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These stories attempt to capture the moment when individual perception is challenged by a naturally occurring reality. The place where what we think we know must be measured against what we have left to learn. Every day is walk in a park that turns into a jungle. Just like when we were kids, just like now.

COLD GLITTER

by

Monica L. Merenda

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This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

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Modus Mundi

We parked at the metro Kiss & Ride since the neighborhood Joe's friend lived in wasn't that nice and he didn't want anything to happen to his Mustang. We didn't talk, just plodded through the rain. Our breath nailed to the air in front of our mouths. Trash piled in mounds along the road, some in bags, some not. I counted five condom wrappers and three used needles glide down the gutter in an oily stream. There were liquor stores at every corner doing a good business even at nine in the morning. We passed a tough looking group of black guys standing in front of a market with bars over the windows called Sunny's. They stuffed their fists in their jackets and ignored us. We were wearing our school uniforms under our coats: khaki pants and green polo shirts with the school's paintbrush and pallet logo. Joe had the collar pulled up on his shirt where he had written *REVOLT* with a black sharpie. I had cut the collar off of my shirt altogether. I guess we got away with that kind of shit because we went to School of the Arts.

Joe and I met during our freshman year. School of the Arts was a hellhole in Annapolis. Lots of rich people sent their lost kids to our school. If they had no aptitude for math or science, School of the Arts was the *alternative*. Their parents hoped that if they couldn't be doctors, maybe they could be famous artists, like Picasso. *It's your attitude, not your aptitude, that determines your altitude*, was the school's dictum. Joe was actually a pretty good sculptor. I drew comics.

I was thrilled to be walking along in the rain absorbing DC run-down but alive, throbbing with the pulse of this more real version of America than the one that Joe and I saw everyday in the halls at school. Here, people were living; there, people were spending, spending, spent. They buy their way out of the struggle and die, soul die, from not having it.

We got to the house and Joe clapped me on the shoulder. “We have arrived.” I loved Joe, and admired him too. He was the kind of blonde girls chase after, hoping their kids will get his golden locks and blue eyes, and names like Chandler and Forrest. I liked him because there was nothing crazy enough for Joe, especially in those days. He was a true pioneer, an emperor, a providence. I followed him.

The house on Front St. looked askew. Joe and I went in smiling. Ted’s apartment was on the second floor. We could hear the music from the vestibule. Bone rattling techno beats thumped in my head and chest. We walked in the front door and Ted yelled from across the room, “Welcome to chaos!”

Ted was a meth-head, which meant he had a lot of parties that lasted for a real long time. There were people all over the apartment, some passed out, some sitting, some dancing. The shades were all drawn and most of the light came from candles and a plasma TV. I could barely make out shapes from shadows. There was a group of guys playing X-box. The screen action made the light from the TV strobe across the room. Ted put his big arm around Joe’s shoulder.

“Glad you could make it, brother, inside the labyrinth. Where we sing to Dionysus and he dares us to continue. Where our temporal actuality is a more or less complete

actualization of our timeless permanence;” and with one finger raised in the air, “where consciousness meets dissonance.”

“What-ever, Ted, this is my friend, Simon. Simon this is Ted.” Joe said.

“Another dying spirit?” Ted asked and extended his hand.

“Life is cancer, man, we’re all dying spirits.” My eyes were adjusting to the light. There were more people in the room than I thought.

“Well said. Let me show you around.”

“Show us to the party favors will you?” Joe asked.

Ted led us to the stocked bar and then directed us to the drugs that were laid out in various corners. “The crystal is in the kitchen, and there’s weed and X floating around. And if you’re interested I’ll show you my private pharmacy in the bedroom.” He had to raise his voice over the music. A couple of girls started dancing on the couch. “Try to keep it down, ok? The cops have already been here twice and things could get ugly.”

“No cops! My dad’s one of those fucking pigs. I can’t run into the cops.” I said. “Seriously.”

“Don’t worry too much, there’s plenty of kids here to bust, it’s not likely to be us. Come on, let’s get ourselves a drink,” Joe said. It’s not easy to shake Joe. I asked him once about a bruise I saw on his neck. He just said point blank: my father hits my mom and me; she stays because she signed a prenupt. “My dad is worth millions, you know, and my mom loves her BMW and designer sunglasses, her three fucking houses. She’s a real victim,” he told me. He looked me straight in the eyes and said real quiet, “It’s better to have a dead mother than one that’s slowly killing herself.” A lake can look like the

roof of the world when you're nine and camping with your father. We never talked about it again.

Ted disappeared. The selection of liquor was impressive. None of the cheap stuff they served at our high school parties. This was primo. I poured myself my first glass of Glenfiddich and Joe took the entire bottle of Johnny Walker Black and disappeared into a shadow.

I tracked down Ted in the hall and asked him about the pharmaceuticals. He showed me to them and then asked for fifteen bucks. "To cover cost," he said. I gave him a ten. There was a nice selection of Valium, Percocet, Xanax, and an empty bottle of OxyContin on Ted's dresser. I chased a Valium and a Percocet with my scotch and dropped a couple of each into my pocket for later. The room smelled like urine. I wasn't on meth but it felt like the walls were crawling. Light crept in from the edge's of Ted's curtains and I could see that the carpet was probably green, possibly shag. There was a mattress on the floor in the middle of the room. I pulled out one of my hashish cigarettes and sat on the bed smoking and waiting for the pills to kick in. A girl came in. She dropped two pills out of a bottle, swallowed one and put the other in her purse.

"Hi, I'm Emily. I've been taking this shit to try to come down. There are these guys in a white van..." She peeled the edge of the curtain back and glanced out the window. "They're trying to fucking take me to Mexico."

"Are you serious?" I asked.

"I don't know what they want. I'm not even from Mexico. I've got to get out of here, but I'm too scared to leave."

“Relax. You’re probably just hallucinating,” I tried to reassure her. She went to the mirror and looked closely at her eyes. She had to bend a little for a good look. My palms started to sweat.

“Did I ask you what your name is? If you already told me, I’m sorry. I can’t remember.” She looked at the bed.

“No,” I said. “My name is Simon. I just got here with my friend Joe.”

“We didn’t do it, did we?”

“Do it? No, I just got here.”

“What are you drinking?”

“Scotch.”

“Can I have some?”

I handed her the glass, and watched her lips part for the liquid and then close and smack against the bite.

“You’re another fucking artist, aren’t you? She handed the glass to me. “All of Ted’s friends are artists.”

“I don’t know about art,” I said. “I draw cartoons.”

“Artists don’t have souls, you know. That’s why they are always trying to make shit, to make being out of event. I used to be an artist, so I would know.”

“What do you do now?” I asked.

“I want to be a secretary.” She sounded rehearsed but I didn’t care. Her hair was black and cut in a square bob that spiked in the back. She leaned in and took my joint. Her hand was cold and shaking. “You know what I think, Simon?” She blew smoke rings

that hung in the air between us. Her mouth was dark but her eyes were wide and blue. “I think sex would help me come down a little. Do you have protection?”

“I really wasn’t trying anything like that,” I said. I don’t know if she heard me or not, she just started taking off her clothes. Just then the pills kicked in and everything slowed down. When the rain stops, so does the sky. We started kissing. She slid out of her skirt. Her skin was cold but soft. I moved my hands over her stomach. She was breathing a fast pant. When my hands came to rest on her thighs, everything turned rough. I felt something smear under my palms.

“What’s the matter? Is something wrong?” she asked.

“It’s just that I haven’t ever.”

An animal stares into the headlights. “Well, you start by taking off your clothes,” she said, and started working the button on my jeans. I pulled on the corner of her shirt. She took my hands and put them on my pants. “Take them off,” she said. I dropped my pants and climbed over her. A boy crouches on the beach and runs for the ocean. The lightning moves closer.

“What are those?” I asked pointing at a number of sores that looked scratched into her arms.

“Meth bugs. It feels like they’re crawling all over me.”

“So you scratch yourself?”

“I can’t help it.” She closed her eyes. “Does it bother you?”

I looked at her eyelids. “No.”

She guided me with her hands. I'm not even sure the act was consummated. I came before I could tell.

The whole thing took less time than a tv ad. After I finished, she masturbated her way to an orgasm and I think she liked that I was there because she kept looking at me and sucking on her fingers. I put my pants back on, sat on the edge of the bed and watched her.

She put on her bra and shirt and pulled her skirt back down. Before she opened the door, I took her hand and kissed it. "Bye Emily," I said and for a second I loved her. I popped another Valium. Her shoes were blue. I was feeling good and headed to the bar for another double malt.

Joe was in the living room passing a bong. I walked around and looked for Emily for a while but she had disappeared so I found a comfortable seat on the couch. There are some things not worth waiting for. Joe saw me and yelled across the room, "Hey man, where you been? Did you get laid?"

"Yeah."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

I couldn't sit still for long, so I wandered into the kitchen. A guy was rubbing the skin off his knuckles with a nail file. A girl in a yellow dress was trying to wipe the bloody spots on his hands and wrists with a paper towel. People with a future in an abstract picture. Sores on her shoulder like little mouths. Love, too, is rooted in shit and piss. The sound of rain was heavy in the kitchen, like it was trying to break through the

roof. I went through the living room and into the small hallway that led back to the bedroom. Her skin was so soft in places. I heard someone crying.

The sound was coming from the bathroom. The door was ajar so I pushed it open and found Ted sitting on the floor with a guy who had a barcode tattooed on his neck. Barcode was crying, curled into a ball. I was going to shut the door and let them be but Ted asked me to stay. “I think you understand don’t you?” Ted asked. “You see where all of this is going. There’s no way out of this maze. Reality and nothingness just fucking hang together out in space and we can never know what’s what.”

“It does seem that there are more things unknown than known, if that’s what you mean.” I said and took a seat under the sink. The drainpipe was poking into my back. “But I don’t think it’s anything to cry about. That’s just the way it is, a delicate balance between knowing and not. Mostly I prefer not to know. I used to think that the truth was important but I learned a good lesson about truth: the truth is that sometimes it’s better not to know.”

“That sounds like a story,” Ted said. He was just looking at me with this keen expression like I would say something, and then I did.

“My mom died when our house exploded. It’s all like history now, a kind of rain that never stops. My father and I were on a camping trip when it happened. I was nine. We got a call during breakfast that the house blew up. When we got home the place was covered with cops and firemen. Two fire trucks parked where the front porch used to be. The house was deconstructed, if you know what I mean, walls on the ground like floors

with windows, the roof was gone. I thought my father had done it. That he rigged the house to blow while we were away.

“I missed her so much I tried to drown myself in the ocean about a year later. My dad’s new girlfriend had money and a place at the beach. But even after all that, the truth wasn’t finished with me. While I was in the hospital I met a really nice nurse, Nancy, who worked the late shift. I trusted her, she had gentle hands, and I told her that my dad was the one who did it. He blew the house up. He killed my mom. I told her that he’s a cop so he could make something like that happen. Houses don’t just explode. Nancy was convinced that something wasn’t right, and made the call to social services.”

Barcode stopped crying. His cracked fingers looked like a sculpture.

“What happened next?” Ted asked.

“I forced truth’s hand is what happened. A social worker and two detectives came to interview me. I flat-out accused him of murder. He lost it, which almost never happens to my father. Before that day I don’t think I’d ever seen him cry. He told me, and everyone that my mom had killed herself and left both of us. I tried to tell them that it wasn’t true. Two days later I was in with Dr. Hicks, a psychiatrist, who diagnosed me with PTSD. I wasn’t traumatized by what happened, I was traumatized by the truth of it.”

“You will want to play with us.” Ted was quivering. Barcode lifted his head and stared into my eyes. His pupils were so dilated that he looked like one of my cartoons.

“Are you ready to die?” he asked.

“I’m ready for just about anything.” I said.

“Ok,” Ted said. “Let’s go.”

Barcode pulled some toilet paper from the roll and blew his nose, and Ted produced a gun from the back of his pants. “Time for some roulette.”

We walked into the living room like a posse. Ted emptied the bullets from the cartridge and laid the gun in the middle of the dining room table. The bullets sounded like coins. He told the people sitting at the table to get lost. A small crowd formed around us. Joe stood next to my chair. “What’s going on, man?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I think we’re going to play a game of Russian roulette.” Ted loaded a round and spun the chamber like a real roulette wheel, then clicked it shut.

“Don’t do this,” Joe said. “You don’t want to. I can’t watch.” Joe was pleading and pacing behind my chair. He would take two steps then lean in and whisper, “Please, Simon, we’re friends right? Please.”

Ted picked up the gun. He put it in his mouth.

The dry click of the trigger against the empty chamber was not loud. Ted jumped out of his chair waving the gun around. Everyone cheered. The thrill was terrible but real.

“Go ahead, it’s fabulous. The best fucking high in the universe.” Ted said. He put the gun in front of me.

I tell one version of this story where I end up with a bullet hole in my head, but not dead. The path of the bullet cuts right through my hypothalamus and severs my spinal cord, leaving me paralyzed and unable to chew my own food. The same bullet enters Joe’s left eye and comes to rest in his frontal lobe causing a brain hemorrhage that first

puts him in a coma and then kills him, all because he was standing behind me, holding onto my shoulders, trying to get me to stop. But let me tell you what really happened.

“Not today,” I said. I got up from the table and stood with Joe.

Joe put a hand on my shoulder. “Ready?” I scanned the crowd for Emily, but didn’t see her.

“Let’s get,” My voice was drowned out.

The gunshot sounded dumb and flat. From everywhere and nowhere music scattered in terror. Barcode’s head exploded all over the wall. Joe started to scream. I watched pieces of skull drop onto the carpet. Blood and gray matter splattered the wall and chair and Ted too, who looked like he might have taken a bullet himself. I grabbed Joe and pulled him out the door. He was freaking. He couldn’t manage the steps, flailed for a second and tried to go back into the apartment, but then just threw up on the landing. I had to push him down the steps and drag him out the front door. “Come on, the cops will be here any minute. We’ve got to be gone. Let’s just get to your car and then you can freak all you want,” I said as we stepped onto the sidewalk. The cement was wet and gray, but the sky was starting to clear. I was afraid Joe was going into shock or something.

I gave him one of the Valium I’d taken from Ted’s to help with nerves. The temperature had dropped since the morning. I was shivering.

“We just left him there.” Joe was crying and for a second I had a vision of Joe as a little kid lost on a street corner in a big city, in this city.

“There were a lot of people around. Besides, what were we going to do?”

“That could have been you, man. It could have been your brains all over that wall. Shit, if I hadn’t talked you out of it, you’d be dead right now.”

“You’re a real hero, Joe.”

Joe couldn’t drive, so I did. We got back on Rt. 50 and I pushed the Mustang up to 120mph. I felt sober enough after the scene at Ted’s. The adrenaline was winning out over the benzos and alcohol.

“We just escaped death and now you want to kill us?” Joe was coming around; the Valium had buttered his neurons.

It was only one-thirty by the time we got back to Annapolis and Joe was still having a hard time so I drove to St. John’s campus, which I really like, and where I thought Joe could collect his thoughts. Everything at St. John’s was quiet. Students with book bags walking straight lines, sitting at tables smiling in the sun, a guy on a skateboard flew by and waved, and we headed toward the library. The world was measured out in greens and blues. The sun was starting to break through and we ended up following one of the paths that wound around the old campus buildings. We found a seat on a bench.

“That bullet could have killed you.”

“One day something will.”

“Aren’t you scared?”

“Sometimes, but not today. I got laid today. It was my first time. I don’t think you knew that.”

“No, I didn’t.”

A small crowd had gathered across the quad from us. A banner went up: IF WAR IS THE ANSWER THEN WHAT IS THE QUESTION? Joe read it out loud. Somebody with a tambourine started to sing, and the song floated across the lawn. The light was refracting stars off of wet leaves. We almost looked happy outside in the sunlight.

“It doesn’t get any better than this.” I said.

“Better? What about worse? Does it get any worse?” Joe looked sad.

“No, I think it just stays the same. Things just turn out to be the way they are until they’re not anymore. Horror and pleasure and everything else just keeps rolling along.”

“You sound like an old man.”

A girl in long skirt came up and gave us each a dandelion. She asked Joe, “Do you want to join our protest?” I could tell he wanted to.

“We’ve got to be going,” he said.

“No,” I said, “let’s stay.”

Cold Glitter

Things couldn't have worked out better than they did, given the circumstances, and my own predilection for disaster. I was lucky that Spielberg never knew about my involvement, but everyone knew I was gone the next day, and since Big S. had no idea what had been going on with me, he would have been well within his rights to turn my name over to the cops. That he didn't is a testament to Big S.'s bigness, the grand and compassionate nature of his persona, the big guy has a big heart, and I'll never forget that. I lost my job after Bill came into town, sure, and that was hard, let me say it out loud, but now that I have some space and clarity about the whole situation, it doesn't feel too bad to have to start over, again.

I never thought I'd make it in LA since I don't look like a movie star type. My hair is brown—not chestnut or espresso. My eyes match my hair, and I have freckles, which are not that dark, but show up dark on film, and, like some kind of cancer, they are impossible to air brush or cover up. But I am not ugly. I am a little fat, especially by Hollywood standards, my mother says big boned, but that is an easy code to crack. Hey, I like Cheetos and Milk Duds, sue me. Not you, Mr. Spielberg, if you're reading this. I would be sued by anyone but you Big S. It would be something awful in terms of media coverage. I don't have a suit that doesn't make me look like a beached whale and nobody in the editing rooms of those godawful tabloid shows gives two fucks about my freckles and how I come off on film. Plus, Big S., I'm broke, which you already know. You'd

have to sue me on principle, and you know, since *Saving Private Ryan*, you've not been doing much on principle. I would like to go on record here to say that you should have won an Oscar for that film, you were burned there Big S., and I'm not just saying that to be funny.

I would like to blame Bill for everything that happened, but it goes back so far that I can't even say without second guessing things myself that it begins and ends with him. Since Bill is dead, I feel, and I'm just being totally honest here, that it would be easier to blame him than myself, and since I don't really believe in God or an afterlife or reincarnation, I have to think that Bill wouldn't mind. Maybe the destruction of the new studio at DreamWorks could have been avoided but for Bill and the trouble he brought with him when he came into town.

Bill and I were an item when we were undergrads at St. Lawrence. He was a BMOB and I was deep into my eating disorder phase, so I looked pretty good, and spent those years wearing as little as possible. Bill gawked at me like the other boys did, but he also congratulated me on my selection of a hemp tank, and invited me to a rally. I went. Since I had seen many protests and rallies in various films, I felt like I knew what to expect.

The rally was disappointing considering I thought it would be like the scene in *Forrest Gump* where it's a big war protest thrown by people who cared so much that they had become deranged by their passion. I wanted the kind of protest that could keep Jenny from going home, safe, with Forrest.

Bill gave a great speech, though, that had some kind of power, so I went home with him. We spent the next two years together. I broke up with Bill five days before his big senior symposium talk on the rainforests. To break up, I wrote him a letter.

If you had asked Bill, I'm sure he would have said that my letter hurt him more than global warming scares him. We talked only once after he got the letter—*by post!* he kept inserting into the conversation—to give him a chance to have closure.

“I'm giving into the grief, Sylvia. It's as if every tree on the planet has been demolished. Why? We had plans. We had a mission.”

I couldn't really explain to him why. I wanted to stop trying to save everything else and just save myself for a while. I wanted to live in a city and eat meat and flush the damn toilet after each use. I wanted to be more important than the cause of the moment. And Bill, well, he wanted to be a terrorist. I did see him one other time before he came out to LA, and that was at his senior thesis presentation: “Diminish the Rainforest, Diminish the Soul.” Bill packed the little auditorium and he gave a speech that would have turned Regan into a tree hugger. It was really something. Several times he was interrupted by ovations. Bill's speech left everyone with a sense that something had to be done, everyone of those people wore the expression of an Agent of Change; they were empowered. Even I was touched. And, as I snuck out of the auditorium that day, I felt that I could go and make something of myself in this world. I would.

Six years later I was grabbed coming out of *Splitz*, a water bar in LA by a man hiding in one of the storefronts along the street. He was wearing a nylon jacket with

orange lining and what looked, in the dark, like a Stetson hat. I pulled back and tried to twist out of his grasp. He easily held me back. He pinned me against the glass of a lingerie shop called, *Little Treasures*. I could see his our reflections in the glass. The man didn't say anything, but with his hand braced over my collarbone, he started to pull at the top of my skirt. He pushed my skirt up, and then stopped. He was listening, and I was too, to the click of heels coming toward us on the sidewalk. They were expensive heels, I could tell. The man had his arm braced over my collarbones, pushing hard. He turned his face toward me and put his finger over his lips. I was watching him, but he was watching the view of the street afforded by our little alcove. The scene was perfectly squared out by the opening of the little shop front we were standing in. The backdrop was an LA strip various pink and blue neon lights splayed across the front of buildings and onto the street, so it was dark with pockets of colored light glinting off windows. A leggy blonde in a very short skirt appeared as if from around a corner Even though I was in a very uncertain situation, I still rolled my eyes as she passed because blondes like that are a dollar a dozen in LA. After she had passed he looked back to me. I had it in mind that I would use my fingers to claw at his eyes as soon as moved his arm. I waited. He strained his neck to watch the blonde walk almost to the end of the block, and then he looked at me again, and just ran off.

If there was a rape that night, I guess, I should be happy that it wasn't me, but I never felt happy. It is ridiculous, but I felt rejected. I felt like the moment had been ripped away from me. My silhouette should have been on the evening news. I should have been up all night at the hospital, getting a rape kit examination, and waiting for the results. I'm

the one who should feel violated. I did go to the cops, and they took my statement, but I was treated like a witness, not a victim. That night, I decided to call Bill.

It was easy, too easy, and looking back I should have seen what was coming but I didn't. But who can say what constitutes a tragedy? Did I really have to be raped to be traumatized? Don't the needs of someone almost raped merit the same kind of sympathy as the needs of someone who was actually raped? And doesn't it makes sense that I would also be bent by the fact that the rapist chose to *not* rape me after seeing the fake blonde with fake tits swagger down the street? I was in a bad place, raped or not, and Bill was the one person who felt safe.

Bill drove into town in a little Volkswagen Rabbit he had converted to run on biodiesel. The car looked ridiculous parked on the street in line with all the pimped-out SUV's and sporty convertibles. I watched him from the window in my bedroom. It felt wrong, but exciting too, to see him again after all these years. He looked different. He was a little heavier, and his smile that used to seem so radiant looked stretched onto his face, like he had forgotten what the expression meant. His hair was still long, but his hairline had already started to recede so it looked like his forehead had grown. For the first time I thought about how things might have been for Bill during these years. After college, I thought he was on his way up, that he was golden, but as I watched him open the hatchback on that funny, dull-blue Rabbit, and the way his jeans sagged and the broken down Birkenstocks he was wearing, I thought maybe things hadn't been so easy for old Bill. I felt grateful that he had cleared things up enough in Oregon, to come and

see me through my private disaster. By the time he got to the door I loved him all over again. It happened so fast the way love does sometimes. When he knocked I could feel my heart in my throat. I wanted to throw my arms around him. I wanted to go back.

There was nothing more to it.

I opened the door and his green eyes were shining like he had been crying and I felt like it was for me.

“Bill.”

“Sylvia.”

We stood in the doorway like kids again. And I could remember the smell of his dorm room at St. Lawrence, how it smelled like patchouli and pine over the musty smell of unwashed sheets and old carpet, like scented mold, I used to say, but when it came back to me it was sweet. In those days, we slept together in a single bed. We stayed up all night talking about global warming and human rights. It was the best relationship I’ve ever had and I threw it away for what, to come to LA and make it big as a studio assistant, a glorified secretary at DreamWorks Pictures.

We stood in the doorway the way people do when they first see each other after many years. I held the doorknob, he dropped his backpack, and we each watched the other for signs of the past creeping back. All of the past is revised history, just like the movies. So what if the rape wasn’t real. My needs were.

It’s hard for a girl like me in a city like this. Back in Watertown I was stunning, hot stunning shit. So what happened was worse than a rape, really. I mean the guy chose

not to rape me. It's a crime of power right? And I don't feel like I need to say this again, but I will: I am not ugly.

I knew the initial hug was coming and I didn't want to screw it up. A lot rests on the initial hug. *Star Magazine* reported that the number of hugs in a relationship was more important than the number of orgasms. I say true. Bill needed a cause and I needed to be needed, so if I gave myself to him as a cause we would both get something. It wasn't completely selfish. I wanted to give Bill what I couldn't ten years ago—I could finally be the world he wanted to save. He could save me and save me and save me. But when Bill put his arms around my waist a cold and a shiver jumped down my spine. And when I looked into his eyes I could see that Bill had changed.

To say it straight, I didn't really think Bill would come. I had tried so many things in the last year to get his attention. I had written a letter to the Sally Jesse Raphael Show expressing my desire to be reunited with him on a show called "Love Lost (and Found)," where he would be brought on, but not told who was wanting to reunite with him and then I would come out and surprise him that this love reaches all the way back to when we were twenty. I even received a call back from one of Sally's staff, but they couldn't track him down. Bill never returned the letters or phone calls from the show. I went to Seattle for the World Trade Organization protest, thinking he would be there, but there were thousands of people and they all presented just like Bill when we were in college, Birkenstocks and hemp backpacks, beards, and curly, unkempt hair, arms crossed, fingers pointing to punctuate impassioned arguments. I even tried to get arrested, thinking how romantic it would be if we were reunited in a jail cell in Seattle. I didn't get arrested and I

didn't see Bill, but when I came home I started to get a little crazy about it all, obsessed is more like what my therapist would have said, who I haven't seen since this whole thing went down because I've been on the run, and I think that bastard doctor would turn me in, he would think that I was involved, that I could have known what Bill had turned into. Maybe I did know. I certainly sensed something when he put his arms around me.

I got my job at DreamWorks because I could read people. Need and desire work through the senses. I could see when someone's face registered cold or hungry or tired or fed up. During the interview I poured a glass of water for Terry, my immediate boss and the guy who hired me, when he asked me why I said that he looked thirsty, and he was thirsty. After he drained the glass I had slid over to his side of the desk, he said "you're hired," and I thought I had hit the Hollywood jackpot. So, I ignored some signs, but Bill wasn't part of my job. I didn't care if his hands felt like dead insects on my back. I didn't care if his head was shaved and his eyebrows too. I didn't care that his stare was hard and his smile was too broad. I knew what he had been. How could I have known?

I told him about the rape over dinner. I had planned to tell him over dinner so that Bill could see how upset I was since I wouldn't eat a thing, and just push the food around on my plate. I thought we would play this scene at a restaurant and that I would cry there so that it seemed so painful that I couldn't hold it back, not even in public, not even to save face. But Bill didn't want to go out. He said that it was something we should talk about privately. We ordered Chinese, and while we were waiting he sat me down on the couch.

"Tell me what happened," he said.

“I was raped.” I had planned to keep the details to a minimum since the story was only true up to a point. I had seen great actors try to lie off camera and there were always tells—a guilty eye darts away, a pause before answering a question that goes just a little too long, or worse, that the story is inconsistent in some minor detail that brings the whole careful edifice crashing down. Since I couldn’t anticipate how closely Bill would be listening I had practiced my carefully constructed responses. When the time came, however, I lost my composure. There was too much on the line. And to say it true, Bill had turned into a scary guy. It felt dangerous to lie to him.

Bill sat there, listening, with his hands folded in his lap. He never moved. The only things moving on his whole body were his eyes that traveled up and down over my body like searchlights. At first I thought he was checking me out, but his eyes never stopped and after a while it was clear that the movement was random. He was looking but it didn’t matter at what, the eyes were an insight into his thoughts that were jumping like their own kind of movement from one to the next. I started to feel uncomfortable right away. It tripped me up too. I had second thoughts.

“Sylvia, what happened?”

“I was coming out of a bar called *Splitz*. It’s a great place in town, lots of stars.” I waited to see if he would react to club’s name. It was a hotspot all right, so hot that I could never get into it unless I was with some Hollywood high rollers. The only reason I had been there that night was to deliver an important package to one of the Execs. I was in and out of the club in less than two minutes. Bill’s expression revealed nothing. “Have you heard of it?”

“Heard of what?”

“The club, *Splitz*?” Bill looked at me like I was speaking Spanish, so I just kept going, “It’s a really great club, maybe we could go there together or something.”

“Maybe we should, go back to the scene, see what that reveals.”

“I don’t think this is something we’re going to be able to solve. I mean, it happened two months ago.” The truth was, and I say it now because it has to be said, that I called him the very next day and he was there three days after, but I thought it would be good to put some distance between the crime and me. I was getting nervous trying to tell the story with conviction. I was hoping he would take my demeanor as a sign of how difficult the whole thing had been for me.

“Two months! Sylvia, why didn’t you say something? The trail is going to be cold. We’ll never find out who did this to you. How far have the cops gotten in their investigation?”

“I didn’t call them. I was just too embarrassed. It took me this long to call you, and I’m not sure why I even did that.” I looked at him, and prepared myself to recite the line that I thought would be the clincher, “I guess you always made me feel safe, Bill, and I suppose, that’s what I needed, to feel safe. So I called you, and you’re here. I can’t believe you came.” In the dream of this encounter Bill and I both start crying here. We cry, and then fall into an embrace. He might have tried to wipe away my tears with the back of his hand, gently wiping my cheek before he leaned in to kiss me. “You’re not safe Sylvia, until this guy is removed from society. Along with all the other pollutants and toxic waste man has contaminated this planet with, he contaminates it more with his

very presence, and cowardly acts like rape only prove the point. These kinds of people don't deserve their lives. They should be removed as pests from a garden. They should be given no more consideration than a woman gives a spider that has bitten her child. This man needs to be stopped, and I intend to make sure that he is."

One of the big jokes at the studio is how "mankind" ends up coming-off on the big screen. In movies, commercials, magazines, everywhere, man is portrayed as a hero, and the more heroic a man becomes the more admirably human he is. I had a conversation with a key grip once who said that if human beings acted in real life the way they do on TV, the world would have gone to shit a long time ago. It's the villains who get things done, he said.

"I just want someplace to feel safe. That is all I want. I don't know why I called you, Bill, except that when we were together I felt as safe as I ever have, it's the true truth, I needed you." I started to cry just the way I had when I practiced that line. It was the one that made me feel really vulnerable. I felt like my tears were real, even though I staged this whole thing, because it was true—I did want to feel safe, and I thought Bill was going to be my refuge. Only, Bill didn't feel safe.

"You won't be safe until we rid the earth of this vermin. That's why you called me Sylvia, you knew I would take care of it, and I will. But you're going to have to tell me what happened that night."

I was getting really stressed about these details. Bill was so intense that I thought if I screwed this up there might be more to pay than just another rejection. Bill looked serious and dangerous. I stammered into my little speech.

“I had gone to the club with some friends, we went to celebrate the final edit of a new movie coming out of our studio. After a couple of hours my head started to hurt. I decided to go home. I could have caught a cab right there in front of the club, but it was a nice night and I thought the fresh air would help my headache. I didn’t get two blocks before the guy grabbed me and pulled me down a small set of stairs to the service entrance of a large building. The man had a switchblade, and he made me undress. I couldn’t fight. I was like a rag doll. He hit me once, in the stomach, and had sex with me from behind and then missionary on the stairs. I had a bruise on my back from the drainpipe I was laying against. He was pulling my hair the whole time, and when he was on top of me, he put his hand over my face. His fingers smelled like oil and tobacco and me after awhile. I went to the doctor, but not to report the rape, to get a pill to abort a chance of pregnancy. You can never tell anybody.” I said it just like that. Bill was just looking at me with empty green eyes that felt like they were searching still for something and that I must have given a tell. He could see it wasn’t true, so I added one last bit, unrehearsed, “It was Spielberg who did it. I was raped by Steven Spielberg.”

When I thought of it later, after I had gotten what I could out of my apartment and hit Route 66 heading east all the way back to the Atlantic, I thought that it was too much. The whole fucking thing didn’t sound real at all.

Bill flew into a rage faster than a light goes on after the switch has been flipped. “I knew it! I fucking knew it! I knew it was one of these Hollywood big fucks that think he control the minds of the people with his fucking films. The media is a drug administered to the global population that makes us forget. It is the great Soma, the great

Deception. It doesn't surprise me at all. I came prepared for this. You were right not to go to the cops. The cops are nothing more than a branch of the capitalist army. No baby, you had to go underground, and that's where I live."

At first I was thrilled. He called me "baby," and it sounded just like the years had not passed. I envisioned Bill and I walking across a quad in springtime, Dogwoods in bloom, Daffodils lining brick walks. I could practically feel my head on his shoulder and his big hand stroking my cheek. I started to think of the bedroom. It was a big turn on for about two seconds then I realized what he was doing. Bill had opened his backpack, and taken two sticks of dynamite out and put them on the coffee table. They looked like props, and I had seen so many fake explosives that for a second I thought that's what they were. But then I watched how careful Bill was about it all. His brief emotional outburst had left his face passive again.

"What the hell is that?" I asked.

"A way to get their attention," he said.

"Bill, what the fuck are you doing? Is this what you've become? A fucking terrorist? Look, none of it is true. I wasn't raped. I just wanted you to come out here. I haven't had a date in two years. I knew you would come for something like this, so I made it up, ok, I made it up. There is no rape, no crime, and no reason for dynamite. What are you going to do with it anyway? Go to his house, set the fuse, and watch it blow? You won't get within a mile of the Spielberg estate. You might be able to blow up the guard's station, but that's about it." I thought about the few times I had seen Steven Spielberg in the studio, how small he looked with his big rimmed glasses and grey

streaked beard. Spielberg was always smiling. It used to piss me off, but now I thought how beautiful and fragile his smile was. He was a genius who had built an empire on his passion for making movies that made people feel and think, and now I was going to get him killed.

“Sylvia, don’t be scared. This is what it’s come to. Terrorism is the new platform.”

“I’m going to call the cops, Bill. I’ll have you arrested. I’ll tell them everything.”

“Call them. If the FBI hasn’t been able to catch up with me yet, what do you think the LAPD will be able to do? I’m going to do this Sylvia, and really I don’t care if you’re telling the truth or not. These people are raping the earth and every person on the earth. They have taken away our ability to experience reality; they have filled our lives with illusion and fantasy as a distraction from what is really happening. If it weren’t for television, the planet would be clean and the people would be clean too.”

“Bill, this is insane.”

“You’re going to have to take me to the studio now.” He pulled out a gun and pointed it at me. What was strange was that I still felt the same about him. I wanted him even more now that he had become so dangerous.

“Bill, what happened to you?”

“You did.”

“What is that supposed to mean? I did this?” He let the gun drop to his side. I probably could have escaped by just walking out the door. I could have gone straight to

the police station and given them all the information they needed to put him away. I could have, but I didn't.

"It was your letter." He reached into his front pocket with his free hand and pulled out a piece of paper folded into a square, and even from a few feet away it looked old and worn fuzzy at the creases. The lines of the notebook paper were faded but still visible. He held it out to me. I took it, but did not open it. I knew what it was. I could see the paper when it was new and clean before I wrote on it, before I put it in the mail, before it showed up again, here, six years later.

"The letter gave me power to evoke a passion into everything I was doing. The letter came to represent something about loss to me, and it gave me the ability to evoke that feeling in others. It also gave me the sense of what it means to destroy something. The night after my senior symposium I went to the local power plant and started a fire there. The fire got big enough to blow one of the sub stations and cut the power to half of Watertown for a full day. As a result people came out of their houses and talked to their neighbors. They helped each other, shared their food, built bonfires in their yards, kids played, parties started. I walked the streets the whole time the power was out and saw the community transform. But as soon as the power came back on everyone went back into their houses, to their little squawking boxes. When did furniture get more important than people?"

"I remember that fire. A couple of firemen died trying to put out that fire. It was ruled arson, but the case was never solved. You did that? Because of my letter?"

"I've kept it with me ever since. It inspires me, and I think it protects me too."

I walked over and kissed him. The speech, just the idea that I could have that kind of impact on someone was enough to turn my thighs to jelly. It wasn't just desire though, I loved him and I knew that I always had.

“I thought you loved your causes more than you loved me.” My lips were close enough to brush against his as I said it. He put his arms around my waist. They didn't feel mechanical this time, they felt strong and sure, his arms felt like the place I always wanted to be.

“I probably did, but you are the drive behind the desire.

It's bad, I know it is, but that's what he said. And when he said it I felt loved. It's funny and it's not what we'll do for love. Everything that night felt like an explosion. And it felt good. I'm probably not doing a good job of getting this across, but I'm not an idiot. My life had been empty for a long time. I hated my job and the people I worked with. I hated LA and all it stood for. I think I called Bill and made up that ridiculous story because I knew he was the one I needed. Maybe I didn't know why, and maybe I still don't, but who's to say why we need what we need, we just need it.

I wanted to go to bed right then, and tried to pull Bill toward the bedroom door, but he stayed where he was. I looked at the dynamite on the table. “But we don't have to do blow anything up.”

“Yes, we do. The media is ruining our ability to think. It is mind control, Sylvia. Think about it, you know what I'm saying is true. I even believe that it is an intentional control that corporate America is imposing as far as its iron claw will reach, and that is to every corner of the planet, and when it does it will squeeze the planet dry of everything it

has. Profit will kill us. It will kill us all,” he said. I couldn’t argue. It was impossible to me how much money was pumped into motion pictures. Bill made it sound evil because it is evil. So I went along.

I used my badge at the gate to get us into the studio. Bill hid in the trunk of my car. After we got past the guard’s station, I pulled in behind one of the big warehouses. Bill jumped out of the trunk and into the front seat. He wanted to blow up the new studio, the one where they were filming all these new kinds of humanized animation, where they could take real actors and render them as cartoons. Bill was really perturbed by this idea; he thought it was the end of humanity.

I drove him around to the new lot. It was the middle of the night, so there were some people around, but not too many. It looked like they were filming a night scene way back in the empty acres behind the big studio buildings. Security guards were making their rounds in golf carts that said DreamWorks on the side.

Construction on the new studio was just finished. The ribbon cutting ceremony had been earlier in the week. Big S. was there, all smiles, with some other big names, all of them wearing sunglasses like their future was so bright. When I thought back on all the cheesy ceremonies I’d attended for the openings of buildings and films and breakthrough technologies I felt sick. They didn’t care about me. My face meant nothing to them. I was glad that Bill would be dropping two sticks of dynamite in a trashcan, and starting a fire. I watched him sneak across the lot. He was such a lonely figure walking across the pavement. He walked under a streetlamp and the light made him look mythic. My heart went out to him.

Just then one of the security carts came around the corner. A searchlight spotted Bill—the halogen headlamps were so bright on those little carts. He stopped and held his arm across his eyes to shield his eyes from the light. I was watching from a parking space across the lot, and got scared. DreamWorks security is tough. Big S. has a special team made up of ex FBI, CIA, and Secret Service guys who make crazy big money to watch over the lot and make sure nothing goes wrong. These were the real deal too, they drove sopped-up carts painted black, and their security uniforms were black too with special silver reflective material that said SECURITY on the back. They were a scary group and two of the guards on duty just caught Bill with a suspicious looking backpack.

I took off. I put the car in drive and didn't stop until I got home. On the expressway I almost turned around to go back for him, but I couldn't think of a way to get back onto the lot without looking suspicious. I figured Bill was picked up right there; his backpack searched, and I wasn't going to just go down with the ship. The game was up, and technically, as long as the place didn't blow, I hadn't done anything wrong, except bring Bill onto the lot, which could have just as easily been under duress.

It took about twenty minutes to get back to my apartment, a big difference from the morning commute, which generally took over an hour with traffic. I thought about Bill. I thought about the whole crazy afternoon. I was worried, but I had to admit to myself I was pretty excited too. As soon as I got home, I wanted to go back. I thought he would understand why I left, that it was probably safer for us both. And I wasn't ready to give up on the plans for the night.

I turned on the TV out of habit. It's become a fad, since the OJ thing, for local news programs to broadcast—via helicopter—police chases. So it did not surprise me to see on the screen a rather bad picture lit by spots and the flashing lights on the cruisers of a black SUV being chased down the Fresno Freeway. What did give me a near heart attack was the ticker running at the bottom of the scene: SUSPECT FLED SCENE...AN EXPLOSION...AT DREAMWORKS STUDIOS...HAS BEEN REPORTED...AND THE SUSPECT...BELIEVED TO BE DRIVING A BLACK SUV...FLED THE SCENE...PURSUED INITIALLY...BY DREAMWORKS SECURITY...

The screen cut from the chase to a picture of a burning building. It was a disaster. An announcer came on. He rubbed his eyes. I wondered who could be watching at this hour? It felt like the whole thing was playing out for me. The night felt rich and sexy. This was big, and getting bigger. I felt the gravity of the situation. Everything disappeared from the moment except what would happen next. If he got away, I would go help him. I thought I would be able to see what happens and then go to him. I thought Bill would get away. I really did.

The explosion was big enough that it ripped a hole in the back of the new studio where the loading docks were located. The news anchor was reporting the details. Apparently, there were no trash bins against the building itself, so Bill had to plant the dynamite in a collection of bins, behind a fence, about twenty yards from the back of the building. He blew the hell out of some trashcans. There was still a minor fire smoldering.

The picture switched back to the chase. The police cars were following the Bill through some neighborhood on the south side. The camera mounted on the helicopter

made the cars look like toys, barely moving through an artificial landscape. I watched as Bill swerved onto an exit ramp to get back on the freeway. The cops were right behind him. I wonder what it looked like to Bill in the rearview.

The reporter was giving statistics about how much it cost to build the studio at DreamWorks, and how many attacks there have been like this since Desert Storm. Then Bill made a wild move, he tried to cut across all four lanes of the highway and get through a small opening between concrete dividers, to get onto the opposite side of the road. He clipped one of the barriers enough to send the car into a spin. Bill managed to keep the vehicle going, but he wasn't moving fast enough. I watched him try to straighten out. I could hear the sirens and see the colored lights flashing red and blue tones over the side of Bill's stolen truck.

I had such an urge to go to him, to help. But what could I have done? I watched as Bill angled the car to the shoulder and smashed into a guardrail and smoke started to really pour out from under the hood. Police cars came into view. Bill tried to make a run for it but was surrounded by four police cars before he could get over the embankment. He never put his hands up. He never even turned around to see how many cops were crouched behind open car doors with guns pointing at him. I wonder if he knew he would be shot before he was.

He was shot four times in the back trying to run from the scene. Those fucking pigs had no right to shoot him. The local news got the whole thing on film and it became national news so that even as I was driving across country I heard about on every radio station and watched it play out over and over on the TV at motels every night.

Everywhere I went I had to watch Bill get shot over and over again. It made my pain, and my determination more intense.

Watching Bill die changed me. I realized that his work must be carried on. I felt that Bill left me with a calling, to pick up where he left off. That night, I packed what I could and left LA. It was dangerous, but I took Bill's car. I needed to feel close to him. I headed back east.

The next morning, I watched the sunrise over the desert. I stopped in a little town built out of the sand and rock. I left Bill's car on the side of the road and walked in. I settled here and started my own work. Bill was not very ambitious about his explosives, but I am.

Blue Morning

Rosie says she can't talk no more, she says it was all talked out last night, and there's nothing more to say. I look out into the morning and see it full of blue morning light. Things feel different, and I want to tell her that a thing is different in morning time. She lights up and stands at the kitchenette window. I can only see half of her face; she is shining. She exhales blue smoke that curls around her face and hands. Nothing has changed, I say, about you and me.

I see thorough the sliding glass door that leads onto the deck little houses littered all over the hills. I trace the black lines that connect them to each other and to me. I see that the road is not the only thing that connects us. Telephone and electric wires draw double lines across the landscape. Many of the houses have satellites on top that send and receive signals all the way from outer space. I see there are so many more things that keep us together than pull us apart. I start to tell her but she turns and the look she has for me stops my voice from coming out. She says she can't believe me now, and never will. She says she's all cried out, but I see tears in her eyes. I pour the last of the Jack Daniels into a dirty glass and she says she could never love me now, and that things are not the way they used to be. It's been years, she says, since I done anything but hate you and this house and those hills in the morning; the morning only makes the walls of this cage visible. I say darling you don't know what you're talking about, not in the way that I do, my heart has been chained to yours and that line, that chain is our connection, there's

nowhere to go that you won't take me with you, and darling, that is a beautiful thing. She turns on me.

And she says nothing beautiful. She says it's not our hearts in chains but time, and time has passed us by sitting up here on this little hill, and she says, she's been waiting for some sign to tell her what she should do, and now she's got that sign, she says she's wearing it. I see her bags sitting by the door. Her hair is pulled back tight. This ain't the way, I say to her, we got things to consider. This morning is wondrous and full of hope. We been at this a long time; I didn't mean to hurt you last night. In the dark, everything gets confused.

I look and see: the grass is blue, the little houses are blue—blue is everything and everything is blue. She exhales one last blue line from the cigarette, stubs the butt into the sink and walks over to the cabinet to pour a shot of tequila. She says she's gonna go and nothing this time will stop her. She's tired, she says, of confused nights and blue mornings. She looks out over the deck and says that morning is no different from night. She says everything around here is dying night and day, and if I stay here I'll die here too; you and me, what we have between us, is already dead, and now I'm old, but maybe not too old to hope for something different, I don't know where I'll go, but I got to get away from you.

I light one myself. I got to stay straight enough to see her bags unpacked and back under the bed where they belong. Every day is a change, I say getting up to open the door, to let a little morning into the house, to get rid of the night that lingers in the corners and on her face. Come on, I say, put your bags back, put those clothes away,

let's have a drink and talk this through. Morning ain't no time to go. I say, I don't know much of what you're talking about, but I know I love you, Rosie; I ain't never been more sure of anything.

I'm your morning, Frank and I'm not staying. She says it and the way she says my name I know she means to go. I'm leaving you, she says, and I'm taking some of you with me. Her shoulders are slumped and her belly is hanging over the top of her blue jeans. I look at my hands. I know morning won't erase the dark blue bruises of the night but she can't go; she don't have no place but here.

I don't need no place to go, she says, it's enough to know what I'm leaving and that every morning reminds me I hate blue. I want my mornings to be yellow.

A Place in Mind

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.
What matter where if I be still the same,
And what I should be, all but less than he
Whom thunder hath made greater?

Paradise Lost, I, 253-255

John Milton stood at the gate and watched the sky. The last thing he saw was the sudden appearance of the sun through two entwined clouds. The clouds turned into wings that covered his eyes; what he was left with was not darkness but an impenetrable, thick and milky whiteness. Mary watched her father from the porch.

He went pale, and tried to steady himself against the fencepost. As his fingers spun round the wrought iron, John felt the texture of cold metal. Before he collapsed, he was keenly aware of his fingertips and the fine lattice that padded them. He could feel himself feeling. Mary was on the front steps, her chin on her knees, her face floating in pink petticoats. She lifted her head and watched her father from wide blue eyes. He fell as if he died on his feet. She screamed.

John Milton was a widower who left most of the parenting to the maid. Eleanor watched over Mary and Rebecca, but she was not gentle with the children. They learned to keep to themselves. John didn't have time for children; he had work to do. He told himself and his friends that he was ready to be blind, that with *Defensio Secunda* complete, he was looking forward to a rest. But in the moment of falling before his knees

hit the ground, he knew the truth: blindness was worse than old age; the truth was he wasn't prepared.

All his life had been a race against this moment: at twenty, the lines started to blur; by thirty the world existed in a dull din; and by forty this perpetual fog had settled on the left side of his vision. He knew he was losing. Even if he couldn't see, he was still able to write. As the forms of the world receded he came to know the scratch of a nib against paper, he began to hear the pen lifted and dipped into the ink, sounds forming a methodical arc.

He thought of this blind writing as a swordfight; John's old sword, retired and useless against his wardrobe, became, to his mind, the instrument for dislodging sound, the stab of a nib to dab excess ink, incise, dip, graze. He could no longer use a sword, but he knew the sound of the pen as it made its way in the count of two breaths from the inkwell back to the page, and started its scratching again like distant thunder. Behind his failing eyes, John could watch sound make words into lines into sentences. He could even hear his own eyes moving in their sockets, a sound like slugs slinking over leaves.

Mary had become a permanent shadow of her father. She crept around him all day. Watching him for hours at his favorite table in the library in this room lined with books from floor to ceiling. Mary hated the smell; it smelled like rotting paper. A window that faced the garden lit the room during the day. At night, she watched him sit at the table illuminated by the soft burn of a lantern as if he could see. It was in the library at night that Mary began to understand what was happening to her father. She could see

his eyes rove around in dark sockets settling on something but never focusing. He recited verse, scripture, Latin declinations, and chapters from his own books, the lantern giving just enough light so that Mary could watch his lips forming the words, carefully sounding each letter. To Mary it mostly sounded like church. A sermon delivered to the dark.

Although he never said a word, John knew that Mary watched him. He could hear her moving around in his periphery. He felt comforted that she could see him. He knew where she stood in the wide space of the kitchen. If he imagined the grain of the wood in the floor he could always see her little feet, the color of the walls against her blonde hair, the thin hallway that connected the rooms upstairs, a marble doorknob, light glimmering from the windows, shadows moving inside revolved around her; her seeing what he could not. He could not explain to himself what Mary anchored him to. He only knew that when he tried to remember what it was like to see a single picture always came to mind: Mary and Rebecca running to the front steps in white dresses after church like little cherubs bathing in the morning sun, and Mary turning to him as she got to the top step, her blue eyes ablaze.

It was frightened for her to watch her father teeter and sway, forced to reach out haphazardly for a wall that wasn't there, or a table that disappeared when he tried to lean on it. He looked like a child learning to walk, especially when he fell reaching for a world that he could no longer see. Mary learned by watching and so it was particularly dreadful for her to think about what it means to be blind. She had watched her mother die, but this was worse. Blindness is no mystery.

John dreaded blindness creeping in at night, behind closed eyelids, outside of dreams. Since he had stopped leaving the house, he rested only briefly in the afternoons when he could feel sunlight through his eyelids. At night he kept the household up, demanding food or tidying from Eleanor or to be escorted to the garden where, for hours, he inspected every leaf and insect tracing shapes with his fingertips, he tried to memorize colors.

Even in the dark she followed her father into the garden, through the flowerbeds and Eleanor's prized vegetable garden studying what he studied. She saw that flowers were an intricate weave of velvet veins, that most insects look quizzical, and that if you look closely enough at a blade of grass at night, you will see that the green actually casts light. For John, day and night were fading into the same misty gray, but for Mary a world of color and detail was opening up. A fascination with details grew in Mary for the rest of her life. Her world grew very small.

John's insomnia ended when Eleanor convinced John to take a glass of brandy, or two, in the evening. He slept in short, fitful bursts.

John's dreams had always been journeys through immense, radiant landscapes, blooming with light and color. He skimmed along the blue surfaces of oceans, dove through them to swim in the softest mountains of flowers; fires infused rivers incinerating forests in explosions of orange and green, and he was impervious to the smoke that drifted up to the sky, where thousands of stars made sweeping orbits through flickering constellations, like suns around John's own body rising.

On the night before he lost his sight, he woke believing that his dream had been a Divine message: God had sent an angel to cover his eyes so that he might see light from dark.

The day glowed with divine inspiration. He knew that his sight would fail soon, too soon, but John resolved to see without eyes. Most people look without seeing. He thought his own household was full of the bumbling blind, the Parliament was filled with blind beggars, the aristocracy, even the church was bursting with clergy whose vision was distorted by sin. John was convinced that the people of London had abandoned the Word. The sunlight over the Thames was not majestic; it did no more than throw shadows across the wall of a cave.

Standing at the gate, his head throbbing, he watched as the sun, encircled by a ring of light, moved out from behind the clouds and widened into a perfectly round rainbow and shot phosphenes, and then the sun, like a candle extinguished in a dark room, went out, just like that.

He fell to his knees and was afraid that he was falling too far like an angel cast out; he couldn't see the ground. He asked God to forgive him. His wife had paid for her sins with death, his daughters with dim wits, and now he was paying a price too, but if God was him, as He must be, then John had no choice but to listen: the rising world of waters dark and deep won from the void and formless infinite.

In darkness, and with dangers compassed round. He passed out.

John opened his eyes and could not see Eleanor, but he could hear her voice timbre with fear and he felt her tears fall on his face like wet leaves. He heard nothing from Mary, but remembered her screaming. He looked to the sky and saw nothing and started whispering a prayer that God had not forsaken him. He was afraid that this was the end for him. That the voice he heard in this ephemeral darkness would be the Serpent. John feared for his soul, for if Satan promised him a way out of this darkness, to see again, then he would follow. He got to his knees swinging his arms about violently. He hit his knuckles against the fence, hard enough that he could feel blood spreading onto his hand in a kind of warm embrace. Strange sounds surrounded him; he shrunk away from what he could no longer place. The bird singing in a treetop could be perched on his shoulder, wind that felt like a breeze howled inside his ears. Mary running toward him over the cobblestones that sounded like crunching glass; crickets screeching—sound accosted him like chaos descending.

Mary was standing beside her father when Eleanor came running out of the house and to the front gate, and not very soon after, Rebecca came toddling and confused. It was Eleanor who was the first to touch the fallen man.

John grabbed her hand, blood smeared like a pact. Eleanor teetered off-balance and fell beside him. She whispered: *as I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death.* She swayed and rocked until she got back onto her knees, hoisted herself up with a little help from Mary. They got John to his feet.

The deep dark of the first night was the most difficult. John wanted to sleep, to dream, but God did not penetrate his milky blindness to deliver any shining visions, and despite his exhaustion and grief, John could not find even a dreamless sleep. The pastoral sounds in the night that used to seem distant turned sinister and sounded like they were right outside his window, crawling from beneath his bed or on the other side of the door. He learned there was no such thing as silence. Late night mooing among cows made the helplessness of lying in bed unbearable. Their bleating sounded like a hymn of the four horsemen. As he lay there growing agitated, the sound came closer, up the hill behind his garden, and surrounded the house. Then John could see them coming, led by the Serpent who hissed like the wind, ready to suck the breath from his throat and take his dead eyes for a prize.

To dissuade himself of the reality of this vision, he tried to imagine the sky as it had been that afternoon, clouds languishing in shafts of sun, turning pink at the rims as it was getting late. He saw the rainbow, the halo, and then, wings. But was kind of dark angel? Here was the moment he had prepared for, he had memorized pages and pages, and strained to see them in his mind, but it was not enough.

Mary, should he get Mary? The sound of his daughter fumbling through words she could not understand would cause him to go mad. He lay in a blind paralysis; his eyes remained wide open to the invisible dark, open and fixed on nothing. Would he fall asleep with his eyes bulging like a hanged man's? Was he sleeping now? Dreaming this gruesome void? In a place between dreaming and the fear of dreaming, John scrambled to recognize the thoughts flying through his head hurtling into this perpetual night. St.

Paul's Church was on fire. He could see. Flames devouring windows and walls, eating holes the size of houses.

He stood in front of the altar, became aware of the flames and tried to escape. He walked out of the church into a field. A tree stood in the middle. Flames shot blasts of blue lightning. John moved through them, unhurt and unafraid. The tree was writhing with snakes. Satan was perched on a branch, and yet, as though bound by the limbs, was also part of the tree, and calling down to John: *In the lowest deep, a lower deep still threatening to devour you opens wide, to which the hell you suffer seems a heaven.* The snakes coiled and hissed as they glided out from Satan's eyes to form branches thrashing in a violent storm. The lightning moved closer until white light saturated his vision, the screaming snakes, Satan himself covered with oily rain.

A voice boomed from him and from all around him: *Eleanor! Mary!* It was his voice screaming: *Eleanor!* Footsteps echoed through the floors. Stumbling out of bed, he reached for the wall, banged against it with one fist, while the other held tight to the bedpost. Anchored there he yelled again: *O, God save me.* He could hear movement all round the house. He stumbled forward and hit the wardrobe. The crash made him shout again for Mary who was making her way slowly down the steps with a candle, Rebecca was hiding in her bed, but Eleanor was dressed and cursed the old badger for making such a racket in the middle of the night.

John groped for anything solid and his hand found his sword leaning against the wardrobe, and he unsheathed it as he had done so many times. He stumbled around the room. He still saw Satan sitting in the tree, mocking him with a smile: *What thou the field*

be lost? He raised the sword and started to swing back and forth until he dragged the tip of it along his naked calf and the jolt of pain made his screaming that much more urgent. He called on God again.

Mary stood in the hallway. She stepped back as he came stumbling out of the room, blood stained, lurching into the hall with the sword in his hand and shrank from him so quickly that her candle went out. In the dim hallway his face was contorted into a nightmare mask, teeth barred, eyes rolled back, huge hands bent into claws, and howling fearsome prayers.

Eleanor wasted no time; she stroked his head and took the sword and found words that brought him to his senses. She led him into the kitchen, dressed his wound and helped him change out of his blood stained nightclothes. Mary watched all of this from the kitchen door. She was relieved, but her father never looked the same to her after that night.

The sound of Eleanor dipping the rag into water to wash the blood from his leg was like church bells. The scene in the kitchen kept him from his nightmare vision, but he could not let go of the feeling that the fire was real. John told them that he had seen London burning. Is it? He asked. Eleanor said no.

Eleanor tried to lead John back to his room. He would not go. Mary's staccato breath was breathing in his ear. John listened to Eleanor walk back to her room and climb into bed. Sitting with his back to Mary in front a wide fireplace whose embers, at this hour, were dying, he told his dream story. She stepped into the kitchen to hear what she could. His head was slightly tilted so it looked like his gaze was directed at the ceiling.

He looked small and bent like an old man, but also like a child all wrapped in blankets; he even had one draped over his head. He told Mary the most frightening story about a fire, about a fire at St. Paul's, about Satan. What scared Mary the most was a word he used that she hadn't known before. The word was seduction. He called the whole dream a terrible seduction, but it was more the expression on his face, like he liked it. This scared Mary so much that tears poured out of her eyes. The entire house must be damned.

John turned around in his chair and looked directly at Mary. His eyes lay right on her, terrible eyes, like the eyes dead fish she had seen. Mary was horrified, the pupils looked like irregular moles filmed over with something like white ink, and it looked like craters had formed on the surface. They never stopped moving. She froze. He called her name. She could not hide from a man who could not see, and in that moment she was most glad that Rebecca had stayed away, for in some telepathy of blood relation Mary could see the truth: John's faith had been tested and lost. He called her again. His eyes were fixed.

That night, Mary sat at the kitchen table with her father until dawn. She was forced to listen as John reasoned his way through a crisis of faith. He took her into the nightmare landscape of his dream and begged her to tell him if this affliction was a punishment handed down from God. When she did not answer he had her fetch some paper so that she could record his thoughts.

But Mary could barely form letters. She lived inside of sense, not ideas; she trusted what she felt. Her faith did not stem from her father but from her mother, who had lived a life of quiet sacrifice. While John defended the Church, the girls were taught by

their mother to follow a simple faith, a simple life. Mary tried her best to do what he asked her. She had trouble placing the letter with its shape. She did not know how to properly dip the nip into the ink; it spilled off in fat drops. John smirked when he heard. But she managed. He would just make sure she got every letter. In his mind, the universe had diminished into a battle for his soul. Should he lose, God would die, and paradise would be lost.

During the night John had seen God in the flames. To repent he would count his blessings rather than losses, and find in his blindness only visual deprivations. He wrote: Wretched therefore as you may think it, I feel it no source of anguish to be associated with the blind, the afflicted, the infirm, and the mourners; since I may thus hope that I am more immediately under the favour and protection of my dread Father.

The sentence took Mary over an hour to dictate. The sun was up by the time she finished. John felt much better.

As the household was waking John went to his room. Mary stayed up to help with the morning chores and didn't sleep until much later that day. There was no one to help Mary. Eleanor would not take the responsibility of authority in matters between a father and his daughter. Mary clung to Rebecca, the only thing she could protect.

John was not convinced that the city hadn't burned. He asked Eleanor to take him to St. Paul's. Mary was grateful to have to stay behind. John told Eleanor that he could still see the ash and smoke that had coated everything in the district with fine soot, the

Devil's dust, and an acrid smell filled his nose and burned the back of his throat. He needed to feel the solid stone of St. Paul's with his own hands.

John's mind was crowded with apocalyptic thoughts. While he waited for Eleanor, he sat beside an open window in the front room where he could feel the sun on his face. He heard the horses' hooves hit the dirt of the road so hard that it made them sound angry; he heard women talking, their voices shrill and moved in octaves that excited him; there were children clamoring through the morning, men with business, rattling carriages. The street was symphonic. The hairs on his arms rose as this understanding dawned and shuttered through his body. The ripples felt like lips brushing against his skin. The intensity of the sensation made him swoon. He smiled, people passed and said hello, their voices sounded like bells. One poor mother yelled to John that looking directly into the sun like that would sure bring on the blindness.

John and Eleanor walked the familiar route to St. Paul's. During the first difficult steps John lost perspective, causing him to involuntarily shrink and duck away; he felt like a fool. He had to bite his lip to keep from crying because he would never again be able to walk the streets of London alone. The blindness made it impossible for him to turn away from the images in his mind, this one of him as a child running up to St. Paul's for classes with his favorite teacher Alexander Gill. He saw himself standing at the podium in front of the chapel during his orations there, over the years, when he would read from his work as he faced the great round stained glass window that contained a color of blue that John had not ever seen anywhere else. He tried to imagine the sun refracting through that colored glass.

A litany of all the things he would never see again came to him instead; even his own footprints had been irrevocably erased. What evidence was there that his life had not ended? His heartbeat started to pound in his ears. He felt again like he was falling into some abyss. He felt confused and betrayed and it made him want to lock himself in his library and never come out. He considered all the ways a blind man might stumble into death: one step in front of a speeding carriage, a sip from the wrong cup, a misstep on the stairs, tragedy at every turn.

When they arrived at the church, John ran his hands over the wood of the door, following the grain along the great planks, feeling the thick, solid cherry under his fingers and smelling in the wood the familiar incense the clergy burnt at the altar where it had soaked in over hundreds of years. The weight of history and time descended on John with such force that a sob broke loose; he crumpled. No, they would not go in, not in this condition. John laid his hand against the stone façade, feeling the pores of the granite under his fingers. He wanted to lay his body against it; he wanted to crawl inside of it; he wanted to become stone.

On the way home, he told Eleanor more of his dream, and that his vision was so clear that even if St. Paul's were still standing on this day, it would burn, and all of London would. He told her that God had revealed this to him and that God had given him a new light by which to guide his course. Eleanor smiled to herself when she said that many great prophets were blind, but John took her words for truth. When they returned, John easily found sleep.

He woke hours before dawn with words rattling his head. Panic did not grab him as it had the night before, he found that if he gave in to the darkness there was a calm like being in the middle of a very still lake at night with the sounds of the world rising out of the dark horizon. He got out of bed and stood for a moment to orient himself. Standing there absolutely still he realized he heard something other than the sounds of the night. He heard vibrations echoing through his cavernous view. He thought about the room and could sense the outline of the wardrobe rising in front of him where it stood and the table next to the bed, the lamp, the books. He knew where he was in relation to the door and the window. He knew which wall the washbasin stood against. He knew but he could never see. He bumped and stumbled his way to Mary's room.

Mary did not sleep well. She was waiting for the sound of her father coming up the stairs. So that when he came heavily into the room, she was not surprised, even when he put his huge hand on her small back. Get up Mary, he said, we have to work. But she was afraid. His eyes were moving back and forth in his head as if they were reading something. He was muttering language she couldn't understand. He pulled at her arm until she got up.

She followed him down the stairs. He was frenzied and twisting Latin and Greek and English together. Mary could not understand him. After she lit the lamps she got the paper and the ink. She put them on the table, but could not bring herself to sit down. She did not want to touch the pen. She looked around confused, wondering what she had done for her life to turn out like this. Her father had always made her uneasy, but tonight was worse, as if something dreadful had begun to unfold. His agitation grew; he stood there

clenching and unclenching his fists, getting red in the face, then he started screaming *Scribe! Scribite!*

His tantrum upset her so much that she wet herself. She cried harder when she realized it was happening. John winced at the harsh smell of urine. Her incontinence enraged him.

He was trying to tell her that God had given him a revelation. He couldn't understand why she didn't rejoice with him, but if he could have seen his own face lit by the soft burn of the lamp, he would have known why: he looked possessed.

He reached for her like he wanted to taste her. She held back a scream. He grabbed her shoulder and shook her violently, trying to shake sense into her. She cried. His arm was extended above his head, both hands curled into fists, ready to blow. It was all she could do to keep standing; she stared at her father with pleading eyes. No, please, no, please, no, please, she repeated in her head like a prayer. *Papa*, she thought. And stood a little straighter. Mary realized that she expected him to beat her; knew this, and that the world was like this—his blindness, her mother's death, and so this night was just something else to endure. He heard the measure of her breathing change. His fist was poised; it hung over his head but he lost his rage. In the silence he listened to their breaths, which rose and fell in unison, his low and heavy hers soft and light, melody and harmony.

He stepped back, and unclenched his fists. He pitied the child that she could never understand the great complex mystery of human existence; she would never know how the gift of intelligence reinforced the soul, she was a charity case. But she saw what he

could not, and she pitied his soul lost in a dark prison. Love passed between them; it rose out of necessity. Mary stepped over to the table and took her seat.

He picked up the pen and put it in her hand; he pantomimed writing, as if she couldn't understand. But she understood; here was a man to fear, who had confused darkness for light, no matter how many times he called to God. She knew but never said. Even after many years, Mary was a woman who almost never spoke. Some thought she was deaf and mute. It was just that she had learned it was better to be silent and to be on watch. But John was not thinking about Mary just then.

She filled the nib with ink, and brought it slowly back to the page. John heard the tip touch the paper.

He spoke the letters: O-F-M-A-N-S-F-I-R-S-T-D-I-S-O-B-E-D-I-E-N-C-E.

Asterism

Jack could feel the tightness in shoulders pulling a headache into he jaw where he clenched and unclenched against the strain; he was white-knuckling ten and two on the steering wheel. Cindy had the window cracked and the breeze was making her white cotton dress flutter up her thighs. He was looking at the dark crevice where her thighs met and didn't see the car coming up on the right or notice that he was drifting. A horn blared and Jack turned in time to see the candy apple red roadster swerve into the next lane. Cindy let out a little scream that set Jack on edge. He didn't see the cause for alarm. The chance of having an accident was pretty slim anyway. It was early on Saturday morning; people were taking their time. No reason to rush.

“Slow down, Jack.” She pursed her lips when she said it, like an angry kiss.

“I don't know why we didn't take the Metro.”

“Suzie doesn't like trains.”

He glanced at Suzie in the rearview. She was sucking her thumb and staring out the window.

“Maybe if we took her on the train more she wouldn't be scared of it.”

“I'm the one who stays home with her. You don't understand; she's a particular child.” Suzie also didn't like restaurant utensils or drinking after other kids.

“Particular? What's that supposed to mean?”

“She’s going to need to be evaluated before she starts school. Dr. Peters thinks she might have obsessive-compulsive disorder.” Cindy said this with such clinical efficiency that as Jack watched Suzie in the mirror, he could imagine her strapped to an examination table with electrical nodes attached to her little head.

“She’s only five.” Jack spoke softly and reminded himself that he was grateful to Cindy for leaving her job to stay home with Suzie. If they could afford it in this overpriced city, Jack would like to have a couple more kids. The first year of Suzie’s life was the best year Jack ever had.

“She’s starting kindergarten, Jack. We have to be prepared to handle her needs.”

Jack tried to pay attention to the road. He didn’t want to miss the Mormon Temple when they drove by it. The golden cherub with his trumpet sitting at the pinnacle of the tower always made Jack feel good, full of hope. As they moved down the highway, three of the gold turrets appeared over tree line. The concrete facade looked alabaster in the diffused morning light, and the little herald on top was like a star that had fallen, speared by a spire. They drove under a bridge where a graffiti sign was painted in huge blue letters, it read: Surrender Dorothy.

Surrendering anything made Jack think of work; things were not going well. It was the first year he would be eligible for tenure, but he was passed over, the department did give full tenure to Dr. Patterson, and African-American, Jack tried to rationalize that it was a reverse discrimination thing, he didn’t get the job because he’s just an ordinary white guy. But that wasn’t all that was going on. Twice in the last week, Amy, the department secretary, had tried to get her hands on Jack’s special coffee mug. The

problem was compounded by the fact that Jack had slept with Amy once, after a surprise party the physics faculty had thrown for him when his first big paper, “The Periodically Kicked Quantum Spin,” got published in *The Annals of Physics*. That was before Suzie was born, and before Amy got married and had her baby, but Jack still didn’t feel comfortable around her. He felt she always had an eye out to sabotage him. He suspected she had tampered with his student evaluations when she transcribed them. But it didn’t really bother him until he found out that student evaluations were part of the Review conducted by the tenure committee. Nobody said anything directly about it, but Jack could feel himself slipping. And now he was paranoid that Amy knew about the bottle in his desk drawer, and that the coffee in his cup was whiskey incognito. He thought about it, and cringed.

“Jack, someone brought Starbucks coffee for the faculty. It’s in the lounge – can I get you a refill?” She had come out of nowhere and was reaching for his NASA mug, but Jack swiped it off the corner of the desk before she got too close.

“Um, no thanks, Amy. I might head over there myself a little later.”

She leaned against his office doorway and squinted her eyes. She knew. He knew she knew. “Ok then,” she said and shrugged.

It was becoming a problem. Not that he couldn’t handle it, but the papers he needed to grade were piling up on his desk, and he hadn’t touched his latest article in months. He needed to publish, but he was stalling. He wasn’t keeping up with the research; the Pathfinder could have discovered life on Mars and Jack would have been oblivious. He spent a lot of his time at work getting drunk and then trying to act sober.

Teaching was actually much more enjoyable under the influence. It occurred to him that he might have become a little too easy-going, but more students were enrolling in his classes and showing up for his lectures, so he felt like it was working, like he was getting through. Not that teaching was something that Jack was especially passionate about. He liked the idea that he was good at it, but Jack hadn't been passionate about his professional prospects since he was twelve and dreamed of being an astronaut.

He had managed to cling to his childhood dream through college and grad school, and it was still floating in the back of his mind. When he finally finished his PhD, he had hoped to work for NASA or at the TEK Observatory, but the opportunities just weren't there, and priorities changed when Suzie was born. Jack used to think he could still be competitive for a job in astrophysics; that his research could lead him to a breakthrough if he just had more time to work. It was getting harder, though, to believe in what he had always imagined for himself; everything was blurring. The next week he was meeting with the Vice Dean of Academic Affairs who had requested to see him, and it was just dawning on him that his drinking could get him fired.

On the morning of Suzie's fifth birthday Jack was struggling to hide this from his wife and daughter, and struggling to make Suzie's little birthday expedition a success. His confidence was building though, since they had arrived at the zoo; he was beginning to feel he could handle it all; he just needed to lighten up a little. He smiled to himself. It was Cherry Blossom time in the city and the zoo was filled with exotic colors.

He strolled along the path with his arm around his wife, he ignored his arm sinking into the soft layer of fat on her shoulders. She was still a pretty woman it was just

that she had put on some baby weight and didn't seem to mind. Her roots were starting to show. Suzie was flawless, as always, with dark curls framing her perfect face. Jack kept busy by pointing out all the little factoids he knew about animals, which were not many, but he littered them around enough that they seemed to accumulate as expert knowledge.

He paused as they entered a thin forest that framed the path to the Wolf Den, and crouched low in front of Suzie's stroller. He squeezed one eye shut and pretended to look through a rifle scope. He whispered, "Over there my dear, two great wolves stalking through our forest. Should I kill them, or let them live?" Suzie squealed laughter and gasped a short breath when she finally saw what her daddy's imaginary rifle was aiming to gun down. The wolves looked back, expressionless.

"Daddy," was all Suzie managed to say; excitement was making her writhe.

"Why don't you let her walk?" Jack asked.

"So she can loose a finger to one of these wolves, or an arm, or have her neck ripped open? She's five, Jack, it's not safe."

"The animals are in cages, Cin, and we're at a zoo, not on an African safari. You need to lighten up."

"So what, we can both float into the stratosphere?"

He didn't take the bait. Instead, he slid his hand into his pocket and felt a knuckle brush against the cool pewter. Jack wanted to get back to the Great Ape House, alone.

They had passed through the Ape House earlier on the tour. Fur! Feathers! and Scales! was billed as a tour through the most interesting zoo exhibits for kids under six.

So far, Jack had found the apes vaguely entertaining, but that was about it. The other animals just looked sad.

“Suzie honey, would you like a frozen lemonade? Daddy will go get one for you.”

Suzie nodded. “Yes, please.” Cindy smiled like a coach when she heard Suzie use the word “please.”

“Don’t forget a straw, Jack, she won’t drink it out of the cup,” Cindy called to Jack’s back as he followed the winding tar-paved path around the corner and into the Aviary. He was walking fast, weaving through the crowd of people who were watching tropical birds flutter overhead. He made it to the Great Ape House just as another tour group was clearing out. As he passed the group, Jack picked Julie out of the crowd as if he had seen her yesterday. It had actually been seven years, but she looked exactly the same. Jack tripped on the railing that lined the path into the ape exhibit, but caught himself before he fell. He could not quite get his balance, though, and stood there for a time, holding onto the rail.

It looked like Julie was also with a Fur! Feathers! and Scales! tour, but this group was wearing headphones, all eyes darting simultaneously from ape to ape. He didn’t know if she would remember him. As he watched her move with the crowd, sunlight catching wisps of her hair and spiraling like a solar prominence; he knew he had to talk to her. Her hair bounced like it was dancing, as she disappeared over a small hill on the path. He wanted to get to Julie before he had to get back to his family. And he didn’t want to do it sober, so he had to get the timing right: slip away for a drink and a smoke,

catch up with Julie somewhere between the Wolf Den and the Aviary, and make it back to Cindy and Suzie with frozen lemonades before Cindy had time to get too bent.

The Ape House was more like a tunnel than a building. Large Roman columns framed the entrances, with sculptured monkeys frozen in desperate poses to mimic climbing. Jack sat in the center of the corridor on a marble bench. He glanced around to make sure no one was watching and pulled out the flask and a pack of Camels. He didn't know exactly why he felt so strongly about talking to her. He opened the flask and took a long first drink. It burned through his body. Seven years had passed since Paul's death, but he could see Julie clearly at the funeral, her red hair contained in a tight bun, holding her mother as they both wept. Jack pulled a long drag from the cigarette and exhaled towards the ground. Even then, there had been something he wanted to say to her, but he couldn't remember what it was.

Paul's funeral was open casket. He was laid out in a coffin made of heavy dark wood that sat at the foot of the altar. In the huge Cathedral, the altar was so grand with flowers and gold gilding that Paul's coffin looked insignificant. It made Jack think of parallax; it was all a matter of perspective. Jack had stood through the service because the seats were full. He did not take communion.

He had to wait in line to view the body. Jack could see that Paul was well loved and he barely looked sick at all, laid out in classy suit. There was a book of Emily Dickenson's poems under his folded hands, and Jack had wondered why. He realized that he didn't really know the man Paul had grown into. He and Paul had been close as kids

but lost touch after high school. Jack was stunned when he saw the obituary; thirty-three was too young to die from cancer.

When Julie read the poem from her little book that was identical to Paul's he had been deeply moved. He remembered the way her lips were trembling so she could barely form words, in places she stuttered over lines, willing herself not to weep. Her voice sent grief loose in the sanctuary; even Jack found himself crying slow, heavy tears. Sitting in the Ape House, he couldn't remember the name of that poem, but one line had stuck in Jack's mind: *I felt a funeral in my brain.*

An ape swung down from a polystyrene tree branch and pressed its face against the Plexiglas cage. Its bulbous eyes were blinking hysterically, staring Jack down as he quickly extinguished his cigarette under his shoe. He moved out of the Ape House just as another tour group began to filter in. The humid animal air threatened to block Jack's buzz, but his mind was on Julie. He walked up the black path, looking for the group with the yellow headphones. Finally he spotted her heading into the Aviary, and watched as she held up the little girl, who was laughing and pointing up at a toucan. Jack stroked the flask in his pocket and played with the screw cap like a nipple. He imagined the gin.

A nearby vendor was selling hot dogs and frozen lemonades, and for a moment Jack thought to just let it go. He should get back to Suzie and Cindy, but he couldn't take his eyes off of Julie as he approached the entrance to the Aviary. The cacophony made Jack a little dizzy. Birds were shrieking and sweeping in loops behind black mesh netting that covered the structure like a giant web. Julie was wearing a bright red jacket that

made her stand out in the crowd. Jack touched it gently, just above her elbow, but she did not turn. He squeezed a little.

“Excuse me?” he said.

Julie turned. She was trying to explain something about feathers and flying to her daughter but paused abruptly. Her eyes said *what is it?*

“Do you remember me?” He scanned for a sign of recognition.

Nothing.

“I was a friend of your brother’s, a good friend, back in grade school. Jack Anderson. I grew up right around the corner from you. I’m here with my family, it’s my daughter’s fifth birthday. I saw you pass by over there at the Panda Hut, and I just thought I would say hello.” Jack was fumbling his words.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know you.” She turned back toward the girl.

“Wait. I recognized you from the funeral; you read that beautiful poem. What was the name of it? I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to talk to you then. Paul was a good friend.”

“What’s gravity mean, Mommy?” the girl asked.

“Hold on, sweetie, why don’t you go with Mom and she can tell you all about it, ok?” Julie handed her over to the woman next to her, whom Jack had not yet noticed.

“Jen, can you take Maggie for a minute? This is one of Paul’s old friends.”

“Oh sure, take your time. Maggie loves the birds the most.” She walked with the child over to one of the glowing information displays at the edge of the mesh netting.

Jack didn’t know what to say.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t remember you.” Julie sounded more guilty than annoyed, so Jack was confident he could jog her memory.

“Paul and I spent a whole summer with your Dad building a fort in the woods behind your house, on top of that busted up Plymouth Duster. It was supposed to be like an observatory so we could track the stars.”

“A fort? I’m trying to remember if Paul had a fort,” she said almost to herself.

“We were twelve. We actually tracked Mars one night from that fort.” Jack could easily recall that Paul’s telescope was a GX-1200 model put out by actual NASA astronomers; it even measured right ascension and declination. Every hour they charted the shifting sky, making sketches of Mars’ ecliptic. Paul drew trails around Polaris that he insisted were mathematically accurate. The clarity of the memory was making Jack a little uneasy.

“Well, Paul was really into astronomy at that age. Tracking Mars, huh?” She was straining to remember something more, and then Jack watched her face register shock. “I do remember you. You were there that night when I followed Paul and Dad into the woods. But you weren’t with them.” She paused, looking out into space somewhere over Jack’s left shoulder. “You were following them too, I watched you. My mother wanted to know what the hell they were up to and she sent me to scout it out that night.” The birds were making it hard for Jack to concentrate.

“That night? I’m not really sure what you’re talking about. Paul and I tracked Mars one night; it was passing in its closest trajectory to Earth. It’s one of the stories I tell my daughter. It was amazing, a perfect night, moonless. We could see a million stars.

And I saw Mars through Paul's telescope. Paul was a brilliant child; we made this ridiculous pact to become astronauts. You know, got my PhD in astrophysics because of that night." Jack was hoping this would impress her, but she was lost in her own memory.

"There were a million stars that night, I remember. And Dad was helping Paul set up his telescope. I wasn't really paying attention because I just wanted to get away to smoke a joint, you know, I was like sixteen then. You were there? Did you know what was going on?" Julie was looking at Jack like she wanted him to say something, to acknowledge what she was trying to say. He didn't have an answer. He wanted to tell her she must have something mixed up, that she had him mixed up with someone else, but her voice was making Jack's own memory ripple. He traced it back in his mind: he saw Mars flicker in vivid red colors through Paul's telescope. Or was it his telescope? He got one for his birthday that year, not a NASA model like Paul's, but on clear night Jack was convinced he could see Phobos and Deimos, globular clusters, Pleiades.

"I'm sorry I don't know what you mean. What was going on?"

"Jack, my father was convicted of molesting Paul. It destroyed our family. Paul, in particular never recovered. His death was ruled an accident, but I was never sure. Did anything happen to you out there?"

What did you say the name of that poem was? The one you read at the funeral?"

"You were there, I remember. Jack. You lived down the street. You followed Paul around a lot, you were younger, right?"

"Two years younger."

“Paul liked you, but you were so shy. I remember seeing you in the woods that night, you were hiding out behind a tree next to where they had built that ridiculous platform on top of that old car.” The screaming birds whizzed around Jack’s head. He needed to get back to Suzie.

“I just saw you and I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry, about Paul’s death, he really meant a lot to me growing up and, like I said, I teach astronomy. And I never really got a chance to talk to you after he died. I just felt like it was important.”

“Astronomy, huh? The way the Earth rotates, everything is tilted, right? I remember that from Paul. But you know, he lost interest in that stuff so fast. Some days he would have every room in our house converted into some kind of space capsule, but then he just stopped. Nobody ever really knew what was going on back then.” Julie’s eyes followed a yellow-tailed bird streak across the Aviary. Jack needed a drink. He needed to get going.

“Listen, I’m really sorry to have bothered you. I wanted to say that your reading moved me. Really powerful.”

“No, I’m glad you came over Jack, I’ve wondered about you since then. I didn’t see you at the funeral. I don’t know that I would have recognized you. It’s good to see your face.”

“You too, Julie.”

“Take care.” Julie walked back to her partner and Maggie, but slowly as she tried to keep track of the yellow-tailed bird.

Jack bolted out of the Aviary and into the sun outside. He found the nearest men's room and finished off his gin. His mouth tingled. He was straining to recall more of Paul, the speed of light, the constellations. Was it Paul's telescope? They were supposed to meet up to track Mars. Mars is 1.5 AU from Earth. Paul had all of the celestial charts. And then? Jack washed his face and hands. A dull throbbing had started in his temples and it was moving slowly to the base of his skull.

After a few minutes in the sun Jack started to return to himself. No, nothing like that had ever happened to him, he was sure. It was even hard to believe that it happened to Paul. Mr. Jack bought three iced lemonades and a blue balloon from the closest vendor. He thought Suzie would really like the balloon a lot. He would tell her that it was magical, that it could pull her up to the sky, into the clouds. Suzie loved magical stories, animals, and the color blue. Jack had watched her when they first arrived at the zoo that morning. Her face grew wide, eyes amazed by the creatures. Animal noises made a song she hummed to. She had her fingers spread out in the air, trying to catch the breeze.

Jack found his family at the elephant exhibit. Suzie's hands were tugging at the straps that kept her fastened in the stroller.

"Here are my girls. I've been looking all over for you." Cindy glanced up at him with disdain, a look Jack was used to ignoring.

"Where have you been, Jack? We waited at the Kuala Den for at least fifteen minutes."

“I ran into an old friend. Paul’s sister, Julie.” Cindy’s face revealed a blank kind of understanding. She was watching Suzie’s progress on her stroller straps.

“She didn’t want to meet your family?”

“Well, she is a lesbian. And I know how you feel about having gay people around Suzie.” Cindy’s head whipped around.

“That’s not fair, Jack. I only said it that one time because I don’t want your creepy friend to molest our daughter. It’s not because he’s *gay*. I’m not an intolerant person, and you know that.”

Jack held out the lemonade like a peace offering. Cindy took it with a little grunt and rolled her eyes. Jack was not quite steady on his feet. He could not shake the look on Julie’s face. He wanted to see things clearly, but could only find stars and darkness. Paul was two years older, he had forgotten about that. He didn’t know why it made a difference. He strained to see Julie that night, smoking her joint just a few yards away. Could she have been there watching? Jack felt nauseous.

He bent down to Suzie, who was trying to grip the iron fence. Behind it, two elephants were standing motionless except for their enormous flapping ears. “Suzie honey, Daddy brought you a lemonade and a very special balloon.” Suzie turned reluctantly away from the elephants.

“I want peanuts. I want to feed the elephants peanuts.” Her tone was demanding, not at all the voice to come from such a sweet face. Jack half stepped, half stumbled back.

“No, honey. I don’t have peanuts, and anyway you can’t feed the elephants. It could hurt them. There is a big sign that asks all visitors to please not feed the animals in

the park.” Jack took a deep breath. “I brought you this frozen lemonade and this magic balloon.” He stood still and used a soft voice, trying to persuade Suzie. She stopped reaching out for the elephants and turned to look at her father. Love for his daughter filled him. Jack’s eyes welled with unexpected tears.

“I want to feed the elephants,” she squealed.

“How about having a lemonade and I will tell you about this special balloon. It’s a magic birthday balloon.” Jack tried to put on his story-telling face. His eyes grew wide and his voice diminished to a raspy whisper. “This balloon can take you anywhere you want to go; it can pull you all the way up to the *stratosphere*. Darling, it can defy gravity. Do you know what gravity is?” Suzie looked scared. He tried to compensate: “It doesn’t have to be a magic balloon if you don’t want. Sweetie, I just want you to know how much I love you.”

Suzie looked at her mother, “I don’t want to go Mommy. I want to feed the elephants!” She started to cry.

“Don’t cry honey.” Jack looked up at Cindy. His buzz was gone and the pressure in his head was building. He clenched his jaw against the strain. Cindy showed no sign of concern or comprehension. He couldn’t stand the sight of her. He felt like an idiot holding onto the balloon.

“Here,” he said, taking a step closer to Suzie.

“NO. No balloons. I *hate* balloons!” Suzie started to cry.

“Don’t cry, honey.” Jack looked up at Cindy, exasperated.

“She doesn’t like balloons, Jack. Get over it.” Jack ignored her.

“Here, let me tie this to your wrist; Daddy doesn’t want to hold the balloon anymore.” He took a step closer to Suzie.

“NO. No balloon.” Suzie looked really frightened. She cried harder. Jack took Suzie’s wrist in a tight grip. She collapsed in enraged defiance, screaming. Holding her up by her arm, Jack took the string and wrapped it twice around her wrist. Suzie jerked with all her weight in an effort to pull away. The pain in his head doubled; her weight was pulling him down.

“Don’t do that!” Jack yelled.

“No!” Suzie shrieked. The balloon was released and bobbed between them beginning its ascent. Suzie squirmed out of her stroller and splayed herself on the pavement, legs thrashing. Jack stood over her, frozen lemonade spilling sticky yellow syrup over his hand watching the balloon hover above the pavement.

Just before it could float out of reach, Jack snatched the balloon from the air. His fingers stretched around it, hairy and slightly rheumatic, bulging at the knuckles. Jack squeezed and closed his eyes. The explosion stung his palm. Cindy and Suzie were silent and still. They looked at Jack.

Suzie let out a long, agonized wail. Cindy scooped her into her arms, pressing the child’s head to her chest.

“Have you lost your mind?” she screamed at Jack. “Look what you’ve done. My God, anymore surprises today, Jack?” She walked away, rocking Suzie in her arms, stroking her back. Shreds of balloon stuck to Jack’s sweaty hands. He peeled them off.

His throat tightened. He looked up at the sky, where a silver plane silently drew white on blue.

Man in Motion

Dalton took a seat in the front row of the Metro Bus. The woman next to him at the window didn't look over. She had learned from years of riding to respect the privacy of fellow passengers. As the bus pushed its way into rush hour traffic, Dalton Chambers watched the street through the front window and chewed a scab on his thumb. The bus stopped for a light. Dalton leaned over toward the woman sitting next him. "Aren't you really scared sometimes, especially when you wake up in the middle of the night and can't remember if you are dead or alive or how old you are? Can't you feel life slipping away?" he asked. She sat staring out of the window with her hands wrapped around her pocketbook.

She looked sidelong at the man on her right. On any other day she might have ignored another lunatic on the bus, but today she was thinking about Rosa Parks and human kindness and the sermons of Dr. King. It was late February and she made it a point to always sit at the front of the bus in February. Bethany was old enough to remember Jim Crow laws. She spoke to Dalton because she could; it was her right and her privilege. He couldn't be more than twenty-five she thought, but his talk about death did not surprise her. She had been ruminating on the same idea. His question felt natural, but she knew it was dangerous to respond to man on a bus, especially a white man.

The bus stopped to take on a few more passengers. The hermetic swish of the doors signaled another stop closer to the Lincoln Memorial, where Dalton planned his public suicide.

“Are you listening?” He asked.

“Yes, I am.”

“Are you afraid of dying?” She turned her head at this and studied Dalton.

“No. But that’s a strange question honey, to ask a stranger on a bus.”

“I am afraid to die.” The look in his eyes told her something serious was going on with this boy. Bethany had been known to get up and move her seat because of foul smell or unwanted conversation. She was private and believed in personal space and that it shouldn’t be invaded, especially on a Metro bus heading into town. Everyone has a burden to carry, lord she knows that, and life might not be anything but carrying around hardship, but that don’t mean it’s right to put it off on other people, especially strangers. But today was different. She was sitting in the very front row of this bus and this young white boy has chosen her to unload his burden. Aren’t we supposed to help those we see who are in need of compassion and human understanding? Isn’t that what Dr. King wanted us to do?

“My name is Bethany, but my friends call me Bee. What’s your name, honey?”

The bus stopped again.

“Dalton Chambers.” Bethany straightened up a little at this name. She had heard it before. Indeed, Dalton Chambers was famous, one of the most famous rising artists in

the country. She had just read in the *Washington Post* about his new installation at the Hirschorn, her daughter's favorite art museum. "Well now, it's something to meet a famous artist on a bus." Dalton cringed. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the Kodak digital he had converted into mini explosive device. It was the most perfect sculpture he had ever created. Bethany looked at the object in his hands and reached into her own purse. "Look here, we have the exact same camera, that must be some kind of sign." Dalton studied her camera with an artist's eye scanning his replica for any trace of difference, and was proud that he could detect none. Her machine would create, his would destroy and they looked identical. The deep paradox of life and death washed over him.

"Life ain't that bad sugar, let me tell you. Take the good that comes as well as the bad. You've been given a gift from God, and I'm sitting here in the front row of this bus talking to you because one woman had the strength to stay put because her legs were tired. Rosa was a gift, I am a gift, and so are you. Living a life full of fear and death closes you off to the beauty and redemption and the glory." She placed her hand over his wrist. He watched as her hand encircled his wrist. He stared at them for a long second and thought that he would like to sculpt her hands. He looked at the Kodak bomb in his lap. "Bee, you are beauty. The most beautiful woman I have ever seen." But his eyes did not brighten when he said it, nor did he smile.

"Well I don't think I've blushed in years Mr. Chambers, but here I am blushing like a schoolgirl. Would you mind if I took your picture?"

“Not at all. I want you to remember me, and know that this was possibly the most important conversation of my life.”

She switched on the camera and waited for the light to signal it was ready to take the picture. “I’m on my way to the Rosa Parks memorial march so this conversation is important to me too, sugar. We wouldn’t have had it forty years ago. That’s some kind of hope right there.” The light blinked and Bethany snapped the shutter button. At the same moment the bus swerved to avoid slamming into the back of a car stopped in the bus zone at the Washington Mall where the Rosa Parks march would begin and end. The picture was a blurry smear of a man.

Both cameras fell. The two of them bumped heads trying to retrieve their property. Bethany grabbed her camera and stood up quickly. Dalton groped for his with a mild panic; he was unsure of how much pressure his little pipe bomb would take before its contents would ignite and cause the explosion meant for his head. His hand found the object and he sat back up, but Bethany was already almost out the door. She looked at him before she stepped down to the street, smiled and waved.

Dalton clutched the camera to his chest and thought that maybe his plan was no good.

Instead of getting off at the Lincoln Memorial stop, where he had planned to perform his suicide in front of a crowd, Dalton got off at the Smithsonian and headed to the Hirschorn to visit his work for the first time. He had put the camera back into his jacket pocket. He had to work up his courage to examine it, to face what he had almost

done. He waited until he was sitting in front of his name on the little brass plate in the sculpture garden to take out the camera. There was a red light blinking and the LCD showed a picture of what could only be a man in motion. Dalton was confused. A sound that could have been a car backfiring made him run toward the mall, toward Bethany.

Sea of Teeth

The beach was deserted except for a small crowd gathered about two hundred yards up-wind from us. People stood at a polite distance from a giant black mound wedged in the sand. The smell of rot and salt rolled up from the south side of the beach, carried by wind to the hotel patio where we stood. Mae wanted to find out what it was and film it. She grabbed my arm and pulled me onto the sand. As we got closer, the shape grew a tail and a head and fins. The whale was the size of a fishing boat, curled on its side as if it was trying to stay warm.

We walked to the edge of the yellow police tape that had been staked around the scene. Even dried up by the freezing wind, the whale was luminescent. Mae placed her eye to the viewfinder and filmed it from every angle. To me, the whale looked bigger than the ocean, bigger than the white winter sky. Two huge gashes hung open like mouths along its torso. Blubber twisted in coils where the flesh had split. The blubber looked like dirty snow and deep inside the gash the snow was stained red and became meaty chunks of flesh. Officials from the Wildlife League of Virginia were in the process of removing the corpse and were lecturing the crowd about what happens to whale anatomy when it collides with the outboard propeller of a large boat. A man in a green jumpsuit addressed the small crowd of people gathered around him. "Humpbacks are dark gray on top, but their bellies and tail flukes are marked in black and white patterns.

They have the most complex of all whale songs. There are only 2,000 left in the wild.” His eyes fixed on the sea.

Another of the team held a chainsaw to the whale’s belly and started the engine. Mae stepped over the yellow tape. “Hey! What is he doing?” she yelled out over the roar. Another green jumpsuit holding a walkie-talkie intercepted Mae before she got to the whale. He explained that the whale was too large to transport off the beach, that they were going to have to remove it in pieces.

“You’ll have to step back, Miss,” he told Mae. She pointed the camera at him.

“You’re just going to cut it up right here on the beach? Don’t you think that’s a little extreme?”

“This whale is already dead, Miss. There’s nothing inhumane about cutting it up. It should only take a couple hours. We’re professionals,” he spoke directly into the camera. “We are here to do what’s best for the animals.”

More VWL personnel arrived for consultation, all in green jumpsuits and white hard-hats. The parts of the whale’s entrails ready for removal were discarded into big white pails. About twenty of the buckets were lined up along the shore. Mae wandered around them filming their contents up-close. The whale towered over the men like a great wall. They looked primitive against it with their small brutal tools. When Mae went down to the shore I watched her hair in the wind being thrown in tangled brown bands in front of the camera. It looked like her hair was trying to escape.

I am not very comfortable at the beach; my brown loafers serve as testament. When I was a kid, we took an annual family vacation to Naples. I loved the ocean but I

never loved sand, and I didn't like the trip from the hotel to the beach where we set-up a small encampment. We would trek onto the beach in the morning like disaster victims with chairs, umbrellas, towels, boogie board, coolers and enough toys for a family of seven, although I was an only child. We stayed all day, until it was too dark to see where the sand became water. My parents drank margaritas out of a thermos during the day and then more openly from plastic margarita glasses after most of the families had gone in. Dusk was my favorite time to be on the beach, when the sun softened everything in diffused golden light. I liked to walk the beach at that hour to watch the sky and the sea change from crystal blue to gray.

When I got old enough I started to take long walks down the beach each time I would set out for the end, but I turned back, afraid I had gone too far. I only got to the end once. I was eleven. At the end of the beach the ocean met an inlet and jutted out in a rocky peninsula. There were signs warning about the rocks and rip currents. It looked like the edge of the world. The ocean had turned into a shadow.

Instead of turning back, I watched a flock of gulls gather in the distance, clattering death threats to each other over the smallest scrap of trash or discarded bait. I watched as more birds arrived until the congregation was colossal, so many that they blocked the horizon. The edge of the world opened onto a torrent of birds. The cacophony grew around me in an invisible onslaught. It sounded like the gulls were lunging at my ears and that the sound alone could tear them off. Years later I saw the Hitchcock film, and I thought he got it just right. Evil birds. I took shelter beneath an abandoned umbrella.

A huge shadow grew on the sand, darker than the ocean had become in the disappearing light. The wind picked up and it seemed to me that the flapping of their wings drove the wind, which caused the dark ocean to stir. The gulls cheered as the surf crashed. Sunset cast a strange light glowing around the flock like a halo. A small girl with long, wispy hair wearing a pink bikini ran, just then, over the dune and right into the middle of the flock. Instead of scattering, the mass enveloped her. I thought I could see birds escaping with stringy blonde clumps that dangled from raw pieces of her scalp. The gulls became raucous clouds. They were swirling and screaming.

The girl's obese parents appeared from over a dune in impossibly neon colors. They moved across the sand in a frantic kind of waddle and entered the storm to rescue their child. She must have screamed but the sound was imperceptible among a thousand shrill wails. The arrival of the parents caused a maelstrom among the gulls and the ocean and sand and rocks became birds. Light plays tricks at dusk on the beach, turning water to sand and sky to sea. Still, I had nightmares for years about those gulls.

Mae flipped the camera around and held it in front of her face. "I can feel something in the air. Not just the smell, something droning, some kind of energy. The crowd is completely absorbed by it. What does it mean? A beached whale on New Year's Eve? Is it some kind of sign?" The wind drowned out the rest of her monologue. I turned against the wind to light a cigarette.

"When did you start smoking?" Mae appeared at my shoulder.

"I'm not really smoking. It's just every once in a while I'll buy a pack." She reached into my pocket and pulled out the yellow pack of American Spirits.

“Thank God. I didn’t think I would have a chance to smoke all weekend.” I cupped my hands around hers to help her light it.

“I think this might make a good documentary. We should keep filming over the weekend, see what happens. I made friends with the guy who runs the edit bay at school and I’m sure I could make this footage really bad-ass if I had access to some good editing equipment.” Mae was still looking at the whale. She glanced up at me and took a long drag off her cigarette. “Well?” she asked.

“I’m not sure I understand what kind of documentary you want to make,” I said. I had other things on my mind for the weekend and I didn’t want my plans to wind up on film.

“You know, it could be something we figure out as we go along. It could be about everything, about the whale, about the trip, about New Year’s, about Mark’s fights,” she paused. “Fuck, we’re late aren’t we?”

“Do you think we missed it?” I tried not to get my hopes up. Mae started jogging back to the hotel.

“Hurry up! We *can’t* miss it!” she called back to me. I buried by cigarette in the sand and ran after her.

At this point in our relationship, Mae was married to a martial arts fighter named Mark “The Shark” Marvin. She invited me to Virginia Beach to watch Mark fight in a tournament. Mae and Mark had been married for almost a year. I didn’t go to the wedding. I went to Colorado instead. She was upset that I couldn’t make it, but I told her I was speaking at a really important conference in Denver and couldn’t get out of it. The

truth was I went backpacking in the mountains by myself and tried as hard as I could to put the whole thing out of my mind.

Mae and I had met on a backpacking trip our sophomore year. Just by chance we both signed up for a student trip to hike along the Appalachian Trail over Memorial Day weekend. We became great friends. Mae was married then too, but to someone else, her high school sweetheart, a writer named Lewis. Lewis had been a good guy, at least. She met Mark a few years after college, and left Lewis to be with him. I stayed out of the whole thing. I was in grad school studying to be a psychologist. When Mae and Lewis split I wanted to tell her about how I felt, but she was falling in love with someone else.

I couldn't put it off any longer, though. The truth was that I couldn't be around Mae anymore like this, and I had to tell her. I had the letter in my pocket.

I was only able to tolerate the situation because of my Klonopin prescription. I had been taking two at a time every four hours since I had arrived in Richmond to pick-up Mae and Mark. It made me miserable to watch them, even when they were arguing, which they had done for most of the time in the car. But the Klonopin really takes the edge off of everything. My friend, Mike, who prescribed them for me said, "If there was a God this shit would be in the water."

I went to the bathroom to try to wash the stench off my skin. Mae knocked on the bathroom door. "Come on, we've got to get down there. Mark's first fight is up any second." I took my time. We arrived just as Mark was stepping into the ring. Mae had reserved seats in the front row. Not that there were many people, but she wanted to make sure that I saw Mark fight up-close. "You can't really see all the moves from the back,"

she said. “Shark has been training in Hop Gar Kung Fu.” I knew nothing about martial arts and couldn’t care less about Mark’s moves. I knew that Mae had not completely bought into Mark’s delusion that he was going to make it big in the martial arts circuit. She also had doubts about his claim that he could get a movie deal one day, but she still called him “Shark” at all times during his tournaments.

The fights were taking place in the Sand Dune Convention Hall of a Ramada Inn. The showpiece for the tournament was a boxing ring enclosed on all sides by a 12’X12’ metallic fence. There were rows of folding chairs for spectators and a judges’ table behind the ring. A red banner, hung from the ceiling, said: KARATE IN A KAGE in a yellow lightning. Suspended over the whole circus was a tiered crystal chandelier that glowed as if presiding over a ball. The fighters entered the ring through a small chain-link door that was locked behind them. There was nowhere to go. Watching men beat each other unconscious was not my idea of a fun weekend getaway, but watching Mark get beat unconscious was another story.

The Shark’s opponent was a tall tan-skinned young man with spiked hair. I felt a bond with Spike since neither of us shaved our heads. Shaved head and goatee was the standard look for this kind of event. From behind us I heard Mark’s sifu whisper, “Mark can totally take this joker,” and then shout, “Come on Shark!” Mark and the other fighter jumped up and down in their separate corners, shaking arms and legs to warm up. Mark had his eyes closed and he was mouthing the words to what I imagined was a kind of karate prayer. The two men stepped to the center of the ring, embraced, and went back to their corners.

The referee's whistle signaled the beginning of the first round. Spike leapt from his corner, crossing the space between he and The Shark with speed and determination. I swung my fist in a mock right hook when the guy spun and kicked Mark in the face and then in the stomach, which caused Mae to give me one of her looks. The fighters had no protective sparring gear in this no-holds-barred event. Mark had been talking about how this kind of fighting was only legal in a few states because it was so dangerous. The real deal, he had said.

The Shark staggered and fell on his ass. Spike was on top of him before he hit the ground. The ref had to give Spike some kind of warning and push him back to his corner. Mae yelled, "Come on, Shark! Shake it off!" The ref checked to see that Mark was still conscious and blew his whistle for the fight to resume. Mark didn't look coherent. Spike wasted no time taking advantage of The Shark's confusion. Again he crossed the ring in an instant, arms swinging like clubs. Mark landed a punch to Spike's midsection and threw a kick that missed. Spike swung a leg out and knocked Mark off balance, sending him back to the mats. Mae sulked. Mark got up. The ref yelled, "Round over."

"How many rounds in a fight?" I asked.

"Three. I can't believe you're enjoying this shit. I didn't think you liked watching men beat each other unconscious." She was irritated so I didn't respond.

Mark had boasted earlier about the last Kage tournament, that four of the fighters had to be carried out on stretchers, which gave me a little hope that Mark might end up spending the night in the hospital. I didn't really want him to get hurt; I just wanted him out of the picture for a while. But I also wanted to make Mae happy, so I let out a "Go,

Shark!” but she didn’t seem to hear me. When the ref whistled to begin the next round, Mark looked like he had gone a few rounds with Mike Tyson.

Spike raced across the ring before Mark could make a move. Mark tried to get him into some kind of hold; Mark’s sifu let out a cheer. But Spike just reached around and started pounding on Mark’s kidneys. Finally, just before the end of the second round, Spike landed a punch to The Shark’s jaw. Mark’s head rolled back, and his massive six-two frame swayed gently before collapsing. The ref was on him in a second counting, “One, Two, Three . . .” Mae sighed. We watched Mark get carried out of the ring semi-conscious by his sifu, bloody and groaning. I was glad we hadn’t missed it.

Mae grabbed her bag and motioned for me to follow. I wanted to stay and watch Mark get carried out by the stretcher, *fighter number five meets the paramedics*. But it looked like he was coming around; his sifu was helping him off the mat. I followed Mae. “Let’s go to the bar,” she said. She sounded depressed. I didn’t want the job of making Mae feel better about her deadbeat husband, so I told her I wanted to get some rest and would meet them later in my hotel room. In the elevator I hummed the theme from *Rocky*. Anything is possible; the most absurd and painful situations unravel like the entrails of a giant whale, and to your surprise it’s no problem-o.

Dear Mae,

You are getting married. You are far away and building your life the way you have always wanted, in love. The truth is: I am happy that you're happy. I can't remember a time when you were happier really, but it's so hard to break you down. I wonder about your plans to go to Paris now, what's changed since you've made up your mind. I suppose it's up to you, what to do next, but I'm afraid that you are not who you are anymore, and I am the only one who can tell. I don't trust myself about any of this. You have always been mysterious to me, and even though we know each other so well now, you always surprise me. I don't know what to say about your engagement. I know you want something from me, or maybe I'm just imagining that you want me to change your mind. I felt it in your voice when you called to tell me. It was like somebody else was getting married. Or like somebody had died. I know it's not fair of me to be skeptical this way. But I feel like I have to explain myself to you. You are finding the way to the life you want. And I am lost between the name and the feeling being named; I want to say it's love but I have nothing to choose here.

Frozen drizzle sprayed the hotel window with tiny drops that rolled around as the wind picked up. I watched the raindrops trace wind with my dilated Benzo eyes and read the letter over and over. I could hear a muffled Dan Rather ruminating about the latest disaster in the Middle East. The Kage was empty for the night and I imagined it was

directly under me five floors down. Through the sliding glass doors I looked at the ocean and could see the dead whale considerably diminished.

I was trying to wrap my mind around Mae's marriage to Mark. She called him *baby*. She got dressed-up before his fights. She had decided on names for their future children.. He called himself "The Shark." He was tattooed with Chinese logographs. He was muscular and shaved his head. Mae complained to me sometimes when he also shaved his arms and legs—so he could scratch his opponents with body-stubble when he fought. She called him a Fighter because he had no other occupation to speak of.

Mae supported both of them teaching theater at Henrico County Community College, while The Shark stayed home and beat the splintered segment of a telephone pole he had strung up in their backyard for his training. Mark believed he was a fighter, and maybe he was. Maybe he would even be famous one day like Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan: his idols. Or, maybe, he was a narcissistic jackass with a chipped front tooth and a lot of silly tattoos. The Shark's favorite tattoo was the giant black logograph that stretched down his back. Only half of it was filled in, the other half was a disfigured outline that resembled a Rorschach inkblot. When he could save up the money to have it finished, it was going to be the Tibetan Buddhist god of war.

I saw delusion everywhere, which was probably how I ended up working with schizophrenics. I worked as a clinical psychologist at a mental hospital in Charlottesville, where most of my patients suffered from paranoid schizophrenia. I hadn't been working with schizophrenics for very long, and I was finding myself wondering about going back to school to study poetry.

I have this patient—bipolar with psychotic features—he came in today reciting wedding vows in a crazed sort of loop: tohaveandtoholdmy love IdoIdo cherish Ihavwill, you know, just off the wall. When I realized what he was saying it made me want to find you, to know how it worked out. And I'm sorry about not being able to be there, or to help with what you were going through. Maybe I've been spending too much time around psychotics—it seems I am only able to feel connected to my own life when pieces of it jump out at me from somewhere inside delusional monologues. Lately I've had this feeling like I'm drowning, like I'm being consumed by their insanity. It's disorienting—when reality is interwoven with unreality, and my own personal reality is occupied almost entirely by this constant weaving in and out. Lines have started to blur. So I'm sitting here at my desk, not sure of the hour at all really, and I'm wondering if you went through with it. I know you had some questions. And really, I'm sorry I couldn't reassure you or counsel you about that. I feel like I have to justify why, but I can't quite explain. I hope you understand. I'm sure it was a very lovely wedding.

We used to write to each other in college, even though we lived in the same neighborhood, just around the corner from campus. I was writing poetry back then and she was writing plays. I would stay up all night sometimes, writing. I typed all of my poems for Mae onto notebook paper, fold them up into sixths and slide them across the table at our favorite coffee shop after classes. She knew not to read them until she got home. I convinced myself that I loved the poems more than I loved Mae.

They came back to my room after Mark was finished for the day. He was discussing the tournament in excruciating detail. Which fighters had the best take-downs and why; who had the best guard, the best K.O. “The big fish eat the little ones,” he said. Mae wasn’t even pretending to be interested. She looked over at him periodically, but mostly gazed at the seascape over the bed. Mark’s shin was bruised and had a nasty looking gash, which I noticed as he elevated his leg with two pillows from my bed. I resented that Mark’s feet were in my line of vision at all, but that they were propped up, bare, so the scaly scars of psoriasis which covered the bottoms of his feet and snaked up around his ankles were making actual, physical contact with my pillows caused my stomach to lurch. I felt for the bottle of Purell Hand Sanitizer™ in my left front pocket, flipped open the lid, dabbed and rubbed, dabbed and rubbed. The setting sun was blunted by snow clouds just behind Mark’s toes. I dry-swallowed two more Klonopin, clenched my jaw, and asserted my presence in the room by clearing my throat loudly. I sounded like I was gagging. I was.

“Tim, are you alright?” Mae turned to meet my eyes.

“Yeah, Timmy, how’s it hanging over there?” Mark’s head flopped around. One of his eyes was completely black. The swelling had reduced his eyeball to a tiny slit. He looked like he just got the shit kicked out of him, which of course, he had.

“I’m alright.” My reply was directed to Mae. I would have liked to ignore Mark all the time, but I felt like I had to at least try to be his friend, for Mae. The Klonopin was working through my bloodstream, though, and was dulling my sense of obligation to be nice to the husband of the woman I loved.

“I can’t believe he doesn’t have a concussion,” I said. “Aren’t you worried about traumatic brain injury? Should we take him to a doctor?”

“Oh, don’t worry about me, Tim-bo. This shit is nothing. Just a few scrapes and bruises. I blacked out for eighteen minutes once. Paramedics thought they were gonna have to put a fucking tube down my throat. I’ve broken my collarbone in three places, shattered my kneecap. My kidneys have swollen up like melons. This shit is minor-league.” Mark derived a great deal of pride from his epic catalog of injuries. I had heard all about his cracked ribs and displaced vertebrae, too.

“Yeah, Tim. The Shark gets his ass kicked all the time,” Mae shot back. “It’s what he does, actually. It’s his most proficient ability. He’s a fucking professional at getting his ass kicked.”

“Baby, what the fuck?” Before he had a chance to get defensive, I decided to roll with it. I wanted Mae to know that I was on her side. The Klonopin was making its rounds through my bloodstream.

“Mark, I think what she’s trying to say is, maybe some of the energy you put into your fighting might be better spent working towards something a little more stable. It doesn’t seem like your career is, at this point, fulfilling for you or Mae. Doesn’t it get old after a while, Mark? Getting beat up in front of your karate buddies? In front of your wife?” I felt like I might have crossed the line. There was a long silence.

“Are you drunk, Tim?” Mark looked confused. “Hey baby, I think Tim’s totally wasted.” Mark started laughing. I could tell Mae had stopped listening. She moved to the balcony, where she cracked the door and lit a cigarette. The wind was drowning out Mark’s laughter. Fire flew over the balcony.

I’ve been calling, but there’s no answer—only Mark’s voice on the machine. You’re probably still on the cruise, if you did go through with it. I can’t remember when you said you would be coming back. I’ve been thinking about it, and I really hope you didn’t change your name.

My work feels like it’s turning against me. There is this vast, ever-present suffering, inextricable psychical suffering. And for the most part, my patients don’t improve. The chief of my division, Dr. Patel, says I’m trying too hard to make a connection, to find a way to break through the disease. He insists that most of the people we deal with are too far removed to profit much from insight therapy, that neuroleptics

are the most promising treatment option. I respect the man, but he's practically catatonic himself. It's frightening, really, to look into his eyes. What am I doing with my life?

I do have one patient, a young woman with schizophrenia, who I've bonded with. She refers to her psychotherapy as *loving*. "At first, I didn't listen to a word you said but I watched like a hawk for your expression and the sound of your voice and I added all this up and it seemed to show love," she told me in our last session. I'm the only doctor she will talk to. I suppose that's why I came back early from Colorado. But everything feels uncertain and smells like disinfectant, and suffers. I miss our conversations about Gestalt and perception, about Shakespeare and teaching. I miss rehearsing lines with you. I can't quite bring myself to leave a message. Please, come home soon.

Mark and Mae went back to their room. We were supposed to be celebrating Mark's victory at a big New Year's party his sifu was throwing three floors down, but I guess Mark was too hurt to make an appearance. And Mae had been so hostile. I wanted to know what she was thinking. I was hoping that she would get angry enough to come stay in my room for the night. The hotel walls were practically cardboard, so I could hear them arguing almost up until the New Year turned. I ordered room service and exchanged my pillows.

"This is my art, Mae, I can't just give up on it. This is who I am," Mark was yelling.

"That's not my problem, Mark. I'm an artist, too. But I have a job."

I pressed my ear against the wall.

“That’s not fair. I make money, too, doing demonstrations with Sifu. And I break my fucking back doing odd jobs, so you are absolutely not the only one working. You never give me any credit.”

“You spend more than you make. And it’s not just about the money.”

“Oh, I know what it’s about. You don’t fucking believe in me anymore. You don’t believe in what I’m doing. And you want me to fucking change who I am. For you. Who the fuck are you?” I couldn’t tell for sure, but it sounded like Mark was crying.

I went to my suitcase and pulled out the letter. Folded in thirds and then in half it was as thick as a wallet. I unfolded the stack of papers then folded them up again and put it in my back pocket. I could still hear them through the wall.

“Who the fuck am I, Mark? Why don’t you answer that? I don’t even think you know who I am. You don’t pay attention to my work, what I love. You miss all of my shows. You don’t even know anything about theater. Because you don’t care to know. And don’t even get me started on how much *I’ve* had to change for *you*. I could have fucking gone to Paris.”

“Oh, here we go again...” Mark was definitely crying. I turned up the volume on the TV. Dick Clark was counting down the last twenty minutes of 2002. Elton John came on and started the intro for *Bennie and the Jets*. I grabbed my coat and went down to the beach.

The hotel looked more like an asylum than a resort. Concrete walls separated each balcony into its own cell. Most of the room lights were off, except a few clusters around

the 3rd and 5th floors, where the tournament teams were staying. It was cold, but a few partiers were out on balconies. I heard music and laughter. I tried to find my room, and Mae's next door. I remembered I had drawn my curtains, so my room was probably too dark to see. I scanned the 5th floor, balcony by balcony. Half-way across, I saw a figure standing at the sliding glass door. I thought it was Mae. I strained to see if it was her. Another figure approached from behind. It was them. Mark was pacing and throwing his hands around, but Mae would not turn to look at him. I couldn't tell if she was looking out at the ocean or if her eyes were closed. She came out onto the balcony, leaned against the rail and pushed her hair out of her face. I knew she wasn't crying, but there was something about the way she moved her hands over her head, like she was trying to soothe herself. The lights went out behind her. I wondered if she could see me in the moonlight. For a minute I thought I should keep walking. She wrapped her arms around her belly and pulled off her sweater. She took off her shirt. I shivered. Then she slipped off the rest of her clothes, her bra, her pants, everything. She just stood there, completely naked in the freezing cold, the ocean wind grazing her skin. Her whole body must have gone numb. I saw her head tilt down toward me. I pulled out a cigarette, held it for a moment, and then lit it with my lighter. I wanted her to see me. She stood there for another minute. Then she went inside.

I hope you've had your caller ID cut off—I guess I've been pretty obsessive with the phone calls; I don't want Mark to know. I suppose you are having a delightful honeymoon. The truth is:

I walked along the shore in the dark, smoking, trying to get my thoughts together. I imagined Mae and Mark were fucking in their hotel room. I walked passed the whale and kept going. I was going to give her the letter and that would be that. I thought we could come to some kind of understanding, although I wasn't sure what it would be. My hands and face were freezing. I fingered my bottle of Klonopin and walked faster. The tips of the waves were lit by the moon, and there were few dim lights in house windows, but everything else was black. I knew the gulls were huddled together somewhere, but I couldn't see any.

I walked until the beach ended in a rock jetty. The tide was out and the surf was calm. I popped two more Klonopin. Everything was dark, but I could still see Mae's naked body. I climbed up onto the closest rock. The wind blew harder, whipping down the beach and through my coat. Fireworks burst behind me. The new year arrived while I was climbing over the ocean on a heap of stones. The rocks began to lead away from shore, migrating out to sea. They curved into the waves like a spine. Fireworks exploded over my head and turned the air blue. Their reflection hung in the ocean. I moved faster until it was too dark to tell how far apart the rocks were. I turned to go back, but shadows moved out to cover the space between rocks faster than I could see where to step. I

plodded carefully until foot landed for a second, then slid off the edge of a smooth, round stone. I could feel myself being blown backward. The fireworks cracked and I fell hard. My mouth filled with ocean and for a moment my lungs froze with it. I couldn't remember myself. The air lit up in white flashes, like birds swooping: gulls. I choked. I tried to pull myself back up onto a rock, but could not find grip or balance. I had to wade around the stones back to the beach. I had never been so cold in my life. The fireworks stopped and I was alone.

Lewis called me today. It was strange to hear his voice after so much has happened and so much time has passed. I haven't heard from Lewis since before you two split. I never told you this, but he came to Purdue about a month before you left. He knew you were having an affair, but he didn't know anything about who you were seeing or if it was serious. Lewis tried to act like he was above it all, like you had an open marriage and it didn't bother him, what you were doing. But he came to me about it, I think because he suspected me and he was looking for evidence. We ended up drinking bourbon and talking about poetry. Before he left, he told me that he was in love with someone else too. He was drunk and he said it like an accusation, but I believed him. I didn't want to know about it, though. I was trying to stay out of the whole thing, so I just let him go.

When he called today, I think he was really trying to find you. He probably expected that we would be together. He left a message. Apparently he has a novel coming

out. He sounded manic. The sound of your ex-husband's voice makes me feel like we just met, like we are in the mountains, and everything is calm. I'm nostalgic for Lewis. I wonder who he fell in love with and what his novel is about. I wonder what could have happened if things had gone differently, if I had known anything about love.

The walk back was agonizing. Luckily, the Klonopin had stayed dry in its bottle. I took two and shuddered. I was straining to remember where the path leading up to the hotel came out over the dunes, but all I could see was the outline of seagrapes shaking in the wind. I kept walking and tripped over the yellow caution tape posted around the dead whale. When I stood and tried to brush the sand off my wet clothes, I realized I was next to the whale's head. Its skin looked obsidian in the moonlight. The sand felt like it was sinking under my feet and I couldn't get my balance again. The Klonopin was making me dizzy. Too deep to be sound, a low vibration was moving through the air and against the back of my neck. I shivered. I heard what sounded like moaning coming from the other side of the whale's head. There was a thud, and then smack. In the darkness I made out a figure standing next to the whale. Someone was beating the whale's sides and kicking against its belly.

"Hey!" I yelled, "Don't do that!" I could barely see the man from the light coming from the hotel, but I knew Mark even in half-light. He turned towards me just as I swung

my fist. My hands were numb but I felt my knuckles crack. Before I knew what was happening, my face was in the sand.

“What the hell are you doing, Tim?” I struggled to get out from under him.

“What are you doing out here, man?” he asked again, letting me go. I couldn’t answer. The cold was making my ears ring. I tried to sit up.

“Don’t hit the whale,” I told him. Mark sat down next to me. The whale was blocking the wind so it wasn’t as cold.

“She’s going to leave me.” Mark’s voice cracked like he had been crying.

“No she’s not, you just got married,” I said. This was unbelievable.

“Did she say anything to you? If you know something that I don’t, man, you better fess up because I’m losing my mind here.”

“I just know her, that’s all. She didn’t tell me anything.” I tried to focus on the whale; it seemed to be growing, swelling out into the darkness.

“She’s the love of my life, you know. I can’t lose her. I won’t.”

I slumped over in the sand. The whale was expanding. I could feel it against me. It was warm and soft.

“Hey, are you wet?” Mark felt my jacket. “Fuck, Tim. You are shit-faced aren’t you?”

The whale was pushing against me, getting heavier. I closed my eyes and tried to feel it. I heard a sound, a soft droning, like bells. It was the whale calling to me.

“Hey, stay with me here, Tim-bo.” Mark’s voice was stern and somewhere from beyond the darkness I could feel a hand hitting my face. I opened my eyes and saw Mae naked on the balcony. She disappeared in shadows behind shadows.

I can’t possibly send you this letter. I think it’s clear why. There is a part of me that wonders how much you already know, if I am completely transparent. I keep telling myself that our friendship is really the most important thing to me, but I’m afraid that’s a rationalization. Why does my body feel like it’s imploding? Why did you have to get married again? I hope you didn’t go through with it; I hope you just took off, and right now you’re having a cappuccino at a café in Paris. But if you did marry Mark—.

It’s windy today and I’m imagining your hair.

I feel paralytic. Where are you?

The next morning arrived late. I woke up when Mae drew the curtains. I tried to open my eyes but it too bright. “Hey,” I whispered. “What are you doing?”

“Happy new year, Tim,” she said. Mae was filming through my sliding glass doors. “It’s a beautiful day, the ocean is really rough.” She had probably been up for hours. The tournament was starting; it was time to get going. My whole body ached.

“They can’t figure out what to do with the whale. Apparently the chainsaws aren’t working. The VWL people are talking dynamite, can you believe it? They want to blow it up. There are news crews out and everything.” She was filming the whole thing from the balcony. I sat up. Mae swung the camera around and pointed it at me. “And what the hell happened to you last night?”

“Film something else, Mae.” I did not want to be documented.

“Ok, ok,” she said and put the camera down. “Seriously, though, Mark had to carry you back to the room. He said you passed out on the beach, that you were totally wasted. We fished the key out of your pocket. You were soaked.” I checked my clothes. I had on sweat pants and a t-shirt.

“You changed my clothes?”

Mae laughed. “No, you came around, kind of, when we got back up here. Mark went down to the party, you changed clothes, and we stayed up for a while before you passed out again. You were completely fucked up.”

I couldn’t remember any of it. The last thing in my memory was the whale.

“Oh, and I found *this* in your pocket.” She held out the bottle of Klonopin like a trophy. “So I know you weren’t drunk.”

“You went through my pockets?”

“To find your key, Tim, are you following? Anyway, how long have you been taking Klonopin?”

“Not long.” Mae tossed me the bottle; there were still a few left. I looked out over the ocean. The sky was blue and the sun made it look like summer, but the people on the

beach were bundled up, huddled around the whale. The wind was blowing the sand down the beach in streams.

“Dynamite, huh?” It was horrifying.

“Yeah, we should get down there so we don’t miss anything.”

“I’ll meet you,” I said. “I need a shower.”

“Hurry up.” Mae took the camera and left.

When the first blast of steaming water hit me, my body went cold. Had she said that they took the key out of my pocket? The Klonopin? Which pocket? I ran soaking wet to find my pants, trailing enough water to leave wet footprints in the carpet. I found the pants. But no letter. I went through everything in the room. I checked my suitcase, under the bed, behind the toilet. It was gone.

At first I was relieved to hear from you. I didn’t care about the wedding. And I was glad to be spending time together again. But things are getting out of hand. It seems like we have been spending a lot of weekends together lately, and I’m not sure I can keep it up. Your new house is lovely, really, and I’m glad you’re having such a good year teaching. I was thinking about your last play, your interpretation of *A Doll’s House*. I think it said it all, but I’m not sure why you don’t see it. It was you in that house. I imagine you have convinced Mark that we are more like family than friends, something you’ve been saying often lately. I wonder if you really feel this way, or if this is just the

way you make Mark understand about us. I hope you know that I'm trying to be his friend too, now that you are married. I don't want you to know, though, how hard it is for me. The truth is I'm ashamed that I am lying to you all of the time. I'm not sure how I can keep visiting on weekends, or why I am willing to put myself through it. I couldn't stop thinking about our backpacking trip together when we first met, and getting lost on the first night. There is a part of me that wishes I had never gone on that trip, or followed you down to Arcadia Falls, or met you at all.

I shook the bottle twice to measure my supply, and took two Klonopin before going outside. The wind made huge sand clouds that whipped along the shore. Sand and cold stung like tiny angry bees. Mae didn't seem to notice the weather; she was obsessed with capturing every aspect of the whale on film: sand stuck in the ripples that stretched under the humpback's mouth, wiry hairs around its blowhole, metallic splinters stuck in its back. The smell of death came in waves and hung motionless even in the whipping wind.

The men in jumpsuits arrived to resume the dissection. It seemed like there were a lot more of them; some were wearing ski masks and goggles to protect against the sand. The men were more agitated than yesterday. No lectures on the characteristics of hump backs. They couldn't seem to decide what to do with the whale. The sand was gusting from north to south. The whale looked like a relic. Mae ran up to me.

I jumped when she spoke. “Here.” I hoped that I didn’t look like I was afraid of her. But I couldn’t help wondering if she had found the letter. “This is part of the documentary.” I took the camera.

“The documentary about everything?” I asked. I was searching her eyes to see if they could tell me what she knew.

“Just record me will you?” She looked completely serious. She lined herself up: yellow tape, dead whale, ocean; and adjusted the sleeves of her coat, pulling them over curled fists. She was posed like one of the local news reporters doing a segment about the whale. Mae motioned for me to begin recording by making a sort of loop with her right hand around her right ear. I couldn’t tell if the motion signified a movie camera or lunacy.

“I have been putting this off for so long, I didn’t think I would ever actually do it. But I have to. I want it on film so I have evidence. I won’t back out this time. I’m going to Paris.” She motioned for me to stop recording with the universal slit throat.

“Is this some kind of bizarre New Year’s resolution?” Mae had been offered a position with a theater company in Paris about a year ago. She regretted not taking it. Quiet sacrifice was not her style, but Mark’s kung fu career was getting ready to take off and there was no way he could go to Paris. So she got married.

“I don’t know. Not really. I just finally have clarity. I’ve got to go. I should have gone a year ago. Nothing has turned out the way I thought it would. The same company invited me to apply for an internship. It’s temporary, but who knows, right? I would get

to work with actors from all over the world. It could be important work.” She took the camera back.

“What about Mark?” What I wanted to ask: *What about me?*

“Mark’s will keep working at his kung fu.”

“How long do you think you’ll stay?” I didn’t see Mark handling a long-distance marriage.

“My contract would be for nine months,” she said.

“But you said something about being a permanent member?”

“Well, if things go really we’ll, that could be a possibility. I don’t know what’s going to happen, Tim. But I’ve never felt like this about anything before. I’ve got to do it.” Mae looked at me with a smile like she was going to burst.

“That’s amazing. Really. I’m so excited for you.” I didn’t know what to say.

“Really?” she asked like she wanted my permission.

“Yeah, of course. I’m surprised, but it seems like you know what you’re doing.”

She turned the camera on me.

“What about you, Tim? Do you have a New Year’s resolution?” The red light blinked. I stared at her through the camera.

“I should probably stop smoking,” I said and shrugged.

“That’s not what I mean.” She wouldn’t put the camera down. My eyes scanned the sea. I tried to focus on the rupturing waves. I thought I saw whales on the horizon.

“Look at the camera, please.”

“I had something I was going to do, but it isn’t working out the way I planned,” I tried to answer. I wasn’t going to be able to explain clearly, to get her to understand, without it. There was part of me that hoped she had it, folded up like a poem in her pocket. I also wanted it to be lost in the ocean, dissolved and atomized. I looked at her squinting behind the camera.

Mae filmed the reporter, and the whale in the background. I felt sick. I walked down to the ocean. The whale’s eye followed me to the edge of the water.

The gulls had probably started to gather above the whale when it first spilled blood into the sea, when the tide started pushing it in. They formed a contorted cloud over our heads. A few brave birds dive-bombed toward the massive carcass, but the sound of the chainsaws kept them at a reluctant distance. Some gulls sat in a pack sideways against the wind. Huddled in a silent wake for the whale. I stared at the gulls and tried capture their prayer. I ran. The wind curled around me and for a moment I felt like I was floating. Sand blew in my face and I closed my eyes, arms outstretched, I ran as hard as I could. The gulls flew off in all directions at once, screaming as they were pushed by the wind out to sea. Mae ran over to capture the moment on film.

“You’re getting wet,” she said. I turned and started walking into the wind. My face was numb. Mae stayed behind me filming. My eyes were fixed on the jagged white peaks of rupturing ocean. It looked like a sea of teeth.

A friend from Purdue has invited me to join his private practice. He lives in Chicago now and he has connections at Northwestern, so his practice is doing well. He gets a lot of couples work and depressed housewives, but he's also building a reputation as one of the best bipolar specialists in the city. I haven't told you about any of this. I haven't made any decisions. The sun came up this morning while I was on the interstate. I watched the colors change and thought about Chicago. This is not normal, Mae. I'm sleeping on your couch every other weekend, while your husband is away at martial arts tournaments, and you are talking about how close you feel to me, like family, and I can barely remember a time when I was not in love with you.

When I got to the whale, I turned to watch Mae walk toward the hotel. I could see her reflected in all the mirrored glass panes of the hotel's façade. A hundred Maes walking toward me, and one walking away. A strange silence settled over the beach and ocean. The canopy of gulls was airborne and still.

I walked down the strip and watched the sun go down from a bar called Big Johnson's. I tried to convince myself that the letter was lost.

When the beach was dark I started back. I thought I was going to find the whale, but I ended up back at the hotel. I got back just in time for the final fights. I stood at the door. I saw Mae wrapped in her favorite gray scarf. She wore it even after the seasons changed. She really had her own style. I stared at her but she never turned around.

The final fights were underway, but the spectators had dwindled. Mae was the only person ringside in the three rows of folding chairs. There were a few people sprinkled in the stands. What the hell was a kid doing in the ring? He couldn't be more than seventeen. He was half Mark's size. My heart went out to the kid. No holds barred. The ref stepped into the ring, this time the fighters shook hands. Mark looked gleeful; the kid looked scared. Ref's whistle blew.

The kid jumped into the center of the ring, but Mark took his time. He was bouncing in and out of the kid's reach. The kid threw a few punches. Mark moved in unfazed. He got the kid in the same hold that he'd put me in last night. The kid went down but not without a fight. The fight turned into a wrestling match. The Shark was determined and was using his whatever means mentality to justify palming the kid's face and digging his fingers into the kid's eyes. The ref blew his whistle and broke it up. Both fighters were back on their feet.

The kid already looked spent. The Shark moved in slowly, pacing himself, moving around the kid in slow circles. The kid kept throwing kicks and punches, but he was caught and he knew it. The Shark knew it too. There was no mercy for the kid on the Shark's face. Here was someone he could beat. The Shark threw a punch that hit the kid in the kidneys hard enough to make him stagger backward. Taking advantage of the weakness, The Shark moved in a round kicked him again, in the same spot. The kid gagged and buckled then recovered. The ref blew the whistle to stop the fight, checked with the kid who nodded, and blew the whistle again.

The kid had a new light in his eyes. He looked like he wanted it bad. I thought it might be enough to turn the fight. The kid had spirit. He bounded toward Mark with his head down like he was going to tackle him. Mark swept his leg out and the kid fell to the mat. After that it was all done. Mark chocked the kid until he tapped out. The look on Mark's face was like he just won the Olympics. When the ref held Mark's hand up to declare the fight Mae rushed into the cage with her camera and threw her arms around him. I left before they saw me.

I wanted to touch the whale, feel its soft rubber skin under my hands. I crossed the police tape barricade. Out of the shadow of its massive form, an eye the size of a prehistoric egg started at me. It looked lit and alive, frozen in a kind of crazed panic. The body laid lopsided in the sand with one of its pectoral fins outstretched and waving in the wind. Sand moved over my skin like insects. I wanted to touch the whale, reassure it against its loneliness. Nothing else mattered: not the gulls, not the cold, not New Year's Day. My arms reached out, as if to catch something, to save it. The ocean licked the sand and waited.

The sound came at first like whining gulls. It wound through the circuits between my ears and brain. The sound grew and made seizures through my legs and chest, pricked my fingertips. My lungs trembled with the vibration. The song stole my air. I saw the whale's eye roll in its oily socket.

Suddenly, the humpback's enormous tail fluke rose and crashed with such force that currents of sand formed behind it and traveled in vortices down the beach. The mouth, twice as long as it was wide, came open and spread the song out in all directions.

It was too loud to run. My hands were doing what they could for my ears; I was holding my head as though it was separate from my body. A burst of air and bile discharged from the blowhole. The whale, dead from propeller blades and chainsaws and two days washed up on this cold resort beach, spasmed and jolted to life.

With another thrust of its fluke it landed on its stomach, still calling out the song, and began slowly writhing its way toward the ocean. I could hear screams somewhere behind the singing, but I wasn't sure if they were coming from gulls or people or me. I could not move. I wanted to touch the whale; I needed evidence. The whale kept moving. It twisted the final few feet into the water, pushed off in one great thrust, and glided into the surf. The wind died. I ran into the water. Waves crashed against my legs. Cold was spreading. I was reaching. The whale disappeared.