Have I Seen You Before?

A thesis presented to

the faculty of

the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

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June 2009

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This thesis titled

Have I Seen You Before?

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ABSTRACT

HILTON, JACOB GREGORY, M.A., June 2009, English

Have I Seen You Before? (94 pp.)

Director of Thesis: Darrell K. Spencer

This thesis includes a collection of original stories with an introduction that attempts to explain the use and importance of images in the author’s work. All of the stories in the collection are constructed on very specific images, which manifest themselves as events that the characters must confront and work through. The introduction examines the importance of imagery in creative writing, and uses quotes from Gordon Lish, Barry Hannah’s essay “Mr. Brain, He Want a Song,” and Tony Earley’s short story “The Prophet from Jupiter.”

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all of my professors, especially Darrell Spencer, Joan Connor, and Janis Holm for their support and their generous attention to my work. I also extend my thanks to Amanda Funk and Ashley Good for putting up with me, which is a feat in itself.
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INTRODUCTION

I am compelled to write about certain things. When I was nine, maybe eight, my family and I were on our way to Bettendorf, Iowa, to attend a Thanksgiving dinner at my aunt Kathy’s house. My sister and I crowded the backseat, a myriad of toys and stuffed animals jammed between us. We had just crossed the Murry Baker Bridge into downtown Peoria, dipping down into I-74. There was a sound, as if a shot had gone off inside the car. The car jerked, and then we pulled over to the side of the road.

Someone had tossed a brick from the overpass, and it had smashed into the roof of our car, landing about a half-inch away from the edge of the window, just above where I sat. Later, my mother would claim she saw the boy who threw it idling on the overpass, somehow knew what he was up to. The brick lay in two pieces on the road. Amidst the rush of traffic, my father dashed out to snatch the pieces.

For about a half an hour we cruised around downtown Peoria, around the projects and the shady neighborhoods, looking for the boy who’d thrown the brick. We never found him, though I have a memory of a beaten-down red-brick house with a concrete patio flecked with weeds, and the shadow of a boy standing in a window. We filed a police report, and they never got back to us.

Ten or so years later, there was a similar incident. A man and a woman were driving along I-74, through downtown Peoria, when someone—the newspapers later identified him as a fourteen-year-old boy—lobbed a brick pulled from a nearby patio over the newly installed overpass fence. By chance, it smashed through the car’s
windshield on the passenger side. The woman died from chest trauma. The couple was just returning from their first date.

Here is another one: when I was sixteen, a friend of mine committed suicide. We had been better friends in grade school, but high school had distanced us. One day in grade school—we were in fifth grade—he gave me a piece of paper, on which he had scrawled “Seth’s soul.” He traded it to me for something I don’t remember. Maybe it was for a piece of candy, or for some small favor, or for a dare; it couldn’t have been that important.

Some weeks before he killed himself, he gave me a call.

“I need my soul back,” he said. He did not sound distressed.

“Your what?”

“My soul. Remember?”

“No,” I said.

“Jesus, man. What kind of friend are you?” he said, quite directly, which was his way, but you learned to ignore it, or at least take it in stride. “It’s a little piece of paper.”

I did remember the little piece of paper then, the paper itself, with alarming clarity. I remembered that it seemed to have been torn from the middle of the page, as if he had folded a piece of loose-leaf paper in half and tore out a half-moon from the center of the page; there were no smooth edges. I remembered Seth’s childish handwriting, written in thin black ink. And I remembered that between the time he gave it to me and the time he called, I had found it in a dresser drawer and looked at it, but that was where my memories ended.
“Oh, yeah. Sorry, I might have lost it,” I said.

“Bummer,” he said, and hung up.

And then one night, he dropped acid, hid out behind some bushes near a set of railroad tracks, and when the train came, he leaped out and laid his head down on the rail. It was an open-casket funeral; they had dressed him in the gray turtleneck I had often seen him wear before. In the parlor of the funeral home, next to the registry, his mother had written a note. I don’t remember much of it, except that she had written, “Remember, Seth always liked to shock people,” and that as I shook each of his family members’ hands, none of them was crying.

So, then: I am compelled to write—moved to creative action—by events like these. I have not yet written these stories, but I know that I will. The temptation, of course, is to describe such a desire as being therapeutic. In therapy, you write, or play music, or paint, as a release, to give up those feelings which haunt or trouble you. Writing, for me, has never been therapeutic. If I want therapy, I’ll sit and pluck the strings of my guitar, or bang on the keys of my piano. I’ll listen to the Beatles, to Robert Johnson, to Miles Davis. I’ll select a few movies off my shelf and put them in the DVD player: Bonnie & Clyde, Nashville, Casablanca, Close Encounters of the Third Kind. I’ll go for a walk. I will not sit down and write.

I admit that I scrambled on this problem. Writing this critical introduction, I knew that I would have to place my work into some sort of context, but what was it? I tried out a number of different “themes,” if you will, none of which struck me as particularly authentic: truth, control/loss of control, sentences, story. And it would be inaccurate to
dismiss these elements as having little or nothing to do with my work, they lacked that unifying context that my critical introduction needed.

So, as I often do in times of distress, I turned to better, more experienced writers seeking guidance. I was leafing through an essay entitled, “Mr. Brain, He Want a Song,” by Barry Hannah, my Savior, when I happened upon the following passage:

In my case, with my training in poetry (failed Beat poet) and music (failed jazz trumpet) and sports (failed small quarterback, now mere tennis wimp), what is required is the intense image. If the image is intense enough, in life or in dream, it always brings a narrative with it. Without the intense image my work dwindles quickly into dishonest and empty sentences (70).

And there it was, as if somebody had suddenly removed the dark cloak that shadowed my brain. Images. I write from images. The rock careening through the car window, the familiar gray turtleneck.

My stories arise almost wholly out of images I have seen or heard about. “The Body’s Curve” is composed of two primary images: a woman drawing her husband nude, and a husband scooping a fetus out of a toilet. “Signholders” finds its origins in my catching sight of two men standing next to each other on a street corner, one holding a sign for Little Cesar’s Pizza, the other holding a sign that read, “Will Work for Food.” “Bury Me Here” stems from a dog I once knew that had one brown eye and one blue eye.
Once, in Kroger, I saw a young boy wearing a watch that was far too big for him, and “At Zeingeldt’s Ranch for the Fantastically Afflicted” was born.

A quick glance at the opening pages of my writer’s notebook confirms this fact. Almost everything I have jotted down is image-driven: a father and son buried in the same grave, two neighboring houses on fire, a swarm of octogenarians power walking through a mall, a young religious girl confessing her sins in front of her congregation, a live re-enactment of the birth of Jesus, a house full of Civil War-era musket balls.

Hannah mentions that if the images are intense enough—if an image is specific enough and interesting enough and carries enough emotional weight—then a narrative follows. Yes, I say, but with my own work, I find that it is—initially—the wrong narrative. Working from images, I find I run into a number of problems. Regardless of the image’s intensity, I often find that my first few drafts feel too obviously constructed. I feel my own hand at work, guiding the story to an easy, linear conclusion, because images carry certain connotations, and, for whatever reason, the easy, less interesting connotations spring to mind first. For example, the image of an alcoholic couple sitting in the dark, drunk, suggests some sort of unhappiness. That is the conflict and tension that presents itself most immediately to my mind. But what if they aren’t? What if the electricity doesn’t work? Then the image takes on a different kind of weight, becomes something much more complicated and interesting. The story veers away from being another story about unhappy alcoholics.

I will also admit to the temptation to steer toward autobiography. I find it natural when working with images from my own life. However, I have no interest in writing
about myself, or imposing myself on the stories. It is simply easier for me to write what I
know, to record events that have already happened. I have ways of fighting these urges,
though. I appeal to Gordon Lish:

My argument is that one can arrive at an enormously more effective artifact, that
is, a storytelling act, if one is attendant upon a procedure called recursion, which
means that in essence one finds one’s utterance by reason of one’s examination of
what has already been uttered. The utterance that you are at this point embarking
on takes its origin from what has just been stated prior to it. There’s much more to
this than what I’ve just stated, because one requires additionally the notion of
torque…so that on the one hand one finds the origins for one’s current utterance
in what is prior, but one is always in a combative relation with what is prior (158-
159).

I have a tremendous amount of faith in Lish’s concept of torque to guide my
stories. If I begin with an image, as in “Signholders,” the first line will likely have
something to do with that image: “They call us dancers, but we don’t dance.” (I found out
that the people who hold signs for Little Cesar’s Pizza are officially called dancers, a
tremendous little detail that changed the story entirely.) Where do you go from there?
The thought of dancing, actually dancing not just holding a sign, alongside a crowded
street always creates in me an instinctive sense of embarrassment. So I wrote the next few
lines, about one of the dancers getting pegged with eggs. The next sentence was a matter
of logistics, in that I wanted to know who threw the bricks, and then I thought, “What if it’s the narrator’s own son?” And from there the story exploded in a direction that was entirely organic—I had never thought the story would be about a man’s relationship with his estranged teenaged son, but that is where Lish’s method took me, and I decided to run with it.

Another technique I am tremendously fond of using in my writing is what I call the George Harrison technique. There is a story about Harrison, while still a guitarist with the Beatles, flipping randomly to a page in a book, picking out the first words he saw—“gently weeps”—and then writing a song about them (“While My Guitar Gently Weeps”). (In actuality, I owe my introduction to this technique as it applies to creative writing to Eric Freeze, my first creative writing teacher.)

I do this Harrison technique a lot. I use it whenever I get stuck in a story or whenever I start to feel myself controlling a story to the point where the story feels constructed. Not only does this technique keep me writing, I find that often it will take the story in exciting directions of which I had not previously imagined. “At Zeingeldt’s Ranch for the Fantastically Afflicted” is a story written almost entirely from picking random words out of Karen Russell’s collection, “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves.” Going back through the story, I can almost recall which words I used: antiquated, carting, arches, pebbled, and so on. I never worry about the story devolving into chaos, a mishmash of words—I rely on both the initial image and the storyteller part of me to keep the story together, and I tend not to have too much trouble.
The stories that I like the most, the stories that I reread and study and encourage—sometimes relentlessly—all of my friends to read always contain powerful images. Tony Earley’s “The Prophet from Jupiter,” the story that I seem to find myself talking about over and over again, is a story built on interesting images. The closing passage in “The Prophet from Jupiter” is layered with images, all of which have been echoed throughout earlier portions of the story:

I walked back and forth and back and forth across the dam until all the ghosts of Lake Glen buzzed in my ears like electricity; I saw the Prophet from Jupiter riding with Old Man Bill Burdette, down the streets of Uree in a 1916 Reo truck, toward the light in Aunt Plutina Williams’s window; I saw catfish as big as men, with whiskers like bullwhips, lie down at the feet of the Prophet and speak in a thousand strange tongues; I saw dancers moving against each other in the air to music I had never heard; I saw Lavonia, naked and beautiful, bathing and healing Junie in a moonlit cove; I saw Elisabeth standing in the edge of the lake in the spring, nursing a child who smelled like the sun; I saw the new police chief in a boat watching over his family; I saw the Mayor on his knees praying in Gullah with Charleston whores; I saw Jim Skipper and Rudy Thomas and Big Julie Cooper driving a bleeding pilot beside the river in a wagon pulled by twenty-four mules; I saw the Prophet from Jupiter and his five young sons shoot out of the lake like Fourth of July rockets and shout with incredible light and tongues of fire, 

*Rise, Children of the Water, Rise, and Be Whole in the Kingdom of God* (31-32).
Every sentence in Earley’s passage contains an image, some concrete, some abstract, all of them intense. And that is what I love so much about the ending of “The Prophet from Jupiter,” that Earley goes for broke, provides his readers with the most interesting and unique images he can muster, each of which takes on additional emotional weight when read in the context of the story. But I believe the specificity and imaginative quality of Earley’s ending (a 1916 Reo truck, catfish as big as men, moonlit cove, a woman standing in the edge of a lake nursing a child) can be appreciated even without reading the story, such is the strength of Earley’s writing and, equally important, his images.

Why are images so important to me? Perhaps I am a visual creature. I sympathize with Barry Hannah when he says, later on in his essay, that he is not much interested in the creative process. Thinking about it, however, maybe it is because images are so versatile, so alive with possibility—the image is limited only to how far the writer is willing to take it. Joy, sadness, anger, bitterness, resentment, a network of personal relationships and an entire family history, can all be found in a house full of musket balls.
THE BODY’S CURVE

It does not surprise him, Teresa wanting to be a nude model. What surprises Patrick more is that Teresa is an hour late coming home. When she tells him, he is standing over the kitchen counter, preparing dinner, cutting vegetables into tiny pieces. He is still dressed in his “moneyman clothes,” as Teresa calls them—pressed black slacks, a button-down shirt, and a gold box-patterned tie, though the knot at the collar has been loosened and his cuffs are rolled up to his elbows. She is standing behind him, at the kitchen island.

“I’m going to pose nude for my class,” she says. She has just come home from her art class, a figure drawing course that she signed up for five weeks ago. Her coffee-black hair is thrown into a loose bun on top of her head, with some escapist strands falling down her neck and the sides of her face. Her clothes are ragged and worn—her painting clothes—and hang loosely off her small frame. A smudge of charcoal dusts her face just below her left eye.

“Yeah?” he says. He does not turn around, nor does he offer a reaction, which is maybe what she wants, but he brings the knife blade down with a little more force than is necessary to sever the vegetables. “Is that why you were late? Were you working out the details?”

“No. I had to stay late to finish up a drawing.”

“Next time, I’d appreciate it if you called, so I can know what time to have dinner ready. The steaks won’t be done for another hour.”
He wipes his hands on a dishtowel and turns to face her. One of her slender hands firmly grips the edge of the kitchen island; the other dangles at her side. Her gray eyes are like wet stones. She is poised as if ready to stand her ground, though he offers no resistance. Fresh with drawing charcoal, Teresa’s fingers leave dark streaks on the island’s surface. Patrick will wipe them away as soon as she leaves the room.

“And if I’m not comfortable with it?” he says.

“Then too bad.” Her mouth is partly open, she is ready to say more, but then her mouth closes and she waits for him to speak.

He shrugs. He does not like the thought of his wife posing nude, is bothered by it, even. The idea nags him, makes the back of his neck hot and his head dizzy. But he cannot think of anything to say. “Do you want red wine or white wine?” he asks.

“I don’t care,” she says.

Teresa wheels around and heads into the bathroom off of the kitchen, her soft footsteps barely audible on the granite tile. She shuts the door, the lock clicks, and pretty soon Patrick hears the creak of the faucet and the sound of running water. From the sink he grabs a washcloth and runs it under the tap. The toilet flushes. He waits until he hears her turn the shower dial, and soon he detects the sound of hot water coursing through the metal pipes beneath the house, gushing out of the shower head in a steady stream. Then he wrings out the washcloth, walks to the kitchen island, and wipes down its surface. The black charcoal marks disappear beneath the wet rag like chalk from a chalkboard, as if they had never been there at all.

*
They dine by candlelight and firelight. Both the living room and dining room are enclosed in the same open space, separated only by a cabinet with a polished black marble surface that serves as a minibar. On the dining table, lighted wax candles are stuck into a silver candelabrum, a wedding present from a deceased aunt. A small fire crackles in the fireplace and sheds light on the living room portion: the chocolate-colored leather sofa and matching loveseat, off white curtains held back from the windows by metal hooks, a round coffee table with a glass top, slick wooden floors. To Patrick, all of these things appear to be moving. It is because of the fire, with its unsteady flicker and shifting shadows, and because of the wine. He is on his third glass. The meat is moist and tender and falls away easily, and the wine relieves his palette with each sip. By the end of the meal, his stomach feels bloated and satisfied, his mind sharp, and his tongue loose.

“What’s wrong with painting?” he says.

“What do you mean?” Teresa says. She has not finished eating. Shafts of orange light illuminate her face, the slim nose and defined cheekbones. The light flows through the folds of her hair and shimmers off each thick strand. He does not have to look at her to know how she eats: how she leans her body slightly forward in her chair, how she wraps all four fingers around the fork, gripping it like a bicycle handle. A woman at an upscale restaurant had seen Teresa eat this way and laughed, saying she ate like a cavewoman. Patrick did not think so; he thought it gave her the innocent look of an child, beautiful in its way, and he told her so, though Teresa has been mindful to correct this habit ever since the woman’s remark. Patrick wonders why a stranger’s influence should be greater than a husband’s.
“I mean, why couldn’t you just stick with painting? I thought you liked painting.”

“I do like painting. I like figure drawing as well. It’s different. It’s more sensual.”

She is tempting him, daring him to become excited and upset. She has done this before. Once, on their anniversary, she confessed to him that she had kissed another man. Patrick knew the man; the three of them had gone bowling together. He had responded to her well, gracefully even, saying, What do you want me to say? She asked him to say how he felt. He told her that he felt betrayed and hurt. He stayed calm. She told him then that it was a lie, she just wanted to gauge how he would react in a situation like that. But tonight, there is something in Teresa’s casual defiance, the way she leaned against the island and looked straight at him when she told him, that makes Patrick believe this is not a lie. And the wine works in him like a truth serum. His face is flushed.

“I don’t want you to pose naked,” he says. “I don’t want those people to see you like that.”

“I knew it!” she says. In the dimness, he cannot clearly see her face, but he imagines that she is smiling, her pink, full lips pulled back to reveal her glorious set of shining, white teeth. She drops her fork onto her plate and pushes the porcelain dish toward him. A piece of meat still lingers on the plate, its red juices pooling about it like blood. Patrick thinks of the steak as once being a muscle, pulsing with life, a piece of living tissue. He is both horrified and repulsed. “I knew you didn’t want me to do it. Jesus, Patrick. Why couldn’t you have said it earlier?”
He is angry now, disgusted by the food in front of him and the food digesting inside his stomach. He steadies his gaze and stares at her, his lips tight and his jaw clenched shut.

Teresa presses her elbows into the table and leans forward, into the candlelight. “Fuck off, Patrick,” she says, and Patrick thinks he feels spit on his face as she says it, like venom. He blinks his eyes and sits back in his chair. Teresa scoots back in her chair, the legs scraping against the floorboards. She stands up and leaves the room, and Patrick hears her heavy footsteps as she stomps upstairs. For what seems like a long while, he stares into his wineglass. In the muted light, the wine looks like apple cider. Finally he stands up to go after her and then thinks better of it. Instead, he pulls on his coat and grabs the keys from the hook by the door and goes out to the car. He gets in and revs the engine, slips the gear into reverse and backs out of the driveway.

He drives around the city for a long while. He does not go anywhere in particular, nor does he have any place to go. He stops and puts gas in the car, at a station where the parking lot is littered with pennies, deposited there by customers who didn’t want their change. It reminds him of a wishing fountain.

When he gets home, Teresa is in bed. The sound of him undressing wakes her and he walks over to her.

“I’m sorry,” she says. Her voice is groggy and raspy. She pulls him to her and kisses him, softly at first, then more passionately. She helps him out of the rest of his clothes. Their lovemaking has a dreamy quality, as if neither of them is completely aware of what is happening. Afterward Patrick lies awake and looks out the window at the
neighborhood. Lights inside the houses flicker on and off, as people alternately either go to bed or plod through the rooms in their homes. The wind beats against the window. Fallen leaves clutter the yard, and, picked up by the wind, swirl about the street.

Next to him, Teresa sleeps, semi-covered by a rumpled sheet, white moonlight falling on the exposed parts of her body still slick with sweat. He tries to see her as maybe an artist would, a series of shapes and lines: silken oval calves, the triangle space formed between her body and bent elbow, square hands, rectangle forearms. It doesn’t quite work, as all he can imagine is the way her cheek feels when it rubs against his, how her arms close around him, drawing him closer, how her hands grip his shoulders, the smooth, velvety texture of her skin and the soft heat of their bodies as they press against each other. Perhaps there are other shapes, more fitting and more appropriate to describe how Teresa looks to him, but, if they exist, he does not know their names.

* 

For ten weeks eleven months ago, Teresa had been pregnant. Almost immediately after they heard the news, they started making plans. They cleared out one of the neglected upstairs bedrooms, which had been serving as a storage room, and began converting it into a baby room. Patrick painted the walls a pastel yellow and the trim white. Teresa picked out drapes, sheer white ones, to cover the two windows. They bought a crib made of oak, assembled it together, and hung a spinning mobile of different celestial bodies, the dangling sun and moon sporting gentle, sleepy faces.

At seven weeks, Teresa began to have cramps, sharp ones in her lower abdomen. Later on, there was some light bleeding. They visited the doctor, a robust, prematurely
balding man in his mid-thirties, not much older than Patrick and Teresa, who told them that there was no fetal heartbeat. The baby was not developing properly, probably because of some genetic abnormality in the sperm or ovum, or a combination of both. He paced back and forth across the room as if giving a classroom lecture, pausing occasionally to gaze out his office window, which provided a blank view of the neighboring hospital building. Then he walked over and sat on the edge of his desk, his hands falling gracefully into his lap, and looked solemnly at them. “Patrick, Teresa,” he said. “The important thing, the thing to remember, is that this is likely a non repeating genetic defect. All right? So that means you should have no problems having children in the future.” He nodded his head as he said this, and, taking on the role of diligent students, they nodded in agreement.

What Patrick remembers most about the weeks in between the doctor’s visit and the miscarriage is the crib. Whereas he and Teresa had assembled the crib together, he had disassembled it alone, piece by piece, screw by screw, neatly repackaging all the materials. Teresa had insisted.

“Did you save the receipt?” she had asked.

“You know I did,” he said.

“Good. Then take that crib back. Use the money to buy a lawn chair or recliner or something. Whatever you want.”

He did as she told him, and replacing the crib with a recliner made of a soft blue fabric, with a built in massager in the back rest. Occasionally, Patrick sits in the chair to read, though he and Teresa mostly avoid the room.
When it finally happened, Patrick was sitting at the kitchen island, a cup of lukewarm coffee and a plate of half eaten, slightly burnt eggs in front of him. Outside the window, a pale morning sun peeked above the neighboring rooftops, bronzing the coal-colored shingles. Above him, he could hear Teresa going about her morning routine, short patterns of footsteps as she moved about the bedroom looking for something to wear, a brief pause at the closet, then more footsteps across the ceiling as she moved into the bathroom. He picked up the dishes, scraped the rest of the eggs into the trash, and emptied the coffee cup into the sink. Upstairs, Teresa screamed.

It didn’t last long. The pure, stinging clearness of it, like a musical note, startled him, and he realized that he had never heard her scream before. The sound pervaded the house, reached every corner. It was horrific and yet also beautiful, and for a moment he was glad to her hear scream, comforted by this show of pain and vulnerability that mirrored his own feelings. Then he set the dishes in the sink, the porcelain banging against the stainless steel.

He walked into the living room. Teresa was already on the couch (he hadn’t heard her come downstairs), crying softly into her hands. He sat down next to her and put one arm across the small of her back without saying anything, and she leaned her body into his and cried a little harder. Encroaching sunlight crept from behind the edges of the heavy shades and glinted off the glass coffee table. The smell of burnt eggs and bacon grease and stale coffee from his morning breakfast lingered in the air. They sat together for a little while, their bodies perfectly shaped so that they fit together smoothly and
comfortably. Teresa’s hair was soft against his cheek, and a small stream of tears dripped through her hands and onto his shirt. He kissed her on the head and went upstairs.

The bathroom door was shut, though the light was on and glowed bright in the space beneath the door’s bottom edge. Strange, he thought, that she should have thought to shut the door. He hesitated for a moment, afraid of what he might see, of what was so bad that Teresa had had to close the door. Then his hand, as if powered by its own sense of need and duty, gripped the cold brass doorknob, and suddenly he was standing inside the bathroom.

The bathroom looked clinical and strangely alien. The porcelain sink and toilet and the white granite tiles seemed brighter than usual, contrasting deeply with the dark cherry wood cabinets and towel racks. He walked over to the toilet bowl and peered inside, the water tinged with swirling red. He slumped to the floor, against the cabinet. More than anything, he had not been prepared for the overwhelming cleanliness of the bathroom, or for the metallic smell of blood, of rusted iron. He had hoped to see blood, smears of red, some outward sign of disturbance. It seemed appropriate somehow. But all there was, was gleaming white, made brighter and more intense by the fluorescent light above him. He stood up and went downstairs and into the kitchen, rummaging through the cabinets until he found a small plastic container. Back in the bathroom, he plucked a hand towel from off the shelf and folded it so that it fit snuggly inside the plastic container and made a soft little bed. Finally, though every muscle, organ, and nerve cell in his body resisted it, he scooped the child, who was no bigger than the palm of his hand,
from the water with his bare hands and tucked it away in the plastic container, so that he could take it to the hospital.

On the way downstairs, he thought about things the doctor had told them. “It may help to name the child,” he had said. “Or, if you want, we can arrange a funeral service. And please keep in mind that if you feel the need to talk to someone, we have an excellent staff of professional counselors and psychologists.” The doctor had smiled warmly, in a professional sort of way. Patrick realized that they hadn’t even thought about names for the baby. When he got downstairs, Teresa had composed herself, though her eyes were red and two streaks of mascara formed trails leading from her heavy lashes to the edge of her jaw. And noticing the plastic container in his hand, she said, her voice steady, “I don’t want to see it.”

*

The day after Teresa told him she was going to pose nude, Patrick pulls into a twenty-four hour restaurant, a smoky place with a neon green sign out front that flashes Café Delicatessen. It is not a fitting name. The diner is mostly empty. Scraps of food and sticky soda stains crowd the tile floor. The lining on most of the booths is slit and peeling, exposing the brown foam beneath. An old man sits at the counter, munching on a BLT, bits of food falling into his lap and onto his plate, while another, younger man sits at a table across the room and works a crossword puzzle. A waitress, a pretty girl in her early twenties with tight curly blonde hair and pine green eyes, shows him to a booth.

He orders a cup of coffee.
“Can I get you anything else?” she asks. “A glass of water? Something to eat?”

Her voice is soft and breathy.

He shakes his head. “Coffee’s fine,” he says.

She nods absently. “Am I bothering you?”

“Not a bit. Slow night?”

“You’re my only customer. Care for some company?” She smiles and lets her weight shift to one side, her uniform pulled tight against her hips.

“Sure,” Patrick says. “Have a seat.”

She sets the coffee pot on the table and slides into the booth. The top of her uniform is unbuttoned, and when she settles, she rests her forearms on the tabletop and leans towards him. Fluorescent light reflect off the plastic name tag pinned to her left breast. Her name is Madelyn.

Patrick takes a sip of his coffee, the hot liquid scalding his tongue, and Madelyn refills his cup from across the table.

From her pocket she produces a pack of cigarettes and smacks it against her palm.

“Mind if I smoke?”

“Go ahead.”

She shakes the pack and a cigarette pops out. With two fingers she brings the cigarette to her lips and allows it dangle as she flicks a green plastic lighter. She inhales deeply and holds it there for a moment, finally releasing the smoke in a steady white stream.

“Long night?” he asks.
She nods and takes another drag from the cigarette. There is a silence between them made more uncomfortable by the sounds in the kitchen: shuffling footsteps, something bubbling, dishware banging against each other, a radio blaring seventies rock music. Patrick twists his coffee mug around in circles on the table.

Finally Madelyn says, “See that guy over there doing the crossword?”

He glances at the man. The man is staring up at a spot on the ceiling and chewing the edge of his pen.

“He comes in every Thursday and won’t leave until he finishes the whole puzzle,” she says. “We tried to kick him out once, but he got all crazy and said he only had two more words to go. So we let him stay.”

“No kidding?” Patrick looks again at the man, whose gray hair, thin and greasy, falls into his eyes. He takes the pen out of his mouth and scribbles on the page.

“No kidding,” she says.

They both laugh then and the tension between them dissipates. She tells him more things about the diner: that the other man, the one at the counter, comes in every night and always eats his BLT from the edges in, so that the sandwich is always kept a perfect square; that two of the male cooks were lovers; that a janitor who worked here once pissed in the mop bucket and used it to clean the floor, and they had to close the whole place down for two days to get rid of the smell. She leans in closer as she talks, and every time she says something new she touches his arm lightly, almost desperately.

Eventually the conversation quiets down and in the lull he glimpses the clock on the wall. The chipped hour hand pushes past six. Both men in the diner have left, the one
with the crossword puzzle winking at Patrick on his way out. Teresa would be home in an hour.

“I should head home,” he says.

“Right,” Madelyn said.

Patrick stands up and rests against the edge of the table. Madelyn stays in her seat.

“How much for the coffee?” he asks.

“It’s on the house. Consider it payment for the company.”

They exchange smiles and he leaves her a generous tip. As he turns to go, Madelyn reaches out suddenly and tugs at his jacket sleeve.

“Wait,” she says. “There’s this place down the street from here. It’s a bar, but it’s got live blues music and pretty cheap drinks. If you’re not busy, maybe you’d like to go there?”

Perhaps there would have been a time when he would have said yes or wondered what it would be like to have sex with her. He would have imagined how it would go. They would drive to the bar in separate cars, knowing that most likely this would be a one-time thing and he would leave in the morning. The bar would be hot and pungent with the smell of stale smoke and alcohol, the music pounding and energetic. They would have a few drinks, nothing hard, just enough to get a little drunk. Then they’d go back to Madelyn’s place and fuck; or, maybe he would imagine them going back to the diner after it had closed and do it in one of the booths, their bodies dripping wet and sticking to the plastic bench lining, rocking in perfect rhythm. He feels none of that now.
“No,” he says. “I’ve got a wife waiting at home for me.” For a moment he pauses, and then adds, “We have a baby.” He doesn’t know why he says it. “A newborn.”

Madelyn manages a tired smile, and Patrick wonders then if she isn’t older than he had originally thought. “They’re sweet at that age. Aren’t they?” she said.

“Yes,” he says. “They are.”

* 

The next morning, while Patrick is still asleep, Teresa comes into the bedroom.

“Get up,” she says. She walks around the bed and flips the light switch. Reflexively, Patrick puts up a hand to shield his eyes.

“What the hell time is it?” he says. The morning is still dark.

“Get up, Patrick. Take off your clothes and come downstairs.” Teresa walks back across the room and out the door.

Still partly drunk off sleep, Patrick blinks his eyes and tries to get a bearing on his surroundings. He think he might be dreaming. Teresa sounds angry. Perhaps she has not forgiven him. He does it anyway, strips off his clothes and slips into his bathrobe, and heads downstairs, stopping once in the bathroom to splash cold water on his face. He isn’t sure if he should be prepared for sex or for a fight, as either one seems possible at this point.

But when he gets downstairs, it is clear that Teresa doesn’t plan on doing either. She is sitting cross-legged on the living room floor, her sketch pad laid out in front of her, pieces of charcoal and an eraser scattered beside her. Her hair is pinned up out of her
face, and she has on a pair of sweatpants and another of Patrick’s T-shirts. She leans over the charcoal and studies them.

He walks over to her. “Funny,” he says, thinking she may be joking, but when she looks up it is clear that she isn’t.

Her eyes are as large and round and clear as he’s ever seen them. “Bring that stool over here,” she says. “And you can lose the robe.”

He grabs the stool, the one in front of Teresa’s easel, and drags it across the living room to where she is sitting, filing down a piece of charcoal, the shavings collecting in a plastic cup. She sets the charcoal aside and glances up at him questioningly, and they exchange a long stare.

“Patrick?”

“Yes?”

“The robe?”

“Oh. Right.” He looks down at himself. The belt of the robe is still fastened tightly around his waist. Gently he tugs at the knot. The robe slackens, exposing his bare chest. Never before has he felt self-conscious in front of Teresa, not the first time she saw him naked (by accident on their first date, after he had stepped out of the shower and into the hallway, only to find her waiting to use the bathroom), not on their honeymoon, not even the times he has peed in front of her. But now, his only thought is to somehow delay the disrobing, and so he fumbles awkwardly with the knot, saying, “Jeez…this knot. You know? It’s really…”
He can’t stall forever, he knows this, and eventually the knot comes undone and the flaps of the robe fall away and he is naked. He slouches, noting his bad posture and how his stomach is beginning to bulge a little, folding in rolls when he bends over further. His chest has lost some of its definition from his youth. Two pink stretch marks, pulled tight like scar tissue, mark either side of his stomach, indicating where he has gained weight over the years. Down further, his legs, thin and wiry, bow in at the knees. He doesn’t even bother looking at his penis.

He says, “Guess I should start working out again.”

Teresa says, “Pose.”

Again he stands there like an idiot, or like a child who has been reprimanded for something he doesn’t understand. Pose how? He crosses his arms at his chest, then uncrosses them uncertainly. He thinks of fashion models, with their chiseled abs and sculpted biceps and sharply defined jaw lines, and the stances they take in photographs. Sensing his uneasiness, Teresa says, “It doesn’t matter. These are gesture poses, so you’ll only hold them for about fifteen seconds.”

“Oh. Okay,” he says, and then shifts his weight to one leg and hooks one arm behind his back and leaves the other arm dangling at his side.

“Good,” Teresa says, and her hands begin to move across the paper. “The idea here is to work quickly, to capture motion, because a body is fluid, moving, even when it is still. Switch poses.”

Patrick brings up the dangling arm and rests it behind his head, nervously eyeing the open window.
Teresa is still talking. “You start by finding the body’s curve. That’s the spine. Then you draw the head and the limbs, the shapes of the muscles, just the general outline. You don’t worry about the details until later. Okay, now stick your left foot out a bit and put your hands on your hips.”

Teresa draws him in as many poses as he can think of, standing, sitting, lying down, her hands all the while moving with the skill and dexterity of an experienced pianist. She draws until the day blossoms full and the sun lights the room and the industrialized sounds of lawnmowers and leaf blowers join the dying autumn wind and faint birdcalls and beating locusts. At one point, a man walks by and stops, peers in the window and sees Patrick. Patrick smiles and waves to him. He and Teresa move on to longer poses that he holds for ten, fifteen, sometimes twenty minutes. Teresa fills up one sketchbook and then another. She sketches until his muscles ache and his body stiffens and he feels as though he might be locked into a pose forever.

When it is over, both their bodies dripped with sweat. Charcoal smears dot Teresa’s arms and face, black stains her soaked shirt. Sheets of paper clutter the floor around them and in the space between them. Exhausted, still naked, Patrick goes and sits beside Teresa, who is sitting with her back against the couch, eyes closed. Teresa turns her head toward him but keeps her eyes shut, and her breath is cool against his bare skin. She opens her eyes and looks at him, perhaps waiting for him to speak. He says nothing, and she brings her knees up to her chest, hugging them with both arms. Patrick reaches up and grabs a quilt from off the sofa, draping it around his shoulders, pulling the ends tight across his chest. They sit there together for a while, neither of them speaking, and
when Patrick finally begins to collect the sheets of paper around them, Teresa does not
get up to help him.

*

Teresa comes home from her class, her supply box gripped tightly in one hand
and her large sketch pad tucked awkwardly beneath the opposite arm. She struggles at the
doors, propping it open with her foot, and when Patrick hears her call for help, he walks
out of the kitchen and into the foyer and holds open the door for her.

“Thanks,” she says. She drops the sketch pad and supply box on the washing
machine next to the door. There is a load of clothes in the washer, and the pencils and
charcoal inside the supply box rattle with the vibrations of the machine. A few loose
sheets of paper slip out of the sketch pad and float to the floor. Teresa bends over to pick
them up, and Patrick heads back into the kitchen, sitting down at the table. Teresa joins
him, and he does not look at her. He flips through the newspaper and sips a glass of wine,
but she is sitting so close that they are almost touching, and he can smell her, a mix of
Teresa’s lilac-scented soap and something like crayon wax.

“Do you want to see them?” she asks.

She means the nude drawings, the ones of her. That is where she has been, and
Patrick knows this. He does not want to see them, or even acknowledge them, but he
agrees and Teresa disappears into the foyer and then returns, carrying a bundle of papers
pressed between two large pieces of cardboard. She spreads them out on the island’s
surface.

“Come over here,” she says. “There’s better lighting over here.”
Patrick walks over to the drawings. Under the kitchen light, the sketches are sharp and clear, the various shades of black and gray distinct. Patrick is impressed by the quality of the work—even the least remarkable sketches display an obvious level of skill and attention to detail—but there is something about them that strikes him as odd.

“These drawings make you look a bit rounder than you are,” he says.

“That’s because I am pregnant.”

Patrick does not look up from the drawings. They really are beautiful, the best of them, he thinks, and for a moment he is glad that she did it.

“When did you find out?” he asks.

“Five months ago,” she says. “Five months, and you never noticed.”

He can see it now, the little bulge sticking out beneath her breasts. He looks at her stomach, and Teresa pulls her T-shirt tight across her waist, the bump becoming more defined. He cannot imagine not noticing it before. He wants to reach out and touch it, to rub his hands over it and feel what is there, but before he can Teresa releases the shirt so that it hangs limp again and Patrick traces his finger over the drawings, following the dark lines of charcoal pressed deep into the paper.
BURY ME HERE

You can still see it, indented like an impact crater, the place where John punched the wall and broke his hand. Before that, I had never seen him punch anything. There are rounded grooves, mini-craters inside the big crater, the place where his knuckles hit. The vermillion paint is cracked and flaking, exposing the white plaster underneath. The whole spot is brittle and crumbly, like pie crust, and if you look closely, you can see flecks of dried blood. I kept it there, even after John left. I kept it even when my father came over with a bucket of plaster and a can of fresh paint and said, “Please, Melanie. Fifteen minutes. That’s all I need.” I told him no, to leave it alone, that you don’t cover up the marks someone leaves on your life.

* 

John and I lived together, even though we weren’t married, which was something in our small town. We lived in the house my parents had given me when, in their mid-50s, they retired early and bought a lakeside condo. It was the house I grew up in. The house was in the country, disconnected from the main part of town, separated by a mile of cornfields. In the front yard there were willow trees that dropped their spindly branches in the fall and during summer thunderstorms. In the back there was a fire pit lined with bricks, and a deck surrounded by hyacinths and day lilies. John and I bought a hammock, one that hung suspended between the two ends of a crescent-shaped pole. John put it together himself. He was good with his hands, supported me by doing construction work while I went to school.

“We never use the hammock,” I told him.
“But we could use it,” he said. “It’s there if we want it. That’s the point.”

*

There was a dog down the road, a Shepherd/Rottweiler mix, with a square face and hard jaws and great, unblinking eyes, one brown and the other blue. They were mesmerizing to look at, hypnotic, but you knew better than to look directly at them, and the only time I ever did was when I was lying on my back in a ditch, with my arm clamped between the dog’s teeth.

The dog’s name was Hobbes. The owner, Mr. Purham, worked at the hardware store, the night shift mostly. John and I bought things from him—wood, nails, a table saw once, supplies we needed to fix up the house. Mr. Purham was wearing the same dusty flannel shirt and faded jeans almost every time I saw him. He had been a farmer, owned a few hundred acres, but stopped when he saw how he lagged in the fields, how much more efficient his sons had become at the work. His gray hair was sparse and slicked back, his fingers permanently dirt-stained. One night at the store, I asked him if he named Hobbes after the comic strip. He looked at me and said, “What comic strip?”

*

I heard it from my mom all the time. Once at Thanksgiving, from across the dinner table, in front of everyone, she said to me and John, “I don’t know why you two don’t get married.” Sometimes my mom bakes cookies and then throws them away before anyone can eat them, just to remember what they smell like.

I felt the back of my neck get hot, my face flushed, and I picked at the heap of mashed potatoes on my plate. Heads around the table raised, some in mid-chew. But John
smiled broadly, showed them his clean white teeth. His course blonde hair fell like strands of frayed rope across his forehead. He held up his hands.

“I keep asking,” he said. “But I never get an answer.”

He pulled me up against him with one arm and nuzzled his chin into my hair, while the people around the table laughed.

It wasn’t true. He never asked me to marry him, but I guess that wasn’t the point.

*

The day that Hobbes got hold of me, tore at my arm with his teeth, there was a breeze that swept through the cornfields, the stalks swaying back and forth, the leaves rustling. It was summer. John and I biked out to the cemetery a couple of miles from the house. On the way there, we passed Mr. Purham’s—there was no other way to the cemetery—but Hobbes wasn’t out. The cemetery was on a hill, and John and I would picnic there sometimes in the field beyond the cemetery’s edge.

Before we ate, John and I laid our bikes in the grass and walked among the rows of graves. The cemetery was overgrown and untended, no longer used, with weeds crowding the stone markers. The tombstones themselves were old and crumbling, the engravings smoothed down by wind and rain into barely discernable bumps and ridges. Most of them were from the 1800s and early 1900s, with none of them dated later than the 1950s. I gathered that was when the city must have opened the cemetery on the other side of town, the one with the wrought-iron fence around the perimeter.

“Look at this one,” John said. His hands were stuffed into his short pockets, white T-shirt clinging to his torso. “Dead in eighteen sixty-three. Nineteen years old.”
I hooked my arm into his and leaned into him, rested my against his arm. “Civil War?” I said.

“Probably.” John wiped his forehead on his sleeve and then stood still, staring down at the tombstone. “The body probably isn’t even here,” he said. “I bet it’s buried in some ditch somewhere, out on some battlefield. Can you believe that?”

I told him I could.

*

When we were done looking at all the graves, John spread out a cloth in the clearing at the edge of the cemetery. From my backpack I pulled two plates and fixed us ham and cheese sandwiches. We drank the lemonade we had poured into used water bottles. For most of the meal, we ate in silence, listening to the light breeze and the sound of the occasional passing vehicle.

Then John said suddenly, “I want you to bury me here.”

I put down my sandwich and glanced up at him. He wasn’t looking at me. He sat cross-legged, staring out over the cemetery. I thought perhaps he was still thinking about the soldier.

“I mean, when we’re old and I die,” he said. He took a bite of his sandwich.

“What makes you so sure you’ll die first?” I asked, to humor him. I had read an article in a magazine about how women lived longer than men, and how married men tended to live longer than single men because they had a wife to tell them when to go to the doctor. Statistically speaking, I did have a better chance.
“Sometimes you just know things,” John said. “You’ll outlast me, in the end. But I’d like to be buried over there, maybe near the bottom of the hill, by the entrance. I think that would be nice.”

I didn’t want to tell him that cemetery was likely out of commission, that when he died, he would probably wind up somewhere else.

“Do you love me?” he said.

The question caught me off guard. “You know I do,” I said.

“Let me hear you say it.”

“I love you.”

He smiled, leaned over and hugged me with both arms. He forced me into his chest and we rocked, together, from side to side on the cloth. Then he let me go. I picked up my sandwich and began to eat, and John, without saying anything more, did the same.

Afterward, John and I started home, the backpack slung over my shoulder; John had carried it on the ride over, and now I was carrying it back. That was the agreement. For the first mile the ride was easy and leisurely, with John and I making small talk about his work and my school. As we drew closer to the Purham house, however, the conversation died down, faded into quiet.

What our silence signified was preparation for the rush past the Purham house, the mad expenditure of energy to get past as quickly as we could. I had been doing this since I was a teenager. Hobbes had been around forever, it seemed, at least for ten years, ever since I was thirteen. My friends and I would pedal slowly until we reached the bend in the road before the Purham house, and then our adrenaline would kick in, make our legs
work faster than seemed possible, pushing us at enormous speeds past the yard where
Hobbes stalked. Even then, not much older than a puppy, he had seemed intimidating. He
would barrel out to the edge of the yard, never barking, mouth closed, saliva dangling
from his jaws. Mr. Purham always kept him on a chain looped around the trunk of a great
oak tree, so there was no real danger as long as you stayed out of the yard. It was like
being at the zoo, watching a lion pace back and forth in its cage. You knew that you were
safe, that it could not get out—how could it?—but there was still the thrill you felt at
being so close to something so dangerous. John and I had taken this ritual and shaped it
into something based less obviously on fear and more on competition; it was like a race,
see who could win, with the familiar sense of danger being the driving, hidden force
behind it.

I don’t remember how it happened. I like to think that it was the backpack on my
shoulders, or maybe the wind, some strange shift of balance that had nothing to do with
me. Whatever it was, I found myself lying in the ditch. The bike lay on its side a few feet
away in the road, tires still spinning. Then I turned my head and saw Hobbes tearing
toward me.

There wasn’t much pain, only a deepening sense of pressure, as if my arm was
gradually being crushed by a vice. I suppose my body was going into shock. But I could
see ligaments and tendons and bits of muscle tissue, and I could see also that Hobbes
would not let go of me until he or I were dead. There was not much point in fighting. It
would do no good, only cost me energy. It was then that I stared at his eyes. I realized
that what he was doing was nothing more than his protective instincts. I had fallen into
his territory, and now I would have had to pay. I was a trespasser to him, nothing more.

I heard voices mixing together in the air, one male and one female, one shouting *Oh my God!* and the other yelling *Hobbes!* I craned my neck, twisted my body around as best I could, looking for where the voices were coming from. Instead, I saw John. He was straddling his bike, facing me, his body completely rigid. His hands still gripped the handlebars, and he seemed to be leaning in toward me, but he was not moving. I could not understand why he was not moving. *Do something,* I wanted to shout. Then I saw that he had his eyes shut tight, like a child.

Mr. Purham came outside and shot Hobbes in the head with his rifle. The gunshot startled John into action. He dropped his bike and ran over to where I was lying. The lifeless body of Hobbes crushed down on me, his blood mixing with mine, until John pushed him off.

“Jesus!” he said. He cradled my head in his hands. “Melanie? Can you hear me? Are you all right?”

What a question to ask me, I thought. Likely he did not know better. I wondered if I still had an arm.

Evidently I did, because John tore off his shirt and tied it around the wound in my arm. “It’s going to be okay,” he said.

Mr. Purham came running up next to me, apologizing. John snapped his head up and said to Mr. Purham, “Get your car.”
From then on I slid in and out of consciousness. I remember, though, that as we drove up to the hospital, a construction crew was digging a hole for a pond in front of the entrance. There seemed to be men in orange vests and hard hats everywhere; some were leaning on shovels, and some were walking around and shouting to the others. Giant excavators dug up the earth in enormous bucketfuls, with long metal backhoes like inverted scorpion tales.

I had lost a lot of blood, but I swear I saw then the pond in its completion: a shimmering, reflective pool, with slick black and orange fish swimming below, geese and mallards gliding across the water’s surface. A mother and her two children sat together at the pond’s edge, casting pieces of bread out into the water. Later, when it was actually finished, I found that the pond turned out pretty much the way I saw it, except that there are green, leafy shrubs and wide beds of flowers circling the water’s edge, so that you can’t ever get close to the things that live there.

*  

I woke up in a hospital bed, with wires taped to my chest and a plastic tube sticking out of one arm. I couldn’t feel the other one, but I blinked open my eyes and saw that it was still there, wrapped tightly in gauze that was stained brown and dripping red. I thought that I should call out to someone, or press a button somewhere, to get them to fix this leak in my arm, but I didn’t have the strength.

John was across the room, talking with the doctor. He was speaking rapidly, shifting his weight from one leg to the next. “I mean, there was nothing I could do, right? Putting the cloth around her arm, that didn’t hurt anything, did it?”
“You brought her here, which was the best thing you could do,” the doctor said. His voice was resonant and patient and made me feel sleepy. I wondered how long they had been at it.

My eyelids were thin buttonholes slits, barely opened. To them, it must have looked like I was asleep, but I could see them both well. John stood in front of the door, his bulky frame blocking the doctor’s exit. The doctor held a clipboard—my chart, probably—against his chest, protectively it seemed, as if John might suddenly reach out and snatch it. John glanced over at me.

“She looks pale,” he said. “I could give her some blood. Does she need blood? I think we’re the same type.”

“Right now, what she needs most is rest,” the doctor said.

The last thing I saw before I closed my eyes was John looking up at the ceiling light, shaking his head.

I fell asleep.

* 

I had been working about ten hours per week as a waitress at the diner in town, but I had to quit because I couldn’t hold the notepad and write at the same time, nor could I carry the tray and pick up the stand to set it on. The doctors had managed to save my arm, but I now had limited functionality: I could move it slightly at the elbow, and that was it. No wrist or hand control, aside from being able to lightly tap my fingers on a flat surface. The people at the diner were good people—the kind who waved at you as you drove past, or said hello in the supermarket—and didn’t fire me, but I could sense their
uneasiness in how they were always so eager to help me, how they always smiled now when they talked to me. I told them I found a paid internship, one that may lead to a full-time career, which wasn’t true. It was to make things easier, for them and for me.

“You got fired?” John asked, when I told him I wouldn’t be working at the diner anymore.

“Not fired,” I said. “I quit. I thought it’d be best if maybe I just concentrated on school work right now.”

He seemed to consider this. We were lying in bed, and he began tracing my shoulder with his finger, running it down along the side of my arm. I wanted him suddenly to stop touching me, and he must have sensed this, something in the way my muscles tensed. He withdrew his hand and let it fall onto his bare stomach.

“Yes, that’s probably best,” he said, and then, after a pause, “Are you sure those people at the diner didn’t make you quit? Because of your arm, I mean. Do you want me to go talk to them?”

I knew what this meant, that this was the end. I had known ever since the hospital, when John was talking to the doctor. Now that I had been hurt, he would never be able to get over his need to protect me, and it would damage our relationship beyond repair.

“No,” I said. “I don’t want you to do anything.”

He sat up in bed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It doesn’t mean anything. Just that I don’t want you to talk to them.”

He flung the covers off of him and swung his legs over the side of the bed. I watched him cover his face with hands and begin to cry. His sobs were deep moans. I
didn’t know what he expected me to do. Should I stroke his arm? Or wait until he was finished? It didn’t matter, because he stood up then, and that is when he punched the wall. I had never seen him do anything like that before. The force sent waves of vibrations rolling through the walls. Almost immediately after, he recoiled, and held his hand against his stomach. I thought that maybe he had sought out to prove something by punching the wall, only it had backfired. I was surprised by the amount of sympathy and embarrassment I felt for him.

He sat down on the bed. When enough time had elapsed—a minute or two—that I thought he had calmed down, I asked to see his hand. He didn’t offer any resistance. He swiveled around and extended his arm. I took his hand and rested it on my palm.

“Can you move it?” I asked.

He tried to move his fingers. “Not really,” he said.

“It’s probably broken. We should take you to the emergency room.”

“Not tonight.” He flicked off the bedside lamp and reclined back against the headboard, on top of the covers. “I don’t want to do anything tonight. Maybe in the morning.” He closed his eyes and mentioned sleep.
TEATRO DE ESPECTÁCULOS

They come shuffling into the *Teatro de Espectáculos*, a legion of vacationers and honeymoons dressed in eveningware or beachware, men in khaki slacks and collared shirts unbuttoned at the neck and the women wearing linen sundresses or floralprinted wraps with matching bikini tops. They come from all areas of the resort, the ones from the beach carrying the scent of seasalt and those from the restaurants smelling of crab and lobster. They settle easily into their seats, wicker chairs arranged in pairs and padded with soft cushions and beside each pairing an oak end table on which many of them set their drinks. They have come here to see the knife thrower.

Inside the theater, merengue music thumps from the loudspeakers, all tambora slaps and accordion bursts. The announcer takes the stage. His long black hair is held back behind his ears and he wears white pants that hug his slender legs and flare out toward the ankles and his hips sway in rhythm with the music. He calls out something in Spanish and two darkskinned men bound onto the stage. One is tall and skeletal and costumed in a onepiece clown suit. He picks up three wooden batons from the stage floor and begins to juggle. The other man is short and muscular and barechested and he wears loosefitting purple pants that shine and glimmer underneath the hot stagelights. Three knives are tucked into his waistband, the blades thick and exposed and ominous looking. Both men’s faces are painted elaborately, streaked with colors and garishly flecked with sparkles, exaggerated circus masks that distort the true shapes of their mouths and eyes. The crowd shifts its gaze between the knife thrower and the juggler and one man raises his hand and calls for a drink.
Outside the theater vendors from the nearby villages have set up their stands along the broad covered walkway that leads from the resort lobby to the theater. Rows of wooden statutes and decorative jewelry and all manner of native ornaments sit atop the stands. Hoping to catch the foot traffic. All the vendors are dressed alike, black pants and white shirts with blue palm trees. They call out in Spanish and English, gesturing at their wares and some waving their goods in front of the passersby. One vendor catches a middle-aged couple on their way into the theater. He holds up a necklace of small blue stones that sparkle warmly in the fading twilight.

“Un regalo,” he says to the woman. “A gift for you.”

The vendor dangles the necklace in front of the woman and gives it a rattle but the woman shakes her head.

“No thank you,” she says.

“Por favor?” says the vendor. “Please? Here. You take it. No charge.”

The woman turns and looks at her husband who shrugs and flaps his shirt to cool off, all the while watching the vendor’s hands. The vendor twirls his finger to get the woman to turn around. He unfastens the clasp and drapes the necklace around the woman in a graceful veronica and then he winks at the husband as if some secret knowledge has just passed between them and says, “And for you, my friend. Don’t think I forget about you.” He returns to his stand and begins to rummage through a pile of trinkets.

*
The theater is flat and level with the stage at one end and the entranceway at the other. Waitresses move soundlessly across its marbled floor. Along one wall is a bar and along the other high arched windows look out upon the great stone walkway with its decorative pools and fountains and rank tropical vegetation. The light at the bar is dim and angled, glinting off the rows of liquor bottles and illuminating the amber liquids inside them. Cool and elegant shadows cast across the faces of its patrons. Some turn to watch the show while the rest simply stare into their tumblers.

The ends of the juggler’s batons are now concentrated balls of fire and they leave pale orange streaks across the air of the darkened theater. A trio of dwarf stagehands similarly garbed in Tyrolean getups roll out a large slab of wood and they stand it on its end and fasten it to the stage with wire straps. Painted on the wooden slab is a bull’s-eye and there are three balloons clipped to its surface, together forming a downward triangle. When the stagehands are finished with their work they skitter about the knife thrower, tugging at his baggy pants and prodding at him with their tiny hands until finally the knife thrower pulls two of the daggers from his waistband and brandishes them menacingly. The dwarves scuttle away in a flash of movement like that of startled spiders. With the hafts of the two daggers cupped in his right hand, the knife thrower removes the third dagger from his waistband and then he begins to juggle, sidling up next to the juggler so that they are side by side and the arcs of the knives and the flaming batons begin to intersect at their zeniths, the stagelights dimming now and the naked blades gleaming sharply in the firelight, and down in front of the stage a group of
partygoers already drunk on daiquiris and piña coladas cheer excitedly and jab one another with their elbows.

* 

The wife kneels beside one of the lamps along the walkway to examine the stones more closely. She holds the necklace away from her chest with her thumb and looks down at it, each stone a perfect confection of swirling blues and whites, the colors of the ocean and the colors of the surf. The husband kneels alongside the wife who is still gazing at the stones.

“I think they’re fake,” he says.

“How can you tell?”

“I can’t. But the travel agent said—”

“Said what?”

“That we’d probably get swindled.”

“Even so. What a touching gesture.”

The husband stands up and glances about the resort. Near the pool a saxophonist and a pianist have struck up a somber tune. Soft melodies lifted on the breeze that the husband can only barely make out. They play in pink and purple and orange lamplight and they play to a small gathering of vacationers seated at round café tables, one couple dancing along the water’s edge.

* 

After the juggling act has concluded and the applause subsided the knife thrower points at the wooden slab and then at the juggler. The juggler leaps back in surprise and
points a bony finger at his own chest, his mouth an open black hole on his painted face. He shakes his head. The knife thrower lets his arm drop to his side and his shoulders droop briefly and then he again extends his arm toward the wooden slab with more force than before, but still the juggler shakes his head.

Some members of the crowd begin to call out for the juggler to stand against the slab and one of the drunken partygoers shouts out *coward* and then turns to gauge his friends’ reactions. The juggler begins to speak but it is unclear to whom for none can hear him over the music. Now the knife thrower walks over to the juggler and gives him a little shove toward the slab but the juggler drops to his knees and folds his hands together at his chest as if some supplicant to those before him and continues with his soundless jabber. The knife thrower crosses his arms and taps his toe in mock impatience. Those in front of the stage jeer him and when the announcer finally asks what should be done all within the theater shout out in their own language for the juggler to stand as the target.

* 

When the vendor returns he is carrying a piece of cord which is threaded through a wooden pendant, a small carved figure representing some primitive conception of man, and this he hands to the husband.

“See?” he says. “I don’t forget you. Mi amigo.”

The husband takes the necklace and studies it for some time. The body of the carved figure small and squat and ashencolored and the head a shrunken globe upon which intricate grooves mark the surface like the roadways of some lost and ancient civilization. The husband slips it over his head and lets it hang there. He walks into the
yellow light of a nearby wall scone. Back at the stand the vendor is showing the wife with
great care each of the items he has for sale. The husband stands there for a minute and
then he removes the necklace and strolls back over to the vendor’s stand where he
discards the necklace back into the pile from which it came. If the vendor notices this he
does not mention it.

“Come now,” the vendor says to them. “What do you buy?”

The husband absently picks through a case of assorted jewelry. He picks up a
bracelet of magnetic gems and coils it up and then drops it back into the case. The vendor
drapes his arm across the wife’s shoulders and pulls a small white index card from his
pocket. The card says BOSS in capital letters and the vendor points to this gravely and
then to the wife.

“This is you,” he says. He points again to the index card. “You are boss. Sí?”

The wife grins and rakes a hand through her hair and nods her head. “Whatever
you say,” she says. She walks back over to the stand with the vendor following. The
husband is holding a cutlass fitted into a decorative sheath and he takes it out and turns it
over in the light and resheathes it. The wife has taken his place at the jewelry case. She
fondles a pair of necklaces similar to the one around her neck except with bigger stones
and is conversing with the vendor. The husband joins them.

“These are beautiful with your eyes,” says the vendor. The wife is now holding a
pair of dangly earrings emerald in color and she lifts her head to look at the vendor. The
husband grunts.
“Very good price,” the vendor says. He looks at the husband. “What do you say? Is she not beautiful, your wife?”

The husband does not answer but the wife says, “Oh, these aren’t for me.” She turns to the husband and shows them the earrings.

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“We should bring some things back home.”

“I know.”

“We told the kids we’d bring them something back.”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

The sun has fallen below the sealeine and the last few faint streaks of orange and red shimmer across the ocean’s surface and fan out along the horizon up into the darkening vault of sky. It has cooled off and the palm trees about the resort begin to sway as the night breeze picks up. A lone bonfire has been erected on the beach and two of the hotel groundskeepers carry a piece of driftwood and chuck it onto the fire.

*

The juggler slogs over to the wooden slab and positions himself in the center of the bull’s-eye with his arms outstretched, his wrists fitted into the sloping metal hook designed for just that purpose. The two top balloons dangle freely beneath his armpits and the balloon at the tip of the downward triangle is clutched between the juggler’s legs. The merengue music picks up tempo and a vibrant shudder travels through the those
seated in the theater. The juggler shuts his eyes tightly as the stagelights begin to twirl and revolve spastically.

Dagger in hand, the knife thrower flicks his wrist slowly and suddenly the juggler opens his eyes and rushes out to the center of the stage where stands the knife thrower. The juggler waves his hands about and wags his fingers as if he now is the director of the show and something has gone awry. He looks out at the crowd and then turns his back to them, falling into the shadow of the knife thrower and whispering something to him. Periodically he swivels his neck and peeks out at the theatergoers who themselves turn to one another, trying to deduce what is happening on stage. Many of the patrons have left the bar and only a few remain, their bodies slumped over their drinks and their elbows resting on the lacquered countertop. The juggler and the knife thrower turn around to face the crowd. The juggler points to himself and shakes his head and then he points at the daggers tucked neatly into the knife thrower’s waistband and then sweeps his hand out over the people in the audience.

The juggler stands with his hand out to the audience and speaks some more to the knife thrower as if to reason with him. The knife thrower nods and together they leave the stage and rove about the audience, seeking out a participant. A spotlight follows the progress of each and the rest of the stagelights blink and pulse and when finally the juggler finds a tall blonde whose fair skin is reddened by sunburn the spotlight shines on them only and she laughs as he pulls her by the wrist toward the stage, turning back to wave at her friends with her one free hand.
Very gently the juggler places the girl’s wrists in the hooks and then he fastens them to the slab with a length of rope that he picks up off the stage. From his pocket he pulls out a strip of black cloth and uses it to blindfold the girl. At this the crowd cheers and the juggler leans into the girl and speaks to her. Then he steps aside and the knife thrower moves to the front of the stage and lines up his body with that of the girl and grips the first dagger.

The knife thrower readies his stance with his right leg slightly forward and his torso straight and rigid and the dagger held firmly in his outstretched hand. The music has quieted some but still the announcer dances at the side of the stage. The knife thrower draws a couple of deep breaths but suddenly he ducks his head and swings it from side to side and back at the audience and then he grins and tiptoes over to the girl, his knees bouncing up and down like a marionette’s, and he pops one of the top balloons with the knife. The girl’s legs shake and buckle at the sound of the balloon like a newly born colt’s but she quickly steadies herself.

Many in the crowd chuckle at the knife thrower’s antics but some turn to one another shaking their heads in disappointment and some still become vocal about their disapproval. A father in the audience calms his nervous child by patting her head and rubbing her back and telling her that it is just a show. At the bar an altercation has erupted between two men and the bartender steps out from behind the counter and leads one of the men to the door by the arm. The other man picks up his tumbler and knocks it back and sets it down on the counter. He stares at the other patrons as if to challenge them but none are looking.
The knife thrower returns to the front of the stage. Again he proceeds through his warmup routine, his broad forearm moving up and down in a chopping motion, but again he tiptoes over to the slab and pops the second of the two balloons. More and more the crowd calls out for him to throw the knife and their cries blend in with the music. The knife thrower shields his face as if afraid the crowd might throw something but nothing happens. Then the announcer dances his way to the center of the stage and holds up his hands to quiet them. He grins at them and continues dancing, knees bobbing and shoulders swaying, and brings a finer up to his lips and the crowd settles down.

The girl’s muscles tighten visibly at the sound of hushed crowd and her breathing has become shallow. She rolls her head from side to side as if the doing so might help her to see what is happening but of course it does not and finally she leans her head back against the slab. The knife thrower returns to the center of the stage and takes the last dagger from his waistband. The juggler moves behind him and begins to massage his shoulders but the knife thrower shrugs him off. He closes his eyes and opens them again and then raises his arm, the only sound now the chugging rhythms of the merengue music. The knife thrower cocks his arm back and then snaps it forward and the final balloon bursts leaving only the sight of the dagger jutting out of the wooden slab and it happens so fast it is as if the balloon has popped of its own accord and the dagger has been stuck there all along.

The announcer shouts “Aplausos!” and the knife thrower turns toward the crowd and raises his arms like he is about to perform some sort of benediction. The drunken partygoers become frenzied, shaking one another by the shoulders and waving their arms
and the men pumping their fists into the air. The juggler unties the girl and removes her blindfold and she steps forward smiling shyly at the audience to their great acclaim.

*  

A cluster of identical wooden statutes perhaps a foot length sit in front of the vendor’s stand. The wife picks up one of the statutes. She hands it to the husband for him to look over. It is of two naked figures embracing, one male and the other female, their bodies elongated and distorted, the male’s bent over the head of the female with his back strangely arched and the female kneeling beneath him and tilting her head up to his, so that together their bodies form a kind of circle through which one could pass a fist.

The wife says, “Do you like it?”

“For the kids?”

“No,” she says. “For us.”

“Right. For us. Yes, I do like it.”

All this time the vendor has been standing back behind his stand in the shadow of one of the pillars that supports the gabled roof and when he hears the husband and the wife talking of the statute he comes over to them and kindly takes the statute from the husband and rotates it in the light with great reverence as if this is the first time he has seen such a thing.

“You like this one,” he says.

“Yes,” the wife says. “How much?”

“Not much at all,” says the vendor. “Not expensive.”
The vendor picks up his calculator and punches in some numbers and then takes the wife aside to show her the figure on the screen. In preparation he takes out the BOSS index card and shows it to her and then he hands her the calculator.

“Are you kidding me?” she says. “You’re kidding me.”

With the onset of night the resort has come alive and the marketplace along the walkway now bustles with vacationers come to shop for souvenirs. Some peruse the vendor’s items and he leaves the husband and wife alone to discuss the price of the statue and to attend to his other customers. The walkway is densely packed and the husband and wife shoulder their way through the horde to the edge of a small copse just off the walkway behind the vendor’s stand.

“He has to be kidding me,” she says.

“Why? What did he ask?”

“I don’t believe this guy.”

“How much?” the husband asks.

“A hundred and thirty.”

“For that?”

“For that.”

“Is he kidding?”

The husband marches to the vendor and takes him by the arm. The vendor has been talking in Spanish with an elderly woman and she recoils a bit at the husband’s approach. The vendor holds up a finger and says, “Un momento.” Then he turns to the husband who signals for the wife.
“We’re not paying,” the husband says.

The vendor nods and holds up his hands in apology. “Okay, okay,” he says. “You are right. What can I say? You are serious people. Seventy-five.”

The wife gasps and the husband raises his eyebrows and turns to his wife in disbelief.

“Seventy-five?” he says. He says it again.

“Fifty, then. Okay?” says the vendor. “Okay,” and then without pausing he begins to bag the statue.

Before the vendor can slide the statue into the bag the husband reaches out and touches his hand.

“They sell this same statue in the hotel shops for twenty-five. Tops.”

The vendor bows his head and all traces of his friendly demeanor dissolve into a face that is tired and solemn and tense with agitation. “Thirty,” he says. “Give me thirty.”

“Ten,” says the husband.

The wife watches a group of children playing near a stone chapel with a heavy iron door. One of children has caught a lizard and she sets it down on the stone pathway. For a while the lizard remains stationary and when finally it darts into the grass the children shriek and giggle and hop about in the grass.

“I cannot do ten,” the vendor says. “Fifteen and no less. That is all.”

The husband starts to say twelve when suddenly the drunken partygoers tumble out of the theater in a deluge, the men tottering unsteadily on their heels and the women hanging onto each other for support, arms locked. They stumble into one another and the
shoppers on the walkway slink away from them and huddle together to make room. The other merchants eye the partygoers cautiously, keeping track of their movements, and some of them come to out to guard their stands. The partygoers fail to notice and the women fall into each other and then right themselves with slurred apologies.

They reach the vendor’s stand and immediately two of them take up the cutlasses still in their sheaths and begin to slash at one another playfully. They jape at each other as they fight and their taunts sound like the speech of cavemen in their incoherence. A few of the women stagger up to the jewelry case and one of them lurches forward at the old Spanish woman who then scurries away.

The vendor is still arguing with the husband and the wife over the statue and when he notices the partygoers ravaging his stand he jumps and quickly shakes the husband’s hand and bids them goodbye and then he rushes to the men who are sword fighting and pleads with them to stop but it is of no use for they poke at him with the cutlasses and go back to their battling, the women now trying on each of the various necklaces and bracelets and earrings and nodding at each other with earnest admiration, and amidst the chaos and the din of the partygoers the husband and wife decide that, yes, fifteen dollars is a fair price for such an interesting statue.
HAVE I SEEN YOU BEFORE?

I had been listening to the neighbors argue again when I fell asleep, passed out, whatever, on the couch. Edie came in late and without much noise but I woke up anyway. That was okay with me. I wanted to tell her about the neighbors. We’d been listening for them for nearly a week, but neither of us had heard anything until tonight. A Val Lewton flick was playing on the television, the sound muted. I rolled over and my arm thwacked against the leg of the coffee table.

“Oh, whoops,” she said, and giggled.

I had fallen asleep on my face, with my nose and chin pressed into the cushion. I worked my jaw back and forth like the Tin Man.

Edie started over to the shelf of glasses above the sink. Her walk became a dance, a slow-groove shuffle. She was the only graceful drunk I had known, and I’d known my share. She slid a champagne flute from the shelf and brought a bottle out of the fridge.

“I’ll have that,” I said. I stood up to go over to her and all the weight in my body dropped into my feet. I sat back down on the couch and turned off the movie.

“You’ve already got one,” she said.

She was right. I had picked it up from off of the coffee table and was holding it. There was still some left in the bottom of the glass, so I sloshed it around and gulped it down.

“My parents say hi,” she said.

“That’s a lie,” I said.
“Yes.” She came with the champagne flute in her hand and sat down beside me. Her breath smelled sweetly of two-fifty margaritas. She leaned her head against my shoulder and we sat there for a while in the dark, swaying softly. Neither of us had bothered to turn on any lights.

Then I said, “You should have heard them tonight.”

Edie lifted her head and sipped her champagne. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It was bad.” I thought about it for a while. “Probably the worst time ever.”

Their fights were becoming more and more infrequent, spaced out a week apart. Edie and I both took that as a sign that things were getting worse. Earlier on, we’d heard them nightly, or every other night, shouts and screams, sobs from both of them, and then quiet. As time went on, we heard them less, but their arguments were worse, and that’s how you knew when things were close to the end, when insults and accusations were all you had to say to each other.

“You should have heard them. She shouted something about a whore, and then he said something like, ‘You think she’s a whore? Take a look in the mirror.’ Then the door slammed and she left.”

“Has she come back?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been asleep.” I nudged my champagne flute with my index finger.

“Too bad.”
I tried to stand up again to refill my glass but thought better of it and sat back down. There was a breeze coming through the open window, just above the couch. I lay my head against the arm rest and propped my feet up on Edie’s legs. Her eyes were closed, the stem of her glass poised between her two fingers, wobbling treacherously on her thigh. I sat up and took it from her, setting it on the coffee table. She woke up.

“I was just thinking about that girl,” she said.

Our neighbors had a little girl, Madeline. I saw her sometimes waddling around the apartment foyer, shirtless, only in a diaper, or outside on the lawn stringing along a toy duck. Then her mother would come out and say, “Madeline,” dragging the little girl by her arm back into the apartment. Edie said it was as close to child abuse as you could come. Neither of us were able to have children.

“I can’t believe they talk like that in front of her,” Edie said, shaking her head. The light from the streetlamp outside our apartment made her blonde hair glow, like an angel.

“I think the grandmother has her tonight,” I said.

“Oh,” Edie said. “Do you think she’s the whore?”

“Yes, that might be,” I said. “I could definitely see that being the case.”

“I just don’t think it’s right,” Edie said sleepily. “To talk in front of a little girl like that.”

“I know,” I said. “I agree with you.”

I took Edie in my arms and leaned us both back on the couch. She sighed faintly and adjusted herself, her head on my chest. I could hear her breathing.
“One of us should say something,” she said, and then we both fell asleep.

*

I suppose Edie and I had our fair share of fights. What couple doesn’t? They were not usually about anything serious, but they could get heated. One of them was about the bathroom. We’d each had a few drinks and the blood between us was flowing.

“Hey, David,” she said, and I could see her from the kitchen, standing there at the bathroom sink, sipping her wine. “Take a look at this.”

I picked up my drink and peeked into the bathroom.

“It would please me greatly,” she said, “if you would alter the goddamn trajectory of your fucking spit.” She pointed at the white crusted flakes caked on the faucet, where I’d spit out toothpaste and missed the basin. She was compulsively clean, especially about things I could never seem to pay attention to.

I nodded at the faucet and took a drink. “Or maybe,” I said.

She left the bathroom and I followed her.

“Or maybe you could just wrap the faucet up in saran wrap—you could wrap all the faucets and all the dishes and all the shelves if you wanted, and then you could put down a layer on the floor—and then I could spit wherever the hell I wanted.”

I followed her down the hall into the small pantry off the kitchen. She grabbed a spray bottle of cleaner and a rag. Without looking at me, she walked out of the pantry and started back toward the bathroom.

“Or what if we got one of those funnels? Like at the dentist?” I said from the kitchen. I didn’t know why I was still talking. I didn’t want to. But I felt like there was a
point I should make, and that our dialogue was like algebra; you had to go through the equations to get to the solution. I poured another drink.

“That’s right,” she said, when she saw my new drink. “Keep at it. See how far it gets you.” She sprayed the cleaner on the faucet and began to rub furiously.

“I know how far it’ll get me,” I said, because I couldn’t think of anything else.

“The couch. That’s how far it will get you,” she said, pausing into between rubs.

“Oh yeah?” I held up my drink to the light. Then I threw it against the hallway wall. There was glass and ice on the floor, gin staining the carpet a darker version of itself.

“Yes, well done,” Edie said.

“Thanks,” I said, and then I picked up her wine glass and threw it against the wall too. “How was that?” I asked.

“Gosh,” Edie said. She had finished with the faucet and was spraying the cleaner over the mirror and the chrome that lined the mirror. She wiped with the rag. “You’re so strong, you could pitch for the majors.”

And on and on it would continue, until, from just beyond the thin plaster walls of our bathroom, came the voices of our neighbors, shrill and filled with emotion. And whatever Edie and I had been fighting about would suffocate and die, like a flame suddenly deprived of oxygen. And we would listen, we would listen for what felt like hours, for as long their argument lasted, our ears pressed hard against the walls, like their voices were some kind of higher authority come to give us greater perspective on our own lives.
*  

When the fighting stopped altogether, when the only thing we heard at night was the sound of each other’s voices, Edie thought it would be a good idea to ask the neighbors over for dinner. We thought that, in some way, we could help them. At the very least we could find out what was going on, and maybe convince them to get help for the sake of their daughter.

“You ask him,” she said. “You’re kind of friends with him.”

I knew his name was Rodney and I knew that he worked for the army, or the ROTC maybe, because once a letter addressed to him arrived in my mailbox, and I opened it up using hot steam and the resealed it, just to see. So I was not friends with him, not exactly, although I had passed him several times standing out on the steps to the apartment, shirtless, his round belly hanging over the tops of his khaki shorts, smoking a cigarette.

I saw him one day going into the apartment, sucking on a cigarette particularly hard and fast, and asked casually how he was doing.

“Pets, man,” he said. “You got any?”

“I had a cat once, before I moved here, but I ran it over with my truck.”

“Right on, brother,” he said. “Run those fuckers down.”

“It was an accident,” I said. But I didn’t have any brothers, though I’d always wanted one, and a strong wave of fondness for him passed over me just then. He stood there, exhaling smoke with enormous force, like he wanted it to stretch in a stream all the way across the parking lot and out onto the highway nearby.
“Do you have pets?” I said.

“Not for long,” he said. “That’s for goddamn sure. Don’t ever let them talk you into it, no matter how much they beg.”

“Pets?”

“Wives. Girlfriends. Women. Children. All they do is shit around the house and eat up all of your money,” he said.

He spoke rapidly, and I’d had a few at the hotel I owned before coming home, so I was having trouble following. “You mean children?”

He laughed then, like I’d said it on purpose, which relieved me. “Them too,” he said.

So when Edie told me to ask them over for dinner, I didn’t object. Rodney answered the door. He told me he thought I was the UPS man or something. I made an awkward joke about packages, and then, feeling stupid enough already, invited him over to dinner. He appeared suspicious but agreed nonetheless, said he and his wife would be grateful, and so we set a date for that Saturday.

*

Edie was smoking at the counter over the chicken and vegetables. Grated cheese lay in a pile on our cutting board. She was turning the chicken over in the skillet every few seconds and dragging on the cigarette.

“You shouldn’t smoke by the vegetables,” I told her. “You’ll give the onions cancer.”
I poured myself a drink and Edie passed me her cigarette. I turned on the vent in the kitchen to filter out some of the smoke.

I went into the living room to finish off the cigarette. I was thinking about the evening with our neighbors and was getting nervous. I blew smoke into our orchids on the windowsill, remembering that carbon dioxide was good for plants before I realized that what I was exhaling was likely carbon monoxide.

I went into the kitchen and rummaged under the sink, looking for the watering can, pushing Edie out of the way with my hip.

“Hey, now,” she said. “What are you doing?”

“I blew smoke into the orchids,” I said. “I thought it was good for them but then I remembered.”

“Remembered what? That you can’t blow fucking smoke into a pot of flowers and expect it to grow?” Edie said. I guessed she was feeling edgy too. She took a drink of her champagne but the glass was mostly full.

I didn’t say anything, but I found the silver watering tin and filled it with water from the tap. Then I mixed in what looked like blue sand, which I hoped was plant food. It had been sitting next to the watering can, in an unlabeled plastic ziplock.

I went back to the living room, holding my drink and the watering tin, and watered the orchids by way of an apology. I opened up the blinds to let in some sunlight but it was already evening, the sunlight fading. Then I kneeled down on the couch and hummed a tune for the orchids on the windowsill.
When I finished my drink and the song, I went back into the kitchen and refilled my glass. “Maybe this is a bad idea,” I said.

Edie raised her eyebrows. “You want to cancel? Be my guest. I’d just love to throw all this food away.”

She had done a fair amount of cooking today, more than she usually did. She had a saucepan full of vegetables and a skillet full of herbed chicken simmering on the stove, cups of strawberries and whipped cream on the counter, and a pie baking in the oven.

I opened up the saucepan of vegetables and picked out a stem of broccoli and started to chew. “I mean, what are we going to say? We’ve spent the last ten months eavesdropping on you and we’re wondering who’s the whore?”

Edie started chopping up green peppers to add to the mix of vegetables. “Stir the chicken, will you?”

Edie handed me a spoon and I stirred the chicken. I took a sip of my drink and Edie took a sip of hers.

“I just don’t want to go through the small talk, is all,” I said. “You know how it will be. Where are you from? I mean, where are you from originally? So, the stock market’s really been shit lately, hasn’t it?”

Edie didn’t say anything.

I went back to the living room and sat on the couch for twenty minutes, listening to the hiss and bubbling of the food in the kitchen, the sound of Edie chopping up vegetables or grating more cheese. I watched the clock. When it hit seven-thirty, there was a knock on the door.
“Jesus, that’s punctual,” I said.

“Shut up,” Edie said from the kitchen.

I answered the door and there they both were, each holding a box of half-eaten pie, one of them pecan and one of them pumpkin. I faked an enthusiastic greeting.

“Leftovers from another dinner party,” Rodney said. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Edie said.

I said, “That’s the only way I eat pie.”

I took the pies from them, held them against my chest with my left arm and shook their hands. Edie came from the kitchen, wiping her hands on the dish towel. She introduced herself, exchanged nice-to-meet-yous with them. Her name was Dana. Edie took the pies and set them in the fridge and then switched off the oven.

“Pour you guys a drink?” I offered.

“Christ, yes,” said Rodney. Dana glanced at him alarmingly. “Forgive my language, if you’re that kind of people. Hell of a day, I’ll tell you.”

“How does bourbon and ice sound?” I asked him.

“Fine with me,” he said. “No ice, though. I don’t take my drinks watered down.”

“My kind of man,” Edie said from the kitchen, and Dana laughed nervously. I poured the drink. His head had been recently shaved, but I noticed that he was losing his hair anyway. Dana was mousy and pale, but her skin was fine and free of wrinkles, like she had never before seen sunshine.

After I poured their drinks, and a fresh one for myself, we all sat at the dinner table and exchange pleasantries while Edie prepared the rest of dinner. I found out that
Dana worked part-time at a daycare, which explained some of the flecks of paint on her fingers. I told them about Edie and I, how long we’d been married, how long we’d lived in Southern Ohio, all the usual. By the time Edie told me that the salad was ready, I was feeling pretty drunk.

“You want to dish up the salad?” Edie said to me.

“Sure,” I said. I lumbered up from the table, steadying myself at the refrigerator. Edie whispered something to me, not loud enough for Dana and Rodney to hear, though I thought I glimpsed them exchanging looks.

I picked up the salad bowl from the table and turned around, a little quickly as it was, because soon the salad bowl lay broken into two pieces on the floor, lettuce and almonds and cranberries and dressing strewn about the kitchen tile.

“Damnit, David,” Edie said, bending over to pick it up.

“Oh oh,” I said. I staggered forward a bit and stooped over to pick up the remains.

“You’re stepping in it. You’re smearing it all over the floor,” Edie said.

I lifted up my foot. There was lettuce and vinaigrette pasted to the sole of my shoe. I slumped against the fridge and slid down to the floor. “Jesus,” I said. “Look at this mess.” I pushed my palm against the floor, right into a piece of glass. The glass worked its way into my palm and then blood began to drip in a steady stream onto the floor, mixing with the lettuce, blending in with the cranberries.

I gasped sharply, even though I didn’t really feel any pain.

“David,” Edie said, when she saw my palm. “Go,” she said. She threaded her arms beneath my armpits and slid me up the back of the fridge. “Run some water over it.”
“Can I help?” Dana asked. She stood up from the table uncertainly, her face scrunched together in concern. Rodney was shaking his head.

“No,” Edie said. “No, thank you. You finish your drinks. Please. There’s more lettuce and dressing in the fridge. Just give me a second.”

At the sink, I pulled the sliver of glass from my palm. A fresh spurt of blood erupted from my hand, and I panicked a little. “Edie!” I shouted, though she was right next to me on the floor. “Come look at this.” I glanced around the room, as if somebody there might know what to do. “I think it might be pretty bad.”

Edie stood up. “Put pressure on it,” she said. She snatched a dish towel from the counter and thrust it in my good hand. “Hold it over the cut.”

I was bleeding over our dishes, temporarily mesmerized by the flow of water over my hand, the coolness of it, the way the blood and water mixed and ran over the dishes and swirled down into the sink. Then I remembered the dish towel in my good hand and wrapped it around my other one. “Hey, Rodney,” I said jovially, trying to lighten the mood, “I don’t suppose they teach you first aid training in the army, huh?”

“Shut up, David,” Edie said.

I looked around. “Where’s my drink?”

Rodney stood up rather suddenly. I couldn’t tell if he was trembling, or if there was something wrong with my vision. It could have been both.

“I think we’d better come back another time,” he said.
Edie had managed to scoop most of the salad remains into the larger half of the broken bowl. “No, don’t go,” she said at first, but then she said, “I mean, yes, it might be better if you come back a little bit later. Maybe next Saturday?”

“We’ll see,” Rodney said. He slipped his hand under Dana’s elbow and escorted her to the door.

Edie stood there looking pathetic and defeated, her knees covered in lettuce and salad dressing, her shoulders slumped. I suppose we both looked pathetic. I was bleeding through the towel but I didn’t mind.


Edie opened the door for them and we watched them leave. I walked over to Edie and she took my palm in her hand. She unwrapped the towel, shook her head and sighed, and wrapped it again.

We could hear them talking outside our door. We pressed our ears against the wood, listening to their voices, listening to her say, “See? I told you. I told you what kind of people they were.”

Edie jerked her head suddenly from the door. “Listen here,” she said to the door. “Listen,” she said.
The waiting room in Zeingeldt’s clinic reminds Henry of an antiquated funeral parlor, all dark wood and paisley carpeting. It is not as crowded as he had imagined it would be. Currently it is only him and his father, and a petite receptionist who is gazing either at the glass window in front of her or the frosted dome of ceiling light just beyond it. This is only Henry’s second day at Zeingeldt’s Ranch for the Fantastically Afflicted, and he has yet to meet any of the other children. He wonders about them, what strange maladies they have, and hopes with shameful bitterness that they are worse off than he is, but does not see how such a thing could be possible.

A woman strolls into the waiting room, carting a small boy, five or six years old, in something like a giant fish tank. The tank is filled almost completely with water and has a filter like a normal fish tank would, and the boy sits cross-legged on the bottom, looking sheepishly at Henry, bubbles issuing from his mouth and rising up in gentle vertical streams. It is an uncomfortable situation; the woman looks at her son and whimpers softly.

Henry’s father puts down the dog-eared copy of *Sky and Telescope* he had been reading. He arches his eyebrows and elbows Henry. “Now there,” he says, “is a boy who is worse off than you.” He whistles a low note.

“At least he’s not shrinking into nothing.” So far, Henry has shrunken down to four feet. This is nearly a foot since his tenth birthday some eight months ago.

“At least you’re not in a fish tank,” Henry’s father says. He snaps the magazine and returns to his article: “Eta Carinae: Galactic Superstar.” The fish tank boy guides a
plastic green submarine along the pebbled bottom. Henry’s father closes the magazine again and leans over thoughtfully. “Do you see the look on that boy’s face, Henry? That’s the look of a boy who needs a friend. That’s you, Henry. You are that friend.” His father is nodding.

“He’s a freak,” Henry whispers. A sharp pang of guilt thuds in his chest. He hopes the boy’s mother isn’t listening.

“Would your mother want to hear you talking like that?” asks his father, and of course the answer is no, no she wouldn’t, but then she’s been dead for almost two years now.

Still, it gets to Henry, and it doesn’t help that the boy looks more and more to him like some sweetly bland goldfish, with his round eyes and smooth, blank face. When he gathers enough courage, he saunters over to the fish tank and gives the glass a tap.

“Hello!” Henry says. The boy looks up and grins, wide and goofy. “I’m Henry. Henry!” He speaks loudly, unsure if the boy can hear him through the aquarium.

The mother breaks in: “He can only breathe underwater!” she sobs, and wilts into the chair, a dehydrated flower shrinking into itself. She covers her face and makes soft crying noises, leaving Henry and the boy standing there, looking each other over stupidly.

Thankfully, a nurse opens the door to the backroom. “Henry Chevalier!” she calls. Henry waves goodbye to the boy and heads toward the door. The nurse looks like a man, looks, in fact, identical to the Book Mobile Man that used to come to Henry’s old school and sell books and play songs on his guitar to the children. Same softly rounded jaw, same thick quadriceps, same frizzy blond hair hanging down to her shoulders.
“Hi, Henry!” she says as approaches, in a bright voice that is the only thing keeping Henry convinced that she is not the Book Mobile Man. “How are we feeling today?”

Pretty damn lousy is what Henry thinks, but then it is a tricky question, one that makes Henry suspicious, because how would he know how she is feeling? He decides not to answer.

“I don’t suppose you’re related to Chuck the Book Mobile Man,” he says. “Like a sibling or a cousin, maybe?”

She gives him a look, one bushy eyebrow raised into a perfect upside down V.

Without answering, she invites Henry to step onto a scale. She measures his height and weight and scribbles the results onto a clipboard she has been carrying.

“Dr. Zeingeldt will be with you shortly,” she says, and shows him into the examination room, shutting the door loudly behind her.

The room is painted to look like an African veldt. A lion and lioness laze near a tuft of wild green shrubbery, while a giraffe, pink tongue lolling, nibbles at the leaves of a tree behind them. A rhinoceros and a group of zebras drink side by side at a water hole, some hyenas skulking in the shadowy background. A cluster of kangaroos in the corner of the room glance nervously, perhaps suspiciously, at the two lions, though it is the hyenas they should most likely be worried about.

This is, Henry notes, a wholly inaccurate representation of an African veldt. For one, there are no kangaroos in Africa, though Henry thinks they have a right to be suspicious, being so displaced as they are. He empathizes. Also, giraffes have black
tongues. Henry wants to mention all of this to Dr. Zeingeldt, but his father has taught him that it is impolite to correct the mistakes of strangers (also the elderly). And anyway, the place was probably painted for the troubled minds of younger, less fortunate children.

Dr. Zeingeldt turns out to be as old and serious as disease itself. Henry believes this is probably why he knows so much about sickness. He shuffles into the room, limbs skeletal beneath his white lab coat. The skin on his cheeks bunches up in wrinkles, two flesh-colored raisins beneath his gray eyes. His skin is that same foggy shade of gray, and, with his elongated nose, he reminds Henry of a small, sick baby elephant. He notices that there are no elephants on the African veldt.

“Hello, Henry,” Dr. Zeingeldt says. He sets a small leather brown bag down on the counter, next to the sink. Henry has never been to a doctor who specializes in fantastical illnesses, and he sweats lightly under the weight of what might be in that bag. But Dr. Zeingeldt only washes his ancient hands under the tap and then tells Henry to take his shirt off. Henry obliges and straightens up, stretching his four foot, eighty pound frame to its limit.

There is nothing even remotely fantastic about Dr. Zeingeldt’s examination. Deep breath in, now out, cough, once more please, open wide, say *aaahhh.*

“How does this feel?” he asks, lizard fingers on Henry’s ribcage.

“I dunno.”

“You don’t?”

“Feels fine, I guess. It doesn’t hurt or anything.”

“I see.”
Henry stares disinterestedly at a poster showing the progression of infected ear tubes. “Ear infections are gross,” he says.

Dr. Zeingeldt looks at the poster gravely. “You’re right, Henry. I’ll tell you, you don’t ever want an ear infection like that one there.” His voice is grim.

They continue to look at the picture, neither talking. The room fills with a sharp, expectant silence.

Finally, Henry says, “So I’m shrinking?”

“Exponentially.”

Henry knows this word from his father, who, when he was still teaching astrophysics at the university back home, explained to Henry the concept of exponents.

“Can you fix it?” Henry asks.

“Try this.” Dr. Zeingeldt removes a glass vial full of green liquid and holds it out. “One teaspoon a day. Absolutely no more. Your shrinking is serious, Henry, so you can understand how important it is that you follow my instructions.”

Henry nods. He does understand. His father tells him that he has been blessed with abnormal maturity. His mother, when she was alive used to tell him that he was “beyond his years.” Perhaps because she knew, in the way that mothers sometimes possess that hidden, psychic knowledge about their children, that he had so few of them to live. Henry takes the vial and tucks it into his pocket.

“Well, then,” Dr. Zeingeldt says. “If you should develop any side effects—scaly green skin, hair loss, hair growth, or semi-transparency—you let me know immediately. Okay?”
“Yes, sir,” Henry says. He hops down off the table. Dr. Zeingeldt produces a bad imitation of a smile and politely, hurriedly ushers Henry through the door.

On the way out of the waiting room, Henry bumps into a girl. When he begins to apologize, she gives him a shy, doe-eyed grin. She’s pretty cute. She doesn’t look like the kind of girl who belongs at Zeingeldt’s Ranch for the Fantastically Afflicted, aside from her long locks of ultrafine blue hair that stretch down her back and shimmer, reminding Henry of falling water, and even that seems more like some sort of miracle, inarguable proof of biology’s inherent creativity.

“How do you do,” Henry says. His voice croaks. He can’t stop looking at her hair.

The girl takes out a pad and pen. I’m Layla, she writes.

Henry squeaks out a perversion of his name, something like Heen-ree. He shakes her hand. It is soft and delicate, like glass.

The girl’s mother comes up behind her. She has a long, earnest face. “Layla’s voice is a natural soporific,” she explains to Henry. “That’s why she doesn’t talk. We don’t know where she gets it from.” She shrugs.

“I’m sure it’s lovely.” Henry blushes. Stupid.

The mother looks at him quizzically, then leads Layla into the clinic. They wave goodbye.

Henry’s encounter leads him to believe two things: 1) that perhaps staying at Zeingeldt’s ranch will not be as bad as he thought, and 2) that maybe girls do not have cooties after all. At least not all of them.

*
Henry knows that his father loves it out here. Zeingeldt’s ranch lies in the middle of the New Mexico desert. There is nothing but scrubland for miles in any direction, and, consequently, no light pollution to contend with the majestic night sky. The nights are black as space, the stars lit up like a dense cityscape. There is little moisture and zero cloud coverage, so every night is ideal for stargazing, which is exactly how Henry’s father spends most of his nights, perched on a stool, hunched over the telescope’s eyepiece.

“I was born looking up,” he tells Henry one night. And that is what he has been doing for the past two years, looking up, ever since Henry’s mother died. Ironic, Henry thinks, considering that Henry spends most of his time looking down, and alone in bed at nights, Henry can’t help but wonder if the world into which he’s headed, the microscopic, subatomic, looks anything like that vast expanse that gives his father so much comfort.

* 

On Thursdays and Saturdays, the children at Zeingeldt’s ranch work in the gardens, tending the plants and pulling weeds. How Zeingeldt was able to grow a garden in the New Mexico scrubland is more proof of his scientific prowess than any of the examinations he has performed on Henry.

Henry is paired with a thirteen-year-old centaur named Manny. Manny is bare-chested and impressive, maybe the most impressive creature Henry has ever seen. Glistening black hair covers his front legs and muscular hindquarters, and a mane of shaggy black hair drapes across his eyes. He is the only thirteen-year-old Henry knows
who has chest hair, a tight swath of it running along his sternum. They walk between the
tight rows of plants, eyes searching for pesky weeds.

“You get to meet the others yet?” Manny asks. His hooves leave deep impressions
in the soil.


“That woman is a loon,” Manny says, presumably referring to the mother. “Stay
away from her. But Fish Tank Boy is pleasant enough.”

“Doesn’t he have a real name?”

Manny shrugs. “I dunno. Probably, but the mom won’t ever say it. Too distraught
or something. The nurses don’t say it either, so we just call him Fish Tank Boy.”

“She is a loon,” Henry says. He bends down and pulls at a stubborn clump of
weeds. They won’t give, and Henry wonders if he’s losing his strength. Not that he had
much to begin with.

“Let me,” Manny says, and he kneels on his two front legs and yanks the clump
from its spot, with about as much effort as you would put into brushing a leaf off your
shoulder. They continue on like this in silence, Henry plucking out the smaller, thinner
weeds, Manny handling the larger clumps.

“So what are you here for?” Manny asks.

“I can’t stop shrinking,” Henry says.

Manny shakes his head. “Brutal, dude.”

“Yeah,” Henry says and kicks at the dirt.
Dr. Zeingeldt insists that all of the patients at the ranch eat lunch together. Manny introduces Henry to some of the others at the ranch: a girl named Franzie who has webbed feet and toes and glow in the dark eyes, and who is, by all accounts, an excellent swimmer; a furry boy named Simon who has a human for a mother and a bigfoot for a father. But the real allure of mealtime is that it provides Henry with an opportunity to know Layla.

And all the while Henry is shrinking. Three feet and three quarters, three feet and a quarter, two feet and three quarters. And all the while Dr. Zeingeldt gives Henry the glass vials of green solution, the taste and consistency slightly altered each time, evidence of Dr. Zeingeldt’s ineffective tweaking.

* 

“I hope you don’t get eaten by bugs!” Henry’s father says to him one morning. Henry looks up from his breakfast, donut glaze slathered across his lips. It is has been three days since he has seen his father, the only proof of his presence in the house being the locked bedroom door and the occasional odd clanking and scratching sounds emanating from his bedroom at the most random hours.

“Do bugs eat people?” Henry asks, worried.

“Some species. But you’ll be so small, there’s no telling! Best to be prepared, I say.”

He leaves the kitchen and retrieves the product of the last three days’ work.

It is a crude little house, assembled out of spare plastic model parts that have been melted together.
“Air tight!” Henry’s father, face illuminated with pride. “So that no bugs can get at you. I figure when you get down to about six inches, we’ll go ahead and put you in there.”

The house is maybe a foot and half high, relatively the same height as Henry.

“Won’t that be a little tight?” Henry asks.

“You’ll shrink into it.” His father chuckles. Something about his laugh is comforting. Henry’s glad to know that his father thinks he can handle the joke.

*

When he is six inches tall, Henry is placed into the house. They hold a goodbye party for him, held in the ranch’s dining hall, something with balloons and streamers and cards and well-wishes for his cosmic journey. They treat it as if Henry is leaving on a cruise ship, though the ship might as well be the Titanic, because the chances of him ever coming back home are decidedly slim, according to Dr. Zeingeldt’s assessment.

And Henry keeps on shrinking. For a while, his father sits by the house and reads him stories, his voice becoming more and more of an indistinguishable roar the further Henry shrinks.
They call us dancers but we don’t dance. Not anymore. Not after a carload of muscled frat boys chucked a cement brick at Jake Sherman, a nice, clean-cut high school dropout, right in the middle of his best Elvis impersonation. The brick clipped his thigh and sent him to the hospital with a fractured femur. Before the brick it’d been smaller, softer stuff—we’d been used to eggs, water balloons in the summer, snowballs in the winter. But not bricks. So now we just hold our signs for Don Brazani’s Famous Pizza and walk up and down along the sidewalk in front of Angel Hills’s only strip mall.

A thing like that, it’s enough to want to make you give up on the world.

It is almost 3:00 today, which means that I will see my son drive by with his friends on his way home from school. He is a senior at the high school, and I haven’t spoken to him in fifteen years. I am always hopeful for a wave. I see his hand, and then his arm, extend out of the passenger side window, first closed, and then I see his forearm flex up at the elbow. At this distance I usually don’t see the egg gripped in his hand, and every time, no many how many times it happens, I am always hopeful that my son will lift his fingers and wave at me.

Instead, he beams an egg. Sometimes, if the car is slow enough or if he is quick enough, he’ll get two off. About seventy percent of the time he manages to actually hit me, pretty good aim for an eighteen-year-old kid moving at thirty-five miles per hour, and I have to wonder whether or not he plays baseball.

Afterward, when I’m wiping yolk from my shirt with the old kitchen towel I keep in my pocket for these occasions, I am tempted to think that maybe he doesn’t recognize
or remember me, hasn’t the slightest clue who I am. But I know that isn’t true, because he never throws them at anybody else.

*   

Most days I show up to work early, and today, as usual, nobody is there yet. I slink against the back door and wait and watch some flies buzz around the dumpster, home to last night’s discarded pizzas. I wait until five minutes before ten, and then in pulls Don Brazani, the owner, whose real name is actually Donald Smith, and whose pizza has never been famous, not even around Angel Hills.

He parks his silver Benz across two parking spaces and gets out. He sees me there leaning against the door and asks me why the hell am I always here so early. I tell him I’m a go-getter. He unlocks the back door to the pizza shop and says well, then, why don’t I go get my sign. He is neither as fit nor as charming as he thinks.

I get my sign and go to work. The work is almost always boring, except for the brief minute when my son drives by, but since the construction firm laid me off it was all I could get. It pays well, though, and I get free lunches, and on Fridays Brazani lets us wear headphones, which helps the time pass more quickly.

Everything goes smoothly until around noon, just before lunch break, when up strolls this man I’ve never seen before and leans very casually against the stoplight post. By his clothes I peg him as a beggar, either homeless or out of work or newly disabled. He appears healthy, though. Not too thin. I note that his beard is long but well-trimmed. A little dirt is wedged under his fingernails and smeared on his hands. His clothes are tattered but, when I pass him, he smells nice, like sandalwood. I wonder if he’s faking.
But here’s the real problem: he’s got his own sign.

Brazani won’t like this, I think. To him, the sidewalk is ad space, like a billboard or commercial spot, except that he doesn’t have to pay for it. Another person showing up with their own sign is like encroachment upon his territory.

And, sure enough, when I tell him about it at lunch, he gets angry.

“Goddamn it,” Brazani says. “Goddamn it to hell.”

He leaves to go check it out and then he comes back five minutes later, face red.

“We look like jackasses,” he says. “It’s like opening a gourmet restaurant next to a soup kitchen.” He kicks the leg of the table, and when some of the pizza we’ve been eating falls on the floor, he tells the cook to clean it up.

He looks at me. “Can you get rid of him, Lionel? Do you think you can?” he says.

“What for?” I say. I am not keen on the idea of trying to scare off a homeless man.

“Have you not been listening to me,” he says.

I think about it for a while. “Why don’t we just give him some food or something.”

“Why don’t we turn ourselves into a soup kitchen?” he says. When I don’t answer, Brazani says, “Fine, pansy. I’ll look into it myself. Maybe there’s a legal statue against loitering or something. In the meantime, do what you can, okay?”

After lunch I saunter up to the homeless man and ask him how it’s going.

“Slow,” he says. “Boring.” I look down at his feet and notice that he’s got a couple of cans and a box of Captain Crunch, not bad for an hour or so.
“Tell me about it,” I say. And then we both stand there idling, listening to the traffic go by.

“All right,” I say, after a few minutes. “I’ll see you around.”

I know there are things I could do to make him go away. I could bully him, or annoy him, or threaten him with legal action, but what do I care? What business is it of mine what another man does? So I leave him there and go back to pacing the sidewalk, waiting for 3:00 to come.

* 

Now that it’s May, and the heavy rains have moved into the valley, I mow my lawn twice a week. My lawn is two squares of land, separated by a concrete sidewalk. Each piece is no more than twelve feet long and twelve feet wide, and in the center of one of the squares is a sweet birch, still young, that I took from a park upstate because it was dying there. On a good day it only takes me fifteen minutes to mow, but if I’ve learned anything from life, it’s to take care of what little it gives you.

I am outside mowing smaller and smaller circles around my sweet birch when I see Mrs. Hutchinson waddling across the road toward me. She is shouting something but I can’t hear her over the roar of the mower. In her arms she is carrying a small bundle, and though I can’t see it I have an idea what it is. I shut off the mower and wait for her to make it to my sidewalk.

“Got another dead one for you,” she says. This time it’s a dead raccoon. She holds out the dead raccoon, wrapped in one of her old beach towels, with great care, and I take it like a live baby.
Mrs. Hutchinson is old and saggy. The neighborhood kids scream out “Fatty Hutch!” when they see her, and I chase them away with whatever yard implement I have handy. About once a week she comes to me with some dead animal scavenged from the neighborhood or surrounding woods and together we bury it in the empty plot behind my backyard. She is my closest friend.

“Flung himself right out of a tree and onto the pavement,” she says. “Kaput. Don’t know why he’d do such a thing.”

“Me either,” I say.

I hand her back the raccoon. Then I go to the garage and fish out my shovel, and together Mrs. Hutchinson and I go around back to the empty plot.

The plot now looks like a miniature version of Arlington. Like she has for every other animal we’ve buried, Mrs. Hutchinson has fashioned a small cross out of two plastic sticks and some twine. The take up almost a quarter of the plot, the rows neat and clean. The mound from where we buried the last animal—a plump robin that flew into Mrs. Hutchinson’s window and fell dead in her lilac bushes—is still there, in a soft heap.

We find a spot next to the robin and I start digging.

“Saw you out there when I went to the grocery,” Mrs. Hutchinson says. “Did you see me drive by?”

“I was probably preoccupied with that homeless man.”

“Such a sad, sad thing,” Mrs. Hutchinson says.

Mrs. Hutchinson is the only person I’ve told about my son and what happened the last time I saw him. He was three years old then, and my ex-wife, Miranda, had given
him to me for the day, which meant that it was either a Wednesday or a Saturday. It was summer, hot and humid. Later, they told me that the temperature had peaked around ninety-four that day. Inside the car, even with the windows cracked to let the air in, it was over a hundred.

I was taking Derek out to eat, probably to McDonald’s so he could play in the children’s area, but I had to make a stop first. I turned into an out-of-service gas station and pulled the car around back, so that it would be shielded from the road. That’s when I cracked the windows and buckled Derek in to keep him safe from wandering off, and told him that Daddy would be right back, would be gone for just a minute.

I got out and hopped the fence that separated the gas station from the bordering neighborhood. The neighborhood was run down, the houses crumbling and infested with addicts. My man was waiting for me outside his house at the end of the block. Resting in his hand was a tight square package wrapped in tin foil, which I wanted very much. And when he invited me in to try some of it, I couldn’t say no.

When I finally came out of the house it was as if the day had exploded into night, the lights from the street lamps soft but intense, like lights from heaven. Even the lights from the police cars and the ambulance, which had gathered around my car at the service station, astonished me with their vividness and their beauty. Miranda’s face appeared grandly, majestically tragic, and my son lying there in the ambulance with an IV hooked into his arm looked less to me like a sick, heat-struck child, as he did some kind of fallen cherub.
I dig a hole about three feet deep for the raccoon. “It’ll be a sadder story if he gets me fired,” I say to Mrs. Hutchinson. “Brazani thinks it’s my responsibility to get rid of him.”

“That man,” Mrs. Hutchinson says, “is a pig.”

When I finish digging the hole, Mrs. Hutchinson very gently lays the raccoon, still wrapped in the towel, into the grave. I shovel the dirt back into the hole and Mrs. Hutchinson rams the cross into the ground.

Mrs. Hutchinson assures me that my son couldn’t possibly remember that day. Children rarely recall things that far back, she says. But I know better. I know he remembers, because, I think, all of that hate has to come from somewhere.

*

Before I go to work, I get up and make breakfast and read the paper. I see, in the local section, that the high school graduation is coming up—my son’s graduating class—and before I even really think about it I resign myself to go.

When I get to work I see the environmentalists. I see them even before I pull into the lot, before I’m even within one hundred yards of the strip mall. They wear green spandex suits with leaves taped to their bodies. It’s a man and a woman. The man holds a sign that says HELP US BUILD A MORE HUMANE ZOO and the woman has one that says HONK IF YOU LOVE MOTHER NATURE AND ALL OF HER CREATURES. They jump up and down maniacally. They wiggle their hips. They take turns running sprints up and down the sidewalk. I know already that I cannot possibly compete with their energy. Many cars honk when they go by. I hate them immediately.
I don’t even get to the building when Brazani flings the door open and says, “My office.”

In his office Brazani has a treadmill and five sets of hand grips of varying resistance. He picks up the purple hand grips, which I judge to be about the second thickest, and squeezes. I sit down in the folding chair in front of his desk.

“What do you know the key to advertising?” he says to me, working his hand grip.

“Catchiness?” I say.

“Visibility.” Brazani stands up and walks over to a picture of himself and on a boat, holding up a thirty-five pound catfish. Brazani’s name, the size of the fish, and the date that he caught it are all listed on a gold plate beneath the frame.

“Right,” I say. “You want me to be more visible.”

“As it is, I might as well advertise on a billboard in the middle of the fucking woods.” Brazani rubs his eyes. “Too many goddamn people with signs,” he says. “You’d be surprised to learn how much of our business comes from walk-ins. People who are driving home from work or from the dentist, or just out driving period, see our sign and think, ‘A pizza sounds pretty good right now.’ We’ve done studies on this, Lionel. But now that ad space—that’s you—has become saturated. And I don’t want to get ahead of ourselves here, but let me say that if this keeps up, we’re going to have to move to a different marketing strategy.”

Meaning I’m out, I think, but I don’t say it. I take a deep breath.

Brazani sets his hand grip on the desk and scoots forward. “I can see by the look on your face that we’re operating on the same page here,” he says. “Now I don’t want
things to come to that. I don’t. But if we don’t figure out a way to get these clowns out of our ad space, I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

“Yes,” I say. “I see what you mean.”

“So get to it,” Brazani says, and he leaves me to get to it.

* 

People often recognize me. Something about my face cleaves to their minds. It happens more in the late spring and early summer, the hot and humid months, and I think maybe it’s because I sweat so much when I’m pacing the sidewalk and holding my sign. I can hardly go anywhere, not to the supermarket or the post office or the video store, without some man or woman—this time it’s a teenage girl, a Wal-Mart employee—saying, “I know you. I’ve seen you before.”

“Probably driving along University,” I say.

I am trying to select a present for my son’s graduation. For an hour I’ve been loitering in the sports section, thinking of what could possibly interest a teenage boy, and I realize now how wide the gulf is between my son and me. I try to think of what I was like as a teenager.

“What do teenage boys like?” I ask the teenage employee.

“I wish I knew,” she says.

* 

When I get home from the store, Mrs. Hutchinson is standing in my driveway, looking paler and more saggy than usual. Her floral housedress seems particularly faded and her hair is disheveled. She appears to have been crying.
“What’s wrong?” I say to her after I get out of the car.

“Look what they’ve done!”

She takes me by the hand and leads me around back to the lot, which is no longer empty. Great machines, bulldozers and backhoes and work trucks, are parked haphazardly across the lawn. All of the plastic crosses have been uprooted and lay in a pile off the corner. There is a massive hole where our cemetery used to be, no sign of the animals.

Mrs. Hutchinson grasps my arm and begins to cry.

“They’ve taken my babies!” she says.

* 

For the first few days after our talk in Brazani’s office I try making myself more visible. I find pink clown pants and a bright yellow button down shirt at a thrift shop. I wear this and hop up and down the sidewalk. I dance beside the environmentalists. I run circles around Earl. I pump the sign up and down above my head like I’m at a college basketball game. I humiliate myself, and still, everyday at 3:00, I keep getting eggs thrown at me, except now I’m moving so fast that I rarely get hit.

But my tactics don’t work, and by the end of the week when the boys and girls of Phi Kappa Delta and Gamma Gamma Mu show up advertising a car wash, I know that I’m finished. Two shirtless boys with big muscles hold signs for their car wash while a couple attractive girls in very thin bikinis smile and stand next to them. The boys do fist pumps and pelvic thrusts and the passersby seem to love this. Cars line up to be washed by girls in even skimpier bikinis and boys who look like models.
“I guess you know what’s coming,” Brazani says to me one day after work, when he calls me into his office. I nod.

“I may have a janitorial spot open for you, maybe something in delivery,” he says, but I tell him no thanks and that’s that.

*  

My son’s graduation is on a Saturday afternoon. The paper mentioned that the school had originally planned to hold it outside, but the rains and the heat forced them into the gymnasium. I grab the graduation present I decided on, a new baseball glove, a Rawlings Primo, real Italian leather, oxblood color, the most expensive one they had. And then, without knowing why, I take a carton of eggs from the fridge and I head out the door.

When I get there, the lobby is filled with parents and students, but I ignore them and make my way up to the balcony so that I can get a better view of the floor. More students are clustered around the stage and the podium, all in purple gowns and purple hats. Rows of folding chairs sit in front of the stage, and a couple of students have already taken their respective seats. I wonder which one is my son, if he’s down there at all.

I get a front row balcony seat for the ceremony. At 1:30, all the students assemble in their places, as if informed by a voice heard only by them, and the parents who had been mingling in the lobby file into the rows of bleachers and chairs set up in the gym.

I sit still for most of the ceremony. The superintendent takes the stage and delivers a confusing speech about grandmothers, elephants, and walnuts. There is a
message buried somewhere in there, but I can’t find it, and the applause when he is finished is polite and subdued.

The superintendent then takes a sheet from a hidden shelf in the podium and announces the start of the name-calling. I notice Miranda then across the room, sitting with a man I’ve never seen, a boyfriend or maybe even a husband, and I notice that she sees me too and that she is very quietly climbing out of her seat. This man, I think sadly, is very likely more of a father to my own son than I am, and that’s when I maybe realize what I brought the carton of eggs for.

I wait for them to get to the D’s, because my last name is Davidson, but when the D’s come and go and I don’t hear Derek Davidson, I realize that he must have adopted Miranda’s maiden name, or, worse, some other, better father’s name. I wait for the S’s, because Miranda’s last name before we were married was Stevens, and when I hear the superintendent call out “Derek Stevens,” a brief wave of relief washes over me.

And then I holler for him. I holler louder than anyone else, and he looks up at me, astonished, unmoving. I see Miranda hurrying up the steps to meet me, and the man she is with stands up suddenly, looking at me from the other side of the gym, and I get out my carton of eggs, all the while whooping and hollering for the son I hardly know, and my wild shouting becomes filled with pride and something else, regret, I think, and Derek watches me from the stage as I take out an egg and hold it over the balcony, letting it slip from my fingers to the floor below. I do the whole carton like that, one by one, all the while looking at my son to let him know that I understand.
WORKS CITED

