ABSTRACT

BIRDS, CHILDREN, AND LONELY MEN IN CARS
AND
THE SOUND OF WRONG

by Justin Edwards

My thesis is a collection of short stories. Much of the work is thematically centered around loneliness, mostly within the domestic household, and the lengths that people go to get out from under it. The stories are meant to be comic yet dark. Both the humor and the tension comes from the way in which the characters overreact to the point where either their reality changes a bit to allow it for it, or they are simply fooling themselves. Overall, I am trying to find the best possible way to describe something without actually describing it. I am working towards the peripheral, because I feel that readers believe it is better than what is out in front.
BIRDS, CHILDREN, AND LONELY MEN IN CARS

AND

THE SOUND OF WRONG

A Thesis

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"There you are," a voice said from the other side of the booth. I turned my gaze away from the meandering hostess and saw a young guy, about half my age, sitting across from me. His hair was unevenly short, as if he'd cut it and then his head deformed. He looked relieved to see me, and it was nice to see him too, even though I had no idea who he was. Since my wife died a week ago, the strangest people had been coming up to me to offer condolences. People I didn't even know, like her childhood dentist and that guy in the meat department at the supermarket. This whole other part of her life that was never important enough to talk about over dinner. All of these small roles being filled in order to feed Maria and keep her teeth straight.

"How long have you been there?" I asked, but he just shrugged. "Do I know you?"
I asked as though I wanted to know. As though while he was sitting there I was racking my brain for an association. Like my high school yearbook was going through my head.

"Yeah, man, it's me, Randy. You know. Randy." He pulled his elbows to his side and waved his hands back and forth, looking very much like a dancing tyrannosaur.

"Right. Randy." We sat in silence, me squinting at him and him leaning back in his booth, slinging an arm over the back and acting proud of himself in general. He seemed handsome in a high school kind of way, and he made eye contact the way business seminars tell you to. "Actually," I said, "I'm drawing a blank."

"I've been looking for you everywhere."
"Mhmm," I said.
He kept talking, and I ordered some french fries when it was clear he wouldn't leave. Maria's funeral was in another hour or so, and it was nice to be around someone who wanted to talk about themselves instead of about me. I had been sleeping with the TV on for several nights because it made the room feel less empty, as though Maria's entire presence had only amounted to noise. Randy, as if they were the key to his vocal cords, continuously shoved my fries into his mouth before saying anything.

"I know you're in mourning and everything, but I think you need to get out."
One of my fries had that black spot on it where an eye got cooked. I picked it off and tossed it back on the plate. "I'm not in mourning, I'm in a suit."

"Yeah, well, you're lucky I found you when I did. I've got this dream, you see, of kayaking down Main Street of some flooded town. I've had it for awhile. I always see those guys on the news in rowboats and crap and I want that, you know?"

"Hmm. I guess I know." I was listening for clues, but the guy was a mystery. He had the kind of patience that only comes when no one has ever liked you.

"Yeah you do. Well I've been charting weather patterns all over the country, and Kansas is having record rainfall. Their river is about to be above flood level, like, any day now. We should be there. Like old times."

"Old times? You're half my age."

"Sure."
The clock on the wall said that it was time to go, so I stood up and put some money down for the food.

"I think I lost your phone number somehow," Randy said. "You know these cell phones." He pulled out his cell phone, eager to make the same mistake.
"About that," I started, a tad confused about how to approach the situation. "I'm still not quite sure I recognize our relationship as real. You keep telling me things that, had we been such good friends, you probably would have told me already. Right?"

He did the dinosaur chorus line again. "Randy," he said, his smile clearly a part of the dance.

"Right." I left without giving him my number.

"I'll come by then," he called after me. "You still in that one place?"

"Yeah," I said over my shoulder. "Right next to that other one."

There was fake grass rolled out over the real grass to protect the plots around hers, and my chair was set up on my future grave. We used the same canopy tent at the funeral that we had used at our wedding, and many of the same people were there. I guess the similarities stopped there.

After the service, while I waited for the line at the gate to shorten, I smoked my first cigarette in months. I drew hard, too hard, and clenched my teeth, trying to hold it like I did in high school, so that no smoke would come out when I finally exhaled. Instead I coughed until I nearly vomited. Everyone who passed my car had their head down or buried in a husband, so no one paid me any attention as I heaved. When Maria had first gotten sick, she was sensitive to everything. Just the smell of smoke on my jacket would make her gag, holding a hand up to her mouth and rattling her bones like dice in a leather bottle, until I left the room and showered. I quit then. Now I'm the one who gags. A relative, one of hers, looked over at me as he passed my car and saw me, red eyed and gasping, and quickly looked away, shaking his head in sympathy. He probably thought I was losing it. That I waited until I got to the car to break down. I hoped he would tell someone that I was. That I had. Someone needs to know that I'm not okay.

Before she lay down in bed without ever really getting back up again, Maria had stopped going out at all. That was partly my fault, though. When I would take her to shows at the theater or to bars with big screen trivia games, she would rest her head in her hands in the first couple of minutes after arriving. Every time she went to the bathroom I waited for a good while then knocked on the door to be sure she wasn't asleep. We left early, wherever we were, and I told her one night that I was tired of wasting my money going out when she refused to enjoy it. She laughed an exhausted laugh and sat on the arm of the couch, rigid arms gripping her thighs for support.

"You're tired," she said, turning her head from me.

I stopped what I was going to say and stood there, somehow glad she had turned away. I didn't like being reminded.

"Look, I know how you feel," I started, until she laughed again, head still turned from me.

"Yeah, I'm sure you understand completely. Because we all live pretty much the same lives." She straightened her back so she could slide into the open couch behind her. Then, in the most aggressive way I can imagine, she fell asleep.

The last couple of months I sat with her while she slept, wondering what it was that made her so tired. I had the opposite problem, and the clock, red as anger, would shine brighter as the light outside faded. I wondered what it was that bound me to the bedside, and why I was alone there. I wondered when I could stop being nice, and start being remembered that way.
I went back to work the next day. Three different people squeezed my shoulder. It was as if they had all made a pact not to talk to me about Maria, but wanted to let me know on the sly. My boss came into my office while I wasn't doing much of anything. "How are you doing?" he asked from the middle of the room.
"Fine. I'm fine. I wanted to ask you, though, if we have anyone working here by the name of Randy? I don't know his last name. He's a young guy, maybe an intern. A real go-getter. Anything?"
"No, I don't recall anyone by that name. The mailroom perhaps?"
"No, I'm never down there."
"Well anyway, the reason I came in here," he said, "was that I was thinking you shouldn't be back so soon. It's... it's just too soon. Why don't you take a few days off?" He wasn't normally a nervous guy, but he fingered his manila folder until it was soft.
"Am I doing something wrong? I've got a lot on my mind, but it doesn't feel like I've slowed down any."
"No, you haven't, which is why you have to go."
"But I've got all of this work still to do. I've been off for a while now, and I don't think I can afford to take anymore time off."
"It's as simple as this: you're creeping people out."
"But I'm not doing anything strange. I'm the same as I was before."
"Remember Joel? Jenkins? When his mother died, he was just worthless."
"Yeah. We collected money. Bought him a fern or something."
"Right. And a cake."
He didn't go on right away, and I thought maybe he had reached his point.
"That was good cake. Did you buy me a cake?"
"Shit, no. I forgot. We'll get you one. But my point is, Joel slowed down afterwards, dropped the ball, and we understood. It's tough to lose someone you love. That's why it's so damned unsettling to watch you in here all focused on the job. It's not right. Just go home."
"There's nothing to do at home," I argued.
"That's the point," he said.
I passed my house when I came to it, thinking I would just circle the block and come back. Just take a quick drive to clear my head and think of other stuff. To listen to radio personalities and avoid bicycles. My block doesn't circle, though, and I drove for fifteen minutes before finally stopping at a restaurant she and I used to go to on lunch breaks. Sammy's. The seats were always bumpy and ripped, but the walls were clean and the people know us. Knew us. Know me. Whatever, it was familiar without being important, so I went in and grabbed the furthest booth from the bathroom.
The server, a young girl named Ashley, said hey, brought me my coffee, and asked if I needed to wait to order. She held her arms at her sides, dangling a pencil between two fingers.
"It's just me today," I said. "I'm just going to sit here a moment."
"Are you sure? We have beef noodle soup today. I know that's your favorite."
"Really, Ash. I just need a minute."
She thought of herself as a poet, and Maria had been sure—sure as the sun rises, to be specific—that most of her poems were about me. She had incredible skin. Everything else made you embarrassed for her.

"You look good, Neil," she said.
"Thank you," I said, smoothing out my suit jacket.

When she left I grabbed my cup by the handle, which I never do, and looked out the window, pretending that it was raining and I was watching it. A few cars went by. I thought about sadness. I longed for longing. I daydreamed about crying on a phone, to someone I never cry in front of. The window looked out on my car. It was comforting to see it so close, though if someone happened to steal it, it would still be a long jog to get it back. The parking lot at Sammy's was a long, narrow strip of asphalt in front of the building, separated from the main road by trust and instinct. Nobody really parked there anymore because you have to back out into traffic when you leave, but as I looked out there, a car pulled up. It was an old hatchback, dented in impossible places with just a hint of tread on the tires. On top was a kayak, and it looked like the most expensive part of the whole situation.

The busboy's cart ran into my table by accident and I jumped, but then pretended I was too melancholy to be upset by it.
"It's okay, man," I said, turning back to the window. "No harm done."
"You alright, Neil?" he asked.
I turned back to him, either looking annoyed or confused, and said, "I just said 'no harm done.' I'm fine."
"Uh huh. Where's your girl? Working?"
"I'm actually just coming back from her funeral." I was still wearing the suit that I had worn the day before. It was a rental because my father suggested that my work clothes were too casual. While I was getting fitted I tried to stay cool, as though I rented suits all the time. Like dry cleaning was for someone less evolved than myself. All around me were postmodern mannequins with missing foreheads, and life-sized pictures of young men in suits like(513,621),(978,814), hitting up the chaise lounge before their limos and underage dates arrived. I was being pampered, as though remaining alive were something to be rewarded for. When I got home from work I looked at myself in Maria's closet mirror. I thought I looked fairly handsome, though I wasn't sure if that mattered anymore. The pockets on the jacket were sewn shut, so I didn't know where to put my hands.

The suit was due back that day, but I had called them and told the woman working that I wanted to hang on to it for a few more days.
"It doesn't feel worn yet," I explained.
"I completely understand, sir," she said, "though I must admit it is quite unusual."
"Well, ma'am, I hear these things usually are." I doffed my collar, pulled down my shirt sleeves. "Just charge it to the card you already have."

Instead of waiting to see the busboy's reaction, I stared down at the table where someone had sketched a walrus.
"Yeah? That's too bad." I felt his arms cross, his head shake at the ground. "She was pretty."

I began to feel like coming to Sammy's was a mistake. For the past few days, my parents had been telling me that the reason I hadn't shown any signs of grieving was that I
had a funeral to prepare for, the way she had nearly ruined her relationship with my father while trying to plan the wedding.

"People get distracted," she had said. "Wait and see. When you run out of things to do, you'll break down like everyone else."

And so I was at Sammy's, waiting for it to set in, and everyone there was getting on my nerves. I wasn't thinking of Maria, but I had no excuse.

Randy called early, while I was still asleep.

"Did you hear? Did you fucking hear? Hello? You awake buddy?" he screamed.

With the receiver sitting on the pillow next to me, far from my ear, I mutter, "No. There is a good chance that I did not hear."

"It's happening, man. Right now. If we hurry we can get there while it's still raining."

"You seem to have missed a step here. I don't know what you are saying." I kept my eyes closed and reserved my interest, hoping to go back to sleep when he hung up.

"The flood. Kansas flooded. Can you believe it? Of all the places. I'm packed and I've got the kayaks. Think of the mudslides, man. The debris. I've got the weekend off, let's do this." Through the phone I heard honk and a scrape. Coincidentally, I heard the same sound out my window.

"Randy?" I opened my eyes. "Are you outside my house?" I asked. He answered by honking again. "Stay outside, Randy."

I heard his car door squeak open and scream shut so I swung out of bed, and as I reached for my robe I realized that I was still in the suit. It had felt comfortable the night before, like wearing a teddy bear, and I dozed off while watching TV in bed. It was still on, and I flipped it to a news channel as I heard the front door open downstairs. In Topeka, there had been a lot of steady rain for a few days and the Kansas River had passed the flood level by several feet. Randy walked in explained that this was the first time in something like fifty years that this had happened.

"Like Haley's Comet," he said. "Fuck yeah."

On the screen, dogs paddled towards shed roofs and volunteers were being rescued by professionals

"This is a bad idea," I said.

"Why? You've lost a lot, and so have they. This will bring everyone closer."

"This will make us bad people."

"Who can blame us? We're in fragile states."

I looked over at him. "Yeah? What's your problem?"

He tugged his shirt down and held it, then let it snap up. I would find out later that this action was the same as a shrug. "We're not here to pity each other," he said. "Are you coming or not?"

We packed up a few of my things, mostly things to read in the car since the actual kayaking wouldn't take more than an afternoon. I also brought a pillow for the immediate nap.

"You're driving," I said, sounding adamant yet unthreatening.

"Like I'd let you drive," he said, wiping grease and crumbs from my bag of chips onto his pant leg. "Swim trunks? Or are you just going to wear that suit the entire trip?"
By the looks of it, this was going to be his car's last trip. The license plate was taped on, the passenger side mirror was gone, and it had a tire resting on my curb. To its credit, though, the outside was the same color all the way around. He drove the same speed no matter what the speed limit was, which was usually well over the limit. I once thought it was a tricky route, getting through the downtown area. When we had first moved to that house, I got lost everyday among the three way stops and the roads that turn back on themselves then split around to make room for shopping centers, merging in a school zone or in the driveway of a church. Maria said the road was like a river the way it meandered, and letting it pull you along with it could be just as dangerous. She said the shops were like little islands, and the public parking was the littered beach. Maria had said that small towns built roads like that, confusing and unintuitive, on purpose, to deter outsiders. To aggravate them, and force them to find alternate routes. No one, she said, likes to be bothered.

"I'm sure you can relate," she said.
"Randy?" I asked. "Why me?"
"That is the most pathetic thing I have ever heard," he said.

I was asleep before we hit the highway, but the radio in the car had a short in one of the wires so every time there was a bump in the road the radio would either turn off or back on. The turning on was the most annoying, like an alarm clock on permanent snooze.

"Why don't you just turn the radio off?" I asked. "Then it would at least be consistent." I meant it as a suggestion, but he took it as a question.
"Keeps me from getting too far into my head," he said.
"Me too. Maybe turn it off for a little while?" When I yawned, I could taste gasoline.

"Here," he said, then veered the car toward a pothole. The car shook and the left tire squealed. My drink tumbled out of the cup holder and leaked onto the floor mat.
"Shit. What are you doing?" I sat up in my seat, fumbling with the bottle as it rolled around.
"Radio's on. Should last awhile. Go to sleep."

Before the trip got too far underway, we stopped for car food. I found that my new friend was an avid eater. He filled the back seat with snacks I hadn't considered since I was twelve. Snack cakes and things filled with peanut butter. And we still stopped every few hours to go to the bathroom and fill up on side dishes. Specifically at buffets and cafeterias that seemed to grow more and more abundant the further east we drove. Each time we got out he would say, "Just stretching the old legs. Let's eat." I only ate at half of the places we stopped, but the cashiers kept ringing me up for full price, claiming that I couldn't enter without paying. Randy would snicker and I would argue and by the fifth one I told him he had to pay my way or else I would hitchhike home.

"I can't believe we're actually doing this," he said over a massive plate of yams.
"Do we have a plan?"
"Sure. Park the car by the water and get in."

He went back to the bar and fiddled with the crab legs, all of them catching the rest like yard waste or wire hangers. The whole pile went on his plate along with a soup bowl of drawn butter. The only pocket in the suit that wasn't sealed was an inside pocket.
where I kept my cigarettes. I lit a cigarette and blew smoke at the table-top ad for cheap prime rib night. I was up to one cigarette a day so far, and things were only getting better. A man at the next table shot me a dirty look, but I didn't know if it was for the smoking or because I looked like I had slept in my suit. Either way, he was wearing a windbreaker inside, so fuck him. Maria would have loved that man, maybe as much as I didn't. Sitting here without her, and without the smell of her tuna melt--warm mayonnaise and cheese--I realized how much I would rather ignore that man than describe him. He could have disappeared, sinking into the vinyl seat covers, or been brushed away by an employee's moldy rag, and I would have felt no more or less lonely for the absence. Maria used to make me aware of things, as if reality was something you had to practice.

"Why haven't you ever asked me about my wife?" I asked when Randy came back. He was stirring his butter with one of the crab claws, and it looked a bit like torture. "I figured it was a sensitive subject," he said. I thought about that for a moment, unsure where to go from there.

"Did you know her?" I asked.
"Sure," he said. He set the crab leg he was struggling with on the table and punched it, crushing it and rendering the meat inside useless. "She was pretty."
"Yeah."
"Why haven't you brought her up until now?" When he sucked on one of the legs it made a wet whistling sound. He coughed and then apologized. "I still haven't brought her up," I said.
"That's weak. I loved her too, you know. She was like family."
I hesitated for a second, then said, "Seriously. You didn't know her. You don't know her. Or me. It's not cute anymore."
He shrugged and ripped off a claw.
"You know," I started, drawing imaginary pictures on the table with my straw, "I still haven't cried. I don't know why."
"I had a friend once. His father died when he was young and he didn't respond in any way. His parents were worried that he might be a sociopath, but then a week later he started vomiting and broke out in hives. Maybe you're like that."
"I haven't vomited, either."
"Well maybe you're an asshole." I didn't respond in any way. "I'm just saying," he said when he knew I wasn't going to say anything.

We only drove for a few more hours after that. The radio continued its staccato report on the weather while I drifted in and out of sleep. I had no ability to make small talk and he seemed to have no interest in it. I dreamt of Maria for a while. Then I dreamt of science. By the time we pulled into a motel I decided that I really missed sex, and wondered if that was normal.
"I'll wait here," Randy said.
"For what?"
"Go grab the room. Tell him it's for one."
He didn't give me any money, citing his generosity at the buffet. The room was cheaper for just one person.
"There's only one bed," I said when I came back.
"That's all they had?" he asked.
"That's all they'll give me."
"So where are we going now?" he asked, jerking the car out of park.
"46, lover." I winked at him and grabbed my bag out of the back before he could drive away.
"I'm not sleeping in a bed with you."
"You can leave if you want, but you'll have to pay for the room."
The bed in the room was a king, sitting roughly in the middle of the floor. The pictures on the wall were crooked, and when I tried to straighten them, I found they were bolted down. Randy made a gigantic noise when he entered, and I turned to find him stuck, wedged between the door frame and a kayak.
"Grab it. Quick."
I didn't move, except to cross my arms and tilt my head a little.
"I don't want them to get stolen. Grab an end, would you?"
We muscled the kayaks in, Randy constantly glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one was around to see the two of us together. When we finally lay down to sleep, he curled up on the very edge of the bed, on the side closest to the door. He didn't even get under the covers.
"Mind if I watch TV?" I asked, remote already in hand.
"Could you not? It messes up my breathing."
I turned it on and hopped onto the bed. The motel had cable, which was something we could never afford at home. I turned it to the game show channel and watched while Randy sighed louder and louder.
"You're just dreaming," I finally said to him. "You think a dump like this would really have cable?"
"Is this funny to you?" he asked without turning to me. "If sick shit like this made me happy I'd be spending my time trying to be sad, too."
"What?"
"You heard me. I said that you're twisted. That you get pleasure in perverse ways?"
"Oh. Have I always been this way?" He didn't respond. "So, old friend, how do I change? You know me better than anyone, right?"
"You've known you a lot longer than I have."
I waited a few minutes before turning off the TV. The screen went black but still emitted light and I looked down at my outstretched legs to watch them fade out of view, then reappear when my eyes adjusted.
"But-" I started, but he was already asleep. I wanted to ask how watching TV at night was any more twisted than planning a canoe trip through a disaster area, but I realized that he would have an answer, and that I wouldn't want to hear it.

The next morning Randy asked twice if I was sure I didn't want to change my clothes. The suit was becoming gray and had inexplicably collected cat hair. I assured him that I was fine, and to remember that he was the crazy one on this trip, and that I could afford to have a few quirks.

The highway was lined with billboards, as if the businesses were trying to block out the trees to make you forget that the world was ever there.

Welcome Center. 5MI.
"Is there something around here?" I asked, pointing to the souvenir sign. "Are we near a big city or something?"

"Everyone has something to be proud of."

LAST GOOD PORK CHOP FOR 100 MILES.
Welcome Center. 4MI.
Gifts. Fireworks. Western Wear.
Welcome Center. 3MI. Free Orange Juice.

"We should do something. Get out of this car." I slid my seat all the way back to try and stretch my legs. I was more well rested than the day before and I was getting antsy.

"We aren't on vacation. We're on a mission."

Trudy's Coffee. Now With Drive-Thru!

DENTAL MUSEUM

There's a WORLD underground. Come see the Caverns.

"There. Look. It's a cave. We should go to the cave."

"I'm not going to the cave."

"Why not? It's sporty. And dangerous. You'd love it."

He tipped up a straws full of sugar and swallowed it all at once, shaking his head as though it had been bourbon.

"I guess it's your trip, too," he said. "You're paying my way."

The old man leading our group had only been talking for twenty minutes before Randy decided that we should escape the group and explore on our own. It was a family owned cave, discovered by the tour guide's grandfather while he was shirking his chores and playing in the cow fields. Each of the natural structures were named after another family member, and instead of describing the process of formation, the old man told the history of the previous generations of Wiltfongs. Finally, when we were told to turn off our headlamps and experience pure darkness, Randy and I hid until the lights came back on and the group had moved on. We waited a couple of minutes there behind the stalactite, staring down as though searching for a lost button or examining cave slime. The walls dripped around us, the earth trying to be water, and it smelled like being pinned under a car. A sign at the mouth of the cave told us not to touch anything, lest their stalactites become calamites. Randy and I both got the joke, but that didn't make it funny. We had been squeezing our way through miles of spaces no wider than my foot. Thirteen adults walking like we were hiding behind each other, and each time we entered a new room it felt like being born. In real life people never got that close to walls unless they were peeing or being arrested.

"Are they gone?" I asked.

I waved my hand in front of where his voice came from, but I was further away from him than I thought. "We are more alone than ever."

"Alright. I'll turn my lamp on, and you leave yours off. That way, if mine runs out of batteries, we'll have a back up."

"Roger that. Over."

I followed behind him and his curious beam of light as he crawled through the narrow passages. We were going the same direction everyone else had, but Randy was
searching either side for a hole or tunnel that he could slip off into. He jerked his head
back and forth, getting more and more desperate, while I tried to keep up, getting more
and more seasick.

"I'm turning my light on," I said.
"Fine. Kill us both, why don't you."
There was no hidden passage, but the exit was locked and we had to knock in
order to be let out. The exit was a back door to the gift shop where I bought a little dish to
hold a wet tea bag.

"That wasn't a cave," Randy said when we got back in the car. "It was just a hole
in the ground."

"That's what caves are," I said, shoving my souvenir in the door pocket.
"No more stops like that, I mean it. From now on, we run on schedule."

We stopped at a rest area on a strip of highway without any exits, let alone
buffets, for 50 miles, and found a parking spot by the door so Randy only had to duck
walk fifteen feet to the bathroom door. I bought a candy bar from the vending machine
and looked at the map on the wall, which was large and protected by glass, like some
Midwestern war room. There were little flags hanging from straight pins, saying
"trailhead" or "root beer floats." A mile was about as long as my index finger between the
second and third knuckle, so I bent my finger and tapped the glass along the highway to
the Kansas border. Randy came out at around thirty taps, rubbing his hands on the back
of his pants. I could still hear the hand dryer blowing before the door eased shut again.

"You gotta go or what?" Randy said. I kept tapping, counting aloud to block out
Randy.

"Sixty," I finally said, and dropped my arm back to my side. "Sixty miles."
"You could have asked me. I already know where we're going. Go on in now, I
wanna get moving. We can get there before the light fades."
Randy was leaning against the back of the car when I came out. He was squinting
up into the air, but I didn't see anything when I followed his gaze.

"You ever want to do that?" he asked, still gazing away at the sky, mouth open. If
it was raining here, he might have drowned. I gave up searching the sky and crumpled up
my candy bar wrapper.

"Life is always gonna be this way," he said.
"What way?" I fished in his pocket for coins.
"Like that bird up there. Flying."
I looked up again. "There's not a bird up there, Randy."

"Of course there's a bird." He looked down and blinked his eyes. I could picture
the bluish haze he was seeing everywhere. He blinked faster, and I don't know if he was
trying to make it go away, or if he was refreshing it. He gave up and looked at me. "It's
the sky. There's always a bird." He looked back up and crossed his arms. "I used to want
to fly, but watching these birds, I just don't know. It seems like you can only glide around
so long before you aim yourself at something solid so you can move at the last minute."

We didn't have enough change for a soda. Randy was watching me not care.
"You know?" he said, and I didn't.
The rest of the trip was pretty silent, except for the radio, which showed valiant effort. I didn't nod off, but instead I picked at dead skin around my fingernails, watching them float down into my soda puddle on the floor. Randy looked exhausted. The foot not driving was resting on the seat and his head leaned against the window.

"How'd you sleep?" I asked.

The news on the radio began a story about Topeka, and then abruptly cut out.

"What? Wha'd he say?" he snapped at me. I opened and closed my mouth like a fish, unsure how to answer. "Fuck," he said, then jerked the wheel hard to the left. The car smacked the median wall and sparked, briefly forcing control out of Randy's hands. I fell against him and he pushed me off. When I made some startled outburst he yelled at me to shut up.

The ride smoothed a little and Randy turned the radio up to drown out our panting, but the report had ended. He punched the dash in frustration.

"What? Are you worried all the water's gone?" I asked.

"This is my life," he said. "Excuse me for being interested."

The water was not, in fact, gone. In all their panic, though, the people of Topeka had left one side of the highway empty. The way in. Going out was harder, though, with miles of people trying all sorts of ways to get out of town, recliners and suitcases strapped to their cars with the same care as the kayaks on Randy's. We got off quite a few exits before Topeka because the water blocked off most of the entrances. The way in wasn't hard to find, though. We just followed the emergency vehicles.

As we unloaded the kayaks, I looked around the parking lot. We were in an apartment complex at the top of a hill. We were going to walk down the hill to the water's edge and set off. The windows of the building slowly filled with people staring out at us.

"What if these people mistake us for rescue workers or something?" I said. "I don't know if I can handle turning them down."

"They live in a new world now, Neil. They see a guy rowing around in a suit, they probably just think he's going to work or something." He handed me a plastic bag. "Cell phone, wallet, whatever you don't want wet," he barked. His motions were quick. Nervous. "Come on. We're ready."

The launch was awkward, and I bumped into a parking meter before spinning around completely. Randy was a little better, saying that the street was a lot like the pool he had trained in. Once we got going, though, I stopped bumping into things. It was drizzling a little, and I thought a rainbow would be appropriate. The sun, however, did not oblige.

"Which way to Main Street?" I asked.

"What am I? From here?" he said as he struggled with his oar. "We have all day to find it, though." He smiled at me and, wrenching his body in what looked like the most painful of ways, he managed to flip his kayak over and stay inside it. The boat rocked as he shimmied underwater, and it took me a second to realize he couldn't get back up.

"Sorry," he gasped after I had helped him over. "I used to be better at that."
The water had risen past the first floor of the buildings where the ground was flat. General stores and dentist offices had signs half submerged, and desks and beach balls floated by the other direction.

"Does that mean we're rowing upstream?" I asked.

"Would you just enjoy yourself?"

We turned against the light, Randy smacking it with his paddle for emphasis, and continued on toward the capitol building.

"Let's split up," Randy suggested.

"Why? Are we looking for something?"

We didn't bob on the water while we rested. The water stayed still, no matter how much we pushed through it.

"No," he said, obviously weighing his next words. "I just want some of this to happen alone."

"Yeah." I waited a comparable time in silence. "We can swap stories later."

He nodded and waited for me to paddle away.

I paddled back toward the car, and the current was, indeed, going that way. Some people had gathered on a few of the balconies to scowl at me as I passed. I imagined they were talking about me, and not how to save themselves and their things. I was sure they were discussing me with their friends. I was probably wrong, but that was sort of the point. I watched them out of the corner of my eye while I adjusted my cuff links, and apparently stopped watching where I was going, because I ended up on a street I didn't remember. It led to a residential part of the town, where some of the smaller houses were nothing more than gables reaching out of the water as if grasping for limbs from the trees overhead. A cat meowed from one of those trees, so I paddled over to it. It climbed higher to escape me and so I thought spiteful things about it.

One house had a window fall out of it, so I rowed through it and found myself in a bedroom. It had belonged to parents, as the wall of pictures bragged, but now it was a swamp. Flies swarmed around the floating lipstick. Moss gathered on the lampshade. I wanted there to be fish swimming around, but there weren't. The water was dark, but I could still see the floor, cluttered with toilet paper rolls and balled up socks and other things that must have floated there before taking on too much.

I slid out of the boat and stood on the bed, not underwater, but wet nonetheless. A picture frame bobbed by the nightstand. It was the mother of the house holding her newborn daughter. The shot was yellow and black, made to look antique, though the subjects wore t-shirts. I held it with both hands, using my thumbs to wipe away the grimy water drops. She looked happy. Something about it made my stomach tighten, and I noticed, for the first time, the smell of mold and decay around me. That the house was destroyed, even as it stood there, holding the things that help create a life. They would tear it down one day, and when they did it would not be its destruction, but rather the first step towards making something new.

Randy's boat appeared at the window.

"You lost your kayak," he said. I looked around. He was right. "I'll grab it."

When he came back, I had put the picture on a pillow. He pushed the boat toward me and I climbed in, knocking over a lamp in the process. Randy put his hand on my shoulder as I paddled by.

"I know, man. I know," he said.
I looked at him close. "What?" I asked, pushing his boat away. "What do you know? I don't even know."
"I don't know. Shit. You looked like you could use some understanding. Forget it. Let's go."
And I didn't know. I couldn't tell when to stop being distracted and start letting everything sink in.
When we got to the car, it was surrounded by full grown adults with children's buckets. They had broken the back window out and were shoveling water into it. A steady stream was coming out from the bottom of the door.
"Hey!" Randy called. "Get the hell away from there." He paddled harder, which made him look ridiculous.
The mob scattered. A police officer watched the whole thing while leaning on his cruiser.
"What are you doing? Can't you stop them?" Randy shouted at the cop. He slid his kayak up onto the concrete and climbed out of it, his splash skirt slapping his thighs as started running. He made a ball out of the wet mulch surrounding a nearby bush and hurled it at the people running away.
"Fun time's over, boys," the officer said. Kansas didn't have an accent, but he did. "Time to get back home."
Randy brushed his hands off on his pants and walked toward the car. I slid out into the water while he opened up his doors to let the car drain. My feet touched the pavement there, and I waded for a moment, looking around at the gray buildings slowly turning green, and the oil spots turning small area of the surface into floating rainbows. It was unhealthy to be submerged, but I couldn't help but wonder if the rainbow spot could make you happy the same way that the warm spot in the water makes you suspicious of those around you. I wondered why everything had to be a metaphor for something else, instead of just being what it was. Why tragedies were so like other tragedies that instead of feeling isolated by pain, I felt average. I looked back at Randy, who was pressing on the car seats to wring them out, and I wondered how Maria would fight back against me, if she knew how I had used her as an excuse.
I pulled the baggy out of my inside pocket and grabbed out a cigarette, lighting it as I walked toward the car.
"Maybe the air blowing in the back while we drive will help dry it out," I said while Randy scooped out the flooded floorboards. "It's not like we're dry anyway."
"These people should know better."
I looked down at my clothes. "I don't think they'll take back this suit now."
Dating

Lou was a dog person. His face was average and handsome, topped with a bowl-cut like his brother, Gabe's, but his body was covered in hair, and his arms and legs were short. He spoke English, but he drooled a lot when he did, and instead of peeing in a toilet, Gabe had to let him outside. So when Gabe's friends asked about Lou, that's what he told them. Lou was a dog person. Simple as that.

"There is a word for me," Lou would say to the women Gabe brought over. "But I can't remember what it is." It was his ice-breaker. A way to make the ladies more comfortable, taking a scientific approach to small talk while also making it a guessing game. "Matador?" he would say, staring down at the floor while his unclipped tail went wild. "Mastodon?" Then he would rub against their legs and they would make an excuse and leave.

Gabe set up a baby gate in the doorway to the kitchen and kept Lou in there when he had company over. Lou could reach the kitchen counter well enough on his hind legs, and Gabe had tied a hand towel to the handle of the refrigerator so Lou could bite down on it and pull the door open. In this way, Lou could feed himself while Gabe was occupied. He would clip-clap his paws back and forth across the linoleum, listening for the sound of Gabe leading his date into the bedroom. That never happened.

"Why don't you ever just go out?" Lou asked once. "I can take care of myself."
"I don't want you peeing on the floor."
"I would never. I live here too, you know."
"You're the one who refuses the litterbox, not me."
"I'm not a cat, Gabe. I'm not even a dog."
"Well whatever. I'd have to bring them home sometime."

Gabe looked everywhere for love, trying to remember his mother's advice that there is someone out there for everyone, and that there are lots of people in the world, so he shouldn't be surprised when it takes a long time to find her. Lou listened to this advice, too, even though it wasn't meant for him.

Before long, the women at Gabe's job all knew about Lou, and so did most of the women in town. And although things changed slowly where they lived, eventually a new woman came to town. Casey. She was hired on Tuesday morning, and by Wednesday evening she had agreed to a date at his house. Gabe sat Lou down before her first visit and asked him nicely but sternly if he would be a good boy and not scare this one off.

"I think she could be special," Gabe said. "And I mean to find out."

Lou stayed outside during the date, but watched through the window as Gabe and Casey ate their dinner, then sat on the sofa watching TV, letting commercials and sitcoms guide their conversations into the way things were, or are, or one day will be. Lou watched them for an hour, and felt relieved that this woman really seemed to like Gabe, and he seemed to like her back. Then he thought that he would be the only obstacle in the whole scenario, and felt like running away right then. But he also felt really horny, and so paused to rub himself in the mulch around the bushes.

The front door opened and Lou froze, not wanting to give himself away. He was, after all, still a secret. It was Gabe.

"Lou?" he called.
Gabe brought Lou in, and Casey gasped. It was easy to see what had happened. Before she had arrived, Gabe had walked around, vacuuming and febreezing every surface and lint-rolling every suit coat, trying to get rid of the evidence. But then, after they had gotten comfortable with one another, they began looking through an old photo album. The track pictures, the graduation shots, the old driver's licenses, whatever else humans do or have. Then, of course, the family photos.

"I know, I know," Gabe said, leading Lou into the kitchen away from the heaving woman. He set up the baby gate quickly, then walked back to the couch to explain.

"There's a name for him," he said.

"But he's not really a dog, right?" Casey asked. "Like, he doesn't have any dog... in him or anything."

"No," Gabe said. "Nothing like that. I don't think."

"Don't be so sure, Gaby," Lou barked from behind his gate. There was a scraping sound, and then a muffled slap as the gate fell onto the carpet. Lou strutted in and sat on his haunches in front of the TV, facing the couple on the couch. Casey watched Lou blink and glance back and forth between them and, as she held back a gag, she thought of how that same piercing stare that made her Lab seem so intelligent made Lou look homicidal.

"I can speak Dog."


"No, bald man, like I understand it. For instance, you, just then, admitted that you shave your legs. Roughly speaking."

"Whatever."

"No really, listen. Ah, sh sh. You hear that? There's a dog now. She's saying, 'Lou! Lou! I need you.'"

Casey said she didn't hear a dog and Gabe agreed.

"And how would it know your name anyway?" Gabe asked.

"It's a translation. Just wait. She's running at top speed two blocks away. You'll hear her soon. They come from all over, these girls."

"Why don't you get yourself one then. Maybe she'd settle you down some."

"Uh, because dogs are ugly. Come on. Would you fuck a dog? No seriously, would you?"

"You're not exactly a stud. Maybe you ought to lower your standards a little."

"Bullshit," Lou said. "I was made like this to transcend. To show you chumps how to really get down. He bit down on a pillow and thrashed it around, which sent him toppling sideways into the endtable. "And not one of these freak-lovers, either. A real classy dame. Got it?" he said, standing back up and sauntering back towards the kitchen. He opened the fridge and took out an old corncob and chewed it on the floor. After a few minutes, they heard the dog barking outside. Lou lifted his head, but then smiled and kept eating.

Gabe and Casey sat on the couch for a few silent minutes, neither one knowing what to do. He touched the back of her hand gently, then, when she didn't mind, he rested his hand there.

"He's like a pet?" she asked, looking at the carpet.

Gabe looked where she was staring. "No. He's my brother."

"He just looks so much like you."

The TV flashed ads for flea collars, invisible fences.
"So next time?" she said.
"Hmm?"
"I shouldn't bring him a toy?"
"Oh. No. Maybe some beef jerky. Or a sponge soaked in beer."
Lou's head appeared on the armrest beside her.
"I like pretzel salt," he said.
Casey looked over at Lou, his face shiny and slick with corn, and she leapt from her spot on the couch and ran, hand covering her mouth, to the bathroom.
Gabe ran some water to start washing the plates and pans from dinner while Lou sniffed around Casey's purse. Gabe thought about Casey, and the conversations they had been having. It was harder now that he had gotten so close, to realize that he might always be alone with his brother. Harder to not wish he was gone.
"So she likes me?" Lou asked, scratching the inside of his ear, slowly at first, then with gusto.
"Yeah," Gabe said. "I'm sure she'd been looking for an excuse to vomit."
"Women are like that," Lou said.
A few yards away, a dog barked again, and Gabe wondered how Lou would interpret it. To him it was probably trying to stand out in a world packed so tight and full, but to Gabe it was the opposite. It was the sound of something keeping everything else away. Something refusing to be separated from those it was attached to. Something doing the only thing it had ever done, because it was the only thing that seemed to work.
Rake Me Up Before You Go

I sat up and shook my head, blinking hard a few times and rubbing the quickly growing sore spot by my ear. Through my groggy, clumsily alert eyes I glanced at my dad, who was driving the truck with a sly grin on his face, like he had just had sex with a mental patient. The window to my right wore a faint smudge shaped enough like me to let me know that my head had touched it for the briefest of moments.

“Did you hit my head against the window?” I asked my dad.

He didn’t take his eyes from the road when he answered, “You are in this truck to work, not to sleep. You can sleep at home.”

“But my head,” I argued. “My head. You hit it. You’re my father and you hit my head.” It was something like eight in the morning and I couldn’t think properly at all.

“You’ll get over it. Maybe later I’ll let you use the radio,” he reached out and patted the dashboard like it was an obedient hound, “but for right now just shut up about it.”

I exhaled, letting my lips flap, and turned my entire body so that I was pressed tight against the door. As the bushes streamed by I picked at the logo on my shirt that said “Pet Waste Removal Expert,” which to me meant “Pooper Scooper.” It couldn’t be that hard of a job if I, at fifteen, qualified as an expert on my first day. The collar on the shirt was already starting to chafe and I hadn’t even been wearing it for an hour. Normally I would be in a tee shirt and my hair would be loose and dirty. Instead, Dad wanted me to style my hair like his, only mine was the brown his used to be before it turned gray.

“It was good to talk to your mother the other day,” he said, trying to make conversation. It didn’t work.

The most embarrassing part about the whole fiasco was that the large white trailer being pulled behind the truck said the name of the company in this inescapable moving-billboard kind of way. The truck kept moving down the highway to a town with what I pictured to be a wellspring of dog crap, expansive and plentiful, and I was going to get to pick it all up myself. My dad had started the business himself two years earlier and it had grown enough to become his only source of income. Before my dad had this business, he had cleaned bathrooms. That, too, was his own business, and he did it until the small number of clients got smaller and he moved on. Before that, according to my mom, he sold reflective address signs.

It was unusual that he had someone to help him, even more so that it would be me, but I had screwed up in an extra special way and put myself in his debt. It involved me wrecking Mom's car into a fire truck without a license, insurance, or supervisor. She had picked me up from the accident in a cab while she was still on the phone with my dad.

"He'll pay for it," she told me on the ride home, "but you'll have to work it off."
"How?" I asked, still shaken from the crash.
"Asshole picks up shit for a living. Take a guess." I didn't guess, but instead let it sink in. "Try not to pick up any of his habits while you're with him."

We finally arrived to the first house a few minutes later. A man in a full sweatsuit was in the driveway washing a large truck. The hose was still turned on, even though
there was a bucket of soapy water next to him, and water was running down the driveway. Dad waved to him as he hopped out of the cab and the man gave a small but friendly wave back.

“That’s Mr. Jordon,” Dad said.

“So?”

“Try and behave yourself, okay?”

He walked back to the trailer and went in the side door. When he came out he handed me a pair of leather work gloves.

“We’re doing this with our hands?” I asked.

“Calm down. Nothing is ever as bad as you think.” He worked with his own gloves for a moment, then handed me a tiny rake and a scoop with a long handle.

“I retired this set about a month ago,” he said. “I think you’ll find it eager to get back to work.” He himself had a set that had clearly been polished recently. He ducked back into the trailer and came out wearing a backpack with a hose coming out of one side.

"What is that?" I asked, pointing at the bag with my rake.

He crossed his arms in front of him and straightened his back like a salesman. One that made you feel stupid for not already owning whatever he was selling. Then he said, "Sometimes the piles can be pretty moist and break apart in the grass. When that happens, we get up what we can and then wash the rest off with this." He squirted the pavement to demonstrate. I jumped back as if the stream was coming near me, which it wasn't.

"Don't worry," Dad said. He looked over to make sure Mr. Jordon wasn't looking. "It's just dish soap and water. Works like a dream." The bag thunked and sloshed when he set it on the pavement. Unzipped, it revealed a pressurized canister, normally used for bug spray. "Pretty clever, huh?"

I shook my head and chuckled.

"What?" Dad asked, zipping the bag again.

"Nothing. It's just that I pictured this being a little more, I don't know, professional. I mean, what do you put the crap into? Paint buckets?"

He stood up with an expression like a child just sneezed in his face. He reached into the trailer and pulled out two large white buckets with metal wires for handles, plastic grocery bags lining the insides.

"Actually, smart ass, they're pickle buckets from the deli. Go ahead and make your jokes now, because, in the truck, there won't be anyone to keep me from bouncing your head around like a ball."

Whenever my dad tries to look intimidating he cranes his neck forward and squints, and he points like you don't know who he's talking to. As a kid it had scared me, but as the years passed it changed to being funny. Or I just changed to laughing at it and it stayed the same. I responded to his threat, so he told me to pick up my bucket and follow him.

Mr. Jordon had been scrubbing a tire, but he stood up as we approached. My dad slipped off his left glove as Mr. Jordon wiped his own on a towel.

"Howdy, sir. Trucks look good," Dad said as they shook hands.

"Yeah. I like to wash it myself so I know that it's done right. Is this your kid?"

They both turned to me as I was in the middle of rolling my eyes, so I reversed
the roll and grabbed at my temples with my hand. After a few rubs I didn't hear an introduction, so I peeked out from under my hand and they were both staring at me.

"Sorry," I said. "I thought I was getting a migraine."

"Oh. You should eat more salt. I hear that helps." Mr Jordon nodded when he spoke, but it was so light and regular that it appeared involuntary.

"I'll have to try that."

"This is my son, Grinn," Dad finally said. "He's helping me out this week, so you'll probably see him again in a couple of days."

"Taking over the family business, eh? No shame in that." He laughed a good hearted laugh and I thought that, much like his head nod, he was completely unaware of the dick he was being.

"Well, sir, we had better get to it," Dad said, extending his hand again for a shake.

"Alright. Don't work too hard, now. Good meeting you, Glen." He didn't try to shake my hand, but instead went back to his tires. I followed my dad around the side of the house and marveled at his ability to unlock the gate without looking at it. He glanced around to make sure the dog wouldn't get out as we went in and then locked the gate behind me. The dog was a friendly little terrier that ran up to Dad when it saw him.

"Hey Ronnie. How ya doin? How's Ronnie doin?" Dad reached into his pocket and tossed the dog a green treat shaped like a bone. "Good boy, Ronnie."

"Are you trying to get him to say his name?" I asked.

He pointed to the far end of the yard where some vines had started to cover the fence. "I'll start there," he said. "you start here on this end."

I was absent mindedly spinning the rake by the leather strap that was, I supposed, to go around the wrist in case the business of dog poo got too turbulent.

"Meet in the middle?" I asked, my head still down, watching the strap braid itself.

"No. We'll pass each other and go over what the other did. Instead of doing it twice as fast, we'll do it twice as good. Give these people their money's worth." He snatched the rake from my hand and I jerked. "Let me show you something."

We walked to the nearest visible pile and he handed me back my rake.

"When you go to scoop," he started, making sure I was watching, "start a ways back behind the pile and give several quick scrapes like this." He showed me what that looked like. "That way you don't smash it or miss any. Here, you try."

I did it right the first try. "I think I've got it. Should I holler when I need a squirt from your backpack?"

"Sure," he said, then walked over to his corner.

We didn't talk during the job, and so my mind kept trying to go to sleep. I would get to a pile, scoop it, and then stand there for a few seconds just rocking back and forth. When our paths finally crossed, he was much further along than I was.

"If you can't sleep in the truck," Dad said, pointing and squinting at me," then why on Earth would you be allowed to sleep out here? They could be watching you."

I widened my eyes and turned my head to either side. "Who?" I whispered.

Dad leaned over to see behind me. "Did you do your half good?"

"Great, actually. It must be in my blood. Can we leave now?"

I don't think that my dad ever liked me. Not really, anyway. Not like a friend would like me or anything like that. I thought about that when we walked back to the truck, his long legs carrying him further and further away from me. I didn't try to keep up
because I was used to it. No one could keep up with him. My mom had kicked him out years ago, and he lived just a few exits down the highway. Not very far, but he still didn't come by very often. I planned to return the favor when I got my license. Most of the stuff that I know about him I learned from Mom, and part of me wondered how true some of it was.

He pulled the grocery bags out of the buckets and tied them off, tossing them into a sealable trash can that was secured in the trailer with bungee cords. With his space-man spray gun he cleaned the scoops and rakes, then he grabbed my leg without warning and I twisted and fell against the passenger door of the truck.

"What the hell?" I yelled.

"Keep it down. I'm washing your shoes off." He aimed the nozzle and turned his head away from the splash before I pulled my foot away.

"Give me that thing. I'll do it."

I sprayed off my shoes and shuffled them in the street to dry them. When my dad was satisfied, we got in the truck and drove away.

The truck wasn't as lulling on that trip, and I started talking to stay awake. Most of it was jibberish and I could tell he wasn't listening. I told him about my girlfriend, Mickey, and her art and I said that she wasn't an artist like everyone is an artist, but that her work was good, relevant stuff that even he would like. I was answered by silence, so after a while I stopped trying.

Talking about her made me want to talk to her, but Dad had made me leave my phone at Mom's. When I told her how I was paying my parents back she giggled and made me put on the collared shirt. Then she mock-swooned and told me to shower before coming to her house that night. Earlier in our relationship I had told Mickey that I didn't ever want to talk about my dad's job again because she always had something snotty to say and it made me uncomfortable.

"So your dad picks up crap," she had said, moving closer to me on the couch so she could pet my cheek. "That's your problem, not mine."

The neighborhoods outside the truck were declining in value as we went and I was surprised when the truck finally slowed and stopped by a single story house overgrown with weeds. The chimney had a crack going clear up the side, and the dogs immediately started growling when we pulled up.

"I thought you were just gouging the rich with this scheme," I said to the window. The screen door to the house didn't have a screen. "You can't seriously take these people's money for cleaning up their crap."

"Why not?" he asked, looking over my shoulder as if pondering with me.

"Because they don't have any money to take. They should be eating their dogs."

"You were raised in a house like that."

"Yeah, and we picked up our own crap."

"It's like I said, Partner. Nothing is as bad as it seems. Come on."

The dogs were boxers, and they were tied to a tree by a thick chain and a padlock. Dad went through the gate without knocking on the front door and told me to start scooping.

"No real pattern here," he said. "They can only go as far as the chain, so you just have to get in there with your rake and fish it out. Don't get to close. I'll be right back."
The dogs had been trying to bite and claw the tree down, so it didn't have any bark left for about five feet up. The ground around the tree was similarly bare. When I cautiously moved my rake toward a pile, squating instead of leaning forward, one of them leapt over and nipped the handle. My dad walked around the tree with a bag of dog food and poured it into a trough-like food dish.

"This is ridiculous," I said, a little shaken. I wielded my rake like a sword, making kung fu noises and snarling. "We are going to die. Can't these dogs go somewhere?" I eased up to a pile while the dogs nipped at my dad.

"Keep it up," he said, picking his scoop back up. One dog spotted me again and ran until it choked itself on its collar.

We took turns distracting the dogs to make it easier, and according to my dad, we finished in record time. On the way out I dared him to pet one of the dogs, and he tried to trip me with his rake.

"Do you feed all of the dogs?" I asked when the mailboxes outside lost their charm.

"No. That client back there, she's an old woman. She can hardly move around. Her son pays me to take care of the dogs, which includes feeding them. It's kind of a special case."

"Can't they just get rid of the dogs?"

"I think it's a protection thing. Makes her feel safe." He pulled down his visor and a pack of cigarettes fell down.

"Yeah, but-"

"Really, Grinn. It's not my place to argue with them. Are you old enough to smoke yet?"

We hit a few more houses, and I was shocked at the places that dogs felt comfortable going. There were small ledges littered with dog dirt, and there were spaces under decks that no dog could fit into, yet there poo would be. My dad knew all of the hot spots, and he would ask as we were leaving if I had checked the daffodils, behind the gnome, or the top of the slide.

"What do you think?" he asked me on the way to lunch.

"I can only imagine that this is the way they celebrate Easter in Hell."

Lunch was fast food, and he was nice enough to ask if I wanted to go in or get drive thru.

"Let's go in," I said. "This truck is making me crazy."

When we finally sat down with our burgers and nuggets, he pulled out his cell phone and started pushing buttons. It beeped and booped for the longest time and I had to stop eating and just stare at him.

"What?" he asked when he noticed. I only raised my eyebrows. "Do you think I should call your mother? Have her meet us here?"

"No. Really, I don't," I said, and started eating again. This was the conversation I was always worried I would have if I hung out with my dad. He had cheated on my mom years before, but I had never thought that it was because he was unhappy. I had never known him to be unhappy. I had, however, known him to be weak.
"You think she ate already?" The beeping resumed. 
"It's been, like, five years since you two ate lunch together. I'm sure she stopped waiting for you. Besides, we already have our food. Just eat and we'll go." He put the phone down and sighed. "She hates you, Dad. Don't even call her.

"Let's forget about it. When do I get to meet your girlfriend? I can take you two out to dinner some time, just the three of us. Someplace nice."

My relieved sigh made my soda bubble. "I'll ask her. She loves free food."

Our last stop was an apartment complex called Honeydew Springs, which sounded to me like a poor man's condominium. I pictured dirty swimming pools and buildings that had halfway burnt but were never rebuilt, but when we got there I was pleasantly surprised. The pavement wasn't cracked and the buildings looked somewhat new. There was even a landscaping crew mowing and pruning.

"Damn it," my dad yelled. He was looking at the crew in an upset way. "We're late."

"What's wrong?" I asked, curious for the first time that day.

"The mowers. I like to get here before them because the blades chop everything up. We'll have to start from the other side and hurry so we can get as much untouched as we can."

He parked the truck by a Dumpster hidden by a fence. Truck and trailer combined took up about five spaces or so, and Dad didn't seem to mind. We climbed out and walked to the trailer like always, but Dad walked to the back and opened the whole thing up with a door that became a ramp when it was let down. Inside was a lawn mower, deep red and shiny, even in the shade.

"You're kidding, right?" I said.

"I'm not as young as you, so I'll need a little extra help. You'll live."

Just inside the door was a small orange cooler that my dad opened. He pulled out a beer and grabbed a can of peanuts from beside it. The can was empty, and he poured the beer into it. He saw me watching and said, "You can't have one."

"They all know, you know. How could they not? Do people drink peanuts in your world?"

He sprayed the trailer next to me and I got sprayed when it bounced off. "It's not my fault you're here, you know. It's that smart-ass sense of humor that's been getting you into trouble your whole life. Things happen, and people deal with it. None of it is any of your business."

I didn't have anything to say. I wasn't really sure what he was talking about. He hopped on the mower and fired it up, driving away without telling me where to start. When he was out of sight, I opened up the driver's side door and grabbed the cigarettes from the visor.

Doing the job on foot was slow work, but I didn't know if I had anything to compare it to. Every time I heard a lawn mower I cursed out loud, even if it wasn't Dad. And I bitched about the heat. And my neck cramping up from looking down. The piles were usually all together in the same area, and when a woman walking her dog came over while I was working, I figured that was just where people brought their dogs. Like they had all claimed the same territory. There was just so much of it. I had to walk back to the
trailer once for a new bag, and I bitched about how much crap there was. I felt justified in that, since I wasn't getting paid by the pile.

A good while into the job, a woman hollered out to me, "It's over here." I didn't know her, or what she meant, but it seemed important so I walked over.

"Are you Keith?" she asked me. "I called your boss and he said you'd be here to get the snake. He's a big one, in that pine tree over there." She led me to the tree so I could see for myself.

Seeing the snake, I suddenly wanted to protest. I wanted to shake her and point out that I was only fifteen. That not everyone in a collared shirt worked for her. That I didn't like snakes. But she urged me on, so I asked her to give me some room. The snake was about two feet long and, judging by my knowledge of snakes, it could have been anything. I tried my rake first, which just made its tongue flick out.

"Did you get it?" the woman asked behind me.

"Just a second. Uh, ma'am."

Reaching in, I saw the snake move its head back slowly, and when I got close it struck. I jumped and the woman gasped. I looked at my glove and smiled. It couldn't bite me through them. I reached in with both hands and pulled the snake out, turning to the woman before realizing that she probably didn't want it anywhere near her. She walked into the house and closed the screen door.

"Thank you," she called from inside.

It felt good to hold the snake in my hands. I carried it around with my bucket swinging at my elbow, feeling very much like an apprentice super-villain. The landscapers were on a break, so I could tell by listening how far away my father was. I walked over into the next yard and let the snake go into some more trees, then sat down on a curb and lit a cigarette. Each time I inhaled I made a noise, and my friends sometimes made fun of me. It sounded like I was in pain, they would say. I ashed in the bucket so I wouldn't litter. The workers had spread their lunch out on the hood of their truck and they were laughing at some joke. They leaned their rakes and shovels against the bed while they ate. I eyed my rake and shovel and found them inferior. A part of me wondered if our shared tools formed some bond that I didn't see. As though we are connected in some way by how we get by. As though my father was like the owner of that company, creating a skill and then selling it. I thought about walking over to them and asking them what they thought about while they worked, and if they felt this comraderie, but I didn't want to bring a bucket of shit to a picnic.

"Can I have one of those?" a female voice behind me said.

The voice belonged to the most beautiful girl I had seen. That day. She was barefoot and wearing a skirt that seemed to be made out of other skirts. Her hair was tied halfway back so it was still down, just not in her face.

"Uh, yeah. They're lights, is that okay?"

"That's all you could swipe, huh?" she said, reaching for the pack I was offering. I expected her to giggle, but she didn't. I lit hers, taking great pains not to look at her for too long.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked, toeing my collection.

"Helping my dad," I said. I had to look up to talk to her, so I gave up and looked back out at the parking lot.
"Your dad's the poop guy?" she asked, sitting down. She didn't sound mean, but she still hit a nerve.

"Yeah."

"That's cool."

We sat in silence for a little while, me looking down at the curb between my knees and her leaning back on one hand, blowing smoke into the air. I didn't want her to leave. I wanted to spend the whole day with her, talking about poetry, or whatever girls like her talked about. The wind blew the smell from the bucket away and blew her smell towards me. Vanilla. I knew that one shift of the wind was all it would take to drive her away.

"I have a girlfriend," I said, to keep her interested.

A car pulled up and she waved to the driver.

"I've got to go," she said, getting up. She flicked her cigarette into the bucket and brushed herself off. Her hips made the skirt swish as she walked to the car and I kept wishing she would turn around. Finally, when she turned to get in the car, she shouted, "Good luck with your girlfriend."

I stayed under some silly, lusty spell where I continued our conversation long after she had gone. "Wow, that's my favorite, too," I said to myself. I snapped out of it when I inhaled smoke that tasted like burning cotton and noticed I was smoking the filter.

The sound from the lawn mower got louder so I stood up and tried to look busy. Instead of stopping by me, he turned and shouted, "Meet me at the truck."

We loaded up quick and headed toward mom's house. His face was red, but if it was from the beer or the sun, I couldn't tell.

"Did you have fun?" he asked.

"No. These people are weird. Do I get to use the radio now?"

I turned it on and scanned the dial until I found a rock station playing something punky and loud. I turned it up and bobbed around in my chair, playfully jabbing him in the arm during a drum solo.

"What is this?" he said as he reached for the volume knob.

"It's punk," I said, smiling at his confusion.

"Yeah, punk. I'll bet I know where they got that name. Probably a bunch of kids playing their stolen instruments too loud in the basement and their parents called 'em a bunch of punks."

"No way. These guys would never listen to their parents."

He shook his head. "So you and, uh, what's her name, you sit around and listen to this? Like, romance music?"

"Kinda." I got quiet again, thinking about Mickey and the girl in the dress. "Dad?"

He didn't say anything, but leaned toward me. "Did you always know you were going to cheat?"

He squinted, but I don't think he was angry this time. "I don't know. I don't even know how it happened. I think I was so comfortable with everything leading up to it that I didn't notice what was happening." I waited for him to go on, but I don't think he wanted to. "I don't know how to help you."

When we pulled up to the house, he made me wait while he fished around his pocket for his wallet.
"Here's some money for working today. I'll just take half and put it toward what you owe me."

I knew what he was doing. If I accepted the money, then I had to work with him longer. It was just as sad as anything else I knew about him.

"Dad, you're drunk," I said.

He threw the money at me.

"Tell your mother," he said as I picked the money up off the floor, "I said hi."
The Way to My Heart

Yesterday while thinking about life and birth I stumbled on a baby in a basket on my porch so while still pondering and distracted I plucked the babe from its bed and sucked it down; swallowed it whole. For twenty hours I carried the child while wondering who the mother was and eating rice cakes with apple butter picturing the morsels chasing the little one down through my tracts and trails hungry to be eaten again, again. Crying on the phone I told my mother that she was right about a family being what I need to turn around. Kicking and screaming came the babe and kicking and screaming I delivered it head first in a baby swan dive into four inches of water. I washed the sweat off my face as my new child splashed in the toilet knowing life could only get better. I didn't know what else I could teach it about living because it had already been shit out and reborn so I brought him out of the bathroom and into the real world hoping next time he wouldn't get chewed up.
Leaving Together

The car hadn't made it to the lake yet, but James was already having regrets. As he drove, he glanced at his wife, Carol, who was asleep next to him. More accurately, he glanced at the handcuffs on her wrists. Every time she shifted they made a clunky scraping sound that even the radio couldn't fully drown out. The plan had originally been to use rope; to tie an inescapable knot like a boy scout or a sailor would in the same situation. He sought out a book on knots on a bargain shelf at a second-hand bookstore and spent weeks going through it, being meticulous in his methods, wanting to understand the basic theories of restraint before he worked his way up to stoppers, bends, and hitches. Each time he looped a Dutch Marine Bowline around a bedpost he had pictured Carol's wrists, and he tightened them accordingly. In time he learned to tie a Diamond knot, Simple Simon over, Fisherman's knot, and Jug Sling Hitch, but as he tried out each one on Marcus, his eight-year-old son, reality started sinking in and he became more and more frustrated that there wasn't just a Wife Kidnapping Knot.

"You're mad again. I can tell," Marcus would say as he handed the loose rope back to James.

"I'm not mad. I'm just thinking," James would say back. "You must be thinking pretty hard because your head is changing colors."

"Go play in your room. And don't tell your mother about this."

The handcuffs worked fine, though, and as Carol started to wake up, James was cheered up a little that they held her hands back just fine. Her head swayed a bit as she started to wake up. She moaned and squinted her eyes as if she had a headache. The chain on the cuffs jingled as she tried to pull one hand up to her head. She tried again a few more times and tried to speak, but the tape that stretched across her face muffled her inquiry. Without looking over at her, James could hear her slide around in her seat, feeling the first stages of panic.

"I covered your mouth," he said in a voice that he hoped sounded stoic and scary, but actually came out like an old television vampire. "I hope it isn't uncomfortable."

To keep her from taking off the tape, he had wrapped it all the way around her head so that it stuck in her hair as well. He had always loved her hair, and it hurt him a little to have to tape it up. It was black as a new suit and couldn't have been more straight if it had weights tied to the ends. When she would walk, each strand would move in sync with the rest and she never pulled it back, even if she went jogging. He liked to run his hands through her hair at convenient times, like when they would watch television together or have sex. As he drove to the lake now, he placed his hand on her head and squeezed gently, like he was palming a basketball. That is how he used to massage her head, but now he was keeping her away because she was trying to head-but him.

"Calm down, Honey," he said in the same bored tone as before. "You worry too much."

Her worrying had never been a problem for James and, in fact, her confidence was one of the things that first attracted him to her. It was not that she was exceptionally outgoing, but that when she spoke she always seemed like she believed what she was saying. Like she was right. James did not know it at the time, but he had been looking for someone in his life that knew what was going on.
They had met when he was nineteen and she was twenty. They had gone to the same high school but, when pressed, had only a passing recollection of each other. When they would go over their high school memories together, each would remember just a little more.  
"You were such a nerd," she would say, laughing.  
"I was not," he would say back, sitting up from whatever position he was in.  
"Yeah huh. I would always feel so bad when my friends would pick on you." Her teeth were bigger than most girls', so after she was done smiling she had to consciously slide her upper lip down so her gums wouldn't dry out.  
"Why didn't you say anything before?" he asked, wanting to trap her in a lie rather than get a real answer.  
"I didn't want to make you upset."  
It was often hard to tell which memories were real, and which ones came from just wanting to remember.  

For a while before they dated, they worked in the same pizza shop. James was not in college at the time and had no desire to go, while Carol was on summer break after her second year at the state university. Through steady, deliberate conversation, she convinced James to apply to college where he went for three years without a major before dropping out. Carol's plan was for him to go until he found something that he was interested in. As it turned out, this had not happened. Similar scenarios played out when it was time for him to find a new job and a place to live. They married soon after they found out she was pregnant.  
"You are one of the only people I can stand to be around," she said when she had proposed. Around that same time, James changed his mind about her confidence. She didn't think she was right, she thought everyone else was wrong.  

James pulled the car over to the side of the road so he could try and calm her down. She didn't put up much of a fight, but it was enough that he knocked his head against the rear view mirror and scratched himself by his eye with a much-chewed thumbnail. He didn't want her to sleep the whole way to the lake. He wanted to talk to her as they drove, to explain things when she would finally listen. If her life depended on it, he reasoned, she would have to change. She would beg for the chance to change. Earlier that morning he crushed up generic sleep aids and put them in the bottle of water she always had with her. She only drank water with added vitamin supplements, and so he didn't think she would notice. By noon the bottle was more than halfway gone and she went into the bedroom to take a nap. He told Marcus to go to a friend's house and let his mother sleep. He jumped up and down on the bed to make sure the pills were working, then he handcuffed her and taped her mouth. Now that she was awake, he decided she was too much to handle and tried to force more sleeping pill water on her and ended up with a faceful of it.  
"Am I dumb or something? Is that what you think? Why would I drink that?" she screamed at him when he pulled the tape off. He thought for a moment while she scolded him, then opened the small bottle of pills, poured a couple of them in her mouth, then put more tape over her mouth  

Shortly after Carol's twenty-sixth birthday, she changed in ways that took James until her twenty-seventh birthday to realize. She talked to James less and less, spending
more and more time in rooms that he wasn't in. She had stayed independent during their marriage, and after Marcus was born, James never changed a diaper. But as Marcus got older, Carol spent many nights on the floor of the nursery. Some nights, James would stand at the nursery door and watch them sleeping. He liked the sight so much that it took a while to think that it might be a symptom of something. It was as if she was settling down finally. Unwillingly. Like a bird with a wing cramp. James' settling came earlier, when he was twenty-one and found out that drinks at bars were much more expensive than at grocery stores. From then on out, he assumed that his life wasn't going to change very much, and planned his life accordingly.

On Marcus's fourth birthday Carol bought a dog, a Chihuahua named Pedro, for him to play with. Marcus was happy, and Carol had a good time with him, too, but James couldn't ignore the fact that Carol knew he hated dogs. Before long, Pedro had had driven James' cat crazy to the point that it would not leave the hall closet except late at night when it got hungry.

"Your dog is out of control. Look what he did to Cat," James said one day, holding up the very nervous tabby.

"I never liked your cat," she said back, not looking up from her crossword puzzle.

"Well it's annoying me to have to dig him out of his hole every day when I want to pet him."

She took off her reading glasses and looked at him. "I never liked you, either." He didn't respond, so she put her glasses back on and focused on her newspaper.

A car had pulled up beside theirs before James could pull away, so he pushed her heaving body into his lap where it couldn't be seen.

"'You okay?' said the man, who was chubby with a red face. He looked concerned, which gave him jowls like a hound.

"Just fine, sir. Just taking a break to rub my eyes," James said, trying his best to look tired.

"You know, your head's bleeding. What's that from?"

"Can't a man just bleed? People bleed all the time."

"Whatever, guy," the man said, speeding off without checking for other cars.

James didn't want to snap at the man when he got lonely. After she got the Pedro, Carol stopped talking to James altogether. In her mind, there wasn't enough time for him with all of her attention being needed on Marcus and Pedro. The first thing Marcus ever said to him was "Puh." The first conversation they had was about thinning hairline.

"Mom says you weren't cute, even when you had hair," he had said.

James had been changing the oil in his car and using his old oil to top off Carol's.

"Well my friends gave me a saddle at my bachelor party because they thought your mother looked like a horse."

"What's a bachelor party?"

"Nothing. Go play in your room." He turned to leave but James stopped him.

"Don't tell your mother I said that."
The pills didn't make her sleep the second time. Instead they made her sit and stare out at the road, taking long, slow blinks and occasionally letting out a heavy sigh through her nose. As he spoke to her, told her he'd kill her, he hoped that she was scared; that she had resigned herself to this fate, but knew that it probably wasn't the case. She had never had much faith in him, but he hadn't given her much reason to.

On Marcus's sixth birthday, James built him a clubhouse with no door. The three of them stood in the backyard looking at it. Carol smiling and James shaking his head. "I'll bet it's nice on the inside," Marcus said. "Learn from your father's mistakes," Carol said.

The next time Carol stirred, James looked over to find her pulling the tape down toward her neck, one hand completely free from the handcuffs. "You are ridiculously inept," was the first thing she said when her mouth was free.

"How did you-
"Try not to look surprised, it's embarrassing. There's a latch," she said, holding up her arm to show a little knob on the cuffs, which she then pushed to demonstrate how easy it was to get free. "Did you get these at the dollar store or something?"

The handcuffs were purchased a few towns over at a sex shop called The Nook. A coworker of James' had told him about it after James had been complaining about his marriage. The complaining had been becoming frequent, and people had many suggestions of how to solve the problem, each involving sticking it out and seeing it through. Sex, he noticed, was the first thing his male friends suggested.

"The Nook," his coworker had said. "It'll spice things up, you dig?"

The cuffs had come with a soft, leopard print fuzzy tube to cover the metal and make them comfortable and sexy instead of hard and terrifying. He had thrown those away. The next time he saw one of them, it was in Pedro's mouth. The Chihuahua presented his find to James by standing on his back legs with his front legs curled down like turkey wings.

"Pedro," James had said, trying to sound calm, "you know you aren't supposed to be going through the trash."

The dog dropped down to four legs and growled. "Hey now, boy, that's not a chew toy. That's evidence."

Again, the dog just growled. His little muscles tensed up and he stopped shaking. "You want something to growl about?"

Pedro remained firm.

James stood up straight and made as if he was turning around to leave, then turned and charged the dog, arms dangling in front of him, waiting to scoop up the little animal. Each time he would get his hands near enough to grab at the dog, it would jump or turn or stop and let James pass.

"Pedro. Come on," James whined as he leaned against the kitchen counter, winded. He was so frustrated and helpless that he had to hold back tears. Pedro noticed that James wasn't chasing him any longer, so he sat down to chew in peace. James waited until he was sure that Pedro was completely relaxed, then lunged forward. He seized the furry tube and yanked it a few times while Pedro's head jerked back and forth with it. Finally it came loose and James whapped the dog on the nose with it and screamed,
"No!" as his voiced cracked. The dog didn't notice the crack, but James felt a little embarrassed.

"You're next," James had said, using the fuzzy tube to point. "You're going in the trunk."

Pedro did not, however, make it into the trunk. It had been hard enough to get Carol in the seat.

"So what's the plan here?" Carol said, still groggy from the drugs. "Am I gonna die or what?"

"I don't know yet. I want to talk to you first."

"Talk? Then why the hell do you keep knocking me out?"

James didn't say anything, just shook his head.

The lake they were headed to was in a state park, and as the entrance came into view, the sun was starting to go down. The ranger at the booth informed them that the park would be closing at dusk, so they had better make it fast.

"Yes sir," James said. When he looked over at Carol, she just smiled sarcastically.

On their way through the winding car paths Carol said, "Did you at least call off work tonight so you don't get fired? Last thing I want is for Marcus to starve because you didn't think of getting a divorce."

James threw his hands up, but put them back down on the wheel when he heard the crunching of tree branches under the car. Years ago he had told her that he never wanted a divorce, and that his parents were divorced and it made it really hard on him as a kid. She told him that it was important to her that he thought that.

"Divorce won't fix this. Only one thing can fix this." She didn't say anything.

"Aren't you worried at all?"

"I just want to see how this plays out," she said without any irony in her voice.

The dock became visible and James lined the front end of his car up so he could drive right at it. He ran his fingers through her hair. She let him.

"I think you hate me," he said.

"You've got nerve," she said, making him back away. He hadn't planned on killing her, but he began to wonder how far he would actually have to go before she got scared.

The wind picked up outside the car. Dirt and leaves pinged against the car and drew his attention outside. Across the lake, the sun was setting behind the tree line signaling the close of the day. The close of the park. The closing of an opportunity. Carol had a look on her face of expectation; of "well...?" His neck was tightening, like it did before sales meetings, or when he got cut off in traffic. His choice was obvious. She wouldn't change her opinion of him. Not without proof. Before she could move, he swung his body toward hers and wrapped a strip of tape over her mouth and around the headrest of the seat. A cloud of gravel kicked up as James punched the accelerator and headed for the dock, opening his door to make his escape easier. He refused to look at her in the few seconds before he jumped, focusing instead on the small path. A few feet before the dock, she was touching him for the first time in months, slapping at his arm and reaching for the wheel. A couple of seconds before he left her there alone, she reached for the tape covering her mouth and pulled it down until it got stuck on her chin and forced her mouth open. The moment the car hit the dock, scraping across the wooden
planks and stopping short of the water as the wheels, which were set further apart than
the width of the dock, draped over each side like a cat asleep on a fence, Carol emitted a
howl from her open mouth, poignant yet wordless, and James, just before hitting the
water that was much shallower than he was expecting, smiled to himself because in her
panic and in her rage, he knew she had finally believed in him.
The End Result

It was Sunday morning everywhere in town, but underneath the ceiling of stained tiles and the dusty fans at the pub, it was just Today. Gene picked up his glass of beer from beside the four empty ones on the faded oakh bar, and held it up to the yellow light overhead. He sprinkled a bit of salt into his glass and counted each crystal as it floated down to the bottom, leaving behind a foam tail that seemed to bend as it passed by one of Gene’s smeared fingerprints on the glass. He held it over his head and looked up through the bottom as they came at him, picturing warp speed from those movies his mom would take him to as a child when it was still so new to be in space. Leaning back in his stool he smiled and rocked, thinking of his mother who died so long ago and had left him without a person to care for, and he dropped his arms to hug himself but it threw off his balance. The first thing to drop was his beer, then he fell in a clumsy back dive into the new puddle. Jason, the owner, tossed his rag into the child-sized sink behind the bar and walked to where Gene lay sprawled on the ground.

“Gene, for Christ’s sake, are you okay? What are you doing?” Jason asked in a tone more scolding than questioning. They had known each other too long to take each others’ accidents too seriously.

Gene stared back at Jason for a moment, blinking slowly and stretching his jaw, before leaning forward. He spoke as if sharing a secret.

“You tell Christ that I’m okay. Son of a bitch died for me. Like I need that.” He shook his head and looked away, wanting to forget his tumble and needing a better place to sit than on a stool or on the floor.

“Gene, listen to me. Are you hurt? Should I call someone?” Jason was brushing off Gene’s coat with his hand, which kicked up more dust than was gathered on the floor, while Gene climbed up a barstool to his feet.

“I am fine. I have survived more things in my life that have been, uh, bad. And this, too. You see, I’ll bet.” On his feet, he turned to Jason, who was a lot closer than he had thought. “Whoa. Got kind of crowded, didn’t it?”

Jason couldn’t help but smile. Gene, though he was almost twice Jason’s age, had always been able to make Jason smile. “Maybe you should sit in a booth today, buddy,” he offered.

“I would like an orange juice, sir,” Gene erupted. Then, as a qualifier, “To calm me down.”

“In a minute,” Jason answered as he walked away. While Gene nestled himself into the last booth against the wall, Jason grabbed a cocktail napkin and stuck it to the back of Gene’s head where there was a cut. He let the blood pool and hold it there as it clotted, careful not to get any on his white shirt.

“At least it was in your bald spot,” Jason joked.

“Yeah. Now when it scabs, I’ll have a nipple on the back of my head.”

Before going in the back for the mop, Jason checked the mirror behind the bar to see if his hair was still slicked back the way he liked it. He was a bit short, so from the other side of the bar he had to stand on his toes to see over the half-empty bottles arranged neatly in front of the reflective glass. When he was still too young to tend, he used to help his dad out behind the bar, and more than once he had punched the mirror as he went for the reflection instead of the real bottle.
The mop sink in the back room was grimy and was collecting a small pile of bottle caps, rocks, cherry stems, stray mop strings that had fallen off and turned black from soaking up filth, and other gravel sized debris that Jason missed when he swept. The drain would clog if weren’t for the water from the mop bucket didn’t kick the mess up and let it slowly swirl back down. As he filled the bucket he thought about cleaning the sink out later, though he usually waited until the end of the night to think that thought.

When he came back out, Gene had leaned over a little bit to the right and was staring at the mess he had just made, amazed by the light that glimmered off the glass and the puddle as his head swayed. He silently willed his body to go to the mess and help pick up the sad remains of the mug. Gene had been coming to the bar since he was eighteen, before Jason was even born, and dropping one of the glasses felt like dropping one of his own, though he had none of his own to speak of. He looked up at Jason and wanted to say that he was sorry about the glass, and how he knew his father used to take such good care of his bar and always was good to his patrons and how every glass that shattered was removing one more piece of his memory in this old bar. His mother died when he was twenty-two, and for years after that he busied himself getting rid of her memory by selling her books and her clothes and her furniture. Then, when everything from her house was gone, he sold the house, too. With the money she left him and the money from her things, he got drunk. It was the first time he had been on his own, and he knew nothing but how to drink. The owner of the bar, Parker, knew his mother and set him up in the apartment upstairs. If his mother showed him how to be a kid, Parker showed him how to be an adult.

Jason noticed the look on Gene’s face. It was one like he wanted to say something, but he also had to go to the bathroom. “Are you alright?”

“I…” Gene started, and then slumped even more out of exhaustion, “I never knew brown could shine like that.”

The beer had spread out far enough over the wooden floor so that it took on the appearance of a lacquer and the wood did seem to shine, but Jason just chuckled through his nose, picked up the big pieces of glass, and mopped until Gene passed out.

In Gene’s mind, an alarm had just gone off that woke him up. There was a glass of orange juice in front of him and a pair of jeans under an oversized turtleneck sweater walking by his table toward the bar. The woman interested him, but he was caught up trying to figure out how this orange juice could have made a sound loud enough to stir him. The bell that was still swaying above the door caught his eye as he turned his head for a witness. ‘Oh shit,’ he thought. ‘I’m still drunk.’

The stool squeaked and settled as the woman sat on it, wondering whether the squeak was that shrill and loud for everyone who sat in it. But she eyed the room and noticed only one other patron, Gene, and he seemed to only notice the door. It looked to her as though he had been expecting, for the last thirty years, that just the right person would clump in through that door and make all of his waiting seem worth it. Or, since he had a small napkin on his head that had gone stiff from dried blood, he might be waiting for an ambulance.

The wine glass in Jason’s hand was already polished as he walked over to the bar, certain that she was the type of woman who would want a white wine while she relaxed. He pictured her ordering it in a sing-song voice, as if she needed to win him over with her
cuteness. It was early in the day, and Jason was not adverse to being pleasant. “What can I get for you?” He kept the glass in his hand in case he was wrong.

“Whatever white wine will be fine,” she said through a fake smile. Her hands were clasped together in a small prayer for service.

Jason set down the glass and presented a bottle for her approval.

“That will be fine,” she answered, not knowing much about wine but trusting him because it was his job.

The wine was poured and she took a drink while Jason watched to make sure she liked it. She noticed him looking and turned the other way, observing the interior. Whenever she went to a bar it was a novelty, like going into the men’s restroom. A certain deal of power came from being the new person, and it made her nervous. She figured that everyone was as bored with their routines as she was, and they felt that she could be their ticket to something different for a little while. She thought that the bar seemed like a sad place, dark in all of the wrong spots so the cobwebs wouldn’t shimmer. It all made her think of rape.

“How is it?” Jason asked. The brand was new to him and he was trying to get feedback.

“It’s good.” On her next sip she bit down on the glass and started fidgeting.

The click-clack of a woman’s nails on any surface had always driven Jason crazy, like little fingers typing up the recipe for annoyance. No one was saying anything and it made him uncomfortable. “So, what brings you to my bar? Not too many new people come by here.”

She moved her eyes over to him, keeping her face turned away as much as possible. “I wanted a drink.” With a certain amount of arrogant obviousness she looked him over and decided that she could toss the greasy little man at least a few feet if he tried anything. She could smell his hair as he walked away from her again. He wore nothing underneath his thin white shirt, so every time he moved she got another idea of his unflattering build; the saggy pecs, the infirm belly being redirected by his belt, the patch of sweat between his shoulder blades that glued the shirt there. She rolled her eyes behind his back.

“Well, we’re happy to have you here,” Jason said over his shoulder, then looked over to check on Gene, who was still watching the door. “Hey, Gene, you expecting someone?”

The crystal wall between Gene and the rest of the world casually shattered when he turned his face to Jason. “You know, I couldn’t rightly say. But I guess it would be nice.” The orange juice was warm and it burned his lip where it flooded one of his new wounds.

“Well, we’re happy to have you here,” Jason said over his shoulder, then looked over to check on Gene, who was still watching the door. “Hey, Gene, you expecting someone?”

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“Is he okay?” asked the woman without looking at Gene. She pictured him to be in his mid sixties. She had always thought that old men were somewhat adorable, and she didn’t like seeing Gene hurt like he was.

“Oh yeah, he’ll be fine.” Jason wiped down the bar with his rag that wiped up nothing, and left behind the smell of mold.

The old man had clearly lost whatever fight he had been in, but even if he was a vicious predator she still would have felt more comfortable around him than the bartender. The cushion on the bench seat didn’t squeak when she sat down but she could feel the padding separate and reveal to her bottom the hardness of the wood beneath it.
“Hello, sir. You don’t mind if I sit, do you?”

“Naw. I’m not even sure how I got here, to tell the truth. Might be your table, for all I know.” He moved the glass, lest it get in his way of seeing her. They were about the same age, though she looked the part. Hunching over the bar for more than twenty years had put a permanent arch in Gene’s back, and from the dim lights that unsuccessfully strove for ambiance his eyes had lost the ability to focus and his skin had gotten so deathly pale that flaws which should never have been visible shined through. “I’d buy you a drink, but I see that you’ve got one already.”

“Well, thank you for that offer. What have you got there, orange juice?” She made her eyes wide and spoke in a louder, more maternal tone than usual.

“Yeah, I don’t like to drink too much.”

Jason chuckled somewhere behind her, and just a whiff of Gene’s breath told her he was lying. “Oh yeah, well is it good?”

“It’ll do.”

“So,” her finger pointed to his bandage, “who gave you that?”

“That son of a bitch at the bar gave it to me.” His arm flopped in Jason’s direction. “Did a shitty job, though. Could have at least… washed it or something.” An elbow slipped as he tried to lean forward on the table. After righting himself he nodded, confirming that he did not, in fact, make an ass out of himself.

“No, I mean what gave you the cut?” Between two fingers she gripped the napkin and tried to pull it off slowly, but he jerked away and the wound reopened.

“Good Lord, woman. What are you doing to me?” The back of his head bounced off of the wall behind it and rattled the tin cigarette signs that were screwed there. Confusion replaced everything in his peripherals so he jerked his head about wildly.

She held her hands out in front of her to calm him. “Hold on, I’ll get a towel.”

Jason tossed her a wet rag before she could ask. At her touch he was able to calm down. With light touches she swabbed the cut clean and he looked at her breasts and rated them against the cheerleaders that came on the bar’s television. Because of the sweater, he was skeptical and couldn’t quite decide. “You poor thing,” she said between wipes. “How did this happen to you?”

“I was fighting. With a bear.”

She laughed out loud and kept washing the cut. This is how she used to take care of her grandfather before he passed away. Though he had never had a drink in his life, Parkinson’s had made his hands shake in much the same way as Gene’s.

Gene closed his eyes and tried to think of his mother again, to relive her touch for just a few minutes more, but all he could think about were the woman’s breasts.

“I am so sorry about this,” she said.

“Just, try and think of something else. Seriously. Ask me a question, or something,” Gene said, trying to make her feel better.

“A question? Okay, what do you do?”

He sighed. “Ask me a different question.” Gene kept his eyes closed.

There was a small chance he would fall asleep again, and she knew it. “Do you mind holding this here? Keep applying pressure to it.” She sat down in her seat again.

“Do you have any hobbies? Something to keep you busy?”

“I do. I do.”

The woman, for her part, was patient. In her mind, he probably couldn’t help
being like this. “Do you have an example?”

Because the orange juice was warm, when he grabbed it he had to open his eyes to make sure he hadn’t grabbed the salt shaker by accident. The glass was halfway to his mouth before he realized that she had said something. “Uh, maybe you could ask me later.”

“Alright, then. I will be in the area next week. Maybe I’ll stop by and ask you when you’re sober. Okay?”

His head rolled around and he shook it to get it stopped. “Come back? You’ll—Yeah, come back. Great.”

“Goodbye, then.” He stayed in her view as she slid out from the booth, and he was smiling as she turned around to walk for the door.

“Miss?” Jason called to her as she pulled her coat off of the hook.

“Yes?”

“If you want to tell him sober, you might show up even earlier next time.”

The door felt pretty. Desired. A pair of eyes looked at it up and down while pretending not to, like any suitor might. Or any stalker. It only wished that those eyes would see it for how well it kept out the cold, or how good it looked in its frame, instead of looking only at its knob. ‘Men are all the same’ it seemed to think. ‘All they want is an opening.’

“She’s not coming today,” Jason called from behind his broom.

Gene looked over toward him but all he could see was the sweeping. “What on earth are you doing to that floor?” he asked.

Jason smiled and gripped the handle tighter. “I thought this place could use a little something if we, I mean if I keep getting new business. Two business men came in yesterday and run me clean out of J&B. Thought I might give the bar a little shine to celebrate.” A picture of himself as Charlton Heston battling an army of spiders popped into his head as he swept the cobwebs from the ceiling. He thought how stupid it was for the spiders to just build the webs and then leave.

“Well, maybe your problem is that you’re using that thing all wrong. It’s for the floor. You’re getting dust in my cocktail.”

“Don’t they make feather dusters out of cock tails?”

“Ha. I see you haven’t lost your sense of humor. Just your fool mind.”

“Don’t you want to drink in a nice place for once?” When he walked into the back he couldn’t hear Gene’s response. “What?” he hollered.

Gene cleared his throat to yell, “I said, ‘I am a drunk. I do not respect myself or this bar. We should be filthy together.’ That’s what I said.”

Jason came back out with a dustpan and whacked Gene in the elbow with it as he walked by. “You are a lying sack of shit, do you know that? The only reason you come here is out of respect, just like the only reason this dive is still open is respect. I’m just starting to get comfortable with the fact that I am going to live above this bar for the rest of my life. Maybe I shouldn’t let it go to Hell before I turn thirty.”

“Hey now, you’re getting too deep for a Monday. I’m sorry.”

“It is Wednesday. Not Monday.” The dustpan slid away when Jason tried to sweep into it.

“Wednesday? So you’ve got fried fish today then, right?”
Jason reassembled his pile and put his foot behind the dustpan. “Yeah. All you can eat. You hungry?”
“Maybe a little later. I’m not drunk enough to eat your food just yet.”
Jason succeeded in collecting his debris and walked to the back again. The dustpan fell into the garbage can, but he didn’t grab it out. Whenever he went into the back room he felt like he was missing something up front. When he got there again, he found that he wasn’t and he turned on the TV.

The buzz from the door downstairs sounded in two short bursts and then one long one that kept on until Jason made it to the speaker.
“The fuck? Who?” No one had come to his apartment before, and he didn’t know how to answer.
“It’s Gene. Are you sleeping? Open the bar, man, I need a drink.” Gene didn’t wait for a response, but instead walked to the front door of the bar to wait.
Upstairs, Jason hurried to dress until he realized that it was just Gene, and probably was just going to be Gene. It was Sunday, but Jason didn’t have high hopes for the woman showing up.
“Give me a vodka,” Gene shouted as they walked into the bar together. He took off his dusty coat, revealing sweatpants and a T-shirt with holes perfectly tracing the letters printed on it, and he sat down on a stool. His coat he flung down onto the stool next to him like a table cloth. “And give it to me straight.”
“Straight, huh. You know that pretty girl wanted to see you sober,” Jason reminded him. Jason was wiping off the bar, even though he had just opened the place up. His hair was parted down the middle and blown dry. It looked clean. Every few steps he took he would turn his head quickly, as if to look at something, so he could feel each free moving strand stack up at the contact point on his forehead then swish back to the side of his face. Before Gene showed up, Jason had stood in front of the mirror and jumped up, watching his hair cling flat to him until he reached his apex where the hair would fan out like wings as he fell, no longer clipped and caged by mousse.
Gene’s eyes lit up a tad. “Is that today?” Jason only smirked. “Fine, a beer. I’ll have a beer. A light beer. Something American.” While Jason poured the beer, Gene fidgeted with the ashtray in front of him, even though he didn’t smoke. “Are you sure that she meant today?”
“Positive. She was here last Sunday, and today is Sunday. Trust me.” He was able to put the beer down a little heavier than usual because he didn’t fill it all the way up. The glass clunked and startled Gene, who dropped the ashtray and grabbed at the turbulent beer, much like a cat who, scared of the water, runs to the one with the squirt gun for safety. It was still funny to Jason that, after all of these years, Gene thought that staying sober meant drinking beer.
“Sunday? You’re open on Sunday mornings?” Every wrinkle on Gene’s head got deeper as he thought about this confusing thought, then deeper still as he searched for why it was confusing him.
“Gene, you are here every day.”
“Yeah, but Sunday morning?”
The bell over the door rang and, again, Gene was startled. The woman walked in through the door and shut it immediately, blocking out the windy cold that had been
chasing her from her car. A powder blue skirt poked out from beneath her coat that was
too thin and ornamental to keep away the weather. On the mat on the floor she stomped
the snow off of her white high heeled shoes and, with actions made jerky and almost
violent by the cold, unbuttoned the coat and hung it on the rack by the door. There was no
hat to hang up, because it would have flattened her curled hair or gotten caught in her
earrings, which were large silver hoops that sparkled, even in the dim light of the bar. She
strolled over to where Gene was sitting and was a bit let down by his appearance. She had
no romantic interest in him, but she still felt that he could have put forth some effort
instead of looking like he showed up in his pajamas. She had only dressed up today
because she went to church. It wasn’t her normal routine, church and then a bar, but she
had never frequented either so she didn’t quite know if it was wrong. But on her walk
through town this morning she had gotten used to being dressed up and started to like it.
Everyone looked her way as she walked and, though she was distracted by learning to
navigate in high heels, she felt beautiful.

“Good morning.” She tried to charge up her voice with cheerful energy.
“Hey,” he said back, in the nicest, politest way possible.
“How’s the morning treating you?”
“Fine. Can you believe this place is open on Sunday morning? Sheesh.” While he
wondered why she hadn’t sat down yet, she waited for him to move his jacket.
“Did you save this seat for me?” she finally asked.
“Naw, no need. I knew it wouldn’t be crowded. Have a seat.” She walked to his
other side and recognized it as the squeaky stool, so she coughed as she sat down.
“So, did you decide what you do for fun?” With her first sentence she already
wanted to change the subject.
“Yes. I have decided that I drink.” His laugh was weak and each outburst needed
to be refilled with air before the next one. Now that he wasn’t drunk, and now that new
track lighting that had been installed, his face had changed. He was not as haggard as she
remembered. The wrinkles that she had pictured on his face were not really there until he
smiled. His hair had not been combed over his bald spot the way most middle aged men
often do, and there was brown mixed in with the gray. She realized that they were the
same age, and that made her uneasy. He was not a helpless old man to her, but rather just
a helpless man. She didn’t respond to his joke.
“I said, ‘I drink’. Funny, huh.” Her look had changed and he worried that he had
upset her. “What do you do?” He looked into his beer until she answered, worried that if
she didn’t say anything soon she might never say anything again. Jason sat a shot of
vodka beside Gene’s beer and walked away. Both the woman and Gene looked at the
vodka and knew what it meant. As in a salute, he picked up the glass and held it at eye
level between them. “I swear I will be interesting in just a moment.”
“Don’t.” Her word stopped him. “Well, you probably will anyway, but don’t for
me. I mean, I think that I’ve made a mistake.”
The liquid splashed a little when he set the glass down. Jason had finally filled
something up all the way. “A mistake? Are you leaving?”
“Yes. I have to go or I will be late for church.”
He turned his chair to follow her, but it stopped so he swiveled back the other
way. “Will you be back?”
Her initial fear of the place returned. Without turning around, she said, “We’ll
People learned how to ignore at the mall. People learned it so well that they did it accidentally during normal conversations with their parents. Gene did not know, having never been in life, how to figure out who in the mall was talking to him, and who was not. Children yelled for people and adults called for people and there was a constant buzz of hundreds of voices that only spoke in question marks. As he walked through the food court, Asian women offered him bourbon chicken, and he stayed in line as he chewed. Hands reached in around him to get to the little toothpicks and it made Gene claustrophobic. He fled the food court on weak but determined legs. At the gumball machine he finally slowed down to grab a dime out of his pocket. The dime slid in easily enough, but the handle wouldn’t turn. A security guard eyed him from a far corner as he slapped the machine’s fishbowl head. His mother had always given him a dime when he wanted candy, but there weren’t Gourmet Gumballs back when she was still alive. If she had been there she would’ve raised a fit.

“A quarter?” She’d have yelled. “There is no need for that to be a quarter. I didn’t get where I am by paying too much for things.” If she had been there, he wouldn’t have gotten his gumball.

Each store had bright lights to catch his eye, and the music followed him like a vulture above his head and compelled him to keep walking. Gene wanted to know something or do something that was interesting. A long time ago he remembered having fun, but how he did it was lost in his head. Mother was always with him, though. People always said that a mall had everything, so Gene thought they had to have something.

A bookstore, a golf shop, a shoe store, a jeweler on the corner. Kids’ clothes, records, pretzels, more shoes, coffee, pets, more jewelry, suits, books, records, coffee, clothes, musical instruments, jewelry, toys, coffee, back to the food court. Gene sat on a bench and massaged his calves, eyeing the bags people were carrying. Nothing in the stores gave him hope. His interest remained unpique. Things weren’t going to get better, so, to fight back the tears, he resolved to head back to the bar.

A young girl was staring at Gene as he rubbed his legs and chewed his gum too hard. “Mommy,” she tugged on an older woman’s sleeve. “He looks lost.”

Gene didn’t respond because he was learning to ignore people. The older woman put her hand on his shoulder. “Sir?” she spoke in almost a whisper, “They already left.”

He told himself that she wasn’t talking to him.

“Sir, are you with the group from the retirement home? I think I saw them leave a little while ago.”

It got harder to convince himself, but he still didn’t speak.

The woman shook her head and urged her daughter to walk away with her.

In the bathroom mirror he saw what everyone else saw. The hair on top of his head was basically gone, and what was on the sides stuck out because they weren’t long enough to hold themselves down. There were dark bags under his eyes that could fit a college workload, and his teeth had gone gray from alcohol. His skin was yellow, but he never could tell when he was under the bar’s lights. Forty-three years old and the small mirror flecked with water spots looked like a junkie mug shot and it terrified him. He wanted to hide, and it was his style to do so, but he remembered the woman from the bar.
There was nothing he could say to her. His life was in that bar.

Racing through the mall, the bright lights drew him in every time he tried to walk by. He drank their coffee and played their video games and let them pinch his toes to size his foot. They said he was an autumn and that he looked sexier already and that with the harmonica he could start with one key for fifteen dollars and then just move on when he was ready. The cookies weren’t too sweet, the dogs didn’t smell bad, the jewelry wasn’t too expensive. When he got tired he moved up to espresso. At the information desk he rented a baby stroller for all of his bags. When he finally started his car, he knew that there would be a new life somewhere in that trunk when he got home.

Jason had started the morning off by sitting at a booth and staring outside. Because the bar was so close to the street, passing cars had flung black snow at the window. When the snow melted it left behind tears of oil and mud, making the world outside look dirty and uninviting. Jason imagined how the bar looked from out there. He had never wanted the bar, but he didn’t know what else to do. Gifts are always like that. All of his belongings were spread out between the apartment upstairs and this pub. Parker, Jason’s dad, had told Gene to move when Jason was old enough to have his own place. He wasn’t much further away from his dad here, but it gave him a little more privacy than he was used to. Where Gene had decorated with empty vodka bottles, Jason decorated with empty cigarette packs. Jason wasn’t born until after Gene’s mother passed, but Parker had talked about her a lot. He had been a good friend to Gene until he died. Jason had never known life without Gene, and that may have been the way Parker had planned it. Jason was raised to pour drinks, and Gene was raised to drink them. This was how relationships bred. He didn’t like thinking about his dad or the past because he knew that none of it was any different than now. To clear his mind he pinched his nipple and exhaled through his nose, then got up and looked for the bottle of glass cleaner.

When Gene finally showed up, there were customers in the bar. The window was clean and as he looked through it he thought it was the wrong place. The bell over the door caught the attention of the three people at the bar, who nodded slowly and squinted their eyes at the armload of stuff Gene was carrying in.

“How’s the weather? Did any snow fall today?”

“Jason, take a look. I got a lot of great stuff here. Look. Model trains. People go crazy for this stuff. They sell whole towns!” He waved the empty box around. The actual train was broken on his apartment floor. “And I got some other stuff, too. I am so pumped and I’m having so much fun. I’m changing, Jas, I’m growing.”

The people at the bar smiled to each other and it embarrassed Jason. They were new. “That’s great, Gene. So why are you here?”

An open mouth replaced Gene’s smile. “To be honest, I needed a drink. Wanted a drink, actually. To go, if you could.”

Jason poured the vodka and orange juice into a styrofoam cup after flashing the three men an ‘it’s okay’ look. Gene grabbed the cup with both hands and walked toward the door. “I’ll pay you tomorrow,” he called.

After the door shut, Jason apologized to the men.

“Was he a friend of yours?” one of them asked.

Jason picked the train box off the bar. “He, uh, was.” He told himself that he might not need Gene anymore if people kept coming in, though that was never the plan.
“Man oh man,” Gene hooted as he bellied up to the bar. “My calendar says Sunday and I have my Sunday best on. Bring on the beer.” The solid white track lighting above the bar shined unnoticed on Gene’s smile as he drummed the bar that was still sticky from the freshly dried paint. The wool suit he was wearing was dark green, and his red tie so wide that it took up all of the visible space peeking from underneath the jacket.

Jason thought he looked like one of the stuffed olives that get tossed into a martini. He sat a glass in front of Gene and stood back, waiting for him to take a sip.

“I think I found a winner with this harmonica. I’m really fired up about it.” Gene was almost bouncing in his seat. “Do you think she’ll like it? Will she know what it is? I hope I don’t intimidate her with all of my fancy talk. I was pretty confused at first, I’ll admit.” The sleeve on the coat shrunk back several inches as Gene reached out for the beer. He gripped it in a tight fist and jerked it in a ‘cheers’ to Jason, spilling some on his clenched hand. “Here’s to it, whatever it is.” The beer slid easily through his lips, and threatened to come up just the same. “Wha- Are you trying to poison me?”

Gene eyed it through squinted eyes that Jason could easily mistake for nearsightedness. “It’s piss. This is what I suspect my urine might taste like if I were a Nazi.”

“No, no. People around here are in love with the German culture. I’ve got this beer on tap and some cheap Riesling in a blue bottle. I’ve even bought a hot dog machine for bratwurst.”

Gene slid the glass like he was scooting shuffleboard. “Gimme a light beer. Something American. And when she arrives, don’t go off at the mouth about this Germany crap, Adolf, or I’ll whoop you. You hear me?”

On the other side of town, her husband walked into the kitchen scratching his head. He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “No church today, babe?”

A sigh moved a page in the book she was reading and she slapped it down before it could completely turn. She had been sighing and slapping all morning. “It didn’t work out the way that I had wanted. No one there was actually happy. They already believed and were waiting and praying and singing and nothing had happened for them yet.”

He looked at his nails and saw white flakes underneath then packed together like cotton in a five year old pillow. For no real reason, the urge to smell them overtook him. “And what did you want?”

The coffee pot beeped that it was done, but no one looked. It wanted to beep again, to show off the fact that it had made the coffee just the way they liked it, and to assure them that it would always do it every morning. But it remained silent until it beeped that it was turning off, the carafe still full.

“Some proof that it works,” she murmured.

In the bar, Jason was finished with the glass of German beer, but Gene had barely touched his domestic. Normally Jason refused to drink his alcohol, but after thinking it through as the glass hovered over the sink, he decided that it would be better tasted than wasted. Gene muttered something, which Jason asked to be repeated.
“Give me a vodka.” Jason poured, Gene drank. “I think maybe she got stuck in traffic.”

A corner of Jason’s mouth tried to raise while the other side seemed to know better. “Yeah. Or her dog got sick.”

“She slipped on a patch of ice.” He sucked the beer from the glass without picking it up and foam surrounded his tongue.

“You know, I’m going to miss her.” Jason made like he had a hat on and tipped it to the door. “Did you ever get her name?”

“What do you care,” asked Gene, his eyes already taking on the droop of a few more drinks. “She was just a customer to you.”

A piece of dust floated in the beam of the new light and danced for a moment as if on stage, dancing just for Jason, whose thoughts followed its erratic steps. “You could be right, Gene,” he admitted, grabbing at the dust, missing, and sending it out of the beam.
Our Swan Just Died

My wife left with Julie and the truck. Early in the morning the engine fired up and I walked outside to find the women checking the straps on a tarp over the truck bed. Before she left I asked if there was anything that I needed to do while she was gone.

“Watch the bird,” she said before closing the door at me. "And feed your daughter."

Before I started scrambling eggs for Sarah, I made myself a cup of coffee with sugar, milk, and gin. She came out of her room rubbing her eyes open, wearing one of my old tee shirts as a sleeping shirt, and after she gave me a kiss on the cheek she told me that I smelled like Christmas.

"Your mom's gonna be gone for a little while," I said, "so it'll just be us two, okay?"

"I know," she said back, looking at her feet as they dangled off the kitchen chair. "You do?" I had, of course, found out twenty minutes ago.

"Yeah. She's going to try and get Odette's eggs for sale at the store. Mom says that they could run an ad in the coupon book and it would almost be like being a celebrity."

"Yeah," I said, cracking an egg into a cereal bowl and beating it with a fork, "It sure would be something."

Sarah picked up an egg out of the carton and threw it into the air, bringing her arms down as she caught it so that it wouldn't break.

"Can you juggle?" I asked.

"No." She threw the egg again.

"Here, let me show you."

I grabbed three eggs and started throwing them in the air while she giggled and waved her arms up and down.

"Like this?" she said, throwing a couple of eggs in the air and pumping her arms again. Her hand slapped one, so it broke before it hit the ground, unlike the other two that waited.

"Here, start with one," I said. "Throw it from one hand to the other."

She tried and missed, then tried again, and before I knew it we were out of eggs.

"Oh no," I said. "You'd better go get some more so we can try again."

"Okay." She grabbed the worn paper carton and walked out the back door. A couple of minutes later she screamed.

Odette was pinned against the side of her cage, the feathers on the side of her face roughed up and torn out from forcing her head out, trying to squeeze her fat body out of a hole the size of a quarter. The space around her was filled with a mass of dried blood and egg yolks, the colors of autumn, a thick liquid clotting even as it tried to flow. She had laid and laid her eggs until they filled the pen, then began crushing themselves and her.

I guided Sarah back into the house and called Louis at home.

"Bird's dead," I said. "And I'm too drunk to drive."

"What do you think it means?" he asked.

"Could mean a lot of things. I think maybe we should start to worry."

I got the chicken from Louis' backyard after work about a month before. Work had let us go early because I had handed Louis the wrong end of the utility knife while
we were drywalling. I started apologizing before the razor hit the ground but Louis, who is too nice to yell at anyone, didn’t reply for a good long while.

When the job supervisor showed up he had several loud words for both me and Louis because Louis couldn’t work and I had to drive him home, which meant that he lost two good workers. I apologized, and in the truck I finally got Louis to smile when I called Andrew a douche bag.

“I can’t believe he asked me not to go to the hospital,” Louis said. They were his first words to me since the accident.

“Did you want to go anyway?” I asked, eager to please.

“Julie will most likely have some stuff to clean it and dress it. If you want, you can come in the house and I’ll have her fix us up something to eat.” I nodded, and for a few seconds that was enough. “Probably just some deli sandwiches,” he clarified. Again I nodded. “Bologna or something.”

“It’s Sarah’s birthday today,” I said. “She’s seven.”

“Young daughter?” he asked. "Neat. What’d you get her?”

“Nothing yet. She says she wants a swan, like she seen in a cartoon movie, and she won’t talk about anything else.”

Louis had started playing with his wound and shaking his head to himself. “I don’t know what to tell you. I’ll add that to my list of reasons I don’t have kids.”

We pulled into his driveway and stopped behind Louis’ wagon. The poor thing was all rust from the windows down, and the front door didn’t latch. It was a good thing I drove every day because that wagon is a scary ride. Julie appeared at the screen door with a worried scowl on her otherwise pretty face and I figured she thought Louis had lost his job again. When he waved his loosely bandaged hand at her, she didn’t get any calmer.

The explanation wasn’t good enough, no matter how many attempts we made to make it seem all right. Her husband had to go several days without getting any money and it was all my fault. She shared her husband's restraint, though, and made sandwiches for us with clenched teeth. There was a lot to feel awful about. Julie slapped the paper plates onto the cluttered coffee table where we were sitting, then went outside and slammed the door. After a few seconds we heard her sweeping the porch with an intensity that wasn’t necessary.

“She’ll be fine,” Louis said. “She’ll yell at me after you’re gone and then we’ll talk about it until it’s figured out.”

“What are you going to do? Do you need some money?” I didn’t think he’d take it, and I was right.

Julie started shouting in the front yard. “Get out. Shoo. Get the hell away from me,” For a second I thought she was yelling at me, or at least practicing for when she came back in. Louis and I got up at the same time and walked out the front door to see Julie waving her broom at a group of chickens that had wandered into the yard. There were about ten of those fat birds wandering around his front yard like old women at a craft show. “Get going,” Julie yelled. “You’ll crap all over the yard and I won’t have it.” She swung the broom again and got one of the chickens full in the face so that it rolled backwards and lay there stunned before getting to its feet and flapping around, exciting the others.

“Hey Julie,” Louis called to his wife, “Let’s catch one and have ourselves a feast.”
"You shut your gimp mouth," she said. "Neither one of you is fit to gut a chicken."

The whole stupid scene gave me an idea. I wasn’t sure it was a good idea, but it made me laugh, and so I guessed that it couldn’t be too bad. “Do you have a dog cage or anything?” I asked. “Something to store an animal?”

“There’s a cardboard box in the kitchen,” Louis said. “Why? You want a chicken?”

“Yeah.”

Neighbors had come out of their houses to see what the noise was about and watched us dive at the birds over and over again. As I was getting pecked in the arm, I heard people saying things like “Isn’t there a law against raising chickens in town” and “I should tell my husband to get his fishing net,” all without taking the cigarettes out of their mouths.

I finally laid hands on one as Julie came out of the house with a pillowcase open. “Okay,” she said after we closed the beast in. “You can leave now.”

On the way home, the chicken looked at me like it wanted to drive. It bobbed its head toward the road, then me, then wherever chickens go to dream. The pillowcase surrounding its body flared out and rested, twisty tied at the neck, the bird beneath trying to see if it was free yet to vainly flap. I wondered if it knew that, in those moments, it looked like a ghost.

The air conditioner was pointed at its face and I didn't know if that was helpful or not, since I hadn't seen it blink yet, but it was a hot day and he was stuck in a pillowcase up to his neck. It didn't seem to mind so much, after I told it that I would let it out soon, and that there was a nice little girl waiting at home to take care of him.

When I pulled into my own driveway, my wife, Melissa, came to the porch with a scowl, but Sarah ran out to meet me like a loyal pup. She had on her birthday dress from last year that Melissa had altered, and her dark hair was pulled back with a rubber band that had once held asparagus in a bunch.

“Daddy!” she squealed as her bare feet kicked up gravel in the driveway. Before I could get out of the cab she was pawing at me to get me to the house quicker. “I iced the cake, Daddy. I want to show you. Hurry up.”

“I’ll be in in a minute. I need to get your present.” Melissa’s scowl made me smile. I loosened the bag around the bird's neck as I lowered it into the cardboard box Julie had given me. Then I followed Sarah into the house with the noisy box in my arm and kissed Melissa on the cheek as I walked by.

I had to make it a point not to get upset when Melissa doubted my abilities as a provider. Several years before, I had opened a business with Louis, selling and installing carpet. I had handled it badly and we lost it along with all of our money. The job we now had together was the worst one we had found since then, but it was the only one we were able to keep for any length of time. At our age, it was getting harder to find a place that would keep either of us.

“Look at the cake. It says my name, and I wrote it in frosting,” Sarah said, again pulling at my arm which was balancing the restless container.

“It’s very pretty. Gorgeous just like you. Here, let’s open this present in the garage.” I put my hand on her back and urged her on.
“Mommy,” she said over her shoulder as I pushed her, “can I open the present before the candles are blown out and people sing to me?”
“If your father says so,” she said. Her arms were crossed and she was obviously confused, but she was going along.
“And I do. Come on.”
In the garage, the chicken jumped out of the box and landed crooked on the ground, then flapped its wings as if that helped anything. Melissa, who couldn’t keep her curiosity in check, screamed when she saw it, but Sarah just laughed excitedly.
“What is it, Daddy?” she asked, chasing it around my work bench.
“It’s a swan,” I said.
She stopped chasing it and looked at me. Then she said, “It’s not a swan,” giggled, and kept chasing it. Melissa grabbed my arm and pulled me into the house, and I started to get sick of all the tugging.
“No,” Melissa said.
“I’ll build a little fence or something in the back yard. It’ll be fine.”
“No.”
“Look how happy she is. She loves it.”
“No.”
Sarah named it Odette after the cartoon character she liked, and Melissa rolled her eyes at me when I asked how she knew the chicken was a girl. I woke up early the next morning to build a fence for it to run around in. Most of the grass in the backyard was already dead, so I was able to set it up beside one of the bean trees without worrying about ruining the yard. I built a cage in the back of the pen so it could be locked up whenever Sarah wasn’t playing with it.
Melissa hollered out to me as I was finishing up the pen and told me Louis was on the phone. I immediately told him how sorry I still was.
“Right. Are you picking me up or what?” he said when I was done.
“What? You’re not going to work with only one hand. It’ll never fly.”
“What will never fly is me sitting at home without a paycheck coming in. Hurry up or we’ll be late.”
As he climbed into my truck ten minutes later, he had a glove on over his heavily bandaged hand. Work went on, and his wound healed slower than it probably should have.
When we had finished drywalling the site that we were working on, we had to wait until the boss called us for another job, which usually took between a couple of days to a couple of weeks. I had been saving a part of my pay in the kitchen cabinet so that I could have some money for the family during the wait. Louis couldn’t afford to do that. In the first week I invited him over a few times for dinner, but after that I couldn’t afford to give any of our food away so I avoided him as much as O’Syrus avoided me.
“What are we going to eat?” Melissa asked me one day.
“I don’t know what you mean. There’s plenty of food here,” I said. I didn’t try to sound cheerful because that would have upset her more.
“I mean when that is gone. We don’t have any more money. I think maybe we should assume that you won’t have a job for awhile and look for another one.”
“They’ll call.” She didn’t say anything back. “I’ll skip lunch. That should stretch our food.
“There’s eggs in Odette’s house,” Sarah called from the yard. It was unrelated, but I pretended that she was being helpful.

“See? Eggs. We’ll eat eggs. Then, when we need to, we’ll eat the chicken. And whatever we’ve been feeding it.” Melissa looked at me with a face that said ‘divorce,’ so I stopped talking and walked out back to play with Sarah.

I started looking for jobs after that. Louis decided that we should look for jobs separately so it would be easier for each of us to find a place. He found a part time one without too much trouble, but it was apparently the only opening in town because I couldn’t even get an interview.

Every morning we had eggs for breakfast. As the weeks went on, Melissa learned to make hollandaise sauce. Eventually, our western omelets became cheese omelets, then it was just scrambled eggs on a plate. Normally Sarah fetched the eggs, but I went a couple of times and there were always exactly the right amount of eggs waiting for me. If I needed three, there were three there. If I wanted a full dozen, that is what I found. Little birdy vending machine. When slices of olives appeared on the deviled eggs at dinner time, Melissa told me that she had made a little extra money by selling eggs at the farmer’s market near downtown.

“Honey, that’s great,” I said.
“Just eat,” she said back to me.

The farmer’s market downtown only happened once a week, so I decided that she should try to find a couple more in the area and pop up there. I also offered to help, but she told me not to bother. The more business she did, the happier she seemed when I saw her. We eventually got ahead on our bills and began eating things other than eggs. Sarah was given an allowance, which she used to spruce up the chicken’s pen. The bird was given a bigger cage with thicker bars, so it would be as protected as possible, and I built a roof on the top so it couldn’t escape.

I got bored one day while Melissa was out working and I had done all that I thought I could around the house. Sarah had gone with Melissa to the market to bond and inherit. They left me alone with just the chicken and a bottle of gin for company, so I tossed a few shots back, but kept around half of the bottle because I was still paranoid about wasting money. I stumbled around the backyard, hoping to find our old hammock, then remembered that it had burned up one Fourth of July. So instead I talked to the chicken about life and thanked him for the opportunity for money and all. Then I picked an egg up out of the pen and threw it like a baseball against the bean tree. It was hilarious to me, and even more so when the chicken laid another egg to replace it. When my family finally got back, I was half asleep in the yard with a mess of egg under the tree, and a few stray ones in the neighbor’s yard from when I missed the tree trunk.

“Honey. Baby,” I mumbled as she lifted me to my feet, “We need to put this bitch out to stud.”

“You’re saying it wrong,” she grunted under my weight.
“We’d make a killing with a few more just like her.”
She sent Sarah off to her room without an explanation, and when she set me down in my bed she just shook her head.

“What’s wrong,” I asked with my face half in the pillow.
“Nothing,” she said as she left. I expected her to get in a last jab as she flipped the light off at the door, but she just hit the switch and walked down the hall. I don’t know
where she ended up sleeping that night, but I hoped that it was at least as comfortable as
the bed.

Word got around about the eggs which were, admittedly, delicious, and people began calling the house to try and order. Melissa hadn’t told me about it, so my first calls were a bit confusing.

“Is it a big farm?” one lady had asked.
“Uh,” I had said.

Melissa hired a young boy to work the farmer’s markets so she could stay home more often like she used to. It was then that she actually seemed happy. To me she offered a sort of formal kindness, as if I was her mother-in-law, but she hummed songs to herself while she worked around the house, and our sex, while lukewarm, was more frequent. She had a successful business and a stable home. My role was full time handyman.

Louis finally called me and asked me how I was, and I told him that everything was great, and that he and Julie should come over for dinner sometime. They came the next night.

“Is that the chicken?” Louis asked in a lull in the conversation. We were in the backyard grilling while the women were talking in the living room. I looked over my shoulder as if there were several chickens back there and I wanted to be sure.

“Yeah, that’s her. I tell you what, I wished I’d have kept every one of those chickens,” I said. The words were flat, and I just aimed at a bit of nostalgia for times past or something.

“Julie wants me to ask for a way in,” he said without looking at me.

“A way in what?” A burger was in mid-flip before I realized what he was talking about. As the burger landed and the grease caught flame I felt my face get warmer from the fire, from anger, from embarrassment. “Oh, now Louis. It’s not like we’re loaded or anything like that. We just make enough to get by a little. And even if we were, it’s my wife’s project now. It’s real small, and I don’t even get to work most of the time.” I looked in the window at the women and saw them both smiling. “See them there? Probably laughing right now about how much better they are than us. Hell, Julie might already be a partner.”

Louis laughed. “Yeah, probably told her how it was her yard that the chicken was found in. How I had wanted to eat one, but she wouldn’t let me.” I chuckled. He continued, “Probably saying how if we had been at work that day, none of this would’ve happened.” I chuckled again. He didn’t sound like he was making it up. He stared into his can of beer as he spoke, turning his rehearsed speech into a joke. I noticed how clean his hands were and realized that I hadn’t seen them like that in a while. I wanted to apologize again, but it wouldn’t have helped.

“This is about medium well. You want any cheese on it?” I asked. He said that he did.

The next morning, Julie and Melissa left together with the truck full of eggs, and somehow or another, along the way the eggs all broke.

"Is Mommy okay?" Sarah asked.
"I think so sweety."

While we waited for Louis, I dug a hole for Odette and tried to explain to Sarah what happens when you die, and how it is really a nice thing, no matter how horribly
brutal it may seem. When he finally showed up, I put her in her room and told her to stay put while Daddy and Uncle Lou went out to find her mom. "Where should we start?" he asked.
Nighttime

I never wanted to be like you I only wanted to be liked by you she said as she crawled onto the stained mattress by the wall. He turned to her a tad indifferent still and flipped off the light taking the three steps to the bed which to her seemed a great desert of ripped tan carpet and cigarette ash. The hum of her zipper seemed never to end, each tooth sparking conflicting thoughts like Why am I doing this and Why didn't I do this sooner. Her eyes opened as he pulled his hand away to look at her in the moonlight sneaking in the broken window and he cracked a smile that seemed to her like the crack of dawn and as she was thinking about how much she would like to hide behind it he told her that she was beautiful in the dark and that the night had done justice to nothing but her and the moon. She touched his cheek and looked in his eyes and told him that she would keep him in orbit if he would always make her glow and his smile faded as he looked away wondering who exactly she thought he was.
**The Yes Door**

Aubrey crept through the room head first, squeezing through clusters of men in three-piece suits and Santa hats, with a full tray of beer bottles and wine glasses stretched high above her head. She paid no attention to her hand which, because of the way her back bent her forward and slightly tilted, was behind her head and perpetually out of her view, soaring kite-like behind her as she trudged along in her limping, broken way. She was scrambled, and ever since her car crash several years ago, she could no longer carry a tray at chest level without dipping her tie into whatever was there. Her daughter had died in that crash, and her husband had subsequently divorced her. The incident left her in poor health and posture, with no more ability to look kempt than she had will.

She worked at a reception hall known for carving things out of melons, serving drinks to no less than three large groups a day: software engineers cutting loose and spiking their Mountain Dews, locally owned cleaning services pressing cake into the carpet with their sneakers, or insurance salesmen, chuckling to themselves as they tell each other, "See you next year!" Aubrey fought her way through them all, smiling from way below eye level. If she could have made eye contact, she would have. Instead, she looked down at the floor or, when trying to be respectful, she would speak to their belt buckles and remind each of what they ordered and ask would they please be dears and help themselves from the tray. Her left arm was crushed, and to keep it out of the way while she worked she tucked it into the pocket of her apron.

The crash seemed to have left everyone confused. Doctors had watched her squirm and kick, and looked at her as though she was lying. Nurses offered her food she couldn't eat, and turned the TV on so she could at least hear something. She remembered being pushed back onto the bed, and every crack or pop she heard as she moved had made her feel as though she was crumbling completely.

"Your husband is here, miss," a nurse had said. "He'll be in shortly."

She had waited there on her side, staring at the chair where they had piled her clothes. In the glow from the TV, the blood looked black, like engine oil on perfectly good towels. She could smell herself. Her body, she knew, was created with holes that leaked fluid at times predetermined by her biology, and that the body had a different sort of understanding than the mind. Her mind would doubt itself, but she had learned in high school that she could trust her body to know what was right.

Her husband never came. The door opened and closed, and knowledgeable hands touched her where she hurt and made the pain go away, but they were never his. He was sitting in the hallway three floors down, asking "why?" without listening to anyone's answers. In all his distraction he must have forgotten about her, and even after going home, packing, and moving three states over to be with his mother, there hadn't been any evidence that he ever remembered her.

They had had one of those moments years before when they both had something to tell the other one, and he had let her go first. It was then that she had told him that she was pregnant, and he claimed to have forgotten what he had wanted to say, though from the look on his face she could tell. He was already half gone then, and the baby had been like a clothesline he hadn't seen until he was on the ground under it. After that, he fell asleep most nights in the recliner and treated her overall like an addiction he was trying to kick.
So she continued to ask the nurses at the hospital about him, and they continued to assure her that he would be there, and they continued to explain to her that he was in pain, too, and would come when he was ready, which, years later, could still be true. She wasn't surprised when she had checked out alone or when she came home to a house without electricity or water. She had learned that her reaction time was slow, but her body was telling her that if she didn't do something fast, the healing would be harder and someday might not even be worth it.

For awhile she would cry into the phone, holding it between her head and the wall, until she would drop it and have to lie down next to it on the floor. "No one will help me," she would tell her sister-in-law. "There is no one."

"Don't worry," her sister-in-law would answer, standing dry and upright. "Let's think of it, maybe, as a new beginning. A chance to learn something, and lead a better life." That was good advice, and Aubrey took it, and after four years of struggle and eventual triumph, she was finally able to carry a tray stretched high above and behind her head without spilling anything.

The guests at the party weren't drunk yet, but they were trying. There were tall tables set up in the cocktail area for the guests to stand around and set down their drinks. People huddled around them like podiums, bracing themselves with one arm and, when it wasn't their turn to speak, lift their drinks to their mouths. Aubrey walked to one of the tables.

"Can I get anyone anything?" she asked. Most of the men had on loafers, but the women wore a variety. Aubrey could usually tell how much money their husbands had by how high their heels were.

There was a thump on the tray that sounded to her like a rocks glass.

"Vodka tonic," said the khakis.

Another thump.

"Cuba libre," said a light blue pants suit.

Aubrey walked away slowly. It usually only took one time being helped by her for guests to look around for another server who would be faster and wouldn't ruin their evening just by being there.

"Honestly," she once overheard. "Do you think we could get someone a little less depressing?"

She could work an entire party with little effort, while other servers got the brunt of the load. The server station was behind a set of swinging doors, labeled either Yes or No to guide the employees like lines on the highway. Each door had a small two-way mirror so servers, when not in the dining room, could check on the guests without being seen. Aubrey walked towards the Yes door and saw James, who was one of the young bussers that could handle little else but dirty plates, slap the No door as he entered to scare whoever might be peeking out. To him, this was hilarious.

"You," said Sherri, after calming herself down, "are incredibly sixteen."

Sherri was the lead banquet server, and was more or less in charge most of the time. She worked days at a mexican restaurant and nights at the reception hall. She was the only server any of them had ever seen that had submitted a résumé. "Professional Server" it had read, with an impressive list of experience. She served like an artisan, and cleared plates like a phantom, but she was unpopular with the bussers because she would rather tell a manager about them than yell at them directly.
"Quit spying," James said. He stopped laughing suddenly before he said this, only to fall right back into it. "It's rude."

James had a junior 'fro and only one eyebrow, but he talked to people as though they wanted him to never leave. He didn't wear an apron because he didn't matter, and when he got to standing still, few things could distract him. He received credit for working there, leaving school at around noon to come, but since the holiday break he had been working more or less full-time.

Aubrey hardly ever spied from the window. She spent most of her time in the dining room. She felt herself a spectacle, and tried to catch those that would stare. From outside the throng of festive guests, she would watch and wait for a drink to empty. She only went in the back to ring in a drink order or run food.

James walked over to her while she typed in the drinks. He ruffled her hair, which she didn't fix, and picked up one of the glasses on her tray.

"So who are these people, any way?" he asked her, sucking on an ice cube from the glass. "They're awfully touchy."

"I can't tell. They're a fine mix. Some are dressed kind of nerdy, and others are all spiffed up. Telemarketers maybe?"

He leaned back against the ice machine and crossed his arms. "Yeah. A lot of money, but little training. I was thinking politicians. They've got D.C. written on everything."

"I don't think so. Wouldn't there be, like, fifty armed guards around?"

"Doubt it. But that would be sweet to see people walking around with fifty arms."

He growled and waved his arms around, swatting at a potted plant beside him. "Get it?"

"Yeah. How do you spell 'libre'?"

"Teacher always tells me to look it up."

Aubrey sent the check and moved away from James, leaving behind a tray of glasses for someone else to put away. While she waited for her order she walked out to check on the table set-up one last time. The guests were all still in the cocktail room, picking at hors d'oeuvre plates and standing too close to one another. They would be there for a couple more minutes, and then would be invited into the dining room for dinner service.

The dining room was elegant, with no less than fifteen pieces of flatware, glassware, and silverware at each setting. The tables moved around depending on the size of the group, so instead of individual lights, there was track lighting supplemented by three large chandeliers. The chairs were covered with fitted sleeves that were secured by oversized bows. Aubrey glanced around the room at the centerpieces and the table skirts, checking to make sure everything was in order. The only thing out of place was a man wandering around in a Hawaiian shirt unbuttoned to his sternum. His jeans were tight. Not the comforting tight of bandages, but constricting, like nightmares. They were a deep, dark blue except for the parts where they hugged his skin, which stretched them to a lighter shade. He leaned against the wall next to the women's room, snapping his fingers to keep from being bored. He was interesting and out of place, like an overly-friendly suitor who doesn't know he's a stalker. He seemed eccentric in the way only the powerful can be, and Aubrey immediately decided that he must be the host of the party. She walked to him, her feet sliding into the carpet like a plow on frozen ground.
"Hello sir," she said. She stood next to him and turned her neck so that she looked up at him, and he looked down at her as though it were a normal gesture. That was the first thing, after the pants and chest hair, that she noticed about him. That he didn't seem to mind her shape. For a moment she felt she knew what it was to have a healthy form and be average, then remembered that, when she was average, she had never cared to notice. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No...," his eyes left hers and scanned her uniform. "You're looking for a name tag, right? It's in the usual spot, you just can't see it. My name's Aubrey. I've thought about pinning it to my shoulder, but I thought that would be strange. You can see it just fine, though, if you're sitting."

He rubbed his hands together and nodded until she finished, but didn't say anything. A woman came out of the bathroom clutching a large martini and immediately took up his arm without looking at her.

"Honey," he said to the woman, "this is Aubrey."

The woman tugged at the seat of her pants and looked down. She rolled her eyes and tugged on the man's arm.

"It was wonderful to meet you," the man said before walking off.

They were all going the same direction, but the man and his wife walked much faster. Aubrey tried to follow and keep them in sight, but she lost them behind the watermelon Christmas tree. She sped up, but was stopped by a woman's cleavage asking for a chardonnay on ice.

"And a cherry please."

As she walked back to towards the Yes door, bottles and glasses started clunking onto the tray above her. Each time it wobbled, and each time no one gasped. She made it at long last to the bar and put in her order, then walked to the dishroom to unload the empties.

The kitchen was a difficult area, if only in terms of floor slickness, but when Aubrey walked through, she was compelled to accelerate. No one who worked there was around when her back was straight, and every time she wandered back by the cooks she was met with a mixture of I've-never-seen-this-before and I've-been-thinking-about-this-all-weekend. Often, when bending down to collect a doilied plate or dressing boat, one or the other cook would run up and hump her head or, on a good day, just stand with their ass uncomfortably close to her face.

"I slipped," they would say. "I didn't see you there."

So at the dishroom she unloaded glasses and tossed her bottles in the garbage then darted out to the bar, which looked more like stumbling.

The chardonnay wasn't at the bar when Aubrey got there. The bartender, a young girl hired for her looks, said that James had taken it.

"Said he needed a closer look," she said.

She loaded the other drinks on a tray and placed it on Aubrey's arm, sliding and adjusting it until she was sure it wouldn't topple.

The guests were communicating mostly through laughter. They moved aside when they saw Aubrey coming through, which was unusual at that time of night. Jackets were coming off and coasters were being used as fans, and guests generally became less aware of the wait staff, and less willing to move out of the way. But Aubrey passed through easily. Each time she broke through another group she looked around for Robert,
believing he would be easy to spot in his loud clothes like a nightlight in an otherwise dark room.

When she finally saw him he was looking right at her, but turned away quickly when he saw he'd been spotted. She made a move in his direction, but clinking and thumping above her head made it impossible to continue.

"Another beer," chinos said. "Something dark."
"And I'll just have water," half a skirt said.

Aubrey got a few more drink orders and ran into James and Michael again by the soda fountain. James was jerking his head around in all directions, creating as much suspicion as he was avoiding. He pulled a black canvas case with an enormous zipper out from under his shirt.

"I think they're doctors," he said.
"So? Do you feel like running my other drinks, too? They're working me to death for some reason and my wrist is getting sore."
"No. But check it out, someone left this in the bathroom." He unzipped the case.
"The bathroom!" Inside was a device with pads, cords, and alcohol wipes.
"It looks like a lie detector," Michael said.

Michael was seasonal help, on a sort of on-call basis. He went to the same school as James, and whenever they were together they got less work accomplished than they would individually.

Aubrey reached out and snapped the case closed, but James pulled away and put his body between the woman and the item.
"You can't just take stuff," Aubrey said. "Put it back. What if a manager saw you with that? You'd get fired. You'd be gone."

The door to the station opened and James tossed the case on top of the ice machine, where no one but he could reach. It was Sherri.

"Take this tray out, Michael," James said. "Aubrey can show you where. I'm going out to smoke."

Sherri found it uncomfortable to walk with anything in her pockets, so on the little shelf by the ice machine where the servers kept their drinking cups she set her keys, lighter, and cigarettes. Which is why James almost exclusively smoked Virginia Slims.

"Hold it right there, Jimmy," Sherri said. Sherri was older than Aubrey, but when they would talk Aubrey would stare at the knot in Sherri's apron string, thinking the way she had to wrap it around her waist twice before it would fit was the sexiest thing she could imagine for a woman in her position. "James, I need you to help the disher with his garbage. Michael, what are you doing?"
"I'm gonna run this tray out. Then I'll make another round."
"Hurry up. I want to have a quick meeting before the food goes out."

Sherri watched Aubrey rub her wrist against her leg, then shake it out, fingers wobbling like pompons.
"I've been thinking," Sherri said. "Some of the people that come in here could probably help you."

Aubrey looked over at her with only her eyes, already bored of the conversation.
"Of course, I can't encourage you to accost the guests at their party, but think about it. We've got lawyers and stuff come in here all the time for their parties. I mean, that's one of the issues, right? The law?"
"People don't want to help me," Aubrey said. "I look difficult. I've seen lawyers. It was my fault. There's nothing they can do, even if it would help."

"Oh, fault. That's such a legal term."

"It's not physical help I need, anyway," Aubrey said. She meant it to be the last word. The sentence that would end the conversation and allow everyone involved to fall back into slicing bread and scooping ice.

Instead, Michael said, "What about priests? There's always a priest at our wedding receptions."

And that was the last word. James had successfully stolen a cigarette from Sherri's pack and tapped Michael on the shoulder to get him to follow. Sherri checked her watch and then walked back into the kitchen to see how the dinner was coming along, and Aubrey half-heartedly finished wiping down the soda fountain.

A priest had once told her that there was no limit to what could be done once we stopped caring who received the credit. Forgiving ourselves, she had thought then, was when we stopped taking the blame.

When Aubrey was younger the teenage boy that lived next door accidentally walked through her garden. She had loved that garden, and so had tried to hurt what he loved, which was his car. She slapped at it and kicked it, trying to dent it and break the windows and scratch the paint. Her soft little fists drummed against the windshield, and the machine felt as frustratingly indestructible as its owner. All of her strength at ten couldn't do what her daughter had done so effortlessly at four. Maybe Sherri was right, and 'fault' was too legal a word, and maybe that was the root of Aubrey's problem. But then again, maybe Aubrey tried daily to calculate the trajectory of unbuckled child through glass.

She walked out of the server station to a group of people standing around an ill-placed armoire.

"If you folks would like to take your seats, we are about to serve dinner."

"Okay, but hey," a man said. He was in a suit that was probably considered 'casual,' and the woman near him clearly made all of the money in the family. "A few of us were wondering if we could get so me shots. Just a round or two." He said it like someone had already told him no.

"No, I'm sorry. It's against policy."

"Oh come on," he said. He smiled intimately. Men did this sometimes, lightly implying an attraction to her to get free drinks or a second helping of gravy, and instead of being flattered, she was reminded of how desperate she looked.

"Sir, if you would just make your way into the dining room..."

She looked away while she was talking and saw Robert walking towards her. Or towards the man she was speaking with. He was laughing and was about to start joking with them until Sherri intercepted him. She said something Aubrey couldn't hear, nodded, then followed some other guests into the next room.

The food went out quickly was eaten quickly, and soon the guests were leaning back in their chairs and pointing at their bellies. The speakers near the ceiling popped to life and the room looked up and around until they finally noticed Robert standing in an empty area in the front of the room. "Excuse me, everyone," he said. "If I could get your attention for a moment. It looks like it's going to be a crazy night, so I'll try and be quick
and people can leave as they feel comfortable." Little murmurs from the crowd. "I'd like
to start by thanking you all first for coming out in this weather. Wow, right?"

Aubrey watched from the wall like a girl in love, and James walked up beside her.
"I asked a guy about the kind of machinery he liked to use and you know what he
told me? He said he was straight, but that if I kept looking I might find some mixers in
the crowd. What's that about?"

He had lifted a beer off of a table and was holding it behind Aubrey's back, taking
occasional sips when no one was looking.

"And second I would like to thank you all for your excellent work this year. In the
seven years since my brother and I first opened Waller Chiropractic in the little strip mall
that has now become a sort of headquarters for us, we have yet to have a year where we
have helped fewer people than the year before. Thanks to you and your efforts, the world
is becoming healthier and happier, and more free from discomfort and illness. People are
seeing and responding to the benefits of chiropractic care. In the last few months alone
we've opened two new branches, and I would like you to join me in welcoming Dr. John
Breenan and Dr. Susan Ingraam to our large family." The two of them stood halfway up,
choosing to straighten their legs rather than their backs. They waved a little and smiled,
cheeks puffy and full of beef.

"And it is in the spirit of thanks that we move on to a new program that my
brother and I have come up with. We looked through the records and spoke to some
patients, looking for things like return customers, growth, and overall satisfaction both
for the patients and the DC's themselves, and created a plaque to present today to the best
and brightest branch. Of course, the winner was myself, in the Oakford office, but I
thought that would be a bit unfair to present myself with an award, so we looked for a
second place, which turned out to be my brother. Well, how embarrassed were we?
Honored, for sure, but embarrassed. So then we settled on third, and that was the
Middleburg branch, operated by Dr. Sarah Pranter. Come on up, Sarah."

The crowd clapped as the doctor made her way to the front.

"I knew she was a doctor," James said. "The women without breast implants are
doctors."

From under a tablecloth, the Robert pulled out a plaque as long as a leg, proudly
displaying a giant safety pin plated in gold. The audience laughed and looked around at
each other, lightly touching wrists and nodding.

"I'll bet they think that's funny for a completely different reason than I do," James
said. Aubrey shushed him.

"I can see you all remember this from school," Robert continued. He removed the
safety pin from the plaque and held it in front of him, unclasping one end so that it
resembled a check mark. "And it actually works!"

Aubrey looked out at the doctors at their tables. They seemed comfortable here, in
a way most employees weren't. She would see people from other companies making
awkward small talk to the people they sat by, or draping an arm around their spouse and
trying not to spill anything. These people grabbed each other's arms and shared secrets.
Observations. They oozed a camaraderie born of quackery. She wanted to step out into
that crowd. To walk onto the little stage and ease herself onto her knees and let him touch
her forehead. For him to heal her like in some southern tent revival. To lay prostrate,
baptized in high velocity/low force sensations and soft tissue manipulations. Her feet slid
forward, moving her away from James and towards the doctor. Her eyes scanned the ground, and then the crowd. Faces, a few of them nodding, watched her make her slow progress, not caring that she was interrupting their ceremony. Aubrey felt like they understood. Like they had been watching her all night and waiting for the time to be right. Bump slide clomp bump she carried on even after the murmuring died away. The doctor respectfully drank from his beer until it was gone, and still Aubrey moved. He put his hand on her shoulder when she finally arrived, face to face with his chest hair.

"Yes, Aubrey?" he said

A ritual, she thought. A sacrifice to mark the passing of time.

"I, uh," she started. His hand on her shoulder started squeezing. Probing. She looked back at the crowd, all leaning forward on their elbows. Their smiles hungry, thumbs tracing out her spine on their thighs. Dr. Waller breathed beer onto her forehead as he leaned forward. "Were you going to say something?"

As he spoke, even as she thought about receiving the help she knew she needed, she felt herself resisting. Her body bent more, protecting itself from any sort of change. For these years, her body had been the reminder of what she had done. Her tilted head and back let her know that, since the passing of her child, she must see in a different way, and be seen in a different way. Things should be harder after something like that, she knew, and she had been ready immediately. These doctors, they wanted to help, but they didn't know what help she needed. They would break her, twist her and force her to walk straight, but no one would recognize her in a new posture. She would be the only one who knew who she really was.

"I can take that bottle from you," she said, bending even further as she exhaled. "If you're finished."

His grip relaxed and so did his lips. "Right," he said, and placed the bottle on the tray, in the very center so Aubrey felt the pressure evenly on her palm. The doctor stepped around her and started to thank the band, and Aubrey began moving back towards the Yes door. The tray above her head was light and comfortable, but as she stole a glance back at the crowd with scowling faces half listening to the doctor, she lifted her index finger, knocking the bottle of balance and sending it bouncing across the floor.

"Damn it," she yelped louder than was necessary. Her hands groped at the tray, trying to lift it off of the ground, clawing and slapping at it until she gave up and started shoving it towards the server station with her foot. James hurried over to her after grabbing the beer bottle and picked up the tray.

"Are you alright?" he said when they made it through the doors. "What happened?"

"Nothing," she said, yanking the tray from his hand. "I'm gonna go smoke."

She never washed her hands after smoking. She carried a bottle of hand sanitizer attached to her key ring, which she felt was just as good and didn't dry her skin out in the winter. Managers had spoken to her about it. "Okay," she would say. "I understand." Entire meetings held over the possibility of Aubrey's saliva contaminating silverware, dinner rolls. "Sorry," she would say. "I forgot."

As she pushed through the back door, hands squishing and astringent, she saw James hunched over by the soda machine, one hand on his back and the other on the floor. When he saw her coming he straightened up while Michael fought a smile and started scooping ice into a bucket.
"I was just getting a cup," he said, unprompted. "Like I care."
Sherri came around the corner wiping her hands with a paper towel. "That went well, guys," she said. "Thanks for your help."
"Yeah," James said. "We work here and all."
Aubrey duffed his arm. "You leaving?"
'I've got to get home. I don't spend enough time with Mom, so, you know. I asked the manager yesterday and she said it would be alright. Just leave my tip by the computer and I'll grab it tomorrow."
Aubrey nodded, and Michael kept scooping ice. Sherri waved one last time, then walked out the back door. "Hey, get out that thing." Michael said.
James reached behind the motor of the ice machine and pulled out the black satchel. He took out the machine, which was the size of a pager or cell phone. "It's like an iPod," Michael said, pressing the pads to his ears. James turned a dial on the machine and Michael jumped away, throwing the pads at James. "You fucker!"
"What?"
"You just shocked the shit out of me. That thing electrocutes you or something."
"Sorry, man," James said. "Thought it was the volume."
"Isn't that dangerous?" Aubrey asked. Her lower arm was wiping off a cutting board.
"Let's put it on you and you can see," James said, taking a few steps toward her. She grabbed the corner of the towel she was using and whipped it at him, trying to snap it like she had seen him do so many times before. "You get away from me now," she said as she backed away towards the door to the dining room. He laughed and turned away, so she cracked the door to peer into the party. Her moment in front of the crowd left her reluctant to walk back in, but she still felt obligated to check on them. They were no longer at their tables. Or, rather, they were no longer in their chairs. A few of them had removed their water glasses and silverware from the surface so they could lie down on their backs while others stood behind them, head in hands, and jerked them until they popped. Aubrey looked back at James and Michael to see if they were seeing this, but James had stuck the pads under his shirt and seemed to be playing some form of Chicken with electricity. She turned back to the party and watched as a man stood up on the back of a child-sized woman, digging his heels in and pushing down on his knees. In one corner, a smaller man motioned to a bigger man, who came over and, standing behind him, wrapped his arms around his chest and heaved him into the air. He bounced twice, and the shorter man sighed.
"Fuckin' God damn," James yelled from somewhere behind her, but she didn't turn. Instead, she pushed through the door and dragged herself into the party. Just behind the door, a man was gripping the corner of a wall, twisting himself so he faced behind him, while an elderly woman smiled and clapped. On a table in the middle, a woman lay on her back while her husband held her shoulders and whispered into her ear. A man with jingle bells on his head took off his jacket and grabbed the woman's ankles, bending her legs, then spreading them so both knees touched the table. There was a clatter in the server station, so Aubrey moved herself further from the door. It's a cartoon, she thought. It's pretend.
"Your body is amazing."
The voice came from behind her. She turned and faced a fabric so bright and offensive that she knew it was Robert.
"They all are. Every one." He swung his arm to display the room, swinging above her head and then back again. She didn't look up at him. She wanted her tray.
"I'm sorry about earlier," she said.
"It's okay. You were afraid. It's natural."
"You can't heal me. Not like I need. You wouldn't know where to begin."
In real life, in the real world, she would have hated his smile. Smug, like an introduction to her incorrectness. But here, while she still looked away, she put her head against his stomach.
"We do not heal people," he said, lifting her chin with his finger. "You are right about that. No one man, group, or medicine can heal a person. It is impossible." He began to walk and she followed, through men lifting torsos by armpits and women reluctantly refusing the hand of handsome doctors, only to finally allow themselves to be pulled away. "We manipulate your limbs and set your spine straight, which can eliminate pressure and banish back and neck pain, but beyond that, we cannot effect real healing."
He stepped over a man who was lying on his side with hands tucked between his knees, then held Aubrey's hand as she made her climb. His jeans creaked each time he moved.
"No, Aubrey, in each of us is an innate intelligence that must be allowed to work uninterrupted and without obstacles. Think for a moment, of your hands. You know where they are, though you are not looking at them. Your nerves are constantly sending signals to your brain, and your brain, in turn, is sending signals back. What we do is remove those obstacles and interruptions so that the body can work correctly." When they came to a window they stopped. The light in the dining room had turned the window into a mirror, and he faced them both towards it. "Ultimately, you must heal yourself."
She stared at herself, hating her form as she thought others must. "I don't think I can. Not anymore."
"You can't," said Robert. "Not like this."
Behind them gathered a number of doctors, and they began to put hands on her back. She felt the pressure of their touch, and felt her body push back as it fought to stay standing. She looked at their faces in the reflection and they looked back with their kind, hungry eyes as they pulled her backwards onto the ground, telling her to relax, be still, and let go.
Breaking Up

Yogesh waited while I blathered and blurted out my indecisions, then swiftly lifted the tank lid open, dunked his hand into the water and pulled up the fish, walked it over to the toilet, and flushed it down the drain.

"All right," he said. "Let's get to throwing out this couch."

"You don't scare me," I said to his back as he was showing it to me for the first time. For the first hour he was in my apartment he either followed me slowly or stared me down from across the room, as if I was dangerous, but shy about it.

"Not all fates are the same," he said, holding up one end of the paisley nightmare that I had slept on for the last six months. "Fish get flushed. You? You might shatter when you land."

I had been lying. He scared the fuck out of me. He was my ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend, determined to make my pain her Valentine's Day present. In their defense, I had been stalking her, angering her boss, her gardener, and Yogesh here, who was breaking my couch in half so that it would be easier to carry.

"But I like it here," I said as he pushed the cushions straight through the screen covering the window. "It's not just Lauren. I have attachments here."

"Well then, I guess I'll have to break those too."

He was moving me out, largely against my will. Lauren was brilliant, and had been wasting her time with me. I, on the other hand, found that dating her was the most productive thing I had ever done. It was the one choice in my life I never regretted, and even now, as Yogesh found which way my house plant didn't bend, I knew he would never destroy the one thing that meant something to me. Of course, it had still hurt when he punched me in the throat.

"As my heart beats against my chest," he said, "so I will beat against yours."

Yogesh was a poet, and I had read his stuff in the local paper. The poems he wrote spoke from a simple place in his mind, where people came together not by accident, but by unseen hands that caressed us and urged us towards our final happiness. They were softer versions of love than what he was showing now, his arms full of my flatware and glasses. Lauren had eaten from and washed those dishes when we had lived together. Our love had been simple, too, laid out before us by our work schedules and obligations to friends. The time we spent together was informed by the television that Yogesh could clearly do without. I hadn't treated her right, I knew, and I had no plan to change. What I wanted her to see the first time I visited her was that a love like ours could work. We only needed to accept one another for our good points. The second-through-nineteenth time I visited, I wanted her to see that I was dedicated in ways that were beyond rational comprehesion. What Yogesh wanted me to see on his extended visit was that crazy shouldn't just be unpredictable, it should be irreparable.

He bit off a piece of glass from one of my cups, and while it still rested there in his lips, he blew me a kiss.

"Maybe you're right," I said, hoping he didn't see me reaching for my coat. I wanted to calm him down, and I also wanted something to hide under.

"I am," he said. When he showed up at my apartment, he had one box with him, which he set on the floor of the living room after I had stumbled back away from the door. The dishes that he did not break, he set inside that box. Then, he put in a throw
pillow and a hand towel, which were left whole only because they could not break. "You will not regret this."

I doubted that, but I didn't tell him so. We had grown together, Yadesh and I, and where before I pictured him as a Goliath I could topple, I suddenly saw him as King Kong, gripping a beautiful woman in his freak paw. He pulled a roll of tape from his coat pocket and stretched it across the top of the box, ripping off the end with no more effort than swatting a fly. I wondered then how difficult it was for him - a beast, a force - to be here, making a mess of me and my intentions. I wondered what the difference was between him and the way he expressed himself. Lauren did not want a man that was always there, but rather she wanted a man that would leave and then come back, victorious for her. I had never been that person, and so had never liked the idea of it, but now that I was there, alone with it, I wanted to try. For the first time, to try.

I grabbed him by the throat as he knelt there, securing my things in his box, and it felt the way the lowest branch feels when you begin to climb a tree. I squeezed like I was falling off and wanted to save myself. When he stood up, I dangled for a moment before slipping, and before he turned around to finally pummel me, unfortunate as he seemed to find it, I could smell on him the detergent my clothes had once smelled of, and I knew that still, to this day, I had only ever made one choice that I never regretted.
All that's Fit to Drink

Martin rested his back against the smooth bleached rocks where chlorinated water pours down during regular business hours. It was in the shallowest part of the pool, meant for children to play near but not on, sectioned off by a blue rope strung through floating beads, like a macaroni necklace made by the baby pool. His half-empty bottle of tequila rested on one of the authentic looking ledges that typically create a mid-fall splash, ensuring proper noise and spray. His half full styrofoam cup was in his hand. The only lights were shining red from the exit signs, or beneath the water at the deep-end: a ghost light for pool goblins. Martin slid his empty hand over the surface of the water, scattering dead bugs and leaves from trees that were not close by, wondering if when he jumped in feet first, one arm straight up, the other pinching his nose and covering his mouth, any of the floating biolayer had rushed into his shorts.

"The middle," he mumbled, referring to the large body of water between the dead matter floating on top, and the dead matter resting on the pool's floor. "Heh," he said.

On the concrete beside the pool, Martin had left the paper bag that the clerk had put the bottle in. She had smiled as she slid the noisy package over the counter towards him, and, as he grabbed it away from her, he did not smile back. He was tired. Just tired enough. He left the bag beside the pool, the receipt still at the bottom, in case someone discovered him. "I broke in," he imagined himself saying, "but I brought my own liquor." He imagined himself sober when saying this.

To make himself feel useful, he lifted his feet until his toes broke through to the air, which felt different than the air touching his face. Colder. And more refreshing. The toes seemed heavy to him, out there in the gravity, so he dropped them back down and held them just below the surface, like pilates for senior citizens. Taking a drink from his cup, he tipped over sideways, catching himself with his free hand and not spilling a drop.

By the bag was a pad of paper pocked with water spots that warped the words and made the paper dry lumpy. Martin had tried three times to write a letter that accurately described his situation, clear-headed and without bias, so that his death could only seem right; a favor to his wife and kids. He started by describing the darkness he had been living in; the way the air in their inherited house tasted like pepper and stuck to his eyes; how her daughters spoke in shades of decay, each utterance a reminder of his deadening hipness; how, at night, the bedroom becomes a festival for his impotence. He then wrote in more specific terms about how he came to know that he was the problem, and that he never wanted to spend another Christmas wondering where he had put all of the gifts. My problems are simple, he wrote, but I am not, and I am your problem, and so your problem is not simple. He held the note under the water with his leg until it wouldn't float anymore, then started a new one, beginning with a mini biography of his life before he met her, with details about past lovers who burned his things, and nephews that called him Sir. He then summarized their life together, inserting good memories like camping in state parks and putting the girls to bed early, and then ended with their present life. The ending had him feeling the same elation, but described her as unloving and impatient and too willing to change. That one he tossed at the basketball hoop hanging over the water. It made it all the way to the filter by the deep end.

The third note admitted things.
"Yep," he said out loud.

He hated the sound of his voice when he was alone. Hated that there was nothing to really focus on or pay closer attention to. It was him out of context, like a shirt on a hanger, and the only thing he could focus on was the high tone, and how all of his emotions, even towards himself, sounded forced.

"Plink plonk," he said, mimicking the water dripping from his arm.

The gate out by the entrance rattled. Not like it had opened and shut, but rather like a young girl, eighteen at the most, had climbed over and hadn't worried about anyone seeing her. Then the bathroom door by the gate creaked and then eased shut. To Martin it sounded like the ladies' room, and indeed, a few minutes later, a young girl appeared. In her hands were a small phone, a watch, and a contact lens case. She squinted her eyes and looked around the concrete area, then she looked around the pool. Martin didn't move. Not because he was hiding, he just happened to be immobile. She was a short person, with arms that hung down almost to her knees. She untied her pants and slid them down her thick legs, which seemed to have grown around rather than up. She unbuttoned her shirt to reveal pale skin and a thrift store bra. Skin like she only swims at night; a bra like she only gets undressed alone.

She wasn't pretty, but Martin wanted her to be, like he wanted so many things. So, standing there in her period panties, reaching back to unclasp her tattered bra, she was pretty. Luminous. Worth being nice.

"Excuse me," he said. She jerked and covered herself with simian arms, then squinted harder and leaned forward like she was walking through a strong wind.

"Who's there?" she called.

He took a thoughtful sip from his cup.

"Martin," he called back.

"Stay right there." She squatted and clutched at her clothes. "Are you moving, Martin?" she called. Her voice wavered between fear and self-defense class.

"No," he said. "I am not moving."

With a faint kerplunk, her contact lenses were pushed into the water by her blind, groping fingers.

"Can I help you with something?" Martin called.

She grunted and flipped open her phone, pointing it toward the shallow end.

"Just stay there like I told you," she said. Her hand reached out as far as it could, making semi-circles over the surface of the water, hoping more than anything that the case was floating, which it was. Her fingers bumped it, forcing it away, and when she lunged for it she managed to fall into the water.

Like a gentleman, Martin stayed put.

For a moment, the girl forgot her danger, and instead focused on the water coming out of her phone. As she fell, she had held her arm up out of the water for as long as she could, but somewhere in the gaining of bearings she had managed to submerge it. She faced away from Martin, supporting herself on the side of the pool by her elbows, and pressed buttons on the phone like she was administering CPR. She dropped it, disgusted, and half turned, still supported by one elbow.

"You still there, Martin?" she called.

"Yes." Then, "Are you hurt?"
"No," she said, lifting herself out and sitting down on the concrete. "I just lost my phone. And my vision. And my privacy."

"Oh," Martin called. Before he had jumped in, he had taken his phone and his wallet and his keys out of his pockets and wrapped them in his shirt, placing the bundle under a chaise lounge far back from the pool. It was a habit he picked up as a kid and he hadn't even noticed that he had done it.

"You can have my phone. I think it's over there," he said, gesturing with his cup as though she could see him. He couldn't tell if she was thinking about it because her face never lost its pained expression.

"Why?"

"Because you need it. And I don't."

"Everyone needs a phone."

Martin raised his glass in a 'cheers.' "Not me. I'm on a waterslide to Hell."

"Mmkay," she said. "Thanks. Or whatever." She stayed silent for a while, and Martin kept drinking and watching her. Neither moved for long periods of time. A wind outside the fence occasionally scattered leaves and soda bottles around the parking lot and someone living in the nearby community had their music up too loud. A car started somewhere, and somewhere else a plane was flying. Martin watched her rub her eyes, scratch her nose, stretch her neck. For reasons Martin couldn't decide, she was waiting for something to happen. Maybe waiting for him to do something.

"Go ahead and swim," he finally called. "I'm just gonna sit here for another hour or so anyway. No sense in letting the whole place go to waste."

Her continued silence made him think he was wrong.

"It's not like you can drive, anyway." The contact lens case was floating along the edge of the pool, flirting with the jets and the filters. Martin pictured a helpless ship. Something foreign. He didn't move to retrieve it.

She didn't look convinced, but she slid back in the water anyway. Ripples came away from her body and traveled a good distance across the surface, but were reduced to nothing by the time they reached Martin at the other end.

"Do you do laps or something?" he asked. "You have a stroke?"

"I just like to swim," she answered. "I like to float. To work hard, and have nothing to show for it."

"You stay alive, right? You don't drown. You've still got you."

"I guess." She was looking down as she spoke, kicking her feet to stay up, so she moved erratically like a buoy. Her voice was strong, even if she didn't seem to be, and Martin felt that she had the opposite problem, and she liked to talk when she didn't know who was listening.

"Is it hard, then?" he asked. "To float?"

"It can be."

She looked up when she heard him move, placing his cup and the bottle on the patio just beyond the floating rope. He lifted up the rope and moved under it, letting it slap the water behind him, then walked to the edge of the shallow end, just before the floor sloped down and away.

"Teach me," he said.
She swam toward him, but stopped a few feet shy and made him promise not to hurt her. Her lessons were good, and he remembered some of what he learned as a kid. In a short amount of time he was afloat for small intervals. Floating around on the water, she tried to get him to talk so he would stop holding his breath. He told her about his idea to drink himself unconscious while in a pool. A real rock star death. His voice seemed to him a deep vibration, like it stayed only within his body and none of it escaped. As if he was listening with his teeth. He told her about his family, and the family before that, but didn't come to any helpful conclusions.

"So it's your last day?" she said, standing close to his face so he could read her lips. "You'll be gone tomorrow?"

He nodded a little.

She told him about her house and everyone in it, and mentioned, more than once, her virginity. Her father looked nothing like Martin, and Martin said he could picture that just fine. Her mother was loving but unfriendly, and spent a lot of her time cutting out newspaper articles about obesity and taping them to the box of oatmeal cookies in the cupboard. Her room had two beds in it, and she was only allowed to sleep in one of them. The other was kept just the way her brother had left it before he went to college.

"You're his sister," her father would say to her. "Try and act like it."

She told him that she had loved every single boy in her sophomore class, and wasn't it funny that it didn't matter a bit. Perhaps, she speculated, she had spread herself too thin. Martin imagined all of the ways he might be misinterpreting the hand on his back.

"Will you float me to my Tequila?" he asked.

She pushed his feet and he coasted over to the side, leaving his feet in the air as he poured in his drink from an arms length above his head.

"Ghhughuh," he gargled.

"I'll bet your breath is stronger than the chlorine," she said, lifting water from her cupped hands and letting it fall. Martin thought that, to her, that water must look very different.

"I love the water," she said. "I love how it moves, and how I move in it." She looked over near Martin, and he moved to be in her view. "My first time, you know? I would want it to be in the water."

He turned from her and poured another drink, wondering if she was ruining everything or making all the difference.

"Is this how it will always be?" she asked his back. "This awful dependence on desperation?"

Martin turned and started toward her, crouched so his head was the only part out of the water. He thought maybe she couldn't see his face, with a smile that meant to be playful, so he exaggerated his movements, coming full out of the water and back down with each step. The girl dodged him as he got near, then kept swimming toward and away from him as he moved, each time splashing a little more than was playful. He thought about being a teenager, and about flirting, and about how most relationships were based on how much a person smiles while they carry out their cruelties. He wanted to grab her, to restrain her, partly because he thought she wanted it, but mostly because it was the only game he knew how to play. When he was a child at this same pool he used to grab
the ankles of the younger kids as they practiced laps, jerking them backwards so they choking on the water, shouting "What?" back at the lifeguard's toot.

With gleeful paranoia she evaded his attempts, kicking her foot from his grip or diving away as he lunged. His finger once caught her bra strap and the entirety of the fabric seemed to dissolve away like tissue. Her first expression made clear that he had broken her only bra, but then she composed herself and leaned away from him, grabbing the rim of the basketball hoop and hanging like an adult mobile. He bobbed his way over to her and let her legs wrap around him, her feet desperately locking behind his back, suffocating him until he straightened his posture and took shallower breaths.

"Is this wrong?" she asked. In response he let water drip off his hands onto her chest and her scrunched-up belly. "You have a family," she said as she adjusted the grip of her legs.

When he finally looked up at her, she was looking at him with a hopeful squint.
"The first thing you should know," he said, "is when to stop talking."
"What?"
"About sex. It's important to preserve the mood."
"The mood?" She let go of the rim and dropped her arms onto his shoulders, almost knocking him down with their force. As he stumbled back she gained her footing and pushed him under the water, kicking at him as he jumped up and away from her.
"What the hell's wrong with you?" he yelled, stuiming and slicking his hair back.
"Shut up," she said, walking to the steps to sit down. The short railing cradled her as she kept her head away from him.
"Shut up? That's what I said. You can't say what I said." Martin found and picked at a scrape on his elbow.
She didn't turn her head. "Why can't I talk? Huh? I have questions."
"Because I don't have any answers for you."
"Well maybe I need some reassurance."
"Well maybe you can make your own damned decisions." As he said this, he put his arms out to his sides and scooped all the water he could in her direction. The two sprays crossed paths and largely missed the girl, but he felt pretty sure she knew what he meant.

Her contact lens case floated in the corner, but she couldn't see it. It seemed to seek her out, floating closer and closer until it finally passed her, hit the side of the pool, and floated back the other way.
"Look," he said, feeling the calm that comes from intense pity. "It usually doesn't matter what you plan or how much you think about things. I've found it's much more productive to just try and explain it later."

For a good couple of minutes she rubbed her eyes with her fists. She stopped and blinked. "Have you tried going to the deep end lately? Maybe you're ready and don't know it."
"Yeah," he said, making his loud way to her corner. "I go down there whenever I need to pee."

She crinkled her nose, then let him carry her into the middle of the shallow part. Her hair floated on the top of the water, dragging a train of leaves and bugs of flight as the two made their way through the pool. From that distance, he could tell she worked with fried foods, that she popped her zits with her fingernails, that she chewed strawberry
gum to cover up smoke. He bounced backwards with her on his knees in the same
innocent way he would do with his wife's daughters and wondered if her father had ever
done this with her when she was young. He assumed she had not, that she was troubled in
some way relating to a man in her life, and that she dealt with it by reading fantasy novels
and naming things that weren't alive.

They zigged and zagged like that for a few laps, humming songs from the
previous decade, until Martin was close enough to reach his cup. Water streamed off his
elbow as he grabbed for the bottle, spilling a few ounces into his cup.
"Can I have some of that?" she asked, nervous with sexuality.
He held the bottle up to the red light of the exit sign. The label showed a dark
shadow that averaged just below the headless sombrero.
"No," he said. Then, gauging her disappointment, said, "You're probably not old
enough anyway."
She let a laugh out and swam backwards away from him. "You mean I can't drink
responsibly like you can."
He took in some water and spat it back out at her. "Whatever I am, I can't imagine
what I would be if I looked to a teenage girl for advice on life or liquor. You ever drink
before?"
"My uncle used to make his own stuff. Sweet potato vodka."
"Yeah?" he said, impressed as he swallowed. "How was it?"
She stood up with her panties dangling from her finger. "Like drinking
thumbtacks."
To please her, he spoke. He got close enough to whisper, wondering how well she
could see him as she sat on his lap, and he kissed water drops from her face that he had
mistaken for tears. As she leaned back against the pool, he crab-walked under her,
remembering in an instant how much more powerful arousal was than love, feeling as he
he did more than one emotion he had thought had gone forever. He told her he would be
dead soon, and that this night wouldn't even count, really. She seemed to concentrate on
the motion of her hips, and how the water was making things less slippery than she had
probably been told. He told her that she was doing him a favor, making his last night
special. She grabbed him around the shoulders and put all of her gravity into him, and he
told her that as far as her parents should be concerned, she was at a friend's house for the night. That the
mark he made on her neck could have easily been made with a curling iron.
"You were playing with their dog," he said after biting her arm.

Out in the open, over the depths of 3 feet, Martin and the young girl floated, her
hand gripping his while they swelled like waves as the water moved beneath them. The
water burned her now, he could tell, but she stayed quiet about it, and they both seemed
intent to focus on their breathing.
"I should go," she finally said. He pretended not to hear, and she swam back
across the pool to her clothes.
The tile squeaked as she slid herself up out of the pool and onto the concrete
patio, leaving her feet dangling in the water up to her shins.
"You don't need to leave," he said, pushing himself with his arms even though his feet were walking on the bottom.
"You should be alone," she said, not making an effort to move any farther.
He made it past the drop-off and paddled over to her, finally gripping the side with one hand and her knee with the other.
"I'm not so sure," he said. "I may have changed my mind."
She brought her hair in front of her with her hand and tossed it back with her head.
"Why? Because of me?"
"Yes," he said, saying it quick because his legs were kicking, making it hard to speak. "I-think-I-huh-love-you."
"You're drunk."
"Yes, I know," he said, working hard to stay in one place. "But, if this feeling is enough to save me, it might be worth it."
She didn't respond and he let go of the side, drifting backwards, arms stretched out, watching her as she stopped squinting and leaned back on her elbows.
"Don't you think?"
She closed her eyes as a car drove by on the street, opening them after it had gone. With his feet he grabbed hold of her ankle so he wouldn't float too far away. One of her legs straightened towards him and circled his face until he grabbed it and pulled it to his mouth. She let him suck and bite her heel and toes for a moment, sighing a little, then pulled away from his grip and rested her ankle on his forehead. His eyes closed as he went under and, holding her leg against him, he imagined falling slowly down a deep hole and taking the time to look around, wondering in which side of the middle he would land.
Bobby had had it. Which is to say, he had had enough. He wanted no more of what he was being given, and had decided to take. He had decided to take things that weren't already being given to him. He was going to take different things. After all, he belonged to no one. He was his own man. And he started that day off, as a symbolic gesture, by taking the lost and found box from the library. It was there, he felt, that true treasures were kept. People hoard, as it were, and he longed for those moments when control was lost, and items were misplaced. He wanted them. A whole box of them. So he took them. Right out from behind the information desk, where the stern older woman asked him what exactly he was doing, and to which he replied "These are mine."

"Well," she said, "can you describe them?"
"They are lost, and they are found, and they are mine."
And they were. In his arms and out the front door. No alarm rang as he left, and no one followed him out. It could no longer be denied that these things were his.

The backseat of his sedan was already covered with the things that had been given him which he had had enough of, but he pushed it all aside and down to the floorboard to make room for his new, different stuff, then took the empty box in both hands and walked back inside.

"Thank you," he said to the stern older woman behind the desk. The box had contained many things, different things, but none of them were what Bobby had expected. There was an action figure, fierce yet forgettable, and a mitten well caked with dog fur. There was a pacifier textured like a frozen raspberry. He opened a vinyl change purse and pulled out three miles of yo-yo string and a dusty comic strip, sticky and gum-scented. Kid stuff. Adults, it seemed, didn't lose things. Their hoarding was efficient; perfected. This was not the way to begin. He leaned back, pressing his tailbone into the seatbelt clasp, and realized that he had never been in the backseat of his own car.

"How uninviting," he said. His knees were on either side of the passenger seat, which was back as far as it could go. The atmosphere was one of inaction and waiting. "Children," he decided, "know. They can lose things. Let go. I, too, must have known." He picked up a soggy stuffed cow. "Or maybe they don't know yet how to hold on, and so there was a time I didn't know." The cow couldn't speak like some toys could, and it was soft all the way through. It was designed to be loved in inaccurate ways and then traded for something that fights back.

His mother, he remembered, had kept a box while she was pregnant so that she could fill it with souvenirs such as her pregnancy test and his report cards and baby shoes. She did not differentiate the good memories from bad. She kept with reckless abandon. He thought of this box as he sat, testing the ashtray and armrest, and decided that he must return home, to his mother's home, where he used to live with her up until the point when he no longer did. There were things in that box that were taken from him, perhaps, or maybe they were never his to begin with. Maybe he just gave them away as he outgrew them. It was there, then, that treasures were kept. Or, rather, given away, which, he realized, should have been his goal all along.
The house he grew up in had only one story, and it was a long one. His father, tall and trustworthy before he had died somewhere in the east wing, had called it a ranch house, and Bobby never forgave him for the confusion. The yard was small and, even though there was a barn-shaped shed in the back, it made for the sorriest ranch Bobby had ever seen. They didn't look alike, he and his father, and no one quite looked like his mother. His little league coach had once asked him about his mother, whom he had seen in the stands back when she looked less like an armchair and more like someone you would notice in the stands at a little league game. Bobby had told him how she was smart and funny and how she smelled good and all that, and his coach had shook his head and said, "Bobby, women like that don't really exist." For a week or so afterwards Bobby looked down into his cereal bowl and wouldn't answer when his mother spoke to him, and would spy on her when she slept to see if she was there and breathing. By the next practice he was sure she really existed, but their relationship was never as flowing.

When he got to the house, he looked in on his mother and all her loneliness, sleeping on her side on the living room couch. The room was not tidy, and she herself seemed stacked in it along with the shoes and the clothing and the clocks and empty envelopes. There were paths from the door to the couch and the couch to the tv and the tv to the window and the window to the kitchen. She used to have a dog, a terrier of some sort, but he didn't know what happened to it, and hoped that she didn't bring it up. He stepped over piles and cut corners quietly until he made it to his old room, which was empty except for a bed and a box. The box held all of the things Bobby had ever kept in the room so really the room was as full as ever, only arranged differently.

His mother came in and found him lying on the bed, remembering the nuances of the ceiling.

"You again," she said. He watched her pull her hair back into a ponytail and smooth out her shirt, which just wrinkled back up again.

"I would like to look through my box. The Me box."

"It's a drawer. The You drawer," she said, emphasizing You as though that was what she was correcting. "What's this all about?"

"I've had enough." She seemed to refuse to enter the room, as though it were still his. He had asked her once, years ago, to please knock but generally keep away.

"If you have enough, why did you come here for more?"

"No, I don't have enough, I've had enough."

She flicked at a piece of wallpaper that was coming undone. "You had, but you don't now?"

"I don't want to be part of the problem anymore. I want to learn to let go. To lose."

"There are people that would be happy to be in your position. That's what the radio says."

Bobby lifted himself up onto his elbow. "The position that I'm trying to change, or the position of trying to change?"

His mother shook her head. "Come on back."

Her room was as he remembered it, only darker and smaller. The blinds were dirty, adding another layer to the shade, and what little light came through held dust so thick that it seemed to be liquid. He knew where the bed was from memory, but now it
was hidden under books and loose hanging files. On top of the dresser was a picture frame with nothing in it, and a couple of photos that were obviously taken recently.

"Mom?" he said, picking up one of the prints.
"Oh those. I joined a photo league."

The picture he held showed his mother from the right side, facing the camera. Her hair was parted in the middle and bobbed at the end, the way he used to draw her in stick figures. She smiled, unleashing her gray teeth in a dull dazzle like wet fireworks. She was beautiful. Was. Bobby cocked an eyebrow.

"It's part of this community center plan to age gracefully and hold back depression. On Wednesdays some local photographer or other comes down and whoever wants to can do a sitting."

The picture showed scabs on her face that he hadn't noticed. He looked back at her and squinted, willing them into view. They popped up, blooming like weeds, and he looked away again. There were others shots, sequential like a flipbook. In one she gripped her hair. In another she was blowing a kiss.

"I think it's supposed to be a one-time thing, like for the grandkids or someone, but a couple of us girls go down every week. Gives us a reason to dress up, you know?"

Bobby set them back on top of the dresser, then stooped down to the bottom. He emptied the drawer, piece by piece, souvenir by keepsake, trying to relive his childhood, but realizing how vague and repetitive it all was. There was a sort of portfolio of fingerpaint scribbles bound with rubber bands, and papier maché hands that had been crushed. She had kept all of his baby teeth in a wooden box that said "Belize." He picked it up and rattled it by his ear. It sounded like voodoo.

"You know where I got that?" she asked. He didn't answer her.
He held up a sandwich bag. "Is this hair?"
"Yes," she said. "I took it from the comb and saved it." She picked a paper clip up off the ground and started cleaning her fingernails. "One day you'll see how exciting it is when something you are caring for grows. It's like a garden, or dough. Only better, because it takes longer and is illegal to ruin."

He cleared an area on the floor, pushing aside things that shouldn't be there, and removed the hair from the bag. It still smelled like the horse shampoo she used to buy. It was balled up like steel wool, but came apart easily when he pulled at it. He arranged it into an arch there on the bare spot of the floor, then emptied out his teeth, arranging them from small to big first, then sorting out how he thought they had been in his head. His mother moved her shadow, cast from the hallway light, over to the little face he was building. Suddenly her shadow had hair. She giggled.

"Mom."
"I'm sorry."

He kept building his old head, adding his glasses and a medal he won for spelling words he couldn't define. He moved the parts closer, then far apart, but he couldn't recognize himself.

"I bought this frame so I could hang myself," his mother said, fidgeting with her photos, "but I can't decide which one I like."

He continued to work.
"Which do you think? Maybe the league photography is bad, you know? Other people get pictures done and they look fine, but me, I just look dumpy. That's not the point, right? To look how I feel?"

Bobby looked in a photo album, comparing himself to his work.
"I tried to improvise in a couple of these. It just seemed so formulaic. Turn this way. Smile. Hold this bear. But when I went out on my own I just looked like I was about to get poked in the eye, or like I was making shadow puppets and trying to surprise myself."

Bobby pulled out a doll about the size of a baby, though it was meant to look around six.
"Who's is this?" he asked. Its head was plastic and its implications were bad. The body was spongy like airplane pillows and wore overalls with an impossibly small pocket on the front. Inside was a small strip of paper from a fortune cookie reminding him to beware.
"Come on now, Robert."

His name was scrawled on the right shoe in orange crayon. He had never loved the doll, but it was his. He remembered writing his name on a lot of things, so as not to lose them. He understood early his inability to keep ahold and relied on others. He had been learning, but learning the wrong things.

He cut the doll's mouth open with his pocket knife and squeezed the cheeks open. He started shoving in teeth, getting to five before running out of room.
"Don't lose anything now," his mother said. "You have no idea how hard it's been to not throw that stuff away."

He tied individual hairs onto the fake hair on the doll's head, braiding them together like friendship bracelets. He taped his old glasses onto the round face. She left him there and went to make lunch for the two of them. He stuffed old wrapping paper into his graduation cap to make it fit. The doll looked awkward and unready, completely incapable of what would one day be expected of him. The hands were soft and fingerless, and the feet wore baby sneakers, good for painlessly learning to run. Together, they walked to the kitchen where his mother was boiling potatoes to make bread. The fan above the stove was on, taking away the smell of the canned beef stew, and it sounded like sneaking out of a tent.
"We're finished," Bobby said, holding up his new friend. His hair was creased and hung into his eyes. "Does he look like me?"

His mother grunted up phlegm. "Uh huh." She reached out and stroked the hair. "Little Bobby. So now what?"

"Now I will give him all of my things, which I have had enough of, and then he will lose them."

She made her tea sweet and viscous, stirring it with a fork. "Are you saying you need a place to stay?"

He wrapped a strip of potato skin around a pat of butter and popped it in his mouth. He offered some to the doll, and then made it shake its head.
"It's working, see?"

When she turned around he saw that, hunched over the counter, she wasn't making food, but had finished framing a picture and was holding it up for him to see.
"What do you think?"
There was something in the lighting that made her hair look wiggy.
"Mom, if you want, I have some pictures of you at home in my photo box. Just of you, doing things, like barbequing. Being real."
"Oh honey, you're not a professional photographer. You're not even an artist. I like these shots. They make me look like myself." She turned it so she could see it, and Bobby could tell she was comparing her picture to her reflection beside it. "Just give yours to your doll."

Bobby left her there in the kitchen, heating up her soup, framing herself. He swept the to-go cups and CD cases off the front passenger seat and belted in his little Bobby, who leaned a little so the shoulder strap didn't cover his face. Then Bobby climbed in behind the wheel and started the engine, revving it for no real reason. They were going away, he thought. Turning their backs on their youth without gaining the necessary knowledge. They would take the fast way, the shortest, straightest route, just them, each protecting the other. Little Bobby smiled his toothy smile, and looked ahead, peering over the dashboard as much as he could. Bobby reached out and squeezed the pillowy hand of his companion and turned off the radio, because he wanted it to be just them for a while.
Comfort

I rented the last room in a small hotel, but I was scared of the sheets so I didn't sleep, and when the familiar flash of the television failed to keep my attention I climbed on my hands and knees to the window overlooking the misleading half-empty parking lot where grown men and women walked away disappointed. Some would curse, throwing their luggage in frustration with energy that came from not having any left, while others would be thinking how to explain to their kids that they would have to try somewhere else, and just as I was feeling guilty a man stopped by his car and turned toward me with his hand raised in a permanent wave and mouthed the words It's alright, sleep will come whether they're comfortable or not.
Act Like You've Been There Before

"You call him Franny?" Frank called from the backseat. "That's a girl's name."
"It's short for Francis," Ann said without glancing back. "We named him after you."
"My name's not Francis. Why don't you just call him Cissy? It's short and gets more to the point."
"Don't listen to your grandpa, Franny. You've got a good name."
Francis looked over at Frank. They were both as far toward the doors as possible, leaving the middle seat open except for Frank's hand, which he placed there to keep from rocking too much during the turns. Despite the extra room, Francis kept a paper Duvlinn's shopping bag on the other side of his legs, pinned to the door.
"You know, Dad, I can take you home," Ann said. "I didn't have to pick you up. I don't know why you'd want to go to the mall, anyway."
"I like the mall," Frank said.
They drove on while the radio sang about girls going out somewhere together.
Francis divided his attention between the the window and the bag on the floor. He kept his hand wrapped around the loop handles.
"You returning something?" Frank asked him.
Francis looked over at Frank and then straight ahead at Ann's headrest.
"Why didn't you sit up front?" Francis said. "I left it open for you."
The mall was crowded, but Frank insisted that they park by a door so he didn't have to walk very far. They found a spot on the highest level of the parking garage, in a space that had been a handicapped spot before some kids stole the sign.
"Okay, Franny, where do you need to go?" Ann asked once they were inside.
"Macy's? Let's go there first so I can get some things done." Ann looked at her watch while she spoke.
"I can go myself," Francis said, also looking at her watch.
She raised her eyes. "You don't need my help?"
"No. I can do it."
She looked at him sideways. "Okay then. Dad, you'll stay here?" She had her hands out like she was balancing herself. Or like she was balancing everyone else. Frank didn't say anything, just eased himself onto the bench. Ann guessed he wouldn't get far even if he did get up. "We'll all meet here, then," she said, then Ann walked off with Francis slowly following behind.
A girl with wheels on her shoes came out of a store being pulled by her mother. She took a few awkward steps and then leapt forward, coasting on the wheels and being dragged by the mother. Through her shuffling, a coin managed to spring from her hand and bounced on the ground. The coin rolled away from the girl, over toward where Frank was sitting on a bench beside the indoor garden. It chimed as it hit the ground once, twice, then the teeth on the rim rattled as it rolled over the beige marble floor, growling like a tiny highway rumble strip. Still the girl kept walking, not heeding the vibratory warning. Frank looked up when he heard it clackbounce, pulling his attention away from the electronic store window where two flat-screen TVs were showing travel locations and female pop stars. His eyes moved from the coin to the girl, who was quickly being pulled into the abyss of the mall hallway, until he was sure that it was going unnoticed. A few
sneakers and high heels stepped carelessly by the traveling quarter, as though it were as invisible as their lover's pet, and one woman actually stepped over it in an exaggerated leap, then turned around to see if it was worth the chase.

Frank moved his baseball cap from his knee to the place beside him and scooted to the edge of the bench, rubbing his hands together and watching the quarter come at him like the world's slowest fastball. As it came nearer he set his hands down by the ground to scoop it up, but it turned as it slowed, making smaller and smaller circles. Ripples in reverse. His open, yellow smile loosened to horror and he leaned forward to gain momentum for his awkward spring attack. He hobbled to the cruising coin and reached for it as it passed, leaving him circling around like a cat chasing its tail. Turning back the other way, he kicked at it and it slid along the tile a few feet and finally lay still.

He glared at the quarter, basking in the mall lights, and wondered if he should stay bent over as he walked to it, or to straighten himself out, only to hunch once more. For his dignity he stood erect, pulled his windbreaker straight, and made his slow hobble over to the pile of one.

Two security guards, broad brims blocking out the florescent lights, shirts too stiff and tucked in, paused on their way to search the bathrooms. The old man way standing, one hand pressed flat against his back, slowly creeping down toward the floor.

"Hey Mr. Jacobs," one called. "You okay?"

"Oh yeah," he grunted back. "It's my lucky day. Found a quarter."

The guards shared a shrug.

"Congrats, sir. What're you gonna buy with it?"

"A gumball," he said as he loomed, still turned away from them. "I could buy a gumball, and keep it in my mouth until is softens."

George Washington, his head turned away, focusing on a straw wrapper that had been knotted and thrown aside, was blocked out momentarily as the old man's thumb covered the face and his index finger worked the edge of the coin, trying to get it to stand straight up. It clicked, clacked, snapped back down each time he got it any small distance from the ground. Looking over his hand, he decided to try his ring finger, as it had the longest nail. It, too, failed to work for him.

"Well, you have a good day, sir," the guard said as the two of them walked away.

Frank just muttered.

Ann marched, swinging her arms forward like she had seen other women her age doing as they used the world as their fitness track. There was a new breeze created by shoppers milling about and it dried her eyes making her blink and finally squint. To shop, for her, meant knowing what she wanted. It meant having a purpose for at least an afternoon. Few things meant so much to her as doing something right, and as she passed the bookstores and shoe stores she felt a dignity that was beyond browsing. Beyond mere bargain hunting. She looked people in the face as she stormed through the hall, seeing them not as fellows, but as buffers to be avoided. Their movements were to be calculated by the second, increasing speed to pass the elderly woman amazed at the teddy bear machine, and slowing down to cut behind the woman in jogging shorts pushing a stroller. If a man was alone, he would certainly slow down by the giant supermodel at the lingerie store. If it was a kid, a hand on their head would freeze them in place.
She walked for a living, serving tables at a pancake house, and her legs had grown strong, but her back had grown curved and she leaned forward, like she was forever trying to catch up with herself.

Ann eyed the pretzel store as she passed it. As a shopper, she recognized her weakness. The line was short and the lemonade fountain was splashing playfully, inviting her to quench more than thirst, promising all the refreshment of a childhood spent right. The boy in the apron behind the glass wall rolled the dough out, thin and even, then, with magician’s flare, amid a cloud of flour dust, tossed the dough in the air like a jump rope and tied a knot. This act, Ann knew, had nothing to do with the flavor of the bread, but it created an experience. Life is only interesting, she thought, because of all of the things that don't matter.

The door that they came in was at the middle of the mall, with a hallway branching off in two different directions. When he saw his mother walking down the hallway that dead-ended into Duvlinn's department store, he slowed down so he could see when she went into a shop. She walked for awhile, covering a lot of ground, but eventually leaped into a women's clothing store, nearly knocking over a couple in matching jumpsuits. Once she went in he hurried the other way, taking caution to avoid his grandfather, and ducked into the first bathroom he came to.

The stalls were brushed steel, reflecting everything as a blur, like watching a storm through a windshield. Standing opposite of the stalls was the sink that was actually four sinks, and together they formed a hallway that led to a bay of urinals. Men took up space zipping up and washing their hands and not buying mints from the vending machine. Francis went into the handicapped stall because it wasn't just square, but wrapped around back toward the bathroom door. It was big and three of its walls were concrete. He sat down on the toilet and put his bag on the floor. Reaching into the bag, he pulled off a piece of tissue paper, then took out a sandwich bag of ice.

Francis never had a large base of friends in school. In eighth grade he met a couple of boys in the lunchroom that sat away from everyone else. They moved seats every day so that the kids that normally sat where these kids were now sitting would get annoyed and have to sit somewhere else. They thought this was funny, but they never laughed out loud about it. They would also share things. As soon as they got to the table they would take one of their hamburgers or hot dogs or whatever and put it in a baggy, and then they took the other one and split it in half. It was an intimacy that Francis didn't understand.

"We hide meat," one of them, TJ, said.
Francis shook his head.
"You know, at the mall," the other, Bobby, said.
Whenever they got the chance, one of their parents would drop them off at the mall to keep them busy while errands were being run. Then they would walk around the stores stashing burger patties in shirt pockets or hot dogs in rolled up posters.
"Why?" Francis asked. This question, it seemed, made them second guess their friendship with him.
In ninth grade they decided that Francis was okay enough to hang out with them outside of school, but before they trusted him fully, they told him that he, too, would have
to hide meat. And not just any meat, important meat. A sheep's head, purchased at a butcher shop as soon as Bobby got his learner's permit.

"Oh man," TJ had said when he presented Francis with a small cooler. "This has been a long time coming."

Francis lifted the head out of the bag and set it next to the tissue paper and ice. It rested on a styrofoam tray, wrapped in plastic. He held his breath as he unwrapped it, expecting it to stink as bad as it looked. When it was off, though, it was fresh, like the world's most terrifying pork chop. With his pinky, he poked at its cheeks and forehead, wondering what on it could be meat, then pulled back the eye to stare at the empty socket. Francis thought the head looked sad, or maybe distracted. He fished a small knife out of his pocket and carved a hole in the bottom of the bag big enough for the head to come out, while leaving enough space to support the head on the other side.

"It'll work," Bobby had said. "And if we're lucky, it'll make the news."

Frank's glasses dangled from his ears, gently bouncing against the bridge of his nose, the thick frames momentarily blocking his view and then moving. He squeezed the coin between his thumb and finger, hoping it would pop up, but instead his fingers just slipped and the coin slid a few inches over. Turning slightly to follow it, he reached down with his other hand to try and get two fingernails under it, one from either side. Before it could work his knees started shaking from the strain so he stood back up as fast as he could and took a couple of deep breaths.

"Lick your thumb," said a voice behind him. When he turned around, he saw an old man sitting by the trash can. The man sipped something yellow out of a paper cup while he chewed on a hot dog that was baked inside a pretzel.

"Tony? Is that you?" Frank said, squinting and leaning towards him.

The old man laughed. "Yeah. Tony."

"You're in my seat," Frank said before turning away.

Tony took another bite from his hot dog. "I'm telling you, Frank," he stopped to adjust the food in his mouth, "lick your thumb. The quarter'll stick to it."

"I don't need any of your damned advice." Frank glanced behind him, then at his thumb. A white dust coated the shallow wrinkles clear down to the first joint. He rubbed it against his first two fingers and it seemed to create more, so he wiped it on his pant leg before putting it to his tongue.

"This is a damned good dog, Frank," Tony called. "You had one yet?"

Frank spat a little and reached down for the coin again. The moisture on his thumb caught the coin a little and raised it enough to make it wobble when it fell. Each time he tried it stuck less, so he licked it again.

Ann passed a few stores with only a glance before entering the first women's clothing store she came to. It was called Urban Urban, and the mannequins in the window were clad in short sleeve sweaters that showed their polished navels. The walls were splashed with neon and several hidden speakers were playing a song about girls going out somewhere together. The clothes were in circular racks, each with its own plastic stripper on top, and Ann took large steps around them, turning her head and bending her body to glance in each corner of the store instead of actually walking around.
"Can I help you?" a young girl asked, stepping into Ann's path. The girl had a headset over hair that looked white compared to her do-it-yourself tan.

Before answering, Ann looked the girl up and down, noting that she was wearing the smallest shirt Ann had ever seen, and that it was still loose on her.

"No," she said, looking down to compare their thighs. "I was browsing. I'm leaving, thanks."

The next store Ann entered was designed for business types. Smart pant suits in shades of black, brown, and dark grey. The blouses came in any shade of red or white. There were a few sections that sold hoop earrings and socks, but other than that, even on her tip-toes, Ann couldn't find what she needed.

She walked up to the counter where there was a frumpy middle aged woman working alongside a trim, well chiseled man with chest hair creeping out of his shirt. Ann approached the woman.

"Excuse me," Ann said, leaning over the counter, balancing on her forearms.

"Yes?" the woman asked, looking up from her magazine.

"I was wondering if you have, um," she looked over at the man again who was obviously trying not to look over. "My mother used to call them 'girdles.'"

The woman squinted in thought. "I'm not sure. I just started. Gary?" She turned to the man. "Do we have girdles?"

Ann looked around and was happy to see she was the only customer.

"No, we don't," he said. "Duvin's might have a cincher top, but I assume you're looking for a buttock and thigh reducer and I'm not sure anyone carries that in this mall."

He never looked up the entire time he spoke.

Francis flushed and then walked out of the stall. He had paced by the toilet to get his walk down, careful during the turns, with the bag close to the ground in case it ripped.

The door pushed when Francis reached for the handle and he jumped back a little. He looked down at the bag to make sure it was still good, and when he looked back up a security guard was apologizing to him.

"It's okay," he stammered, then hurried out past the other guard who was knocking on the ladies' room door.

From the bathroom he walked to a store that sold mostly black shirts and heavy metal cds. On his way in, he looked around to see where the nearest door and the nearest crowd were in case he needed to make a quick escape. The shirts and accessories were hanging on the wall clear to the ceiling, so he was able to look for security cameras and mirror, of which there were none. The woman behind the counter said "hello" through blue lips while folding a shirt with hands heavy with rings and the same blue on the fingernails. Her short ponytail was streaked with red, and she wore Christmas socks on her hands as gloves. Francis wondered if this was the kind of store that would even mind an animal's head resting on the floor.

The store widened toward the back wall because it was wedged beside and behind a jewelry store with a corner lot. It created a blind spot from the counter and, when Francis got there, a kid was already there sticking a tattoo magazine down the front of his pants. The kid turned away and walked toward the t-shirt rack by the door. Francis set the bag on the floor and thumbed through some videos. He rolled his eyes like their selection was crap in case someone saw him and wondered why he hadn't picked one out. Then he
grabbed the handles on the bag and tilted it forward, letting the head roll to the hole, then picked it up and walked to the stocking cap section, where he set the bag down again. After throwing his hands up, frustrated by the shoddy headgear, he picked his bag back up and left the store.

A pair of women in spandex shorts and tank tops rounded the corner and had to separate to get around Frank, shaking their heads at their broken strides. Frank moved to the side of the hallway and began flicking the quarter at the wall. Sometimes it would slide flat and come right back to him, while other times it would lift a little in the air and bounce back, rocking before Frank's hand accidentally slapped it flat again.

"Damn it," he said each time. He pressed his other hand against the wall to support himself and to keep him from falling forward. Behind him, Tony watched as people threw things into the trash can next to him.

"Cola. Can't drink that anymore," he said as a 20 ounce bottle clattered in.

"Just hasn't been the same since Joe quit," he said as a half eaten burrito was tossed in.

A heavyset woman with a nametag walked past and Tony looked away, but she saw Frank hunched up against the wall and walked over to him.

"Are you all right, Frank?" she said, placing a hand on his back. He covered the quarter with his foot and looked over at her.

"Sheila? Oh, yes, I'm fine. I'm just stretching. I can't sit next to Tony too long, you know." He shoved himself away from the wall enough to point a thumb at Tony before catching himself on the wall.

"Tony's here?" she said, spinning around on one heel. "There's my buddy," she said when she spotted him.

He waved and nodded once. "Howdy, Sheila. You work today, huh?"

She had a grocery bag in her hands that held her lunch. She set it down on the bench.

"Yep. Seems like I work every day. I don't guess you old timers remember what that's like, though. What is this, the third time today you've been here?"

"Naw, just here for a hot dog." He showed her the empty wrapper.

"I see," she said. "Probably time for you to go home and take a nap then. Both of you should be wore out by now." She laughed to herself and grabbed her lunch. "Hope you feel better, Frank," she called over her shoulder.

"Christ, Tony," Frank said after Sheila had gone. "I almost offered her this quarter for her to shut that mouth."

Ann rested her back against the wall between two stores and searched her purse for some gum. Broad leaves from a potted plant partially blocked her view of the mall, and her eyes wandered to the paper cups and half eaten sandwiches that collected in the pot. The contents of her purse rustled and tumbled around like she was digging a hole in sand, but she never found the gum. Exhaling hard, looking around as if to make sure no one had witnessed her failure, she stood up straight and walked to the next women's store she came to. A plus-size store.
A couple of times a week, the produce man walked through the break room of restaurant where Ann waitressed. He wasn't very attractive, but he was married, which was obvious even though he didn't wear a ring. He carried himself like a married man. He would push a dollie stacked with carrots and peppers through the smoking area to get to the coolers, and Ann would come back for a cigarette just in time. She would peek over the newspaper that she wasn't reading and watch his quick unloading of boxes and wait for him to glance over at her. He never did.

Ann had never not been single, even when Franny was conceived, but she had never been lonely until recently. The voices of men that she had tried to drown out, men that were passing through in their rigs or stopping in just because they wanted someone to wait on them like their wives used to, had slowly gone away, and the resulting silence sat painful and in the way. She wanted to move around it; to anticipate its next move and outwit it.

Sometimes, while the produce man worked, she would check herself in the mirror installed to make sure her bow-tie was correct, looking at his reflection to see if his eyes would wander. They didn't. He would say a few things to the kitchen manager while they looked over the invoice, and other than that he was quiet.

The clerk at the plus-size store smiled sympathetically when Ann asked and said "No, honey. We have a different philosophy here. We want bigger girls to be comfortable in their bodies, and we sell clothes that complement shape, not hide it."

Ann tried to speak, but couldn't. She wanted to explain the urgency that leads people to lie. She needed credit on her body, that she could one day work off. Surely, she thought, there must be a way to explain it.

"That's not really what I'm looking for right now," Ann said.

Francis squeezed the foam sneakers at a kiosk just across the hall from the store.

"Try one on, man," the salesman said. "You like red?"

A feminine yelp of surprise finally came from the store, followed by an ohmygodohmygod and a pierced young girl coming out to the entrance to pace. Francis saw two security guards walking his way and, as they came to a bend in the hallway, started jogging until they reached the girl. Francis walked closer as a crowd formed, still clutching the shopping bag.

"We came as fast as we could," he heard one of them say.

After glancing around, a woman spotted the trash can next to Tony. She tossed a flat piece of wax paper into the hole, and as it floated down Tony noticed the logo printed on its surface.

"Pretzel, huh?" he said as she shifted her weight away from her.
"Uh, yeah." She hesitated for a second, then kept walking.
"Try the hot dog," he said to her back. "I shoulda said wiener, huh Frank." He laughed until it made him cough.

Frank pushed the quarter with his foot until he got to the bench where he sat down. Tony finished coughing and laughing and patted Frank on the leg.
"Needed a rest, huh? Lemme get that for you."

Tony reached down for the quarter but Frank moved it away and swatted at his hand.
"Get the hell away from my quarter." His phlegm made it sound like he was growling. Tony jerked his hand away and started laughing again.

"Here, try this," Tony said as he dipped his hand into the garbage can and pulled the wax paper back out. "Use it to scoop, you know?" He curled the paper and jabbed it a few times at Frank, who took it and curled it the same way.

The paper slid under the coin fine, and the oil shone in the light more than the now smudged quarter did. Then, when Frank lifted the paper, it bent and the coin slipped off. He tried it again and got the same thing, so he adjusted his grip and got a similar result.

"Fold it, fold it. It'll make it stronger," Tony coached.

Frank folded the paper and tried again, but the first swipe sent the quarter sliding away from him.

"You fool," they said to each other.

The security guards, with their smooth leather soles slapping the tiles, walked up to the men, one of them stooping to grab the quarter, which he handed to Frank.

"Here you go, Mr. Jacobs." Frank nodded as he took the coin. The other guard patted Tony on the shoulder and then but his hand on his hip.

"We got a complaint earlier about an older gentleman harassing people by the trash can," he said. "You kids know anything about that?"

"No, sir," Tony answered. "It's just been us here for a few hours. We'd've seen 'em." He nudged Frank to let him in on the joke, but it was the guard who smiled.

"Well, keep your eyes out, okay?" The radios on their hips cracked to life, with a young voice saying that an animal head was found in a store.

One guard slapped the other on the chest and said, "Heh. Maybe if we go fast enough a janitor will beat us to it." They walked away, both of them tugging on their elastic waistbands. Tony started laughing again, but stopped when he saw Frank staring at the quarter in his hand. It was greasy from the paper and Frank rubbed it between his fingers to polish it. Then he bent over, resting his elbows on his knees, and put the quarter back on the floor.

Ann was poking at her hips as she slowly walked down the hall toward the indoor garden. The flesh gave as her weight shifted to the opposite leg, then pushed back when the weight shifted back. She wrapped her arms around her stomach and exhaled again so her lips vibrated. When she reached Frank on the bench, he and Tony were watching the TV screens in the shop window.

"Did Francis come back yet?" Ann asked. Neither of them looked over at her.

"Dad."

He looked up. "Huh? No, he didn't. What's with you, you didn't buy anything?"

“They didn't have what I wanted. I'm gonna go out again tomorrow."

"Can I come?" he asked.

"I'm not going to a mall tomorrow, Dad. It won't be any fun for you."

Frank turned back to the TVs. Neither of them had sound, but he watched them anyway. Tony got up and offered Ann his spot, and she took it only after he insisted he had to go.

"Where is he?" she asked. "I need to drop you off so I can take a nap."

Frank turned away from the TV again and looked at his daughter. He knew she didn't expect an answer, but he took the opportunity to look at her. He wondered if it felt
the same for her, this waiting for children. She looked at her watch, clearly weighing the probability of finding Francis in a random search of the stores. Music stores and book stores would be the safest bets, or was he still at Duvlinn's. She decided instead to just lean back against the bench and close her eyes, feeling the weight of keeping busy.

A noise like rushing water made her open them again, and she saw Francis being led down the hall by two uniformed escorts. He smiled as they walked him past the bench his mother and grandfather were resting on. He knew they wouldn't understand, and it made him giddy.

"I'll meet you guys by the car," he said as he marched closer to the door.
1. Jumbling

The girls built a ladder out of the chairs and pillows in the living room. Then they climbed it, each struggling to get to the top first, clearly uninterested in the danger. Stephanie tugged at Sehra’s hair, which was short and brown like her father’s, while Sam pinched Terra’s thigh (a little too close to the crotch, their mother thought). The structure wobbled under their struggles, the pillows swallowing their feet and slipping around on each other. None of the furniture was loved. It was unsentimental; unattached. There were no memories in them, except that they were in the "good" room, which the kids weren’t supposed to enter.

The top of the pile sat just below the chandelier, a brass number with six light bulbs, each perched on a tarnished ‘S’ and flickering like a candle in a light breeze. The girls grabbed one apiece, twisting in little turns, having to pull their hands away when the bulbs got too hot. Terra, who always wore long sleeve shirts, won their race, and was the first to hold up her bulb and drop it to the hardwood floor. The other girls paused to watch the glass shatter and blink as it tumbled around the room. Then they each became braver, more determined, and grabbed their bulbs harder and with more fingers, alternating hands as quickly as possible until the floor was a diamond field, only two of the bulbs remaining in the fixture.

“Why are they doing that?” Jan’s mother asked through the speakerphone. “It sounds horrible.”

In the newly dimmed room, Jan watched each of her daughters jump in the air, twisting and kicking to outperform the others, landing flatfooted on the tiny, delicate shards.

“To punish me,” Jan said.

The girls walked around the room slowly, as if they suddenly found themselves waist deep in ice water. But when two or more of them came within reach of each other, they began shoving.

"Ouch," Terra squealed as she stepped back. "I landed on the metal screwy part." Stephanie, who looked like Jan when she frowned, walked to Sam and stepped on her toes, cutting them with the glass stuck to her soles.

"Can't you make them stop?" Jan's mother asked. "They might hurt themselves." Sehra tried to run, but the blood seeping from the balls of her feet made her lose traction. Soon, all of the girls were sliding around as though they were climbing up a hill they had just sled down. Stephanie and Terra grabbed each others' forearms and swung themselves around until they pitched over onto the sky-blue couch, gray paisleys suddenly swiped with red.

Jan backed her wheelchair away from the kitchen phone using a mouthpiece and her head. She blew into it and the chair moved forward, taking her to her children.

"Please stop," she called into the room. Her faint voice barely penetrated the pinched laughter.

"Why?" Sehra called from the chairladder.

"This is not how you should behave," Jan answered.

"That is not for you to decide," Stephanie said.
"We are adults now," Terra said.
"Two weeks ago, I could not cross the street," Sehra said, having landed from a graceful leap. "But now, I can buy groceries."

“My bosom,” Sam said. “It aches.”

The girls gathered their voices together, and it was noisy. Jan wheeled herself back to the speaker on the wall, knicking the baseboard when she turned too sharply.

"It's no use," Jan said to her mother.

"It's not fair," her mother said. "Oh well. Would you like me to write it down in your journal for you?"

The noise in the good room quieted down, but it took a moment for Jan to realize it. The girls were no longer jumping or giggling, and instead there was silence. Again, Jan left the phone and moved her chair. There were little red footprints leading out of the room and down the hall, and Jan moved to follow, hoping that they hadn't gone upstairs. The blood had started to dry to a salty brown, and the glass was visible only as bumps in the clot. By the chair stack, down feathers had blown out of a pillow and landed in the puddle, looking as though someone had gone duck hunting with a cannon. The trail of footprints led under the door of the guest bathroom. Jan urged her chair forward until it bumped the door, then back again, then waited to see if the girls understood that to be knock. Sam opened the door a crack and leaned her head out.

"Is everything alright in there?" Jan asked. " Anything I can do?"

"We're fine. We'll be out in a minute."

Sam poked her head back in without closing the door and Jan stayed there in the hall, peeking in the crack. Stephanie was picking glass out of Terra's left foot, while Sehra wiped the right foot with alcohol. Sam picked up a roll of gauze and ripped a long section off. Jan tried to reach out towards them. She looked down at her arm and mouthed her wish towards it, that it would lift up and grab the girls, pull them out of the bathroom and hold them down in front of the TV. To dial up their friends on the phone and then hold that phone to their ears until two in the morning. The girls were no longer giggling. They no longer played at violence, or competed. They worked diligently while Terra leaned back against the toilet and sighed.

2. Bumbling

-Well, Honey. Hmm. Uh, you see, there's this... no. Picture a man.
-Okay.
-I've been picturing him all my life.
-Well this man likes to eat. I mean a lot.
-Why wouldn't he?
-Uh huh. So he's married to this woman who likes to cook. And when they first met, she was really into trying new recipes and finding out what he liked.
-Was he at all interested in what she liked?
-I don't know. Let's say he was.
-I bet he wasn't.
Whatever. The point is, at first, they were adventurous. Sometimes she cooked for him and sometimes he cooked for her. And some other times, just like when he was single, he had to cook for himself.

-Poor guy.

-And as time went on, he found himself cooking for himself more and more. He eventually started reading from cookbooks or watching cooking shows while he cooked, just to keep it interesting.

-No imagination. I see it so clear in my head.

-Well after awhile of that, he starts going over to, say, his secretary's house for dinner a couple of times a month. Maybe her cooking stinks so he stops that and goes to a restaurant and pays for someone to cook for him. And it's the best thing he's ever tasted, so he keeps going back. Sometimes the staff changes and the food's not as good so he asks around for a certain cook's schedule and only comes in when-

-Are you leaving me for a hooker?

-What? No, Sweety, you're hearing me wrong.

-Oh. Good, because it sounded like you were leaving me for a hooker.

-It's a metaphor, Darling. Try and keep up. Maybe food isn't the best one.

-You could just say what you mean.

-How about this: There's a guy.

-Is this one as attractive as the first one?

-Sure. Better, even.

-Wow.

-Or maybe it's the same guy.

-This guy's got a lot of issues.

-They're not all his fault.

-Maybe he should leave. He's probably pissing his wife off anyway.

3. Mumbling

She thought of him first when she was six. He would be a tall, skinny boy who hated action figures unless they could be fathers and husbands. Then they would stay all day in the basement of the dollhouse, which could be best described as "back at his house." They would play outside sometimes and he would be the only boy she could change in front of before she went swimming in the lake. By the time she was nine she knew what her first kiss with him would be like: dry. Her parents were sure that she would eventually find a real friend.

When she finally met him he was everything she wanted and nothing more. On their first date she didn't hear his horn honk and he was too shy to ring the bell when she didn't come out so, instead, he walked around the house until he found a window with faded bear and heart stickers and knocked on it with a penny until she came over.

"My prince!" she squealed.

At his mother's house she looked through his photo albums with a 'how neat' grin on her face, not at all surprised at his young, skinny body.

They dated for a few months and she became less aware of him as she planned for their future. They would share a car to save money until they could afford something
nicer, and by then they could move into a nice apartment where they could each have
their own room to work on their crafty projects.

He came to her parents’ house a few times when he knew no one would be home
but her, but she was in bed, dreaming of his touch, his sympathetic embrace. He watched
for movement in her bedroom window, then got in his car and left.

He loved her like she knew he would, and didn't need him to say it. She, in turn,
ever brought it up. She left him messages on his voice mail thanking him for flowers he
never sent, and on her birthday he found that she had already wrapped a couple of
presents for herself from him.

By the time he cheated on her she had already planned his funeral and who she
would then marry after the healing ended. He was a lonely old widower that had lived
modestly enough in his mountain home that he could afford to support the two of them.
He would listen if she wanted to talk about her past, but she never would want to,
preferring instead to rest with him under their animal-skin quilt until they fell asleep,
breathing in each others' faces and dreaming of heaven and babies.

4. Crumbling

Christine was crying. She cried all day long. She cried while she cooked, while
she bathed, while she potted plants, while she drove her son's car to the shop, while she
mopped the floor, boxed care packages for soldiers, drank smoothies made with fresh
fruit, and filed down her nails. Once, she wept, but it only made her cry harder. She drank
glasses and glasses of water, over salted her food, and dabbed at her face with tissue
rather than wiping it.

Her life, the neighbors said, was ending. But not in the real way, those same
neighbors explained. In the metaphorical way. Her husband comes home every day with
a new perfume. He comes home smelling like a pretty woman, lost in a bowling alley; a
lonely bicyclist who believes in onions. More than once, he has smelled like vinyl.
"It's my allergies," Christine sometimes says to him before blowing her nose. He
often catches her tears on his fingertips and believes it is romantic.

She leaves the world damper than when she found it. People at the grocery store
stare at her as she pushes her cart down the aisles, treading lightly so as not to slip on her
puddles. Inspecting the eggs, she moves her head around to try and find an angle where
her eyes aren't blurred and sparkling in the florescent lights. She shops slowly but
carelessly and then goes home.

At night she tells her daughters stories about a girl who cried forever.
"Like you!" her daughters would squeal with delight. Their thoughts were of
themselves without context. They were not yet ready for compound emotions.
"This woman," Christine said, "cried for so long and so hard that the world began
to flood. Oceans rose and the rivers flowed backwards, and eventually everyone's grand
parents moved from the coast and settled somewhere higher. Bit by bit, the world was
falling apart under the strain, and everyone began to feel the pain of this girl. They got
together, these people, and sent volunteers to her to try and cheer her up and make her
stop crying. One woman brought no-bake brownies, and another brought a blanket with a
letter written by a child. These did not work. A man came and promised to protect her
and make her dreams come true. She sent him away, and the water rose higher and higher.

'What can we do?' the people called. 'What do you want?'
'I want it to be like it was,' she called down to them, 'But now it can never be.'"
Christine's daughters closed their eyes and, after their mother had left their faces wet with light kisses and heavy tears, the children discussed the story and decided that it wasn't very good, and that they should watch each other closely so that they wouldn't be affected by it when they got older. Their father peeked in, and they shut their eyes again.

5. Stumbling

Peter picks up a wooden turtle.
"Do you remember this?" he asks.
"Of course," Susan says. "We were the youngest ones aboard."
They keep walking until Susan spots a potato bin made of cedar.
"Do we need this?" Peter asks.
"Of course not," Susan answers.
The booths at the flea market seem to float by like sticks on a river. Susan and Peter turn their heads as they stroll, their eyes being drawn to very different items.
"This sauce pot," Peter remarks, "would make a very fine bucket."
"That's true," Susan replies, "but if we keep looking, we may find a real bucket."
Susan thinks of the market as a brain that thinks only of her. It thinks of things, like cast-iron paper towel holders and grapevine wreaths, then suggests them to her.
"No," she often says.
Peter holds up a leather baseball cap. Susan shakes her head.
Peter thinks of the market like he thinks of America. Anyone can shop, and anyone can sell. He pays his dollar every weekend so that he and his wife may search and uncover.
"Is this who I am?" Susan asks, wearing sunglasses monogrammed with rhinestones.
Peter sees his reflection in her frames. He watches himself stretch out his cheeks and stick his tongue out, and Susan laughs out loud without moving her head.
"I guess it doesn't matter anymore," she says as she pulls them from her face and returns them.
They drive their truck when they come, in case what they buy is large, like a recliner or an aluminum gazebo. The truck is the first thing that Peter has ever owned, given to him by his parents when he was seventeen. They didn't believe in hard work; only in good luck. They told him that life would put things in his way, and instead of driving around them, he should stop and pick them up. Now he is thirty-eight, and owns many things, and he cares for them as he would care for a child.
"Your mother would love this," Susan says about an old oil lamp.
Peter's mother believes that she is made of paper. He thinks of this instead of answering, and Susan understands. Susan's parents are sympathetic but impoverished, and they tithe forty dollars at church every Sunday. They told Baby Susan long ago that the world is very big, and it feels as though it grows everyday, and one day she would walk to work and find that it took thirty minutes instead of fifteen, and it would not be
more distance, no, but rather her inability to keep her feet. She would take a step and fall, and it was likely that no one would help her up. They told her that she needed a man who would hold her arm as she traveled, that would keep her up and give her balance, and was she listening? Did she understand what they were saying?

Peter and Susan stand in front of a man who shouts around them about his crème. He tells everyone that it soothes as well as moisturizes. It eases pain. Peter and Susan look at the list of possible ailments, but find that they have none of them. They walk on.

"It will happen," Susan says as she loops her arm around his.

"Yes," Peter says. "It will."

The booths continue to flow as they browse. They believe that they will one day find the thing they need. They don't know what it will be or what it will look like, but they know that this is where it will end up, the way things often end up in the sea.

"Watch out now," Peter says. A little boy stands in the middle of the aisle, playing a small video game. Susan stops just before she hits him, and Peter lifts him by the armpits and sits him down on a nearby bench. The boy waves as they walk away, pushing buttons wildly on his controller.

"When we find it," Susan asks, "Will we haggle?" Peter looks into her eyes. "Will we bargain?" she asks.

"No," Peter says. He opens the door for her and she aims herself at the car. "We will set it down and keep looking."

6. Rumbling

Michael came home and found Denise sitting on his recliner.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"You are out of soda." she said.

Michael came home with soda and found Joan sitting next to Denise, their legs crossed over one another to make enough room for both of them.

"Oh good," she said. "I'm so thirsty." She poured herself a glass and didn't offer any to anyone else.

"Who are you people?" he asked. They did not respond.

Michael woke up next to Bobby, who was gripping the sheets to keep from falling off the twin mattress. Michael immediately wished he hadn't turned on the light.

"Man," Bobby said. "Do you have to hit the snooze button so many times?"

Michael ran into the bathroom and Sarah ran out screaming, covering herself with a hand towel.

Michael called a meeting with Denise, Joan, Bobby, and Sarah.

"You need to chip in," he said.

"I cleaned the toilet yesterday," said Joan.

"Yeah," said Sarah, "and I unlocked the door when Mimi got out."

"Meow," said Mimi.

"This won't work," Michael said. There's no room. This place is only big enough for me."
"We think that it will work," Denise said. "And we are willing to try."

To get to the door, Michael had to step over bodies and pillows and late-night snacks. His new guests slept late and did not have jobs, but he got up early to go his. He got into his car and Jimmy was already there in the only other seat.
"Give me a ride?" he said.

Michael woke up and found that his new lock to his bedroom had been broken and there were people packed in all around his bed.
"You don't make time for us," they said.
"I don't make time for anyone," he said in his defense.
"We are disappointed in you," they said. They turned and walked out, their footsteps vibrating the floor, knocking his water bottle off his nightstand and his pictures off his walls. The neighbors beneath his apartment rapped on their ceiling, requesting silence, but the crowd was not in the mood. They felt rejected, and wanted their presence known. They jumped into the air and landed hard on the floor. The windows rattled in their frames, and dogs began to howl from somewhere.

Michael had left before the building collapsed, and after it had finished falling, he walked back into it to see if he could find his things. He found his many roommates sitting on the ground in the rubble.
"There is room now," they said. "Room for many people, and not just you."
He suddenly felt sleepy and the crowd linked arms and legs creating a bed of people, where Michael could curl up and sleep. He stayed there, warmed by incidental fire light, until someone came to sweep him away.

7. Tumbling

"I want to build a memorial for Tommy," Jones said.
"But Tommy isn't dead," Mariah pointed out.
"Ah, yes," Jones said, as though he had known what her response would be, "but someday he will be." He picked up his wine glass and held it in front of him effectively.
Mariah was a big woman who found pleasure (the general joy that life is rumored to be soaked with) in lifting heavy things and setting them down somewhere higher than they started. Her face was a brutal monument to misplaced femininity which often brought to mind (in those she served hotcakes to) the uphill fight against good decisions that the town itself seemed to have been fighting for generations. These people lived there, and they knew.
"I don't understand you," she said to Jones.
They talked it over and agreed that Tommy was tall, and that the memorial, if they were to do it right, must also be tall. So they built and built, often finding no time to eat, which suited Mariah just fine, because she was in a place in her life where she wanted to be thin and love a man, which was the opposite of her old feeling and so she believed it to be correct. She was in love with Tommy, and felt that she was doing something good for him. She wanted to keep doing good things for him. When she lifted
the marble stones high above her head and let them rest atop the others, she kissed each one and thought about the peace found through strain.

Jones was not jealous of Tommy. He, himself, was tallish, and had once before known how it felt to be loved. She had been a relentless woman with stretch marks on her palms. He thought of her sometimes while he worked, hoping that his experiences would one day make her want him back. All day long he worked himself wet and sucked on pebbles to keep salivating.

The monument was rough and had all of the amateur charm of elementary school valentines, and all those who passed by on their way to the diner remarked how tall it was already getting, and how tall it might one day be. Up and down the ladders, Jones and Mariah carried bricks and stones and compacted scrap metal, along with a small cooler, since toward the end it would often take days just to lay down a few blocks. Clouds, wrapping themselves around Mariah and Jones' heads, become no less mysterious after they passed through them. Mariah's hair became moist and flat, and she would wrap it in a loose bun on top of her head. Jones told her that she looked cute and took pictures of her with his camera phone. Eventually they broke through a final cloud and found themselves in Heaven. God was sitting on a couch, inhaling and exhaling smoke that didn't originate from any flamed source.

"Hello," He said in a majestic voice. Then, in a way that seemed to suggest that He disagreed with their very lives, flicked them off of their memorial and down to the ground. When they came to and, surrounded by rocks and damaged cars, tried to sort out what they had just experienced - forming thoughts about Tommy's memorial and how they didn't want this story to overshadow the story of Tommy- they found that they spoke different languages and had different customs, and so they split whatever was left in their small cooler and headed towards their homes.

8. Fumbling

She knocked on my bedroom door sometime in the late afternoon. I didn't realize it at first, and by the time I had figured it out she had already slowly opened the door and said my name.

"Mark?" We grew up together, her being my sister, and I couldn't decide if she was just alerting me of her presence, or if I was really unrecognizable. I had spent many days in bed, and pretty much had a permanent headache, which was, under the present circumstances, a fine thing to have to get over.

"Are you awake?" I don't know that this helped me. She was in a suit. I laid back down. My sister's name is Jolene, and that bothers her. It has made her constantly suspicious of what things are called, and even calling a loveseat a couch was a point of contention with her. This is, to clarify things, the first thing anyone should know about her. That, and she wears suits. She is a lawyer and makes a lot of money aggravating judges and reporters and has never been our parents’ favorite, because I am so pitiful that there is no time for anyone else. This, as it turns out, is the first thing anyone should know about me. Mostly my charm comes in the form of unlived-up-to potential, which, at the moment, is collecting up under my bed.
"Jolene?" I asked. I knew who it was. I just didn't want to let her know that. Despite sitting upright and recognizing her after four years of not seeing or hearing from her, I was not, in any dictionarily-strict way, awake.

"Yeah. It's me. Are you awake?"

Up until three months ago, I was married to an unclean woman named Frisco. I met her in a thrift store bathroom, which I considered fate since it's rare that they let anyone in there in the first place.

"Who let you in here?" I asked, too forcefully. She let me know by scowling and continuing to button her shirt over one that probably wasn't hers. "I mean, was it an old woman named Darla? Because that would be so like her. To forget. Am I intruding?"

There weren't stalls, only a toilet, the lid of which held her purse.

"Tell you what," she said, checking herself in the mirror by ducking under the "No Smoking" sign pasted in the top corner, "I'll suck you off right now if you don't tell anyone what I was doing."

I looked at my crotch as if the answer were dripping from it. "Can I pee first?" I asked. "I really gotta go."

"I'll wait outside," she said.

When I got outside, she wasn't waiting. Rather, she was yelling at three employees.

"You fucking people are too much. Why am I in such a hurry? That's your fucking question? Ask fucking Darla, who unlocked the bathroom door while I was on the pot, to let-" I had stepped up at this time, "-this asshole in to watch me." They all four looked at me, Darla included.

"Uh, yeah." I offered. "I was embarrassed for her." They looked back to her, but I kept it up. "She must have been embarrassed, too, because she left without washing her hands."

In the end, they let her go, and I followed her out to her car. I was, despite my unsmoothness, entitled.

"Get in," she said, nodding towards the backseat.

Two hours, one police chase, and zero blow jobs later I found out that she did not own the car she drove us to the bar in. With both Darla and Jolene's help, I was able to shake the accomplice charge and, before I left the courthouse, I managed to slip the woman, whose name ended up being Frisco, my number.

Anyway, she's dead now, and I've drank myself retarded over her.

"Yes," I told Jolene. "I'm awake."

The last time I heard from Jolene was when she turned down my offer for her to be Frisco's bridesmaid. It was a small ceremony, and it was a bit last minute. She would have been the only guest there, and she would have needed to fly 500 miles that night. Before she hung up, she told me that Mom would have been upset that I was doing this. "This' most likely meaning marrying a convict in a booth.

"Oh good," she said, closing the door and then leaning against it. If she hadn't been my sister I would have found that seductive. There was a silence, which I blamed her for and made her break. "I heard what happened. I'm so sorry."

She didn't mean Frisco's death. She meant our child's. Women, even if they ignore the birth of a child, always get sentimental about its death.
"It's okay," I said through closed eyes.

Attentive to detail, she opened the door again and walked the three steps into the kitchen. I crept to the edge of the bed and crawled out, hands first, onto the floor and rested my head on a pile of dirty socks. I used to take my socks off in bed. I've never done my own laundry.

"I feel so bad," Jolene said, crouching down with a cup of coffee between her hands. It was a water glass with cartoon characters on it, and burnt like hell when I took it from her. She started to say more but I cut her off by waving my hand. The sympathy people get for other people is understandable. Like people thinking puppies are cute, people should think death is sad. But why did I need to hear about it?

"Coming to me in this way," I said, warming up to the smell of my feet, "is selfish. It's like asking a dying man for forgiveness. I can not help you."

She stood up then and walked into the kitchen, coming back with the carafe from the coffee machine and a cup for herself. She cleared a spot on the floor with her foot and used one of my t-shirts as a trivet. I reached under the bed and, after clattering through some empties, I found a bottle of bourbon. I had opened it a month ago and had forgotten where I had put it. Sitting on the floor there it was easy to spot, resting on a board game I had bought from the thrift store. It was a counting game in which you spun a dial and picked a certain number of fruit from a tree. I poured some of the bourbon in my glass and Jolene extended hers to me.

"I bought this for the baby," I said, setting the game down in front of me. I slid the top off the box and Jolene reached for it.

"It was a little early for this, don't you think?"

"I was excited. I thought everything was just going to happen at once."

I unfolded the board game and started putting the fruit in my tree. She watched me for a second, then started doing it, too. We had played the game as kids, and so it didn't bother me that the game didn't come with instructions. Thinking back, we probably made up most of the rules, anyway. It was hard to play by the rules when no one was watching. After we had set up, we paper-rock-scissored for the first turn, which she won.

"It isn't selfish," she said after her spin. She plucked three cherries. "I'm worried about you."

I twisted the dial hard, still believing that faster was better, then refilled her cup with the bourbon. She looked at my face the whole time, so I smiled at her.

"Do you feel better now?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

My spin told me to put my fruit back, but I didn't have any.

9. Grumbling

"Becaaaauusse," Millie said, imitating her son's question. Her short hair was matted to her eyebrows and mouth, and she had long since given up trying to tuck it behind her ears. They- her father, husband, and son- had decided to take a hike through the forest to try and get to a natural bridge which, as it turned out, was really just an anorexic cliff.

"But we're in the woods now," her son, Tyler, said. "Why are we gonna go look at 'em?"
Her husband, Brade, walked a few hundred yards ahead everyone, returning only to tell them what the faded wooden signs on the trail said.
"3.2 miles," he said.
"How far's that?" Tyler asked, but Brade was, by then, gone.
"I liked the lodge," Millie's father, Johnnie, said. When she looked at him, he was leaning against a tree, tapping the trunk with his pinky knuckle. "We should go back. Drink coffee."

Millie stopped walking. Tyler thought they were resting and grabbed at Millie's backpack, which was still too high up on her shoulders to reach. He extended his arm and said something like "uh," repeating it several times before Millie shushed him with a finger on her lips. She watched Brade walk away, his calf muscles alternately melting and carving the rough flesh of his legs. He seemed to her to be inexhaustible, given from birth the ability to never stop. Camping, whenever it came up, was always his idea, as it was this time. Tyler's grandpa, he reasoned, needed to know the boy, and camping was how he came to know his own grandpa, who was now dead, though his memory surely remained within Brade. Perhaps, Millie sometimes thought, that's where his energy came from. This collecting of the dead.
"Come on," Brade shouted from somewhere higher up. "We're almost there."

Millie found him on top of a set of rock stairs, pointing towards a giant rock arch. Now we've seen it, Millie thought, so why to we have to go to it? Tyler dropped the mossy rock he was holding and waddled quickly towards his father. He covered half the distance with great effort, his chubby legs pumping, his feet sliding, and then he resigned himself to walking.
"That's my boy," Brade said before disappearing again.

Millie and Johnnie walked on silently down the trail, each leaning on the other. The family had been including Johnnie in their lives for the last couple of months, believing that he didn't have much time left, and that it should be memorable.
"What do I need with memories?" Johnnie had said once.
"No, Dad," Millie had responded. "Memorable for us."

They made it finally to the bridge, and Tyler was on his hands and knees, reading the names that had been carved into the rock floor in clumsy capital letters. Johnnie walked to one of the edges and stared, his hands in his pockets. Millie walked to Brade, who was contemplating a bush growing out of the rock. She pulled a bottle of water out of her backpack, then moved in front of Brade so that he could wrap his arms around her.
"How ya feeling?" he asked her neck.
"My head hurts," she said.
"Stay away from the edge, T," Brade called. "I don't want you falling off."

Millie opened her eyes and saw Tyler waving his arms in giant circles backwards until he was standing upright. Then he walked to the other side of the bridge and laid down on his stomach to peer over the edge.
"How much longer until he knows everything?" Brade asked. Millie just smiled. "Sometimes I think I'm ready for him to just get married and visit occasionally. You know?"
Johnnie stayed in the same spot, sweat hanging on to the wrinkles of his forehead. He was strong, and liked short bouts of effort followed by long periods of stillness. He was a pond ripple; a good idea.

"That's how it was," he said out loud. In front of him was the view they had come for, but none of them had looked at yet. The trees stretched out across the valley, with no visible break where the river was supposed to be. Despite the heat, it was fall, and the leaves were changing one whole tree at a time, pixelating the scene with brown, green, and yellow bunches. If someone jumped, Millie thought, they couldn't touch the ground. Instead, they would be choked out; suffocated.

"On the train," Johnnie said. "All colors, it didn't matter. We were packed in tight, just like this, to where you couldn't see the end of it all."

Millie leaned back her head and Brade kissed her forehead, salty like brine.

"After awhile, you forgot that the world wasn't like that before."

Taylor's arms hung limp over the side. He reached for a quarter someone had set on a ledge, but then gave up and lay still.

"God, Grandpa," he said into his chest while getting up and dusting off his jeans. "Why do you have to ruin everything?"

10. Humbling

Meredith and I were leaving the restaurant. We had driven separately because she had called me from work and asked could we please go out to eat tonight because she was simply starving and she had incidentally received an email coupon from the Italian restaurant near her work and maybe we could go there and get that baked ziti that she had been craving for a month. My goodness, she said, she had spent the last hour talking an older man out of terrorizing the company she worked for. He was angry, it seemed, at the way they did business and, damn it, maybe she was too and she needed to take a night to relax and eat professionally made food for a change. Of course, I said. I didn't feel one way or the other about eating right away because I had had a bag of chips and a salad at my desk while I worked entering phone numbers and names into a database. Honestly, I would love to have cooked for her, standing at the stove, staring into the potato water and waiting, waiting, but she wanted food in the now, and she wanted to be served.

So we ate and tipped and kissed goodnight at her car door, then I walked across the lot to my car, which was closer to the door since I beat her to the place at their busy time. When she finally got out of the parking lot, I had already made it through the first stop light, and by the time she made it to the on-ramp for the highway, I was weaving a few exits ahead. I was known, in my high school years, for being a bit of a road maniac, tearing up the highways and making any dangerous well-timed maneuver so long as it got me somewhere faster. I would cut off cars, changing three lanes at once to pass a car in the emergency lane. But as I got older, I guess driving became more of a chore, and I wasn't willing to push myself anymore, which Meredith sees as a weakness of some sort. She loses her mind riding shotgun in my car, and has always been skeptical of my stories of triumphant driving.

I watched her in my rearview mirror, and she seemed to be making decent time. She passed three people on her way to the fast lane, where she would, no doubt, stay until it was time to exit, browbeating slower drivers with her headlights until they got out of
her way. She was gaining on me, and I got giddy. It had been awhile since I had shared a road with someone I knew. The car in front of me slowed to let merging traffic on, and instead of slowing down, I switched lanes and sped around. Behind me, she rode the bumper of a van until the driver relented, giving her the open road. I passed a linen truck, then swayed to the fast lane to get by a motorcycle. In front of me then was a sports car, black and slow, and I rode its tail until I could finally get over in front of the bike, but just as I made my turn, the sports car made the same move, and I was stuck behind him as Meredith moved in beside me. I laughed and shook my head, slapping the steering wheel in defeat. When her rear bumper was even with mine, I started thinking about how I should surrender. I would smile at her, I knew that, but would I wave? Blow a kiss? Her window came up fast and I looked over, my hand raised in a peace sign, but she passed without looking over. Her head was resting on her fist, supported at the elbow, somehow oblivious to her boyfriend in the car next to her. Her speed didn't change, and when it was safe, she changed two lanes at once to make our exit. I followed her path with her eyes, unable to find the indifference that she was capable of. I got off behind her and she breezed through a yellow light, leaving me behind when it turned red.