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This thesis is a draft of a short story cycle. It is comprised of stories inspired by many individuals with whom I lived at the Denver Catholic Worker, a house of hospitality for people experiencing homelessness, from 2012 to 2016.

JOY

by

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Joy

Joy knew the pad stuck into her underwear was filling with blood. She felt the blood leaving her body, falling all the way from her head down into it. Washing machines pounded around her. A woman dragged a mop around the room.

“You have to hold it higher,” Joy’s mother said to her, and she held the blanket higher so that the bottom of it didn’t graze the floor. Her little brother, Larry, lifted the bottom of the blanket up, meeting her hands with his, and Joy took that edge from him. Behind Larry, a man was filling the washing machine next to them. He smelled like urine—or maybe it was Larry. He’d started having accidents again.

When the man peeled his sweater off, his undershirt slipped up with the sweater, and Audrey saw red hairs vining up from below his belly button.

“He *homeless*?” Larry whispered to her.

“*Shh!*” she said, glaring down at him, turning her back to the man. She continued to fold her mother’s bras, which were still warm.

“Your soap machine isn’t working,” she heard her mother say.

“No more soap,” the woman said. “We’re out.”

Joy zipped up her dad’s sweatshirt, slid the hood over her head, her skin tingling, like the smell of bleach was burning her. Last time she’d seen her dad, he was lying on the floor in the kitchen, his hands tucked flat beneath his cheek, his pants wet. When she and her brother got home from the library the door had been open. The ceiling fan in the

front room was going in slow, unsteady circles, ticking each time. Every time it went around, Joy was sure it was going to fly off of the ceiling and kill one of them. But when Larry walked ahead, she grabbed him. “Wait,” she said, and then they walked into the kitchen together.

Joy knew what an overdose was. And she knew someone had positioned him that way—that someone had been there with him, had left him there. She’d never seen someone have an overdose, but she imagined it was like an electric shock. She wondered if they’d left him before or after he was done shaking, but imagined it would’ve been hard to move his arms like that if his body was still writhing like a snake. They didn’t have a funeral like they had for their uncle when he died.

“I’m gonna need you to walk to the store,” her mom said, digging through her pockets, collecting change and opening up singles. “I’m meeting someone.”

Joy looked at the suitcase full of their clothes. She was so tired. The first time she got her period a month earlier, they’d been staying at the shelter for women and children. Her mom told the woman that their dad was abusive, even though he was dead by then. Joy held Larry’s hand and listened to her mother tell the woman behind the desk all the things he’d done to her, some of which were true. “That’s the only way we were getting in,” she whispered to Joy, even though Joy hadn’t said anything. Later, a different woman was at the front desk, and when Joy told the woman what had happened, the woman winked when she handed the pads to Joy. Joy held them with her arms, lowering her head. “Oh, honey,” the woman said. “It’s completely normal.” In the bathroom, Joy unfolded one. Lying in between her mother and her brother, she tried to forget what was

happening inside of her, tried to block out the sound of a baby screaming down the hall, the prickly feel of her mother's leg hair against her own.

Larry was looking at her in a way that said he was sorry that she was the one who had to go to the store—but she was glad that she didn't have to fold more of their dad's clothes.

Outside the sun was too bright. She liked when the sky was low, when it looked like someone had dragged some gray throughout it with a finger. Joy didn't want to pass the two men who were leaning up against her family's car in the parking lot. One of them tipped his cowboy hat to her. She didn't know that one, but she knew the man beside him, his eyes lazy like he hadn't slept in days. She'd seen her dad like that, hunched over his dinner with his eyes closing. "Wake up," Larry said to him once, but that didn't stop his head from falling.

Joy kept her eyes on the ground and turned the other way.

"Always look people in the eyes," her mother had told her. "If you don't, they'll think you're weak—that you're afraid."

The store was only a few blocks away; she walked behind the laundromat, past the Chinese place, past the place with the yellow and blue sign: We Cash Checks! Joy clutched the rolled up bills in her hand like a weapon.

The security guard at the front of the store had cheekbones that made Joy remember that she'd put on one of her mother's bras that morning. Suddenly, she was aware of the thick flaps of material against her chest. Her eyes went down to the gun in his belt

and slowly back up to his eyes, his lashes; they were thick, black lashes that Larry had had since he was a baby. She was glad that she was wearing her new shirt—that she'd taken off her dad's hoodie, big enough that she could zip her brother up in it with her. It was easier for them to fall asleep in the backseat of the car if they were wrapped up together like that. And his smell, familiar and sweet, his skin like silk, was like that of a favorite blanket or stuffed animal; she'd never gotten attached to either. He had always been like her stuffed animal. His hair—which she was sure had taken on the smell of her own morning breath—was fine as feathers, unlike hers. She knew now this was because they had different dads—that she'd only met her dad twice, both times before she was two. Larry's dad had been around as far back as she knew. When she turned five he blew up the balloons with his own mouth; she'd seen it. But now she knew why the color of their skin—her brother's and hers—was a few shades apart. What she believed before she knew the truth was that Larry was lighter because her mother gave birth to him six years after she gave birth to her, like how watercolor paints become thinner the more water you add, as if time was water. She'd thought if her mother had another baby it might look the most like their dad—Larry's dad, who'd been her dad too, even though he didn't have to be.

Now she knew that was dumb. But still, even though she knew it was wrong, she liked that she looked more like their mother—that because they were both a rich brown, undiluted, she was closer to her mother in other ways and might always be.

Joy let her hands hang in front of her crotch as she looked for the detergent. The pad itched, heavy between her legs. She wanted to peel it off and toss it in a big trash can

she knew they had in the back room. A few years before, her mom had worked in a supermarket; when Joy was sick with the flu, she'd had to go with her, sat on an upturned crate and watched her mom stack boxes of bananas. She was surprised by how much her mom could lift. She had such tiny wrists. The caverns of her collarbone always looked like cups to be filled—sometimes, when her mother wore a low top, Joy could see her heart beating beneath her skin, like the newborn kitten she and Larry had found, its little mouth open, eyes peeling open like a sunset. Back then, Joy still had her baby fat. Her mother called the pillowy folds between her shoulders and chin “sweet rolls,” and pretended to nibble on them, which, when she was a baby, made her crack into laughter. She had that fat neck for a while—at eight, her hair still hadn't grown past her shoulders—but she couldn't remember when she'd told her mother she didn't like that anymore, said *stop?* Said *I am not a baby*. Joy overheard one of her mother's coworkers say to another one out of the side of her mouth, *That a boy or a girl?*—since then, Joy wore pink, just so that they knew. Any shade, so long as it wasn't too red or too orange. But now—especially now, a man watching her walk past him in Aisle 4; *after you*, he said—Joy wished she had some of that baby fat back, both so her mother might nuzzle her again, so that no one could tell what was hiding beneath it.

Joy stared at the Salami. “Want a sample, baby?” a woman said. She was standing behind the deli counter, with a hairnet wrapped around the little bun at the back of her head. Joy nodded.

“You have to speak up, honey. Loud and clear, tell me—do you want a sample of this cheese?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, please,” she said, her hand in front of her mouth.

“Once more, with your hand out of the way. Stand up straight. Ask for what you want. Chin up.”

Joy stifled a laugh, uncurled herself. “Yes, please,” she said, letting the woman really see her. She struggled to keep her arms at her sides, fought the urge to cross them at her chest. Ever since they started living in their car, Joy was almost always being seen. Even when they stuck those blankets up by the windows at night, there was always a slip of light coming in. The first night they stayed in their car was after they’d been kicked out of the shelter. Her mother had broken one of their rules; once she and Larry were in bed, she left, said she had an errand to run, and when she tried coming back a couple of hours later, the door was locked. Her mother had to sleep in the car alone in their parking lot. In the morning the person at the shelter told her mom they were allowed to stay one more night, but then they had to go. The next morning they parked outside of a church downtown. The sun was bright as lemons and Larry said, “I’m hungry.” While her mother called shelters in the office, she and her brother walked through the chapel. She wished they could just stay there, lie out on the slippery wooden pews, wake up to the light coming through the stained glass windows in all different colors. Larry had walked to the front of the church and was looking up at the cross, Jesus’ outstretched arms, golden in the light. *Everything we observe in life is reflected by light*, she’d read in her science book; she held her arm up to the sun, coming through the windows, and that, too,

was golden. After that they went to one of the shelters that didn't answer their phone. After knocking for a while, her mother put her face flat on the door. *Please. Please. Please.* Larry followed, his little head swiveling against the door. After driving around for a while, they parked in front of an auto store. Joy and Larry lay on the back seat; even after her mother and brother fell asleep, she couldn't. She worried that Larry could feel the sudden throbbing, could smell the liquid spilling out, but he began to snore and that whole night she held Larry tight, pressing his warm body against her belly, which, every other minute, tightened into one burning knot. Not long after she had finally fallen asleep, light was blooming, turning her mother's cheek silver and pink. Footsteps came towards them. "Hello?" she heard. A few knocks on her mother's window. "Someone in there?" Eyes still closed, her mother moved the sheet she'd stuck into the corners at the top of the glass. She rolled the window down.

"Sorry, but you can't be here."

Joy caught his eye. Looked away.

"Oh," he said. "You've got children in here. You know, that's not safe."

"Yes, sir," her mother said. Joy couldn't see her mother's face, but she knew she was looking directly at the man. He sighed. And when her mother looked back at them, he said, "Don't they have places for people like you?" Joy held her breath as if that would make her invisible.

But now Joy's breath was as loud as a tiger's. Every other minute, her body pulsed with sudden pain. She imagined she was turning red from the inside out. One big heart. She tried to distract herself from the sound of it, certain if she could hear it others

could hear it too. She let her eyes linger on the things she wanted, like the bag of Skittles or the tampons, which they never had at the shelters or the churches. The cube of cheese had disintegrated in her mouth, and she stared at the glazed donuts. Her jaw clenched and her soft hands got hard, turned into fists, into rocks. She used all that want, which was also like anger, also like power, to dispel the churning in her gut.

After she paid for the detergent, Joy noticed the bleeding had maybe stopped, or maybe it had simply become more natural for her to bleed.

The men were not gone. They were exactly where they were before. They looked at her with slanted eyes. One slid off the car and stepped towards her. She knew him. He was her dad's friend.

"Hey, Joy," he said, and she looked quick into the window of the laundromat. She couldn't see her mom or her brother.

"I didn't know she would be so young," the man with him said, nervously rubbing the corners of his chapped and bleeding mouth, and her dad's friend said, "It's her *daughter*, sick fuck." Joy took a step back. At once, she became aware of how long her nails were, how they were sharp—as if they grew an inch that second—and knew what she could do with them if that man touched her.

"I'm sorry about him," he said of the man, and took a step in front of him. Looking at the asphalt, he said, "And I'm sorry about your dad. It was not supposed to go that way." When he looked up at her, only with his eyes the way Larry did when he was

sorry, Audrey felt her breath coursing through her body, quickening. Before his eyes could latch onto hers, she looked away.

“Your ma in there?” the man said. Two missing teeth. Little, milky blue eyes, wet even though he was not crying, as if it were spit instead of tears. And that dirty cowboy hat on. As she stood there, she imagined her anger pouring out toward the man like a silent wave.

“No,” she said.

Joy walked as calmly as she could into the laundromat, thinking, *They can smell your fear. They can smell your fear.* When she walked through the door, a bell chimed. Her mother looked up from folding. Grabbed the soap from her. “Thanks, baby,” she said. Joy quickly sat down, her back to the windows, but she could feel them looking at her from the other side of the glass. She glared back at them, looking at them directly for the first time.

“Oh,” her mother said. “I didn’t see them out there.” Before she walked outside, she paused for a moment. It was as if she’d forgotten something, forgotten where she was or what she was doing, and then she said to Joy, “Finish this last load.”

On the chair beside her, Larry was looking at Joy, who was trying not to look and see what her mother was saying to those men. She hoped that she would tell them to fuck off, the way she’d said that to their dad. She sat with her hands on her knees. Larry was still looking at her. Even though he had those sweet beginnings of cheekbones, she didn’t want anyone looking at her.

“Stop,” she said, refusing to look at him. She felt her hunger in her face now—she knew it looked like she was blushing, which made her even more mad. “*Stop.*” After continuing to stare at her for a moment, petting her hand, lying his cheek on the top of her hand, Larry crawled beneath one of the chairs. He started whispering to himself. He’d had tiny plastic figures—a Batman, three green soldiers—but they were lost somewhere in the seats of the car. He still made up stories about them. No bodies, only voices. Spit flew from his mouth onto his knees when he imitated an explosion. His hands crashed together, fingers mashed up like they were cars flying up into the air and falling to the ground.

“Shhhhhhooooooboom!” he said.

After Joy put everything left into the washing machine, she said, “You. Stay,” to Larry. She walked outside. “Ma?” she said. A man came out of the liquor store with a case of beer. Then she noticed the cowboy hat on the top of their car. Larry was sitting with his ankles crossed; he was watching the clothes get tossed up in the washer, colors swirling like cotton candy. His mouth hung open.

Joy walked towards their car. She couldn’t see their bodies—they had a blanket wrapped around them, like how Joy wrapped herself up with Larry, pulling it over their heads so that they were hidden—but her mother’s body was jolting up and down, up and down, and Joy had a hard time imagining what her face looked like beneath the blanket, what that man’s face was doing, but when Joy walked closer to the car, her mother’s face was suddenly revealed and her eyes were closed tight like she was crying—Joy had never

seen her cry before—like she was saying something, but Joy couldn't hear her. She pulled at the door handle, and her mother turned her face to the window and said, "Go! Go away!"

Joy was out of breath, staring at the many boxes of tampons. She had no idea how they were different from one another, but she grabbed a box that read, "Super," and as quickly as she could, using her sharpest fingernail, she opened it. She pulled out six tampons, and slipped three into each back pocket.

She'd left her brother alone—her mother had still been in the car with that man. Now she walked towards the exit again, towards the security guard. Now she was not thinking of her brother. She looked at this man straight in the eyes. Smiled. He smiled back at her, his hands in his pockets. She kept walking. Once she was outside she wondered if he'd let her walk away because she was just a kid—she realized now the wrappers of the tampons were showing out the tops of her pockets—but then she felt certain that he'd been looking at her, at her body, at the shape of it in her jeans and her top which read *Princess* across her chest. It was not the first time she felt a man looking at her, but it was the first time she slid her hands into her back pockets, made her body curve in a way that felt good, in a way which she imagined locked his gaze, in a way which said, *I am not afraid*.

Her mother was folding Joy's clothes when she walked in. "Hey," her mother said. "I made sure to put yours in separate." Her hair was pulled back into a tight knot, which made her eyes look more awake than they really were. "Look how nice this came

out,” her mother said, holding up a top she’d found for Joy at the Arc. “That stain came out. I love this color.” Even as she held it against Joy’s chest, seeing how it might look on her, she did not look up into her eyes. As her mother turned back to the stacked clothes, her elbow grazed the side of Joy’s breast. Joy’s eyes widened; she knew they were glowing red. She found her dad’s sweatshirt where she’d left it, hidden beneath the chair so that it wouldn’t get thrown into the wash with the rest of their things. Joy loved its smell: cigarettes and dog hair—they’d had to give their dog up when they lost their house—and oil from the cars he worked on. She pulled it on, zipped it up, and grabbed Larry. She put him onto her lap and he melted into her, as if she were his mother, and not the woman looking back at them, as if from across the world, squinting as if she couldn’t see them clearly, the strange woman who’d just had sex with a strange man. When, finally, her mother smiled through her eyes at Joy, Joy did not smile back. The next morning, when the sun was coming up around them, when she knew her mother, lying in the front seat, had her eyes open, when Larry was still asleep on her own lap, Joy would ask her, Why did you do that?

I wanted to, she’d say.

But you were crying.

Sometimes a little pain feels good.

Joy refused to help hang her dad’s clothes on the fence. She watched her mother slip the t-shirts onto the wire hangers, drape his jeans along the top. They’d had yard sales before, when they had a house. They’d never had a yard sale on a sidewalk. They’d

never had a yard sale for their dad's clothes. Larry looked at the clothes and scratched his head. He walked up to Joy and said, "Um... what are we doing?" He tapped his chapped bottom lip with his finger. When Joy didn't answer he let his head hang back and he turned around. Sat on the ground.

A couple of men touched the clothes on the fence. Looked at Joy, leaning with her side to them. Looked at her mother. "You sisters?" one said, and bit his lip. Eventually he gave her mother two dollars for her dad's favorite t-shirt of Biggie Smalls. The man from the laundromat who smelled like piss walked by. He held a sweater to his face for a long time. He seemed to have something wrong with him. "I really, really like this."

"Take it," her mother said.

They'd only sold four things, made fifteen bucks, when a cop came up to them. "You can't do this here. Time to pack it up." In their car again, Joy could smell that man's licorice cologne. Before she'd run back to the store, she'd seen his face, sweaty and yellow, appear against her mother's breast. It was the second time her dad's friend showed up with some stranger in the past couple weeks, the second time her mother disappeared, came back looking confused, as if she were trying to remember something important.

"What are we doing?" Joy said.

"I'm waiting for something," her mother said.

"Waiting for what?"

“Something.” A few minutes later that man showed up again and Joy heard some kind of screaming inside her head as he walked toward their car. She was nervous about what she might do if he touched her mother. “Stay there,” her mother shouted to the man, out her window, and quickly said, “I’ll be right back,” before slamming the door behind her. Joy watched the man slip something into her mother’s hand. She turned her back to them as she looked at it, put it into her pocket.

When her mother got back into the car, turned the ignition, Joy felt like she was going to get sick. The animal inside of her moved. Her groin burned. A fire between her legs.

“I have to use the bathroom,” she said.

“Go use the laundry’s,” her mother said. “We’ll get some food afterwards. You hungry?”

“Are we sleeping?” Larry said, eyelids heavy, opening. They’d been closed the whole time their mother was not in the car. Joy knew that what he meant was: Are we sleeping in the car tonight?

“I don’t know,” her mother said.

“Should I go to sleep?” he said, by which he meant: Can I?

“I don’t know!” she said, and then Larry said, “I’ll try not,” and made a face like he was pushing into his eyes, trying to keep them open.

Joy got out and walked up to the laundromat, but it was closed. She looked back at her mother in their car. She had her head back, her eyes closed. Joy walked up to the door of a new place called “Common Ground.” She smoothed down her shirt and ran her

hands over her ponytail. She passed a woman at a table, looking at her computer screen as if she were angry, and then another woman approached her.

“Can I help you?” she said. A white woman with the sides of her head shaved. Like a bird.

“It’s for paying customers only.” Her face was so tight, Joy was sure it’d pop and wilt like balloon if she poked it with a pin.

When Joy told her mother, “I need to buy something to use it,” she said, “But you’re a kid!” Joy considered going to the Safeway, but was too scared to go back there. Scared because she stole something. Scared because of the way she’d looked back at the security guard. Maybe he’d expect her to look at him that way again.

Behind the laundromat, the grass sloped down into a little forest, which backed right up to the highway they’d just been on. It was amazing to think they’d been going that fast when in the car time moved so slowly. Now, Joy was separate from that movement. She walked until she was sure no one could see her, and when she looked up and all she could see was a crown of branches and a smudge of sky, she pulled down her pants and squatted down. Then she felt like she’d been punched in the gut, and when she saw it on the ground below her—a glob of blood, black as a beetle—she gagged. Looked away. She tore the soaked pad out of her pants. She pulled a tampon out from her pocket, unwrapped it, and when she pushed it up, she winced. Closed her eyes. When she pushed it up, she felt like the rest of her disappeared, like all that was left of her was this core of her—a core she hadn’t known was there before. Her mind went black and she thought maybe this was what sex was like. Maybe this was what having a baby was like. The next

morning her mother would find her crying in a McDonald's bathroom stall, tell her she was supposed to release the cotton from the plastic part—*why didn't you tell me?* she'd say—but now Joy was standing legs apart, breathing in and out, in and out, until the pain blended into the sound of the highway. When she saw a man walk around the dumpster behind the shop, crack open a bottle in a paper bag, she quickly pulled her pants back up. Before she reached the car, she stopped and grabbed a bag of Skittles out of her backpack. After she'd grabbed those tampons, she'd taken it and let it fall down the front of her shirt, settle in the cups of her mother's bra. And even though she told herself she'd share the Skittles with Larry she poured the Skittles into her hand, sucked, chewed, and swallowed, breathing heavy, heavy, heavy, until there weren't any left, until her mouth ached. She pushed all the syrup on her tongue to the back of her throat, and opened the car door. She was relieved to see Larry was asleep, that he wouldn't smell the candy on her.

“You ready?” Joy heard, and got in the car.

The Mexican place they used to go to with their dad was a block of concrete, painted red, an orange awning. One dollar per taco. Her mom slung Larry over her shoulder, held him in place with her long neck. As they ate, Joy couldn't keep her eyes off of her mother—especially her mouth, every time it opened so that she could put more food into it. She heard her say, “I should have enough for a motel by the weekend,” but she was focusing on the gauzy spit that followed when her mother's teeth touched and separated from her bottom lip. Her laugh, which, when Larry began to talk in his sleep, his

head on her lap, seemed to come out on its own—her eyes, tired and distracted, as if they were not connected to the mouth, to the laugh. Her fingertip pressing into a soft bead of rice which had fallen off her plate, catching it like a ivory-colored maggot, placing it on her tongue. She noticed the shadows on her face, watched them move and bend. These things kept Joy’s mind off of what she was reminded of each time she moved just slightly on her chair—of the thing that had come out of her in the woods, how then, when it was reflected by light, it glowed like a ruby against a gray rock, how when she tapped it with her foot it went from dark red to bright pink, how now it was invisible in the dark, how it was gone, how she couldn’t even find it if she wanted to.

“Are you feeling better?” Larry said. He was sitting up. Wiping his eyes in slow motion. Both hands. And for the first time that day Joy forgot about her body. She lost herself in the rhythm of that movement, something she’d seen every morning since he was born, something he might do—something she might get to watch—for the rest of her life. She settled into that thought, that image. And watching her mother rub her face against her brother’s like a lioness with her cub, she couldn’t help but reach out toward them, her hand moving across the table as if on its own, until it found the silky warmth of her mother’s hand, until she heard the low voice—low like it came from the purple pit of her belly: “Hi, baby.”

The Beast

As the caseworker interviewed her and her husband, Nicole peeked inside her bag to make sure El Diablo was doing okay. She'd thrown a black shawl with fringes on the sides of it over her shoulders; it draped all the way down to her elbows. Carefully, she peeled back the edge of it like a curtain. Two eyes blinked at her like stars.

"How long have you been homeless for?" the woman asked. Nicole sat straighter on her chair. She looked at the woman, and smiled. Looked at her husband, Matt. Together, they sounded it out. "Two months."

"We're not like other homeless people, I swear," Nicole said, laughing a little. "It's just Matt lost his job." Matt, who'd put on weight since the accident—and especially since they were now eating spaghetti and bagels every day and whatever else they got served—cleared his throat. "Nicky, *can I?*" he said to Nicole, giving her a look. "Yes, Matty," she said, "Sorry. You tell her." She knew he hated when she did that, spoke for him—that's what happened after nearly twenty-five years together. He explained that he'd fallen off, or through, scaffolding—beginning, as he always did, "So, I'm up there, three stories high, when all of a sudden I feel the floor beneath my feet drop." Nicole couldn't help but let her attention wander—she'd heard the story so many times. She knew what he'd say—what he was saying now, even if she wasn't really listening. He always ended, after detailing his surgery, how after he was "healed" the hospital shoved

him out—by saying that he was still waiting on workman’s comp. They’d filed two appeals—but nothing. Said Matt must’ve done something wrong. Nicole knew anger lived in her, but it was harder for Matt to stay angry at something he couldn’t see. It was tiring, trying to see the shape of something without a body—trying to give it eyes and a mouth and a nose. There was always a beat of silence after he finished speaking, and then he laughed, one quick laugh—like a question, like *huh*. He was looking at her now as he said it: *huh*. It was strange, he’d said to Nicole more than once, how it all happened. “So strange,” he’d say when they received a letter in the mail from the company he’d worked for—the words just letters, just symbols. They’d tried to read closely, to read beneath the letters, the symbols, to find some secret buried in there, some truth. Sometimes, Matt even said it was funny depending on how one looked at it—depending on what their perspective was—how it happened, how his leg broke all the way to his hip bone, how his body split three layers of plywood, how his jean pant leg was stripped in two, how he was left almost naked from the waist down, legs splayed like some animal on a butcher’s table. When he told the story he seemed surprised each time—like *that happened?* Nicole had heard him work it out aloud, like he was trying to convince himself that it did happen—that he wasn’t at fault. Wasn’t him who made the mistake. There were witnesses. His coworkers had seen it; he heard them say, “Oh, *shit!*” He’d explained what it felt like to be unable to move, to know others were looking down at you; as Nicole and Matt lie in their car in the Walmart parking lot watching a movie on Matt’s smartphone, he’d interrupted the movie to tell her about it. He couldn’t speak, couldn’t respond, when his friend James said, “Matty?” Now, even though Nicole knew the caseworker could give two

shits about what had happened to him, his mouth was moving. He crossed his arms over his chest, which Nicole thought of as her pillow—though she hadn't been able to lay her head on it since they'd started sleeping in their car. They were not small and there was no way they could both lay down together in the back seat—they'd tried. Even as Nicole watched him speak—not really listening—she could tell he was becoming embarrassed. She wished she could let El Diablo's face pop out of her bag; the dog's sharp toothed underbite would cheer him up. He could never *not* laugh at that. But they weren't supposed to have pets in the shelter, so she kept her hand over the bag, the vibration of El Diablo's breath tickling her palm. Through the slip of space she left unzipped for him she could see his little nose, twitching slightly like a little black heart. When she began to smile, Matt pinched the skin on her elbow, and she sat up, straight. She noticed the wall across from her, behind the caseworker's head, was decorated with a mural: HOPE in royal blue, 3-D letters, each the size of a person. There were balloons painted on the wall, too—a little slip of white in a corner of each balloon, as if that meant they were *real* balloons. The mural was the only colorful thing in that room. It was obvious to her that the shelter was once a Catholic school of some sort—that where they were was once some kind of gym or cafeteria. She'd been in Catholic school her whole life—her mother still called from back home and said she couldn't bear to hear what was happening now with them but that she was praying for a miracle to happen, was beginning, that day, a new Novena for her. Now the room which was once a gym or cafeteria was sectioned off by cubicles constructed with dry wall. They were surrounded by clusters of other people being interviewed—she knew there was a family, a boy and a girl; she could tell by their

shoes, their voices—but Nicole could not see their faces because of these walls. Matt was picking off a piece of it with his thumb and finger, the chalky material crumbling off and silently falling to the floor.

The woman nodded very slowly; she seemed to have also noticed what Matt was doing. Her eyes, which for a moment appeared to be frozen in place, blinked. She shook her head quickly as if to wake herself up, and turned slightly towards Nicole.

“And does Nicole have a job?” she said, as if she were much older than she was. She was wearing a stone around her neck, wrapped in copper wire—hanging by a thin, silver chain. It was a dark grey-blue color, like this rock their oldest had found once, when she was ten or so. It was shaped like a heart and she brought it home to them in her pocket. It was not their anniversary—it wasn’t even anyone’s birthday. Their kids were just sweet like that. They had amazing kids. It was just thoughtful, just an ordinary day—their daughter had found it while walking home from school—but she left it on the kitchen counter with a note that said, “Mom and Dad, Happy Happy Love.” That’s something she remembered.

“Nicky *did*—” Matt began, but she continued, “I had a job. I did have a job. But they fired me. I worked for one of those marketing companies, you know, on the phones. Calling people from eight in the morning to seven at night. Going through the whole speech. Hello, sir, how are you my name is... We were selling phones—well, not phones, but services. TV or phone or internet. They let me go. What can I say?”

She kept her eyes on Matt’s as she spoke; he was her comfort—him and El Diablo. Actually, Diablo was special—it was as if he took her pain on himself. Allowed her

to feel just light enough to finally get up—go outside. She'd had to, anyway—had to walk him round the block three times before he'd even think of relieving himself. Had to look ahead of her—sometimes she looked up at the trees, even though sometimes that made her dizzy, made her feel like she was underwater, like they all were.

The woman was checking off boxes, skipping over others. She was bent forward over the table, over the intake sheet. “You have any children?” she said, her pen hovering.

“Two girls,” Matt said.

“But they're older,” she said. “Youngest is sixteen. She's staying with her sister at the moment. They'd let us stay—but they have two roommates. They're good kids, but we can't do that to them.”

The woman nodded. “So...” she started, squinting hard as if she were really thinking. But her eyes opened quick and then relaxed as she sat back in her chair and said, “We don't have a room here for couples without children.” She tossed her pen on the table and looked at them, simply watching their reactions—as if she were barely amused. She looked at Matt as she continued—“You have another option,” she said. “But you'd have to separate.”

El Diablo began to growl from somewhere dark and deep in his little body—it was as if he knew exactly what Nicole was feeling—but in order to keep him a secret, Nicole had to grunt a few times. Matt shot her that look.

She turned towards him with the bag kept tight to her side. “What do you think, Matty?”

“I’ll do what you want to do,” he said. His cheeks were pink. It was summer. July. The caseworker’s eyes flicked to the clock on the wall for the third time in what seemed to be barely a minute. “So…” she began.

“She’s the love of my life,” Matt said. “Whatever she wants to do, I’ll do.” When her bag vibrated again, Nicole grunted to cover up the sound. But then she realized it was her phone buzzing. She flipped it open to a picture of El Diablo. In it, he was wearing fuzzy, red horns. There was a text message from her youngest saying, “Where are you staying tonight?”

She would’ve preferred to stay with Matt in their car, but the night before a cop had knocked on their car window; “Excuse me, ma’m?” the young cop had said, and it was that alone—his young voice calling her “ma’m,” that she was old enough to be his mother, that she was forced to cover herself with her shawl at four in the morning in a parking lot, a flashlight shining into their car. Matt was still asleep, snoring even, and she was certain he’d seen them sleeping—curled up pathetically in their car, she in the backseat and him reclining on the front passenger seat. When she saw her daughters in the morning, she told them they wouldn’t do that again—and she hated the thought of her kids worrying about them—a kid should not have to worry about their parent. It was supposed to be the other way around. Fortunately, by the time they lost their home—a ranch out near I-80—Danny, who was a hair stylist, had her own place she was renting, and offered her little sister the couch in the house she rented with two other young women; now Julie—she was in AP Math *and* English—was trying to find a part time job, while she

finished her senior year. Then she was going to apply to Metro Denver—wanted to study social work. Wanted to help people.

By then, the caseworker had gotten up and walked away. Nicole reached for the intake form on the table, turned it around. Under “Reason for Homelessness” the woman had written in round, childish handwriting, “no money,” a tiny, misshapen heart as the o in “money.” “NO” had been circled in the “Dependents” section. Nicole looked at Matt and said, “Are you kidding me?” When he laughed, his belly popped out a little. One of his front teeth had cracked during his accident; so it was just a little white nub. Nicole couldn’t help but touch it, especially when he was smiling at her like that, his eyes like little worlds, like a river had been gathered up by two hands, been balled up just for her—a gift. The nub-tooth was like a special mole or mark on his body, something new to her. He flinched when she did that, but there was this sudden intensity between them, like they were teenagers and she’d suddenly put her hand on his crotch over his jeans.

“At least we’ve got one of our babies with us,” he said, after she released her finger from his mouth. He bent towards her bag, put his ear beside it, his mouth slightly agape. Quickly, he peeked inside bag, his blue eyes widening, becoming bluer, or a lighter blue, as if the little dog were emanating light, as if it were a bag of gold.

Nicole and Matt decided to craft a lie that their daughters would believe—their daughters knew they’d used up their motel vouchers the month before, when they were first evicted. Maybe they’d tell them they got some money from their Nana, sent some in the mail—enough for a weekend at the motel, that the next week they’d have something

else figured out. Last time they saw them their oldest did Nicole's hair, putting light red highlights throughout it, even blowing it out, curling it with a pink curling iron as Matt watched and said, "Look at how beautiful she is." Their daughters couldn't understand why they couldn't get any more vouchers, why they were sleeping in their car now. "Why?" the youngest yelled from the little kitchen, and Nicole said, "Well, we're not allowed to have more. Every person gets a certain amount. We used all ours up." The feeling of her eldest's hands—her long, red nails with a little rhinestone glued onto each one—running through her hair was heaven. "Let's not talk about this, okay?" she said, closing her eyes. The oldest separated the freshly dyed red hair from the dull brown. "Bullshit," her daughter said in response to Nicole's simple request that they leave it alone, and eventually when she released the clamp of the curling iron, a ribbon of light red, almost pink, hair fell onto her shoulder. "I love..." Nicole began, but was interrupted by the youngest: "So, like, they have the vouchers—like they have them in their hands but they just won't give them to you?"

"Your mother and I aren't the only people who need those," Matt said. "We need to share." Matt was a good man. Now, as they walked past a group of people lined up outside of the shelter, he smiled and said, "I'm so sorry," as he walked around one woman's things, gathered around her wheelchair. They walked to the little dog park a couple of blocks away. El Diablo skipped ahead of them, his blue leash wrapped around Nicole's wrist.

"We're free!" she said to the dog. "We're free!"

Nicole, Matt, and El Diablo walked through the iron gate at the entrance of the park. The metal awning was coated with flowering Clematis vines; one of these flowers brushed the top of Nicole's head and Matt plucked it off the vine, placed it into her hair by her right ear. Golden dirt softened the half-acre of gravel, creating a slope for the dogs to run up and down on. Matt released the leash from El Diablo's collar. Nicole began pulling dog poop bags from the dispenser, stuffed them into her bag. She threw an old tennis ball towards El Diablo, but he just looked at it. Matt seemed exhausted as he looked up at her from a bench. Behind him, a homeless man appeared; he was looking up over the metal fence, his hands wrapped around the spikes at the top. He smiled at the dogs, his blue eyes moving back and forth like an owl. They locked onto El Diablo. "He's nasty looking," he said, smiling. Nicole walked towards El Diablo. Whenever another dog approached him, he seemed to push his bottom jaw out further than it already was—that growl surfacing like thunder. Nicole stood near him and said, "Be nice," and "Sorry. Sorry," to the other dog's owner, a blonde woman in purple yoga pants.

"What's his name?" the woman asked.

"El Diablo." She didn't smile at the woman though she knew she should. "What's your dog's name?" It was a Pomeranian. It wore a rhinestone studded collar.

"Chi Chi," she said, her arms crossed over her breasts. Nicole imagined that if the woman's breasts not restricted by her sports bra they'd be the supple shape of balloons. Nicole's own breasts—which she hadn't seen since she could remember because the mirror in her daughter's bathroom cut her off at the shoulders—seemed tired, as if they had long ago given up. She looked over at Matt to see if he noticed this woman—her breasts.

If he was thinking the same thing that she was thinking. But he had laid out on the bench; his eyes were closed. He looked peaceful.

“Hey, man,” the homeless man said to him, disregarding the fact that Matt was clearly asleep. “Can’t sleep there. Better watch out.”

“He’s fine,” Nicole said, her voice loud and quick so he could hear her over the traffic. “He’s tired.” Nicole looked at Matt’s face again, and now it seemed like maybe he was having some kind of nightmare—his eyebrows pinched tight at the middle. She thought maybe she should wake him. She looked at the homeless man; it was *his* fault Matt’s dream turned into a nightmare. Of course, it was—how can you dream peacefully if something is hovering over you saying things like, *Watch out*. Nicole couldn’t understand why certain homeless people were so filthy—there *were* showers. Weren’t there? She and Matt were able to use the bathroom at their daughter’s house a couple of times a week, but still—there was no reason for people to be so filthy.

Across the street, a cop was speaking to that woman in the wheelchair, his hands on his hips. She was looking up at him, saying something Nicole couldn’t interpret, though she could tell the cop was telling people to move out of the sidewalk. The old woman’s hands were on her oxygen tank as if it as if it were her child, and she was afraid she might lose it. Suddenly a man in woman’s clothing—pink slippers, hair long and thin, greasy—appeared and stood behind the woman’s wheelchair, gripped the handles. He nodded when the cop spoke, and then carefully picked up the woman’s oxygen tank and put it carefully against her calves. She held it in place as he rolled her away.

They didn't belong in that crowd, she and Matt. They would never belong in that crowd—they, at least, still had their dignity.

“Can I pick your dog up?” Somehow the homeless man was standing next to Nicole—she glanced at the metal gate. Wasn't there some kind of sign—some kind of *only for people with dogs* sign? She'd been too distracted, watching that woman in the wheelchair, trying to decipher what exactly she was saying to that cop. She was a fighter, Nicole, and she'd considered going over there, sticking up for the poor woman. That's what you get for thinking of others instead of yourself, she thought, as she took a step away from this man, looming down at her, his mouth open. How did he even get in there? He didn't even have a dog. He must've been six foot five—bigger than he'd seemed when he was standing behind the gate. Potato-colored food had gathered in between his teeth. His face was flushed, his blonde hair stuck to his forehead.

“I don't think that's a good idea,” she said.

“Why?”

“He can be a little feisty. His name is El Diablo, like the devil.”

“But he's so cute!” the man said. Something about the way he breathed, the way he stood, his toes outward, like he was still learning how to balance the weight of his body, began to remind Nicole of a giant in some movie, the kind who didn't know his own strength. She took a step back.

“What's wrong?” he said.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Come here, *now*,” he suddenly said to El Diablo, laughing afterwards. Nicole’s breath caught. The woman on a bench looked at Nicole, as if to say, *Run*. The man was squatting now, looking at El Diablo’s face, his underbite.

“Something is wrong with his face,” he said. “You should get that fixed.” Nicole looked at Matt, hoping he’d wake up. He’d know what to do—how to handle the situation. She didn’t want to say something that would make the homeless man more angry. The woman with the Pomeranian was watching with her dog in her arms; it began howling when a SUV crept by in the traffic, rap music pounding out of it: *Give me what you got bitch*.

“It’s the ugliest dog I’ve ever seen,” the man said.

Nicole looked hard at him; she could almost feel her pupils getting darker, dilating. “It looks so weird,” he said. God knows this man wouldn’t have terrorized that Pomeranian—God knows that blonde woman with her diamond ring wouldn’t have stood for this. People would’ve come to that woman’s rescue right away—but even though Nicole kept herself looking as nice as she possibly could given the circumstances, maybe they could tell something was wrong, maybe something about the shadows—she’d never had those shadows before—under her eyes gave it away. That they were—well, not *technically* homeless, were they? But struggling. Definitely struggling. The man remained crouching over El Diablo for a few minutes, even as El Diablo growled with everything in him at the man, his voice grinding, his body vibrating harder and faster than ever before. The poor baby was terrified, and so was Nicole. She wanted to get in between the man and El Diablo but she was nervous to get too close to the man—he might touch her,

he might drool on her. His sweat might drip from his hairline onto hers. She was barely over five feet, maybe even a foot below him. There were people everywhere, homeless people sleeping on the sidewalks, their limp bodies nudged into the doorways of abandoned storefronts, hip twenty and thirty-somethings lined up outside a restaurant from which the smell of bacon wafted, cars rushing past, stopping short, honking, families covered in Broncos crap coming out of the Pepsi Center holding hands and grinning as they crossed the street, but she felt utterly alone—alone with this man, this monster. No one seemed to notice what was happening—not even Matt—as the man bent down, putting his face right up against El Diablo’s face, picked the dog up, held him in the air. “Put him down,” Nicole wanted to say, but she couldn’t speak. Her hand crept about her neck, her eyes widening, as if she were choking. The man wasn’t hurting the dog. He was petting him with the tips of his fingers in an excruciatingly slow, careful way. But still she felt violated—like she was the one being touched, examined. Soon, she could barely see what he was doing with the sun suddenly in her eyes. She was dizzy. Lightheaded. The dog was whimpering now, his cry high and erratic, as if the man’s warm fingertips were sending tiny shocks through him.

He looked closely into El Diablo’s eyes, squinting—said, “His eyes are sad.”

She looked at El Diablo’s eyes, too, and said, “No. He’s not sad. He’s angry. And he doesn’t like that. You’re scaring him.” She tried to speak loud enough so that the cop across the street would come over and do something about this.

“Why’s he look so sad?” the man said. “Is he a whittle baby?”

He was almost eight. They got the dog a couple months after their first daughter went off to college—Matt brought him home to Nicole. He was just one month old, looked like a little big-eyed rat. She chose the name. Had the dog taken on too much? She knew he felt what she felt. One time they were walking across the street—she thought she'd seen her sister, who'd died when she was twenty-one. A car accident. Goddamned drunk driver. Nicole had started to have one of those panic attacks—"Elise!" she yelled—she couldn't figure out how to breathe again. El Diablo pulled her forward to the sidewalk, barked until someone saw her hunched over, clutching her chest. She still didn't know if it had just been someone who looked like Elise—or if it had been a ghost. Her ghost. Elise would've turned fifty this year; she was three years older than Nicole.

"Why's he shaking?" the man said.

"He's shaking because he's frightened!" she said. "He thinks you might drop him. Please give him back to me." As the man brought the dog down, El Diablo turned into himself again, growling and reaching for the big, strange hand that held him. Nicole screeched when El Diablo dropped to the ground, holding her face with both hands—he'd only been dropped a foot, but it was just the thought of it, a stranger's hand on her baby, like when they'd identified her sister, the man at the morgue put his hand on her forehead, stroked it softly with his greasy, fat thumb, that fingernail against her sister's soft skin, and Nicole knew anger then, knew the shape of it, the taste of it in her mouth. Why was she there for that, anyway? Her own mother relied on her too much, didn't she? She was too young—eighteen at the time. A tear slid quick down her cheek. The man bent down to pat the dog on the head, and despite herself Nicole yelled, "Leave him alone!"

Before she could stop him, Matt had woken—though he appeared to still be asleep, his eyes were barely open—and he took the man by the shoulders and shoved him against the fence.

“Don’t you touch her!” he said. “Leave us alone!” He punched the man in the face—and quickly Nicole put El Diablo into her bag, zipped it up all of the way, grabbed their other bags, swinging them onto her shoulders, and when blood began to spill out of the man’s nose, she grabbed her husband’s arm, and said, “C’mon, Matty. We’ve gotta go.”

As they ran, Matt still in shock, they passed the cop who was standing under an overhang of a deli, telling a person in a sleeping bag they had to leave. “Move along, lady,” he said. Once they were almost downtown—they’d run almost ten blocks, their breath sticky and hard in their throats—Nicole took El Diablo out of the bag, and held on tight to his leash as he pulled them forward, through a throng of Asian tourists, who looked at the dog, its teeth bared; the people gasped, and parted for them, unintentionally shielding them with their umbrellas. Instead of conferring with Matt—who appeared to be crying silently—saying, “Are we safe?” or “Will everything be okay?” she kept her mouth closed, her eyes ahead in front of them. She was leading them farther and farther from that monster—he was a child, somewhere inside of that body—and told herself she would not cry out, she would not make a sound, she knew how terrifying that was, that sound which suggested too many things. There were children around, a tiny hand wrapped around a mother’s hand, and she did not want to give them another reason to fear. She knew the sight of them—the sight of a woman and a man hunched as they walk

quickly down the street so that no one might notice them—that the sight of her, whispering to herself, her mascara running, could keep them up at night.

Soon, they became tired. It was getting dark.

“I didn’t make him bleed, right?” Matt said, his eyes sore and red. “I thought he was hurting you. I thought he was—

“No,” she said. “You didn’t make him bleed.” They sat down for a moment. They’d have to catch their breath before walking back to their car. The commotion should be over by now, she thought. She pulled a little bowl from her bag, and filled it with water from a bottle they’d gotten at the shelter. She placed it beside El Diablo, but he just looked up at her.

“How’s your leg, Matty?” she said.

“You think anyone saw that? There was that cop across the street—you think he saw that?”

“No,” Nicole said.

Nicole laid her head on his shoulder. Closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she saw Matt had fallen asleep. Then she saw in front of her, a young woman was walking away from them. Her dog, limping beside her, wore a bandanna and a vest. At Nicole’s feet, the girl had placed a container of leftovers. Without thinking, she bent down, and as she sat back up with the container on her lap she caught her reflection in a storefront window. People had always said she and her sister looked alike—but she had never been able to see it. But there—then. Maybe it was something in her eyes; Elise had always had these big, dark eyes. Sad eyes. When Nicole placed her hand on her face,

she felt for a moment that Elise was there—and as Nicole opened up the box of leftovers, she realized how starving she was.

Fire in the Sky

Inside his right boot, Carl slowly moved his big toe in little circles. Leaning on a cold, brick wall outside of the shop, he whispered, *Come on*. He was searching for feeling in the toe, which would be amputated in a week, three days before Christmas. If he felt something, maybe he could tell the surgeon, “Wait! There’s still something there!” His earlobes burned. There was no stopping the infection. He’d read this even before he saw a doctor about it, when he’d looked up, “SWOLLEN TOE DIABETES.” It was headed for his bones. He watched the red sun settle behind the mountains, which were now a blue-gray. Like blue velvet. He felt like his toe could crack, drift away. Would anybody notice? He was thinking about that—about the toe, about the meaning of it—though he was quietly singing, “Softer than satin was the light,” with a steady vibrato, remembering how as a kid he’d wanted to be a singer, like Sinatra, when a gust of wind, carrying the smell of urine, pushed his hat right off his head. It slid on the cement. Carl put out his cigarette and stumbled after it. Each time he caught up to the cap, it skidded further from him, lifting up into the air like a feather. “Come on,” he said. It was his dad’s hat. A black cap with “WWII” and “KOREA” stitched into it in yellow—“VETERAN” just below. Sometimes, when he wore it, he was approached—his hand was shaken. He was looked in the eyes. “Thank you for your service,” the man might say, “Thank you so much,” before his hand was released, before he was able to say that it was his father’s hat, not his. Carl was only sixty-two, but his beard had grown long and gray, and if the

cap was pulled down, it created a shadow over his blue eyes, and, of course, he looked older. This was rare, though, and he didn't mind it. Once, a meal was paid for. A plate of twelve hot wings was set before him; when he looked left and right, a man saluted him from across the bar. But now he was panting, coughing, wiping his eyes when he saw his hat had hit a homeless girl's sign. He'd seen her many times but never up close. Hair dyed green. She was sleeping, her head back against a wall.

"Sorry," Carl said, grabbing the hat near her feet, and quickly walked away.

On his way back into the shop, he saw one of his regulars giving a dollar bill to an old man in a wheelchair. Don't give it to him, Carl wanted to say. That's just what he wants. The man's wheelchair had an American flag tied to the back of it, and Carl thought there was something wrong about that. How can someone claim to love this country when all they did was leech off of it? When Carl heard laughing, he looked back. The young man was sharing a joint with the bum. Carl said, "You can't do that back here," as the man began to exhale.

"Who are you?" he said. "You the owner?"

"Yeah," he said.

Carl knew the man lived over at Franklin Place. "Waiting list is a year, honey," the woman in the office had told Carl when he went over there. "You have Medicare?" When he shook his head, she said, "Well, check back with us in a few years, sweetie." When he walked out, he saw the man in the wheelchair rolling out the automatic doors.

Carl sat down at the register and looked up at the surveillance camera. It pointed down at the register, and—because of where he stood—at him. His boss, a young man

with a cabin out in the mountains, watched the footage every Sunday. Sometimes he called Carl, his voice surprisingly low, and reminded him of when he'd "fucked up." Almost a year before, Carl had been in the back room, about to restock the PBR when a thug came in, grabbed one of the small containers of cigarillos in front of the cash register. Carl went for him, but tripped. Cried out. It was then that he realized something was very wrong with his foot—half of it completely numb. That night, when he got home he sat on the edge of his bed, peeled his sock off, and brought his foot up as high as he could. A red blister had sprouted at the corner of the toe, but it was how big the toe had become which startled him. He took off his other sock, and compared his feet. Carl lay back on his bed, and thought of what he may have looked like on that video. If he'd been allowed to carry a small gun at his belt, he would've popped him, right then. That box of cigarillos would have been right back where it belonged.

Carl tried not to think too much about that night. He felt he'd proven himself since then. He was reliable. He liked working. Never complained about needing to work. He was not like those parasites who hung out by the light. "Homeless Vet," their sign might say—gave veterans a bad name, in his opinion. Looking up at the clock, Carl wet his lips. He thought of his cat. She still smelled like peppermint from a flea treatment he'd rubbed thoroughly through her fur. He'd had to be gentle with her; she had a limp, always had, though he didn't know where she'd gotten it. She was a brave thing. Actually, she inspired him every day.

Carefully, he wiggled his big toe a little in his shoe, breathing in and out, in and out, even though he knew it was too late for that. Fifteen years before, they told him to

keep an eye on his feet; his ex-wife, then a CNA, had made him get a check up, and he did. For her. She left him anyway for one of her client's sons, a commercial real estate broker. She and Carl had not been able to have a child, but within the following year, she got pregnant. Too soon. Just after the baby was born—they lived close to the beach—Carl decided to make a change. Every time he drove past her house all he could think about was the pitying look she gave him before she moved her things into that man's home, a house twice the size of theirs. She was no longer attracted to him, wished he was more confident. "You need to start taking responsibility for yourself, Carl," she said. Years later, Carl still didn't know what exactly she meant by that. At the time, Carl had been working as an insurance rep, a job he hated. But for the most part, Carl felt very confident.

Carl had heard about Colorado from a nephew whose in-laws had a house in Breckenridge. "You wouldn't believe it," he'd said. "The air is just, like, *different* there. People are *happy*. Everyone just goes hiking and skiing and walking all the time." Carl could see himself hiking. Even though he hadn't been skiing since he was a kid on a trip to the Poconos, he could see himself skiing. He kissed his mother goodbye—she no longer recognized him anyway—and that summer, he drove across the country, listening to his John Denver album from college. "And the Colorado rocky mountain high, I've seen it raining fire in the sky, I know he'd be a poorer man if he never saw an eagle fly!" Denver sang.

After that night when he first realized something was wrong, the swollen toe went from purple to gray, and began to crack open, smell like a rotten egg. Only he and his cat knew about it, and that's how he hoped it'd stay. But one night—when the flowers had begun blooming, opening up as if just for him—he forgot about the toe and threw on sandals. A customer noticed the discoloration, told Carl he'd probably qualify for insurance. Medicaid had been expanded.

“I'm not indigent,” Carl had said.

Before he closed up, a couple came in. The little bell woke him up—he'd fallen asleep for just a moment—when the woman let the door slam shut. She clung to the man's left arm, leaning on him as if she couldn't stand on her own.

“Dude,” he said to her. “Quit it.”

“But I'm so drunk,” she said. It was maybe twenty degrees outside, but the woman was dressed in what looked to Carl like a slip, made of sequins. As she stumbled around the store, picking up a pack of gummy bears, sour skittles, bringing them up, close to her face, putting them back, the dress seemed to change colors. Silver to blue to purple like a fish.

A few minutes later, the man placed an energy drink on the counter, and before Carl rang it up, the woman started to open a bottle of Yoo-hoo. She slurped from the top of it. It was as if she'd forgotten how to drink. Chocolate milk spilled down her chin. A soft line of brown curled down her collarbone.

“Shit,” she said, and looked down at it, into the space between her breasts and the dress. She looked up at Carl, and laughed. She drank more from the bottle. Breathing heavy like she was dehydrated. After the man paid, and they were about to walk out, the girl turned on her high heels, and said, “Um. This is going to sound really mean, but there’s this homeless person like right in front of the door and it’s kind of scary.” The man with her sighed, and said, “It’s *fine*.”

“Oh. I guess I’m just an asshole then. Whatever,” she said. “Just like don’t let her get me when we walk out. You don’t know what she’s got in that sleeping bag.” She made big eyes at Carl, as big as she could make them. It seemed hard for her to open them wide.

“Something happens to me it’s *your* fault,” she said, pointing her finger at her boyfriend and then slowly the finger came around to Carl. She seemed to draw a circle around Carl’s face.

After he closed the shop, Carl got a burger and fries from the place a couple blocks away. He ate the burger on the bus. There was a family ahead of him, two kids asleep on their mother’s lap. She looked out the window, slowly petting their heads. The kids shifted slightly when the bus hit a bump; they curled deeper into each other. Carl always wished he had a sibling.

Who are you, was what the bum had said to him. Was that he’d said? He got off the bus and, eventually, with one hand on his stomach, he walked up the two dark flights of stairs. There was an empty feeling in his gut, like a bit of it had been scooped out long ago, and he was only just now noticing. He was thinking about how part of his own body

would just be cut off, tossed into some trash can like it never meant anything in the first place. What was the point of that toe in the first place, if it didn't mean much?

Who are you? he'd said. *You the owner?*

When he opened his door his cat appeared.

"This is for you, cat," he said, as he placed the styrofoam container of fries onto the floor. "There you go," he said, opening it. He rubbed its head, its green eyes flashing at him.

Carl sat in his chair, let his belly out. "We will try this one more time," his ex-wife had said the last time they made love, said it as if she were helping a client move from their chair to the toilet, something she'd complained to him about many times. She moved her hips in wide circles. "Come on. *Come on,*" she said, and he did. He did want a family. He had tried to make one with her—they tried everything aside from IVF, which would have cost them 30,000—but it didn't work. For a minute, biting a nail, he thought about her. Or maybe he was thinking about himself, about who he might have been. He'd always regretted saying, "Food. Sex. Shelter," when she'd asked him what he wanted out of life on their second date. There was more to life than that—he may not have known it then, but he knew it now.

Carl checked the lock on the window, took out a large bag of raisins from the pantry and returned to his chair. He rubbed the calf of one leg with his other foot, pushing a few raisins into his mouth. He took out his phone and looked at his ex-wife's photos on Facebook. He was surprised she had accepted his friend request a month before. A customer had helped him set up an account. Carl zoomed in on her daughter's face. If he'd

had a daughter, maybe she'd pick him up from the hospital. He coughed, and his cat flinched, slipped off his lap, ran into a corner of the room behind his chair. Carl got up, and despite its scratching he picked the cat up, held it like a baby, carried it back to the chair. "Please," he said, holding its soft body tight. "*Stay.*"

Under the covers the next morning, Carl looked at his ex-wife's daughter's big, brown eyes. He wanted to see something of himself in her, wanted to imagine that some of his sperm had, somehow, come alive inside of his wife months after she left. A few weeks before, Carl had written a message to his ex-wife. "Hey," he'd said. He'd even taken and sent her a selfie, something he'd never done before and now regretted. He hadn't heard back. Carl looked at all of her photos carefully, hoping to see a picture of himself somewhere. He paused when he found a picture of her husband. He was standing behind a long white table, a banner behind him reading "JESUS SAVES." He was ladling out soup. He was wearing a big grin, and an old woman holding out her bowl to him seemed to be smiling back. "BLESSED!!!" his wife had written in the caption. Ever since she'd married up, she seemed to think she was better than everyone else.

Without looking her in the face, he clicked the cat's thin leash to its collar and locked the door behind him. They walked down the two flights of stairs. "Let's go," Carl said to the cat, tip-toeing as if each step she took hurt. "Come on," he said. Outside the sun was unrelenting. His cat's tail snaked through the air. By the playground in the park, they sat on a bench. A father helped his daughter slowly down the slide. She ran up again.

He waited for her at the bottom, arms open. Carl couldn't help but laugh along with the little girl. She was adorable, curly brown hair like he'd had as a kid. His mother had always called him her little "Shirley Temple"—he had a high voice as a boy, like Frankie Valli—until it started to upset him. Carl thought of his mother in that nursing home, playing with that Barbie doll she loved, and tried to remember why he moved to Colorado in the first place. She died a year after he left. Last time he saw her she was in her casket, holding that doll. Somehow, she was still smiling.

When they got home, the cat walked away from Carl. In the evenings, she rarely spent time with him.

That night at work he got a call from his boss. He'd watched the footage from the night before, had seen the homeless girl move herself and her belongings next to the front door. In the past year, his boss had lights installed outside the storefront. "The homeless are taking over Denver," he'd told Carl. "We need to be ready." He'd seen the girl step over the body, zipped up almost completely in a sleeping bag.

"I told you to call the cops if anyone stays out there," he said. "That girl seemed scared."

"It was raining," Carl said. After the couple had left he'd opened the door and looked to his left; all he could see was a bit of her green hair sticking out at the end. She was curled against the wall beneath the overhang, using her bag as a pillow.

"The cops will find them somewhere to stay. You'd rather them stay out there in the rain? Listen, Carl. I need you to understand something. If we lose business, you lose

business. Get it? If people don't come in and buy shit, I don't get paid. If I don't get paid, you don't get paid."

At some point, Carl had stopped listening. He'd been working there for five years. He didn't think he'd ever be fired. But then his boss seemed to notice Carl wasn't paying attention. "I've been thinking about giving you a raise," he said suddenly. "Fifteen an hour, okay? But I need to know you're serious."

"I am," Carl said. He'd just gotten a notice saying his rent would be going up January 1st. He owed \$150 on his gas bill. He already had a stack of medical bills, the biggest one yet to arrive. A few days after that first message he'd sent his ex wife, he broke down, messaged her again. He'd explained that he was about to lose his car—though he'd lost his car a few years before—that if he could borrow just a grand, he'd pay it back straight away. Carl had never been so ashamed before in his life. A few days after that, he sent her a picture of his toe.

Carl lay in bed that night looking at a photo of his ex-wife and her new family. In it, she had her arm around her husband and her daughter. They were on a beach. Orange and pink light. Bare shoulders. The next photo was just his ex-wife and the daughter, their faces pressed together, flowers in their hair. The husband had most likely taken this photo. The caption read, "GRATEFUL!!!" Carl noticed his ex-wife's teeth were whiter than they'd been; he gently ran his tongue over his own.

December 17, 2016

When Carl received the check, he looked at it for a while, and then set it aside.

As he headed into work that night, he noticed the girl in the crook of the storefront. It wasn't even raining that night. Even though she wasn't bothering anyone—at least no one had complained yet—her presence began to irk him. He knew he'd get shit from his boss about it sooner or later. He needed that raise.

The check came with a note: "God bless you!" It wasn't his ex's handwriting, which had always been script. These were blocky print letters. Childish handwriting. The husband's words. What did he expect? Of course she'd tell him, tell him how her ex was pathetic, couldn't even take care of himself—maybe she'd even shown him the picture of Carl's rotten toe.

No one came into the store for two hours, and Carl was suddenly sure that it was because the homeless girl was intimidating all the customers. Just the sight of her made people turn away. Before he knew it, Carl was dialing 911. Soon, he was saying, "Yes, I *am* the business owner." It was not much longer before a police car stopped right in front of the store. Carl looked out the window, pulling his cap low over his eyes. He watched the cop nudge the girl with his boot, at the end of the woman's sleeping bag where it seemed her feet might be. She slowly sat up and pulled her belongings closer to her, away from the door. She said something to the cop, and he stood with his hands in his pockets, shaking his head. As the girl began to get up, the sleeping bag fell down to her waist. Carl

counted to sixty seconds, waiting for her to disappear. He stood up from the stool and went outside.

“Hello, officer,” he said. “You going to take her to a shelter?”

“She didn’t have an ID on her,” he said. “At least she’s outta your way, right?” he said, before slamming his car door.

December 21, 2016

It was a day before his surgery and Carl still had to find a ride home from the hospital. At work, he sighed and looked down at the slope of his belly, watched his breath expand his middle. He stretched his arms out. Palms up. His first appointment with her, the doctor had said he should schedule in five minutes per day of “flex time.”

“Can you touch your toes, Carl?” she’d said. “C’mon. Show me.

“You know,” she’d said. “Most problems come from letting things go. Not noticing them. Not paying attention. If you gave it your all, this wouldn’t have had to happen.” A smile spread across her face at the end of each sentence. Told him maybe this would teach him to never take his feet for granted. Said, “I want to show you something,” and, because he had a hard time seeing the bottom of his foot, she put his chair in front of a mirror, propped his leg up, and had him watch as she peeled back a layer of spongy skin on the bottom of the toe, revealing black-red flesh.

“You see that wound? It’s deeper than you think. There’s very little meat between what you see here and the bone—and we want to save that bone. That is a good bone. We need that bone. That bone is okay for now, and we need to keep it that way.”

On his break, Carl went out to smoke. He had not seen the homeless girl since he’d called the cops on her. Snow covered the cement; the streets looked abandoned. It gave him an eerie feeling, like the world had ended.

Carl went back inside, set his hat on the counter. He was training a new clerk who would be working over the break. A student at Metro Denver. “Hey, John,” he said. The kid was staring at his phone. “You seen this homeless woman around here?”

“Um,” the kid said, tapping little balloons on his screen. “There’s, like, homeless everywhere here, Carl.”

“This one’s hair is green. Neon green.”

“Green?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s weird.” He had not looked up at Carl. Then he said, “Shit motherfucker.” He looked up and said, “I lost.”

An hour later Carl asked John if he, by any chance could pick him up from the hospital after his surgery. “The doctor says I shouldn’t ride the bus. It’s not safe.”

“Fuck safe,” the kid said, eyes down again. “Sorry. Oh. What? Nah, I can’t. I have, um, class tomorrow. I’m also on probio. Can’t drive.”

Eventually John showed Carl how to download the Uber app.

“You totally got this,” John said, patting him on the back as Carl surfed around the app on his phone.

After he closed up at eleven, Carl got two burgers. Two fries. In the dark, he looked for her green head. Carl had always refused—though politely—to give her money. Now, if he did find her, he’d leave the bag of food there; he hoped she’d be asleep, hoped she’d have the sleeping bag zipped up over her head. Still, he wanted her to know who he was.

“Thank you, sir,” she’d say. “I’m so hungry.” Maybe he’d take a photo of the exchange. Carl had seen someone comment on his ex-wife’s Thanksgiving day photo of her husband: “Making a difference in the world!” Carl asked a man at the corner of Colfax and Washington about the girl, nodding towards her spot. But the two became distracted by a couple of women, lips bright red, who passed them on the sidewalk. Their linked arms tightened as they passed. One of them glanced up, back, and smiled at Carl in a pitying way that he did not appreciate.

December 22, 2016

A nurse wheeled Carl outside, and said to him, “Where’s your ride, honey?” Carl wished the sky was gray. It was too blue. Dishonest. He tapped on his phone but it would not work.

The beautiful, blonde-haired nurse said, “Are they on their way, you think?”

“Yeah,” Carl said. “Around the corner.”

“Oh, good. Okay, well let me help you. We’re going to move you to this bench over here—I’ll hand you your crutches, okay? And you know what to do when you get home, right? Good. Okay, and we will see you in a week.”

It took Carl a half an hour to cross the street. By the time he got to the bus stop, he was drenched. Climbing the steps was more difficult than anything Carl had ever done before, and he moaned as he reached the top step.

Then there she was. The woman with the green hair. She was sitting with a little boy. They were looking at a book together. She was saying, “Good. Now, what’s four plus four?”

The boy stared at Carl, and said, “What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s sick. Don’t stare like that. It’s rude. Move your leg out of the aisle.”

Somehow Carl got up his stairs. Took some more pain killers. He fell asleep. He had a dream. In it, he called his trainee.

“John. It’s Carl. I just wanted to let everyone know the surgery was a success.”

Pain crawled up his leg like a snake. “John, do me a favor,” he said, and then the cat was with him. Its tongue—sliding up and down Carl’s cheek—felt like sandpaper. He was in bed, looking at the ceiling, at the blue paint cracking. He remembered something the doctor had said: “Cracked skin equals fungus. Fungus equals wound. Wound equals infection.”

“Tell that girl if she wants a job tomorrow, I need a maid. Give her my address and tell her I’ll be waiting.” Carl dreamt that she showed up with her little boy. He was

not ready. He'd still been asleep. When they took one step inside, they saw Carl lying there and Carl couldn't move, couldn't get up. Couldn't speak. They were staring at him, and he felt himself trying to hide, trying to say, "I'm sorry," but nothing came out. They saw that Carl had no foot, that the blood was flowing out from the end, spilling over the edge of the bed, smelled like Carl's rotten toe. "This is too much for me to take care of," the girl said. "You need to learn to take care of yourself." When he woke up a day later, a letter came telling him his phone had been shut off.

January 2, 2017

As the doctor re-bandaged his foot, Carl said, "Can you hurry up?" He was hoping to catch the same bus he'd caught the day of the surgery. He'd brought his ex-wife's coat with him, which he'd found underneath the seat of his truck a few years earlier when he turned it into a scrap yard. It'd been the last time he'd seen the mountains up close; his truck broke down on the way back. Now nothing was left from that trip. The day after the toe amputation Carl had woken up to wood chips spread throughout the two-room apartment. He'd positioned his pinecones he'd collected along the mantel. "Come here, cat," he said, and she crawled onto his chest. He hadn't been able to give her any of that wet food she liked since he'd become bedridden. Gently he squeezed the meat on her back legs with his pointer and thumb. When he held her close to him, he said, "You deserve better," and put his forehead gently to hers.

The coat was pink, plush, and even had some white fur around the hood. He would give this to the girl, no matter what. But now Carl, already wearing his own coat, had begun to feel cold all over while waiting for the bus, even where that pain usually fizzed at the missing tip of his foot. He hesitated before he decided to put the pink coat on. He licked his upper lip. His nose wouldn't stop running and though he tried to stop himself before it happened, he wiped it with his pink sleeve. "God *damnit*," he said, looking at it. "Christ!" Carl didn't scan the bus for her face, but sat in the same seat he'd sat in before. Carl glanced back and sure enough there she was, her hair greener than ever. The boy was not with her this time. She had her bag beside her. The one he'd seen her move the night he called the cops. He could hear her speaking on the phone. "See you tomorrow. I love you." Carl couldn't remember the last time he'd said, "I love you," to anyone.

When the bus pulled to a corner and the girl stood, Carl's pulse raced. Her eyes flashed at him. He was standing right behind her now—there were only a few other passengers—his mouth still open. He couldn't breathe through his nose. The door opened and he stepped down and out after her.

The girl began walking very fast. Maybe she didn't know who he was. Maybe she didn't remember. Carl tried to keep up. He needed to show her he was not sick. He was fine. He was not the one who needed help. She was. But he couldn't give her the jacket he was now wearing—his snot was all over it—but he could offer her something else,

some kind of message of hope. It would come to him in the moment. Carl felt determined—he wouldn't lose her again. "Come on," he said to himself, to his foot. Not again. He followed her through a crowd of people who'd just been let out of a concert—he elbowed his way through, peeking up and over shoulders to keep an eye on the girl's green head. He felt in that moment that this was meant to be, that this was exactly where he needed to be, that she had a green head so that he could find her, offer her something, though he wasn't sure what it would be. First he needed to apologize. He needed to apologize before doing anything else. First he would apologize for calling the cops—that was wrong. He knew that now. "You deserve more," he'd say. When he saw the green blur turn a sharp left, down an alleyway, he took a breath and continued on.

Just then the girl, who was standing on a few steps to his left, sprayed him in the face with something like fire. Before his eyes began to burn, what he saw was the girl looming above him like an angel, her hair like a green halo. He stumbled, moaning, but didn't quite fall—and he felt the girl running past him. He heard the echo of her footsteps like rain—like rain becoming lighter, and lighter. He turned towards the noise of the street he'd been on—where there were people he'd find help! "Help!" he said. "—Fuck off me, man," someone responded, and a woman, whose breast he'd accidentally grazed with his elbow, "Creep!" And then, once she'd taken a better look at him—his face hidden by the wet fur on his hood, his eyes squinting—"What the fuck?" As the crowd grew thicker, Carl was pushed, and he tripped down the curb into the street. He heard honking. He could hear his heart in his ears. He was alive. He saw lights, blooming white and yellow.

Carl sat in his chair, closed his eyes. His cat was on his shoulder, licking his eyes. “Thank you,” he said. He turned to his CD player, slid in his John Denver CD, pressed play. “He left yesterday behind him,” Denver sang, “you might say he was born again.” Carl began to remember that last trip to the mountains. He’d driven up after working the morning shift, woke up to find he’d parked beside a river, smooth like silk—like this dress his ex-wife had worn in the beginning. He couldn’t see where the river began or where it ended. He walked carefully down to the water, took his shoes off. Peeled off his socks.

When Carl opened his eyes, the cat was looking directly at him. Her yellow eyes rimmed with green. As he looked at her, he knew someone had pulled him out of the street. Maybe it was the girl. And in that moment, Carl could swear the cat was thinking the same thing he was. It was the longest they’d held each other’s gaze. “I love you,” Carl said, and swore he heard it back.

Hope and a Future

1996

Pat worked in the Safeway beside the laundromat where Edwina folded clothes behind a light green linoleum counter. She let him wash his clothes for free, once, interrupting him as he counted change in front of a machine. “Here,” she said, taking four quarters from the cash register. She whispered something in his ear, but all he could remember from that moment was her nails on his palm. Edwina was from Texas, Pat from New York. Although he never saw them up close, Pat came to Denver because of the mountains. It was as if just knowing they were nearby was a comfort, like he’d achieved something just by being there.

1998

“Let me tell you a story,” Edwina said to him one night, when she was pregnant with their first child. She laid her head on his chest. There’d been something about the way he’d folded his clothes that drew her near him, she said, as if he didn’t know how to do it but tried very hard. Or maybe it was the time and the place in which he stood near her which lay on him a strange orange glow. She spoke with her eyes closed, spoke in images, in pieces. When she’d first met him, she explained, she had never seen fall before—and there was something about watching the leaves become full, heavy with gold

and red and green, then become pale, the color of flesh, red and pink and veined, as if they'd turned inside out, become thin as butterfly wings, fall, and turn to dust. Edwina had had a life—she'd been married before, he knew that—but now she said there'd been a baby, stopped breathing one night. Maybe that's why she'd fallen in love with Pat, that she knew she could take care of him, that she knew he needed her—she stared at the ceiling now as she spoke—that and the leaves falling around them, turning the ground pink.

2002

Pat and Edwina rented a house in a Chicano neighborhood, and once in a while they would walk down the street for burritos, Pat with his hand around James's and Winny's around the baby's. He worked for a construction company. He was hopeful that he'd learn how to frame doors soon—in which case he'd get a fifty cent raise. "I'm gonna build us one of those houses like out near the plains. Horses roaming. Sky like cotton candy," he said, as they waited to cross the street.

"What's cotton candy?" James said. He had curly black hair which Pat wound around his thumb. Winny looked up at Pat, smiled gently.

Pat always checked the dumpster before he went to work. More out of curiosity rather than necessity. But sometimes he found something useful, like a brand new mop or a rake with only slightly bent prongs. One afternoon, when Winny and the boys arrived home from church, Pat was out front, raking the leaves into little mounds of light. His boys jumped into the piles; the leaves broke into shards of orange and green and red. His

wife laughed with her head back, teeth glinting. Pat felt his body crack open. The sun reached down into him. *Thank you*, he found himself saying. *Thank you*.

2006

Once, Pat found a fur coat that he gave to Edwina who complained that it was not real fur and didn't he know that? He did not tell her where it came from. He did not tell her that he had been drinking with Terrance, his boss.

Edwina wanted to have another baby—it seemed to Pat that she was only happy with her breasts full and sore, a tiny mouth against her nipple—but Pat told her he could barely afford the bus the way it was rising every year, let alone another God damn baby, and Edwina got a job at a saloon down on Federal. She walked there six nights a week at dusk; a man at the corner would cackle at her in Spanish. Lick his lips.

One night when she got home she woke him up, told him that neither of their boys were ever as beautiful as her baby girl had been—the one she'd killed. It wasn't your fault, he said. But, she whispered, I put too many blankets in her crib. An extra quilt, yellow and green and purple, because it was so cold. He left me, she said, that God damned son of a bitch. Her heat had been turned off. Still, it was *her* fault—*she* was the mother. She slapped her own face once and then again—began to cry, and when Pat grabbed her wrists she bit his breast, and a red line slipped down his chest.

Not *real*? Pat had said, inspecting the hairs of the fur coat with the tips of his fingers. She told him she didn't want to look like trash even if he did. They'd been married for almost ten years. She looked at him with small, suspicious eyes.

2013

Pat was pushing a wheelbarrow full of silver rocks when his knee snapped, and he felt everything go white and red just like when he got sick from drinking. He fell, the little, glittering stones spilling on top of him.

After that he didn't work for six months, and his friend George told him he should apply to get Disability. Edwina talked about the guys at her work, where she was a waitress, calling her baby and buying her drinks and everything.

I put my breasts out like this, she said, nudging them up toward her chin with little fists. *I get more tips like that*. Edwina's voice had become deep as if it had suddenly fallen an octave, now stemmed from a different part of her chest. Yet it was shallow, as if she had trouble breathing. She told him her voice had changed because they let customers smoke in the saloon, that if only he took care of things, none of this would have happened. She spoke in spurts when she found the energy. When she was not alive with anger, she curled into herself like a leaf.

Pat tried real hard to get the Disability. When the doc put a fingertip on his knee, tiny shocks raced up his thigh. Pat answered questions to see if he was crazy. He didn't mention that when he was sixteen he got so high just after his mother died, that his friends were in a bright blue room in Queens with women doing things that he wished he didn't see, that his friends looked like demons, yellow eyes and red mouths—he didn't mention that sometimes those demons made him real angry towards Edwina. He thought for a moment about telling the doctor. When Pat had told George that he didn't deserve shit, that no one else should pay for his mistakes, George said, "That might help you.

That you got nothing, ya know?" But then Pat noticed how clean the doctor's nails were, that he was clean shaven, that he was young enough to be his son. He decided he better not tell him.

And Pat would not tell Edwina why he left New York—that some days he dreamt of being a boy again. That some days he missed his mother.

2016

I want you to beg, she said to him one night when he was drunk. She was a blur of gold to him. He crawled toward her; she backed away.

You don't do anything for the boys, so why do we need you? she said. His youngest was watching from the doorway. Pat stumbled to his feet, fell towards Edwina, put his arms around her waist.

You hit their mother in front of them—they see it. What do you think they think.

Hmm?

Pat looked at his boy, licked his lips and mouthed something. He began to cry. Then he turned to his wife, and said, *You hit me too, Winny*. And he held up his chin—*See?*—where once she brought a steak knife to his face and gave him a small, slow cut when he was passed out and hadn't seen it coming, where there was a thick, shiny scar.

She said, *But you are the man. You are the man.*

2017

“How’d you lose those two teeth anyway?” Brie, who worked at the supermarket, said to Pat one morning. She told him he might qualify for new teeth—that Medicaid was no longer just covering extractions, that her man had just gotten some.

“I was in an accident,” he said.

He was fifteen, and his mom had needed to go to the store across the city. He had to step up, he’d been told, being the only man in the house. That was when she’d stopped taking her meds. Pat didn’t stop at a stop sign and a truck came from the right.

Pat kept his eyes down as he asked for a pack of cigarettes. He’d been sleeping in his car; it’d been two months since he’d seen Edwina.

“How’re the boys?” she said. “How’s Winny?”

“James’s got a girlfriend,” he said. But Pat didn’t know much about James, who was seventeen and had been expelled from school twice. He’d found out about the girlfriend from pictures online. In one photo the boy held a gun up in the air, eyes thin, his face pale. That last time he saw him in person James had a yellow-purple smear beneath his right eye, the color of the sun rising in winter. He’d looked at Pat with a sideways smile, like he knew Pat’s secrets. Pat knew even less about his fourteen-year-old, who had always been too forgiving, his eyes big and naive like those of a horse.

Pat was sleeping in the car when a lady knocked on his car window. Her face was like old rose petals. He rolled down the window, wiping his mouth and sitting up straight.

“Sorry,” he said. “Sorry, Ma’am. I’ll leave.”

“You need money?” she said. She looked like water to him.

“Okay,” he said.

In her garden, he would use his muscles to pull thick weeds up, careful around the limp raspberries and strawberries. He tiptoed around tiny white flowers that coated patches of blue grass. He didn’t know if they were weeds—if they were meant to be there or not, but he bent down, and gently he threaded his fingers beneath the petals, bent down to see if they had a scent.

The pink sun fell onto Pat and when he woke up, his wife, Edwina, was still gone. He squinted ahead at the light, at the thin window five or so feet above where he slept. There was a pain in his jaw, as if the tendons throughout it were being stretched in opposite directions. “*God damn,*” he said. He sat up, cupping it, holding it gently with both hands, holding the weight of his head. The pain was his new teeth, put into his mouth days before. The dentist said they would hurt some, and Pat wanted to drink bad but he had a plan. He hadn’t had a drink in three months. He even had a new job, pulling weeds for the old lady with fat, white legs—she even let him live in her basement room. Pat’s tongue lapped in his mouth. He’d been feeling older than he was—he was almost sixty—but as his breath became long and steady, he felt a surge of hope. He thought of the beginning, when Edwina pushed her body onto his. *Oh my God,* he had said once, *Oh my God,* and she’d said, *You are my man. Show me you are my man,* and he grew for her and he was amazed, and she said, *Come on. Show me,* and he grew stronger and stronger, and

he was a man for her for a moment, her face wild and her teeth like the mountain tops, her neck long and yellow like the golden plains.

He stood to his feet, holding on to the edge of the bed for balance. All he would have to do now was smile at Edwina to get her to see him like a man again.

Before heading upstairs to get cleaned up he made the bed, carefully tucking in the flowered sheets, and looked at the plaque on the wall. It was a bible verse. It said: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope, and a future.”

Slowly, he walked up the fifteen steps; counting them made it easier. He walked with a cane he found.

“Good morning, Patrick,” the old lady said to him from the kitchen. He could smell peppermint tea, hear a spoon against the rim of her cup. Pat looked at himself in a bathroom mirror, opening his mouth, pushing his teeth out. Lately he’d been dreaming of the gray beach, of Coney Island after the high season. He thought of the seagulls and the Ferris Wheel. Sometimes he thought maybe he was ready to go back home—that his boys would get a kick out of the arcades, that he could teach them to swim. He bent closer to the mirror, his teeth soft and white as seashells.

As he walked up the three, cracked steps of the house he and Winny shared he noticed that Edwina’s plants were almost dead—and his heart raced, worrying that something had happened, that maybe they had been evicted, that maybe she went back to Texas to her grandma’s, took the boys with her, that he would never get to show her his

new teeth, that he was no longer drinking, that he was going to church—that his boys wouldn't see him on his feet again. He thought about Edwina's hands, which had always been like the hands of an old woman—that the last time he'd seen her she'd seemed to be slanted like their little house.

He opened the door. His youngest was sitting on the floor in front of a TV. A lamp shed a big, yellow light on the boy, who rounded his eyes up at Pat, eyes too hopeful—and Pat got nervous, suddenly realized he'd left his cane in his car, and though it was hard for him to walk on his bad leg he remembered God has a plan for him, and his teeth ground with each step until he made it to the backyard, where there was music playing, smoke wafting, where there was laughter, both shrill and high and low and coarse.

Edwina was sitting on a man's lap, a man with a thick mustache and big, chapped lips. She shifted, but didn't stand. She covered her face in her little hands, her forehead folded like a quilt. Only the deepening crack in between her eyes showed her age—she was still small and limp, as if she no longer had the strength to hold herself up. "Pat," she said, her voice like a kite, and with great effort she inhaled, reeled it back in. "I'm sorry, but I told you," she said, her voice faint. "I told you." Her eyes were iridescent, opaque like the eyes of a sick dog. She was not looking at him.

Now Pat saw there were other people sitting around drinking beer and playing cards and that his other boy—the one that looked too much like him—was drinking a beer, his eyes heavy and long as if he had been drinking all day. Pat noticed Winny's hand—the web of veins, like lace on top of her hands, had swollen—and went to this boy, put his hand on his shoulder, and said, "James, what's wrong with your mother?"

but the boy ignored him, cracked another beer open. Pat looked back at Winny—felt everyone was looking at him, that his whole body was on fire—and felt a sharp pain at his groin when he saw her shift into the man. His knee began to ache with a might not like before, as if it were tearing open again, as if all that had healed was being undone. The pain spread into his whole leg, his stomach, his chest. Pat could not fall in front of his boys—especially not his boys—and stumbled towards the back gate. Edwina stood, unsteady on her feet, and followed him. “Go!” she said, pushing him in the back. “Just go! I told you to let me go!” It was the same voice as the demons—deep, pulsing in his ears.

Let me go, she said, and Pat’s foot fell into a crack, a hole, in the pavement, and he saw the boy with the brown eyes running toward him, and Edwina was behind the boy, slumped against the gate, and now she was only a blur—no longer slanted, but shapeless, like a seagull from a memory that had already flown passed.

Pat could hear the old woman open the front door. She was humming something but he couldn’t make out what. Pat had stopped at the liquor store. He was slouched at the kitchen table. His face was burning. Melting. She walked into the kitchen. He looked at her through milky eyes until he couldn’t bear it. At once, as he lay his head on the table, as his eyes began to close, she looked like Edwina, like his mother, like those women in that blue room. I’m sorry, he tried to say, but soon he felt a palm on the back of his neck, felt her say, “Shh...” Pat felt her sit beside him, felt the weight of his head suddenly gone. She cradled him against her chest. He felt the rise and fall of her breath, heard her heart beating steady. She took his hand in hers, and, after a moment, began: *For*

the sake of his sorrowful passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world. For the sake of his sorrowful passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world. For the sake of his sorrowful passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world.

Her Baby

Madisen was always worried someone was going to take her baby. More than anything in the world she wanted to keep her baby, and when the day was through—she did maintenance at the Holiday Inn from three to six, worked the cash register at Dollar General from ten to two—she looked at him, her baby, and when he'd say, "My mommy," she'd say, "That's right, baby. I'm your momma. You're my baby."

It had been done to her own mother—well, Madisen was twelve when she was taken—so why wouldn't it be done to her? To her best friend, Sara, too—actually *two* of Sara's babies had been taken. (To be fair Madisen thought Sara should be more careful, think more about what she wanted from life.) Once, when Madisen's baby tripped and fell down their four carpeted stairs, even after she saw that he was fine, looking over at her as if he were only a bit surprised, she nearly threw up. After she picked him up, pressed his hot face to her cheek, she worried that someone had heard the sound—*had* there been a sound?—that someone might start knocking on her door, asking about her baby. Not the landlord, Nico, who was never around—sometimes she thought she could even trust him—but maybe a neighbor, the Spanish speaking woman downstairs who seemed nice but Madisen could never tell what she was saying so how did she know if she would try to take her baby—they could call, they could say she shouldn't have her baby. Once when her baby had a rash—not anything abnormal, just the way babies get sometimes—she rubbed his sore cheeks with face moisturizer, even put some powder on

his face to cover up the redness, worrying someone might think she even *did* something to her baby...

She *was* a mother, and a good mother, a *really* good mother and on the bus to the doctor's office—her baby had a routine check up scheduled—she went *ahhh*, as if she were opening her mouth for a doctor to see all the way to the back of her throat. Her baby looked into her mouth, and his eyes went wide. She knew *she* would be the one questioned, examined. She stuck out her tongue and her baby laughed at that, mimicked her, his little mouth open. Madisen rubbed her nose to his nose and, her hands curled about his, sang, "You're *my* baby. My baby. My baby. Baby, baby, baby."

In order to get to the hospital, Madisen had to take three different buses. She smiled to the second bus driver when she boarded. He'd looked a bit like her baby's father, Aaron, his eyes sparkling like the ocean.

"Morning, Ma'm," he'd said. He had a nice accent, elegant-like, from Africa maybe, and Aaron did not sound like that at all. Aaron was from Nebraska. Aaron was thirty-six. His hair was even turning gray though he wore a baseball cap most of the time. Aaron was not in jail anymore, but he was at a halfway house on the other side of Denver. When Madisen had his baby, they were living out of Aaron's Auntie's car. She cried when the nurse finally said, "Well, he's yours. You can take him home in a day or so," on account of Aaron's grandma letting them stay.

To the receptionist at the doctor's office, Madisen said, "I am his mother," though the woman hadn't yet asked. She bounced him on her hip. She sang in a quick rhythm—

singing helped calm her—“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...” But she kept her eyes on the receptionist. Even now, two—almost three—years later, she was sure that the receptionist was looking at her as if she were *not* his mother.

Madisen did not like—she did not appreciate the pitying look of the nurses, their hair always sharp as if they’d just had a haircut. Her *own* hair was blonde too but had a couple of pink highlights that her friend Deserae had given her. This moment, this day, she wished she did not have those pink highlights.

Her baby hiccuped and Madisen rocked him. The receptionist might even go ahead and ask Madisen questions, about her home or about her job or what foods she gave him. Madisen wanted to give him good food—she even made a list before she went to Walmart every other week. Getting him to eat the good stuff was hard though—no one had taught her to be a mother, she’d had to learn it all on her own—and what he preferred was macaroni and cheese. Chicken—*yes*, he did eat chicken. She needed to remember to tell the doctor at the clinic about that—he ate a lot of chicken. She could also mention that she’d been given a seventy-five cent raise—that was something, showed she was trying.

“Follow me, Madisen,” the nurse said—a different nurse, her lashes golden.

She didn’t look so different from Madisen. Madisen was twenty-six and guessed this woman was about the same. There was a thin, blue ring through the nurse’s nose, something Madisen had always wanted. She had told her Auntie Linda that she wanted one—it’d been a few months since she’d seen her mother, then—but that was when her

Auntie told her that her mother wouldn't be out of jail for another year. That's when she found that out.

Madisen looked at the spaces around her, the gray-blue things, the plastic walls, the medical equipment, the scale like the one they'd recently weighed her on. After years without any check-ups Madisen had been grateful when they got insurance—grateful, even, to have her woman parts examined, to know that she was clean, now, inside and out, grateful too that it had been a woman doctor. Flinching as she had even then, Madisen could not have handled a man doctor sticking that thing into somewhere she couldn't see—scared that depending on what that doctor saw inside of her they could decide to take something from her.

“He's a *cutie*,” an older nurse said to her as she passed. Madisen looked back at her. She was leaning on a cubicle wall, one foot crossed over the other. White sneakers with a pink stripe right around them. As he slipped lower down, Madisen caught him with her hip. Madisen had always been thin and narrow, but somehow her body changed as she grew her baby—now, her hips cupped him perfectly, both the left and right side, as if it were all meant to be.

“How old is he?” the woman called.

Madisen stopped and turned, thinking now that it might look bad on her and her baby if she was rude. “Two—and three months.” She forced a smile. Then the woman crouched in front of her baby and gently gripped his black hair, alive with tight curls, with both hands. “Ugh! I *love* his hair,” the woman said, “I wish *I* had his hair.” The

woman threw her head back, a cloud of gray. Then, very seriously, her mouth sad, looking not at Madisen but into Madisen's baby's eyes, she said, "Do you know how beautiful you are?"

Madisen took a step back from the woman. *She* loved his hair, and she hoisted him up, held him close, let her own straight hair cover his face. She did not like the way people stared, the way black women squinted, suspicious of her, the way white women talked about his "complexion." To these women Madisen wanted to say, "Yes. He is beautiful. He *knows* he is beautiful," but when she was talking to some kind of authority figure, like a landlord, a cop, a church lady, even, she found it was safer to say nothing at all.

Sometimes, though, when she felt brave, she said, "I am his mother," enunciating *mother*, as if there were nothing worse she could say.

The nurse showed Madisen to a room. When Madisen put him down, took her jacket off, she noticed that she had put two different socks on her baby's feet. One was yellow, and one had Elmo on it. "*Shit*," she said, and pulled the bottom of his pants leg down, covering the tops of the socks. He had tiny blue jeans on. She gave her baby the best things—sometimes she could only afford clothes from Goodwill or the Arc, but when she brought him anywhere like this she made sure to put him in his best clothes. She'd given him a long bath beforehand, put some lip gloss on her own lips, even some eye liner. Sometimes she ran gel through his hair so it wasn't too frizzy—once, she'd even tried to braid it into tiny braids like she'd seen the other little boys at his daycare wearing, but that didn't work. Now, she licked her palm and smoothed his hair down. He

began to moan. “Momma’ll be done in one minute, baby,” she said. She had put him on the soft bench, and crouched before him, made sure all of his buttons were aligned and snapped correctly, his tiny shoelaces tied. As, she retied the shoelaces three times until she’d made a perfect bow, he watched her, his lips apart. She took her Chapstick out and with her finger spread some along his upper lip, which was chapped from a recent cold. He started to cry, and she said, “*Shhh.*”

It was at least twenty minutes before the doctor came in—a young woman with thin eyes, thin lips. “How are you today, Madisen?” she said, slowly.

“Fine.” Madisen had put her baby on the table where he would be examined, wanting to be ready for the doctor, but when the doctor noticed him she said, “You can hold him. He doesn’t have to be up there.”

“Oh,” Madisen said, grabbing him. “I don’t usually put him up high like that—just thought it’d be easier for you to—”

“How’s everything at home Madisen?”

“Fine.”

Suddenly Madisen noticed a fly—a dead fly—in the cup of water one of the nurses had given her. His tiny legs were limp, soft; the black of them seemed to extend into the water like ink. The doctor squinted at her, looked back down at her notepad.

“His father around?”

“I teach my baby everything he needs to know.”

Madisen held her baby on her lap as the doctor checked his ears, his heart beat, had him open his mouth wide, pressed his tongue down with a depressor. When he coughed Madisen said, “He’s okay. He’s fine,” and, “You okay, baby?”

“Just need to weigh him now,” the doctor said and took him to place him on the scale, just outside of the room. Madisen’s throat became tight as he disappeared—but she placed both hands on her knee and waited. For what seemed to be forever, she waited, until finally the doctor came back into the room and said, “He’s underweight.”

“Well, I *feed* him,” Madisen said, in a tone she regretted.

“I’m sure you do,” the doctor said, her back still to Madisen—still turned away, writing something in her book. When she turned around, she didn’t look Madisen in the eyes, even though Madisen was searching, sitting patiently, her left leg shaking, for something on the doctor’s face. Instead, the doctor just said, “I’m writing down a list of—what he should eat.” Madisen did not like the way the woman seemed to dumb down what she said.

The doctor tore off the slip of paper and handed it to Madisen. As Madisen walked out, her baby in her arms, the receptionist said, “The doctor would like to see him in eight weeks. Just to make sure he’s normal—that he’s gaining weight.” That receptionist didn’t let Madisen see her eyes either, as if they all knew something she didn’t.

Madisen stared hard at the paper on the way home—and, later, as her baby was napping she knocked on her neighbor’s door. Cassie had a toothbrush in her mouth. She worked at the Ceasar’s Pizza nearby, smelled like Pepperoni. She looked little inside her

Broncos sweatshirt—her man’s, Madisen guessed. Madisen didn’t mind Cassie’s boyfriend, though he wasn’t supposed to be living there with her since it was Section 8. She wasn’t about to rat anyone out, but she *did* hear some noises—she’d heard them a few times actually. Shouting. Things knocked to the floor maybe. She couldn’t tell for sure. Madisen had thought of interrupting what she heard, knocking on Cassie’s door, yelling something simple like, “I hear you!” She didn’t know if she’d be yelling it to Cassie—only to let her know that someone was there with her, if she felt all alone in it—or if she’d be yelling it to Cassie’s boyfriend, the one with the eyebrows. Like a warning. Usually, sitting on her couch with her baby, trying to read him a story, she’d hear those noises start up. Her heart would thump like a fish out of its bowl—one of her pet fishes had committed suicide that way when she was a little girl, when Madisen’s mother had forgotten to buy more fish food—as if the yelling and the other loud noises were directed at her. She worried if she called the police on that man he would take it out on Cassie—*then* she thought about what he would do if he’d found out it was she who had called the police.

Cassie squinted at the words. “I can’t read cursive either. All I can make out is milk.”

The next day, she set out before work to Walmart. She made a face at her baby in his stroller, and he smiled. It was a twenty minute walk to the Walmart; she didn’t mind it, let the sun warm her face, though she did mind all of the dips, the cracks in the sidewalk which made it near impossible to walk with that stroller, especially with its broken

wheel. She had her WIC checks in her purse; she'd made sure twice before she left, even as her baby stuck his hand into his cup of applesauce. Finally ready she grabbed him out of his high seat, turned the faucet on and ran his arms under the water. That's when he screamed and pulled on her hair—the water had been too hot—and she let him slide down her hip to the floor, let him slip down onto his back, let him cry, kick, bite. No one had taught her how to be a mother—had to learn every little thing on her own. She brushed her teeth and ran a comb through her hair, grabbed her baby, his face slick and warm, his hands still caked in applesauce.

For dinner that night Madisen made spaghetti with meat sauce. She'd been able to make out one or two more of the words on the list the doctor had made, and after a while trying to figure out which potatoes were the sweet ones, she looked for yogurt, figured her baby would like strawberry the best, grabbed some bananas. She stared for a long while at the diapers. Of course, he needed diapers—there was no going around that—but, like always, it took Madisen a while to figure out which diapers she could buy with her WIC money, then which were the cheapest, refusing as she did to ask someone for help. \$44.86 for 200 diapers, \$16.12 for 108. She had not finished high school—she was fifteen when she was moved to Colorado to live with her other Auntie, who'd wanted to get far from family as possible—though she was sure that if she *had* stayed in high school she would've done a great job, especially if she was able to keep going with that tutor the

school gave her. She was hopeful that her baby would be potty trained soon—he was already learning, coming to her when he had to go, looking up at her with wide, wet eyes—and that she wouldn't need to buy diapers at all.

It was eight p.m by the time that she sat down beside her baby—he in his “Thomas the Train” bib—at the dinner table. She could hear shouting through the walls. She spooned a bit of meat sauce and some cut noodles, held it up to his mouth. His mouth—his lips full, heart shaped like his father's—pursed closed, his upper lip folded down.

“It's good,” she said, “See?” chewing her own forkful, but when the sounds—at first it was as if her neighbors were speaking a different language, something she couldn't understand—came up on her like a wave, the sound of something being thrown, then a hard thump against a wall, the sound of Cassie, a small voice, Madisen let her fork rest on her plate and she put her head in her hands.

“You cry?” her baby said.

She looked up at him, eyes heavy, and said, “Take this.” She put the fork in his hand, pinched it with his own thumb and pointer, but as soon as she released her grip, he did too.

“You cry?” he said again, this time a whisper.

The next week, a knock on her door at seven a.m—it was the landlord, Nico, she saw when she peeled open her blinds. She ran back upstairs, dressed, tying her hair into a bun. Her baby stood at the bedroom doorway, watching. She'd felt she could trust Nico—

that Nico understood what it was like. She even knew Nico when he was staying out at the Jesus Saves shelter, when *she* had housing and he didn't, when he hated that place more than anything, saw him on Colfax at six in the morning—that was when she used to work mornings—when they made people leave. But Nico worked for the Housing Coalition, now, which tried to give people a second chance, hired people who'd been on the street—and maybe Nico felt worried about his own job that he needed all of a sudden to check in on people. She still had to bring her baby to his daycare—hadn't fed him yet, brushed his teeth. She heard the knock again.

“I haven't cleaned yet today—I was planning on cleaning when I got home from work,” she said, as she opened the door. “Sorry.” She left the door open, went about folding a blanket that was strewn on the couch, and then filled the dish-filled sink with soapy water. She lit a scented candle, then, realizing that maybe she wasn't allowed to have candles in there, blew it out, put it quickly in her junk draw.

Nico was short. He wore khaki pants and a tight red shirt, almost metallic colored, his middle bound by a brown leather belt. “It's cool,” he said. He'd stepped inside, looked around. Her baby was at the top of the steps.

“Mama?” he called.

“Stay up there,” she said to him. “What is it, Nico? I've gotta get him ready.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” he said. He'd been staring at a picture of her baby—his school photo.

“So, um... Oh, yeah. Okay, so the bossman wanted me to check with you. He's been getting calls from that Spanish lady downstairs. About noise—shouting and such.

You're not—you heard it? Sorry. Sorry. Have you heard anything like that? Shouting or...?"

"Shouting? Who would I shout at, Nico? I'm the only one here." She threw her hand into hot water. "*Fuck*," she said, then, "Excuse me," bringing her hand to her cool lips, remembering that Nico was an authority. She took a deep breath, rinsed a juice bottle, aware of the dirty pans on the stove behind her, the left over spaghetti stuck to the pot, aware of the stains in the carpet—those created by tenants before her, which Nico might think were *her* stains, as well as the stains that her baby made, his leaky bottles of juice. If only she'd had some extra money to buy new bottles those stains would most likely not be there—could she explain that to Nico? Could she trust him? She'd had a hard time affording diapers the week before—after the diapers and the chicken and some frozen vegetables she couldn't even buy that strawberry yogurt that her baby loved.

"The Spanish lady said she heard a kid crying, too."

Her baby walked carefully down the stairs, holding onto the thin poles along the banister. He stood beside her, wrapped his arm around her leg. She picked him up, swept hair from his eyes.

"I haven't heard anything," she said, holding him so tight she could feel his heart beat, an echo of hers—or was it the other way around?

The Spanish lady paced around the grass in front of her apartment, in front of her tiny deer statues, mumbling, "*Cabrón!*" again and again. Her hand nervous at her mouth. In his stroller, Madisen's baby looked up at the woman. "*Huh?*" he said. Madisen put her

foot on the lock at the base of the stroller, went and stood in front of the woman, in the center of the grass, until the woman looked her in the eyes, pointed to the apartment above her. “Help,” the woman said, “I call help.”

At the hospital, the bruise beneath Cassie’s eye was purple from a distance, but up close it glowed iridescent against her dark skin—looked like a ruby or diamond was beneath her skin, trying to show itself, to come out. The puckered skin, still some blood in the creases, looked like the inside of a fig—exploding pink—a fruit Madisen hadn’t ever had before, but which the food pantry at her church had had too many of. “Does your baby like figs?” the church lady had said, her long gray hair thick like a cape, as she put canned fruits and vegetables, cereal boxes, instant mac and cheese into large paper bags. She was squatting on the floor. She nodded behind her into the kitchen, where there were three crates of figs, spilling up and out.

She wanted to ask Cassie if her man had gone—had she left him, would he be there when she got home, did she want Madisen to say something to the Social Services people—but Cassie seemed to be day dreaming. Her lips seemed larger than they’d been. There was a cut across her chin. It was like the first time Madisen was really seeing her. She had never noticed Cassie’s eyes were green until she sat up in the bed, covered her bared shoulder with the corner of the bed sheet, seeming to take her time, her motions delicate and slow, her hands carefully coming together on her lap, as if to draw out the time. Madisen glanced at her baby who she’d placed on a chair across from the hospital

bed. She'd given him a book to read, a "Thomas the Train" book, but he'd placed it beside him, as if it were the right thing to do, was looking at Cassie with a kind of understanding in his eyes—in his mouth, too, the shape of his lips—that startled Madisen. He looked too old, his eyes large and sunken. She wanted to say to him, Don't look, or Close your eyes, or Stop that! but that's when Cassie said, "I'm thinking of running away." Her eyes had been on Madisen's baby when she said it, a whisper, one child to another. Then her gaze landed on the floor.

"Where are your kids?" Madisen said.

That night Madisen followed a recipe she'd found for tacos. She watched the meat change colors, and thought about Cassie's bruise, her kids. She grabbed a fistful of figs from the refrigerator.

"Here," she said to her baby, putting one in his hand. He was watching a show inches from the screen. "It's good for you." He looked at it in his hand, and threw it at her.

Two weeks later Madisen was walking home from the Dollar Tree, pushing her baby in his stroller. Earlier, he'd been walking good, holding her hand and listening carefully when she told him to wait when they were about to cross the street, to look both ways. He was even helpful at the store. She'd said, "What else? What else is on our list?" when she couldn't remember what all they needed, but it wasn't until they passed the big twelve-roll packages of toilet paper that he shouted "*Toy-pape!*" picking up a roll, squeezing it tight to his chest with both hands.

But on the way back he said, “I *tye-ar*.” He did not want to walk anymore, and she said, “Okay, fine,” and, “You are my little king, aren’t you?” as she strapped him into the stroller in the parking lot. She stuck most of their shopping bags into the little shelf beneath his seat; what she couldn’t fit was slung onto her shoulder. But one of the plastic bags—in it was a thing of orange juice, some American cheese, peanut butter—stretched thin and snapped, and the contents inside went everywhere.

That was when she noticed him. Cassie’s boyfriend. Wasn’t the first time. She looked away immediately, pushing the stroller forward abruptly. Her baby looked back, up at her.

He walked over from where he was standing, leaning up on a trash bin in front of the gas station with a few other guys. She knew he was coming, so she looked up, smiled.

“Hey,” he said. He was skinny and pale, even more than before. His eyes looked bigger but it was most likely because his face looked sunken in and yellow. For the first time she realized that his left eye was always lazy, drifting off somewhere else. She couldn’t help but stare.

“You seen Cassie?” he said.

Madisen shook her head. Cassie went to a safe house for women. The kids were put somewhere else. Madisen knew there were safe houses for families—maybe Cassie could’ve kept her kids and just didn’t want to keep them. She wished she could ask Cassie about this, but she didn’t know where she was. But Madisen wasn’t altogether surprised, especially because of how Cassie had been talking in the hospital that day, as if she was a child again.

“We sorta split and—but, I gotta tell her something important.”

“*Tye!*” her baby said in a long whine. He was trying to fall asleep in his stroller but the blanket had slipped off him and was dragging beneath the wheel, the baby blue of it was already black. She knew they were talking too loud, and she’d stopped pushing which he didn’t like.

“I have to tell her something important,” he said again, even walked beside them. She paused; could she say, Leave me alone? When she stopped pushing, her baby said, “*No, ma!*”

She hadn’t seen Cassie’s boyfriend since that week Cassie was in the hospital. Far as she knew, he was arrested, put in jail for a week. The Spanish lady downstairs had seemed nervous that whole time. Though Madisen could never quite understand what she was saying, she could feel it.

“I really don’t know where she is,” Madisen said. “We’ve gotta go.” She started to push the stroller again but he walked alongside them. Her heart started to pound, and she sighed loudly, hoping it might sound just aggressive enough that he’d leave but not too aggressive that he’d get even more mad.

“It’s about the kids,” he said. “I gotta tell her something about the kids.” Madisen looked him in the eyes. She didn’t pity him, even as they got sad and wet looking. Even less did she pity him as he said, “*Please.*” He reminded her of too many men she’d known, and just looking at him gave her a sick taste in her mouth. Even if she wanted to, she couldn’t help him. Couldn’t couldn’t help him or Cassie or those kids. Her baby began to snore. She had her own family to think of.

She was relieved when that woman from church—the one who'd given her old toys to give him for Christmas—had called her just as Cassie's man, *ex-man*, started really bothering her. "Please tell me where she is, Madisen," he'd started saying, almost crying, but Madisen said, "*Hello?* Yes? Marcia?" into the phone, turning from him and walking faster, pushing the stroller harder, going over the cracks in the sidewalk as if they weren't there. Her baby, asleep, didn't notice them that time. The woman asked Madisen if she needed a ride to church in the morning and Madisen said, "Yes, we do. We would. Thank you!" Madisen found a way to stay on the phone with Marcia as long as possible—"How is Bill? How are your grandkids?" she asked, when usually she was pretty quiet around those people—until finally Cassie's man left her alone, walked back towards that gas station.

By the time they got home it was almost eight p.m. Her baby was still asleep, and for a while she thought about whether or not she should wake him up, make him eat. She watched his little belly get full with breath, watched the breath come out through his tiny mouth.

Madisen thought about what she might say if she saw him again, if he started hassling her about it. She wouldn't call the cops. She hadn't even tried to call Aaron in almost a year; maybe if she started asking for money he'd call the cops, tell them what she used to do—even though it was him who made her do it. Two years she did whatever he said she had to do. Cops didn't care about that though, and she didn't want them snooping around her life. She wasn't ashamed anymore about what she'd had to do— she'd forgiven herself. But she knew what they thought about women, about mothers— she

was called all sorts of things when she was arrested. Thank God that was before her baby was born—thank God her baby didn't know anything about that. If a lady cop came around claiming she was trying to help her, Madisen knew that cop would wind up looking into her business and that she might feel compelled to say something like, "My baby saved my life, you know," but even then Madisen would feel like she was letting that cop in on too much.

Carefully, she lifted her baby out of his stroller. He still smelled like maple syrup from that morning. He was limp with sleep, and as she carried him upstairs, clicking the baby gate shut at the top of the steps, she could hear the buzz of his breath, warm and fuzzy at her ear.

She climbed onto the bus with her baby on her hip. When she sat down, she held him, felt his warm weight in her lap. She hoped he'd grown enough for the doctor. She turned him around in her lap, looked over his face, his neck, arms. He hadn't eaten that morning. He'd knocked the eggs she'd scrambled for him off the table with his elbow; as she picked the eggs off the carpet, her fingers were hot, shaking. There was anger in them. "You eat?" he'd said, to which she responded, still on all fours, "You eat!" and put the curds of egg back on his plate. Madisen went to the sink, made the water hot as she could, held her fingers beneath it until they became numb.

"Babies?" he'd said, before they walked down the stairs from their apartment, pointing vaguely to Cassie's door. Madisen did not like to lie to her baby, but she said, "Yes, baby. With their momma. Right where they should be."

At the doctor's—after an hour on the bus—the same receptionist greeted them. “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...” she sang, swaying with her baby on her hip. They were going to draw blood today, the receptionist informed Madisen, make sure everything was okay, and Madisen nodded quick. She had wished the receptionist had been thoughtful enough to say it a different way, wondered if she'd said it that way because of how she looked—her hair disheveled, her skin yellow. She hadn't been sleeping well—felt more alone, to her own surprise, without those noises next door.

“Oh my God. You see him? He's *amazing*,” Madisen heard an older nurse say to another. “I always wanted a mulatto baby—was what I used to say. I know that's not PC now. Used to say that all the time.” They were shown to the same room as the last visit.

Everything was going fine—Madisen even let the doctor put her baby on the table, she even watched as the doctor took the needle out of the drawer, waiting meanwhile for the doctor to say something sweet, something which might calm her down, which might calm her baby down, who was crying now, squirming, trying to break free, saying, “No!” and “I hurt!” and “I cry!” and “My mommy! My mommy!” but all the doctor seemed to say to her was, “Hold him down! Hold him down!” If only she'd said it kinder, gave him a toy, or a lollipop or offered him a kind of melody Madisen would not have had to grab him from that table, say to the doctor, “*No*—no, thank you. He is just a baby! He is *my* baby,” before walking—had she run?—out of that room, out of the office, pushing a woman off her who'd placed a hand on her shoulder, who'd said, “Honey, are you

okay?,” turning left onto Sixth Avenue, taking a breath only to look back to see if they were following her, trying to take him from her—but soon she was free, and she was singing to her child, she was whispering into his little, perfect ear, and he was looking right back at her, saying, “You cry, mamma? You cry?”