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This collection includes three stories (and an excerpt from a novel) that inhabit the space between the realistic and the fantastic. The characters in these stories are afflicted with those peculiarly human illnesses: boredom, grief, madness, and solipsism. In searching for respite they discover only dead-ends and the fleeting possibility of a world outside the body, outside the self, outside the limits of imagination.

A FILM OF FLESH ENVELOPS US

by

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MUCK HER OFF

Todd sat in the waiting room, tapping his foot against the tile floor, hoping for some sign of his wife Erica. The waiting room was in the basement of St. Clair's Mercy and wasn't so much a room as it was an L-shaped nook in the hallway that connected the cardiology department to the morgue. Todd knew this because he'd already walked around the basement floor a couple of times, following the colored lines that were supposed to make it easy to find your way around the hospital, his thinking being that maybe she was lost somewhere on the basement floor. Like maybe she had taken a wrong turn and wound up finding the waiting area for the Dialysis Clinic, which did look too much like the Oncology Clinic. Same pink Formica tables, same tweed chairs, same desolate magazine racks, back-issues of *People* and *Time* and *Us* strewn everywhere. But he hadn't found her in the Dialysis Clinic on his second round of the floor and plus there was a large sign above the check-in desk that she would have seen, so he'd gone back to Oncology and sat down where he could watch the nurse's desk and, if he craned his neck, the elevator at the end of the hall. Whenever her heard the ding, Todd leaned over in his chair as far as he could to see who was getting off the elevator.

There were about a dozen people sitting in the waiting room, mostly old and mostly coupled. People talked quietly or stared at the television that hung in the corner of the room. Todd tried to watch, but the sound was off and the closed captioning lagged

and he had a hard time following what was happening. The image of a frigate bird flew across the screen, but the caption read “...kills ninety-nine percent of bacteria on contact.” He flipped through a pamphlet and put it down. Then the pamphlet was in his hands again without his noticing and when he realized that he’d picked it up again he tossed the pamphlet on the chair across from him. The elevator dinged and Todd bent forward to take a look. The doors slid open and a pair of nurses exited. Todd slumped back in his chair and closed his eyes. Maybe she *was* sitting in the Dialysis Clinic? She could sometimes be forgetful, absentminded, like when she drove around a whole day with her lunch bag on the roof of her car and it hadn’t somehow fallen off or like before when she was still living with him in the house and she used to get sad and give him these blank looks like she’d forgotten his name. Or maybe he’d seen her without recognizing her? He supposed that was possible. He didn’t know the exact number of rounds of chemo she’d received or how many it necessarily took before a person started to lose their hair or even if losing your hair was a guarantee. He’d read somewhere online that it wasn’t everyone who lost their hair, but that might not have been true. And but what if she had lost her hair? What would she look like wrapped in a shawl or a scarf? Or what if she had decided to buy herself a wig? Would he recognize her then? He remembered that one time at a costume shop at Avalon Mall she had tried on five or six wigs, silly things in neon pinks and purples, Whoville shapes like whipped cream, laughing wildly at herself in the mirror. He hadn’t liked it. The wigs made her seem other than herself, like a stranger even, and it made him feel disconnected from her—and, in a

weird way, from himself. In any case, he doubted that he wouldn't have noticed her, even if she was wearing a wig. This was his wife.

The elevator dinged again and Todd opened his eyes. An orderly in green pastel scrubs pushed a wobbly cart of what looked like empty meal trays out of the elevator. No Erica. He stood up from his chair and decided to double-check the Dialysis Clinic. If she wasn't there, then maybe she wasn't coming today. Though it made his chest hurt to consider it, it *was* possible that he'd come on the wrong day, that he'd misheard the nurse when he'd called to find out when Erica's next appointment was, though he'd had the nurse repeat it to him twice. If she wasn't in the Dialysis Clinic he'd have to find some way of confirming Erica's appointment with the front desk. Todd followed the colored lines to the Dialysis Clinic, but when he got there there was a sign that said CLOSED and the only person in the waiting room was a woman in black slacks who was pulling thumbtacks out of a corkboard. When he got back to the Oncology Clinic he approached the nurse at the check-in desk.

"Can you confirm an appointment time for a patient?" he said.

"Do you mean for yourself or for somebody else?" the nurse said.

"My wife," Todd said. "Erica. Erica Payne. She's the patient."

"Is she here?"

"Well, I can't find her. She's supposed to be here."

"We're not really supposed to give out patient info. Even appointment times, I'm afraid."

"Well, on the phone—"

“I’m sorry, sir. I’m not able to say.”

“Fine,” Todd said. Then added, “Thanks for nothing.”

Todd stomped over to his original chair and retook his seat. The nurse glared at him for a moment and then turned back to the papers on her desk. Todd didn’t think of himself as an angry or irrational guy, but he felt like he’d like to give the nurse a thwack on her dumb head. He wasn’t some creepy weirdo or stalker type. He wasn’t there brandishing weapons or ill will. He wasn’t screaming or making crazy demands, kicking over wastebaskets or punching holes in the wall. He was waiting for his wife. His *wife*. And sure maybe Erica didn’t think things could work out, but didn’t it seem clear to everyone that this was the cancer talking—or the fear talking through the cancer or whatever—and not his wife or his wife’s desire to actually leave him? She was just scared. She was just facing her own mortality, which wasn’t fair, sure. She’d only just turned thirty-two. But sometimes life put disasters in front of you and you could either stay the course, your partner by your side helping you steer, or you could crank the wheel too hard, trying to avoid the disaster all together, and spin out and crash over the guardrail. And here *he* was, trying to be a good husband, trying to help her steer. Was it fair to him that she’d turned away? And but then he tried to remember that there were times when he wasn’t his best. He’d thrown a potted plant at the couch, for instance. The pot kind of exploded on the couch, throwing dirt and fertilizer pellets all over the cushions and the floor. But that was after she’d told him that she wanted to take some time to herself, now that she might not have much time left. Afterward, he’d picked up the pellets one-by-one and vacuumed the couch. And all he wanted now was to see her

again and to speak to her and say something to her, the thing itself not quite worked out in his head. The truth was that he couldn't think about what he wanted to say without getting angry and then feeling guilty about the anger. She was being selfish, he wanted to say, abandoning him, when didn't he have every right to also be scared about the future? She would die and then he would be alone. Which was worse, he couldn't say. So why did she think she needed to preemptively abandon him? Did she think she was doing anyone any favours, preparing him in a way for her death? But this was selfish and it hurt him to think that he could feel this selfish. But there it was. He was being selfish, but she was being her usual selfish self. It shouldn't have surprised him, he now realized, that he was there in the waiting room and Erica wasn't. That she'd choose now to bail. There'd always been something tentative in her, some reluctance in her that he couldn't crack. When they'd met in university he'd found this thing—this what, guardedness?—endearing, even attractive. It was almost impossible to get her to commit to anything. Not to drinks, not to a night partying downtown, not to a picnic in Stanley Park. But still she seemed to be inviting him to try. “Maybe,” she'd say, but it was like she was asking him to try harder. She was always saying that, “Maybe.”

The elevator dinged again and for a moment Todd tried to keep his eyes closed and his butt planted in his seat, let her come to him this time finally. But what if she saw him? He wasn't technically supposed to be here. She would turn around. Get back on the elevator. Drive back to her friend Magda's apartment where she'd been staying these last three months. Todd opened his eyes. A man was leading a woman out of the elevator. The man held the woman by the crook of her arm and walked a good half step ahead of

her, dragging her down the hallway. The man looked to be in his fifties, his hair gray and cropped close to his head, almost military-like. He had on a thick down vest, a camouflage fanny-pack that hugged tight to his hip, and a pair of those black fingerless gloves. The woman was older, in her sixties or maybe early seventies, although she wasn't dressed in a way that made it easy to tell. Tight zebra print leggings, a loose black sweatshirt printed with the Molson logo, a tattered scarf. Her hair was wiry and straw-colored. To boot, she was messily made-up: cheeks like smashed cherries, eyelids aglitter with swaths of lime green. Her face looked applied by long-range tactical strike, Todd thought. The man led her to the waiting room and sat her down a few chairs from Todd.

“Alright,” the man said. “Listen. You wait here. I’m going to check in for you.”

The woman looked around the waiting room and winced like she was taking in an unpleasant smell. “Is this where we’re staying?” she said. “Isn’t there anywhere nicer? Oh, don’t you remember the inn in Trinity? The one with the fiddle player and the field of nettles in behind?”

“Missus, I told you I don’t,” the man said. “Just wait here, okay?”

The man walked over to the check-in desk, where the nurse was blowing her nose.

“Well,” the woman said, smiling at Todd. “Do you think *you* could at least bring my bags inside?”

“Excuse me?” Todd said.

The woman frowned, like she hadn’t understood what Todd had said. “A lady’d like her brush,” she said. “I must look like a birch broom in the fits.”

“I’m sorry,” Todd said. “I don’t see any bags.”

The woman sat back in her chair and brought her hands to her face, massaged the lids of her eyes. “No,” she said, her eyes still closed. “No. You don’t. There aren’t. I’m very sorry. I get confused sometimes.”

The man came back from the nurse’s station. “Missus,” he said. “Let’s go. You’re up.” The man lifted the woman by the arm and pulled her toward the curtain beside the check-in desk. The woman shuffled along behind the man, who handed her to the nurse. The woman and the nurse disappeared behind the curtain and the man came back and sat down across from Todd.

“What a wreck, that one,” the man said.

“She’s your aunt or something?” Todd asked.

The man laughed. “Mrs. Bungy? Lord thundering,” he said. And then, “No, thank God. I drive for City Wide. She, I picks her up every Wednesday, drives her here or sometimes to the Health Center on Prince o’ Philip. Wait whiles they pump her full of the good stuff. Then I drives her home. Arrangements made by the missus’ granddaughter over in Gander. Bungy’s a kind old girl but she exasperates.”

“Oh,” Todd said. “Does she pay you to wait?”

“I’d say,” the man said. “A charity I am not.”

The man picked up the pamphlet that Todd had been looking at before. He folded it in half and then looked at Todd thoughtfully. “It’s awful,” the man said, “to see a man your age here. I didn’t know they made the cancer so young.”

“It’s my wife,” Todd said. “She’s the one.”

The man rubbed his chin. “God bless her,” he said and sat back, quiet. A few minutes later the man’s cell phone rang. As the driver listened, his face slowly darkened. “Well you can tell Snelly that I don’t give two shits if he say I do or I don’t,” he said. After a moment, he stood up and yelled, “Fine, fine.” Then he put the cell phone in his vest pocket and turned to Todd.

“Boy-o,” the man said, “you going to be here a while? I gots to run out a minute. If Mrs. Bungy finishes up, you might keep her here until I gets back?” Before Todd could say anything the cab driver was out of his seat and bounding down the hall. Well then, he would sit with Mrs. Bungy until the cab driver came back. Maybe Erica would show up in the meantime. In fact, while the cab driver had been talking to him, he’d had the anxious feeling of having missed her, of feeling like maybe he’d better get up and walk around the hospital one more time, just to be on the safe side. But now he had to wait here until Mrs. Bungy was finished, if only to let her know that her ride was coming back soon. And but what if Erica was here, somewhere? Fifteen minutes passed, then another fifteen. The cab driver hadn’t returned. Erica hadn’t shown up. On the television, two pundits yelled at each other, spit flying. Underneath, the caption read: *...don’t you deserve the best?* Then finally Mrs. Bungy emerged from the green curtain, the nurse at her side. The poor old lady slumped forward, dazed. She seemed smaller, Todd thought, like she’d aged another dozen years behind the curtain.

“Mrs. Bungy,” Todd said. “I’m here to—”

“Great,” the nurse said, passing the Mrs. Bungy’s arm to Todd. “She needs to get home and rest.”

Todd took Mrs. Bungy's arm. Her sleeve was rolled up and there was a ball of cotton taped to her arm, the skin yellow and paper-thin and sliding queasily under his hand. He could feel the throb of her heart beat in her wrist, pumping through the skin, knocking itself against him. And he smelled her, too. It was a dense odour, layered and pungent, florid and scummy like an overgrown pond. But there was something else in it, the ammoniac smell of disinfectant, of hospital beds and .

"Oh, I'm quite fine," Mrs. Bungy said, patting Todd's hand. "My driver here knows exactly what needs doing."

In the elevator Mrs. Bungy leaned against Todd, although it felt like nothing, her weight. "Terrible," she said. "I don't think I'll come back."

He walked Mrs. Bungy out to the parking lot. He held her by the arm and he noticed that she swayed back and forth as they walked, unbalanced. "Are you okay?" he asked. "Do you need to sit down? Do you need to go back inside?" But she didn't seem to hear him. Todd didn't know exactly what was going on. It might be better to leave the old woman alone in the hospital. The cab driver would probably be back soon. Or, he could find a member of the hospital and deposit her with them.

"What a lovely evening," she said, and stepped off the curb.

"Here," Todd said. "This way."

The dark blue sky had descended over the parking lot. There'd been a light snowfall while he'd been inside waiting, the rows of cars now like dusty knickknacks in an old cabinet. He scanned the parking lot for Erica's white VW Rabbit, but he didn't see it. Then they were at his Saturn and there was a slip of paper under his wiper, a goddamn

ticket. He lifted the wiper blade and tried to pull the ticket off the windshield, but it was frozen to the glass and all he managed to do was tear it in half. In his hand he had a slip of paper that read IF YOU CHOOSE TO DISPUTE. He opened the door, slid into the passenger seat and leaned over to unlock the passenger door for Mrs. Bungy. But when he looked up she wasn't there. He turned in his seat. She was standing at the rear of the car. He unrolled the window.

“Are you getting in?” he said.

She didn't say anything.

“Look,” he said. “It's getting late.”

She didn't move. She said, “You wouldn't make an old lady lift her own luggage into the boot, would you?”

Todd got out of the car and stepped around to where she was standing. He looked at her and she smiled back at him cordially. “You don't have any bags,” he said. “See?” He pointed to pavement beside her. “No bags.”

She looked at him like she didn't understand what he was saying, like *he* was the one who was saying something crazy, the one who didn't get it.

“No bags,” he said and kicked the air beside her. “See? Nothing. Empty. Gone.”

“Oh,” she said.

Todd opened the front door and stepped behind it, gesturing with a swoop of his left arm that she have a seat. But again she looked at him like there was something that he wasn't getting, like he'd forgotten the circumstances of their relationship.

“What?” he said.

“Don’t take offence,” she said. “But it’s quite unusual for the passenger to ride up front with the driver. To be honest, I’d feel like wouldn’t be proper.”

“Okay. Sure,” Todd said and closed the front door. Then he opened the rear door and Mrs. Bungy bent over and climbed into the back seat. When Todd retook the driver’s seat he turned around and asked Mrs. Bungy where she lived. She gave him an address in Georgestown and then sat quietly in her seat. Todd repeated the address to her.

“That’s you?” he said. “That’s your address? You sure?”

Mrs. Bungy repeated her address again, expect that this time she mixed up the digits.

“Wait,” Todd said. “Is it 305 or 503?”

“305,” she said.

“And you’re sure?” Todd said.

Mrs. Bungy sighed and turned toward the window.

They pulled out of the hospital and headed down LeMarchant Road. Todd had forgotten to scrape the rest of the pink ticket of the windshield and then it started raining and Todd had to flip on wipers. The frozen wipers shuddered and then dragged the ticket across the glass, smearing fleshy pulp that Todd had to lean forward to see past. He took LeMarchant to Gower Street, where the old clapboard row houses seemed to pitch away from the harbour and the prickled green surface of the ocean. When he and Erica had first moved to St. John’s they’d lived just off Gower Street, in a tiny apartment that his thesis advisor had rented them. They’d just gotten married then and they’d flown out to Newfoundland so Todd could start school because that had always been their plan.

Literally flown out the day after they'd said their vows in her mother's backyard garden. He remembered that Erica wasn't working then and that sometimes he'd come home, stinking of Formalyn and latex, and find her in the bedroom, staring out across the street at the Toronto Dominion Building, all red brick and dull glass. Once he came home late and she was there, her eyes red and her cheeks flush, like she'd been crying.

"Are you okay?" he'd asked. He'd thought maybe that she was angry at him for something he'd said that morning. He knew that sometimes he could be insensitive, drop words on her whose weight he didn't understand.

"No," she'd said. "I'm okay. I've just been watching the bank. The lights keep flicking on and off but I can't see anyone in the windows. Do you think they're on some kind of timer or is there some invisible custodian wandering around in there, emptying the wastebaskets?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said.

"I'm lonely," she said. "It's lonely here."

"I'm here," Todd said. "We're here. We're a team."

"I know," she'd said. But she didn't stop staring out the window.

In his mind she'd moaned, too—or, not her, no—it was Mrs. Bungy, who was mewling beside him now, her lips trembling in the corner of his vision. She doubled over in her seat and pressed her forehead against the dashboard.

"Lord," she said. "Dear Lord."

"What's wrong?" Todd asked.

Mrs. Bungy sat up and said, "I'm going to be sick."

“How sick?” he said. They were only a few minutes from Mrs. Bungy’s house.

“Please,” she said. “I don’t—”

At that moment Mrs. Bungy let fly with a stream a vomit that splashed across the dash and across Todd’s arm, which Todd leaned back toward himself, letting go of the wheel of the car, which skidded against the curb.

“Jesus,” he said.

Mrs. Bungy lay back in her chair, vomit dribbling down her chin and across the front of her shirt.

“I’m going to be sick,” she said.

“Were,” Todd said, as he pulled the car to the side of the road.

There weren’t any paper towels to muck off the dash, only an old t-shirt. Todd wiped the dash clean, careful to keep the puke away from his hands. Mrs. Bungy didn’t seem to notice him leaning over into her lap. She was humming to herself. When Todd finished wiping up he balled the shirt and put it in a plastic grocery bag and threw the bag into the back seat.

“This isn’t my house,” she said.

* * *

The Saturn glided down Dalton Avenue. On either side were large old houses, columns and peaked roofs, fences half buried in the snow. Mrs. Bungy’s home was at the end of the street, the largest of the houses. Todd pulled the car into the driveway. Todd looked up at the house, feeling certain that they were in the wrong place.

“Here we go, I guess” Todd said.

But Mrs. Bungy had climbed out of her seat and was already on her way up the front steps. Todd watched her fumble in her purse for her keys and then, once she had the keys, with the lock. She tried one key and then another. She looked over her shoulder at Todd, embarrassment on her face. Todd opened his door.

“Do you need a hand?” he said.

“It’s one of these damn things,” she said, trying another key.

“Here,” Todd said, and jogged up the steps. “Let me try.”

Mrs. Bungy handed him her keys and stepped away from the door. Todd pushed one key into the lock, but it wouldn’t turn. The next didn’t fit.

“Are you sure these are the right keys?” Todd said, turning to Mrs. Bungy.

She was gone.

And then he heard the sound of breaking glass. He loped across the flattened snow along the side of the house and found Mrs. Bungy reaching through the door’s broken pane, a rock in her other hand. She smiled at him, a loose crazy smile. “The spare key should’ve been under this rock,” she said, holding up the rock in her hand, though still leaning through the door. “But it’s better,” she continued, “to crack a window than to freeze out here. We’ll have to get Henry to repair it.”

A commotion suddenly burst from inside the house. Lights were being turned on and people were yelling. Mrs. Bungy pulled her arm out of the door. “Oh, no.” she said. “I think I’ve made a mistake.” The door opened and a man appeared, a golf club raised over his head.

“The fuck is going on out here?” the man said, looking at them.

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Bungy said. “Who are you?”

“The fuck are you?” the man said.

Todd grabbed Mrs. Bungy by the arm and hurried her back out to the car, plunking her down in the passenger seat. The man had followed them around to the front yard and was at Todd’s back, waiving the golf club like he meant to do harm. When he swung the club Todd ducked and slipped into the driver seat. He threw the car into reverse and pressed hard on the gas. The man chased them out of the driveway and into the street, slipping on the ice. Todd kept his foot down on the gas and sped backwards down the lane. They reached the end of the block, still going backwards. Todd stopped the car. He could see the man at the far end of the street, no longer running after them.

“Not your house I guess,” Todd said.

But Mrs. Bungy didn’t say anything. She was staring down at her lap, her whole body crumpled and shuddering. She was crying softly.

“Where do you live?” he asked.

She gulped loudly and gave him an address.

“No,” he said. “That’s where we just were.”

“Who’s in my home?” she wailed.

Todd drove on, not sure where to go. They drove past Quidi Vidi Lake, the chicken factory and the Constabulary. They drove past the brewery, the air suddenly heavy like the fug of morning breath. They passed the Basilica and the Legislature and the University. He drove the car along the waterfront, where if it were daytime you could watch gulls and gannets dive headlong into the migrating bubble of sewage that traveled

in and out of the harbor. Where was he supposed to take her, where was she supposed to go? This poor old woman, demented and alone. Here she was. Dressed like a maniac. Dying or about dead or maybe not, but certainly lost in the in-between place of the past and the present, the living and the dead, a mystery to even herself. He could drop her at the police station. The hospital. He might even take her to the taxi headquarters and leave her there until the driver from the hospital could take her home, wherever that was.

“Please, deary,” she said, unrolling her window. “I’m going to be sick.”

Todd parked the car below a row of oak trees. He got out of his seat and hurried to the other side of the car. But by the time he’d reached her, she’d already been sick again. Not as much as last time, just a dribble hanging from her chin. Todd grabbed it in his fist and wiped it in the snow.

“It’s okay,” he said.

He remembered when they’d found out about Erica’s cancer. The lump in her breast. She’d come home in tears and pulled an envelope from her bag and slid it across the table at him. This motion, the sliding of the envelope, later seemed to him like she was passing him a bribe, but only of course because the thing she’d said to him after he looked in the envelope was “I don’t love you” and how could it not then seem like she was using her circumstances as a way out, a free pass. But before then, before she said those words, there was just this harmless manila envelope. Just a thing. But then he opened the envelope and inside was an x-ray of her breast. It was strange to see. She wasn’t crying anymore. Todd didn’t even recognize the shape of it, her breast. What he had in front of him was like a photonegative of the thing, an indigo pear webbed over

with these tangled white threads, roiling and electrical as a storm cloud. Erica had to explain to him that it was the penny-sized dot, innocuous-looking, that was the cancer. Not the teeming mass of veins and nerves. Todd had never broken a bone before, had never had a doctor explain to him some inside part of himself. Never had a chance to look inside his own body. Mrs. Bungy was the same. A thing that couldn't understand itself, that had no home or way to get there. She might die in his car for goddsake and then what? Then he would drive around until dawn with a body in his car. Two bodies, his and hers. Not that much different after all. One cooling and one cooled. And there was Erica, somewhere. He mustn't have known her. He mustn't have understood what she wanted. Why would she choose the time of her dying to leave him. What did that mean? Had he been that awful or unaware? And what was left for him now, whether she died or didn't, whether he could tell her the thing that need telling—or, better yet—forgo the telling. But it didn't matter. She was gone. Always been gone. A woman in a wig.

He looked at Mrs. Bungy. She was leaning against the window, staring up at the star-clotted sky. The vomit smeared across her shirt was steaming up into her face and Todd realized that it was freezing in the car, he hadn't turned the heat on.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

Mrs. Bungy squeezed his hand

Todd turned the key.

“Okay,” he said.

AND THE BEASTS DID THEM NO HARM

The famous painter I had married was getting on my nerves. He kept apologizing for everything, even for things he knew I didn't care about: the spatter, the clutter, his strange hours. I told him to stop it, that things were, all things considered, great. His lean years were over. In fact, they'd been over before we'd met. Now he made too much money in television appearances and speaking engagements for us to ever spend. There were antiques and antique bookshelves choking on unread first editions we'd never get to, even to admire the jacket copy. Our rooms were full. But he wouldn't or couldn't stop; it'd become pathological. And then—Jesus!— he started apologizing for the constant apologies. I felt trapped in a Möbius strip of rebuffing this insistent politeness: You don't need to apologize for apologizing because you don't need to apologize for apologizing, etc. One night I asked him, "What's up? Are you having an affair or something?"

"No," he said and I believed him. He didn't look me in the eye and he didn't pull the usual evasive laughter. He said it sheepishly, shoulders shrugged, as if he were repentant for having forced me to ask.

"Sorry," he added.

The only way out of this, I thought, was to ignore it. Use my own silence as a provocation and a template. But he didn't seem to get it. Maybe it was that he was distracted by his current project, a series of portraits of famous people from history

painted as they were portrayed in movies by famous actors. For instance, Sir Ben Kingsley swaddled in Gandhi's sun-bright dhoti and Hannibal Lecter as Richard Nixon. Milla Jovovich as Joan of Arc. I tried a different tack and started dropping in at his studio at lunchtime to seduce him, which was something he couldn't get enough of at the beginning of things. Now he seemed surprised to find me standing there, and looked, you'd almost think, like he'd forgotten my name. Only once did I manage to coax him to the floor. He was careful to put away his brushes and palette before he lay down.

"I miss rolling around in the paint and making a mess," I said.

"When you were a kid?" he said.

"I used to leave here with blotches of paint on my ass."

"Oh," he said. "Right. Yeah."

I grabbed the clasp of his belt and begged him to paint leopard spots or tiger stripes or bright yellow bird feathers on my breasts. Me a strange animal, I said. He apologized and said he could not. It wasn't in his power.

That evening I suggested we get away for a while, vacation somewhere far from the city and its yellow lights and the giant soothed eyeballs of Ben Kingsley. He had a younger brother who happened to be a hunting guide in some remote part of Alberta, in the northern foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

"What—you want to go bear hunting?" the painter said. "You?"

"I just think we could get out of the city," I said. "Sit in a cabin. Think. Rekindle. I don't need to *kill* something. I just need to be elsewhere for a while. And so do you."

So in April we took a plane to Edmonton and then another smaller plane to some smaller city and so on until we'd hopped all the way across the map, landing in the end among a group of paunchy bankers and insurance agents from Wichita, who were hunting black bear, though they all bragged they'd be bagging grizzly. They joked and called each other "asshole" and shook fistfuls of camouflaged crotch fabric at each other when they thought I wasn't looking. On the ride from the airport to the lodge one of the bankers kept looking back at us from the front seat of the van. "You don't seem the type," he said. "You know, for spotting and stalking. The old search and destroy."

"We're not," I said.

But that evening, John, my painter's brother, invited us to follow him and the bankers out to one of the stands, and the next morning we sat hunched in the wet air as the bankers threw crushed beer cans into a pile and fired indiscriminant rounds into the trees. My painter flinched at every rifle shot. He crouched in the forest with his index fingers at ear level, ready. He didn't, he said, want to be a party to some poor animal's messy demise.

Then one of the paunchy bankers shot a black bear. The bear took the bullet into itself and collapsed. We watched this in intimate silence.

"This is awful," the painter said and turned away.

"That's the world for you," John, my painter's brother said, giving me a look.

"One thing kills another. There's at least life in that. At least a little bit of the passion and destruction of the world."

The bankers and insurance agents flew home on the promise that the bearskin would be shipped to them when it was properly cured. That night John prepared dinner for us in the lodge. We ate beans and canned pork and he and I drank whiskey from a dented flask that he kept in his vest pocket. Every time he took the bottle from me he let his fingers linger on mine. Between swigs John explained that the whole thing was a sham.

“There ain’t a bear for a hundred clicks,” he said. “The thing those bankers shot today? No. Not a real bear. It’s a man inside a kind of mechanical bear suit. A bearskin pulled over a moveable frame. It’s easier than waiting on an actual bear, which as I say, don’t really exist anymore around here. There’s just too much money to lose on unhappy tourists who fly all the way up from New York or Los Angeles. They want to kill a bear and if they don’t their friends hear about it. It’s easier to just make it happen for them.”

My husband was relieved and stood up and went outside to pee in the forest. I was upset.

“But we saw it get shot,” I said. “We saw it get shot. There was blood in the grass.”

John sighed. “Squibs. Corn syrup. Food coloring. The man inside at the controls takes care of that. It’s shitty work. When the bullet strikes the bear’s outer shell, it clangs as loud as anything. Whenever I’ve done it, I’ve been left with a ringing in my ear that I can’t shake for days.”

My husband came back inside and John went on to explain that the lodge owner had got the idea for the mechanical bears after a crew from the National Film Board had

come in from Toronto. This was several years ago. They were adapting a novel about a doomed romance between a divorced librarian and a grizzly bear. The guide said that he'd had a thing with the script supervisor's assistant, who was fanatical about the novel and even more fanatical about the script. This girl kept calling it the truest Canadian love story ever told. In any case, John continued, the crew had shown up with a life-sized grizzly bear thing, an animatronic suit. By chance, there'd been a group of drunk Minnesotan pharmacists staying at the lodge and one of them, mistaking the suit for the real thing, leveled his rifle as best he could and fired three times in the bear's direction before one of the key grips tackled him. All three shots sailed right past the fake bear and into the trunk of a whitebark pine—and then finally, as all of the guides joked, right into the lodge owner's money-buggered mind.

“Not that I'm complaining,” John said. “Bear season's never been busier. Last week I made a thousand bucks in tips.”

In bed my painter and I talked quietly about what, if anything, should be done. I wanted to call Wildlife Services or the Mounties or the Office of Consumer Affairs but the painter said that it'd better to let sleeping dogs lie. You mean let lying bears sleep, I said. He frowned and said that no one was being harmed. In fact, the opposite was happening. Everyone was getting what they wanted: the bankers and pharmacists and insurance agents got to shoot the bears, the lodge got to charge them for the privilege of shooting the bears and any real, living bears got to not get shot.

“But it's not real,” I said.

“It's real enough,” the painter said.

The next morning I was still feeling upset about the guide's story so I asked him if he would show me one of the bears. At first he said no, but then I reminded him that now I knew the lodge's secret and that the lodge would probably be interested to know that their secrets were being given out to the wives of brothers who were staying at the lodge for basically free. Then I went and said goodbye to my painter. He didn't want to join us because he'd discovered a room at the lodge that was full of Indian animal masks and he wanted to sketch them in his notebook. He was thinking of a new project: photorealist paintings of animals with their heads switched out for these cartoonish masks. What did that mean? I asked. He said he didn't know yet and then showed me one of the masks; its eyes were sad and its mouth was open and frozen, like a never-ending yawn. I kissed the painter on the mouth, but he must have been thinking we'd already left because he started talking to himself before our lips even came apart. "Oh," he said, looking surprised to have found my mouth still on his mouth. "Sorry."

The old service road lead to a narrow dirt road which turned to a rutted trail where the tree branches thwacked against the truck's dusty mirrors. A cabin appeared and inside the cabin there were three bearskins hanging from a frayed rope that was tied across the room, from window to window.

"Say hello to the Just-Right Porridge Gang," John said as he pointed at the bears.

"Cute," I said.

In the middle of the room there was one of the bear things. I touched its black flank. The fur was cool and stiff and I could feel the hard surface of whatever it was that was underneath the bearskin. John opened up the hatch on the back of the bear and let me

look into the bear's dark insides. The cockpit ran lengthways and smelled like pine-sol and old leather and dirt.

“No room,” he said, fitting his head in the hatch beside mine, “for more than one or maybe two people, provided they didn't mind snuggling up nice and close.” I could feel the warmth of his breath on my shoulder

“I don't like where you're going with that,” I laughed. “You might remember that I'm married to your brother.”

He smiled. “All I mean is, there isn't any room for shitters or kids or those robot vacuums or any of the other amenities that make life such a damn rich joy.”

I looked out the cabin window and saw a strange bird sitting in a tree. The bird was black and white and the tree was evergreen, but I didn't know the name of either the bird or the tree. And then I realized that if somebody asked me to name *anything* that I could see, anything outside the cabin, it would be almost impossible. The pebbles, the furrowed clouds, the grass—none of it. I didn't know any of it; it was in a different language.

“I want to do it,” I said.

“Do what?” the guide said.

“I want to be the bear. To drive it.”

“It's not so easy,” he said. “There's a lot of things to learn.”

“Teach me.”

The guide lowered the hatch lid, but hesitated to let it close all the way.

“Okay,” the guide said. “But only just for the practice of it.”

It was tricky at first. The two of us had to snuggle up nice and close inside the bear, like John had said. He showed me how to make the bear move forward and backward, side-to-side. I used the swipe control and accidentally pulled down the rope and the three bearskins. Opening the jaws was hard—the hand crank was in an awkward spot—but when the jaws opened all the way the bear made a satisfying growl.

When the lesson was over we wiggled out of the bear and drove back, sweaty and flush, to the lodge where the painter and the lodge owner were eating dinner with a group of tense dentists from San Diego. The lodge owner waved us over with the end of his turkey leg and announced the new good news: He'd received a call that there was going to be another film crew coming up tomorrow. A pair of documentarians this time, after footage of black bears. They wanted the guide to be in the movie. The lodge owner winked at John and asked if he thought they'd have any trouble finding the footage they wanted.

“No,” John laughed. “I don't think so.”

In bed that night I tried to talk to the painter about the bears again, but he was still too caught up in his new mask enterprise. He had brought a couple of the masks to bed with him. He lay there with his eyes closed, tracing with his finger the wooden ridges of a beak, a tooth, an ear. It seemed like he was trying to memorize the shape, the texture of the masks. He wanted, he said, to be able to draw them if he went blind. I pulled my shirt over my head and unclasped my bar. I lay a hand on the mask in his lap, but he brushed me aside with a tut-tut of his hand. So I watched him trace the masks until his breathing slowed and it seemed as though he had fallen asleep. Then I slipped out from beside the

painter and went to John's bedroom in the basement of the lodge. He opened the door in his long underwear and gestured for me to sit down on the bed. I said no thank you I wasn't there for anything like that and told him that I'd only come to borrow the keys to his truck because I'd forgotten something on the dash. He sighed and said something woeful under his breath and handed me the keys.

I drove to the cabin and climbed into the bear and the two of us lumbered out into a stand of dark trees. The night was clear and the moon near full and the stars like a thousands tentative asterisks in the sky. At first, because I couldn't see and because I'd forgotten exactly how to use the controls the bear kept stumbling leftward. The bear crashed into trees and shrubs and scraped along the side of a boulder. From inside the bear's cockpit the scraping sounded like the screech of a screaming child. Then we came to a creek and I lost control of the right forepaw and we slipped on the mossy streambed. The bear landed on its side and water started streaming in through the bear's eyes. It took several minutes to roll the bear over and I was soon wet and cold and exhausted. But we kept on and by the time the bear and I reached the other side of the creek I had things more or less under control. I found that I could stand the bear on its hind legs. I could swat at low hanging tree branches and drag my claws along the soft tissue of tree trunks. The bear, I discovered, was more sensitive than I'd thought. If I forgot about the effort of maneuvering it I could feel the faintest reverberations of the earth traveling up through the bear's metal shell. The ground was like Braille and I could read in it the stones and the brittle pin straw and the spongy skins of moss. Here was the language of the world. I wandered for a long time in the forest. The trees were tall and ancient and silent and as I

passed through them I was enveloped. The bear, it felt like, was part of the forest and moved in it like a spirit floating among other spirits.

After a while, I sensed that I was being followed. This sensation was dim and distant, no more concrete than the crackle of a snapped twig. I turned the bear around and searched the woods for sign or cause, but found none. I turned and ambled on. The orange glow of daylight opened up the forest, which seemed to deepen as the light grew stronger. The fading moon looked now like a yellow stone half-sunk in some pool of dark water, the stars like the glitter of macadam. Then there was another loud crash, like the sound of a tree falling. Again, I turned the bear around. This time I saw my stalker standing amid a crop of saplings: A black bear, sniffing at the air. The bear was close enough for me to see the twitch of its nostrils, the dew on its face. Its eyes were small and searching and tucked close beside its almond nose. It looked like the ghost of some great Russian aristocrat.

“Hello, Russian,” I said.

It lumbered down toward the bear machine, the slipping silver rock crunching beneath its paws. It came up to the hollow bear and poked it with its nose. It snorted along the flank, huffing loudly. This grunting carried through the shell, prickled the skin. The bear’s tongue unfurled and lapped at the side of the head. The bear’s breath was sweet and heavy, like moldering grass or fresh fish. Then the Russian nuzzled up against the bear and seemed for a moment about to say something, to make some secret promise or request.

S.O.P.

YOU ARE HERE.

Or so it says on the laminated map that is tacked up on my cubicle wall. Which, full disclosure, isn't a space designated specifically for me, just the place I happened to be on the night when the fire alarms went off and everyone rushed out of the building, headsets dangling from the collars of a hundred and forty-five people, and I was still in my chair, watching Freddy Harkness watch the sheet of flames whirl up from his desk. But I don't want to start at the end. What you need to know first is the beginning of things. That not even the most senior CSAs—that's customer service agents—get a fixed or recurrent seat but are forced, like the rest of us, to find a seat as quickly and as efficiently as possible, especially since there's the added pressure of David Aisle's near-ubiquitous hovering presence and the attendant threat that if he finds you standing around like, as he says, "a chuckleheaded nunnyfudger"—and he *will* find you—you're almost certain to be invited to a private powwow in his office, where you'll either be fired right away since "Telecon won't brook this sort of thing," or you'll the two of you go through *Policies for Effective Time-Management*, which is about at least 100 pages and is therefore a much worse fate, especially since the outcome of these meetings is you're being fired anyway—though actually, truth be told, most CSAs couldn't give two shits. I *do* though—or did. I liked this job, liked the way my nights drifted under the hum and whirl of overhead lighting. The way I left the building just as the sun was coming up and I

could sit in my car and watch the orange and purple wash of sun bubble out of inky clouds and feel like there was nothing in me but the voices of all the people I had spoken to on the phone. Answering phone calls all night—even if every call was somebody calling to let into me about where was the service technician or why the fuck didn't their cable work—even a night of these awful calls left me feeling hollowed out but whole, scrubbed clean of all those little psychic clumps and tangles that I understood to be me. Maybe it sounds strange, but what I liked most about the job was that the eight-hour respite it offered from the obligations of selfhood.

Let me explain.

A month after mom died I was still at home, broke and uncertain. Dad kept asking me if I knew when I was going to get back to school, but I didn't have the heart to tell him that when I'd left in the middle of September to fly out here for her last months that I hadn't said anything to anybody—not my professors or advisors or friends—and that by now the university had already probably declared my semester D.O.A. And in fact, I didn't feel like going back at all and had an inkling that I might blow off next semester, too. But these aren't things you tell my Dad. So when he asked me about it, I redirected, asked him how long was he going to be on leave himself.

“Don't they need you back?” I said. Dad worked as CFO for a small paper mill.

“Well yeah maybe,” he said and we'd leave it at that. Mom had always been this buffer that prevented Dad and me from wearing each other down and now that she was gone he and I kept coming up against each other, taking bites off. Imagine two insects in a jar, weapon-ready. He had this habit of pronouncing words in odd, angular ways that

drove me bonkers and somehow I'd forgot this tic of his while I was across the country. But now I was back under the same roof and Mom was dead and I had to listen to Dad mispronounce words like condom, which he pronounced like it was two words, cone dome.

"Dad, listen, Dad," I said, one morning as I looked the kitchen window at the lake behind my parents' house. There'd been a storm the night before and the lake water was brown and mucky, stirred up. Dad was standing at the sink, eating a piece of toast. "Do you hear yourself? Do you hear what you're saying?"

"If you're going to stay here," he said, "you need to find something to do with yourself."

"It's like you've invented a way to use words that only you understand."

"It's not healthy for you to sit in the house all day," he said.

"You understand that language is consensus, right?"

"Think of your mother."

"You can't just make things up," I said. "There are rules."

Dad sighed and put the crust in the garbage. "Figure something out," he said.

The next day I applied at Telecon. They were set up in the mall in the space where the bargain bookstore used to be. I walked in with a copy of a resume that I hadn't updated since before I'd left for college and the next day I was in training, learning about call flow and conflict resolution and the six signs of satisfaction and I realized that I'd found as good a place as any to hide.

And so I kept out of view and off the managerial radar by arriving early and by not laughing too loudly at lunch breaks and by looking people in the face when I talked to them, but not too aggressively, which can work against the whole disappearing act, since you know how when someone looks at you too attentively you can get skeeved out and wonder whether they're not maybe trying really hard to smell you, and now you're more likely to remember them than not, the way their eyes seem vacant and lonely and focused all at the same time, and the outcome of this is that this creepy person-in-question's creepiness becomes the topic of hushed, fluttering break-time chatter and then it won't be too long before David Aisle or Dale D'Aleson or Deb Deloitte is calling this probably harmless employee into one of their respective offices. So I hid behind courteousness, pleasantness, a friendly empty nod to the potato-shaped security personnel who watched with a bored kind of lust as lines of employees were moved from the wintry parking lot by the revolutions of Telecon's smudge-free doors. Though it wasn't as if my behavior at work was different from who I was day-to-day, outside of work—I *am* pleasant, courteous, friendly—just that when I entered the building via this whorl of winter wind and glass all of these things seemed at once amplified and diminished, like the way you can blow up a photograph to a point where the image becomes almost incomprehensible to you: a vacationer's sunburnt face melting into colour, a famous decrepit landmark become a pile of pixilated rubble.

This particular night—which the particularity of the night doesn't matter a whole lot outside of the fact that it was *the* night that Freddy Harkness set his desk on fire—I was near the south wall of the building, tucked away in one of the building's several

mandible-shaped clusters of workstations, sharing my desk's tweed divider with an old lady—say forty or fifty or something like that—who was one of the regular cases you'll sometimes see around Telecon: usually women, middle-aged and divorced (you'd guess) and lonely-eyed and loosely wearing the skin of the heavy smoker/drinker/drug user. Basically somebody who'd made all the wrong decisions you're in the process of making right now. This sad, beat-down old woman sitting beside me we called "Mother Father" for some reason, I think because she talked constantly about her son (several months incarcerated for ripping off the Tim Horton's he worked at) and because her upper lip had the faintest flowering suggestion of a moustache. Or maybe we called her Mother Father because she'd been a nun or something like that, although there wasn't anything about her, except maybe the softness of her voice, that'd make you think of a holy person of *any* denomination. And, in all honesty, whatever reason didn't really matter because she was one of those CSAs who wasn't going to make it, who'd be gone in like probably a week, whose every moment of actual on-the-phone professional interactions with other human beings was, for her, pure terror—though who can blame her.

I think Mother Father—or somebody like her anyway—had even been in my original training group and had turned to me in tears after our first real-live call and said "How do you do this? Some retired widow just told me to blank off." Which I didn't know what to tell her and could only smile at her in a way that I hope was reassuring, but wasn't. Luckily for her then, Dale D'Aleson overheard us and reminded her that, "Unless you do something royally stupid, like promise undeliverable remuneration, then just remember that the customers aren't angry with *you* or at *you* and that, for all intents and

purposes, while you're on the phone you're not even a person to them, just a voice." But I wasn't convinced that this helpful little idea took hold of her, or that she was convinced of her own immaterialness or of the benefits that might result from imagining this to be true, which given that we'd the night before completed a half-day's HR seminar on Telecon's dedication to, and the importance of, its employee's individuality maybe wasn't really that big of a surprise after all. We'd listened for hours to a handful of different people from HR—all of them men, all of them white—discuss how important diversity and individuality was to the corporate culture there—and how could you listen to these talking heads for hours on end without starting to believe, even a tiny bit, that you have an irreducible physical existence, however lonely or terrifying or professionally unfulfilling and detrimental to the performance of your job said existence might be? On my post-workshop comment card I wrote: "Helpful but counterproductive."

Freddy was there too that night, sharing my desk's other tweed divider, quietly staring into space. He was sitting at his desk in his blue pinstriped pajamas, his headset on but his lips unmoving. About Freddy I knew only that he'd recently become mute. One day, rumor went, some necessary filament unspooled itself in his brain, clogged up the synaptic avenues and thus the relatively happy and high-functioning Freddy Harkness became, to our collective professional consternation, a kind of CSA folk hero, which is to say an indifferent telephonic dead-end. (There were those, of course, who believed Freddy'd *decided* to give up speaking to spite our bosses or our callers or both; but then, he didn't speak in the break room or in the hallways or at the bus stop, so.) For a solid week he'd been showing up for work in his blue pinstriped pajamas, would find always

the same seat where he'd sit with an ambivalent glint in his eyes while his mouth just kind of trembled like a muscle subject to the twitchy electrical output of a dying brain. "Hello," his callers would say. "Hello?" But he wouldn't, or couldn't, reply: he'd become the smooth operational surface of a useless technology, the dead eye of a burned out computer screen, an incommunicado cluster of industrial furniture. And it wasn't as though he simply refused to talk to his customers; he refused even to acknowledge their existence. He just sat there staring. Or not staring. (It was hard to tell.) And even though everyone thought it was funny that our customers, who we loathed for their sociable arrogance and surety, should find themselves frustrated by whatever silent psychosis had descended on poor dumb Freddy, there was something sad and resilient in what Freddy was doing that we found I guess terrifying and reckless and self-involved and pointless and, well, crazy—so we left him alone. If it had gone on much longer no doubt Quality Assurance would've found him out, questioned him—who knows how that conversation would've gone—and fired him.

"Yo Freddy," I said when I finally found that night's workstation. "You awake?"

Freddy didn't say anything or open his eyes or move, not deliberately anyway: he and his chair were swaying slightly, pivoting on a single planted toe-point, and his body seemed to reverberate with the mowing sound of the overhead fans. (It was always hot inside Telecon—hot like the inside of a mouth.)

"He's been like that for hours," Mother Father said. "At least since I got here, anyway."

"Days, I heard."

“Maybe we should get someone? Freddy? Can you hear me, Freddy?” Freddy opened his eyes and smiled.

“Leave him alone,” I said.

For most of the evening the incoming calls were typical—billing complaints, intermittent connectivity—but sometime after my first fifteen the callers suddenly seemed more belligerent, their requests stranger and I looked over at Mother Father whose eyeballs were addled and swamped and I knew that she was experiencing the same weird influx. I opened with the usual phoniness (“Hello, my name is John, how can I assist you today?”) and was met by either silence—there were, that night, a lot of dropped calls—or apparent insanity. I listened to paranoid voices cite Bible verse, describe in obsessive detail a plot to remove the letter “I” from general circulation, and explain the necessary flatness of the earth. One caller refused to identify itself except to say that yes it was a customer but that no it wasn’t going to provide me with any identifying account information. The voice was husky, dark, lived-in, probably male. (“Never assume you know,” Dale D’Aleson told his trainees. “You don’t.”) It was an unusual voice, tactile even, not at all remote and tinny and whiningly desirous, which was how most peoples’ voices sound on the phone. (“Know that nasality is an index of customer anxiousness, anger and fear.”) So I questioned it for several minutes, trying different interlocutory tactics as outlined in *How to Help an Unhelpful Customer*.

“How can I assist you?” I asked.

“You can’t,” the voice said.

“What can I do for you today?” I tried.

“I don’t want anything.”

“Everybody wants something. Do you need your bill prorated? Your cable out?”

“I don’t want anything,” the voice said. “I just need to get out of here.”

I looked up from my screen and watched as Freddy, having pulled his legs up into a modified lotus position, started slowly spinning in his chair. In some nearby row, a poor young CSA screamed through tears at her customer to stop screaming at her, the loudmouthed fuck. Could you hear the wind batter the hollow exoskeletal building with sleet, or was it only the faint static of an imperfect connection humming in your ear? I overhead someone say: “This guy says one of our site techs had sex with his daughter. Like, what form do we have to fill out for that?” Mother Father seemed to be doing all right with whatever drama she’d been embroiled in.

“That’s *my* job,” I explained to the voice, which did not laugh or even make the polite chuffing sound of an abortive chuckle. The voice didn’t respond at all.

“Okay, why not let’s work together on this?”

“Let’s not and say we didn’t,” the voice said.

“Hey, you’re the one who called me.”

I disconnected the call—a first, for me, who was always courteous to even the most discourteous—and immediately I felt irritated by the ease with which the voice had got under my skin, got *into* my skin, and for its contravention of protocols designed expressly and beneficently to facilitate reparatory dialogue between corporate representatives and the (theoretically) wronged customers of these same corporate entities being represented—protocols that, moreover, kept inviolate the anonymity of these

corporate representatives, for whom anonymity was honestly and truly necessary and therapeutic and emotionally indispensable, and without which anonymity the whole pretense of basic psychological normalcy could, at any time, crumble. I felt, I don't know, breached, cracked open.

Which was about when Mother Father peeked over the supposedly sound-reducing partition and said "Psst." She spoke with her left hand cupped over but not touching the headset's microphone.

"I've got a live one," she whispered. "Said he can't reach his wife, who's somewhere or something. Said he's forlorn. Said he's going to blank me in the blank. Cried a little, I think. Won't stop yelling. Doesn't want to talk to a supervisor. I've tried to, like, escalate him three times but he flat out refuses."

"And?" I said, a little caustically. Mother Father's swampy eyes got swampier.

"And how...how do you schedule an appointment?"

"You think it's appropriate to send a live person to this guy's home address?"

"I dunno. Maybe he needs a little one-on-one. Where's the screen thingy?" Her head bobbed along the top of my wave-shaped cubicle wall and I suddenly felt sorry for Mother Father, who really wanted nothing more than to be good at her job but who wasn't, who'd never be, who'd stick it out because her options were few and fading, and who'd suffer through every moment in the stiff-backed way she had of answering her calls until eventually she'd stop believing that she liked people, which is where most CSAs start out.

“Listen—” I said. But then my headset made a soft, short digital beep and I had another caller on the line. Next to me Freddy made two quick silent rotations in his chair and I wondered briefly about the physics of his spinning, about the forces that propelled this self-contained movement.

“Hell-o,” the voice said. It was the thick, present voice from before.

“Uh,” I said, incredulous. The thousands of nightly callers—and the requisite thousands of agents needed to coax and satisfy and placate them—made this recurrence nearly impossible.

“What are you wearing?” the voice said, following which question, I’ll admit, I momentarily glanced at the body that floated below my regular line of sight. Everything was wrong. Some ratio of clothing to surface-area seemed out-of-whack.

“Nothing,” I said, although I meant to say “None of your business” and I paid for misspeaking by having to listen to the awful salivary sucking sound, like the lips own masturbatory slapping.

“I mean,” I said, “That we have policies for terminating connections with unruly and lewd callers.”

“Do you believe in it,” the voice said. “The policy?”

“For one,” I said, “I already dropped you once. For two, I don’t need creeps wasting my time. For three, it doesn’t matter if I believe it or not. It *is*.”

The voice didn’t respond except to sigh hoarsely into my ear.

“This like a sex thing for you?” I said.

“Doesn’t it bother you, having to answer the phone all night, to suffer these little intrusions into your brain-space?”

“I think you’re overestimating what we do here,” I said.

“They want to make you a part of their desire, to make you a mechanism of it. You need to protect your own desire, to insist upon your existence against theirs.”

“You mean ‘yours.’”

“How long can you flatten yourself out and still keep it together? Imagine dry pie crust. This is you.”

“Dough.”

“Consider this: desire is the root of all suffering, but suffering is the sole origin of consciousness.”

“You sure you don’t have an account with us?”

The voice sighed again.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“It’s me,” the voice said. “I am me.”

“And who is that?”

“Can’t you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“It’s Freddy.”

I looked up to where Freddy was sitting. His eyes were closed.

“Say something,” I said.

“Like what?” the voice said.

“Ha,” I said. “Your lips aren’t moving.”

“My lips aren’t moving? But you can hear me, can’t you?”

“Yes,” I said. “But you aren’t Freddy.”

“Prove it,” the voice said, Freddy’s lips unmoving. I hung up.

The following three callers were normal, decent human beings interested in little else besides the rectification of their status as holders of accounts in arrears. I spoke calmly. I requested verification of credit card expiration dates. I emoted in appropriate ways. (See: *CSA Guide to Successful Customer Relations*, Chapter 3: “Smile with Your Voice.”) I used a different name through each transaction. When prompted I made vague remarks about our site’s physical location: “North of that.” When asked if I had any family I replied: “Sort of.” Language seemed like an excess not worth exceeding. It was near or exactly or recently passed midnight. The darkness of the night sky—which I could see through the building’s narrow tooth-gapped slices of window—made everything under the diffuse glow of our cyclic overhead lighting seem brighter, purer, simpler. I overheard Mother Father say to her customer (the same forlorn husband?): “If she loves you then she will come back. If not, then you shouldn’t force her to stay.” I forgot, for a moment, that mom died. (Or that she’d even been alive.) That it was possible for *anyone* to die. That silence wasn’t a form of absence or lack but rather something you could sink into, like a soft cheese. Better to chat, talk, gossip, converse, yak, or shoot the breeze—or be, at least, shot by the breeze—than to remain lost and destroyed. For a moment or two I felt perfectly and sincerely unknowable.

Suddenly then behind me there was the sound of Freddy screaming and spinning furiously in his chair, which had traveled from the alcove of his cubicle to the pathway between our row of stations and the row across from ours. The noise coming out of him was a strange uvular howling, ugly and sorrowful, reverberant—because of his spinning—in a way that might be approximately reproduced by yelling into a slow-moving fan blade. A few CSAs turned and lifted their sleepy heads to see what all the fuss was about and were transfixed. Oddly, Freddy’s mouth was slack, his face tranquil. The screaming rose and fell with each quick clockwise revolution of the chair.

“What’s wrong, Freddy?” Mother Father said, who’d noticed before I had that Freddy’d gone manic at his desk, that he and his chair had drifted into the aisle, and who’d gotten up from her own desk to try to soothe him. Her headset she’d pushed up so that the earpiece rested on her left temple, the band around the top of her head. “It’s okay,” Mother Father said, “Whatever it is, it’s okay.” Scattered across Freddy’s workstation were sheets of blank white paper. More blank paper had been spilt across the floor. Mother Father moved slowly towards Freddy, who was still screaming. “It’s okay,” Mother Father repeated. “It’s okay.”

“The hell is wrong with him,” someone said.

“Hush,” she whispered, though to whom I couldn’t tell.

“Maybe call someone?” I suggested. “Or wait, you know, for a manager to call someone.”

Mother Father ignored me and reached out to touch him.

“Don’t you dare put hands on that wailing nut,” Mr. Manager David Aisle said, who’d obviously been watching things unfold from wherever and who you’d have to guess was probably enjoying all of the potential reprimanding inherent to a situation involving two derelict employees—one of whom was audibly/visibly insane. His body conveyed anger as a function of some internally consistent 3-D geometry: his arms were at formidable angles at his sides, his shoulders were parallel to his hips to his feet. He spoke in that annoying, practiced colloquial way that he had, which no one could assess the sincerity of, which seemed like mere corporate, big brotherly affect. “He’s obviously bonkers. Why don’t you re-find your little desky-woo and start rectifying some complaints before you find yourself a hurting?”

“Hush,” Mother Father whispered. She stood at the edge of the chair’s orbit. Freddy continued to scream and scream and scream. His whole body shuddered with every whooshing fricative breath.

“Listen,” David Aisle commanded. “Listen here.”

Which then Mother Father reached *into* the chair’s orbit, to touch Freddy, calm him, to slow the chair’s movement—which all turned out to not be that considered, since David Aisle thought simultaneously to introduce his own self into the little hurricane. Both he and she were struck by some revolving point of anatomy that belonged either to the chair or to Freddy himself—struck twice, actually, since neither Mother Father’s yellow hand nor Aisle’s cubic one did all that much to slow the chair down. I watched then as Mother Father and David Aisle flailed into each other and fell against an empty workstation and onto the floor. It almost seemed like they struggled with each other as

they went down, as if they were wrestling. Or it was if she got thicker as she fell, while his body wanted to evaporate so as to escape the pernicious effects of gravity. When they hit the ground we all heard an ugly crunch.

Freddy meanwhile had become quiet and still. Mother Father moaned.

“You okay?” Someone said. Mother Father moaned again. There was, you could see, a dark splotchy something growing in the carpet beside Mother Father’s semi-conscious face: a solid cartoon speech bubble filled in with dark red marker, like maybe it was overfull. But I had another caller abruptly arrived in my ear, and so what was I supposed to do? “Thank you for calling,” I said. David Aisle looked up from the ground, where he lay in a tangled sprawl with blood smeared on his carpet-colored face.

“Call Bamberg at security” he said to I suppose me. He must’ve thought that I was a person in a chair with access to these kinds of resources. I shook my head and pointed to my earpiece.

“Listen,” the voice said. It was the Freddy voice.

I didn’t say anything.

“Listen,” the voice said, again. “Just make sure to get her out of here.”

Freddy stood up from the floor and pulled open the drawer of his desk. From out of the drawer he took a small tin. The tin had a little nozzle on the end of it and when Freddy squeezed the tin a thin jet of clear liquid sprayed across his desk. He pumped the bottle several times until the all of the liquid had pumped from the can dribbled out of the nozzle. The liquid had that acrid stink that lingers in the air on summer nights, the smell of BBQs and patios and sunshine.

David Aisle picked himself up of the floor. He couldn't see me any longer, panicked as he was by Mother Father's immobility—which was a good thing for me. Mother Father moaned again, but didn't move. Her headset had been knocked under my foot, where I left it.

“Tell me about yourself,” the voice said. “Like, what do you want?”

As the Freddy voice said this, the other Freddy lit a match and tossed it on the soaked paper. The paper whooshed and blackened and fire burst up from the surface of the desk.

“Nothing,” I said. “To be left alone.”

“Well, you should probably call security,” the voice said.

I couldn't speak.

“I'm sorry about Mother Father,” the voice said. “Didn't look so good. Do you think you could get her out of here for me?”

“Seriously,” I said. “Who is this?”

I looked across the production floor. There were other versions of me—that is to say, other CSAs—scanning the horizon for some explanation of the commotion. For the smoke that rose from the desk, filling the building. We all looked exhausted and depressive and lonely and basically absent. A guy a few rows away waved his flappy, fungiform tuque at me and looked to be saying something, but I couldn't hear him. He pantomimed something that I didn't understand.

“Help her,” the voice said. “I need to stay here.”

I said: “I can't. Mom is dead.”

“You’re right there. Help her. Call for help.”

“A word is the most useless thing in the world,” I said. “What could it do?”

And so I sat in my seat, which was not my seat, quietly thinking about Mom, who was dead. She was dead. I realized that, for the life of me, I couldn’t remember what she’d sounded like. Her voice was a total mystery to me, a dead memory. The woman who’d cooed and baby-talked me into language. Who at Christmastime put a hand-carved wooden letter on the mantle, which letter was the first letter of my name, which name I didn’t any longer even have any real use for. What was her laugh like? There was no way to remember it properly, no way to reproduce it. She’d had a body that’s specific configurations produced a specific kind of laughter that I could not remember. For a brief moment, the little slit of black sky in the window seemed to get brighter, then dimmer, then brighter, like an entire day’s worth of time and sunshine and moonlight had slipped by. But it was only the blue-and-red dumb-show of emergency semaphore. The fire alarm was blaring too, pounding the vast, corporate, ashen-carpeted space with it’s tintinnabulary throb. I was dimly aware that people were rushing past, skirting the small black pool of blood and that, despite their sidling attempts at making their bodies as slim and un-corporeal and one-dimensional as possible, they still had to occupy some of the aisleway’s narrow avenue and so a few of them brushed up against me. Someone gleefully whispered the word “bomb.” There’d been a bomb scare or two, so it was an honest mistake. I just sat there thinking quietly about Mom, who was dead.

“Hello?” Some far distant voice said into my ear. “Is anyone there?”

ODLENKA, ODA, O (AN EXCERPT)

I. HISTORY

In the waning years of the nineteenth century, as historians declared the death of the American frontier and the electrical convenience of Edison's future seemed all but inevitable, the public became suddenly and desperately hungry for some old distraction to rescue it from its own inescapable dreams. Circuses, carnivals and freak shows flourished. In dusty corners of the Midwest canvas tents sprung up in empty fields, and men and women in their Sunday best could pay a nickel to look upon the wonderful and aberrant: men shot from cannons, bearded women, two-headed goats, fish-boys whose skin was rough and iridescent and oily to the touch. Audiences gasped at the sight of women who ingested broken glass and darning needles, men who breathed fire. And of course, there were the contortionists, dressed as harlequins or Eastern mystics, capable of their own intricate displays of magic, transformations that rendered the body into new forms: crab, dove, engine. Sensational accounts of these contortionists linger at the edges of what can be believed: in Des Moines spectators fainting in a church basement as a man swallows his fist and forearm, retrieving a copper ring from his stomach; a Macedonian girl in a sideshow that traveled along the coast from Halifax to Dorchester County, the girl capable of kissing every surface of her body save her own head. But among the remarkable contortionists of that time, none perhaps achieved the brief infamy of Oda, the Amazing Elastic Woman of Ceylon. Though her disappearance—and the arrest, trial

and imprisonment of Dr. William Self—inflamed the public’s prurient ardor, it was the her final performance that seemed to ensnare the public’s imagination, where it was read by some as a perfection of that woman’s art, by others as a terrible omen.

II. THE GOOD DOCTOR

In the early mornings before he opened his office door, middle-aged Dr. William Self imbibed a snifter of boiled spring water and ether. The ether he administered to the half-empty tumbler by way of a glass pipette, the long slender beak of which he dipped into the dark brown jug that he kept in the cabinet behind the translucent bottles of weaker escape. The tiny beads of ether clung to the tip of the pipette and Dr. Self had to shake the pipette gently to dislodge these droplets, which then plunked in the water and plumed under the surface, in whorls and vortices, like an amoebic creature suddenly hydrated and alive and thrashing about in his cup. It only took a few faint glassy drops for the drink to reach the obliterative strength required to carry Dr. Self across the stampflat days of explaining to these immigrant Slovaks and Germans and Polacks how to treat dropsy and thrush in their workhorses. It was frustrating work because these men often spoke crude, gutteral English, nodding eagerly in the absence of understanding, and because even if they did understand Dr. Self’s advice it would surely be misapplied. Indeed, Dr. Self had full knowledge that these tenant farmers were likely to do more harm to their animals than good. On several occasions he’d been begged out to a farmstead to re-examine a cyst on a pastern or to demonstrate the application of a mustard poultice, only to find a good animal that had been crippled by the ignorance of

its master and that needed to be put down. The farmers, having been apprised of this hard fact, would curse Dr. Self and then, staring out across the undulant sweep of wheat or grass, weep. Even once or twice the Doctor had been chased from the property at gunpoint. Neither reaction struck Dr. Self as anything but irrational and ignorant and mortifyingly personal—how was it that these men let themselves behave in such a manner? It rankled him, this emotional ostentation. Even for a men who'd lost their horses and thus the means by which they kept their fields in good shape, this seemed too much. Worse, it seemed that the whole Dominion was populated with such types, men whose hard lives effected in them not a likewise hardness but a sensitivity that made interaction difficult. Thus the ether was a palliative necessary for the continued performance of his professional duties, without which he'd have neither the patience nor the fortitude to deal with these men, Miriam be damned.

Dr. Self was not by training a horse or cattle doctor. He'd matriculated at the Royal Academy of Medicine in London in 1878 and had opened his own practice near his father's firm, his parents' home and his own bachelor's apartment shortly after he'd passed his examinations. The practice thrived—Dr. Self specialized in ailments of the respiratory system at a time when Britain was yet recovering from the sooty industrialization of its economy—and on Sunday evenings he visited his parents' home and enjoyed dinner with them and his older sister, Claudette. He and Claudette had an especial bond; as children the two of them would stay up into the early hours of morning telling each other stories of magic and adventure in the New World, which William knew even as a boy was not as *new* as it once was. Claudette liked the stories of Indian

shamans who could transform into other animals: bears, wolves, birds of paradise. “Wouldn’t it be lovely,” she said one night from under a curtain they’d bivouacked in their father’s library, “to be possessed of such powers?” He and Claudette lay wrapped together in a warm sheet inside their makeshift tent. It was the eve of his thirteenth birthday. “To be able to thwart your enemies by slipping into some other form?” William understood by “enemies” that Claudette was talking about their father, who found his children’s fancies offensive and thus dealt with them hardly. “Yes,” William said, “I would love to be able to metamorphose into father’s ottoman so that he would rest his feet on me instead of kicking at me.” Claudette laughed and kissed William on the cheek. He pulled his head away from hers; for a brief and terrible moment he had felt stirred.

In the spring of 1880, Dr. Self’s parents introduced him to the young Miriam Crispin, daughter of the widower Sir Albert Barnes Crispin. A marriage was soon decided upon by the familial parties; the children were to be wed in July. Miriam seemed agreeable enough and Dr. Self, whose flourishing practice had led in turn to a professorial appointment at the Academy, found himself too busy to wonder with much thoroughness about his looming nuptials. He felt only that Miriam was beautiful and intelligent and that she would make him a proud, if not uxorious, husband. And then, a month or so before the wedding, Dr. Self began to feel troubled by the memory of that evening with his sister in the tent, by the memory of that kiss. He began waking at early hours, sopping in sweat, his nerves a-jangle with something dark and unsettling that he’d witnessed in his dreams. He soon stopped attending the Sunday evening repast at his parents’ home, where the presence of his sister filled him with a strange tingling dread.

And then. And then Claudette, in her kindness and grace, arrived one day at his office at the university to inquire about his recent absence from the family suppers. He then might have begged off for work or pleaded illness or explained it as pre-marital anxiety. But he did not—(Why was it that he did not? He did not understand. Was it that he wanted to unfold himself to her, to make his soul known to another? He did not understand);—instead unburdening his heart to Claudette in a way that brought a change in her face from sisterly concern to something akin to abhorrence and fear. She left quickly and he did not choose to follow her though he might have. The next morning his father sent word to him that his presence was required in his father’s offices. Father and son met that afternoon and didn’t speak of Claudette, though William knew that this was the reason for the summons.

“You may still be married,” William’s father said from behind the expanse of his desk. “In fact, for reasons of finance and family, I insist that you go through with it. Sir Crispin’s been generous with his name, as we have been generous with our coffers. It’s too bad we’ve put the cart before the horse. Know that it may yet take some cajoling on your part.”

“What do you mean ‘may still be married’? What do you mean ‘cajoling’? The date is set. The venue selected. Miriam loves me.”

“I mean it to imply that your fiancée may find your circumstances much changed and therefore, in her eyes, the match much wanting.”

“Listen—”

“I’ve purchased passage for the two of you on a ship that is sailing for Lower Canada. Go with her or go alone. It is up to you.”

“So I am to be a remittance man then?”

His father shuffled a stack of correspondence on his desk. “You cannot stay in England,” he said. “You cannot stay.”

William felt some mechanism tighten in his chest. It wasn’t anger, but shame. A two-fold shame: to be yet again made a son by his father; and to know in his heart that he had done something shameful.

And so he and Miriam were wed and a week later a-sail on the northern seas. Some several months later, having cast about in the nascent nation’s tiny, quivering metropolises without much success (their connections were few) they set out west on the promise of peace, order and good government and arrived, somehow, in the prairie wastelands of the Dominion of Canada, with its ever-shifting borders and nomenclature and peoples. Indeed the Members of Parliament—if those indigent drunkards could be so-called—seemed to change the titles of the land at a fortnight’s pace. Soon the portion of the North-West Territories in which he now lived would be renamed Saskatchewan in deference, many thought, to the selfsame Indians whose brief, bloody “Red River Rebellion” had thrown the stability of the Dominion into question. They settled near Mud Lake. There was no doctor in the town and Dr. Self imagined that he might find himself useful to the farming community that resided nearby. In fact, Dr. Self and Miriam discovered that the local midwife and barber (who acted as the town’s dentist and mortician, when such services were required) took care of most corporeal concerns and

that, what's more, few of the farmers found cause to visit the doctor. But for the accident of his becoming the district's veterinarian—which happened when a young Ukrainian pig farmer begged of him a salve for an infection in a sow's teat and the salve proved curative to the animal—Dr. Self and his wife might have traveled further North or West, in search of some small town that might have given the good Doctor enough resources by which to sustain his wife and to hide his shame from the world. In this tortuous way, Dr. Self became the veterinarian of Mud Lake and left off treating human beings for animals.

III. THE NAAKTGEBORENS

Oda, née Odlenda Naaktgeboren, was born in British Ceylon in 1867 or 1869. Little is known of her childhood or indeed of her life outside her brief, though popular engagement with the Trilling Brothers Circus. What few scant facts exist we owe to promotional pamphlets, posters, newspaper advertisements and articles, scrapbooks and the journals of a handful of the attendees at Oda's few performances. (Much of Dr. Self's unpublished account of Oda's life can be ignored on the basis of a personal and juridical bias, the good doctor having his own self-interested reasons for obscuring and exaggerating some of the more outlandish aspersions.) Her father was descended of burgher and Portuguese coffee growers—her grandfather, it is said, was one of several officials sent by the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie to oversee the transition of the Dutch governorate to British rule—and her parents operated a plantation east of the village of Ampar. Who can properly say what life was like for the young girl? Stories abound, but what of the facts? And are these stories to be reconciled? In one version of

Odlenda's history, she is a quiet girl who paints weepy water-colors of butterflies and blue-footed ducks. In another, she is a precocious and ungovernable child at constant odds with her rheumatic mother; a girl who runs away for a week in the picking season and sleeps in the rows of coffee plants or in the abandoned hut of a migrant family.

It is this second Odlenda, the headstrong dreamer, who persists in the stories. It is this second Odlenda who one night, wandering in the heavy February air, finds an old woman sitting beneath an Ironwood tree. Odlenda does not recognize the woman. She is a Tamil, but she is not one of the Tamils that her father has hired, not one of the women who spend the day plucking the trees of their coffee cherries, nor one of the women who throw bucket after bucket of pulpy bean husks into the ditch, where Odlenda has seen a small mountain of seething grubs. The woman doesn't speak English or Dutch, but she beckons Odlenda, who approaches. The woman wants to show her a trick. In one story the trick is nothing more than a bending of the arms around each other, so as to form two intertwined serpents, the fingers flapping at the ends of the woman's hands. Another finds the woman performing what the adult Oda would know is called a Durvasa or crane pose: She stands on her right leg and pulls her other leg behind her head. The Tamil woman laughs as she scratches her right ear with her left foot. Then the Tamil lowers her leg and proceeds to jerk violently on her left arm, twisting and tugging, and pulling it finally out of its socket. Odlenda is aghast, but watches as the woman slowly rotates the arm a full three-hundred and sixty degrees. Once the revolution is complete, the woman shakes the arm once and there is a popping sound. Odlenda winces and recoils, but then sees that the woman is wiggling her fingers as though nothing has happened. As the

spectacle mounts we can imagine the effect on Odlenda as transformative. Here is a mystery she hasn't yet considered, the mystery of the body's own machinations. In the version of this story as told by Alistair Trilling, entrepreneur and impresario of Trilling Brothers Circus—a version that gets told nightly as Trilling prepares the crowds to bear witness to Oda's strange craft—it is at this point that the woman vanishes, seemingly into thin air. And sometimes, if Trilling is feeling a certain aura of apathy from the crowd, if the men and women seem too quiet, to sedate, then it is not just the woman who disappears but the Ironwood tree and Oda herself, transported to some dark elsewhere to learn the mysteries of her art.

But, as history teaches, the lives of men and women are seldom as dramatically meaningful as the myths that envelope them. Despite the stories, Odlenda did not meet this old Tamil woman, we can be sure. By Odlenda's seventh or ninth birthday the plantation was in ruins. Her birth had coincided with the arrival of the malignant coffee rust, brought to the island in the holds of British merchant ships. The fungus destroyed plantations and their owner's fortunes across Ceylon. By the late 1870s a traveler might have traversed the countryside and seen nothing but crops besotted by rot, the coffee plants turned sulfurous and black as if burned. The Tamil farmers, having nothing to farm in Ampar, vanished. In turn, so did the Naaktgeboren family's fortune and health.

Here the family's history becomes traceable as a series of receipts and bills and slips of paper. First, in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek there is a copy of the bill of sale for the plantation, signed August 18th, 1877, date of transfer September 10th, 1877, purchased by the British Tea Company for fifteen shillings an acre. In the margins of the bill

someone has written the word “schurken”—scoundrels. The second bill of sale is for a pistol, a Remington smoot, recorded September 6th, 1877. Then there is the record and receipt of Viktor Naaktgeboren’s body in the register at the Burgher hospital in Ampar, dated September 9th, 1877. He was the victim of a gunshot to the left temple. Self-inflicted or not, it is unclear; the doctor who received Viktor’s body doesn’t speculate and there are no accounts of arrest or inquest and finally no mention of dispute or incident in any of the Tea Company’s journals. We know only that on September 23rd, 1877, the steward of the H.M.S. Mullford recorded the late addition of two passengers, an “L. & O. Naaktboran” who booked passage to Liverpool. Lastly, there is the receipt of Odlenda herself, arrived at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, an orphanage in the Andalusian province of Cádiz, sometime in November of 1877 according to the orphanage’s own register. At the same time, Sister Margarite of Our Lady writes in her personal journal—one of the few to survive the bombing of Cádiz in 1936—of the arrival of a girl “of ten or eleven whose mother passed on while aboard a ship bound for England...[and] who screamed and screamed she could not be consoled.” Thus the story of the Naaktgeborens ends.

IV. THE WOLF-BOY

On July 19th, 1897, the rain clouds finally blew off and the floodwaters began to abate. In the early morning of this day, before Dr. Self had administered his dose of ether, a strange man presented himself in the Doctor’s offices. His face was wrapped in a white scarf such that only his dark eyes and shaggy brown eyebrows were visible. And yet, despite these oddities, his body was adorned in the formal, if dated, attire of a young

gentleman: he wore a dingy brown frock coat, black slacks and a blue ascot. The man introduced himself as Julian and took the seat opposite Dr. Self's desk. For a moment this Julian stared at the floor.

"Yes?" Dr. Self said, annoyed at the boy's timidity and by the dry ache in his own throat. "What is it that I can help you with today?"

"Doctor," Julian said, gesturing with a furry glove toward his head, "do you mind first if I make myself at home? My head wrap is rather uncomfortable. Much too hot for today's sun."

"Yes," Dr. Self replied.

"Meaning you do or you don't mind?"

"I do not mind," Dr. Self sighed.

"Good," Julian said. "Thank you." Julian proceeded to unwind the white scarf from his head. He did this slowly, in large theatrical swoops of his arm. Thusly the young man's head was made visible by degrees: firstly, the topmost part of the head's dome, which presented itself as a coarse shock of curly brown hair, disheveled as a lion's mane; secondly, the forehead, thick with the same hair; then the cheeks and jaw, also strangely hirsute. Dr. Self realized that the man's whole body must be similarly covered in hair.

"If you've come for a cure for your wolfishness," Dr. Self said, trying to disguise his surprise, "I'm afraid there isn't a cure for it anywhere on this earth. Least of all here."

Julian laughed. "No, no. It's how I earn my keep, Doctor. I work in the sideshow. I'm the Wolf-Boy of Belgrade."

"You don't speak like a Serbian."

“It’s just a name, Doctor.”

“So, if you’re not here searching for a cure for your disfigurement—”

“Really, Doctor, it’s not—”

“Then how and why is that a ‘Wolf-Boy’ has arrived in our little territorial outpost. And what does that ‘Wolf-Boy’ find itself in need of? A razor, perhaps?”

“Be careful, Doctor,” Julian snarled and stood up. It appeared to Dr. Self as if the Wolf-Boy might leap across the table. Dr. Self wasn’t frightened by this so much as annoyed; he didn’t want this kind of animal passion abounding in his office. He stared at the boy evenly. Then slowly the boy’s lips drew back across his teeth and the boy’s courteous smile retook his face. “I’m not here for anything to do with me. There’s been an accident,” the young man said as he sat back in the chair. “Our elephant is dead.”

“It sounds, then, as though you’ve arrived too late for me to be of any help.”

Julian smiled again and looked at the floor. “In fact, no,” he said, “I’ve not come about the elephant, specifically. The truth is Master Trilling wishes to see you. It’s about our dear Oda. The contortionist.”

V. IN THE PROVINCE OF CÁDIZ

The first flyers announcing performances by Oda the Girl from Ceylon emerged in parts of Illinois in June and July of 1888, some ten years later, some thousand miles distant. Oda appears on these broadsheets illustrated in full costume, no longer a child but a young woman. She wears striped leggings and a skirt that looks like tulle, although the sketchiness of the illustration leaves this unclear. Her chest and stomach flat on the

ground, her back arched and legs swept up over and around her head, in a full chest stand. She is not smiling; her expression is calm though not serene, as though this presentation did not require concentration exactly, but a kind of deliberate mental unwinding. She is handsome, but not beautiful. There is something lost in her expression.

But what to make of the gap, the decade lost at the Spanish orphanage? It must be here that Odlenda the girl transformed herself into Oda the performer, but how and for what cause? One suspects that the Sisters would not approve of the kinds of stunts that Oda became briefly famous for, nor would have tolerated them. One imagines, moreover, the nuns reacting to the child, bent in half or curled uncannily around her own torso, as though before them there was something cultish or occult. But there are simply no records of Oda's life at the orphanage, few details in the nuns' journals and no diaries, if Oda kept them—all of it perhaps lost during the Civil War. We have only the diary of Dr. Self, seized by court officials in the aftermath of Oda's disappearance, though whether it can be trusted is unclear. Though the court used the Doctor's diaries to establish the fact of Oda's consultations with Dr. Self in the weeks before her disappearance, it had some difficulty confirming the circumstances of her first appearance at the Doctor's offices or the "evidentiary reliability of [Dr. Self's diaries] themselves." Still, it seems improbable that Dr. Self would have known that Oda had lived in an orphanage and unlikely that he would invent stories about her life there. However one feels about the ethics of Dr. Self's practice or his involvement in the mystery of Oda's disappearance, it seems unlikely that he would simply have made things up Oda's past.

In his diary entry dated July 26th 1897, Dr. Self writes about his second meeting with Oda. “She spoke,” he writes, “at length about her experience in an orphanage somewhere in the south of Spain, I do not know. But I shall endeavor here to transcribe some of what she told me, if for no other reason than it fascinates my scientific mind. The girl herself is curious, unlike most of the girls who arrive at 34 Lispenard. These other girls are scullery staff or servants of some sort whose troubles are common enough—and commonly enough shared by this girl Oda—but whereas these others seem bitten by their misfortunes, Oda seems preoccupied by something else. She speaks rapidly and at length and were it natural to suspect nervousness here, I suspect that there is none. Or at least not nervousness of a typical sort. Rather, it is as if she is like a pent dam come uncorked and all the waters held therein flood out at once. And in any case, as I say, I’d like to record some of what she told me, it is so strange.” As the Doctor continues,

... ‘It was not a nice place,’ Oda said, ‘the home that I grew up in. It was a refuge for abandoned children, but the women who kept us didn’t seem to understand us, seemed even worried by our presence. They did not smile at us when we entered the classroom or the dining hall, only looked at us as though they wanted to ask us each a question, but were too scared to ask it. What was the question? I don’t know. Who are you? From whence did you come? But yes, we children seemed to worry them. Again, why? I don’t know. Perhaps because we didn’t seem part of the world of God’s love? Because we were evidence of catastrophe, of dead parents, of God’s indifference or cruelty. I am not sure. Maybe. They seemed to study us and their love did not extend beyond that.

'And we might have suffered this indifference, but for the existence of Sister Díaz. She was young and beautiful—her lips, I remember, were scarlet and thin as the horizon at dawn—and she hated us. She would find excuses to beat us. If we failed to make our beds, if we spoke out of turn, or forgot our prayers. If we were found wanting Sister Díaz would strike us her abedul cane. I forgot to say this part. Yes, Sister Díaz had a heavy limp and needed a cane to walk, though as I say she was beautiful. There were rumors that she'd been beaten by her father or attacked by a gang of boys when she was a little girl, who'd broken her leg and worse. But these were only rumors, I think. The cane, it could be heard echoing throughout the halls, tick-tock like a clock. Tick-tock, as though Time itself wandered the halls. We sometimes called her Sister Reloj though not of course in the dark hours of night, when we could be safe to say these things. I've said that she hated us, but perhaps I misspoke. Perhaps it was that she hated God, but finding him absent, looked around her and found us to hate instead.

'We all knew the story of the boy Paulo who'd responded to Sister Díaz, saying "Yes, Sister Reloj." Sister Díaz took the boy by the ear and led him to the pump in the yard. "Now," she said, "You must fetch enough water to fill the caldron in the kitchen." There was no shade in the yard—the plum trees had been removed because in the summer the fallen fruit drove the wasps mad and the Sisters were afraid to be stung—and the sun beat down on poor Paulo, who struggled with the leaky wooden buckets. He would fill two buckets at the pump and then drag them to kitchen. The water leaked from the sides of the buckets and lapped over the sides. By the time Paulo had dragged two buckets to kitchen he had lost about half of it.

'It took many hours to fill the caldron, which was as big as to fit two whole Paulos inside of it. When the caldron was full Sister Díaz told Paulo to bring in the kindling and make a fire. This again took some time, the boy already tired, sweating and red-faced, the firewood in a shed on the far side of the yard. When the firewood was gathered and the fire finally set Sister Díaz then told Paulo to stand by the caldron and wait until it boiled. Once it was boiling he was to come and find Sister Díaz. So Paulo stood by the caldron and waited for it to boil. You can imagine, Dr. Self, that a caldron of the size I've described doesn't boil instantaneously. Paulo stood for some time, his muscles aching, the lids of his eyes heavy and drooping, the sleepy boy stepping from foot to foot to keep himself from falling asleep. And then finally wisps of steam began to sweep up from the surface of the water. Then finally, the water bubbled. Sleepy Paulo shuffled off to Sister Díaz's room. "The water boils," he said. "Let us see," Sister Díaz and the two of them returned to the kitchen. Sister Díaz looked at the boiling caldron. "You've done a good job," Sister Díaz said. "But your penance isn't complete." Here, Sister Díaz took by the arm and plunged Paulo's hand into the scalding water. Paulo screamed and tried to wrest himself free, but Sister Díaz gripped the boy as hard as she could. "If you struggle," she said. "You will make it worse." Paulo cried out again and Sister Díaz released him. Paulo looked up at her from the floor. "Now," she said. "You must clean up."'

'Surely,' [Dr. Self] interrupted, 'this is only a story that children tell? The cruelty of it. It sounds like a horrible fairy tale.'

'Perhaps,' Oda said. 'But what difference if we children also believed it? The point is that these were the circumstances of the place that I spent many years of my life. It filled many of us with dreams of escape. For some, this meant filling their pockets with bread and climbing over the stone wall that surrounded the yard. In the several years that I lived there, there were dozens of runaways. Some of these were discovered in nearby villages and returned to the Sisters, some of these not.'

'And what about you,' I said. "Did you ever try to escape?'

'No,' she said. 'I did not. At least, not until I did.'

'And why not?' I said. 'Why not escape such deplorable conditions?'

'I am not sure,' Oda said. 'Perhaps I should have. There were nights when I dreamt of escaping, of returning to the green hills where I was born. Perhaps I might have. But I had already discovered in myself different means of escape. In simple terms, what I mean is that I discovered a way of hiding. The kind of hiding one does in plain view. You know what I mean, I think, Doctor. The hiding one does where the imagination turns inward on itself, dives deep below its own surface. A way to do this is to tell oneself stories, to invent things. I did this, as a child. I imagined a different life for myself. I imagined that my circumstances were other than what they were. One of the stories that I told was about a sea captain who falls in love a creature—a mermaid, you might call it—that lived deep in the ocean. The sea captain pursues the creature across the globe. There are storms and weeks without food and many of the captain's crew is lost. But finally the captain discovers the creature, sunning itself on a beach. He traps it in net and brings it on board and installs it in his quarters. Several months pass and there is a child

born of the creature. But child is not of man and neither yet it is of the sea. The captain is appalled, abhors the thing and casts it in the ocean. The whelpling sputters, it cannot swim, it is too much of land. It sinks to the ocean floor. But here it discovers something, a world of caves, where it makes its home and is happy. Oh, there are other adventures for the whelpling, but suffice it to say that it finds happiness of a kind, in its own tiny world.

'But,' Oda said. 'I'm losing the thread. All I mean to tell you is that I turned inward. This is not so unusual, I don't think. What is unusual is that in my case the cultivation of this inner talent was matched by something in my body. One day I discovered that if I twisted my hips in a certain way I could fit inside the wooden crates that the oranges arrived in at Christmas time. Sure, it was not a comfortable position. The fibers of the wood were rough against my skin and if any of the nails had slipped in their seams, I would climb out of the crates with welts on my skin and bloody scratches along my arms and legs and back. I looked a mess, as though I'd been attacked. The Sisters began pulling me aside and asking if I had been fighting with some of the other girls. When I told them no, they looked at me askance and reminded me that to lie, even in the protection of the other girls, was a sin. But I continued to practice with the crates and as I practiced—this at night when the Sisters were asleep—I became ever better at twisting my hips and pulling my legs closer to my chest and the orange boxes became in turn less dangerous. I began emerging with fewer and fewer gashes and wounds.

'But there are few secrets in a place like that and it was about then that a few of the other children discovered what I was doing at night when I crept out of our shared room. Several of them began to follow me to the room where the empty orange crates

were kept and watch me fold myself into the crate. They watched but did not say anything. I would fold myself into the crate and sit quietly and a half hour would pass, the moonlight sliding across the slats of the crate, casting shadows like strange animals across the ground. And no, the other children would say nothing. Only stand there and watch me, transfixed. Then I would emerge from the box and let them inspect my body for evidence of damage. Then we would return to our beds. And, in the morning, they would not say anything to me, pretending as though we had all spent the night tucked in our beds.

‘This continued for several months. And then one morning a girl came up to ask me if it hurt, folding myself up like that. I said that it did not and she replied that maybe I had outgrown the difficulty of the orange crates. It was not a thing that I had considered and left the girl in silence. That night was when the dares began. Before we marched off in silence to the room I told the small crowd that I was finished folding myself into the orange crates. It’d become too easy and I wouldn’t do it anymore. What was needed, I said, was a new challenge. At first, the gathered children were silent. Slowly, they began whispering suggestions. “Curl up inside the cabinet drawer in the classroom,” one girl said. “Climb inside the chimney in the kitchen,” said another. “Why not fit inside the old military drum in the yard, it is smaller than the orange crates?” said a small boy. In turn, over the course of several weeks I fit my body inside each of these things and others as they were suggested. Not each was easy—and indeed a few were impossible on the first try, some simply impossible. One night I tried to climb inside a small empty barrel that we found in the kitchen. My waist slipped easily enough through the opening, but my

shoulders were too broad, and I could only manage to get one shoulder into the barrel. Still, the children seemed satisfied and each took a turn patting my head in congratulations. On a later evening it was decided that I would hide inside of the bookshelf in the room where we took our lessons and that I would spend the whole day inside the bookshelf, listening to the class. We snuck into the classroom and carefully removed the books from the middle row of shelves. Once the shelf was cleared, I was lifted into it and made my body as flush to the back of the shelf as I could. The books were then placed back on the shelf to hide my body, and the books on the shelves above and below pulled out slightly so as to fortify the illusion.

'Now this may seem like an easy trick, Doctor, but I would only say that it took much discipline of breathing to not disturb the books pressed up against my ribs and even greater discipline to remain in that position for as long as I did. The night passed slowly, although I had no way to tell the hour. And although my back did not cramp as it had when I'd performed longer stunts, by the time I heard the scrape of chairs and the bustle voices I felt dazed. Still, I thought it best to stay hidden. To be discovered would be bad, a certain punishment. So I remained hidden behind the books, even as Sister Margritte began to ask the class about my where I had disappeared to. From behind the books I couldn't tell if they were close to giving me up, but Sister Margritte continued to ask her questions and I held my breath even tighter. Then I heard the sound of clapping footsteps as—I later figured out—Sister Margritte went to go report my apparent disappearance. The students chattered among themselves for a few minutes, about what I could not tell, but none of them disturbed my hiding place.

'But then suddenly the voices of the children fell away silent and I heard the hard fast ticking of a clock. Tick-tock. A spasm ran along in my back, a long shuddering pain. My ribs pushed out toward the books, which I could feel slipping forward Tick-tock. It was Sister Díaz, arrived in the class to find out what had happened to me. "Where is the girl Odlenda?" she said. "If you are hiding her or know about where she as gone, if she as run away to the village, you will tell us. If it is discovered that you know the truth but have not told us, then you will be punished as she will be punished for running away, we will not make a distinction." There was then a commotion in the classroom as the voices of the children broke loose. "She is in the shelves!" they yelled. "She is hidden behind the books!" In the next moment the book in front of my face was pulled away and a blade of light struck my eyes, I could see nothing and then only the gray eyes of Sister Díaz staring back at me from the bright room.

'I was dragged to Sister Díaz's room and set to kneel on the floor. "What is this game you play?" Sister Díaz said, sitting on her bed across from me. "Why do you hide when you should be in class? And the others say you do this every night, roll yourself up in a ball to stuff yourself in our cookware and furniture. What good can come of this silliness?" But I said nothing. "You will be punished for this," she said. "There is no way around that. It is God's will that the wicked be scourged. Your body is not a plaything to be driven here and there." She lifted her cane and tapped her left leg. "Do you think any of us invincible to God? Certainly we are not." Again, I said nothing. Here she paused and leaned forward, her fingers playing the skin of her temples. "I don't understand any

of you,” she said. “I had truthfully in my heart hoped that had you were gone. But here you are yet. And what shall we do with you?”

‘Sister Díaz laughed,’ Oda said. ‘She laughed as though she’d discovered God’s will in front of her, hidden in plain view. “Well,” she said. “The others say that you can fold yourself up into almost any small shape that there is. Is this true?” I did not reply and she asked it again, “Is this true?” I lowered my head and said “Yes, Sister Díaz it is true.” “Well then,” she said. “We will test the limits of what your body can do.” Sister Díaz stood up from her bed and went to the closet. For a minute or two she rifled through the drawers, although I could not see over her shoulder what it was that she looked for. When the business stopped, Sister Díaz turned toward where I still kneeled on the floor. “Here,” she said. “If it is your body you wish to hide, then it is your body shall be hid.” In her hands was a sheet of black silk, as beautiful a piece of fabric as I had ever seen. The sheen of it crackled in the light, bright and burnished as lightning. “If it is your body you wish to hide,” Sister Díaz said, “then it is your body shall be hid.” She laid the silk across the stone floor and bid me step into the center of it. “Now,” she said, “You will make yourself as small as you have yet made yourself.” I didn’t know what she meant to do and so I stood for a moment, staring at her. She turned from me and picked up her cane. “Please,” she said. “You needn’t make me beg.” And so I slipped down to my haunches in the center of the black silk and pulled my knees to my chest. “Smaller,” she said. “Make yourself smaller.” I tucked my head between my thighs and wrapped my arms tighter around my legs, as I had done when I first stepped into the orange crate. But without the resistance of the wood, without the surface to push against, it was difficult to

make my body smaller. Sister Díaz struck me across the back with her cane. “Smaller,” she said. “Smaller.” And so I made myself smaller yet, bringing my mouth to the center of the stomach, my lips parted as though I were kissing myself.

“Don’t move,” she said and began to gather the corners of the fabric. She pulled the fabric up around me and suddenly there was darkness all around. I could not see what she was doing, but I could feel the movement of her fingers in the fabric wall. It seemed like she was fastening the corners of the sheet together. Then the fabric walls were still and I waited for Sister Díaz to tell me what to do next. But she said nothing and a moment later I heard the sound of a door opening and closing and that was the last that I heard or saw for many, many days.’

Oda paused in her telling of the story. She looked at me as to a person who lived on a different planet altogether, a foreigner with whom she shared only the most basic means of communication.

‘You won’t understand,’ she said, ‘what it is like to spend a week in darkness, your body aching and cramped and the smell of your own filth wafting up from your body, your mind slipping in and out of a world that is maybe a dream or maybe not, though certainly a horror. It is an agony. But then it becomes something else, or so it did for me. I turned inward, having nowhere else to go. I sank deeper. There were oceans before me, eddies and whirlpools and currents that, if I concentrated, I could swim through. There are not words, I don’t think, for the thing I am describing. It is as if the soul, trapped in the body, escaped by entering itself. Suddenly my body no longer ached. I could no longer smell the rankness or feel the way the constancy of the fabric burned

my skin. It seemed even that I suddenly became stronger, capable of becoming yet smaller, tighter, more whole. In this way, I think, Sister Díaz's punishment revealed itself to be a boon—although I didn't come to this conclusion until many years had passed.

'As I say, I drifted in and out of dream and did not even hear the door open. Nor did I feel the fabric come loose or the two Sisters carry me to our little infirmary or the heat of the bath water as they scrubbed me clean. I was immune to sense. Nor even did I notice the arrival of Sister Díaz in the infirmary or the words that she spoke as her face slowly swam into view. She could no longer harm me—in fact, in trying to harm me had shown me a new way to strength—and so she seemed to cease to exist in the same way as she had before. She was nothing and her words were like the water that part around a boulder in a brook, passing by unnoticed. When she finished speaking and I neither nodded nor spoke she scowled and left the room.

'A week later,' Oda said, 'when the postman arrived, I snuck out to his wagon. In the back of it there was an oblong chest. I broke the lock with the butt of postman's rifle. Inside, clothes smelling of oats and horsehair. I folded myself carefully into the box, careful of my aching back, and closed the lid.'

VI. THE NEW WORLD

Oda the Elastic Woman of Ceylon premiered with the Trilling Brothers Circus in Toronto in the spring of 1897 and performed five shows before the circus left for a summer-long tour. Although the first show was poorly attended, reports of the fantastic feats that the star contortionist seemed capable of soon brought in larger crowds. In only a few brief

weeks she became known for strange feats. She seemed capable of climbing inside impossible spaces, tiny boxes, a rabbit cage and the inside of a tall snare drum. During her second show she looked up into the crowd and asked for a lady to volunteer her handbag. The contents of the bag were removed by one of the stagehands, the items placed on a table at the edge of the ring. Oda then climbed into the bag and the stagehand clasped the buttons of the bag. The audience watched the nothing bag for ten, fifteen minutes. It didn't move or even seem to twitch with the girl's breathing. The audience began stirring and coughing, anxious for something to happen. A murmur rippled across the crowd, a nervousness and displeasure. Had they paid their tickets to watch a lady's handbag on the floor? More minutes passed and a man yelled "Trilling, you better have your checkbook handy" and the crowd laughed. Still, the lady's handbag did not move. People began to boo and throw scraps of paper at the stage. Alistair Trilling appeared on stage to try to calm the crowd.

"Listen," he said. "Listen. Please, if you'll just watch."

In the hush that followed one could hear the swishing sounds of fabric. The lady's handbag in the middle of the stage seemed to vibrate, as though it were alive and breathing. The stagehand then unclasped the bag and Oda emerged from it, dressed now entirely in white. The crowd applauded loudly as the stagehand gathered up the lady's effects from the table and returned them to the bag. Oda bowed but as she did she tottered, lost her balance and fell to the ground. Alistair Trilling rushed to the fallen girl and with the aid of the stagehand carried her from the center ring.

This was the evening of July 19th, the selfsame evening on which Dr. Self recorded in his diary that “A circus performer and her master arrived at 34 Lispenard tonight in search of a curative for her irregularity, which the master denies liability of—although I did not press the matter beyond the few cursory questions.” As he continues, “I did note that he wears a wedding band, while she does not, whatever one is to make of that. She is an interesting specimen to be sure. She makes her living at deforming her body and surely this other thing is making complicated her livelihood, I told her as much. Apparently she fainted tonight while performing. Her master seems worried that unless we deal with the matter expeditiously these fainting spells should continue. ‘You are sick,’ he says. ‘We are here for the thing that will cure you.’ And she says, ‘It is not a sickness,’ and although she is right about the cause, he is perhaps right about the effect. And meanwhile she seems unsure of the course of action and doubts about the morality of it—a problem, I told her, that I certainly was exceptionally ill-equipped to answer for her. Although I don’t like to speculate about the lives of the women who come through here, this case seems especially troubling. She claims that she is unable to decide and he guffaws at her indecision as though she had any choice in the matter, as I suspect she does not. Still, when she left my apartment on the promise that she would return for consultation at a time when I could be of actual assistance, I caught a glimpse in her eye of something that seemed to say that she had already decided on a third course of action, that here in front of her their weren’t only two options. It was a look to leave one with a feeling of apprehension.”

Oda's final show was on August 1st, 1897. It had rained the night before, but it was that evening warm and seasonable and the crowd that had gathered outside the tent was large and boisterous. Men and women drank beer from vacuum flasks and children ran around the fairgrounds, slipping in the mud. The barker emerged and announced the commencement of the show. Slowly people made into the tent, where rows upon rows of bleachers circled the plywood stage. Once people'd taken their seats the gas lights slowly dimmed and Alistair Trilling stepped onto the stage, where he welcomed the teeming crowd. That night, the show which preceded Oda's act was not especially unusual, only perhaps in how sedate the crowd was. There were clowns and an elephant and a magician who pulled a small bouquet of daffodils out from the ether and handed them to a thin woman in the front row who smiled wanly. A bear was paraded around as members of the audience were given fish heads to toss at it. Then a strong man appeared and lifted above his head a barbell painted with large white numerals. The audience clapped politely as the strong man lowered the bar.

When Oda stepped finally out from behind the curtain, the audience seemed ready for the evening to be over. There was a brief bout of applause. Oda didn't speak or introduce herself. She walked out to the center of the stage and began to perform. She began slowly, demonstrating the flexibility in her wrists by bending her hands backward against her forearms. Applause. A clown brought out two chairs and Oda mounted these, demonstrating various kinds of splits. Applause. She then lay flat on her stomach and arched her back, bringing her legs over top her shoulders. From here she gave a brief

push with her hands and was suddenly upright again, having flipped herself around. Oda bowed and the audience applauded.

Next the strong man reappeared on stage and stood beside Oda as she folded herself into ball. The strong man gently lifted her into an empty burlap sack, tied it fast with twine and lifted the sack over his head, the sack no bigger than a medicine ball. As the ball floated above the strong man's head, it seemed to shudder. After a moment the strong man placed the bag on the floor and stepped back behind the curtain. The sack did not stir. But then a hand appeared from out the top of the sack and slowly unwound the string. For a moment Oda appeared to struggle within the sack, wiggling and contorting, stretching the sack into irregular shapes. She began to emerge from the bag, one naked limb at a time. An arm, a second arm, her head, a breast, a thigh, a foot, finally all appearing before the audience, unclothed and naked. People were shocked, silent. She stood before them in nakedness, her skin pale and freckled a low swell just below her belly button. Then she began to contort her body again, but more vigorously this time. Her bones began to protrude at awful angles under the skin. Several men in the audience scooped up their children under their arms, as though to shield them. Oda made a fist in her right and fit the entirety of it into her mouth. Her fist she worked back and forth in her mouth, slowly sliding her arm deeper into her mouth. A woman in the audience shrieked. Oda's body suddenly collapsed, the bones losing density, becoming malleable, the skin elastic. It was as if she had managed to roll herself up. Or, it was if she kept folding herself in half and half again on that and on and on and on. People in the audience began fainting, throwing up, bursting into tears. It wasn't any longer fathomable how she could

be effacing herself in such a manner, folding and refolding, the sound of bones crunching and turning to dust, the squelch of organs and skin tearing. Finally then there was nothing left, only a bit of cloth kerchief, empty space. She'd contorted herself into nothing. She'd vanished.

Or so the stories claim.

VII. AFTERMATH

Dr. Self left the fairgrounds and returned to his office where he mixed himself a drink and then, the following day, another drink. The circus, much delayed, left town finally in early June. Neither Julian the Wolf-Boy nor Trilling came to visit Dr. Self before they left. That was fine. Dr. Self had no need to see them. They could not—or would not—illuminate the mystery of Oda's disappearance. Nor did he want them to. He found himself thinking on Oda's final performance often, and often when he thought on it, he discovered that he saw in it not only all of his own history of loss and self-effacement—and even the Dominion's own ever-present desire to rename itself, to transform, to become other than what it had been—but also a kind of courage that he realized had been wanting in his own life. To remove oneself willingly, to make obliteration a thing to be striven for. There was something in that, a negative desire. In these moments, looking from his office window across the winter white slope of a barren field, he almost felt like he might find a home here after all. For now, however, he had but to watch the droplets of ether swirl in his glass like a ghost.

But in the aftermath of Oda's disappearance and the outlandish stories that attended her final performance, the Mounted Police was forced to open an inquiry. In short order the Trilling Brothers Circus was closed and Dr. William Self arrested for immoral applications of his medical license. In court Alistair Trilling accused Dr. Self of conspiring to hide Oda from the him and from the authorities but there was no proof of any consorting or conspiracy, and Self was convicted only on one count of abortion, though he claimed to never have given Oda the means to do this. In turn Dr. William Self accused Alistair Trilling of hiding or possibly murdering Oda, the poor girl having been an obvious victim of Trilling's impropriety, as Dr. Self's own conviction proved. But there was even less evidence of Self's claims.

Not that any of it made much difference. Oda was gone.