ABSTRACT

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH: STORIES

by Michelle Lawrence

*Neighborhood Watch* is a collection of short stories set within a single neighborhood called Five Oaks. The stories question suburban values and rules of behavior with a focus on girls and women, as well as the men in their lives. Like suburban neighbors, the stories and characters are simultaneously independent and interdependent. How the residents navigate family and community expectations when experiences, values and belief systems vary is explored through traditional realism, fairy tale, and magical realism. Each new voice, setting, and style impacts or influences one that has gone before or will come later. This rippling in the stories mimics heredity, memory and tradition, but also the way social roles start within the household—small, comfortable, seemingly safe—then grow larger and more nuanced as members (and their stories) move into the neighborhood, then return home armed with new experiences and beliefs that change every relationship and situation irrevocably.
NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH: STORIES

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lividity</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divine Beings</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed Doors</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewn Up</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevation</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go-Give</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ones That Got Away</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Belly</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Watch</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lividity

This morning I took out my heart and left it on the fence between my house and my neighbor’s. It’s been almost twelve hours, but it’s still there, still beating even, wrapped in an embroidered napkin that had been part of my hope chest, one of twelve napkins my mother had sewn for me before I was even out of high school. As I cut, I clenched my teeth so hard that I’m afraid I might have cracked a molar, but it’s out, and that’s what matters.

I’ve been watching it through the back door on and off all day, watching the flutter the napkin makes as my heart beats: ba dum, ba dum. I’m not sure how long it can keep beating out there, but it hasn’t shown signs of slowing yet. I still feel well enough to go about my day, though raising my arms makes me wince.

Maybe he wants to wait until the sun sets to come out and take it. That’d be romantic. Once it’s dark there’s no telling what might happen. I hope the raccoons don’t get it. The last thing I need is to see my heart next week, shriveled and gnawed, dangling from the telephone wires or laying in a nest that’s blown out of a tree.

Our leaving things for each other on the fence started at the beginning of the summer. Back then it was just warm enough to go without a jacket at night. He’d cut an iris and lay it on the fence post, a damp paper towel rubber-banded to the cut end of the stem to keep it from wilting. I’d return the favor by baking him a batch of my favorite peanut butter cookies. I left them in a Ziploc bag so they wouldn’t get stale, and by the next morning, a late-blooming lily of the valley, surrounded by dark, heart-shaped green leaves, was waiting for me in a paper cup. And so it went. Me leaving cookies; him leaving flowers. One day there’d be a bluebell, which is actually more purple than blue, or another day, a sprig of yellow forsythia would be wound between the wooden slats of fencing. I’ve kept them all. At first I pressed them inside the pages of my dictionary, flattening the spring beauty with my fingertips under the nearly translucent “s” pages, an anemone under “a”. My husband was none the wiser. He has no need of definitions.

Now that I live alone I put the fresh flowers in vases and jam jars full of water throughout the house, at least one in every room. As I fold laundry, I can sniff the honeysuckle blossoms, taste the sweet nectar when I remove the stamen from one and hold it to my lips. At breakfast I enjoy the violets I’ve placed in the middle, without worry that I’ll be questioned about where they came from. After I brush my teeth, I pluck a buttercup from the glass next to the sink, hold it up to my chin and let the yellow glow against my skin. Steve’s not here to tell me that wildflowers are the same as weeds, and the machine answers when my mother calls to tell me I should listen to him.

While hidden flowers expanded the dictionary, my skin began to feel different; I could feel the blood flowing through my veins underneath it. I’d grown so sensitive to touch that I had to replace my pressed khakis and Mother-approved button downs with skirts made of layers of gauzy fabric that swish around my knees when I walk. Before Steve left our marriage (with a sports duffel full of shirts I’d pressed and socks I’d rolled), he’d noticed the change and touched my bare knee.

“This is new,” he said, and my skin turned pink, not from his touch, but from the feeling that someone who was not welcome to touch me had. I stood, and he pulled me to him from behind, his hands spanning my waist, pressing the loose flesh of my belly between his spread fingers. I moved away; found something to sweep up.
“You never let me touch you anymore,” he said, and slid open the patio door. “Make sure you get the dirt out of the corners this time.” I heard the door swish shut and the John Deere mower come to life, ready to cut straight, perfect lines in the Kentucky bluegrass.

I was no longer his, hadn’t been in years, at least since our son had been born. Steve had stayed outside of the delivery room, preferring the contents of his briefcase to the smells and muck of birth. The baby was a blue-tinted damaged thing with a mop of dark hair that matched my own. Blood had flown then, too, and he hadn’t made it home with us.

Without my heart the world seems very quiet, hushed, like when a storm knocks the electricity out. I hadn’t realized how loud it had been, the steady beating, the rush of blood in my ears, until it was gone. I know that the birds in the trees are still singing, and I know someone down the street is using an edger to make their lawn just so against the sidewalk. The katydids have started singing, signaling the end of summer. I know, I know, but it’s muted. The dogs two doors down—a lab and a retriever—are barking at something, but I ignore them. I’m listening for my neighbor’s footsteps through the grass, telling me he’s come to the fence. That he’s chosen me.

Usually at this time, he’s digging in his flower beds, bare hands sunk into the rich soil, the knees of his jeans getting wet from the evening rain we’ve been getting. While he transplants seedlings he’s grown in their windowsills, his wife comes out to fire up the grill kept on their patio. She wears an apron that she ties in the back with a large bow, and a quilted mitt on her hand as she lifts the lid to check on whatever’s cooking. She’s pretty, with that peachy, freckled skin she lets tan in the sunshine. The rest of the women in our neighborhood wear straw sunhats and sunscreen, but not her. She’s tanned and likes being barefoot, almost mocking us, the conservative women in our neighborhood, in her apron over her bare breasts. Her laugh reminds me of wind chimes when it carries across our yards. I met her, briefly, at the Memorial Day block party. She’d had too much to drink, and kept throwing her arms around all of us, knocking my paper plate of strawberries and cornbread from my lap as I sat in someone’s open garage. Steve had grinned and hugged back when she’d weaved over to him, both straps of her tank top sliding down her shoulders. When he saw people watching he moved his arms as if to steady her and made a show of complimenting the homeowners on their new brick driveway.

“You should be more careful,” he said, while I gathered my spilled food from the cement of the garage floor.

The wife threw herself into the chair beside me in a heap, legs spread like a man’s, and then belched like one. My neighbor gathered her up and took her home, having to hold her with both arms to keep her upright. When he came back out he’d found me admiring his flowers by the light coming from the houses, my husband and our fellow neighbors off shooting firecrackers they’d bought over the state line, wives cleaning up empty casserole dishes, the children racing bikes down the tree-lined street with playing cards clothes-pinned to their spokes.

“I never bring the flowers into the house,” he’d told me. I watched as he bit into a cookie from the open Tupperware container I’d held out. “It’s because of her allergies,” he said. His eyes asked me not to mention that she’d passed out in a dramatic heap as he’d led her into their house. I’d bent down to smell the huge pink peonies that grew at the edge of their driveway, their sweetness so strong it made my eyes water.
“I hope she’ll feel all right in the morning,” I answered, and smiled, watching him as he pinched back the browned blossoms to make room for new growth. He’d called it “deadheading”.

“My husband hates flowers; he likes the grass to be perfectly green all the way up to the foundation of the house.”

“Mmm-hmm,” my neighbor agreed, “He advised me to start digging up my dandelions with a screwdriver.”

“My mother adores him. She thinks because he wears suits to work, he’s a great husband.” He gave me a lopsided grin, picked a peony, and after brushing a fat black ant from the petals, tucked it behind my ear, and took a second cookie from the container.

I don’t think his wife knows about the flowers or the cookies we leave each other, and I haven’t seen her come out to tend the grill tonight. I’m glad for that. I don’t want anyone but him to see what I left there.

The last fireflies of the season have started to twinkle. I’ve always thought of this as a magical time, those moments between evening and night when the sky grows dim and children are called inside for bed. It’s become hard to focus, and I’m not sure if that’s because of the sun going down or my blood pooling in my feet and fingertips. He still hasn’t come out, and my chest is starting to hurt. It’s too empty. All day I’ve told myself he’ll come, he’ll come, he won’t forget, won’t ignore me. He’ll see my heart; he’ll take it and smile. I don’t want to lose faith again. I lost faith the day I found out I was pregnant despite the pill, the day I found out the baby wouldn’t live past the morning, the two times after that I bled again, in the bathroom with the fan on. My mother told me that as women, we had no choice but to bear our pain in private so as not to upset anyone.

My husband just thought I couldn’t get pregnant again. He said, “Look at you; you’ve got the stretch marks and big hips of a mother, but no child to show for them.” I think he left his heart at the hospital. My chest is hollow now, too, and I’m going to have to fill it with something. I’ve given my neighbor my heart, it’s his to keep, and I refuse to take it back. This is my choice.

My head feels heavy, and my ribs are starting to sink. They look funny beneath my blouse, almost like they want to cave in. I walk from room to room, my bare feet puffy and purple; they’re heavy and sensitive. I can feel each loop of carpet beneath my toes. I gather each flower he’s given me from the cups and vases and jars, and I shake the pressed, dried flowers from the dictionary. I wind them all together in my hands, making a bouquet of blooms and leaves. The smell is heady, and makes me swoon. Resting the bouquet on the table, I unbutton my shirt and let it slide down my back to the floor.

I sign my name above the line marked “wife”, petals falling from my chest and sticking to the wet ink. My mother would be disappointed. I refold the papers, place them in a manila envelope, lick the awful-tasting glue and seal it. I am no longer married.

I walk outside, wearing only my skirt, into the night. The fireflies are sparse now; just a few twinkle in the grass, the females waiting for their matches. As my eyes adjust to the changing light I see a figure near the fence. It’s him. I take a few steps closer and see that he has my heart. He’s holding it without the cloth napkin, letting it beat within his cupped hands,
ignoring the mess. I come closer, and he looks up at me, his eyes taking in my naked extremities, growing darker with my sluggish blood. He has the kindest eyes I’ve ever seen. As I stand in my back yard under the trees, in the moonlight, feeling faint, he walks to the gate, my heart now in his left hand, which I notice wears no ring. He uses his free hand to open the gate and walks quickly to me, his steps making a swooshing sound in the uncut grass. He stands close and traces my cheekbone, his hands scented with geranium. His fingers follow the shape of my shoulder bones, move down to brush against my breasts. He frowns when he sees the petals falling from inside my body and bends to kiss me: first my lips, then my jaw, the hair on the top of his head tickling my nose. His empty hand rests on my waist, thumb tracing the marks criss-crossing my skin. He kisses the top of my ragged chest, holds me up with a hand on the small of my back, bringing me closer, still holding my heart, still kissing; trying his best to heal me.
It all started when Max, my husband, saw Buddha-shaped pears had been grown in China.

“Would you look at that?” he said, clicking through Yahoo! Photos of the day, the bright green fruit Buddha in the foreground, a blurry Asian farmer in the background. After glancing at the photo, I spun my chair back around to my own desk and monitor, multiple documents open on my screen. I’d been writing the next quarter’s assignment sheets all afternoon, and just wanted to finish. Someone had to do their job. Or rather, someone had a job to do, and that someone was me, not Max.

“Do you think Buddhists would be offended if someone sank their teeth into a Buddha face?” I asked, and then continued, “And how’s the job search going today, honey?” I tried to keep my voice sweet as I asked, but it might have been a bit saccharine that time.

“A.,” he answered, “No, I don’t think they’d be bothered, and B., not so hot.” I squeezed my eyes shut, glad he couldn’t see the deepening lines around my mouth. A year ago he was the type to wake up early, go for a run, then drive to work in khakis and a polo shirt, a big thermal mug of hot coffee wedged between his knees, a Bluetooth attached to his ear. No time for breakfast or email. Lean and clean, a runner’s body, direct deposit. After the layoffs, he sat in front of his computer all day long, growing his gut and a beard, searching Monster.com when I was looking, surfing porn when I wasn’t. I knew he’d found a favorite site—one that featured twenty second clips for free, like YouTube but dirtier, categorized into every desire you could think of and many you hadn’t. At least it was free. He didn’t know I knew, but Mozilla keeps track of every site you visit, even if you think you’ve cleared your browsing history.

“Whoa,” he exclaimed.

“What?”

“Each Buddha pear sells for around seven dollars U.S.”

“Um-hmm,” I said.

That September Max had started whittling. By then I’d lost track of the hobbies he began to counteract job-hunting burn-out. First he whittled with a little pocket knife we’d picked up during our first and only camping trip. We’d spent a whole week in a Florida state park early in our marriage. Heaven was getting away from Max’s mother and swimming in the ocean every day, countless fish tickling our bare legs, our arms around each other while we bobbed in the waves as if no one could figure out what was happening below the surface. Max wasn’t exactly the outdoorsy type, but he tried, almost burning his eyebrows off by starting a campfire with a bottle of butane. His mother is always calling people “evil” and “demons”. She believes that demons are always around us. Satan is always peeking over our shoulders, blowing into our ears, seducing us into joining his evil ways. It took over three years to convince Max that it would be all right to refuse her invitations to plays complete with glossolalia, parties that turned into Bible studies and Revelations-inspired “Harvest Trails” filled with aborted fetus imagery.

“You’re not a bad man, Max,” I told him, kissing below his earlobe as he let the answering machine pick up her calls. Four in less than an hour. “Just because she’s your mother doesn’t mean you have to believe what she believes.”

We have his mother over for brunch one Sunday per month. She’s his mother, after all. Since we’d chosen not to give her any grandchildren in favor of our careers, Quiche Lorraine and fresh fruit was the least we could do. On top of not producing a baby to carry on my hip, we’d
done even worse before that: we hadn’t married in a church. Max and I met in a Victorian Literature course. I was there because I wanted to be; he was there because it fulfilled a requirement toward his business degree. Reading about dark nights of the soul had brought us together. Much to his mother’s dismay, it carried over to our ceremony at the courthouse downtown, officiated by a female justice of the peace instead of a preacher.

“And she wouldn’t even wear white,” Ruth Ann complained after Max had showed her the photos after our honeymoon. I could hear her crying through the receiver when she called, telling him she wished he’d married his high school sweetheart instead, and then offering to loan him money for an annulment.

When Ruth Ann saw that Max had taken up carving, she brought him her own father’s favorite knife. He took to whittling from his favorite chair in front of the TV, a waste basket between his legs where that huge coffee mug used to reside on his way to work. He started by carving crude spoons from balsawood, and as he got better, turned to small animals and people. The mantle above the fireplace was lined with tiny collies and the shapes of box trucks that he said he’d attach wheels to for our nephews’ Christmas gifts. Ruth Ann, however, had planted what she surely considered a bright idea: a crèche. The church down the street had a life-sized carved wooden crèche every Christmas time, and the houses on either end of the street would line their sidewalks with luminaries made from paper bags or empty milk jugs to light the way for Jesus. It was a pretty sight, I’ll admit, but their donkey looming over the wooden baby in the manger looked more like a llama. Its smooth brown neck stretched too high to be a donkey, a point I’d made every time we drove by.

His family ooh’d and ahh’d over the carvings of the Three Wise Men he’d done for them. They liked his Jesus carvings best, and Ruth Ann added a small loop of satin ribbon to the neck of one and hung it from her rear view mirror along with a new bumper sticker on the back of her Buick that said, “Don’t drive faster than your angel can fly!”

“May, Max,” I said after Ruth Ann had left another Sunday brunch at our house in a cloud of Jean Nate body splash. “Why don’t you carve something more seasonal? You’re getting pretty good, and maybe you could sell the carvings at the market downtown.”

We’d have to turn the air conditioner on soon. My paychecks would cover the basics, but summer in our state is stiflingly humid, and we could only spend so much time at Barnes and Noble, reading the books in the cool comfort of the armchairs before the booksellers started dusting the shelves around us, circling closer and closer, their eyes and mouths hard from annoyance. When we were newlyweds it was romantic to do without, to live on love. A decade later, we had a mortgage and student loans that needed paying off.

“Speaking of the market,” Max finally answered, “I’m going to plant a garden. My thumb might not be as green as Mom’s, but she said she could give me advice on raising squash. Remember how much she had last year? If I grew it organic, I think there’d be a market at the market.” He chuckled at his own joke.

“Yeah, funny,” I said, and went back to grading essays on the Salem Witch Trials. “Do you know I got notes from parents over these papers? A bunch of them thought I was promoting witchcraft in the classroom. I wish we’d researched more before I took this position…”

Max didn’t answer me, because he was back to looking at photos online again. The Buddha pear from last year was back on his monitor, and I heard the printer’s inky arm moving back and forth as it spit out a piece of paper. Max had printed out a diagram of the mold the
Buddha pear farmer had used to shape the pears that way. He got up and took it from the tray and held it with both hands, eyes moving over the picture.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

“We don’t have many Buddhists here, do we?”

“No, I don’t know any, actually; most everyone goes to either your Mom’s church or the community church. Have you seen how huge it’s getting? I heard they added a Starbucks inside.”

“Isn’t one of your students Jewish?”

“Yes, but her family doesn’t really practice that I know of.”

Max was still studying the printed photo, and his fingers moved like they wanted to scratch an itch. He took a pencil out of the mug on my desk and started drawing something on the paper. When I craned my neck to see what he’d drawn, I saw that it looked a little like Jesus.

“What if I made a Jesus mold for the zucchinis?”

“A Jesus mold….”

“Yeah! Those Buddha pears sold for seven bucks each. How much do you think I could charge for Jesus-shaped organic zucchinis?”

“I think the plural of zucchini is zucchini. And don’t you think that would just piss people off? Do you remember what your cousin said when I told her I thought those Mary statues Catholics put in their yards look like vulvae?”

Max smirked, and muttered something about what sounded like “Mary’s head was the…”

He blinked and said, “Lara, I think it could work. We have so many churches around here, and so many people are into organic crap anymore. It’s like…the best of two worlds. How many zucchinis did Mom get from her couple of rows? A hundred, easy! Seven bucks each…if I planted ten rows, and if I could stagger when the zucchinis ripened…”

“Zucchini,” I said again, but he wasn’t listening. He’d gone out to the garage, and I could hear him rustling around in his wood supply, probably looking for the right kind for the molds he clearly planned to carve. “I think I’d rather you watch porn clips,” I said, louder than I’d intended.

Max came back to the office in a hurry, a piece of balsa wood in one hand and pine in the other, the paper crinkling from where he’d put it under his arm.

“Lara, I get that you think this is crazy. ‘Another one of Max’s stupid hobbies.’ But I’ve been thinking about this on and off since last fall, and I really think it could work. You know I’m not having luck finding a job, but I can provide for us, and I can make people happy doing it. So just let me do it, would you? You didn’t marry an idiot. You know I can do this.”

His color was high, and he was gesticulating with the wood pieces while he talked. He was serious about this. He was going to make zucchini Jesuses, whether I thought it was a good idea or not. “You know, I don’t have to ask you for your permission,” he added.

“No, you don’t,” I said.

The next afternoon I came home to find various sizes of yellow squash and zucchini on the kitchen table. A plastic grocery sack was on the floor by his feet. Max had a particularly thick squash in his right hand, a piece of balsa wood in the other. The room smelled like a lumber yard from the shavings covering the counter. I left my school bag on the floor by the fridge and picked up a block of wood that he’d already carved, and ran my finger along the indentations in the shape of a human being.

“That one will fit a zucchini up to six inches,” he told me. “I just need to fit it with hinges and a clasp, and then attach a stake. Once the blossoms start to drop, I’ll fit the zucchinis
into the empty molds, hook them shut, and plant the stakes. I think I’ll have to do some holes or something, too, to let in the sunlight so they stay green, though maybe they’d keep white like those weird asparaguses that cost so much.”

“Zucchini,” I stressed, but he ignored me. “And the plural of asparagus is still asparagus.”

“Think they’d look more like Jesus if they were white?” he asked, turning his back to me as he cradled a mold he was working on close to his chest.

“Jesus couldn’t have been white,” I told him. “The Romans just appropriated the images of pagan gods so that the heathens would accept Christianity. He didn’t really have a halo; that was Apollo.”

Max squinted at me, clearly annoyed with my lecturing. He didn’t say anything, so I picked up my bag and went back to the bedroom. Most evenings Max was too busy sketching and carving to come to bed on time; I kept waking up in the morning to find him asleep on the couch, a throw over his shoulders and shavings stuck in his hair. I’d taken to grading in bed, now, since nothing else happened there in favor of babying the seedlings and carving the molds. He used the want ads I’d leave on the kitchen counter to catch the dust and curls that would drop when he gently blew the molds clean.

By the end of the month he’d also cleared a large section of our backyard and turned the earth for the squash seedlings. Each day he went out to tend the plants he placed into holes he dug on his hands and knees, jeans turning black with dirt and wet at the knees. I’d watch him from the window, bent over the plants, affixing the lightweight molds and using both hands to plunge the stakes into the fertile soil. He begged the man who lived in the house behind us for his cigarette butts so that he could peel the paper away, pinch the tobacco in his fingers and drop it into a spray bottle of water. He’d shake the bottle and spray the leaves of the plants. He said it was a natural insecticide he’d read about online and that, so far, it was working very well.

By the end of June he produced his first small crop: four zephyr squash, the bottoms a bright alien green and the tops a sunny yellow. Each looked like a crude Voodoo doll and when he deemed them not Jesus-y enough, I chopped them in the food processor, imagining they were Ruth Ann. I poured the macerated squash into a plastic bowl, put a lid on it, and shoved it into the fridge. I made a mental note to ask one of our neighbors for her zucchini muffin recipe.

By July he’d gotten it right. Each morning he would rotate the molds so that the sun could shine on a different section of the fruit, never letting them get too pale. Fifteen zucchini, each a good six inches long, came out of the molds and into Max’s eager hands looking more Jesus-like than I’d thought he could manage. He let out a cheer that I heard clear inside before he rushed in the back door, the fruit piled in his shirt like a pioneer woman carrying apples in her apron. He dumped them all onto the kitchen table and we rushed to catch them before they rolled off. I held one vertically, and looked at Max from the corner of my eye.

“Wow,” I said, both impressed and uncomfortable.

“Yeah,” he answered. A grin spread across his face. He took the Jesus from my hand and held it up to the ceiling light like an offering, gazing up at it in rapturous delight. “It’s perfect.”

By the following Saturday he secured a spot at the open-air farmer’s market in the parking lot of Wal-Mart and PetSmart. Surrounded by booths of local honey, home-baked breads and early sweet corn, Max displayed his Jesus Zucchini on a folding table he borrowed from his mother’s church. Ruth Ann had been happy to help by letting her son use the table in return for including pamphlets for the church with each purchase. The first day, Max sold ten
zucchini at eight dollars each. They were organic, he argued, so he could charge more than those pears had sold for in China.

The Saturday after that, I stayed home, but word had gotten out, and he sold his entire supply of thirty by noon.

“You should’ve seen it, Lara!” he crowed, pride straining his voice, “people surrounded the table with cash in their hands!”

By the end of the month, Max’s inbox was full; people emailed requesting special orders. Others started calling, leaving messages until the voicemail was full, asking if Max could place Jesus in different positions, maybe one with His hands up in the air like that giant statue down the highway that had burned down after being struck by lightning.

Ruth Ann got Max to go to church with her on Sunday.

“You should have seen it, Lara!” he repeated. “The entire congregation prayed for the success of the business, and they’ve donated their own gardens and zucchinis for molding!”

“Zucchini,” I whispered, knowing this had gotten way out of hand, but at a loss for wrangling our lives back under control. “Are you going back next Sunday?” I asked, and he said yes.

“Do they care that you’re not Christian?”

But he’d gone back out to the yard to tend his plants, whistling some twangy tune that sounded suspiciously like Amazing Grace. Somebody knocked on the door, and when I opened it, I found one man and three women in dress clothes waiting.

“Is this the home of Max Bennett?” the man asked, his hat in his hands.

“Yes,” I answered. “And who are you?”

“Missus Bennett,” he said, blue eyes overtly kind. “We’re from the Church of Good Grace. We’ve been told of a miraculous achievement by your husband. Can we speak with him, please?” One of the women held out a Styrofoam plate wrapped in clear Saran Wrap.

“These are for you,” she said to me. Squares of white fudge, homemade.

“Um, thanks,” I said. “He’s in the back. You can go through the gate just there,” I nodded in the direction.

“Thank you kindly, Ma’am,” he responded, placing his hat back on his head.

I shut the door and peeked back the wrapping on the plate, sniffed at the treats. They smelled like sugar and were dotted with walnuts. I slid the plate onto the counter and watched through the window as the quartet found my husband on his knees in the garden. One of the women was pushing buttons on her phone as the man talked to Max, and within a minute, more people had joined them in our yard. They were all bent over at the waist to look at the plants, floral-print Sunday dresses and grey slacks covering the expansive behinds, the women’s low-heeled white dress shoes sinking into the grass. They made phone calls, and as the sun dipped low in the sky, my yard was filled with parishioners. They held hands and sang hymns. A man with a walker pushed through the small crowd, then left the tennis-balled contraption aside to shuffle toward the plants, emotion or age or maybe just zealotry shaking his arms and hands as he grasped Max by the shoulders and hugged him. I could see, even from the window, that Max had tears in his eyes as the man embraced him. Zucchini. The Jesus Zucchini. We weren’t even Christian.

“We’re atheists!” I called to them as I slid open the back door and trotted outside. My voice sounded pitifully small against the women in twangy song, something about graves and Jeezuz. “My husband just wanted to earn some money so he’d feel important again,” I added,
and they all turned to look at him, two stepping forward to lay hands on his head, to add a new prayer for his financial well-being to their lists.

“All success comes from Christ,” an old woman said, sucking at her teeth and looking at me like I was dirty, sinful. “And salvation can only come through a mediator.”

“You think my husband’s zucchini Jesus booth is successful because of God’s intervention? Are you people crazy?”

“Not just his zucchini,” she stated, “but his soul. Yours would be too, if you’d let Him into your heart.”

I stared at her, and then at Max, who had two middle-aged women with big, curly hair on either side of him, their heads bowed, their hands clasped around his. They were muttering low, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying.

“Max, since when do you wear sandals?”

He didn’t answer me. He’d bowed his head, too, toes peeking out from the leather footwear, his beard wiggling as he mouthed the prayers with them.

“Max!”

Nothing. A young girl wearing a long denim skirt, her hair grown past her waist, tugged at my sleeve.

“What?” I asked, pulling my arm away from her.

“It’s August eighth! We’re having a singing tonight and a bonfire. You should come.”

“A singing?”

“The Gospel Brothers are coming. They’ll even sign their CD’s for you and everything.”

I looked at her. I looked at my husband, and at the yard full of praying strangers. I looked at the zucchini in their molds, destined to become small, green divine beings. Someone had dragged the snake of garden hose over, and I heard someone else turn the squeaky knob of the faucet. Grown men and women held the hose to their lips to drink the cold water that was flowing out and falling to the ground, causing a divot of mud to form in the grass. The evening heat had caused sweat to bead on foreheads and along the backs of cotton dress shirts.

“Max,” I said, stepping through the women gathered round and putting both of my hands on his chest, “Why don’t you go to their church with them? I’ll fix something to bring, and I’ll join you for the singing.”

“Really?” His eyes lit up. “Are you feeling this, Lara? Can you feel the love these people have for us?” His smile was wide, grateful. These people were treating him like he was important, like he mattered.

“Go on, I’ll meet you there,” I said, and shooed him and the visitors, telling them how nice it was to meet them, and how kind their interest and invitation was. I promised I’d be along soon, and that Max would be happy to ride to their church along with them in one of their vans.

When the last of the stragglers left, and I had my yard to myself again, I stood and stared at the zucchini plants. One by one, I pulled out the stakes lining the rows and let them drop to the ground. Once the stakes were all out, I opened each mold, wrenched every zucchini out and tossed them into a pile behind me. I worked from row to row, gathering not-yet-developed Jesuses into my shirt like it was an apron and dumping them into the pile. By the time I was done I had sixty or seventy zucchinis piled at my feet. I went back into my house and got a basket from the laundry room, took it back outside, and heaped the zucchini inside it. It was heavy, so I dragged it by one end instead of picking it up. I got behind and pushed it to the front yard, then to the house next door. As the sun dipped behind the trees, I stuffed zucchini into my neighbor’s mailbox. I pulled the basket to the house two doors down, and left two on their front porch, on
top of their welcome mat. I did the same with the next few, and when I reached the house at the end of the block, the blue one that left its porch light on at odd times, I opened the storm door and left a stack of zucchini in between it and the front door. The old dog that lived there must have heard me, because I heard barking and then voices, a man and a woman, inside. I hurried to the next house, then the next, crossing the street and hitting the houses on Sycamore Street, too, until I was able to lift the basket and carry it on my hip.

When the basket was empty, I went back to my own house. By the beam of a flashlight I propped in the grass, I pulled up all of the plants and threw them into the basket. I’d had it. I’d had it with zucchini, with Jesus and Jesus freaks and religion. I’d had it with parents telling me what to teach, and with wood shavings all over the kitchen floor and with a husband who slept on the couch instead of in bed with me. I’d had it with Ruth Ann and the Christmas donkey that was really a llama.

My cell phone rang in pocket. It was Max.

“Lara, are you coming? The singing is about to start, and I think you’d enjoy it. Everyone here is being so nice to me, and I want to share this with you. I love you, Lara.”

I told him I’d try to get there soon, and hung up.

I sat down on the ground, the basket of ripped-up plants beside me. The August heat had already parched them beyond repair. I’d killed the Jesus zucchini plants, broken the wooden stakes and molds my husband had worked so hard on. He’d been trying to do the right thing, something good to redeem himself in my eyes, or maybe his mother’s eyes or God’s eyes. I felt like a witch as I picked up the green hose and drank from the trickle of water that had been trapped inside after the church folk had turned off the tap. I let it pour over my face, trying to wash away the sweat and shame for what I’d done, praying that Max might forgive me.
Closed Doors

You and your husband have lived in this neighborhood for the last six years. All of the houses were built in the sixties, placed in a perfect grid atop what used to be farms. When the original owner of your house passed away while mowing his lawn, his riding mower carried him in wild circles, bouncing into tree trunks and through the daylilies until it ran out of gas. It was so hot that day that everyone else had stayed inside, praying for rain and wondering who was mowing all day long. The next day it poured, and that’s when they found him, slumped over the wheel, stuck between the mower and the Ash tree. The house sat empty for months after, the only one that didn’t sell within a week, you heard. No one wanted the house with the man who died out on the front lawn, soaking wet in his white undershirt and pants held up by only one good suspender. Your husband did, though, and you were easily convinced by the low price and his promise to use the money you saved for professional landscaping, not another DIY project, but he’d yet to hire anyone.

Everyone’s half acre lot is just slightly graded, letting rainwater and melted snow flow south, so your yard ends up flooded every spring, standing water filling with mosquito larvae that hatch into flying, blood-sucking bastards that keep everyone slapping well into October. Even though you spent the afternoon covered in Deet, tonight it’s chilly, so you break it to your daughter that she’ll have to wear a jacket over her fairy princess costume.

“But these gloves have fairy dust,” you convince her, shifting them in the light of the lamp to show off the gold threads woven into the yarn, “because fairies tend to get their hands covered when they sprinkle it all around!”

She believes you, you’re relieved to see, and stroke her towhead curls. No tantrums anymore. She’s a big girl now, riding the school bus that picks her up at the end of the driveway five mornings a week. She loves the sign in the window with the black cat printed on it, the driver who always remembers to honk hello and goodbye, and especially the way she bounces in the green vinyl seats when the driver hits a pothole. Two full months of kindergarten have prompted her to grow up just enough that you know it won’t be long before she stops calling you “Mommy”, and by this time next year, frilly fairy skirts may very well be a thing of the past.

“Ben’s going as a ninja,” she tells you, referring to the boy who lives on the street behind your house.

“Claire, do you even know what a ninja is?” You laugh as you use a small paintbrush to apply green makeup in a twirling vine across her cheekbone, then a little glitter on top. She twists around to admire her wings. “I wish I could fly!”

“Honey,” you call to your husband, “It’s just about six. Are you sure you don’t want me to stay? If you want to take her out this year…” But no, your husband loves being the one to dole out the glow-in-the-dark bracelets you buy every year from Target’s dollar section, a good selection of pink, purple, yellow and green because you like to give the children their choices. It’s a waste of money, he tells you, because half of every box either has a broken plastic connector or never lights at all, but when the neighborhood kids scramble to choose their favorite color of bracelet from the bowl he holds out, adjust her bright pink wings, then take her by the hand and go to the front door. Your husband follows behind with his jack-o-lantern in his arms, intent on seeing the two of you off. Opening the door, a chill wind comes through and catches your breath, just like Halloween is supposed to. Once everyone is outside, he places the pumpkin in the flowerbed that still holds geraniums, their red petals falling onto the dirt below, trying to hold on to summer.
You lead the little train of three down the cement walk to the driveway, keeping hold of Claire’s hand. Your husband takes her other hand, counting, “One, two, three…up!” and the two of you lift your little girl into the air, the three of you one connected unit. When she comes back down she hugs her father around his hips and he tells her to beware of the witch two blocks over, pulling his face into a crazed grimace and grabbing the hair over his ears, yanking it up into spiky horns. Claire shrieks and flings her empty plastic bucket his way.

“Stop it, Daddy, you’re scaring me!” she laughs, and he bends at the waist to let her pat his hair back into place. You see other children in threes and fours trailed by adults turning the corner at the end of the road, and know it’s time to start on your way. You tell your daughter to kiss her poppa bye and she does, standing up on tiptoes, one of her wings hanging down at an angle.

“Come on, Claire, let’s go,” you say, slipping two of the glowing bracelets onto her wrist. You come to the end of your driveway. Rows of houses line both sides of the street.

You’ve got a flashlight in one hand, and your daughter’s little hand in the other.

“Which way is right, and which is left?” you ask. You started working on direction over breakfast this morning. She lets go of your hand and holds her own up for you to see, her index finger up, her thumb at a ninety degree angle.

“L is for left,” she says, “Right?”

“Yes,” you answer, “but do it this way, not like your uncle does, all right?” You unfold her other fingers so all four are together with the thumb apart.

If you’d like to go right on Birch Street, turn to #2.
If you’d prefer to go left toward Bramblewood Court, turn to #3.

#2

You turn right out of your driveway, leaving your husband there to position his jack-o-lantern just so. You know by the time you return he’ll have pushed the mower into the yard and rigged up a flying ghost made from an old sheet; you heard him talking on the phone with his brother, planning it. It will slide down a line he’ll tie to the ash, the one you keep hoping won’t be invaded by Emerald Ash Borers and have to be cut down. He’ll want to do it himself, and you’ll have no choice but to watch from inside as he and his brother, always that brother, yell “timber!” like suburban lumberjacks and suddenly demand tall stacks of flapjacks for breakfast and want their coffee bitter black instead of hazelnut-flavored. They’ll wear flannel and refuse to shave for a few days beforehand, and you’ll hold your breath, hoping the tree won’t fall down the wrong way, forcing you to deplete your savings to fix the roof. It’s happened before.

“Loser!” you wish you could say, throwing his brother’s favorite insult back where it belongs, but unlike him, not in front of Claire.

In this neighborhood, roofs are always in good repair. Trees are routinely trimmed and gutters are clear. Driveways are expected to be smooth and free of cracks, and curtained windows are always clean. Each house follows the same three- or four-bedroom, two bath plan, though sometimes a garage will be on the left instead of the right, or a bay window will look out onto the backyard instead of the front.
There’s the beige house with the big metal star above the garage, which you know contains a gold Town and Country. There’s another beige house, this time with an American flag lit from beneath by a spotlight timed to turn on each evening at six, and then shut off again at six in the morning. It’s got a silver Honda Odyssey parked in front. You follow Claire to each driveway in turn, knowing she won’t trip and fall because you all got a great deal on asphalt service last summer. Within each doorway is a mother dressed in costume ready to call out “Happy Halloween!” in response to your wave and smile.

Four, five, six houses go by in much the same way, their only real difference the color of van or SUV in the driveway, or the breed of dog left barking in a room closed off from the candy-craving children. You spot at least five ninjas, but none of them answer from behind their fabric masks when Claire asks if they’re Ben.

“Why aren’t the daddies passing out the treats?” Claire asks, swinging her candy bucket in a wide arc as you turn a corner. She’s figured out that the candy won’t fall if she swings the bucket hard enough, and she’s breathing hard from the effort. “Why don’t those mommies take their children trick-or-treating like you do?”

“Well, a lot of people, I guess, think it’s a better choice for the mothers to stay at home, and that the fathers will keep the children safer out on the road.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they just don’t know what they’re missing.”

Claire swings her bucket even harder, and it makes a whooshing sound that she likes. You stop at another beige house, and then another, the mothers inside dressed like witches, bunnies, or ragdolls. Each slips a treat into Claire’s bucket from her spot in the doorway. You picture the women trapped behind the storm doors, hands and noses pressed up against the screens, hoping to trade the candy for a chance to come out.

If you’d like the break the rules and cut through yards to Cherry Street, turn to #6.
If you’d like to walk toward Bramblewood Court, turn to #3.

#3

The sun is setting by the time you get to the end of your block. The last house on the right is red brick. When Claire rings the doorbell for candy, you can practically see the gin cloud from between the housewife’s overly-lined lips. Her feet are shod in clean, white Nike cross trainers and she’s wearing a zip-up hoodie and yoga pants. Her hair is perfect. From your spot at the foot of the walkway, you hear her make a joke about fairies that you’re thankful goes over Claire’s head. You noticed that she decided to leave the John McCain bumper sticker on her white Escalade even though that election was years ago. “Women for McCain/Palin”, it says, in hot pink against black.

Claire walks back to you, her small nose wrinkled. “Mommy,” she states matter-of-factly, “Mrs. Elliot’s breath makes my nose feel funny.”

“Did she give you a candy bar?”

“No, she said she knows you voted for Obama, and that she doesn’t give candy to liberals.”

Six years. Six years you’ve been bringing Claire through the neighborhood, smiling at people even if you were having a bad day, making small talk about things you don’t care about
in order to not make waves here. For six years you’ve watched Mrs. Elliot slur and stagger at her door and ignore the plastic pumpkin buckets the children from single-parent homes hold up, giving full-sized Twix bars to her book club members’ kids, Bit-o-Honeys to the ones with mothers who work outside the home, and small boxes of raisins to the kids who’d put on too much weight since last year.

You hear the booming voice of her husband, Tony, as he strolls up the driveway, their twins in tow. One of the girls wears a bride’s white gown and veil, and carries a pillow case weighed down with enough chocolate to impress Willy Wonka. The other wears a pink and purple version of a Wee Dragons football player uniform, incomplete without cleats and helmet. Claire’s told you that this half of the duo wishes on every star, every fluffed out dandelion and every clock that says 11:11 to be a boy when she grows up. Both of the girls have unisex names; Bailey and Cameron. You can never remember which name goes with which child. You just wonder how their parents can think it’s a choice when one of them feels so wrong in her own skin before she’s even finished elementary school.

You feel something knock into your shoulder.
“Hey, little girl!” It’s Tony, leering at you. “Are you here for some candy?”
You step back. “Apparently you’re all out.”
“Awww, I’m sorry, doll,” he says, pulling his face into as contrite a look as he can muster. “You’re sweet enough as it is.” He winks and saunters up the driveway, sliding past his wife as if she’s not even there. She glares at you, looks you up and down as if your jeans and jacket have turned into a raincoat with nothing but garters and stockings underneath.

If you want to leave, turn to #4.
If you just thought something rude about pigs and lipstick, turn to #5.

#4

“Where would you like to go next?” you ask Claire, and scratch a mosquito bite under the collar of your shirt. You let her lead the way across the street to the next section of houses, shining the flashlight onto the cement in front of her, pointing out the way it glitters like the gold threads of her gloves did. The jack-o-lanterns in front of each house hold toothy grins that glow from battery-operated lights. You’ve always preferred real candles, enjoying the flicker and heat of the flame, the unpredictability of its pattern. Things are different now; make-up has replaced plastic masks, homemade treats are suspect, even fire in a jack-o-lantern is dangerous.

Counting the pumpkins, you realize you’ve lost track of which houses you’ve visited and which you haven’t; they’re all so alike. You suspect that Claire may have double-dipped, but decide not to worry about it tonight.

Turn to #6 if you’d like to go forward.
Turn to #10 if you want to go back the way you came.
You wish you could march up to Tony’s wife and give her a piece of your mind.

“What’s your costume this year, Mrs. Elliot?” you’d ask, a saccharine smile to disarm her. All of the other mothers insist on referring to each other this way. Maybe she’d answer that she hadn’t had time to dress up because her children’s home sewn costumes were her top priority, that she’d lined them in the most expensive Vera Bradley-print flannel so that both children would keep toasty warm without having to ruin their costumes with jackets and gloves.

“Drunk college drop-out, right? Good one!”

You’d keep the sweet smile and watch while she grew confused, knowing she’d have to ask Tony to explain your joke later and that it would probably cause a fight. You’d pull a book out of thin air and hand it to Cameron, the bride—or maybe it was Bailey—and invite the other one to come over and play ball in your yard, stain the knees of her pants with grass and mud, pretend to shave in the bathroom mirror, or even walk around without a shirt, just like boys do, whatever made her feel good about herself. You’d offer to cut her hair on the back patio, let the dark strands fall to the ground and be picked up again by the breeze or birds, carried off to other places. Shave it off, let her have a mohawk if it pleased her and shocked her mother. Tell both girls, and Claire, too, that they never have to get married if they don’t want to, never have to get pregnant and become mothers, that they can choose the life they want, the partner they want or no partner at all. They don’t have to hide behind clothes or doors, they can come out into the sun and be who they want to be.

Their mother looked at you like she knew everything about you tonight, and hated every strand of hair on your head.

You look down the road at all of the houses, lined up like a gauntlet on either side, fence posts, wheeled garbage cans and flag poles instead of sticks or tomahawks. You’re eager to turn the bend, to get to what’s waiting for you there.

If you’d like to walk down Cherry Street, turn to #6.
If you’d like to go left, turn to #10.

Her first Halloween, you hauled Claire down Cherry Street in a red metal wagon your dad had sent fully assembled. You dressed her in a faux fur tiger costume you’d found on sale. Your husband taught her to growl, and instead of her all-purpose “bye-bye!” greeting, when each door opened to show a mother with a bowl of candy at the ready, she’d let out a frightening guttural sound that startled the living daylights out of them.

“How adorable!” they laughed, tugging at elastic-bands to straighten their witch hats and holding out the candy to the baby. Claire would grab mini Hershey bars with both fists, forcing you to unhinge her little fingers and remind her every single time that she could only take one. She’d gum at the wrapped bars, sometimes puncturing the plastic with her newly-sprouted teeth, sucking at the melting chocolate, its smears making her lips look fierce and messy in the twilight.
Tonight, however, she’s perfect. She walks herself to each door, leaving you standing in
the driveway with a flashlight so that she can ring the doorbell and let out her practiced, cheerful
“Trick or treat!” She twirls when each neighbor exclaims over her costume, happy to be a girl,
happy to wear pink and glitter, happiest of all to feel how heavy her bucket gets as they slip in an
extra treat. You zigzag from house to house, waving and smiling to folks you’ve seen every year
and those you’ve never seen before.
You hurry her past the house with all of the animals. You don’t want to have to throw
away the caramel apples the lady gives out every year, the ones you always find hair stuck to.
Better to just avoid her house altogether.
You stop just for a moment to admire the late-season flowers tended by the Botany
student and his wife, wondering if the woman who lives behind them still watches him with love
in her eyes. You’re uncomfortable when you see her husband digging up crab grass, knowing
that something must be very wrong behind their doors.
You come to the end of the street and see the full moon has started to rise in the eastern
sky like something out of a werewolf story. The blue house on the corner has its front light on.
It blinks, the owner flipping the switch once, then twice, like a signal or maybe a beacon.

If you want to stop at the house on Elderwood Court, turn to #7.
If you’d like to keep going, turn to #10.

#7

You know the light is for you; that the man inside has been watching for you through the
window. He’s waiting in the doorway behind the screen door, a bowl of your favorite candy on
the small table next to him.

“Happy Halloween, Claire!” he says to your daughter, a smile in his voice. He beckons
you both inside, offers to take your jackets. Claire shrugs her wings onto the floor, then her
fairy-dusted gloves and jacket, and runs off to gorge on her candy. Jake’s ancient yellow lab,
the one that groans and grunts when he moves, follows, happy to let Claire lay atop him like a
giant pillow, patient but breathing hard, his tongue out and dripping.

“Don’t share any chocolate with the dog!” you call, but she already knows. She knows
the rules of this house, where to find the Barbie DVD’s and picture books, that there are always
drink boxes cold and ready for her in the fridge, and that here, she can drink as many as she likes
and you won’t tell her she’s having too much sugar. When you hear the TV come on upstairs,
Jake slips a handful of chocolates into your jacket pocket. He carries the bowl outside and places
it on the welcome mat, then shuts the front door behind him. He switches off the porch light.
He kisses your cheekbone, your right one, just under your eye, a soft brush of his lips that
you want to lean into. You slip your hands around his waist and pull him close to you, happy
that he’s not wearing any cologne, happy to breathe the scent of his skin, wishing you could keep
it for every day, instead of this sporadic every-now-and-again schedule that has become a habit
neither of you can break. As you stand there, your arms around each other, bodies pressed up
close, you hear Claire laughing. You don’t dare think what if; you don’t dare think for a second
that this is anything but the last time, because if you let yourself do anything other than live in
this exact moment, you won’t be able to hold it together. You’ll fall, in every sense of the word,
and you can’t guarantee that there will be someone to catch a woman like you. And so you savor
You savor it as he kisses your face, as his hands press into your back, holding you close, taking that October chill from your body and replacing it with something that feels like June.

You stand there in his living room, your lips fractions of an inch from each other’s, feeling each other’s breath, hearing a pair of costumed children tromp up to the locked door and then dump the entire bowl of candy into their buckets with a clatter.

“Win!” they hoot.

Jake’s hands are moving all over you; they’re on your back, then in your hair, holding you still while he stares at you, daring you to go ahead and kiss him. His hands move to the back waistband of your jeans, fingers playing with the band of your panties.

______________________________________________________________________________

You’ve reached a fork in the road.
If you’d like to kiss him, turn to #8.
If you prefer to pull away, turn to #9.

______________________________________________________________________________

#8

You love the feel of him there, so close, his left hand sliding down the back of your panties to touch your bare skin. You never meant for this to happen, you never meant to do anything other than walk and feed the dog when he went on vacation with his wife that year, the wife who left months ago, choosing a high-power career in the city over the rat race of suburbia.

You never meant to let Claire fall in love with that dog, you never meant to feel more comfortable in his home than your own. You don’t know why you chose to keep coming back with zip-lock bags full of zucchini muffins after she’d left him, you just know he loved them, and that Claire loved that dog. And that you loved the way he looked at you, the way he asked you to tell him more when you’d started off on some dumb story about your best friend growing up, the one who taught you to French kiss when you were ten and had been hiding in the fort you’d constructed of couch cushions and extra blankets from the hall closet.

He’d smiled as you told him about pretending she was a boy, or her pretending you were a boy, and trying to figure out just how to make it work when neither of you could ever be a boy. Jake touched your hand when you told him that you’d been scared to death you were a lesbian in high school, just because you’d played like that with a girl years before, the worry of it blotting out how boy crazy you were. You’ve never told your husband these stories, your secrets; you know he wouldn’t understand.

Jake had smiled through your stories, and smiled the first time you kissed him, your judgment shelved in favor of enjoying doing something so reckless, so out of character. With that kiss, and his smile, you grew to see the value of having and making choices all on your own, the sweet independence of it. He’s smiling now as you hover there, so close, and reach out the very tip of your tongue to the space between his upper and lower lip. His hands are on your ass and you kiss him, you love kissing him. There’d never been that awkward time of not knowing how to kiss each other, of silently trying to get the other to kiss a different way, or of adjusting the way you kissed to flow better with his kissing style. No, it was just right from the first time and just right this time, too.

You can hear Claire unwrapping another chocolate candy and singing along with Barbie as Rapunzel, trapped in her tower with paintbrushes, Angelica Huston as Gothol the evil witch.
“She’s fine,” Jake reminds you, and takes you to his bedroom.

When he was gone on his trips, you’d let Claire toss a tennis ball to the lab while you pored through his books. Each wall in his bedroom is lined with wood shelves, each book carefully alphabetized by the author’s last name. On one bottom shelf he’d stored photo albums, everything from childhood snapshots to one full of wedding and honeymoon photos. Like you, he’d had a church wedding. Like you, his wife had worn a white dress. Yours had been puffy with layers of crinoline underneath to hide that you were starting to show. Your breasts had grown a whole cup size within a few weeks of accidental conception, speeding up your wedding vows. Jake’s wife, however, was sleek and firm in a column dress that proved she was into exercise.

You’d spent hours poring over these photos without Jake knowing, looking at each one, analyzing whether he was really happy with her or not. You looked at how sweetly he held the cake for her to nibble on, remembering how you’d asked your husband not to shove cake in your face but he had anyway, yellow frosting staining the dress you’d wanted to pass on to your daughter someday. It had gone up your nose. His brother thought it was pretty damned funny.

Thinking of it, you kiss Jake harder, deeper, letting him shift your body so that you’re lying on his bed. You wonder, just for a moment, if she picked out the green duvet and shams, if they’d slept curled together. Maybe they’d kept apart with their backs to each other, or maybe he snored and she made him sleep on the couch. You haven’t slept well in your own bed for years. You try not to wonder whether you would here, in this bed.

Jake eases down next to you, still kissing you, lifting your shirt. He kisses your belly and puts the tip of his finger into your belly button, tickling you, then lets his hands wander across your exposed skin. His lips brush past a set of mosquito bites, pink and swollen at the base of your throat, and you make a little noise of itchy suffering until he scrapes them with his teeth, gently, easing it.

He unbuttons your shirt now, lets it fall open so he can see your breasts in a plain black bra. You stay still, knowing he likes to look at you, anticipating how you know it will feel to have his bare skin on yours, how warm he is, how sweetly dirty as he unclasps your bra with a smile, breathing close to your nipples to make them hard. You let him strip off the rest of your clothes, the sounds of a singing lavender dragon wafting through the vent from upstairs. You still won’t let yourself think of what it would be like to stay here, you and Claire and Jake and the achy dog, even as he pushes inside of you, still smiling, making you smile, too, and arch your back and pull him in closer. You can’t let yourself think of it, because you’re too busy smiling, too busy falling.

After, he walks you back to the living room, knowing it’s close to 8:00 and trick-or-treat will be over soon.

Turn to #9.
You lean your forehead onto Jake’s shoulder, let him stroke your hair for a moment, your arms around his body. He clears his throat to speak, but before he can, you pull away and tell him you’ll have to go now.

“Claire?” you call up the stairs, getting your jackets from the hook on the back of the closet door, fumbling with the knob, fumbling as you try and fail to get your arm into a sleeve that’s turned inside out. You’re stopping. You’re stopping because you’re feeling, because you see him watching you and you want him. But you can’t have him, not really. “It’s time to do some more trick-or-treating!”

She comes down the stairs, smelling of chocolate and caramel, the sugar almost visible in her veins. She drags the plastic bucket down the steps behind her, letting it clunk, clunk, clunk. You’re glad she’s complacent, that tonight she’s not begging to stay for one more DVD. Casey, the lab, sits at the top of the stairs, his arthritic joints probably aching but with eyes that show how much he loves this little girl he watches walk away from him, this little girl that keeps your secret in return for a dog’s lick to her cheek and never-ending boxes of apple juice. You help her put her jacket, gloves and wings back on, trying not to look at Jake. If you let yourself look him in the eye, you might say something you can’t take back, and so you don’t look. You sit on your words like a nail-biter sits on her hands. You whisper a goodbye and a see-you-later to each other, and he tells Claire to enjoy all of that candy. He says it with a smile, as always. He flips on the outside light and you walk to the street. By the time you get there, it’s been shut off again.

If you’d like to let Claire choose the way, go to #10
If you’d like to walk down go back to Birch Street, turn to #12.

Claire pulls you by the hand along Elderwood Court, away from the blue house on the corner, and back onto Birch.

“Didn’t you already visit those houses?” you ask, sneaking a piece of candy out of your jacket pocket and into your mouth. There’s another beige house, one you remember as having a black Suburban, or maybe it’s a white Lexus. The garage door is shut, so you can’t be sure. The jack-o-lantern out front grins and sneers, just like they all do. You shine your flashlight out onto the street. Another ninja appears out of the dark and hurries past, zig-zagging between parked cars and around shrubbery.

“Ben?” Claire shouts after the boy, and he stops, turns, and sprints back.

“Hey Claire!” he says, pushing his black mask up to his forehead like a headband. “You go to Jake’s house?”

You feel the candy slip into your throat and turn away from the kids to cough. You hear Ben mention that the light at the blue house was turned off but that there was a bowl of candy left outside, so he and his pal Simon took it all and ran. “We could hear people inside,” he continued, “But they acted like no one was home. Want some?” Ben takes a handful of chocolates out of his pillowcase and pours them into Claire’s bucket.
“That’s my Mommy’s favorite kind,” she exclaims, “but she says I’m not allowed to share it with our dog.”

“When did you get a dog? Can I come see it?” Ben asks, “What kind is it?”

“He’s a lab. Ben, what’s a ninja, anyway?”

“Ninjas are so cool!” Ben answers, striking a pose that makes him look like a dying mantis. “They do everything in secret, silently, and you never know when they’re going to strike! And they always wear masks so you never know who they are!”

The candy finally slides down.

“Ben,” you sputter, “Maybe you’d better get home before your mom worries.”

Two teen girls in stilettos and short skirts totter down the street toward you, laughing. One weaves while she walks, trying to type on the tiny keyboard of her phone while holding a shopping bag heavy with candy.

“That guy really looked like he was dead, didn’t he?” one asks the girl texting.

“It was creepy,” she agrees, “his skin even felt all clammy when I poked him in the arm.”

“She said ‘poke’,?” Ben giggles, pulling his mask back down. The girls stand in the middle of the street, using the phone to take a picture of themselves flashing what they think are gang signs.

“Look at this,” one says, showing the screen to her friend. “His eyes are rolled up in his head, and that’s got to be a fake arm smashed against that tree. It’s just like that guy that died there, remember? Just younger.”

“Tiffany, he was faking it, right, just to try and scare us?”

“Well, yeah,” she says, unwrapping a Blow Pop from her candy stash and popping it into her mouth. It gives you the willies. You look over the fence and through the trees toward your house, knowing they’ve got to be talking about your husband. You don’t know if you should be worried, or if you even are. Maybe it’s time to go home.

If you’re feeling suspicious, go to #11.
If you’re not worried at all, turn to #12.

#11

“Ben,” you say, “Your parents are at home, right?”

“Yes,” he answers, “Why?”

“Could you take Claire home with you for just a moment, and then I’ll send her dad over to get her? Would you do that for me?”

“I guess so…okay.”

“Claire? Go back to Ben’s house for a little bit, okay? He’ll take good care of you, and Poppa will come and get you. I need to take care of something and it wouldn’t be nearly as much fun as going to Ben’s would be. Maybe you two could dump out your candy and trade so you both have your favorites?”

Sweet Claire, always so agreeable. You’re realizing that six-year-olds are much easier to deal with than you thought, and you’re thankful for it. Your husband better not be in your front yard, pretending to be a dead old man. When you get there, you think, he’d better be sitting on the couch inside watching Charlie Brown and not on that lawn mower, the same one the old man
had died on and had been left in the shed since the police didn’t need it for a natural death case, even if it did become the stuff of neighborhood legend. What if Claire saw her father behaving like that, acting like he was dead? What kind of father would take that risk?

Ben leads Claire toward his house, battling invisible foes along the way through a series of awkward, earnest roundhouse kicks that threaten to knock him down.

“I’ll protect you, Princess Claire!” he shouts, the direct opposite of stealth.

You go the other direction, and pass at least three more beige houses. You stare at the moon while you walk, trying to get your bearings. When you approach your house there’s a fire truck parked out front, the one that slowly rolls through the neighborhood every Halloween night, offering to check candy for safety and passing out coloring sheets with Dalmatians on them. You walk faster, then break into a run.

There are blue-uniformed EMT’s wheeling a stretcher through your yard to the ash tree. Your husband is there, wearing only an undershirt and pants, his chest hair fuzzing out from the v-neck, and old suspender drooping off his arm. His other arm is wedged between the ash tree and the old riding mower, his leg, too. His face is dead white and his lips are slack.

“What the hell are you doing?” you shout, louder than you intend.

“Ma’am,” an EMT young enough that he could be your son starts.

“I’m so sorry,” you say. “My husband likes to play jokes on Halloween. Actually, he likes to play jokes a lot, not just on Halloween. His brother puts him up to it, and he’s such a loser that he listens, and never thinks about whether his daughter might see him, pretending to be the old man who used to live here, the one who died out on his mower and sat there in the heat and then in the rain for over a day until these pathetic people we call ‘neighbors’ stopped looking at their own belly buttons long enough to realize something was wrong!”

An older EMT is leaning against your husband while another is slowly pushing the riding mower away.

“Jesus Christ,” you holler at your slack husband, “Cut it out! Stop pretending! You’re not really trapped by the mower!”

The EMT’s keep working, and you see your husband’s eyes are still shut, and his arms, both free now, flop pathetically against the man holding him up. Your throat feels tight, and you wonder if the candy from earlier is somehow stuck, maybe it never quite made it down. You wonder if your husband isn’t faking it. You dig at the mosquito bites on your neck. You look at his chest and don’t see any movement. You wonder if your husband is dead, if he’s been dead all night, sitting there on that mower, with his limbs stuck between it and the tree, if teenagers were sitting on his lap and taking pictures of themselves with their cell phones. You wonder who called the EMT’s over, and swing your eyes to the other houses, their doors shut now. You wonder how you’ll tell his brother that he died playing the joke they’d planned together. You wonder what you’ll tell Claire, whether you could, or should, stay here without him, how could you live here without him? But what choice would you have? You look at him, your thoughts coming faster than you can make sense of.

“Loser,” you say, and then realize that the EMT’s are flexing his arm and leg, and now he’s sitting up, his eyes open.

“Hi honey,” he says.

“He’s all right,” the young EMT tells you from over his shoulder. “He just cut off his circulation for too long and passed out.”

“It’s a good thing one of your neighbors flagged us down,” the other says.
You take a deep breath, then another. Once you’re assured again that he’s fine, you walk back to Ben’s house to collect Claire.

To find your way back home again, turn to #12.

#12

The streets of your neighborhood are slowly quieting down. The last few parents are shuffling their chilled, tired children home and switching off porch lights. The candles in the jack-o-lanterns are being snuffed out and spooky sound CD’s are being put back into their jewel cases for next year. Claire’s got her bucket of candy and skips next to you, shaking her wings and admiring her fairy-dusted gloves in the light of the moon, which hangs high in the sky, bright and white. You point up to it and ask, “Can you see the man in the moon? Is he winking at you?”

“He’s smiling!” she says, and reaches up as if she could take the moon into her arms if only they were long enough. “Mommy, are we almost home?”

You tell her, “Yes, we are,” and carry her bucket for her so she won’t feel too tired. Your husband is in the yard when you return, peeling a piece of bark away from the ash tree. He’s wearing a thick flannel jacket, and you see suspenders hanging in loops from the back of his pants.

“Hey,” he greets you, then comes closer to you, threads his fingers into your hair and runs his thumb, tenderly, across your cheekbone. His brow furrows as he looks from your face to your neck, and he moves the collar of your shirt away from your skin.

“What’s this all over your collar?” he asks. “Are you bleeding?”

“I must have scratched open my mosquito bites,” you say, and smile, but his attention is back on the tree.

“Shine your flashlight over here, would you?” he asks, so you do. He runs his fingers across the exposed wood, feeling for the meandering S-shaped trails they chew into it. He presses his hands to the trunk and pushes.

“We sure have nice neighbors, don’t we?” he asks you, and when you tell him yes, he takes Claire’s other hand and you walk toward your front door together. You choose that moment to count, “One, two, three…up!” and with that she’s up in the air, her wings catching the breeze, the moon casting your shadows onto the cement, fusing them into a winged, three-headed thing that would scare you if you saw it in the light.
Sewn Up

The transplant was scheduled for a Friday morning.
“I….in forty-eight hours?” she asked when they called to tell her they had the perfect donor. A woman her height. A well-respected business owner twenty years her junior.
“How did she die?” Margene asked, wondering if there was some law against giving the answer.
“A head injury, but the skeleton is fully intact. Her bones are very healthy. You mustn’t eat for twenty-four hours before the surgery,” the nurse answered.
“I understand,” she replied. She was frightened and excited all at once; scared of the pain, scared it could go wrong, in awe of what or who she could become if it were a success. She could die on the table, face-down and alone but for nurses and a doctor or two. If she lived she would have a scar, a large one, though it would be easier to cover than her sister’s. Olivia wore her own transplant scar proudly, collar usually unbuttoned to let it show. The edges of that scar looked exactly like the petals of wild roses, hearts gathered up and sewn together.
Margene’s scar would be cleaner, straighter, like a zipper running from just above her buttocks all the way to the base of her skull. She imagined the way a man’s fingertips could run its length, how straight and tall she would become.
“You understand that this is a new procedure,” the woman on the other end was saying, “You understand the risks.”
Margene tugged at the phone cord, sticking her fingers into the curled plastic swirls, pictured them as the perfectly aligned vertebrae she’d have in just a few days time. The idea of a new spine, strong and sure, had her entranced.
“Yes, I understand,” she answered. “Will you fax the paperwork to me today?” The woman said she would, told her to return the signed documents in person when she arrived on Friday, reminded her again that she’d need a long recovery. A new and improved backbone would take getting used to.
Two days later she waited in a hospital room. Margene squeezed her eyes tight to keep the tears back, frightened but determined. She’d just turned fifty; if she didn’t do this now when would she? She knew she must be pale; she hadn’t eaten in over a day. She felt too skinny, the bones of her spine poking into her flesh, reminding her of the poor fit. She shifted positions, but it caused a pain in her belly. She remembered being six years old, of having to eat everything her mother and father told her she must eat or risk never leaving the table. She hated lima beans. Rice with purple raisins stirred in. Half glasses of plain milk.
“Can’t I have a whole glass?” she’d asked, wishing for Ovaltine stirred in with a bendy straw.
“No,” she was told, “You’re too little and won’t finish it.”
Margene shifted again, and this time her spine pressed too close to her lungs. She sucked in her breath, remembered standing at the top of a hill near the house she grew up in, arms outstretched. She’d spun around and around, singing at the top of her lungs to the sky, wishing for snow-capped mountains and outfits made from green damask curtains, a handsome man with a demanding whistle. She had wanted to be a singer.
She sat with the other sixth-grade girls on folding chairs in the school gym, singling scales and picturing herself atop a horse-drawn carriage with a gaggle of children.
“Margene,” the chorus teacher called, “You’re off key again!” She never went back to chorus; took a study hall after that in which she’d nap each day, her open mouth leaving a fog on
She shifted again. The spine pressed near her heart, and she was reminded of the man who’d left her. In the beginning she’d been so happy; he made the butterflies swoop in her stomach. It had pleased her that he didn’t mind her age; he made her feel pink and toasty, until he finally came clean.

“Something’s missing,” he said. “I can’t quite put my finger on it...”

It was her spine that was missing. She always put his needs before her own, afraid to tell him when she was feeling left out or jealous. She’d never raised her voice at him, only did what she could to treat him with kindness and respect, understanding, just as she wished someone would treat her.

Lying on her belly in the hospital bed, she thought of him, wished he was there next to her, that she could go back to those moments when love was true, when there wasn’t another woman in the way.

They wheeled her into the operating room; it was chilly and made almost entirely of ceramic tiles and stainless steel. It smelted of antiseptic that grew more intense as a nurse in plain blue scrubs opened the back of her gown and sponged a frigid liquid onto the exposed skin of her back. She was asked to roll into the fetal position, her arms wrapped around her knees.

“The anesthetic will take affect soon, Margene,” the anesthesiologist murmured as he inserted a tiny catheter along her old spine. She felt the tingle of the chemicals entering her bloodstream, the taste of them flooding her tongue.

“Why can I taste it?” she asked, her face pressed down into a doughnut-shaped cushion. The flavor was disgusting; bitter and metallic. She was on her belly, so the nurse squatted down to peer at her face, which was turning pink from the pressure.

“That happens sometimes with this particular dosage; just let me know if it gets any worse. You’ll be awake for the whole procedure, but you won’t feel a thing. If the sounds bother you, you can signal me and I’ll give you headphones and music to listen to.”

“Okay,” Margene said, her voice small. Her back was beginning to feel strange. The combination of cold antiseptic wash, the warm lights hanging over the operating table, and the pins and needles of numbness made her shiver.

“Rabbit across your grave,” someone joked, and Margene forced a laugh because they were all watching her.

Her surgeon began by touching her back. He tapped gently with his fingertips, first on the knob of her tailbone, next moving upward to the small of her back, checking to see what she could feel and what she could not. He touched each freckle along the way, counted each vertebra that built her original backbone. It had always given her so much trouble. From the time she was small, it hadn’t worked properly. She’d grown up timid, a people-pleaser, and it had sometimes served her well, but more often than not left her feeling unwanted, needs unmet. Both big and little things frightened her; driving on the highway was impossible, being left by a lover catastrophic. It left her feeling weak, pathetic when she couldn’t stand up for herself. Of course, that’s what had brought her to this place, to this extreme act of spinal transplant in a new medical office she’d found in the yellow pages.

She came alone in a taxi-cab, something unusual in Five Oaks. If she’d scheduled the cab to come after seven o’clock in the morning, her neighbors would have been out walking their dogs or watering the grass. They would have spotted the bright yellow and checked car in her driveway and talked over their fences about it. Women her age usually went to clinics for face lifts and Botox; they wouldn’t understand this kind of procedure. She had the driver come
before sunrise, asking that he not beep the horn. No one could know what she was doing except the clinic staff in case the operation wasn’t successful and she had to come back home just as broken as before.

“I’m going to cut now, Margene,” the surgeon stated, his voice calm and low, relaxing. She didn’t feel the scalpel at all, just heard the cold liquid sound of her skin coming open like lips after a kiss.

“Doing all right?” a nurse asked from behind a paper mask.

“Yes,” Margene answered, eyes shut tight, teeth clenched. She wanted so badly to remain calm.

“You’re doing fine. I’m going to take the old one out now,” the doctor told her. Another nurse wheeled a large metal table closer to them. It was covered in a wide, white terrycloth towel, and the edges hung over near Margene’s face. Her body rocked; she felt a thud. She heard a crack and suddenly she felt flat, like a balloon inside her had been popped.

“Hurry now!” her doctor urged, and she heard the thump of her old spine as it was laid to rest on top of the toweled table. She felt something new nudge her, then slide into the empty cavity of her torso, felt it push past a ridge of muscle.

“Oh!” she gasped, eyes wide.

She felt the jiggle of her flesh as the new bones were fit deep inside of her, as her skin was stretched and molded back into what constituted her body. The sounds were those of a carpenter’s shop; hammering and drilling, metal against bone instead of wood as all of her parts and pieces were reassembled and connected to be better than before. She twitched the fingers of her left hand, then her right, and was told to stop.

“Not yet, Margene.”

She felt the warmth of the surgeon’s body as he leaned above her, bent over in his work, peering closely at her insides. She became aware of his hand resting on the back of her bare thigh, the weight of it, the intimacy. She purposely flexed her muscle, hoping it would cause him to move.

“Almost there,” her surgeon stated, distracted. She felt the pressure of his other hand pressing onto the new spine; somehow his touch could be felt in her teeth, just like when she’d bang her elbow on the shower door and feel a hollow pain deep in her molars.

“How are you holding up?” the nurse checked again, bending over so that she was looking at Margene sideways. The nurse’s cheeks were plump, the flesh hanging down from gravity’s pull.

“His hand is on my ass,” she complained, words half smothered from the pillowed face rest.

“Doctor, it’s working.” The nurse straightened up, and Margene watched as she wheeled a different tray toward the operating table, this one covered in a towel like the first, but lined with packets of black thread and suture needles. They were nothing like the needles Margene used every day in her tailoring; these were curved like silver fish hooks, some in a compound curve, others like the letter “J”.

She wondered how the transplant could change her business. She’d been a seamstress since she was in high school, repairing her teacher’s hems and attaching replacement buttons on their old-fashioned tweed jackets. She always hoped that they would thank her through better grades or friendlier recommendation letters when she was ready to apply to college, but they didn’t. The older she got the better she became at her work, taking care of new mothers in the neighborhood when they found they couldn’t zip the backs of their pre-pregnancy dresses.
many times had they stiffed her overtime fees, how many times had she driven all the way across town to let out a prom dress or repair a set of ripped trousers during a businessman’s lunch hour while his secretary watched? She never talked about one customer to another, never complained when she was snapped at for accidentally pricking a teen beauty pageant contestant or telling a bride-to-be that the dress would have to be let out.

The nurse handed the surgeon the suturing needle. Thread tickled her leg as it brushed past. His hand was still there.

“Give it to me,” Margene commanded, lifting her head up from the table.
“What?” he asked.
“Give me the needle, and take your hands off of my body.”

“Now Margene…”

“Don’t you ‘now Margene’ me, Doctor Jones. You’ve been hovering so closely I could smell your breath. Your hand has been on my ass for the last twenty minutes, and I saw the way the nurse had to try five times before she could thread the needle. Give it here.” She curled her fingers over and again to signal he was to place the threaded needle in her palm.

“I know what I’m doing,” she said. She felt him staring at her. “I’ve been sewing since you were in high school.”

“A cougar,” he said.
She huffed, wanting to send him to his room.

“Now!”
The needle was placed in her hand.

“Prop me up.”

A nurse slid a pillow under her head so that she could look to her side instead of straight at the floor. She craned her neck, then asked for a mirror to be placed so that she could get a better look.

She saw it then. The spine. It was fully exposed, creamy white, knobby, perfect. She couldn’t see all seven cervical vertebrae, but she could see each thoracic, twelve total, five lumbar, and at the end, the sacrum and if she squinted, the little pointed coccyx. Surrounding it was her own pink flesh, and she hoped that they’d given her the right size. She had trusted them that morning, felt secure enough when they measured and calculated.

Margene told the nurse to reposition the overhead light so that she could see via the mirror. She began low, using a perfect whipstitch to bring both sides of her split flesh together, covering the new spine. She breathed slowly, deeply as she sewed, feeling each pull of thread, the tug and the smooth line of it as she raised her hand to tighten the stitch. It reminded her of when her younger sister gave birth; Anne had told her that her anesthesia wore off just after the baby had slipped out, so that she felt every episiotomy stitch. Anne had clung to a nurse and almost broken her hands to get through the pain. Margene was thankful her own skin was still numb; she wasn’t ready to test her new spine to that extent.

The needle slipped in easily with each stitch. She could only feel its chill as it slid close to her backbone, the tightening of her skin as it was pulled together, those kissing lips closing. Instead of a zipper along her back, she’d have a seam: strong, tough.

She got to the middle of her back and found she couldn’t reach no matter how she twisted and repositioned. It dawned on her that asking for assistance wasn’t a sign of weakness.

“I need your help for a few minutes,” she requested, “Please.”
She felt the nurse take the needle from her fingertips and watched via the mirror as she handed it to the surgeon. He didn’t speak, just continued Margene’s whipstitch, his arm making
large swoops as he brought the needle high in the air to pull the length of thread through, and then swooping down again for the next loop. Margene also saw that his unencumbered hand was resting on her back this time, keeping the flesh lined up, appropriate to the task at hand.

When he reached her lower shoulders, she found that she was able to twist her arms into a new position and finish the job on her own. She laid down the first loop of knot, and followed that with a second loop in the opposite direction, working backwards because she was watching her reflection in the mirror. She finished with a perfect square knot, and then allowed the nurse to clip the ends with sterile scissors. She was proud of her work, how perfectly spaced the stitches were. The scar might not be ugly after all. They cleaned and bandaged her, then transferred her to a rolling table, then moved her again into a hospital bed in a private room down a long hallway. A new nurse covered her in a thin blue blanket, dimmed the lights, and pulled a large curtain shut around her bed.

As the anesthesia wore off, the pain began. Margene tried to sleep through it, but the pain of the bones mending made it difficult.

“You have to endure the pain of new growth,” she was told by a counselor that visited the next morning. “The transplant won’t be as effective otherwise.”

“I see,” Margene sighed, wincing and trying to hold as still as possible.

She knew that soon, the pain would diminish to an ache; the ache would turn into a deep itch that she’d long to scratch but would resist. She would heal, the stitches would be removed. Her new spine would dictate that she do what was right and good for her, only her, from now on.
The first time Mary flew she had her hand down her pants. She was thinking about the two older boys down the street; in her head they wanted her and only her, and were willing to share. It was pleasure and discomfort all at once, like long strips of paper-thin skin being peeled from a sunburn. Bringing herself as far as she could go, she opened her eyes and found herself nose to ceiling, the bed no longer beneath her body.

That summer one of the boys pressed her up against a catalpa full of cicadas. When his lips found hers, her toes tingled. She banged her foot on the tree trunk.

“Stop squirming,” Garrett said, putting his hands on her shoulders. He tasted like Orange Crush; she smelled like Coppertone. It felt as if ladybugs were tiptoeing up her thighs.

If she was lighter in his arms Garrett didn’t notice. When the street lights came on, he muttered, “Later, Mary!” and she thumped back down, her hair catching in the bark. She watched him coast down the road, standing on his bike’s pedals and leaning over the handles. As the tingle faded, she knew it was true: she could fly.

Through experiment she found it wasn’t touch alone that did it. Even candy became a game; the crackle of rice crispies, the rich chocolate, the crinkling silver wrapper—how many bites would it take?

She felt sure her mother could do the same, and her father must have known. Before Mary could play dress-up in the clothes she’d left behind, he threw them away. He dumped her spices down the disposal, poured out her perfumes, hung curtains over the picture window. In confusion, five-year-old Mary climbed into his lap and asked where her mother went. Her hair, the same as her mother’s, tickled his face. He pulled back, then pushed her aside, rushed into the bathroom, and threw a bottle of her mother’s shampoo into the trash.

“It was her time, Mary, that’s all.”

He ran a tub for her, told her she’d have to bathe herself now that her mother was gone. The soap was slippery; she kept dropping it and had to pat around the tub’s floor, finally finding it between her knees.

“Don’t touch there,” he whispered. She wasn’t sure where he meant.

By ninth grade Mary knew what could make her rise; if the sun warmed her skin, or her favorite teacher read aloud, she wrapped her feet around the legs of her desk. She let her hair cover her flushed cheeks, and if her bottom rose, she feigned just getting comfortable.

That spring Garrett started coming to Mary’s house to study. She let him lie on top of her when they kissed. But one day Garrett asked to bring Tim along, the other boy from her fantasies. She baked cookies that filled the house with cinnamon and nutmeg. She buried her head in Tim’s neck, lips parted to take in the scent of grass on his clothes, the taste of sweet tea on Garrett’s tongue.

Up close, she saw the ceiling was cracked. Her body was electric; her dress was on the floor. The boys, still on the couch, stared up at her with wide, frightened eyes. Her father’s keys rattled in the front door.

Tim fumbled with his jeans while Garrett crammed his feet into the wrong sneakers.

“I think she’s possessed or something!”

Her father slammed the door behind them; Mary fell to the floor.

Her door was removed, her stash of chocolate, too. There would be no more pleasure for Mary, no more flying.

“You can’t do that,” he said.
“Dad,” she backtracked, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to!” But he knew she did, and told her so.

The next morning she came out of the house with a daisy tucked behind her ear. Her father snatched it away, his fingers dry against her cheek. He tossed the flower to the ground. When she got to school, the girls looked at her like they smelled something musty and sour; Mary wondered what the boys had told them. During class she focused hard on her textbooks.

That night she sneaked out to lie in the tall grass of her backyard. She sucked in a long breath, tasting the green, living things and coming rain. The wind brought the charged scent of lightning. Something big floated toward her, landing on her sweater. A luna moth. She raised her hand slowly, and it tiptoed onto her fingers. She remembered doing the same thing when she was small, before her mother left. Attracted by her bright clothing, butterflies would land and unfurl their proboscises to taste the salt on her skin. They’d fly away to pair in wild corkscrews before she could touch their powdery wings. Her mother would wrap her up tight, her arms a cocoon.

When the Luna opened and closed its wings, Mary felt the air caress her face. Warmth traveled up the back of her thighs, her eyes went soft. She realized the fence was much lower than it should be.

She heard her father slide open the screen door.

Mary hovered, the breeze lifting her hair. She took in every sensation: the heavy scent of peonies, thunder she felt behind her ribs.

“What the hell are you doing?” he demanded, grabbing for her leg. She bent her knees so he couldn’t reach. She floated higher; it reminded her of kissing beneath the catalpa.

“Mary!” His voice cracked. He looked tattered and torn. She shrugged off her sweater. She kicked off her shoes, too, and they landed a few feet from him.

“Is this what my mother did? Before she left?”

Mary slipped out of her jeans, letting the night air surround her. As she reached the tips of the tallest trees, her father remained grounded. He stared up at the spitting sky, maybe seeking his wife among the rolling clouds, she thought, maybe fighting the instinct to join them.
Go-Give

It had been one thousand two hundred and nine days since Poppy had made love to a man. For over three years she’d been praying that the right one for her, one that would be everything she dreamed of—supportive of her goals, highly intelligent, dark eyed, young, handsome—would find her. He wouldn’t smoke, he wouldn’t live on frozen pizza, and he’d have clean, trimmed fingernails. He’d look good in a suit so that she could show him off at her monthly business breakfasts at the Holiday Inn. He would treat her with kindness and respect, opening the door for her and standing when she stood at dinner. He wouldn’t cheat or lie to her. He’d enjoy self-help books and motivational speakers. In short, he’d be perfect, unlike any man alive.

The recruiting breakfasts were held every first Saturday morning of the month, and Poppy knew to dress just so. Run-free pantyhose in “black mist,” a black pencil skirt that stopped at the knee (no higher, no lower), a pressed white blouse and her prized red blazer, which signaled her star recruiter status. Just like her sales director’s, her hair was short to gain and keep respect. She even went to the same stylist, and that stylist’s chair was in the same salon that her national sales director frequented. Like both women, Poppy kept her fingernails polished to a glossy sheen to best show off the giant heart-cut pink ice ring she’d won last month. The stones weren’t real, but under the lights in her clients’ living rooms, they shined. She knew to fake it till she made it.

“I’m Poppy Montgomery from Columbus Ohio and I’m on target for my brand new car!” she quipped into the microphone at the front of the banquet room. She was tired of introducing herself in front of two hundred or more women and men, all of them gushingly married and walking arm in arm to the buffet to get their Potatoes O’Brien and scrambled eggs. She hated never being able to introduce herself as a missus, never finding a brilliant smile in the audience meant just for her, or a hand to hold under the table when she sat back down next to her clients.

She jogged down the center aisle in line with her fellow Red Jackets, clapping her hands to the electronic beat of the pep rally-style music. She smiled big at the others as she slipped into her seat and took a sip of the coffee a server had just poured. Poppy was the only single woman at her table, and at any of the other tables that she could see.

“Poppy,” Brittany, her director’s director, started. “Tad and I have just the man for you to meet.”

“Oh?” she answered. This happened every month. Tad slipped her a business card. She made sure to keep her face positive while she skimmed the raised print, though seeing that the man was yet another financial consultant was disappointing. Each time one of the director’s husbands (almost all consultants from the same investment firm) set her up on a blind date, his coworker was more interested in managing her money than winning her heart. She didn’t know how it seemed to work so well for all of the others.

“You’re still single?” Poppy’s guest was all ears. They’d met at the bulk grocery store just the week before. Poppy had spent almost an hour in the dairy aisle, keeping her eyes peeled for women with potential. When she saw this one, a tired but potentially stunning young woman, she followed her to the deli counter. She’d touched her arm gently, radiating safety and warmth.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy, but I’m in training and really need a model for my company’s new product line. You’re so fierce, and I think you’d be perfect. Can I count on your help?” The young woman’s shoulders straightened, and her eyes told Poppy she hadn’t been
complimented in a long time. She showed up at the Tuesday training meeting, making a splendid model, and agreed to come to the breakfast in exchange for a gift bag of product and the promise of prize drawings galore.

“I haven’t found the love of my life yet, no,” Poppy answered, trying not to stare at the other consultants and directors around the table, their well-moisturized fingers entwined in their spouses’.

“I tried an online dating service, but it told me I’d find e-chemistry with only one man out of every eight hundred and twenty-nine. One. In eight hundred and twenty nine.”

Brittany gasped, audibly, from behind her compact mirror and tube of lipstick. “That’s a lot of warm chatting, Poppy! But I believe in you. Stay positive!”

“Even if you met one every single day, it could be what, almost three more years until that ‘one’ showed up?” Her guest watched as Poppy stirred Sweet ‘n’ Low into a second cup of coffee.

“Sales is a numbers game; it always takes so many no’s to reach a yes.” Tad was ever the cheerleader. Brittany crinkled her nose at him. He returned the gesture.

But by then Poppy’d be twenty eight. She couldn’t wait that long.

The music over the speakers changed, and Brittany and the other top directors rose from their seats and lined up at the front of the room. Each woman held the other’s hand and bowed her coiffed head. The reigning Miss Go-Give, named so for her selflessly unwavering displays of caring and sharing, led the room in prayer.

“And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, Oh that Thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that Thine hand might be with me, and that Thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested.” Miss Go-Give gave a brilliant smile to the crowd, and an even brighter one when she found her husband in the audience. He raised both fists, giving her two thumbs up.

“What you think about, you bring about!” her sales director said into the microphone that was passed from hand to hand.

“Hear my heart, ladies, you’ve got to show up to go up!” another director quipped.

“Find a way or make a way!”

“If it is to be it’s up to me!”

* 

“I’ll trade you five deluxe skin care sets,” Poppy told her newest hostess, “and I’ll add the silver bag to go with it. The products will last over a year, and are specially formulated to adjust as your skin’s needs change with the seasons. It’s a good trade, wouldn’t you agree?” She was sitting on the floor at the woman’s feet, a position meant to make the client feel more in control of the buying situation.

This one she’d met using the criss-cross directory for her own neighborhood, cold calling all of the women that were listed as her neighbors until one said yes to a skin care class. Erzulie was new in town, so Poppy suggested she invite some of her coworkers or new neighbors.

Before the guests arrived she told Poppy about her hometown west of the city. She was born, she said, the day a tornado ripped through. It started as two, she said, and those two joined together to form one large funnel cloud. It was a spring of storms; one hundred and forty eight had touched down across the country, but that one was the worst, killing thirty-two people. It flattened the buildings and twisted the young trees into corkscrews that still stood, their roots
gripping the soil. She’d always felt an affinity for those trees, she claimed; they gave her power. While Poppy set up the pink mirror trays and squirted dollops of cleanser and toner into their divots, her hostess spoke of her ex-husband, a big burly man she’d moved to get away from.

“He wouldn’t leave me alone,” she said, and Poppy nodded in sympathy. “He kept telling me his doctor seen a spot on his brain and he wanted me to fix it.”

“You’re a doctor?” Poppy asked, wondering how to best market to someone like that. “No, not exactly,” she answered, “But my grandma taught me all about healing and such. I don’t want to heal him, though; he don’t deserve a second chance.” She lifted a section of her hair to show Poppy a scar on her neck. The skin was paler there, like it hadn’t been around long enough to develop the melanin. She’d recommend Bronze 500 for that section, to be blended with Beige 400 so it wasn’t so noticeable.

They spoke of Erzulie’s grandmother, the trips they took through the fields and woods for medicines, the men and women that came to her door for help.

Poppy confided that she just couldn’t find a man good enough, she wondered if she could...

“Maybe we can work something out,” she was told.

The class itself went beautifully; only two of Erzulie’s guests heckled, one claiming that she’d been researching the company’s stance on animal testing. She refused to accept Poppy’s assertions that the sparkle in the lipstick came from minerals, not fish scales. Poppy bit her tongue to keep from asking where the woman had found her beautiful alligator loafers, her Italian leather purse. The second kept saying that the makeup felt like a mask, like she was dressed up for Halloween. Poppy told her she looked gorgeous and rested, like she wasn’t nearly old enough to have a little girl in elementary school. At first they’d been afraid to try the samples she placed in the mirrored trays on the table, telling her they couldn’t be as pretty as her. She showed them how to use the green highlighter to cover reddened pimples and the tiny lip pencil samplers to form a powerful “M” at the top of their lips. When she was done, each woman’s skin was flawless and the latest perfume samples covered the scent of their days spent working in hospices, funeral homes and their own kitchens. She spent extra time on her hostess, showing her how to hide her scar, how to roll the nail polish bottles in her hands instead of shaking so that there wouldn’t be air bubbles, how to bring out her hazel eyes and make them look twice as big.

While the guests snacked on artichoke dip and something called Puppy Chow, Poppy took Erzulie to the living room for privacy. The five complete skin care sets waited on the coffee table, their pink and white boxes lined up to greet her, charm her. Poppy unzipped her enormous rolling inventory bag for extra effect, the stacks upon stacks of foundations, lipsticks and perfumes inside just begging to be popped into tissue-lined paper sacks along with her business cards and extra samples. The client’s eyes widened, her newly-applied eye shadow making them look sultry and model-perfect.

“Can I have everything tonight, and deliver him to you tomorrow? I can’t get him till after midnight. Just tell me where you live at.”

Poppy moved to the couch, leaned in, looked her straight in the eyes and touched her wrist. “Erzulie, I trust you. You can take everything home tonight. Just don’t talk to your friends about this after I leave, okay?”

“I won’t, and call me Zulie, all right?”

She marked the little box on the pink sales slip “cash payment”. If this worked, she’d slip Zulie as many skin care kits as she could safely write off her taxes, and happily so.
He was brought to her door just past midnight the following day. Poppy had fallen asleep on the couch waiting, two cats at her feet, her face perfect. She knew her bread and butter; never let yourself be seen by anyone without your face on and a smile, especially not your new client and the boyfriend she was bringing you.

“He’s a little stiff yet,” Zulie mentioned, leading the man into Poppy’s kitchen with his right arm slung over her shoulder and his head lolling. His tie was loose, but only a little, easy to fix. His curly hair, long but not too long, hung in his eyes, covering his face in shadow. He was wearing a perfectly-fitted suit, a pink carnation in his lapel. She smiled, immediately reminded of being officially recruited into her company, her young, sharp-dressed sales director handing her a single flower and a room of equally sharp-dressed young women chirping in unison that they were all building a “pink car-nation!”

“It’s going to take awhile; he might be sleepy for a few days, and he’ll need to eat. He’ll need to eat a lot. Meat, mostly.”

Poppy pulled a chair out from under the kitchen table and turned it around. Her client heaved the man into the seat, and then slid his feet under so that he was sitting properly. Zulie’s hair was coming down; strands sticking out at all angles from the effort of leading him inside, but her skin looked perfect, the free product already working its magic just as well as her magic on this man clearly had.

“He looks nice,” Poppy whispered, as if speaking with normal volume would somehow startle him. Looking at him thrilled her.

“Yeah, he’s nice,” Zulie answered, wiping the palms of her hands on the front of her pants, then slipping an elastic band from her hair. “His family had good things to say about him, at least the few that came. I think he was an only child,” she said through the band now in between her teeth. “And he was a PhD candidate. A sharp mind, just like you said you wanted.” She held her black hair in a ponytail with her hands and then used the band to fix it back in place.

“Well,” she said, “it was good doing business with you, Poppy Montgomery from Columbus Ohio. I really hope he’s everything you wished for.” She moved to let herself out the back door.

“Wait,” Poppy called, “is there anything else I should know? What else does he need?” She looked at him and wrapped her robe tight across her chest. One of the cats had come into the kitchen, its tail fur standing on end, curious enough to sniff the man’s shoe. The man sat there, dark eyes staring at the edge of the countertop, a little bit slumped. “What do I do to make him right?”

But the woman had gone, leaving the door open behind her. Poppy shut it softly and flipped the latch to lock it, turning to look at him. He had given up staring at the countertop, and was now looking at the cat. She heard his stomach growl.

“Don’t even think about it,” she said, herding the cat into the living room with her foot and sliding the door shut. Her new boyfriend blinked, his reflexes as slow as sap. His hands remained on his lap, but he lifted his chin toward the refrigerator.

“Would you like something to eat? What is your name, anyway? She didn’t tell me your name…”

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out except for a little groan to accompany another growl of his stomach.

Poppy opened the fridge, the light glowing against her pink terrycloth robe, a prize earned by placing a sapphire-level inventory order. She had blueberry yogurt, a package of
toasted flax seeds, a half-full gallon of milk, and a package of spicy Cajun sausage. She held out each item in turn, waving it a little to catch his attention, hoping that one would pique his interest. The yogurt didn’t get a reaction at all; the flax just brought a look of perplexed confusion.

“Omega acids are good for your heart,” she offered, then remembered that his might have been removed during his autopsy. She realized she wasn’t sure if he’d had an autopsy, which led her to the realization that she wasn’t sure how he’d died, let alone exactly how he’d been brought back around. Heart or no heart, it was clear that he still had a stomach, because it was growling again.

“Sausage it is,” she said and took out a pan. By the time she’d blown on the burner to get the flame to light, he’d raised himself up from the table and come to stand beside her at the stove, intent on the smell of the uncooked meat.

“I need to cook it,” she told him, and sliced open the package with a kitchen knife she’d taken from the drawer. As she slid the links out of the plastic wrapping, he reached out and snatched them, one after the other, putting them into his mouth and chewing as if he hadn’t eaten in days. And he hadn’t, she remembered, because he’d probably died a week or so ago. She watched him as he ate, not knowing whether she should tell him to slow down and eat politely, or insist that he sit at the table and allow her to serve him. He had grease on his fingers from the encased meat, so she led him to the sink and held his hands under the running water, rubbed cleanser from her Satin Hands set into them, gently washed them clean. His hands were soft, almost as soft as a woman’s, and he let her tend them without a word.

“Are you tired?” she asked, peering up into his face, drying his hands with a kitchen towel. She wasn’t sure where he should sleep, but felt it would be best if she made him a bed on the couch since they’d only just met and she still didn’t know his name. She parked him back at the kitchen table while she cleaned up the remnants of his meal, his legs stiff and straight as a life-sized Ken doll’s. His eyes had perked up after eating, but he still looked a little bewildered and sleepy. She hoped that after a good night’s sleep, he might feel up to talking, to telling her his name, to beginning their new life together.

While she settled herself in bed, she imagined the following month’s breakfast, her new boyfriend there to support her, shaking hands with her national sales director and chatting with her guests as they signed their contracts to join her team. Poppy would be announced the newest Miss Go-Give, elected for her always-positive attitude, her devotion to her team and unit. Her boyfriend, radiant, would wave to her as she gave her “I-story” to the crowd, telling them how her business brought her the love of her life and financial security all while helping women to be the best they could be.

At the table, when her director asked what he loved best about Poppy, he’d smile and say, “Her brains. She’s the smartest, most gifted woman in this room.” He’d take her hand under the table and squeeze it; reminding her of the diamond he’d given her to wear on her finger.

She would drive the two of them home in her free car, and the neighbors would see that she’d finally made it. Once inside, he’d make love to her. He would love her for her mind and spirit, and she would open to him like the flower she was named for.

When Poppy woke up the next morning, she found that he’d raided the refrigerator. The milk jug was empty; one of the cats had jumped onto the counter and was licking at the edge of the spout. The yogurt containers had been squeezed until the lids popped open, the contents sucked out. The flax was untouched. Her new boyfriend wasn’t on the couch, and the pillow and blankets were still on the coffee table, perfectly folded. A cool breeze tickled her face, and she
saw that the back door was open. She tightened the sash on her robe and leaned out of it, looking into the backyard. There he was, still in his suit, staring up into the walnut tree.

“What are you looking at?” she called. He turned his head slowly, eyes wide.

“Squirrel,” he said, his voice thick like he needed to clear it.

She closed the door and tiptoed to him across the grass, dodging blackened walnut casings, her bare toes sinking into the dewy lawn. The closer she got the redder his lips looked, and by the time she got all the way across the yard, tiptoeing the whole way, she realized that the new tint to his mouth was blood.

“What have you been eating, honey?” She didn’t know what to call him, so a pet name would have to do. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer to her question.

He tossed something to the ground by her feet, something red and grey and furry. He’d cracked the skull with something, slurped the brains right out. She turned a little green but tried to remain calm.

“You found some more breakfast, I see.”

“I caught it,” he said, “the brains are good.” It was the most he’d said since he’d been brought to her. His left hand was blacked and sticky, still holding the walnut meats that he’d apparently lured the animal with.

“You’re talking!” she said, smiling through her dismay.

“It’s...difficult.” He looked at her, then at the limp squirrel. He dropped the walnuts and held the squirrel out to her, his hands cradling its grey body.

“Um, no thank you,” she said. He studied her with his head cocked to the side. He shuffled back to the tree, then stretched up to place the debrained squirrel inside an abandoned nest. Its companion chattered from a higher branch, its tail whipping and shivering with anger. The morning sun was shining on him from above, illuminating his skin, pale and green-tinged where the funeral home makeup had worn off. The skin around his lips was cracking from his meal, and even so, he looked young, too young to have died already.

“Let’s get you back into the house before the neighbors see you. I’ll take care of your skin for you, and then I’ll go to the store and stock up on better things than squirrel, all right?”

She took his hand and led him inside, tiptoeing again around the fallen walnuts dotting the lawn, the bottoms of her feet cold and dirty. She wiped them on the mat and motioned for him do the same. He honored her wish, and then opened the door for her, still stiff, and still a bit foggy from his recent trip to the other side and back. Poppy found, as she stepped through the door he held open for her, that despite his rough ways, a gentleman was dying to get out. She also discovered that needed a shower. His smell was different this morning, riper, something like the butcher aisle.

She took him to her bathroom, turned the shower taps to a soothing temperature, gathered bottles of shower gels and shampoos, all purchased at cost and written off of her taxes, and placed them at the edge for him to use. She turned her back to let him undress.

“Buttons,” he said, signaling he needed help. His fingers were still stiff enough to make his starched shirt hard to remove, so she helped him, first tugging the buttons loose and then sliding his shirt off of his shoulders. He had bruises in the shape of a circle on his chest, and she traced them with her fingers, raised her eyebrows in question.

“Car crash,” he said simply, and looked down at his pants. There wasn’t a bruise to show he’d been wearing a seatbelt when the accident had occurred, and a little flicker of displeasure ignited in Poppy. He was a PhD, or would have been, and he should have known better. She
was rougher than she'd meant to be when she undid his belt buckle and let his pants slide down his legs. Steam was filling the bathroom, and she turned away to let him bathe.

"I need help!" he called from a cloud of perfumed bath products, his voice cleaner from the steam.

"What is it?" she asked, sliding the shower curtain open a few inches and keeping her gaze level with his chin. He stared at the floor of the shower. In the puff of bubbles headed down the drain was skin he'd rubbed off with the blue net sponge she'd shown him how to use. It lay there peachy pale, bloodless. She snatched the sponge from his hand, tossed it into the sink, took a towel and wrapped him up in it. He stepped out of the shower, eyes wide, and she turned off the water. She spun toilet paper off the roll and scooped up the flesh he’d lost, wrapped it and placed it on the counter, not knowing what to do with it. She peeked at the skin again, so pale, as light as porcelain, then back at him, finding it had come from his neck, just above his right shoulder.

"Honey, don’t panic," she said, her hands on his damp arms, flicking her gaze between his neck and his eyes. "I have just the thing to cover that spot right up, and you’ll look as good as new."

She slipped out of the bathroom and into her office, swallowing hard to keep the sick at bay. She could fix him, she knew what to do, she was in control. She opened her inventory closet, took a new compact from the top of a pile, knowing that the very lightest shade of cream foundation—Ivory 100—would always be on top, since she stocked lightest to darkest. She left the empty box on her desk to write off later, as well as the plastic wrapping of a makeup sponge, and returned to her newly-clean boyfriend. He stood, drier now, on her bathroom rug. She sat him on the edge of the tub, dampened the sponge with warm water from the sink, and swirled it in the creamy makeup.

"Hold still." She dabbed it across the spot on his neck, his lips closed, eyes still wide. She blended more makeup along his jaw line, noting to herself that he’d need bronzing powder, too, so that he didn’t look so…formerly dead.

She finished, and then stood back to admire her work. "As good as new," she stated, and gave him a peck on the lips. He swallowed hard; something had been in his mouth, had slid down his throat. His Adam’s apple bobbed, and he let out a sigh of satisfaction.

"What were you eating?" She looked into the shower, noted that the bar of soap was still in its holder on the wall. The makeup sponge was in her hand, so it wasn’t that. She hadn’t brought anything else with her into the bathroom. She swiveled her head around, checked the sink. The wad of toilet paper was still there, but it was flat, crumpled, empty. He’d eaten his own skin.

"No!" she said, voice firm, lips firm. "You cannot eat your own skin; you’re not allowed!"

"I’m so hungry, honey," he told her, and his stomach gurgled to prove his point. It had been a long time since anyone had called her by a pet name.

"Then I’ll go to the store, I’ll get you meat. She told me that’s what you’d want. What do you prefer, fish? Chicken? Steak?" Poppy knew that offering a choice of three almost always meant that the chooser would pick the middle item, a tactic proven true each time she sold skin care kits, and she herself was in the mood for poultry.
“Brains,” he said quietly. He touched her hand, held it. She thought of the walnuts that he’d picked up from ground outside, how the meat inside the shells had always reminded her of brains, the two halves joined in the middle.

He took her hand to his lips, kissed the back of it sweetly, tenderly. It was the first time anyone had kissed her hand like that, like something out of a movie. His hair was curled from the shower, his bruises visible, his stomach growling. Before she knew it he had her hand in his teeth and she yanked away, getting cut in the process. He grabbed for her again, his reflexes stronger than they’d been the night before.

“So hungry,” he said again, and licked the blood from her hand, lapped it like a dog would, soft and loving. She hadn’t been touched like this in so long.

He sunk his teeth in again, and she let him. She soothed the sting with memorized prayer; with a positive attitude all pain would be rendered null and void. One thousand, two hundred and twenty-five days, and she finally had the kind of man she wanted, she’d gone after her dream and she’d achieved it, just like her company told her she could if she just planned to work and worked her plan. When he moved his lips to her neck, she let him, running her hands across his shoulders, bare and perfect. She traced his bruises, raising goose bumps on his already cool skin. He nibbled at her, tasting her skin, and with the tastes the pink bloom started to return to his cheeks, no makeup needed. She saw what she did for him, and thought of Miss Go-Give.

He was nude in front of her, and with stiff fingers he removed her robe so that she, too, was bare.

“So hungry,” he repeated, gathering her body up close, close enough that he could hear her heart. She knew what he was hungry for, what he preferred. She was ready to give herself to him, to shoot for the moon, to land in the stars. As he cracked her open, took her body, her heart, her mind, she knew what she did would make him right, make her right.
The Ones That Got Away

Jim Harris knew his wife was good at her job. He knew she was a good mother who volunteered at their sons’ elementary school library. She liked it when the children came to the IMC, walking in straight lines, the boys on the left, the girls on the right. She liked it when they’d sit on the floor in a semi-circle, carpet samples protecting their delicate, pointy ankle bones from the linoleum, ready and eager to listen to her.

He found it endearing that she liked to clean with blue rubber gloves pulled up to the crooks of her elbows, Clorox making the air in the house smell like an indoor swimming pool. Once she finished her list for the day Jim would watch her eyes go glassy and unfocused. A smile would spread across her face; her chest would flush a mottled pink.

“It helps me think clearly,” she said more than once, “I love having a refrigerator that sparkles when I open it, not one sticky streak of orange juice marring the shelves.”

She liked clean language, too, he knew, switching even a simple and accepted word like “hell” to “h-e-double-hockey-sticks” when she caught a thumb in a drawer or opened the dishwasher to find a drinking glass in pieces. She was sweet. She even kept their cars spotless, running Swiffer cloths over the air ducts and the vacuum cleaner in between the bottom of the seats and backs, which she kept straight up and down because to lean the seat back just made her feel sloppy.

Jim, however, was her opposite, and that’s why she kicked him out.

“Carrie,” he’d said when he found her cleaning the old receipts and used-up gift cards out of his wallet, “I love you, but I think, maybe, that you’re too fucking clean.” The moment he said it, he knew he’d gone too far. He wished he could stuff the words back into his mouth, but it was too late. She placed the wallet on the table. It was empty, but the leather still buckled out from months of stuffing every ATM or gas pump receipt inside, each shopper’s card or fast food coupon he’d come across.

“I’ve got a lot going on,” he explained. “I thought by the time we were adults, you’d have grown out of your bad habits,” she said. “That you’d learn you didn’t have to be anything like your mother.”

She packed his bag for him, filling it with travel-sized deodorant and two week’s worth of pressed tighty whities. Without him around, she could keep the bathroom sink free of his blue toothpaste spit, one item in an ever-growing list of things she said she would no longer take care of for him.

“My name is Carolina,” she reminded him before slamming the front door. “Don’t you ever use that kind of language around me or the boys again.”

“Where am I going to go?”

“Go back to your mother’s!” she said, her voice muffled from behind the door. Jim wondered if the boys would notice him missing from the dinner table, would think their mother had cleaned him away like she had their pet gerbil, their crayoned drawings from the walls, and any spelling tests that had been marked with less than an A.

Jim had always been messy. His childhood bedroom was a disaster, something his parents didn’t mind. When he was a kid his clothes were often stained, sometimes torn. His father was a truck driver, gone all the time. His mother was a collector. She collected newspapers, slides she bought at swap meets that featured other people’s vacations, books about Jesus Christ, Hummel figurines, and stray animals. Jim would come home from school ready for
a snack, but all of the dishes in the house would be piled on top of the stove, forks glued by old food to the tops of plates, old grease congealed in saucepans.

“Sorry, Jimmy,” she said. “I’m trying to keep up.”

His mother scraped piles of dog shit from the house’s floor with a dustpan and spade, then squirt the spot with ammonia she kept in a spray bottle. A dog would nose the spot she cleaned, raise its leg to mark it again, then knock over the trash, spilling it everywhere, which always brought another dog, who growled at a cat, which ran away to the living room to claw at the couch at least twice a day, bits of stuffing getting caught between its claws. The doorbell rang continually, signaling another delivery from the Home Shopping Channel. The amount of stuff she bought or saved rose every year, growing totally, unequivocally out of control.

Carolina would pass him tiny samplers of cologne she’d picked up at the mall while they rode the bus to school. When the other kids hurled insults at him for wearing clothes that smelled like cat piss or rotten food, he’d try to wash up in the boy’s room, then uncap the thin vials of cologne, pour it into his hands, and splash it onto his cheeks and jaw, hoping Carrie would like it.

Jim knew Carrie would start with what he had left behind. Black, 13-gallon garbage bags in hand, she’d clean out every drawer, every shoebox and secret stash he realized she probably knew about. His hidden nude magazines would go into the bags. Baseball cards from his childhood that still smelled as sweet and sticky as the bubblegum they’d been wrapped with—into the bags. Yearbooks, his old and scratched AC/DC albums, even his tackle box—into the bags. Maybe even the pictures of him holding their boys when they were infants, maybe even those. She would stuff them full, stuff them until they were so heavy she had to hunch and drag them to the curb by their yellow plastic handles. If one broke, she’d just stuff it all into yet another black bag. She had plenty, bought with her warehouse club membership. His bottles of cologne might crack and scent everything with heavy, spicy musk, and Carrie would pile more bags on top to dampen the smell. Ten bags, fifteen, seventeen by time she was ready to move on.

She’d get rid of the VHS tape of their wedding night, and the other one he’d taken of her in bed, crossing her legs and reaching a pale hand out to cover the lens, him saying, “Come on baby, make love to the camera…” in a silly, bedroom voice, then laughing at himself in an attempt to make her smile. Time after time he’d try to get her to enjoy it, to relax, just for a moment. He pictured her yanking out the film, yard upon yard of it, cutting it with scissors and tossing the pieces into another bag. She’d go into the garage, start pulling out boxes of accumulated items. Carolina would carry everything that was his out to the street. The pile would be to her shoulders.

The underside of Jim’s car hit the curb with a bang when he pulled into his mother’s driveway. The house was dark and quiet. He bumped his key against the lock, willing it to slide in and turn the bolt, and by the third try it worked. He pushed it open and the smell hit him like a wall. She left him the house when she died that past spring; her will was made from a kit she’d bought online. The house was paid off, so he didn’t inherit a mortgage, but he did inherit all of
the junk left behind. He’d taken all of the dogs and cats he could catch to shelters right away, but avoided any other work there, something that Carrie reminded him each and every night while she smoothed hand cream into her cuticles and elbows.

“If you want it cleaned up so bad, Carrie, why don’t you just do it yourself?” he kept saying, secretly hoping she’d take him up on the offer, but she didn’t, just turned out the light and turned her back to him.

“I’m doing the best I can,” he whispered to her form under the covers.

“No, you’re not.”

He patted the wall just inside the door, feeling for the switch, but knocked a stack of something over when he found it and flipped it on. Newspapers. A giant stack on the table by the door; all still rubber-banded and inside clear or orange plastic bags. There had to be eighty papers on the table, piled up like a pyramid missing its top. He used his foot to scoot the papers that had fallen underneath the table, remembering the day that Carrie came to the door for the first time.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, only opening the door a few inches. He didn’t want her to see inside, didn’t want a dog to push past him and jump up on her clean clothes with muddy, matted paws; she was so pretty, so pristine.

“I found your folder on the bus; you must have forgotten it,” she answered. She wanted inside, he could tell by her eyes, the way her pupils were dilated. She tilted her head and rubbed at her nose. He knew she could smell the house from outside.

“Thanks,” he said, and motioned for her to slip the folder through the space he opened at the door. She looked confused, but slid it through anyway.

“Can I come in?” She asked.

“My mom hasn’t had a chance to clean,” he answered, “Maybe another time.”

“I don’t mind, James,” she offered, “I’ve seen cluttered houses before. My aunt’s pretty messy.”

He knew for a fact that Carrie hadn’t seen anything like his house. He wanted to let her in, to take her back to his room and shut the door. He’d been trying to keep it cleaner in hopes that someday, he could have a friend over, but as a dog squatted next to him, just out of her sight, the shame of it made his chest tight.

“I can’t. Thanks, though.”

“Oh, okay. Save you a seat on the bus,” she offered, backing away, her eyes locked on him. After she was gone he opened the folder to find that she’d reorganized all of his papers according to his class schedule. Ripped notebook paper was smoothed and taped, the holes at the margins covered with white adhesive circles to keep them intact. She’d even checked his Math homework.

He didn’t know what to do with his mother’s house now. He worked his way past dead plants in cracked pots he spun in a middle school art class, tottering piles of magazines, an old organ covered in dust. Already he wanted to go home. If Carrie wouldn’t let him come back, he’d end up living here, back where he started before she came home from college and cleaned up his life, gave him children and purpose. He pushed open the door to his old bedroom to see that his mother had filled it with all of his father’s things. He’d never come back for them, choosing a life on the road to family and home. Jim used both arms to scoop piles of his father’s
shirts that were still on hangers from his old bed. His sheets hadn’t been washed since he’d gone off on his honeymoon with Carrie; when he pulled back the blankets he found an old Victoria’s Secret catalogue he’d left there. Inside was a picture of her from the school newspaper, civil service medals around her neck, a certificate in her hands, her chest and cheeks pink from excitement. She’d organized a clean-up of the creek a few miles from the high school and had been awarded a scholarship by the city.

He’d have to rent a container in the morning, one of those huge metal boxes that a service would drop onto the driveway and then, once full, come back to pick up and haul to the dump. He looked from that old picture of Carrie to the models in the catalogue, back and forth, remembering her back then. He decided he wouldn’t clean up the stains he left. He let himself fall asleep with his pants still unzipped.

When the sun came up he used the phone in the kitchen to call information. He asked to be connected to the nearest garbage collection service. The man who answered told Jim they’d bring a container within an hour if he paid extra. He thanked him, hung up, unplugged the phone, and threw it into the already-overflowing trash bin next to the stove. He wondered if he should have brought rubber gloves; the kitchen was covered in a greasy film of dust from too many years of cooking with a gas stove and never cleaning up afterward.

The container delivery truck arrived, a semi beeping its way into his mother’s driveway and back out again, clunking a huge metal box into the yard. Jim spent all morning shoving and kicking boxes out of the garage, years of accumulated junk. He hooked up a garden hose and sprayed down the walls. Dust ran down in rivulets, small handprints and streaks left from when he’d come home covered in mud after playing in the creek as a kid. Spiders complete with webs and dried leaves that had blown in last fall rushed down the driveway, sluiced into the gutter. He sprayed and sprayed until there was nothing left. Jim dropped the hose, letting the water wash the driveway without him, and started tossing all of the boxes into the container. Some broke; the cardboard had gotten wet and the heavy contents ripped through. He had to stoop to pick up pieces of broken appliances, screws with drywall still attached in white, dusty bunches, and dead bugs, their tiny legs curled into their bodies as if even they couldn’t bear to touch things here.

He didn’t stop. Broken tools from the shed out back went into the dumpster, too. The dead potted plants, complete with never-fertilized dirt. He found a screwdriver, unhooked the mailbox, tossed it in. The house grew cleaner. He took up the hose, squirted cold water over the siding, washing away dirt left over from the Ohio hurricane back in 2008. Helicopters from the Silver Maple that were stuck in between the slats of the shutters had to be picked out by hand. He took down the shutters, threw them into the container. He hosed the walls again, then the garage door. The welcome mat went into the garbage.

For two days he pushed and pulled, dragged and threw, until every single thing in the house was gone, leaving only the things he couldn’t move if he tried. He didn’t stop except to buy supplies from the Lowe’s down the road, his cart overflowing with bottles and buckets. The check-out girl wouldn’t meet his eyes, barely spoke to him because to speak she’d have to breathe, and breathing meant smelling him. He knew he was filthy; clumps of old dog hair clung to his shirt and pants. There had been a small skeleton behind one of his mother’s bookshelves, and when he picked it up too roughly, it had crumbled in his fingers, and without thinking he’d wiped them on his thighs. After he handed his money over, the check-out girl squirted a large dollop of antibacterial gel into her hands.

He wasn’t sure how he’d lived like that as a kid, how he’s grown accustomed to the smell and chaos. He just knew he couldn’t tell anyone, even now, and that without Carrie, he was
afraid he’d go right back to that lifestyle. She was the only one that knew he still had nightmares of dead animals, of being a kid again and hearing the answering machine messages from animal control or the police telling his mother that a neighbor had complained. They were his dogs and cats, his mother had said, she only kept them to make him feel better after Daddy went away. The messes, she told him, had started because he kept leaving his dirty dishes under his bed at night.

Every towel, every container of soap he bought back from Lowe’s, every sponge and squeegee was put to use. He scrubbed the floors, the walls, the now-empty kitchen cabinets. He dragged the long green garden hose inside, sprayed everything. The walls and floors were dripping wet, everything smelled of soap. He pulled down the shower curtain, used it to hold soaked bath towels and countless throw pillows, gathered them up like some strange Santa Claus over his shoulder and took them to the metal container.

He opened the chest freezer last. Inside he found mounds of ice pops, and below those, three trout wrapped in Saran Wrap, their eyes covered in frost, their scales white with freezer burn. He remembered the first time he took his sons fishing, how proud they were with their Styrofoam cups of worms, how he’d worked them through the fear of fish guts. Carrie hadn’t been pleased when he brought them home, the boys popping out of the back seat, baby-sized fishing poles and backpacks in their arms.

“We caught fish!” the oldest screamed.

“We cut off their heads and we ate them!” his younger brother added. They ran to her, threw themselves into her arms. They reeked of fish. Jim had watched as she stripped off their clothes right there in the yard, tossed everything into the trashcan in the garage, ignoring their protests. She took them by their hands into the house, stood them in the shower, their little shoulders sharp and soft all at once. Jim knew she found their lack of concern about their rank smell just like his, like his mother’s, like it was hereditary. She turned on the water and scrubbed them.

“Carrie,” Jim had said from outside the open bathroom door, “leave them be, would you?”

“They can’t grow up like you did, James.”

She’d scrubbed their hair, scrubbed inside their ears, scrubbed their armpits and inside their mouths and the bottoms of their feet. She rubbed soap into washcloths and rubbed the washcloths into their skin, one boy after the other, then back to the first boy, cleaning and cleaning. They were barely in elementary school then.

“Mom, stop,” they begged, but she kept cleaning.

“Carrie,” he insisted, and she shut the bathroom door. They cried and still she wouldn’t stop until the fish smell was gone. Jim could hear her scrubbing and cleaning, the squishy sound of her fingers working shampoo into their scalps, the rinsing and starting all over again, until everything was gone, washed down the drain. He heard her finally turn off the tap. The four of them listened to the sound of the water as it gurgled down the drain, bubbling down into the pipes, Carrie and the boys inside, Jim outside, behind the closed door.

“Your turn, James,” she said, finally allowing him to come back in.
Jim took himself, his muscles stiff from work, to the empty front porch. He sat down on nothing, because the swing had been unhooked from the frame and heaved into the storage container, which was almost filled to the brim. He’d worked through the third day, torn up all of the weeds and crabgrass, leaving fresh-turned dirt behind. It smelled like wet leaves and worms. He wanted to rest just a few minutes, then he’d finish cleaning up and go back home.

He woke in the middle of the night, back against the brick wall. Something warm was against his hand, something rough and wet. He opened his eyes to see a cat there, a grey striped tabby, licking his skin clean. Its eyes glowed a bright green in the light from the streetlamp. It meowed and went back to licking, then bit down on the soft, meaty place between his thumb and index finger.

“Ouch!” he yelled, yanking away his hand and using his knee to kick out against the cat, which trotted back toward the metal container still there next to the driveway. He sucked at his sore hand, awkwardly rose from his seat on the ground, stretched his stiff back and pulled his shoulders down, feeling the tense muscles pull from the base of his skull on down. The cat meowed again, pounced on something it found scurrying across the driveway. Jim crept near, seeing the cat with a mouse in its jaws. The cat dropped its prey to the ground and tore at it, soft, furred pieces ripping in its teeth. He heard more meows, saw movement near the container.

“Hey!” he hollered, used his fist to bang against the side. Cats of all sizes jumped out in twos and threes from the container, the smell of years-old thawing fish and old lunch meats wafting out with them. Every cat in the neighborhood must have come to the container, every stray and every pure bred, young, old, wanted and unwanted, all of them there to take a look at what he’d done, to take what they could of it. He kicked the side of the container again, and garbage bags shifted inside, bottles and other trash toppled in clanks and clinks. One more cat jumped out with a howl and skittered down the driveway into the dark neighborhood, making dogs bark in outrage.

The garage door was still open. Jim went inside, took himself one last time through his childhood house. He stood in the bathroom, stared inside the bathtub. It was empty. He walked through the other rooms, their walls bare, floors stripped of carpets. His bed, the frame too heavy for him to move by himself, sat devoid of mattress and box spring. Everything had gone into the garbage or down the drain or into the sewer.

Jim turned the lights off and then, for good measure, flipped all of the circuits to “off” from the box on the wall in the garage. The house was bathed in darkness and in silence. He let himself out under the garage door, used his hands to pull it closed.

He slept in his car that night. He’d hire a contractor to replace the flooring and drywall, or just price the house low so someone would buy it as a fixer-upper.

The next day he bought the boy’s favorite doughnuts—powdered sugar—from the convenience store. He wanted to check on the boys, see them get on the school bus. He wanted to tell Carrie that he’d cleaned his mother’s house out and wanted to come home. He wanted to pantomime reeling her back in, make her laugh as he took her to bed, his prize catch. When he pulled onto his street he turned his radio down so the bass wouldn’t bother the neighbors, smiled when he saw his home appear down the block.

No lights were on inside the windows when he pulled up. Trash bags were piled up to higher than his bumper when he parked in the driveway. When he reached his front door, key in his hand, he realized there was realtor’s padlock on the knob. He peeked through the front curtains, saw everything was gone. No furniture, no boys getting ready for school. No Carrie at the sink, arm-deep in dishes and soap suds. They were gone.
He’d spent the day sitting in his car, staring at the empty house, at the piles of black garbage bags Carrie’d left behind. Everything blurred as rain came down, the shadows of it through his car window making his skin look pocked and dirty. Something smelled sour, like a baby’s bottle he once found lodged underneath the seat of his car a year after his youngest was out of diapers. He lifted the collar of his t-shirt and sniffed at himself, realizing it was him. He looked into the seat behind him, saw all of the wrappers, empty plastic soda bottles and junk mail piled in the back.

When the rain stopped he went back to his mother’s house. It had poured there, too, the yard filling with muddy puddles. Despite his hard cleaning, it still smelled inside. The tang of garbage and animals unchecked for years had seeped into the drywall, soaked into the cement foundation, and the day of rain just released it that much more. He’d never be rid of it; it would cling to him no matter what he did, inside and out. The way he’d grown up had woven itself into his skin, the hairs inside his nose, the way he ate and breathed and spoke. It was in the Harris blood, and as long as he lived, it could be passed down to his boys. Carrie was right to take them.

One last cat watched from the sidewalk as he let himself into the shed belonging to his mother’s next door neighbor. He took a bottle of lighter fluid, and then shut the shed door behind him. Jim crossed the yard in between, went back into the empty house, and ran his hands across the walls. They were dry enough. He poured the lighter fluid along the cracked baseboards, made a trail out to the driveway. He climbed into the container, and lowered himself down inside. He pulled the lids closed and let his body rest on top of the filled garbage bags. Soon, the truck would come to haul the container away, and he would go with it. He settled inside, entertained himself with the memories of every picture book Carolina had read to the children in the library, filled his mind’s nostrils with the scent of her perfume, of his sons’ hair after she’d bathed them in Johnson’s. He fished a lighter out of his back pocket, scraped his thumb against the wheel, and allowed his clothes to catch. He watched a flame lick up the side of the container, let it escape outside where it could find the house, waited for everything to burn clean away.
The first time he saw her, she was running like a doe through the forest, her bright hair streaming behind her, loose and wild. Her legs flowed out of nylon shorts only a very young woman could wear, legs so firm and smooth he longed to press his face to them, to taste her skin. He imagined pressing her down into the grass, her calves melting like flan on his tongue, a delicate vanilla-infused custard underneath her clothing, a warm caramel on the skin tanned from her runs under the morning sunshine.

She launched past him at the same time every day, give or take a minute. He waited, back pressed up against a giant oak, his face tilted into an Audubon field guide, only raising his eyes to watch her pass. Most days he brought his coffee, waited to see her, the crows above his head chasing hawks away from their nests. He waited, allowing her to grow more comfortable with his presence there—solid, reliable, safe.

On a cooler morning just after the trees had suddenly exploded into yellows and oranges, he crouched in the middle of the path. When she hurtled toward him he held out his hand.

"Wait!" he said, motioning for her to stop. She did, and pulled her ear buds out. Music blasted from the tiny speakers as they lay across her shoulders. He watched her heart banging away in the base of her throat, waited as she caught her breath.

"I didn't want you to step on it," he said, scooping something up in his hands. "Do you know what this is?"

She shrugged. "It's a wooly worm." She gave him a polite smile, but backed away, just a fraction of a step.

"A tiger moth caterpillar. Since it's more black than brown, it means winter is on the way, and it'll be a cold one." He moved in front of her. "I see you here all the time, running by yourself. Are you sure that's safe?"

"I'm not afraid," she said, her shoulders square.

"No, of course you're not." He was tempted to touch her hair, to push it off of her shoulder to reveal the freckles dotting her skin. "What's your name?"

"It's Becca," she said, using her hand to pull her right foot behind her, stretching. "I know these trails like the back of my hand."

He watched her run down the path, her ponytail flipping up to show the pale skin at the back of her neck.

Every few days he brought something new to show her. A giant Great Horned Owl feather, as long as his forearm. A trilobite he found along the bank of the creek, ancient and primal. A bottle of water he held out as she ran past, like he was fortifying her for a marathon.

"You're beautiful," he told her. She began to linger a bit longer, long enough for her heart rate to slow to a resting pace and her sweat to dry to a thin sheen of salt on her skin. He asked her questions about her life, careful not to push too hard. She told him about her life, about her mother and her aunts, but never talked about a father or a boyfriend. She hoped to go to state college, she wished she could go to Mexico on spring break. She was failing math, and it took her three tries to earn her driver's license. She ran because it made her feel like she was flying. She planned to try out for the cross country team next year.

Some days he stayed away.
“I missed you!” she said when he showed up again. He never told her where he’d been. He took a chance and kissed her under the first snowfall, the flakes shining in her hair. She'd covered up for warmth, black pants tight against her legs, a fleece jacket zipped up to her chin. He could tell she’d never been kissed before, and just as he knew it would, it stirred him. He kept her longer each morning, knowing he’d make her late for school, that she thrilled at making up a new story for the school secretary. A flat tire. A flock of Canada geese blocking traffic as they meandered across the road. Her runs became shorter, their time together longer, until running was simply an excuse to get to him a little faster. They roamed the paths together, crossing the creek into the older sections of the reserve. She showed him oaks that were over five hundred years old, found patches of grass deep in the woods that were still strong and green. He never told her that he'd been to those oaks a thousand times, that he knew every inch of those woods, where the short cuts were and the places the rabbits hid at night.

He spread his coat across the ground, touched her bare skin with the silky contents of a milkweed pod, then used his breath to smooth her goosebumps. He watched the caramel tint of her skin fade to a sugary white as the days grew shorter, always making sure to bring her to a sweat so her mother would believe she was running the three miles of her favorite trail. He let her talk all she wanted, listened and remembered.

“Sometimes I smell you all around me when you’re not even there,” she told him. He answered her by kissing the tips of each of her fingers in turn. “We should stop,” he’d say, feigned guilt pulling at his face while his hands found her waistband.

She kept asking to see him in between her classes, and even in the middle of the night, climbing out of her bedroom window. Her mother kept the car key in a magnetic box under the driver's door, she said, and she patted around until she found it, kept the headlights off until she reached the borders of her neighborhood.

When she arrived at the reserve she parked the car as close to the woods as possible. She let the moon guide her through the trees.

“Did you hear me coming?” she said when he waved to her from his spot on a fallen log.

“I have big ears,” he claimed, and pulled her into his lap.

“My aunts are getting suspicious,” she told him. “I’m scared they’ll get my mom all worked up.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “They’re just jealous. After your birthday I’ll take them to dinner, your mother, too.” He knew even the idea would please her, would let her yield.

He kissed her ears. “Mine.”

He pushed up her sleeves and stroked the fine hair on her arms, breathed against her eyes, felt her eyelashes brush across his cheek. “Mine.”

He used his teeth, nipped the soft skin at the base of her throat. “Mine.”

He grinned at her, warming his hands in the soft places of her body, tickling her until she howled. She ran her fingers across the places his hands and mouth had been, knowing she’d been marked.

“Yours,” she whispered into his ear.

After he broke through her last barrier, smelled the blood and smoky salt of her, he howled, too, up at the moon. It was ringed in a white halo, signaling the coming winter storm.
Within

My mother and aunts keep asking me what possessed me to give myself up to him. How can I explain it in a way they'll understand, the three of them growing dustier every day? The tug of him, the way he called to me. I lay in my bed, trying to sleep, and saw him behind my eyes, waiting for me, wanting me. I felt him reach out; he reached into the place just below my ribs and pulled, and in one smooth motion I was brought to him, hand over hand over hand, until I was there, in the woods, my feet bare and numb. I don't even remember driving, though they say I did.

He enclosed me in his coat, wrapped it around me and I was surrounded by him, his scent, like smoke and wool with something else underneath, something wicked and primal, a sort of steam.

I trusted him. He used his hands, made me pliant and slippery until I couldn't feel the cold anymore, until I couldn't feel the rocks digging into my legs and back when he pulled me to the forest floor. I curled into him, my blood rushing in my ears, electricity jolting me, little shocks he conjured with his fingers until I couldn't breathe anymore. I clung.

He said, “I need you.”

He pulled me up until we were both kneeling, and I braced my hands on his shoulders. I kept my eyes open, and so did he. He kissed me, opened his mouth so I could taste him.

“Let me,” his whispered, and kissed my face, his teeth against my lips, against my cheekbones. “Come on.”

He gathered my hair into a ponytail at the base of my neck and opened his mouth wide, then wider still. The last thing I saw was his eyes, almost silver in the moonlight. I felt his hands holding my head, a pulling and a push, and I was inside, filling his mouth and throat. It was dark. Tight. I struggled, suddenly panicked, until he made soft sounds deep in his chest, a sweet whimpering. He rubbed the small of my back, calming me.

As I slid down I felt the scrape of his teeth on my skin. I ran my fingers across the bones of his inner throat, I pressed against his lungs to feel them deflate like the soft down pillow on my bed; I sunk into him.

And there I stayed.

“Thank you,” he said, the sound reaching me from above.

I could feel him slow down, feel his temperature grow warmer from the exertion. His body grew limp, satiated. I was happy; I’d given him what he told me no one else could. I’d fed him. He stirred again, and I felt each step as he slowly carried himself back to his car, sensed the jolt of movement when he reached between his legs to move the seat back, needing more room between him and the wheel. He took me home with him, his secret passenger, and though I couldn’t see it, it felt windowless, dark and damp.

Running every morning gave me strong lungs, but the longer I held my breath, the more the stars would prick behind my eyes. That’s when I began to forget in earnest; I lost myself in waves. I started shutting down; first it was my sight, then it was my breath. I slept, but would wake with starts because I’d forget that I couldn’t breathe inside him, there was no amniotic fluid and my body had forgotten how to be inside another person. I lay curled, my knees into my chest, wondering how long it would take for my body to break down, wondering why I'd done
this. Whenever I'd shift positions, he'd murmur to me; I'd feel the pat of his hand from the outside, the way a father would stroke the belly of his pregnant wife.

My heart still beat, but slower, weaker. My thoughts came in soft flashes, mostly red, just like when I was a little girl and would press on my eyes to see a show of crimson shapes float past. Sounds. Bubbles moving through his intestines. The beat of his own heart, somehow foreign. Muffled music from a radio. A drumming from the spray of water in the shower. A back and forth rhythm, a bumping, as he pleased himself in the morning, and again before bed. A shaking when he'd drive over a pothole, a thump-thunk when he'd walk down the stone steps that led to the creek in our woods. A whoosh of warm coffee on its way down his throat, the tightening of his muscles as he continued to swallow. The coffee, always the coffee, trickling over my skin.

3
Pelt

He regretted it sooner than he could have expected. At first it was fun; he'd talk to her, sit at the piano and play the music he grew up on; Pink Floyd, Cat Stevens. He knew she'd feel the vibrations as he pressed the pedals. He held her inside him, belly round and lumpy from her folded limbs. He’d never felt such deep satisfaction; he wondered if the others had been too old, too fat. His Becca was lean, fresh. She’d feed him for weeks, he thought, her body giving his everything it needed to thrive, a beautiful gift from an equally beautiful girl.

Within a few days, however, he felt that something wasn’t right. He woke in the morning with an almost itchy feeling, like he needed to move, but she was still so heavy inside him that even walking very far wore him out. He’d drive to the reserve and hike out to his favorite spots only to feel the distinct need to sit down and catch his breath. Still, his legs ached to run, to hear the sound of dead winter leaves beneath his feet, to feel the cold air pinking his cheeks.

He looked down at his belly while in the shower, the hairs moving like kelp as the water beat down. A crop of bright red fuzz had grown around his belly button, crept down beneath. He shut off the water, stepped out of the shower and positioned a hand mirror to look between his legs. His pubic hair had turned red, long strands grown puffy as they dried. It threatened to move down his thighs and calves, to sprout from the tops of his toes.

“What are you doing to me?” he asked his belly. He felt her shift beneath his skin, saw the round lump of her knee rise like a growth. He pressed it back down from the outside, felt her settle into a more comfortable position. She pressed on his bladder harder than he felt necessary.

He hadn’t been to work in over a week, but when he tried to drive there to pick up his paycheck, he found himself distracted, overwhelmed by the other cars. Within a mile of home he’d scraped a car parked on the side of the road, and in a parking lot he opened his door too hard and dinged a silver minivan.

“Mr. Combs,” the woman said as she approached his window. “Is that you?”

He apologized profusely and wrote a check to cover the damages, offered to tutor the woman’s daughters when he returned from sabbatical. When he slipped the check through the rolled-down window he saw her look down at his stomach.

“Are you all right?” she asked him, and he insisted he was, just that he’d put on some weight over the holidays. He’d start jogging very soon, he said, maybe even offer to coach the
high school cross country team. The woman smiled, and then he saw her eyes grow large when she looked at the check he’d written.
“Oh, this is so generous!” she exclaimed. He wondered what he’d written, how many zeros he’d added.
“What are you doing to me?” he shouted at his belly as he raced away.

4
The Three Sisters

“Here’s your little box of needles and thread, Margene,” Olivia said. “Put it in your bag. I’ve already packed my knife. We’ve got to be fast; he knows who we are, and when he sees us, he’ll understand that we’re here to take her back.”

The woman zipped her jacket all the way to her throat and took the keys out of the ignition.
“The sun’s coming up. He’ll be there by now.”
“How do you know?” her older sister asked from the back seat, tucking her grey-streaked hair under a scarf.
“I read her diary, that’s how. She keeps it behind the books on her bookshelf, exactly where you kept your own when you were her age,” she answered, looking back through the rear view mirror. “What, you’re shocked? Mom used to read yours, too, you know. Oh, now really, don’t look at me like that.”
“Can we get back to the plan, ladies?” Anne spoke from the passenger side. She was the youngest of the three sisters, and the only one to have had any children. Only fifteen when she gave birth to Becca, her older sisters had become extra mothers to the baby, spoiling her even more the closer they got to a childless middle age.

Olivia nodded, then twisted in her seat to look at her oldest sister.
“Margene, ask him if he’s a birdwatcher. He must be, because she had all of those feathers between the pages. Ask him where we can find some, distract him. I’ll pretend to fall, and when he moves to help me up, that’s when I’ll do it.”

She turned to her other sister. “Anne, that red car is his. Once we’ve got him, come back here. Tie up your hair, then wipe down the seats and the wheel, put it in neutral and let it roll down the hillside over there. We don’t want any fingerprints left behind. When we’ve got her out, bring her back to our car, and we’ll do the rest.”

The women got out one by one. Each closed her car door slowly, quietly.
“Olivia, which path do we take?” Anne asked when they reached the entrance to the paths. Olivia knew her way around. She loved the reserve, especially in late winter when the wildflowers bloomed deep off the trails, their purples and blues bringing life back to the forest.
“See that marker?” she said, pointing. “It’s this one, lined with Pitch pines that cover the trail with their needles.”
“I bet he sleeps in the woods at night like an animal.”

Olivia led her sisters past the prairie and the frog pond, down the stone steps and across the creek, each woman stepping where she stepped so that only one set of tracks showed in the snow and dirt.
“There he is. Do you see him? He’s got the coffee, just like I said. He does this every single day like clockwork. See him?”

50
Anne’s mouth curled. “Look at his belly!”

“Shh! Do you have your binoculars? Good. He won’t be able to move very quickly, but stay on guard. Don’t forget to smile. He sees us. Try to look innocent.”

Margene stepped into the sunshine.

“Excuse me,” she said to the man. “Do you happen to know the best place to find cardinals here? I just love the way they stand out against the white of the snow, almost like drops of blood, don’t you think? They’re just beautiful. Your coffee smells delicious, by the way.” She knew she was talking too much, but she was nervous.

“All the better to warm you up on a morning like this,” he said, and slid to the ground.

“Olivia, are you all right? Did you hurt yourself?”

“I felt that all the way into my teeth; I felt it in the little bones deep inside my ears. It felt like hitting an anvil with a hammer.” Olivia laid the rock at the base of a nearby oak.

“Help me tie his hands; there’s rope in my bag.”

“Let’s drag him over there, closer to the creek.”

“Anne, hurry, go back to the parking lot and get rid of his car.”

“If I cut across his belly, beneath her, once you sew him up, Margene, it will look just like an umbilical hernia repair scar. I stayed up all night researching the best way to do it. I read until my vision blurred.”

“Hurry, Olivia! His eyes are opening!”

“And what big eyes he has,” she said. “His skin is so warm, almost hot. It takes a lot of energy to digest something as big as a girl.”

She peered into the man’s eyes. He didn’t struggle.

“Can you feel the steel, how cold it is on your big, fat belly, how sharp and large the teeth are?”

“Now, Olivia, hurry!”

Olivia was straddling him, sitting on his thighs.

“I didn’t expect it to slide in so easily.” She looked at the knife in her hand.

“No bones down there to get in the way. You didn’t hit her, did you?”

“I don’t think so. His blood smells like tar.”

“Thank you,” the man said, his voice as gravelly as a bullfrog’s.

“God. Shut him up, would you? Put something in his mouth; those leaves there by his shoulder will do, they’ve still got enough give that they won’t crumble to dust between his teeth.”

Margene shoved a handful down his throat, held his lips shut with the palm of her hand.

“Becca, can you hear us in there? We’re here, Aunt Margene and Aunt Olivia, too. We’re going to get you out.”

“I can feel her! She just moved! She rolled underneath me; did you see? The way that big lump moved under his skin, stretching it? It felt just like when Anne was pregnant with her. Put your hands on his belly, above where I cut.”

“Like this?”

“Yes. Wait, maybe she’ll move again.”

“I felt her! Her hand was on the other side of mine, pressing out. Keep cutting!”

“I am; but I can’t cut too quickly. I want the incision to look like a surgeon’s would, not like a woman sat on his legs and sliced him open with her favorite kitchen knife. Wait, wait, I’ve almost got it.”

“Oh, hurry!”
“My God that stinks. I think I nicked his intestine.”
“Is that her? I think I see her. Reach inside. Grab her!”
“She’s slippery; she keeps shifting. Help me Margene; my hands are wet!”
“I’ve got her arm. Can you get the other? She keeps sliding back!
“Yes, I think I’ve got it. Oh, there’s her head! Can you see? Pull!”
“Hurry, wrap her in the blanket. Yes, that one; it’s her favorite, the patch quilt. Here, use the edge to wipe out her mouth. Don’t forget her nose! Is she breathing yet? Her skin looks so blue. Becca, Becca, can you hear me? We’re here. You’re safe now.”
“I can’t get her to breathe, Olivia. Her mouth is full of blood. What is this all over her? It smells; is it stomach acid?”
“Becca, don’t fight Aunt Margene; she’s going to help you breathe. That’s it, cough it up, it’s all right, you’re all right. Look, your mom is back. See, Becca? Momma’s here, too.”
“Anne, wrap her up tight. There’s water and food in my bag for her; take her back to the car. We’ll finish this part.”
“Let’s drag him down to the creek.”
“Do you hear that? Is someone coming?”
“No, it’s the creak of the tree branches rubbing together. They groan like old women in the cold. It’s spooky when everything else is so quiet. Hear that? The ice is squeaking, too, breaking up.”
“These rocks are perfect, Olivia. Press your knee against his side to open him up, then feed the stones into his belly. They sound like the bones of the Earth when they clunk together inside him, don’t they?”
“Look, this one has a fossil, a brachiopod. Put it in; let’s get this over with. The crows have found us; maybe they smelled his blood in the air. Here’s another rock; is there room?”
“I can fit one more; his skin is starting to stretch and pucker. There. Will you hand me my sewing kit? I’ll take care of this while you clean up. What color thread should I use?”
“Black would be best. Make the stitches tiny.”
Margene used a hemming stitch. She pinched the sides of the wound together as she sewed, like sealing two pie crusts together, stones instead of fruit and flesh instead of pastry.
“When did he stop breathing?” Olivia asked, nudging his body with her toe.
“I felt him stop a few minutes ago.”
“When you’re done, help me slip him into the water. It’ll look like he lost his footing on the ice.”
“Unless they open him up. Oh...his head. I’d better sew that, too, or else they’ll see the gash.”
“If anyone finds him they’ll think he hit his head on the rocks. Do you think anyone will notice he’s gone? What if there’re more out there like him?”
“There are always more out there like him. But men like him disappear all the time, you know that. What’s one more?”
When my aunts cut me out, I couldn’t remember my name. I’d lost it somewhere without even realizing it, so that when they called to me, “Becca, Becca!” The sounds were nonsensical, just the sounds of breaking, spitting and cracking, not the name for a girl. I feel like a baby, learning everything all over again. What’s still his, what’s mine?

I know this body belongs to me, the long arms, always good for reaching things my grandmother couldn’t get to without a step stool. These are my own fingers, the nails still soft and tender where the acid in his stomach started to burn through. Here is my scar from the tip of Aunt Olivia’s knife when she accidentally nicked me; I own the mark. These are my wrist bones, jutting out. This is my hair, still long, still as red as a sunset but now it waves when I let it dry in the air, instead of hanging straight down. This is my face, Becca’s face. I look the same, but I don’t. I am, and I’m not.

They estimated that I’d been inside him five days, since that’s when I’d gone missing. Another day and I’d have been much more badly burned. Aunt Olivia comes to squeeze drops of juice from fresh aloe leaves onto the worst spots. She doesn’t want me to have any scars. My skin is still too tender, my senses too raw to wear clothes. My mother sits on the edge of my bed with her hands to her forehead.

“You didn’t think at all,” she says. I hate her for being right.

“Don’t you understand,” she continues, “I remember what it’s like. I am only thirty. I’m not filled with cobwebs like you think.”

She lets me stay in bed, the shades open to let the sun into my room. It shines in her hair like fire. Something about it makes me think of a phoenix. She says I need the light and the air.

When word got out that I’d run off with him, people started talking. They cawed like crows, filling the trees and the sky, insisting that if I’d only had a father to live with, I wouldn’t have done it. They said I craved male attention and would get it anywhere I could. I heard the messages they left on our answering machine: beep! This is Mrs. Elliott. I’m glad your daughter is safe, but this would have never happened if…beep! Hello, I’m Mrs. Bennett, and I wanted you to know that my entire church is praying for the soul of your Becca.

They ripped us apart like we were road kill; feasted on rumor and speculation, blamed my mother, my aunts, me. They never identified themselves by their first names, always by their marital status and husband’s last names, as if it gave them more credibility, more authority to judge. What happened to the girls they were before they became one with their husbands?

Each morning at dawn, like clockwork, I’ve been clearing my throat and naming myself. It’s a good a place to start as anywhere. Rebecca, I whisper, Rebecca, I sing. Rebecca I rasp, and Rebecca I call out. Rah-beck-ah. I taste the syllables, roll the “R” on my tongue, let the “ah” melt. Own it.

Soon I’ll be strong enough to walk outside again. I’ll ask my mother to come with us; we’ll fill our pockets with stones older than the earth and build cairns as tall as a man. I’ll write the names of women on their surfaces, stuff them into the mouths and bellies of the men like him, so that they’re too full to eat any more of us. When they sink below the surface of our lives, I’ll chant the names: Olivia. Mary. Anne. Lara. Margene. Ruth. Claire. Poppy. Rachel. Rebecca…
Neighborhood Watch

The men have been disappearing from our neighborhood. Fathers, grandpas, big brothers and uncles. Old ones with skin like softened paper, middle-aged ones with too much hair in their noses. The ones that you could hear from a block over, yelling at their dogs, wives, the cracks in their driveways. Vanished. The shy ones that play with model airplanes in their backyards. Poof! Gone, up in smoke, bags packed or not. Trucks gassed up and waiting, or classic cars covered over with sheets in the garage. No one yells at us anymore to get off my lawn! or stop making the dogs bark goddammit!

The lady down the road with the big, ugly scar on her chest howled, grieving the man she loved. She’d woken up one day to find him gone, like he’d never been there at all. My mom said things like, “you deserve better” and “he’ll regret leaving someone as wonderful as you” but she looked worried when she said them.

“Don’t grow up too fast, Simon,” she told me. I’m almost as tall as her, but I don’t feel like a man yet.

Mary’s dad disappeared. She asked us not to tell our mothers or the guidance counselor, because she likes being alone in the house. They call her “troubled” because once, she ran away. She claimed she got all the way to Mexico before she turned back, but when she got home her dad was gone.

“I’m glad he’s gone,” she said. “He always tried to hold me down.”

We see her sometimes when she leaves the lights on and the curtains open at night, hovering near the windows, eating as many candy bars as she wants.

Our gym teacher had been gone for two whole weeks. Mr. Combs, the science teacher, never came back from a bird watching trip at the reserve. Over the morning announcements, words like “sabbatical” were used but never explained.

They told us the janitor had been arrested for selling drugs, but we weren’t so sure. The huge rolling trashcan he pushed around at the end of the day was found in the middle of the parking lot, halfway to the dumpster, like he’d been snatched into the wind. We spotted his cigarette a foot away from it, burned down to the filter, never stomped out.

Ben and I watched our bus driver from five rows back, knowing it was only a matter of time before he disappeared, too. I was squished up against the window, my backpack shoved under my feet to give Ben enough room.

“Silent, like ninjas would, right Simon?” Ben whispered to me, his eyes locked on the front of the bus. Ben loved ninjas.

Danny, the driver, was skinny. Really skinny. We never saw him with a candy bar or a sack of McDonald’s, just a gigantic thermal cup of coffee.

“Danny could blow away,” Ben whispered out of the side of his mouth as we sat in the afternoon traffic. “He needs something to hold him down.”

“What do you think it is? Where are they going?” I asked, watching as Danny turned the knobs on the radio, settling on a twangy bluegrass tune. The older kids in back groaned, wishing for something cooler, though they should’ve been used to it. Most of our families had come to Ohio generations before, traveling west through Pennsylvania Dutch country or northwest from Appalachian coal mines, bringing their religion and music with them. Not mine, though.

We watched the other boys. The tallest ones stood with their backs to the bus windows, elbows resting on the seat tops on either side of them, swiveling their necks to eye the girls, or
holler at the sports cars zooming past. With their dads gone, they thought they were men to be reckoned with. They swaggered down the bus aisles, enjoying their new roles.

“I think it’s the Rapture,” Rachel said from the seat across from ours, smoothing her dress over her knees. “Those religious folks brought my mom some of that white candy with the nuts in it the other day. They said we’d have to get baptized or else we’d be left behind when the Rapture came and took people away to be with Jesus. They said God always watches.”

“What’d your mom do?” Ben asked.

“She told them we’re Jewish, then turned the hose on ‘em,” she answered, and opened up her doodling notebook. She didn’t normally ride the bus, but we heard from the other kids that her dad left a few nights ago, disappearing with the car he normally used to chauffeur her back and forth to the building. Her mother was so angry that she changed all the locks herself, so that if he came back, he’d have to knock on his own front door and ask to be let in.

Ben chewed his bottom lip, something he always did when he was stumped or worried. “I got baptized when I was a baby,” he said. “So if it was the Rapture, wouldn’t I be in Heaven right now with the others?”

I thought about the dirty magazines he swiped from the rack at the gas station. Some water sprinkled on him twelve years ago wasn’t going to cut it.

“Maybe it didn’t take?” I pondered.

“Maybe we’re not old enough.”

Rachel got off at the stop before Ben’s. Her mom was waiting at the end of the driveway for her, just like ours used to when we were younger. We watched her mom hug her and take Rachel’s book bag onto her own shoulder. It was overstuffed with drawings and bits of stories she wrote when she was supposed to be taking notes in class. She never did the work like she was supposed to, just talked like she did. Her mom looked as heavy as the bag, like sorrow was turning her feet into cement bricks, the shadows under her eyes too dark to cover with makeup.

When we came around the bend to Ben’s house, we saw a police car parked out front. The bus was silent; everyone stared. The Collins’ had been hit. Ben dragged his bag behind him as he walked down the aisle, his face pale instead of his typical sweaty red. Danny levered the door open for Ben to pass through, his eyes locked on the attendance sheet clipped to the dash. A hiss of air from the bus’ suspension system made us all jump and Ben glanced back toward my window. I raised my hand at him to say goodbye, hoping it wasn’t what we both knew it was.

He dumped his backpack onto the grass and ran to his mother. She tucked Ben’s head under her chin like a mother hen would.

Our bus hadn’t pulled away yet, so I knelt on my seat and pushed at the window’s latches to lower it. It was stiff and scraped, and while I struggled with it I heard the police woman say, “Another deadbeat?”

Ben stared at her, then his mom.

“Give it a few days,” Ben’s mom was told. “He’ll come crawling back. If he doesn’t, go after him for child support.”

A week later, Danny was replaced by Darlene. Darlene had a black spider tattooed across the back of her fat neck. Her feet and ankles were swollen and pink from sitting behind the huge steering wheel for hours on end, making the skin above her socks puff out.

“Think she ate him?” Rachel said, hunched over her notebook, a pencil in her hand.

“Simon,” Ben said, holding onto the top of the green seat in front of ours, “what the hell is going on? Where are all the men going?”

55
“They said on the news that the divorce and separation rate is higher this year than ever,” Rachel said. “But Mr. Combs wasn’t married, and neither was Danny. She probably ate them. She might eat you, too.”

We glared at her.

“I’m just kidding!” she said, and rolled her eyes.

Darlene hit a pothole and we both bounced hard in our seats. Rachel sighed loudly and retrieved her pencil from the sticky floor where it had fallen. She’d been drawing a shimmering pool of water with figures lining up, a person in robes beckoning with its arms for the people to come to the middle.

When the bus screeched to a halt for the first afternoon drop-off, I spotted a blue sign I usually ignored. “Neighborhood Watch,” it said, “We Watch Out for Each Other.”

“Have your parents ever talked about a neighborhood watch group, Ben?” I asked, pushing my glasses up my nose. It was hot in the bus, and sweat was starting to form on the oilier parts of my face.

“No,” he replied, and flipped open one of his stolen magazines. “My mom said those signs have been there for years, though, maybe just to scare thieves off? Like when people get those doorbells that sound like barking dogs.” He tilted the magazine so that the centerfold hung down. “Would you look at those?”

“She looks exactly like a Barbie doll, doesn’t she?” Rachel commented from her seat across the aisle, “Just with more plastic.”

“Put that away, Ben, you’re going to get us in trouble!” I grabbed the magazine from him and crammed it into his backpack, watching for Darlene’s eyes in the giant mirror above where she sat.

“If our parents started a neighborhood watch group, maybe they’d figure out what’s really happening,” I said.

Some of the older boys hadn’t gotten on the bus that morning, so by afternoon the girls had stretched out in the back seats, talking and trading lip gloss. We could smell wet nail polish and Juicy Fruit.

“Shit!” rang out when Darlene hit a pothole just before Birch Street. One of the cheerleaders had messed up her paint job.

“They could put security cameras on the houses and keep track of the guys,” Ben suggested, rubbing his fingers into the place his part had been before his mom discovered lice and shaved it. “My next door neighbor works at Best Buy, so he could get them at a discount.”

“You mean the guy that’s got all the newspapers in his driveway?” I asked. They’d been piling up there for weeks, rainstorms making them swollen and fat in their orange plastic bags.

“Oh, yeah. Well, maybe our moms could…”

“They don’t have time do that, Ben, they’re single mothers now,” Rachel said, her head bent over her sketch book, her hair curving like a sparrow’s wing across her cheek.

“Mine’s not,” I insisted. “I’m not a statistic.”

“My mom told me my dad just went out of town for work, but his suitcases were still in the closet, and that yours probably went fishing or something, Ben.”

She looked at me. “She said your dad, Simon, just couldn’t get to the phone.”

I fiddled with the bracelet I wore on my left wrist.

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I fiddled with the bracelet I wore on my left wrist.

“Why do you always wear that bracelet?” she asked me.

“My dad made it for me,” I answered, and held out my wrist. “It’s made from parachute cord, and it’s like a survival kit. I can undo the knots to use the cord like a rope, or unravel it to
get to the thinner threads inside. They make good fishing line. My dad taught me to fish when I
was little, out at the reserve. We got a largemouth bass once."

I looked back at the older girls. They leaned into each other across the aisles, whispering
behind their hands and scribbling on pieces of notebook paper that they slipped to the girls in
front or behind them. One stared right back at me, her red hair lifting in the breeze that came
through the open bus window as we rode along. I pictured her opening her mouth wide and
eating the men up, like a fish, or like in one of the poems my mother loved to recite. "Out of the
ash I rise…"

Rachel sighed. "Some of the women are acting like they’re helpless and others hate
every man they see. They’ll never start a watch group, and soon there aren’t going to be any
men left."

Ben had his fingers in his teeth. His nails were chewed down to the skin, so he bit at the
cuticles. "None left," he whispered through his fingers.

I hung onto the seat in front of us as Darlene rounded the bend and the bus leaned. I was
sitting on the outside this time, and caught Ben’s backpack with my shins before it slid into the
aisle.

“No word from your dad, huh?” I asked.

“Nah.” Ben chewed his lip, then gnawed at a hangnail on his thumb.

“Did your mom go back to work?” I kept my voice down, knowing Ben wouldn’t want us
overheard.

“Yep. She’s working second shift. She said she’d leave a plate in the fridge for me
yesterday, but she forgot. If she forgets again today, can I come to your house for dinner?”

“Sure. It’s Friday,“ I reminded him. “Breakfast for dinner night.” My mom would make
pancakes, sausage, eggs however we liked them. Other families do pizza or taco nights, we do
breakfast for dinner. Ben nodded, a little smile turning up the wet corners of his mouth.

“Maybe I could sleep over,” he wondered out loud. We hadn’t done that in a long time,
so I knew his dad disappearing was getting to him. Maybe he’d feel better staying over at my
house, so I said, “Sure, buddy,” and hauled up his backpack for him when we got to his stop.

I watched him unlock his front door with a key he had been wearing on a chain around
his neck while the bus pulled away, and after we came to my stop and I got off, I took my time
walking down the block to my house. With so many men gone, the moms and other women
were having trouble keeping up with the yard work. Most of our houses were older, built on
almost an acre of lot a piece back when the area was more farmland than strip malls. Most of the
yards were more grass than trees or flower beds, so there was a lot to weed, water and mow.
This weekend the boys left behind would be out in the heat, sitting up on riding mower seats,
pretending to be men. It could be fun to pretend we were in charge for a little while, but soon,
we’d want our neighbors back. We’d want our moms to have their husbands back, so they didn’t
have to do all of this alone. We’d want our dads. I wanted my dad.

At a minute till six Ben knocked shave and a haircut at our front door. He had a pillow
and sleeping bag in his arms, and when he moved I could hear the crinkle of glossy paper he’d
tucked into the back of his pants, up underneath his shirt. I wondered if my dad had any, and if
they made my mom mad. They’ve been married since he was a new cadet in the ROTC program
at their college. His current tour started with a red-eye flight to a base out in North Carolina, but
he couldn’t tell us where he was after that.

“He told me to tell you that you’re the man of the house while he’s gone, Simon,” my
mom told me. “He said to keep your eye on things.”
We wrote to him, hoping our letters and emails would follow him wherever the Army had taken him, but we might as well have been tying notes onto milkweed fluff and watching them float away in the breeze.

At dinner, my mom didn’t say anything when Ben and I both took a third helping of bacon, but I saw she only ate half of her own meal. When we were through, she carefully scraped the uneaten strawberries and toast into a Pyrex container and slipped it into the refrigerator. She saw me watching her and beamed a smile my way.

“My eyes were bigger than my stomach,” she said. “I’ll finish it in the morning.”

Ben and I decided to put our sleeping bags on the lounge chairs out back. From out there we could watch at least six houses, and if we craned our necks, two more on the other side of the street behind those. We sat side by side, staring out into the trees, in between fence slats, and around clothesline poles and swing sets.

“Simon,” Ben whispered. I could feel him staring at me.

“Yeah?”

“I’m bored.”

I took off my glasses and used the hem of my shirt to wipe at the sides of my nose and forehead, then answered, “There's no one out here to watch over.”

When my mom’s bedroom light turned off, I took two flashlights out from under my sleeping bag and told Ben to put on his sneakers.

“Follow me,” I whispered, and tiptoed around the back of the house and out the gate. The warmth of early summer wasn’t enough to have made the wood swell, so the lock slipped easily, quietly.

“So what are we going to do, patrol?” Ben whispered back, shining the flashlight up to my face.

“Yeah,” I said. “We’ve got to be the ones to keep an eye on things. We can’t see enough from the yard.” Purple spots floated in my eyes. “Could you keep your flashlight on the ground, please, Ben?”

“Oh, sorry.”

We could hear the sound of each other’s breathing, the soft rubbery squish of our tennis shoes, and as we passed the houses, the whir of air conditioning units switching on. Some houses had lights on, and a bunch had left their garage doors open, their cars parked inside, windows dark.

“Don’t they worry about kidnappers? What if the men were kidnapped?” Ben asked.

“Rachel said she saw a documentary on cable about human trafficking.”

“Or what if it’s aliens?” he continued, sweeping his flashlight beam up into the sky like a tiny spotlight. “What if they’re doing experiments on the men? My dad used to shape his mashed potatoes into mountains and hum that song from Close Encounters of the Third Kind. What if it’s true? Or what if they really do keep alien bodies at the base, Simon?”

“My dad told me that wasn’t true. If there really were spaceships the military would shoot them down way before they could take any of our citizens,” I said, feeling like the entire neighborhood was in my charge. I stood up a little taller, making my back straight like a soldier would.

“Have you heard from him? My mom said he hasn’t sent any money in awhile.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I answered, “My dad always does the right thing. He takes care of us, and he’ll come home just as soon as they let him.”
I didn’t realize I was walking so fast until Ben asked me to slow down. He stood bent over at the waist, hands on his knees, his mouth open and panting. He’d tucked his flashlight into his armpit and the beam jumped with each inhalation.

“I never said he wasn’t coming home, Simon,” he said, and rubbed his belly. “I think I ate too much bacon.”

I heard the crinkle of his magazine as he bent deeper, staring at the ground like he was going to be sick.

“You didn’t have to say it, and yes, you did.” I reached around behind him and yanked the back of his shirt up. I wondered if what Ben’s mother heard was true. How many times had I watched my mom wrap up her half-eaten dinner for the next day? My dad hadn’t been able to write us for a long time, but didn’t the Army send my mom money every month for the bills? I took Ben’s magazine.

“Aw, come on, Simon,” Ben said when I held the magazine up too high for him to reach.

“And you ate as much bacon as I did.”

I dropped the magazine into the next sewer opening we passed.

“Jerk,” Ben said.

“Shut up, Ben. Don’t forget why we’re out here.”

We walked slower this time, keeping our eyes on the houses of our neighborhood, looking for anything out of the ordinary: burglars in black masks, a sink hole in the cement sidewalk, something, anything to explain where the men were going.

“We’ll find them,” I said. “They wouldn’t just leave us.”

“Hey, that’s Mary’s house!” Ben clicked off his flashlight and trotted up to the side window of a beige, single-story house.

“What are you doing?” I asked, looking around me to make sure no one had spotted us so close to it.

“I want to see if she’s…oh!” A blue light shone through the window, illuminating the spit that had formed in the corners of his mouth. Ben wiped at it with the back of his hand, and his flashlight slipped to the ground with a little thud. He pressed his face close to the window, tilting to peek through the space in the shades.

“What?” I whispered, and leaned so that my chest was against his back, my head just above his. I squinted, shifted until I could see, too. Mary was inside, naked in her bed, watching something on the television. The screen flickered lights across her body, blues and greens against her face, neck and bare breasts. I looked away.

“What are you two doing?”

We spun around, bumping into each other. Ben’s buzzed head knocked into my jaw and pushed my head back against the brick wall of the house, and my glasses slid all the way off my nose and into the tufts of grass at our feet.

While I put them back on, Ben straightened himself and declared, “We’re watching. We’re the Neighborhood Watch!”

“And did you see anything?”

“Well, no,” he answered.

When my eyes focused again I saw it was Rachel. She held a shovel, and her dress was covered in mud.

“What are you doing?” I scolded, “Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“You’re not my dad, Simon,” she sneered, and drove the shovel into the ground. She leaned on the handle and then swooped her other arm behind her.
“Behold, my baptismal pool.”
She’d been digging in the yard between her house and Mary’s. A pile of dirt and small stones stood hip-high, and the hole was waist-deep.

“Now that I’m done, I’m going to fill it with water, bless it, and start baptizing everyone so that we can all go where the men are going. If it’s the Rapture, women and kids should be a part of it, too.”

I stared at the hole she’d dug, imagining people from all over coming to be dunked by little Rachel in her dress, moms, babies, even pets. She’d bless them and they’d disappear like our fathers and uncles had, go to wherever they’d gone. To wherever Ben’s dad had gone, and hers, too. I wondered if I’d find my dad.

“And if it isn’t?” I asked.

“It might be aliens,” Ben added.

“If it isn’t, I’ll join your Neighborhood Watch. I’ll spy on the older girls and see if they know anything.”

We shook on it, her dirty hand leaving mine feeling grubby. Together, we went to the shed in back of her house and hauled the hose out. Ben hooked it up to the faucet and Rachel and I led the sprayer end to the hole she’d dug. We took turns holding it toward the ground because keeping the trigger pressed made our hands sore. We stared in silence, watching the water and dirt churn and spin as it filled to the brim.

“There,” she said with finality. “It’s full enough.” She kicked off her shoes, lifted her skirt above her knees and stepped into the pool. Standing in the middle, she raised her arms up to the moon and then down into prayer hands. She bowed to each of the four directions. She crossed herself, too, then dipped her fingers down into the water, whispering unintelligible words.

She beckoned me to her. “Come on, Simon. I’m going to baptize you and we’ll see what happens.”

By then Ben had come back around to the pool and was watching, lower lip sucked in under his front teeth, brow furrowed.

“Let me go first,” he begged. I nodded and watched as he slipped on the muddy bank, grabbing at Rachel to hold him steady.

“Wait,” I said. I took off my paracord bracelet and unknotted it.

“What are you doing?” Ben asked. I told him to be patient.

“Give me your hand,” I said, and when he offered it, I tied one end of the cord to his wrist, and the other to mine, using my teeth to pull the knot secure. I imagined my father on the other side of the world, using a similar kind of cord to repel into a desert compound or maybe lower supplies into a school full of children.

“Okay,” I told him, “if you go, and you want to come home, just yank on the cord and I’ll pull you back to us.”

I nodded to Rachel.
She pushed Ben down into the water.

“I bless you Benjamin Collins, in the name of our fathers, their sons and ghosts.”

The cord pulled against my wrist as he flailed. I held my breath and waited for him to disappear. He didn’t. I couldn’t decide whether I was relieved or not. He sputtered as she let him back up, the muddy hose water dripping from his nose.

Rachel stepped up out of the pool and sat down in the grass. I sat down next to her, and together we stared up at the moon. Ben tossed his end of the cord onto the grass next to me, and
walked back to Mary’s window, his wet sneakers making squeaking noises against the blades of grass.

“It didn’t work,” Rachel said. “What did I do wrong?” She had her sketch pad in her hands. By the light of the moon I could see she’d drawn a diagram of the pool. There were equations and measurements scribbled in the corners, and words with letters that didn’t look anything like English. She ran her fingertip under the words like she was scanning for misspellings.

I tugged at a clump of dandelion in the grass next to me, the sharp edges of the green leaves snagging at my palm.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Rachel.”

“I must have, Simon. Maybe I got the prayer wrong?”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s not the Rapture, it’s not aliens, or kidnappers or magic. I don’t know why our dads are gone. They’re just gone.”

“Man,” we heard Ben sigh behind us. “Would you look at that.”

We turned at the same time, mouths open to tell him to knock it off, but he wasn’t by the window.

“Ben?” I called, low so that Mary inside wouldn’t hear. I got no answer. I looked in her window, half expecting to see Ben inside, but all I could see was Mary, sound asleep in the light of the television, the sheet pulled over her bare body. “He’s not in there.”

“Ben!” Rachel got up, peered behind the bushes. She walked around the circle of her pool, staring into the shallow depths as if he could have drowned inside when we weren’t looking. I trotted down to the street, looked up and down.

“I can’t find him,” I said when Rachel met me at the sidewalk. “He’s gone.”

“But he was right here!” she said, voice getting higher. “Wait. Do you think it worked?”

“Do it to me, Rachel,” I said, going back to her pool. I hopped down the slick bank into the water, tossed my glasses back onto the grass. It was cold, and my feet stuck to the bottom where the dirt had been churned into mud. I sat down in the water until it was at my chin. Rachel joined me, standing in front of me so that my face was near her belly.

“Are you sure you want to try?” she asked. “If you go, your mom would be alone.”

I hesitated, picturing my mom at the dinner table. I thought of what Rachel had said on the bus before, that some of the women seemed helpless while others were angry at all men because of the ones that had left them. My mom wasn’t like any of them. She was strong, and capable, and loving, even though my dad had been deployed over and over again. She weathered it all. I had to bring my dad back for her. Ben had been out here, instead of at home with his own mom, because I wanted to patrol. I had to get him back. I had to at least try.

I nodded to Rachel. She put her hands on the top of my head and pushed me down, and from under the water I could hear her voice but couldn’t make out the words. After a moment my lungs started to burn so I pushed her hands away and came to the surface. Rachel stood there frowning, watching me while I slogged out of the pool and stood next to her.

I hadn’t disappeared.

“Should we call the police?” she asked, and slipped her fingers around my wrist like I might blow away if she didn’t.

“Would they believe us?” I asked, wringing out my sleeves as best as I could.

“I heard they’ve been calling the boys from the bus runaways.”
“How many runaways can one neighborhood have?” I spat. “How many divorces, how many business trips, how many deployments and roadside bombs? How many helicopter crashes?”

“A lot,” she said, glancing back at Mary’s darkened window. She bent down to fish the cord from the muddy puddle, where it had been floating in a tangle, and handed it to me. I used my fingers to sluice the water off, and then wound the cord into a ball and stuffed it into my pocket.

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“Do you think that’s what happened to your dad, Simon? That he died out there?”

“No,” I insisted. “My dad did not die. He’s out there somewhere.”

“Well, so’s mine. So is Ben.”

I walked Rachel to her front door, and made sure she locked it behind her. I jogged home, woke my mother up. She called the police and Ben’s mother. One of the officers that came was the same that I saw at Ben’s house a few weeks back. They asked me what happened, but I didn’t know what to tell them.

“He was just gone,” I said. “I know you think he ran away, but he didn’t. He wouldn’t.”

My face was hot. I took off my glasses and wiped my sleeve across my face.

“Losing a father,” the other officer started, “is hard on kids. Sometimes they act out. We’ll do our best to find your friend.”

“Yes ma’am,” I said. I spent the rest of the night awake out on the deck, watching the houses and reknitting the parachute cord by the light of the patio lamp. I scanned the sky, but all I could see was the glitter of fireflies throughout the treetops, and stars beyond them. Once in awhile, a plane would go by, sometimes a passenger jet on route to the airport, sometimes a craft from the base.

The next morning I went from door to door, pushing my lawn mower in front of me, my backpack full of trimmers and spades. I took care of each woman’s lawn that let me, mowing and weeding, using their hoses to water the grass and flower beds. When some offered money, I only accepted half, and told them I’d give it to my mother. When I was half done at the scarred woman’s house, she brought me a glass of sweet tea.

“You can call me Olivia,” she said.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Your mom says you’re a lot like your dad,” she replied, smiling. “So polite. A real man. I’ve got my eye on you.”

“Thank you ma’am,” I answered. I spent the rest of the day watching over my neighborhood, vowing to stick around.