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In these six stories, I explore my belief that each of us, old or young, is constantly changing so much so that within a few years, we are hardly a reflection of our old selves. As children, we grow up under the shadow of an adult world. We are given a name and brought up in whatever environment we are born into. Decisions are made for us, and even the most creative expressions of our childhood are acted upon by an adult world. Likewise, as adults we are still subject to rules and regulations laid out by those mothers and fathers that have gone before us. I am most interested in the small, everyday moments in life where the child and adult world intersect. We are all, in a way, caught up in someone else's past decisions.

Also, no one goes through life as a stagnant being. We all change. It is the one element of being alive that unites us all. In these stories, I use memory and the past as a tool to discover how each of these characters has changed and either submitted to, or broken free from the decisions placed upon them by other people.

The storm is used in some pieces as a representation of the past and also the thing that unites everyone. The stories are told from many different perspectives in order to capture as many experiences as possible. Also, the stories contain elements of the fantastical in hopes of producing, for the reader, an effect of childhood creativity and innocence.

CHILDREN IN THE STORM

by

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This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty
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FLAT DADDY

Flat Daddy arrived through the mail in a box the color of dried walnuts. I don't know what I was expecting, exactly—maybe someone from the organization, a woman perhaps with her own Flat Daddy, delivering him by hand—but not a plain old worker with a plain old box. I was with Little Ian when the UPS man walked up the steps, dropped the box by the door, rang the buzzer, and left. I thought surely they hadn't packed him—my son—all folded up into this tiny little box by my feet. I looked at it, not sure what to do. Little Ian was more interested in the rain (as he should be, God bless him) and so I just decided to leave it on the porch. I checked on it though. I did. Once an hour, at least.

When Pam came home from work, we opened the box together. Little Ian was asleep in the crib, taking one of his usual mid-afternoon naps. Pam lifted the box onto her lap. I felt so timid, I must admit. Pam's my daughter-in-law, God bless her. Her husband, my Jeremy, is in Iraq right now, and when she told me about Flat Daddy I was a bit unnerved. I agreed to come stay with them for a while if she promised not to apply. But after a few months, after seeing Little Ian's face each morning without his dad, I agreed to allow it.

“It's getting a great response among other families,” said Pam.

“I just think it's creepy, is all,” I said.

“It's really more for Ian,” she said, and I let the matter drop.

Pam is weaker than I am. She holds it together for Little Ian, but sometimes I look at her and just see a baby girl on a balancing beam. I can tell when she talks to other

women about Jeremy. The conversation will go from groceries, to weather, to church group meetings, and then to war—always back to the war. She gets comfort in other people feeling sorry for her, but I can't say I fault her. When I was her age, I had three children, and when I was tired and needed help, I just toughed it out, I did. Well, because all of our husbands were gone back then, that's why. But she's the only one in the neighborhood as far as I can tell, so I might not can relate. And she doesn't know I hear her cry some nights. Not every night. Just a handful here and there.

“Flat Daddy is a program offered by the Maine National Guard,” Pam told me. “They will take a picture of your deployed love one and turn him into a life-sized cardboard cut-out. It's like he'd be right here all the time.”

“Are you just going to put him in the corner?” I asked.

“No,” Pam said, pointing to a video on the website, “Families do all sorts of things with them. They take them to movies, church. Look here, this mother takes hers to her child's basketball games.”

On the screen, I saw a woman, smiling, next to a flat rendition of her husband. He was completely covered in army camouflage and smiled the flattest smile I had ever seen. She even had her arm around him, her hand gently resting on his paper thin shoulder as though any weight might break him.

“Do they come with different clothing options?” I asked.

“Yes,” Pam said. “It says here you can have the option of army fatigue or civilian clothing.”

I had never seen her this happy. Not even when Little Ian was born.

“Oh good,” I said, “Let’s get civilian clothing. I can’t imagine taking Jeremy to church in camouflage.”

Turns out, the box was more packing material than Jeremy. When we pulled him out, he was folded into five separate parts: his head, his shoulders and arms, his waist, his legs, and finally, his feet. Pam took the mass and held it up against her and smelled it.

“What’s it smell like?” I asked.

“Like cardboard,” she said.

I don’t know why I was thinking it would smell like him. It’s just that mothers are always being amazed by things. Tell me ten years ago that I would be opening a box to find a cardboard version of my son, I wouldn’t believe it.

Pam held him by the head and I watched as he unfolded in front of me. I noticed quickly, before Pam, that they had got the order wrong, and Jeremy was not in pants and a button-up shirt like we had ordered, but green and black splotched camouflage. They did capture his smile, though. Not like that flat, fake man I saw on the website. And, as much as I hate to admit it, I was comforted by my boy standing there in front of me.

“They messed it up!” Pam yelled.

“Shhh,” I said, “You’ll wake Ian. And besides, look at that smile. They did so well. I wonder how many times he posed for us.”

“But camo?” she said.

“Honey, it’s Jeremy. That’s what matters.”

Flat Daddy spent the night in the living room propped up in a corner. I thought it might be better to let Little Ian see him in the morning. "After all the creases and folds work themselves out," I told Pam.

That night, Pam didn't cry. At least I didn't hear her. I, on the other hand, couldn't sleep. I kept picturing my Jeremy in front of some camera all those miles away. Did they tell him that we had ordered him? Oh what a fool he must think we are! Pam and I only get to talk to him once every month because, now that Ian is here safely, Jeremy is considered less needed by us. He did get to come back the week Pam was due, and even though Ian was a week late getting here, the army let him stay. I told Pam, "Now you keep that baby in forever and our Jeremy never has to leave." That's what I told her.

I was kidding of course. Jeremy loves the war. He has been a fighter since he was born. He came out of the womb kicking is what I always say. It's hard being away from him, but we get emails. They aren't the same as hearing his voice, though. I stayed up wondering what he will say when he calls next. He'll say, "Mom, you did it again. I hope I'm making you two happy." And he is. He's so brave, my Jeremy.

The next morning, Little Ian saw Flat Daddy and cried. He was like banshee, wailing and tearing up. His face grew redder and redder until I finally yelled at Pam to take him out of the room. She went for Flat Daddy.

"Not him," I yelled. "Take Ian out! IAN!"

I swear, sometimes I wonder what that woman thinks being a mother is all about. It's not a cake-walk. Good Lord, no.

“Wow,” she said, after putting Ian in his crib, “I didn’t expect him to be so loud.”

“He’s so young, dear,” I said. “It’s very normal for him to react like that. He might not even remember what Jeremy looks like anyway.”

“Yes he does,” she said, adamantly. “Of course he does.”

“Well, we can’t be for sure.”

“Of course we can,” said Pam. “That’s silly. He knows Jeremy. He knows.”

Pam and Little Ian live in Dalton, Georgia. She and Jeremy met in high school when they worked together at a carpet factory around here. We didn’t live here at the time, we were further north in Calhoun and Jeremy would drive down each day to lift carpet and cut swatches and load trucks.

I don’t much like it here. Dalton has an aroma about it that doesn’t sit well with me. Pam tells me that I am making it up in order to gain sympathy, but I don’t need any. It’s not my husband who’s away. Plus, it’s muggier here. I can tell. At home, back in Calhoun, I would brush my hair only in the evenings out on my porch, in the cool of night and it would stay straight all up until the next night. But I swear the moment I walked out of my car six months ago with my suitcases, my hair knotted and joined and Lord help me if I don’t have to brush it twice a day now.

I sell Tupperware from home. The first few months I was here, helping Pam, I took orders by phone and had my friends back in Calhoun take turns selling at local fairs and vendor stations. All the phone calls, though, got to be too much. I couldn’t look

after Little Ian and keep up selling. It's not that it's such a big business in Calhoun, but people like to stock up for the holidays or for those birthdays that sneak up on them.

I thought it would be nice to have a Tupperware party here with Flat Daddy. Pam thinks that I've lost my mind. I used to hate the idea of Flat Daddy, but now, I mean it's like Jeremy is right here with us. Little Ian grew more comfortable with him too. He can now sit in the room with Flat Daddy and not cry. The way he walks around him is comical to me, but Pam worries that it's bothering Little Ian. See, he's like a scared dog. When Flat Daddy is in the room, he looks at him once every few minutes. I think Little Ian is making sure Flat Daddy doesn't move. He's that real. Once, Pam took Flat Daddy and placed him in the center of the room and Ian spent the next five minutes crawling to the wall and out into the kitchen.

The ladies I invited to the Tupperware party arrived when Flat Daddy was behind the television. Little Ian had pointed in that direction and so Pam just moved him there hoping it would calm him. He looked comfortable there, but the women thought otherwise. One woman, a friend of Pam's from church, thought it was grotesque the way Flat Daddy stared at us the entire time we talked about the new products coming out on Tupperware's new Grab N' Go line. I kept talking about the convenient snap on lids and the newly collapsible bowls for storage space and all that woman did was stare right at Jeremy. You'd have thought the television was on her favorite show.

"Is there something wrong?" I asked her.

She looked like I had completely crossed my boundaries, like I had spoken up at her wedding or insulted her husband. In my own house! Well, Pam's house. She just

looked back at me and said, “No, nothing’s wrong, I was just admiring your drapery.” But there was no drapery behind the television.

“You were looking at Flat Daddy,” I scolded her. “Do you find anything wrong with him?”

I could tell the other women in the room were getting uncomfortable, but I liked it. It was nice feeling in charge again after being so far away from my usual group of friends. I try to tell Pam that she needs to work on getting her a group of girlfriends together, but she claims she has no common interests with other women her age. And why should she, she’s so young, the thing. Jeremy and she married right out of high school and now what, she still works at the carpet factory part-time and her husband’s not even around to help her.

It’s not Jeremy’s fault, of course. That’s what I told those women at the meeting too.

“That is a cardboard cutout of my son,” I said. “His name is Flat Daddy.”

The women smiled and seemed fine with the entire notion that my son was there in front of us. One even made a joke asking which Tupperware single bowl he admired most. The other women laughed but I thought it a bit disrespectful.

“In the Army,” I said, “Tupperware is not a laughing matter.”

After the meeting was over, and the women had placed some orders, one woman, (I can’t remember her name so help me), asked if I called him Jeremy.

“Do you call him Jeremy?” she asked, just as plain as imagined.

I can't lie to one of my Tupperware ladies. There is something deeply ingrained in me that prevents me from doing so. But I do have some dignity. I do look at myself in the mirror some days and wonder how I ended up with a cardboard son. What was that trigger? What person or group of circumstances pulled that lever switching the tracks on the way my life was to play out? The other day, in fact, I thought about that while eating some yogurt in front of Flat Daddy. I thought, here I am enjoying this yogurt, with strawberries mind you, and my son is on some God awful wasteland eating meals that taste like sand. Or cardboard even! Isn't that ironic? And I lifted up my spoon to his mouth, I did. Right there in the light of God and Little Ian. I don't know what I was thinking.

“Yes,” I told her. “But only when we're alone.”

When Jeremy calls it's a big event. He emails us a few days before with possible times and like a family awaiting a visit from the Pastor, we sit in the living room waiting to hear from him. This last time he called, Pam had taken off work the entire day. She took a shower and washed her face. She put on a blue dress like she was heading to church for some reason. In fact, Pam was ready two hours before we even thought he might call. And I couldn't be the only one not dressed for the occasion, so I added a string of pearls to my turtle neck.

The line to Iraq is fuzzy sometimes, but mostly it's just like talking to him if he were around the block. He talks to Pam most of the time. I hear little snip-its of their conversation and I can tell that he loves her. Some soldiers, I read, fall in love with other

women while they're over there. Email relationships mostly, so that when they come back to their wives, they're even further gone than they were when they were overseas. But he loves her; he's a good man like that.

Little Ian puts the phone up to his ear and he just listens. Once, a few weeks back, he cried and I laughed because it was like Flat Daddy was in the room all over again, but it was really just Jeremy on the phone. Of course, when I talk to him, it's all business. I want to know if he's ok. Does he need anything? Those kinds of things, really.

"I have some good yogurt I could send," I said.

"Naw," he said, "They have that here."

He didn't get the joke, but then again, who would?

We gave Flat Daddy a birthday party. It was the website's idea. Apparently some other women had had some success with it with younger children, so Pam and I tried it. We invited a few kids Little Ian's age and their mothers from the neighborhood. I thought it would be fun to send out little pieces in the shape of Jeremy, but Pam thought it was tacky.

"It's not really his birthday," Pam said, "It's just a representation of his birthday so that Ian understands that he is like his real dad."

"Then why don't we just wait for Jeremy's actual birthday, then we can actually celebrate," I said.

"That's strange."

“And throwing this party isn’t?”

“The website said to try it,” Pam said, “so we’re going to. Maybe Ian will take to him more.”

And he did. It must have been the large mass of people. Or maybe the hats and the streamers and all the smiling, but Little Ian stayed in the room with Flat Daddy and even let Pam hold him next to Jeremy’s hand without fussing. He’s only learned to say a few words so far, so it’s hard to understand exactly what he is thinking. But, any response other than a downright yell is nice.

When the party goes left, I had to clean out some leftover cake from the carpet.

“Can you believe this?” I asked Jeremy, “Here I am cleaning up your birthday mess.”

Flat Daddy was getting slightly faded on his right side from the window and from constantly being placed in the corner by the couch, so I moved him. Little Ian was in the room and watched me cautiously as I moved Jeremy over to the other side of the curtains. Ian was playing around with some crayons and paper when I noticed he had started drawing on the floor. That’s when I got the idea.

Instead of leaving Flat Daddy behind the other set of curtains, I decided to bring him with me when I sat down by Little Ian. It was risky, I know, but something about the crayons made me go for it. I also talked to Jeremy, like he was a real person. It was something the website offered under a category labeled: Other Uses for Flat Daddy.

“Well hello there, Jeremy,” I said to Flat Daddy.

“Hi there, Meemaw.” I said that too of course, in a deeper voice and with my mouth parted to one side.

Well, I tell you. Little Ian loved it! He ate it up like sugar and sweets, he did.

“Well, Jeremy,” I said again, “who is the best little boy in the whole world?”

“Why, that’s Little Ian,” said Flat Daddy. “Why, he is the best little boy in all of Georgia.”

“Just Georgia?” I asked.

“No, Meemaw, all the world!”

Well, Little Ian’s face vanished behind his smile, I tell you. And do you know what, I speak the truth, Little Ian came right up to Flat Daddy and kissed his leg. I swear you not, right up with courage just like his father and kissed him right below the knee. Well, I was so happy I cried. And then, I bent Flat Daddy right at the waist and the three of us sat down and colored right in the light of God and the open window.

Little Ian loved it. He was laughing and laughing and I was laughing and laughing and I wished Pam could have been there. Little Ian took a crayon and started marking on Flat Daddy’s foot, just like his boot was extra paper. At first I was horrified, but then I let him keep going. Curly cues and ziggy lines all over his clean, polished commando boots. All those little routes that somehow added up something in Little Ian’s mind, why, a whole maze, a whole world of adventure just gushing out on Flat Daddy’s ankle. It is such a blessing to see a grandchild smile.

I even drew on Flat Daddy. Right out like I was a kid again. I drew a flower in his hand. Oh, when Jeremy gets back he’s going to get me.

“A flower, mom?” he’ll say. Then we’ll just laugh and Little Ian will laugh and he’ll give Pam a kiss.

When Pam got home from work around two in the afternoon, she didn’t even care that Little Ian was playing with Flat Daddy. She just started yelling.

“What is this?” she said, pointing to the flower in Jeremy’s hand.

“I drew it on there.”

Well, I swear, she blew up at me. All these questions and then she started crying right there in front of both me and Little Ian. I tried to keep telling her how much a blessing it was that finally Ian wanted to be around his father, but she didn’t listen. She just kept screaming that we had ruined Jeremy. That he wasn’t the same anymore and that all she wanted to do was throw him away now, that it was a stupid idea to begin with.

Then she grabbed Flat Daddy and started to bend him all up. She put dents and creases all over him, on his face, his hands, his chest. Flat Daddy looked more like a road map than my son. But I let her do it. I just grabbed Little Ian when she headed for the kitchen and out the small, sliding back door to the trash can.

The next day, Flat Daddy was back in the living room. Pam got it out when we were asleep. There are water marks all over him now, and his head sags a bit. It leans forward like a bunch of wet grapes, like he’s all the time tired.

In the mail, we got a letter from Jeremy telling us he was getting re-stationed in a safer part of Iraq, and that he should be home within the year when his service time was up. He’ll be twenty-two when he gets back. Little Ian will be turning three and he and

Pam can pick back up like he never left! Also in the letter was a note telling family members where they can send Love Packages. What a silly name. Love Packages.

“What would you like to get in the mail?” I asked Flat Daddy, his head still slumped over from Pam’s outburst a few weeks ago.

“I’d definitely like something other than this cardboard tasting food,” said Flat Daddy.

“Well, you just wait, your mother will send you all sorts of love.”

I spent the next three weeks making a list. I knew he’d need more socks and some new underwear. Pam said the Army supplied all that, but who wants to wear passed down Army underwear. And food! There were rules of course, but as long as I didn’t send anything perishable, it would be fine. Dried nuts, chocolate chip cookies, Dr. Peppers (wrapped in a zip-lock bag of course), and plenty of sunflower seeds, his favorite. Pam said we should send a few books in case he was bored, and maybe an electronic game or two. So, we picked up a few decks of cards and poker chips, and through in a few leftover Reader’s Digests we had around. Little Ian drew him a picture of circles and squares (he’s into that now).

I thought it would be fun to take a picture with all of us and Flat Daddy, to let Jeremy know he was always with us. Pam put on that dress she normally wears when Jeremy calls and I put on my pearls again, this time with a purple dress I usually keep around for Christmas Eve services. Pam bought Little Ian a shirt that said ARMY and we put that on him with some baby overalls. I suggested we smile as wide as possible and have Flat Daddy behind us like he was looking over us. Pam did her best to get the

creases out and to hide the dents in Flat Daddy's face. We taped the back of his neck so it would stand up straight and tall behind us.

The picture was a gem. Just a gem.

You'd think we'd be more efficient getting a package together, but things are so hard sometimes with Little Ian needing to be taken care of all the time. And I didn't have a box to put it all in. Pam said I should just use the box Flat Daddy came in because it was the right size, and after a few days of putting it off, I just stuffed everything in there.

I left early on a Saturday morning to mail the Love Package. I had to get the picture of all of us printed and find a small frame to put it in before I sent it. Pam was off work and kept at home with Little Ian. Oh, it was nice to be out and about without the two of them. I was so free and so excited to be sending something to Jeremy. I kept getting chills when I thought that he'd be touching the same box I was touching. Maybe he'd open it around other soldiers and they'd see how much we were thinking of him and they'd all sit around by lamplight and play cards and just have the best night.

The Post Office was busy the day I sent the box, but that was okay. It gave me time to hold it just that much longer. I didn't tape the box because I wanted to hold our family picture until the very end. The man behind the counter seemed a bit upset that he had to help me tape it, but I got to show him all of us. I chose a green camouflaged frame I found at a novelty shop. The picture was precious. Little Ian was looking right at the camera and leaning into Pam's shoulder like he was that happiest boy in the world. And Jeremy was just so happy behind us all, still and stoic, like he had never left and we were sending this package to some phantom Jeremy half-way across the world.

I placed the picture right on top. Right where he would see it the moment he opened it.

When I got home, Little Ian was screaming in the middle of the living room floor. Alone in the middle of the carpet, on his back, crying, his diaper wet and dripping. I picked him up and carried him around the house.

“Pamela!” I yelled.

That girl, I swear to God.

I found her in the bathroom with Flat Daddy.

“What in the hell is going on!” I demanded.

I saw Flat Daddy’s left leg in the bathtub; the rest of him slumped between the toilet and the trashcan. Pamela had ripped it off, just ripped it off with little pieces of jagged edges hanging here and there. And then she looked up at me, her eyes wide like wet coins and her breath coming out in tiny, steady gasps.

“While they were in transit to the safer place,” she said.

And then I sat down next to her and we just cried. Right there in the bathroom. I held Pam like I thought Jeremy would. I wrapped my hands right around her waist and I didn’t let go until her breathing was back to normal. She held Little Ian until he cried himself to sleep and we lay there on the floor listening to his innocent breaths go in and out like sweet melon. Little Ian must have been so scared, but so was I.

It took until the next day for Pam to explain about the phone call from the Army representative and that Jeremy was fine, just missing a leg now. They had been

ambushed which they told her happens sometimes. Just like that, they said, “It happens sometimes.” We didn’t move Flat Daddy either. When we had to go to the bathroom, we just covered him up with a towel. I went back after a week and threw his leg away in the trash outside.

Jeremy got to come home early because of the accident. We met him at the airport. I tried not to cry when I saw him. He looked smaller, but it was because he was slumping over some crutches, his army suit crinkled and crunched from the long plane rides he’d taken to get back to us. Little Ian cried and wailed when Jeremy tried to kiss him and Pam didn’t exactly know what to say other than, I love you. And when he got to me, I just held him and held him and held him. I was so used to seeing a cardboard face, that when I saw him, right there in front of me like real flesh on flesh, it seemed somehow fake. I bet we looked like a pair of fools, staring at each other, my hands on his face; he slumped on crutches, and other passengers flying past us like falling stars.

A few months later, I got a call from the Post Office saying our package had been returned. I had moved back to Calhoun after a few weeks of Jeremy getting used to life in Dalton, and didn’t know how I was supposed to go back and pick up the box. Somewhere in Dalton was a perfect Pam, a perfect Little Ian, a perfect Flat Daddy looking over us all, and a perfect me, staring into a camera on top of cards and poker chips and dead sunflower seeds? I asked them to throw it away.

It seemed the right thing to do at the time.

ON THE OTHER SIDE

Katherine lifted her hand from the glass countertop she was leaning against. In a thin layer of left over sweat, the outline of her hand flared and faded away. The heat inside the store was thick and sodden, buzzing with flies. She had come in to buy film for her husband; two rolls to be exact so that he could capture, in chemicals the temple they had come halfway around the world to see. A young Thai woman with dark hair and a thin, straight smile rushed behind the counter to fill the order. Katherine noticed that the girl, unlike herself, was perfectly dry as if behind the counter was another world—a cooler, less humid world—a world where deodorant and flies were as distant as the thought of a child dying.

Katherine walked outside. There was no difference in temperature, but the illusion of space made the humidity more bearable. She and her husband, Paul, were in Nakom Phenom, a city in Northeast Thailand, bordered on the east by the Mekong River and just across from that, Laos. Paul was attempting to speak to a man on a traveling food cart.

“Here’s the film,” Katherine said.

“Thanks,” Paul said.

He went back to gesturing and trying hard to communicate to the man who was now resting on a shaky leg.

“Paul,” Katherine said, “This man is just trying to sell some food. What are you asking him?”

“I’m trying to find out where the temple is,” he replied.

Paul turned to the man on the bicycle and said in a slow, syncopated style, “*Wat That Phanom, yoo tee nae?*”

The Thai man pointed to his left and smiled.

“Did you ask him where it was?” Katherine said. “Because I can see it. I can see the top of it right there over those trees.”

Paul looked. “I just wanted to try and speak some Thai, that’s all,” he said.

“But this man thinks you’re going to buy something from him. And look at his bike, he’s about to fall over sitting like this talking to you.”

The Thai man shook his head with the sound of Katherine’s voice. Even when she stopped to turn to him, it kept rocking up and down like a boxing bag that had just been struck.

“*Mai pen rai ka,*” Katherine said, “*Korb khun ka.*”

She put her hands together, palms flat against one another and bowed slightly at the waist; the bag of film hung from her pinky fingers. She had learned the phrase from Paul. It meant basically anything. Thank you. You’re welcome. Don’t worry about it. In this instance, Katherine hoped her inflection was received as “I’m sorry for my husband.”

“Let’s go this way,” Paul said, pointing away from the temple.

He led her across a few streets, covered in dust and outlined with small open-air restaurants serving coconut soups and tea with lemongrass. Paul was taking her to the Mekong River, the easternmost border of the province.

“Isn’t this great that the temple is so close to the border,” he said, “It’s a two-for.”

Katherine was happy that Paul was happy, but she wished, just once in the middle of this strange place, that he would acknowledge her stomach was still hurting.

As they walked, Paul explained to Katherine that Laos was more volatile, and that they were lucky to even be staring into the country. When they got to the river's edge, they stood in the ruins of an old waterfront temple, the stone weathered to nothing but white, pasty columns. Katherine gazed across the muddy moving water to the green trees and the faint appearance of roads and homes that housed people so completely the same and yet so disconnected with her own ways of life. There was something freeing about this to Katherine, something that made her think she could start all over again on another bank of some other place, far enough away from her own life that she would once again be free—free to look a child in the face and not feel ashamed.

“It’s beautiful,” she said into the slight wind that had begun to blow.

“It’s just Laos,” Paul replied.

Two months before the trip, Katherine miscarried. She was at four months and her belly had just begun to punch out like a small bowl under her business suit. In the driveway of the house she and Paul had just purchased, Katherine sat in her car and watched the rain dissolve the outside world. It was the main reason they had decided to move in together, the baby.

When she first thought she was pregnant, Katherine grabbed her running shoes and put on the tightest blue wind suit she had. At the time, the idea made sense to her. She left her apartment in downtown Chicago, and spent the next hour and a half running. It was mid-February, and the wind blew in from all sides of the buildings, propelling her

around some corners, resisting her on others. She knew nothing about pregnancy. Katherine was a business woman, a young twenty-six year old, recent grad school graduate with an MBA and a ticket to big business. The pace of the city enlivened her, the thrill of deadlines, and the dark city night punctuated with the office lights of dedicated workers like herself.

The run was meant to scare the baby out. The more movement, she thought, the less chances there were of the baby grabbing hold of her insides and making a permanent nine-month stay. At a park, she stopped to do sit-ups, ravenously lifting and lowering her torso in time with the children swinging on the sets next to her. Women passing by were encouraged by her stamina. They watched Katherine twist at the waist, and then propel herself up onto a bar only to flip over and over again like a grown child.

When her period still didn't come a week later, Katherine saw a doctor.

That night she told Paul in a way that let him know she didn't want it.

"I'm going to have an abortion," she said to him.

"Why's that?" Paul asked.

"Because I'm pregnant," she said.

She watched Paul's eyes shrink into thin slits, his prominent cheek bones rising to match his concern.

"Why?" he asked.

"Why am I pregnant?" she said. "Because this kind of thing happens to women."

"Why the abortion?" Paul asked.

"Because we're not ready," Katherine said.

Katherine had not meant to be so caustic. She had only wanted to end the conversation without allowing Paul time to react. It was her safety mechanism, in a way. She used it at work, at home, with friends, whenever there was a chance that she could be blamed or looked upon with disdain from others.

“Ok, then,” Paul agreed.

Katherine was at work when Mindy, a copy assistant, invited her to a baby shower.

“Well, John and I have been trying and this time, it stuck,” Mindy said.

Katherine thought Mindy intolerable. She was slow and incompetent, something Katherine found altogether unforgivable. Yet Mindy was liked in the office. She was so loved that on the first announcement of her pregnancy, she received five greeting cards and a basket of fruit from Jeanette in Human Resources. It was an anomaly Katherine could not wrap her brain around. Katherine didn’t think of herself as elitist or altogether cynical, but she could not identify with the bubbly, sprite-like charm that Mindy possessed.

“A baby shower?” Katherine asked.

“Yes,” Mindy said, “You know, where all us girls get together and tell funny stories and eat little goodies and open gifts and just—just forget about the office for a time and have some good fun.”

“I know what a baby shower is.”

“Good, then,” Mindy said, “Then you must come, I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Mindy slanted her head to one side and smiled, and for one small moment, Katherine saw something beautiful about her.

“But why invite me?” Katherine said. “I’m your boss.”

Mindy’s eyes darted to the left and the right, quickly.

“Because,” she said, “And not to be mean, but some of the women in this office think you are, well, frigid. It’s not my words, honey, it’s theirs. I just want to prove them wrong, because I think you’re precious.”

Mindy handed Katherine the invitation, turned, and bobbled back down the hallway.

Katherine brought chips and salsa to the shower because Paul said it would be a hit. “Everyone woman loves chips and salsa,” Paul had said, and he was right. When she walked into the kitchen she saw six women, four she knew from the office and two that were apparently friends from John’s office that knew Mindy, each one squealed for a good three minutes about how they have a sinful lust for Tostidos and salsa.

“Sometimes,” one woman said, “when my husband is asleep, I sneak into the pantry and eat half a bag before crawling back into bed.”

“You think that’s bad,” another woman said, “I’ll leave while my husband is watching tv and tell him I’m going to walk with a girlfriend around town, when I really go down the block to the corner store and eat a bag of Bugles and catch up on Entertainment Weekly.”

The women in the room all nodded their heads, as Mindy opened up the salsa Katherine bought and poured a generous helping into a cereal bowl.

“What about you, Katherine,” Mindy said. “Do you have any binge eating stories?” She smiled and poured the bag of chips out on a plate.

“Not really,” Katherine said.

“Of course not,” another woman said, “Look how skinny you are. I bet you don’t eat anything.”

“Oh, I eat,” Katherine said. “I just exercise a lot.”

“She’s not kidding either,” Mindy said. “I saw this one at the park a few weeks ago doing hundreds of sit-ups and these twisty things that looked so painful.”

Mindy stepped over and put her arm around Katherine’s waist. The touch was inviting, but made Katherine uncomfortable.

“Do you always work out that intensely,” Mindy asked.

“No,” Katherine said, “I usually just power walk.” She tried to make her face appear natural, but the more she thought about it, the more she felt her lip curl up unnaturally. The other women in the room made a collective *mmmmm* and shook their heads in unison.

In the living room, the women sat around in a circle with white plastic plates and small napkins, eating and talking about things Katherine knew little about. The curtains were pulled back and the mid-day light seeped in slowly, filling every crevice with an unexpected importance. Katherine felt it. She saw the smiles on the women’s faces as they talked about all the things in Mindy’s life that were about to change. No more

nights of uninterrupted sleep, no more dinners without spill, no more nights out with her husband, no more slim hips, no more perky breasts, and the list went on. And all the women, Katherine noticed, grew more excited with the prospect of losing the things she loved the most.

Mindy opened her gifts: A baby blanket, a diaper bag, three bibs with cross-stitched embroidery, and a gift certificate to an online baby store. Katherine brought a basket of gourmet coffees and a coffee mug that said, “Baby.”

“Well, isn’t that sweet,” Mindy said, her head tilting to one side.

“I thought maybe—I don’t know—that if you had to be up late at night when the baby was crying, you might need something to keep you awake.”

Mindy laughed, “Honey, I don’t drink coffee, but let me assure you, John does, and we’ll make sure *he’s* the one up at night with the baby. How’s that?”

All the women laughed and some raised their small napkins to their mouths. The sun was so bright Katherine could see the wrinkles beginning to show at the corner of their mouths and under their eyes. The way they talked about their lives, she couldn’t understand it. Like they were honey in the hands of their husbands. Like fate was destined to impregnate them with this sudden change in their lives, and everything was meant to be okay afterward.

“I have had such a wonderful time,” Mindy said to all the women. “I just love you all so much.”

Katherine wanted this gesture to be fake and maudlin, but she could not find anything but genuine goodness in Mindy’s comment. The thought warmed her.

“But, before we go, I want us to share something that makes us happy, so that the baby feels welcomed here, in the world. I’ll start,” Mindy said, “I’m happy to have all of you here with me, going through this together.”

The women *mmmed* again.

When it got to Katherine, she was ready with a response.

“I am happy,” she said, “because I am pregnant and I am going to have a baby.”

When she told Paul she wasn’t going to have the abortion, his reaction was the same: “Ok, then.”

He went with her to pick out baby clothes.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit early?” he asked.

“No,” Katherine said. “This is the best part, anyway.”

At work, Katherine allowed people to come into her office and congratulate her. On Mindy’s last day before maternity leave, Katherine had a group of women into her office for a joint baby party. She wasn’t even showing yet, and some of the women even wondered if she was pregnant, but Mindy rushed to her defense.

“Some women,” Mindy said, “don’t even begin to show until five or six months in because they are so fit. I, on the other hand, looked like a blimp the day after I found out.”

Everyone laughed, even Katherine.

Paul mentioned moving in together.

“We can move outside the city, a house in a nice neighborhood, but still close enough that you can drive to work or we can go out at nights if we want to.”

“No,” Katherine said.

“No to living together,” Paul asked.

“No to us going out after the baby is born,” Katherine said, “We are going to be having a lot of nights inside from now on out. Can you handle that?”

“Of course,” he said.

“Then yes, we should move in together.”

A month later, they purchased a house.

Things moved so quickly for Katherine, but the new movement in her life was refreshing, an escape from the style of business momentum that propelled her through graduate school. And Paul was okay, she thought. He was kind and funny and intelligent. He held a lower rank in the office they worked in, but she didn't mind. Paul was in a completely different branch of the company, one devoted to historical accuracies and an understanding of different people groups and places.

Paul had called himself a budding anthropologist when they first met at an office wide weekend retreat. Both their nametags had a blue upside-down triangle in the bottom left corner, and so they had found each other and paired up and asked each other inane questions provided for them by a sheet of paper some temp worker had arranged.

“What is your name?”

“Paul.”

“What is your name?”

“Katherine.”

“What do you do?”

“I work in the preservation branch, but I’m more of a budding anthropologist.”

Katherine eyed him throughout the day. At dinner, he sat next to her and they laughed about how dumb most of the day’s events had been.

“Did you have to do the game where—the one where you had to lie on the ground next to the feet of a co-worker and say a word back-and-forth until you completed a sentence?” Paul asked.

“No,” Katherine said, “but we did had to go around the room shouting our full name backwards.”

“What was—was the point of that?” Paul said.

This was the second time Paul had paused or stuttered and it made Katherine worried. She was not about to let herself become vulnerable to a man that couldn’t finish a sentence without stopping.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It made us all sound ridiculous.”

“Sgninnej Luap,” he said.”

“What?”

“That’s my name—backwards. Nice to meet you.”

“Nworb Enirehtak,” said Katherine. “Nice to meet you—again.”

When Mindy delivered her baby, Katherine took a day off work to visit her at home. Mindy met her at the door. The hair that was usually curly and bright looked as

though it hadn't been washed in a few days, but Katherine forgave her. It was just another aspect of motherhood that she found grossly inviting.

"You look beautiful," Katherine said as she was led into the living room.

"I look like I just heaved a baby out of me," said Mindy.

In the time it took Mindy to deliver, Katherine had grown one pant size. Though no one noticed, Katherine made a point to throw away her oldest pairs of pants, assured she would not be fitting into them in the near future.

"Can I see her?" Katherine asked.

Mindy led Katherine to the crib. Mindy's daughter was on her back, staring up, her hands waving softly in the air like kite strings.

"Why don't you hold her?" Mindy offered.

"I don't know," Katherine said, "I've never held a baby. I've always been scared."

"Well, you'll have to learn soon enough."

Katherine leaned her hands into the crib and cradled the underside of the baby like a soft melon. There was something natural about the inertia of lifting another body. All the years she had been afraid to touch a child because they were too frail, so dependent on other people. The smallest mistake, the mildest overlook, could result in something horrible. Katherine was more focused now in this moment than she had been in weeks. She noticed the light, how it slanted across the baby's face just above the bridge of her nose. When she lifted the child, Katherine felt her fingers spread out on the young girl's back, feeling each small shoulder blade beneath the white cotton blanket.

Paul and Katherine had spent their first night in Thailand near the airport in Bangkok. It had taken them a full twenty-seven hours: through Chicago, Minneapolis, Tokyo, and eventually Bangkok. Katherine had watched the small hands of her watch slink around slowly as Paul slept beside her. She had never been aware of a time when she watched the little hand make a full rotation, but now, as she was flying over the Pacific, it seemed of vital importance. When they arrived at their hotel, it was early in the afternoon. In the distance, she saw the outline of large, skeletal buildings poking out through the ground like pieces of far off grass. All the images she had seen of Thailand were of elephants and rice workers and women in brightly-wrapped garments.

“This is just like Chicago,” she said to Paul.

“Like Chicago, but more spread out,” he said. “Yeah, I can kind of see it.”

They slept until the next afternoon. Katherine woke up with an upset stomach and spent a few minutes in the bathroom, throwing up everything she had eat yesterday on the plane, before returning to bed and rousing Paul for some antacid.

“It’s just what’s left over,” he told her. “You’re body is trying to figure things out.”

“That’s not funny,” Katherine said.

That night, they left the hotel in a cab to go downtown. Paul was told by a friend to check out Bangkok’s Sukhumvit Road. The travel book that Paul carried with him rated the street four Buddhas, and had listed it as number three on the hot spots in Bangkok, behind the Floating Market and King’s Palace.

Katherine listened as Paul sat in the front seat and tried to speak Thai the driver. She watched as they entered Bangkok's superhighway, leaving other cars to dawdle on a less express road. They went up a ways, gaining speed. The city lay out before her like inverted sky; lights upon lights spreading out and out until she was certain her eyes were playing tricks on her. It was passing so slowly, like muddied water, like millions of people completely other than herself moving and milling about as if this night were just like any other: a mark on a calendar, a blip of a lifetime.

By this time, Paul realized that the driver spoke perfect English, but continued trying to talk to him in Thai.

"Pom ben Sukhumvit, khруб," Paul said.

"And your wife?" the driver asked.

Paul leaned back over the seat and looked at Katherine, then back to the driver.

"You said you were going to Sukhimvit," the driver said, "What about your wife?"

"She's going to," he said.

"Then you should say *rau ben* not *pom ben*," the driver chuckled. "That is Thai for 'we.' You're good at speaking, but I would feel bad for your wife if she wasn't able to go with you." He turned and smiled at Katherine.

"Mai pen rai ka," Katherine said, *"Korb khun ka."*

Paul looked at the driver. "I taught her that," he said, proudly.

When they reached Sukhumvit, they began to walk through a mass of people from all over the world. So many accents, but most speaking English. Katherine was nervous

at first; the stray dogs and varied fluorescent lighting from sidewalk vendors came upon her like a flood. The smell, too: the putrid Durian fruit mixed with sweat and sewer pipes. She walked with Paul, but he didn't seem to notice her. He was examining a wood carving of Buddha, laced with gold flakes.

"This smell," she said.

"I know," he said, "Isn't it invigorating!"

As the night went on, she found herself engrossed in every detail of Thai culture that Sukhumvit had to offer. Thai men and women whom she had pictured differently at her office in Chicago were now standing right in front of her wearing blue jeans and cut off tops, fanning themselves with paper plates and reed fans, drinking Pepsi. She passed by three Starbucks, a Subway, a Burger King, a bookstore selling everything in English as well as a McDonald's that sported a life size statue of Ronald McDonald bowing slightly at the waist, his palms flat together in front of his chest in a *wai* position, the word *SAWASDEE!* written beside his mouth, HELLO!

Katherine walked faster than Paul, and, after a few minutes, was completely separated from him. She felt a tug on the back of her pants. There was a small girl no older than five staring up at her. The girl was dressed in traditional Thai clothing, the type Katherine had expected to see on every inhabitant. A gold headpiece rested firmly on her small head, golden earrings hung from each of her soft, brown lobes, a variety of necklaces clanged around her neck, her face was vibrant with makeup. Her torso was covered in a gold silk wrap that ended halfway to her knees, the rest of her legs covered by tight pink tights.

Katherine was mesmerized by the young Thai girl who now clung tightly to her leg. Since Mindy's baby, Katherine had not been this close to a child. She did not know what to do, and for a moment, wished Paul was there to shoo the girl away.

"*Sawasdee ka*, little girl," Katherine said.

"*Ka*," said the little girl.

Katherine began to move again, but the girl didn't let go of her pant leg. She looked around at a vendor nearby and gave him a look asking for help. The vendor, caught up in his own customers, waved his hands but offered little. People of all ethnicities were passing quickly, pushing Katherine in the back, and once knocking her so much she had to place her hand on a passing Thai woman for balance.

"I don't know what you want," she said, looking down.

The girl just smiled sweetly and held on to Katherine's leg. Katherine bent down and reached in her pocket to give the girl money. A German man tripped over her and fell onto the pavement, cursing loudly. The girl grabbed hold of Katherine's hair and held tight, trying to shield herself from all the commotion.

Katherine pulled out a 100 Baht bill, about 3 dollars worth of U.S. money and handed it to the girl. The girl placed her hands together and bowed at the waist. When Katherine stood up, she knocked over a man carrying a tray of soda and fried eggs. The man leaned to one side and fell along side the girl, covering her in dark soda and wet eggs.

"Oh, my god," Katherine said, crouching again to the girl, "I'm so sorry."

She didn't know what else to do. The Thai man growled at her and spoke quickly to the little girl who got up, crying, and ran off into the crowd. Katherine stood, and offered to help the fallen Thai man, but he only extended her hand demanding payment.

Paul showed up.

“What's going on here?” he asked, loudly.

Katherine was crying now, her hair also wet from the spilt sodas.

“I was trying—I crouched and this man spilt his drink,” she said.

Paul handed the man ten dollars worth of Thai Baht, and pulled Katherine to the side of the street, away from the crowded walkway.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he asked.

“Do not yell at me,” Katherine said, “I was just trying to help this little girl.”

Paul looked into the crowd.

“What girl?” he asked.

“This little girl in this beautiful outfit. She grabbed my leg—”

“Like this?”

Paul reached into his pocket and flipped through the pages of his travel book until he found a page with a group of young girls, all dressed in traditional Thai clothing, all younger than five.

“Yes,” Katherine said. “She was so beautiful, Paul. She grabbed my leg.”

“Says here those girls are most likely prostitutes,” he raised the book and pointed to the picture so Katherine could see. She walked back into the street, avoiding a passing man with a rope of bananas, and vomited.

Katherine was now loading one of the two rolls of film she had just purchased at the Fujifilm store into her 35 mm camera as she and Paul came to the entrance of the temple they had traveled halfway around the world to see. Leaving the dusty road behind them, they stepped up to a large set of double doors crested in a dark maroon red with gilded images of Buddha on the front. The doors were opened providing them a full view of Wat That Phenom.

The temple area housed a variety of different buildings surrounded by lush green trees. All the buildings were square with red pagoda style roofs slanting upward with different layers, each corner holding a golden spike that faced skyward like upside down golden icicles. Within the temple walls, there were also hundreds of Buddha images, some golden, some bronzed, all sitting in the same positions, their arms across their chests, palms flat against one another in a *wai* position.

The temple itself was a slender white tower built directly in the center of the grounds. Turning the corner into the temple area, taking their shoes off before they entered, Katherine and Paul got a full view of the tower. Their eyes readjusted quickly from the sun's reflection off of its golden framework. There were six steps leading up to the tower area, each side of the steps guarded by small white cement lions, their mouths open slightly in a partial inaudible roar. Katherine had to shield her eyes when looking directly at the tower. It curved out slightly before curving in again to meet at a golden point. The gold lattice work on the façade was very intricate and resembled a tree with 15 small golden buds.

Around it on the ground sat men, women, and children kneeling properly with their feet behind them, heads bowed, meditating before the Buddha. Incoming visitors would take a long stemmed flower resembling a tulip and place it at the altar in front of the Buddha, while the Thai men and women took strips of gold leaf and pressed it directly to the face and head of the statue. The reverence and respect given to every detail of the temple was something that Katherine noticed the moment she stepped through the gates. Everything had a purpose, everything was destined, and every Thai person was somehow connected to this same thread of consciousness, routinely going through their rituals as if they had been born with some knowledge both Paul and Katherine lacked.

“It says here that this place was destroyed around the early 1500s by a severe storm,” Paul mentioned to Katherine as they walked further towards the tower. “Says that it was completely demolished, nothing was left standing, not even the buildings.”

Katherine was still staring at the scene around her trying to take into consideration that all of this had been rebuilt from the ground up.

“I’m glad they did it, aren’t you?” Paul asked standing behind her.

“Did what?”

“Rebuilt all of this.”

“It sure is beautiful,” Katherine said.

She walked towards one of the Buddha statues at the base of the tower, engrossed in its golden luster. A young girl ran right up to the statue’s face and touched it, first with her hands then with the crown of her forehead, closing her eyes. Katherine stopped and watched the young girl rub a piece of gold on the statue’s face. Katherine told Paul to

stay where he was, she too wanted to touch the Buddha, touch its face and place her forehead against it.

She walked within inches from the statue, the Buddha's face staring intently into hers. She touched it. Bronze. Warm from the sun. She knelt closer until her forehead touched the statue, her cool breath making a noticeable area of frostiness on its surface. She closed her eyes and leaned in with her body until the end of her stomach, still swollen slightly with left-over pregnancy weight, touched the hard, old hands of the Buddha.

Katherine opened her eyes and looked intimately into the eyes of the bronzed Buddha in front of her. Then without warning she took off running as fast as she could, passing Paul without explanation, running down the six steps and through the large red gates that served as the entrance to the temple area. She neglected her shoes still left at the entrance, and was now running on the dusty road, her bare feet accepting the heat and the small pebbles that dug into her flesh. She ran out of the temple, pass the Fujifilm store she had visited less than half an hour ago, and continued to run, her sights set on the small ridge cut some 500 yards away. Her lungs were burning, begging her to slow down. The pain of her chest was cleansing, cathartic. She continued to run passionately with a distinct disregard to the people around her. Katherine reached a small ridge and ran up it, stumbling once, but regained her momentum

The view was the Mekong River, muddy and powerful, just like it had been earlier in the day when she and Paul stood over it. She looked hopefully to the other side, the sun reflecting strong off the rocky sand dunes that clung to the opposite shore.

Katherine knelt to the ground, her stomach aching from her run, this time not dull and relenting but sharp and painful.

Paul made it to the river's edge a few minutes later. He ran up to her and knelt beside her, placing his hand on the small of her back. "Are you okay?" he asked her gently.

"No," she replied and looked out toward the river.

THE WAIT OF WORDS

While Carlos floated above me, I wondered what the end would be like. Our fourth grade nutrition play was that Thursday night, and we still had not practiced all the way to my lines near the end—the ones where I let everyone know that an apple a day was the way to live a long life. I was under the pine tree in Carlos' front yard and had arranged all the twigs and leaves surrounding its base to resemble a small group of onlookers. The twigs were dads and the leaves mothers because parents were the only ones going to be watching us up on stage, walking about, spouting off lines as bean sprouts and various kinds of fruits.

“I am an apple,” I said to one leaf, “I make you strong.”

I turned to a twig. “And if you eat me, you will live long.”

“I don't think that is too much to pay. An apple a day keeps the doctors away.”

I bowed.

Carlos called out from above me, “Carlos the amazing trapeze artist! Watch him fly, watch him fly!”

I looked up in time to see him swinging down towards me. He flipped and turned, bent branches and dropped from higher to lower limbs like a disk on a peg board. He ended upside down in front of my face, knees locking onto the lowest branch, his arms akimbo at his waist. A leaf flew halfway across my makeshift school auditorium in the wake of Carlos' wind.

“Ta-da!” he cried.

“You’re going to hurt yourself one day,” I said. “Besides, you just made one of my moms fly out of her seat.” I bent to replace the leaf next to an adjacent twig.

“Whatcha doing?” he asked, still upside down.

“Practicing my lines, like Mr. Myers said we should be doing. He doesn’t have to help us with this performance. We’re fourth graders now! He could have been doing something with those kindergarteners. We should work hard because he wants us to.”

“Mr. Myers also said to have a good weekend.”

With that, he righted himself, dismounted to the ground, and with the same momentum propelled himself back up into the tree. Part of me wanted to jump up there with him, but I went back to practicing instead.

Carlos and I became friends after my father died four years ago. The day I started kindergarten, my mom and I moved into the same apartment building as he and his mom. I lived on the top floor, and he lived on the bottom, which meant the tree we played on was his, but I didn’t care too much as long as we got to be friends.

Being friends with Carlos was like being friends with a balloon. He was all the time in some other place, thinking up ways to get higher up in a tree or deeper into some hole. Two years before, his baby brother passed away. I thought that would slow him down. Instead, it made him more creative. We passed the days turning trash cans into trampolines and brushing the scrapes from our skin as if we were protected from hurt.

As Carlos flew around up in the tree, I continued to practice my lines. That’s when I heard Carlos’ mom yell to us from their door that we had to leave quickly; Mr. Myers was dead.

When people die, their words come out of them. We learned that four years ago in kindergarten. Some of us learned before others. I remember that first week when Wendy Tate came back from visiting her grandmother in the hospital. “The words came right out of her like snakes. Right there in the hospital bed. My mom was happy, but I thought it was scary.” When we asked what they said, she replied with a smile, “‘Wendy’ and ‘Golden Hair.’ Those were the words about me.”

“How did you know?” I asked. “We can’t even read yet.”

“My mom told me,” she said. “She says it’s the highest compliment. To be remembered in words.”

She went back to a table full of dried macaroni and small containers filled with oil pastels.

That was my first brush with the words. I remember not understanding anything about them, how they worked, why they happened. Weeks later, my own father died. He had been driving home in the rain when a small car crossed into his lane sending him down a hill into a field where his car struck a tree. These words I had heard about from Wendy were mentioned again by my mother and other family members; my father’s were never found. Everyone was talking about them as if the loss were something I should understand. And then came time for Mr. Myers to teach us himself.

About halfway through the school year, he called kids up one at a time. I remember walking up to his desk knowing what I was about to learn and yet having no idea exactly how I would feel about it. On his desk was a large papier-mâché head twice

the size of a normal head. The mouth was an expressionistic “O!” as if the head was screaming in pain and yet the rest of its features were completely normal. Its eyes were staring peacefully over a calm lake; its mouth was watching the collapse of a building.

“When someone dies, Thomas,” Mr. Myers said to me, “their last thoughts and memories come out of them. Like this.” He reached a finger into the papier-mâché head and pulled out a long piece of receipt paper. On it was written things like, “Thomas is friendly,” “Fun guy,” and “Creative.” I looked at Mr. Myers with a blank expression.

“They don’t come out exactly like this,” Mr. Myers continued. “Not on paper is what I mean. They are more airy like. Or more rough and tangible.” He looked at me, waiting for a response.

“I know,” I said, “Wendy told us about when her grandmother died.” This seemed to calm him.

“No one really understands it, Thomas, much like death itself. It’s a mystery. But we do know that these words are very valuable and should be cherished as a way to remember our loved ones.” He reached into the papier-mâché head again and continued to pull out the roll of paper. “When an older person dies, Thomas, their words are very strong and durable.” He made me feel the paper that had somehow become thicker.

“Do you know why this is?” he asked. I shook my head, no. “Because,” he continued, “the older a person is when they die, the longer their life has been. It’s like play-dough that hardens because it’s been open a long time.”

I stayed silent, but attentive. I think it was harder for him than me. He went on to explain more. That when an older person dies, their words come out quickly because

they have lived so much and are ready to pass on. The younger a person is, the longer it takes for their words to appear. “They are little,” he said, “and not ready to die, so we have to wait a long time for them.” We sat at the papier-mâché head and waited.

I could see Carlos playing with blocks across the room. The other kids were floating from station to station occupying their time until the bell rang to send us home. Mr. Myers swept some dust off his desk with his forearm before continuing.

“Do you have any questions?”

I pretended to think.

“What if you can’t find someone’s words?” I asked. “What if they get lost by accident?”

Before Mr. Myers could answer, the bell rang.

The car we rode in smelled of pine trees. Convenient, I thought, since Carlos reeked of pine. He and I sat in the back for the long ride to the hospital. If there was ever a person to calm me, it was not Carlos. He was a mixture of both kite and kid. At the moment, he was shifting his weight back and forth to see how many different sounds the seat belt would make against his dirty jeans. I turned back to the window and tried to focus on objects as they passed. They passed at an alarming speed. A hydrant, a telephone pole, a crack in the sidewalk. I forced myself to look at things farther away for stability. A water tower made its way slowly from left to right, as did a church steeple some distance away. I remember thinking I had already dealt with death once and I didn’t want to do it again.

On the ride over, Carlos' mom, Ms. Perez, never mentioned how Mr. Myers had died and so I just assumed it was something sudden, something I wouldn't know about anyway. I also thought it was because her own son died only two years ago and she still didn't like the idea of letting us in on other people's misfortunes.

When we got to the hospital, Ms. Perez asked where Mr. Myers was and we made our way through the elevators and halls to the third floor. On the way out of the elevator, I saw a man carrying a small bundle of clothes on top of which sat letters I couldn't make out. They were bright yellow and solid; his eyes were swollen.

Farther down the hall, Ms. Perez told Carlos to stay outside the door while she helped me into the hospital room where Mr. Myers used to be. My mom was there. She wasn't crying, but her eyes were red. She looked thinner than normal. I was used to seeing her in slacks and festive colored sweaters and scarves. She was a woman who was unafraid to wear large necklaces that hung down to her belly and earrings that sparkled like rubies in the sun. But now, as I made my way up to her standing near the empty bed, she was wearing loose pants and a plain white shirt. Her frame was sweetly melting away beneath her, drawing itself into itself giving her the appearance that she might disappear if I took my eyes off her.

“Hey, bud,” she said.

I walked over to her and stood next to the bed. She put her hand on my shoulder. “He left us words,” she said. “They are strong and look like they will keep for a very long time.”

She glanced down and saw the questioning in my eyes. “He died really fast, Thomas. He didn’t even hurt at all.”

She walked across the room to the only table and came back holding a large, sterile-looking bowl. She pulled out a string of words. The words were blue and purple like dusk after a tornado. One by one they came out. One string read: “Life good good and life great.” Another: “The blue day we spent together sky walking park downtown.”

“This one is for me,” she said. “Remember when you went to Carlos’ to spend the night and Mr. Myers and I went downtown for dinner?”

I nodded.

“I don’t know what all of this means,” she said, pulling out more phrases. “I will have to call his family and ask them.”

She brought her hand across her face to straighten an earring, drawing her hand across the underside of her nose on the way back.

“These are for you,” she said pulling out a small strand. They looked so bold under the white florescent lights hanging above us. As she placed them in my hand, a nurse came in asking my mother to come and give her the names and numbers of Mr. Myers’ family. I quickly folded the words and placed them in my back pocket, not wanting anyone else to read them. They were rough and I could feel the weight they added to my pants. When my mom reached the doorway, she turned to say, “I know Paul would have wanted you to have those,” before walking out the door.

Paul. Not Mr. Myers.

My mom and Mr. Myers met at Carlos' brother's funeral. Carlos and I were in the second grade by then. The death was unexpected and so we all gathered and waited for Carlos' brother's words to come out. My mother explained that babies' words are different. They come out slow and fragile because they are not ready to give up on the world. That's exactly how she put it too—not ready to give up— because I remember. As if we were all holding on to life and if any of us kids died earlier than expected, even our insides knew to keep fighting. I remember what Carlos' brother's words looked like. They were soft. So soft. And fragile. And short. They placed his small body in a crib in the center of the living room like a wake. All of his family members came. I sat next to Carlos and made sure he didn't cry. And then after what seemed like hours, they came out. Just like that. They were white, and barely visible against the background of the crib. Mrs. Perez picked them up and tried her best to show them to the room without breaking them. "Happy" "Mom" and "Carlos" were all that came out. Carlos looked at me and smiled. It was always special to be remembered in words. And just like that they fell apart, floated to the ground, and vanished into a wisp of air.

After the service, my mom and I were leaving when I noticed Mr. Myers at the back of the room. He was easy to pick out because of his tall, healthy frame against the grounded mess of folding chairs. He held the white service bulletin in his hand; a stark contrast to his dark suit and deep maroon tie. I went up to him first. My mom followed.

"Thomas!" he said. "It's been a while, no? How are you?" He bent down on one knee to hug me before standing back up and shaking my mother's hand.

"How are you, Ms. Henson?" he asked my mom.

“As fine as I can be considering the circumstances.”

“Of course, I understand.”

“Actually,” my mom said, “I don’t do very well at funerals. They just remind me of—” she put a hand on my shoulder then to my head to tousle my hair.

“—Yes, of course,” Mr. Myers responded quickly, tightening the service into a cylinder in his hands. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Oh. Oh please,” my mom said quietly, “don’t even worry about it. I’m fine, it’s just a sad time for everyone, you know? Ms. Perez. Carlos. The rest of the family. I can understand what they’re going through.” She shifted her weight to the back of her heels and forward again. “And those words,” she said. “They won’t hold up for very long, will they?”

“Oh, I know. They were beautiful, though. Ms. Perez will remember them.”

“Yes,” my mother answered softly.

I noticed Carlos across the room sitting in his grandmother’s lap. She was squeezing him hard and I could tell it was hurting him. His mother was in the next seat over by the casket, crying silently.

“It’s a shame not to have the words as a keepsake,” said Mr. Myers. “It really does provide some closure. I’ve read a lot about it because we are required to teach it now in schools.”

“I know,” my mom said, “I remember being surprised when Thomas came home that day and mentioned that you and he had talked about it in class. I just thought it was something they learned over time. Death,” she said, “I just think they should learn

another way. Do we have to let children in on things so young? I didn't know about words until I was in my teens; it was my father's father."

"I was in my teens too," Mr. Myers answered. "My grandmother."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago." He gestured to the past with his hand. "A shame about those words though. Carlos really could have benefited from them."

"We never found my husband's words," my mom said. "Apparently, they flew out during impact. It was raining and the grass was high so they never found them."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Mr. Myer's said. "I didn't know—"

"Don't worry. It's in the past."

She paused. Mr. Myers looked over his left shoulder to the wall.

"Well, we should probably be leaving. Lots of cars here, lots of people trying to get out at once," she said, placing her hand on my shoulder.

"I understand," said Mr. Myers.

He caught up to us right outside the door.

"Mrs. Henson?"

"Debra."

"Debra. If you ever need someone to look after Thomas, don't hesitate to ask. I don't have any kids, I'm not married, I teach kindergarten for chrissakes," he smiled. "If you ever need—you know—someone to look after Thomas or to do something with. Maybe a game or something? Baseball? Basketball? The two—three of us?"

The silence was cut by a car's engine starting a few feet away.

“That would be nice,” my mom said.

It didn't take long for Mr. Myers, my mom, and me to hang out together. We went to a local sandlot down the road and Mr. Myers hit balls to me in the outfield while my mom cheered me from the stands. After awhile, he motioned for her to come play and, after a lot of protests on her part, she joined me in the outfield. When Mr. Myers hit the balls, I would run to them before my mom had a chance to move, which made her laugh even more. It was the first time she had worn make-up in a while and I remember her eyes looking darker but sweeter. The night was capped off with ice cream even though it was later than I was used to being up. I remember staring at the ceiling all night on a sugar high, trying to match Mr. Myers' face with the few pictures that remained of my dad.

I liked Mr. Myers so much that one day I started talking to him about my dad.

“I don't remember him too much,” I remember saying. We were building a makeshift fort out of some chairs and old bed sheets. He had come over; I forget why.

“You were really young, Thomas. But, your mom tells me that he was a very good man.”

“He died in a car wreck.”

“I know. Your mom said it was very rainy and he did everything he could to not hurt another driver.”

“He went down into a field. That’s what my mom said. I think that bed sheet should go here.” Mr. Myers lifted me so I could get one corner around the back of one of the chairs before setting me down and fixing it himself. “We never found his words.”

I remember thinking of that papier-mâché head.

“I know,” said Mr. Myers. “Your mom told me. But hey, I’m sure there were some for you.”

“Wendy has some from her grandmother. Carlos saw his brother’s.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

I don’t remember much of what else we talked about, but I do know that the moment we finished the fort, Mr. Myers had the idea to go back to the site of my father’s crash. I went along with him not really knowing what to expect. I had been by the field many times before with my mother, so I knew exactly where to go. I pointed to roads and he took them without questioning. When we got out of the car, I grabbed Mr. Myer’s hand because the grass was so high and I could barely make it through without falling over myself.

“Let’s look over here,” he said. “They might be somewhere over here.”

We walked over to a tree near the embankment and began to look around. A few blackbirds sat on a telephone wire at the distant edge of the field watching us move; our heads down, we looked like buoys bobbing in a sea of dry grass.

“Look real hard, Thomas! Here, I’m going to hold you up, and you look from the top like a bird.”

High above the ground, above Mr. Myers' shoulders, I remembered something about my father. Something I had forgotten until that moment. As if my lift into the air for that brief amount of time was enough to bring to mind some small ash of memory left over from when he was alive. It had just rained. I was in the car with him. We were looking for the end of a rainbow. "Ooh, look here! It looks like it goes just down over that ridge. Let's go find the end of it," I remember him saying. We kept driving over ridge after ridge until the fog had lifted and the bow of color had vanished as if it never existed. "Next time, Thomas. Next time, we'll get it."

"See anything up there, bud?" Mr. Myers asked.

"Nope," I said.

He set me down. We kept looking for a while, tracing and retracing our steps until the tall grass around the tree had been pressed down and was easily manageable even with my small legs.

"Well, bud, looks like we should be heading out. It was worth a look though, right?"

I didn't know how to respond.

"Sometimes you just have to wait on things like this. But, you sure are a good searcher."

On the car ride back to the apartment, I wanted to tell Mr. Myers that I *had* found something. That small memory that had been floating around inside me just waiting to be remembered. But I knew he already knew that. We both knew we weren't going to find my dad's words. That wasn't the point of looking.

Rehearsal was awkward without Mr. Myers there. Monday afternoon, all of us were sitting around on stage waiting for a group of parents to decide what to do with us. Carlos wasn't there yet, which was unusual for him. His mother was always on time to everything. As I sat wondering where he might be, the group of parents decided that Wendy's mother, Mrs. Tate, should be the new director. She was the gym teacher at the school and had a daughter in the performance. For a gym teacher, though, she was anything but fit and the main question on everyone's mind was how she was going to pull off a thrown-together play on nutrition when she seemed to know so little about it herself. Her first solution was to move us around so that her daughter was in the center. I, the apple, was sent farther left on the stage in front of twin asparagus stalks.

During the first small break, I sat on the stage with Wendy. She was tall for her age, taller than I was, which is probably why Mr. Myers had cast her as the "sweet" section of the food pyramid, so she could stand in the back and everyone could still see her. Apparently her costume was going to have glitter and silver lining.

"Where do you think Carlos is?" I asked, worried.

"Oh, I don't know. He's just late."

"But he's never late."

We continued rehearsing and I finally discovered that I was the second to last fruit to speak. I walked proudly to the front of the stage and recited what I had learned. "I am an apple, I make you strong. And if you eat me, you will live—"

“Thank you, Thomas!” Mrs. Tate belted from the seats. “We’re going to have to cut you short just for this time. You sound like you know your lines really well, though. How about we all line up again at the top of the show? Let’s all get backstage and prepare to do a full run-through.”

While Mrs. Tate shoed us all backstage, I saw Carlos and his mom come through the back door. I was relieved to see him. Because he was the last grape in the bunch, he got to stand next to me on stage.

“Where were you?” I asked.

“Oh, my mom forgot something at home so we had to go back.”

“Oh.”

After the rehearsal, Mrs. Tate sat us all down and reminded us why eating right and exercising were so important. “Nutrition!” she yelled. “Strive to live a healthy life. Dismissed!”

That night, Mrs. Perez gave me a ride home again. “It’s no problem,” she said. “Your mom is sad right now.” I gave her a nod and walked up the two sets of stairs to our third floor apartment. When we first moved here, right after my father died, my mother placed dark blue sheets over the windows as curtains until we could buy new ones. For the past few years, they had been tucked away in a closet somewhere, but had been resurrected since yesterday after coming home from the hospital. The result was a blue light punctuated by the outline of tree branches that cut the room at awkward angles. New corners of light and dark were formed each night as tree shadow met the aura of the television glow.

I walked in the door. My mom was lying under a small blanket on the couch. I lifted her feet and slid under them.

“Hey, honey,” she said. “How was practice?”

“It was good. Mrs. Tate has taken over.”

“Oh—”

She went back to watching television.

We sat in silence for some time, enough for me to go over the entire show again in my head. My lines. My new placement. Trying hard to superimpose Mr. Myer’s face onto Mrs. Tate.

“Why do older people’s words keep longer than little kids?” I asked her. I knew it was the truth. I knew because Wendy still had her grandmother’s words taped to her wall. They weren’t fragile at all, but strong and long lasting.

“Because older people, when they die, have lots of stories that make their words strong. Lots of memories—like glue. The more life the more strength.”

I waited a second to see if she would say anything else before I asked, “What do you think dad’s words were?”

She covered herself more with the blanket before responding. “No one can ever really know what someone else is thinking.”

Her face was sprayed with the shadow of her hair from the television’s glow.

“You’ve seen so much death, Thomas,” she said. “I don’t even understand it. And I wish, somehow, I could keep it from you. But I can’t even keep it from myself. You’re so strong, and you don’t even know it.”

She smiled in a way that made me think of an action figure I once left out in the sun too long; stretched, uneven, but sincere. “I’m going to go fix us some dinner,” she said.

There was no room on the table due to some old piled up mail and coupons, so we ate wherever we could find a place. My mom liked to do her grocery shopping mid-week, and we were running on low. Our dinner was a hot dog and an ear of corn. We sat on the linoleum floor together.

“You know I’m proud of you, Thomas. For this play. For doing so well.”

She set her plate down and slid it forward, over half of her meal untouched.

“Are you not hungry?” I asked.

“Not right now.”

She watched me eat the last kernels of corn from my plate.

“I miss Mr. Myers,” I said.

“Me too, babe. Me too.”

The week passed slowly. On Thursday afternoon, I asked what Carlos thought about the words Mr. Myers left my mom. “They were nice,” Carlos said as he climbed back into the tree in his yard. “My mom told me what they said.”

“Just nice?” I asked.

“Yeah, you were there. You saw them.”

He was right.

“How does it work?” I asked Carlos while he was upside down.

“What does it matter how it works?”

“And what are they made of?” I asked. “I can feel them and see them, but what holds them together? And why do they fall apart sometimes? And why are they hard sometimes and soft other times?”

“Why don’t you wait until you’re old? Old people know everything.”

“I just want to know where all those words come from. And why don’t they come out earlier? Are they inside me right now? Why can’t I control them?”

“I dunno.”

“I think that maybe they’re inside me right now kind of floating around, you know? Or maybe, maybe they don’t form until the very last second before I die. What if I could hold my breath for a real long time and trick them? You know?”

“You think too much.” He righted himself in the tree and looked down at me. “What did you do with Mr. Myers’ words?” he asked. “What did they say? I bet they were pretty strong, like they’ll last for a long time.”

“I just put them next to a picture of him in my room,” I lied. I still had them in my pocket. I had taken them with me everywhere I went since I got them. Sometimes I rubbed them under the covers when my mom and I watched television.

“Really? I thought maybe since he was so nice to you after—you know. Maybe, I just thought you’d do something really nice with them.”

“Naw, just by the picture.” I looked down near the trunk of the tree to see if anything remained of my mock auditorium. A few twigs and a leaf I remembered

because it had red tips. Carlos hopped down from the tree and made a few nervous trips around the trunk.

“Why do people die so much?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I think it just happens when it happens.”

“Don’t you ever wonder, though? Like how and when it’s going to happen?”

He flipped off a limb onto the ground.

“I’m never going to die,” he said. “Ever.”

Friday night came. My mom stuffed me into the apple costume some other mothers at the school had helped sew. The inside was cramped and scratchy, nothing like an apple. And the suit only came down to my waist which made me look more like an apple slice than an actual whole apple. When my mom left the room to fix her hair, I grabbed Mr. Myer’s words from my sock drawer where I hid them and stuffed them into the back pockets of my pants.

At the school auditorium, I lined up backstage with the other kids. The twin asparagus stalks seemed to make it with no problem. Wendy was there too in her sequin-lined, silver jump suit. The grapes were right next to me as well, but Carlos was not among them.

“Where’s Carlos?” I asked one of them.

“I dunno.”

The kid’s grape suit rose and fell which I figured was him shrugging his shoulders. Mrs. Tate walked by shortly after.

“Mrs. Tate! Carlos isn’t here.”

“Oh my,” she said. “Not a problem. There are plenty of grapes to cover his spot. Now where is my sweet little thing?” She walked over to Wendy, gave her a kiss, and walked out onto the stage.

The show started without Carlos. We danced and sang the songs we had learned and the audience seemed to enjoy the thought of a long, healthy life of vegetables and fruits. When my turn came to speak, I was confident. My mother video taped from the audience. “I am an apple, I make you strong. And if you eat me, you will live long. I don’t think that is too much to pay. An apple a day keeps the doctors away.” The crowd clapped and I did my best to bow and return to my spot.

During the few remaining minutes of the show, I saw my mom put the recorder down and head to the back of the auditorium, cell phone in hand. I slowly stood on my tiptoes and leaned to one side, trying not to be obvious. I watched as she raised her hand to her mouth and put down the phone.

At the end of the performance, while all the other kids were eating cookies and being congratulated by their parents, my mother pulled me aside.

“We’re going to have to leave a bit early, Thomas,” she said. “Let’s get your stuff from backstage.”

A few minutes later, the two of us were driving to St. Joseph’s hospital. When we got there, my mom walked into the room before she would let me go in. Carlos was in there. I heard Ms. Perez and my mom talking softly.

“How bad is he hurt? How far was the fall? I am always worried when they play around that tree? Should Thomas come in?” My mother appeared in the doorway and motioned for me. Down on one knee, she hugged me and said that Carlos was playing and fell out of the tree before the performance.

“I told him he would get hurt,” I said.

“Thomas! That is not the thing to say right now,” my mom responded in a harsh whisper.

She hugged me once more, but I couldn't feel it.

I was still an apple. My arms were only halfway functioning because of the suit and I found it hard to find a place to sit that didn't require me to lie on the ground and roll into place. This was my second trip to the hospital this week and I was numb from standing on stage for so long. And like that, Mrs. Perez, my mom, and me, the apple, waited. We waited hours. At one point, I think I fell asleep. I know because I thought I saw Carlos in my room, but I wasn't in my room, I was in a hospital and I was waiting for his words. The same way when my father died. The same way when Carlos' brother died. The same way when Mr. Myers died. Does everyone experience this much death? I thought. I needed something to focus myself. Twigs maybe. Maybe leaves. And then I thought about what Carlos would have for me, unknown, tucked deep down inside him. Maybe a memory of looking down from the tree at me. Maybe a word of encouragement from beyond. And then it happened.

Small letters oozed out of his mouth. Slowly. Too slowly. They dripped out as if from a clogged faucet. Thick. Sticky. For a minute, Ms. Perez waited, her eyebrows

extended, her face turned slightly. When she went up to wipe the residue from Carlos' lips, he coughed. An oozy mush came out of his mouth; small, broken letters and goo of what might have been fragmented words. Ms. Perez continued to clear the mess from his mouth, reaching her finger in at one moment to clear it away from his teeth.

“What are you doing?” I asked, standing and walking close to her side.

“I'm just wiping this away from his mouth so he can breathe better. Just wiping this away.”

“But those are his words,” I said.

“No, no. This is just a bit of—coughing. He was coughing earlier, you know. This is just some left over coughing.”

“But Ms. Perez, you want to keep those.”

She looked down and smiled; her upper lip was stretched tighter than normal.

“It's just some coughing, Thomas. Nothing more.”

“But—”

“—Thomas!” My mom called me from the other side of the room. “Let Ms. Perez help Carlos right now, ok? You come back here and sit with me.”

This went on for some time. Nurses came in and out to check his progress. My mother and I watched as Ms. Perez stood by her son. She grabbed his hand and held on, rubbing it, assuring him we were all still there. She held his hand until his eyes opened and closed. Syncopated at first, then longer, then longer, then longer, as if the tempest we just endured was floating slowly out of everyone's collective memory. The nurses

made less frequent visits until finally one told us that Carlos was indeed recovering and, if everything went smoothly, he should be fine.

In the early hours of the morning, Carlos was doing so well that the nurses agreed to let him leave that evening after a few more tests to see what damage had been done to his lungs during his fall. When he became more coherent, they asked him questions. How high had he been before he fell? Where did he hurt? Did he remember what he was thinking? When it was time for my mom and me to leave for him to rest, I went over to his bed.

“How was the play?” he asked.

“Good.” I said.

“I told you I wasn’t ever going to die,” he said.

I nodded.

When we got home, my mom and I spent some time watching television under the same blanket we had used all week. The air was still stale, and dust flew up every time my mother moved her legs. The small particles reflected the glow of the television and made me think I wasn’t stuck at home, but rather, in a snow globe waiting for things to lie to rest so I could be shaken up again.

When I thought my mom had fallen asleep, I slowly lifted her legs off mine.

“You heading to bed, hon?”

“Yes,” I said softly.

“Come here for a second,” she said.

I stood and took the few steps over to her, blocking her view of the television. She sat up and reached her hands out, taking mine.

“Let me look at you,” she said.

I could see my shadow projected large upon the back wall from the light of the television behind me.

“You’ve grown,” she said. “You’re growing up just like your dad.”

She kissed me on the forehead and walked with me down the hall.

Alone, in my room, I pulled the apple off over my head and sat down on my bed. I pulled Mr. Myer’s words out of my pocket. “Creative and loved.” “Son I never had.” I turned them over and over again in the palm of my hand. The words themselves were nothing I hadn’t heard before. But these were unique. They were strong. Full. Lasting. I walked over to my dresser, wiped the patina of dust from the front of my sock drawer, and tucked Mr. Myer’s words deep inside. The sun was beginning to rise outside my window.

INDEPENDENCE, KANSAS

I

As the storm approached over the flat land of Kansas, Mark thought of how things had changed. As a child, he was unaware of just how vulnerable Independence was. Now, as a man of sixty-three, he saw the town in its depravity. The lifeless storefronts, once busy with families and the smell of roasted almonds, were now ghostly somnolent, dim from overcast skies. The town, surrounded by miles of cornfields, lay completely naked to passing tornadoes. And yet somehow the town remained, stubbornly weathering each tempest; a firmly rooted tree that swayed but never broke.

Mark stood in the small front yard of his mother's house waiting for Marda Kerstein, his mother's nurse, to arrive. She had called him three days ago when his mother missed a routine check-up and hadn't responded to any of her calls. And, although the nurse assured Mark that his mother, Coralline, was in fine mental and physical condition, her behavior was slowly becoming more erratic. When Mark confessed that he didn't know what exactly to do, Marda promised to meet him and help him confront his mother. The plan seemed easy and fresh a few weeks ago, but now, while standing in the yard, Mark was unsure how to approach even the house.

It was the same house he grew up in. The cloudy light from the approaching storm cast a soft brilliance on its face. The house, matching the height of the towering magnolia crammed into the small front yard, appeared sturdier now from new shingles Mark had added last year. The pitch of the roof angled down into two small windows of second-floor bedrooms. The pine-green paint, peeling off the underside eaves of the

glass window panes, fell with the leaves and mingled on the front porch where wrought iron beams spiraled down from overhang to stoop, anchoring the house to the ground. Around the foundation was a mixture of old dirt and over-turned brown grass forgotten by the young teenage boy his mother paid to clean up the yard once every two weeks. It was his theory that the house, like Independence, was destined to remain a relic, exactly as it always had been; a town perfectly preserved from outside growth, like brushstrokes of a painting tucked away on some forgotten wall of a museum.

Mark heard the sound of a car door behind him and turned to find Marda navigating her way out of her car and up the lawn. For the last five years Marda had served as Coralline's nurse. She answered her medical questions when she could, and soon became a trusted friend. She was young and intelligent with a surreptitious humility that made her undeniably one of the nicest people Mark had ever met, especially in such a small town as Independence where an antiquated patriotic zeal tended to jade those who weren't careful. From time to time Mark thought of her as a gateway to some younger self. If only I were younger, he often thought.

"Mark! You handsome old man, you!"

Marda paused mid-stride, long enough to throw her arms around him.

"It's been a few months, no? How are you? What are you now, three-hundred?"

"I'm sixty-three."

"That's right you are, and boy are you handsome as ever. Seriously, the ladies must be all over you. If I wasn't such an old lady myself, I might actually go for you."

"Old lady?" Mark chuckled, "What are you now, thirty-eight?"

“Thirty-seven! And shame on you for that extra year.”

She pushed her hip out and turned the bag on her shoulder to her front.

“I brought some papers and brochures with me, Mark,” her voice was suddenly serious. “I’m sure this won’t be as bad as you think. And I’ll be here, of course. This is very normal, don’t worry. Besides, this storm looks pretty rough. I heard on the radio it might have the makings to produce a category three. Supposedly nothing will happen for a day or two but good old fashioned rain.” She looked at the sky behind her. “Of course, they can’t really predict anything, those bastards. They just look at what happened before and come to some piss of a conclusion and then say they told us so when the devastation is over.”

Mark nodded in agreement and said, “I haven’t gone in yet. I just got here. My mother doesn’t know you’re with me.”

“Well,” Marda said, “she’ll just be a bit blind-sided, I guess.”

It was another trait Mark admired about Marda, that in every situation she somehow knew when to be the voice of reason, and unlike Mark, Marda possessed the power to switch between friend and nurse in just the right instance. Mark felt at ease around her.

“One other thing, Mark, before we talk to your mother I wanted to give you some pointers. From my experience, most elderly women don’t take well to this news initially, but over time they warm up to it. So don’t give up. I’ve known your mother for five years and I know this is the best option.”

Mark remained silent. He had yet to become comfortable with the idea of interfering with his mother's life. To him, she was simply an older version of the woman he relied on as a child; he, an older son who never had the nerve to overstep his boundaries.

"Some advice," Marda continued. "You don't always have to be direct. You can casually say things like 'Oh, mom, these stairs are so long and narrow. Wouldn't it be nicer to have a home where everything was on one floor?'"

"My house is all one floor," Mark added.

"Good, good! Use that! You can even bring up the yard. 'That yard is such a hassle to keep up,'" she said in her best exasperated voice. "See? The goal is to guide her to her own decision. Make her make herself aware of how unsafe it is for her to live alone."

Mark shuddered at the word *unsafe*.

"It seems so manipulative," he said.

"Honey," Marda jabbed, "she's a mother, she knows all about manipulation. This is just a chance for you to pay her back. Now, let's go in before get rained on."

Mark's mother answered the door faster than either Mark or Marda expected. She was dressed in a thin, sky-blue house robe Mark had given her on a return trip from college years ago. Her slippers, also sky-blue and unraveling slightly at the toes, concealed the rest of her lower half. She held a small, red hand-crank flashlight in her left hand, also a gift from Mark.

“My, my—Marda, I didn’t know you were coming too. Oh, I wouldn’t be dressed in this silly robe and oh—these slippers.” She was visibly flustered, but continued to speak in rapid succession. “Why are you here anyway? Oh Mark—,” she turned to her son, “Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you say Marda was coming too? Lord, now—oh, Marda, your hair is so lovely today. What a surprise, come in come in.”

“Mom,” Mark asked when they moved into the foyer, “why do you have that flashlight?”

“The storm, hon.” She ushered them into the living room. “In fact, I was down in Hoover School just a few minutes ago and just by luck—God help me—I came up here for some water and heard you two knocking.”

“Hoover School?” Marda asked.

“Oh,” Mark said, “It’s the tornado shelter downstairs.”

Coraline spoke up. “My sister and I named it that as a child,” she said. “We used to play down there. She’s dead now of course. Lung problems. She never smoked a day in her life. Can you believe that? And at a time when we all thought smoking was healthy. Oh my—we were young then. But there’s still a desk down there, so it’s still school enough, I say.”

Mark felt uncomfortable for Marda.

He carried his things in while Marda and his mother stayed in the foyer talking. Marda asked why Coraline hadn’t returned her calls, while Coraline complained about the low ringer volume of her telephone. “I guess I just didn’t hear it,” she said. “Mark will have to look at it.”

Mark carried his things in, allowing his mother to open the door for him. The house smelled the same as it always did, musty and hot, with a slight hint of gas from the heaters in the upstairs bathrooms. He headed left through the small hallway and into the living room where he placed his things on the floor.

The living room, like the rest of the house, was stuck somewhere in the distant past. The opening to the room was framed by two large white-washed pocket doors. Over the years, the doors had warped and aged so that Mark and his mother began moving only the left door, leaving the right door permanently exposed to the room. It was sad, Mark thought, to leave the door out when it was designed to be hidden, but he and his mother both had grown increasingly tired of it. The rest of the room was just as worn and exposed as the doors. The floor was carpeted in a dull, stepped-on green, while the walls were covered in amber wallpaper showcasing a floral pattern that stretched like ivy before turning up slightly at the baseboards. Most oppressive was the amount of junk left lying about in all sorts of stacks and shambles. Old picture frames, boxes of appliances long broken down and thrown away, newspapers from months ago, all lying haphazardly askew on every surface.

“Mom,” Mark said, “I thought I talked to you about all this mess.”

“Oh now,” his mother replied, “Don’t act all manly now that Marda is here. She knows that I’m working on cleaning up. I just haven’t had time yet, is all.”

The three of them sat down where they could find a place. Coralline sat on the side of a small piano bench not yet covered with old magazines. Marda settled on the couch after moving aside some half-used knitting yarn while Mark sat in a rocking chair

facing away from the television which had been on The Weather Channel since he had arrived.

“Tell me again why you’re here, Marda?” Coralline asked.

“Well, Mark wanted me to come with him today to discuss some things with you,” Marda said. “It’s nothing big, really. It’s just some ideas for the future.”

Marda waited for Mark to add something, but he remained silent. The wind blew outside causing the walls to hiss; the slow, steady monotone of the weatherman’s voice lingered in the background.

“Have I told you about that rocking chair?” Coralline asked her son.

“No,” Mark replied.

“Well, that chair belonged to your great grandfather. He used to sit in it next to the fireplace in his house. And, you might not believe this, but that chair is haunted.”

Marda sat silently, watching both mother and son on the other side of the room.

She began to weave for him the story of the rocking chair. Each night Mark’s great-grandfather sat by the fireplace and rocked in the same spot for an hour while reading the day’s paper and listening to the fire die away behind him. When his great-grandfather died, the widow swore to her friends and neighbors that she still heard the chair rocking at the precise hour, while the embers of the fire grew dim. She called in a specialist. A tall, rotund man with turn-of-the-century handsomeness told her that he had seen this before. He assured her that her husband’s ghost was returning each night, not to haunt her, but to rock and hold onto the life he lost.

“And he stayed in that house, and that chair, each night for exactly one hour, while the poor widow grew older and eventually died.”

Coralline finished her story and looked directly at Marda whose mouth was forced into a smile. “But Coralline,” Marda said, “that widow would have been your grandmother. It doesn’t make sense. Did she already have children? Where are the kids in the story?”

Mark looked at his mother.

“You know how things get jumbled,” she replied, “I bet I just forgot to mention them in the beginning of the story. It’s really more about the chair anyway.”

The truth was that Mark had heard the story before. He had heard it from his mother’s mouth at least a dozen times. Mark also knew that the story was not at all true but rather came from an old detective book his mother used to read him as a child. When he was a teenager, the story had been turned into a television movie and the two of them had sat and watched it together on the same couch where Marda now sat. After the movie aired, she had gone and bought him the rocking chair as a birthday gift. Mark couldn’t remember the first time he heard his mother twist the facts, but each time he heard the story, he confronted his own weakness, condemning himself for not correcting her sooner.

“Mom,” Mark said, “Marda is here to help us talk about moving you into a home.”

The sound of his voice dissecting the room in two made him nauseous. The next twenty minutes were spent presenting home after home while Coralline sat stone-like on

the piano bench. For Mark, the time passed all too slowly, and although he knew he was talking, all he remembered hearing was a windy hiss—like static—that refused to leave him. Marda excused herself by laying some brochures on the coffee table. She kissed Coralline on the cheek before leaving. Mark and his mother sat silently for a few minutes with the weight of the house above them. The cold, grey air crept in through the tiny cracks in the house while the weatherman's melodic drone matched the cicada's beginning to come alive. Outside, the storm approached slowly, turning the sky as dark as faded memories.

II

From an unsteady sleep, Mark thought about the growing storm. He woke early to the blaring beep of what he mistook for tornado sirens, but was instead a garbage truck backing out of a nearby alley.

He walked downstairs and found his mother asleep on the couch. Her head was resting askew on a folded couch pillow and one leg had fallen to the floor, half-supporting her lower body. The Weather Channel still played on television.

After a bowl of cereal, Mark washed his dishes in the yellow enamel sink and set them to dry on a ragged dishtowel he remembered from his youth. The kitchen was cramped with a large cabinet, refrigerator, an old cook-top stove, and a ceiling that slanted so much Mark had to lower his head to reach the sink. Adding to the mess was a clutter of needlepoint and collectable Campbell Soup figurines that managed to fill every inch of available surface space. Mark always thought this kitchen was too small

considering the size of the house. Because it was built in the early 1920's, the house was extravagant in its stature: four floors, including the attic and basement. The house was also divided right in two, meant at one time for two families. On the exact opposite side of the wall from the cramped kitchen in which Mark stood, was a slightly larger, untouched kitchen full of unlabeled boxes stacked to the ceiling. Coralline had bought the other half of the house from her sister years before she died and refused to let anyone live in it all these years simply saying, "I don't trust strangers."

Mark had seen the other side slowly fill with old appliances, ancient knick-knacks, and other relics from his childhood. When he visited years ago and found the other kitchen and half the other living room so full of junk that he could not walk around without stubbing a toe, he confronted his mother. She could only tell him what was in two out of ten boxes and when he asked why she kept a handful of old appliances, including a rogue vacuum cleaner Mark remembered breaking while playing with G.I. Joes as a boy, Coralline simply responded, "In case I need them."

When Mark's grandmother passed away twenty years ago, Coralline inherited all of the extra furniture and as many as fifty boxes of old unlabeled photographs and garments including his grandmother's wedding dress, dried bouquet flowers, and both his grandparents' wedding rings.

Mark had helped his mother move in the boxes. The entire situation made him uneasy. He was forty-three then and the realization of his own mortality came to him in brief flashes like lightning: illuminating the unsustainability of his own flesh then vanishing quickly without sound. Mark began considering his own death rather than just

feeling sorry for the deaths of others. He also noticed his mother was slowing down. When he asked her why they should keep all these things of a woman already dead, she said boldly, “Because very soon—one day—I am going to go through them all.”

Twenty years later, Mark could not set foot in the second living room and had recently discovered that the doors of two upstairs bedrooms could only open slightly because of the layers of paper and boxes housed within. Three years ago, Mark was looking for the Sunday paper to find movie times. In a small corner of the dining room, hidden behind more boxes and an extra table cloth, Mark found five stacks of newspapers that came up to his waist. On top, he found a Sunday paper and looked for the Entertainment section only to find the paper was from the previous year. He asked his mother why she kept them.

“For the obituaries,” she had said. “I like to keep my correspondences updated.”

“But these papers are over a year old,” Mark said, angrily. “Why do you *still* have them?”

Coralline recovered the stacks with the table cloth and said, defiantly, “I’ll get to them soon. I just haven’t had time yet.”

“No,” Mark said, “not any more! If these newspapers aren’t thrown away by the next time I visit, then I’m going to throw them out myself. All of them. No questions.”

Mark stood in the cramped little kitchen three years after confronting his mother and knew that he had done nothing of what he threatened. The newspapers were still there, covered by the same extra table cloth. A new stack had started in his mother’s

bedroom recently, and now overtook her bed. On top of a bed forever and finally made lay three years worth of deaths, editorials, lost dogs never found, and cars long ago sold.

Mark checked on his mother. She hadn't moved from earlier. It is too real, Mark thought, to see your mother grow older. Here was the woman who knew everything about him. She raised him alone—a lone woman in the midst of other women with husbands and large families and reasons to interact with one another—and now, somehow, vulnerable and meek, like an infant left on a doorstep, he was having to take care of her.

He let her sleep and wandered back to the kitchen and through the door that lead down to the basement. The stairs were old; they bellowed with each step he took. They were rough-edged and bare from years of people descending and climbing. The basement was only half the length of the entire house and was divided into four rooms and a storm cellar. The air was thicker below ground. A few bare light bulbs hanging from shoestrings and exposed wire lit just enough of the area so Mark could maneuver around with ease. The walls were lined with shelves of preserves, old boxes of detergent, and mason jars filled with screws and bolts. On a flattened stack of bricks sat a new washing machine and dryer that Mark had purchased for his mother some time ago. She did not want it upstairs because it didn't match the rest of the house, and so, reluctantly, Mark had installed it in the basement. He put a basket next to the old laundry chute that the house had, connecting all the floors for the cause of dirty clothes, but he knew his mother never used it. Mark tried not to think about his mother, slower and weaker now, climbing down those worn, wooden steps with a bag of laundry in her hand.

He walked into the storm cellar. On the door was a small, wood-burned sign that read simply, “Hoover School.” The room was smaller than Mark remembered. He had been down here many times in his old age, sitting quietly with his mother while a storm passed. Hoover School had become a haven for them both. Mark vaguely remembered playing down here the day his mother told him that his father had left them. And to what effect? He was so young then that consequences were not an option. Hoover School was also the place—in his teens—where he came with girls to hide from his mother. One girl he remembered in particular. May Mitchell was the first girl he dated that let him feel her breasts.

He was seventeen at the time. May was a year younger, but, Mark thought, much more mature. She had long brown hair that she wore up in a ponytail and long, white legs that reminded Mark of the slender Greek columns he saw in the textbooks at school. They dated for three months before she agreed to go down to Hoover School with him, and it was there, in the dark, thickened air, that she allowed him to reach under her shirt for just a few seconds. They never went any further than that, but for the next few months, whenever he asked, she would allow him to touch her. Like a child craving sweets, he longed for the time in the storm cellar with her, where he could kiss her and touch her softly, and where she would lie down, rigidly, and allow him to hold her. This is the girl, Mark thought, that I will spend the rest of my life with.

When Coralline walked in on them one day, she forbid her son to see May any longer. Mark saw her at school the following weeks. She would not even look his

direction, and the lingering feeling of her breasts on his fingertips slowly faded like a sour memory.

Mark graduated a year later and moved three hours away to Kansas City to attend college. The capital was larger than he had imagined, and he soon became accustomed to the quickened pace and fancier cars. Mark tried hard to get as far away from Independence as possible. He rarely called home, visited only on holidays, and spent most of the summer months working odd jobs around the college campus. It was the early 60's and the world Mark had grown used to was suddenly larger. *The Manchurian Candidate* was out in theatres and Mark became more focused on political events: a coal mine explosion in West Germany that killed over two-hundred people, John Glenn orbiting the Earth and returning completely unscathed, and Senate leaders leaking the first proof that the efforts in Vietnam were worse than expected.

Mark clung to the idea of freedom, both political and personal. After graduating, he took a job near campus in hopes of boosting his career opportunities, but instead grew too comfortable in his life until he realized, one day, he was a man of thirty. He was promoted to manager over a sizable faction in the company he worked for, and decided that this would be where he remained.

The same year, he was invited to May Mitchell's wedding and had not intended to go, but rather, the day of the ceremony, rented a tuxedo and drove two hours east into Missouri to sit in the back of the church and watch the girl he thought he'd marry be handed over to another man.

"I've got to move on," he said to no one.

“What, dear?”

Mark turned to find his mother standing in the doorway to Hoover School.

“How long have you been down here?” she asked.

“Not long,” he said. “Did you sleep well?”

Coralline walked closer to him and sat at a small desk in the corner.

“Yes, dear,” she said.

“You know, mom, I can help you move those boxes on your bed so you don’t have to sleep on the couch at nights. It wouldn’t take long at all.”

“No,” she replied, “I don’t mind the couch. I usually sleep there anyway. By the way, good news, the storm passed us. But there is another one coming this way. They say this one has a much greater chance of tornados.”

“They always say that, Mom.”

Mark sat on a bench up against the wall.

“You should really fix your hair differently,” Coralline said. “The way you have it now makes you look old.”

“I *am* old,” Mark said.

“And you should straighten up more when you walk. You should be proud to be so tall. You take after your grandfather. He was tall.”

“Mom,” Mark said, “I’m too old for you to tell me things like that, so just stop it. You know I’m already set in the way I walk. And I even like my hair this way too.”

Coralline watched as her son pushed back the few strands at the front of his head.

“Are we not going to talk about last night?” she asked. “You think I’m senile, don’t you? That I am too old to live by myself?”

“I think that this house is too big for you, yes,” Mark said. “And I think you are beginning to forget things. I also think that you keep too much junk around this house and it isn’t safe. I worry too much about you. That’s all. And I don’t understand why you just won’t consider moving.”

“Because this house,” Coralline said, “is safe to me. That’s why.”

“But this house is too big. It’s built for two families. Not just one woman.”

“It’s just fine for me. Besides, I just always assumed that you would move into the other half when you got married.”

“Well that’s not going to happen now,” Mark added.

“You know, I always thought you’d marry that sweet girl from high school. What was her name?”

“May,” Mark said.

“Right, I knew that,” Coralline said. “Ask me something.”

“Ask you what?”

“Ask me anything—check to make sure I’m not forgetting or going senile.”

Coralline stood up from the desk and stared straight at her son. Mark thought she looked like a soldier standing ready for battle, for any barrage of bullets about to come her way.

“Mom,” Mark pleaded, “this is silly. I’m not—”

“—You will! Now ask!”

“How old am I?” Mark asked.

“Sixty-three,” she replied.

“Where do I live?”

“Kansas City.”

“What kind of car do you drive?”

“1976 Blue Chevy.”

“Who does your hair?”

“Marda Kirstein.”

Mark paused.

“Why did you miss your last appointment with Marda?” he asked.

“Because my hair is just fine right now, thank you.” Coralline responded.

Mark knew he looked worn, but did not try to hide his fatigue.

“Have any more brain busters?” Coralline taunted. “This is silly. I am fine. And I do not need to move into a smaller home or any kind of assisted living situation. No matter how old *you* think I’m getting.”

Coralline got up from her desk and leaned in to kiss her son before returning upstairs.

That night, after dinner, Mark found a stack of phonebooks. He was going to call the assisted living home halfway between Independence and Kansas City and cancel the appointment Marda had made for him and his mother. When he opened the phonebook, he saw a number of names that had been crossed out by a steady, single black line—most likely a marker. He turned through the pages slowly. A line on one page, three on

another, five on the next. Each page had names completely crossed out, forgotten, written over by a heavy, thick black pen. He took one of the phonebooks to the kitchen where his mother was washing the night's dishes.

"Mom," he asked, "why are some of these names marked out?"

Coralline dried her hands with a towel before taking the book from his hands.

"Oh, these?" she said, "These are the people that have died."

"What?"

"From the obituaries. These are the people that have died. No use them being in a telephone book if they're dead, right?"

"Mom," Mark pleaded, "that's sick. Why do you do that?"

"That's why I keep the newspapers, hon. I'm going to catch up soon, don't you worry. And when I do, then I can throw out those old papers and phonebooks."

That night, Mark didn't sleep at all. He called Marda and asked if she could help him. Mark told her to come to the house tomorrow while he was away with his mother and begin moving boxes and furniture out. All the boxes from the extra side of the house were to be taken in one truck and given to the Salvation Army while his mother's furniture and personal belongings could go in a smaller truck and then be taken to the home. He knew his mother was not going to go with him to look at assisted living houses, but Marda assured him that it was the right thing to do.

Mark lay in bed all night thinking about all the things that had led him to this moment. He hated the possibility of taking over his mother's life, but he could not deny himself the right of becoming a man who could make decisions and follow through. This

one decision, he hoped, would make up for a past full of wrong choices. Mark's mind drifted to another bed—a warmer one—where a woman lay next to him, softly naked, placing her head full of hair on his shoulders and trusting him to make things right. May, he thought, I could be with her right now.

The sky outside became blank and cold, a sign of another storm approaching.

III

When Mark work up, Coralline was ready to go. She was wearing a navy blue blouse with a long black skirt. Her hair was uncharacteristically kempt, her eyes made more noticeable by the slightest bit of mascara added to each lash. She was taller too, bolder; her entire presence filled her frame completely, forcing her frail body to command her son's attention.

“Mom,” Mark asked, still trying to wake up from a night of no sleep, “Why are you dressed like that?”

“We're going to Garnett. To see the home,” she replied.

“Mom, yesterday you told me to cancel the appointment.”

“You didn't, did you?” Coralline asked.

Mark was confused. “Well no—but I was going to do it this morning.”

“Good,” Coralline said, “then we're going. But we have to go soon—that second storm is coming. I heard it this morning on tv.”

They were in the car in under an hour. Mark drove his own car, fearing that his mother's '76 Chevy couldn't make it out of town. He watched his mother while he

drove, glancing at her without her knowing. Coralline's silhouette was stoic against the flat cornfields passing by the window. Mark was unsure what his mother was thinking. He couldn't read his mother and it pained him; not having access to her mind, to knowing or not knowing if this day even registered in her understanding of past and present. Mark felt like a man on the shore, watching helplessly as a boat on the horizon bobbed and sank down into a blue sea. His own feet were uneasy, rocky, as he drove with the realization he didn't know the woman sitting beside him.

"These fields are beautiful," Coralline said, quietly.

Mark did not respond, but rather, kept driving hoping his mother would tell him why she was acting this way.

"When I was 15," she continued, "I lost my virginity in a cornfield."

"Mom," Mark said.

"Don't worry, hon, it wasn't your father. It was my first real love."

Mark remained silent.

"We laid there most of the night," Coralline continued. "We talked about so many things, he and I. And the stars that night! There weren't any storm clouds, no passing planes to fly by and remind us we were lying on the ground. Oh, and the things we talked about. He wrote songs; he was so poetic. And not songs about me, never about me. We weren't that way. And he told me then, right there in those old, dead cornfields that the whole world was before me."

Coralline paused. A few rain drops hit the windshield and streaked across her window leaving a tail like a broken comet.

Mark saw his mother turn to him from the corner of his eye.

“I thought he was talking about the sky and the cornfields,” she said, slowly, “The edges of the sky, they were touching the edges of the fields and everything was just so big then. How was I supposed to know he wasn’t talking about either of those things? I was just a stupid girl then. Who knows how to be young anyway? No one, that’s who. You have to be old to be young again.”

“But what about those people,” Mark asked, “that can’t remember being young.”

Coralline looked back out the window, “They just make it up, I guess.”

The rain continued to fall, harder now; the sky grew blacker. Within the hour, Mark and Coralline were inside the Garnett city limits. Because of grey light and the windshield wipers’ streak, the city appeared more foreboding than Mark remembered. He passed through Garnett every time he came home. It was small town off Highway 59, much like Independence. Coralline used to meet him here, halfway between Independence and his home in Kansas City on occasions when she felt she hadn’t seen him in some time.

“Not too much farther,” he said to his mother.

Mark thought about Marda. When he talked to her the night before, she said she could get a team of movers ready by the time he and his mother left for their appointment. The idea had sounded noble last night, but he had never thought about how he would tell his mother what he had done.

Mark stopped at a stop light three blocks from the assisted living home. At the exact moment he stopped, he heard the passenger door opening and turned to see his

mother slowly stand and walk out into the rain. Without a word, Coralline had exited the car and left her door hanging open.

“Mom,” Mark called, “what are you doing? Get back in here!”

His mother continued to walk without turning around. She was shaking her head.

“Coralline! Coralline!”

Mark’s voice grew angrier. He turned right and slowly drove next to his mother, the car door still hanging open. As he yelled, he saw the whole scene from far off in his mind. How comic this must look, he thought, the son following his senile mother down the road in an oncoming storm.

“You’re getting drenched! Mother!”

Putting the car in park, Mark leapt from the car into the street. The rain was so bad, and the threat of tornados so strong, that no other cars were on the road. He crossed in front of his own headlights and stopped his mother head on.

“Stop this!” Mark cried. “Stop this, now. Get in the car.”

The sound of the rain hitting the pavement was louder than Mark expected. The wind had picked up too. Neither he nor Coralline had raincoats and by the time he reached his mother they both were soaked. Mark stared at his mother, the two of them standing in the rain like lost children not knowing where to go. Coralline made no attempts to move, but rather, remained with her head still, unflinching as each raindrop hit her face.

“Why are we here?” she said. “Take me home.”

“Mom—we came to look—”

“I know what we came to do!” Coralline yelled. “I’m ready to go back now.”

She walked to the passenger door and stepped inside, careful not to hit her head on the frame of the door. Mark watched the movement in silence, as if the wind had stopped and the rain on the pavement was somewhere miles away, far from him. Through the streaked windshield, he saw his mother fix her wet hair to one side and sit forward in her seat expecting the car to move again any second. Mark thought she was envisioning the ride home in her mind as if maybe, by willing it in her head, this whole ordeal had never happened.

Mark returned to the car and began driving home. Wet and exhausted, he realized that the time they were to spend at the home, making arrangements and taking a tour, was now past them, another plan on paper that never made it to life. He knew the ride home would take less than an hour, and he could only stall so much with the excuse that the weather was impeding his speed. Marda was still there with the movers, sure that he and Coralline wouldn’t be home for many hours, but he didn’t care. He wanted his mother to see what he had done. A few stray stones of pea-sized hail hit the windshield then vanished.

“I hope this storm blows that damn house of yours away,” he said. “I’m tired of it, Mom.”

“You respect me,” Coralline said. “I have never done anything to you for you to do this to me. You should be mad at yourself.”

“For what?” Mark asked. “For trying to help you?”

“Moving me closer to you is not *helping* me,” she said.

“Being in a house full of junk and crossing names out of old phonebooks is not helping you either!”

“That is my home!”

“That is a dumpster,” Mark said, angrier now than before, “and it’s not safe for you to live there. You’re too old.”

“And a home closer to you is supposed to help?” Coralline asked. “I am your mother, Mark. *I take care of you.*”

“You can’t even take care of yourself.”

Coralline turned to Mark; her pupils were thin as pinpricks, white specks surrounded by two dark orbs. “You will respect me; I will live in that house.”

When Mark returned home, he purposefully drove to the back of the house. He knew the truck would be back there. He hope for the worst, and he got it. The movers were moving a couch out of the house and up into the truck. There was no covering and the fabric was visibly soaked. Marda stood on the porch, covered from the rain. When she saw them approach, her eyes widened in panic. Mark wished he could have been there in the moment to hold her and let her know it was his doing, and that she was still a good woman.

“What is this?” Coralline said to her son.

“This, mother, is me taking a stand.”

Coralline jumped from the car and screamed at Marda. Mark heard the commotion from the car and made no effort to get out. His mother stood in her back yard waving her arms frantically. The dark beads of water flung from her like a broken spigot.

The movers stood still, not knowing what to do with the frail woman having a tantrum in front of them. Marda motioned for them to put the couch down, which they did gladly before exiting the ramp and going with her through the house and out the front door.

The whole thing took less than a minute, and when they had gone, Mark watched from the car as his mother stormed into the house. He parked and went inside, noticing that the hail was back and the clouds above him were growing darker. Coralline was waiting for him.

“You,” she said.

Mark remained silent. He had played this moment in his head a dozen times since last night, but now, with his mother before him, her clothes clinging to her so tightly that he could see the outline of her flat breasts, he was unsure what to do.

“Why did you do this?” she asked..

“You need help, mom.”

“I do not!”

Mark knew that he was cutting his mother to pieces. He envisioned himself in a rage, storm overhead, a knife in hand as he scalded his mother with every little thing he had been storing up in him all these years.

“Last night, Mom, you told me Marda was your hairdresser.”

“I did not,” Coralline said. “I did no such thing.”

“Yes you did. And you said we weren’t going to the appointment. And today, you were ready! You don’t even know what you’re doing.”

“One mistake.” she cried. “One little mistake, and all this! I am not your burden, Mark. I am not yours to dispose of. You just want me to move so that I’ll be closer and you won’t have to take care of me.”

“That’s not true,” Mark said.

“Yes it is. You’re mad because you never made it past Kansas City. You’re mad because you could never make a goddamned decision on your own. You’re taking it out on me that you never got married. You hate yourself for being weak, and now you’re taking out on me.”

Mark paused for a moment. An alert came on the television saying a tornado had touched down ten miles away.

“You really did mistake the name, mom.”

Coralline walked to her son, aggressively.

“I did, did I? I’m so senile and forgetful, am I? You know that girl you loved, the one you thought you’d marry? She died two weeks ago, Mark. She moved back to Independence recently with her husband to retire. Heart problems. But I’m senile, and forgetful. Right? And I can’t even make a coherent connection. Go check, I don’t care. I am going to Hoover School.”

Coralline passed Mark and went downstairs to the basement.

Mark went to the nearest phonebook and found May’s name crossed through with black marker. Her husband’s name was still there, alive, mocking Mark.

A window in the living room broke as a tree branch came through the window and Mark too headed to the basement. As he passed the kitchen window, Mark saw his mother's couch left outside, unprotected from the rain.

Coralline sat at the desk inside Hoover School. Her frame was again outlined by the old furnace and laundry flume that still sat unused in the house. She was crying. Mark sat down beside on the cold ground and the two of them sat quietly, listening to the sound of wind mingle with the cries of the house.

Coralline began to weep, softly.

"Mom," Mark said, "I really didn't mean all that. What I said."

"I'm not upset about that," she said. "You've said worse things to me before."

Mark tried to picture a time when this was true, but came up with nothing. The image he had was of himself, young, a boy of six or seven, lying down on the same stepped-on green carpet still in the house. A pile of his G.I. Joes lay on the ground. He had his mother's vacuum cleaner poised and ready for a moment of massive annihilation. When he ran them over, the machine hissed and wailed like a dying animal.

Maybe it's the wind, Mark thought.

Coralline broke his thought with more sounds of crying.

"Mom, its fine. I'm here with you and when this thing passes, we'll talk more."

"It's not the storm either," she said, "It's that rocking chair. I think I got that story from a television commercial. Or a movie I saw. Every time I see it in my mind, I see it differently, and every time—every time—I see it so many different ways, I don't know what to think."

Another window shattered upstairs and Mark went to close the door to Hoover School.

“I just can’t remember,” said Coralline.

“No,” he said, “you got it right. That chair is definitely haunted.”

THE TIME CHARLENE RANDLEMAN CAME TO DINNER
(A PARABLE OF DISHES)

Fork, knife, spoon, napkin.

Fork, knife, spoon, napkin.

Fork, knife, spoon, napkin.

Fork, knife, spoon, napkin.

Judith stepped back from the place settings at her kitchen table and took a moment to make sure everything was in order. Her attention to detail, so she had been told, was eagle-like and her sense of comfort and style was akin to royalty. She even brought this perfection home with her, where she stood with the fork, knife, spoon, and napkin arrangement laid out before her in four equally magnificent place settings. Her life, like her place settings, was meticulously constructed. The life of her family was well within her grasp and well crafted to fit within her ideas of how all families should be. Her husband was a provider, what more did she need; her daughter was a student of English, how noble. She was a woman of forty-three who was ready for this dinner. She might be shaking, but she would take control of it when the time came.

“Honey! Can you come in here for a second?”

She raised a finger to her mouth and chewed on her cuticles.

“Yeah, what do you need?” Ron asked as he entered the kitchen.

“I need your advice on this table.”

“I like it. Anything else?”

“Ron!” Judith nervously walked around to the other side of one of the chairs and faced her husband, “What do you think about it? What needs to be changed?”

“Nothing, dear. You’ve done a fine job, yet again.”

“Ron! I need to know about the blue in the flower arrangement.”

“What about it?”

“Is it too blue?”

Ron walked over to her side of the table and gave her a quick peck on the cheek before bending over the flower arrangement. He leaned his nose into the lilacs.

“You know what?” he said, “I do have one suggestion to make.”

“What’s that?” Judith asked.

“You see here. This flower.”

“Yes.”

“It’s doesn’t give a rat’s ass about this dinner.”

He stood and crossed to the other side of the kitchen while Judith remained.

“That is NOT nice, Ron” she said, “I want to make sure our daughter is comfortable bringing a dog back to this house. Is that so wrong?”

Ron turned back to face her, in his hand was a roll. “She’s brought back plenty of dates before, Judith. Remember that time she brought home Curtis whats-his-face? The football jock? We ordered pizza and ended up watching college football on television.”

“That was different.”

“You’re different,” Ron said. He turned back to the counter to see what else Judith had made for the occasion.

“You stay out of all that! I didn’t make enough food for you to go eating it all before they get here.”

Judith crossed the kitchen floor in Ron’s direction and grabbed his arm before he was able to down the roll.

“Are you shaking?” he asked.

“No, don’t be silly.”

Judith dropped his arm, turned abruptly, and walked over to the sink to wash her hands. From the sink, staring through a small window at eye level, she could see the Randleman’s house. She eyed it quickly, trying to catch whatever glimpse she could. She wanted to know if Charlene Randleman was home. She had asked Charlene to keep their dog Baxter for the night considering the situation, which she decided not to explain to her. Judith was in control after all. And so Baxter was sitting on his haunches just inside the fenced yard of the Randlemans, staring back at Judith.

“Isn’t that sweet, Ron. Baxter misses us.”

“I still don’t know why you made Charlene keep him.”

Judith and turned back to the window. She looked past Baxter in the other yard and stared through an open window in the Randleman house. It didn’t look like Charlene was standing watch. Judith knew that if her neighbor saw Liz’s car drive up in a few minutes and what-should-she-call-it-him-it get out with her then she’d sure have a mouthful to talk about to the rest of the neighborhood.

“You know what?” Judith said.

“What?” Ron replied.

“I am totally okay with this,” she said proudly, “the fact that my daughter is dating a dog is not only fine but,” she fought for words, “but natural as well.”

“Natural?”

“Yes, as normal as pie. And frankly, I have no inhibitions.”

Then, why were you looking out the window to see if Charlene is home?”

“I was checking to see if her azaleas were in bloom.”

Judith left the kitchen and entered into the adjacent living room for one final inspection. The room was average size, enough to fit a sofa, loveseat, recliner, and a coffee table with leg room for Ron. It was lit during the day by a collection of well placed east facing windows, and at night by either floor lamps, candles, or the glow of the television screen depending on what mood Ron was in. Since their daughter, Liz, left for college a few years back, Judith found the need to redecorate of top priority, spending each Saturday morning sifting through other people’s discarded furniture and knick-knacks until she found an item or two to make her own. She would then bring her findings home like treasure from an expedition, croon over her husband telling exactly how she found them, how much she paid for them and how much they were really worth.

“What do you think, Ron? Does everything look in place?”

Ron walked from the kitchen and placed his arms around his wife.

“This place looks like it vomited country.”

“Ron!”

“All we need now is a small, wooden rocking horse with a lacy blue seat covering or some decorative plates to hang on the wall.”

“You think? Charlene has some of those. And I saw some just last Saturday but it wasn’t a full set. Maybe I should have just gotten what they had and—”

“Shouldn’t they be here by now?” he interrupted.

“What? Oh yes, any moment. So do you think this is okay? I even hid the pictures of Baxter because I didn’t want him to get the wrong idea.”

“I think the fact that you took him over to Charlene’s is fine enough.”

Judith checked the room once more. “I just want Liz to know that we still love her. You know? I mean, we may not agree, but we still love her.”

“We?”

“Yes.”

Ron walked past her, through the living room, and took a few steps leading upstairs. “I’m fine with this, Judith. You are the one shaking, remember. Now, relax some would you? I’m going to go upstairs and brush my teeth.”

Judith stood alone in the living room. In her head, she replayed the phone conversation she had with Liz a few weeks ago. She had found a new friend. Great. She was very interested in him. Splendid. He was in pre-law, loved to read, and was a natural at frisbee. Wonderful. His name was Max. How strong sounding. She wanted to bring him home for dinner to meet them. Wait until she told Charlene! He was a dog. Excuse me? A Border Collie. What the hell is that? When could she bring him home? Whenever you want, honey. Are you okay with this? Yes, of course, don’t be silly.

The room was calm now. Each small vested teddy bear on the shelves, each chicken crested pillow, each wooden orange coaster, each laced doily was telling Judith

that everything would be fine. We're here for you. This is just a phase. We'll be right here the whole time. She walked over to the wall by the front door and adjusted a small framed picture of her, Ron, and Liz that had been taken in a portrait studio down the road. The doorbell rang.

"Ron, they're here!"

"So let them in!" came his voice, gargled with toothpaste.

"You sure you don't want to do it?"

"For God's sake, Judith, open the damn door."

She straightened the photograph one last time before walking to the door. Judith waited a second. In her head, she replayed a mental image of her kitchen table, thought about maybe swapping the dessert plates with another set she bought ten years ago, thought better of it, and then opened the door. She stood face to face with the Border Collie. He was not, as she had always expected, on all fours, lapping his tongue in the wind. Rather, he stood tall, erect, his paw resting comfortably in Liz's hand.

"Hey, mom!" Liz dropped Max's paw and leaned into Judith for a hug. When she pulled back, she introduced Max. "Mom, this is Max. Max, this is my mother, Judith."

"Pleased to meet you," he said and extended his paw.

Judith froze. She had the sensation of being punched in the stomach.

"Mom, don't be weird," Liz said.

"Sorry, sorry, I just...well, you just caught me by surprise is all. I was...um...washing dishes and I didn't hear the bell and so I ran and—"

"You're just now doing dishes?"

“No, no I just—well that’s not important. Hi, there, Max. I’m Judith.” She resisted the temptation to pat his head or scratch behind his ears and simply grabbed his paw. Do you shake a paw? Do you caress a paw? What the hell do you do with a paw? “Welcome to our home.”

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you,” Max said.

“That’s such a lovely coat you have there,” Judith replied.

“Mom! Geez. Don’t embarrass me.”

“I was trying to be funny. I was going to ask him if he bought it somewhere. Get it?”

“Mom, can we just come inside? Where’s dad?”

“He’s upstairs brushing his teeth.”

Judith stepped aside and moved her hand motioning inside. Stop being so damn Vanna White. “You two can have a seat if you like while we wait for Ron. I’ll just run upstairs real quick and get him.”

She waved her arm again towards the couch before reaching the stairs, trying not to look too hurried to get out of the room. Where were all her comfort objects now? Where were the doilies and the orange wooden coasters? “I’ll be right back.”

At the top of the stairs, she spotted Ron on his way down the hallway. She stopped him and pushed him into Liz’s old room.

“He stood up when he opened the door,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I just thought, you know, he’d be on all fours. I mean, that’s what Baxter does.”

“Judith, I swear,” he kissed her forehead and pinched her ass before leaving the room and heading for the stairs. On the way down, Judith heard his throaty voice belt out their daughter’s name.

“Liz! So good to see you as always. Man we’ve missed you around here. And this must be Max. How the hell are ya? Welcome to our home!”

Judith waited in the dark of Liz’s room while the salutations went on below. Ron was so gifted at things like this, she thought. He can just up and accept anything, anyone, anytime. Why was it so hard for her? Why was she shaking in her daughter’s room? She looked around, mentally check pointing the made bed, the pictures she hung after Liz left, and the bookshelf with all the books she remembered Liz reading as a teenager. Books about girls falling in love with boys and bringing them home to their family. Books about raising a family and having grandchildren, living life as it should be. The sounds from downstairs were more muffled now as Ron gradually brought his excitement back down and his voice returned to normal. She would have to find a way right into the kitchen. The objects in the living room had failed her, but her clean, perfect table was waiting to provide some solace. That’s what she would do, walk right through the living room, into the kitchen, and serve the meal. She briskly walked out of the room and down the stairs.

“Hey mom,” Liz said, “what were you doing up there?”

She had a moment to survey the whole room. Husband, daughter, dog.

“Oh nothing, hon. Just checking some—socks were misplaced. Gotta get dinner ready. We don’t want to keep anyone waiting.”

She quick stepped her way into the kitchen and turned the corner so she was out of view of her family before leaning against the counter and letting out a long sigh. Why was this so hard? Last night, in bed, she had come to terms with her daughter seeing Max. She was fine with it. Fine. Fine. It wasn’t what she would have hoped, but her daughter was happy. And therefore, she was happy. Yes.

She spent the next five minutes setting plates on the table, surrounding the flower arrangement she bought that morning, and removing one small lilac that stuck out unnaturally. She filled each plate with the same amount of food while the other three continued to talk in the next room. Baked chicken with a thin Ritz cracker crust, green beans, corn, mash potatoes and gravy, and a roll. When all the plates were full, small expanses of steam rising from each of the four place settings, Judith smiled at her work. She walked back over to the kitchen sink and washed her hands. The water was too warm for her, scalding, yet she didn’t remove her hands. Instead, she allowed them to heat up while she looked outside one last time to see if Charlene was home and how Baxter, was holding up. Ron, came into the room.

“Geez, babe! Are you still worried what the hell Charlene thinks?”

“I am checking on her azaleas. I told you that.”

“You checked on them ten minutes ago. I’m sure they’re still fine. Now look,” he approached her and took her into his arms. He was gentle but in control, “I know you are not too thrilled with this whole Max business. Okay? It’s even taking me some time

too. But, all this sneaking around and shaking and checking to see if Charlene is going to see him is just childish. You've made a wonderful dinner and we are all going to sit around that table and be comfortable. Okay? Now stop worrying, and enjoy yourself."

He backed away. "Are you ready for us to come in and eat?"

"Yes."

"Good," he leaned over and kissed her forehead. "I love you."

"I know. I just don't know why—"

"Judith! Just serve the damn food."

He walked out of the room leaving Judith to dry her hands on a small kitchen towel before Liz and Max came into the room.

"Mom, this smells wonderful!"

"Yes, Mrs. Layman, it smells great! Can't wait to get my hands on those rolls."

Paws, she thought, can't wait to get your paws.

"Well thank you Max, that is very kind. Okay, does everyone want to gather around the table and, um, Ron, will you say the blessing?" She looked up and noticed Liz coming her way.

"Mom," she whispered, "we can't eat at the table. Max can't sit in chairs like this."

"What?"

"Yeah, mom, did you think he could? Baxter can't sit in a chair."

"But—I just thought. I didn't know what—"

“Well we can’t eat on the table, I thought we’d have our dinner in the living room or something. I thought you were just setting the table to look nice.”

“The living room?”

“Yeah, so Max can lay down, mom.”

“Oh. Right. But the table—”

“Living room, mom.”

“Right.”

Liz turned around and went to the table as if nothing was wrong. As if her mom hadn’t failed her. She took a plate for him and Max and made the announcement, “Mom and I talked and we think it would be better to eat in the living room because it’s so much more comfortable.” Judith noticed Liz giving Max a shrug of her shoulders before walking past Ron out of the kitchen.

“Sorry, about this, Mrs. Layman,” Max said.

Judith didn’t answer. She wasn’t trying to be rude, but the thought of all her work, another safety object taken away from her, forced her thoughts inward and took her out of the moment.

“Judith,” Ron said.

“Yes?”

“Max was just talking to you.”

She turned to face him, “Oh no, dear,” she said, “it’s fine. I never liked the table anyway.”

She walked over and took her and Ron's plate and followed Liz into the living room. When they were all settled, she asked Ron to say the blessing again.

"Dear Lord," he began and Judith drifted out again. She opened her eyes and looked around the room. She sat in the love seat with Ron next to her. Directly across from them sat Liz in the recliner and Max stretched out on the floor with his plate before him. It was the first time she allowed herself to get a good look at him.

His fur was thick, a mixture of white and black. The white was on his underbelly from what she could tell and the black formed varying shapes on his back and haunches. Is it haunches? His hind legs were tucked under his body, his back elongated, and his head rested on his front paws. His eyes were closed through the prayer, but she thought they were a dark brown from when she opened the door. Or were they black? He wore no collar. His ears were perky, and covered in black fur that came down through his eyes and billowed off the sides of his face. Just like sideburns. Only sideburns. Ron had sideburns, too. The middle of his face was white, his nose jutted out handsomely, and his mouth was subtle, the line from his jowls reached back just below his ears. Jowls? While she was watching, Liz's right hand reached down and scratched him behind the left ear. Can she do that? We are praying right now, thank you very much.

"—and for this time together, we thank thee. Amen."

"Amen."

"Amen."

"Honey?"

"Yes dear," Judith looked up at Ron.

“We’re done praying.”

“Oh, sorry. Amen.”

Judith began eating her chicken first. She looked over to see what Max was eating before she realized that he was more digging than chewing. He had to turn his head sideways slightly and raise up on his front paws to get a good bite of the chicken. Such large bites. Is that normal? Why can’t he just lick it or something?

“Mom,” Liz said, “ask Max to tell you his good news. We already talked about it with dad.”

“What’s the good news, Max?”

“Well, Mrs. Layman. Liz really talks it up more than necessary. It’s nothing that great. It’s just that I found out I was chosen to be the intramural Frisbee captain next year.”

“Oh that’s great.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty pumped about it. Liz is being real cool with it too. I mean, it’s a lot of work. Scheduling practice, making plays, planning events. Liz and I won’t be able to spend so much time together next year, I guess.”

Not much time? How much time do you spend with her already? Does this mean you might not be spending time alone? What do I care about how much time you spend with my daughter?

“Oh, well I’m sure you’ll find some happy medium.”

Before she knew it, Judith was half done with her chicken. She surveyed the rest of the plates. Ron was halfway through his chicken and vegetables, Liz was picking as usual, Max's plate was empty.

“Wow, Max, you sure devoured that plate.”

“Mom!”

“What?”

“That's not very nice.”

“What's not nice about it? He's done and we're all still eating. He devoured that plate of food.”

“Devoured? That's so—animal sounding.”

“Well.”

“Judith!”

“What?”

“Maybe instead of commenting on other people's plates you can tell us—I dunno—just tell us something. How was work today?”

Judith took a moment before answering. “Work was fine. We folded the bulletins for Sunday's service then Charlene and I had lunch.”

“Charlene Randleman?” Liz asked.

“Yes, why?”

“I never did like her.”

“Liz, that's awful.”

Max raised up on his front paws. “Who's Charlene Randleman?”

Liz replied, “She’s this old lady that lives next door and gossips about everyone in town. For some reason, mom likes to have lunch with her to get the latest scoop on everyone.”

“I do not! We talk about gardening things. If you don’t believe me, ask your father. Ron, wasn’t I just saying how worried I was about her azaleas a few moments ago?”

Ron flashed a give-me-a-break-Judith look.

“Is she keeping Baxter right now?” Liz asked.

Judith sat up straight and tried to change the subject. “What we really talk about sometimes is politics as well.”

“What about Baxter?” Liz repeated.

“Who’s Baxter?” Max asked.

“It’s our dog,” Liz replied.

“You guys have a dog? What kind is it?”

“Terrier.”

“We only have a dog because we got her when Liz was little. We are VERY nice to it, I promise,” Judith interjected.

“Mom, stop being so weird about the dog. Why couldn’t you have just left it here. Max loves dogs.”

“I have a beagle,” Max said.

Judith was stunned. “You have a beagle?”

“Yes, my family keeps him during the school year because I can’t keep him in the dorm. But I’ve had him for, oh, about five years. Real smart, too.”

“You didn’t have to hide the dog, mom. That’s so like you.”

“Liz! I just wanted Max to feel—”

“Max,” Ron spoke up in his voice that told Judith to shut-up-I’m-going-to-save-this-conversation, “what are you studying in school?”

“Pre-law right now. But most of my classes are English based. That’s how Liz and I met. We had an American Lit. class together last semester.”

Judith sat silent. She couldn’t move her fork. She didn’t care about the rest of the food on her plate. She just wanted to let her daughter know how rude she was for pointing her out in front of both Ron and Max. How embarrassing. She was just trying to help. How did she know dogs had dogs? How can Ron be talking so normally? What is it in him that she doesn’t have? Look at Max there. He’s drooling. This boyfriend of Liz is drooling.

“You have a favorite book?” Ron asked.

“Well,” Max replied. “We just got done reading *Watership Down* and I really liked it.”

Liz turned to Max. “My dad loves to read, Max. You two should throw out some titles.”

“Actually, I kinda have to pee. So I think I’ll just excuse myself for a moment.”

Judith snapped back into the conversation. “Max, the bathroom is upstairs.”

Liz leaned her head down with a sigh. What did she do this time?

“That’s okay, Mrs. Layman, I think I’ll just go outside.”

“Want some company?” Ron asked.

This time Judith lowered her head with a sigh.

“Sure, Ron. That would be great.”

As Ron got up from the loveseat and Max from the floor, Judith ran over all the reasons in her head why Max would call her husband Ron and still felt the need to call her Mrs. Layman. She had cooked the dinner. She had cleaned the house. She was trying her best to be okay with this dammit. She looked up and saw Liz staring at her.

“He’s a real nice guy, Liz. I really like him.”

“Dog, mom. He’s a dog. You can say it. And I know you’re not okay with it. Which is fine. I don’t expect you to be, okay? But maybe we can just get through the evening without anything else going wrong. Okay?”

“What do you mean anything else?”

“Mom, you complimented his coat. You—you stayed upstairs when he first came in then rushed into the kitchen. You wanted him to sit in a chair. You watched him during the prayer, I saw you! Then the whole devouring thing, and you hiding our pet. What was all that about?”

Judith sat with her fork in her hand. She thought of Charlene. Why was her life not like this? Her son or daughter never brought a dog home. Why did she have to burden this? What had she done in her life? And where did Liz get the idea that this was okay? “I am totally okay with it,” she lied, “I am just trying my best to be a kind hostess.”

“Well, you’re trying too hard, mom. Just relax okay.”

When did she learn to talk to her mother like that?

Ron and Max came back into the room and sat down.

“You have a nice yard, Mrs. Layman.”

“Thank you, Max.” That wasn’t hard.

Liz reached back over the arm of the chair and put her hand behind Max’s ear.

Right here, Judith thought, right in front of her mother and father. Is that even wrong?

What is petting behind a dog’s ear equal to if you’re dating it-him-it?

“What do you do for work, Ron?” Max asked.

“I’m an engineer. Mechanical mostly.”

“Yeah,” Liz added, “Dad works at a plant a few miles down the road. I’ll point it out to you on our way out.”

“Cool. That would be great.”

The doorbell rang. Everyone in the room froze. Judith looked over at Ron who gave her a set of shrugged shoulders.

“Are you expecting anyone else?” Liz asked.

“No. Not that I know of,” Judith replied. “I’ll get it though. You all can get ready for the dessert if you want. It’s in the kitchen”

She stood up from the loveseat, stepped over Ron’s legs and made her way toward the door. As the rest of her family and Max stood up to go into the kitchen, Judith opened the door to find Charlene Randleman standing out front.

“Hello, Judith,” she said in a forced falsetto. “I was just getting home and I noticed Ron was outside with the cutest dog I’ve seen. Did you get a new pet? I sure hope you’re not trying to pawn your old one on me. I have my own pets I have to tend to. We can’t have too many dogs in this neighborhood now can we? Haha. Oh, he was just so cute. A border collie it looked like.”

Judith’s face turned to plaster. She tried her best to shield Charlene’s view from the living room, but in haste she had opened the door too wide. She noticed that Ron and Liz had made it safely into the kitchen, but Max had lagged behind and remained on the floor mid living room. Looking over her shoulder, Charlene saw Max and pushed past Judith to get to him.

“Oh look,” she cooed, “here he is.” She bent down next to Max and started petting him behind the ears. “Oh, Judith, he is so cute. Where did you get him?”

Max gave Judith a what-the-hell-is-going-on-here look and began to open his mouth when Judith blurted out—

“We got him at the pound today! We saw him and just couldn’t pass him up. He’s got a skin disease though, so don’t touch him too much. In fact, it’d probably be better just to leave him be. Seeing as how he is still adjusting to our house and such.”

“What skin disease?” Charlene asked while standing up and backing away.

“Oh, geez, I forget the real name. It’s something really hard to pronounce and—”

“Oh my!” Charlene screamed.

Max stood up in front of her and now, fully upright, he walked over to her and placed his paw out in front of Charlene.

“My name is Max,” he said. “I don’t have a skin disease and I’m here because I’m seeing Liz.”

Charlene backed over to Judith. By this time, Liz and Ron entered the room with dessert in their hands. “Does anyone want any—”

“Mom! What’s going on?” Liz put the dessert down on the side table nearest her and walked over to stand next to Max. “What is Charlene doing here?”

“Finding out a lot about this family that I didn’t know before. That’s for sure.”

“Now Charlene,” Judith said, “I was going to tell you about this earlier, but I didn’t think you would understand. I mean, we love Liz very much, and we support her,” she gave her daughter a look to say see-I-can-do-this. She smiled at Max.

“This is not natural!” Charlene cried.

“Neither is your hair color!” Ron blurted out from the kitchen entrance way.

“Well, I never! Just wait until I tell my husband about this.” She turned and walked out the door. Judith raced after her and yelled from the doorway.

“I’m not okay with it either!” She looked back into the room and saw her family and Max glaring at her. What should she say? She hated moments like this “It’s disgusting and gross and I hate it. You don’t have to tell anyone. Charlene! Please.” She watched Charlene continue to walk back to her house. Judith turned back around to see three sets of eyes trained directly on her. Whew. “I’m pretty sure she heard me. I don’t think she’ll actually say anything.”

Liz walked over to the nightstand, got the desserts, and handed them over to her mother. “We are leaving,” she said. “Max, get my coat. This is crazy.”

Max got down on all fours again and ran over to get Liz's coat. He grabbed it in his mouth and headed out the door right by Judith's legs. Judith stared at Ron. What did I do, she thought. I just saved us from being the laughing stock of the neighborhood.

"You sure did it this time, Judith," Ron said while placing his own two dessert plates back in the kitchen.

Max was past her heading for the car and Liz was standing by her side now. "Mom, I am so mad right now. I love you, but you have got to stop worrying what other people think of us."

"But, honey—you can't leave! I made dessert. Don't you leave!"

"I'll call later, okay?" She yelled to her father, "Dad, I'll see you later, k?"

"Okay," came a voice from the kitchen.

Judith watched as Liz walked briskly out to the car where Max was already seated in the driver's seat. It was Liz's car. Why was he driving her car?

"Why is he driving your car?" Judith asked. She ran out into the night and followed Liz as she stepped into the car and shut the door. "You roll down your window!"

As Liz was lowering the window, Charlene yelled from across the yard, "Here's your dog back, Laymans—as if you even wanted him now that you got your own to call family!" She waved and let Baxter out of her gated back yard. Baxter, full of vigor and devotion to the Laymans, came barreling out full speed toward Judith. He was a good fifty feet away and making a fast comeback when Judith leaned in and slapped Liz.

“I am your mother, dammit! I work hard to love you. And I may say I’m okay with this—this—dog as a boyfriend of yours. But I’ll be damned if he is going to be a part of this family!”

The left side of Liz’s face swelled. “Max, get us out of here!”

“My pleasure!”

He put the car in reverse, leaned over his shoulder to see if any cars were coming, then depressed the gas. The tires squealed an ungodly whine, forcing Judith to step back and cover her ears. She looked over at Ron, now standing in the doorway. He was saying something. She uncovered her ears.

“Max, watch out—”

The same moment she heard her husband yell, she heard another deafening squeal. This time not from the tires. She ran around the other side of the car and screamed.

“You backed over my dog!” She ran over to Baxter. He was bleeding on the ground. The back left tire had gone directly over his back legs and now the undercarriage of the car sat ominously over him. Judith bent down and began to cry. She saw Ron running over to her from the front door. When he got to her, she was shaking again. He raised her up from the ground, and she saw Max’s face in the window of the car and Liz’s hand on his leg. He rolled down the window.

“Mrs. Layman. I’m sorry. I didn’t see her. I—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Liz said to Max loud enough for her mom to hear her, “she loved that damn dog more than me anyways. Let’s go.”

“But, Liz—” Max replied.

“Just back over the rest of it,” she said.

Judith felt Ron pulling her back out of the way as the tires backed up again. This time she saw the tires back over the rest of Baxter’s body, leaving him silent on the pavement. She watched as her daughter and Max pulled out onto the road and drove away.

“I can’t believe you.” Ron said, to his wife

“What do you mean?”

He let go of her and walked back to the house. “I love you Judith, but sometimes you are too much, even for me! And stop crying over that damn dog, we’ll get another one.”

“It’s not about the dog,” she cried.

“Then what? What is it, Judith? Huh?” He now stood in the doorway watching her. She remained silent. What should she say? What would make any of this seem normal? “You got anything for me or what? You just going to stand there and cry?”

Judith didn’t answer.

“Well, come in when you’re done. I’m getting my dessert.”

She watched Ron walk inside and close the door behind him. This wasn’t how she had expected the night to go. She was supposed to be pulling out a game of Yahtzee right now and passing out the dessert plates. Judith stood there like a statue poised over her dead terrier in the driveway. She looked back once more to the Randleman’s house. Charlene was staring at her from the window, phone to her ear. Judith stepped over

Baxter's body and walked back to the front door. Forks, knives, spoons, napkins—all had to be washed.

UPON DISCOVERING WHAT THEY HAD

Tonight I will tell my husband I am pregnant and the baby is not his.

We drive toward the airport at the edge of town. The car is new, a perk of his recent promotion. I can tell he is uncomfortable in the car because his leg twitches. His right arm, the one that usually holds mine, is dead by his side like a piece of old firewood. I don't know why that is exactly. I don't even know why I notice. Why should a dead arm be anything but a dead arm? A tired arm? The past weeks, the weeks that I have known about the baby, have been nothing but this—this—constant awareness. Yesterday I sat at an intersection through an entire green light because next to me—next to me—was a tree so crowded with birds that my mind mistook it for a beehive. And I sat there and watched; hundreds of birds flitting away at a tree branch without honey, vying for space in a tree that had no knowledge of its magnetism. And why with such a display of movement and rhythm did my eyes focus more on the surrounding trees, empty except for the wind? Because I know about the pregnancy, because I have waited until tonight to tell him, because this is a night that we will talk about five years from now—a night that will be used against me in the most blaring of future arguments. And he knows nothing except that tonight is *his* night, a celebration. The world outside our windows is black as the night we drive in. I think I see a deer, but it turns out to be a large stump.

“How was work today?” I ask.

“It was fine. I'm really beginning to feel comfortable in my new office,” he says.

“David asked about you again today.”

“Oh really?”

He guides the car over a hill and parks.

“Yeah. He’s a real nice guy. Great worker too. We should have him and his wife over sometime for dinner.”

“That would be great,” I lie.

He tells me to wait as he turns off the lights, gets out of the car, and crosses to my door. He carries with him a bottle of champagne. I see him walk and I think, “Actually, Mark, I’ll pass tonight. My stomach’s a little rocky right now,” or “Champagne! That’s so sweet, but I never did like the stuff. I’m more of a Chardonnay girl, you know that,” or “No thanks, Mark, it’s not good for the baby.” When he opens my door, I am shaking, but I blame it on the wind.

I allow him to lead me over the hill. The sky is clear and there is a slight wind coming over the crest. From his side, I see the blue line of lights delineating three separate runways on the flat land below.

“I love coming here with you,” he says.

I look at him when he looks away over the ridge. The outline of his face is chiseled like stone against the satin sky, but I know otherwise. His muscular features do nothing but mask a boy inside. The air is alive with the smell of the pressed grass beneath us, and all I can think about is why I married such a weak man.

“Mark?” I ask.

“Yes?” he says.

“You know I would never hurt you, right?” I say.

“Of course,” he says without hesitation. “What brings that on?”

“Nothing,” I say. “Just love being here with you, that’s all.”

We sit in the grass. Mark sips champagne and we watch the lights of the runway turn on and off with each incoming plane. It is a small local airport and the planes coming in all have front propellers, each carrying only a handful of passengers. His left hand is now holding my own hand, keeping it warm, safe. I turn and look at my husband. I’m only able to delineate his facial features when a plane approaches. The runway comes alive and casts a bluish glow on the both of us like we are made for the blue. He is looking over my shoulder at the plane coming in and when he notices I am watching, he smiles. After it lands successfully, the lights on the runway go out. We sit in a dark, unremarkable silence.

“Honey,” I say.

“Yes?” he says.

“I’m going to have a baby.”

His silhouette moves and I can tell he is looking at me. He stands up then pulls me up as well. We are shadows to one another, but what are lights anyway? I cannot see what he is thinking. I cannot see his eyes to distinguish any emotion. Then the blue lights of the runway return and I can see now that he is joyful. His forehead wrinkles and his eyes are soft and for a moment we are cotton.

“That’s great!” he cries. He hugs me and again we are engulfed in blue.

Now that I am close to his ear I can smell the drop of cologne he placed there earlier this morning. And all I can whisper to him is “It’s David’s.”

He immediately tenses and the ground shakes followed by a flash of red and orange and white light so bright that shows me his face in the moment of realization. He pushes me away and I turn to look where his finger is pointing. On the runway is a fireball; a wing fragment hurls fifty feet from the fuselage. And then the sound. The sound of a thousand kegs falling in an unused warehouse. Windows shattering from the sound of expanding heat; a wall of red sound. We are orange now. I can see his entire frame from his feet to his face. His eyes are fiery and all I can do is ask, "What do we do now?"

In my husband's eyes, I see what I am thinking. The roiling and reeling inside him as he tries to process the last thirty seconds of his life. The far off wail of emergency vehicles has overtaken the blast of heat and the wind carries us, sound and all, out into the darkness and I am carried to that tree full of birds caught in the flurry of their own wings and I am whispering to them softly, "Don't fear. Don't fear. Don't fear."

"Let's go home," he says.

On the ride home we are silent. He doesn't ask me about David or the baby, and for a short while, I even think he might not have heard me. But he is driving too close to the white lines, and his teeth are making a noise like a far-off jackhammer, and I know he *is* thinking about David. He pulls us into the driveway and he says, "Those poor, poor people."

In the bedroom, he turns the television on and we watch the news of the crash on mute. We crawl in bed together and he wraps his arms around me. The television casts a

glow over both of us—a glow that hides the shadows. His bare shoulders are green, then blue, then white.

“Mary,” he says, whispering into my ear, “Can we just forget tonight?”

“I’d like that.” I say.

“And the baby,” he says, “I think we should name him Noah. Or Sarah if it’s a girl.”

He kisses my neck and turns back over to turn the television off. In the quiet, I think of the pilot. I think of what he had. I think of what I have. I think of Noah. Or Sarah.

* * *

Mark tries hard not to stare at the man with one arm. He imagines the man’s eyes as having the winning lottery number and if he continues to look at them, he will hit it big. The man behind the counter moves so much that the small nub of his left arm, cut and remolded past the elbow, continually pokes through the half-length sleeve of his yellow cotton polo. Stop looking at it, Mark thinks. Look at his eyes, his face, start a conversation.

“Nice weather isn’t it,” Mark asks the man checking him out. He is buying Tylenol for David before they both head to work. They carpool now. They have driven to work together for the last five years. Mark on even days, David on odd days. When Mark asked which were even days and which were odd, David grabbed his shoulder and laughed saying, “With you and me as friends, Mark, they’re all odd days!” Mark agreed. He never did like David, yet his wife had made sure they got along for Sarah’s sake.

Mary had argued for the carpool, knowing the extra money saved in gas could go to Sarah's college fund. Mark was never a man to cause trouble. Resigned and modest, he was sure that life was simply a collection of moments, not all of which should be discussed.

"Oh yes," says the one-armed worker. "Not such a good day for this guy though."

The man leans over the counter and points to the headlines of the day's paper. Mark reads that a man returned home after a quick vacation to discover that his house had burned down. How sad, he thinks. The one-armed man mistakes Mark's sigh for sympathy and continues talking.

"Says there that the man just kept driving. Says that his neighbors saw him drive by and tried to stop him and he just kept going. Sounds tragic, you know? I mean, that borders on some serious emotional cuckoo shit...you know." The man used his good arm to circle his ear, bugging out his eyes like a great wind had struck his face.

"I can't say that I blame him," Mark says while staring at the headline. "Sometimes it's harder to stop than to just keep going." Mark can say this now, here, to this man that doesn't know him.

The one-armed-man nods his head in agreement.

"You got a headache," he asks.

"Naw," Mark says. "It's my friend in the car. We're on our way to work."

The man places Mark's Tylenol in a bag. "What do you do?"

"Office job," Mark says. "Nothing to boast about. But stable, I guess. Enough to support my wife and daughter."

“Well good for you, man. I mean, I’m headed that way too. An office job I mean.”

Mark smiles at the man acknowledging that they both are people and begins to walk away.

“You can take that newspaper if you want. I’ll just write it off. Maybe your friend in the car would like to read it, or something? Maybe someone in your office?”

“Thanks.” Mark admires the man’s personality, but he knows there’s no way the man is moving up in the world. He’s stuck, Mark thinks before he gets back into his car and hands David the Tylenol.

“Thanks,” David says. “You’re a real pal.”

On their way to the office, Mark notices a car in his rearview mirror. The driver, a tall woman with brown, droopy hair, is making wild movements with her hands, signing and speaking to the woman next to her. The two women, Mark thinks, are gesturing about their day, maybe even gossiping, and he is jealous that their hands can be used for something his own hands cannot. Backwards through the small rectangular mirror, he admires these women, whose hands tell a story in a symphony of silence.

* * *

Robbie is a father, and a great one at that. He had worked the late shift for a full three months in order to get the extra money needed to take his family on a vacation, and though his wife was worried about the financial obligations of the trip, he assured her that everything would be perfect. He remembered the look on his daughter’s face when he told her, a smile surfacing from under a few stray golden curls.

Robbie was driving back through his home state after two weeks spent with his family on the way to and from the Grand Canyon. It was night-time, the dusk beginning to take over the sky. His seven-year-old daughter, Ella, was in the back seat, sleeping, smiling, no cares in the world. His wife, comfortable, resting her head on a small, thin pillow propped up against the passenger window. He was conscious of every dip in the road and avoided them at all cost, looking over to her quickly after each small jolt to make sure she was still asleep. He fought every urge to stare at her for any length of time knowing that his gaze might wake her. It was moments like these that made him proud to be a man, to be the sole guardian of his wife and daughter's slumber.

Robbie felt the same way five days ago when his daughter reached for his hand and let him know that she could not see down into the canyon like everyone else. "Daddy," she cooed, "I can't see what everyone is looking at. Lift me up, I want to see." She even began to lean forward and jump a bit the way children do when they know for sure they will be caught and hoisted up. When he had a firm grip on her, he lifted her up and over the railing above a group of onlookers so that she could see down into the canyon gully. He watched her eyes widen and saw a smile grow on her face as she discovered not only the vastness of the world around her, but also what it felt like to fly.

She was resting in the back seat now, clutching her thumb between her teeth, her face illuminated every other second by diffused light from passing street lights. Peaceful. He would give her the world if he could, if he had enough imagination to do so. He had worked so long to make her happy. It is what she deserved.

They were almost home. Only a few minutes more. In a way, Robbie was happy to be back. He found comfort in returning to what was known, the foundations of what life was really like. The problems they had left behind for a few short weeks. But, something in that moment as he entered his neighborhood was eternal. He, his wife, his daughter, everything he ever needed in the same place.

He didn't notice the lights until he turned the corner onto his street. There was no sound, nothing to disturb his family's slumber, just piercing red and blue, enough to blind him for a moment until his eyes could adjust to the contrast between the night sky and the oscillating lights. The closer he got to his home, the more his comfort faded. Robbie's face relaxed and his mouth straightened, his shoulders raised slightly. His breathing became heavier.

As he drove by what remained of his house, he saw two men walking over charred wood, and a handful of police officers huddled together, talking and pointing. He couldn't get a good look because of the silent commotion, but he could still make out the silhouette of a chimney, standing stark beside the ruin. Robbie stopped breathing for a second, slowed the car to a creep, and exhaled.

He continued to drive.

He drove for a full hour around town, avoiding stop lights and dead ends. It wasn't until the sun began to rise that he knew something had to end. Solemnly and deliberately, he returned to what remained of his house.

He pulled into his driveway and let the car idle as long as he could before turning it off. His daughter was still sleeping, beautiful. His wife slowly began to tousle against

the passenger side door. Robbie looked at her, then to his daughter, not knowing what he should do next. This is what being a father meant, he discovered. The Provider, the Lover, the Giver of flight, the Knower of all things.

He took a deep breath, sighed, turned his gaze toward his wife, and waited.

* * *

Sarah sits with her friend Anne in the cafeteria of Jackson State, a local community college. Sarah is eating the main dish: pork cutlet with mashed potatoes. Anne is eating a strawberry parfait.

“My mom and dad told me last night they are getting a divorce,” Sarah says.

“Really?” Anne says.

“They told me after my night class. I thought they were going to talk to me about moving to a larger college because they think I can do better. But then all of a sudden they were talking about tension and not being in love and stuff.”

“Just out of the blue?” Anne asks.

“I guess,” Sarah says. “But I’m not surprised.”

“Why?” Anne says.

“Because Mark’s not my dad,” Sarah says. “They told me when I was in high school.”

Sarah remembers growing up. She remembers the times her mom and dad were together. She remembers the times they were apart. She remembers the odd times David and his wife came over to dinner and how her dad’s leg shook and how her mother spent more time preparing things in the kitchen rather than sitting around the table with the rest

of them. She remembers her mother pushing the wrinkles out of her dress in church. She remembers her father placing envelope after envelope in the offering plate. She remembers sitting between them.

“You remember when my family and I flew out west on vacation a few months ago?” Sarah asks.

“Yeah,” Anne says, “Did you think anything was up then?”

“It’s not that, really,” Sarah says. “It’s like more deeper than that.”

“Like how?” Anne asks.

“Well, when we took off, I thought we were heading away from town, but then we did this huge turn and headed back over this area. I don’t know why it struck me as so odd, I guess it all had to do with wind direction or something. I don’t know.” She pauses for a second, observing Anne’s lack of interest. “And you know what I saw out my window? My house. And Jackson State Campus. And the mall I worked at a few years ago through high school.”

“So,” Anne says

“So—so it was smaller than I imagined,” Sarah says.

“Well, duh,” Sarah says, “You were way high up in the air. Of course it was smaller,” says Anne.

Sarah leans back and begins to pack up her things before continuing.

“But it all fit within one window? That kind of small. I mean, every day I go out and I think I move so much. I go to school. I go home. I go out with friends. I go home. I go back to school. All the time I think I am accomplishing something, moving in some

general direction. Somewhere forward. And when I flew over the town, it was all there. My entire life wrapped up in one little window.”

Anne gives Sarah a look.

“So—what do you think about that?” Sarah asks.

“I think you’re smarter than me,” Anne replies. “And I think you were right earlier. You should be at a better college.” She begins to pack her things.

“Right,” Sarah agrees.

“Sorry about your mom and dad, by the way. I didn’t really say that when you told me. I should have said that earlier.”

“No problem.” Sarah says. She remembers David and his wife and how when they come over everything is tense. “I mean, I think my mom and dad—well, my mom and Mark—have been stepping so softly around one another my whole life. And I didn’t ever know why. I wish they’d just get it out, you know?”

“Sometimes not talking helps people cope,” says Anne.

“I guess.” Sarah stands up from the table, gathers her things, and leaves with Anne.

* * *

Harold Miller knows his plane is going to crash ten minutes before it happens, giving him an eternity. Thought usually works like that, he thinks. Like looking into the large lens of a telescope and seeing your finger twice as small. Or looking back from an alleyway to make two buildings converge into one point. Or knowing the right thing to

say at a funeral. Thought is thought in the moment. This moment is Harold's and his coffee turned cold an hour ago.

Through his cockpit window he sees the landing strip up ahead, blue lights fizzing hazily into the horizon. He squints his eyes tightly to forcing them to focus on the sight so far away. It doesn't help; his heart beats with an unnatural syncopation. Like arrhythmia meets African drums. The blue lights jump with each dip and yaw of the plane's nose as it cuts through the dark outside the window.

Harold is a good man. He chose to be a pilot for both the risk and the safety. The passengers behind him might be sleeping, or reading, or talking, or laughing, or crying, he doesn't know exactly. Before the flight he watched each passenger get in. His is a small plane, driven by a front propeller, and there is very little room for passengers. An elderly man and his wife, holding hands. A young couple with a small boy wrapped in a blue blanket. A small load, preciously floating on air until their trip is over. Simply waiting until that next time they fly.

Harold knows that the landing gear is not working.

The cockpit is thick with silence. The ground controller has offered Harold every suggestion for a safe landing and is preparing a ground team of emergency vehicles to help in the aftermath of what will come. What will come, thinks Harold. He is alone. Sitting at the helm of a plane that will be in flames in the time it takes his eyes to focus on the blue lights.

He remains staring off towards the runway, the blue lights more visible now. The thought comes crashing upon him, like removing his eye from a kaleidoscope. Should he

tell the passengers, he thinks. He can announce it, sure. But what good will that do? He has the power not to tell any of them. To let them sleep, read, talk, laugh, and cry with the thought that they will do it again tomorrow. He wonders if it is worth allowing them time to take stock of their lives? Or is it better to let life take stock of them? This is the most power Harold has ever held; he realizes he does not want it.

His eyes blur back and forth between the growing blue lights of the runway miles ahead. A bulbous blue aura mocking the night around it. Stasis, and in the cockpit he knows his coffee is still cold. Harold accelerates the plane, receives final preparations from the ground, and waits.