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Consolation Prize

Amelia Gray

I

Vultures

The vultures were everywhere. On the local news, the meteorologist speculated calmly after his seven-day forecast that the vultures were eating moss by the river. They weighed down trees and circled over the town.

I found Brenda looking at the sky when I was hauling boxes into the storage shed behind the daycare.

"They're over the baseball diamond behind the high school," she said, "three blocks away." She shielded her eyes against the sun, watching.

"Everybody's looking up these days," I said.

"The radio says it's good for the muscles in your neck," Brenda said. Inside, the children tore down the plastic Easter eggs I had spent the morning hanging from the ceiling.

At home, I told my boyfriend Toby that he had to come with me to Evelyn Merkel's to mop her floors and fight the vultures.

"I don't want to go anywhere near any vultures," he said.

"It's my money, then."

"It would be your money, anyway."

"I've got some ideas," he said. He was wearing his stolen suspenders. "I need time to put something together and I can't waste it on vultures."

"Fine," I said.

Evelyn Merkel was wearing a housecoat with a nightgown underneath, and her hair was curled in rings that fell over her shoulders. She set her thin hand on Toby's back and gave him a little push over the threshold.

"Out back," she hissed.

Mrs. Merkel had a metal pole in the yard to hold up the clothesline and two vultures were chasing each other around it. They screeched and darted, beaks terrifying and open, sharp tongues. I couldn't figure if they were playing or fighting. When Tony moved the curtains to the side, they turned at once and screamed at us. Mrs. Merkel tugged the curtain back over the window.

"I don't want them knowing we're in here," she said, scolding. "Do you two want breakfast?"

"We already ate," I said.

"What do you have?" said Toby.

We ate English muffins with unsalted butter. Mrs. Merkel said she wanted to make orange juice but couldn't due to the vultures around her citrus tree. Out back, the vultures made frantic scraping noises against the pole.

Toby found a rake in the garage while I finished the dishes. Mrs. Merkel switched on her soap story. Toby stood at the door, gripping the rake with both hands. It was the old kind of rake, with a heavy metal bar at the end and tines that could aerate a lawn if you dragged it.

"Don't slam the door," Mrs. Merkel said. On the television, strangers danced at a party. "Don't kill them."

He laid his palm on the door. "These vultures are symbols," he said.

"Wave that rake around and make some screech noises," she said. "I don't want you killing anything."

"Symbols of what?" I asked.

He narrowed his eyes at the vultures. One was rooting around in the compost pile, and the other snapped at the clothesline and fell back.

"They're big," Toby said. He slid the door open.

Outside he danced around the vultures with his back to the wall. They shrieked and he swung the rake low to the ground like a golf club, catching a long divot of grass and flinging it back to the door. Mrs. Merkel turned up the volume on the television and Toby took another swing, passing more threateningly close to them. The birds fell back in unison and took off running, rising. He leaned the rake against the wall and opened the glass door so violently, it smacked into the other side.

"For goodness sake," Mrs. Merkel said.

Brenda invited me out to lunches on weekends because she wanted to be my friend. We drank ice water and watched the sky.

"Do you think there are more?" she asked. She wore a thin neck brace almost covered by her turtleneck. "There are more than last week."

"Mrs. Merkel has three more," I said, squeezing lemon over ice, licking my fingers.

Brenda looked desperate. "The parents are asking me about it, I don't know what to tell them. They don't think it's safe to bring their children outside."

"Did you tell them it was safe?"

"I don't know if it's safe, I don't think it is." She held her hand to her throat and leaned back in her chair to look up at the sky. "On the radio they say the vultures won't go until they've exhausted a population."

"I just wish somebody would do something about it," she said. "I'd swear it, they're after us."

The next morning, I touched Toby's hand. He looked up from the paper. "Mrs. Merkel's vultures are back," I said.

He chewed at the inside of his mouth.

"I can't spend all my time there," I said. "I have another job."

"I can't go. I'm working on an idea." He closed the paper and pushed a yellow pad towards me. On it was a drawing of a refrigerator door, with knobs and buttons in a row across the top.

"What is it?"

"Condiment dispenser. I'm working on the cleaning mechanism, and then I'm going to call this phone number and they're going to start making it."

"Would it really work?" I leaned over to the notepad again and he covered it with his hand.

"You're always talking about how you can't find the right jar of mustard," he said.

"This way, they'd all be in a row. There's a panel across the top, you don't even have to open the refrigerator door."

"Do I need to do the rake trick myself?"

"You'll never have to look for mustard again," he said.

I showed up to clean thinking Mrs. Merkel wouldn't be home, but when I went to take the sheets off the bed, I found her crouched in the corner of her bedroom.

"I know what they're here for," she said. "They're waiting for me." She had a cardboard box duct-taped over the window.

"They've been circling for days," she said. I knew I'd have to use adhesive remover to get the tape off the window. "They're waiting for me to die." Her voice shook.

"Don't say that."

"That's what they do, isn't it? They wait for things to die, and nobody's doing anything to help me." She looked despondently towards her cardboard window. "I'm hungry."

"I'll make some soup if you come out of here."

Later, she emerged from the bedroom looking apologetic. "I've been alone for fifteen years," she said.

"Your soup is at the table."

She went to the table. "I know what they're here for," she said to the soup.

When I got home I found Toby on the couch, eating peanuts and drinking champagne from the bottle.

"She's losing it," I said.

"I think we could really do something with this town if we set our minds to it."

He passed the bag of peanuts. "I was just thinking, everyone's scared to death of these vultures." He took a drink of champagne and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"We need to make some kind of repellent."

I sat at the other end of the couch and he moved his feet to give me more room.

"How would we do it?" I asked.

"We play off people's security," he said. "Take a guy afraid they'll find him while he's playing golf. Sell him a golf umbrella with metallic panels."

"Blind the birds?"

"Or a lady who's scared they'll eat her garden. Sell her a bag of quicklime, but you've got 'Vulture Repellent' written real big across the front." He took a long drink of the champagne. "The overhead is practically zero. I felt like celebrating already."

Brenda ushered the children inside as soon as they stepped out of their parents' cars. She held them close to her, casting furtive glances at the sky. The children usually played out front on nice afternoons, but the meteorologist's article in the newspaper said the vultures came in with the warm front and to be cautious when allowing children and small animals out.

"Did they carry off Mrs. Merkel's laundry?" Brenda asked. We were eating snack with the kids.

"She hasn't hung her clothes out in a month. She wears her housecoat and the underwear she put in storage years ago."

"Who puts underwear in storage?"

An animal cracker fell in my glass of milk. It bobbed once and sank.

The children had all the typical meaningless adorable things to say. Louis asked if the devil sent the vultures, probably because he had seen the flock circling over the abandoned Methodist church. Brenda's girl, Brittney, said the vultures came from the desert and smoked cigarettes.

For the craft project, I came up with the idea of making vulture pictures out of feathers and macaroni. After they finished we could paste on some paragraph printed from a book about where vultures come from, and the kids could take the pictures home to their parents. Brenda put Robert in time out when he made a picture of a vulture eating his baby brother.

"I don't think I want children," I told Brenda, who was busy separating feathers globbed together with dirty paste.

"They're not bad when you have one at a time," she said. Brenda did daycare to be with her daughter. When Brittney cried, she ignored the other children, picked up her baby and cooed until Brittney laughed and returned to hitting everyone.

"You shouldn't wait until you're thirty, though," Brenda said. "Your kid'll end up retarded."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Radio," she said, sneaking another animal cracker from the bin. "It's medical science. How are your boyfriend's ideas coming?"

"He's making a vulture repellant."

She finished her cracker and started filling juice cups on a tray. "That's a pretty good idea," she said. "That's good, that he's trying to do something."

"He wants to poison them."

"He could market that." She drank a cup of juice and filled it again for the tray.

"You've got to believe in him, or he's going to lose faith in himself."

"But he wants to kill them."

"I'm not saying you need a man right now, but that man of yours, he's fine. He's no bastard, like Brittney's father. He's an inventor, he's one of those genius types that we don't understand right away." She pursed her lips and picked up the juice tray. "Just let him crack his eggs, honey."

The blue panel with yellow flecks I saw in Mrs. Merkel's backyard was, on closer inspection, an image of the Virgin Mary printed cheaply on a hook-stitched rug. It hung from the clothesline. Inside, Mrs. Merkel had meatloaf in the oven.

"Your beau brought it over for me," she said. "He put the clothesline back up and said a prayer and, wouldn't you know, those buzzards haven't touched the ground since."

We watched Mary from the kitchen window. She held her palm serenely against the possibility of vultures. The blue tassels at the edges of the rug flicked around in the wind. Toby had arranged pillar candles and small statues. The pillar candles had blue and green wax and depicted the Stations of the Cross, and a big white one was set in the center for the resurrection.

"It was so kind," Mrs. Merkel said. "He wants me to call him if they come back down. I'm making meatloaf, it's his favorite."

"You seem better," I said.

She was wearing an old housewife dress with a wide, white belt. Her hair was out of curlers and she had it pulled back. She was stirring a pitcher of Tang.

"I feel like a million bucks," she said.

"It's not very Methodist, is it?"

She tapped the spoon on the pitcher. "It's more Methodist than shooting them, which is what Mr. Dobbs was doing."

Toby was smiling in his sleep. He had my satin eye pillow strapped to his face. I crawled into bed and lay my arm over him, kissing the back of his neck. When the sun came in through the windows and it got too warm, I pointed the fan towards the bed.

On the kitchen table was Toby's stack of receipts, for groceries mostly. On the top was one from the Christian Supply. Its total was deducted from his debt to me, refigured and circled, "\$1,103.38," in red pen.

Brenda ordered a crab cake at lunch. "How's the inventor?" she asked.

"He's still working on it."

"Any day now," she said. "You stick with a man like that, he'll hit on something soon enough."

"I'm starting to wonder how long I have to stick."

Brenda's crab cake arrived and she stabbed at it with her fork. "Brit had to go to the vet," she said. "I mean, the doctor. The cat had to go to the vet."

"What's wrong with Brit?"

"She stuck a ball of paper in her ear. I don't know why she did that. They had to use long tweezers, actually. Cost me twenty dollars."

My chicken salad came in a lump on lettuce leaves. "Why did you have a baby so

young, anyway?"

Brenda speared the crab cake and lifted up the corner of it, turning the piece over with her fork.

"Were you scared of the retardation thing?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. She took a bite.

"What's wrong with the cat?" I asked.

"Put it to sleep," she said.

The meteorologist interrupted his weekend forecast. "It's a dark world out there," he said, tapping the sensor in his hand and changing the seven-day on the green screen to a picture of a red-eyed vulture. "We've had a lot of calls and letters. This town hasn't seen a disaster like this since the bees." The picture faded and changed to one of a group of vultures closing in on a family. "Keep walking when you leave your house, don't stop for anything. Carry your children and keep your pets on a short leash. Protect your own backyard by putting up a chicken wire net."

Brenda stayed five hours past close, hanging the chicken wire net over the daycare's backyard. She tried to crimp the wires without a tool and ended up in the clinic for tetanus shots. After that, she refused to leave her bed until the vultures left. I had to lead classes. We fingerpainted vultures and made vulture sculptures with popsicle sticks. We drew plans in crayon detailing how to safely trap and release vultures. Robert drew his baby brother as bait. After show and tell, I told a story about vultures.

Once upon a time, there was a kind princess who lived in a castle protected with

spiked walls and lava moats and knights. She had a beautiful garden and a stable full of prize horses but she could never go outside because of the killer birds circling day and night around the castle. They avoided the spiked walls and flew over the lava moat to stay warm. The knights couldn't reach them with their swords and the situation grew desperate until one of the knights had the brilliant idea to kill one of the smaller horses and fill it with quicklime. The vultures swooped down, gorged themselves and fell dead, and the knights had the whole mess cleaned up before the princess came out for her evening walk.

Toby bought fifty golf umbrellas from a wholesaler for his vulture project. He handed me the new, lower debt when I walked in the door.

"I wanted panels of aluminum, and fabric glue," he said, "but it was impossible to cut the panels correctly. I ended up buying jumbo rolls of aluminum foil and stapling them to the nylon. That's on the second receipt."

I thought very hard about being supportive. "The second receipt," I said.

"Under the first one. These will sell," he said. There was one finished next to him. "My old manager at the putting green said he was very interested, and all I showed him was the prototype." He pointed at a mass of foil and nylon. The staples had snagged on the support poles and ripped the fabric, and he lined the exposed rips with tape and rows of staples and more foil.

"Since I'm bankrolling, maybe I should be able to help." I rustled the prototype with my toe and he snatched it away.

"I'm doing this for us," he said, exhaling through clenched teeth and laying in

another row of staples. "I don't need any goddamn help. You're profiting from this." He opened the umbrella triumphantly, and closed it again to keep the top layers of foil from splitting more.

"You're going crazy."

"I'm doing something," he said. "I know, I was different before, but I'm helping us now. Plus I'm using my intelligence, and I'm really starting something for us. Don't shut me down already, when you haven't even seen what I can do."

"Listen," I said. "I want to forgive your debt."

Toby picked up his box of forty-nine compact golf umbrellas, his jumbo roll of aluminum foil, both of his staplers and his cans of spray adhesive, and walked out.

On television, the news had a camera following the meteorologist, who made a camouflage tent and camped among the nests in protest of the hunters. The Methodists were holding nightly prayer meetings and when I showed up that night, they played their electric guitar. I stopped by the store but the shelves of bread and milk were cleaned out. The hunters were taking practice aim at the magpies from the parking lot and when I got home, the meteorologist had taken over the camera and was speaking urgently of buckshot and environmental terrorism. I didn't answer the phone when it rang and Mrs. Merkel cried from the machine that the vultures had gathered on her clothesline and weighed it down towards the candles. Her Virgin Mary rug had been burning for hours.

"Nothing can be done," she cried. I turned up the television, thinking *that rug must look like a miracle*.

There were only four more golden hours for sleep when James touched the covers above Angie's hip. She sighed, and he thought of another woman. The woman hung laundry over their balcony rail. It was a memory of no importance but he shuddered to think of it. He used to spend all day at work talking about women and poetry with a man who worked with him in the shoes. The man said he wrote enough poems to fill three shoeboxes in his closet. I am either very prolific, he said, or very old. The man said this while tying a shoe for display, fumbling the laces into their grommets while James thought of another woman, laughing, breathing heavy from running through the rain.

In the break room, where a table shared the room with a pallet of mismatched shoes, the room smelled like new rubber and coffee and James thought of a woman pulling a red wagon full of groceries. The shoes came from dealer and warehouse errors, or when customers took two left shoes or the wrong size. He thought of a woman resting her fingertips on a pot of melting chocolate, and the way she moved her hand to bring the chocolate to her mouth.

They were meaningless dark memories. A woman worked on her drawings and had him sit for her, telling him to look away and not at her but he liked the way she frowned at the page, pressing her thumb along the lines to smudge them and taking the pencil's eraser to them gently as if they were alive but weak from the journey. He thought of her trying on a silver pair of running shoes at his store, and how the arch on her foot felt in his hand when he measured it. He thought of her flicking bathwater at him and pulling on his arms in a garden. He knew she was gone. He was laying on his back in a bed in a dark room and thinking about how they were gone, and all the time sunk into

that loss.

Angie sucked in air through her nose when he shook her awake. Do you have any memories of me, he said.

Memories of you, she said. She turned and lay on her back, and he couldn't quite make out her face in the dark. Why would I have memories of you, she said, you're right here.

No old memories, he said. He was relieved. No old thoughts, not even nice ones. He realized before that he couldn't think of anything about her that stood out, that his thoughts of her melted into one thought and that nothing stood out particularly. There was one, and he tried to make himself forget it for the sake of their shared bright future but there was the way she held her hand still until the snail crawled over it and then held him there with her hand in her lap, touching the shell with her fingertips. It was too small to count. She might not even remember it, herself.

They lay together, quiet. She knew he was still awake. She touched his hand. There is one thing, she said. He turned away from her and she moved closer and put her arm around his waist, holding him. I do remember when that old man from your work died and we went to the funeral, the way you looked when you lay your hand flat on the casket.

She pressed her lips to his back. I don't know why I never mentioned that, she said, I always think about it.

She wanted to give him more—memories of him at movie theaters, memories of him laughing with her mother—but she stopped. He was trembling slightly, so slightly and she let him go, remembering his movements as those of a man dreaming dreams.

The Big Tattoo

Paul and Jillian were having wedding rings tattooed on their fingers to prove their bond would last forever. They sat facing each other in the parlor, holding hands over the backs of their respective tattoo artists, who buzzed over their left hands. Jillian's would be a Celtic loop with black and green interlocking bands, and Paul's a dark line of barbed wire that he drew in his notebook when he was in high school, long before he met her.

The most important benefit of the tattoos was that they wouldn't have to worry about their fingers fattening out of it; they both fluctuated on and off diets. Paul was too large to fit comfortably in the tattoo shop's padded chair, and Jillian took the seat, holding her breath a little. Paul sat next to her on a wooden chair the tattoo girl brought in from the lobby. His bicep twitched and he let go of Jillian's hand to rub it.

"How's things, sugar," he said.

"Fine, baby." Though they had only been dating for three months, Jillian knew how important Paul was to her as soon as he went to one knee. She had found her soulmate in the body of a man who understood the euphoria of losing a great deal of weight and the indulgence of gaining it all slowly back.

A line of blood ran down her finger, and the man working on her wiped it off with a paper towel. He hadn't said much beyond the price quote, and the time it would take for the ink. In thirty-five minutes, their lifelong connection would be sealed. It felt like fire under her skin.

"You two getting married?" asked the girl working on Paul. Her low-cut halter revealed a pair of wings tattooed on her skinny back. Jillian could see the bones in the

girl's shoulder blades. She hadn't immediately trusted the tattoo artists, but Paul insisted they each draw a sample of the designs. The work looked good enough to Paul, who had examined it carefully against his own plan.

"Common-law," Paul said. "Jillian and I don't believe in ceremony."

"That takes a bit," the girl said.

Paul shifted in his seat. The wooden chair responded with a series of creaks.

"You look uncomfortable," Jillian said. She craned her neck to look around the sanitized room. "Is there a pillow around here?"

"Careful," the girl said to Paul, lifting the tattoo gun and waiting for him to stop moving.

"They don't do common-law in Oklahoma anymore," the tattoo man said.

Once Paul finished readjusting, the girl leaned back in. "Arthur's a law expert," she said.

"Used to run a speakeasy shop out in Oklahoma," he said, "back when it was still illegal. Gotta know law when you're an outlaw." He turned Jillian's hand over, dabbing at her skin and examining his work.

"When was it illegal?" she said.

"Couple years ago," he said, adjusting the band on his gun.

The skinny girl leaned back. She had been working in a crouched position that looked painful. The whole tattoo parlor room was cramped, and everyone was in a non-optimal position except for Jillian, in the big green chair. Sweat dripped between her shoulders and settled at her lower back. Paul's hand in hers felt like a hot sponge.

"Tattoo's an outlaw art," the girl said. "It's a prison art."

"What is it now that it's legal?" Jillian asked.

"Well," Arthur said, "business is its own art form, I figure."

Paul nudged the tattoo girl with his foot. "What's your name?"

"Candy," she said.

Paul raised his eyebrows. He didn't seem to move, but the chair under him groaned with the force of shifting weight. "That's interesting," he said. "I was once deeply in love with a woman named Candy."

The tattoo artists both looked at Jillian, who pressed her lips together and made no response.

"A while back," said Arthur.

"Not really," Paul said. "We haven't spoken in a few months. The chapter of our love drew to an unfortunate close last year, around this time." He thought about it. "In a week will be the one-year anniversary of my first real heartbreak. Before that, we were in love for five years."

"That's so sad," said Candy, watching Jillian.

"We met online," said Paul. He hadn't recently had a chance to tell the story. "We hit it off immediately. She was a beautiful young woman, twenty years old and a dancer. She felt love and compassion for every creature on the planet, and saw the beauty in me, wretched creature I was at the time. She lifted me up and taught me the meaning of love, and trust. The scene was set for true romance, but one man got in the way."

Paul rearranged himself awkwardly in his chair. "Our connection was pure," he said, "but it weakened and split when her father found out that she wasn't marrying at her class. She wept and begged, but her obedience to her father proved too strong. It ended

up being a pretty classic story, actually. She stayed out late just for a chance to talk to me. I toiled at my work and saw her face in the trees. Her precious loyalties were the seed of my first heartbreak, but I learned to accept them with the stature of a man."

"So," Jillian said, stretching her shirt down over her belt. "We're familiar with Candy."

"That's apparent," Arthur muttered. He smiled a little lopsided. "Sorry, sugar."

There was a hard silence. "Well, Art," Paul said, after a minute. "Go ahead and refrain from insulting the physical appearance of my bride and myself, thank you."

Paul was a force in an argument. Jillian blushed and briefly choked on something internal and had a coughing fit that everyone had to wait out. Paul squeezed her hand.

"You can call me Mr. Williams," Arthur said, "if you'd rather not call me Arthur."

"How did you run an illegal tattoo shop?" Jillian asked, once she could breathe normally. "The one in Oklahoma?"

"It was more of a private location," Arthur said.

"Trailer," Candy said. "In the woods."

Arthur wiped another line of blood from Jillian's palm. "We lived out in the woods there, and we ordered all our supplies in the mail from Japan, and people came out by word of mouth."

Paul was paying a bit of special attention to Candy. He had stayed out of her way before, but now, he leaned over her work. Their heads bowed together reverently over his hand. "Looks nice," he said.

Candy shifted her weight to her other foot. "Barbed wire was my specialty back in Oklahoma," she said. "I'm broadening my horizons these days."

"Candy and me fell in love over that outlaw ink," Arthur said. He switched off his gun and ducked under the clasped hands to kiss his girl's shoulder.

Paul let go of Jillian, and brought his hand up to rub his forehead. Jillian reached for him, but he'd already started speaking.

"Jillian and I don't really believe in falling in love," he said.

In the green chair, Jillian crossed her legs nervously at the ankles.

Paul eased into his usual speech. "See, Mr. Watkins," he said, "Jillian and I believe in the *state* of being in love—"

"Williams."

"We believe in the beauty and power of that state, Mr. *Williams*, but there's too much of a distance for us between falling in love, being in love, and falling out of love. It's a little simpler to think of it like this: We've always been in love, since the day I was born and the day Jillian was born, and we simply didn't know each other at the time." He dug his hand with some difficulty into his front pocket, pulled out a set of keys and set it on the counter. "Poking at me," he said. "We're adults now, I figure. We've done all the changing we're going to do, and you can't fall out of love with a person that doesn't change."

"Quite the catch," Arthur said.

"This is all the catch I need," Paul said, picking up Jillian's hand.

Arthur pulled Jillian's ring finger straight like he was trying to dislocate it.

"Be still," Arthur said. "This your first ink?"

"Yes," she said, shamed, trying to hold her finger steady. Her arms felt uncomfortably stretched.

"This webbing at the base of your finger has lots of nerves and little fat, so you feel it all more." Arthur pointed and she dutifully looked. Only one band of the Celtic pattern had been completed, and she would have to sit while he filled in the extra lines and overlapped them over skin that was already sore.

"You're doing fine," Arthur said. "This is a tough place for your first." He ran his thin fingers gently over her knuckles. He held her hand as he wiped his needle.

"Paul's got a tattoo," Jillian said, dumbly.

Candy sat back on her heels. "Let's see it," she said. "I'm ready for a break."

Paul grinned at her. "Nothing better to do, if it's break time."

"We've got things to do after this," Jillian said. There were the common-law papers to sign, and then she would have to call her mother and tell her that she could stop holding her breath because it was all done. "There's no time," she said.

"Let's have a look," Candy said. "We're all professionals, here."

"Jillian," Paul said. "We're professionals."

Paul struggled to unbutton his shirt one-handed, to keep the blood off his clothes. They all watched. There were eight buttons from waist to neck and he had to twist his wrist and fingers to push each button through its eyelet. Jillian sat still, dreading to see it in public. It was something she had always felt was a between the two of them, though he'd gotten it before he met her, and now she'd ruined it.

He got the shirt open, tucked down the collar, and shifted a bit to pull his undershirt out of his waistband and lift it all the way to his neck.

Arthur let out a low whistle. "That's something," he said.

Compared to the half-finished rings, Paul's ink was epic. It was an ocean of fire,

stretching from breastbone to waistline, flames horizontally encompassing the whole expanse of his gut. The flames spread in a mass, interrupted occasionally by branches and trunks of trees, also on fire, and barely distinguishable from the scene.

"A forest fire," Candy said, leaning close to the work. "It's beautiful."

"And here's me," Paul said. He took hold of the skin at his waistline, where it folded over his belt and raised it up to show the lower end of the tattoo, where a realistic Paul stood in silhouette at the edge of the fire. "Jillian's on the other side," he said. He braced himself against the chair to stand, and lifted two handfuls of flesh so the lower half could be completely clear to Candy from her spot on the floor. He took a paper towel and wiped the band of sweat off from where his skin had touched his leather belt.

Jillian imagined Candy's viewpoint, of a mountain of fire with Paul's small face peering down from above it all.

"It came to me in a dream," Paul said.

"We're in forestry," Jillian said, to avoid having to hear the story of the dream again. "Paul does perimeter burns for logging companies."

Paul leaned down to pat her leg. "And this little lady calls me out when I clear too many of her precious conifers." He reached back for his shirt, but Arthur stopped him.

"Hang on now," Arthur said. "We're us four in a gallery, right now. Wait a minute."

Candy and Arthur looked at the skin intently, and Jillian suppressed a protective urge to cover Paul's stomach with her hands. "We met in the woods," she said. She remembered Paul, in control, with his tree density maps and his big handshake. On the day they met, she had to call the Parks Department to physically remove him and his

equipment from the land. He came back the next day with a renewed permit and an extra cup of coffee.

Candy touched Paul's stomach, examining the art. "This is beautiful," she said. "You get this done in town?"

"Out of town," Paul said. "While back."

"The shading's a real surprise," Arthur said. "I'd have done it in red, but you've got green here, and these pieces are near blue. Could I get a picture of this?"

"Sure," Paul said. "I always wanted to be a centerfold."

Candy held Paul's stomach up over her head, leaning in close to see the silhouette at the edge of the scene. "Was this one re-inked?" she said, pointing at the shadowy female figure.

"It's noticeable?" Paul lifted his skin to get a closer look. The image distorted with the stretched skin.

"Someone put thicker lines on this woman," Candy said. "It definitely isn't original to the piece."

Paul craned his neck. "It was initially Candy," he said. "You know, *my* Candy. Once that ended, I got some extra ink put on for the sake of verisimilitude."

"That's a lot of ink for love," Arthur said. "We usually do names. Sometimes a face. More business comes in for name cover-ups, actually."

"What did your girl think of this work?" Candy asked. "Considering how much time it took. Did you surprise her with it?"

Paul glanced at Jillian. "Well, if we're telling the truth," he said, slowly. "She never *exactly* saw the thing. We talked all the time online, and on the phone, but her

father ruined it all, remember, and we broke up before we actually had a chance to travel and meet each other. Face-to-face, I mean. It's one of those embarrassing situations." He turned his face away from Jillian, who followed his eyes to a poster about ink safety tacked on the opposite wall. Cover Tattoos, it said. Keep Tattoos From Sun.

Arthur tipped his head to the side, oblivious, examining the art. "You never met?" he asked. He traced the flames on Paul's stomach with his finger.

"I've never told anyone that," Paul said, the color spreading from the back of his neck. "You cornered me into it, I guess."

Jillian stood up. "I could use a soda."

"We're almost through," Arthur said.

"I'll be fast," Jillian said. "Let's start again in a minute."

"Break room's back there," Candy said, pointing.

The machine wouldn't take Jillian's nickel and she was short another quarter. She pocketed the returned change and looked around. The room was functionally bare, counters wiped down and clean as in the rest of the parlor. There was a hand towel folded next to the sink, and a bottle of disinfectant. She opened one of the cabinets above the sink. It was empty, except for a phone book and a series of volumes titled *The Economics of Zoning Laws*. The other cabinets were empty. In the employee fridge, she found three styrofoam takeout boxes and a twenty ounce bottle of cherry soda. The soda looked unopened, but the plastic safety ring was split. Someone left a good bottle of cherry soda to flatten in the fridge. Jillian suspected Candy.

She opened the break room door a crack and held herself against the frame, listening. From down the hall, she could barely hear Paul telling the dream story of his

tattoo. She couldn't make it all out but she heard *fire*, and *visions* and *terrible future* and *bride*, which meant it was the same general story she had heard many times. She pictured Candy and Arthur staring up at him silently, thinking of something they would say afterwards to prove they had been listening, though they hadn't been listening, because nobody wants to hear a dream that isn't about them.

Jillian shut the door quietly, easing down on the handle. Her ring finger was wet and throbbing, and she was hungry. There was macaroni in one of the styrofoam containers and she figured it could serve as fair compensation for her pain and humiliation. She took the soda too, placed the food in the center of the small table that took up most of the room, and pushed down the door's handle again to lock it silently.

In the other room, she imagined, they were still all talking about Paul's tattoo, and photographing and touching it. She opened the soda and took a big drink, holding the liquid in her mouth until gas from the bubbles rose up and escaped through her nose. Her teeth felt brittle.

It was cold in the break room, and the walls were bare except for a posted minimum wage sign. She hadn't found any silverware, so she ate the macaroni carefully with her fingers. Her heart pounded with the excitement of stealing, and of sitting alone in a cold room. Jillian had another drink of soda and a handful of macaroni. It was good cold pasta, and she licked her fingers before wiping her hand on a towel she'd found folded next to the sink.

There was a knock on the door.

"Jillian," Paul said, on the other side. "Sugar, what are you doing in there?"

"Taking a break," she said. She scooped up the last of the macaroni with three

fingers and leaned forward to catch it in her mouth.

"Open the door?"

Jillian tipped the bottle back, and the soda went down with a sharp burn. "In a minute," she said, gasping for air.

"I hope you're not upset because nobody was paying attention to you," Paul said.

She screwed the cap back on the soda and stowed the bottle in the styrofoam box.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, wiping her fingers on the towel. She didn't want Paul or the others to find evidence of the stolen food, but the break room was too small to hide much. The trash can under the sink was completely empty. She hid the box behind the can, wiped her fingers on the hand towel, and unlocked the door.

"They were interested in my art," Paul said. He was buttoning his shirt.

"I know."

He pulled a dollar from his front pocket and bought a bottle of water from the machine. "Thinking I might go back on a diet," he said, facing away from her. "For the wedding."

Jillian could feel the soda bubbling in her chest. "What wedding?" she said.

He cracked open his water, grinning, too nonchalant. "You know me, sugar," he said. "I'm spontaneous. Let's have a big wedding, in a church."

"You hate weddings," she said. "You hate churches."

"It's an empty ceremony in a place of empty promise, sure, but we could hire a caterer. Wasn't that what you wanted?"

She couldn't remember what she had wanted. "I just don't know how you got all this into your head," she said.

Paul took her up in his arms. He smelled like wet clothes accidentally left in the machine. When he spoke, he rested his chin on the top of her head. "I was just talking out there with Mr. Watkins and Candy," he said. She could feel his throat vibrating as he spoke. "They're really a sweet couple. Strange, you know, with the trailer operation and all, but they're good people."

"His name is Arthur."

"Candy started talking about having a legitimate wedding, in a church." He ran his fingers through her hair. "We could even get real wedding bands over these, if you wanted. She said they're real easy to resize if we need to."

Paul kept his hands on Jillian's shoulders when she leaned away from him. He held her back at arm's length, examining the little space between them.

"I think we should both lose this extra weight," he said. "I think it's really hurting our relationship."

Jillian ducked out of Paul's reach. She picked up the dirty hand towel, took it to the sink, and turned on the tap.

"Candy in there is somewhat of an unofficial marriage counselor. That's what she says. Anyway, she says, and I agree, a diet would make us feel better about ourselves. I think it might actually solve some of the little problems we've run into along the way here, you know. Make us happier with each other."

Streaks of macaroni had worked deep into the towel fabric, and she scrubbed it against itself. "I wasn't aware we were unhappy," she said.

Paul took a long drink of water. "I'm not unhappy," he said. "You're not unhappy either, really. I just think there's some issue of regret for the past that you think I have,

that I don't actually have, that you're actually fabricating in your mind."

The hand towel wasn't getting clean. Jillian wrung it out and sprayed it with disinfectant. She wiped the counter around the sink and within the sink itself, then wrung out the towel and sprayed it again. The smell of it was clean, and the disinfectant burned the raw skin on her ring finger.

"Candy is such a ridiculous name," she said. "Don't you think so? I'm always shocked to find a Candy in the real world, outside of a trailer park or the street corner, you know?" She watched him flick at the plastic ring on his water bottle. "I guess you did find that one online," she said, "but you never even *met* her."

"She wanted to be a ballerina," Paul said. "Not that you ever cared to meet her or, you know, talk about her ever."

"She was a dancer," Jillian said. She thought it over and made a conscious decision to be cruel about it, but couldn't figure out a properly nasty thing to add. "Skinny whore," she tried.

Paul looked at her with a disappointment Jillian first interpreted to mean she hadn't been insulting enough. "You don't know anything," he said, "*anything*, about it. You can't even sit still long enough to get a twenty dollar symbol of our love. You know how long this took?" He rubbed his stomach with both hands. "One year. Five sittings. Thirty-five hours. Six hundred dollars." He pulled at his skin like he was trying to offer it to her.

"So I don't know anything about love?"

"Plus the laser hair removal."

"I can't believe this," Jillian said.

Paul tossed his empty water bottle in the sink and opened the refrigerator door.

"All I'm asking from you is a small amount of sacrifice," he said. "If we lost twenty pounds each, I would personally feel so much better about this relationship." He cracked open one of the styrofoam containers and closed it again. "We're co-dependent," he said. "I figured us out."

"You figured us out."

Arthur knocked politely on the open door. "We're ready to go again," he said. "We have other customers waiting."

Paul shut the fridge in a hurry. "Just a minute, Watkins."

"Williams." Arthur turned around and left.

"My finger is goddamn killing me," Paul said to the space Arthur left, before turning to Jillian. "I don't think he cares about us," he said. "He hasn't exactly treated us like important clients."

Jillian held up her hand, extending her ring finger and the half-finished tattoo. "You always want proof," she said. "You want proof of how much a tree is worth. You want two forms of proof that I love you."

"Everybody needs proof," he said, smiling. He reached out awkwardly to touch her elbow, and she brought her arms back to her body, wrapping them around herself protectively.

"Did you need proof from the ballerina?" she asked.

"Okay, one, I can't believe we're even talking about this," Paul said, drawing back his hand, "and two, *no*, she didn't have to offer up anything, because it was clear to me immediately that her feelings were real and pure and true and free." He counted off the

qualities on his fingers. "Candy and I were equals at every moment we spoke. Everything I did for her, I did out of the purity of our love, and the only thing that ever kept us apart, *ever*, were the meaningless, *meaningless* miles." Paul's face was splotched red, and he was breathing hard from the effort of argument. He leaned against the fridge, supporting himself with one hand.

"I thought you had this great love that you lost or gave up for me," Jillian said.

Paul got a good grip on the fridge and pulled himself forward, holding his stomach protectively. "You don't know," he said.

Jillian looked at her ring finger, around which one lone black band intertwined with nothing. Paul was holding his stomach as if it were a child and looking at her with defeated eyes. He was a sensitive man, and weak. In the other room, she heard men laughing, and tattoo guns buzzing over fresh skin.

They watched each other without speaking.

Paul put down his bottle of water, and rubbed his forehead with two fingers like he always did when he was about to speak his great truths. He closed his eyes, letting his fingers work across the ridge of his eyebrow. He sighed and opened his eyes.

"I wonder what's in the fridge," he said.

"Let's go back in," Jillian said, holding her arms out to the pathetic figure of her future husband.

Hotline

Linda started finding problems with the new home the day her husband moved out. She and Gary had bought the house together, saying they needed more space, suggesting the idea of children or at least cats when all they really needed was less of each other and more places to hide, places with mature-life names like *foyer* and *garden bath*. They wanted a place with history to counteract their own lack of history, so they moved into a grand old house that had been converted into a retirement community and then converted back to the old house, grander than before.

They hadn't unpacked the china before Gary was gone, citing a stifled feeling that had followed him silently for years, which he had never hinted at but could be pointed out in hindsight—remember the camping trip, shopping for the car, remember the year without work, the broken window—the forgotten events, the small mistakes. He craved a new leaf, and an apartment of his own. Once he left, she found a crack in the basement's concrete that meant the house was slipping, nearly imperceptibly, off its foundation.

There would be the problem of resale. Linda's mortgage official said that in the current market, she would do well to stay put for a few years, to earn a little equity, to wait for the market to turn around.

Linda sat in her silent home, writing press releases for educational firms and waiting for the electrician she had called to fix the wiring problem in the bedroom closet. She made a pitcher of grape juice, and read home improvement magazines. The

electrician called and said he would be delayed until the next day, and she closed her book and went upstairs for a bath.

When she turned off the tap, she found a single red hair, nearly two feet long, wrapped around the hot water knob. Linda stretched the hair out to its full length on the edge of the bathtub. She remembered the people who'd sold them the house. The man was bald, and the woman had black hair. But here was the a hair, laid out like a crack in the porcelain.

Linda leaned out of the tub to reach her cell phone. She had seen the pregnancy hotline's number on the television and had written it down though she didn't need it, wasn't even planning on being with a man for the foreseeable future. She imagined, when she wrote the number down, that the hotline women could make good conversation.

"Hello?" Linda said, when the line picked up. "I think I'm pregnant." In the background, she heard other phones ringing, and women speaking faintly.

There was a jostling noise as if the receiver had been laying on the desk.

"Tell me what's going on," the woman on the line said, louder than Linda anticipated

"We've been married for two years," Linda said. She imagined there was a protocol for the way counselors could talk about marriages that didn't last two years.

"And how are you feeling?" said the counselor.

Linda thought about it. "I've been puking all day," she said, "and Alex, my husband, , he's watching me." She had always liked the name Alex.

"Watching?"

"Yeah, sitting and staring at me like he forgot how to speak English." Linda soaped up a leg and started shaving. "Which is funny, since he's an English teacher. He's actually here right now, watching me on the phone. Do you want to talk to him?"

"Does he want to talk to me?"

"Sure." She lifted her leg up to get the ankle, pausing for effect. "Wait, no, he got up and left. He doesn't even want to talk about it, you know?"

"That's a shame," the counselor said.

"Men are like that though, aren't they?"

"They can be."

"They're terrible dirty pigs," Linda said, rinsing off one leg and starting on the next. "They roll around in their own filth and then they expect you to wash the slop off them when they're stuck in it, you know?"

"I guess."

"Then Alex wants me to shake his hand and make him a baby, and then he trots off, and you're there alone with diapers and the electric bill because he's found a new trough to stink up."

The counselor cleared her throat. "Would you like me to send you some literature?"

Linda hung up and laughed the first good laugh in months, it seemed, and the water felt cleaner and her muscles felt stronger and she got out of the bathtub and went downstairs for another glass of grape juice.

Within the week, Linda called again. It was morning, and she had nothing better to do while finishing her second cup of coffee. After the call, she would make herself go to the store for another can of primer. There was some unpacking and cleaning to do, but she and Gary had packed their things separately, before the mess of separation became literal, and most of the boxes went with him. The mess never fully developed, and Linda only regretted pulling all the newspaper off his water glasses and throwing the newspaper away that first night, when the two of them slept curled up together on the carpeted floor of their first home.

"Tell me all about it, honey," the counselor said. She sounded sweet, and Linda almost felt bad about lying to her.

"I don't know how it happened," Linda said. She cradled the phone to her ear, holding the coffee mug with both hands. "I mean, I know how it happened, you don't have to explain it to me, but we were so careful, and it happened anyway."

"These things happen, honey."

"I never thought I'd have something growing inside me, that's all. It's like, this growth, it's inside me, and there's nothing I can do about it." She put her hand flat against her belly, wondering what it would feel like. "I can't cut it out or anything, you know."

"You're experiencing a transitional time," the counselor said. "You're doing your best to stay afloat, honey, and then this comes along."

"It's like a parasite, you know."

"Excuse me?"

"Right now I'm thinking of it more like a tapeworm than anything, is all. I'm thinking," Linda said, glancing at her watch, "should I keep it?"

"You're asking me a difficult question," the counselor said automatically. "I have to go from years of medical science and research, combined with moralized legislation and your personal view on the potential of cells, as well as the potential of your own cells, and together they—"

"In your non-professional opinion, should I keep this child?" Linda dumped the rest of her coffee down the drain and picked up her keys. "Would *you* keep it?" she asked.

The background noise rose, and Linda imagined the woman holding her end of the line up in the air. The counselor made a coughing, sniffing sound. "I've had to ask myself that question," the counselor said. "That question is why I'm here."

"Because you didn't keep it," Linda said, looking at her keys.

"I wasn't aware of the possibilities."

The counselor sounded upset, and Linda was embarrassed. "But there's always a choice," she said.

"Well," the woman said. "I made the wrong choice."

Linda hung up the phone, feeling sick.

There was a message from Gary when she got home. Linda called him at the office.

He sounded busy. "Do you have my desk?"

"I threw it into the river," she said.

"I am missing my favorite desk."

Linda walked into the study to examine Gary's desk. He had made it in college, before they met. It was an ugly thing, with a plywood surface he had painted yellow.

"How much did that desk cost you," she said. "Twenty dollars?"

"I can't work without it."

"You can work without me," Linda said. She imagined Gary in his office, surrounded by plans for other people's homes, staying late out of some fear that the opportunities he had built up would fall around him. "I'll give you twenty dollars. You can make a new desk."

"It's the principle."

His office had a river view, which he had taken her to see a few days before he moved out, so her last memory of him was of a man with a view of a river. She could picture him in the office, the lights off, sulking over the thought of his plywood desk.

"Gary," she said, "I'm pregnant."

When the movers set up Linda's new bed, they failed to remove its plastic protective cover. She never had the energy to heft the king-sized mattress off the bed, and instead threw a sheet over of the plastic. When she lay on it, she had a funny impulse to try to pee. The plastic made a quiet wrinkling sound whenever she moved and she slept a light, stiff sleep. Her neck still hurt in the afternoon, when she ate cold chicken and called the pregnancy hotline.

"I'm terrified," she said. "He said he wanted to leave, he said he was in love with somebody else, and I couldn't even tell him that I'm having his baby."

"Sweetheart," said the counselor, laying on a layer of false pain to cover what Linda suspected was an ugly brand of curiosity, "when did this all happen?"

"I took the test this morning," Linda said. She made a whimpering noise and took a drink of milk. "He's hauling logs up north all day, so I can't call him."

"Was this sudden?"

The chicken was comfortingly bland. "I thought he was screwing around on me with his dispatcher, but I never confronted him about it. Now I'm thinking, should I keep it?"

This one was on point. "A child is not an 'it,' Miss."

"Of course it is," Linda said, ready for the argument. "Everything is an 'it.' You are an 'it.' Now, should I keep it, or send it to heaven to be with the angels?"

"*He or she* has already flown with angels." The woman spoke quickly, like she was reading off a card. "It is time for this beautiful baby to come into the world, and if you cannot give *him or her* the care that *he or she* deserves, another loving family can provide—"

"Maybe someone else can have it," Linda said. "Good idea."

"Another loving family can provide love and all possible care for this baby boy or girl," the woman finished. "Was the pregnancy sudden?"

Linda felt around for the television remote. "Maybe I forgot a few pills," she said.

"I see," said the counselor. "How does that make you feel, to say that?"

Linda thought about it. "Like a moron," she said, and hung up the phone.

She needed to go to the home improvement store again, for new hardware to replace the faulty set on the kitchen cabinets. The screws were stripped and the accent

colors were all wrong anyway; the glare of aluminum clashed with the dark wood of the kitchen. Gary was supposed to be some kind of interior design genius, and she had trusted him, but he missed so much when they were buying the house.

There was a difference, Linda decided, between a designer and an inspector.

At the store, as she observed the displays a man in a blue work vest approached.

"I'm examining my options," she said.

"It really depends on the type of look you want in your kitchen," the man said.

Linda had an implicit trust for men in blue work vests. "I know," she said. "I know that."

They looked at the displays together. The knobs and pulls were displayed against different colors of wood. Pine cabinets were paired with more aluminum, and the dark oak featured brass or pewter. Linda didn't want to look at the man in the blue work vest, so she instead stared straight ahead and listened while he explained the difference between finishes and fixtures.

"Harder wood like oak and maple won't scratch as easy," the man said.

"Sure," she said, "but I want to carve my initials into it."

The man laughed, and then stopped laughing.

"You would significantly reduce the resale value of your home," he said.

"I'm not going anywhere," Linda said.

"That's a serious expense, if you ever change your mind." The man crossed his arms in front of his vest. "You never know where you'll be in ten, twenty years, and putting a home on the market is a serious expense and hassle. Respecting the wood finish of your home is a critical step for any homeowner."

"You're right," Linda said. "I never thought of it that way." She picked up a set of brass knobs. The box was heavy in her hand. "These will be perfect," she said.

After the man in the blue vest walked away, Linda opened the box and used one of the screws to carve her initials into the oak display cabinet.

Linda always hung up on her counselors without giving them time to speak. She imagined a group of women in a damp cluster of cubicles, tapping their earphones and turning their heads to see if they were the only ones suddenly disconnected. Linda pitied them, and decided to give her next counselor the last word.

The woman took a long time to get the phone to her ear. Linda had an excellent story prepared, but forgot it.

"I have this child," she said, instead. "Should I keep it?"

The silence was strange against the usual background noise. Linda imagined her past counselors all sitting in a row, painting their nails or finishing the crossword, waiting for their shift to end so they could go back home to babies of their own, or cats.

The silence alone would have convinced Linda that she was on a bad connection, but she could hear the operator, on the other end of the line, chewing gum.

"A baby," Linda said. "I don't want the baby."

The gum on the other end cracked and snapped.

The counselor spoke. "So?" she asked.

"I'm thinking of getting rid of it."

"Yeah," the counselor said. "So what if you do?"

"Well," Linda said, pacing the room. "The thing is at five months. Don't you think that's horrible?"

The counselor blew a bubble with her chewing gum. There was the soft exhalation, the muted pop. "Why would I?" she asked. "Free country, last I checked."

"I'm sick of it," Linda said, trying her best to sound disaffected, though her palms were sweating. "I've put in my time. I thought I'd want the thing, but I don't know. Guess I don't." She studied a spot on the refrigerator. "I'm sick of it."

"So take care of it," the counselor said. "Sometimes we've got to help ourselves."

"Life certainly helped me," Linda said.

"Just remember one thing," the gum-cracking counselor said. "It's all your fault."

"You're not a very good counselor."

The counselor said, "I'm sick of women calling me and crying like it's not their fault. Everything is your fault. If you don't take responsibility for your actions, you'll never be a grownup. Don't you want to be a grownup?"

"I'm thirty-two years old," Linda said.

The counselor let out a low whistle. "Impressive," she said.

"What's your name?"

"My extension is one-oh-nine."

"But your name?"

"One-oh-sunshine-nine, lady."

"Can I talk to your manager?"

"Talk to this," the counselor said, hanging up the phone.

Linda listened for a moment to the silence, flipped her phone closed, and surveyed the room. She hadn't cleaned her house since she'd moved in. There was a dark line around the bathtub and cosmetics scattered across the long counter, where Gary had insisted the buyer install an additional sink. The single red hair, the one she had found wrapped around the bathtub faucet, was still laid out along the edge of the bathtub. She picked it up, stretching it to its full length between her hands. She wrapped it around her neck.

Linda thought Gary would have come over right away after she told him she was pregnant but he took his time, waiting the rest of the week before arriving unannounced. She was just starting to think he had caught on, written the desk off as a loss, and skipped the country, but he finally showed up on Saturday. He handed her a bouquet of daffodils.

"Oh, Jesus," Linda said.

His hair was stuck down wet to his forehead. It had been raining.

"Your favorite," Gary said.

Linda felt tender towards him. "Come in," she said. "I cleaned the desk off for you."

"I realized this morning that today would be our two-year anniversary," Gary said.

"I don't want the desk."

"You can't work without it."

"I can't work without you," he said. "By which I mean, our life together."

She took the flowers. "You're soaked."

He sat down in her chair, taking in the room. Linda had the stepladder out to take down the broken pieces of glass she spotted on the chandelier. One corner of the room was still taped off for painting.

"I like this place," he said. "I like this whole place. I spend my life trying to get out of apartments, and when I finally get the opportunity, I screw it up."

"You didn't screw up," Linda said.

"You're feeling felicitous."

"You didn't. If anyone screwed up, it was me. Or maybe we both screwed up. But I know for a fact it wasn't just you."

"This is strange," Gary said. "Talking about this is strange."

"I'll get you a towel."

She brought him one of the soft hand towels she kept in the powder room. She bent over him to dry his hair, his forehead, behind his ears. Gary was the first visitor she had in the house since he'd left, not counting the electrician.

"What's that around your neck?" he asked.

She touched the piece of hair. "A necklace."

"It doesn't look like a necklace," he said, reaching for it.

She straightened up, draping the towel over his outstretched hand. "Did you want that desk?" she asked. "Because I really will throw it into the river if you don't want it. I'm tired of looking at it."

"The river is not your personal waste receptacle, you know."

"That desk is going to belong to the river," she said.

"I can't get the desk today," he said. "I wanted to come and see you." He was looking at her strangely, barely avoiding eye contact, and she realized he was still focusing on the piece of hair wrapped around her neck.

"I'm very busy," she said. "We should have lunch."

"I'm pretty hungry now," he said, standing.

"I thought you were just picking up the desk, but I'm busy today. We should just meet somewhere for lunch sometime, soon, tomorrow maybe, at that place you like with the Greek food." She moved the stepladder across the room, to more fully give the impression of how busy she was.

"I haven't been to that place in a month."

"We'll meet there," Linda said. "We'll eat dolmas."

"I love dolmas."

"I know," she said.

She locked the door behind him and picked up the phone. "I need extension one-oh-nine," she said.

One-oh-nine was working on a fist-sized piece of gum. Linda remembered buying gum from the store when she was little, unwrapping all of the pieces and chewing them at once until her jaw was sore. "I knew you'd call again," one-oh-nine said.

"Could you lose the gum?" Linda asked. "I'm having trouble hearing you."

There was a pause. "You're having trouble hearing yourself," said one-oh-nine, more clearly. "Liars are like that."

Linda blinked. "What?"

"You're not at five months," one-oh-nine said. "You're too bright to call me at five months. You'd jump off a bridge if you were really at five months."

"You're good," Linda said. "I'm not at five months."

One-oh-nine let out a triumphant little laugh. "And if you're lying to me, you're surely lying to the poor man who was foolish enough to give you the time."

"I wouldn't call him foolish, exactly."

"Now we're getting somewhere."

"I have to meet with him tomorrow."

"Can you keep your pants on, this time?"

"We're having dolmas."

On the other end of the line, the soft unwrapping of a stick of gum. "That had better mean you're keeping your pants on," one-oh-nine said, chewing again. "Try to be bright about something, for once."

"I should tell him the truth."

"See, that might not be the best idea," the counselor said. "Think about what he needs to hear, add that in with what he wants to hear, and divide it by what you're willing to lose."

"Like a math equation," Linda said.

"A dangerous math equation," one-oh-nine said solemnly. "Perhaps the most dangerous math equation in the world."

Gary had an extra-large plate of dolmas laid out to share.

"They had to cut down an entire grape tree to provide the leaves for this plate," he said.

"It was worth it," she said, sitting."

"How have you been?"

"Busy," she said. She thought of things she could say that would make him believe her. "We brought on a surprise client," she said, "and they want three releases by Monday."

"That's a good job."

"No river view."

"It's a good job when you need to stay at home."

"I usually go out anyway," she said. "I like thinking I've got somewhere to be."

He squeezed a lemon over the dolmas and picked one up gently. Gary was always careful with things.

"About our situation," Gary said.

"About that."

He took a bite of the tender rolled leaf and chewed thoughtfully. "I'm not sure what you're thinking in terms of my financial obligation," he said, "but I have a few concerns."

"Concerns?"

"I'm paying for my own apartment in the city," he said, "but I'm hoping to put down the closing costs on my own home." He took another bite. "I found a beautiful place in a good neighborhood, by the river."

"Wonderful," Linda said.

"You should come see it."

"I will, every time I close my eyes."

He sucked on the lemon rind. "With the purchase, as I'm sure you remember, comes a substantial financial obligation," he said. "I should probably just say this. I'm not sure what you've been doing since our separation, what kind of company you've been keeping, you know, and between the house payments and my moving costs, and the stress of my new job, you know, you have to figure that in—"

"You don't think it's your baby?" Linda asked, incredulous. "You think I've been sleeping around?"

"I think we should keep talking about this," he said. "I think we should talk this out."

Linda picked up the plate of dolmas. It was a big plate, shallow and heavy like a shield, and she had to use both hands. She hefted the plate up, flipped it over, and pressed it solidly onto the table. Rice and greasy leaves pushed wetly out from under the plate.

"Talk to this," she said.

Linda called one-oh-nine as soon as she got home.

"I did it," she said. "I told him what he could do."

"Oh, I've got to hear this."

She held her hand to her chest, feeling her heart's wild beating. "We were at the restaurant," she said. "We were eating. He said he was unclear regarding the child's paternity. I threw a plate of food."

"Across the room?"

She felt short of breath. "I kind of flipped it over like a pancake."

"Did they throw you out?"

"No," Linda said. "I left."

"You walked?"

"I apologized first."

One-oh-nine snorted. "No destruction, no permanent damage, and you apologized? This is sickening."

"Sickening?"

"Your behavior constitutes the low-spectrum end of how you're expected to behave at this point."

"What am I supposed to do?"

Linda heard a rhythmic tapping on the other end of the line, the sound of fingernails or a pencil.

"Did he break your heart?" one-oh-nine asked.

Linda touched her neck. The long red hair was still wrapped around it. She was surprised the knot had held. "Of course he broke my heart," she said.

"Great," she said. "Call me back when you know what that means."

She thought of Gary. It was a beautiful day, but she imagined Gary was surely ignoring his floor-to-ceiling view of it in favor of the big deadline. The balcony design proposal he spent the week revising had been rejected twice, and the third would be the loss of the client and the end of him. He saw his own interior design work as pure arrangement, of taking other people's steel sink faucets and looking-glass mirrored balls

and kitchen islands and simply installing them to please the client, not even considering the artistic vision of the place as he had read in architectural books.

Gary must feel awkward in his rented space. The office furniture was all rented, along with the sailboat pictures he had picked out by hand from the dealer, and of course the office itself, all of it bound under various contracts to third parties until he had enough work to justify a permanent address full of his own lamps and photographs and leather chairs.

He would be surprised to be thinking of Linda in the middle of such a time, on a day with such importance to him alone. She imagined him walking to the window, distracted. The river spread out wide, four stories below his feet, and he could barely make out the yellow top of his old desk, half-buried in muck at the river's edge. The yellow painted surface vanished and reappeared as it sunk and rose with the rolling current.

To Gary, it would look like a banner.

Linda sat in the bathtub and wondered how it would feel to be pregnant. She had had a brief fascination with baby names when she was in college, of choosing the perfect name for the children she later decided she would never have, but she had never considered the details of a pregnancy, the physical weight, the stretching and tightening feeling of a body growing to accommodate another body, and she thought too about how the heart accommodates in much the same way, and the beauty of that, and the danger.

The Pornographer's Bride

Tessa sent up a hasty prayer for forgiveness as she slipped on the dress Mama had bought her in an exchange for a promise not to marry Al. Al was dead, and Mama was dead too, and as the prayer was leaving Tessa's lips she saw them together in heaven, looking down critically at the world together from lawn chairs made from angel wings. Al ashed his cigarette and the ashes fell miles and rested, like kisses or ashes, on Tessa's hair.

The dress itself confined her torso and stomach, cinching skin tight under her armpits and around her shoulderblades. She pinched the whalebone supports in the corset and pulled them forward to breathe. Her ribs and stomach pressed against the fabric. Cotton might breathe but polyester has a memory, expressed in the stain under her arms, the line of dirt and ash at the floor hem.

A woman in a wedding dress is a dangerous thing. Even Tessa, sitting on the edge of her bed at the extended-stay hotel—poured painfully as she was into a dress bought by a woman who hated any man worth loving—looked into the mirror and felt powerful and malicious and afraid.

Tessa went without perfume but opened her makeup caddy, which was plastic and large like a toolbox. The photographer told her about the idea of a makeup caddy when they met (she had thought it was a blind date, and it was, in a way) that he had known a famous actress with such a toolbox, and the morning after that first meeting Tessa went to the beauty supply store and bought the box, plus base foundation, moisturizer, shadow, blusher, continuous wear lipstick in three colors, eight-hour mascara, false eyelashes,

foundation sponges, costume earrings, body glitter, eyeliner in three colors, fake nails, nail polish, lip liner, and hairpins. In the big bottom drawer she put hosiery and hair extensions.

All these things were new and carefully packed like a lunch bag for the first day of school. She stepped back after completing this packing and looked at the box and thought of the famous actress and how her box must look, the same products but surely better.

Tessa was done with weddings. She hadn't said it in her prayers, as it wasn't any of Mama's business or Al's or God's, but she had decided long before that she was through. Even if the most beautiful kind man in the world walked through the door of her room in the extended-stay hotel—ignoring the energy bar wrappers and the failed herb garden at the window (still in their plastic pots, the unwatered sponge of dirt choking the seeds while she was gone a whole weekend), the lingerie in a size four and schoolgirl uniform in a size three and the plastic sheets on the bed—even if the man had ignored all of that and dropped to his knee and said Tessa, I want to be your lover and your friend and I want to support you and introduce you as my wife, she would say no, thank you. It was a pride of age and experience, the ability to say no. Even if she was relentlessly pursued.

The dress, a size two, was tight enough that Tessa felt like she was on stilts propped up in it, the corset making one long support and the control-top hosiery under it holding her waist to her thighs. She pushed off the bed with her hands and used the momentum to stand. The photographer would arrive soon with their supplies. She would throw the flowers behind her and listen to the sound the wet bouquet made when it

slapped against the wall.

The Garden

There once was a woman who lived on the far edge of town, where the houses had courtyards and vegetable gardens. The woman grew a small amount of flowers and vegetables in her garden, a small plot behind her house. Her bedroom window faced the garden, and she spent many happy weekend hours watching the scene.

One day, she turned away from the window and noticed that the rest of her room looked darker than usual. She assumed that her eyes had gotten too used to the brightness of the window and waited for them to adjust, but they never did. The room, her house—everything around her except the window—grew darker and darker by the hour and finally vanished into blackness. The window, however, was bright with sunshine and color. She looked out at the garden for a long while, frightened to look away, and when she finally did look away again she was confronted with total darkness, and she cried and touched the walls and found her telephone and called her doctor.

The woman's doctor and his colleagues were entirely baffled. They traveled to the woman's house, tested her sight, and found it to be entirely disintegrated. At the window, she seemed to recognize the plants and flowers by general color and shape, but when one of the doctors stood in the garden, waving to her through the window, she continued describing geraniums and the leafy tops of the carrots as if they were all she saw. The doctors determined that her claimed sight was only a memory of sight, and that as time progressed, that memory would soon fade as her sight had faded and she would be left in a complete and unforgiving darkness.

The doctors stood in the kitchen and discussed the ethics of their situation. It was only right to tell her the truth; the tests on her corneas and pupils had revealed no reaction, and it was not a selective blindness but a total blindness. They were drinking coffee, which they had made for themselves. The woman apologized for not making it for them due to her sudden and disturbing blindness, and they said that was all right, and one of the younger doctors found the filter and the beans in the pantry. The doctors all liked the woman. They decided that she had been through enough for one day. Eventually, the doctors reasoned, they would tell her that tests had come back and that she should be prepared for the worst. By then she might even be used to it, they speculated, drinking their coffee. They were small-town doctors and very kind, and interested in the woman's mental well-being.

When they told the woman that her selective blindness was focused on her window, and perhaps the condition was permanent though they would be doing more tests to be quite sure, the woman looked out the memory of her window and nodded, though she didn't entirely understand. Sunlight filtered in through the tall trees and lit the grass and the garden in shades of green and brown. Soft breezes rustled the leaves and gave her a comforting sense of the wide, changing world. She had always loved her garden and was happy to still see it. The doctors washed their coffee cups and left them to dry next to the sink.

The woman passed many satisfactory days at her window. When she opened her eyes in the morning, she was always briefly afraid of the darkness, but out of the corner of her eye she was comforted by the sight of the glowing window. She stumbled and touched the walls and found her shower, and then dressed herself for the day and dug in

her pantry for breakfast. In those first days, she was ashamed to call her friends and frankly didn't feel like explaining everything, so instead she worked through the canned foods in the pantry for basic sustenance. It was a surprise at every meal in that way, and for the days where she ate only pumpkin pie filling and creamed corn, there would always be a morning where she opened a can of premium crab meat, which she had received as an unfortunate gift from an aunt in Maine, but with her blindness realized that it was delicious sweet meat. She spooned up pieces of it while watching the wind work through the leaves of her summer squash. She tried to go outside and was disturbed by the blindness that remained, and went immediately back inside even if it felt like a good day to her skin.

The woman was suspicious of the idea of selective blindness, of the way the doctors asked how her garden looked when they called, adding that no, the tests had not yet come in, but any day now, they must have gotten lost on the way to the testing center across the state but surely they'd be in soon. She sat in front of the window and held her hand in front of her face and felt chills across her arms because the hand was not visible, even when she waved it frantically in front of her wide eyes. All she saw was the garden. She was a smart woman and determined to know the truth, but the blindness made her desperate, and she convinced herself that the selectivity of her blindness was a rare condition that actually blocked out anything but pure beauty, and that was why she couldn't see her shower curtain or her stove or even her own body, but still saw so vividly the outside world from inside. It was a symbolic blindness, she decided, which understood the condition of her home as a bodily condition, and kept her blind when she stepped out of it—for her own good, because she would hurt herself if she moved too far

out of the house. She ate tomato soup from concentrate and wished abstractly that someday she would be brave enough to step outside and retain her vision.

And then, because it eventually had to happen, word of the woman's condition got around town. She had only a few friends and they were mostly interested in their own lives, but eventually they started wondering to each other where the woman had gone. They began calling her house, and the telephone's ring startled and bothered the woman. She ignored the calls and finally pulled the phone out of the wall and was done with the sudden noise.

Meanwhile, the doctors spoke enough between themselves about the woman's strange condition to be overheard by receptionists, wives, waiters, and valets, all of whom had fewer ethical qualms when it came to gossiping about medical problems. Soon, the whole town was putting the pieces together like a true mystery. The woman's friends let themselves into her house in the country and found her, in mismatched socks, eating lima beans out of a can from her chair in front of the window. It had been three weeks since the doctors left.

There was an amount of shock all around and, after tears and explanations, the woman found herself seated unnaturally at her dark dining room table, maneuvering a spoon through a difficult bowl of her friend's onion soup. Though it was nice to have a glass of wine, and to talk with old friends, they were all more interested in the boring specifics of her condition more than the stories of her garden that she had discovered at the window: that snow peas at the moment of their growth were a slight shade brighter than the leaves that protected them; that soil seemed to open up and breathe in the morning; that after a good rain, the dirt swelled in contentment before settling back down

under the plants. Her friends looked at each other with some concern before asking for her to talk again about exactly what the doctors had said about her tests. They cleaned her house and brought the requested cans of maraschino cherries and tuna and promised to return for dinner the next day. The woman was comforted by their kindness and promised to be more entertaining the next time. Her friends told her to not worry about it, she had been a delightful hostess and they all loved her very much.

They all said good-bye to the woman and got into one car, because only one friend knew the way out to the country. On the drive back, the woman's friends were silent for a while before one said: Well, that was bizarre.

The next day brought more visitors. The doctors' wives showed up in a pack, bearing casserole dishes and jugs of iced tea. They sat in a half-circle behind the woman and squinted at the window. As they were leaving, a group of teenagers from the high school arrived and held a Bible study with the woman, who was happy enough to eat the lemon bars they brought and waited until they were their way out to declare that she had always found the Bible to be more of a solid set of stories than a guideline for proper living. A few waiters from the big restaurant in town stopped in after their shift with some bottles they had lifted from the bar. Everyone who came by made sure to look out the bedroom window, nodding at the woman's stunningly accurate descriptions of color gradations and the origins of different fragrances—sticky okra overlying the rust from the old tomato stands. When they left her house, they saw the world more gratefully.

It was only a matter of time before the woman's home became a local attraction. A steady stream of students and church groups and retired folks and scientists and psychics and skeptics passed through her doors. Her friends joked that she should take

admission, and quietly set up a donation box by the door. They requested any amount for the upkeep of the house as well as the care for the poor woman, which they had all partially assumed. The woman woke in the morning to gentle knocking at her bedroom door and sometimes fell asleep at the window and had to be moved to bed by her devoted visitors.

As one grows used to anything, the woman grew used to her visitors. They were friendly, after all, and brought gifts, and told her news from the town and the world beyond, and listened with great interest to events of the garden only she could see. Skeptics sometimes tried to convince her that her vision was false, that there were clouds where she saw solid blue sky, that many of the plants she was describing had in fact died long before and had been replaced with flowers or trees planted by other visitors. The skeptics were hauled out and denied reentry, and the woman was reassured by those who remained that everything she saw was real. A theory had begun to circulate among the believers that the woman's vision of the garden was the true vision, and what they all suffered to see approached the ideal but would never reach it.

The woman's vision never faded; on the day she died, she described caterpillars ascending the vines on the far wall and sunning themselves on wide leaves. After her death, the townspeople made plaques and pieces of art in the woman's honor and created a holiday within the town wherein everyone was required to look very closely at something and to discover something new about it. In this way, they turned the woman's vision and eventually the woman herself into an idea, and their own ideas became much easier to believe.

A Working Relationship

Jamie was in no state to sell pizza on television but Manny was pretending not to notice, because he wanted her to sweat it out a little more. "That was the best game we've ever had," she said.

"Cut," Manny said, sweetly. "Jamie, you're letting us down. Take it again."

I didn't have to reset the camera for another take because we'd been doing the same one for an hour and a half into lunch, which had given me ample time to realize why Manny Grosh valued us non-union types. But we needed the experience, me and the sound man and most of all Jamie, the actress, the looking-for-a-break type. It explained her unpracticed energy as well as her lack of foresight in sleeping with one of Manny's more powerful friends when she should have been focusing on Manny, at least until her whole commercial was in the can. She figured correctly that he would hire her off a casting couch, but she didn't consider the low self-esteem of a hack, and now he was taking the entire afternoon to bring the point home.

She seemed like a nice girl, though, sweating in her polyester softball jersey, a plastic bat propping her up between takes. She leaned off the bat and gave Manny a big smile, the way girls do sometimes when they want to look menacing. "That was the best game we've ever had!" she said, her imaginary teammates ready to give a high-five and hop down to Galvano's Pizza (Home of Sharky the Pizza Shark, Supporter of Local Little League Teams!) for a hot pie and some soda pop.

"Cut," said Manny. "I'm not sure you really believe it was the best game. Take it again."

The rest of the crew was as zoned out as I was. The sound man leaned back, balancing the boom mic against his belt. The lighting director lay on the floor on the other side of the set. Makeup sat next to him, working on her sketchbook. The only reason why I was at the camera was just in case Jamie moved off her mark and I had to pull back a little, to make sure we got it.

"That was the best game we've ever had!" She spoke directly to the camera, so the people watching the finished commercial could either feel like they were on the winning team or that they had some reason to be in the dugout, as local reporters or proud parents ready to load all the kids into the Astrovan and cart them out for some moderately-priced celebration. It'd be a great line either way, Manny said, back when the project was still fresh.

"Cut," he said. "Best game of the week, maybe I believe that. But best game we've ever had?"

"You're a shithead," Jamie said. She had a sweet Southern accent.

He smiled. "Take it again."

She flashed her pointed teeth at me. "That was the best game we've ever had!" The line was out before I had a chance to cue up.

"Let me hear that again," he said, "with your face just a little to the left."

I set the tape going as she cocked her head to the left. "That was the best game we've ever had!"

"Try moving your whole body. Do you think you can manage moving your whole body, sugar?"

She stepped a foot off her mark and I rolled the camera over to follow. "That was the best game we've ever had!" she said.

"I figured you could manage," he said.

"It's a little dark now," I said.

Manny tipped back in his chair. "Lights!"

The lighting director stood and ambled over, rolling a cigarette. He looked pointedly at Manny and pushed the light a foot to the left with his middle finger.

Manny had a script on his lap, and he patted it with his fat hand as he laughed. "I wasn't aware I was paying you all to be jerks," he said. "Your agents should bill you all as jerks, you need to be up-front about this kind of talent." He looked back at Jamie. "An agent is a nice person who represents talented people, sweetheart."

She scowled. "I know what an agent is."

"Ah," Manny said, fingers dancing over the script. It was probably his script, his own writing, and he was carrying it around to remind himself of what a fresh catch he was even when his cute little girls ended up with better men. "I didn't think you knew," he said, "with the way you've been representing yourself."

The blush made her cheeks look clammy under the bad makeup. I wished girls like her would go back to Topeka and Little Rock and leave these jobs for jerks who deserved the torture, Manny and me and the lighting director, who right then had his arm around Makeup and was pretending to be interested in her sketchbook.

"Roll it," Manny said, and I realized I'd been rolling for five minutes already.

"That was the best game we've ever had!" The blush was still there. I started wondering how it felt for her right then under the lights. On the edge of the scene it was

warm, but right in the middle she must have felt like she was tanning. I wondered what she would do if I stepped into that center and put both hands on her hot face.

"The best game," Manny said, as if he was thinking out loud. Jamie leaned forward in the silence, misunderstanding. I'd seen him take it out on girls before and I didn't want to watch this one, but I turned the mount a little—a cameraman's instinct—to get Manny in the frame when he walked over to Jamie. The sound man lowered the boom towards them. We were catching a nice little scene.

Jamie looked away for a moment when Manny put his hand on her shoulder, but she made herself turn back to him. "I hired you because I thought you had talent," he said. "Sure, we had a personal connection, and I'm sorry you didn't value that, but this—" he gestured to the particleboard dugout set, "*—this*, honey, is the real thing. We can kid around and help you out, and we can all have a good time together, but when it comes down to work, I just don't think you're ready to work."

He was laying it on, rubbing her shoulder and everything. I knew a girl like her would fall for the whole act and it only took a second for the tears to start rolling down her cheeks, taking with them the majority of her thick mascara as well as the remainder of the Pink Blush powder that Makeup swore would outlast the lamps.

The lighting director nudged my elbow. "We're going for lunch," he whispered. "Let's leave the lovers to their drama."

I nodded absently, watching Jamie cry. Manny was just waiting her out, that big hand of his resting protectively on her shoulder. They deserved each other, in the same way that everyone in the world deserves a consolation prize. The camera stayed trained on them when I let it go and we left them there, Jamie crying and Manny moving towards

her. Only the sound man stayed behind, lowering the boom close to catch anything they might say out loud. If it were an umbrella, it would have kept them out of the rain.

The Last Fight

The weirdest thing was that, and I'd swear to this, he looked exactly like my eighth grade Geography teacher. He was sitting at the bar, wearing a suit and tie and drinking a light beer from the bottle. He had a bowl of limes next to him and was squeezing them, one by one, into his beer.

A customer caught me staring and pulled her chair over, because it was early still and everybody loves being in on things. "Which one?" she asked.

I pointed with my thumb, trying to be discreet. "With the lime."

"Black guy?"

"I think he was my eighth grade Geography teacher."

She tilted her head, looking. It was still light outside and hard to see him with the windows at his back. "He's cute," she said. "Too young, though."

The guy at the bar looked twenty-five, and my old Geography teacher had to be twice that by now. I went into the backroom to start my shift still wondering at the idea of Mr. Merrill, where he was now and what he was thinking about. I'd have to tell Reggie about it when I got home.

Mr. Merrill used to tell stories about prison. He wore a dress shirt and a tie to school every day, though the other teachers wore cutoffs, and t-shirts with cartoon characters silkscreened on them. He wore slacks and patent leather shoes and told cautionary tales when we irritated him.

The act of shanking involves a disagreement and a plastic knife, he said. He'd tell us that life is difficult for a youth of the working class trying to stay alive—an idea I

understood, though I was a white girl living in the suburbs, only at this school in Charlotte's inner city because the school board had some ideas about education that involved bussing kids around in order to avoid spending too much money on the south side of town.

Mr. Merrill said that being stabbed with a plastic knife is degrading enough. It's a sign of weakness, just as not knowing all of the state capitals is a sign of weakness. It means you don't respect yourself enough to watch your own back. Then it just takes one fight with the wrong man, and you find yourself against the wall. The news of it gets around the cell block and eventually forgotten. The details fade but the humiliation of it lingers past your parole date, through your difficult college years, until you're standing in front of a class of eighth graders who are at the point of puberty where they're just starting to sweat and the whole classroom smells like rotten fruit all day and it's up to you to make them realize how easy it is to get yourself into a perilous situation.

Now I'm almost thirty, and living a life that would be a happy dream for some college kid, but I'm ready to be done with pool halls and coffee shops. I'm ready to move into a house and paint the walls. Every fear I had about not finding peace and a meaningful job came slowly true.

Currently, I help subvert a smoking ordinance by playing bingo six hours a day in the back room of a downtown bar. The ordinance only passed because the city left a loophole for all the old people who would rather die than give up smoking in their Elks lodges and bingo halls, so I'm paid to sit and watch an eight millimeter reel of a guy calling out numbers. Reggie found the reel at the library, and they just happened to have a projector in storage. I have a card, and an ink dauber, and there's a camera on me at all

times. They send the tape off to city hall for nobody to watch.

It's a kind of bureaucratic job you don't want to talk about when you get home. I almost envy my friend Reggie, who works two jobs to pay his debt. He splits his time between his barback job and a gig at the outlet mall perfume store. He smells like cheap women when he comes to the bar after his shift. Reggie's the kind of guy who pretends to love his job while he's there. We have been friends for many years.

Our boss lets him sit with me in the room so long as everyone's playing bingo. Reggie digs a card out of the box and pulls up a chair.

"How's perfume?" I ask.

"Fragrant," he says. He groans when he sits down, and puts his feet up on a box. He's convinced that his own happy dream of making manager and paying off his debts won't come true until he sleeps with the general manager, a Hawaiian woman named Mona who takes day trips to Mexico for Wellbutrin and circles her fingers, like bracelets, around her big arms when she talks.

Reggie marks off the top corner of B. The man on the television turns the wheel and sends his number cage spinning.

"Mona's busting my balls to get the summer stock in," Reggie says.

I finish a diagonal and reach into the prize box. It's mostly plastic rings and stickers that you'd find in bulk at a dollar store. I slide a pink ring onto my little finger.

"Congratulations." Reggie leans over to pat my shoulder.

"I thought I saw Mr. Merrill out front."

"Merrill," he says, looking at me. "Our History teacher?"

"Geography. I don't think it was him, though."

"I wonder what that guy's doing," Reggie says.

The bingo caller was recorded on a loop from a national bingo tournament—years ago, maybe ten years—and an hour into the reel, someone in the back of the hall starts yelling. There's just a second of reaction when he looks up, and then it loops back to the beginning. No matter how hard I look, I can never catch his expression at that moment.

Mr. Merrill said that the last fight can be about anything. He never did say what his own last fight was about, the one that ended up with him getting shanked outside his cell. He said that if those things don't happen in the cafeteria, the guards call it premeditated, and the other guy was obviously going to make a premeditated event worth the trouble. Mr. Merrill said, if the other guy is really upset, he'll push you down hard, hold your arm for leverage and snap the blade off under your skin. Then all he needs to do is keep you somewhere, under a mattress or in the shower, and you bleed to death trying to dig the piece out of your arm. He said that being shanked is like jumping into cold water. It's a deadening shock; the body can only handle so much pain. And then it takes time. You pass out from the shock and make a bloody puddle on the men's room floor.

Reggie's a nice guy. He wants to own a dry cleaning business and pour the profit into a series of fine cars. We live in different apartments in the same complex. We make each other dinner. I'm cooking one night when I start thinking, maybe there are people out there who don't hate their jobs. It's a pretty simple concept and I'm surprised it hadn't occurred to me earlier. Reggie's car pulls up and he comes over right away because he smells meatloaf and scalloped potatoes. I pour the iced tea.

"I was thinking today," I say, handing him a glass, "about how there are people out there who don't hate their jobs."

He spoons sugar into his tea. "That's not true."

"Sure it is. There are lawyers out there making a hundred thousand dollars a year."

"You think they like the work? They like the money." He tastes his tea and digs the spoon into the sugar bag for more.

"What about baseball players, and doctors, and zoologists?"

Sugar is piled up in the bottom of his glass. He stirs it, and when he stops stirring it settles back. "Baseball hurts and hospitals are full of death and panda shit stinks." He spears a potato. "Everyone likes the money because they can take it back to their homes and make meatloaf and scalloped potatoes and talk to their wives and husbands about how much they hate the work."

"So what's the point?"

He points at the potatoes with his fork and nods. "You work for a while," he says, tipping his chin up, his mouth full, "and then you get to buy a boat."

"You're kidding. A boat?"

He shrugs. "Or a house, or a car. Whatever. You bring something home to your woman and your kids and it makes them happier. Your house is happier, work has made you happier."

"No it hasn't. Work hurts your feet and makes you smell like perfume and cigarettes," I say. "Depending on the situation."

"You need a hobby," he says.

I have the bingo tape memorized. Sometimes I watch it and imagine that I am the only friend of the man who reads the numbers. He wears a mustard-colored striped tie and I imagine I gave it to him, for his birthday. The two of us would sit together and enjoy his birthday dinner at the nicest restaurant in town. He turns the tie over in his hands, pleased with the look and feel of it. He thinks fondly of me when he puts it on before work.

Reggie has dinner ready when I get to his place. Our whole schedule is about six hours off normal, because he comes into the bar at three in the afternoon and I don't come in until five or six, then we eat dinner at two in the morning and say good night when the morning news starts. It's an odd feeling, ending a day when the weatherman has just put his makeup on. Reggie sometimes sleeps on the couch at my place because I keep heavy shades over all the windows.

"I might bring Mona by the bar later," he says. He's made macaroni and is stirring peas into it. He has the palate of a six-year-old.

"I'm surprised you haven't made manager yet."

"It's only a matter of time."

He serves me, big spoonfuls of macaroni and peas.

"I wonder why Mr. Merrill went to work every day," I say.

"You're still thinking about that guy?" Reggie takes a big drink of milk. "Maybe he loved teaching."

"He's got to be forty by now."

"I bet he's still at that school," he says.

"Maybe he is," I say. "He probably sees himself a shaper of young minds."

"Didn't really work out in our case," Reggie says.

"I want to find him."

Reggie thinks about it. "He probably works at that same old school," he says. "If your mind-shaper theory is correct, anyway."

When we're done eating, he leaves the dishes in the sink with water to soak off the cheese. I watch the first half hour of the news before heading to bed. There's traffic on the road, accidents already, and I'm happy to avoid them.

It's the kind of bar where people would notice a piece of paper folded and wedged under the leg, and think less of the whole establishment. I'm a three-time winner tonight and I'm just getting started.

Reggie leans into the room. "Are the straws back here?"

"They're under the register," I say. "What are your goals in life?"

"The dry cleaner," he says. "You knew that. Manny said the straws were back here."

"Manny forgot he put them under the register three nights ago. What are your big goals though, other than the dry cleaners?"

He leans against the doorframe. He starts to run his hand through his hair but stops at the hairline when he realizes he has so much product in it that it would break in his fingers. "Right now, I'm looking for the straws."

"Besides the boat?"

"When Manny leaves, I'll maybe get to make some money behind the bar."

"And then?"

"It'll be awesome?"

"And *then*?"

"Listen," he says, rubbing his shoulder against the doorframe. "Are the straws in here or not?"

"They are not."

He leaves without another word and the air behind him smells like women's perfume. I watch the bingo reel start over. The guy looks up and I swear he's about to be happy, but he isn't smiling yet. I have to figure out what the look on his face means. I almost trip over the stupid box of straws when I leave.

That last fight can be about anything. I dated a guy who ended it with me over politics. My parents divorced over furniture shopping. My mother said she didn't want dark leather, but when she was on her own, she filled her apartment with it.

The hallways feel small at the old middle school. The office secretary gives me Mr. Merrill's teaching schedule after I sign in. I write my name on a plastic badge. I've got this indulgent selfish feeling the whole way across town about how easy it is to find everyone in the world, and I'm so high on that thought that I march right into his classroom.

I find Mr. Merrill surrounded by five-year-olds, a picture book open on his lap. He looks up, surprised. He looks a little soft around the edges and I figure well, that's what teaching does to a guy.

"I can wait," I say.

The kindergarteners turn to look at me. One of them raises his hand. "Here's the milkmaid," he says proudly, before he can be called on. The children around him fall over themselves laughing in the way that children do.

"We're reading Aesop," Mr. Merrill says. He must be used to people wandering into the classroom, because he goes back to the book. I sit on one of the tiny chairs on the other side of the classroom. I'm sleepy because I had to get up early to do all of this. I start opening bottles on the counter. It's a playset with a kitchen sink and stove. All the bottles have fruit-chew vitamins in them and I take one.

Mr. Merrill arranges pieces of felt on a board. The kids call things out and he moves the shapes around. I see a house with a garage and two people and a dog, and a car and three bicycles and a baby. He asks where the baby goes and they say, inside the house. He asks, where does the dog go and they say, inside the house. The car goes inside the garage with the bicycles and when he asks where the people go the kids say, inside the car, inside the garage, inside the house and he says that the people can go everywhere.

The kids like this, and then it's time to play and they get up and run outside, shrieking. Mr. Merrill goes straight to the real sink to wash his hands before coming over. He looks younger than forty and I realize it's only been about fifteen years.

"I'm one of your former students," I say.

He steps back. "Really?"

I struggle to stand up from the tiny chair. I shake his hand.

"This is amazing," he says. "I've never had a student come back. Can you believe that? I thought you were a parent."

"It was easy to find you."

"What a thrill," he says. "This job can be pretty thankless sometimes. You might not realize this, but a lot of teachers are just in it for the paycheck, and I think that ruins things for the rest of us. Vitamin?"

"I already got one, thanks."

He packs up the bottles and puts them in the cabinet with the felt pieces.

"You really did make a difference in my life," I say. "You were teaching Geography at the time—"

"History," he says. "Wasn't it?"

"Well, you were my teacher, and I always thought that stuff about making a difference was a cliché, but you really made History happen for me."

"Maybe it was Geography," he says, reaching into a top cubby near the door for his bag and bike helmet. "It depends what year."

"It was about fifteen years ago."

He touched the bridge of his nose, thinking. "You know," he says. "I think I do remember you. You were always writing the most interesting responses to my prompts," he said. "You sat in the middle of the classroom, always asking questions about the mystery of life. Remarkable."

I can't remember asking those questions specifically but it sounds like something I might do. "I think that's me," I say.

"I can't believe it," he says. "That was my first year teaching, and you were one of those special kids that made me keep going, you know? Everyone else in that class would just draw pictures all day but you were right there with me, you challenged me."

"I really had that effect on you?" This is exactly what I want. "Listen, I can give you a ride home if you want."

He taps his helmet. "I've got my bike."

"That's fine. I just have some questions for you, if you have time."

The zipper on his coat seems broken, and he tugs at it. "Listen, Jenny, I'm really happy you came here," he says, "but I have this interview to get to."

I remember Jenny Brunker, with her long black hair that shone like a hair commercial, Jenny Brunker who sat in front of me in the eighth grade and never shut up.

Mr. Merrill smiles at me, and I smile at him. We stand, smiling at each other. He reaches for the doorknob behind him and misses it. "Bye," he says, shyly, like a child. He turns around and leaves. Before I go, I take another two vitamins and the felt bicycle.

Reggie and Mona show up an hour after my shift starts at the bar, and they come back to say hello before drinking in earnest. Mona has a weak handshake and bares her teeth at me when she smiles. She smiles prettier at Reggie. By the end of the night, her mango lipstick is smeared into the corners of his mouth.

"Buy me a drink," he says to me over bingo, when she's gone.

"Getting that boat?"

"We were celebrating my promotion before my shift starts, thanks for asking." He tries to smile, but he looks too beat up.

"You look like hell," I say, doodling on my bingo card, making roots out the undersides of the letters and planting them into the number square. "I'm unhappy here," I say. "I need a hobby."

"You're right," Reggie says, screwing the cap back on his dauber. "This can't be your whole life."

"I'm in a strange place. I'm second-guessing myself too much."

"That's it exactly. You need a hobby."

"I need to be passionate about something." I look around the room for a magazine or a book, something with an inspirational cover to give me direction. "I need to make a major life change, and then I'll feel better all the time."

"That sounds easy enough."

"What do you want for dinner?"

He stands up and pats the pocket of his jacket for his keys. "I'm going out after, with Mona."

"Mango, then?"

I start the reel again after he leaves. It clicks in a different way and lights to a thin woman in an oversized red sweater, pulling numbered ping pong balls from a hopper. "B-thirty-two," she reads. She smiles at the camera.

Reggie is behind the bar, rinsing Mona a new glass.

"What the hell is the meaning of this?" I rattle the canister at his face.

"I thought you could use a change," he says. "How long were we looking at that other one?"

"Five months," I say, the tape inside hitting metal walls, "and thirteen days and an hour. Where is the old tape?"

"I don't know," he says. "I misplaced it."

"Is this about the straws?"

He sets a clean hurricane glass on the counter and picks another up for washing. "You knew where they were all along," he says quietly, in a way that sounds absolutely idiotic coming from him.

I throw the reel at him—sideways, a heavy, dual-edged metal frisbee. He catches it easily with two hands, stepping back. "You knew where they were," he insists.

The women turn their chairs away when I storm behind the bar. "Listen," I say, close to his face. "What you took was the only thing that meant anything to me, *ever*. Imagine your best girlfriend, and your mother, and your football coach and your second-grade teacher and this job and your dog, imagine I put all those things in your car. I know you have a nice car, it seats two but imagine I fit all those things in there. Do you follow? Now, imagine that I set that car on fire with its own gasoline and *drove it into a burning building*. Can you see what I'm saying? This is what you've done."

"I'm sorry," he says. He points toward the ceiling. "I thought it would be funny."

My old movie is above us. Rather, its case is over toward the big-screen TV, secured to the wall by a big nail. The glossy film leads across our heads to the entry, running in a double strand back around to a banister on the bar, above the mirrored back wall, looping around the elk's head and dipping low as it stretches back to the television. Along that dark film, impossible to see from the ground, one man looks up at the camera in a series of frames that will dull and gather dust, bloating, the weight of it lowering nearly imperceptibly over the heads of a rotating regular crowd that will never think to notice.

Reggie places the last of the hurricane glasses in front of him and watches me from behind their delicate, breakable line.

Love, Mortar

My love for you is like a brick. It sits silent in me when you bring out my food at the Dine and Dart, red tray aloft, your skin gleaming like grilled onions. My love is rough around the edges but solid through the center, fresh from the kiln. My love for you is heavy and dark, Jenny, it builds and breaks down, Jenny, it cracks the windows between you and me—you, mixing milkshakes for little league winners, and me, miserly with sandwich wrappers in my car. You, smiling down at the register like a woman with secrets, and me, in agony over the golden arch of your eyebrow.

A brick, inert and dangerous. This love can be worn down but there is always substance to it, always heft, as when you struggle to lift the box of flash-frozen patties, that iced meat against your bare arms, the cold thickness of your flesh a barrier against the protected warmth of your lungs, your heart, your bones. When your manager helps you with that box, the brick grinds in my chest. Your manager, Bill of the blue eyes, Bill of the "no parking" policy, Bill of the fast-food tie. He tucks it in his shirt as he walks to the bathroom. You might be kind and claim that Bill is a good man but what you'll soon learn is that there are no good men, Jenny, none left at all. Not even me, though I'm good deep down, almost to the center.

Almost to the center. But the center of me is that brick. It's there when you bring my cheeseburger no lettuce on a steaming red tray. It's there when you reach into your flat front pouch for my straw. It's there when you pull your hair up behind your visor when you go in for your shift and when you lean over the grease trap with your scraper and bucket. It's there when you stand at the register, Jenny, your unpainted fingernails

hovering over the keys as you think of those old dollar bills, the tens and rolls of quarters, wondering if you shouldn't just no-sale the register and open it, one of those times when blue-eyed striped tie Bill is smoking a cigarette in the bathroom and looking at the Sears catalog he has hidden behind the toilet. You could just open that register and reach in with two hands and pull out fistfuls of cash and put it into your front pocket, stuffing it all down there, paper-wrapped straws scattering across the greasy floor. You'd walk out and throw your visor into the garbage and you would never come back.

But where would you go, with your great treasure? I see you on the beach at Galveston, peeling off that thick dirty uniform and walking slow into the water, trading the salt of french fries and tater tots for the healing salt of the ocean. I see you saving souls in that warm water, Jenny, I see you taking men in that water and making bricks of them all. You sink them there and build a wall with them, and create purpose to their roughness and use to their weight. You build a sea wall and stand on the other side with your feet planted wide on the hot sand, your golden hair streaming behind you like a flag of independence.

You have a power, and there is no reason this power should frighten you. Surely you see how Bill looks at you, and the men paving the road and even me over my cheeseburger no lettuce sucking chocolate milk through a straw. We are all drawn to you, but I am the only one who understands that draw, knowing how I started the kiln's fire myself, long ago. Now, my guts are full of clay and you can dig it out yourself. Open me up and hold the dangerous brick in your hands. Feel the sharpness under your fingers, its deadly complexity.

II

Babies

One morning, I woke to discover I had given birth overnight. It was troubling to realize because I had felt no pain as I slept, did not remember the birth, and in fact had not even known I was pregnant. But there he was, a little baby boy, swaddled among cotton sheets, sticky with amniotic fluid and other various baby-goops. The child had pulled himself up to my breast in the night and was at that moment having breakfast. He looked up and smiled when I reached for him.

"Hello," I said.

I bundled my sheets and my mattress pad into a trash bag and set it by the door. I got into the shower with my new baby, because we were both covered in the material of his birth, and were becoming cold. I soaped him up with my gentle face soap. He laughed and I laughed, because using face soap on an infant is funny. I towed him off and wrapped him in an Irish linen shirt.

On the walk to the store, I called my boyfriend, Chuck.

"I had a baby overnight," I said.

Chuck coughed. "I am not amenable to babies," he said.

I looked down at the baby. He was bundled up in the fine shirt and smiled as if he was aware of the quality of the shirt, and enjoyed it. "I am in love with this baby," I said, "and that's that."

At the grocery, I bought baby powder, diapers, two pacifiers, and a box of chocolate. I walked us home, fit a diaper on the baby, and ate a piece of chocolate. Chuck

came over and said that perhaps he was amenable to babies after all, and we fell asleep together with the baby between us. The baby had not cried all day and neither had I.

The next morning, we woke to discover I had once again given birth, this time to a little girl. The babies were nestled together between us on the bed, and my spare sheets were ruined. I handed the babies off to Chuck and sent him to the shower. I bundled up the spare sheets and set them by the other bag of sheets. Then, I got into the shower with Chuck. It was a nervous fit, with the two of us and the babies.

"These babies are so quiet," said Chuck. "I love them, too. But I hope you don't have another one overnight."

We all had a good laugh. The next morning, there was another baby. And another. And another. And another.

And that brings us to today.

Trip Advisory: The Boyhood Home of Former President Ronald Reagan

Before you visit The Boyhood Home of Former President Ronald Reagan, you should first note that there are, in actuality, *many* Boyhood Homes of Former President Ronald Reagan. Choose wisely, and you will find yourself in the fully restored Boyhood Home which served as a Boyhood Home of Former President Ronald Reagan from 1920 to 1923, located in Dixon, Illinois, home of the Petunia Festival.

For the purpose of this report, consider the Dixon, IL home, in which Former President Ronald Reagan spent the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth years of his life—essential, formative years—as The Definitive Boyhood Home of Former President Ronald Reagan and therefore the only Boyhood Home that will be discussed, though he was born above a bakery and surely experienced many instances of the wholesome heat of warm bread.

Very little of the furniture, carpeting, foundation, and artifacts within The Boyhood Home of Former President Ronald Reagan are original to the site. The reason for this is that old things smell terrible.

Within The Boyhood Home of Former President Ronald Reagan, you will find Former President Ronald Reagan's Fully Restored Boyhood Bedroom, featuring items you might expect a nine, ten, eleven, or twelve-year-old boy may have owned between the years of 1920 and 1923. These items cycle seasonally within The Home and could include baseball cards, autograph books, the wooden cup-ball game, and footballs. While Former President Ronald Reagan never actually touched or considered these actual artifacts, you

will be encouraged to observe and consider the objects in terms of their importance to Our Nation's History. Think: Would Former President Ronald Reagan have excelled at cup-ball, or would he have swung the game around by its wooden handle and launched it onto the roof, and how might those actions later affect his Cold War policy?

The importance of visiting The Boyhood Home of Former President Ronald Reagan to your personal life is clear and unchallenged. Touring the Home will give you a light and powerful feeling, that in fact we all had Boyhood or Girlhood homes, and that though none of us are destined for the greatness that awaited nine-year-old Ronald Reagan, we all have a manner of greatness within us, untouched perhaps for many years, but held there in the heart, like a secret.

One piece of The Boyhood Home of Former President Ronald Reagan serves as a centerpiece to visitors and Boyhood Home employees: Four pennies, hidden between the spaces of the brick wall. Former President Ronald Reagan insisted on replacing the pennies at the final ceremonies for The Restored Boyhood Home, and while he replaced the pennies, he told the lucky crowd in attendance that, as a child, he used to hide money in the bricks of that very wall. Of course, the wall was actually not original, but completely restored, and Former President Ronald Reagan had in fact called ahead to order the workers to leave one brick loose, so that he might tell the story and lay the pennies and please the crowd. The show was always of paramount importance to Former President Ronald Reagan, and if visitors concentrate, they might be able to picture an eleven-year-old Ronald Reagan hiding the pennies in the bricks of the wall and dreaming

of the day that he might lay different pennies in restored bricks, placed specially for him, so that he might tell the story.

It should be noted that the four pennies in the brick within The Boyhood Home of Former President Ronald Reagan are not the pennies that Ronald Reagan placed within the brick while telling the story at the final ceremonies for the Restored Boyhood Home. The pennies are actually replica pennies, but are within view of the Actual Pennies Former President Ronald Reagan used during the ceremony. The Actual Pennies are of great value and are mounted to a plaque over the mantle. The replica pennies, meanwhile, have their own worth beyond monetary value, for they act as a symbol for a symbol of a very powerful symbol.

Visitors are advised to take care in preparing for The Boyhood Home of Former President Ronald Reagan. All are encouraged to wash their hands before touching doorknobs and rails, to wear shoes with soft soles, to speak quietly and with reverence. Visitors are reminded to refrain from flash photography, to not carry in food or drink, and to take the time to respect each orderly room of The Boyhood Home of Former President Ronald Reagan, because it is integral to the history of the world, because it is sacred ground.

The Church of The Way Things Are

Thomas Parsons found the new bride standing by her mutilated cake. She was scowling out the window at Jim—her new husband, Thomas' son—who was at that moment drunk and shirtless, pinning down his best man on the golf course behind the largest hotel in Flagstaff. Sandy and Jim had just tied the non-denominational knot there on the hotel greens. Sandy and Jim had politely forbidden Thomas from speaking at the ceremony.

"I wish you happiness," Thomas said, remembering his own wedding day, long ago, when Hazel accidentally snapped both heels of her expensive shoes during their first dance and hobbled, cursing, from the stage.

"Screw happiness," said Sandy.

Outside, Jim released a primal scream and charged his best man, who was swinging wildly at Jim with the flag he had pulled from the eighteenth hole.

"My dear," Thomas said. "Aren't you a little young to know eternal truths about love?"

She stabbed at the pile of cake, and threw down her knife. "I've been married before," she said. "I'm watching the man I'm supposed to love until my death, and he's rolling around with a guy who introduced himself as the King of Horseshoes, and I'm realizing there's actually nothing better than this."

"It's not that bad."

"It's a really special feeling," she said.

"You know," he said. "You understand The Way Things Are."

She shrugged. "It's the way things are, sure. I'll never leave him, and he'll never leave me. I already hate the guy too much to give him the satisfaction."

"The paradigm of the long-term relationship."

She nodded. "I'll make him breakfast in bed and he'll roll onto it in his sleep."

"Men are thoughtless."

"He'll surprise me with tickets to the opera, and I'll pretend I have the flu so that I can stay in bed and listen to the radio." Her lipstick was gone and her mouth was red at the corners.

"It's The Way Things Are," Thomas said. "The most satisfying relationships are built on a mutual and sustaining disdain. You should be happy."

"I'm ecstatic," she said, plunging a finger into what was left of the cake. Her guests were gathering around the picture window. The King of Horseshoes had taken off his pants and was shouting at a bridesmaid. When Thomas left the party, guests were throwing their dress shoes across the fairway like patent-leather lawn darts.

He started towards his car, but turned back. The hotel bar was nearly empty, and he ordered a scotch and water from a bored bartender.

The woman next to him touched the drink menu's leather cover. "You should try the Lemon Drop," she said. "It's lovely." She tapped her martini glass. Its dregs, which resembled what Thomas as a youth had called *bug juice*, formed a syrup at the bottom. The woman shifted in her seat, tugging the strap of her shapeless powder blue dress. She looked tired, and twenty years his junior.

"Do you like my dress?" she said, turning the menu over and over. "I was in a wedding," she said, pointing towards the open door of a ballroom Thomas hadn't noticed.

"I don't usually drink. It was awful, though. You know, weddings."

Thomas had a sip of scotch. "I rather enjoy them."

"I don't know how you can like them when they're so awful," she said.

"What happened?"

"I can't even tell you," she said, holding her hand to her temple. "The woman, the lady, the bride—anyway, she's my friend. She came down the aisle and started crying and then we were all crying, and her fiancé, her *husband*, started crying and we all had to stop until he calmed down. He'd come back from the war, and Jenny and I, we're friends from work, and they, they're so—" she started flipping the menu over in her hands, holding it upside down, stabbing its points into the bar.

Thomas had absolutely no plan of action for sensitive women. "That all sounds very emotional," he said to his scotch.

"The minister cried," she said, covering her face. "And, you know, those guys never cry."

"Well, that doesn't sound awful." He saw that one of her false eyelashes had come unglued and was curling slightly up from her eyelid like a turning page. He sat up straighter, suppressing the urge to pluck the lash off.

"You don't even know," she said.

"What don't I know?" He felt like her grandfather, though he surely wasn't that much older. "Try me," he said.

"Love is too much."

Thomas leaned forward in his seat. "Exactly, my dear. Do you know what too much love feels like?"

The peeling eyelash waved at him from the corner of her face. "I don't know," she said.

"Doesn't it feel terrible? Doesn't it feel horrible, like pain, like death?" He was nodding. He couldn't have pulled her along any more forcefully if he had taken her by the hand.

"It's horrible," she said, nodding, wiping the tears from her chin. "We don't need it."

"But it's our oldest emotion," he said, agitated. He took the drink menu from her hands and laid it on the table. "And the truest. My dear, how long has it been since we were thrown out of Eden?" How long have we been fooling ourselves that we've been living in a golden-boughed paradise?"

She reached for him. "Are you married?"

"My wife resented me every time she starched my shirts," he said. "She never realized The Way Things Are." He thought of Hazel, dead ten years. He always knew she secretly agonized over the pain of love, but never came to the conclusion that it was simply The Way Things Are. He hadn't realized it himself, at the time, or he may have been able to help her.

Thomas looked at the woman in her ugly blue dress and felt the desire to help her. "Listen," he said. He felt like a man behind a pulpit. "When two people love each other very much, there forms a special bond. Then, when two people live in the same space so

long that they become furniture to one another, that's The Way Things Are. If you don't understand revulsion, you'll never understand its antonym."

The woman tipped her head at him. "Do you ever cry?" she said, slurring her words. "I cry all day." Caked makeup glistened on her forehead and cheeks.

"I'm not sure," Thomas said, struggling unsuccessfully in an attempt to remove his hands from her grasp, "I'm not sure that's your business."

"Seriously," she said, holding him. "Have you ever cried? Have you cried even once since you were a child?" The eyelash trembled.

"Miss," he said, detaching her and standing. "My portion of tears in this life is no concern of yours and, if I may, a piece of eyelash is peeling from your face, and if you do not remove it, you are in danger of its adhesive coming into contact with your cornea." He reached for her eyelash, and she fell back, grabbing at her chair. Only after he settled in his hotel room did he recall the regrettable amount of scotch he had left in the tumbler.

Thomas presided over a club of miserable, vinegar-blooded couples in the tradition of The Way Things Are. They met on Friday nights for dinner and listened to him speak.

Thomas tapped his sugar spoon against his plate to get the attention of the group, which was gathered in his living room for coffee and dessert. He smiled at each in turn, and said:

"Jim and Sandy met in traffic. She called him—pardon me, ladies—a *motherfucker*, and he nearly sent her car off the road. Fortunately, Jim paid attention to his father's advice. He memorized Sandy's license plate number, taking the first steps

towards a courtship which might have benefited from a restraining order, had it not sprung from the philosophies of our dear Church. You are all aware, surely, of the costs of passionate love, but Jim and Sandy were discovering it for the first time, all its fire concentrated in that bluest portion of the flame.

"He left eggs in her mailbox. The postman avoided her house entirely when she started putting the rat traps in there. She stayed at home, watching out her window for the boy with the eggs to come by, but Jim knew to wait until her bedroom light went off at night. And then she tricked him. She put the light on a timer and stood around the side of the house with a shovel, and when he came up to the mailbox with the carton, she ran screaming at him and the flat head of the shovel caught him at his waist and eggs cracked and covered them both and two months later, they were married.

"Jim and Sandy—my children, my brothers and sisters—are this Church. They are pragmatism elevated, passion translated. This boy with his eggs and his woman with her shovel, they are honesty, and truth, and faithfulness. Who among us, who among *any of us*, would want anything less?"

Thomas ordained the first sanctuary of The Church of The Way Things Are—his split-level in Phoenix—and cleaned its grounds weekly. The grounds consisted of about a quarter acre of gravel, which he raked into flat paths and meditated on his sermons. One morning, he raked his gravel into flat paths and thought about Jim's new bride. They had been back from their honeymoon for a few weeks, and he imagined them throwing chairs and screaming epithets at one another in their new home.

Sandy, he knew, was entirely aware of The Way Things Are. She felt her anger in no uncertain terms, and craved more of it. She came right off one divorce into another marriage because the despair of it was an addiction. His sweet son had found himself one perfect bitch-cat of a woman.

Inside, Thomas poured himself a glass of lemonade and dialed her number. Jim picked up.

"I thought I'd call," Thomas said.

"Sandy's gone," Jim said, sounding distraught.

"Where did she go?"

"Hell if I know, Dad. She left last night."

"Did she leave a note?"

"I was right there, she didn't have to."

Thomas took a sip of lemonade. "Another man?"

"Of course not."

"What were you arguing about?"

"That's the thing," Jim said, "we weren't. We had a great weekend in New York, and when we got home, things kept getting better. I got that promotion I was hoping for—"

"Congratulations, son."

"—and she didn't have to work anymore."

"So she lazed about the home all day?"

"No, no. She started cleaning, and cooking the most wonderful dinners for me when I came home. It made me happy, and she said it made her happy to make me happy,

and dinner kept tasting better and better. I'd bring her flowers and try to do the dishes, but she would always insist on doing them herself. And she was reading more, which she always loved, and she started painting."

"She must have resented you, for all the work she had to do."

"She loved it. The only time she got upset was on her birthday, when I made her stay in bed and cleaned the whole house. She was happy, Dad. I don't get it. She stood in front of me and looked me in the eye and said, 'I'm so happy,' and then she turned around and left. She had her bags packed all day, and dinner warming in the oven."

This woman, this martyr of *The Way Things Are*, was so aware of the impossibility of a permanent happiness that she had outright rejected it. Thomas hung up the phone and went immediately to his study to draw up the papers for her canonization.

Over pecan pie and lemon bars on the last Friday night of March, Thomas set down his coffee cup and said:

"The human union represents the last great foundation of the civilized world. You know the other parts—the lying, idolatry, and divorce—those are a rotted foundation of a sinking house. The beams under that house are white lies that wedge into that wood like maggots, like hot and dirty bugs. The obsession with material possessions are the steel beams bending perilously under their own weight.

"And what is the house? The house is life. The house is not cars or retirement funds. The house is not errands and gossip and magazines. The house is not the Bible and the house is not Jesus but it is God's house. That house is on God's property, and he's got a contractor out there—I suppose that could be the Holy Spirit—and the contractor is

saying, you see those beams, that crack in the crawlspace door, that's your foundation sagging. And God's thinking, I only built this house a couple thousand years ago, I must be off my game.

"But then the contractor hunches down and says, now wait a minute here, see this *concrete*, this is looking pretty good. Maggots can't get into concrete. Termites, mudbugs, lice, chiggers, skeeters, tweeters, bats or rats can't get in there. Can't fit a spider in it, it's poured that good. No lies, no heartbreak, no worship. And that concrete, my friends, that fine stone—crafted from dust, crafted by man—is the holiest of human unions.

"You see, there's no room for anything in that weight. Nothing about love has that kind of mass. Nothing about love has that permanence. Only bitterness lasts like concrete. Don't worry about chipping off a corner of it. All that does is put that feeling in a smaller place. If we're talking foundation, brothers and sisters, let's pour it from the heaviest source."

Three days later, Sandy showed up at Thomas' door.

"It's a miracle," he said.

"It was a bus trip," Sandy said. "You're too sentimental."

"Am I dreaming?"

She breezed past him into the house. "Air conditioning," she announced, depositing the bags in the living room. He shut the front door and watched her open and close cabinets until she found the glasses. She helped herself to a glass of water and lifted it to him.

"To the father of a kind man," she said.

"Oh, dear. He was kind?"

"He worked all day and asked me how I was feeling over dinner. He did housework on the weekends and rubbed my feet." Sandy downed the glass of water and poured another. "He came home with the most ridiculous bouquets of flowers, and gave them fresh water in the morning."

Thomas had a moment of painful memory of Jim as a boy, helping his mother with the ironing. He had dropped the iron on his hand, a stupid mistake that left a scar across his fingers. Hazel should not have allowed the boy to use the iron.

"I couldn't handle it," Sandy said. "It made me feel guilty, right? He was in love with me, and he was such a sap about it, and I tried to wait him out, but I couldn't. That was his damn personality." She threw her glass into the sink and stepped back from the broken shards. "Sorry," she said. "I'm very upset."

"My son is not a sap," Thomas said, straightening up. "He kicked holes in every wall of this house. He killed a dog. He came drunk to his mother's funeral."

"He was *heartbroken*," Sandy rolled her eyes. "He told me all about it. He visits her grave every year and weeps like an idiot."

"Parsons do not weep," Thomas said.

"Like a *baby*."

"Does Jim know you're here?"

"I'm not going back there," she said, pointing at the door as if Jim was standing on the other side. "It was a really beautiful home, you know. We were very happy. I thought you'd understand."

Thomas picked pieces of broken glass from the sink. "I'll talk to him," he said.

"Great," said Sandy. "I'm going to take a bath."

By the evening, it became apparent that Sandy had no plans to leave, and so Thomas drove to Flagstaff the next morning to see his son. In his briefcase were two hundred pages of his most central writings on The Church of The Way Things Are, divorce papers signed by Sandy, and a bagged lunch.

Jim answered the door in his underwear. He scratched his stomach and regarded his father with squinted eyes.

"It's four in the afternoon," Thomas said. "Shouldn't you be at the office?"

"Come in," Jim said. "I just made some cornflakes."

They sat across from each other at the table. Jim tipped the contents of his bowl into his mouth.

"Sandy arrived at my home yesterday," Thomas said.

Jim set down the bowl. He picked up his spoon, and laid it down. "Really," he said.

"She asked me to come and speak with you. It seems—" he paused, considering tactful ways to continue, "—it *seems* that you've been causing some guilt within your marriage."

Thomas snapped open his briefcase, pulled out his theology, and slid it across the table.

"Oh, no," Jim said. "Oh no, no, no."

"It's been a while since you've read these," Thomas said.

"Did you show this to Sandy?"

"It would have been an insult to her. She's more aware of these tenets than I am, myself."

Jim pushed the stack of paper back across the table. "I love her," he said.

"But you hate her," Thomas said. He pulled out the divorce papers and held them in his lap. "And she hates you, too. Very much. If you'd only accept that and understand it for what it is, you could be so blissfully happy."

Jim covered his face with both hands. "Dad," he said, into his hands.

"You're misdirecting your anger," Thomas said. "That woman left you with a mortgage and two car payments. She's doing her best to ruin your entire future. You hate and resent her for what she's done."

"I lost my job, Dad." Jim took a ragged breath.

Thomas, at a loss, examined the lock on his briefcase. "Calm yourself," he said. "This is no way to behave. If you only embraced my philosophy—"

"Did you hate Mom?" Jim looked up at his father. His face was streaked with tears.

Thomas picked up his writings on *The Church of The Way Things Are* and placed them in his briefcase, careful to keep the pages flat. When he stood, the divorce papers nearly fell off his lap and he had to grab at them. He laid them on the table awkwardly, face-down. He felt strangely like he wanted to shake his son's hand.

"I still hate your mother," Thomas said. "I'll always hate your mother." Jim rested his forehead on the table and sobbed. Thomas left his son there, and took his briefcase with him to his car. He sat in the driveway with the engine idling, distracted, thinking of Hazel on their wedding day, picking up the heels from her broken shoes, announcing to

the stunned room her intent to never dance again. He put his car into gear, and drove home alone.

Kill Kill Kill

Here is all you need to know to understand. Kill them three times, and they're dead. Kill them two times and you're dead. Kill them one time, and you never know.

I.

Sister Martha gave me a ham and cheese sandwich that came from the back of her food service van. I killed her once and I never did know. Simple as that.

II.

We called him Scoots because he rolled on a stretcher when he went out. It was a big scam too, the bastard could walk, but he was a regular on those T.V. evangelist shows. They'd wheel him in and say *veteran, war hero, madman* and then the man in the suit would push him off the stretcher, just dump him on the floor like the trash he was and old Scoots would roll and bound up, screeching, on his own two naked legs. They gave him a cut from the prayer donations. Some shanker from out of town heard all this and came to kill Scoots for his donation money and Scoots killed him first, slice, and then killed him second, splash.

Of course you see, he didn't kill him enough, they found the shanker and they found Scoots. He didn't know any better, but few do.

III.

Killing a person three times is hard if they're not really a person after two, if they're just cut and skin and eyes after two. An animal is those things. You can't kill after that, only a madman kills after that and few are.

Here's the trick.

My own mother. I go to war, I kill her. I come back out in pieces, I kill her. The pieces hated her, anyway. We lose touch, she dies. I forget the sound of her voice and the feeling of her hands on my forehead, my head my hair and she dies a lonely death. She dies the death of martyred saints and her eyes are Sister Martha's and her legs are Scoots' fine-boned naked legs and she dies a hundred times.

A hundred is too many. Three is enough. Fewer than three, you can't feel it on your skin.

Diary of the Blockage

DAY 1

I am hesitant to talk about it, but I'm the kind of person who turns off the television when the newscaster starts in on colon cancer. Therefore, I must say this delicately: it so happened that I came down with a mild stomach virus, hopefully gone by the morning but tonight was difficult and in the course of my time in the restroom I succeeded in expelling most of my dinner save for one small and stubborn piece which managed to lodge, it seems, between my esophagus and windpipe. At three in the morning I was crouched in bed and swallowing chronically, painfully aware of the foreign mass that will not move up or down but only vibrates unpleasantly. In the morning, I will call the doctor.

DAY 2

I did not call the doctor. I went so far as to find my insurance card, but I could imagine the *remember Miss Mosely, well she has had a thing lodged in her throat* all within range of anyone with half a mind to be within earshot of the office window. I feel very sincerely that bodily functions have their place, but why would the toiletries and makeup and personal privacy industries all be such multimillion dollar successes if the place for those bodily functions was in public? To say otherwise is to disrespect culture. Meanwhile, the object makes itself known whenever I swallow or cough but is otherwise not troublesome. I can't decide if it is disintegrating or I am growing used to it. I think it is a piece of hamburger.

DAY 3

It is not disintegrating. It is much like a jilted lover; once it heard its presence in the world was becoming bearable, it revealed itself to be living down the street, to frequent the same local eateries and second-hand stores once enjoyed on peaceful solitary afternoons. I have changed my diet. I avoided hot coffee with my breakfast though it left me useless and squinting at the turn arrow against the sun. I brought a tomato from home for lunch because the thought of my usual hamburger out was distinctly unpalatable, but I realized too late that the acid of the tomato plus the salt I sprinkled on it (the only way to reasonably enjoy a tomato) stung my throat and left me pitiful and nearly in tears, crouched in my cubicle. I have begun meditating. I can picture the fleshy walls of my delicate throat, red and raw, with the blockage the size of a small fingernail touching two sides of the void, vibrating with my vocal cords when I speak and avoiding, by some cosmic misfortune, the tomato and milk and corn chips and yogurt I send to destroy it.

DAY 4

Office meeting today. Mr. Wallace brought in hot coffee and orange juice. During the meeting I discovered I can widen and collapse my palate around the blockage. It requires a slight back and forth motion of the head (imagine a small bird) and dominated my efforts over talk of redistricting, distribution, advertising, human resources news, 401-K plan changes. I picked out of obligation the orange juice believing it to be the lesser of liquid evils but of course it goes down like murder. I consider the possibility of a very successful diet: allow yourself to chew and enjoy the taste and texture of many foods, but at the point of swallowing, simply spit out the morsel and replace it with a healthier alternative such as a vitamin pill. In my case, something easier on the throat-parts such as ice water. I wish to patent this diet and to advertise its concepts in small checkout counter books across the country.

DAY 5

Worrisome creaking sounds and feelings from the throat. I feel a moment of judgment or shame: the reason for my stomach flu of Saturday night was perhaps exacerbated by the drinks I had out at what I surmised to be a singles' bar, drinks that would have been far less troubling to my long-term health had I not seen my first husband, who suggested with his own meaty fisted drink that I had not yet had enough and who am I to deny a challenge. (The blockage encourages me to feel this way.) I can admit that yes, the confrontation may have been a part of it. I sit on my couch and cough for a satisfying amount of time before falling asleep to the sounds of smooth jazz.

DAY 6

When I recall my behavior from that first night (there was a throwing of drinks and some shouting), I repeat a litany of self-assurances. I am kind, I am thoughtful and beautiful, I am clever, I am kind I am thoughtful and beauty I am kind of clever and thoughtful and beautiful cleaver and kind though beautiful. I must perform the litany in a somewhat secret manner. I have taken to ducking my head under my desk as if I am looking for a dropped pencil and then I can begin my meditations. The blockage seems to grow; tinier pieces of food and digestive acid and saliva perhaps. When I cough or swallow, the vibrations seem lower and longer, more permanent. I don't mind adding to it. Strange, how the disgusting becomes commonplace and then welcome. I wonder how long I would have to live with a parasite, a tapeworm or a leech, before it became a happy addition to the host of my body. I look at myself in mirrors obsessively.

DAY 7

Power outage due to hail storm. I wonder, has anyone created a candle wax remover with an attachment that allows the remover to make new candles? A kind of catch system with a heated core. The resultant recycled candle would be multicolored from the different waxes and in that way it would be wholly the property of the consumer and free of obligation to a consumer system. I have many good ideas. I find that when I lie down, I have consistent trouble breathing. Swallowing also grows more painful. I force down some of the cottage cheese otherwise curdling in the warming refrigerator. Through this pain I have decided I must learn a valuable lesson. In the night's uncomfortable darkness, I consider my connection to the past and future of the planet. I take off my arch support shoes and remove my under-eye coverup gel when I undress for bed. I am quietly aware of my flat feet. Propped up on pillows, I touch the lump swelling gently on my throat.

DAY 8

I have finally begun to internalize the blockage—it feels strange even to write "blockage," because I forget what exactly it was blocking and why I felt so constrained. I found the plunging neckline shirts in the back of my closet and wore one out to lunch. I allowed the stares and gestures towards me with cool disregard. I sat at a table in the center of the room. For lunch? Ice water, ice water, ice water! Later, I have a protein shake out of desperation and collapse on the kitchen floor, sobbing. A cloud to every silver lining!

DAY 9

My delicate condition has brought me a kind of daily transcendence when I move through the world. The girl who argues politics in front of the coffee shop has gaps under her fake nails where the real ones are growing, and she's waiting for the problem to get obvious enough to do something about it. The young man who listens to her has a piece of hair that never lies down flat. He is very disturbed by this and will lick his fingers and slick it down when he thinks nobody else is watching. I am very interested in necks, and how their owners handle them. People mostly ignore their own necks, except for very nervous girls who hold them while they talk as if they are trying to keep their vocal chords from exploding and splattering across the other person.

DAY 10

I have a very interesting theory in terms of my condition: I am fairly sure that it never existed—never in any real, physical form. Can I conjure a physical event out of darkness? Could I imagine my toenails shorter? Could I create, using my mind, an object that has never existed before, anywhere in the world? *Is such a material, at this very moment, within my throat?* Tenderly, I carry within me the first invented treasure known to mankind. My body is the first supernatural wonder of the world. I am careful to cough, afraid of disturbing the gestation period, protective of the mass.

DAY 11

I have considered feeding myself intravenously but I worry that medical professionals would realize the unique quality of the blockage, and would conspire to take it from me.

DAY 12

Mr. Wallace called today to ask why I haven't been coming to work. I had been a model employee in terms of attendance and grooming. I wish I could press the appropriate button and confirm that yes, I was feeling fine, that yes, I would like to keep my job, that it would be nice if everyone understood that I was doing something for the benefit of the world and that my duties as a paper-mover would have to wait. The colors in my body have moved and centralized at my throat. There is a terrible pallor in my face and hands but I am heartened by the growing darkness around the strange, wonderful object.

DAY 13

The swirling patterns behind my eyes confirm what I have secretly felt for days, that it is time for the blockage to finally emerge, the gestation period has concluded, the suffering is nearly through (though it has not been true suffering, though we will never know true suffering), that which will most closely resemble joy is prepared to leave my body and move into the world!

DAY 14

I am wildly aware of the feel of everyday objects. My body feels wholly perishable against the tile and dirt and ground it touches. I set out the silver bowl I once received as a wedding present (so long ago, such strange emotions!) as well as a set of silver spoons and monogrammed hand towels. My plan was to expel the Object into the bowl, but when I attempted the expellation (hunched over the bowl on the floor, which I chose to be the easiest method for both myself and the Object) I was greeted by a sharp, shocking pain. My nose bled into the bowl and I hunched nearly blind with emotion but the blockage screamed *OUT* and my grasping hands touched bowl, towel and finally spoons! and gratefully I took a spoon in my shaking grip and fully formed ideas flashed before me, Stop the bleeding! Save the Object! And I do understand that This will be a difficult labor, indeed!

Code of Operation: Snake Farm

The thing is that everyone is jealous and I hate to say it but everyone is jealous because I am finally creating a SNAKE FARM which has been my lifelong dream, and I spent a very long time in the world saving up for this dream to become a reality as they say on the television *for this dream to become a reality* and at each of the jobs (gas station, collision repair, hardware store) I pinched the pennies and thought about how to create a SNAKE FARM that will really appeal to the masses and I came up with a plan and detailed it in a notebook because I have always been told that *I have fine organizational skills*. The plan is as follows:

Safety First!

The goal of the SNAKE FARM is not only to make lots of \$\$\$ but to show the public once and for all that SNAKES are not FRIGHTENING, many are not even DEADLY but that they are SAFE and often FRIENDLY. It is therefore important that the snakes who are a danger to the community be placed under wire mesh cages and that only *trained professionals such as myself* will handle the snakes. In the occasion that a garter/green snake seems interested in being touched, children may hold and touch the snakes. Pythons will be touched but not while digesting *because disturbing the lunch of a snake is cruel*.

Care and Comfort!

It should be known that SNAKES are not used to THE GOOD LIFE. They are used to being compared with evil, being that they have no legs, being that they tempted *that woman*, being that they DO have the ability to defend themselves. If visitors only realized that *many of us have the ability to defend ourselves but that we do not advertise this ability with fangs*, they could understand how CLOSE we are to snakes. In the meantime, the habitat of the snakes will be improved with soft dirt, places to shed scales (dark places), fresh food (living) and other surprises that even the snakes could not foresee.

Visiting Hours!

The snakes do not live in a hospital and should therefore not be confined to the hours that a nameless faceless ENTITY has chosen for them. Obviously the snakes cannot talk but their disposition on any given day will determine the SNAKE FARM hours of operation. If for example the snakes are coiled around a tree, the hours will be shortened. If the snakes seem interested in visiting by displaying *tendencies* (sunning themselves on rocks, showing healthy appetite), hours will be extended *until the snakes are tired of this treatment*. The hours of operation will be determined daily via a MAJORITY VOTE among the snakes.

Owner Tours!

As the proprietor of the SNAKE FARM and owner of the land the snakes the cages the information kiosk and the refreshment stand I WILL PERSONALLY give *special behind-the-scenes tours* to all willing to pay a slightly accelerated fee. Visitors paying

this fee will have the pleasure of seeing 1) the holding pens and preparation for feeding time, 2) the process of preserving sheddings, and 3) the OWNER'S OFFICE which contains many plans for future expanding, including a small coaster ride for children, coasters being the obvious choice as they are snake-shaped and children riding along them will understand *the serpentine quality of many things*.

Suggested Dress!

All visitors to the SNAKE FARM will be advised to come prepared with the proper clothing which will be: long pants for the men and children, shoes with closed-toes, shirts untucked (important in case of accidental snake release). Long dresses for ladies, to make it difficult for snakes to cling (in case of accidental release). Ladies will be advised to wear a floral print in soft colors, to soothe and comfort the snakes. Fellow visitors and employees of the SNAKE FARM may be *soothed and comforted incidentally* but the snakes in THIS and ALL situations are the #1 PRIORITY.

Research Projects!

The SNAKE FARM will become *a center of research for the county*, drawing students from public schools as well as scholars from the local farm and community colleges. Because of the potential for RESEARCH on interesting and unusual snakes there will be a special day set aside for these students to observe and experiment. Of course the snakes will be cared for and at ANY SIGN OF DISTRESS the experiment will be OVER and the SNAKE FARM will go into LOCKDOWN. To avoid contamination and *maintain a professional atmosphere*, lab coats will be provided.

Feeding Time!

Digestion time is a special personal time for snakes but one of the most fascinating times to observe a snake is during FEEDING TIME directly prior. It should be known that many snakes actually enjoy putting on a show for an audience during this time, much to the dismay of *the animal which will be consumed* but as a capitalistic venture and as a favor to the snakes, FEEDING TIME will be announced and may be observed at the visitor's discretion. It will be advised that children observe, because contrary to popular belief, the mind of a child can take in *much more horror* than that of an adult, that it can be a detriment in fact to deprive a child of the facts of life as they say on television *the facts of life*.

What to Expect!

Visitors to the SNAKE FARM will see snakes in great number and variation. They will see milk snakes and ball pythons and garter snakes, and vipers and rattlesnakes and king snakes and adder snakes and diamondback snakes, and tiger snakes corn snakes cottonmouth snakes asp snakes rat snakes. Many inferior SNAKE FARMS try to keep and show other animals such as turtles alligators bats and baboons but I as owner and proprietor of this SNAKE FARM will insist that there only be snakes. THERE WILL BE ONLY SNAKES.

Waste: A Meditation

In the hours after work, Roger was a connoisseur of his home's smell. His assigned route had him picking up medical waste at most of the plastic surgery offices in town, and he smelled it on his skin by the end of the day. The plastic surgery places were less of a hassle than the hospital, and worlds away from the free clinic, but nonetheless after a day full of sharps and used lipo tubes and ruptured implants and the weight of discarded flesh, he tried not to think about the contents of the barrels. He kept his noseplug in until he got home and had stripped off the jumpsuit and secured it in its own plastic bag.

The long shower he took after work helped a little, and it was good to finally smell the world around him as he dried himself off. From where he stood in his bedroom he could smell the dust in the carpet, the vinegar smell of his freshly washed windows, and the wooden bed frame. He detected the slightest hint of mold in the wall, which didn't surprise him, as the duplex was fifty years old at least and sagging on its eaves. After a good rain, the mold smelled damp and sweet.

Roger enjoyed his evenings when Olive, his neighbor on the other side of the duplex, was cooking. He rarely took his noseplug out at work, and took bland foods in for lunch,. Olive worked as a line cook at a vegetarian restaurant, and spent her evenings frying meat. The smells permeated the walls, slipping under the door connecting their apartments, and seeping from the closed windows to surround their house. Roger usually enjoyed the smells without comment, but an especially pungent or memorable smell made him knock on the yellow connecting door.

"It's chorizo," Olive said. Behind her, a sauté pan sizzled with orange meat.

"My grandmother made that in the morning," Roger said. "With tortillas, I think."

Olive leaned against the doorjamb. She was holding a greasy spatula and was still wearing her hairnet from work. "Probably with eggs," she said.

"And cheese, and corn chips sometimes."

"A fine breakfast." She gestured towards the pan with the spatula. "I'm making hamburgers. It's strong meat, so I mix it with ground sirloin."

He breathed it in. "It smells like Indian food."

"Saffron," she said. "Good nose. I have enough for another burger, if you want."

They sat on the floor to eat. The meat soaked dark orange fat into the bread.

"This is delicious," he said.

"It's a once-a-month thing," she said. "It's so fatty, you don't want to overdo it."

Olive certainly didn't look like she overdid it. She wore a housedress that was about as shapely as the extra-large hospital gowns Roger picked up for disposal, but he knew she was thin from her collarbone, that slight white bump of a bone that barely peeked above her collar.

"You have a beautiful collarbone," Roger said.

She looked at him. "Lymph nodes," she said.

"Come again?"

"And salivary glands." She took a bite and chewed thoughtfully. "They make chorizo with the lymph nodes and salivary glands of the animal. Of the pig. Cheeks, sometimes."

He swallowed. "Cheeks," he said.

"Pig to pork," Olive said. "When does the change happen? At death, it's a dead pig. At the market, it's a *pork product*." She said the last two words with some savor. "But when does the grand transformation take place? After the animal's last breath? When it's wrapped and packed?"

"It's a horrible fate, to be wrapped and packed."

Olive shrugged. "Some might think so. The pig might think so, if it wasn't well on its way to becoming pork. But it's lucky, in a way. Not everything gets to transform."

Roger returned his sandwich to its plate. "I'm going to save the rest of this for work tomorrow," he said.

She walked him to the connecting door. "Think about it," she said. "The pig gets to become pork. The rest of us simply go from live body to dead body."

He loaded bags into heavy drums, and wheeled the drums from the loading dock to his truck using a dolly and securing straps. He rolled the drums onto the truck's hydraulic lift and operated the lift and drove to the next office and eventually to the incinerator. The metal drums warmed in the sun in the bed of the truck.

The job required him to wear a jumpsuit, a heavy-duty contamination mask, and a noseplug that hurt his nostrils by the end of the day. Most of the guys didn't wear the plug for the pinch of it and the awkward lanyard, but Roger enjoyed the sensory deprivation. The smell at work was not so typically unpleasant that day, in part because it was raining and he spent most of the day working with the wind at his face, but there was something in the drums that almost smelled like home. He decided it must have been a slow day at the clinics.

One of the big autoclaves was broken at the sterilization plant, and he got to take his time on his last pickups, to talk to the nurses and drive aimlessly around town. He ate the other half of the burger during his lunch, sitting at a covered picnic table five hundred feet from his truck. The flavors had mixed in the fridge overnight. He removed the noseplug and clipped the lanyard to the lapel of his jumpsuit.

When he was young, one of his teachers in grade school showed the class a video of a slaughterhouse. It began slowly, the picture grainy and unclear, the storyline featuring frowning men in white lab coats and packages of meat on a store shelf, but a brief segment at the middle of the video showed the actual process of the killing, the animals screaming, bleeding between metal railings. their heads swinging.

Roger couldn't remember what type of animal it was. He was in the fourth grade, and some of the girls in the class threw up in a trashcan next to the teacher's desk. Roger took a pencil out of his plastic pencil case and drove the lead into his palm, inhaling deeply, focusing on the pain of it. The graphite left a black mark on his palm, ringed with purple. The teacher was fired later that month.

As he ate his lunch, Roger decided that the pig never turned into pork. He decided that the pig was always pork, from the moment it was born into the world.

The hot water ran out at home that evening and Roger shivered as he rinsed his hair. He dressed and knocked on Olive's door. She answered it in her robe, a towel wrapped around her head.

"So that's where the hot water went," she said. "Mystery solved."

"The pig was always pork," said Roger.

Olive thought about it. "I want to show you something," she said. "But you can't tell anyone. And you have to wait while I change."

"Okay," he said.

She was wearing the housedress when she opened the door again to invite him in. It was a black and white dress with a flower print that folded strangely around her hips and ended halfway down the calf. That day, she had a scarf tied awkwardly around her waist, and another in her wet hair. She was holding a shoebox.

"You can't tell anyone," she said. "This is highly illegal."

She balanced the box on one hand and removed the lid with the other. Inside was a clear plastic bag, with a small brown piece that looked like a dried mushroom. Olive shook the box gently, as if it might come alive.

"Tongue," she said. "Actual tongue, from a person."

"No," he said. He touched the edge of the shoebox, and then shoved his hands into his pockets.

"The real thing," she said. "Cost me a fortune. They're from this freaked-out monastery where the monks cut out their own tongues to get closer to God. They dehydrate them and sell them for two thousand a tongue. Luckily I know a guy. I've been saving all year to get three. Apparently they're like pâté."

Roger was acutely aware of his own tongue, safe in his mouth. He bit it gently.

Olive took the box into the kitchen and set it on the counter, next to a white bowl filled with a white liquid. "Buttermilk with a dash of vinegar," she said. "Takes the bitterness out of game. I'm not sure we're gamey but I thought I'd give it a shot." She set a

pan to heat on the range and dropped two pats of butter into the pan. "I believe I will fry these," she said.

Roger looked around Olive's apartment, trying to make conversation. There were roach motels lining their shared wall, and an old city map covering a foundation crack in the wall next to her bedroom door.

"There was a Japanese cannibal once who told the court what people taste like," he said.

Olive turned around and leaned on the counter. "Really?"

When he first got the medical waste job, Roger found himself interested in such things. He was pleased to offer the little information he had on the subject.

"Sushi," he said.

"Fish?" Olive opened a bottle of wine and arranged three bowls on the counter. She cracked eggs into one bowl, poured flour into another, and breadcrumbs into a third. She sliced a clove of garlic and dropped the slices into the pan.

"Tuna, to be precise."

"You should stay for dinner," she said. She poured two glasses of wine and handed one to Roger. "This is a really special night," she said, putting away the eggs and raising her glass. "I'm glad to share it with someone."

"Cheers," Roger said, sitting awkwardly on the floor, holding his glass with both hands. He strained to smell what was frying in the pan, but could only make out the butter, and garlic, with only a hint of something darker underneath.

"Don't be nervous," Olive said. "You can have a little bite, and if you don't like it, I'll eat the rest. Culinary adventure is the greatest adventure one can have within four

walls." She fished around in the buttermilk for one of the tongues, and dropped it first in the flour, then the eggs, then the breadcrumbs. She left the first tongue in the breadcrumbs while she repeated the process with the second.

"I've never had pâté."

"Liverwurst?"

He shook his head.

"You should try it," she said. "It's a hell of a meat. It's one of the few meats you can eat where you think to yourself, 'I'm eating the energy of an animal.' It used to be this strong, busy liver, and all that energy is contained in this tiny mass."

"The tongue is a busy organ."

"Exactly," she said, washing her hands in the sink. "That's the idea behind it."

The garlic grew fragrant in the butter. Olive dried her hands and used a fork to drop the tongues into the pan. She stood at the range with her glass of wine, watching them fry.

"I feel like I should cross myself," she said.

Roger was thinking about Olive's tongue.

When the tongues were done, she plated them simply, between lines of red and green sauces. "Wasabi and chili, for a little spice," she said, pointing. They ate while sitting on the floor again. Her knives were sharp. Olive declared the meat to be closer to liverwurst than pâté.

"A strong meat," she said, finishing the last bite.

Roger left half of his portion on the plate for her, and was finishing his wine. "I was thinking we could go out to eat sometime," he said. "Somewhere nice, I mean."

She had a way of watching him that made him look away.

"Not that this isn't nice," he said quickly, examining the roach motels along the wall. "This is very nice," he said, and tipped back the last of his wine and stood. "It's up to you."

Olive remained seated. "There is a meditation to this," she said, watching him intensely. "You don't yet give it that."

Roger stood, a little uncertainly. "Thank you for dinner," he said.

"I'd walk you to the door," she said, "but I think we're close enough for me to point it out for you." She pointed. "There's the door, friend."

The light was harsher on his side. He smelled the roach motels, mold in the walls, and the dust in his carpet.

"We'll work on you," she said, through the closed door.

"I appreciate that," he said softly, because he wasn't sure she was talking to him. She didn't respond. He turned off all the lights.

The sanitizing facility where Roger collected trash could process five million pounds of waste a year. After sanitation, the waste was taken by another set of trucks to the landfill, eight tons at a time, then sanitized and shredded, and then dumped and compacted and picked through by seagulls.

The rusty barrels were almost too warm to touch by sunset. Roger regretted telling Olive about the cannibal. It made for unpleasant dinner conversation, in retrospect. He wondered if he should call her and apologize. He skipped lunch and picked up two extra clinics from the main office. On the loading docks, the drums were waiting for him. He

loaded each onto the dolly and wheeled the dolly to the hydraulic lift and pressed the button that lifted them into the truck, and moved them from the lift to the truck bed.

He found it difficult to work without thinking about the contents of the drums. The needles, the gauze, the hot, moving mass of lipids and grafts, of broken or rejected skin, punctuated by shards of bone like bullets, or raisins in a cake.

On the way home, he bought a roll of liverwurst and a bouquet of flowers. He wasn't sure which color Olive would like, and picked white lilies because they looked the freshest. It had been a long time since Roger had bought flowers. The cashier covered her mouth when he passed through her line, and Roger remembered with some embarrassment how terrible he smelled.

Roger felt better after his shower. He put the liverwurst in the refrigerator, picked a wilted petal off the lilies, and knocked on the connecting door. At first, there was no response. He held his ear to the door and didn't hear anything. The door smelled like rot and wood and paint. He knocked again.

"Roger," she said, from the other side. "Come in."

The first thing he noticed about Olive was her clothes. She was sitting on the floor in the same black and white flowered housedress, cinched up with a gold belt. The gold belt made her look segmented, cutting the top from the bottom. Her hair was pulled back, and she was leaning against the far wall, underneath the old map of a city Roger didn't recognize. The crack in the wall, the one the map only partly covered, stretched down to her head, making it look like she was attached to it. Under the belt was the billowed skirt of the housedress, and her white legs stretched out like a child's, and her left foot

bleeding through a wide swath of bandages. The bowl next to her was stained with blood, and the knife next to that was making a spreading stain on her carpet.

"I was waiting for you," Olive said. She looked a little pale. "I don't think I should move."

Roger shut the door behind him. He didn't want to come closer. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"I decided I might try and eat my toes," Olive said, closing her eyes. "But now that I've started it, I'm feeling a little lightheaded, and I don't think I should move."

"You're losing blood. You should really tourniquet the whole leg." He pushed himself off the wall and kneeled down next to her. He unbuckled her gold belt and reached with it under her dress. He looped the belt around the top of her leg, next to the waist, and tightened it as much as he could. His hands were shaking.

"Sit on the loose end," he said. "I hope that works."

"You brought flowers," she said, closing her eyes.

One of the lilies had dipped into the bowl and was stained by the blood. He moved the bouquet and could barely make out five separate pieces in the bowl.

"Olive," he said. "You cut off your toes."

She opened an eye to look down at the bowl. "Are they still toes?" she asked.

He thought about the metal drums heating in the sun, bouncing in the back of the truck as he paraded their human contents across town. "I don't want to look at them," he said.

"Me neither," she said. "They must not be toes anymore."

"The bleeding is slowing down." He wasn't sure how much it was slowing down, because he was too nervous to look at the wound directly, but it seemed from a glance that the blood had stopped spreading across the carpet.

She touched her leg. "Let's have some grapefruit juice," she said.

"We should really get you to the hospital." He thought of the metal drums, the hot blood inside clinging to moist gauze pads.

"I'm thirsty," she said.

"You have no toes on your left foot."

"But I'm thirsty," she said. She looked at him. She seemed very reasonable.

"A little juice," Roger said. "And then straight to the hospital."

She nodded and motioned to the kitchen, where Roger filled two glasses with juice.

She held her glass weakly, with both hands. "I was thinking of a stew," she said. "Chop, braise, heat, stew. With a bay leaf."

"A bay leaf."

"I bought the carrots this morning," she said. "I already had the potatoes and the broth. They would need a bit of flour first, and butter."

The juice glass trembled in her hands and he took it from her.

"Cooking always makes me feel better," she said. "It's meditative."

The paleness in her face suited her. Before this moment, Roger had only seen her flushed from working in the kitchen.

He looked around for another bandage for her foot. "I don't cook," he said.

"I can't feel my leg."

"That's normal."

"You should try it," she said. "And then we'll go."

"Cooking?"

Roger sat back on his heels to look at her. He could tell just from the look of it that she would lose the leg, but he was proud of himself for the proper tourniquet procedure. She would lose the leg, but he had saved her life. She might thank him, once she was in a better frame of mind.

She raised her head and shook it a little, opening her eyes briefly before closing them again. "A stew," she said. "Please, Roger."

"I don't know how," he said, but she made no indication that she had heard him. He picked up the bowl and the flowers he had brought her, ruined now, though in the sink they still managed to brighten the room.

One of Olive's cookbooks was open on the counter. He read the recipe for stew. It looked easy. On the counter, Olive had arranged bowls of flour, chopped carrots, peeled potatoes, a stick of butter, and a carton of broth. Looking at all the ingredients, Roger took a deep breath, exhaling slowly through the nose. He already felt calmer.

Unsolved Mystery

My first week on the force and that crazy guy we call God starts killing men, digging into the chest cavity (with an actual bonesaw, we think, the cut is so clean), and removing a rib. My girl thinks I'm joking when I tell her this and when I insist it's true, she throws me out. A devout Catholic girl; I should have known. But meanwhile this guy's on the loose, he's looking for victims. Usually homeless guys. We found one last week in an alley, frozen to his own blood, stuck to the ground with it. No calling card from God, just a wound that looks like a shotgun blast at first and more gruesome on closer inspection.

And that's another thing—no other marks. I can't figure it. We run toxology on the guys. We go over them with blacklight, we check every inch of skin and hair with agonizing precision. Sam, the morgue tech, Sam says precision in this business is usually agonizing. No strangle marks, no bruises, no chemicals beyond the ones typically cruising through a bum's veins. No organs harvested. I half expect these guys stitched up, it's such a clean job. Other than the blood, I mean. Sam says it's divinity, or a spell, but I think that's bull. I think it's cold in those alleys, and God's working fast.

Two things happen to bust everything wide open. This sicko, he gets a guy in a house. He gets him, safe and warm, in his own bed at night. This will baffle me when I find out about it but I don't know it at the time, because my girl Lisa has pulled a sneak attack on me and brings a priest home for dinner. While some poor sap was missing a rib, bleeding out on his 350 thread-count Egyptian cotton, I was passing the asparagus to a guy in a plastic collar.

This is Father Matthew, Lisa says. She serves fish sticks with bowls of mayo, and pours us some iced tea. Father Matthew spends some time looking pleased with himself. Finally, he says, Lisa's been telling me some interesting things about this case you're working on.

I say, yeah. I say listen, the boys aren't sure it's a serial case yet and we don't want copycats, so don't leak it to the press or anything.

Father Matthew holds up his hands. He says, what is going on with this world.

I tell him, this guy God, he's got a bonesaw on loan and he's cutting into men and taking their ribs. Homeless guys, I say.

Bonesaw? says Lisa, dipping a fish stick into mayonnaise.

And he calls himself God, Father Matthew says.

Yeah, I say. Well, tell the truth, that's what us guys down at the precinct are calling him. Kind of a code name, you know.

Nobody knows his true name, Father Matthew says.

I say, that's right.

He puts down his glass, says it's a very serious thing to name God, you know.

Yeah well, I say, he's everywhere, right?

Sure, he says.

Even in serial killers, right?

I thought you didn't know he was a serial killer, Lisa says.

Father Matthew holds the edge of the table. It's not a name you just throw around, he says. It makes it sound like you respect him.

After Father Matthew leaves, I do the dishes for Lisa and crawl into bed just as she's finishing her prayers. All the doors are locked, the windows are bolted and I have a chair propped against the front door. Just in case God's watching, and he wants to make it personal.

We're safe, Lisa says. I asked for protection.

He won't get in tonight, I say.

She says, I think you worried Father Matthew a little with the respect thing. She kisses me on the cheek.

Worried myself a little, I say, truthfully. What I don't say is, God's a clever bastard and I do respect him. He's everywhere.

The Day California Fell Into the Sea

The day California fell into the sea was a very sad day and many were lost. The scientists were baffled, because earth had split far beyond the San Andreas fault and actually made an approximate cut at the California borders. Nevada, Arizona and Oregon remained unscathed, but California was gone.

Along with the land, many cars fell into the sea, floated briefly, and sank. Gas stations went as well, and their underground tanks released gasoline from the earth and poisoned the surrounding sea immediately, making it very dangerous to operate a combustion engine near the water. Many rescue boats were lost in this way, and an entire fleet of cruise ships burst into huge flames on the water.

Some friends of ours fell into the sea in San Francisco. It put a very human face on the tragedy of everyone else in San Francisco falling into the sea as well.

People who had no ties to California and had never left their own home cities were affected by the tragedy. Even people who couldn't recognize California on a map were saddened by the loss. News programs featured famous dead for months. Across the country, beautiful memorials were planned.

People in Arizona who had always joked about buying beachfront property in border towns like Yuma and Quartzite felt bad. Many began apologizing for their crude humor

to their friends, who assured them that of course nobody could have known that California would ever actually fall into the sea.

A few people did travel to Yuma, and found that the earth indeed ended approximately at the border. The televangelists who did not fall with Los Angeles reported live from the borderland that this was God's way of saying California was a den of iniquity and that contributions would result in Him giving us a hint as to which land would go next.

The news media flocked to the borderland, bringing along geologists, geographers, cartographers, and land surveyors. The biggest networks found attractive and brilliant scientists, but the smaller stations had to make do with what they could find. Local places only managed graduate students, or artists who peered into the abyss and meekly noted the color palette of Earth's striations.

Many beautiful national landmarks were lost, including the vast redwood forest. Huge trees unearthed and shot out of the ground like flares, forming sturdy natural rafts for one or two lucky survivors who had hung on. One man ate moss and leaves from his tree, and chewed on the bark, and when he landed safely in Oregon he ordered that the tree be preserved and made into a home for him, so that they might always be together.

There were a few survivors. Some Navy Seals doing a test maneuver in their submarine were tumbled fathoms by the huge waves, but righted themselves and had lunch before

returning to the new shore. A whale named Daisy, who had been raised in captivity, swam blindly through the polluted waters before beaching herself in Mexico.

Because Hollywood and its many beloved stars sank to the bottom of the ocean, figureheads for the major production companies declared that no movies would ever be made again. Later, they would say that New York would begin some production details on new movies, but that no picture could ever be made from the tragedy of California falling into the sea.

Five years later, everyone would decide there was enough distance, and the movie would star Woody Harrelson and Scarlett Johansson, who had both been shooting elsewhere at the time of the tragedy.

The city of Reno held a massive party, with the proceeds to benefit the Coast Guard. A bartender in the city invented a drink for the occasion called The Miracle, a mix of gin and sweet vermouth spiked with a drop of seawater.

Some government officials representing California in Washington at the time of the tragedy suddenly found themselves without a constituency. Many applied for top-level jobs at federal aid agencies. One representative from a county in Northern California went insane, filled his Washington apartment with flotation devices, and drowned himself in the bathtub.

There Will Be Sense!

And then, though they had a choice, the doctors put a generator in my heart, and they gave me a band to wear on my wrist which I must pass over my heart when the old feelings begin again. *Arnold*, they say, *you are certainly a special man*. And the following is true:

1. Because of a history of powerful migraines accompanied by the trilling melody of seizure, I have certain precautions installed by man in my body preventing me from biting off my tongue
2. A side effect of the migraines is a disorder called Alice in Wonderland which causes worlds to complicate outside of my control
3. The word "special" often carries both positive and negative connotation

Jeannie serves me tostadas at the café, the gold cross on her necklace (warm, no doubt, from her skin and the heat of the deep fryer) dangling close to my sweet iced tea. It's the first thing I see as I come out of the dangerous haze, and I feel small and close enough to the cross to make a leap for it. I'd like to dig my fingernails into the soft cooling gold and balance on the arm of it as on a tree branch, holding the chain for support.

"Watch the plate," Jeannie calls from miles above. She throws herself back like a gymnast and vertigo pins me to the wall. The generator in my heart ticks one sad farewell tick and silences. I miss it already.

"I almost had a seizure," I say.

"I sneak up," she says. She points to her soft-soled shoes. "Sorry if I scared you."

"You didn't," I say. "It was just my head."

Jeannie smiles like an acolyte. "Tostadas are the special today," she says.

"They look special."

"Are you Catholic?" she asks, folding the plate's towel under her arm. There's nobody else in the restaurant except the cook who, finished with the obligation of soaking a corn tortilla in tomato puree and calling it a tostada, is lighting his cigarette on the grill. "I thought I saw you blessing yourself a minute ago," Jeannie says. "I'm just wondering."

"God is very important to me," I say, though what she saw as spiritual devotion was an act that has always been purely physical, my body prompting the machine to prompt my heart to regulate my brain's foolish attempt to revolt against the whole. Religious women are often interested in me because they misinterpret the event. I am often interested in them because they remind me of my mother. This is not strange.

Jeannie rolls silverware and talks to the cook. My tostada depresses me and when I leave, I feel it in my stomach as a whole. My stomach conforms to the shape of the corn disk. I avoid eye contact out of shame.

This town has one fountain, and I pass by it on the walk home. People come to watch the water go up and down, and they throw coins in the fountain and feed the birds around it. It's an idyllic little scene. What the world needs is more fountains. The corn disk is cutting the soft lining of my stomach in half and I lie down on a bench, feeling embarrassed and oppressively blocked. The only other person at the fountain today is a woman wearing a zippered pouch around her waist. She sits with her feet in the water, looking in, and every few minutes she reaches, takes a handful of money, shakes her hand a few times (water's qualities in sunlight: mirrors, jewels, fire) and drops it into the

zippered pouch.

"That's illegal," I say.

"I reject law," she says. "This fountain has no laws."

"What about gravity?"

"That's just a good idea."

The tostada grows three times larger in my stomach. I have the brief sensation of the woman shooting far away, into the trees at the edge of the park, me tied to the bench without hope of pursuit. The feeling passes before I think to move my arm.

"That money goes to charity," I say.

"What do I look like?" the woman says.

I tilt my head to look up at her. She's wearing blue linen pants, wet at the calves from the fountain, and a white shirt. Her hair is tied up with a yellow kerchief, which has the effect of pulling her features up and back, lengthening her neck, brightening her face. I feel heat like a rash. "The Virgin Mary," I say.

"The Virgin Mary?" she says. "That's strange."

"No, it's not."

She stands up. Her zippered pouch drips water down her leg. She is unusually tall.

I have to shut my eyes. "I'm sorry," I say, "I'm disoriented."

"Story of my life," she says. When I open my eyes, she's vaulting over a line of bushes on the other side of the park. I think, good. The world needs tougher religious artifacts. Everything you find on Sunday morning is too delicate. Candles burning over white linen. Transferring the wine from vessel to vessel, chasuble sleeves hanging

perilously close. You can buy all this stuff from a catalog, but it's expensive.

Sometimes, it comes blessed.

The fountain is very close to my home and at my home's heart is my medicine cabinet. Something feels very strange about the container of my body. As I was getting up, the corn disk hardened into a circular saw blade and went to work on the flesh of my organs. It consumes and spins faster and threatens my spinal cord. My brain howls in protest. I want darkness and my bed and the calming mechanism of a great deal of medication.

My brain says, *careful what you wish for!*

The next day, Jeannie serves me King Ranch chicken (the finest chicken dish named after a bastard since General Tso's) at the café. She has her hair pulled back.

"Your hair looks nice pulled back," I say.

"I pull it back every day," she says. This sounds a little accusatory and I feel like apologizing for not noticing every day and then I resent the desire to apologize for not noticing every day because it's not as if noticing her is my responsibility. I have been thinking about responsibility lately. The chicken is concealed against my plate under a solid greased mound of cheese.

"What are your responsibilities?" I ask Jeannie.

She glances at her other table, two women who are also having the King Ranch chicken. It is the special. "I take orders," she says, looking back. "And I bring out water and I serve plates and sometimes I say 'that plate is hot' and I roll silverware, and I cut lemons and limes and I clean the women's restroom and I wash the windows and I change the specials board and write receipts and make change."

"That sounds like a great deal of responsibility," I say, thinking of lists (1. bring out water 2. serve plates 2a. that plate is hot 2b. I hope you enjoy the food 3. roll silverware 3a. this silverware is heavy and right 3b. what am I going to do about my problems 4. cut 4a. lemons 4b. limes 5. clean 5a. windows 5b. restroom 5c. specials board), "but I meant in your whole life."

"That's a lot more," she says, smiling.

"I imagine so."

She picks up my menu. "What are your responsibilities?"

"To keep my body alive, and my mind well."

"That's it?" she says. "Well, you're lucky."

I cut through cold cheese with the side of my fork. "I am the luckiest man alive," I say. "I am the luckiest man in the history of the free world."

"Don't you have a job, though? Don't you have any goals?"

These questions make me uncomfortable. There is a poster behind her of peppers from around the world and I wonder, which pepper would be the worst on the tongue. Then, if you swallowed them, which pepper would be the worst in the gut, and how would the burn differ. Jeannie would not be interested in me if I told her that I got checks from my mother and from the government and, though I respect the necessary existence of each, that I dislike both as sources of revenue, and that my goal is her, or someone like her. These are normal ways to think but no way to talk to a religious woman.

"My goals are to be alive and well," I say, "and to be closer to God."

"Those are good goals."

"I want to get so close to God that God has to file a restraining order."

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

Q: Why does Jeannie like you?

A: Jeannie appreciates my honesty and understands that there is not nearly enough of it in men in the world these days. She has not given it much thought.

Q: Is it possible that she will break your heart?

A: She would need a much larger magnet.

Q: Do you expect us to believe you?

A: You have absolutely no choice.

Q: We resent this, Arnold. Please give us a reason to trust you.

A: Gladly: You have absolutely no choice.

Q: Don't you feel that God is *so beyond* caring what is going on down here?

A:

The fountain is broken. The water in the concrete basin is still, and the pumps are shut off. A man in work clothes is bent over an electrical box I never noticed, twisting wires. I think of the electrical box in my chest and feel a little sorry for myself.

"The water is powered by electricity," I say to the man. "Doesn't that seem like a cop-out?"

The man pulls a crimping tool out of his box. "I'd be out of a job if it wasn't," he says.

"What are your responsibilities?"

"To keep food on the table," he says, turning his attention to the electrical box.

"You're lucky you don't live on a boat."

"What's that?"

"You're lucky you don't live on a boat on the ocean. It would make things difficult."

"Fishermen make a lot of money these days," the man says. "I was watching a

show about it. It's profitable but dangerous."

We live in a world where fishing is sexy. "My responsibilities are to keep my body alive, and my mind well," I call out to the man working in the electrical box.

"That's hard to do on your own," the man says from the electrical box. He's hiding in his work clothes. All I see is blue denim and brown belt. This man is a novice practitioner of the electrical box and is growing smaller by the second. This is terrifying to me and I call out, "I'm doing the best I can!"

I'm very worried that he will become the electrical box and that the fountain will never be repaired. "Please be careful!" I yell desperately towards the smooth denim, a hanging curtain now over the electrical box. My hand comes up, my wrist, and I start the generator in my chest. The battery is tiny and creates a small alien warmth as I am brought back hard to the world.

From my brain, an urgent message:

Why did you do that? We were all about to have a good time. If it weren't for you and your precious medical science, we'd be orbiting Saturn right now and watching the stars fall. You call this keeping your mind well? We're all well on our way to crushing boredom, that's all. But don't worry about us. It's not as if we power your dirty shell through this world. It's not as if we spend all day waiting for a nap in the sun, only to find you jogging us back to your own pointless day-to-day. We have nothing better to do. Please, continue.

My brain is diseased with logic.

Jeannie tells me that the daily specials in the café are always the food they didn't sell enough of from the day before. She points at my sloppy joe.

"Taco meat from Thursday and marinara sauce. Some ketchup."

"What about the King Ranch?"

"Chicken quesadillas. The tortillas went stale."

"How late do you work tonight?"

She looks at me and doesn't say anything. Under the table, I rip my napkin in half, and then in half again, and again and it's snowing white paper over my shoes.

"You might want to come to my home for dinner," I say.

When Jeannie and I walk to my home, the following does not happen:

1. We turn miniscule but not unimportant, and find that blades of grass have their own weapons, though they are weapons against small insects, who look like demons at close proximity
2. The sidewalk turns liquid and claims us, drawing us deep through hot sharp earth, where we meet those from generations past as well as some people working in a coal mine
3. A wise man confronts us and suggests that the *Pieta* is the most beautiful piece of art ever made by a human in the history of the world and while I don't disagree I think it might be even better as a fountain

I do, however, realize that Jeannie is essential to not one but both of my responsibilities and is therefore very precious to me. She nourishes my body with her daily leftover specials and she is strong and essential to the health and safety of my mind. It is when I look dreamily at the pendular motion of her golden cross that I realize I feel entirely well. Inside my heart, the generator rides the thumping aortic valve in blissful,

silent contentment. Jeannie's hair flows behind her like a river. I am in ecstasy.

In my home, Jeannie looks around. "It's cleaner than I thought," she says.

I offer her a mint because I'm not sure what else to do with her. We are both very shy, and not used to interpersonal communication outside the arena of the café. I do feel very shy. My generator feels that I feel very shy.

She pinches a mint with clean fingers. We both smell like ground beef.

"Where did you get this box?" she says.

"From a catalog."

"It's adorable," she says, taking it and turning it over in her hands. "Isn't this what priests keep communion wafers in?"

"A pyx," I say. "It came blessed."

She looks around the room. Her eyes see: table, books, parament, pyx collection, stove, palm fronds, window, stained glass. I see in the stained glass tiny bubbles which contain worlds.

"Did all this come from a catalog?" she says.

"The oven came with the apartment."

She laughs, and then she stops laughing. She looks at the oven and I want to tell her that it really did come with the apartment and that's not a joke and she's really quite kind for coming over for dinner and I'm really sorry that I didn't make anything and moreover that I don't have anything in the house to eat because I usually take my meals out because it's good for the spirit and as usual what's good for the spirit is bad for the wallet.

Jeannie sits down at the table and begins to cry. I touch her hair with my lips and

her head is warm and smells like ground beef. She sobs and holds her fists closed on her knees.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'm frightened."

My fingertips brush against the place where her hair is drawn up in a ponytail and I say, "you certainly shouldn't be frightened of me, if that is what you are frightened of."

"No," she says. "I am having a terrible fight with my husband and I have nobody to talk about it with. I am terribly frightened that he will leave me," she says.

(Then, a terrible thing happens: My brain leaves the picture entirely. The room goes completely black, and the spotlight comes up on the two of us—Jeannie at the table, with my brainless body propped up behind her. Someone coughs. The curtain man lights his cigarette and digs into the fuse box.)

JEANNIE:

(in tears)

I am terribly frightened that he will leave me.

ARNOLD:

Don't be frightened. Please, let's talk about it, between the two of us. Let's work out a solution for you.

JEANNIE:

I can't do that. I feel terrible about doing this to you, burdening you with this.

ARNOLD:

(putting his hands on her shoulders)

It's no trouble at all, my dear. Can't you see? I care very much for you. How long have you been married?

JEANNIE:

Six months. He's a good man, he has a good job. He's great in bed—

ARNOLD:

And why don't you wear a ring?

JEANNIE:

We're getting rings tattooed on our fingers as soon as we can find the perfect artist. I figure it's more lasting that way.

ARNOLD:

So what's the problem?

JEANNIE:

If you'd let me get to it—

ARNOLD:

(laughs suddenly)

I just don't see the problem then, pretty girl like you, a newlywed, striking out in the world with a sensitive and handsome man—

JEANNIE:

Who ever said he was handsome?

ARNOLD:

Your responsibility overall is to care for your own life and your own handsome husband because he is a lucky man and to see you sad should be one of the great sadnesses in his life and I'll tell you that honestly, it should be one of his greatest sadnesses.

JEANNIE:

Who ever said he was handsome?

BLACKOUT.

"What gives?"

"Sorry." I reach for the wall, feeling for the lightswitch. When I find it, she's looking at me with fish eyes.

"I think I'd better go," she says. She stands up and I shrink back in my chair.

"But thank you," she says, "for the advice." She is a tower of a woman! In the center of my seat, I am acutely aware of the false-feeling velvet under my hands.

"Would you like a glass of water?" I ask the tower of Jeannie.

"No, thank you." She reaches across the room and puts her hand the doorknob. She fills my apartment and I cower in the low cover of the chair cushion. And then the *whump whump* of my brain as it comes down the stairs two at a time, looking for breakfast. As she leaves, she sees a man alone at his kitchen table, blessing himself before the invisible feast.

After that, as after all great tragedies, the days go by:

Jeannie serves me meatloaf at the café.

Jeannie serves me spaghetti and meatballs at the café.

Jeannie serves me pork barbecue and french fries at the café.

Jeannie serves me breakfast tacos at the café.

Jeannie serves me fajitas at the café.

Jeannie serves me onion soup at the café.

Jeannie serves me quesadillas at the café.

Jeannie serves me chicken fried steak at the café.

Jeannie serves me grilled cheese sandwiches at the café.

Jeannie serves me steak and eggs at the café.

Jeannie serves me baked potato at the café.

Jeannie serves me tomato soup at the café.

Jeannie serves me pork chops at the café.

Jeannie serves me cheese crisp at the café.

Jeannie serves me ham and cheese at the café.

Jeannie serves me fish sandwiches at the café.

Jeannie serves me chicken salad at the café.

Jeannie serves me corn dogs at the café.

Jeannie serves me tamale pie at the café.

Jeannie serves me vegetable soup at the café.

Jeannie serves me macaroni at the café.

Jeannie serves me chili at the café.

And one day, I come home to my apartment and the Virgin Mary is sitting at my

kitchen table.

"Hey there," she says. She is eating mints from my favorite pyx.

"How did you get in here?"

"I try doors. Aren't you that man from the fountain?" She offers me a mint.

My hands are huge and I am concerned they will flatten her in the course of my reach. She watches my awkward progress with careful pinhole eyes. When I touch the pyx, she snaps it closed.

"What is life?" she asks.

"Alive," I say, "and well."

She nods once, grandly. "I thought you might know, if anybody did."

VITA

Amelia Gray was born on August 17, 1982 in Tucson, Arizona, the daughter of Richard and Susan Gray. She received her B.A. in English Literature from Arizona State University. Her fiction has been published in *Barbaric Yawp*, *Bound Off*, *Caketrain*, *McSweeney's*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Spork*, *Storyglossia*, and *Swivel*. She works in San Marcos, Texas, as a freelance writer and editor.

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