THE POINT WHERE THEY MEET
AND OTHER STORIES

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by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is dedicated to my grandparents, Gene and Garcia Burchett of Duck, West Virginia. They’ve shown me that beauty, love, and joy can thrive in adversity. Little bits of their spirits are in each of these stories.

Brittany Stone
3/15/11, Kent, OH
A REAL HOLLYWOOD PRODUCTION

The man came on a Saturday morning and knocked on Bud’s door. The man didn’t know Bud and Bud didn’t know him. Bud had been sitting in the kitchen in his big old house, writing a check for the gas. For as long as he’d had been paying his own way—too many years, as far as he was concerned—bills came first on Saturday mornings. He tucked the pen behind his ear and answered the door.

“I’m from California,” the man said and put out his hand for Bud to shake. The man wore khaki shorts and a black T-shirt with the word “love” airbrushed across the front in big red letters. His hair was slicked back with mousse.

“And I’m from right here,” Bud said. He shook the man’s hand. Bud had never been rich or important, but still felt good about his handshake. “Seventy-one years.”

The man rocked back on his loafers. “I’m with the folks down there. You may have noticed us already.” He pointed down to the river where a crew worked on setting up scaffolding. “It’s a big production. We should be out of your hair soon. A week, maybe less if we really move. Don’t be alarmed if you see anything out of the ordinary.”

“Well all-be-damned,” Bud said. “Just when I think I’ve heard it all.”

Bud had read about this movie on the front page of the paper, heard about it on the news. It was all quite an ordeal, but he wasn’t a film guy. He’d been retired fifteen years, widowed one. For a half century, he worked as a foreman in the mines, long
enough to still be blowing soot out his nose. How could an experience like that ever leave a man? When he cooked, he thought about coal, when he sat down in front of the television, he fought an itch in his calves for the slope of a track, the give of ground under his feet.

“Will there be noise at night?” Bud asked. He slept light and short, but needed it all the same. November was unseasonably warm this year and he felt hot and itchy inside his flannel pajamas. The air stank of mud from the river.

“I’ll apologize now for whatever happens. We’re asking people to be patient.”

“Do you offer compensation to the folks you’re putting out? More than once I had to keep men overnight because we were coming up short on the take. Do you think I put a man out for nothing?” Bud rested both hands on the shelf of his abdomen. He used to be a big guy and still had the stomach to prove it. Now, he felt nearly the same as he had before—he lived in his body, after all, and the reality of change set in gradually—except he wore smaller pants and felt altogether lighter.

The man squinted, thinking. Bud could tell he was getting his goat. “I’ll tell you what,” he said. “We’re paying people eight bucks an hour to be extras. If you come down and see Sandy in the tent on the bridge, maybe we could use you in a shot or two.”

Bud figured that was the most hare-brained idea he’d ever heard, an old man taking up a career in the movies.

“Lord, I don’t know,” Bud said. “I can’t tell you for sure.”
“What’s your name?” the man said and pulled a small leather notepad and pencil out of the back pocket of his shorts.


The man took down Bud’s name and left. Bud went inside and finished writing out his bills and placed them in the mailbox, flag up. He stood on the porch and looked up and down the street for the man, but didn’t see him. Bud’s town sat on the lip of the Ohio River. He liked to tell people that he could cast a hook into the water from his front porch. He’d lived in that row house on High Street since 1954 when he married Gladys. When the trains were still running, carrying loads of coal or glass up north, the house shook and the windows rattled in their panes. After ten years of marriage and not one baby, Gladys gave up the idea of motherhood in the same no-fuss, who-can-help-it manner that a new baker pitches a spoiled batch of fudge. Bud had known a lot of women who lived for baby-making, who couldn’t find happiness existing independently in the world. Not Gladys. Bud built a kitchen on the second floor and found a renter, Betsy. Really, who needed all that room, a big old house with no bodies to fill it?

These days, except for Betsy, Bud only knew a handful of neighbors. Houses sat quiet. If the town ever came back to what it used to be, how Bud remembered it, there would be cars lined up on the street, men walking down the sidewalk with lunch pails, women hanging laundry over porch banisters.

If Bud took the notion, he could jump over the railing at either end of his front porch and be on a neighbor’s. On the left side, he’d seen a young woman with a
deformity—a nub arm—and a girl child. The house on the right had sat empty since six months ago when prostate cancer killed Jim, the retired logger from Beckley.

What Bud loved most about his place was the view. Directly across the road were the tracks, followed by the gentle slope of the grassy riverbank, fifty or so feet wide, and then the river. Not too long after Gladys died, Bud looked out the living room window and saw a woman walking down by the water. My God, he thought, that’s Gladys. She wore slacks and a loose black sweater. Her hair hung long and white. Looking back at the house all the time, she walked slowly, as though she had nowhere to go, nothing to do. Now, two men hammered stakes into the ground down by the tracks and hung yellow caution tape. On the Buford Bridge, a group of people pitched a big, white tent and police officers set up orange cones to block traffic on either end. A warm breeze picked up downriver and stirred leaves on the road.

Bud figured he ought to go up and tell Betsy about the movie being filmed because she spent a lot of time in Moundsville staying with her daughter and mostly missed out on big news in town. He went to the bedroom and found his pants folded on top of the dresser and pulled them on. Since Gladys passed, he’d learned that a person could get away with wearing pants two or three times before they had to be washed. He put a clean white dress shirt, threaded a belt through the loops on his pants, and went upstairs and knocked on Betsy’s door. For years, Betsy kept that interior door locked and her business mostly quiet. Except for the occasional hello or the sudden appearance of cash in the mailbox the first of every month, Bud and Gladys hardly knew she was there. Some years ago, Bud had given Betsy a house key and told her to come in the
front door anytime but she still insisted on using the outside entrance, a stairwell Bud had built on the back of the house when he and Gladys first decided to take on a renter.

“I’m coming,” Betsy said from inside. She opened the door. “Hello, Bud.”

“Hi there, Betsy,” he said. “I’ve got news.”

Betsy let Bud in and he sat on the couch. Even though he’d been visiting Betsy frequently since Gladys passed, he still felt strange sitting in her apartment. For so many years he occupied the bottom half of the house and nearly forgot about the top, about Betsy trudging through her own life right above his head. He and Gladys, they’d carried on like the only two people in the world. What had Bud missed, living like that?

“Well, tell me your news, Bud,” Betsy said. She sat down in a chair on the other side of the room and crossed her legs at the calves. Today, she wore a knee-length dress and house slippers. Betsy always dressed up, even at her age, even when she had nowhere to go.

“I thought you might like to know,” he said, excited to share news with someone. “There’s a Hollywood movie being filmed down by the river. It’s a real production. The bridge is shut down and we may be hearing some noise at night.”

Betsy said, “Hmm,” and sat neatly with her lips pinched tight. Betsy had the tiniest, most peculiar face Bud had ever seen—a little turned up nose, a chin that came to a point the size of a large marble.

“I talked to a man from set,” Bud said. “And he offered me a part. Imagine that. He asked me to come down and get my makeup done.”

“I think you’re fooling me, Bud,” Betsy said. She smiled tiny and tight-lipped.
“I am not!” Bud said. “At first I didn’t believe him, and then I thought the idea was stupid. But I may just do it. What do I have to lose?”

“Well I don’t know, Bud. I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I’m in shock about it all.” Betsy stood up using the arms of her chair for balance. “Can I get you a Coke or some coffee?”

Bud shook his head. He felt happy, having made his mind up. He’d set his alarm and get his makeup done in the morning.

“Do you notice anything different about me?” he asked.

Betsy stopped in the middle of the living room and looked at Bud, her hands on her hips. “Not that I can tell. I’m no good at guessing.”

“I feel good, Betsy,” he said. “What a difference a few hours can make.”

After Gladys had passed, Bud felt old and alone for the first time in his life, despondent, afraid to talk to people. The more a man thinks about aging, about curling up in bed and giving up, the more he actually feels feeble in his mind and in his bones. Not Bud, not anymore. Suddenly, he felt better than he had in years, talking to a woman.

“That’s right,” Betsy said. “That’s what I tell myself when I get down.”

Bud had a crazy idea, one he might never have had if he weren’t feeling so good. He reached out and took Betsy’s hand.

“What do you thinking about going out to eat with a movie star?” he said. He couldn’t believe those words came out of his mouth. Her fingers were thin and cold in his hand. His Gladys, she’d worked in a rubber factory from the time she was fourteen
all the way up until they were married and had thick fingers because of it, agile, calloused from peeling gloves off molds. Those fingers would have done good burping a baby.

“You mean today?”

“No better time.”

Betsy pursed her lips. She twirled a tiny pearl button on her dress. “Okay. I think I will.”

Bud squeezed Betsy’s hand. He let go and stood up, pulled his belt over so the buckle lined up with his zipper.

“Fifteen minutes,” he said. “I’ll be right here knocking at your door. Remember, I know where you live.”

Betsy laughed. She went over to her purse and pulled out her wallet. At first, Bud couldn’t figure out what she was looking for. She licked the tip of her index finger and counted bills inside the leather fold although Bud couldn’t be sure they were bills because she wouldn’t let him see them. Ladies never count money right out in the open and Betsy had been proper as long as Bud had known her.

“I’d like to pay my own way,” she said. “I want to be sure it’s right.”

“Not a chance,” Bud said. “If that’s the case, I might as well make a bologna sandwich and bring it up to you.”

Betsy tucked her wallet back in her purse. “You’re so difficult, Bud.”

“That’s what happens when you’re big time.”

“Oh, you,” Betsy said.
Bud let himself out. He went downstairs to the bathroom and found a bottle of Stetson in the medicine cabinet and sprayed a little under his shirt. He combed his hair back with one end of a fine-tooth comb and then used the other end to neaten his eyebrows. Even now, at seventy-one, he still had thick grey hair on his head and that made him proud. Gladys’ makeup bag sat on the back of the toilet, nearly untouched since the day she returned from the hospital. She’d worn the same lipstick for twenty years, the same shade of rouge. Whenever her birthday rolled around, Bud called the Avon lady and said, “Give me Gladys’ regular,” and that’s how she stayed stocked.

He unzipped the bag and pulled out the lipstick, twisting it up from inside the plastic tube. The tip was still sharp and shiny. She’d been too sick that last year to bother. He looked in the mirror and dabbed lipstick on the center of his bottom lip and, upon seeing how strange he looked—like Betsy with her little puckered mouth—licked it off.

When had Gladys last worn this lipstick? He imagined it could have been a couple days before she died when she’d gotten this incredible surge of energy and cleaned out the kitchen cabinets, stacked the canned-goods on the table and took a wet rag to all the corners. She was ninety-five pounds and sitting on the floor in her housedress, all angles against the linoleum, cutting sheets of contact paper to line the shelves.

Bud felt hopeful about Gladys’ newfound health. He took her out to dinner and she wore a long black skirt and a purple scarf on her head. He called the hospice nurse and asked her not to come out for a few days. On the phone, the nurse told him she was
sorry, that this was all a part of the process. Before a person can pass on, he or she must
gather spiritual energy for the journey ahead.

At the time, Bud thought this was a load of malarkey. But, when Gladys didn’t
get out of bed the next morning, he knew he’d been a fool, believing there might have
been a chance.

What am I doing? Bud thought. He tossed the lipstick inside the bag and put it
back on the toilet, thinking he ought to do something with the whole lot one day soon.
Not today. He had to go get Betsy before she changed her mind. He decided to surprise
her by going up the stairs on the outside of the house, just like a common visitor or the
postman. A pennant hung on her door that read WELCOME FALL. On the road below,
a car drove by and stirred up dry leaves and they skittered across the pavement. Bud
knocked and waited.

“Surprise,” Bud said when Betsy answered the door. “I’m starting proper.”

While they were apart, Betsy had put on a blue cardigan with miniature seashells
for buttons. Bud thought maybe her lips looked redder and he smiled thinking about
himself wearing lipstick. He and Betsy, they were living in another time, another day.
Fifty years ago, a stunt like that would have bought a man a beating in the mine.

“You thinking about something, Bud?” Betsy said. She grabbed her purse off the
coat stand by the door and held it so it hung down by her thighs.

“Not in my head. My stomach’s dreaming about food,” Bud said.

Bud took Betsy down to the driveway and let her into his car. They drove three
blocks to the café, an old train depot-turned-sandwich shop. In his days of eating at the
café—they were growing in number since Gladys passed—Bud had learned the coffee was weak but the hamburgers were excellent, a trade-off he willingly made.

Bud asked for a table outside so they could look down at the river. After they ordered, he sat sipping ice water. “Look,” he said. He pointed downriver to the movie set, busy with people. “Actors, pretending they know about work. The thought! Do you remember, Betsy, when the trains pulled coal from the mines? We’d load the cars up, fifty, a hundred at a time, black up to our eyeballs. Hard work, building a life—that’s what today’s kids don’t give a damn about. I’d give my right arm to go back.” Faintly, he could make out his house sitting up near the river, gleaming white in the sun.

“All that’s water under the bridge. Yet here you are, planning to take up a role. That strikes me so funny, Bud.”

“Go on and have your chuckle,” Bud said.

“You know what I mean. Don’t go sour on me. I always tell people, ‘Do what keeps you young.’ We’ve got to move forward, don’t we?” Betsy paused, thinking with her lips puckered off to the side. “Gladys was quite a woman. To be honest, I forget she’s gone.”

The sound of Gladys’ name coming out of Betsy’s mouth made Bud shudder. He’d grown so used to the private whisper of that word in his mind’s voice, so soft in its ending—ess, a sound like a spring breeze working its way through new leaves. Betsy, her voice, the way her lips met softly in the corners as she spoke, stirred Bud from the inside, made him pine for what he thought he’d never have again.
“Tell me if I’m out of line, but I’d like to see you again. That is, if they don’t ship me off to California.”

Betsy smiled, her teeth so neat and straight in her mouth. Bud could tell he’d embarrassed her. “We’re still neighbors and I pay you rent. I do like your company, Bud. Let’s just not be so serious,” she said.

Bud pointed to a stain on his breast pocket. “Does this look serious?” He said.

“Ketchup. Two weeks ago. I still haven’t found the soap that takes it out.”

The waitress set a hamburger and basket of fries in front of each of them. Betsy put her hand flat on the table, a few inches from Bud’s hand.

“Come on now,” she said. “Don’t look so glum. I never told you no.”

Bud opened his eyes at five o’clock in the morning. As he lay in bed, still wanting sleep, he could have sworn he heard the faint clamoring of pots in the kitchen. It can’t be, he thought, and sprung to his feet.

“Are you here?” he called into the dark, cold house.

In the hall, he felt for the light switch and flipped it on. He looked into the empty kitchen and then into the living room, where the blue light of morning glowed through the windows.

He heard the noise again and shouted, “Where are you coming from?”

The house rattled as the furnace kicked on.

Bud sat down at the kitchen table, disappointed, feeling all the stiffness of a hard sleep. The telephone rang and he got up to answer.
“Hello?” he said.

“Bud. This is Betsy calling. I hope I didn’t wake you. I was going to hang up if you didn’t answer on the third ring.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You probably heard me shouting.”

“I feel crazy for calling. I thought maybe you were hurt.”

“I’m not hurt,” Bud said. He looked down at his bare toes on the linoleum. “Just woke up yelling. I appreciate you calling.”

“Okay, Bud. Good luck at your movie. I’m looking out the window just now and see that they’ve got a train down there and lots of cameras, too.”

“Thanks, Betsy. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Goodbye Bud.”

Bud hung up the phone and went into the living room window. During the night, a crew had set up shop along the river. Three big cameras sat on tripods and one dangled from a crane. An old-fashioned passenger train sat on the tracks. In his mind, he could see a shay pulling railcars full of coal to plants in Ohio and West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Maryland. Bud known lots of foremen who sat in their offices reading the newspaper but he’d gone underground for his men, labored right alongside them. In those days he felt lucky to work and brought home a good paycheck to support Gladys. He always longed to go back to that time to see if he’d just imagined being happy, if all this time he’d been remembering a dream. The most beautiful and destructive truth about his life was that his mind kept him hostage. Always, he blindly hoped for what would never again be.
From the window, Bud watched costumed actors standing around drinking from thermoses.

Hot damn, he thought. Is this what people call work?

After breakfast, Bud dressed in blue jeans and a T-shirt and started for the bridge. At the front door, he stood with his hand on the doorknob, thinking, and then went back to the bedroom closet. From the top shelf, he pulled down a cardboard box and rummaged through, finding some of Gladys’ nightgowns and a sweatshirt he’d bought her on a trip to Morgantown. After a little digging, he pulled out his old blue Dickies work shirt with BUD and FOREMAN embroidered across the breast. If he was going to be in a movie about trains he didn’t want to look like a sissy. The shirt fit loose. Bud couldn’t believe that. If Gladys were here he would have said to her, “Look at what a big guy I used to be.”

Out loud, Bud said, “Gee, I was fat,” and instantly hoped Betsy hadn’t heard.

On a whim, Bud decided to call her before he left. He’d been so out of it when he woke up and still felt stupid.

“Betsy, this is Bud,” he said when she answered. “I’m all right now.”

Betsy paused on the line. “That’s good, Bud,” she said. “I was worried.”

Bud suddenly felt a rush goodness, a goofy high he hadn’t felt since he smoked his first cigar. He wanted to get down to the river and be a part of that movie being filmed. A real Hollywood production!

Bud said, “I’m glad that we’ve stopped being such strangers. Come in the front door anytime, Betsy, any old time. That’s how it’s going to be from now on.”
“I know,” she said. “What’s mine is yours.”

Bud walked briskly down High Street and wondered if people were watching from their windows. They’d probably think him to be a man of fifty or sixty by the way he moved, the way he looked in his clothes. Bud laughed out loud. A hound yowled somewhere far away. The sun felt warm but the wind blew cold and long and Bud wished he’d worn a coat. Down by the river, people gathered around a barrel of fire, warming their hands. The hum of voices made Bud’s town feel alive. A man announced, “Quiet on set,” through a megaphone and Bud stopped along the road to watch two men on bungee cords jump from the top of the train and land on a round trampoline.

At the bridge, he was stopped by a police officer. “I’m Bernard Meekly,” Bud said. “They’re expecting me.”

The officer disappeared in the tent and reemerged to motion Bud in. “The lady says you’re late.”

Inside the tent, costumes hung on metal racks and three curtained dressing rooms lined the back wall. A woman wearing feather earrings stared at Bud, tapping her clipboard with a pencil. “You’re late,” she said, and glanced at the clock that hung from a tent post. “We sent the last extra out forty-five minutes ago. We’ve got to get going if you want to make next take.”

“I’m supposed to see Sandy,” Bud said.

The woman made a note on her clipboard. “That’s me,” she said. “Sit down.”
Bud sat. In his mind, he’d pictured Sandy as glamorous as Elizabeth Taylor. He thought he’d sit in front of a mirror outlined with lots of little lights. He figured someone would notice his shirt and say, “You’ve made our job easy. Go on down. They’re waiting for you.”

A man in knee-high boots went to a rack of clothes and began sorting, looking at tags. “What size are you, Mister?” he said.

“Large,” Bud said.

Sandy opened a case of makeup and held a bottle next to Bud’s cheek.

“Mmm,” she said, her face so close to Bud’s that he could smell peanut butter on her breath. “What shade are you, anyway?”

Sandy pulled out another bottle and shook it. With a brush, she applied liquid makeup to Bud’s cheeks and forehead.

Bud sat with his hands folded. “I don’t want to look like a sissy,” he said.

Sandy said, “You’ve got to be matte for the camera.”

Seventy-one years old and putting on makeup to be in a movie. If someone would have whispered this in his ear fifty years ago, Bud might have wailed him.

The man in the tall boots picked out a thin, short-sleeved shirt with a collar and suspenders. He looked these items over closely and then tossed them on Bud’s lap.

“You can keep your blue jeans on,” the man said.

“Go change,” Sandy said. She turned her back Bud, packing up the makeup in a plastic container.
In the dressing room, Bud looked at himself in the mirror, pleasantly surprised. Sure, he sagged a bit, but what a difference the makeup made. With both hands, he smoothed back his hair. How long had it been since he looked this good?

Bud buttoned the new shirt over his old one. He thought the suspenders made him look fat but he kept them on anyway and came out to see Sandy.

“Where do I go?” he said.

Sandy didn’t look up from putting away her makeup. “Down to the river,” she said. “Listen for the call for extras. When you’re done, they’ll tell you to go home.”

“When will I get paid?” Bud said.

Sandy went over to her clipboard and rifled through paper. “Do I have your mailing address?”

Bud gave Sandy his address and she wrote it down on her clipboard.

“Don’t forget to mail the check,” he said.

Sandy exhaled, air whistling through her nostrils. “You do know you’re walking in on the third take, don’t you?”

Bud stood with the other extras along the edge of the river in an area marked off with stakes and neon pink ribbon. He stopped counting at fifty extras, all standing in groups, a few here, a few there, most talking to each other as if they’d done this a gazillion times before, old pros. Water lapped the shore. More than once, somebody piped up and said, “What are we waiting for?” The area around the train had also been roped off for filming. If there were any big-time actors, Bud figured they’d be right there
inside that partitioned area, protected, where nobody could touch them. He saw cameras attached to the front of motorized carts, men talking into headsets, hands moving fast. Big lights hung from scaffolding.

Bud saw beautiful women. Young women, old women, all wearing long skirts and bonnets, looking like they’d stepped right out of the Old West.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a woman standing by the water’s edge, kicking rocks with her toe. It can't be, he thought. With his eyes, he traced the familiar profile of her face, the soft folds under her chin, a tuft of loose white hair peaking out from beneath a bonnet. He held his breath, thinking maybe he’d get lucky and find out that his whole life had been a production, scripted and cast with actors all meant to carry him toward this moment where Gladys would pull off her bonnet and say, “Missed me, didn’t you?”

No such luck.

As he waited to be called, Bud met a man named Sal. Sal was a real actor, flown in from California. Bud asked Sal if he’d done many movies, and Sal said no, that this was his first big job.

“Who are you playing?” Bud asked.

Sal smiled. “One of the outlaws who takes over the train. This is the only time I’ve ever had a name.”

Bud watched Sal jog in place to stay warm. Sal looked thirty, maybe younger. He wore a black suit and a cowboy, a puffy red jacket that Bud figured wasn’t part of the costume.
“What about you,” Sal said. “Have you been in a lot of films?”

Bud felt proud that he could pass for a real actor. “No,” he said. “I’m a retired miner. I’m doing this for money. And to try something new.”

“It’s a tough road, man. Sometimes I think I’d do better going your way.”

“You got a woman, Sal?” Bud said.

Sal laughed and wiped his nose. “We can’t keep them in L.A.”

Bud said, “You’re missing out,” and looked out at the river, the reflection of clouds on the water.

“For art, you sacrifice. They’ll tell you that in any good acting school.”

Bud hadn’t known a lot of men to go without wives. “You like women, don’t you?” Bud said. He felt funny asking.

“Sure I do,” Sal said. “I love women as much as the next guy, just not enough to settle down with one.”

Bud couldn’t believe people like Sal existed in the world, making this God-forsaken dream a life. What kind of happiness could a few minutes behind the camera bring a man if he didn’t have someone at home waiting for him, loving him?

“And you like this lifestyle, Sal? You’re happy?” Bud said. He felt stiff from standing around so long. Even if it killed him, he’d stay to make the shot.

A loud voice came over the crowd and Bud spotted a woman with a megaphone standing on a ladder. She said, “We’re ready to film scene two, Fight on the Run. Again, scene two, Fight on the Run. Extras in position.”
“This is my scene,” Sal said, and put his hand out for Bud to shake. “Good talking to you, old man.”

Bud shook Sal’s hand and Sal disappeared into the crowd. Bud didn’t know what to do without Sal and said so out loud. “I don’t know what to do.” No one seemed to hear Bud. He was alone, confused, and feeling further from home than he’d been in his entire life. “I’m a coal miner, not an actor,” he said, loud enough for people to hear this time. A woman with kind blue eyes looked over and smiled.

“Stand around the train,” the woman on the megaphone said, “Right here, all of you.” She pointed to an area that had been roped off around the train. “Fill in this area, people. Make it look full.”

Sal stood near the train with three other men, who were also dressed in black suits. He pushed a mask down over his eyes and waited, moving all the time, as if he might take off running.

“Are we ready to call action?” the woman said. She looked at the man standing behind the camera, who gave a thumbs-up. “We’re ready to call action,” the woman said. She paused, looking over the crowd like a mother checking for lost children. “Okay. Action!”

Sal and the other actors rushed into the train while the extras forced surprised, frightened faces.

Bud looked surprised because, really, he felt it.
“Cut,” the woman said. “Did we get it?” she looked at the man behind the camera, who nodded. The woman said, “Okay we got it. We’re done for now. Extras are dismissed. Thank you.”

Bud couldn’t believe it.

“This is it?” he said. “That’s all?”

In unison, the mass of people headed up the river toward the bridge. Bud didn’t follow. “I’m going home,” Bud said.

Home, for Bud, was over the tracks and across the road. He could see his house and Gladys’ flowerbeds, Betsy’s second-story windows glaring down at him like eyes. He stepped over the tape onto the tracks. He looked back at the train, its paint shining in the afternoon light, and at the river, as calm as he’d seen it all day. For the life of him, he couldn’t figure out why he’d come, what he’d expected to feel.

That night, Bud ate dinner and turned in early without setting his alarm. In bed, he listened to the quiet, which he’d learned had a sound all its own. And then he heard a woman humming. Had he drifted off? Certain, Bud got up to check the house. He turned on one light switch, and then another, finding rooms in the same condition he’d left them. In a rage, he flipped over sofa cushions, opened closet doors, and peered out windows, looking for the noise that evaded him. When he found nothing, he went to the door at the top of the stairs and knocked softly.

“Betsy,” he said, and knocked again, “Is that you?”
When Betsy didn’t come, Bud twisted the doorknob and found it wasn’t locked. He let himself in and sat down on the sofa. When his eyes adjusted, he saw the outline of Betsy’s books on the shelf and the sweater with seashell buttons slung over a kitchen chair.

Restless, he stood up and lingered outside her bedroom door, listening to her breathe. It felt so good to be planted here, his bare feet sunk into the plush carpet, the night black and empty and new.

When a man goes underground, his body fights descent and then after a while it gives in, acclimates. He figured love wasn’t much different. He was ready.

“Betsy,” he said.

Betsy stirred under the covers and sighed. Bud crept inside and sat down on the end of the bed, careful not to disturb her. Against his back, he felt the curve of her foot, the bone just as thin and delicate as a willow sapling. Is this real? he thought. He put both hands up to his face and traced along the sharp tip of his nose, his eyeballs in their sockets, the warm, flaccid flesh beneath his chin.

Suddenly, Betsy sat straight up, rigid with fright. She fought the air in front of her like a dog paddling furiously to get out of water.

“It’s me, Betsy,” he said. “It’s just me. It’s Bud.”

Betsy cocked her head, thinking, trying hard to understand, making sense of his face in the half-light of the moon. “Damn you, Bud!” she said. “What are you doing up here?”
“I don’t know,” he said. Suddenly, he felt ashamed. Had he been out of line? “I
don’t know,” he said again.

“Just go home,” she said. She put both hands over her face as if she might cry.

“I don’t understand,” Bud said.

“You must be out of your mind. You’re dreaming. This is all a dream you’ve
cooked up.”

Whatever Bud wanted had faded into near-obscurity, the tail-end of a caboose on
misty morning tracks. He’d go back downstairs and sleep it off.
Friday at work, I tell Sally about my brother Bill.

“He’s nice,” I say. “Cooks for himself. That’s rare in a man.” I slide a tray of broccoli into the steamer and set the timer for five minutes. At Clay Primary, the kids come through the line in forty-five minute intervals beginning at eleven-thirty, so we hustle all morning.

Sally is just a little thing, the kind of woman a man likes to pick up and carry around for the sake of feeling strong. She’s twenty-eight and colors her hair blonde every month, sets it in hot rollers and lets it do what it wants. At work, she pulls it back with a clip shaped like an abalone shell. I’ve had lots of co-cooks in the past five years, retirees looking for easy work, young girls right out of high school, but Sally’s the best, a real Clydesdale and a good friend, too. If I ever forget a casserole in the oven, you can bet Sally’s already pulled it and it’s on the counter cooling by the time I come running.

“Has Bill ever been married?” she says. She hurries across the kitchen to the walk-in freezer and pulls it open.

“No,” I say. “Come over for dinner tomorrow and you can meet him.”

“What about my kids?”

“What about them?”

Sally pokes her head out and smiles, and I know that she’s thinking about a few months ago, when her babysitter dropped the kids off at the school kitchen. Sally and I were finishing the dishes, soap up to our elbows, when the three kids came in. I don’t
really remember the girls. The boy was the one who struck me, made me feel as if someone hit me over the back of the head and said, “See here?” His body was drawn up everywhere, his head hung limp. One of the little girls pushed his wheelchair into the kitchen and the other carried his coat. Sally told me that the girls fight about helping the boy all the time, about who gets to push his wheelchair and so on. She said that the little one likes to wipe his face.

Sally was surprised to see her kids. “I don’t know what to do,” she said.

I held the boy’s fingers. “Good to meet you.”

He rested his head against the back of the chair and closed his eyes. The girls sat down at the break table with a tablet of paper and drew with pens from Sally’s purse. Sally stood against the cooler and fanned herself with her hands. It had been a long day and we came up five or so dollars short in the cash register. When this happens, we fork over the difference with our own cash, splitting it right down the middle. That day, Sally must have been broke.

“God, I must be the shit of the earth,” Sally said. I looked at all three kids and then at Sally. Her husband left when the kids were just babies. It’s a real pompous thing to say, but I may have been her only friend.

Knowing Sally’s situation, it’s only natural that I want to help her out. Bill’s a good catch for a woman like Sally. I think she’d gab about him all morning if I let her.

“My God,” she says as she walks back from the freezer with a big bag of frozen tater tots in her arms. “I don’t think I remember how to talk to a man.”
I turn up the heat on the fryer and a drop of grease jumps out of the well and stings me on the cheek.

“Well don’t get worked up over it,” I say. “I’ll just tell Bill it’s no big deal. You’re my friend and I want to invite you over.”

Sally opens the bag and pours the tater tots into the metal basket in the fryer. The two of us stand there, watching the grease foam up like muck on a pond.

“You ever want a man?” she says and looks at me so sweet and, for a moment, I think an ounce more heartbreak may ruin her for good.

“Ha,” I say. “Got two of those at home.”

After work, I tell Bill about Sally and the kids coming over for dinner.

“She’s really pretty,” I say. “She’s got blonde hair that goes on forever.”

Bill sits across from me at the kitchen table, wearing coveralls and smelling like Murphy’s Oil Soap. In the living room, Dad sleeps on the couch.

“I just don’t know,” Bill says and takes a bite of cereal. “What do I have to do?” He chews and looks at me through the slits of his eyes. If I didn’t know better, I’d think the idea of a woman put him off. He’s never been married. He takes care of Dad in the afternoons while I work and cleans the Baptist church at night. After Mom died, the preacher gave him a job polishing pews and waxing floors and then, out of nowhere, Dad broke his hip.

Bill knows a lot about what’s going on in the world, about taking care of people, fixing cars and managing money, you name it. When Mom was alive, she always
worried about Bill making friends. She’d send him out to meet people and he looked so solemn sitting behind the wheel of Dad’s Chrysler, not knowing where to go or what to do, wearing clothes freshly starched and his hair combed back so black and shiny. I can still see Mom standing at the door waving, saying “Go on, Billy, you’ll have a good time.” Who knows what Bill did when he went out. If I had to guess, he probably bought a cheeseburger and drove around town listening to the radio until dark. Poor Bill. He can’t talk to a woman to save his life.

“Having Sally over, it’s no big thing,” I say to Bill. The coffee maker gurgles from the counter. “I’m making meatloaf. You can play with her kids. Even if you don’t say a word to Sally.”

Dad coughs and Bill fidgets at the noise. For a long time after Dad broke his hip, the doctors thought that he was a goner. The domino effect, that’s what Bill calls it. He told me that after a person’s hip goes, everything else fails, too, and pretty soon, the body just gives out, kaput. I think about contests I’ve seen on television, people lining up thousands of dominoes and standing back to watch them fall. What’s it worth in the end, all that mess?

I get up and pour a cup of coffee and look out the window above the sink. Outside, it’s getting dark, just a sliver of sun left in the sky.

“Don’t expect me to fall in love,” Bill says and stands up from the table. “You go on ahead and make your meatloaf.”

Dad coughs again. I take out a skillet and begin frying a couple eggs for his dinner.
A couple weeks ago, I called the house from work. Dad picked up the phone and put it down again, probably forgetting it ever rang. I said “Hello” over and over again, cussing Bill out in my head. What if this call had been important?

I listened to people laughing on the T.V., the rattle of the old furnace, noises a person never really pays attention to when he’s sitting right there in the room.


“I’m here,” Bill said. I imagined him plodding through the house in his old leather slippers, not dressed yet for work.

“Your mother was a bitch,” he said. “If she walked through the door right now, I’d punch her.”

“Do you want me to take you to the bathroom while I’m right here?” Bill said.

“No.”

On my end, I watched Sally eat green beans from a Styrofoam bowl at the break table. This was probably the only moment she’d get to herself all day, aside from sleeping.

Bill said, “Okay. This is your last chance for a while. I need a shower.”

“You’re a good boy, Billy. I love you better than any of them.”

“Yeah right, Dad.”

I wanted to tell Bill to start a load of laundry before I got home, but seeing the line might be tied up for quite a while, that would have to wait.
Just as Mom taught us, Bill sets the table in the dining room, lays the silverware out, knife and spoon on one side of the plate, fork on the other. I wait on the living room sofa, legs crossed, wearing one of Mom’s sweater dresses and drinking Coke on ice. If this were any other time, I wouldn’t have bothered with ice but tonight is an occasion. I think I might do this more often, dress up, pour myself a drink and relax. In ten years, I haven’t had to heart to dump Mom’s clothes and thank God for that. This dress—a turtleneck with little sequins sewn at the end of the sleeves—makes me feel fancy in a way that hairnets don’t. In the bathroom, I hear water sloshing around in the tub. Even in his condition, Dad insists on bathing himself. Every few minutes, I glance out the window for Sally’s van.

Bill just brings out the dinner glasses when I hear the sound of gravel in the driveway.

“Okay, Bill,” I say. “We’re going to have us a dinner.”

From the front door, I watch Sally walk up the driveway with the two girls behind her.

I meet the three of them at the door. “Your engine’s still running,” I say.

“I know. Frank comes down on a lift. I figured I’d bring the girls in first. We all haven’t done something like this in a long time.”

Bill comes out from the bathroom soaking wet, a towel wrapped around his neck.

“Dad poured all the shampoo in the tub again,” he says to me. “And this time, it was a brand new bottle.”

Bill looks at Sally. Sally touches the littlest girl’s ponytail.
“Bill, this is Sally,” I say. “And her two girls. She’s got a boy out in the car.”

“Nice to meet you all,” Bill says. He rubs his cheek with the palm of his hand.

“We’re going to have a good dinner.”

“That’s what I hear. We’ve been looking forward to it, that’s for sure,” Sally says. She looks down at her girls. “This is LuAnn and she’s six.” She points to the taller girl, a small dark-headed child with a blue mole under her eye. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she’d accidentally inked herself with a pen. The younger girl is the spitting image of Sally, blonde hair and all, and she fidgets behind her mother’s leg. “And this is Peggy. She’s three and into just about everything,” Sally says. Even though the girls look nothing alike, Sally’s dressed them in matching red jumpers and tied their hair back in ponytails.

“And the boy is just the sweetest thing you’ll ever meet,” I say.

Sally smiles and I notice that she’s put on pink lipstick. She glances back at the van. “His name is Frank Jr., and I’ll go get him if you don’t mind.”

“Go right ahead,” I say. “We can’t wait to see him.”

Sally walks out to the van and the girls stand next to me, one on either side, the little one feeling along my hem with her finger. Every few steps, Sally’s navy blue pumps catch in the gravel.

“Put something nice on,” I say to Bill as he walks away.

Sally pushes the chair up the driveway and stops in front of the steps, tucking a loose hair back behind her ear. I wonder if it’s always such an ordeal for Sally to go out, to have a little fun.
“We’ll have to carry him in,” she says, “wheelchair and all, if that’s okay.”

“Bill,” I yell. “Come help us get the boy in.”

Bill comes out wearing a long-sleeved red T-shirt and jeans, his hair combed back with water.

“Is he heavy?” he says and pushes up his sleeves. Bill is a big guy who looks tougher than he is, always squinting as though he’s really thinking. At thirteen, he had a growth removed from the tip of his nose and the scar looks like the bare top of a mined mountain.

“There aren’t that many steps,” Sally says.

Bill takes his place behind the chair and Sally and I stand on both sides.

When we all look up, ready to haul the boy in, there’s Dad standing in the doorway wearing only underwear. The girls, who haven’t moved an inch from the top step where I left them, stare wide-eyed. With all that skin out in the open, Dad looks ten feet tall and my first thought is to tell LuAnn and Peggy that it’s okay, that he doesn’t know he’s doing, but I don’t have a chance. Peggy, the baby, begins to cry, her mouth open in Sally’s direction.

“What are you bringing into my house?” Dad says.

“This is Frank. He’s Sally’s son,” I say.

“How about Sally? I don’t know any Sally,” Dad looks Sally up and down. Frank Jr. opens his eyes and grimaces as if he might be hurting.

“Sally from work. Her family’s going to have dinner with us.”

Dad leans against the door frame and scratches his belly.
“You’re in your underwear,” I say. “Go put some clothes on.”

“It’s okay. We don’t care,” Sally says. She pats Peggy’s head and smiles at Dad. He turns around and walks away, dragging his feet on the carpet.

Sally sits Peggy down on the ground, “Stay back,” she says. We pick up Frank’s chair and start up the stairs again.

“He does that sometimes,” Bill says.

“I know how it goes,” Sally says as we haul Frank over the threshold. “Frank keeps me busy.”

There’s always a minute shortly after guests come in and everyone’s standing around with not a word to say when I panic. We didn’t have a lot of visitors when we were growing up except Dad’s brother, Jerry, who drank and smoked Pall Malls and moved his hips like Elvis Presley. He was a funny drunk and we loved him for that. In a skillet, Mom would melt a block of cheese and ground sausage together and Dad and Uncle Jerry ate this on bread, drinking straight from the bottle between bites and listening to music so loud on the phonograph that neither Bill nor I could fall asleep. Sometimes Mom came in wearing her nightgown and slept on the rug beside the bed, her legs tucked up to her chest, and we felt content that she was there and pulled the blankets up over our heads and fall asleep. But a lot of times she didn’t come in at all and we fought our eyes to stay awake, to keep watch. If I managed to drift off, I usually saw Dad and Uncle Jerry’s headless corpses dancing with the music, reality and dream all mixed up and terrifying.
Back then, our house was the only one on Hollendale, built board by board on the family land as Dad could afford it. Loggers get paid when there’s wood and if Dad managed to haul a load down to Ivydale, he went to the bank and cashed the check and got busy on framing a room or a section of the roof. The house was supposed to be two stories but he stopped building at one when he ran out of money. When all was said and done, it took him three years of saving to finish the plumbing and the place stood empty in that field surrounded by corn and the far-away dots of silos.

Now, we’ve got a couple neighbors, the Bates family who breed and sell pygmy goats on a plot of land across the way, Tom and Lucille Matheny who work office jobs in the city and built a big brick colonial down the road just for the view. It’s nice to have people around breathing the same air, even if we don’t see them much. It used to be that if there was a party at our house—a massacre or an alien abduction—no one knew about it except us. All drunks have their safe places, and Uncle Jerry found his at our house.

So here we are inside—Bill, Sally, me, and the kids, Frank in his chair just as peaceful as can be—and Sally’s fussing over the girls, pulling off their coats and little patent leather shoes and then she takes Frank’s scarf from around his neck and tucks it inside her purse.

“I’ll put the coats right here on the back of the couch,” I say, and I lay them out, smoothing the wrinkles.

“Bill’s got a spider,” I say. I look at the back of Bill’s head because he’s already taken to watching the baseball game on T.V. “Don’t you, Bill?” I say louder.

“What’d you say?”
“I was telling Sally you have a spider.”

Bill puts his hands in his pockets. He keeps his eyes on me, puckers his lips.

“Yes I do,” he says softly, and looks at Sally. “It was a stupid idea I had a while back. I really didn’t think he’d live this long.”

“Oh?” Sally says. “How long?”

“Almost five years. That’s quite a long haul for a spider, if you ask me.”

“Billy, I need you,” Dad yells from the couch. After the scene on the steps, he managed to put on a pair of sweat pants and a cardigan with a white T-shirt underneath.

He looks altogether sane. Moments like this come and go.

“Bill’s talking to Sally right now, Dad,” I say.

On the television, a bat clinks and people cheer. Both girls look up at Bill. Little Peggy picks at the fuzz on her jumper. LuAnn says, “Spider, spider, spider,” and puts both hands up to her cheeks and laughs.

“Go show Sally and the kids your spider, Bill.” I wink at Sally.

Sally pulls her lip into her mouth. “I don’t know how I feel about this. What kind of spider is it?”

“Tarantula. It doesn’t have enough venom to kill a rat. If it did, I’d be sleeping on the couch with Dad.”

“You keep it in your room?” Sally looks at me and smiles. “You never told me your brother had a spider in his room.”

“That would’ve come sooner or later.”
“Well let’s see it, then,” Sally says. “Would you like to see a real live spider, Frankie?” She talks close to his face and he opens his eyes at the sound of her voice.

For the first time, I notice that Frank’s eyes are blue, clear as creek water. Before I ever met Frank, Sally told me the wiring behind his eyeballs is weak and they wobble in their sockets. “Here,” she said. She picked up a cardboard box right there in the school kitchen and threw in two apples leftover from the line. “Try to make them move they way you want.” I thought this was out of character for meek little Sally but I took the box anyway and, of course, the apples rolled around without much regard to where I wanted them to go. Not until now, watching Frank struggle to see the world, did I know what Sally wanted me to understand that day in the cafeteria.

Bill says, “Come on,” and we all follow him down the hall into his room. If I would have known that guests would be back here, I might have straightened up or at least dragged a mop over the floor, but it’s been just Bill and me for eight years and honestly, I’ve given up. Bill keeps his bedroom the same way he always has, twin bed on one side against the wall, clean clothes folded and stacked on top of the dresser, shade pulled three-quarters of the way down. Over the bed hangs an old tin advertisement for fishing lures, a boy tying a red fuzzy on a line with his hound dog puppy snoozing beside him. That picture’s been there for as long as I remember.

God bless Bill for being so sentimental. When I got old enough to consider myself a woman, I yanked down the lace curtains in my room and boxed up the dolls, bought a remnant of plush blue carpet and hired a couples guys to install it. I pulled the sheets off the bed and put them out to the road with the trash, took off the mattress and
scrubbed it down with a good stiff brush on both sides and set it out in the sun to dry. I must have been eight years old when I got lice and Mom set all the pillows and couch cushions out on the grass all day for the sun to make clean. I never forgot that.

After all that work, I fixed my bed up with a quilt Mom made from the pockets of old blue jeans and hung two sconces on either side of the window.

Sometimes at night, I light candles and turn on the radio, hoping the smoke won’t reach Dad where he sleeps on the couch. I don’t know why I bother to sneak. Even now, with half a mind, he’ll rush down the hall wiping sleep from his eyes, sleuthing out crimes under the roof of the house he put up with his own two hands. “No goddamn candles in your bedroom,” he’ll say, and I’ll hear his voice before I see his figure, large and looming in the shadows. Suddenly, I’m eight years old again, barely breathing because it’s nighttime and he’s in my bedroom. Dutifully, I’ll take him back to the couch, blow out the candles, and turn on the light on my nightstand.

On his nightstand, Bill keeps the spider inside a glass tank. When Sally sees this, she says, “Really, Bill, right here next to the bed?”

“Is that bad?”

“What if he gets out and crawls between your sheets in the middle of the night?” Sally taps on the glass with her finger. LuAnn does the same. At this age, her mother is the sun and the moon. She can do no wrong.

“Is he hot?” LuAnn says. She speaks softly with one finger to her bottom lip.
“Not at all,” Bill says. “He came from Chile. That’s far away, where it’s always hot and muggy. If he got a whiff of cold air he’d be sick, so I keep this heat lamp going outside the glass all day, just like sunshine.”

Sally takes Frank’s soft white hand and holds it against the glass. “Warm glass,” she says. “Feel here.” She looks at Bill. “Knowing me, I’d overcook the little guy.”

“Nah, it’s not hard. Just leave the light on all day and turn it off at night. I do monitor the temperature pretty closely. If it starts to creep up, I mist him with a squirt bottle. He’d die without a little rain every now and then.”

“Show them how you hold it, Bill,” I say.

“Oh lord,” Sally says. She brushes off her pants. “I don’t know if I’m ready to see him come out of the tank.”

“I won’t if you don’t want me to,” Bill says.

“Might as well,” Sally says. She looks at me. “I think you invited me over here to give me a heart attack.” I can tell she’s having fun. When it comes down to it, Sally’s a good sport.

Sally pushes Frank to the door. “Stand back with Frankie,” she says to LuAnn and Peggy and they move. Peggy looks at her mother and says, “For me?”

“See here Bill? See what you have my kid wanting?” Sally laughs. “No, honey. The spider’s not for you.”

Bill takes the lid off the tank and lets the spider crawl on the top of his hand, its little furry legs moving gracefully across his skin. “Ta-da! This, my friends, is a Chilean
Rose Tarantula.” Bill puts his hand out like a sideshow performer. Never in a million years did I think he’d warm up to Sally and her kids this quickly.

The girls squeal and jump up and down. “Big spider,” LuAnn says.

“Look at it, Frank. Spider. Bill’s holding a spider,” Sally says, her face lit up with the joy of showing her child a creature he’s never seen before.

Frank smiles and claps his hands. “Spider,” he says, just as plain as day. That’s the first time I’ve ever heard the boy speak.

“Yes Frankie. Yes, yes, yes. Spider.” Sally claps her hands and the girls follow suit.

“Atta boy, Frankie,” I say and pat him on his knee. A wonderful, beautiful child, this Frank Jr. is. And my friend Sally, she’s a good mother.

“Damn it anyway,” Bill says and flings the spider into the tank. It hits the glass without a sound and scurries behind a rock. “He bit me.”

“Stop playing,” Sally says. “You’re joking.”

“Look here,” he says. He holds out his hand and right there on his knuckle are two bleeding wounds the size of pin pricks.

Sally waves her hands around. “Oh my God, oh my God. What do we do?” Peggy, sensing her mother’s panic, begins to whimper.

“Not a thing,” Bill says. “It’ll swell up like a lemon and then go away.”

“You’ve been bit before?” Sally says.
Bill holds tight to his hand. I’m not sure, but from where I stand, his fingers look purple. “Yeah,” Bill says, “A few times. Only if he’s startled or I pick him up too rough. You saw how I handled him. I didn’t do a thing to make him act that way.”

“Oh well,” I say. “As long as you’re not going to lose a finger over it.”

Suddenly, I’m itching to get out of this room. In five years, I never once thought about what might happen if that spider bit somebody. Now, I never was fond of the spider, even when he was just a baby and Bill brought him home in a little plastic carrier with wood shavings on the bottom and told me he was keeping him in the house. The creature was never more a part of my world than those sickly beta fish they keep in tiny bowls at the pet store or the newscaster in the blue eyeshadow on television, beings that go on living on one side of the glass while I go about my business on the other. All this time that spider’s been quietly waiting to take off our hands and we’re the idiots who keep on feeding him.

After a long silence, Sally looks up at me. “You can’t make a cougar into a housecat,” she says.

“What the hell is going on in there?” Dad shouts from the living room. I all but forgot he was out there on the couch, waiting to eat.

“Is this okay?” I say to Sally. I park Frank’s chair at the table so Sally can keep an eye on him.

“Fine,” she says.
I believe everyone has a talent for seeing and if there’s one thing Dad had an eye for, it was building homes. He built ours with high ceilings, held up with beams from old barns. There aren’t a lot of walls because he liked light and I guess Mom did too. He kept the bedrooms private. From the kitchen sink, I can look into the dining room and beyond that into the living room. Sometimes I wash dishes and watch television at the same time although I have to careful because I nearly lost the tip of my finger on one of Bill’s good fillet knives.

“You know,” I say to Sally, “If Frank wasn’t sitting right there, I wouldn’t even know he’s in the house. He’s so quiet and well-behaved.”

Sally and the girls stand in kitchen with me. Dad sits sideways on the couch with his feet on Bill’s lap. Peggy, as nervous as ever, whispers in her mother’s ear. “Ask her yourself, Peg, and say ‘please’,,” Sally says and looks at me.

“Milk, please,” Peggy says.

I open the refrigerator and take out the carton. “This what you want, honey?”

Sally sits down at the kitchen table. “How long has your dad been that way?”

I take a cup down from the cupboard. “A while. Four or five years. It started sometime after Mom died. I probably should have warned you before you came over. Lately, it’s been bad.”

“No, don’t apologize. It’s an awful disease. The best I can say to you—and Lord, this probably doesn’t make it any easier—is that you’ll always have the gift of remembering him the way he was.”
I pour milk for LuAnn and take out a saucepan for Peggy to play with. Without asking, Sally wraps a dishtowel around her hand and takes the meatloaf out of the oven. I hand her a knife and she begins cutting slices.

“This is the only home I’ve ever known,” I say.

“You’re blessed,” Sally says. “Life out there is hard.”

I carry food from the kitchen to the dining room, carrots and potatoes and rolls and meatloaf, stepping over LuAnn and Peggy on the way. At the table, I bend over and pat Frank on the cheek. “Yes Frankie boy, this is good for your mother.”

I call everyone to the dinner table, Sally and Peggy and LuAnn, Dad and Bill. Dad goes to pull himself up with Bill’s bad hand and Bill stumbles forward. “Oh, shit,” Bill says.

Dad has big arms and legs, thick hands and fingers like the roots of the mangroves I saw in Florida when I was a kid. I watch the two of them holding each other, Dad’s grip too much for Bill. Suddenly, I’m remembering the motel room in Tallahassee, Bill and me almost asleep in bed when Dad really loses it, throws Mom against the wall and holds her there by the neck. She doesn’t cry. He says, “I’ll choke the life out of you.” Mom looks at us, embarrassed. The skin on her neck takes on the red outline of Dad’s fingers. She stands there a few seconds until he takes his hands off her and then he throws her on the bed. The next day in Okeechobee, we visit an alligator ranch. Dad buys Mom a genuine alligator belt from the gift shop and it makes Bill and me so glad to see her happy,
Out of habit, I seat Dad at the head of the table. Sally and Frank sit on one side and Bill and me on the other. In the living room, the girls plop down at the coffee table with place settings in front of them and cartoons on the television.

“Frank’s a great kid,” Bill says to Sally.

“Thank you, Bill,” she says and folds her napkin on her lap. “I guess if we’re being nice, your spider’s not that bad either.”

“You think?” Bill says. He holds up his hand and it’s swollen to twice its size, shiny and purple like the plums that come off the truck in wooden crates at school. We usually have to get out a colander and wash them down because they’re so slick with wax.

“Bill!” I say. “That looks terrible. Sally, don’t you think that’s the most awful sight you’ve ever seen?”

“It’s not pretty,” she says. She looks over at Frank. “Frankie, you tell Bill he’s crazy for keeping that thing around.”

“Crazy, crazy,” Frank says. He laughs and looks up at his mother, proud to be talking to Bill.

Bill reaches across the table with his good hand and touches Frank’s arm with two fingers. Bill stays like that for a while, patient, waiting for Frank’s eyes to settle. “Come on now, Frankie,” he says so gentle and so sweet I could almost cry. “I thought we were pals.”
Dad drops his knife on his plate and we all look at him, surprised. He stares at Frank for a few seconds and says, “Tell me something, Sally.” She looks at Dad, waiting, her lips parted in the center. “What’s it like to have a retarded child?” he says.

The table buzzes with excess energy and I’m aware of it all at once. Bill pokes the potatoes on his plate with a fork. Frank pushes a green bean across the table with his index finger.

“Well,” Sally says, and moves the green bean to her plate. “There are a lot of things I wish I could change, for him and for me.”

Dad drops his fork and folds his arms across his chest. “Seems to me he’s a vegetable,” he says. “A spud in the field.”

“That’s enough,” I say to Dad and glance over at the girls in the living room. “No more.”

“I’m sorry, Sally,” Bill says to Sally, his voice low. “He doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

“Fuck off, Bill,” Dad says.

I watch the muscles in Bill neck’s ripple. He swallows hard and his Adam’s apple moves under his skin like a cyst. The girls fall silent at the coffee table. Saliva bubbles up at the corner of Frank’s lips and, without missing a beat, Sally wipes it away with her napkin. Frank’s eyes move quickly and erratically and I wonder how we all look to him at this moment, if we’re just a blur of fantastic color and light.

“He can tell me when he’s hungry,” Sally says and looks at Frank. Her voice is calm and steady. “He puts one finger next to his mouth and taps until I say, ‘Okay,
Frankie, I’ll get you something.’ Not too long ago he caught a ball. Imagine that.
LuAnn was out in the yard and Frank was on the porch. She threw the ball at him and he
put both hands out and caught it.”

Dad laughs, his mouth open wide enough to see the food on his tongue. “Whoop-
dee-doo,” he says.

I lay my napkin on the table. “That’s enough now.”

“It’s okay.” Sally says. She looks at me and I know she feels stuck. She pushes
her fingers up through her hair, antsy, looking as spent as the day her kids came to the
cafeteria.

“Who’s going to take me to the toilet?” Dad says. He smears potatoes across his
plate with his hand and laughs. “Billy, you up for it?”

Bill folds his arms across his chest and he’s big, all arms, suddenly grown into his
body. “Burn,” he says, and looks at Dad with such cold, hard meanness that I see, for the
first time, what he might be capable of.

“He’s upset. It might be best if we just sneak out early,” Sally says.

“He’s just so sick,” I say.

“I know,” Sally says. She looks at me and blinks twice, so sincere and sweet, the
best friend I’ve ever had.

Sally sends the girls out to the car to wait for her. LuAnn takes Peggy’s hand and
looks back at her mother. Sally nods at her to keep going.

“Please take some food with you,” I say. I don’t know what to do. I hold open
the door.
“Thank you but we don’t need a thing. Don’t you worry now,” Sally says. She stands behind Frank’s chair and pushes him to the door. Bill follows, ready to help haul him out. “Don’t you worry now,” she says again.

“Who’s going to take me to the toilet?” Dad says.

I look back. He sits in his chair like one of those ancient gods carved in marble, feet flat on the floor, white hair pointing every which way. He doesn’t know he’s doing. I watch Sally and Bill, pretty little Sally, my big brother Bill, the shape of the two of them carrying out wheelchair in the dim light.

After everything’s over and Dad’s asleep, Bill and I sit in the dark at the kitchen table. The light from the moon shines through window above the sink. I ask Bill if he thinks Sally hates me. He said she probably doesn’t, although we might never know.

“What would you have done if you were Sally?” Bill says. Although I can’t make out his face, I hear him breathing across the table.

I don’t say anything. I swallow and look out the window.

Bill takes a deep breath. “I’m getting rid of the spider,” he says. “It’s been five years and I’m done.”

“That’s it?” I say.

“That’s it,” Bill says. “I’m out.” He’s silent for a few moments and then says, “Do you think you’ll ever have enough of this shit?”

My God, what if Bill is serious? He’s upset. He isn’t serious. I listen to Bill’s breathing and the oppressive quiet of the house. I don’t think about the spider. I think
about Dad, about Sally and Frank Jr. and the girls. About what Bill’s decision could mean for our family, for me.

He won’t do it. He can’t.
A stranger called on a Friday afternoon, just as Mary put stew on the burner.

“This is Charlie,” he said when she picked up the receiver. “And if you’re Mary, you may be my mother.”

Well, Mary thought, and stared at the chunks of beef floating there on the broth, the carrots, cut too big to cook all the way through. “Charlie?” she said.

A long time ago, Mary had taken to looking at faces on the street, hoping if the right one came along she’d just know. Now, she felt as breathless as when her pumps caught on the ice and she had to sway like a trapeze artist to find her balance.

“If you’re Mary, and your husband is James Poke, and you delivered a baby the first day of May in 1960 in Bethesda, Virginia, then I’m your son.”

Mary stirred the stew and held the phone between her ear and shoulder, feeling, for just a moment, that this call was no different than the ones from the Injured Veterans Fund or the neighborhood Avon lady. But then she felt sort of warm all over, suddenly relieved, as if she’d ventured through the house on a cold morning in her nightgown and then stood over the vent.

“It really is you,” she said. What could she say? Sorry? We missed you?

“Charlie, you say?”

“All these years,” Charlie said. “As soon as I knew, I started looking for you.”
His voice, now that Mary thought about it, sounded like Jimmy’s, as hearty and robust as the fat men who sing bass in bluegrass bands.

“I can’t believe it,” Mary said. “I might as well have seen a ghost.” She put the lid on the stew and sat down at the table, fiddling with the corner of the gas bill.

“Naturally, I’d like to meet you, Mary,” Charlie said. “I hope this is all right to say, but I can hardly wait.”

Mary took the phone off her ear and held it to her chest. “Jimmy,” she yelled, “Come see who I have here on the phone.”

Jimmy shuffled into the kitchen. “Who is it?”

Mary put the phone back up to her ear and spoke to Charlie. “Jimmy is my husband of forty-one years. If you’re our son, he’s your dad. I’m your mom, Charlie. Oh boy. I never thought I’d say that.”

“That’s our son, you say? You got our son on the line?” Jimmy said. He stood behind a chair and held on to the spindles, looking down at a square on the linoleum. Poor Jimmy and his lousy eyes. The doctor said that he saw the world through closed mini-blinds, all light and shadows. As a test, sometimes Mary spread her fingers out in front of her eyes, to see in slivers.

“Yes,” Mary said to Jimmy. “It’s Charlie and he can’t wait to meet us.”

“Charlie,” Jimmy said and shook his head in disbelief. “Are you sure he’s our son?”
Mary handed Jimmy the phone and he held it firmly to his ear. “You say you’re my son?”

Mary went to pick Charlie up at the bus station. A week had passed since he called. She wrote CHARLIE on the backside of an old manila envelope and held it on her lap. For fifteen minutes, she waited in the car. The sun sat high in sky, hot and yellow, and reminded her of a glass lemon-shaped lamp she used to keep on a shelf in the living room. She had Jimmy put that lamp in the closet because it got hot and she thought maybe, under the right conditions, it could burn the building down.

The bus from Albuquerque pulled in and began unloading and Mary held the sign out the window. People walked off the bus carrying duffel bags over their shoulders cameras around their necks. A man with brown curly hair stepped down and looked around. In his hands, he carried a big black box. He saw Mary’s sign and grinned.

“Are you Charlie?” Mary yelled out the window.

“That’s me.” He held the box near his chest.

Mary pointed to the passenger seat and leaned over to lift the lock.

“It’s been a long time,” she said and folded the sign in half. She braced herself for a hug, willing to reciprocate if should one occur. Unsure of what to do with her hands, she folded the sign in half again.

Charlie reached out and took Mary’s hand off her lap. He held it for a second and then let go. “It sure has been a time,” Charlie said.
Mary watched her son fasten his seatbelt. The skin beneath his eyes drooped and she could see the wet pink flesh behind his lower lids. She remembered the sad little Bloodhound puppy Jimmy had brought home years ago for protection and ended up giving away because the creature wouldn’t stop howling.

Mary turned the air conditioning on high but Charlie rolled down the window anyway. She thought about the woman who taught him how to use his hands, how to wave and hold a spoon, skills that would lead a kid to figuring out how to roll down a window. Lord, she’d missed so much.

“I don’t know what I thought you’d be like,” she said. She offered him a peppermint from her purse and he took it and put it in his mouth.

She put the car in drive. Charlie rested his hands on the box in his lap and tapped out a little tat-tat-tat against the hard plastic. He seemed feeble and pale, as though he hadn’t slept for a good many nights. He was a tall man, lanky and curly-headed. All that hair. To her dismay, Mary couldn’t place his face.

“It’s good to be here, Mary,” Charlie said. “Do you mind if I call you Mary from here on out?”

Mary had expected this. Jimmy had told her, he’s not ours anymore. “That’s just fine, Charlie,” she said.

“I hope this is all right, me coming here. My parents are dead. It’s good, feeling like I have a second family.”

“We couldn’t be more tickled.” She looked out at the road ahead of them, at the sizzling summer asphalt that would carry them into town. Sometimes, for lack of a better
way out, a person simply has to get used to pain or sickness or giving up a baby. But ta-
da! Out of nowhere, relief, an answer for Mary. Life could be so funny.

Charlie stared out the window toward the hills. He shook his head in disbelief.

“My honest-to-God mother. What a trip.”

“What do you do, Charlie?” Mary said. “I’m so anxious to hear about it all.”

“I’m in the business of horticulture. You know, plants, flowers, and such?” He
looked down at the black box on his lap. “It’s my bread and butter.”

“Do you own a greenhouse?”

“No. I’m a mobile operation. It allows me to live and work at the same time. I
figure a person can’t really live if he has to work away the good years.”

“Lord, Charlie, if I would’ve known my son was into plants, I’d have watered the
window boxes.”

Jimmy sat on the stoop, waiting. The apartment building was tidy, proportionate,
a square two stories with three concrete steps out front and pink begonias planted on each
side.

“We’re here,” Mary said. Charlie walked behind her, holding the box against his
stomach.

“My God, it’s good to meet you Charlie,” Jimmy said. He stood up and brushed
off his pants. He’d dressed in a good white dress shirt, black trousers. Mary had laid
these clothes out on the bed before she left.
Charlie reached out to shake Jimmy’s hand. When Jimmy didn’t move, Mary looked at Charlie and mouthed, “He can’t see.” Charlie set the black case on the stoop and hugged his father cautiously, as parishioners hug the preacher in the receiving line after Sunday service.

Mary looked at the two of them, the slouch of their shoulders, the lines in their faces, and tried to make sense of the time that had passed

“I couldn’t have dreamed it better,” Jimmy said. Mary figured this was Jimmy’s day. He was seventy-five years old, older than Mary by at almost a decade, and had been sick for a while, getting tired easily for God knows how long, spitting up gunk all the time. When he came home from the doctor’s and told Mary that he might not have too much longer, she put her hands in her pockets and said Well…, all drawn out and confused, and he took off his good shoes and put them in the closet. But who knows about the truth in a doctor’s diagnosis. Mary was hopeful. Finding Charlie proved that a person could never—not for a moment—give up hope, because that was like giving up living all together.

She figured she’d tell Jimmy this later, after Charlie settled in and the two of them were alone.

“Thank you for having me here,” Charlie said. He picked his box off the stoop and groaned. By the looks of the box, Mary wouldn’t have guessed that it was heavy.

Jimmy clapped his hands once. “Okey-dokey. We’re all here. I don’t know where to start.”
Jimmy was a handsome man, happy-faced, fair and blue-eyed. Hair still grew thick and white on his head. Somebody once told Mary that all blonde-headed people end up with pure white hair, and she never forgot it.

“Let’s get Charlie in his room,” Mary said. She made a move for the door.

“You’re welcome here, Charlie. Our house is yours.”

Charlie set up the guest room the way he liked it—two pillows against the headboard, comforter folded on the floor in one corner of the room, sheets turned down. There wasn’t much to unpack, but Mary hovered over the back of him as he kneeled over and pulled out an empty dresser drawer. She refolded each piece of clothing from his black case—one sweater, a white t-shirt, two pairs of blue jeans—and handed them to him to put away.

His clothes smelled like soil, like the rich black earth an hour or so south where tobacco fields rise into green hills. This soil smelled like cold coffee, good enough to lick right off your finger, and Mary figured she’d done that a few times as a child or else she wouldn’t feel so passionately about the experience.

In the bottom of Charlie’s black case Mary found seed packets, plastic pots, and a lamp with a long, flat bulb.

“You weren’t kidding,” Mary said and Charlie stood up and looked at her. He licked his lips.

“Can I trust you with a secret?” Charlie said.
Mary looked down at her loafers. She’d polished them the night before. Now, she sensed that the woman who polished the loafers the night before was gone, that she had passed quietly in the course of the night and was reborn the moment she saw her child. A secret from her son, her boy. She could hardly contain herself.

“Of course you can,” she said. “You can tell me anything.”

Charlie grinned so small and tight so that the skin of his cheeks rose in little pink mounds. “These seeds are from a parrot flower.” He picked up a packet and held it in the palm of his hand. “They are the rarest seeds on earth.”

“How did you get them, Charlie?”

“The best part of growing plants is that there are no rules.” He sat down on the bed with the seeds in his lap. “If you can get it to grow, it’s yours to keep. I got one parrot flower to take off. One flower, a few seeds, another flower, a few more. Do you see, Mary?”

“And you’ll work on this here, while you’re in our house?”

“If that’s okay with you and Jimmy.”

Mary put up her finger. She went to the kitchen and found a watering can under the sink and came back to Charlie’s bedroom. “You just tell me if you need anything else.”

Charlie opened a folder marked BUSINESS. “This is what I show my customers,” he said. He handed Mary a newspaper clipping announcing the discovery of the parrot flower in Thailand. A scientist wearing thigh-high boots and a mesh hood stood in the jungle next to a tall, wiry bush that reminded Mary of forsythia.
“And this is it?” Mary said. She’d seen a lot of beautiful flowers in her day, even carnations excited her when Jimmy used to bring them home from the grocery store on her birthday, but she couldn’t make heads or tails of the photograph.

Charlie ran a hand back through his hair. “They’re not spectacular in their hibernation period. If you saw one in the jungle you’d probably walk right past it. But then they bloom, and wow, how can I say it? It’s a once-in-a-lifetime experience.”

“You’ve seen this happen?”

“Yes. No matter how much I’ve sworn at the soil—and one time, honest to God, I tossed a plant out the window—I feel the greatest joy when a parrot flower blooms. Tickled. Like I’ve discovered America or something. Holy moly.”

Mary left Charlie to finish unpacking and went down to sit with Jimmy on the stoop.

“Seems like he was raised by good people,” Jimmy said.

“I can’t say I know yet. But he’s wonderful. He’s growing plants.”

Mary slipped her hand in the back of Jimmy’s hair. He closed his eyes.

“Plants? You talking flowers or—”

“God no Jimmy. Not what you’re thinking.”

“Do you feel like he’s a stranger?” he said.

Mary laughed. “Stranger than you?”

“Come on, now,” Jimmy said. “If my own father were to come back, I don’t think I’d remember where we left off. I’m an old man now.”
Mary knew Jimmy was stronger than her, less dreamy, more practical, faster to heal. That scared her. For a long time after Mary and Jimmy gave up the baby, three years, at least, he made bird houses. His eyes were good. The two of them had just been married, Mary and Jimmy, and were renting this house outside of town with a soybean field on the side and a little garage in the back. Whenever Mary brought up the baby Jimmy said, We gotta move on, Mare.

Jimmy made one bird house a week, working in the garage an hour every evening. One bird house after another, all from the same pattern, square walls, peaked roofs. He painted them bright red or orange or green, signed his name on the bottom. Mary had bird houses hanging on the front porch and in the kitchen, sitting on the hearth in the living room. Finally he quit. Out of the blue he was done and they packed away those birds houses or sold them at garage sales.

“You’re happy, Jimmy, aren’t you?” Mary said. “This is what we’ve always wanted.”

“Oh Lord Mary. Yes. Did you even have to ask?”

The evening sky looked not quite real, distorted and wide, as though Mary was very young again and looking through the makeshift telescope of an empty jelly jar.

As soon as he settled in, Jimmy lined six pots on the radiator, filled them with soil, and planted seeds. He fussed and fiddled around, scarcely leaving his room for two days, and then Jimmy took a coughing spell at the breakfast table and got laid up.
Mary sat on the edge of Jimmy’s bed and told him that Charlie had a right to know because he was a part of the family.

Jimmy laughed and rubbed the back of his neck. “We’re all dying, Mary. When you’re as old as I am, it’s not news anymore.”

Mary looked out the door. “Charlie,” she yelled. “Come here for a minute.”

“Not now, Mary, really,” Jimmy said.

Charlie came in and stood in the doorway wearing the white t-shirt. A piece of mud clung to his right eyebrow. “Here I am,” he said.

Mary hadn’t bothered to get dressed. She stood up and sat back down again, smoothing her nightgown down over her behind as she went.

“Jimmy is sick,” Mary said. “Are you a praying man?”

“You have to have faith to grow plants.” Charlie crossed his arms, blinked a few times, fast.

“We’ll just pray that he gets better,” Mary said.

Jimmy put his arms straight up in the air. “It’s all right,” he said. “No big thing. A tickle.” He settled back into bed. “I want to ask you something, Charlie. Did you always know about us?”

“No,” Charlie said. He cleared his throat. “Not until I was fifteen and needed a baby picture for school. My mother didn’t have anything earlier than six months.”

“My God, they kept you waiting six months before they placed you?” Mary said. She always imagined her baby had gone right out in the world to a beautiful couple and a
room with an airplane mobile. The idea of him lying in a crib waiting for a family—she had put that thought out of her head a long time ago.

“I guess,” Charlie said. “I don’t remember any of that and I still turned out all right.”

Jimmy closed his eyes. “We wanted to keep you but we weren’t married.”

Charlie smiled. He moved a piece of fuzz on the rug with his toe. “I know. You don’t have to say another word.”

After Jimmy fell asleep, Mary opened the guest room door and found Charlie spritzing his pots with blue liquid.

He looked up at her. “Hi there, stranger,” he said.

“If you don’t mind me asking, Charlie, what were your parents like?”

Charlie looked surprised. “They were good people. Older by the time they got me, in their fifties. My father wrote for our town’s newspaper and my mother was a homemaker.”

Mary had been thinking a lot about her life, about how it could have been better, fuller, with a child. She’d spent the last forty-nine years an obsessed woman, regretful, convincing herself that her situation wasn’t much different than a logger’s. Her father had been in the business, running the route from Bethesda to Atlanta and back two times a week.

As she saw it, Mary had hauled her own load, sweated and worried over it, dropped it off, turned the empty truck around and headed home lighter and nearly
despondent for her loss. How could a person put in all that work and not feel as though part of them had died in the process of giving away?

“Did you always grow plants?” she said to Charlie. They were starting over, mother and son, opening doors to dark rooms.

“I saw a Venus flytrap on television once when I was very young. I remember thinking, what makes me so different from that thing?”

This made a lot of sense to Mary. She was sixty-six years old and feeling every bit of it. She was Jimmy’s wife and the daughter of a logger and midwife. Her legacy began and ended there. Once, a long time ago, she said to Jimmy, What does anything matter in the end? He got angry. He said, Damn it, I never want to hear that again. She would have never killed herself and, if that’s what Jimmy was thinking, she’d probably never know. But she lived always with an impending sense of doom, a feeling of emptiness that she couldn’t shake. She’d been born and she’d die. She loved Jimmy and lots of people, places, but what for?

Now, she felt an urgency to give her history to Charlie, to say, Here, take a little bit of me and carry it with you.

“Look here, Mary.” Charlie pointed to the pots, the soil inside them wet and black.

“You’ve already got them going. You haven’t wasted any time,” Mary said.

“They’ll be springing up any day now. It doesn’t take anything. A little sun, some food, and they pop right up. Crazy, right?”

“A miracle. I couldn’t have wished you better.”

For a week, Jimmy and Mary woke up at the same time as Charlie, ate eggs over-easy, and talked about the plants. They’d grown a quarter of an inch since the day he’d put the seeds in pots and lined them up on the windowsill.

One morning, Mary ate toast and Jimmy felt his way around a child’s puzzle, twenty-five pieces. Puzzles kept Jimmy’s hands busy. He never talked about not being able to see, but Mary knew she’d go crazy if she was confined to the world inside her head and thought, as far as people go, Jimmy must be infinitely strong and patient.

Charlie reached into his pocket and held his hand open.

“Feel here,” he said to Jimmy and guided his fingers to the tiny round seed in his palm. “This is the thing that makes the world spin.”

Mary smiled and took a drink of coffee. She liked to listen to Charlie, liked the sound of his voice, but she still couldn’t place him as her son, the baby who slept peacefully on her chest when they came to take him away. A long time ago she had convinced herself that he died, that his casket was the empty place inside her belly where he just kept on existing.

“I’ve held a lot of seeds,” Jimmy said. “But you know, I can really feel the difference in this one. It’s so small and heavy.”

“Say you were going to shake my hand. Do it right now,” Charlie said, and put the seed on the table.
Jimmy looked straight ahead, his eyes as sad and murky as green pond water, and extended his hand.

“Don’t move now,” Charlie said. “Turn it palm-side up. Like you’re holding an apple. That’s what a parrot flower is shaped like.”

“Well, all-be-darned,” Jimmy said. “Are my fingers the petals?”

Mary carried her cup to the sink and ran some water.

“Yes,” Charlie said. He looked at his own hand, which also clutched an imaginary apple. “The petals are lilac or purple at the tips, but at the point where they meet, in your palm, they’re blood red,” Charlie said.

“I just can’t believe that,” Jimmy said. “What I wouldn’t do.”

“The seeds cost at least thousand dollars each. And that’s not even the part that’s hard to believe. People spend a good deal of their life savings going through seed after seed, hoping one actually takes off. The trick is the acidity of the soil. Too little, you watch dirt and hope for nothing. Too much, the thing will shoot up faster than a jack rabbit and then die before the first bud. That’s the worst.”

“Why want one at all? Why do people bother?”

“God, Jimmy, I can’t tell you. It’s a real pain at times but I can’t explain the feeling you get when it blooms. It’s magic.”

While Mary washed dishes, Charlie and Jimmy went outside. From the window above the sink, she watched them walk across the street to the flowerbed at the post office. The morning was already hazy and oppressive and Mary had the fan going in the dining room. Jimmy held on to the corner of Charlie’s shirt, not knowing what to do, and
Charlie knelt down next to the long rectangular bed. His hands moved wildly over the flowers as he spoke, over the brilliant purples and pinks and July oranges. Jimmy kneeled down, too, and when he was down on his knees, Charlie took his hand and coaxed it over snapdragons and alyssums. Charlie took his time, holding Jimmy’s hand so sweetly, moving his lips so veraciously.

Finally, Charlie pushed his father’s hand into the soil and they stayed like that for a while, their eyes closed and their heads down. After a few minutes, the two of them came back inside and Charlie went to his room. Mary squeezed dish soap in the palm of Jimmy’s hand.

“I’m buying a parrot flower from Charlie,” he said.

Mary was quiet. Under Jimmy’s fingernails, she saw dirt. “It’s expensive?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter.” Jimmy looked into Mary’s eyes as though he might actually see her.

Truth be told, Mary envied Jimmy’s blindness. Wished sometimes that she might close her eyes and fall into a glorious half-sleep and feel her way along, let her mind make up what her eyes lacked.

Once, he told her that every sensation on his fingertips triggers a specific reaction in his body, a tingle here, a feeling of warmth there. He liked to touch earlobes, hair, suede, and glass, and he lingered a long time on just about everything else, the braided trim on a pillow, the seam on his slacks, his fingertips so sensitive and receptive, graceful in their cognition.
With a brush, Mary scrubbed Jimmy’s nails clean in quick, efficient motions. The water was brown as it trickled down the drain.

Mary did something she hadn’t done in a while. She pulled three tens from the moneybox on the top shelf of the closet, knocked on Charlie’s door, and told him she’d like to treat him to lunch. She brought her good pocketbook, reserved for weddings and funerals, and wore the silver rope necklace Jimmy had bought her for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. The only place she remembered having good food in town was Rosie’s, a diner on the corner of Main and Chestnut where she and Jimmy ate every Friday night when he was well.

Charlie sat across from Mary at a table next to the window. If she would have thought about it, she might have asked the waitress to pull down the shades because the afternoon sun was blinding, making Charlie glow in his chair. In the light, she saw the thin, veiny skin under his eyes, the fine hairs in his nose, the inflamed follicles from this morning’s shave. His lips were dry, white in the corners, and he licked them nervously, flicked the tip of his tongue out like a snake. Under the table, she felt along her forefinger, the familiar slack of her skin, a scab on her knuckle, and she knew. Whatever she had hoped for had gone away, sunk into the past.

This man was no more similar to her than a dandelion to a lily.

“Charlie, you can’t stay with us anymore,” she said.
He cupped both hands around his water glass. The waitress still hadn’t brought their food. “Does this have something to do with the plants?” he said. “I didn’t ask Jimmy to buy one, if that’s what you think.”

“Jimmy’s sick,” she said. “He’s an old man now.”

Thinking about Jimmy nearly brought tears to Mary’s eyes. He was her husband and she’d do anything to protect him, lay her own life down just like a mother to keep the sadness of the world from touching him.

A mother—she didn’t know anything about being one. She knew that when she felt her baby kick, she loved him, and that never stopped, even now. She knew that her body had built him and kept him and she had sent him out in the world for others to build and keep. Now, she had to accept that he didn’t come back to her the same as he left.

“I’m taking off to Santa Rosa,” Charlie said that evening in the kitchen.

Mary barely had the hamburgers fried and he told her that he was catching a ride with a friend and that he’d be back someday. For a few moments, they all stood around the kitchen with their eyes on the ground and Mary didn’t know what to say. Jimmy looked like he could cry. The two of them waited at the kitchen table while Charlie packed and when he was ready Mary kissed him on the forehead. Jimmy shook Charlie’s hand.

Charlie carried his plants in a plastic tray with round holes cut in the bottom. The black case was slung over his shoulder. Jimmy’s plant sat on the windowsill in the horizontal light of evening.
“Call us,” Jimmy said. “You’ve got to be the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“You always have a room here,” Mary said, although she knew she’d never see him again. She watched Jimmy’s mouth tighten and relax. She felt lighter, as if she’d just carried grocery bags all the way home and sat them on the kitchen table.

After Charlie left, Jimmy watered his plant twice, sprinkled powdered fertilizer on the soil, and sat next to the window with the sun in his face. He coughed every little bit but mostly the house was quiet.

In a few days, the little bean pod sprouted off and Mary thought about telling Jimmy that they’d been duped.

She stood behind him with her hands in his hair, feeling her way along his scalp, knowing that there was no going back, that the only way left now was forward.

“It’s already redder than the asphalt in July,” she said and he leaned into her hands. “Oh my lands, if you could only see the little flower that’s forming.”
BOBCAT

It had been raining all afternoon in the Yellow Valley, a steady sideways rain that fell hard and cold against Ralph’s face. If he could have started the day all over again, he might have sat down in his chair in front of the fire with Basil and listened to a radio program or read from a book he’d been meaning to start about boiling plants into medicines—mountain laurel, foxglove, poke.

If Frank wanted a free book in the Yellow Valley, he had to wait until the library van pulled up in front of Raymond’s Everything Store the third Tuesday of each month and look through a couple shelves of dog-eared paperbacks that women read to get hot. He liked Louis L’Amour but only lucked out once or twice a year to find one he hadn’t read. That morning, he’d woken up feeling the itch in his legs to get out and move, to cover ground and make something of the day.

He came into the cabin with the gun slung over his shoulder and the bobcat kitten tucked in his shirt. From the other side of the room, Basil stirred up the embers in the woodstove and wiped soot off his cheek. The kitten meowed softly.

“Whatever it is, no,” Basil said and cleared his throat.

Ralph hung his gun across two hooks near the door. He pulled the kitten out of his shirt, held it in the crook of his arm, and went to the kitchen sink.

“Her mama was squashed on the side of the road.

65
Basil stood up from his haunches and closed the door of the woodstove with his boot. Basil always wore boots, even in the house, which their mother would have had a fit about.

Ralph turned on the spigot and, holding the kitten by the scruff of her neck, plunged her under the stream of water, working her fur with his fingers. The kitten hung limp, arms and legs outstretched in resignation, looking every bit the helpless stray that always managed to find its way down the hill from Jay Mollohan’s where housecats had been shacking up ever since the old man died. But this kitten felt different in Ralph’s hands, sturdy, built for the kill, with wide coon paws and yellow eyes outlined in pure white, as if someone had taken a fine artist’s brush and painted them on. The water that trickled off the kitten’s fur was pink.

“Is it hurt?” Basil said.

“Not that I know of. Probably came back to sniff and got dirty.”

Ralph pulled off his shirt and wrapped it around the little wet creature, working his fingers down her body, his hands as patient and skilled as his mother’s when she massaged damp black soil around a tulip bulb or a shoot of forsythia.

Basil leaned against the counter, pulled a butterscotch candy out of his back pocket and put it in his mouth. Ralph opened the refrigerator and pulled out a quart of milk. He poured half in the saucepan and put it on the stove.
“Do you have a light?” Ralph asked, even though he knew his brother carried around matches as sure as a person might carry a few dollars or a comb. He also kept a little vial full of Vaseline for his hands.

From his breast pocket, Basil pulled out a cigarette, rolled last night on the cover of one of Ralph’s library books, lit it, and ignited the burner before the flame went out on the match. Basil smoked and watched Ralph stir for a few minutes and dragged a chair over with his leg, rested one foot on the seat, and pulled off his boot. He did the same with the other foot, took another drag from the cigarette, and expelled two long grey trails of smoke from his nostrils.

“We don’t have anything to feed it,” Basil said. “Unless you want to quit eating for a few days.”

“Got deer cutlets in the freezer. You know we’ll never touch them.”

The kitten made a noise that sounded like air being squeezed out of a balloon. It began to shiver.

“No,” Basil said. His hair was dark on top and white around the temples. The sun had made map of his face and he looked older than thirty-five, pulled through the wringer by fifteen years of farming and ten years of dragging coal from the mines. He didn’t look anything like Ralph, who took mostly after their mother’s side with his strong back and plain drooping face. Basil was lanky and stoop-shouldered, and people always assumed that he was either sick or too poor to eat. “Last time I checked,” he said “we didn’t have a pot to piss in.”
“Noah gave the animals a boat,” Ralph said. He took the saucepan off the stove and dipped a spoon in the milky water. He blew on the liquid and then put it near the kitten’s face. The kitten opened its eyes and sniffed and kneaded the counter with one paw.

“If Noah would’ve been starving, he wouldn’t have given a those sons of bitches his last deer cutlets, believe you me,” Basil said, every bit his father’s son, hard, unforgiving.

When they were kids, Ralph had taken a beating for Basil. A chicken got loose from the neighbor’s place and ran big circles around the yard. It made so much racket that no one really knew what to do with it. Basil was twelve and Ralph was eleven, and they’d been hanging upside down in a tree, counting ants on the bark, when Basil’s face got red and he said, “I just can’t take it anymore.” He jumped down from the tree and clobbered the chicken with a bat.

“Pluck it,” he said to Ralph and went inside to cry.

Ralph sat near the edge of the road pulling feathers from the chicken, and the neighbor’s wife came out and yanked him up by the nape of his neck and blistered his backside with a spatula. That’s the way it was in those days. People put kids in their places and no one blinked an eye.

For years, Basil never mentioned the chicken and neither did Ralph. Then one day in the back room of a clinic in Flattsplain, the two of them stood next to the baby’s body, fifteen minutes out of the girl Basil would never marry, and the midwife mouthed, “I’ll give you a minute,” and closed the heavy white door behind her.
“I’m sure am sorry,” Ralph said. “Best I can explain it is that some creatures have to be put out of the misery of this world before it even starts.”

“This isn’t like the chicken,” Basil said, and looked at Ralph in such an odd way that Ralph got the feeling he wasn’t even looking at him at all. Basil touched the baby’s head with two fingers and sat down on the floor with his knees tucked up to his chin.

For three weeks the bobcat kitten slept in a refrigerator box on the porch of the cabin. When it got hungry it scratched at the door, and Ralph gave it whatever scrap of food they had.

“Wild things stay where the food is,” Basil said to Ralph. He lay on the couch with his hat over his face. The kitten sniffed a pill bug on the floor. “And fools like you think it has something to do with love.”

Basil lost his job after a collapse in the mine shut it down. Four men were crushed while he was on the surface pouring coffee out of his thermos and waiting for the next cart to come. He considered himself one lucky son of a bitch. Ralph delivered papers for fifty dollars a week which wasn’t a whole lot, considering the route was fifteen miles long and mostly dirt road. Sometimes hunters brought their ten-pointers or mallards to the house and he mounted them for a couple hundred dollars a pop, ordered foam molds shaped like animals from a supplier in Tennessee and worked out in the barn at all hours of the night draping skin and feathers and painting eyeballs. It wasn’t pretty work, but if it was a good month for business, the bills got paid.
“He doesn’t have to stay here,” Ralph said. “He knows me by now, knows that I’m not somebody who’s going to drag him under the fence. He’s good for something. Smart as smart can be.” Ralph went to the burn pile and took out a newspaper. He crumpled it into a ball.

Basil got up and coughed and took some snuff out of his back pocket. He stuffed it in his lip. Ralph threw the wad of newspaper in the air and the kitten jumped and hit it with its nose. Basil threw his head back and laughed. The kitten brought the paper back to Ralph.

“I see that,” Basil said.

“If you only knew,” Ralph said. He held the newspaper in on hand and the kitten watched it, ready to pounce. “It takes months to teach a dog to squat in the grass, let alone fetch a ball. This is a wild animal and he’s already bringing things back to me.”

Basil used to take a woman from the farm store out. She had bleached hair and dark roots growing in, and when they’d come back to the house, her arms would be wrapped around him. They’d sit on the couch and watch Johnny Carson and he’d start to dose off, wake up for a minute to take off his boots and put his feet on her lap. One night Ralph came from bed to get a slice of bread and Burt Reynolds was on the television.

“Dios mio,” the woman said to Ralph. Her hair was in her face. Basil was snoring.

“What?” Ralph said, and crossed his arms over his chest.

“It means ‘my God’ in Spanish.” She got up off the couch, moved Basil’s legs to the cushion and covered him up with a blanket. “Dios mio.”
Then, the thing just happened—they were both hungry for it, the woman more than Ralph, and the night was a strange refuge for them all, the two who just stumbled upon each other, and Basil sleeping peacefully on the couch. When Basil woke up and found them together he smiled and walked to the sink to wash his face.

“Better you than me,” he said to Ralph after the woman left, and that was that.

The woman never came around again.

Ralph took the bobcat to the sportsman show in Flattsplain. He registered a few weeks before at city hall as a performer, bought a leather fringe vest at a thrift store with money he’d been saving for a Polaroid camera. The cat was almost sixty pounds, hardly a kitten anymore, and had seen the most growth between its second and third month at the cabin. The show was in the high school gymnasium and Basil took a seat on the top of the bleachers, watched an old man with long gray hair throw tomahawks at playing cards.

Basil’s hand was bandaged. A couple days before, Ralph had come home from his paper route to find Basil sitting on the porch railing dangling a piece of raw tenderloin in front of the cat’s face. His hand was bleeding and the cat was growling.

“What the hell?” Ralph said, and dropped his stack of papers on the ground. He ran to porch and grabbed his brother’s shoulders. Basil pulled away. He laughed.

“You’re bleeding,” Ralph said.

“Fucker bit me,” Basil said. He dropped the meat on the ground and the cat ate.

“It doesn’t even hurt.”
“You’d gnaw a man’s arm off if you were hungry enough,” Ralph said. “And if you tell me otherwise, you’d be lying.”

At the show, Ralph came out in the leather vest and the bobcat was trailing behind him. Basil coughed and spit a wad of chew in an empty Coke bottle. The cat had grown into an agile creature, with the hardy body of a dog and a short, bristly tail that curled up at the end. Some men in front of Basil put their fingers in their mouths and whistled. Ralph bent down to pet the cat and it gnawed at his hand.

“This here’s a wild animal,” the announcer said. He was wearing a raccoon skin hat and camouflage pants. Ralph stood next to the man and folded his hands in front of his stomach. The cat sat down next to his leg. “And Mr. Ralph Boggs is going to show us how he managed to tame the beast.”

The crowd clapped. A woman in Carhartt coveralls rang a cowbell over her head. The cat put its ears back, began to pace circles around Ralph with its head hung low. Ralph got down on his knees and put his hand out. The cat hissed.

“He’s an idiot,” Basil said to the hunters in front of him. There was tobacco juice on his lip and he wiped it away with his sleeve. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was retarded.”

One of the men turned around. “I’d like to pop that cat between its eyes,” he said. “It’d look better on my wall than out here catching Frisbees.”

The man was wearing a tight orange cap and a duck call around his neck. The other men laughed.
Ralph threw a tennis ball across the gymnasium and the cat chased it, pounced, and brought it back to Ralph in its mouth. People clapped. The man in the orange cap put the duck call to his mouth and blew a long note, and then lots of quick, urgent ones. The cat dropped down on all fours and crawled toward the bleachers. Ralph motioned for silence.

The hunters laughed and one of them turned around to offer Basil a pinch of Redman.

Basil laughed. “Oh shit,” he said.

“You know,” the hunter in the orange cap said, “I once knew a man to keep a deer for a pet.”

The cat prowled along the bleachers, agitated, and Ralph trailed behind, his face peaked. A woman in the first row pulled a little boy into her lap and the cat stopped to look at the two of them through small, black eyes. Its fur rippled and it stood still, ears stiff, gaze fixed, looking like a common tabby stalking a robin. The boy closed his eyes and the woman pulled her legs off the floor, tucked them up to her chest and he was engulfed by her body. The cat growled like an exhaust pipe backfiring, pulled its ears back and showed its teeth. Ralph jumped on its back, put his arms around its neck and tackled it the floor. The two of them fought for a few minutes, rolled around like dogs fighting and the dirt, and then they lay there for a while, defeated. Ralph got up and pulled the beast out of the gymnasium by its collar. He was bleeding.

“Oh shit,” Basil said again.
“Two years,” the hunter in the orange cap said, “that doe hung around like an old friend, and then one day her leg was on the man’s porch and her head wasn’t too far away. Something had itself a good meal.”

The hunters laughed. The man with the tomahawk came out for another performance, pulled his vest on and looked at the crowd, speechless.

“And now, a truly amazing act of agility,” the announcer said, and the crowd clapped.

Basil leaned back against the bleachers, rolled up his sleeves.

“When does the show start?” he said to no one in particular because he got the feeling no one was listening. He thought about blood, about the subtle odor of wounds, raw and wet and musky like soil.

“Hell,” he said, and licked his lips. “I came to see a show.”
OF DESPERATION AND CARS

Susan’s Oldsmobile Omega sputtered for three-quarters of a mile down State Route 57 before she pulled over at Moe’s Grocery to use her cell phone. What more? she thought as she dialed home, hoping to reach her husband, Harry.

On the toilet that morning, she’d discovered that she bled during the night. Eight days had passed and she’d just started to feel hopeful, ready to take another test. She washed and dressed and woke Harry, who looked like the perfect image of bliss in morning’s half sleep. At the sound of Susan’s news, he wriggled up against the pillow and kneaded his eyes.

“Maybe it’s not meant to happen now,” he said, yawning. “It’s nobody’s fault.”

Harry put his head back down on the pillow and closed his eyes, exhausted. He worked long hours putting up drywall and always came home looking like hell. Upon seeing Harry close his eyes, Susan did something she couldn’t explain. She left him sleeping in bed and put a note on the table that said she was going to see her mother. She took off in the blue light of dawn, driving aimlessly until the sun was high in the sky and after a while, ended up miles out in the country where the fields where flat and so glaringly white with snow that she had trouble seeing. Feeling foolish, she turned around for home.

In the parking lot at Moe’s, the line rang five or so times and Susan hung up and dialed again. He should be home, she thought, and looked at her watch. One o’clock on
the dot. On Saturdays, Harry bowled with Bill Schlenker until twelve-thirty and then came home to make a sandwich.

   She heard a click on the line and Harry said “Hello.”

   “Harry, I’m pulled over at Moe’s. I’ve been telling you this car’s shot.”

   “Where have you been all morning?” he asked.

   “Didn’t you read my note? Can you just come pick me up?”

   “Sure thing,” Harry said. “We’ll have to tow the car. Do you need me to get you a number?”

   She heard a clunk and pictured Harry standing over the sink, banging a butter knife against the lid of the jelly jar.

   “Honestly, Harry. The phonebook’s in the drawer next to the stove. Can’t you just call for me and then head over here?”

   “Yeah,” he said, his voice gone soft. “Of course I will. Do you want me to make you a sandwich?” The sound of running water hit Susan’s ear like static.

   “No,” she said, and rolled down the window to feel the wind hit her face. “I’ll just see you when you get here.”

   Susan hung and turned off the ignition. A van pulled up in the spot next to her with an eagle airbrushed on the passenger door. The door opened and a boy of about eight or nine jumped down and stuck his tongue out at Susan. She pulled her collar up around her ears and leaned back against the seat, waiting for Harry to save her.
By the time Harry and Susan pulled in the driveway of their white Cape Cod, the day was already dimming. The tow truck had hauled the Omega to the mechanic and all was not well. Bad rotor, failing transmission, and Susan was beat. While Harry showered, Susan sat down at the kitchen table with a mug of coffee and put her feet up on a kitchen chair. Everything that has a place in the world has a purpose, she thought, and poured half and half in her mug. They’d start over fresh after this cycle ran its course, just as they had so many times before.

She remembered three years ago, her mother standing at the sink just after her father died, pouring the contents of the refrigerator down the disposal, jars full of applesauce and mayonnaise and the Tupperware container filled with pot roast from three nights before, which he’d not been able to eat. Susan cried right along with her mother as the lot of it gurgled down through the bowels of the sink.

She’d learned the hardest part of life was letting go of hope and then setting out to find it all over again.

Suddenly, the kitchen door flung open and in rushed Susan’s sister Fran, neck speckled red. Fran always rushed, more excited about life’s next great offering than its current.

Not tonight, Susan thought, not now.

Fran had been seeing a psychic who advised her to pursue a job in singing. Susan wasn’t one to discourage a dream. Fran was twenty and pretty when straightened her long blonde hair and put on lipstick, penciled in her brows. She was pale with fair eyelashes and a thin upper lip. She looked sick without makeup and always went out
with a full face. Susan always thought it better to have good, solid features that didn’t need tinkering than a face that’s extraordinarily attractive with makeup. She felt satisfied with her full cheeks and big almond eyes. She’d inherited her father’s dark hair and, as a result, had to have her thick brows waxed into arches every few weeks. People always told her she was pretty but when she went out with Fran, with her makeup and hoop earrings and short dresses, she didn’t stand a chance.

Fran always brought her daughter, Lucy, over to stay at Harry and Susan’s on Saturday evenings while she sang karaoke at Bub’s. Usually Susan didn’t mind watching Lucy because she loved the child like her own but tonight she felt spent. Lucy, dressed in a red T-shirt and jean overalls, trailed a few steps behind Fran, sucking her bottom lip. Susan figured the only way Lucy recognized her mother was by her backside.

And as for Lucy’s father—who was Lucy’s father? Last time Susan heard, Fran had been looking for an old boyfriend, a busboy in Buckhannon, and planned on asking him for a paternity test. Fran worked as a waitress at the Italian restaurant attached to the gas station down the road. She lived in a garage apartment with Lucy. Truth be told, she couldn’t make it much longer without child support.

“I packed pajamas and one bottle. She’ll cry for more milk, but absolutely no more after it’s gone,” Fran said and looked back at Lucy, who plopped down on her butt in front of Susan’s chair. “Right Lucy Goose?”

Susan wrapped her hands around the mug and sank down in her chair. “I wish you would have called. It’s been a long day.”

Susan had never told Fran about trying for a baby.
“Oh come on,” Fran said. She stood with one hand on the white Formica countertop and one on her hip. “Where’s Harry? I just need someone to feed her and put her to bed. There’s not much to watching a sleeping kid.”

“He’s upstairs in the shower. My car broke down, he had to come get me—it’s fine, Frannie. Just please don’t be late. Please?” Susan heard the shower turn off upstairs. She thought about Harry, wet and oblivious.

Fran hugged Susan. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” She bent over, holding her dress down at the back, and kissed Lucy on the top of her head. “Be a good girl.”

Susan scooped Lucy up from the floor and rested her chin on the child’s head, smelling Fran’s verbena and baby powder. She watched Fran teeter out the door in her heels.

“Well, it’s just you and me and Uncle Harry, baby girl,” Susan said. Lucy looked up at her with big brown eyes and Susan immediately felt bad about not wanting her.

“You’re a good girl, Lucy, and I love you,” she said.

Harry came downstairs wearing a robe, a towel draped over his head. He walked straight to the fridge door and stared numbly inside. “We got lucky, tonight, right? Not a peep from Fran.”

“Uncle Harry didn’t even see you sitting on my lap,” Susan said to Lucy. The child sank heavy and limp in her arms. “What’s he going to do if he ever gets one of his own?” she said.
Harry turned around and looked at her. “Oh God. Fran’s out again?” he said and threw his towel over the back of a chair. “I don’t mind having you, Lucy, but I don’t know about your mother.”

Thin and tan, hair wild and curly, Harry was good-looking in the same easy way her father had been, sturdy, sure in his movements, with big handsome hands and fingernails perpetually stained with grease. He could fix anything. Susan had never wanted to marry a sissy. Harry worked fifty hours a week, mowed the lawn, paid the rent on time, and put food on the table. Susan stayed home because that had always been the plan.

“Ask Uncle Harry nice and I bet he’ll heat up your bottle,” Susan said to Lucy.

“Come on,” Harry said, “I don’t know how to do that.”

“I’m just so tired,” Susan said. She scratched the small pink mole on her cheek and looked out the kitchen window at icicles forming on the gutters. Lucy whimpered and Susan swiped a few blonde hairs off the child’s forehead and kissed her again. “I love you, Lucy.”

Harry found a beer in the refrigerator and closed the door with his foot. He went into the living room and Susan heard the television turn on.

“Sue,” Harry shouted from the living room, “we’ve got to find you something to drive.”

Susan stood up with Lucy on her hip. “It’s been a day, Harry.” She rifled through Fran’s diaper bag, pulled out the bottle, and gave it shake. She put it in the microwave and set the timer for sixty seconds.
“I don’t have eight hundred dollars to fix that car now or another eight hundred to fix it in two months when it does this again,” he said.

Susan stood in the doorway between the kitchen and living room and looked at Harry, hunched over on the couch. He was reliable and good but at this moment repulsed her. She couldn’t care less about the car.

The microwave dinged and Susan retrieved the bottle and put it on the table to cool. She changed Lucy into white one-piece pajamas, carried her into the living room, and sat down on the couch next to Harry, cradling the child like a baby. Harry watched the news, a bottle of Coors sitting between his feet on the rug.

“Did you hear what I said this morning, Harry?” she asked, and he looked at her with pursed his lips, thinking.

“I wasn’t sleeping,” he said. “God, what do I say about something so hard?” He thought for a moment and looked down at his lap, his head bent so far forward that the skin under his chin fell into two neat folds. “To be truthful with you Sue, I never got my hopes up. You can’t get hurt if you don’t get your hopes up.”

Harry and Susan had tried for two years to get pregnant. Every morning, she recorded her temperature on a chart drawn on notebook paper and choked down vitamins: selenium, folic acid, and Siberian ginseng that she ordered special from a natural foods store in Kentucky. She had Harry put a fresh coat of yellow paint on the walls of the extra bedroom, just in case, and hung white lace curtains on the windows.

“I just don’t know what else there is to do,” Susan said. On her lap, Lucy ate, her lashes fluttering, and Harry picked up his bottle and took a drink. Susan closed her eyes
and imagined that Lucy was hers, that she’d the girl her up to bed in the yellow room just as soon as she fell asleep. She tried to envision another face on the child but couldn’t. All she could see was Lucy, her blonde-white curls, the space between her front teeth, her little turned-up baby nose. Susan opened her eyes and Lucy inexplicably opened her sleepy eyes as well and the two of them stared at each other for quite a while, content in the moment, both seeming to know what the other thought.

Harry coughed. He cleared his throat and tapped on the neck of his bottle with his fingernail. “Maybe we ought to back off, give it a break. I always say that when something’s meant to be, it will be.”

“I don’t care,” Susan said. “What difference does it make?”

Susan decided she just wouldn’t think about it anymore. Was it even possible? Fran hadn’t thought about having Lucy when she went out dancing (living, she called it) every weekend after their father died. And poof! There was Lucy, the sweetest baby on earth, born to Fran, who had never worked a minute of her life at the heartbreaking task of willing a child into the world.

Susan nodded off with Lucy in her arms, the sound of a female newscaster’s voice keeping her barely conscious. Suddenly, Susan was struck on the knee and she jumped awake, ready to clobber someone. She saw Harry’s face, white with terror, close to her own. From far away, she heard a scream as steady and high as a kettle whistling, a sound so unwavering that for a second, Susan wondered if it might be coming from a car outside on the road. She looked down at her lap for Lucy but the child wasn’t there. Certain about where she’d gone, Susan jumped up and looked into the kitchen. Sure
enough, Lucy stood next to drawer where Susan kept her kitchen knives, sobbing spastically, arms outstretched. She wailed, “Mamamamama.”

“She’s bleeding. Jesus,” Harry shouted. He backed away from the couch.

Susan sprung to her feet, still dizzy from sleep, and rushed to Lucy. Right there on the linoleum floor was the finger, as settled as an olive shell in the sand, the most pure thing Susan had ever seen. Next to it was Susan’s favorite paring knife, bought from a vendor at the county fair who sawed through a lead pipe and then peeled a tomato to prove the blade would never go dull.

Susan looked down at Lucy, at the single strand of spittle dangling precariously from the dimple on her chin, and then at the stump of her right pinky, oozing purple blood. Susan grabbed the finger off the floor and held it in her hand, the skin still warm against her own, and thought maybe she could feel it throbbing.

“Oh my God,” she said, seeing and doubting all at once. She felt as though her stomach was burrowing up through her esophagus. “For God’s sake, Harry, call the squad!”

She remembered her mother’s bingo blotter and how if she squeezed it just right, the ink formed a perfect blue bubble like water filled a millimeter over the top of a glass. On the television, a dog barked incessantly and the noise made Susan’s ears ring. Instinctively, she as if it were a roll leftover from dinner and set it all on a box of peas in the freezer.

Harry rushed into the kitchen. He held his palm against his forehead as though he’d been hit and dragged it down the side of his face, pulling one side of his mouth
down in a half-scowl. Susan grabbed the dishtowel off the oven’s handle and squeezed Lucy’s stump in her hand. Upon seeing the bloody towel, one of Susan’s Halloween directions with a grinning jack-o-lantern printed on the front, Harry went over to the phone. “Get her coat on,” he said as he dialed.

Susan started to cry. “I don’t know what to do,” she said, feeling trapped in the bright white light from the open refrigerator just as she had the month before at the doctor’s, exposed under the sterile metal lamp with her legs in stirrups, listening to him tell her that there was not a thing wrong, that sometimes the best medicine is not to think, to let the fixing come about all on its own.

Now, she held the screaming Lucy in the fetal position against her abdomen and felt the child’s cries move through her body just as sure as a swarm of insects buzzing around inside there, trying to break free.

“I got them on the phone, Sue,” Harry said. “Tell me what happened. They need to know what happened.”

“I don’t know,” she sobbed. “Tell them her finger’s gone and I can feel bone in my hand.”

“Jesus Christ,” he said to Susan. He looked at the receiver intently as if it might speak to him. “My wife says the finger’s off. Yes, cut off. She says she can feel bone.”

“I’ve got the finger in the freezer,” she said.

“Put pressure on the wound, Sue. The lady says to put pressure on the wound and keep her awake. They got someone on the way.” Harry said “Please hurry,” and hung up
the phone. He went to door and moved the curtain over the window, desperate, and looked out to an empty driveway.

“Lucy, honey,” Susan said. “Look at you.” She touched Lucy’s head with the back of her free hand.

Helplessly, Lucy parted her pink lips and vomited and the white liquid dripped down the front of her pajamas and onto Susan’s jeans.

Harry touched Lucy on the top of Lucy’s head with his index finger. “Kid,” he said. He ran both hands back through his hair, not knowing what to do. “We’ve got to call Fran.”

“Not now,” Susan said. She sat cross-legged on the floor covered in vomit, holding Lucy’s hand in the towel. “We’re taking care of this.”

Before Susan could protest further, Harry picked up the phone and dialed. After a few seconds he said, “Where the hell are you Fran? Lucy’s hurt and I called the squad.” He hung up and slammed the phone on the table. “Damn it. Tell me, why doesn’t Fran ever answer her fucking phone?”

He pulled the phone book out of the drawer and dialed Bub’s number. He held the book down by his hip, waiting.

“Yeah, Sam,” Harry said when the man answered. “I’m looking for Fran DePandy. Do you have a Fran DePandy there? It’s an emergency.” He waited while Sam put him on hold, pacing across the floor. “What do you mean, occupied?” Harry said when Sam got back on the line. “What the hell could she be doing? You tell her she’s got a very sick kid. This is urgent. Have her call Sue.”
“Just hang up, Harry,” Susan said, and he did.

Fran was probably standing up on the little platform at Bub’s singing. Or maybe she’d lied to Susan and hadn’t planned on singing at all. Who knew with Fran?

The ambulance came and put Lucy on a stretcher and the child laid back, calm, resigned to the panic. As if passing off something sacred, something she’d never get back, Susan gave the paramedics the finger and they packed it in a cooler on ice. Susan rode in the back of the ambulance with Lucy, holding the child’s hand and looking out the back window at the familiar glow of the headlights on Harry’s work truck, lights as bright and true as beams beckoning a ship to harbor.

There had been times in life when she wondered if she’d ever learn to be strong, if the fear would leave her and she’d be made new, a woman who could carry pain as nonchalantly as a dog carries a tick.

She looked Lucy on the stretcher, a paramedic holding her sweet little hand, and in a rush she remembered her brother, five or six years old, falling off his bicycle and landing square on his head, the family kitten losing her eyeball in a fight, the tumor that grew through her father’s lung and burst through the skin on the back of his shoulder. And, with all this, she remembered her mother, faithfully unfazed, moving steadfastly forward to the medicine cabinet, gathering gauze and iodine and Band-Aids and smelling salts and doling out medicine from amber bottles and boiling water on the stove—all this she remembered at once, and she felt awful, because even as Lucy lay sick in front of her, she couldn’t shake this overwhelming feeling of discontent.
At the hospital, doctors took Lucy back into surgery while Harry and Susan sat on a hard bench in the waiting room, silent, Susan unwilling to speak.

“It’s nobody’s fault,” Harry said, and pulled her head down to his chest.

After an hour, a doctor came out through the heavy swinging doors, drying his hands on the front of his blue paper apron.

“Mr. and Mrs. Depandy?” he said when he saw them and Susan looked a Harry. He shrugged.

The two of them stood and met the doctor in the middle of the room.

The doctor smiled. “Everything went brilliantly. The cut was clean and that made reattachment easy. Blood flow’s good, the skin’s pink and healthy again.” He put his pinky finger up in the air and bent it. “This is what we’re going to have to work on. Bending the finger at the joint. The tendon was sliced clean through and only time will tell how much function she’ll regain. We’ll just wait and see, but I’m pretty optimistic. She’s in recovery so give us just a few minutes and somebody will come out to get you.” He started to walk away and then turned around and pointed at them. “Oh, I wanted to ask, who thought about putting that finger in the freezer?”

“That was Sue,” Harry said cheerfully. He turned to his wife. “I never would have thought of that, Sue.”

Susan didn’t remember what she’d been thinking when she bundled the finger and put it in the freezer, except that it had to stay cold. Where had she learned that?

“Good going, Mom,” the doctor said. “Quick thinking.”
When the doctor left, Harry turned to Susan. “Haven’t we learned something tonight? Fran’s a deadbeat. She’s selfish and she’s a slut. Sue, maybe this is the reason for all our trouble. We’ve got to be here for that little girl.”

Susan looked at him as he waited for an answer, confirmation, his eyes so wide and sincere that she felt genuinely sorry for him. He tried so hard. He was a good husband, reliable, kind, and genuinely oblivious. He had no idea.

Just as they sat back down on the bench to wait, Fran came in with her purse slung over her shoulder, frantic, makeup thick around her eyes.

“Is my baby okay?” she said. She grabbed Susan’s arms and shook her. “My God, what’s wrong with my baby?” Fran said.

For a moment, Susan hated her sister more anyone else in the world. She looked in her face and saw the haze that lingered from Bub’s, her eyes manic, pupils engorged and black, her false lashes unglued and peeling. But then, as Fran held tight to Susan’s biceps, Susan experienced desperation she hadn’t know in all her years, desperation that emerged from the fear of not knowing and it traveled through both of them in waves, each of them needing exactly what the other possessed. Whatever Susan despised in her sister a minute ago disappeared, dissolved in the air as the two of them held onto each other and passed along great burdens, Susan feeling for the first time a love so powerful that she could have fallen down and sobbed both for the incredible beauty of the experience and the dark possibility that she may never feel it again.
Fran began to heave, suddenly aware of everything she’d done, the mistakes she’d made, and Susan cried, too, needing more than anything to tell Fran about her problem, about Harry.

“I’m so sorry,” Susan said, sobbing, suddenly losing all the resolve she’d gathered when she held the bleeding child on the floor in her kitchen. “It’s all my fault. I tried so hard to be strong.”

The car dealership sat nearly empty and grey in January, an old IGA parking lot with streamers strung between light posts. Susan watched an enormous American flag flutter in the breeze above the lot. That flag had to be as big as a football field, probably bigger. If a strong enough wind came along and took the pole down, all the cars in the dealership and maybe half the town would be covered in stars and stripes.

“I’m going to get you something good, Sue,” he said as they walked across the lot to the office. “You’re a good woman and you deserve a good car.”

A salesman greeted the two of them at the double doors. Hair wet with gel, he shook Harry’s hand. “A man who knows exactly what he wants,” the salesman said and slapped Harry on the back. He squinted at Susan. “And a lady who’s not so sure.” He laughed and motioned them outside, walking briskly with his hands in his pockets against the wind, as if he already had the perfect car in mind.

“Here we are,” the salesman said. He ran his hand over the chrome bumper of a black minivan, paint just a smooth and gleaming as onyx. “A 2009 Chrysler, fully-
loaded V-8, air conditioning, leather, power everything. She’s lived happily in Florida all her twenty five thousand miles, not a spot of rust underneath her.”

Harry pulled his snow cap down over his ears. “What do you think, Sue?” he said.

Susan thought the car looked expensive, but it was beautiful and she liked it. “It’s nice, Harry,” she said. “It could fit the two of us and groceries and whatever else might come along.”

The salesman took a key out of his pockets and fumbled to open the door. “Look at all the room,” he said. “The seats fold down in the back. You could fit a bicycle. This is the perfect car for a young married couple like yourselves.”

Harry expelled two long trails of fog through his nostrils. “I don’t know, bud. It is a beautiful car,” he said. “But I don’t think it’s what we’re looking for. You don’t like it that much, right Sue?”

Susan shrugged and pulled the collar of her coat up to her chin.

“Well,” the salesman said, “let me show you the second thing I had in mind for you. See, couples like you swing a couple of ways when you’re buying an automobile. I always start with this car because it’s obvious. Some people don’t really know what they’re looking for, even when they think they do, so I never ask. Come here, I got something for you.”

The salesman led them to a red Mustang convertible, the prettiest, flashiest car on the lot. He opened the door and Harry sat in the driver’s seat.
“Oh Susan, honey,” Harry said and put both hands on the steering wheel. “The leather is so soft. Come on the other side, Sue, and sit in your seat.”

Susan walked around to the passenger side and Harry unlocked the door. She sank down in the bucket seat, feeling the cold leather against the back of her blue jeans. From the rearview mirror, she watched the salesman lean against the bumper and pick a tooth with his pinky nail. The man studied the ground intently, and Susan knew he was giving the thrill just enough time to set in and take hold, as if he’d seen the two of them a thousand times before and knew exactly what might happen.

“We’d drive all over the place in this thing,” Harry said. He touched Susan’s face with his hand and it felt cold on her cheek. “We’d go to Indiana to see your grandparents. And next summer we’d go to Gettysburg and stay at a bed and breakfast. Just me and you, Sue. You and me.”

Susan knew the decision was made. They’d drive the Mustang off the lot, the two of them in the front seat and the road behind them as empty and wide as the vacant space inside her.
THE HEN

The man came on a Sunday, dressed in a black suit and shiny shoes with square toes. Janet watched from the window as he walked up the stoop, loosened his collar, and knocked. She answered the door with a dollar in her hand because she’d been expecting the paper boy to come and collect his wage, and at that moment, didn’t have the mind to put it elsewhere. She kicked the old bloodhound, Dud, back with her foot and looked at the man, surprised.

“What can I do for you?” she said, and pushed a few loose strands of hair out of her face.

“Your husband home?” he said.

She studied his face, so thick and droopy she thought he might have something wrong with him. His top lip protruded farther than his chin and his ears were thick and long in the lobe, yellow like the pig ears her mother pickled and lined up in jars in the cellar when she was a girl.

“He is. I’ll get him.”

“Tell him Bennie Wagner’s here to see him. I’m an old friend. Just stopped by to talk about making some money.”

“In that case, no thank you,” Janet said. She didn’t believe anything that came quick and easy. Her whole life she associated calluses with bread, backaches with the rent.
The man looked at her with round, sympathetic eyes and turned his head to the side. “Let’s think about something. Say you spend some money to buy an orchard.” He put both his hands out in front him as if he were holding a pie. “The first couple years, depending on how bad things are, there might be hardly any apples at all, even though you’re out there working your tail off, watering and pruning and such. You’d be out a few dollars, wouldn’t you?”

Janet thought about turning around and going inside. She could tell this wasn’t going to be easy. “Yes,” she said, lackadaisically. “That’s right. Who knows with apples. The next year might be worse. Or, it might be better.”

“Better?” he said, and smiled.

“You’re pushing me,” Janet said. “I’ve got so much to do today.”

“I’m a dreamer. I think you are one, too.”

Frank came to the door, ketchup smeared on his cheek, his hair combed over with water. “Who’s this?” he said to his wife and looked at the man.

She pursed her lips. “A salesman.”

“I guess you don’t remember me,” Bennie said to Frank. He introduced himself as Bennie from the farm store and said he was looking to make some money.

“Bennie from the farm store, Bennie from the farm store,” Frank chanted softly, working things out in his head. “My God, Bennie, I didn’t even recognize you. It’s had to be about ten years. Where you been all this time?” He looked at his wife. “You remember Bennie, the one who did so well selling lumber?”
“I’ve been all over doing a little bit of this and a little bit of that, but as soon as I came back here, I thought of you, the only guy around here I’d ever do business with. A hard-working, honest son-of-a-gun.”

Frank laughed so close to Janet’s face that all she could see were his teeth, flat all the way back as if somebody had taken an emery board to them. Once, he’d been attractive to her, big in the shoulders, doe-eyed and dark (he always wore a full beard), but she’d learned a few things being married fifteen years and stopped loving the way he looked a long time ago.

“Say you bought an orchard full of apple trees,” Bennie said to Frank, who stared blankly out toward the road. “The first year, there are no apples. What would you do?”

“I’d burn it down and start growing corn.” He slapped Bennie on the shoulder.

“Well, Frank, you’re in luck,” Bennie said. “No orchards. That was just to get you thinking. I have a project you might be interested in. Do you still work at the store?”

“No. I stay home and take care of the kids,” Frank said.

“I think you’re lying,” Bennie said.

“I know he’s lying,” Janet said, “Unless, of course, he wants to start by making supper tonight.”

Truth be told, Frank hadn’t worked for ten months since he hurt his back hauling feed at the farm store where he tended the warehouse.
“I got a plan right here in my back pocket,” Benni said. He pulled out a stack of yellow paper, folded in quarters. “I own a house that needs fixed up. We can talk details, draw up contracts.”

“I don’t know if we should,” Janet said. She looked up at her husband, sure he’d agree. They’d been living off unemployment. Jobs came and went. They weren’t desperate.

“It’s Bennie,” Frank said. “How can I say no without hearing what the man has to say?”

“It’s me,” Bennie said, smiling so large his cheeks formed two red, shiny mounds on either side of his face.

Bennie came in and he and Frank sat down at the kitchen table, the yellow papers spread out in front of them.

“Can you get me a pencil, Mom?” Frank said. He sat crooked on the chair, legs crossed and one arm resting on the edge of the table. For weeks, Janet had watched her husband mope around the house for reasons she couldn’t put a finger on but assumed it had something to do with losing his pride. She believed a man needed to handle business to feel worthy and he looked good sitting at the table, talking money with another man.

Janet went to the roll top desk in the living room and retrieved a pencil. On the way back, she picked up Frank’s blue jeans from where he’d tossed them over the back of the rocking chair. Ever since he hurt his back, he’d been staying up late and sleeping on the sofa, watching television all day. She cleaned right around him, brought him food on a plastic plate with cute little pictures printed on the surface to mark where everything
went: bread, vegetable, potato, meat. She always used this plate to serve the kids when they were sick.

Janet carried Frank’s pencil to the table. Up close, she saw the yellow papers were actually individual blueprints of rooms, a bedroom on one paper, a kitchen on another, and so on. Bennie had drawn the rooms out with a straightedge and filled them with catalog clippings of furniture and paintings and rugs. One bedroom had a grand four-poster bed, just what Janet would have imagined being in a castle, with red Fleur-de-Lis patterned linens and an intricate gold crucifix hanging on the wall. All in all, there were about eight rooms, all laid out on the table the way they would be in a house.

“That’s strange,” Janet said, “I’ve never seen it done like this.”

“It’s careful work,” Bennie said and switched a bedroom out for a living room, “but I’ve got to envision how a place might look before I go in there ripping it out.”

Frank laughed. He slapped on hand on his knee. “This isn’t Beverly Hills. This is Fowler. I don’t think anyone around here wants a house with a damn velvet couch or 14 karat gold Jesus.”

“You just can’t go into an empty space without a vision.”

“Do you want something to drink, Bennie?” Frank said. “Honey, you forgot to ask Bennie if he wants something to drink.”

“Oh, Bennie, I forgot about you,” Janet said. She rushed over to the refrigerator and opened it. “I just couldn’t stop looking at those beautiful rooms. We’ve got orange juice and Coke and beer. Do you like Miller?”

“Do you have water? I’ll just take water if you have it.”
Janet took a few ice cubes from the freezer and put them in a glass and filled it with water from the tap. “Is that good?” she asked.

Frank crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back on two legs of the chair. “Tell me how I can make the money, Bennie,” he said.

“Can you still work?” Bennie asked and smoothed down a corner of one of his blueprints. “If there’s one thing I remember about you, it’s that you worked hard and fast. I’m going to need somebody who can carry on all day tearing out walls, putting down floors, painting, you name it.”

“Sure I can. But I won’t start anything unless I’m sure there’s money involved. How much are we talking?”

Janet wet a dishcloth and wrung it out in the sink and began wiping down counters. She was nervous and Frank was impulsive. This life, the two of them shared it. She wanted to hear what Bennie had to say.

“Fifty percent of what I sell the place for, right down the middle. We’ll draw up contracts and everything.”

Frank looked up at the ceiling, thinking. He turned his head and stared at Janet. “Jan, why don’t you let Bennie and me get this worked out?”

“Hold on, now,” Bennie said before Janet could take a step toward the living room. “I got something I’d like to ask her. What do you do for work, Janet?”

Janet could have laughed out loud. She tossed the cloth in the sink and put her hands on her hips. “You’re looking at it,” she said.
Immediately, she felt bad for speaking harshly about the job she loved. She looked at Frank, who frowned so sternly that four vertical wrinkles formed in the space between his eyebrows.

“Well come on over here, then. I got something for you,” Bennie said. He waved his arm as though shuffling a great breeze across the kitchen. He pulled out a chair for her. “I had this idea for a kitchen,” he said, and pulled out another sheet of yellow paper from his back pocket, “and it’s gone dead. I can’t figure out what to do.”

The light hanging over the table flickered and Frank said, “Gahhh,” and looked up as if it might fall on his head. Dud waddled in from the living room and plopped down on the linoleum floor in a heap.

As Bennie unfolded the paper, Janet could see that there were lose clippings inside. “Now, you show me what you’d like a kitchen to look like,” he said and handed her the clippings.

Janet looked around at her own kitchen, at the white metal cabinets that had been there when they moved in and the wallpaper printed with sunflowers that she’d cut and hung while her oldest, Timmy, sat in his high chair. Besides the sink, which she liked under the window because she could see the kids playing out in the yard, she’d never thought much about how a kitchen might be set up to make her life easier. She looked through Bennie’s clippings and found a shiny new range and a stainless steel refrigerator, wooden cabinets in various shapes and sizes with ivory and gold pulls. She felt a stirring in the pit of her stomach, a glimmer of excitement like a flame smoldering on a short wick, as she moved the clippings around inside the square Bennie had drawn on the
yellow paper. She moved cabinets to wrap around the back three walls and found a round oak table and placed it against the empty wall, picturing her family, Frank and Timmy and Ted, sitting there eating dinner.

"Ha," Frank said when Janet finished. "You made a kitchen just like ours."

"I did not," she said. She stared down at the room she just put together with the most beautiful, expensive materials she’d ever seen in her life and, by God, it was just like her own kitchen. "Oh my Lord," she said, "I did."

She couldn’t believe she’d sat there with all the freedom in the world and made her own damn kitchen.

"You got her good, Frank," Bennie said.

Frank half-smiled, his lips parted on one side. "Are we gonna talk money are we gonna sit around watching my wife butcher your plans?"

"Okay, okay," Janet said. She left Frank and Bennie to work in the kitchen and went out on the front porch, where Timmy sat in a lawn chair rolling up his pants. Dud squeezed his way out between Janet’s legs and she said, "Darn you, dog."

Timmy was Janet’s oldest at twelve, tan and thin and precocious, always thinking. He liked trains and Janet had bought him a battery-operated locomotive and he’d taken it apart and put it back together so many times he got bored with it and put in a box under his bed.

"When’s lunch?" he said.

Janet pointed toward the house and said, "Dad’s got company."
Ted, the younger boy, always looked sick and pale with blue circles under his eyes. He chased the dog around the yard. Summer had been particularly rainy this year and big heavy drops began to fall. Janet stood at the top of the steps, still covered by the porch roof, and looked out at the yard, at the grass brown with mud, the chicken coop, off to the side, built just like a miniature A-frame house with wood siding painted lilac and enclosed by a high white picket fence with chicken wire stapled over it. In the front of the house, a door had been cut out just big enough for a hen to pass through. A couple years ago, Janet decided to start raising chickens. She went to the farm store and picked out fluffy spring chicks that she felt sorry for, chicks huddled in corners and under the heat lamp, not at all the way her father used to when he looked for the fighters, the dominants.

In the yard, Dud crawled under the porch and Ted followed, shimmying under on his belly until only the bottom of his blue jeans and bare feet were visible. Janet found a bucket under the porch and went to gather eggs. She wondered if Bennie could see her from the kitchen window, a picture of grace and beauty all sunburned and freckled, auburn hair pulled back in a tight bun. She held one leg of her blue jeans up as she walked lopsided, trying to avoid mud holes. All the time he’d been laid off, Janet had worked outside, repairing holes in chicken wire, digging up weeds in the vegetable garden until her hands were raw and stained.

“Sometime,” the hen said to Janet as she stooped to gather eggs. The word came out of the hen’s beak just a plain as day. Feeling momentarily dazed, as if she’d just seen a phantom shadow out of the corner of her eye, Janet blankly put a couple eggs in the
bucket and stood up and wiped her hands on the front of her jeans. She stared at the hen, a homely little creature with black liver spots showing through her thin white feathers and the hen looked back knowingly, her head cocked to the side as if she might have the capacity to speak long into the night.

The rain fell hard on the tin roof and Janet was sure she was hearing things.

That night at dinner, the family sat around the table eating with their heads down, except for Timmy, who chewed with his mouth open and his eyes halfway closed in slits as if he were looking up at the sky on an extraordinarily bright day. Bennie had left his number with Frank and told him that the offer would stand until he heard from him.

Janet wanted to talk about the hen. She said, “You know, we’re getting more eggs than we ever have.” She’d come straight inside from the coop and taken a bath, hoping that the hot water would bring clarity. Her hair hung wet in one long rope down the center of her back.

Frank cut a strip of meat from his pork chop and stabbed it with a fork. “I have a theory,” he said, and put down his fork, meat sticking straight up in the air. “I think that cock’s been working her hard.”

Timmy flicked his eyes up at his father, waiting for permission to laugh. Frank looked at Janet and grinned, his thin red lips stretched from one side of his face to the other, mischievous, as though he knew he might be in trouble and felt good about it. Upon seeing his father smile, Timmy laughed, cornbread falling out in crumbs from between his teeth, proud to be let in on a joke. Ted stared at Janet with pupils as deep and black as pond water.
A baby bird, she thought, her sweet, tiny boy. She reached for a knife and buttered a piece of corn bread.

The rooster had been gone for two months, pulled out of the coop by Dud and dragged all around the yard until he was nothing but a beak and a few feathers.

The next day, Bennie called to speak with Frank and the two of them bickered on the phone about lumber and framework and insulation and Janet listened from the kitchen where she made the boys white beans and biscuits and watched them eat with their faces nearly touching the bowls. Once, she heard her husband say he wasn’t above killing a man, and a few minutes later, he laughed just as jovially as when Ted was six years old and brought a dead robin in the kitchen—plucked just as naked and pink as a chicken—and asked her to cook it because he felt so sorry about shooting the bird for no reason at all.

“Come on over, then,” Janet heard Frank say, and she knew the deal was done.

Janet and Frank sat silently on the porch swing together like two strangers saving face in a game of chess, watching for Bennie to come up the road. Janet had seen Frank and Timmy play chess at the kitchen table, and she figured it was the biggest waste of time a human could contrive. The only kind of thinking that was good was the kind that led to a plan, hope of some sort, and sometimes she’d stay up late imagining porches or trellises, a new coop for the chickens, a cement bench she’d like to have near the garden.

“You sure are crazy,” he said, suddenly. “One crazy wife I have.”
“Why do you say that?” she said, panicked, wondering if he’d noticed something about her that she hadn’t, a change.

“Oh Bennie, I just love your drawings, oh Bennie, let me put a table in your kitchen.” He stared straight ahead to a pot of petunias on the porch railing.

“Is that it?” she said, relieved, certain that she hadn’t heard anything in the coop at all.

He looked straight at her now, through her, as if he knew exactly what she was thinking, what she might be capable of. “Don’t be a bitch.”

Bennie pulled up and Frank got off the porch swing, smoothed his pants, and put on a Yankees ball cap that had been resting on the banister. Bennie rolled down the window and waved, and Janet waved back, thinking he looked different this time, relaxed, the deal already having been made, like her daddy when he came home from the coal mines covered in soot and stopped on the porch to spray himself off with the hose. She’d as watch the soft, heavy folds of his face become her father’s again as the black water rolled off his skin.

“You coming with us?” Bennie shouted to Janet as Frank opened the passenger door.

“No,” Janet said. “Too much to do.”

“Shucks,” Bennie said, leaning over Frank see her out the passenger window. “I think you’d be good at this. There are all kinds of things we could have you get into.”

“We’ll call you when it’s time to put up wallpaper,” Frank said.
Janet stepped back and waved, watched them pull away in the truck that shone bright red in the light of the morning sun. She decided that when Frank got his money, she’d ask for that cement bench to put near her vegetable garden or new aluminum siding for the house. Really, she didn’t need much.

Janet had avoided the coop. She figured if she stayed away from it, she’d be better off, happy, but what she found is that it haunted her, beckoned to her when she stood at the kitchen window or on the porch, in bed at night when she closed her eyes and dreamed, the little white hen tucked neatly into her roost, waiting.

Janet watched the bumper on Bennie’s truck become a blur on the road and then looked over at the coop, where some of the chickens had come out to scratch around at the dirt. Suddenly feeling very foolish, she went over to the tool shed where she kept the bucket of feed and carried it to the coop and tossed out the yellow-brown grain in handfuls until it covered the ground, being extra generous to make up for the days she’d been too afraid to feed them. All the while, she watched for the white hen to peek her head out of the little chicken door. As each second passed, the urge to laugh grew stronger and stronger. The sky above her shone clear and blue. She threw the last handful of feed up into the air and let it fall over the chickens, piling upon one another to eat.

“Ha!” she said, looking back to make sure the boys hadn’t heard her.

Janet was almost out of the coop with the bucket of feed in one hand, the latch of the gate in the other.
“Sometime.”

Janet felt her heart beat steadily up into her throat. Her worst fear had been confirmed and there was no way to escape the panic other than to concede to it. Slowly, she turned around and there she was, the white hen, nestled in a bed of hay away from the mess of the chickens feasting. Had she been there all along?

“I know you can’t talk,” Janet said.

“Sure I can,” the hen said in a voice that was breathy and high, “but I won’t be here much longer.”

Janet looked back at the house, and then down at her feet. It suddenly occurred to her that she was wearing Frank’s boots, which felt big on her feet and gritty on the inside, like dirt in the garden when it had only rained two or three times in a summer. She couldn’t wait to take them off, to get away from the hen with its tiny black seedling eyes and yellow beak, just as thin and fragile as china. More than anything in the world, Janet wanted to get in the house and take her a boy under each arm and feel them warm against her body.

“Sometime I’ll fly off,” the hen said, and rustled its wings so furiously that delicate wisps of feathers floated up into the air. “And that’ll be that.”

Janet turned around and shut the gate behind and ran toward the house, thinking about creaks and squeaks, about all the noises she’d heard in her life that sounded like voices and turned out to be nothing at all.

This time wouldn’t be different. She wouldn’t let it be.
On Saturday, Bennie came and knocked on the door. Janet had just sifted a cup of flour, telling Timmy to get out from under her feet, that she couldn’t take him moping around like a crow on a carcass.

“Go do something with your brother,” she said. “Listen to him play his harmonica on the porch.”

And the boy hissed at her and headed for the door. As he went out, Bennie came in.

“I’m looking for the man of the house,” he said and stood on the linoleum, staring at her. He was wearing red suspenders and a white linen shirt, looking every bit the kind of man who drives around on Saturdays for no reason at all, his dark hair wind-blown and sticking straight up in the front.

“He’s not here,” she said, and thought about asking Bennie in for coffee. She didn’t know what time Frank would be home.

Bennie scratched his head. “Well, I guess I should’ve called. I apologize.”

Janet heard the boys laughing out on the porch. “I suppose the house is coming along,” she said to Bennie.

Bennie slapped the middle of his chest. “Ugh,” he said, “I’m hurt. Frank hasn’t told you anything.”

“Well, I guess I should’ve called. I apologize.”

Janet heard the boys laughing out on the porch. “I suppose the house is coming along,” she said to Bennie.

Bennie slapped the middle of his chest. “Ugh,” he said, “I’m hurt. Frank hasn’t told you anything.”

“I will when it’s done,” she said. “You’ve hardly started.”
“I’m just now taking out a load of stepping stones shaped like hearts. I figure I’ll lay them all the way from the road to the front porch.” He looked at his watch. “You could help me figure out where to put them.”

The boys ran behind her with sticks in their hands and Bennie laughed, swerving to miss a blow.

“Be careful,” Janet said, and looked at Bennie. For a moment, Frank looked at her so intently that she felt self conscious and rubbed her cheek, expecting to pull her hand away and see flour.

“Oh come on,” he said softly and reached out and touched her hand with one finger, “just lend me your eye.”

She thought about mentioning the hen, but the idea of telling him made her feel so good she figured she didn’t need to say anything at all.

She went over to oven and switched it off.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” she called to the boys as she closed the front door behind her.

On the way, Bennie told Janet about the house, his left foot tapping incessantly on the floorboard.

“It’s got original wood all the way through. Oak floors, oak trim, a massive walnut door with original stained glass windows. You’ll love it, Janet,” he said.

“I really don’t know the first thing about fixing up houses,” she said, and looked out at the corn fields, pale yellow against the brilliant blue sky. She wondered about his
peculiar drawings on yellow paper, if they still were folded in his back pocket. It felt
good to get away from her place, the white ranch with black shutters and the big front
porch, the coop out in yard, waiting as silently and viciously as cancer.

“Just humor me and close your eyes for a second,” Bennie said. He reached out
and touched her knee so gently that she couldn’t bring herself to move his hand away.
“Walk in through the front door of the house in your mind. It doesn’t matter what it
looks like. The point is, you’ve gotta have something in that head of yours to be able to
imagine it.”

Reluctantly, Janet closed her eyes. At first she didn’t see anything except black,
the emptiness inside her lids, and then she saw the faint hint of sunlight, appearing
suddenly with a break in the trees. And then the miraculous occurred. From the darkness
appeared a door that stood without any walls supporting it, all glass and nearly
transparent, reflecting sunshine so brilliantly that she could hardly look at it.

“Ohhh,” she said softly, her voice working of its own volition.

She felt Bennie’s hand moving up her thigh. The motion of the truck carried her
to the door and she reached out to touch it. She was flying.

“What do you see?” Bennie said, interrupting the dream.

She opened her eyes quickly, feeling the shock of waking suddenly in unfamiliar
place.

“Nothing,” she said. What had she been thinking? “I didn’t see anything,” she said.
Bennie frowned and looked at the window. “My God, Janet,” he said. He looked disappointed. “Are you blind?”

Janet looked at Bennie, and then out the window. She thought about Frank. He’d be home pretty soon, and she should be there to meet him. Lord, whatever possessed her to run off and leave the kids like that?

“No,” she said. “I don’t.”

The house came into view—a pretty two story with window boxes and a fresh coat of blue paint, a cement driveway along the side and a yard that rolled down into a creek—and Bennie stopped the truck. She felt his hand on her knee, heavy and intense, and pushed it away. She closed her eyes,

“Can we go back home?” Janet said to Bennie, and he looked at her in such a way that she felt like crying.

The two of them sat in the car looking at the house for what seemed like minutes, not really sure where to go next. Finally, Janet said, “I mean it,” and Bennie put the truck in drive.

“You never got to see the inside,” Bennie said.

“I don’t want to.”

It was raining outside when they pulled up Janet’s house. Sometimes rain falls hard in Flattsplain—the sky opens up and dumps big quantities of liquid like a farmer bailing bucketfuls of water from a trough. The boys kneeled on the porch with their
pellet guts aimed over the railing, the older one pointing at something flying in the sky, the younger one looking up with eyes as wide as saucers.

Janet got out of the truck and waved goodbye to Bennie.

Frank wasn’t home yet.

“Are we having dinner tonight?” Ted said.

“Yes,” Janet said.

Her hair was wet and sticking to her face, making it hard to see. She figured she’d make something easy for dinner and wait for her husband to come home. She looked out toward the coop for the hen.

If it spoke again, she’d cover her ears until she couldn’t hear another word.
AS GOOD AS MOTHER

My Uncle Mackie is a tall man and skinny too, with lots of black curly hair that falls down over his eyes. All year long, he wears one pair of blue jeans with a little patch sewn over the right knee and a long-sleeved flannel shirt, even in July, when it’s so hot I’d take my clothes off and run around naked if Mother let me. When Uncle Mackie laughs you can see all his flat brown teeth and I imagine he’s been chewing on sassafras sticks, which Mother says will wear your teeth down faster than I don’t know what.

Uncle Mackie’s arm was blown off in the service and they gave him a fake one that snaps on at the shoulder. He sleeps in the back room that used to be for guests and ties up the bathroom so much that Daddy sometimes says, “Uncle Mackie’s going to find himself a new house,” although, as far as I know, he’s never found one. When he was a boy, Uncle Mackie wanted to be a farmer but Mother says the war took the wind out of that sail.

For the longest time I wanted to see that fake arm and finally came right out and said, “Uncle Mackie, let me see your fake arm,” and Mother claimed to have nearly dropped dead right there in the living room because of my lack of couth.

“Let me see your arm, girl,” he said, and I pulled up my sleeve. “Just what I thought,” he said, “you have one.”

Nobody’s seen Uncle Mackie’s arm past the hand, which looks like it’s carved from wood and doesn’t serve much purpose beyond filling out the end of his sleeve.
Once, he picked up Mother’s purse with his wooden index finger and the purse dangled there in the air until she snatched it from him. Mother’s funny about people touching her purse or hair.

This afternoon, my Girl Scout troop is going to sell cookies at Foodland to benefit the soldiers. At the breakfast table, Mother tells me it might be nice to bring along Uncle Mackie to show people the money goes to a good cause. And then she looks at him directly and smoothes down one side of her blonde hair like she’s setting the crease in her church slacks. She rolls her hair every night and sprays it so good in the morning that it hardly moves but she’s still always fussing over one piece or another.

Uncle Mackie takes a long drink of coffee and says, “If I was looking to give away money, I’d want it to go to a gimp.”

Mother laughs. “Oh, Mackie. You know what I mean.”

Mother always comes along when we sell cookies. She sets up a lawn chair and holds the money box in her lap. All the girls call her Mrs. Moneybox although she’d probably wallop them if she heard. If people say no thank you to the cookies, she says, “There’s a place in the kingdom of Heaven for givers.” I lie and tell the girls my real mother died in a horseback-riding accident and this woman adopted me from an orphanage in Charleston because she couldn’t have babies. Needless to say, Uncle Mackie is not Mother. He’s about a gazillion years younger and doesn’t care a wink about talking with food in his mouth. As far as I can figure, none of the other girls know a real soldier or anyone with a missing arm, so he’s bound to be a hit.
“If we sell a hundred boxes, we get a trip to the pool in Byesville,” I say to Uncle Mackie.

“I’ll get my bikini ready.”

“It’d mean so much to Margaret,” Mother says. She puckers her lips so tight they turn white along the edges. I’ve tried this a hundred times in the mirror and always end up looking like a trout.

So it’s decided, Uncle Mackie’s going to help me sell cookies. When we get to Foodland, Harriet Boggs and her mother have already set up the table. Harriet’s kid sister Fannie always makes the sign that hangs in front of the table. In my opinion, all her coloring-outside-the-lines makes our troop look downright adolescent. Mrs. Boggs is Troop Mother and thinks her little Fannie is the smartest thing to walk the face of this earth. Once, when Fannie spelled “girl” with a U, Mother told Mrs. Boggs that she’d commission a sign to be painted for all our cookie-selling events and Mrs. Boggs said, “I can’t imagine what you’re implying.”

Mrs. Boggs looks Uncle Mackie up and down and says, “Margaret Grace, I see you’ve brought your Daddy along.”

Uncle Mackie says, “I’m her uncle,” so fast that Mrs. Boggs hardly gets the word “Daddy” off her lips.

Before we left, Mother wrote down a little monologue for me to recite in case anyone should question why I brought Uncle Mackie to sell cookies and I practiced all the way here. I think Mrs. Boggs, with all her fiss-fussing over Harriet and Fannie and prancing around, should know that my uncle is a hero, and I tell her so.
“Uncle Mackie fought overseas for our country and he wears a badge of honor for sacrifices made on behalf of our freedom,” I say. The words come out of my mouth just as easy as air.

Mrs. Boggs’ eyeballs nearly pop out of their sockets like when we were earning our Indian Lore Badge, dying pillowcases brown to make buckskin dresses, and Ida Mae Neal came running with Rit spilled all over her gorgeous blonde hair.

“Well isn’t that wonderful! A genuine soldier of war! Come here girls and meet Margaret Grace’s uncle,” Mrs. Boggs says, and the girls come over from their place by the table, giggling and poking each other’s patches and stand around Uncle Mackie with their mouths open. Lela Brown, the ugliest girl in the troop by a mile with her stringy black hair and beak nose, is missing her front tooth. She’s four years younger than me, a Brownie, and I’ll probably have to hear all about how her Mum-Maw pulled the tooth with a piece of thread attached to the knob on the medicine cabinet, blah blah blah.

“Margaret, tell them what you just told me,” Mrs. Boggs says.

For the life of me, I can’t recall my monologue, so I say, “Uncle Mackie suffered a very serious life-threatening injury in the war.”

By this time, Uncle Mackie looks like a spooked barn cat, eyes all squinty and black, shoulders low. Mother always says he’s the nervous type and I shouldn’t do anything to upset him.

“Oh what a shame,” Mrs. Boggs says. She cocks her head to the side. “It just breaks my heart to hear what our men go through.”

“I’m all right,” he says,
“Uncle Mackie has a fake arm,” I say. Uncle Mackie looks at me. “Uncle Mackie, you forgot to tell everyone about your arm.”

“Honest to Betsy, Margaret Grace,” Mrs. Boggs says. She acts all prim and proper, as if someone’s offending her every five minutes.

“Can we see your fake arm?” Lela says. She lisps without her front tooth.

“Let me see your arm, girl.” Uncle Mackie says, and I know what’s coming next. When she pulls up her sleeve, he says, “Just what I thought. It’s real.”

“That’s enough now, Lela,” Mrs. Boggs says. “Stack the Do-Si-Dos under the table so they don’t melt in this awful sun.”

Harriet loves to see her mother yell at other girls—probably because she gets it so much at home—and she smirks. Mrs. Boggs, who I swear sees everything, says, “Harriet, these Trefoils aren’t selling themselves.”

Mrs. Boggs sets Uncle Mackie up in a lawn chair right next to the table. “I’m the troop mother,” she says to Uncle Mackie. She hands me three boxes of cookies and nudges me in the direction of the glass doors. “Go on now, Margaret, and use your manners.” Who does she think she is, rushing me off? Mother told me to stick close to Uncle Mackie and not take a step in any direction that I didn’t feel good taking.

Uncle Mackie says, “I don’t know the first thing about selling cookies.”

Mrs. Boggs and Harriet put up the table right next to a crate of watermelons which is generally a bad idea in summertime unless of course you like flies crawling all over your legs. Mother told me flies step in manure and carry it along on their feet and give little children ringworm and malaria.
Mrs. Boggs always says we should ask ladies to buy cookies because they carry lots of extra cash and have scarcely tucked it back in their pocketbooks by the time they get outside.

She says that not too many decent, good-hearted ladies can resist charity or a sweet, beautiful child. If selling cookies is based on beauty, I don’t how Lela sells a single box let alone twenty-five, which is the goal, but she always gets rid of hers before everyone else and sits on the curb, sucking up lemonade through the hole in her lopsided face.

“Shouldn’t you get on with it, Margaret?” Uncle Mackie says. He talks loud enough for Mrs. Boggs to hear, which makes my cheeks turn red. Harriet, Lela, Molly, and Ida Mae are already lined up in front of the doors, waiting with their vests just as straight and neat as the doilies on the back of Mother’s sofa. Even Fannie, who’s not old enough to be a Brownie, stands next to her sister holding a few boxes of Tagalongs.

“Yes Margaret, fix your vest and stand with the other girls. Your uncle’s not going anywhere so let him sit here and rest,” Mrs. Boggs says. She pulls down on my vest so hard that my head nearly falls off my neck.

I’m not supposed to talk disrespectful, but I have no choice. “Mother told me I’m not to leave Uncle Mackie’s side, not for hell or high water.”

Uncle Mackie opens his mouth so wide I can see all his warn-down teeth. “Yes ma’am, that’s my sister,” Uncle Mackie says to Mrs. Boggs and shakes his head.

She giggles so stupid that I know she’s faking. I only saw her laugh one time and that was when Fannie got her Mary Jane stuck in a sewer grate and stood there crying.
like a fool. Mrs. Boggs has got a pretty face as far as mothers go but when she starts laughing, I mean really takes a fit, she honks like a goose and you can see all the way down the back of her throat.

“That’s about right,” Mrs. Boggs says, still giggling. She puts her hand on Uncle Mackie’s good shoulder. “How are you at counting money?”

“I know my way around a cash box,” he says and looks up at me. “If Margaret would get to selling, we’d fill it up.”

If I were the crying type I might break down right here in front of the crate of watermelons, but I won’t give Mrs. Boggs the pleasure of pulling out her hanky to wipe my face. I take my boxes of Thin Mints and stand next to Ida Mae, who I can stomach most out of all the girls.

A woman comes out of the store with her cart loaded plum up to the top with bags.

“Well what have we got here?” she says and looks us over from one end of the line to the other. “My word, you all are just as neat as pins.”

As always, Harriet jumps in to speak first. “We’re selling cookies to benefit the soldiers like that man sitting in the chair over there.” She points to Uncle Mackie. “He lost his arm in the war.”

The nerve of Harriet Boggs! I could just clobber her, using Uncle Mackie’s arm to sell more cookies than me. My eyes sting but I still squeeze out a smile because more than anything, I want to sell my twenty-five boxes and go swimming in Byesville.
“Well, I suppose I could take a box of those.” The lady points to the cookies in Lela’s arms. I just don’t know how Lela does it, but the look on Harriet’s face is priceless. Her bottom lip hangs out so fat and limp a lark could swoop down and perch there.

“Good job, Lela,” I say loud enough for Harriet to hear.

Lela smiles so big I can see the fresh red socket where her tooth used to be. She hands the lady her cookies and points to Uncle Mackie.

That’s where you pay the money,” she says.

Mrs. Boggs pulls her chair right next to Uncle Mackie and reaches over to his lap to open the money box. If Mother were here, she wouldn’t stand for Mrs. Boggs’ digging around in the money. She says too many hands in the pot is the quickest way to sicken the stew.

“Margaret Grace,” Harriet says. She looks just like Mrs. Boggs with her little beak nose and fair eyelashes. “The girls and I were talking and we’d like to know. How does your uncle wipe?”

Lela laughs and puts her hand over her mouth. “I never said that, Harriet,” she says through her fingers.

Ida Mae looks as though someone kicked her in the gut. “Me either,” she says. “I never said that, Margaret.”

Next to Mrs. Boggs in her yellow sundress, Uncle Mackie looks downright pickled in his flannel. When he wears that shirt, people don’t know he’s missing an arm.
The doctors made a good fake with an elbow that bends at the joint so the arm doesn’t just hang there all the time.

If I could take it all back, I might pretend Uncle Mackie was just like the rest of us. These girls are too immature to understand the sacrifice a soldier makes.

“Everyone knows you only need one hand to wipe and it doesn’t matter which one,” I say to Harriet. I make my mind up that that’s the last word I’ll ever utter in her direction.

I go over to Uncle Mackie and Mrs. Boggs. She’s pulled her chair practically on top of him. She might as well be sitting on his lap.

“I don’t feel good,” I say. “My stomach aches.”

Mrs. Boggs looks at Uncle Mackie in the way that all older people do when they want to make children look stupid. A half-hour and already she wants my uncle to like her better than me.

“Go on and sell your cookies, Margaret. If you want to go to Byesville, you’ll tough it out and go stand next to the other girls,” Mrs. Boggs says.

I look at Uncle Mackie. I just want him to take me home. He’s my best uncle, the only one I know besides Uncle Rick in Richmond and he’s married with twin boys who aren’t welcome in our house because they’re uncivilized. When I was one and Uncle Mackie still had an arm, he whittled me a spoon and burned my name on the handle. Mother put it in my baby box with the silver chalice from Grandmother and the velvet satchel that holds my first baby curl. I was a darling little infant and Uncle Mackie loved me better than anyone else in the world. When he got called up to get his high
school diploma, Uncle Mackie stopped by Mother’s chair and gave me a great big kiss on
the cheek and everyone in the crowd just *ohh* and *awww*. Uncle Mackie cocks his head. “Come on Margaret. Hop to it. I’ll sit here as
long as it takes.” He turns to Mrs. Boggs. “They have to learn.”

“Amen.”

With that, I’m all alone in the world. Just like when I was eight and Daddy forgot
to pick me up at the park where Mary Smeiles had her birthday party because he’d lost
such-and-such account that day and his mind was busy working numbers all the way
home. Daddy’s a very busy man and we can’t blame him for that. Just as the tree frogs
began to holler, Mother pulled up sniffing, a tissue balled up in her hand and her purse
flung over her shoulder.

If Mother were here right now, she’d buy all my cookies and take me home. She
says that if a person surrounds herself with negativity her insides are bound to turn sour
and I believe that’s true.

I go over and stand at the end of the line next to Ida Mae. “I swear I never said a
word about your uncle,” she says.

“Just forget it Ida Mae.”

In an hour, Lela sells all her cookies and sits down to wait for her mother. An old
man with thick glasses says she’d like to buy three boxes from me but Harriet shows him
the Trefoils and he decides he likes them better. I don’t care. I make up my mind that
I’ll stand here all day without selling another cookie just to see Uncle Mackie melt from
the heat.
One minute Uncle Mackie and Mrs. Boggs are sitting in their chairs and then they’re up, walking toward us.

“Stay put for a minute, girls,” Mrs. Boggs says and folds her hands in front of her stomach. Harriet looks like she wants to say something and opens her mouth a little. “It’s okay, Harriet, whatever it is,” Mrs. Boggs says before Harriet has a chance to get a word out.

“Y’all are doing so good we have to get another case from the car,” Uncle Mackie says.

I watch the two of them walk out to the parking lot, Uncle Mackie striding along just like a pony.

Lela stands up from the curb and comes over to me. “I think your uncle might try to kiss Mrs. Boggs,” she whispers in my ear.

“Never,” I say. I’m so angry I could punch her. I picture my Mother’s face, the shape of her eyes when someone offends her. I open my eyes so wide my lids nearly turn inside out. “I hope little Fannie didn’t hear you say that about her mother.”

Mrs. Boggs is married to Mr. Boggs. He’s a decent man with a black mustache and a big gold watch on his wrist. He drives a nice black car and sometimes drops Mrs. Boggs off at one of our events. They look good together, Mr. and Mrs. Boggs, just as my mother and father look good together, and the couples at church look good together sitting on the pews with their gazillions of kids.

“Yes. And he’ll stick his tongue in her mouth,” Lela says. She slips her tongue through the open space where her tooth used to be.
My stomach stirs at the thought of someone’s tongue in my mouth, wet and red and sluggish like a snail. “You make me want to vomit,” I say.

“And then he’ll do just like this,” Lela says and licks my cheek so fast that I don’t have time to move out of the way. She laughs, a drop of spit hanging on her bottom lip like a tear. Immediately, a foul smell creeps up to my nostrils. Am I imagining things or has Lela’s spit has gone sour on my cheek? I rub my face so hard that my skin burns.

If I were as good as Mother, I’d pray for Lela because she’s ignorant. But I can’t pray now because all I can think about is taking Lela’s neck between my hands and strangling her. I don’t believe in killing so I shove her as hard as I can and she says, “Uhhh.”

The girls stand around gawking. “Are you all right Lela?” Ida Mae asks.

Lela begins to cry with her arms wrapped around her stomach, gasping as if she’s just belly-flopped into a pool. For a second, I almost feel sorry for her, the poor little child with her grown-together eyebrows and hand-me-down Mary Janes. We humans can’t ask God to be born to good people and Lela can’t help that she was born ignorant.

“You poor little creature,” I say. I’m suddenly very thankful to be me, to have parents who don’t go around talking dirty or licking other folk’s faces. “You just don’t know anything and that’s the saddest part of it all.”

I decide I’m going to find Uncle Mackie and go home. I’ll tell Mrs. Boggs she can take my cookies and let them melt in the back of her car for all I care because I won’t sell another Tagalong or Do-Si-Do for this troop, honest to goodness. I stack my cookies in a pile on the pavement and start for the parking lot.
“You’re not allowed to go anywhere without a chaperone,” Harriet says as I take off running between parked cars.

I don’t know what I’m looking for, where I’m going. Cars all look the same. Uncle Mackie drives a Blazer with tires so big he has to lift me up onto the front seat. Halfway down the row, I spot his car between a little red sedan and a delivery van, which weren’t parked here this morning when the lot was empty. The afternoon sun is hot on my back and I stand on my tippy-toes next to the Blazer and bang on the windows before I decide nobody’s in there. I lean against the passenger door, safe for a moment, and look around at the sun glowing white off a sea of shiny trunks and hoods, convinced that I’ll never find my uncle in all this mess. If I don’t, he’s bound to miss me and look for me for hours, only to give up and go back to the car and find me here, waiting, and then he’ll know what it’s like to panic.

Finally, at the edge of the lot where no other cars are parked, I spot Mrs. Boggs’ black car. The front door is open and Uncle Mackie and Mrs. Boggs are standing behind it so that I can only see half their bodies. This strikes me as funny, the two of them missing their legs.

“Uncle Mackie!” I shout and take off running toward him. I know I’m going to be in trouble but I don’t care because sometimes a person has to do what’s wrong to stand up for what’s right.

When I get closer, I see that Uncle Mackie’s got his shirt off. I almost don’t believe it when I first see it because I’m so used to him wearing that flannel. Mrs. Boggs stares at me, her mouth wide open, and then puts her hand out and says, “Stop.” I’m still
running across the pavement and for a moment, it occurs to me that maybe Mrs. Boggs is trying to tell me that a car’s coming and I’m about to be hit. I check all around me but there are no cars coming in any direction. I stop just short of the open door, shocked by what I see. Mrs. Boggs has got the straps of her dress hanging down on either side of her arms. She hurries to push them up, panicked, but Uncle Mackie makes no effort to find his shirt. He just stands there with the most sheepish look on his face as though I’ve just left footprints on the rug or broken an expensive vase and he wants me to see what I’ve done. His chest is pale, hairy in the middle. The hollow place between his ribs rises and falls as he breathes.

But that arm really gets me because it’s not what I’d been expecting at all. From wrist to shoulder it’s all twisted black metal, as if someone peeled off his skin and uncovered telephone wires instead of bone. The arm’s attached at the shoulder by a shiny plastic tube the color of a Band-Aid.

“You didn’t see anything, Margaret,” Mrs. Boggs says softly and she stands with her hands on her hips. By now, she’s pulled her sleeves back over her shoulders. She squints at me, her eyes slits on her face.

I’ve never seen my Uncle Mackie look so mean. His lips are stern, a flat line across the bottom of his face and twitching in one corner. His pupils have grown so large that I can hardly see any color but black in his eyes.

“No, no,” he says. He doesn’t look at Mrs. Boggs. He stares right into me as though he might see right into my thoughts. I feel the heat from the pavement rise up through the rubber in my shoes. “How else is she going to learn?” he says.
He grabs his fake arm at the shoulder and pulls down until it pops. I think of my Barbie dolls, plastic arms and legs detaching from bodies so swiftly in my hands. Uncle Mackie stands there for a minute, holding the arm out in front of him. But it’s his stump I can’t take my eyes off, red, covered in white scars criss-crossing like railroad tracks across his skin. A round bump, just like a tumor, juts off the end and reminds me of a shooter marble.

“Here,” he says, and thrusts the arm toward me. “Hold it.”

I’m repulsed. I feel dirty, as though someone’s told me very bad secret. At the sight of Uncle Mackie’s stump, Mrs. Boggs’ puts her hand over her mouth and looks out toward the store where the girls are selling cookies.

She reaches out and grabs my wrist. “That’s enough, now,” she says, “Mackie, just stop.”

“Someone’s got to teach her,” he says.

“Goddamn you, Margaret. Take it,” Uncle Mackie says, and shakes the arm in front of my face. Metal rattles somewhere inside the tangled wires and I think of Father’s workshop, the cans of nuts and bolts lined up on the workbench and his wrenches hanging neatly on a pegboard by size.

“No,” I say, “I won’t touch it.” I feel my face turn hot. If a car passes I think I’ll throw myself in front of it to show Uncle Mackie that I’d rather die than do anything that I don’t want to do.

Uncle Mackie growls. He sucks air in through his teeth and grabs my hand so hard that my bones nearly break. I make a fist around his fingers, vowing that I’d rather
lose my hand than be made to touch his filthy arm. Violently, he rubs my knuckles up and down against the fake arm and I think maybe I feel them begin to bleed. I think of little Lela, standing back there on the stoop waiting for her mother, oblivious.

“Stop,” I plead, “Please, Uncle Mackie.”

“Hold it,” he says, the fire of the devil coming up through his throat, and I reach out and take the arm between my hands and hold it, the contraption heavy, longer than half my body. I have no other choice than to stand here in front of Uncle Mackie and Mrs. Boggs and hold it, humiliated.

Uncle Mackie towers over me, half a man, the wound on his arm more horrific than I ever could have imagined. For the life of me, I can’t figure out what I ever expected to see.

Uncle Mackie takes my hand and moves it up the metal, right up to the hard plastic tube where his stump fits, laughing so hysterically that I’m sure Mother will have to come and have him admitted to a hospital.

“How does that feel?” he says.

Mrs. Boggs looks at me sweeter than I’ve ever seen her look before, her eyes gone as soft as a mother’s. “Give it back to him, now, Margaret,” she says. “You’ve had enough.”

Uncle Mackie takes the arm and snaps it back on his shoulder and then he dresses, pulling the flannel shirt up over the mess of tangled wire and that ugly wound. The fake hand hangs quiet and heavy at the end of his sleeve, beautiful.
We’ll drive home and he’ll be Uncle Mackie again, Uncle Mackie who sleeps in the back room, haunted. Always, I’ll quietly hate him for what he’s done.

I’ll never tell Mother.
The telephone rang in the middle of the night and woke Marty. He fumbled around the nightstand and picked up the receiver.

“What is it?” he said.

“It’s me.” The sound of Lars’ voice took the sleep right out of Marty. It had been a year, maybe more, since he’d spoken to his son. “What’s wrong?” Marty said and turned on the lamp.

“Don’t panic, Pop, really. No need for that.”

“Is there trouble? You all right?”

Lars sucked in air through his teeth, a sound that came through Marty’s receiver like static. “I’m all right,” Lars said. “We got a call down here that some kids are breaking into houses. Just wanted to make sure your doors were locked.”

Lars worked as a deputy for the county, a real badge-wearing son-of-a-gun. He was thirty five years old, a pup, as far as Marty was concerned, and as belligerent as they come. Marty imagined that if ever saw Lars on the street, he’d walk right up to him, reading pride on his face as sure as a rider senses stubbornness in the stance of a mare, and tell him a thing or two about being proud, about men who pulled logs off mountainsides until their arms nearly fell off, men who came home so tired they couldn’t hold a biscuit to their lips.
Marty paused and looked toward the window. Through the slats in his blinds, he saw a night that glowed electric blue, a kind of unnatural, glaring light that reminded him of the neon Pabst sign behind the bar at Pint’s.

“I wish you wouldn’t have called,” Marty said. “I was just sleeping good. You know how hard it is for me to find good sleep.”

“Is this how we’re gonna start off?” Lars said.

The last time Marty spoke to Lars, Nancy was freshly in the ground, dirt still mounded up over her grave. Lars brought his friend Mike to meet Marty and they all sat there on the sofa, Marty and Lars and Mike, three songless chickadees, as Marty’s mother would have said.

A friend. Ha! Marty knew a queer when he saw one. Once in awhile one of them ended up working at the mill but in those days, men knew enough to say nothing at all, to keep their mouths shut and work.

Lars asked his father to love him unconditionally, at the very least, to give Mike a chance.

On the phone, Lars said, “All right then,” and cleared his throat. “We have a deputy out patrolling. I miss your voice, Pop.”

Marty held the telephone between his jaw and shoulder like Nancy used to when she spoke to her mother. “The line’s always working,” he said.

“Yeah, I know. I have to let you go,” Lars said. He hung up the phone.

Well, I’m awake now, Marty thought. He fished around under the sheet and pulled both socks up from around his ankles.
“I’ll be here,” he said aloud. “I’m up and ready to shoot whoever breaks in.”

Marty kept a loaded gun in the closet and on sleepless nights toyed with the thought of having to shoot somebody. If Nancy was alive and Lars was a boy again tucked in his bed, Marty would’ve happily knocked off any intruder. But now, fairly sure that he’d siphoned his share of joy from life, figured he’d be the bigger guy and allow himself to be had.

There comes a time in life when every man realizes that he’s been fighting death since the day he was born and it hasn’t done him any good at all.

Marty got up and flipped on the overhead light. He stopped and listened to the silence, half-expecting to hear the crash of glass or the heavy clod of boots on the stairs. He suddenly remembered little Lars, two or three years old, shuffling upstairs wearing the brown slippers Nancy sewed him with two embroidered eyeballs on each foot. When he walked it looked like he was dragging along a couple of moles.

Not sensing any suspicious activity, Marty went down to the kitchen and put on a kettle of water. To hell with it, he thought, and sat down at the booth he built for Nancy, a real fancy project with turquoise vinyl stapled over the wood and finished with brass tacks around the edges. Marty thought the job looked professional. Nancy died before the booth got any good use.

When they bought the house, she’d stand in the kitchen with both hands in her hair and say, “If I have to work in here one more day.”

The kitchen was small and outdated but one thing had led to another and Lars was born and Marty worked like a madman at the mill so that when he came home he wanted
not a Buffalo nickel more than food and sleep. By the time Marty got around to putting
in cabinets and a booth Nancy had started to wither and she watched Marty work from
her wheelchair.

In the kitchen, Marty sat and listened for the kettle to whistle. Now that he lived
alone, time passed effortlessly so that when he looked at the clock he often wondered,
Where have I been? He was sixty-five years old, retired. Hadn’t this looked so good at
thirty?

Every man is entitled to occasionally feeling like he’s going nowhere but Marty
felt it ten-fold in Elmyra where the two-lane highway literally dumped men right into the
mill. On a map, the village was an airplane-runway sort of place, one long road of lonely
homes that dead-ended at the mill.

He’d been there and done that. Now what?

Marty heard the kettle whistle he got up and fixed himself a mug of tea. The
telephone rang and he answered.

“Two times in one night,” Lars said, “This has got to be some kind of record.”
Marty pictured him down at the station, kicked back and taking a drag from a cigarette.

“Just when I got myself settled,” Marty said.

“We haven’t had a call in over thirty minutes. I don’t want you worrying over
nothing. I know how you worry, Pop.”

Marty sipped from his mug and looked out the kitchen window. For a second, he
considered asking Lars about his friend. He had the words right there on his lips but
couldn’t get them out.
“Lars,” he said, “you still living the same?”

The silence on the line made Marty remember what he’d been so inclined to forget.

Lars said, “Mmm,” as though he were reacting to a painting in a museum or the sky after a thunderstorm. After a few seconds, he said, “I’m not going to talk about that now.”

What had Marty expected to hear? One thing’s for sure, he’d never stopped hoping. “That’s too bad,” he said and looked down at his toes cold and white against the tile. “If you say the coast is clear then I’m going back to bed.”

“That’s it?” Lars asked, his voice calm and resigned.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Son.”

When Lars was a boy, Marty had bought him a Chihuahua and somehow ended up falling in love with the dog himself. He bent over backwards for that dog, buying him bones and good food and letting him sleep in the bed. Then one summer the dog got such a nasty case of fleas that the whole house was crawling with them, the carpets and curtains and even Nancy’s winter sweaters in the back of the closet. Marty was so disgusted he didn’t want a thing to do with the dog. He chained him outside and eventually the neighbors took him out of pity.

It truly scared Marty how quickly he could give up on love.

He stopped and looked out the window about the kitchen sink. He could see lights of all sorts, porch lights and street lights and rooms glowing behind curtains. He’d been a few places—Knoxville, for one, a God-forsaken dump of a city—and still
considered Elmyra country. Most of his neighbors were sleeping, blissfully unaware of the evils in the world. If they had been robbed they wouldn’t know until morning. A few more hours of peace and ignorance. Marty figured life wasn’t much more than that, man falling constantly from calm to turmoil and back again, pulling himself back up by the fabric on his britches.

He started to walk up the stairs and made it to the landing when he heard a little tap on the door. Hell, he thought, and turned around to see who was there. If he had been afraid at any time during the last thirty minutes, having a queer son was his worst nightmare and not too much could top it.

When he got to the door he saw that he’d left the porch light on. If Nancy was alive she would have seen that and gone up to bed and shaken Marty awake. “You know what you left on?” she would have said. Good old Nancy, Electricity Patrol.

Outside, Marty saw a man standing on his porch, stoop shouldered and large, a mammoth of a person, body and shadow merging in this light as one fuzzy entity.

What is it?” Marty said through the glass pane on the door.

“I saw your light on. Could I please, please use your telephone?”

That’s just my luck, he thought. Marty opened the door and noticed the man was smaller than he’d expected, sheepish and large in the stomach. He had black hair, long on the sides and thin on top, tiny ears that stuck straight out. When he spoke, his front teeth grazed his bottom lip.
“Can I use your telephone?” the man said. He looked at Marty with such serious intent, with eyes as dark and droopy as a dog’s, that Marty almost let him in. “I’ve managed to lose my horse,” the man said.

Oh man, Marty thought. “Was she a purple mare, by any chance?” he said.

The man stood with his hands tight in the pockets of his blue jeans. “I know. I don’t hold a cent against you if you don’t believe me. I live down there, toward the mill.” He pointed down the road.

“And you ride a horse in the middle of the night?” The wind picked up and blew a few leaves down on the porch. If Marty had planned on being outside, he would have put on his robe and a pair of slippers. As he stood near the door in his checkered pajama pants and T-shirt, he felt chilled to the core.

“No,” the man said. He blinked quickly a few times and then once, hard. “I heard the most awful noise a little while ago that sat me straight up in bed. Honest to God, I thought maybe the whole barn started to cave in. It’s not sturdy anyway so that wouldn’t have shocked me in the least. I went out and looked and there were my two big barn doors, sawed right off the hinges and laying in the grass. First thing I thought about, of course, were my horses, and I got lucky there. Only one got away.”

“You happen to be in the big white house with the chickens in the yard?” Marty said. He thought he knew the place with the big barn.

“That’s me,” the man said. “You might know some of my mother’s people, the Browns. My name’s Jerry.”
Marty thought he might know some Browns, men who worked at the mill, a fellow named Michael who ran big logs through the saw as though they were toothpicks.

“I think maybe I do,” Marty said. He felt his big toe go stiff and he bent it until it popped. “Who do you want to call about the horse? It sounds like you may have been robbed. You say your hinges were sawed off?”

“Yes, Sir,” Jerry said. “All that trouble to take the doors off the hinges. All I’m thinking about now is Chessie. It’s stupid how much I care for the horse,”

Marty put out his finger and told Jerry to wait. He went to the end table next to the sofa and pick up the cordless phone from the receiver and brought it to the door.

“Here,” Marty said. “Call down to the sheriff and tell them what you told me.”

Jerry dialed and when he got someone on the line, reported the vandalized barn and escaped horse.

“That’s good to know,” Jerry responded to the dispatcher. “Makes me feel a whole lot better.”

Marty figured that Lars was probably still answering phones down at the station. If there wasn’t much that Marty approved of in the way of Lars’ life, he liked the way Lars handled people. Nancy always said he had the demeanor of a lap cat and that made Marty proud.
Jerry hung up the phone and handed it to Marty. “I guess I’ll just walk a little further down the road.”

“You got a wife, Jerry?” Marty said. He guessed Jerry to be about forty, a few years older than Lars. But then again, Lars seemed to have not aged since high school, perpetually thin and fair with pin-straight blonde hair that he wore long, a few pale whiskers on his chin that never fully grew in.

Jerry, however, appeared to be pulled through the wringer, the folds in his hands ruddy, as if he’d been out digging in the dirt. He had a scar that ran the length of the middle of his neck, right down to the hollow spot above his shoulder blades, and Marty felt sick looking at it, imagining the wound caused the mark.

He remembered Nancy in her last few weeks of life, lying in bed with the hole doctors cut in her neck so she could breathe. If he could’ve taken any part of her suffering away it would have started with that hole, which in his mind opened her body up to the world, made her vulnerable to the air and him uncomfortable, and what good did it do anyway?

He and Lars sat in that pale yellow room in the hospital listening to the air gurgle through that hole, Marty, oblivious, watching Lars holding her hand, thinking that all this might be worth it because of what he could be, justifying her suffering for his potential.

Marty had been such a fool.
Jerry laughed so that yellow stubs of his bottom teeth were visible. “No wife yet. I’d like one but she hasn’t found me.”

“My Nancy passed away a year ago. Time moves fast when you get old.”

Jerry stood by the door, antsy. “Any grandkids?”

“No, but it’s okay. I’m tired, man. I retired five years ago and think sometimes I should have kept the old body going. What’s next, you know what I mean? Used to be there was always something coming up, something to look forward to.”

Marty felt good talking to this stranger. So good, he would have liked to tell him everything about Lars and Mike and this odd feeling he couldn’t shake, as if he’d farmed all summer and then woken up to an empty silo.

“So you never had any kids?” Jerry said. He blinked fast three times, once slow and sleepy. His face, red and thick, made Marty remember the hogs his father used to smoke in a big stone pit.

“No.” Marty said, thinking, running both hands through the back of his grey hair. “And let me tell you, it’s better that way. You know how you feel about the horse. You’d be doubly or triply disappointed if something happened to your kid. Devastated. If you think about it, when you only have your own neck to look out for you worry about a lot less necks.”
Jerry coughed. He coughed so furiously that little pieces of spit strung between his teeth. He wrung both hands, his fat red fingers busy and nervous, and then pushed Marty in the door, one big hand on each shoulder.

Marty said, “Huhhh” and fell backwards, catching himself on the end table.

“This is so hard,” Jerry said to Marty and flipped the deadbolt, *clunk*. “I was going to take your money but I just can’t.”

There were lots of instances in life when Marty, like every other man, imagined the worst possible outcome in bad situations, and sometimes—albeit rarely—they had come to fruition. He’d lost Nancy at a time when most men his age still had good, healthy wives. He’d lost Lars to another man and figured, at moments, that death would have been an easier fate for him to handle. And now, with Jerry, he felt like laughing at the shared misfortune of their lives. Really, he could just toss back his head and laugh until his whole body hurt from convulsing.

“It’s okay, Jerry,” Marty said. He felt his face go hot. “It’s all right.”

“I have to ask you to sit on the couch,” Jerry said. “And I hate this. I *hate* it. I can’t go back now.”

Jerry appeared to be crying. Yes, Marty thought, those are real tears.
“What is it, bud?” Marty said. He remembered Lars, tiny little Lars standing barefoot at the end of the driveway, sniffling over a dead turtle in the road. What in the world had happened to Marty’s boy?

“I’m in big trouble,” Jerry said. “I’ve done something terrible and they’re going to know.”

Funny what a man thinks about when he’s scared beyond scared. Marty thought about his father’s pocket watch in the bureau drawer upstairs, wrapped in a handkerchief. He thought about the milk he meant to throw out yesterday. He thought about the window he may have left open upstairs.

“It can’t be that bad, Jerry. We all do bad things,” Marty said. He rubbed one arm incessantly, feeling the coarse hair against his palm.

Jerry walked over to the fire place and kneaded his eyes with his fist, as if he’d been laboring in soot up to his brows all day long and still had a few particles to work out.

“That’s easy to say when you haven’t done anything at all. You let me in to use your phone and you don’t even know me. You treat me like a human when I left one in the ditch.”

The telephone rang and Marty looked at Jerry.

“Go ahead,” Jerry said and felt his back pocket as if he really had something in there. “You can answer it.”
“Pop,” Lars said when Marty answered. By the sound of his voice, Marty could tell Lars was all business this time. “Please be on the lookout. I can’t tell you what, but something terrible’s happened.”

Jerry squinted at Marty. He mouthed, Who is it?

When Marty didn’t speak, Lars said, “Is everything okay?”

So many months and not a single hello from his son. Why now, why tonight?

The sound of Lars’ voice was an old familiar song, a sound that made Marty want to cry. He missed his boy, missed Nancy. As soon he got over missing one of them, resolved to forget and go at life alone, they’d come back to him in a flurry, just as quickly as Marty’s own father sprung to life from the smell of dust along the road.

The feeling of being three—Pop and Mom and Lars—still felt as familiar to Marty as slipping into last year’s winter coat.

“Yeah, everything’s okay. You called me just as soon as I got a foot on the stair.” Marty said.

Marty had sweeter words to say, words that might have been just right if he had more time, but they wouldn’t come to his lips.

“Ha. I planned it that way,” Lars said.

“I’m going back to sleep now if you’ll let me get there.”
“Please just watch out. Check all the doors. Do you still have that gun in the closet, just for peace of mind? I want you to be safe. I know you’ll be pissed but I’m calling again later, just to check,” Lars said.

Marty thought about the phone ringing late into the night with not a hand to answer it and Lars down at the station, oblivious. He looked at the old square clock that had hung over the television for years, a hand-me-down from Nancy’s grandmother, and realized all at once that he’d never really looked it except from far away, in passing, and only for the time.

Painted in the center of the clock, directly behind the intricate metal filigree hands, was a sun with each of its brilliant yellow rays extending out toward a Roman numeral. Around the circle of Roman numerals were clouds, faded and nearly gray, which Marty had always mistaken for the grain in the wood, and a cherub descending down onto the number twelve, naked and plump with a look of elation on his face.

Every dream or wish or grudge Marty had ever coveted he let go into the night as he sat looking at the clock, listening to his son breathe. Oh, what he’d missed.

“Lars,” he said, “What we talked about earlier, it’s not something that keeps me up at night.”

Lars exhaled a slow, steady pffft. “God, that feels good,” he said.

Marty heaved. He coughed, not wanting Lars to know. “Now let me get some sleep.”
“I love you Pop.”

Marty hung up the phone. Jerry put one hand out, palm up, as if a little bird might swoop down and perch on it. “Who was that?” he said.

“My son.” Marty felt relieved, those words slipping off his tongue like a prayer.

Jerry looked at Marty, his eyebrows twisted up in an expression half hurt and half question.

“You said you didn’t have any kids,” he said. Then, he slid one hand in his back pocket and said, “I’m not playing.”

“I know,” Marty said. “I just want to live.”

“I want you to live, too. Would you forgive me? For what I did? If you were my father could you look me in the eyes and say it’s okay?”

“My God, Jerry,” Marty said. He looked down at the phone in his hand. He opened his mouth but couldn’t speak. The words were there, settled in the back of his throat, but he couldn’t bring them up.

If Jerry was a sinner, Marty couldn’t see it now and never would. He closed his eyes, willing, resigned to his fate, and felt Jerry lay hands on him, on his neck, on his head, and then he felt the cold metal of the barrel against his temple. In life, he’d fallen easily into dream, barely settling into the pillow before being carried off by the visions inside his mind. As he sat on the couch with his eyes closed, waiting for something he wasn’t sure of, he watched Lars become a cherub on the clock and, as visions go,
suddenly Marty was inside Lars’ head, seeing through Lars’ eyes, and he saw himself on the sofa and Jerry, the light around him.

And then, without any more doubt or worry, he felt lighter, as if he’d just hauled a ton of logs through the saw and experienced the giddy relief that every man works toward, the feeling of handing off a load to the next fellow and then turning around to go home.
Albertus Huxley was a sailing man, all five-feet four inches of him, taut and leathery, bulging like a sail caught in the breath of the wind. His cheeks were strange crimson-pink like evening skies painted on Erie waves and he moved like a sailing man, seaweed arms and legs flowing like thick green foliage in water.

He died with a fishing pole in one hand and imported vodka in the other. His boat, Katherine, named after some lover from thirty or so years ago, lulled him softly into a deep blue-black ocean sleep and he never felt the tugs on his fishing line or the liquor spilled on his shirt. Three days later, some fishermen found Albertus—rigor-mortised, pickled in vodka—and pulled his boat to shore.

In years of fishing, they’d pulled lots of stray objects from the water—shoes, car doors, capsized boats, but never a body. Once, they found a burnt-up piece of satellite and made the front page of the newspaper, all of them standing behind that sheet of metal.

They didn’t know much about the dead man. They had seen him before on the docks, moving like water, pulling ropes and dropping anchors, and they called him Jonah. Once the tip of his stern began rippling across the lake’s surface, they knew he wouldn’t return to the shore for days.
Each morning as they fished and waited, they clenched their bellies and joked that he’d gotten swallowed up by a whale. And then they silently went on fishing, secretly hoping to see the charcoal bump of a whale (or what they imagined a whale bump would look like) so they’d have something to talk

When they dragged his body into the boathouse by his arms and legs, he was wearing the kind of shirt sailing men on Lake Michigan always wear, brownish-green, thin enough to keep the sun out and still let the breeze in. And the pungent odor of liquor merged with the stench of rot and lake water and the men held their noses and decided that he smelled like trout filleted on a thick August afternoon.

The smell of trout wasn’t that bad, they agreed, as they remembered all the trout they had filleted and one of the men said he dragged a possum on his muffler from Wichita to Detroit and that odor was much worse than the man’s.

“If he doesn’t smell like he’s all-the-way dead, maybe he’s not all-the-way dead,” another one of the men reasoned, and the others crushed pebbles of dirt with their heels and flicked their eyes up at the half-way dead man slumped in the boathouse chair and agreed.

So they left him there and went out to the docks to fold up their nets and gather their poles and follow the crimson-pink light home.
The wife of the fisherman who dragged a possum from Wichita to Detroit felt sorry for the dead man her husband told her about at dinner. She wondered if they’d made a mistake, if he’d wake up alone in the boathouse, hungry.

She fixed him a plate of Spam and biscuits spread with molasses, found her husband’s key to the boathouse, and drove to the lake. After unlocking the door, she opened wide enough for a column of moonlight to seep through. She slid the plate into the darkness.

“Here you go, Thing,” she said softly through the door, and then she left Albertus there, crept off into the night thinking about what it meant to be gone, to pass on to another place, heaven or hell.

Really, she hadn’t thought about if before.

Albertus Huxley would never again eat. In life, he’d loved molasses but now his body had fallen into a state of decomposition. He’d become no more significant than the wayward rose petal that wastes away on the ground near its mother flower. Rats crawled down from the boathouse rafters and began to nibble at his hard purple toes. He hated rats.

For most of his childhood, he thought he was one. At night, his father kicked in basement windows and came home with strings of pearls and foreign coins and gold crowns and his mother wrapped the pearls around her neck and let them drape down into her breasts and sent him out of the room while the two them had their fun.
Sometimes, when his father was out, Albertus would curl near his mother on cold nights in that little attic apartment and listen to the rats burrow through the holes in the walls and scurry across the floor. For a long time, he thought this was how his father got into basements at night. He pictured the man’s tiny, sharp teeth gnawing through screened windows and maneuvering through impossible crevices.

This is the species, Albertus thought, I must belong to.

After a night in the boathouse, Albertus’ body started to bloat and his skin dripped a sort-of clear yellowish fluid and the fishermen stood around him with their noses plugged, wondering what they should do now. They were afraid, regretful of pulling him in and leaving him sitting in the chair.

Because the morning hours pass quickly the fisherman were anxious to get out on the water and they went out and fished silently, begrudging the day’s previous discovery, the sudden responsibility of making an important decision.

One fisherman said he heard about a woman who went to prison for leaving her husband’s corpse on the couch for three years. Another said he watched a television special about secret government agencies that apprehend criminals in the cover of night. Finally, the oldest fisherman said that raising too much ruckus always leads to trouble and that they should quietly send the dead man on his way.

With no consensus, the decision was made to make none at all, and Albertus stayed locked up in the boathouse.
The wife of the man who dragged a possum from Wichita to Detroit couldn’t stop thinking about the dead man in the boathouse. Not since she delivered her last child five years ago had she felt such a compulsive urge to nurture. Every day for a week when her husband came home from the lake she’d ask, “Is he still there?” and her husband would say, “Nothing’s changed.”

In all the years the wife had known her husband, he’d never sung a note, but a week into the dead man’s arrival the husband began singing all the time, singing on the toilet, singing as he readied his poles in the wee hours of the morning.

She sensed something had changed by the arrival of the sailing man, by his quiet, steady presence, but she wasn’t sure what.

A secret: sometimes very early in the morning a fisherman wandered to the boathouse door alone and looked around, checked for dirt under his fingernails, lingered to make sure no one was coming. He went in and sat at Jonah’s feet and talked about a baby that was due in two months and how much he hated the water.

After a week, the wife of the man who dragged a possum from Wichita to Detroit couldn’t fight the compulsion to sneak out at night and check on the dead man. She thought Albertus was cute like baby animals in their most vulnerable stages of life. She
snuck out, leaving her husband snoring on his side of the bed, and fussed over Albertus as if he were a child, wiping his face with her hanky, combing back his thin black hair.

Once, on a whim, she pressed her lips against his. They felt cold and hard like jerky, pulled tight against his teeth. She longed to feel the brush of his bones against hers, the recognition of body. If anyone walked in on her now, she figured they’d think her crazy, sick.

She’d seen plenty of people in caskets—her grandfather, a baby just two months out of her belly, but she’d loved them enough to let them go as remnants, their bodies as cold and placid as the thin ice that conceals the treachery of the lake in winter time.

This man, he made her feel alive, raw and warm in her own skin.

Softly, she spoke to him about being poor, about staying at home all day long with a couple of crummy kids. She wasn’t unhappy, really, just indifferent, and that was the problem. She floated endlessly above herself, seeing herself in the kitchen as she worked, in bed at night next to the man she’d loved since she was fifteen years old, and she didn’t recognize the woman she’d become.

She wondered where she’d missed out on living.

As she spoke, Albertus listened with a crooked look of satisfaction.

After several weeks, fishermen started bringing their children to see Albertus.

On Sunday mornings, the children gathered around his chair and told him about their new puppies and showed off their half-picked scabs. Sometimes they’d fiddle with his belt buckles or poke their fingers into his nostrils and ask to see his sailing-ship or compass.
“What would poor Albertus do if he saw you behaving like this?” mothers asked when the children dug up flowerbeds or snuck pieces of cake for breakfast.

And the children’s fathers told them about what Jonah was like when he was alive—how he battled Japanese in the Pacific, how he hooked the largest bass in Michigan history, how he saved a baby from drowning and lived in a sea castle somewhere beyond the farthest blur of the horizon.

And the children listened with pink opened mouths and wondered how long it would be until they could die.

One morning he was gone. Except for a trail of water and a few bits of flesh, Jonah’s chair was empty.

The fishermen followed the trail down to the shore and looked for a body floating on the waves, but there was nothing. Some said the morgue intervened. But most of them thought his body had wasted away to the deepest, wettest center of its core and had somehow found a way to trickle back home.

After Albertus, the fisher-people looked at the massive expanse of water, feeling every bit a part of it, and basked in the peace that comes from confronting darkness and finding that there’s nothing there to fear at all.