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An *inheritance* is what we leave behind when we go, what is derived or acquired from the experiences or the people we encounter during a lifetime. From 2006-2008, I lived one life as a graduate fiction student at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. This collection, *Inheritance and Other Stories*, amasses my literary experiences (and experiments) in the writing workshops at UNC-G, what I'm taking with me for future stories and what I'm leaving behind for the program.

As a collection, these stories were written to restore and reaffirm the lives of the characters, whether they survive or not. Each explores the themes of solitude and death (the ultimate solitude) in a series of stories that are sometimes of this world, and sometimes not.

INHERITANCE AND OTHER STORIES

by

Jenna Dietzer

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FOR THE LIVING

Baba Eva says this is ridiculous. She does not want to go. And if her son even so much as thinks of reaching for that walking cane, she'll tell him where he can stick it. Mendel–who has preferred his middle name, David, since his Bar Mitzvah – considers her offer. He smells like shaving cream and has the build of a horse, muscles carved beneath the skin. He's a real pal, a sidekick when it comes to the little things in life, like opening peanut butter jars or unclogging the drain. And what that means is Eva knows she cannot live without him. His expression, thirty-five years aged, reminds her of her late husband – his father, the *gentile* – and the way he frowned when perturbed, eyebrows pressing forehead into accordion folds of skin. He smirks when he is right, and he's right most of the time. "If you'd rather stay at home," David says, "talking to your ghosts again, I suppose I could slip some sandwiches under the door."

Eva is not ripe; she knows what this means. Cane or no cane, guile or no guile, she doesn't really have a choice. She will go because she is old, and arguing, like everything else, takes more out of her than it used to.

"You're my favorite son. Have I ever told you this before?" she says.

"Favorite and only," David reminds her.

"Yes, but that still doesn't change the facts," she says. "You remember when you were three and told me you'd found a cure for sadness? You said, 'Mom, I'm gonna be

famous!' I said, 'Mendel, what is it?' And you nearly toppled me over with this monster hug you'd invented. You were a cute kid once, David. What happened?"

"I grew up. Come on. Let's go."

At the van, his younger daughter, Masha, screams with her big O mouth as his wife tries to load her and the other one inside, but they take off running in opposite directions. Eva has never liked David's curveless wife or her thick lipstick or the way she snorts at the funnies and yells at baseball players on the television. She's less of a woman than Eva would have wished for her son. But Eva tolerates her, because this is what mothers do when their children fall in love.

Eva likes the van. It has a sliding side door and a little step with tracking lights and a handle on the inside that she can grab to steady herself as David hoists her up. She feels like he had her in mind when he purchased it. In front of her in a granite-colored booster, little Masha kicks her legs up and down like scissors. Her black spiral curls bounce off her temples, her voice repeating Ba-ba, Ba-ba, Ba-baaa at Eva. She smiles. At the age of two her nose is upturned, undefined, and small. But she will take after her father, Eva thinks, just like Natalie did. And by the age of ten that Silly Putty nose will hook down and hump in the middle. Eva does not understand how her son's nose grew to be the way it is. His father did not have the nose, and she hoped that would nix it for the children. No such luck. David inherited the nose and her coarse black hair, while everything else–his sarcasm, wit, nearsightedness, and, when given the choice, his faith–all mimicked his father.

"Daddy, what's taking so long?" Natalie whines. She presses her forehead into the windowpane.

Questions, questions. Always asking questions this one, Eva thinks. She slides into the seat beside Masha as David closes the door. For a while Masha is quieted by the hum of the engine as David drives, but when the van's front right wheel hits a pot hole on 2nd, she's a whimpering mess all over again.

"What does little Masha want?" David's wife asks. She uses the same voice with babies as she does with dogs – intense and full of squeaks. "Is it time for Ribby?" David's wife turns around and shakes a plush green frog in front of Masha's face.

"Maybe she doesn't like long trips," Eva says. She turns to Masha and shakes her head. "Neither do I."

Natalie rolls her eyes and makes squirming noises in the back seat. David glances in the rearview mirror. "Natalie, put your seatbelt on."

"Where are we going?"

"To the Holocaust Museum. Do you know what the Holocaust is, Natalie?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "Will we be back in time for lunch? I'm starving."

"We'll get something there. Now put that seatbelt on you *will* be lunch." They hear the seatbelt click.

David's wife leans closer with the frog, tries to make it dance for Masha. But the girl doesn't want any part of it. She grabs at her pink cheeks and swings her head from side to side. Eva knows they've been having problems with their children. Sass always

from this Natalie and now the waterworks from Masha. She is sure, somehow, this is their mother's fault.

"Feh," Eva says. "Feh! She does not like the frog. Stop waving it in her face."

David's wife pulls Ribby to her chest and stares out into traffic as if she's been slapped. Masha continues to tear up. "Oh, little Mish-mash with the puddle face," Eva says. "Disney wouldn't make a dime off you. Come here." She reaches out for a tendril and twirls it around her finger. "Let Baba tell you a story. I had a friend once named Liesl. Liesl Weissman, whom I met when I was a girl just a few years older than you are now. She had little black curls like yours and little dimples like yours, too." Masha wipes her cheek with the back of her hand. "But I never saw her cry. Not once, and here you are crying enough for the whole *mishpacha*."

Masha starts wailing again and pushes Eva's hand from her face. David frowns at Eva in the rearview mirror. Eva pretends not to notice.

"Are we there yet?" Natalie asks.

They finally pull into a lot of narrow spaces and the occasional honking horn, the museum's visage a garden-variety brick with no windows. On the sidewalk Eva tugs at David's sleeve. She asks him what he thinks the children will learn here about history or their people or the faith that they can't learn from the synagogue, which – she reminds him–he does not attend regularly, or from school or even from their Baba, who, she is certain, is the expert on this thing if no other.

David laughs.

"Who's funny?" she asks.

"Listen, Mom. I object. The girls, they drive you batty. They'll take your words and have you beat, spinning in circles screaming, by the time they're done. Everyone loses. No dice."

"What accusations," Eva says. "I appreciate the youth. I do."

David shakes his head. "But it's not all cracked up like it used to be, you see? Not like when I was a kid. Not like when you were. So leave that parenting thing to me and look at the deal you've got here: kisses before bedtime, few responsibilities, small consequences. It should all be soup and crackers for you from now on. Soup and crackers! Easy! Why mess up a good thing?"

"Don't mock me," she says. "I wiped *your* ass once upon a time."

"And some day I'll do the same for you. Now look, if you want to wait out here, be my guest. I'm sure there's a tourist somewhere who has more time for this conversation than I do."

"Such a handsome face," Eva says, "but such ugly words. Do you really hate your mother so much?"

"Look, Mom, don't make me out to be the bad guy. I'm just calling it what it is. When it's over, it's over, and this conversation is over. Dead. Done for."

David's wife and daughters appear from around the corner, tickets in hand. Masha peeks her head between her mother's legs and squeals. "Boo!"

"Yes, Masha," Eva says, glaring at the parents. "Boo."

Inside, a group of middle school students clog the entrance to the first room. Hungry Natalie is already pointing at the café and talking of bread. But David scoots her

through the turnstile, his wife stalled as they rummage through her bag in search of what? Eva doesn't know how she schleps that thing and two children around all the time. They pull headsets from a bin, practice their plays and pauses before they head for the displays. David's wife holds Masha's hand as she straps on her own player and cups one half of a headset to her ear.

Eva tries, briefly, to work hers, but the play button sticks and the strap won't stretch enough for her chest. The recorded voice sounds too distant. Too pleasant and theatrical for the plot behind this whole production. She tugs at the earpieces and abandons the whole thing. Already, she has lost sight of the family.

In the corner of the opening floor, a blue polka dot dress with gathered shoulders, pleated waist, and a simple hem hangs. It reminds Eva of Liesl and sadness, how their mothers met while sifting through piles of gingham and taffeta, beige chiffon and mint-colored velvet as dressmakers before the war, and how their mothers would never make dresses again. Of the time they, as girls, were both caught swimming in their dresses– much to their mothers' dismay – in the Baltic Sea one summer, because they were too embarrassed to strip down naked, even in front of each other. How Eva was plump and serious while Liesl was lithe and sunny. How Liesl got her period first, and teased Eva, calling her "little girl" for a whole month, until Eva got her period and they were equals once again. How Eva hated Liesl's laugh, like hiccups, but loved everything else about her. How the war and the train had buried all that.

Eva bumps into an elderly man with a newsboy cap. He grabs her arm to steady her. She looks over his shoulder and along each of the walls, but finds no answers: where

she came from, where she is supposed to go next. He pulls one of his earpieces out. "Have you seen a tall man," she asks, "with two little girls and a frog wandering around here somewhere?"

He gestures with his hands. "Was there a woman, too? About yay tall?" Eva nods. He points her toward a flight of ivory stairs and says, "You just missed them." Eva shuffles past, thanking him with a wave.

She sees her son and his family in another room at the top of the stairs. Here the lights are dimmer, casting shadows on the wooden barracks and making bold the metal divide between places one can wander and places one dares not touch. Photos stretch behind ceiling-to-floor glass panels of bodies face-down in shallow graves, marches toward death, the guts of gas chambers, and a guard pointing a rifle at a man's head as he flees with a young boy wrapped in his arms.

Eva walks up behind David, swipes the frog from his hand and whacks him alongside the head with it. He turns. "Ouch. Mom, be reasonable."

"Reason is wasted on the youth. This is what you brought them to see? You want Masha to have nightmares, as if it isn't enough that I already do?" She covers Masha's eyes and escorts her out of the room, leaving David and his wife to stare gape-mouthed at each other. Masha giggles and runs and hides behind the blackened vintage railcar as they enter the next room.

"Peek-a-boo?" she says, poking her head out from behind.

"Your father is a putz."

This room is lined with television screens of old and ragged survivors telling their stories about the world before the war. Their voices converge and float thick around Eva's head. In the center of the room is the boxcar, lined by white gravel strips, and Masha standing off to the side. Eva takes her hand. She remembers it, the kindertransport, and how Liesl refused to go, how she said she would stay and die with her parents if that's what was meant to be. Such brave words, Eva thought, but she knew Liesl was scared. The way her eyes looked as the train chugged away: blue and fervent and on fire.

They were twelve, not nearly old enough for such a thing, and Eva brought Liesl's ghost on the train with her, pretending she was in the next seat, whispering to her as they chugged from city to city, because Eva was afraid of the silence. "There's a mountain a few miles ahead and its peak is circled by a big, gray cloud. I think it's going to rain. I wish I was home... Now we're disembarking in London. Oh, you should see the city, Liesl. Never have I found such flat roofs or so many windows or so much perfume on the women... Liesl, don't be mad. Just hear me out. It was here yesterday, I swear it was. But now it is not. That pair of boots your mother gave to me last Chanukah? They're gone. I've got a hole in the only pair I have left and now I just can't stop crying. I'm so sorry."

But Liesl wasn't really there beside her. She was on the platform or headed back to the city with her parents. And now? Now? Eva wonders. She doesn't want to admit the first thought that comes to her mind. She is probably somewhere doing the same things I have done, Eva thinks, entertaining memories of old men or following our children through ridiculous displays of former life. What is this fuss anyway? Museums for the dead, when they should be for the living. And when my usefulness is over, I don't want

someone making a poster board out of me. No, sir. Thank you. Next. We deserve our memorials now, while we can still remember them. We may be old, but we're not throwaways. We have our eyes, and if we do not have our eyes, we have our teeth. And if we do not have our teeth, we still have our wits or our voices or our complaints. Something to sustain us. Pensions and lap cats and gardens, enough pills to keep the medicine companies in business and family who, at the very least, pretend to tolerate us. Yes, the living. That's who should be honored.

Eva closes her eyes. "I miss you, Liesl. Can you still hear me?"

A subtle awareness comes to her: the absence of touch. It is enough for Eva to abandon the ghosts and realize Masha's hand is no longer in her own. "Mish-mash?" Eva sees Ribby in a pile beside the train. *Drek. Where has she gone now?* Eva pushes toward the corner of the room and wanders farther into a labyrinth of halls. The first hall bombards Eva with words, newspaper headlines blown up into marquees that read "Juden," "The Final Solution," and "Arbeit Macht Frei." Work makes one free. Eva wishes she were free of this headache that's been burning a hole behind her left eye. She wishes she had brought the cane after all. She turns. In the next room, maps of the ghettos– Krakow, Vilna, Lodz, pictures outside the gas chambers – gold teeth and leather shoes, empty glass frames, dissecting tables, the hinge from a crematoria door, and a violin with a single, broken bowstring.

Too much, too much. Eva pauses to catch her breath. Her left hand tingles. Pins and needles, and numbness up her left arm. She presses the other hand to her throbbing head and looks down at her body, an unreliable cast: bruised arms, diabetic shoes, legs

that stopped growing hair years ago, arthritic fingers–a result of too much crocheting, and a pelvis that spread during childbirth then broke in the eighties when she tripped in a department store. *Oy, what a mess. What's wrong with you all down there? Shape up, shape up. We've got a show to run.*

She shuffles down a narrow hallway without a sign. It's lightless except for one panel at an indiscernible distance and, she thinks, a voice still talking somewhere. But she can't make out whose it is. Woman or man, young or old. Inside or out. She stubs her toe on something sharp.

Now wait. This isn't right. Hold still, Eva.

Something tugs at her dress.

Liesl? Is that you?

If you don't hold still and let me fix this hem, I swear I'm going to out you to the Germans. She laughs. Oh, her laugh hasn't aged one bit, and neither has her face, that porcelain skin that surfaces from the darkness. Just glowing.

We have to get you out of here, Liesl. You have to come with me. Will you?

I never left.

Eva reaches out to touch Liesl's hand, but pulls back when she gets a scream. "Ba-baaaa!" Masha wails and wails.

The face disappears. Eva paddles through the darkness in search of it again. Left, right, stroking as the little clot goes to work inside of her, pushing its way through a narrow artery until it gets stuck. The first handful of brain cells hush. Time passes. Two

minutes. Three. *Liesl?* Eva mouths the word, but nothing comes out. It's trapped inside her throat.

A light hits Eva's retina, and for a moment she is blind. She turns her face.

A guard and David and the rest of the family appear in the doorway. "I'm sorry, Ma'am. But you can't be in here. This part isn't set to open until spring."

"Masha, where on earth have you been?" David's wife brushes past. "You had us worried sick. Come here." She pulls Masha to her, the porcelain face disappearing behind a pair of khaki legs.

Shh, Eva hears Liesl say. *Shh, they can't find us here.*

Eva's mind unravels like a spool of thread. The cobblestone roads of Poland, soupy with mud when it rained, and the candy-colored honeycomb of buildings that ran alongside them, America and the park and the rusted slide where her Mendel-soon-to-be-David broke his collarbone because he thought he could fly, and an old gray cat enamored by a string of red thread hanging off the side of a laundry hamper. Beneath her hands, she can feel the cool firmness of the foundation of their first home and the rocking of the boat as it approaches the London shore and the heat from the spider bite that made David's thumb swell like a sausage in a frying pan.

Liesl? I need some help here.

It's just a little bit of blood, Eva. Don't panic. I'll get a pad. Here, sit, sit.

Eva leans to the side and presses her palm against the glass cover of a portrait in black and white. A family from a long time ago.

"Mom?" David braces her other hand and then her body. "Someone get an ambulance."

It's just a headache. I just have a headache. Leave me be. She tries to swat him, but instead falls forward. David catches her and guides her body to the floor.

Eva, stay with me.

Cabbage and kielbasa stew on the stove and David's wife escorts silver trays of honey-baked ham, goose, and rum cake with glaze to their table on the eve before. The dining room decorated in green and red. "Merry Christmas, Baba!" the girls scream. *Oh, you funny things.* David at eighteen with his black curls shaven, bald, and Eva in a puddle of tears behind the garage. Her husband's pale body alive beneath the sheets then tossed across an ocean. His pieces like an ellipse or a string of beads or a universe scattered in constellations, dot after dot after dot. Where had the time gone now? She lost it in a careless sort of way, like a quarter through a hole in the pocket. It no longer stretches out before her as an endless shore.

She wants to tell them something, her son and his family. About men and their fathers, about women and their mothers, about war and malice and grace and the difference between hunger in the stomach and hunger in the heart. She wants to tell them about time being like a river with a dam at the end, about loss and the living and her secret life: its sighs and missed chances, lost friendships and other tragedies. The things she never said, and now it is too late. Her tongue is fat with silence.

She reaches out to David.

Hold on, Eva! Liesl grasps her hand as they run toward the water, shoes dangling from fingertips and ruffles aflutter behind them. Faster! The foam of the Baltic tickles the skin beneath their skirts, and Liesl's laughter pops like bubbles in Eva's ears. The first wave barely grazes their kneecaps, but the second is enough to push their bodies back and under, round and deep and full. They resurface and grow braver as the last one crests before them, two bodies rushing forth, held together by hands. And against the rise of light and voices, Eva hugs the tide.

ANY ROAD WILL TAKE YOU THERE

Kim checks the time. It is November. The leaves are falling along the road. One of them – a gold one – catches on the windshield wiper and sticks for several miles, making a blind spot in her view of the highway. But it escapes when they turn, when the road banks toward the west and disappears behind a hill. Kim checks the gas again. It's almost empty. In the passenger seat, Darrell smokes a cigarette and turns the radio to a country music station with static. Johnny Cash croons. He's been turning it off and on, off and on again since Lake City, Florida. Kim checks the child safety lock. It's still on. In the rearview mirror, she watches the little girl's eyes flit back and forth as the exits and mile-markers and the occasional abandoned car pass by her window.

"Can I go pee?" the little girl asks.

Kim turns to Darrell, who taps his fingers with the rhythm on the radio. He's not talking much.

"Darrell?"

"Fuck if I care, Kim. It's your call."

He's nervous, Kim thinks. She knows when he's nervous. He's mowed through the last pack of cigarettes like a John Deere on grass, puffing just long enough to burn down the tips, then tossing the rest in the ashtray. She's nervous, too.

"If you're going to waste them all, then give them to me," she says. He hands her the cigarette, and she takes a long, slow drag and chucks it back into the ashtray.

Another mile marker on I-75 passes. The blue exit signs tell her there's a Stuckey's up ahead in Valdosta with a Dairy Queen inside. Nothing much else except gas stations and a motel and miles and miles of red Georgia clay. Kim checks the time again. Yesterday at about this time, Mrs. Bellows would have phoned the house to check on Emma and ask to speak to her. She always did that, like clockwork, during her lunch and dinner breaks. Kim would sit the little girl on her hip or let her stand on a chair so she could reach the phone, a white one with a long spiral cord attached to a wall in the kitchen. Yesterday Mrs. Bellows would have phoned again. Yesterday the phone just kept ringing.

Kim peers over her shoulder. Emma is pinching her skirt between her hands, feet pigeon-toed and knees buckled toward each other, straining. Her gray eyes shift between Kim's face and the back of Darrell's head. Kim wonders if she should pull off at the Stuckey's now or just let the girl wet the back seat.

"Please, Kimmy?" the little girl says. She looks as if she's about to pop.

A horn wails beside them. Kim swerves back into their lane.

"Goddamn it, Kim. Would you keep your eyes on the road?"

Kim tries to catch her breath. "We'll stop," she says, glancing over her shoulder again. "We'll stop, but we have to make it quick. Ok, sweetie?" The girl nods her head, but keeps gripping her skirt. "We're going to need gas soon anyway."

Kim exits the highway, pressing the brake until the speedometer slows down to 30 mph. It's an old car. It creeps into the Stuckey's parking lot with a *tick-tick-tick* behind the left front tire. Mrs. Bellows offered to have a friend look at it, because Kim said she and

Darrell couldn't afford a mechanic. That was a week ago. If it can just wait, she thinks, they'll get it fixed in Louisville. Darrell said he knew a guy there.

Kim pulls into the lot in front of Stuckey's. She wonders if they should have taken a different route, should have stayed off the main highway and gone through the boondocks instead. She wonders if someone has seen the license plate yet. She parks backwards just in case. As she unbuckles her seatbelt, Darrell opens his door. Kim turns and plants a hand on his shoulder.

"What? I just want to get some Marlboros," he says.

"I'll get them for you." She turns to the little girl, who is pinching her skirt between her hands again. "I'll get them. Just let me get them. Ok, Darrell?"

"Jesus Christ. Fine." He closes the door again. "But I don't want any of that light shit you always buy."

Emma waits for Kim to come around the back of the car and unbuckle her seatbelt and help her out. Kim holds her hand. It gets cooler as they drive north. Emma will need a coat soon. Kim forgot that. Together they walk toward the red and yellow sign, the steep-pitched roof with its thick, blue tiles. Kim slips on a pair of sunglasses before she opens the door.

The Stuckey clerk behind the counter, gas station attendant for the two pumps outside, is a Middle Eastern man with a Jerry curl. The bell beside the door rings when they enter. He picks his head up. He waves at Emma. Emma waves back. Kim expects this. She remembers her first week as Emma's nanny and how the clerks at the shoe store oohed and ahhed over the little girl as they took her pink sneakers and the socks with the

frills around the ankles off. All the questions – how old and was she in school yet and could they give her a balloon?

"She has your eyes," one clerk said as he slipped a pair of Mary Janes on Emma's feet. Kim did not correct him.

The aisles inside are decorated with pretzels and candy and cereals, cheap Thanksgiving memorabilia and evergreen candles for the season. The signature pecan rolls have their own shelf near the front. Brown leaks from the cappuccino spigot and blueberry foam oozes out of the slushy machine with an Out-of-Order sign taped to the front. Blizzards and hotdogs are being made next door. She can hear the Blizzard machine whir in the background. She can smell the chili.

"I want a ice cream," Emma says.

"I thought you had to go potty."

They slip into an aisle, Kim pushing Emma past the magazine racks, doughnut display case, and back into the toiletries. Another customer comes in to complain about Pump #2 being out of receipt paper, and Kim pockets a small bag of chips while the clerk is distracted. Emma frees her hand and runs toward the bathroom in the back.

In front of Kim is a line of toothbrushes, angled and compact and children's size. Mrs. Bellows always had a spare toothbrush sitting on the countertop in the master bathroom, just in case.

Kim opens the door to the women's bathroom. There's some kind of stain on it. Paint, maybe. "Emma?" she calls. "Which stall are you in, honey?"

"I had a number two!"

Kim bends at the waist and spots the little girl's feet dangling above the floor of the second stall. "You ok in there, sweetie?"

"Don't look!"

Kim waits. It's frigid inside. White chunks from the ceiling on have fallen to the floor like flakes of dander, like snow. The sinks weep and the drains are stained a red-brown. Hinges on some of the stalls are rusted, too. Kim opens the bag of chips. She checks the time. 5:30. They should be going again soon.

Emma hums a children's tune Kim can't quite remember the name of. It's familiar. Mrs. Bellows used to sing it all the time. Kim remembers the Bellows home, the smells of fresh laundry and polished wood everywhere and a stout Mrs. Bellows standing at the door in her pinstripe shirt and brown pumps. Her face was level with Emma's. It was the first time.

"Please don't go, Mommy."

Mrs. Bellows leaned in closer as Kim held Emma's hand. Emma held Mrs. Bellows' long blonde hair. "You know I wouldn't leave you, right? Not for good. But how about just for a night? I promise I'll be back by the time you wake up." Mrs. Bellows was off to a dinner meeting with a client, then to a hotel room where her husband was already, drinking champagne. It was their anniversary. She took the little girl's hands and started singing softly. "Let's sing the goodbye song. Ok, Emma? And a one and a two..."

Emma joined her. They went through two verses and a bunch of choreographed hand gestures. Kim melted.

"Be good for Miss Kimmy," Mrs. Bellows said as she kissed Emma on the cheek.

"Don't worry. I'll take good care of her."

You have an honest face, Mrs. Bellows had said the day she hired Kim. It was meant as a compliment. Kim didn't reply. She didn't like telling people they were wrong, that this 'honest face' Mrs. Bellows thought she saw had landed herself in jail at the age of sixteen for petty theft and was married to a man whose only drive in life was gambling. First the horses in Louisville, then the greyhounds at the track in Tampa, giving all his love and money to the likes of Number 2, Destiny, The Santa Fe Slicker, and All That Jazz. This honest face had taken Mrs. Bellows' cash advance and pocketed it for the gas and cigarettes and cheap motel rooms ahead. This honest face had told Emma to pack up her bag last night, and when Emma asked why, said they were going to the theme park in Georgia. This honest face, when Emma asked if Mommy was going to be there, too, said yes. This honest face was already gone by the time the phone rang.

Kim lowers the brown lenses and scrutinizes her face in the mirror. She looks tired. Black hair twisted like licorice sticks, circles under her eyes, unglossed lips and furrowed brows. Mrs. Bellows had everything she wanted. The hair, the house, the husband, the life, the girl. She throws the empty bag of chips into the trashcan and wipes her hands on her shirt. Her belly aches. She shouldn't have eaten them so fast. She sticks a hand underneath the hem of her shirt and rubs her stomach. She dips the hand further down, beneath her underwear, feels it. It's still there, still real. Long and curved and puckered like a smile beneath her navel. She turns to the mirror and traces the white scar with a fingertip and glances up at her face again. "Ok, Emma," she says. "Time to go."

"But I'm not done yet." She keeps humming and swinging her feet.

"I'm serious. Now."

"Aww. Ok."

"Don't forget to wipe."

Kim hears the toilet paper roll click along its plastic brace, watches the line of paper gather in a pile on the floor. Emma rips it and flushes the toilet. Her feet drop to the floor.

"It won't stop running," Emma says when she opens the stall door. "It's gonna flush forever."

Kim nudges her toward the sink. "Don't worry about it now. Just wash so we can go."

"Can I get a ice cream now?"

"It's too cold for ice cream, sweetie."

The girl shakes her hands beneath the faucet so the water splashes onto the floor. The blow dryer is positioned too high. She has to raise her hands above her head and bounce just to reach the stream of air. Kim picks her up and sits her on her hip. When Emma's hands are half dry, she sets her back down.

"But I'm not done!" Kim takes her hand and can feel the moisture, the tiny fingers sliding between her own, as they walk through the door. "Kimmy, wait!" They pass the toothbrushes again.

Kim hears Darrell's voice at the register. "Pump One and a Marlboro. And none of that light shit. Jesus Christ." The clerk frowns.

Kim hides behind a magazine rack and watches them. The clerk turns to the cigarette case and fiddles with the key. Above him is a television, local news broadcast. The anchorman is talking about a tropical storm brewing in the Gulf. Then something flashes. AMBER alert. The little girl's face appears on the screen, a portrait taken in September with her hair in pigtails, the old pink sneakers on her feet.

Kim holds her breath. Please don't look up, please don't look up. The clerk digs for Darrell's cigarettes.

The anchorman reads from his script. Name: Emma Bellows. Age: 3 years. Weight: 31 pounds. Physical features: grey eyes, black curly hair, a birthmark on her left arm. Then they show a picture of Kim and Darrell side-by-side at her mother's trailer in Indiana four summers ago. The corn in the fields was already knee high by the fourth, blue-sheathed stalks rising toward the sun and vomiting up their stale yellow tassels. In the picture she is pregnant, belly protruding far enough for people to ask if they could touch it. She remembers. All those fingers. After a while she just said no. Within months she felt swollen, grape-like. On those nights she sat on the hickory swing Darrell built in front of the trailer, swaying back-and-forth, back-and-forth, watching the autumn breezes undress the trees.

Do you have any kids of your own? Mrs. Bellows asked during the interview.

No, but I wish I did.

Kim wonders where they got the picture.

Emma pops out from behind the magazine rack and points. "Kimmy, that's –"

Kim's hand muffles her. She shoves the little girl toward the double doors, pressing the sunglasses to her face as if they could fall off at any moment.

Darrell glances over. "Hey, Kim! I was just –"

Kim swings around and glares. She sticks a finger at the screen above the clerk and then toward the door. Darrell looks up and sees his face. A gray telephone number against a blue backdrop covers him. The anchorman tells viewers they should call if they have any information about the missing girl and her kidnappers. Darrell looks down; the attendant is still fumbling inside the cigarette display case. He finds the package of Marlboros and turns back to Darrell.

"Hey, uh, want to ask you another favor, man." The clerk sets the packet on the counter, and Darrell swipes it from his hands. He draws one out and lights it.

"There will be no smoking in the building, sir."

"You know how to get to Asheville from here?" The cigarette dangles from the corner of Darrell's mouth.

The clerk stares at the burning cigarette.

"Hey, man. Hand me one of those lottery tickets while you're at it, too. I'm feeling lucky."

"Would you like a quick pick or a multi-draw today, sir?"

"Darrell," Kim says at the door. He looks back. "We need to go. Now."

"In a minute." He plucks a roadmap from the carrel beside the counter and leans into the attendant. "Could you point us in the direction of Asheville, please? Was

thinking me and the missus could find ourselves one of those cabins up in the mountains, maybe do a little..."

"Ow! Kimmy!" The girl collapses to the floor and shakes free of Kim's grip. Kim bends over to pick her up again. "Darrell. Now!"

"I'm coming. Sheesh." He turns to the clerk. "Women. They're all nuts. Now where was Asheville again?"

The attendant clears his throat and points to the map Darrell has laid out on the counter. "If you head out toward 75 and north to Atlanta, there will be turn a for I-85. Follow that and it should get you to Greenville, just south of Asheville."

"And after?"

"Just follow the signs. Any road will take you there."

"You don't say. Well, thank you. Thank you very much." He folds the map, slaps it on the countertop and tosses it aside.

"Don't you need that?" the clerk asks.

"No, I trust you." Darrell winks and pulls the cigarette from his lips. The clerk punches in the gas, ticket, and cigarettes, and Darrell throws two twenties onto the counter, telling him to keep the change. When he gets to the door, Kim smacks the back of his head. Emma giggles.

Outside, Kim loads Emma into the car. Darrell slumps into the passenger seat as the overhead light flickers. Kim shifts gears and peels out. The passenger door slams shut on its own.

"Jesus Christ, Kim. You could have taken my foot off."

The car speeds toward the highway, white lane dividers ticking away faster than the seconds. The speedometer sticks on 90; the car rattles. Kim stares down the road, blind to everything but the sound of bugs splattering against the windshield. Darrell reaches one hand toward the radio dial. She smacks it down.

"You've ruined everything, Darrell. Why'd you talk to him about us going anywhere?"

"Look, Kim, I know we're not going to Asheville. You know we're not going to Asheville. But he doesn't know that. I was throwing him off the trail."

"Yes, but he'll tell them we were here. They'll know we took 75. They'll know we were somewhere in Georgia."

"By the time he says anything we'll be at your mom's. Jesus, Kim, slow down."

"I don't think we can go to Indiana now, Darrell. We're gonna have to figure something else out."

"Now just hold your horses. All we have to do is get to Louisville. Then I can go to the races. Then we can see your mom."

Emma unbuckles the seat belt and begins to crawl across the cushions. "Guess what!" she says.

"Emma, sweetie, sit down."

"We're going to Six Flags!"

"Emma, don't make me pull over this car." The overhead light strobes on Darrell's forehead. "Fuck the races, Darrell. We can't go to Louisville now either."

"Why not?"

"You think someone won't recognize us there? You think someone won't recognize us anywhere we go now? We're on the fucking television, Darrell. There's a warrant for our arrest."

"And whose fault is that?" Darrell lights another cigarette. "You and your crazy ideas. Stealing little girls just because you can't have one of your own. I told you we should have gone with ransom. Then we'd at least have something we could use. Money doesn't need food or ask questions or jump up and down in the back seat."

"Six! Flags!"

"Emma, sit down!" Kim checks the child safety lock.

"You should be thanking me, Kim. I got the gas, didn't I? Didn't I pump the gas for you? You were in there so fucking long I'd thought you'd slipped out the bathroom window and left me."

"Shut up, Darrell."

"Kimmy?" Emma says as she starts to cry. "Where we going?"

Darrell turns around and yells at Emma. "Miss Kimmy here lied to you, kid. You're not going to Six Flags. You're not seeing your mommy. And I was fucking nuts to agree to this. Stop the car."

Emma wails. Darrell unbuckles his seatbelt and presses the lock, but it won't budge because of the safety.

"I'm going to get off at the next exit, Darrell. Just hold on. Just wait until I –"

A horn wails next to Darrell's head. The overhead light goes out. A red Jeep from the ramp barrels toward them. Kim tries to swerve. She sees the gray hair of the driver

pass, another one in the passenger seat, all clear and liquid, like water. Everything but the colors drowns. Momentum and shadows. Her fender scrapes along the bottom of the Jeep doors. Metal against metal. But she can't hear it, can only see it, crumpling backward, folding on itself. They spin from the impact. Darrell screams in the seat beside her, but his mouth is empty, silent. It all seems so distant, the trees crawling above the dashboard, the stars hanging like figures from a mobile, slowly circling. Stop-time. She feels her jaw, her chest, her stomach punch into the steering wheel. Then she blacks out. When she wakes up, mile-marker 29 is folded over the hood of the car and staring at her. Her ears are ringing, like air is being pushed from the inside. She looks down at her hands, sees all the blood, feels the pain in her stomach, like a kick. Then she remembers that morning, when the ground had finally shed its ice and her period never came. It was March. Darrell was asleep, but should have been at work, and so she went to the drugstore by herself and plucked a test from the shelf. And in case it said yes, she bought prenatal vitamins and diapers and canned fruit. They never kept fruit in the house.

She spent almost $75 of Darrell's winnings because there was no other money to spend. And when the clerk told her to have a nice day and good luck, she imagined Darrell slugging her for spending all that money. But when she had drunk what felt like enough to fill a waterbed and moistened each test with her urine and watched the control strips darken and the test strips beside them match, she was so happy she didn't care what Darrell would do when he woke up. Instead of hitting her, he took a long drive and a smoke instead. When he came back she told him they had to find a doctor. For the baby.

The doctor said it would be due in late November. It would be a girl. She didn't arrive on schedule. Kim waited. She spent the hours coming up with names, and when Darrell rejected them all she let him fall asleep, changed the spelling of some of them – Rain to Rayne or Brittany to Britney – and tried it again when he woke up. It only irritated him more. She checked the overnight bag. It was already packed for the hospital. She unpacked it and checked that the lids were screwed on tight and put the things back in one-by-one. Hair bands and toiletries, little toothpaste tubes, shampoos, and deodorants, crackers and raisins and a fresh change of clothes.

When there was nothing left to check, Kim paced back-and-forth in the trailer until Darrell complained she was making him dizzy. Then she swang back-and-forth on the hickory swing all day worrying, thinking the longer it took, the more worried she would become. *Maybe it doesn't want to come out*, she thought. *Maybe we're not good enough.* Her mother said everything would be fine.

Thanksgiving came and passed, and she didn't even have the stomach to eat turkey or pumpkin pie or her mother's warm stuffing. Kim checked the nursery. Pink sweaters and baby caps, the one with the lady bug and the other one fleece with a monkey face and ears, the blankets and teddy bears. She spun the mobile with her fingertip, the one she finally talked Darrell into buying – miniature black and gray horses galloping in circles above the baby's head, their soft hooves driving out the nightmare of an unfulfilling life – the kind her parents lived. She checked the crib, grabbed the edges and shook it to make sure it was sturdy, checked the screws. It was ready, just like everything

and everyone else. Everything but the baby. She unpacked the overnight bag. She packed it again.

It would be December soon, and the baby had not kicked or even hiccupped for a whole day this time. She called the doctor and he calmed her with words like "rare" and "unlikely" and "patience." She called her mother, who explained with a smirk that this would be the first of many times her life she would be inconvenienced by a child. So Kim repeated her rituals until the next morning. At 2 a.m. her water broke while Darrell slept, and when she shook him awake he wasted time teasing her for wetting the bed while she grabbed the overnight bag and the car keys.

She felt the contractions in her back and stomach first, suffered the pain for hours, screamed until her throat went raw, pushed, screamed some more. They told her to slouch and taped a sheet with a hole cut out of the center to her back. They gave her the epidural. She pushed more. But the baby didn't budge.

A nurse rushed for aides, shaved her, cathetered her, covered her in blue so she couldn't see what was going on down there. The doctor prepared the scalpel. The anesthesiologist promised she would be ok, but he said nothing about the baby. Kim was naked underneath her gown and frightened like a live frog on a dissection table. They told her to breathe.

Afterward, the doctor spoke to her in private. He apologized about her "rare" and "unlikely" circumstance. She asked him if this was punishment for everything else she had done in her life. He asked her if she'd like to speak to the psychologist.

A nurse cleaned the corpse and wrapped it in a white towel, softer than anything Kim had felt before. She stood on Kim's right and let her look at the girl's face, still and close-eyed, but peaceful.

"You can hold her if you want to," the nurse said. "It might help."

She was right. Kim took the dead child and watched the hours unfold on the clock as she cradled it in her arms, as the painkillers drained from her limbs. But the real pain, the one inside, never went away. She lost herself in thoughts of what home would be like when she returned. Empty picture frames faced down, the mobile plucked from the ceiling and trashed, and the baby crib dismantled. Darrell came to the ward then, complaining about the no smoking policy and how he had to walk across the street to light one. He looked at the thing in her arms and said, "What color were the eyes?" She couldn't tell him. She didn't have the answer. That's when Kim finally cried.

Emma's eyes are gray. She remembers. Emma.

The steering wheel is smeared in blood. Kim wipes a finger at the edge of her eyebrow and realizes it's her own. She cannot see her feet. She wiggles her toes to make sure they are still there. The adrenaline keeps the rest of the pain at bay, but she knows she will feel it soon, like bricks falling on her shoulders and blades cutting through her thighs. She looks to her left and sees the Jeep in the moonlight, its side crushed and its driver, a gray-haired man with a moustache, slumped over and pressed against the windowpane. A thin burgundy line drips from his scalp to his chin. A mass of hair splotched against the windshield. The passenger seat is still, too.

She turns to her right. Darrell is dead. The window beside his body is splintered, half of it no longer in the windowpane, but in his chest and neck and face. The metal frame of the door cups Darrell's body like a hand, his mass so small Kim is sure all his insides are no longer inside of him.

Emma, too, is beside her, the little girl's shoulders just barely pinned between the passenger and driver seats. She didn't have her seatbelt on.

Kim reaches out to touch Emma's face, so soft and smooth and placid in the moonlight. She brushes the little girl's hair from her forehead and strokes her cheek, streaking it with blood, waiting for her to do something, to say something, anything. She checks for breath.

Emma opens her gray eyes. "Kimmy?" She coughs.

"Hush, sweetie," Kim whispers. "Everything's going to be all right."

"It hurts."

"Where?" she asks.

"Everywhere."

"I'm going to go get us some help, ok?"

Emma's eyes grow wide and frightful. The cut on her cheek starts to ooze. "Don't leave. Please don't leave me. Kimmy!" She moves her arms to grab for Kim, but they're pinned behind the seats. She wails.

Kim leans in close to her face, smiles, and whispers. "You know I wouldn't leave you alone. Not for good, right? But how about an hour?"

Emma sniffs. "Don't go. Please."

"Can you sing the goodbye song for me?" Emma is silent. "Sing the goodbye song and give Kimmy a kiss."

Kim bends forward and kisses Emma on the forehead. Then she pushes at the door until it falls at the hinge, extends her legs and feels the blood rushing back, the pain along with it and the memories, too. She can't stop now. She must get out. Get out, damnit. She peels herself from the seat and begins to walk step-by-step, dragging one of her legs, the cold nipping at her ears as she searches for a way to keep her promise. Kim turns north and south and north again, unsure which way to go. She can hear Emma humming behind her. She checks the sky. And over there, beyond a hill, are lights that seem to blur, their distance immeasurable, like stars above a lonely stretch of highway.

INHERITANCE

My plane came in on time, but Mama did not. She had always lived on what my father called "Indian time," or more specifically "Coeur d'Alene Indian time," which drew out the minutes like long, slow puffs from a locomotive chimney. Of all the things I expected to change during my time away in Phoenix, this was not one of them. So when I arrived, I took a Coke and sandwich at the one good restaurant at Spokane International Airport and sat down to wait. The Chevy arrived nearly two hours late, rattling around the corner at the terminal drop-off and Mama barely tall enough to see over the steering wheel. It had been my father's Chevy, but I suppose it was hers now. Dead men can't own trucks. Can't own anything, really, except your memories.

She pressed against the horn, trying to make it honk, but it came out sounding more like a cough. The Chevy was getting old, and so was Mama. She wore her salt-and-pepper hair tied back in a ponytail and a red baseball cap over her olive face, rivers of perspiration forking at the wrinkle lines. The jowls along her chin had changed the shape of her face, rounded it out, while the rest of her was thinner than I remembered. Or maybe it was my memory that had thinned. Maybe she looked this way before I left five years ago, and I had simply forgotten.

She squinted and pulled up to the sidewalk to rescue me from the summer heat. "You eat yet?" she asked. She still smelled the same: dusty, earthen, organic.

I threw my duffle in the truck bed. "Yeah. Lox and a bagel at the café. But you look like you haven't eaten since I left, Mama."

"Not particularly hungry these days," she said. "You forget how to sustain yourself sometimes when everything around you is dying. But I suppose you already knew that."

I didn't want to tell her she was wrong, that seeing a dead body always made me want to eat enough to save myself. Didn't want to tell her how hunger and thirst were all I had thought about since I started working at the morgue in Phoenix.

My father died a mere eight hours before my flight was scheduled to land in Spokane, and in spite of what you might think, this did not surprise me. He had a history of checking out at the most inopportune moments and for being stubborn, which I have to admit I sometimes was myself. When Mama called me, I figured she was going to chastise me about taking so long to make up my mind about coming back home or remind me to pack a coat or something. But all she said was "Well, I guess you aren't under any obligation to come home now."

I rubbed my eyes and checked the time on the nightstand clock: 1 a.m. I asked her what she meant.

"He's dead, Nell."

Well, what could I say to that? I rolled over and sat on the edge of the bed and drifted through thoughts of home: the broken plank of wood on their front steps, the wind chime that hung above it and always rang slightly out of tune, the hollow my father's body had worn into the front porch swing. The way the smells of Daddy's gin – like pine

trees and Mama's coffee mixed in the morning. How they looked down into their mugs instead of up at each other, as if they had run out of things to say and the answers were all in down there in the bottoms, drowning.

"I suppose you were trying to sleep," Mama said. "Just call me tomorrow after you've canceled the ticket."

"No, wait, Mama. I took the days off work. I can't cancel the plane ticket now. I said I'd come and that's what I'm going to do." Through the phone line I could hear the fire crackling. It took her a long time to answer.

"Well, if that's what you want..."

It was and I did and by the time 2:30 rolled around, I was watching Mama glide the Chevy's tires onto the highway as I sat in the passenger seat, a rattle beneath my feet and miles and miles of landscape laid out before us.

I remembered once, after I had just turned ten, my father driving Mama and me to Washington State to see the waterlogged lumber mills at the base of those mountains, Spokane's mountains. The sight of the cold-breath air hovering over the water's surface, like smoke from my father's cigarettes and the eagles as they peppered the ash-colored clouds with their wings and swooped down in search of fish, the way the tall marker logs stuck out of the water like porcupine quills.

We passed the hour's drive from Spokane into Idaho in silence, past Post Falls and on into Coeur D'Alene, near the reservation where Mama was born, then farther north beyond Sandpoint. All the way to an area of the panhandle saturated by trees. My father used to quiz me over those trees during rides to the elementary school: virgin white pine

and the red cedar, hemlock, spruce, and grand fir. The difference, he said, was in their seeds and how the branches either curled up or frowned.

Mama drove just beyond the Coeur d'Alene city limits, and as we got closer I realized I didn't want to see him, that maybe I should have cancelled the plane ticket and sent Mama some roses instead. The body he had left behind wouldn't look like his anymore, like the ones in the morgue in Phoenix, embarrassed to be there more for themselves than for me. Men with erections and women with unshaven armpits or legs. Sometimes they'd have been in a car accident and a hand or a foot would be missing. Sometimes there'd be burns or lacerations, and the family would have to decide: cremate or cake with makeup. Folks packaged into luggage-stiff leather bags, their dentures and Vaseline-covered wedding bands and still-ticking watches bundled in see-through plastic bags beside them. Some looked confused, but others looked as if death were a piece of candy they had just taken a bite out of. I didn't want to see him, didn't want an awkward corpse occupying his place in my memory. The idea made me nauseous.

"Nell? Honey, you don't look so well. You ok?"

"I'm fine," I said, "I think it's just the heat."

"Well, do you mind if I stop at the bait and tackle before we get home? I need flour. I can get you something cold, too, if you'd like."

"I'll be fine."

The pickup turned off the highway and onto a gravel road that led to the bait store. The little wooden shack, with its single gas pump and signs out front advertising

anglers and tobacco and informing hunters about the special licenses and the hours of the fish and game check station, sat in the same spot it always had, just a little more worn.

"I'll be right back," Mama said and shut the door. She left the key in the ignition.

I rolled down the window, letting the summer heat kiss my face before it had a chance to swelter the inside of the cab. It was so hot the air smelled of asphalt and smoke. The part of my bra that cupped beneath my breasts was already wet to the wire, and I thought to tie my thin, black hair up in a ponytail like Mama had before the strands could mat to my forehead and neck. I looked out past the gravel into the skies flooded by blue, the gray backdrop of mountains, and grassy hills, untamed by fences. I tried to remember all the names of grass he had taught me: bluebunch wheatgrass, sandberg bluegrass, squirreltail grass, needlegrass, cheatgrass, crabgrass, candy ass. No, that was what he called Ryan, the boyfriend before college. The one who ran through those woods and the woods beyond them and on into Canada when the military said he'd either go back to Iraq or to jail. I wondered what became of him. We weren't kids, I guess, when it happened. But I still had not decided if I could call Ryan braver for fighting in the first place or for knowing when to run. All the things my father warned when I was growing up: Don't put your hand on the stove. Don't skip school. And later, Just don't break his heart. I never listened.

"Well I'll be damned if it ain't Nellie McClure, all grown up and sitting in her father's pickup out in the middle of nowhere, Idaho."

I recognized the voice before the face. That's one of those things that rarely changes with time, the voice. Take away my eyes and give me a few words, I'd still know who was talking to me.

"Hello, Bert."

Bert was a veteran lumberjack friend of my father's. They were both fallers, partners at one time. That's how they met. I remember how my father would work with axes and saws and jacks, gripping each one as if shaking the hand of an old friend. Their main job was to make incisions and guide the trees down to the forest floor. They'd take measurements and count its knots and flaws and rotten spots, like Mama inspecting apples at the grocery store. Then they'd clear brush from their escape path and cut V's into the trunks and call "Timber!" and run for it, each tree giving off a gunshot pop and bowing forward like a man to his dancing partner before it finally hit the ground.

Bert's body spoke to me. Dead or alive, bodies say more in their silence than any man can communicate with words. It said it was worn from too many miles, but willing to go until it ran out of road. His spine curved forward like a prawn's hooked tail, and his hairline had receded to the thickness of a crescent moon along the base of his skull. His gut was bloated, and he shuffled with an unbalanced to-and-fro instead of the forward march I remembered.

"Lord, you look more like your mama every day. How's your schooling going?"

"I've been done with that for a while now," I said. "Been working at a mortuary in Phoenix past couple years. It pays the bills."

"That so? Can't remember the last time you came to visit. We sure do miss you around here–me and your mama and daddy."

I frowned and turned toward the bait store. "It's been a while I suppose." Bert had no clue about my father then. I figured Mama had told him, if anybody. They did everything else together outside of work – fishing, cursing, smoking, flirting with each other's wives, raising kids. That is until the accident. Bert wasn't there. He was on break, so Dad had to partner up with someone else. When a tree came down too fast and needed a place to fall, the other guy ended up dead. Everyone told my father it was an accident, could have happened to anyone. Don't blame himself. But how can you not blame yourself when you're the one still alive? Dad broke off the partnership and refused to work the sites. Instead of felling, he took an inventory job behind a desk and made calls to distribution and the mill and other loggers' wives if they got injured, or worse. Most of the rest of his life was spent apologizing into the phone by day and into his pillow by night.

"What's the matter with you?" Bert asked him. "You didn't even know the man. It could have been anybody."

"It could have been you, Bert," my father said. "It could have been you." There was no changing his mind. Bert tried to rescue him with venison and pecan brittle and pork rinds, which my father used to love so much he'd chipped a tooth on one once and kept eating until we got him to a dentist in Spokane. Everything Bert – or anyone for that matter – gave was refused. Dad already felt he owed one man his life. He didn't want to owe anyone anything else.

"You here to help them evacuate?" Bert asked. He leaned against the truck door.

"For what?"

Bert pointed a bony finger toward the horizon in the direction of my parents' cabin. "Look out there. You see that tiny black fume coming from that batch of trees on the right?"

I shook my head.

"Over there – beneath the hill's crest? No more than twenty miles off." He pointed harder at the horizon. Above a scar of rock on the hillside and just below the precipice, where green and sun burnt trees collided with azure skies, a black line of smoke, crooked and long as Bert's finger, stretched up. I nodded when I saw. "That's just the start of it," Bert said. "Got a whole army of flames running along behind it. Been gathering for days now. State says it's headed this way. Fighters already calling for an evacuation, knocking on doors. I figured you knew."

"No, I just got in. Mama didn't say anything about it."

Forest fires were known to happen during the summer months, but usually contained themselves to a small acreage of brush before they were extinguished. Mama and Dad lived in what the county called the red zone – deceptively benign plots of land that could ignite and fall to ash in a single moment. There was never enough manpower to go around. I thought of how flammable their cabin must have been all these years – cemented splinters of wood among matchstick trees, just waiting for a spark – and how the flames would travel faster, like a wave barreling toward the shore, if it descended from the hilltop behind their house.

The only time a fire came close to us happened when I was no higher than Mama's waist, and she took to hosing down the grass, whispering "not my house, not my house" to the trees while my father took a drag on his cigarette and challenged it with his eyes. I remember sitting in the den with a blanket over my head, watching the fire creep toward our log cabin, a thin line of fighter trucks and acreage separating us from the flames. Off in the distance a raccoon had shimmied up to a treetop and got stuck there. It clung to the uppermost branch, swinging back and forth in a merciless tug-of-war with the flames. The fighters killed the firestorm that time, but I turned and never saw what happened to the raccoon. I didn't want to know.

Sometimes the fires were caused by carelessness – a hiker tossing a cigarette or hunter abandoning his camp. Other times it was arson or lightning. But Mama always blamed Coyote, a legend responsible for every solace and misfortune of the world, from creation and the placement of the stars to death and the origin of fire. If cookies went missing from the jar, sly Coyote stole them. If my father got drunk, Coyote helped him find the alcohol Mama had hidden. If we went a summer without rain and fires sparked by the thousands across the Idaho landscape, Coyote had made the gods mad, drought and heat the atonement.

I wanted to believe her, but I told my teacher that Coyote ate my homework once, and she didn't believe me. I was sent to the principal, who suspended me from school instead. That's when I realized Mama's beliefs did not apply to this world, where man made his own misfortune and suffered the consequences. My father was one of those consequences. Coyote wasn't a myth or a god, but something very real. Sometimes he

was Dad. Sometimes he was Mama or me. Sometimes Coyote was the rest of the world. But always, he was that howling thing inside of us. The thing that wanted to get out.

Bert tapped on the side door twice. "Well, I just see that smoke out there as a blessing of sorts. Gives us time to act now, you know? Clear the brush. Douse the roofs. Fill up on gas and get the hell out. Least that's what I'm doing." He picked up his head. "Speak of your mama, here she comes now."

"Hi, Bert." Mama ran a hand along the brim of her ball cap and tossed the flour onto the seat between us. The engine coughed a few times before the pistons finally pumped and ignited the gas. Bert stood back and tipped his hat.

"I was just telling Nellie here that we were glad to have her back."

"Well, I'm sure she's glad to be back."

"You girls get yourselves back to Bill and tell him I said hi. You all are leaving tonight, aren't you?"

"Sorry, Bert," Mama said. "Got to go."

The tires shimmied the truck back onto the gravel road as we drove off, and Mama rolled down her window, letting the breeze, thick with smoke, whirl between us.

"You didn't tell Bert about Dad, did you?"

"This is the first time I've seen him since it happened, Nell. It was just this morning."

"But he was Dad's best friend."

"That's right, *was*. Now your father's dead and things are different."

"You both should have left already," I said.

Mama adjusted her hat and put the truck in park. "He was dying, Nell. And I'm not going to move a dying man. There's something sacred about it, shouldn't be touched."

I turned toward the sun. "Then, I suppose if we had to, we could ask the firefighters to help us take his body."

"They won't be coming either," she said. "It's all volunteers this year, and barely enough to go around. One knocked on the door last night and mentioned evacuating. I said we had it covered."

"I don't know, Mama. I just don't like the sound of it."

"You don't have to. You won't be here long enough to worry about it anyway."

I shielded my eyes as we approached the cabin, where starved mock orange bushes reached their parched leaves toward the sky, begging for rain, and tall, brittle pines lined the gravel driveway. The crick that ran so freely in front of the house during past summers was a dry vein carved into the ground, not a teardrop to its name, and you could hear the hard earth crack beneath the weight of the truck as we pulled to a stop.

Mama opened the truck door and shuffled her boots along the gravel and dust to the porch, danced around the broken plank of wood that was still there. I hesitated at the truck bed, fiddling with the straps of my duffle and finally abandoning them for my pockets. The minute the screen door shut behind Mama, I pulled a cigarette out, to calm my nerves. But my hands shook so I nearly dropped it. By now the air was muddy with the smell of ash, and when I turned to look at the hillside a red ribbon of fire lined the horizon, gray smoke choking the sun's yellow rays.

Mama called from inside. "Nell? You coming in or what?"

I threw the cigarette on the ground and smothered it with my shoe.

She stood with her back against the open door, brown arms crossed over her chest, waiting. "That better not have been a cigarette. You promised you quit that."

"Right, Mama."

I hovered at the porch, my eyes locked on the welcome rug beneath my feet. A stain in the shape of a boot sole clung to the fibers. I wondered if it was been his, then knew it probably was. It was bigger than a woman's foot, but small for a man. A nine or a nine and a half, depending on the brand of shoe. Dad always had small feet for a man, but a big heart to make up for it, Mama used to say. *That's Daddy's foot*. I kept thinking it to myself as I ran my fingers along the seams of my jeans. Mama patted my shoulder. "You want some frybread?"

"I thought you weren't eating much these days."

She stopped patting my arm. "You remind me of hunger, Nell. What can I say?" She went inside and disappeared into the kitchen.

I walked inside and stalled there, too, examining the honey-colored floor panels, their long lines and brown flecks and color variations, the way they stretched across the den and seemed to anchor the house to the ground like skeletal tissue. Refusing to look up for fear of what I'd see, though I saw things like this all the time in Phoenix. It had never been my father before, though. The doormat had a frame of dust around it, and the air vents near the windows disturbed the curtains. Something in me knew I just had to do it. I mean, that was what I came for anyway, wasn't it? To see him, dead or alive? So I lifted my eyes, but I didn't recognize the man sitting in the rocking chair across the room.

It wasn't the aftermath of death that surprised me so much – the pale face and dark feet from pooling blood, the rigor mortis. I expected those. But the cancer had made him a stranger even before death. He was fragile, like an eggshell, his body reduced to a cage of ribs on toothpick legs and his full, wheat-colored cheeks sunken and burnished with age spots. Mama hadn't tried to close his eyelids before the rigor mortis set in. He leaned back in his chair and peered with gray eyes at the head of a taxidermied caribou mounted above the mantle. His prize from a hunt. I remembered when he brought it home and hung it on the wall, its antlers forking into the ceiling like tree branches, and how he'd shown it to all my dates in high school, just to give them a scare. Now the caribou smiled down at him, as if after all these years the tables had turned – the hunter prey to his own body.

Outside the window two squirrels scurried up a tree, one chasing after the other. Reminded me of something. I was in second grade after the lumber mill accident and Daddy's consequences, when he took to drinking hooch. One time he got so drunk every bird, squirrel, and snake between the crick and our cabin was dead on the lawn. My father slumped over the arm of a chair on the porch with a bottle of hooch dangling from his hand. Mama shooed me in the house and tried to wake him, which was stupid. Startled from sleep, he screamed the man's name, then shot at another squirrel in the center of a pine tree as it tried to scurry to the ground. The bullet left a scar in the bark.

Mama took to naming Dad's drunken episodes like Indian battles, that last one Massacre at Wounded Tree. Another, the Battle of Little Big Door, happened when Mama locked him out of the house one winter night and wouldn't let him back in until he

sobered up. I could hear the curses fall like pinecones from his mouth and the pounding on the door until morning. Then there was the Siege of Syringa, when my father took to pissing on all of Mama's mock orange bushes that lined the property's edge, his laughs drawn in unison with each pull on his zipper.

Once, after Mama and Dad got into a terrible fight, she fled to somewhere without me. I didn't know what she was thinking, and she probably didn't either. She left a note on my bed, but didn't say how I could find her if I wanted to try. Just said she'd be back in a few days to get me, to have my things packed and ready. I wondered what I had done to her to deserve being left alone with that man, who was hot-headed and hooched from the moment she left. Two days into it he took to dismantling the kitchen, pot by pot, and pan by pan, and flinging the larger objects across the room. I had locked myself in my room at first, but then I was so mad at her and him both that I joined him, tore down her dreamcatchers and broke their webbing, beads sprinkling the floor, then doused a patch of grass in the back yard with his booze and lit it on fire with his cigarette lighter. I watched the flames catch and spread and stuck my hand in it. It felt good.

He smelled the smoke and came running out and beat it with a towel. Then he grabbed my collar with one hand and dug a folding knife out of his pocket with the other. Between his fingers, the knife glinted. I cussed and swung and spit at his cheek. He held on tight, but I managed to grab a rock and ready it in front of his face. We stood off.

"Where is she?" he yelled. "Goddamnit, you tell me now."

"She didn't tell me."

"Like hell she didn't. She wouldn't go off and not tell you. You're her daughter."

"She didn't tell me! She just left me here." My voice cracked. "With you!"

"You're a goddamn little liar."

"And you're a goddamn drunk."

He held the knife tighter, his eyes red with fire and wet with I can't say what at the same time. My hand and the rock were shaking. Then he dropped the knife and stormed off into the house and locked himself in a bathroom for the rest of the night. I slept on the porch steps, just in case he tried to come after me again, and poured out all the booze I could find. He apologized the next morning, with shameful eyes and barely parting lips and didn't drink the rest of the time Mama was gone. Later that week she returned, but my father and I took our time speaking to her again. And to each other. I didn't know who I hated more–her or him or myself.

My father was never quite himself during those moments, his body present – stirring, cursing, and blinking red-gray eyes at you – while his mind seemed to have abandoned here for somewhere else. Most of the time he was a stranger to me, drunk or not, and I realized I still did not know the man who once lived in the body slumped in the middle of the den. I had wanted to after I left. But now it was too late to reclaim the past. To this day, I'm unable to explain my first kiss without the Massacre of Wounded Tree or my eighth grade dance without Siege of Syringa. Nell McClure didn't exist without him. Or her, for that matter. Our fates were entwined after all. I just didn't want to admit it.

Mama came back from the kitchen. It must have been a long time, me staring at my father from across the room like that. "You'd think you'd never seen a dead person

before," she said. I walked past her and turned on the television. Almost every channel had a report about the fire.

"Can I at least get you some coffee? I know the weather's hot, but–"

"Coffee's fine," I said, and Mama brewed a pot for both of us.

According to the news, the fire was coming fast. Several stations were already saying we should evacuate; some were offering advice to protect your home before you left. While Mama and her coffee kept me company, the phone rang. She slipped off into the kitchen, muttered some kind but firm words, and returned.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"Bert. Said he was leaving. Wanted to know if we were coming along." She took a sip. "I told him no."

"What? Why?"

"God, you're as stubborn as your father, Nell. Will you drop it already?"

"Bert could have helped us move Dad's body. That is if you would've told him."

"The body doesn't need to be moved. The body's staying right here."

I turned down the volume on the television. "Mama there's no way stay here, and there's no way we can move him ourselves." It was true. My father's body, though shriveled, was still almost the size of our bodies combined. Even if we had managed to lift him out of the chair, I couldn't see us getting him all the way to the truck without running the risk of dropping him, and with the rigor mortis that meant we also ran the risk of breaking him – something I knew Mama couldn't handle. Something I was pretty sure

I couldn't handle right now either. In maybe half a day, the rigor mortis would wear off and we could move him easily. But we didn't have that kind of time.

She pursed her lips. "I don't think you and I quite understand each other, Nell. I don't plan on moving him. This is where he died and this is where he's going to stay. End of discussion."

I looked at the announcer and the warnings that flashed at the bottom of the screen and back toward her, over at my father's corpse and back toward her.

"Mama, this is insane. We need to evacuate now."

"Then go." "I left your father once, and I'm not leaving again. I wish I could say the same for his daughter."

"Why are you going to risk your life over a dead body?"

"This isn't just any body, Nell. It's your father." Her eyes were wet at the edges. "That's something you don't seem to understand. He was waiting for you. He didn't want to die before he saw you again."

"It's not like I could decide when he died, Mama."

"And then, *then* when he's already dead, that's when you make the time. He's not one of your corpses down in Arizona, Nell. He's a person, a real person. Your father, and you weren't here for him."

"That's not fair," I said. "I'm here now."

Rage knotted her fists. She could barely get the words out without spitting. "Aw, shit, Nell. Quit playing games. We both know you never wanted to come back. When

you're here, you want out, and when you're gone, you could care less what you left behind."

"And what about you? You said you're not gonna leave him again, but he wasn't the only one you left that time." My jaw tightened.

"I said I was coming back for you. I had to figure things out."

"Doesn't matter. I was a kid. And you left me alone with that sonofabitch drunk."

"Don't call your father that."

"We almost killed each other. Where were you?"

"I said I was coming back."

"Yeah, and when you came back, not a goddamn thing changed. He was still drunk and you were still in denial."

"No. You're the one that never changed, Nell. You never forgave him, and you never forgave me for deciding to stay with him."

"Bullshit." I threw the remote control on the floor and stormed out. She threw down her hat and ran after me.

"Don't you walk away from this. Don't you leave us here again. Nell!" The screen door slammed shut between us, and as I ran she called after, yelling, throwing words until they hit against my back like stones. "You're just like him!"

"No," I screamed. "I'm just like you!"

I stormed down the road toward the bait shop, but decided to turn back. The hot sun coated the mountains and treetops in a thick orange glaze as it descended. The road was so fevered it had a mirage of water on its surface. Road signs and homes smeared

like watercolors in the distance. My head felt light. Something in me knew I couldn't walk away this time, couldn't leave her alone with that fire and rest easy at night. So I returned without a word and got to work clearing out the brush, dousing the edges of the property with water, removing the curtains from the windows, gathering all of the furniture in the center of rooms, and shutting off the gas meter. Anything to keep my hands busy while Mama paced or cursed or cried or whatever she did inside of the cabin with my father's body. During the time I cleaned out the last of the brush, the fires crept closer and a wind stirred up the trees, sprinkling my face with droplets of ash. Twilight fell.

After a while I broke down and knocked on the door to ask for help. My back ached and my hands were chaffed. "Mama, could you come hold the ladder while I wet down the roof?" We braced the legs against the side of the house, and I climbed to the top with the hose and began dousing while Mama held the bottom steady.

"I wanted to carve a casket for him, you know," Mama said, "from that tree that fell in the front yard. You remember, the one with the bullet hole?"

"The pine? I didn't know it had fallen."

"Just after you left," she said. "He yelled 'timber' so loud, I figured everyone from here to Arizona knew."

From the forest, creatures emerged, filtering through the leaves and scurrying with panic in their eyes. A rabbit's cottontail was on fire when it came into view, and it ran so fast and so blind that it smacked headlong into the wall at the base of the ladder

and scared Mama. I gripped the shingles until she steadied me. The hillside was orange with lava-like flames melting down the trees.

The sun set, but you couldn't tell by looking out our windows. My father's lacquered skin still shone in the peach and blue lights, the floor mopped in a reddish-orange, and the sticky, mirrored faces of Mama and me illuminated in the windowpane. Our necks were wet with sweat. Mama took a sip of coffee and counted the trees at the edge of the property, still untouched.

"You know," she said, "he was seeing things before you got here. Uncle Mac and Aunt Jean." Uncle Mac died when his semi jack-knifed on a highway in Texas four years ago. Jean was his sister; she died from complications of Alzheimer's two years before Mac. "I thought it might have been the pain medicine. You know how it can do things to your head? He said they were standing in the room with us and even talked to them. Maybe they were there after all. All I knew was the end was coming." She wiped her sweating brow and then her eyelids along her shirt hem. "Then last night, just before I went to make the coffee, before it happened, before I called you, he turned to me and apologized. He said, 'Aya, I'm sorry for this life. In another place, another time, we'll meet again. And when we do, I promise I'll do it differently.'" A tear escaped the corner of her eye, and she held her hand to her mouth, trying to hold back the words, "I didn't know your father believed in anything like that. I don't even know what I believe anymore."

I gazed from the window out into the woods and saw the glowing ash afloat on the air, like fireflies. The woods watched us. I thought of Bert and death and ghosts and

then of Ryan, smiling in his dress blues and ribbons in our senior photographs, then shielding his head with his hands as he ran into those woods. I wondered where he was now, what he would do if he were here facing the firestorm.

"Nell," Mama said, "you're right. You aren't like your father in the way I said it." She walked over to the fireplace then pulled the red ball cap off and lifted her shirt over her head, changed into a clean one. "And I'm sorry," she said, "for saying you were. I made a choice to leave and come back to stay, and that decision affected you, too. I know it wasn't fair. Nothing's fair when you're a kid, is it? But when you were old enough, you made a choice to get out. I respect that. I do. I just didn't have the chance to tell you before now."

"It's all right, Mama," I said, stroking her hair with my fingertips. "Let's just get some sleep."

Before I crawled into a blanket on the couch in the center of the den, I turned off the television. Silence enfolded us. I caught glimpses of Mama sitting at my father's feet, weaving her tributaries of black and gray hair into braids as I drifted in and out of consciousness.

I awoke just after 4 a.m. to the sound of wind and fire screaming through one of the windowpanes and Mama's voice yelling "Nellie? Nell, get up!" in my ear. I didn't know what was going on. I couldn't see for all the smoke and felt the first wave of heat strike me like a punch in the gut. She threw a blanket over me before I suffocated. Flame climbed up the broken front porch steps and coiled around the banisters then knocked at

our door, but it didn't wait for an answer. It raided the entrance and shot gunfire sparks into the den. The roofing collapsed as the fire's canine teeth bit into it, its hot tongue lapping against each surface, devouring everything in sight. Fire, feeding on its own embers in a cannibal hunger. Fire, igniting the caribou head above the mantle and flooding the cabin. Fire, like a thing fleshed out of blaze and ash, like an animal, like Coyote, eyes alight with rage.

She turned to me and tried to say something then. But the fire around us was so loud I couldn't hear it, couldn't hear the sound of my own heart beating in my chest. Mama grabbed my shoulder. She delved hands into my jeans pockets and emerged with the cigarette lighter in her palm. She walked over to my father's body. With a fleeting glance into his eyes then into mine, she kneeled down. I didn't know what she was doing, how we were going to escape from here, where we'd go if we got out. She bent to each hand, cradling it, kissing each fingertip with her mouth then setting fire to the palms. It burned and burned, chewing at the flesh and fabric of his sleeves, as my father's gray eyes glowed with the image of orange light.

She ran back to me and took my hand–a touch so tender and sacred it felt more alive than the thing that dared to swallow us in that house–and mouthed *Go*. So we ran. We ran out the back door as support beams and cinder flakes rained down behind us, her leading and me close behind. We ran to the truck and jumped inside and drove into the woods as I watched in the rearview mirror as flames devoured the place of my birth and the rows of wounded trees, the demons and the regret and the past, as Mama sped down

an empty highway. We ran, together, away from Coyote's angry eyes and from my father's memory and into the darkless night.

PERIMETERS

Joseph is in his own world and doesn't hear Dick the first time he says it.

"I said I've always liked the idea of a fence, whether it's keeping things in or keeping them out." He drives a shovel into the grass. "But my wife won't hear of it."

"Well, Alyson insisted on this one." Joseph stops and scratches his head. "I'm sorry, Dick. That came out wrong. It's not because of anything you and Lynella have done over there. Alyson's just protective right now, with the baby and all. You're not offended, are you?"

"Nonsense," Dick says. He holds up the auger and signals Joseph. "Where do you want this?" Joseph points him toward the northeast corner of the property and follows close behind.

Dick is a tall man. He towers over Joseph, though this isn't hard to do since Joseph is barely five-foot-five. Even his wife is taller than he is. In fact she has an ongoing joke about it, one where Joseph is so short when he sits on the sidewalk his legs dangle off the edge. They've been married for ten years. It used to be funny when she teased him. When they were dating it even aroused him. But now the joke is irritating, like a skin tag that keeps getting caught on his shirt. The first time she said it in front of Dick, Joseph turned red.

They moved because they needed the space. They could afford it now, since she'd found a job last fall with maternity leave and he'd just been promoted to middle

management at the firm. It was time to leave the annoyances of the city: Zamboni-esque sidewalk sweepers, neighbors pounding brooms and canes and fists into walls, patios for front yards, and not being able to hear rain on the rooftop as they fell asleep. All those people. Suburbia, in comparison, is bliss. One fat emerald plot of grass melting into the next. All that space for Joseph and the children and Alyson. A week later she asks for a fence.

Dick shovels a scab of dirt onto the grass, and Joseph drives iron stakes into the concrete-dirt puddles in the ground. They install the fittings, and unravel the chain-link mesh from end to end. He looks back and sees Alyson nibbling on something in the kitchen window. She disappears behind the blind. The house is stone-built with cherrywood doors, wooden floors, and a gray thatched roof. Alyson said it reminded her of the pictures in her medieval history books. Joseph said it reminded him of a fortress.

"How many years have you and your wife been married, Dick?"

"Lord, I don't know. We stopped counting after thirty years." They drive nails into the wood with their hammers. "I see your wife's pregnant," Dick says. "It your first?"

"No, we have three. All of them girls. The oldest are twins."

"Jesus." Dick chuckles. "There should be a law against that much estrogen in one house. You know what the next one's going to be yet?"

Joseph smiles. "We just found out before moving. It's a boy."

They set the last post and rub the sweat from their eyelids. Joseph shakes Dick's hand then turns toward the house for supper. His joints are stiff and the skin on his hands burns. Inside, Alyson is cooking over the stovetop. He approaches her from behind and

wraps an arm around her distended belly, molds himself to her frame. She removes his hands and sniffs at them. "Joseph," she says, "you smell. Go take a shower." He remembers when she used to want him regardless. That time they made love on the kitchen table as the chicken burned and burned.

"What's this?" Joseph asks, picking up a serving fork. Flecks of metal are missing from the tines. "Did the movers damage these?"

"Must have," Alyson says, plucking it from his hand. She buries it in a drawer.

Joseph lets his underwear fall to the floor beside the narrow standing shower, what the realtor had called an "economical use of space." It's yellow and barely fits one person. Something had to be done to accommodate the lavish, claw-foot bathtub that sold Alyson at the viewing. Joseph recalls the shower in their condo in the city. It was spacious, spreading across the bathroom's entire length. This one reminds Joseph of Houdini's glass-walled water tank. He examines it a while, then enters with his eyes closed, breath held. He has found he must stand with his nose pressed against the back panel, chest turned away from the showerhead, because streams of water soak his face otherwise. This is because the showerhead is too high. Just once or twice this past week, Joseph didn't take a shower. He used musk and aftershave instead, to hide any smell from Alyson, whose nose had been sensitive with every pregnancy.

Joseph closes the shower door and opens his eyes and lathers up as quickly as possible. He wants to be done. As steam rises from the shower floor, it catches in his lungs, causing Joseph to feel dizzy and breathless. The water must be too hot. He tries to

turn the knob, but soap drips in one of his eyes. He tries to turn around, but water hits his face unexpectedly. He spins, blind now and pressing against each wall until he finds the door handle and pulls back. Water spills onto the bathroom tiles and vapor escapes into the air. He breathes again and finishes his shower with the door open, streams of water bouncing off the back of his head and onto the bathmat, soaking it and forming puddles along its edges. Tomorrow he thinks he will wash his hair in the sink instead. Anything to avoid those three towering glass walls, the phantasmal steam, and the small void between them.

At dinner, the twins play with their food, forming identical rings of peas around the edges of their plates, building castle-like walls of mashed potatoes and pouring gravy moats. Joseph hangs his damp head over his plate and spreads the portions around with a dented spoon. Meredith, the youngest, sits across from her sisters. She shoves all of her food into a pocket in her dinner roll, pretends it’s a mouth and vomits up the food. Joseph and the twins laugh. Alyson stares at them all. She hasn't touched a thing on her plate.

"Daddy, can you–"

"pass the salad?" the twins ask together.

Alyson watches the light glint off of their forks. When she was carrying the twins, she craved chili and onions. Whole ones that she could just bite into like apples. And peppers. One time she ate a whole jar of jalapeno peppers and it left sores in her mouth. When Meredith came along, it was lima beans and asiago cheese. Those were what kept Meredith the Fetus happy. Leafy vegetables, too. Alyson had a craving for them in the

middle of the night once and couldn't get Joseph to wake up to drive her to the grocery store. There were no heads of lettuce in the fridge, no spinach or even a stalk of celery sitting on the counter. So she snuck out onto their condominium balcony and gnawed at the leaves of their ivies and ferns. When Joseph asked her the next day what had happened to the plants, she shrugged her shoulders and said it must have been the birds.

Meredith was a surprise in both timing and appearance. At thirty-one Alyson had barely survived twins. The last thing she expected was a towheaded girl with thick, dark eyebrows four years later. Meredith was an enigma. But Joseph adored her and became excited. He thought they might still have a chance to have the boy he had always wanted. Alyson didn't say no. Instead, she asked for a house.

Alyson's stomach grumbles. Meredith stares at her from across the table. Her blurry, oversized glasses magnify her emerald eyes. "Mommy, do you think when the baby's born he'll like milk?" She pops a wad of gum in her mouth. "I don't like milk."

"He'll eat what he eats, Meredith," she says. "Now stop it with that gum."

The family finishes what's left on each of their plates, except for Joseph, who leaves a smooshed mess in the sink. Alyson watches Joseph disappear into the den and waits until the sound of the girls playing in their rooms fills the hall. She turns on the water, as if she were washing dishes. Then she dips a hand into her pocket and pulls out a spoon. For a moment she lets it slide in and out of her mouth like a lollipop, sucking on the metal and pressing it between her teeth. She places a hand on her stomach, and the grumbling stops.

* * *

The neighbors bring maternity clothes as gifts for Alyson one morning – a muumuu with white picket fences stitched along the hem, long skirts with stretchy fabric and elastic waistbands – and hand them to her over the fence.

"We didn't know what size you were yet," Lynella says. "But we figured you'd be needing the bottoms soon anyway, even if you can't fit into them now."

Dick nods his head. Lynella has gray hair braided down her back, and when she smiles her eyes crinkle at the edges. Alyson smiles back, but cannot think of anything to say. They wander back to their porch hand-in-hand.

Alyson tries the clothes on and they fit. She doesn't like this. She stows the clothes in the bottom bureau drawer in the nursery in hopes that she'll forget they are there. She likes her own clothes better anyway, even if her tank tops are starting to cling to her belly like paint and the hems are rolling up at the bottoms, even if she'll have to wear her jeans unbuttoned and unzipped to the crotch, underwear peeking through. She'll wear what she wants. Alyson peers out the window of the nursery, admiring the rose bushes she spent all weekend planting along the fence line and imagines how they'll grow taller, shielding and sheltering, their thorns thicker before winter comes. Dick and Lynella come out of their house again, still hand-in-hand. Alyson doesn't like that either. She dips her head below the window frame and slowly peaks up over the edge. She pulls the dented spoon from her pocket and watches them smile at each other as rearrange the mulch trim around their house.

The twins walk up behind her. "Mommy, what are–"

"you doing?"

Alyson drops the spoon, and it clangs against the hardwood floor. She scoops it back into her pocket. "Girls, go to your room."

Joseph looks at his watch and stares up at the sky-scraping offices of Tilton, Inc., puffy clouds and azure sky reflected in its windows. Fourteen miles to the city center and thirteen stories up every weekday. Usually he is early so he can take the stairs, but today he is late. He will have to take the elevator.

He presses the Up button and the doors open at his feet. His heart starts racing. The employees of Tilton, Inc., people he has never even seen before, rustle in with their skirts and loafers and adjust their ties and press their shoulder pads against each other, packing into the elevator. They collectively stare at Joseph just before the doors close. He watches the lit numbers above his head climb higher. He realizes he is sweating through his shirt. Joseph loosens his tie and runs toward the stairs.

He arrives at the meeting late. His boss is angry. He calls Joseph into his office later that afternoon, after he's cooled off, and says, "Look, Joe, I know you worked hard to get out of those cubicles," he says, "and no one deserved the promotion or the raise more than you did. I like you. I really do. But if you're late for another meeting, it's going to cost you your job. Understand? This isn't the first time."

Joseph nods his head.

"You just have to get rid of this thing you've got and move on." He speaks as if the solution to Joseph's problem was as simple as removing something stuck between his teeth. "By the way, how was the move?"

"The usual. Moving stinks."

"I hear you. But it can't be as bad as being trapped in the city."

Alyson gathers the towels off the bathroom floor. They have been accumulating a lot this past week, once she realized Joseph was skipping out on showers and scolded him. She didn't understand; they could afford the water. Why was he trying to punish her? Halfway through the third load, Alyson wanders into the den to sit. She can smell the old wood of the furniture and the dust in the rafters; they smell good. She recalls once, when she was pregnant with Meredith, how the smell of Joseph's aftershave made her sick to her stomach.

She goes to the bathroom and finds the aftershave, fingers it in her hands and throws it in the trashcan. He'll buy another.

Afterward, she goes shopping. Bags full of bottled fragrances and wax candles accompany her home. Tutti Fruiti for the living room, and Enchanted Forest for the hall. Root Beer Float for the twins' bedroom and Herbal Wasabi in the kitchen. The bathroom will be doused in sprays of Honey Jar, the bedroom lit with Solitary Apple. Alyson partitions the house into sections, closing all the doors after spraying or lighting a candle in each one. She hears a knock at the bedroom door, but doesn't answer. There is still much laundry to be done, piles and piles of it gathered on the floors in the hall now. It could take all day.

Another knock. "Look Mommy!" Meredith says, standing in the hallway as Alyson opens the door. She wonders how Meredith has gotten home from daycare

already. Did she come back after Alyson returned from shopping? Or had she been there all along? The neighbors' red muumuu envelops Meredith's tiny frame, its torso ballooned and swollen around her middle, hem dragging along the floor. She sticks a hand underneath the dress and pulls out a rag doll, waving it in the air. "I'm gonna have a baby, too!" she shouts. Alyson drops the detergent box. White crystals spill across the floor. Meredith stares, spectacles magnifying her caterpillar eyebrows and blinking green eyes. Alyson bends to clean up the mess and sends Meredith, sniffling and wiping her nose on her arm, to her room.

The grumbles come again. Steam from Joseph's shower this morning still clings to the bathroom walls. Alyson catches a glimmer of the metal showerhead as it glistens behind the glass door. She tiptoes down the hall to look for the stepping stool in one of the moving boxes. It has Meredith's name printed in red across the top and a bear holding balloons painted underneath her name. Alyson finds it and tiptoes back to the bathroom and places the stool on the tiles, just beneath the showerhead. She pauses to listen for the sound of Joseph coming in the front door or Meredith or the twins going in and out of their rooms. Nothing. So she cranes her neck until she can reach it with her mouth, until her lips wrap around the wet metal and it glides across her tongue.

Alyson watches the neighbors from the kitchen window the next morning, rubbing her stomach and pacing between the refrigerator and the sink. She is hungry, but has broken two spoons and three forks already. She notices the showerhead is a little crooked today, too. Joseph might figure it out if she does anymore damage.

Sunlight dances on the metal webbing of the fence outside the kitchen window. Alyson shields her eyes for a moment, then lets her hand fall back to her stomach. The baby inside stirs. He wants something. Alyson's mouth begins to water. She goes out to the yard and searches for Dick and Lynella, but can't find them. Alyson walks out to the fence in her flip-flops and examines the rails. She bends to one knee and begins sucking on the galvanized mesh. The salty, jagged rims slip back and forth along her tongue, the brackish ropes grazing her taste buds as she chews. When Lynella comes outside to water her plants and spies Alyson gnawing at the links, hands gripping the chain fabric and pulling it to her face, Lynella stops and stares. Alyson pulls some fence off in her hand, drops it in the grass, and runs back toward the house.

Alyson phones Joseph at work.

"Is something wrong with the baby?" he asks.

"No, but I think our neighbors are spying on us."

Joseph cups the receiver with his hand. He doesn't want his boss to hear through the door. "What gives you that impression?"

Alyson stands over the kitchen sink, her protruding stomach pressed against the edge of the counter. She pulls up the window blind and peers out. There is the chain-link fence. There is Dick riding on a lawnmower, mouthing the lyrics to a song playing on his headset and drawing two-tone lines in the grass with his blades. There is Lynella, stooped at the edge of their property, pulling weeds from the crevices under the chain link fence. Lynella lifts her head and waves at Alyson in the window, her face speckled by light

filtering through the brim of her sun hat. Alyson gasps and releases the cord for the blind. Lynella disappears behind the fabric. "Look," she says, "I think we need to re-do the fence. Maybe a brick one this time, with a gate? People can still see into the yard."

Someone knocks on Joseph's door. His voice drops to a whisper in the receiver. "I can't do that by myself, Alyson. It's going to take some time. Are you sure? Dick and I just set up the other one." He walks toward the door to lock it, but gets his foot tangled in the phone cord and nearly topples over. Another, more earnest knock sounds. "Look, can I call you back? I can't tie up the company line talking about this right now."

Alyson hisses into the phone. "Joseph, I don't like them looking over here and seeing what I'm up to."

He hesitates. "Are you up to anything?" His door creaks open and his boss sticks his head inside.

When Joseph comes home from work, he sees the tear in the fence between the two properties and wants to ask Alyson about it, but when he gets to the door it's locked. Meredith's voice comes like a ghost from the other side.

"Password?"

"Meredith, honey, it's your dad. Please let me in."

"But Mommy said no one was allowed to come in without the password."

"Meredith." Joseph hears his wife's voice whisper through the door then feet sent shuffling down the hall. Alyson turns the lock and opens the door.

"What's going on here?" Joseph asks.

"I can't take this anymore. I can't have the neighbors spying on us while you're gone at work all the time." She turns her eyes to Dick and Lynella's property and sees them staring at her from their front door. Dick has Lynella wrapped in his arms and their eyes stare accusingly at her. She pulls Joseph inside.

"I mean the fence, Alyson. What happened to the fence? Did they do something to it? There's a hole."

"No, no. That was just– it doesn't matter now, Joseph. What I'm saying is it needs to be replaced. The whole thing. We can't have a baby if we don't have a good fence."

"It's still a good fence, Alyson. Can't we just mend that one area?"

"No, Joseph. You're the one who wanted this."

"I didn't want the fence. That was your idea."

"That's not what I mean."

"The move wasn't my idea either."

"Joseph–"

"What's gotten into you lately? First the fence and then the neighbors and now these ridiculous candles." He points to Blueberry Madness on the fireplace mantle and Fresh Cut Grass beside the sofa, their tips flickering orange. "It smells awful in here. Are you trying to hide something?"

Alyson stomps a foot on the floor, and the spoon shifts in her pocket. It topples onto the floorboards, the metal against wood clang echoing down the hallway. Meredith and the twins open their bedroom doors, their little black and green eyes peering out. Alyson and Joseph stare at the spoon. She picks it up and grips it in her hand. "Fine. I'll

do this by myself then," she says. "And I'll sleep by myself, too. You get the couch tonight. Extinguish whatever you want." She stomps down the hall.

"Wait, Alyson, I'll call a brick mason tomorrow. Please. Just don't–"

The bedroom door slams shut.

Joseph dreams of the elevator. This is not the first time.

"Joe, you got to get these to the offices on the first floor pronto," his boss says, handing Joseph a stack of papers. "This could mean our jobs. So take the goddamn elevator and stop being such a sissy."

"I– I–"

But his boss frowns and points a finger down the hallway toward the elevator doors. He is a gruff man, wide and towering, much larger than Joseph even in dreams. When he gets angry veins sprout from his neck like tree roots and pulsate blood beneath the thin layer of skin. Joseph walks slowly down the hall. He watches the numbers above the elevator door climb higher until they reach his floor and hears the *ding* as the doors open. It is empty inside. Joseph realizes his palms are sweating, and he's afraid he'll get the papers wet, so he wipes them on his pants legs and drops the stack. White sheets fly every direction. The elevator waits. Joseph picks them up and tries to shield his body from the elevator's gaping mouth with the stack.

"Get on with it, Joe," his boss calls down the hallway.

Joseph steps inside. Shallow breaths escape fast as the elevator doors press together. It is small inside, like a coffin, like the shower, and Joseph prays to the red

numbers above the elevator door. But somewhere around floor four, the numbers dim. Joseph's knees bounce like springs as the traction stops. *No*, he thinks. *Please, no*. He waits. When he realizes the elevator is not going to move again, he drops the stack and frantically presses the call button with his thumb. No one responds. *Help!* he cries. The steel interior reflects his face from every angle, full of an animal fear. He claws at the crack between the doors and screams at the top of his lungs. When he has exhausted himself, he drops down to his knees. Joseph cups his head in his hands and tries to bring his breathing back to its normal pace, tries to hold back his tears.

When Joseph wakes up, the door down the hall is still locked and dawn is peeking through the morning clouds and window blinds. He has overslept and needs to go soon. Joseph makes a pot of coffee and adjusts his tie, runs a comb beneath the kitchen faucet and slicks back his hair. He scurries to the door.

By the time Joseph arrives in the lobby it is 7:58 a.m., which means he has two minutes to scale the tall Tilton building before this morning's meeting starts. There is no other option; he must take the elevator. The clouds reflected in the windows are menacing this morning, black and full of spit, threatening to rain at any moment. Joseph scurries into the main lobby and counts his steps on his way to the elevator as the seconds dwindle. No one else waits; they must all be in their respective conference rooms and offices and cubicles by now, he thinks. Joseph's finger hovers over the Up button and presses lightly once. If it does not come, he decides he will just take the stairs and his chances with him.

The elevator chimes and the doors peel back. Joseph steps inside. He thinks for a moment that this is just like his dream, and his heart beats faster. But it's not entirely like his dream. Traveling alone, the elevator doesn't seem so daunting, its burgundy carpet threaded with golden circles and overlapping vines. An overhead speaker plays "The Girl from Ipanema" as it slowly starts to rise. The smells of hairspray and cologne from its previous occupants linger, a refreshing change from last night. Even the mirrored walls reflect a glimmer of relief, not fear, in Joseph's face. He inhales and grips his briefcase between his hands. The numbers light up red, digit by digit above Joseph's head, as they climb. After floor three they slide to a stop, and Joseph waits for the doors to open. But the doors don't open. The tinny sound announcing their arrival at the next floor never comes. He waits. He looks at his watch. He tries not to panic as the walls close in around him, but he can hear himself breathing now, low, shallow gasps as a bead of sweat trickles down his spine.

He knows he is stuck and the dream comes back to him. He presses the Emergency Help button. A male voice filters through a speaker in one of the walls a few seconds later. Joseph is nearly soaked in sweat.

"Hello in there? Is there a problem?"

Joseph uses his handkerchief to blot his forehead. "I– I– I think I'm stuck."

There's static in the speaker as the man talks. "Look above the box where you pressed the Emergency button. What elevator does it say you're in?"

Joseph squints and searches. He can't see anything. His vision is a blur, and he can't tell if he's about to cry or just blind with fear. "I– I– can't find it," Joseph stammers.

The voice in the speaker box crackles and filters through. "Which floor do you think you got stuck on, mister?"

"Somewhere between three and four. I'm on the north side elevator." Joseph loosens his tie, feels the sweat sticking to his neck and dripping down his back. He can smell it on his skin. He feels sick like Alyson was that time with Meredith, after she ate the chili. He thinks he will vomit, too. Joseph hears air rushing fast past his ears, but nothing moves.

"I'm sending someone out right now. It shouldn't be more than five minutes." He waits for a response. "Hey, mister? You gonna be ok in there?"

Joseph moans. He props his back against the wall then slumps to the floor unconscious. When he opens his eyes, he's staring at the elevator ceiling. His muscles ache and his tongue feels like a washcloth shoved in his mouth. He rolls toward the doors and looks up, hoping to find they've opened by now. But in the corner of the elevator, with a scowl on her face, Alyson stands, a finger pressing into the Doors Close button.

Alyson has a few hours before Joseph returns home from work. All of the laundry is done. The twins are at school, and Meredith is at daycare. They won't be picked up or dropped off for hours either. So she lights all the candles and sprays all the sprays again and retreats to the bedroom with the phonebook. The fence outside her window is pleasing, in spite of the hole she left in it. No neighbors. No children. Finally, some solitude. After she phones the mason, she grabs a book from their bookshelf and starts reading to pass the time. But ten pages into it, she realizes the binding smells stale and

throws it in the trash. Seven rows of putrid smelling spines stare at her – Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster, Margaret Atwood. She grabs the bookshelf by its edges and tries to slide the base across the room inch-by-inch, until the shelves press against the door. But she can't get it past the threshold. She stares at the back of the bookshelf, its wooden panel high and daunting, and realizes she will never be able to pull it away from the door. If she does, the books will fall out into a pile at the door's base, still blocking her only outlet from the room.

Alyson sits on the edge of the bed and strokes her belly and feels the stone partitions closing in around her. Around them. The baby kicks her hard in the stomach. She looks out the window at the fence and its intersecting metal lines and grows hungry for the things outside these walls, for the things she has yet to tell Joseph.

A BURNING AND A FEVER

After 60 years of marriage, Mario and Mona were comforted by the stability and familiarity of the world they had created for themselves. Sunsets and sunrises on a two-story villa home that echoed of Venice and their youth – its bright coppery paint, two square windows like eyes in the front, a balcony draped with emerald-colored vines, and always a string of fresh laundry pinned to a clothesline that stretched the length of their backyard. Sunday afternoons were spent playing Scrabble and eating salted tomatoes off of paper plates. Mondays were reserved for trips to the bookstore, where Mario would pay for Mona's crosswords and his biographies and would always offer her the change. They relied on the subtle April showers and the clockwork deliveries by the mailman each morning, early beddings and early risings, but mostly they relied on each other. Many years ago, he taught her to read English, and she learned enough to recite "The Raven" and passages from the classics when they found themselves sitting in too much silence. In return, she taught him how to make love, and he learned enough to impregnate her with two wayward children, who grew up and grew out, but never grew to need them as much as they needed each other. Now he fed her, and she did his laundry. He helped her fasten the buttons on the backs of her dresses, and she helped him pull up his socks. Every evening Mario served platefuls of cappellini with veal or spaghetti marinara or another dish on two-tone black and white ceramic plates – meals so soft one could dissect them with a toothpick, because they both suffered from ailments of the mouth – while

Mona set the table with the precision of trifold napkins and sharpened knives. They also knew, no matter how large or small their portions, Mario would never finish, and Mona would stare at his scraps until he put his fork down. Then she'd stretch across the table to steal the remains.

In spite of their differences their relationship seemed as harmonious as one could ask for. She had forgiven him long ago for talking to his toolbox as if it was his best friend, for forgetting to turn off the lights when he left a room, and for being a man and thus imperfect. He, likewise, forgave her her obsession with punctuality, for never replacing the roll of toilet paper in the bathroom, and for making him watch her grow old. They knew how to ignite each other's tempers, but chose not to, and they knew each other's preferred ways of making love, so foreign and absent now.

This evening, Mario and Mona sat with forks poised in their hands, ready to take the first bites of dinner, when a knock came at their door. It sounded once then twice then stopped altogether. The couple exchanged inquisitive glances. They weren't expecting anyone.

"All my cousins are dead now," Mona said. "It's your turn for unexpected guests."

"But my relatives are miles away," Mario complained, "or feet under ground. It's your turn."

Only one significant visit had interrupted their dinner before. A cousin from Mona's side had appeared on their doorstep a little over a year ago. He was a sickly man with a runny nose, recurrent cough, and anemia. Ten years younger than Mona, though he appeared more ailing than anyone they knew, other than themselves. His car had broken

down two miles from their home on the way to a conference, and he didn't know anyone else in the area. So he knocked on their door and asked to spend the night. They gave him the couch in the living room and blankets for his unusually cold skin. Then Mario built a fire on the hearth and watched the man's creaking chest soothe under the weight of sleep before crawling into bed beside Mona.

In the morning, the cousin called a tow truck, thanked the couple for their generosity, and bid Mario and Mona goodbye. But before leaving, he inquired about a woman who had visited in the middle of the night.

"A woman?" Mario asked. "You mean Mrs. Tulouse?" They were standing on the porch, and Mario pointed to the yard next door, where an obese figure with a sun hat was weeding hydrangea bushes. "What could she have wanted?"

"No, another woman," the cousin said. He fell into a fit of coughing then and blew his nose. "She was more slender, tall, graying hair? She was quite lovely. It seemed as if you might have been expecting her, so I invited her in for tea." Mario and Mona shook their heads. The tow truck honked its horn. "Just wait!" he called and started hacking all over again. "If she visits again," he said, handing Mario a slip of paper, "would you please give her my number? I'll arrange to come through here more often if she's willing to entertain the idea of seeing a sick man like me."

They nodded their heads and waved good-bye. It must have been the medication, Mario reasoned, or a dream, as Mona suggested. They knew of no such woman. They thought they would never hear from him again, and they didn't. But a week after his visit, his son called to say the man had died of asphyxiation – not the carbon-monoxide-

filtering-into-a-car kind or by the slow, fat fingers of a pillow – but by his own hand, a tissue, pressed too tightly to his nose during a fit of sneezing at another conference. The death surprised them just as much as his visit had.

The knock sounded again. Mona turned to Mario. "Who answered the door the last time this happened?"

"I don't remember." Mario shrugged his shoulders. He stuck a forkful of ham between his dentures and slid it back and forth on his tongue then smiled.

"You always were a stubborn old goat," Mona said. "I'll get it."

She left Mario in the kitchen and tottered through the living room to find out who had disturbed their dinner this time. It couldn't be Mrs. Tulouse. She had introduced herself on the day she moved in and had been scarce ever since, except when pruning her bushes. Sometimes Mona waved to her from her own garden, but that was the extent of their relationship. No knocking on doors to ask for sugar or flour. The children never visited anymore, only sent candycane-striped cards during the holidays with pictures of their own unfamiliar families inside. A shelf was dedicated to them in the living room. Perhaps, then, it was someone who had been sent by mistake to collect a bill again. Mario and Mona were never late paying bills; she made sure of that. And she had reminded the one man who dared inform her otherwise one time.

The hinges on the door creaked as Mona opened it. "Yes?" she said. "May I help you?"

"Is a Mr. or Mrs. Romaro in?"

Mona didn't recognize the tall woman who stood in her doorway. She didn't know why the stranger had come and, of course, her timing was all wrong. Mona's stomach growled as she examined their guest. "We don't want whatever you're selling."

Their guest cleared her throat. "Does a Mr. or Mrs. Romaro live here?"

"Yes."

"Then may I please come in?"

"Absolutely not," Mona said. She set one hand on her hip.

"I'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding," the woman said, "I need to speak to a Mr. or Mrs. Romaro."

"And who are you? The bank didn't send you, did they?"

"No. Not exactly."

"You stay right here," Mona said. "I'll get my husband." Perhaps Mario had forgotten he invited someone. "Mario! *Veni*! Your friend is here."

Mario did not answer. They waited. "Mario!"

Mario shuffled into the living room with sauce stains down his shirtfront and at the corners of his mouth. He squinted at the stranger, but could not distinguish her features. He wondered if he weren't developing cataracts. He couldn't even find his own mouth with a fork anymore.

"Do you recognize this woman, Mario? Is she here for you?"

"I don't think so. We weren't expecting anyone. What does she want?"

Mona scowled. "Do I look like a translator? Ask her yourself."

"What do you want?" Mario asked.

"My, it's chilly out here." The guest took Mona's hands in her own and gently maneuvered her way into the house. "Perhaps I can explain this better inside." She closed the door behind them, and Mona nearly hit her as she took back her hands.

"Just what is this all about?" Mona glanced at Mario, as if she expected him to explain all this to her, just as he had explained everything else since they moved to America years ago.

Mario shrugged.

"I was wondering if I might have a word with you two," the guest said, "over a cup of tea." She examined the mantle where their children's cards were arranged and walked over to pick up the most recent one. "Oh, this is new. Have they sent you another since I visited? The little one is growing so fast."

Mona stuck a finger in her ear and wiggled it around. Her hearing hadn't been the same since last winter. "I'm sorry," she said. "I thought you just said you had been here before."

"Perhaps I'll get to meet them some day," the woman said. "But hopefully no sooner than necessary." She set the card on the dusty shelf again and turned to the couple. "Right now we just need to figure out who I came for tonight."

"Came for?" Mona said. "So you did meet–"

"Your cousin was a very genuine man, Mrs. Romaro. Kind and loving. And tonight I want to do for one of you what I did for him."

Mona looked at Mario, and Mario looked at Mona. Then they looked at their guest: the thick eyelashes and fingernails painted the color of Concord grapes, the

pedestal of long legs in grey pantyhose, haphazard salt-and-pepper hair. They remembered the cousin's final request and the guest they believed never existed and the cousin's death. They took a step back. Mona grabbed for Mario's hand. "We're not going anywhere."

"I can see you're very confused," their guest said. "But I think I have a simple way of solving this. Just tell me which of you is more sick, and that will be the one I take tonight."

They recalled the invitation to the cousin's funeral and their decline. The son's request for their presence was lengthy and heartfelt; his father had spoken so highly of them since the accidental visit. But Mario and Mona did not like funerals, especially for people younger than themselves. So they chose not to attend, preferring their solitude for the weekend as planned. Besides, it was half a days' drive away, and they had their ailments to attend to – invented ones that complimented their real ones of senility and old age, that kept them too tired, too sore, or too medicated for such journeys. It seemed one or the other always had some ailment, and it had became a competition. When Mario suffered from arthritis, Mona suffered from vertigo. If Mario was diabetic, Mona was incontinent. Mario had a rash; Mona had a toothache. Mario had a burning; Mona had a fever. And on and on until one of them complained of a cough that rivaled that of Mona's dead cousin. Then they stopped making excuses. They didn't want to invent hospital beds for themselves as well. So they sent a bouquet of dandelions, each with a rosette of leaves around the yellow head, in honor of the man who had visited. Since then their afflictions

had grown from a trickle into an avalanche through no fault of their own, as these things so often do in the final years.

Their guest waited for an answer.

"I feel fine," Mario said. "How about you Mona?" Mario puffed out his chest and straightened his back to prove he was strong. But he could sense a spasm in the fingers of his left hand – his arthritis acting up again.

She glanced up at her husband and noticed the coy smile. She matched his stance. "Well, I feel fantastic." But she really felt a dull itch creeping up her back, stiff as a tree trunk, and ringing in her ears. They wanted their pain pills beside their plates at the kitchen table. They wanted, of all moments, to have the power to control their bodies again.

Their guest flitted her eyes between the two, noted their hunched backs and pallid complexions, each of their swelled joints and tufts of thinning hair. Their faces wrinkled in the same way. From the backside they could be mistaken for twins.

"I understand your resistance," she said, "and I can leave and come back tomorrow if you wish. But when I return one of you will need to come with me."

"Tomorrow?" Mario asked. "But her cousin had a week!"

"Tomorrow," she said. She turned and left, heels clicking behind her. The door shut on its own.

Mario's chest deflated. Mona moaned and pressed a hand into her lower back. They went to the kitchen defeated.

For a while they couldn't look at each other. They just stared at the cold food on their dinner plates. "How does a thing like this happen?" she finally asked.

"Don't blame it on me. I'm not the one who answered the door."

Mona lifted her eyes. "What was I supposed to do, Mario, just sit there while she kept knocking?"

"That would have been one option."

"Isn't that your solution to everything, Mario? Ignore it. Ignore your problems, and they'll go away. Ignore your children, and they did go away."

"Oh, no. Don't you blame that on me either. You always demanded more of them, like their love wasn't good enough. You were never satisfied with any of us. That's why they left."

"And if you weren't so stingy with your own love, maybe they would have come back!"

He stood up. "Can we please stop talking about this? I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"When else can we talk about it? I can't hear you when I'm in the grave, Mario. I can barely hear you now."

"You're not there yet." Mario reached over and grabbed the green pillbox. It was divided into seven compartments for the days of the week. The first three letters of each day, none of which Mario was capable of reading, were printed on the side. "But I almost was. Remember, Mona? That one time you screwed up the dosage. Giving me a double of the heart pill and none of that one for my cholesterol. I almost had to go to the

hospital." He jerked it up and shook it. The tops opened. A rainbow of pills spilled out between them and rolled to the floor. Mona scowled then bent down on hands and knees to retrieve them. There were so many.

"Mona, please get off the floor." She continued picking, one by one and into the pillbox. It hurt to crawl on her knees. "Mona, can you hear me?"

"I'm not deaf, just hard of hearing. And yes, I can hear you shouting at me. It was an accident, Mario. I apologized a long time ago. Must I do it every day of my life as well?"

"I didn't mean to spill the pills. Please get up." She ignored him. He tried to take her by the wrist, but she pulled away. "Mona, you're being ridiculous."

"Am I? Maybe you should go then. You always said you wanted to go first so you didn't have to watch me grow old and die. Well, now's your chance!"

"I don't know how we've stayed together all these years, bickering nonstop. I can't take care of you anymore than I can take care of myself."

"You just don't want to take care of me. I got old and you stopped wanting me. But guess what, Mario? You got old, too. Just look at yourself. Look at us." Mona threw the pills in Mario's face.

Sixty years of marriage and they realized they knew each other no better in these last moments than they had known each other in the first. They couldn't recognize the words coming out of their mouths. He hated confrontation, hated to be a disappointment to her. She hated herself, hated what they had become – old and crippled, with no one to save them but themselves. Mona fled to the bedroom. Mario followed. He tried to take

her by the waist, but she struck him across the face with her hand. Each fingertip bit at his cheek with the vigor of a mosquito bite.

"Mona, stop."

She hit him again.

"Mona, please."

Again and again. She felt she could go on forever like this, smacking him into loving her again. Maybe she could smack them into the past, to a time when they could know what the other was thinking without speaking a word.

Blood burned beneath Mario's cheek. He stared at his crazed wife, let her smack him over and over again, until he grabbed her by the arms, forced them down and back, until their full bodies pressed against each other.

And then he felt it. He hadn't felt it in years. It wasn't like those times when he was young, when he could get it right, but would lose it all while fumbling in the dark for a mouth or a breast or the condom. Embarrassed, he'd blush in the dark while she, Mona, breathed softly and waited for him. And when he'd finally found the thing, oh, the peeling back of the wrapper and the dropping and fumbling in the dark some more. He was a klutz even when making love.

But Mona took the time to help him search, with her hands on the floor, then over his body and down his spine, mapping out the roads with her fingertips and her thighs, with her kisses, her tongue, her breath. She tasted so sweet. Even now, with the dry folds of skin pressed into him and rivulets of lipstick coming from the core of her mouth, she tasted sweeter than ever. He remembered.

And it wasn't like those times with the pills, the routine and mechanical intimacy of Viagra. Where he knew he would do it, he had to do it, he must, he must finish. But it was all expected. There was no surprise. And even if he lost the desire in his mind, he could not lose it in his flesh. The embarrassment lingered, but for a different reason. When he lost his ability, he thought he had lost her. He just stopped trying. But now he knew it wasn't true, that she had been his all along. Why had he been so embarrassed to tell her? Mario dug into Mona, trying to bury the memory.

Then she felt it, too. But not the way he did. She ignored the angles of his body and the way they racked against hers like bent puzzle pieces. She paid no attention to the creaking of bone on bone or the wheezes from the back of his throat; she could not hear them. Instead she remembered a day in the distant past, when she had planted the first bulb in her garden in America and how Mario had taught her how to say "flower." She kept fumbling over the word, pronouncing it as "flo-ver" or "flo-where," because its equivalent, *il flore*, did not require such an acrobatic dance of the lips and tongue. Then one day Mario took her face in his hands and pressed his lips against hers. "Like this," he said, drawing her lips into a kiss. "Say the last syllable like this. With me now. Flow–"

He coaxed her lips forward with his own, and they parted upon his release. "–wer" she said, almost effortlessly. "Flower." She never forgot the word after that.

But the thing itself took a while to grow. She remembered her worries about the soil – was it too moist? too dry? – about the light – too much? not enough? – and about her own capabilities as its caretaker – could she be trusted to handle such a fragile thing?

But in spite of her misgivings, a single pink petal unsheathed itself. And though it started as a fragile and uncertain thing, each spring it would reappear.

When she felt Mario plant himself in her, Mona imagined she was that petal, imagined she was that word, and exposed herself again to a love with as much rarity and impermanence as the day lilies sitting between them in a vase each night at dinner.

It was over before either of them knew it. But they stayed wrapped in each other until slivers of dawn peeked through the curtain, Mario staring into eyes he couldn't entirely distinguish, but could imagine, and Mona nodding her head at whispers she could not hear, but could feel.

They had found the answer living between those sheets; they would go together. In the morning, Mona let her hair linger on her naked shoulders instead of pinning it up, and Mario sank his bare feet into the carpet instead of asking her to help him with his socks. They held hands and watched the sun rise and waited. But another hour passed and they still heard no knock at the door. They tiptoed from their bedroom and searched the house, around the balcony and through the drape of fresh, pinned laundry, past the toolbox and beside the lily beds, until they met each other again on the front porch step. Their guest was nowhere to be found, not a trace of her dark fingernails or a lock of salt-and-pepper hair.

TIME AS A THEORY OF MAN

(I)

Scientific acclaim and pure fate were what delivered Dr. Stanton Arthur to the Atlanta airport terminal, but only the promise of a blue pill wedged in the folds of his pocket could get him on the plane. It's small and circular, like the clocks that hang above their heads as his wife, Maggie, convinces him to enter the airport security gates, because– as she says – he created this fate for himself.

Stanton knows she is right. The only true gifts he possesses are a love of mathematics and a mind for curiosity – questions, what-ifs, an insatiable advocacy for the Devil. The core requirements of a scientific mind. These plus years of fastidious experimentation in the physics laboratory led to the current high point of Stanton's career: his name in an issue of *Scientific American* and him at the airport, about to start a tour around the world.

He admits in his humblest of moments that his theory is just that, a theory. Numbers on a page. Atoms beneath a microscope, spinning countless numbers of times. Observation. Conclusions proposed. Repetition. Sifting through the static of improbability and error as a gardener weeds his flowerbed. Pruning the hypothesis and then harvesting the answer.

The old theory of time, promoted by the likes of Neitzche and Hawking and Schopenhauer, was eternal recurrence. Its proposal: the quantity of matter in the universe

is fixed, but time is infinite. Therefore, time is like a tape set to rewind and rerun once it reaches its end. It repeats itself infinitely and in similar ways. Every birth, death, and life event recurs as if it is happening for the first time. And all the accomplishments and mistakes of man, then, are destined to repeat, too.

For minds like Stanton Arthur's, this theory seemed wrong, flawed somehow, and he set out to prove it. He believed, instead, that time was simple, with a beginning, middle, and end that unfolded like a line of dominoes pushed by a fingertip. Once a man moved beyond a point, he could not go back.

How Stanton stumbled upon the proof was brilliant; all his colleagues said so. It involved expounding on the Poincaré recurrence theorem, which mathematically proved that a finite amount of energy confined to a finite volume would, after an extremely long time, return to a state similar to its beginnings. But when Stanton pushed the equation to the limits of spatial volume, the result could not withstand infinite time. Stanton saw then that, yes, seasons could repeat, because their repetition was limited to a finite amount of time. And, yes, stars could pattern themselves in cycles in the sky, because their repetition also occurred in a limited amount of time. But if time as they claimed was infinite, then so were the possibilities. Instead of rewinding and repeating, the tape keeps on playing forward, and man is destined to invent new scenes.

Stanton would rather have kept to his solitude and let the world do what they wished with his findings, but the project's corporate sponsor urged him to tour with the idea. So did his wife, Maggie, who insisted he go in support of the research in spite of her

approaching due date. Her parents would drive in from Macon and take care of her while he was away. He still hates the thought of leaving her now, though.

"You may never get the chance again," she says.

"But what about the baby? What about you? Don't you need me here?"

"We'll still be here when you return."

Stanton's eyes linger on her belly. She looks like a basketball has been shoved underneath her shirt. He secretly wishes he could crawl inside of her and hide.

The schedule is designed to be rigid and swift, with travel from Atlanta to Tampa, FL then to Miami, Chicago, Beijing, Hong Kong and so on. Stanton feels nauseated. He swallows the pill with a glass of water and takes the peanut butter sandwich Maggie made for his trip, but doesn't make any promises about eating it. Maggie kisses him goodbye. He waves before disappearing behind the queue of passengers and entering the concourse. Inside, Stanton passes the smoking lounges, ringed with crowds of discontented strangers behind glass panels, transportation malls filled with duty-free goods, toiletries, and celebrity magazines, and the occasional airport staff making rounds on a golf cart that beeps when they stop to pick up passengers. Stanton finds his gate and waits to board the plane. He tries to breathe deeply. When they call his row, a woman at the ticket counter scans his pass, and he's swept into the cabin with a handful of other passengers.

Stanton loads a carry-on case into the bin above a woman in a window seat on row 17. He glances at his ticket and down at her, then at his ticket again. "I believe you're in my seat," he says.

The woman glances up from her book and eyes Stanton over the rim of her glasses. Her red hair is disheveled, and there are crumbs on her collar. She withdraws a crumpled ticket from her coat pocket and reads it aloud. "Lila Daniels. Flight 723 from Atlanta to Tampa. Departing at 6:17 p.m. Row 17, Seat C." She turns it toward Stanton so he can see.

Stanton frowns. "Yes. But Seat C is an aisle seat, not a window seat." He points at the overhead at the picture of three seats with letters printed on them as his proof.

Lila stands halfway up in her seat and examines where his finger is pointing. Seat A beside the window, C beside the aisle. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry," she says.

"Well... yes." He moves over so she can slip out and back in behind him.

Once seated, Stanton waits for the pill to kick in and taps on his knees with his fingers, whistling enough to disturb the woman's reading. He glances up and down the aisle as far as he can see and waits for the pill to kick in. While the plane taxies down the runway and the flight attendants cross-check the passengers and explain the evacuation procedures, Stanton counts. 117 seats in rows of 2 and 3 across. 12 passengers unidentifiable because they are seated behind the panels for business class. In the main cabin, 58 men, himself included, and 43 women, 4 children, one of whom is a baby. 39 blondes, 56 brunettes, 4 redheads and six who are either gray or balding. If he counts the stewardesses, the blondes number 41 and the brunettes 57 and so on. This is his way of coping, his distraction from a difficult situation. He's used this method successfully in the past – at doctors' offices, in crowded city buses, whenever he and Maggie had to have a "talk." Here it distracts him from the fact that within several minutes they will be at a

cruising altitude of over 30,000 feet, the fields and city buildings mere specks beneath the silver body of the aircraft. Stanton freezes at the thought and tries to concentrate on his breathing again.

The captain's voice materializes on the intercom. He tells them they are over the Gulf and starts announcing their altitude, so Stanton counts louder to drown the voice. Lila looks up from her book. "Are you ok?" she asks. "You look pale." Stanton nods his head and turns away. The captain announces there will be some turbulence, and the stewardesses begin their walk up and down the aisle with the food carts. Lila orders a cup of coffee, but Stanton waves a hand at them. "Are you sure?" Lila asks. "I hear ginger ale helps calm an upset stomach. Something about the bubbles." Stanton glares at her.

The floor beneath his feet starts rattling. He tries to think of something else, plugs his headphones into the armrest and closes the window shade beside his head. Lila sips her coffee, steam briefly fogging the square-frame, black-rimmed glasses that rest on her nose. She glances down at her book. He thinks he needs to go to the bathroom. He tries to get her attention.

As she looks up, the plane hits a current of air like a bump in the road, jarring her cup of coffee. The hot liquid spills onto her lap. She curses and Stanton presses the overhead button for assistance. A light shines red above them. He takes a handkerchief from his pocket and offers it to her. Lila is still cursing when the stewardess arrives. She rushes some towels over and asks if the woman thinks she burned herself. Lila says no, but complains about her book being ruined. She calls herself a klutz and starts wiping her lap.

Stanton takes his wife's peanut butter sandwich out of his coat pocket and munches with small, nervous bites. The pill kicks in as the hum of the engines carries them over the Gulf of Mexico. Stanton can feel his heart and breathing slow. He's loopy, like he's had one too many drinks and rolls his head to the side and falls asleep. The dreams begin. When Stanton awakens, there is darkness and something screaming in his ears and Lila clutching one hand to a mask that has dropped from a panel above her. Another dangles in front of his face like a noose. He grabs it as the lights go out and tries to scream, but can't hear his own voice. The silver bullet body of the plane barrels toward the ocean as Stanton and the rest of the passengers look on with dread.

(II)

Stanton Arthur can't seem to get rid of the strange feeling he gets when his wife books the flight for his trip to Miami. It started when his sponsor showed up to work saying he'd be going on a tour for the space-time project, but disappeared for a while when the sponsor said his first stop in Tampa had been canceled. His wife keeps saying it must be his nerves. But when she prints the ticket, a feeling of trepidation sweeps over Stanton and he runs to the bathroom to vomit.

"Stanton, sweetie? Are you all right in there?" Maggie knocks on the bathroom door. He takes a few moments to clean up and emerges pale and clammy. Maggie presses a wet napkin to his forehead and then his neck. "You'll probably just fall asleep once the pill is in you," she says. "So don't work yourself up in the meantime."

"I feel terrible."

"Of course you do. You just vomited."

He strokes her swollen belly and rests his head on top of her shoulder. She envelopes him in her arms, gently pressing her fingertips into his back. The baby inside of her kicks. "Uh-oh. I don't want it to kick you in the stomach, too," she says smiling and pulls away.

Stanton stares at his wife's belly.

"What?" she asks.

"If it's a girl, let's name her Lila."

Maggie laughs. "This from the man who didn't want kids when we met. Now you're naming names?" She presses the napkin to his neck. "Why Lila?"

"I don't know," he says. "It just sounds pretty."

She takes his hand. "Don't worry about us while you're gone. We'll be right here waiting, and Mom says if the traffic isn't bad, they'll be here by dinnertime." She leans in for a kiss. "Are you going to be ok? You still look pale."

Stanton swallows hard. "I'll be fine."

"They have you flying in two days before the conference. You can always postpone."

"I just need some sleep."

But by morning Stanton is not all right. In fact, he feels worse than ever before and tries to suppress his fear until he leaves Maggie at the security gate. Then he starts feeling sick again. As he pushes his way through the terminals, a knot forms in his stomach. The blue numbers on the computer screens above his head glow too bright, and

the smell from the smokers lounge sends him running to the men's restroom. He vomits into the toilet and flushes, watching the blue pill swirl around and disappear beneath him.

"So much for that," he says, wiping his mouth with a paper towel.

When he arrives at the gate, the airline attendant presses a microphone to her lips and announces that the flight to Miami, his flight, has been cancelled due to a tropical storm off the Atlantic coast. It should pass in a few hours, but all current flights are being held. Then she announces that a flight to Tampa on their airlines has a few extra seats. If anyone is interested, they can switch free of extra charge and pick up a carrier that will arrive in Miami the next day. She invites interested guests to come to the ticket counter.

Stanton weighs his options: call Maggie and go through all this again in two days or get the flight over with. He rolls his suitcase to the ticket counter. The number of people wanting to switch flights exceeds the number of tickets, though. The attendant is left with one odd ticket. Only families and couples who are unwilling to separate remain, except for Stanton. This coincidence makes him relieved briefly.

"You better hurry," the attendant says as she passes him the spare ticket. "The gate closes in 15 minutes."

He looks at his wristwatch and grabs the ticket and runs for the other end of the terminal. No golf carts are there to flag down this time. By the time he reaches the gate, he's dripping with sweat. The blonde at the counter calls his zone number, and he walks down the long gray corridors connecting the airport to the plane. He boards and makes his way to a seat beside a woman with square-frame, black-rimmed glasses and a book in her lap. She drinks water from a small bottle. Something about her is familiar. He tries to

place his finger on it. She looks smart. Her novel, what he can make of the cover, says something about science. Perhaps she is a scientist, too. Perhaps he has seen her at a conference before.

"What are you reading there?" Stanton asks. He slides his suitcase into the overhead bin.

She peers up, apparently perturbed that her reading has been interrupted. She waves the book at him. *The Gay Science*. Neitzche. Stanton tries not to laugh. "I'm not studying gays if that's what you're thinking," she says. "Just trying to occupy my mind until I get to Miami tomorrow. It was the cheapest thing at the bookstore."

"I'm headed there myself," he says and glances at his ticket. "Hmm, I think you're in my seat."

"Really?"

"Yes, look up here." She cranes her neck. He points to the picture along the edge of the bin. "A is at the window and C is at the aisle."

"Oh. You're right. I'm sorry."

He slides into the row. "I'm Stanton, by the way," he says, extending a hand. "Are you speaking at the conference, too?"

"What conference?"

"The space-time conference in Miami."

"Oh heavens, no," she says. "All I know about space is that I take up too much of it, and as for time, well, there's never enough."

"I just wondered," Stanton says. "I thought I had seen you somewhere before." The woman blushes as she looks down into the pages of her book and takes a sip of water. She must think he's flirting with her. "I'm sorry. I didn't catch your name," he says.

She looks up. "That's because I didn't say it. My name is Lila. Lila Daniels." She extends a hand.

Stanton stares at her hand. The name starts as a tickle in his ears then dives down to his stomach. He is suddenly aware that something is terribly wrong. He is trapped, like a specimen beneath a microscopic lens, like the hands that circle beneath the glass face of his wristwatch. The plane eases forward on the runway. The saccharine voice of the stewardess on the intercom guides the other members of the crew through their choreographed emergency procedures. The engines vibrate and hum below them all. He knows what's going to happen next.

Stanton panics and starts pressing the button above them. He turns to Lila. "Don't order the coffee."

She glances over at him. "What?"

"Please. I beg of you. Don't order the coffee." His hand latches on to her shirtsleeve, and she tries to pull away.

"Stop. What's wrong with you? Let go of me."

The men across from them stare. Stanton pulls her close and whispers in her ear. "If you order the coffee, we're all going to die."

"Get off of me, you freak." Now she's the one pounding the assistance button into the panel until red light paints both their faces. They are airborn and climbing, and the stewardess takes her time coming down the aisle.

"Is there a problem here?" she asks. Her suit is navy blue with a set of golden wings pinned to her breast pocket that match the gold in her hair.

"No, it's just– It's just that I shouldn't be on this plane." Stanton looks around. He tries to count things, but it's too late now. "I want off the plane."

"Sir, we'll have to ask that you remain in your seat until the flight has landed in Tampa. Is there anything I can get you in the meantime?"

Stanton's face grows hot. "I want off the damn plane!"

"Sir, put your seatbelt back on."

He reaches toward her, over Lila, as the men next to them scurry to stop him. He feels hands press against his chest and sees Lila's water spill onto her book and across her lap. She curses. The plane rattles beneath their feet. He feels the pressure build in his ears. A dip and a thrust to the left, then another hard drop down. The plane sways and banks. Some of the smaller passengers, the children or women, are lifted from their seats. The stewardess stumbles in the aisle and rolls toward first-class, banging her body against several armrests along the way. The masks in the overhead compartment drop down over their heads. Someone on the intercom tells them not to panic. People start screaming, and for a moment Stanton can't find his own voice in the mass. He mouths the words, "I don't want to be on this plane! I'm not supposed to be on this plane!" to Lila, but she shakes her head and points to her ears. The engines roar around them. He can feel it, the nose tipping

forward, the smooth descent back toward the earth, the hug of gravity as it propels his stomach up into his throat.

Lila reaches out to grasp his leg, but can't. Stanton winces at the open window shade, the blue and gold sunset as still and peaceful as a painting. It angers him. That and the fact that he was wrong. He was wrong about the whole thing, about time, about the theory, about his destiny. He curses science. He should have listened to his gut. Stanton claws at the sweeping colors below, the wide mouth of the ocean waiting to catch his fall. And on the way down he closes his eyes and whispers this desperate prayer: "Remember, remember, remember..."

(III)

Stanton has spent an entire lifetime trying to avoid this moment. The same crew attends to the passenger, and the same woman with the square-frame, black-rimmed glasses sits beside him. Lila. He has known what her name would be since he could speak it. He munches on the same peanut butter sandwich, closes the same window shade, listens to the same satellite station headphones the airline has provided. But when Lila spills her cup of coffee on her lap, he does not rush to grab a handkerchief from his pocket. He simply stares.

He has known from a very early age how and when he would die, though no one, not even his family believed him when he told them. Except Maggie. She would believe the earth was flat if he said so.

He thought maybe he could change his destiny, that maybe changing some aspects of his life would help to avoid the crash. So Stanton tried changing his profession.

First, hot dog vendor at a baseball field, where he was fired for burning too many dogs. Then camp counselor and high school teacher, but none of the kids seemed to like him. They drove him out of the system. Then mailman, bus driver, and a brief stint as a telemarketer. Each time he was dismissed or became injured or failed to meet the requirements of the job, in spite of his efforts.

So he had tried changing his location, moving first to the west coast and working in the aerospace industry. But a mudslide buried his home, and the heads of his company chose to relocate him to Atlanta before he could purchase a new one. When he quit and tried to escape to New Zealand, there were complications with his passport, then the bank transference, then something else. Always something else.

He couldn't imagine giving up Maggie altogether. But he did try to meet her at a different time in his life. Instead of waiting until his senior year in college, he tried tracking her down during high school. He even went so far as the stake out her house, but was hit by a car while crossing the street to go knock on her door. She wasn't even home that day. He tried to register at a different college than the one where they met, and succeeded. But he ended up in the city to visit an old friend the same weekend they originally met. She found him in a coffee shop, where he was sitting alone, eating a tuna salad sandwich, and asked if she could have one of his napkins. He still managed to spit tuna salad on her shirt. He tried to change the date of their wedding, planned to drive out to Vegas and elope a full four months before it was scheduled. But their car broke down in Texas and the blow to their finances forced them to adhere to the original plan. He tried to avoid impregnating Maggie, insisted on using condoms, which had a strange

tendency to break, and she tried birth control. But her body couldn't handle the prescribed doses of estrogen and progesterone. She found herself vomiting almost every day and decided to end the pills. So Stanton tried to get a vasectomy, but the first doctor became part of a malpractice suit a month before the procedure and the second discovered Stanton had a rare bleeding disorder that prevented him from having the surgery.

Stanton grew desperate. He even tried changing his name, but a misunderstanding and the sudden appearance of his new alias on the FBI's most wanted list nipped that in the bud. He tried changing the flight again, the seat, the first destination on the tour even though he knew that was futile; it hadn't managed to change anything the last time. He tried to avoid the discovery of his own theory. But the figures showed up in his lab work regardless, and when he tried to trash the evidence, an intern found it and credited it to his name behind his back. He didn't even believe in the theory anymore. He was wrong about all of it. In the end, nothing worked to change the course of his fate. He had tried to deviate from the original path, changed the variables, lied, hid, swindled, cheated, exhausted all his options. But in the end, he could be nothing but a physicist, living in a suburb on the outskirts of Atlanta with a woman named Maggie, who was pregnant with their first and only child. A child he would never live to see born. He could be no man but Stanton Arthur.

So when the woman beside him says her name is Lila and spills coffee on her lap, Stanton isn't surprised. He turns to Lila, offers his handkerchief, presses the red call button and waits for the inevitable.

(IV)

He asks Maggie, "What would you do if you knew it was your last day on earth? What if you knew, inexplicably and without doubt, that nothing you could do would change your fate, that you would die tomorrow?"

"You're starting to worry me," she says. "Is this about something else, and you're just trying to ease me into it?"

"No, I was just curious."

"You mean, like, if I had a dream and knew I'd die tomorrow? What would I do?"

"Sure," Stanton says. In that moment he thinks, I will miss seeing her like this. Her hips swaying with the rhythm of the trees in the wind and the sunlight dancing through strands of her hair. I will miss the way she sings off key when she weeds the garden and the freckles painted along her collarbone and on top of her breasts. He isn't even sure if he noticed those things before, but he knows them intimately now. He had wanted to tell her, right from the start, right from the moment he met her that this was how the story would end, that it would begin again. But he chose not to tell her this time. He can only imagine what she had done or felt after he disappeared behind the security gate the last lifetime. He didn't want to scare her now.

"I think I'd live it the same," she says. "I'd wake up and make your coffee before you ran off to work, pour myself a glass of orange juice and sit on the porch. I'd look out into our backyard and imagine what she'll look like sitting in that grass in her diaper or on that swing set when she's older. I'd watch the game shows and the soap operas. I'd phone my mother to see how the weather was in Macon or ask if Dad had received the package I

sent for his birthday yet. I'd take a nap on that big bed. But, of course, since it was my last day, I'd let the dog up on the bed with me this time. Then I'd end it all, right here with you. I'd take your hand and we'd go for a walk, and then I'd take you inside and let your head rest on my stomach while I sing a lullaby to the baby. Then we'd go to sleep. That is how I would live my last day."

"That's all you would do? Nothing different?" he asks.

"If it's good enough for every day, isn't it good enough for the last one, too?"

Even though he still knows and still doesn't want it to happen, Stanton lives the remainder of his life just as the circle pushes him. He schedules the flight and says goodbye to all of his colleagues and embraces Maggie at the security gate for as long as he possibly can. She says, again, that they'll be there when he returns, but he already knows this is true, but not the way she means it. He maneuvers his way through the terminals and the shuttles, past the smoking lounge and blue overhead screens and airport assistants on their golf carts. He finds his gate and waits for Lila, and when he sees her he offers to help her carry her bags on board. He lets her have the window seat, even though that's not what her ticket says, and he insists on covering her lap with his handkerchief before she orders the coffee that will spill. He counts the people in the cabin, each head in his or her place, each overhead light like a star above those heads and each blue-backed chair positioned as it should be.

Stanton anticipates the dip just before it happens, but doesn't bother putting his mask on when it drops down. He wants to pass out and away and get back to Maggie in the next lifetime. He looks over at Lila and makes sure she is able to get her mask on,

though. He adjusts the strap at the back of her head as tears form in her eyes and takes her hand in his. Lila looks at him and then out the window. Stanton wonders if she sees more colors in it than he possibly could have all those other times, if he did the right thing by giving her this, if he has done anything right during any of this. And then he remembers there is no right or wrong. Just Stanton, just Lila and all the world below.

SLEIGHT OF HAND

Matilda returned to her desk with a mug of hot, steeping tea and a smile on her face. She kissed the warm rim of the mug for a sip and twirled a brown strand of hair around her finger and stared at the writing sample in front of her. It was beautiful, the most beautiful writing she had ever seen. But not beautiful in the sense that it was effeminate. This was written by a man. It said so on her paper. Across the top, just like all the other applicants' samples, a name: Mr. Ronald Agee. Sex: male. Age: 35. Employment position desired: security guard. Preferred start date: soon, and desired salary: negotiable. Then two handwritten paragraphs on a topic of his choice. But no phone number. That glimpse was all she was allowed, and it was enough to have her enamored.

Her job: make flesh from these bones. Analyze the applicant's script and its implications about his or her personality and report back to the client. They would hire based on her analysis. Her current client was HG&A, Inc., a large firm that specialized in government projects and nuclear research. This week they needed a full-time security officer to man a loss prevention team, patrol their grounds on-call during nights and weekends, and provide general public safety. Last week it had been applications for a database clerk, and the week before a new engineer.

On the desk's surface were a computer, a pen, her magnifying glass, a stack of handwritten applications and a ruler to measure the letter heights and alignments. She

used a computer instead of paper to write her analyses because she didn't want anyone to see her own handwriting. Her loops were inflated like balloons and tended to dangle below the line or hover into the lines above them. This meant she had a tendency to fantasize, as she was doing now with Mr. Agee.

She wondered what his hands looked like when he did it, when Mr. Agee filled out the sample, and how they might feel against her own plump and ruddy hands. Were they smooth or calloused? Were the fingers long and tapered, or were they thick and firm? She imagined Mr. Agee's hands and nearly let the mug slip from her fingers.

To her right was the window that looked into her neighbors' living room and their fat, gray cat curled on top of a table in front of their windowpane. Normally Matilda despised fat cat and the way he stared at her through the window, but today she smiled at him, too, as rain fell lightly between them. Though at this time of year it should have been snow.

How had she become fascinated with hands, of all things? It seemed ridiculous now. Matilda had been writing since grade school, but apparently in some wrong way that had gone uncorrected until a middle school English instructor pointed it out during a placement exam.

"Matilda," her instructor said, slapping a ruler on her desktop. Matilda jumped. "What on earth are you doing with your hand?"

"Writing, Ma'am."

"You can write like that?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"It makes your hand look crippled." The instructor hovered over her and examined the way Matilda gripped her pencil in her right hand, wood resting on the upper knuckle of her ring finger, middle and pointer fingers pressed against the pencil body, and thumb sticking out as if she were giving a thumbs-up to whomever might be sitting beside her. It did look a little deformed, Matilda thought, but she could still write. Legibly even. She glanced around the room at her classmates. They gawked, but kept their pencils poised in their hands. Each rested the pencil on his or her middle finger or balanced it with the tips of the first finger and thumb. No one's hand looked like hers. No one's handwriting did either.

"Did someone teach you to hold your pencil that way?" her instructor asked.

"No, Ma'am."

"Were you ever taught the right way?"

Matilda thought. The right way? She didn't know there was such a thing. "I suppose not, Ma'am." She put the pencil down and hid her hands beneath the desk.

"Then I guess it's my responsibility."

For the next few months Matilda stayed after class twice each week to correct the problem. Matilda tried to reframe her eccentric hands into something that would help her pass seventh grade English. But change seemed impossible, and the instructor abandoned her efforts. A note explaining the situation was sent to her parents, and Matilda cried as if she was handing them a suspension slip.

"Bucker up, kiddo," her father said. "Just become a doctor. Then no one will care how you write."

But that wasn't consolation for Matilda, who became obsessed with her hands' appearance and getting it right. She watched how the secretary in the nurse's office filled out reports for sick students and how her mother signed the bill when they went out to dinner. She watched how her girlfriends doodled hearts into their notebooks and how her math instructor gripped the chalk when he wrote algebra equations on the blackboard. She watched and she copied, and eventually she just saw hands.

When Matilda worked, she sometimes imagined that the applicants' hands were things other than hands: clocks for the one who scribbled so fast her letters were illegible, fire for the one whose slashing strokes and heavy pen pressure betrayed his short temper. For Mr. Agee, she imagined hands like streams of water. His script seemed to wash over the paper in a current of ink. So smooth flowing and masterful. Like calligraphy, but not quite. It was bolder, more robust. The words "commitment" and "worthy" were especially attractive in his handwriting, and she admired the way his final strokes lingered on the page. She imagined his hands lingering on her own and became flushed.

The anatomy of his penmanship intrigued her most. Body height, ear, and arm. The lower loop of a y could reveal how passionately you kissed; the thickness of a letter stem, the strength of your backbone. An infinite number of variations and combinations of each trait existed. One writer could be sensitive to criticism and obedient, the next sensitive to criticism and rebellious. But as a whole those features could belong to only one person. Writer and penmanship were as indivisible as a prime number. Everything else was a forgery. Analyzing allowed her to read between the lines.

How low do you cross the bars on your letters?

How high are your aspirations?

Do you use exceptionally tall capital letters?

Are you egotistical?

Are the spaces between your words narrow?

Do you have possessive tendencies?

Do you write slowly and carefully?

Do you have a hidden concern for appearances?

She knew who suffered from insomnia, who was homicidal, and who had cancer (but only in the late stages, when irregularities surfaced along with weak pressure and trembling strokes), who had lost a job or a finger or a child. She knew who was addicted to alcohol or cigarettes or love, who was homosexual and who was straight. She could predict an IQ within ten points, as well as whether a marriage would survive or end in divorce. She knew who wore corduroy and plaid in a room full of polyester suits, who preferred to eat meals alone, who was sociable, who was committed, who didn't give a shit. She also knew the man who went to parties and thought only of how he stood and the woman who forgot how beautiful she was when no one was there to remind her.

Because of this, Matilda liked to think she could recognize these people if she met them on the street. She imagined she had a few times. Was the blonde waitress boarding the bus the same woman whose u's were as round as coffee cups, whose self esteem had been gnawed down to a crumb? Was the homeless man extending his palm to her the same man whose appetite for spending was revealed in a descending loop?

HG&A, Inc. provided Matilda with a summary of whom they were looking for each time, and it was her responsibility to find a suitable fit. For the security guard position, HG&A were looking for "a diplomatic applicant, flexible yet firm. Must be capable of working independently, as well as with a team. Someone who gets the job done."

Matilda always found the right one. She held the magnifying glass over the paper, positioned her ruler beneath Mr. Agee's lines, opened her word processor and listed the positive and negative qualities of his handwriting in two-column format. Then she composed a rough draft of the analysis for her client. She tried not to sound too smitten:

> Dear Sirs:
>
> Mr. Agee's fast-paced writing indicates an intelligent, alert mind. The balanced and proportional line, letter, and word spacing, combined with the handwriting being centered on the page is the expression of an upright individual, who defines his place in society by the quality of his relationships. The way his words taper slightly toward their ends, height decreasing from left to right, reveals a keen ability to evaluate and act with diplomacy in any given scenario – a peacemaker of sorts and an asset in group situations. His ambitious nature is expressed through the elevated placement of his t-bars; he sets high goals for himself and tends to achieve them. And the fact that he accounts for all of his punctuation with clarity and proper placement indicates reliability, logical and analytical reasoning, and attention to detail. Medium-heavy pressure discloses his passion for this line of work.

(And, though she did not type it, this also meant he had a strong libido. She blushed slightly at the implication and the paths it allowed her mind wander down.)

> And, finally, the absence of loops on his g's, y's, p's, etc. indicates a no-frills approach. He is a man who "gets the job done," as you seek...

She rolled the base of her pen in her mouth with her fingertips. This was the kind of handwriting she had been hoping to find: the perfect match. But not just for her client. Mr. Agee was everything a woman could want. His hands, those perfect hands, resurfaced in her mind, and she wondered if a gold band wrapped itself around his left ring finger. The pen in her mouth snapped between her teeth and a gush of ink poured onto her tongue. She ran to the bathroom to spit it out and brush, then returned to her desk. The rain had stopped. Fat cat was awake and peering at her with his green eyes, flitting his tail behind him with an exaggerated swagger. He had probably peed in her neighbor's potted plants or clawed an expensive chemise dangling from their closet door. That was just the kind of cat she guessed he'd be. He took a break from staring to lick himself. Matilda turned away.

In a former life, five years ago, Matilda had been a forensic document examiner. People's eyes always widened a little at the title, but Matilda always added, "Exciting title for a pedestrian job." She analyzed documents for forgery and reported back to the courts on a 9-to-5 clock. Her office was a taupe cubicle in a room of ten just like it and a black phone on each desk, though no one's phone ever rang and no one really called out. Rarely, if ever, did she talk with someone other than an office mate or a lawyer or a judge. She testified in court and was bombarded with questions about the process and her interpretations and her credibility. But it was boring, this task of answering every single

question – Yes or no? True or false? Black or white? – and no others. She provided answers, but never understood what they meant for the people after the trials were over. Instead she wasted away her cubicle hours daydreaming conversations with the accused rapists and murderers and perjurers and embezzlers whose handwriting she examined. Did you do it? she would ask. And their answer was always the same: What do you think?

Matilda thought she could do better. She pursued graphology through a self-study program for two semesters while still employed, analyzing stems and serifs and baselines until she earned a certificate. She wanted a purpose. She wanted to understand. She needed to feel a connection to something. She tried to explain this to her colleagues in the forensics department, but they frowned and labeled her a heretic the day she left. She was the classical pianist turned vaudeville musician, the bestselling author turned romance novelist. She was the professional hocus-pocus. Matilda viewed it more as finding a new pew in the same church of thought. Wasn't the goal – to see the truth within the script – still the same? She was still Matilda, with the same principles and passion. All that had changed was her perspective, one that now allowed her to view each hand's performance with as much color as the light cascading through a stained glass window. They laughed in her face.

The change ended up being for the best. Now Matilda worked her own hours. She had her routines and the power to change them if she wanted to. She had her purpose. It was still a commonplace job, but none of the subjects were ordinary, especially ones like Mr. Agee. People hid secrets in their palms like magician's cards, manipulating and

misdirecting at every stroke. But she saw the truth; the windows to their souls were not in their eyes, but in their hands.

Some traits were easier to identify than others, because she saw their strengths and faults in her own handwriting. That was one of her first assignments at the school of graphology: analyze herself. It was a humbling experience. There were flaws in her character she didn't exactly like seeing on the page. Her letters were cramped together within words, meaning she was reserved. A prude almost. Wide spaces between words depicted her solitude, but that was an asset for her line of work. And the light pressure meant she generally wished to avoid confrontation.

She shared many positive characteristics with Mr. Agee, too: punctuality, reliability, detail-oriented. And ever since she switched to graphology, she wrote capital I's in print instead of cursive, a sign that she had embraced her autonomy.

Matilda cracked her knuckles and began to draft the not-so-positive qualities of Mr. Agee's handwriting:

> The applicant also shows a poor level of creativity, though this is not a requirement of the job. Stubbornness and a bit of an ego (tall capital letters) are possible faults, but may prove to be assets in a leadership position. Mr. Agee also has a tendency toward sarcasm (determined from the short, tapered crosses on his t's), but this also should not be a limitation since his writing doesn't indicate any resistance to authority. As for Mr. Agee's threading...

She paused. His threading? She grabbed for the magnifying glass. Those somewhat formless lines that she had taken for rivers, that extended into whispers of

shapes, squiggles drawn out like strings, so she could barely read the words. His threading. She put the magnifying glass down. Blinked. It couldn't be.

If what she saw was true, then it meant Mr. Agee was indeed diplomatic, but he was also indecisive. And if Mr. Agee was indecisive, then he could be slow to act. And if he was slow to act, then when the time came, if it ever happened, she meant it could happen, certainly, but sometimes these things don't happen, but still. If he did. If he did act slowly, then ... She didn't want to imagine it. She tried to stop. But what if everyone's life was in danger? What if it was a disgruntled ex-employee or a terrorist or a madman? These things made the news sometimes. They happened. What would he do? Would he just stand there? Couldn't she ask them about this sort of thing? Wasn't there a requirement? Weren't you supposed to have done something like this before? Surely he had. Or no. No. If he had been a cop, perhaps. But a security guard? No. It couldn't be. What would he do?

Matilda stared at the paper. She tried to summon the words, but they were silent. She tried to wring the letters, but they were dry. She tried to expel the answers, some answers, any from the lines, but they were all hollow. Only the white space echoed.

She turned to the window to search for fat cat, but he had disappeared. Matilda gripped the ruler in her hands. For five years she thought she had known them so intimately, the people behind those lines. Had she known any of them at all? And Mr. Agee. Confused and indecisive Mr. Agee, was he really confused and indecisive? Could she be certain? Could she tell a damn thing about this man? Or the others before him? She didn't even know if she had judged fat cat right. She had never taken the time to get

to know him. What if all his licking and staring was just that – licking and staring – and no maliciousness under the surface? If she were wrong about Mr. Agee, would she be denying him the chance? If she ignored it, would she be putting his life in danger?

The ruler snapped in half. Matilda stared at it, then out the window, then back into her hands. She set the pieces aside, next to the magnifying glass and the stack of handwritten applications and her now cold cup of tea. The computer had fallen asleep during her thoughts. Its screen was blank. She tapped the space bar to wake it up. When she read her half-sentence again, "As for Mr. Agee's threading..." she imagined what she would write where the tiny vertical line blinked and what the hiring committee would say when they read it and what Mr. Agee would do with the response he received in the mail or by phone or in person at the HG&A offices. She wondered what it would feel like, instead, when she picked up a pen and a fresh piece of paper and scribbled the black, permanent letters across the page in all their fat and insubstantial glory. She wondered, but only for an instant. Then she wrote it. She took Mr. Agee's analysis and shuffled it back into the stack of applications and went to the kitchen to steep a new cup of tea.

AL FINE (TO THE END)

My mother once told me that a single feature on a woman could make her either very beautiful or very ugly – the pout of her lips, the long line of her neck, her infectious laughter or skin like crêpe paper and a smile that unfolded only when she was about to slit your throat. It wasn't often my mother imparted these pieces of wisdom to me, preferring I dunk my head into the bucket of life and bob for my own apples of knowledge. There were times this made me feel neglected or unloved, but in later years I understood her reasons. Being the bearded lady had never been her aspiration in life. It was simply a way to turn misfortune into profit, or as she described it, "making popcorn from the kernels." She wanted more for herself. And she wanted more for me. But she was unable to have either.

I remember the wiry shag that hung over her mouth and down to her bosom, the sweat droplets that collected on the layer of makeup below her nose. Her own face was a riddle to me – a mother's voice with a father's features. We shared a degree of akwardness, no doubt. But mine turned out to be temporary. In the end, I looked nothing like my mother. But then I was, dare I say it, average in every respect, just a girl and no more molded than a lump of clay on a potter's wheel. There are few things I remember about that age. My slippers always seemed to fray at the toes for being too small or formed pink puddles of leather around my feet for being too large. My figure had yet to cinch at the middle. My voice squeaked, and my hair lacked gloss. I was an

embarrassment to all that is feminine, but not mismatched enough to be anything unique. Unlike my mother and the other circus performers, I did not have a talent or deformity worthy of the money in people's pockets. I fell through the cracks in that parade of grotesque faces and masterful contortionists. What I wanted more than anything was to be special, acknowledged, desired. What I was was a normal amongst eccentrics, belonging neither here nor there, wanting – as children sometimes do – the things I could never have. But when my body began to feel as if it were a butterfly ready to burst from its cocoon, my confusion over my mother heightened, and I pushed myself further away. I needed a standard, a model, a touchstone. I asked for an example. What they gave me was a task: Mademoiselle Amarette, the 4'11" French glass dancer at our circus, with bands of blue-black hair that reached her waist.

My job was to dress her before every performance and fill her bathtub with water each night – by order of Mr. Henessey, the circus owner. Truth be told, Mr. Henessey and Amarette were lovers and had been since her audition. Even the flame eater, who had singed the tip of his nose more times than I could count on my hands, could smell the tension between them.

In terms of beauty, Amarette was paramount. Every turn of her pale wrists orchestrated a symphony. Each eyelash batting like a Japanese fan. And when she danced for us, time itself seemed to bend to her grace. She possessed within herself some form of music, the kind that drew you toward it like a child is drawn to the calliope chimes of a carousel. I was already enamored by her, as was everyone else. The men and the boys. The audience and the cleanup crew. The clowns and the midgets and the lions circling in

their cages. Even the women were charmed, because Amarette's looks were just imperfect and asymmetrical enough to make her approachable – an eyebrow slightly arched or her thick and nasal French accent. For us, it was not so much the presence of Amarette's lovely smile and fluid limbs, but how she molded them into her muse. The idea that I would be responsible for such a woman, that I would be in her company, rendered me speechless. It was like the pauper befriending the princess.

The first time we met for my job, Amarette was holding two slippers in her left hand and was naked. I blushed at the sight of her bare thighs and her vanilla-colored breasts with their dark centers. I don't recall having seen any woman naked before, not even my mother. And my body was meager in comparison.

"Quick," she said and motioned with her hands. "This goes here. That goes there. No, there! Right. Don't forget to button the last one. Hurry, *mon petit chou*. I'll miss my cue." She dropped a glove onto the floor. "*Zut*!"

I took this and that and went here and there as best I could, all the while mesmerized by Amarette stroking her black hair with a comb and securing it into a bun at the nape of her neck. Her costume consisted of a tutu of crushed white velvet, suspended like an upside-down umbrella by a web of pleated nylon. Her corset bodice laced up the back with indigo ribbons, which she asked me to tighten before grabbing her cape and whisking toward the stage.

She paused at her door and turned back. "*Comment vous vous appellez*?"

I cocked my head like a mutt.

"Little girl, what is your name?"

"Oh," I whispered, "Clarice."

"Well, Clarice, I like my bathwater nice and hot – almost steaming, *comprenez-vous*? That way I can feel it. If you'd be so kind as to have it ready when I return?"

I nodded my head.

"Has *le chat* caught your tongue? One says, *'Oui*, *Mademoiselle.'*"

"*Oui*, *Mademoiselle*."

She pat my head and vanished behind the curtain.

That night I sat in the wings of the audience and watched as the trapeze artists poured rosin and pieces of broken glass as small as diamonds onto the floor. Amarette stood in the darkness, head bowed, until a single band of light from the balcony came down and kissed her forehead. She walked toward the center of the ring and paused at the edge of the circular pool of glass, letting the cape slip from her shoulders. Silence. Stirring. She let the moments linger. Then, as effortlessly as a swan glides from the shore banks into the water, Amarette removed her slippers and slid onto the glass with her bare feet.

Mr. Henessey cued the music. Tchaikovsky's "Lake in Moonlight" filled the tent with a metallic, music box rhythm. Amarette performed pirouettes and arabesques and ground the glass shards into the dirt with soft cracking sounds one could only hear from backstage. The audience held its breath, each pair of eyes pinning their gaze to her like clothes on the line. They waited for a stumble, a shriek of pain to escape the ballerina's lips. But it never came. She spun around until the metallic ticks of her accompaniment slowed down, *ritardando*, *morendo*, and disappeared.

The audience gave a standing ovation.

I delighted in catering to her every need, in spite of her growing demands. The way I figured it, the task was far preferable to shoveling horse manure. For the next few months I attended to Amarette before and after the shows. She was the only one with a trailer and running water amongst all of us, and sometimes she would reward me for a good scrubbing with bath time of my own. The bathroom itself seemed no larger than a vestibule, the kind of place where one could squat on the toilet and have just enough room to turn around and wash her hands in the sink. The tub, however, was spacious. It stretched farther than my legs could reach at the time and had porcelain sides that cupped up like hands, allowing the water to well like a tear in the eye. And the smells – her imported lavender and raspberry and freesia soaps, the butterscotch odor of her mousse and the rose petal bathwater – eased both our minds.

In the wings each night I watched her perform, her movements replaying themselves like a silent film reel. She never faltered, even on those nights when she argued with Mr. Henessey and locked him out of her room or on nights when he retaliated by laying glass shards as thick as mulch on her stage. The audience never suspected; neither did most of the crew. Only someone who knew her face as intimately as I did could detect the loathing or sadness in the midst of their lovers' quarrel behind that mask of a smile.

I asked my mother once as she trimmed her moustache and beard what gave Amarette the ability to do it, to dance upon the glass. After countless baths, one begins to notice things, like the calloused patches on Amarette's soles, thick as the burnt glaze of

crème brûlée on custard, or the way she would never bleed, even when I scratched her too hard with the pumice stone.

"I've heard them talking," I said. "The lion tamers say she slathers an ointment on her soles, but I can't find any in her quarters. The acrobats think she wears leather patches, but I know this isn't true. And the tightrope walker claims it's all in how they lay the glass – that if it's flat enough it won't even break the skin. But I've seen the scratches, and I know she's really dancing out there. How on earth does she do it?" I furrowed my brow.

My mother set her scissors down on the counter, ran a fingertip across her lips to collect the fallen hairs. "Sometimes the gifts we are given come at a price," she said. "And Amarette has paid dearly for her own. It is a disease of the blood and poor circulation. She cannot feel the pieces of glass prick her feet, let alone the ground beneath them or even your hands as they scour her body."

"It seems like a small price to pay for her ability to dance. I wish I could do it."

"Don't fool yourself into thinking it's anything other than serious, Clarice. And don't idolize it. It is a costly gift and temporary at that."

"What do you mean 'temporary'?"

My mother reached for the comb and scissors again. Coarse black and brown lumps of beard fell to the floor as she spoke. "She's a piece of fruit rotting from the inside, Clarice. Eventually she won't be able to walk, let alone dance. She'll need more than a child taking care of her. I've already asked that you be assigned another job. I don't want you watching her fall apart. It's not good for a girl your age."

I plucked the scissors from her hand. "That's my decision, not yours. You have no right. Amarette understands me more than you ever could. We belong together."

"Clarice, please. I'm sorry to say, but it's already started. Yesterday she took a spill during practice. I didn't want to tell you. It didn't cut her, but her hip is bruised. You'll see when you–"

"I'd rather eat the glass beneath her feet than hear anymore!"

A voice bellowed in the distance. Amarette and Mr. Henessey exchanged threats and French obscenities until the spaces between the tents filled with their rage.

"I want to dance, and I will. You're trying to punish me again, you *enfoiré*!"

"If you go against my wishes, I swear will withhold your pay. I implore you, Amarette. Do as I say!"

"Is that all I am? Your little act, your *petite* puppet, your *putain*?"

"I never said that. Come back here! Amarette, *mon amant*!"

Amarette's footsteps could be heard down the hall. "Clarice? Clarice!" she cried.

I looked at my mother in panic.

"Your lady awaits," my mother said and snipped a final lock of hair.

I rushed toward the footsteps and shouting and found Amarette wrapped in two towels, one around her torso and one around her head. Her cheeks were flushed from rage and her inky hair drew lines across her brow beneath the towel's frayed edges. Mr. Henessey stepped back in surprise upon seeing me. He stuttered. His face reddened as a ripe tomato in summer. "You're in no condition," he said to Amarette. "Please, be reasonable."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said and grabbed my hand. "I am ready for my bath now, Clarice. Take me?" She held Mr. Henessey's gaze.

"Don't fool yourself into thinking you can use the child as a shield, Amarette. She can't protect you from what lies ahead."

"Hmph." She turned to her quarters and dragged me along behind. I looked back at Mr. Henessey, whose eyes became small and gray in the distance. His forward-cast shadow painted our backs. And on his face was a queer expression. If you have ever seen a trapeze artist in the moment he misses the barre and realizes his helplessness in the face of the fall, then you would know how Mr. Henessey looked as he watched Amarette and me disappear down the hall.

The bath water came lukewarm at first, so I turned the knobs all the way to the right. Behind me Amarette dropped each towel to the ground, then placed her head in her hands. Even though the water escaping from the faucet drowned out her sobs, I knew she was crying. It needed no mention by me.

I finished the tap, swirled the bath bubbles with my right hand for consistency, then turned to help her in. Then I saw it. A large turnip-colored bruise was on Amarette's right hip, just as my mother had said. Amarette stood transfixed on her reflection in the mirror. Her expression startled me. "What are you thinking of, Mademoiselle? Is everything all right?"

I could see she was debating whether or not to lie to me.

"I am trying to imagine what I will look like when I am older," she said and turned her naked torso toward the tub and myself. Her raven hair cascaded over one nipple. "How old are you, *mon petit chou*?"

"Nearly twelve."

She sat beside me on the edge of the porcelain tub. First her feet, then her birdlike legs, then her subtle abdomen and breasts descended into the bubbles as fluidly as the sun descends into the horizon. Her hair cascaded over the tub's side, blue-black painted on white. "And do you have *un ami*, a sweetheart?"

I blushed and clipped her hair to her crown. A boy in Chicago once invited me to a dance when our tour took us through there over a year ago. He was tall with a ruddy complexion and tendrils of blonde hair that fell in his face. I thought I was in love immediately. I made it so far as the threshold of the hall, wearing one of my better dresses (though that is not saying much for a vagabond). Then, for fear or another reason, I turned my mind in the opposite direction and my body with it. I never looked back, and my mother said it was probably for the best.

Amarette wet my hand with her own. "You are in a daze. Perhaps it is not so simple a question?"

"No," I replied. "I don't have one." I began to soak her shoulders with the sponge.

"Well, good. Stay away from them," Amarette said. "The love people have at your age is cheap. Penny promises and nickel kisses. Real love, *ma fille*, is like bath water. It envelopes you, seeps into your skin, fills every one of your pores."

She lifted her hands above the water, which ran from palms and made her pale arms as luminous as the porcelain. "Then after a while you realize the rest of the world feels cold in comparison, and all you want to do is sink deeper and deeper inside. Even after love turns frigid, even after it wrinkles your toes and loses its allure, all you want to do is stay. Because it's the only thing you care to know."

I poured water over her chest and watched her frail ribcage rise and fall.

"Is any of this making sense, little one?"

I did not understand the meaning of her words then. Later on I figured out on my own that one's understanding of love must be as unique as a fingerprint and sometimes just as complex. Perhaps what she felt for Mr. Henessey was a version of love, if love meant trying to distance yourself from the one thing you never wanted to lose. Or perhaps her idea of love was like walking on broken glass. Touching, but not feeling; wanting, but never reaching. Both dangerous and beautiful at the same time.

Perhaps I was in love.

"They're trying to separate us, Amarette. You won't let it happen, will you?"

She blew a bath bubble off her hand and frowned. "It would be a tragedy," she said. "It would simply break my heart. No, little one, I need you here with me."

The next evening Amarette was scheduled to perform multiple shows, the first at seven and the last at ten. The tickets were already sold. But before the second performance, she collapsed near the tiger cages. The two dwarves who found her hoisted her back to her room and summoned Mr. Henessey, who looked as if he had been drinking. They called a doctor, who ordered me to retrieve cookies or candied apples or

anything sweet from the popcorn vendor as quickly as possible, and as I turned to run, I saw him draw a short needle from his bag and prick Amarette's hand. A spray of blood speckled her flawless, white skin.

The doctor gave me orders when I returned. "She is to stay in bed for now. No more shows. Her blood sugar is too low. She is weak. Make sure she eats at least two more sugar wafers, then put a quilt over her and let her rest."

I opened the door to Amarette's parlor and stepped into the candlelit darkness.

"Mr. Henessey," the doctor said, "we need to have a talk." They left and the door clicked shut behind them.

"*Mon petit chou*," she whispered. "You have something for me?"

Amarette opened her mouth, and I placed a piece of broken cookie on her tongue. She chewed and grabbed the rest from my hands. I sank into a nearby chair and stared at the floor. I felt as if I would cry.

"Do not frown, sweet Clarice. Come and rest your head *ici*." She scooted over, and I lay down beside her. Her hair was wet and matted to her scalp, but it still smelled of vanilla. "There is a saying in my home country," she continued, "'*Impossible n'est pas français*.' For the French, nothing's impossible. Perhaps you will see me dance tonight after all then, *non*?"

"Promise you'll be all right," I said.

"But of course, little one. Of course."

I crawled in beneath the sheets and felt her cool skin press against my skirt. If it were possible to sew my feet in place of hers or drain her blood like an hourglass and fill

it with mine, I would have. She stroked my hair with slender fingers and breathed moist air onto my face. I sighed and repeated the words in my head and wished for things I knew I could not have. Amarette hummed an old French tune. It was not long before slumber found both of us.

When I awoke, Amarette was not beside me. I wandered dewy-eyed through the corridors and out into the open grass near the circus tent, searching for her. Inside the main tent I could hear the prancing of horse hooves and the roar of the lions and the ahh's escaping from the audience's lips. A single figure stood in the shadows behind the entrance in the back of the tent. Just as the horse show and jockeys exited, I saw Amarette slip inside. I gasped and tiptoed after her, careful not to be seen. But she was soon lost, and I found myself milling through a haze of bowties and suspenders, rustling skirts and lavish hats. The ringmaster made a somber announcement, saying the glass dancer would be unable to perform her second show tonight. The crowd's throat began to rumble with a cry of objection. Then someone cheered and every head turned. Amarette stepped into the light, a bag cupped in her hands and a ruby smile drawn on her lips.

The ringmaster, baffled, stuttered and left his platform. The crowd applauded until she raised a hand to silence them. She cued music from an unknown maestro and poured her own pool of broken glass onto the floor and eased onto the floor. Each graceful movement flowed into the next. Amarette was ravishing, more alive than I had ever seen her before. She spread her legs in a *grand jeté*, leapt, and as she came down, the purple shadow of her bruise peeked from beneath the tutu layers.

Her eyes widened, and she started to fall. Her feet landed first, hard, and pressed into the shards of glass, knees buckling above them, her body sinking toward the ground like a collapsing tent. Her hands reached and gripped at the glass, suspending her head just above the reflective pool. But for the rest of her body, it was too late. She sat back on her haunches, cherry syrup blood coating the crystal beneath her limbs. Her tutu was stained, and the ribbons behind her had unfolded.

She searched the crowd with her eyes. For a moment the music box seemed to sustain one minor note, and in that moment Amarette's painted face looked up to find me. Her eyes were frozen with fear. I wished I were an acrobat who could swoop her off the floor. I wished I were a magician who could make her disappear with a wave of my hand. I wished I were my mother, with a long beard to hide behind. I wished we were anything but ourselves.

She hung her head and let the music play. Then she formed a smile. She smiled and caught my eye again and then began to laugh. Her laughter crept up her throat and slid through her teeth and slipped from her mouth until it filled the corners of the circus tent like the aroma of popcorn. She rose to her feet and wiped the red glass from her hands on her tutu. The audience watched and wondered what would happen next. The music played on. Then, just as water broken by a rock in its path will always find its rhythm again, so Amarette rejoined the music and swept away from us all. Even as the music died, Amarette danced. With bloody knees and broken hands, she danced on. Touching and now feeling; wanting and finally reaching. To the end of her song and

impossibility. To the end of love and whatever waited beyond it. To the end. To the end.

Al fine.