

Ebony boasted she could “pimp” any ride when people asked her what she did for a living. Carla had a hard time explaining the ins and outs of folding panties and negligees. It took her two years to learn how to work the cash register. She hated up-selling. When Carla started her sales pitches, her voice wavered, and her eyes burned. “It’s—it’s my—my allergies,” she stammered if her customers stared at her.

Now, she leaned against the counter, watching the only other person in the store, a woman in a red coat pick through the silk robes and make the hangers squeak across the racks. The woman looked up suddenly as if Carla had made a noise. When Carla smiled in her direction, the woman shook her head.

“Okay,” Carla muttered. Before she could start picking at her fingernails, the bell above the door jingled. She squinted, then her face brightened when she recognized the man’s gait. “Hey, Doug.”

“Is it possible for one person to be two places at once?” He looked the same way he did in high school; his skin never cleared. He waited too long to get a haircut, and his thick, curly hair looked dusty under the soft glow of the store lights. He draped an arm across her shoulders and kissed her cheek. “Think your sister felt that?”

“Why aren’t you at work?”

“Bank holiday.” The woman glared at them, clutched her purse, and left. “What was her problem?”

Carla shrugged. “Beats me.”

“And where are your glasses?”

Carla pushed his arm away. “I don’t need my glasses. I’m not driving.” She licked her lips. “You haven’t come around here much anymore. Have I gotten that boring?”

“Never. You know how it is. Accounts and balances. I wanted to tell you, though: I’m having a party—not this Friday, but the next.”

“What are you celebrating?”

He shrugged now. “It’s just a party. Do you think you and Ebony could make it?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not even going to ask her?”

“I think I know my own sister,” she replied. The bell above the door jingled again. “Call me when you can tell me more.”

In the tenth grade, Carla lost her virginity to Doug. That night he told Carla he loved Ebony more than anything. “Ebony is so…” He searched for the right word. “She’s so *cool*,” he decided. Carla nodded, and he gave her a strange look. “Does it bother you when I say stuff like that? I know Ebony would be pissed off if I mentioned you when we were together.” Carla had already taken off her top. She already knew

Doug wouldn't think about mentioning her if he were with Ebony. "I'm okay," she assured him.

When Carla later discovered Ebony had never let Doug do anything more than fumble with her bra, she cried for hours and wouldn't speak to Ebony or Doug. For two weeks, Carla felt as if she'd lost her house key. She walked the halls of their school with her hands shoved in her pockets; she couldn't take four steps without looking over her shoulder. Finally, one night Ebony climbed into bed with Carla and whispered, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you." She draped her arm over Carla's stomach and fell asleep with her face nestled in Carla's neck. That ended the only rift between the two sisters.

Sometimes, after work, Carla couldn't resist the urge to clean her sister's room. She could see Ebony's oil-stained jumpsuits strewn all over the carpet no matter where she stood in the kitchen or the living room. When she cleaned, she found Ebony's secret life: tissues with lipstick smudges, condom wrappers, ripped theater stubs, half-full coffee mugs, carbon copies of invoices, phone numbers scrawled on napkins, matchbooks, frayed shoelaces. She threw out most of the evidence, but she hoarded a few pieces.

After she put everything in order, she pulled back the coverlet and eased herself into the center of Ebony's bed. She tried to fit her head in the dent in the pillow, and she inhaled the scent of her sister. Ebony smelled like sweat and gasoline, no matter how often she dusted her skin with perfumed powder from the cosmetics counter.

If she didn't fall asleep, Carla flipped through the pages of Ebony's journal. Her sister's handwriting was tiny and precise; she wrote in all capital letters. There were gray

smudges on the lined pages of her notebook. Ebony wrote about petulant customers who disputed the charges for their repairs, and Carla pretended she, too, could tell people to take their business elsewhere. Ebony made lists of the foods that gave her indigestion: cheese, red meat, and anything with garlic. On some pages, Ebony wrote, “Carla, I know you’re reading this.”

Carla couldn’t help noticing the way the initial “D” had begun to leap from the pages. Ebony often crept out of the apartment in the hours before sunrise, tiptoeing past the couch where Carla slept. “She’s meeting D,” Carla thought when she heard Ebony close the door softly behind her. She imagined Ebony and Doug rekindling a love affair in those all-night diners. He hadn’t *really* asked about Ebony; Carla figured he’d been seeing enough of her sister to know exactly how she was doing.

Now she heard the clunk of Ebony’s car door. Carla scrambled out of her sister’s bed, smoothed the covers, and retreated to her own bedroom. She stood in front of her desk, holding her breath, waiting for Ebony to call to her.

“I know you’ve been in my room,” Ebony declared after she’d tossed her keys onto the counter. “Come out.”

Carla sighed and walked into the living room. She flopped onto the couch. “I wasn’t in your room, you know.”

Ebony unbuttoned her work shirt and tossed it onto the floor. “It’s sweet of you to say that. How was your day?”

After Doug left, a child had thrown up on Carla’s shoes. His mother didn’t apologize. “It was fine, I suppose. What did you do today?”

Ebony grinned. “Why don’t you wait until after I’ve written about it in my journal? We could save some time here.”

“Why would I want to read your boring old diary?”

Ebony yawned and rubbed her eyes. They looked red. “Oh, sister. It’s sweet of you to say that, too.”

Carla smiled. “I can make you some dinner. We could stay in tonight and watch some movies.”

Ebony sat on the floor to unlace her boots. She blew her bangs out of her eyes. “Thanks, but I’m probably going out tonight.”

“You seem to go out every night,” Carla observed. She could feel the corners of her mouth twitching. “I’m starting to think you have a secret romance.”

Ebony glared at her. “Grow up, Carla. I’m just going out. And don’t wait up. You’re going to mess up your back sleeping on the couch like that.”

“I like it.”

Ebony yanked off her boots and wriggled her toes. She sniffed her socks after she eased them off her feet.

“Your feet hurt,” Carla said.

Ebony nodded. “How do you work in those pumps all day?”

Carla couldn’t think of what to say. Ebony came home with motor oil trapped under fingernails and between the lines on her palms. On her first day on the job, she broke her coworker’s little finger after he grabbed her ass. And Carla felt like she

remembered what it was like to feel irritation and rage course throughout her body, to hear the echo of that small bone's snap in the garage.

The time she spent at the boutique blurred in her memory the moment she stepped into the street. "I saw Doug today. We're invited to a party next Friday."

Ebony rubbed her eyes again. "We'll see. I might have plans." She took a deep breath before she pushed herself up from the floor. "You're not wearing your glasses."

"I only need them for reading and driving." Carla had driven home without her glasses. The streetlights and brake lights glowed and throbbed when she leaned forward to peer through the windshield. She wanted to ask Ebony to sit next to her for just a moment, just so she could see her face. "And I don't like the way they make my face look."

When she was eight years old, Carla wanted, more than anything, to learn how to sew a dress. Ebony did not. Carla stripped all their dolls and laid them side by side on the floor in her bedroom. She found a needle and a spool of black thread on top of the bureau in their parents' room. She had to stand on the bed to reach them. She cut squares out of her sheets and jabbed at them with the needle, but she couldn't make a dress. "Your dresses are ugly," Ebony told her. She stood in the doorway of Carla's room. "They don't even have any sleeves or buttons or anything."

Carla gave up. She covered her face with her hands when she cried, and Ebony sat beside her and patted her back. "Don't cry, sister." The last time Ebony said something mean to her sister, she got a spanking for it. "Please don't cry," she pleaded.

Carla poked her sister's upper arm with the needle. The thread tickled Ebony's skin; she didn't cry. "Did that hurt?" Carla asked. Before Ebony answered, she stuck herself with the needle and winced.

The needle could either push deep into the fleshy part of her arm, or it could slip right under the skin. Carla closed and locked her bedroom door. She sat beside her sister again; she brushed Ebony's hair off her shoulder. "Hold still, Ebony." Ebony let Carla pinch bits of her skin and push the needle and thread right through; then she watched Carla do it to herself. Carla made six or seven tiny stitches, and they were sewn together, closer than they'd ever been. Ebony bit her lip. They couldn't see the blood staining the black thread, but it was there. "It hurts if we move," Carla told her sister. "You have to be still."

After a few minutes, they both started picking the thread out of their skin. Ebony left the room without a word; she gripped her arm where the stitches had been. Carla watched the blood droplets swell then slide toward her elbow.

It took the entire week and a half, but Carla convinced Ebony to go to Doug's party. "We've known him since we were girls. And you haven't seen him for an age." Carla winked when she said this.

Ebony raised an eyebrow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"What?"

"That wink. What was that?"

“Nothing.” Carla thought she could smell his cologne on Ebony’s work clothes. In high school, Doug soaked his skin in Brut when he didn’t feel like taking a shower; Ebony used to say she could smell him coming from the other side of the school. The scent that now clung to her clothes and her hair was crisp and light.

Ebony crossed her arms over her chest. “So, did Doug want us to call—let him know we’re coming?”

“I’m sure we can just show up. We’ve known him—”

“Yes, I know, we’ve known him forever. I’ll freshen up so we can go ahead and get this over with.”

Carla was already dressed. She sat on the couch and smoothed her skirt with her hands. Her glasses slipped down the bridge of her nose. She took them off and tucked them into her purse. She listened to the sounds her sister made behind her closed door. Ebony sang in the shower. Her muffled voice changed tunes as she pounded a beat on the shower door. And she kept singing as she pulled on her clothes, sprayed her perfume, and styled her hair. Carla could picture her sister smiling at her reflection in the mirror, happy. Carla checked her own face in her compact mirror. She brought the mirror close to her face, so close she could see the sprinkling of pores on her cheeks.

Ebony emerged from her room. “If you’re not going to wear your glasses, then I’m driving.”

Carla recognized two or three of the people standing on Doug’s patio. All of them seemed to glitter under the light of the moon and the red paper lanterns. And they all knew each other. They touched each other’s arms when they talked and threw back

their heads with laughter. Carla slipped her hand into Ebony's without noticing she'd done it. Ebony gave her an exasperated look, but she didn't let go. "This was your idea, remember," she whispered.

Ebony pretended to know a pair of women leaning near the food table. "I love your dress," she gushed. "Of course, I always love everything you wear." She turned to Carla, who could only stammer an agreement. She stood so close to Ebony, the skin on their arms stuck together in the Georgia heat. "Come along, Carla. We should go find Doug. Good seeing you again." Ebony patted one of the strangers' shoulders before she led Carla away.

They bumped into a man loudly telling a joke, and he spilled his drink down the front of Ebony's dress. She stared at him with her mouth gaping like a fish when he turned back to his audience. "Carla," she began, irritated.

"Ebony!" He came out of nowhere. Doug, drink in hand, hugged both of the twins. Carla thought his breath smelled sweet and spicy. He pulled back. He seemed to see through Carla, but his eyes darted from Ebony's hair to her hips. "You're all wet."

"Great party, Doug, but we've got to run." Ebony started toward the door, but Doug stepped in her path.

"But there are so many people I want you to meet." He grabbed her hand, and the three of them pushed through the clusters of people chattering at each other.

Ebony let go of Carla's hand so she could slap away his. "You've had too much to drink, and my dress is ruined, so—"

Doug picked a fork from the ground and tapped it against his glass. When no one paid attention, he smashed his glass against the cement. Carla curled her fingers into fists so tight her nails pierced her palms. “Hey, everybody!” Doug slurred. “Hey, everybody! This is Carla. And this—” He pointed at Ebony. “This is the only girl I ever loved. Ebony! And she—this one right here—gave me away to her sister. And now she’s marrying—what’s his name?”

Ebony’s eyes widened and glistened. “Doug, stop it. Don’t.”

He shook his head, trying to remember. “Danny, David, Danny, David—I don’t remember. What is it, Carla?”

Carla tried to make sense of the blurred faces around her. She could feel the strangers’ gazes burrowing under her skin. She opened her mouth to say, “We should go,” but the words pricked the back of her throat.

“And I’m setting them up with a *home* loan,” he announced. “Danny-David and Ebony—the only girl I ever loved. To their debt! Congratulations!” He looked at his hands. “Where’s my drink?” he muttered.

The noise of the party began to rise again. Ebony glanced at Carla. “Hey, sister? We should go home.”

Carla held her breath. Her voice trembled when she said, “We don’t know any Danny or David. You never mentioned anyone like that. Where would he even come from?”

Ebony reached for Carla’s hand. “We shouldn’t have come here. Let’s go.” She started explaining on the way home. Carla hadn’t heard her talk so much since they were

girls. Ebony and David worked together. He had always been there, even on the day when Ebony had snapped that mechanic's little finger. "And I wanted you to meet him. I was about to tell you everything. But I just wanted this one thing for me. Do you know what I mean? I wanted something that was only mine."

It had been Ebony's idea to keep the sewing a secret. She pressed adhesive bandages onto Carla's upper arm, and Carla did the same for her. "We'll get in trouble, and we won't be allowed to play together anymore," Ebony told her sister matter-of-factly.

The thought of being alone terrified Carla more than anything. She cried when their third grade teacher seated them on opposite sides of the classroom. When they were reunited, she tangled her fingers in Ebony's hair, just to make sure she was real. If Ebony left her for only a moment, Carla could feel herself disappearing into the walls and the floor. She brought out her needle and thread on the days when she could feel Ebony pulling away from her.

By the time they entered sixth grade, Ebony had a neat row of tiny scars on her right arm that matched the ones on Carla's left. When middle school started, Ebony nervously told her sister they shouldn't do it anymore. "I don't like it, Carla."

Carla shrugged. "Fine. Sometimes, though, it just feels like we're not close enough," she told Ebony matter-of-factly as she pinched their skin. "Now, just hold your breath, and it won't hurt as much."

Ebony left early to go to the garage, but not before she stood in the doorway of Carla's room and promised to bring David home. "I think you'll really like him."

Carla pulled the covers over her head. Her eyes burned. She had been awake the entire night, trying to figure out when exactly Ebony met her fiancé, how she could have gotten away with it.

Later that morning, she sat on the edge of Ebony's made bed. She surveyed her sister's bedroom. None of it felt familiar anymore. Ebony must have cleaned in the middle of the night. All her garbage was in the trash can, and she'd arranged all her toiletries into neat rows on the bathroom sink. The room smelled like cinnamon air freshener. Carla didn't see the diary anywhere.

When she finally stood, she noticed the tiny pink contact lens case open on the nightstand. It was still damp with solution.

**FIRE-DAMAGED TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH CLARA LEE BURKE
(LIFTED FROM RECYCLING BIN BEHIND LAREDO PUBLICATIONS)**

... you comfortable? Do you need a glass of water?

BURKE: I'm fine. How are you today, Belle? You look well. It was nice of you to wear make-up.

[...] *okay? Be nice.*

BURKE: This is nice. I'm doing you a favor here. I need to clear the air, sure, but you are [...] noticed the by-lines. Belle Caldwell delves deep into the world of celebrity cosmetics. "Who's getting fat?" That's good stuff.

Honestly, [...] too much to ask. All right? I am Belle Caldwell with Triumph Weekly. The date is November 23, 2003. I am interviewing Clara Lee Burke, who is a—who is a—

BURKE: You want to say "mistress to the stars" really bad, don't you? But they already called me that in [...] with something else.

What would you call yourself, given [...] to people who want to know [...] say to that?

BURKE: What do you mean [...] I never did anything [...] wouldn't do. I'm just like everyone else. What would it mean to you to have [...]

[...] *call it prostitution. I would call it that. No offense.*

BURKE: None taken. You and I were never [...] that's stupid. I'm going to trust you this once to do the right thing. Do you care if I [...]

Oh, it's fine. Help yourself. These days, how do you keep people from [...]

BURKE: Funny thing about that. My address is listed wrong in the phone book. Off by a letter and a number, maybe a couple of letters and a couple of numbers, just plain wrong. [...] to correct it. As far as I know, it's an empty space, no place.

Don't you have friends?

BURKE: Oh, you're coming from that angle, all soft and human interest. Don't try to redeem me—or yourself, for that [...] to the point. You want to know all about [...]

Fine. You're right. Tell me, tell everybody: how did you meet them, all of those men?

How did you [...]

BURKE: Lure? You make me sound like a spider. I'm not a spider.

What would you say you wanted [...]

BURKE: I have a dumb, plain name. Clara [...]. A person with a name like that isn't trying to make it big. Clara Lee Burke. I would say I wanted [...], like I was saying before. I'm just like everyone else. Everyone needs love.

From the rich and powerful? From the famous?

BURKE: Yes.

[...] the same? What made each [...] special or unique?

BURKE: They were men. They are men. I don't think I understand what you're trying to ask. Shouldn't you start with easier questions [...] ask me where I'm from?

What were you doing before all of this started?

BURKE: I never really stopped doing what I was doing, at least, not in the beginning. First [...] and they make you snip the fat with these scissors that look like they were

made for construction paper. They were sharp, but they didn't work, so those of us in the kitchen had to tug on all this poultry flesh with our hands and it got under our nails and [...] Pretty gross stuff.

I agree.

BURKE: So, after a few months of that, I get moved to the front of the house, and I get this [...] costume—red checkered dress, a little matching cap, a name tag. I still have the name tag from that place; it says, “Irving.”

Is that where you were working when you met [...]?

BURKE: Sure. Now, it wasn't this—I don't know, pivotal or important—moment. He shoved his way through the door at closing time. Yes, I knew who he was, and, no, I did not care. That's the problem with [...] They treat being a normal human being like it's a day at the carnival. They get to watch; they get to perform. I hate that shit. So, I told him. I said, “Hey, we're about to close. No burgers, no fries.” [...] looked like he wanted to take a picture of me in my grease-stained, checkered dress. I mean, I even had the pit-stain thing going on—

Gross. Where was this?

BURKE: This is Brooklyn, and I would say it's, like, summer 1986. And here's what you have to [...] saw them everywhere. I mean it. Everywhere. I could tell you what kind of day I would have by which one I saw on the street. Seriously. [...] Turner? Oh, it's going to rain shit that day. Billy Idol? Someone was going to buy me a drink. The best days were the ones when [...] or someone from a cop show. Actors on cop shows are tops. Once I saw the Stray Cats, and that was confusing because I found a twenty on

the sidewalk, but I also almost got hit by a car. Anyway, I saw them, but I usually didn't speak. That was the New York way, you know? [...] care.

Now, when you met [...] only 16?

BURKE: It *is* sick if you think of it like that. No, though, I had to work. I had to be a grown-up about things. Don't you hate people who say things like, "She's old for her age," or some such nonsense? I hate that phrase, but that's what I was. Old for my age. [...]

BURKE: Your story would be more interesting if I were an orphan, wouldn't it? Do you want me to say they're dead? I'll bet, when they saw me on the news, when they hear about me, they wish they were. I bet [...] I would at least change my name, leave off the surname, I mean. They wanted me to be [...]

What did you want to be?

BURKE: Left alone.

I meant, when you grew up.

BURKE: Manager of something. Head waitress. I wanted to make a living, you know. Leave home and make enough money to take care of myself and a small animal. I started with a fish, and now I have a puppy.

You've made it then?

BURKE: I think we were talking about my jobs—about the way things were. [...] rude.

My apologies. New York, 1986. You meet [...] at closing time. Go on, please.

BURKE: He comes in, and I'm rude. I'm Irving, and I'm rude, and he says, "Please." That's it. That's all he says. "Please." So, I make him some eggs—my specialty—and

he invites me to sit down while he wolfs them down. They like all the grease, the way food can get soggy under the weight of its own grease.

What did [...] in common? Obviously the two of you led [...] lives before that night.

BURKE: [...] very different lives *now*. Books [...] volumes as old as—I don't know what. I didn't have anything to do with all of that. [...]

And you did realize he was married?

BURKE: You know, I don't think I like [...] questions as if you can't understand [...] perfectly clear what was going on to the whole world. [...] was married, and that was half the fun for him.

And you? Did you care?

BURKE: No. [...] about that? I did not [...] or anything else. I only wanted to get the rest of the closing work done and go home. Point blank. Simple. That night, I just wanted [...] stupid conversation about *Don Quixote* [...] thing: someone put this guy under the impression that waitresses are dumb. But think about it. How smart do you have to be to stretch a \$10,000 a year salary?

How long did the [...] last? That is, [...]

BURKE: Two years. Two and a [...] before the worst of it started with him. A little after, too. [...] these bloodshot eyes [...] even seen cocaine before that—and what was I—a little bit over 18 years old—and I'm dealing with this stuff—

And waiting tables still?

BURKE: It was a good job. It was my work. He wanted [...] changed about being manager, head waitress. That could have been me. I could be that [...] even with his

money, I could do that. I knew I could. [...] sharing an apartment with a friend of my mother's, Fran—and she was this great person, just a lovely human being—and [...] I didn't tell her [...] I carried on—she called it “carrying on”—with [...] right under her nose. [...] never saw him running his fingers over the worn threads of our couch, daydreaming aloud about rescuing me from my own life. He wanted to teach me about [...] lent me paperbacks—*Gatsby*, Hemingway stuff, novels with [...] so worn the pages felt like cotton. I didn't have time to [...] I worked the later shifts. And I don't like books.

And what about the drugs?

BURKE: Listen to you: And what about the drugs? [...] sordid details. You know what, Belle? I always wanted to compare you to Lois Lane. I always wanted to be interviewed by Lois Lane. She is a real reporter [...] the drugs, she'd use this brisk, tough-as-nails voice, and I'd know—it's like she would ask hard questions for the good of Metropolis. You only want to know so you can see if you're better than me.

Damn it, can't you just, for once, treat [...] I'm trying to be professional—

BURKE: Oh, I didn't realize. Okay, okay, ask again, ask again.

[...] *drugs. Did you do them with him?*

BURKE: [...] fact: Rock stars don't do as much blow as you'd think. Except [...] do three things—smack, books, and me. Maybe four if you count his music—smack, books, music and me. Wasn't that clever? Did you [...]

You know I can't use that if you want to “clear your name.”

BURKE: We'll strike it from the records then. And just so you know, the restaurant didn't give drug tests. Do with that [...]

Was it only about the money? Did you feel any affection for him at all? Did [...] him?

BURKE: In my way. I got through the first 50 pages of almost all those books.

In the end, what happened?

BURKE: [...] go away. Leave me alone. [...] had to break my heart. His words, not mine. [...] wife was having a baby, and he had to get out of all that stuff. Can you believe that? He thought of me as stuff, something he could [...] broke my heart a little. Nothing \$30,000 couldn't cure. You can't believe I said that, can you? Want to strike that one, too? I want to strike [...]

You're saying [...] because he didn't want to break your heart? How do you expect anyone to believe that? Or, rather, what was it that made you worth it?

BURKE: Maybe I'm a witch.

You have to admit [...] about money and greed.

BURKE: Think about it this way. Is it at all possible to love two things at once? It is, isn't it? How about three or four? [...] no problems at all, loving individual members of our families, each in a different way. It's easy. You don't even have to think about it. I loved him, and I loved his money. Two things at once. Does that make sense?

No. I think you're saying you accepted money in exchange for your silence. That's blackmail. Didn't that seem wrong to you?

BURKE: Do you remember when you wanted to be my friend, Belle? [...] different times, I know, but [...] Funny, now you're [...] mean, we could have had coffee or something. I can afford to treat.

[...] *just respond to the* [...]

BURKE: He didn't ask for my silence. That's what everyone keeps getting wrong. I didn't make any deals [...] understand about men like [...] every last one of them that came after [...] The key is to make the whole lot of them think I don't want anything from them. Except love.

Again, is that all you wanted [...] *ended?*

BURKE: Maybe it was all I wanted. I liked [...] even when he [...] good time. And I liked the \$30,000 he gave me after he found out how old I was on the night we met. I thought I'd never love anybody again. Isn't that worth something? I think [...]

If [...] *do with all the money?*

BURKE: I opened a bank account. I used to keep my money from waiting tables [...] all these cute spots; sometimes I hid my cash so well I couldn't find it myself. Not until it came time to do the laundry anyway. Yeah, I opened a bank account at [...] idea how it worked. I dressed up like it was Sunday or like it was a funeral. I wore a black dress with buttons up the back and shoes with heels. They were a size too big, so I stuffed toilet paper [...] wore a hat with a real feather. I put on make-up, but I just had lipstick, some pink stuff someone left in the diner. [...] grown-up and beautiful [...] pride. You know? Pride in myself. I had [...] take a picture of [...] I felt like I'd earned something.

But you hadn't. Not really.

BURKE: I said I *felt* like I had. Thirty-thousand dollars. I could have done anything I wanted to do. [...] the rent. I had a checkbook [...] Fran and I thought about moving away. We worried about camera people—we thought of them just like that, too. Camera people. Monsters. [...] wondered if they would try to break the locks, snap pictures of us in our sleep. Or take the money back. I kept working here and there. They fired me from that diner [...] had to turn in the uniform. No more “Irving.”

Did you hear from [...] again?

BURKE: No. Once it’s over, it’s over. I suppose you could say [...] me off. I bought a couple of his albums. I framed the cover art, broke the records. [...] promised myself I’d read some of the books he left at my place [...] never could get through an entire novel.

[...]

BURKE: Oh. Him. I wish you wouldn’t [...] You’re getting greedy [...] not letting me tell it the way I need to—

Why did you [...] of 4.8 million dollars?

BURKE: [...] being such a bitch

[...] *blackmail?*

BURKE: I don’t think I like your tone, Belle. I am trying to do you a favor here. I don’t have to [...] Rephrase your questions.

Am I a little too Lois Lane for you, then?

BURKE: Yes. It’s scary.

Well, back to the old way. Tell me about how you met [...] Please. And not because you're a bad person who needs to explain herself—or try. Tell me because I'm so very interested.

BURKE: Good girl; that's more like it. [...] met in the airport.

Still in New York?

BURKE: And still the 80s. It didn't take long to run out of money, especially since Fran got sick. You know, I lived with her for all that time, since I was 13 years old, and it never occurred to me to ask her [...] she was or what she wanted to do with herself. And as she slipped away [...] of all the things she used to do for me started to slip away, too. [...] just gone, nothing left of my very best friend in the [...] I think—yes, I think by the time I started working at the airport, she had passed away. Yes. Yes, she had. I thought it was funny how the hospital kept sending bills after she was gone. What was the point?

What did you do at the airport?

BURKE: I cleaned. I wanted to be a security guard [...] walking around with pepper spray or a club or something [...] shiny name tag with my last name on it. Real tough, you know? But I didn't have any experience, and, to be honest [...] I became a janitor. And I can tell you, for a little while, I thought [...] best job I ever had. I'm serious. How clean can a place be when there are always people racing through gates, all nervous and sweaty? I spent a lot of time leaning against the mop in the ladies' room or thumbing through fashion magazines. I got paid for that.

Get to the moment when you met [...]

BURKE: [...] waiting for a delayed flight. He wasn't that big of a deal then; he had about a year until then—so no private jets, no bodyguards. I watched him trying to bend his body into one of those chairs in [...] winter, so people could use their coats as pillows, but he had this stupid, stupid leather jacket [...] swept under his feet to get a closer look. Now, [...] understood how he wasn't that big a deal. [...] like, "Do you *mind*?" I love it when people who are only kind of rich say stuff like that. "Do you *mind*?" And I laughed at him.

Do they like that? Do you think that's what it was?

BURKE: Sure, Belle. You can add that to the formula. You can teach [...] how to snag a television star in 30 days or less.

Ha ha.

BURKE: Anyway [...] pretended I didn't recognize him. [...] sir, I just need to sweep up under here before my boss gets on my case. It's late, and I only want to get home." And that was true. I'd bought this lizard after [...] died, and I could stare at it for hours—[...] better than sleeping [...] moisten its eyeballs, flick out its tongue to catch the crickets. I called it Doris Forbes [...] telling him all about Doris Forbes while I'm leaning against my broom. It's so late it might as well be morning. [...] go ahead and sit down next to him, take a breather. I don't think he was as into costumes as [...] We had coffee from a vending machine while he waited for his flight. [...] stand up the whole time to look like I was at least trying to work. You know, I really wasn't a very good janitor. [...] He promised to call when he got back in town. And he did.

How long did you have to pretend [...]

BURKE: If we're going to talk about honesty, you can't make it seem like [...] that he liked being obscure. His best performance to date—regular Joe, guy off the street spending a little time with some girl off the street. [...] for sure I didn't watch his show, you know what he told me he did for a living? He said he worked at a pet shop. Oh, yeah. He said he worked at a pet shop, but he screamed like a woman when he saw Doris Forbes hanging on to the lamp shade. [...] no bigger than my forearm, sweet little thing. For a lizard. And he's like [...] We stayed in most of the time [...] told me because he didn't have a lot of money, but I knew [...] couldn't risk it. And I could never [...] told me he had a roommate who [...] have to humor people sometimes.

And how long did this one last?

BURKE: [...] wasn't like [...] Not at all. Sure, no cocaine, and he wasn't married, but—actors, you know? What's worse, his show became this phenomenon. It had been about three, maybe four months. It's like one Wednesday night, everybody in America turned on their TVs at the same time, and his train wreck happened to be the thing they wanted to watch. So he had to tell me. Are you ready for this?

Okay.

BURKE: [...] sudden, "Let's go out and celebrate, Clara." So, we go to this French place—and I know it, I've been there before with [...] they have great [...]—or maybe I worked there. I don't know. Anyway, I get dressed up—that same thing I wore for my first trip to the bank—and he gave the cab driver a huge tip for dropping us off, like, a block away from [...] a couple of girls rush up [...] patiently signs autographs, shakes hands, but doesn't look me in the eye. I don't say one word because I know I'll just bust

out laughing. Why would he think I was that stupid? I couldn't figure that out. Why would he [...] not the only one like that, the ones who think there's something sexy about a woman who's living under a rock with a lizard. Or I guess they think [...] whole world is something they can [...] shape like clay or dough, and a woman like me, a janitor or a waitress [...] or a toy in a game.

So, why did you indulge him?

BURKE: The going rate for a toy isn't that bad. Anyway [...] middle of another course, and he's waiting for me to ask how he's going to afford this [...] fan goes, "I love your show, I love your show. May I [...] I just sit there. [...] whatever. [...] leans in, and it looks like his nose'll catch fire from the candle on the table [...] says, "Clara, I've been lying to you about who I am." Dun dun dun! [...]

And how did you react?

BURKE: [...] so understanding. [...] all really started right then, in that restaurant. It wasn't [...] and his \$30,000. I wasn't Clara Lee Burke, celebrity hand bag, when I was with [...] a career out of being nearly invisible. Remember that game, the book [...] Waldo? [...] look at me. Flat, brown hair. [...] nose from when I broke it. Unpainted fingernails—you can even tell I chew on them. My eyes are a little small for my head. I blend into backgrounds [...] wallpaper of life. I think [...] being with me—plain, dumb Clara Lee Burke—made him feel like a human being, like he could be *deep*. He liked that word. Deep. [...] regular woman like [...] talisman or something.

Did he know anything about your romance with [...]

BURKE: [...] long as we're being honest, I should let him know. I told him. Not, mind you, on the same night as the French restaurant confession. I certainly didn't want to stop the show. When I did tell him, though, about [...] money, I saw this little light [...] had it all figured out. I had a few things figured out, too. [...] You know, when I was a janitor at the airport, I never knew on which day I would walk into a restroom smeared with crap. [...] are disgusting. People in a rush are even more disgusting. Sometimes mean. It's one thing to [...] quite another thing.

So, you didn't want to be a manager or head waitress anymore?

BURKE: [...] dignity. It's just airports are so [...] disgusting.

When [...] leave you 4.8 million dollars, or did it happen a different way?

BURKE: [...] didn't want me living in that "ratty" apartment. Don't finger-quotes drive you crazy [...] always want me to move, but I'm going to stay there. I'm not buying any more stuff. Just animals. I like my place. It's clean. It's familiar. It's mine. And the rent is paid up for the rest of the year. I don't need anyone to save me from myself.

Any of them ever try to buy you a house in Beverly Hills or something?

BURKE: Sure. Things are different now. I say, "No, I'll just take the money." Payment for services rendered.

[...] sexual services?

BURKE: You're so filthy, Belle. I'd forgotten that about you. [...] what needs to be cleared up with everybody. I am not Heidi Fleiss. I don't run a brothel. That's so [...] I'm not going to go to jail. I didn't do anything wrong. I was a good girlfriend. Those are harder to come by than you think.

I don't believe you. You know there's more to it than that. Everybody knows [...]

BURKE: [...] because they're famous? You won't get anywhere if you keep thinking that way, if you make yourself believe there's something in a person that makes him better, like he deserves to have a woman who has never scrubbed shit. [...] I can keep secrets, too. Like a friend. An air-tight friend. Is that what you want to hear? Because I have secrets, but no proof. They weren't interesting enough to write down.

[...] *death of [...]* *feel about that?*

BURKE: I guess this is where we start running into problems.

He gave you [...] dollars last year. Alone. Now, he's dead.

BURKE: I know what people are saying. Makes a great story, doesn't [...] I thought saw Robert Smith at a deli the day after [...] so I knew things weren't going to go well for somebody. [...] heard about it on the news. That's how important I am in the end. Weddings, funerals [...] have to hear those things on the news, locked up in my apartment with Doris Forbes and Kitty Kitty and Judy [...] just like a regular person. Only richer.

[...]

BURKE: No, I never name the fish. [...] nothing at all to do with it. He wasn't upset with me when the accident happened. [...] already forgotten about his time in my dinky apartment. I was already with [...] tours of the "old world." [...] always called it that and sounded ridiculous. "We are going to old country." The past is the past. Can't go belching it up because part of it dies. I'll bet [...]

You could have at least pretended [...] taken a break from your—from your job.

BURKE: Why?

Don't you feel awful for keeping the money?

BURKE: Would you? Would you feel awful? Tell the truth, Belle. Would you feel guilty if someone rewarded you for being yourself? [...] making a living [...] easy as that?

No. I don't suppose I would.

BURKE: There you go.

[...] going to do now? Everyone knows about you. You can't be [...]

BURKE: That's fine. I'll do more of these—interviews in cafes—until no one cares anymore. You can watch. [...] with the windows closed. [...] anybody from a certain corner at my place. [...] better that way. I'm not lonely anymore. [...] to be me.

But you don't have any friends.

BURKE: Except you, Belle Caldwell. Nothing like a friend who gets paid to keep company with me.

Well, you know how it is. All in a day's work.

BOOKEATER
For Stephanie and Crystal

Nora More couldn't remember the title of the first book she ever ate, but she could recall the distinct flavor of its pages. Nora found it on a dusty shelf in a thrift store in Cleveland, Ohio. The store smelled like sweat and Elmer's school glue. At 19 years old, she could not be counted on to have more than three dollars in her pocket. And this novel—written by one of her favorite authors at the time—cost \$2.50 without tax.

She kept a stack of art history textbooks next to her nightstand, and she spent most days flipping through the pages and gazing at the pictures. Nora had dropped out of college to work on a fictionalized account of the life of Albrecht Duhrer. She wrote nothing. Once a month, her sister and literary agent, Elise, brought her groceries, and once a month, Nora threw a dinner party for her boyfriend and her friends.

After buying the thrift store novel, she had no money for even a cheap dinner at the diner. Her stomach grumbled as she flipped the pages. She had to read some paragraphs twice, and she forgot some of the characters' names for chapters at a time. In the book, a man and a woman married too young. The wife went crazy after they moved to the big city.

"They always go crazy," Nora grumbled. The light bulbs in her apartment hummed; they blinked when busses rumbled past her building, through the slush in the street.

In the book, the husband had an affair with a girl he later shot and killed.

“Wait, what?” Nora turned back a few pages, wondering if she’d missed something. Her refrigerator clunked when the icemaker spit cubes into the plastic tray in the freezer.

In the book, the wife tried to cut her husband’s lover’s corpse at the funeral. Then the wife befriended the dead girl’s aunt.

“I have no idea what’s going on.” The print blurred. She struggled to think of a way to make a meal out of salt, pepper, and a half-empty can of PBR.

Then, without thinking, she eased the title page away from the hardened glue binding it to the spine. She ripped off a corner of it with her teeth. The coarse paper melted on her tongue like a bland divinity with a mesquite aftertaste. She found where she left off in the novel and ate the pages after she finished reading them. By the time she climbed between the sheets on her futon, her stomach strained against the elastic of her pajama pants.

No other book would taste like that first one.

Now, Nora More tried not to remember the title of the novel she finished writing one year after she ate that book. *First Sin*. She wrote it in a feverish frenzy. She ignored calls from her boyfriend and her friends until they stopped calling altogether. She threw away the empty hardcover shells of the art history books she devoured. She could feel the texts transforming in her belly and pouring out of her fingers as they moved along her keyboard.

A critic from *Publisher's Weekly* called Nora's murder mystery a "predictable, pedestrian train wreck of a novel from a would-be phenom." It sold 500,000 copies.

"Just goes to show you," Elise said, "critics don't know everything." She volunteered to help Nora sort out the details of a movie deal. Her eyes darted over the document and she underlined an entire subsection. "You should negotiate for more than this, by the way."

"I suppose." Nora hadn't known *First Sin* was awful until after she read the reviews. She imagined she'd won some kind lottery, and her luck would run out soon. In the mean time, she could afford to live in a house in Columbus and eat at restaurants whenever she wanted. "Don't you want to change your clothes before dinner, Elise?"

"No." Elise wore the black pantsuit. Her matching shoes had heels as sharp as nails. If her feet ached, she never let on, and her heavy gold necklaces and earrings didn't seem to weigh her down.

Nora's worn red sneakers squeaked against the tile in her new kitchen. "I made us pasta—linguine with real sun-dried tomatoes in the sauce."

Elise scoffed and tapped the paper with her pen. "They can't be serious. You could wipe your ass with \$300,000—oh, pasta sounds great, sweets."

Elise didn't put away the contract until she pulled a marinara-stained strip of paper from between her teeth. "Nora, what is this?"

Nora shrugged. "Rushdie."

"What?"

Nora sucked a noodle into her mouth. "*The Satanic Verses*."

“I lent you that book. You said you didn’t like it.”

Nora shrugged again. “It’s good with this sauce.”

Elise straightened the stack of papers and pushed herself up from the table.

“Honey, I really don’t have time for this weird writer-artist stuff. I’ll wade through all your paperwork, but don’t invite me to dinner and feed me my own books. Okay?”

The movie version of *First Sin* received mixed reviews and made a modest profit at the box office. After it went to video, Nora More started writing under the name Zoila Carrere. Her publishers only asked her to pen two more novels after *First Sin*, but she managed four in two years. She wrote two historical romances. One took place during the Middle Ages, and she set the other in Chicago during Prohibition. She tried her hand at another murder mystery, and then she wrote her comedy of errors, *Eros Flamenco*. She became a novel-writing machine; she put out two books a year, without fail, for five years. And she hated almost every word on every page of every novel.

Still, her luck didn’t run out. At 29 years old, Nora More could be counted on to have no less than \$300 in her purse. “You’re number one again,” Elise announced as she folded her newspaper. “And your critics are—well, less harsh. That’s—” She watched Nora guide a steak knife across the page of a book with brown pages. “That one looks old. What is it?”

“*Beowulf*,” Nora answered absently. She set the knife aside, then peeled away the page and smelled it. “I bought it at auction. It’s almost a century old. It survived two World Wars and two fires, one in a London mansion and another in a private library in

Cincinnati.” She deftly folded the page into the shape of a crane and added it to the population of paper birds on her counter.

“And you’re making cranes out of it. Nice.”

Many of the birds displayed brown mildew speckles and fading type on their breasts and folded wings. A handful of birds, however, had little or no text slashing across their bodies. Nora called these her “chapter end” birds. “This edition was too moldy to eat,” she told her sister. She cut her finger on an unfinished crane. She sucked the blood from her fingertip.

“You’ve got quite a population here.”

“I’ll burn them.”

Elise rolled her eyes. “Have you even bothered to read it?” Nora frowned at her sister, and Elise apologized. “I’m sorry; I’m sure you’ve read *Beowulf* a million times. It’s just that I don’t see the sense in burning such an expensive investment.”

“Well, you wouldn’t.” Nora savored epics and early novels. She stored her rare hard covers and first editions in the basement on a shelf next to her wine rack. The *Beowulf* had had a rich feel; the thick, cream-colored pages seemed to rub off on her fingers like moths’ wings. She had wanted to spread those pages between layers of softened lasagna noodles and ricotta cheese. She had even matched them with the perfect wine, a pinot noir from 1990. She hurled the book against the wall when she noticed the sneaky black spots blooming on the corners of some of the pages. “Do me a favor, and get me that trash can from over there.”

Nora used her arm to sweep all of the birds off her counter and into the garbage. She struck a single match against the side of the box and dropped it into the flock of paper cranes. The birds curled into each other while bright orange sparks leapt into the air, escaped onto the floor, died on the countertops. Elise doused the flames with two glasses of water. “What a waste.”

Nora sighed. “It is a shame. The next one won’t go bad so quickly, though.”

It took Nora More a while to turn herself into Zoila Carrere. Before her first reading on BookTV, Nora dyed her hair a coppery shade of red. She found a pair of wire-rimmed glasses in a vintage shop and wore them on the tip of her nose. She wore no make-up, but she did pluck her eyebrows until the remaining hairs formed two straight, thin lines. She tried on a few accents, but she ultimately decided to make her regular voice soft and nasal. In interviews, she came off as shy, polite, and unimposing. Interviewers wondered aloud how a person like Zoila Carrere could write violent sex scenes and sensual death scenes. Nora usually chose that moment to stammer and blush.

Nora couldn’t talk seriously about her work unless she “did the Zoila Carrere thing,” as Elise called it. When she was alone with her sister, she called her work trash. “I don’t know why anyone buys any of it. I crap on paper, and I make a million dollars. And Melville wrote the great American novel, but he had to make it on his day job.” Nora More had eaten a first edition of *Moby Dick* along with a couple of paperback copies of *Billy Budd*. They needed no sauces or spices. “My work is crude. His is rich and lasting.”

“I’m sure he didn’t think you’d feast on his masterwork with a side of asparagus.”

Elise reminded her at least once a week how much money she spent on books.

Nora had five different copies of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* aging in her basement. One of the manuscripts was 188 years old—four volumes bound in burgundy leather. The cover smelled like aged Swiss cheese. Nora had ordered it from a seller in Alabama, a steal at \$1100.

She didn’t have to pay for her sixth and most valuable copy of the *Quixote*. She first saw her Bowle edition beneath a glass case in a university library in Texas. After giving a talk about her latest novel, *The Tarot Knight*, she scrubbed away Zoila Carrere for the day. She smeared light blue arches over her eyelids and applied sugar-pink lipstick. She wore a wig of long straight black hair over; the fine strands kept sticking to her cheeks and nose as she peered at the *Quixote*.

According to the display card, the three-volume edition of Cervantes’ masterpiece sparked scholarly interest in *Don Quixote*. She could imagine John Bowle, a bewigged nobleman, nestling in bed with this one novel, tenderly guiding his fingers over the text by the light of an oil lamp. She wanted it.

She hid in the stacks all evening, listening for the warning chimes that would clear out the students. She evaded the circulation desk managers and a security officer. She crept to the special collections office on the third floor and found the librarian scribbling at his desk. The light from the lamp made the rims of his glasses twinkle. He gave her an irritated look when she knocked on the door. “We’re closed,” he told her in a stiff voice. He didn’t move from his desk.

“I know.” She smiled and tucked her hair behind her ear. “I know, but I was wondering if you could do me a favor.”

He frowned. “Do I know you?”

“No.” She held out her palm. “I’m Nora.”

He stood and moved across the room to clasp her hand for a moment. He told her his name then he crossed his arms over his chest. “And you say want a favor?”

“I want you to show me the *Quixote*. The John Bowle one.”

“It’s downstairs. It’s on—” He faltered when he noticed the way her eyes lingered on his collar, the buttons dividing his breast, his round stomach, his crotch. “It’s on display. Downstairs. You can—” He cleared his throat. “You can see it any time during operation—operating hours.”

“I think I want to see it with my hands.” She took one step forward, and his eyes widened.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Nora closed the space between them and placed her hands on his shoulders.

“Please?” She nipped his ear with her teeth and whispered, “It’s just a book. I just want to see it.”

He fumbled with the key when they stood in front of the display. She planted kisses on his neck and collarbone. She smelled the book the moment he lifted the top off the case. Her 1818 edition smelled like cheese, yes, but this one—the scent of animal skin, of old ink—the scent of its vulnerability filled her nostrils. Nora covered her mouth

with one hand and reached for one of the volumes with the other. She traced the title on the spine with her fingernail. “It’s wonderful,” she said. Her voice trembled.

“It is. We’re lucky to have it.”

His voice seemed too loud. She kept hers low. “What do you think it’s worth?” She used her other hand to caress one of the pages; the parchment felt like warm, human skin. She recoiled; her hands curled into fists.

“Quite a fortune. There’s nothing like it—excepting the original.”

The security camera above the circulation desk, slowly nodded in their direction. “Close the lid,” she said as she tugged at his blazer. He was trying to protest when she pushed her tongue into his mouth.

They rushed behind the circulation desk, shoving aside metal carts loaded with returned books. She pulled down her skirt and draped it over the roving lens. Then she grinned at the librarian. “A little privacy, right?”

He made it easy for her. He kept his eyes closed the entire time she straddled him. She slipped his key ring over her middle finger, and he didn’t notice anything amiss—not afterward, not when she led him back to his office, not when she kissed him good night.

“You sure love books,” he said.

She shrugged. “I guess.”

“Do you want to stay while I lock up?”

“You know, I have to get out of here.” She smiled and pressed another kiss to his lips. “I’ll see you around.”

She left the display case open and empty, and she tossed his keys behind the circulation desk. She hid the Bowle *Quixote* under the bed in her hotel room. She couldn't sleep for the rest of the night; the volumes seemed to hum and chatter in the darkness. In the morning, she wrapped them in her camisoles and packed them at the bottom of her suitcase, along with her wig and her check from the university. By the time her limo pulled into the circle, she was Zoila Carrere.

She only let the volumes age for a week before she started eating off of them. Elise watched her sister pull spices from the cabinet. She asked, "How much did this one cost?"

Nora had shredded a single page from the Bowle *Quixote*. She added a tablespoon of olive oil to a skillet. "What?"

Elise took a sip of her wine. "How much did that book you've just destroyed cost? That page looks *really* old."

"The annotated Bowle edition of *Don Quixote* came into being in 1781, as a matter of fact." Nora chopped peppers and onions; they sizzled when she dropped them into the pan. She added the *Quixote* shreds to the mix and stirred them. "And it was a gift. It didn't cost me a thing, sister."

Elise arched an eyebrow. "Oh, really? Was it from the same admirer who gave you that first edition of *Tender Is the Night*?"

"No." She had lifted that one from a curator in Cleveland. He kept an impressive collection of first editions in his attic, and Nora had a devil of a time finding her way, in

the dark, from his bedroom and up the winding staircase. She let him keep her underwear. The Fitzgerald novel was valued at almost \$12,000.

“Okay. Was it the same person who gave you the autographed copy of *Gone with the Wind*?”

“That made a great white sauce—but, no.” She had never been with a woman before she met the librarian in Atlanta, who inherited the book from her grandmother, who had Margaret Mitchell sign the copy in the moments before a car struck down the author on Peachtree Street. The librarian stayed awake all night, watching Nora, who pretended to sleep. Nora had to steal the book and leave while her new friend was in the shower.

“Fine. Was it the one who gave you the Hemingway?”

Nora made a face. The former owner of her first editions of *A Moveable Feast* and *A Farewell to Arms* also owned a chain of hotels. He had thick gray hairs and wax clogging his ears. He didn’t believe in brushing his teeth or kissing on the mouth. He did believe in licking Nora’s face. She couldn’t bring herself to eat those books just yet.

“No, not that one either.” Nora didn’t look up from the cutting board.

“So you must have some loving friends—or some very adoring fans.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Do you think maybe I could meet some of them?”

Nora considered the question for a moment. “They’re the kind of friends whose names you don’t remember after one night.”

Elise shook her head. “How surprised and disgusted would I be if I asked you what you were willing to do for one of your dinner books?”

“I think you should be proud of me for saving money.” She winked at her sister. “For saving money and for being so generous.”

Elise downed the rest of her wine. “I keep telling myself to just mind the books,” she muttered. She wiped her mouth. “Just make sure you stay out of trouble.”

Before she could start writing a novel, Nora had to eat a chapter from a Toni Morrison paperback. She usually chose *Beloved* and mixed the ripped pages with oatmeal and raisins. This morning she made herself a bowl of Cream of Wheat with honey, butter, and strips of *The Bluest Eye*; she scraped it clean. Snowflakes drifted and stuck to her windowpane. Then she sat down in front of her computer, stretched her fingers, and started clacking away at the keyboard.

She wrote about an Alabama slave girl who falls in love with her master in the years before the Civil War. The slave girl is barely 14 years old, and the master is twice her age. He beats her because he, too, is beginning to fall—

“This is stupid.” Nora pressed the backspace button, casting her words back into oblivion. The central heating system came to life with a quiet hum.

She tried again. The master is twice the slave girl’s age, and he loves her. He does not beat her after all. He brings her gifts—

Nora pushed herself away from her desk.

She couldn't understand it. She had eaten at least five copies of *Beloved*. Some nights, she had Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Stein swimming in her stomach all at once. She added slices of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Boccaccio to her salads. When she ran out of Rushdie, Borges and Fuentes flavored her pastas. Sometimes, she could feel the words staining her intestines, the old ink coursing through her blood.

In the past three years alone, she'd slept with a man who could read Dante in the original Italian, another who tracked centuries-old artifacts all over the world. She'd seduced a woman who collected Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys adventure stories, another who translated the *Bhagavad Gita* into four different languages. They kept their books in special rooms; they organized their libraries according to their memories of the texts: "Here, Nora, is where I keep the books I read by flashlight. These are the ones my mother forbade me to read. This is the first book I ever bought. My grandfather left me this one." They all thought she was like them. Nora found the pages tasted even better when she knew someone had pored over them, searching for whatever it is people needed to find when they read and re-read books.

Yet she couldn't come up with anything more innovative than a slave girl in love with her master. The characters in all her novels were interchangeable stick figures. She knew this novel would turn into an anachronistic sex adventure with limp metaphors and gaping plot holes. And she knew she would tack on a twist in the end to avoid comparisons to the authors she aped.

The mutilated copy of *The Bluest Eye* lay on the floor, open and ready for her to dig more out of it. She left it there. She stuffed her hair under the black wig and pulled a pair of horn-rimmed glasses out of her sock drawer.

She drove too slowly. She sweated under her wig when she pulled onto the interstate. She cringed when the other cars swerved angrily to get past her. She turned down the radio. “Maybe the slave girl is actually her master’s half sister—and he *does* beat her because he knows it but still can’t help falling in love with—” She sighed. Now she’d started trying to peddle incest.

She squinted to read the signs leading to downtown Cleveland. She parked on the street and fished through her purse for quarters, dimes, and nickels to feed the meter. She almost slipped on a patch of ice on the sidewalk, and the near-tumble left her wig askew. Nora tightened the belt on her coat and pushed against the wind, toward the art museum. The wind seemed to yank the breath right out of her mouth, and her cheeks were so cold they burned. She could see the roof of the museum and the tops of the columns from the sidewalk. She had to hold her arms out to keep steady as she climbed the snow-covered hill.

She remembered this. Before *First Sin*, she only had a deep green Members Only jacket to protect her from the elements. It had an ink stain on the right pocket, and she couldn’t help fingering it. She had a real boyfriend then—a Case Western art student—and he bought her a pair of thick, yarn gloves from a college bookstore. Before Nora More started eating books, she and her boyfriend used to sneak lunches into the print exhibit. She secreted tuna salad sandwich halves in an old biology textbook with the

pages cut out. He hid his flask in his messenger bag. They squatted next to the Duhrer prints, their fingertips blue from the cold. “He was so great,” Nora said. She kept a photocopy of one of Duhrer’s self portraits in a frame on her kitchen counter.

“You’re such a freak.” It drove her crazy when he talked with his mouth full.

“Everything I write is going to be about him,” she declared. She eyed the woodcuts behind the glass. “Biographies, portrait studies, historical romances—”

He took another bite of his sandwich before he observed, “You haven’t started anything yet.”

Before she began eating books, she couldn’t press her fingers to her keyboard. She pleaded with her parents and her sister to believe in her and her work when they insisted she go back to the university. She almost bought her argument until she sat bored and cross-legged in front of her thrift-store typewriter.

Then, she had spent many afternoons at the art museum, but now between tours, book auctions, and novel-writing sessions, she didn’t have the time. Before this blustery afternoon, Nora hadn’t been to the museum since she had stolen the curator’s Fitzgerald. She tried to remember his face, the sound of his voice, but he was as dim in her memory as all the rest, even the art student boyfriend who talked with his mouth full.

The print exhibit housed Renaissance woodcuts and scriptures on vellum, but she couldn’t smell them. Security guards cleared their throats in her direction if she touched her fingertips to the glass of the display cases. Today she wanted to visit the page from the Gutenberg Bible. She couldn’t imagine what it would taste like. Perhaps the worn,

deteriorating parchment would turn to powder on her fingers, before she could bring her tongue to the ink. She hadn't tried to take it, even when she had the curator on his knees.

“Maybe the slave girl is a writer. The master is the one who taught her to read and write, and he doesn't know she has become master of his language. And maybe when he finds out he—” She reached the stairs of the museum entrance and stopped to catch her breath. The building loomed in front of her, a monumental tomb for the sculptures and prints behind its stone walls. In the summer, ducks and geese cackled at each other as they milled around the nearby pond. Now the snow blanketed the layer of ice on the water. She couldn't even hear any schoolchildren playing in the snow outside of the natural history museum next door.

Her boots crunched salt on the steps. She wondered where the rest of the people were. She felt a lump in her throat as she approached the trinity of small, heavy doors. She tugged one of the handles, and nothing gave. Closed. Her eyes focused on the damp sign stuck to the door: THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART IS CLOSED FOR RENOVATION. PLEASE VISIT US AGAIN WHEN WE RE-OPEN IN JUNE. WE APOLOGIZE FOR THE INCONVENIENCE. She stared at the sign for a full minute.

Behind that door, the exhibits rested in the dark; the sculptures, paintings, and prints waited to emerge with the warm weather. There were no windows on this side, so she couldn't even peer through her cupped hands to see this so-called renovation. What happened to the prints when there was no one to look at them?

The snow had already filled in her footprints on the hill. Now she could hear the hammering, the tinny whine of the electric drills. Signs directed her to a wooden tunnel.

Her breath hung on the air, and she could hear herself panting. She followed the tunnel and emerged on the other side of the museum. Security guards sipped from Styrofoam cups and laughed at each other's jokes. They looked out of place in front of the modern architecture, but they didn't seem to notice. They dusted snow off their shoulders.

Nora's first novel, the only one written under her name, had been out of print for five years. She had a perfect copy of it in her study. The spine had no creases; the pages had never been turned. Yet, the edges of those pages had begun to turn yellow, and she could never completely wipe away the layer of dust on the cover. She knew *First Sin* didn't deserve to be preserved under glass; she couldn't even stomach the idea of chewing on it, much less swallowing it. That single page from the Gutenberg Bible would remain under glass, though, long after the pages of her bodice-rippers and trash novels fell apart.

When she yanked off her wig the wind assaulted her bare head. One of the security guards glanced at her. She unlaced one of her boots and let the water and snow on the pavement soak into her sock. She wanted to see that page from the Gutenberg Bible, and she decided she wasn't leaving until she did. That fragment was worth more than anything she could write in three lifetimes. If she could get past the guards and the glass, the metal bars, she would gobble it in one bite.

She gripped the laces and swung her boot in a circle over her head. She saw the security guards rushing toward her out of the corner of her eye, but she couldn't stop now. She couldn't remember the title of the first book she ever ate, but she would

remember this one, the book-meal to end all book-meals—if she could get past the guards and the glass.

She let her boot fly.

A well-worn paperback copy of *Eros Flamenco* lay open on one of the desks behind the counter at the city jail.

They made Nora leave her wig on the ground in front of the side entrance of the Cleveland Museum of Art. One of the guards trampled on it.

“You look familiar,” one of the officers noted. Nora ignored her and dialed Elise’s cell phone number, with no luck. “I’m at the police station in Cleveland,” she began after the beep. She lowered her voice to whisper. “Bring one of my wigs.”

Her boot hadn’t even cracked the glass on the door of the museum, but she hadn’t helped her case when she kicked and punched the walls of the building. Her knuckles stung when she flexed her fingers, and she had to wipe blood onto her shirt.

She waited alone in her cell. She used her fingers to comb through her hair. She plucked a few of the strands and noticed her roots had turned dark brown again. After two hours, the officer unlocked the door. “You can go.” She squinted at Nora. “You really look familiar.”

Elise’s large, gold hoop earrings shone coldly under the fluorescent lights. She stood with her arms crossed, tapping her heel against the tile. None of the officers asked her to stop. She shook her head when she saw Nora; she still had her checkbook out. She began, “You know, all you had to do—all you *have* to do is—”

“Zoila Carrere!” Nora turned to see one of the officers behind the counter checking out the back of the book. Nora remembered posing for the black and white photograph on the cover. In it, she had attempted to look austere and thoughtful while petting a black cat she’d borrowed from the animal shelter. Her cheeks colored when she realized how stupid she looked in that picture. “You’re Zoila Carrere.” The officer looked like she wanted to say something else, but one of her coworkers shook their heads. “You look like Zoila Carrere,” she said.

“Oh. Thank you,” Nora said. Elise grabbed her by the arm, digging her nails into Nora’s skin. They rode in silence for half an hour. Nora wanted to ask about her own car; she’d only put in enough coins in the meter for a couple of hours.

“Do you know what I’m starting to think?” Elise gripped the steering wheel, and Nora could see her knuckles turning white. “I’m starting to think there’s something the matter with you. And it’s not just writer-artist stuff; there’s something really wrong.”

“You didn’t bring a wig.”

Elise shrugged. “I’m sorry, sweets, but I couldn’t find the time to get you a wig in the rush to get you out of jail.”

Nora stared out of the window while Elise continued. At one point, Elise smacked the dashboard with her palm. Nora thought maybe the slave girl in her new story wouldn’t be a slave girl at all. The slave girl is just a girl. And the girl loves someone she can’t have. Nora’s knuckles had begun to bleed again. She pressed the back of her hand to the window.

“Are you even listening to me?”

The girl in her story loves someone she can't have. "And it's killing her," Nora said aloud.